

Key Stories – Tales on geographies, maps, and methodologies of bordering

Maja Korac-Sanderson*

Fecha de recepción: 19/06/2016

Fecha de aceptación: 02/11/2016

Resumen

Ésta es una historia en tránsito. Un collage que reúne viñetas de mis experiencias de viaje, signadas por mis encuentros con procesos cotidianos de demarcación de límites. Este artículo da cuenta, en clave personal, de la multidimensionalidad de dichos límites y así explora las categorías, rótulos y significados que ellos producen. Por ello es que tiempos y lugares se desplazan en el texto, armando un rompecabezas de sentido y entendimiento vinculado a mi experiencia de viaje.

Palabras clave: demarcación de límites, viaje, encuentros, rótulos, sentidos

Abstract

This is a journeying tale. A bricolage that brings together vignettes of my journeying experiences marked by my encounters with everyday bordering processes. By offering a personal account on the multidimensionality of borders, this essay engages with categories, labels, and the meanings they produce and construct. As such, times and places shift in the essay, filling in a jigsaw of meaning and understanding relating to my journeying experience.

Keywords: everyday bordering processes, journey, everyday encounters, labels, meanings

* School of Social Sciences, University of East London, UK. Email: M.Korac@uel.ac.uk.

I have a spring in my step. I am strolling down one of the narrow streets in the *Kalenićeva pijaca* district of Belgrade, the neighborhood I call *mine*. Every cell in my body is absorbing the moment, as I am taking in its chaotic charms. I don't get to be in Belgrade often at this time of year. And Belgrade is nicest in May. What I delight, I think to myself. As I walk pass one of the cafes lining up the road, my ears are pierced by a sharp tone of a woman's voice: 'You, who don't live here, go and vote in Canada.' In a level tone, a man's voice trails behind me as I continue down the road and turn around the corner: 'I am born here. I have my identity card...'

While my brain is busy processing this conversation I picked up in passing, my body signals immediately the layered meaning of this exchange. The feeling of recognition formed somewhere in the centre of me tells me that this is about the methodology of borders that has been playing with my life for more than a quarter of a century. I am still examining the information acquired on that sunny May morning in Belgrade. What was the 'local' woman defending? Or was she denying something? What was the point that the 'Canadian' man was trying to make? What was his claim? Is he a member of the 'diaspora,' engaging in what has been termed 'diaspora nationalism'? This type of political involvement of emigrants into the affairs of the places they left has been at work in this part of the world that I call 'mine', and helped to stir up and sustain much of the brutal violence that hit it in the 1990s. But this level of meaning is not what has touched my soul and captivated my mind ever since I overheard that argument in a Belgrade café. The quarrel has triggered in me the question of 'who is *local*?' How does this get negotiated? How do those of us on the move come to be seen as 'local'? Anywhere? My mind is still busy thinking and playing with a huge set of concepts, theorisations, and other category drawers, all neatly piled up and labelled. I know that this may take quite a while. I also know that anything that comes out of this process will be somehow lacking.

I am a social scientist, a scholar. I 'do' what has been termed 'refugee studies'. Some like to see it all as part of 'migration studies' – as one mode of migration experience. Yet others insist that forced migration is something different altogether – distinct in its causes and consequences for both the people and the societies it affects. Then, there is also the term 'displacement'. It is mostly seen as appropriate category to describe the situation of people labelled as refugees, but not as adequate to capture the situation of other people who move from one place to another. They are not considered acutely *uprooted* and therefore displaced. They are not constructed as people 'out of place'. They are mostly seen as people who have *routes* rather than roots, hence, a different lens through which to look at and make sense of their situation. And 'mobility'? That is, according to many, a totally different thing. It describes undertakings ranging from travel to the movement of ideas and things. It all gets very complicated. All these fields of study and related categories are there to help understand different experiences and meanings of what we may call *place* and how people move between them and why. And yet, as someone who moves in this field of study, as well as between places, I am aware of

the difficulties of understanding and conveying the layered meanings of these journeys, for those on the move and for the people and places they are connected to. That is why I am eager to tell my story. Now. Just the way it comes out.

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I am in a café with my sister. It is some months after my father passed away, suddenly and unexpectedly. I remember it all vividly. I was on my mobile phone, working from home in London, and talking to a colleague in Oxford about a project we were developing, when my landline phone rang. I picked it up and heard my sister's small voice breaking the news. First, was the shock of it all. Sadness and grieving came later. Much later. It started around the time I was with my sister in that café in Belgrade, close to my parents' flat. I was trying hard to keep my tears back, determined not to burden anybody with the overflow of sad emotion. Besides, I thought that you could tell it all from simply looking at me. It is only much later that I came to realise, to learn in a very hard way, that is, that looking and seeing are two very different things. Most often, as I came to understand, they do not match at all. Since dad died, I say to my sister, no one ever contacts me. I feel left out, as if I am no longer part of this place. Ever since I left, we are in touch only when I am in touch. Why is that? As the saying goes, I hear her say, 'those who leave should write a postcard'. This reminds me of 'the crippling sorrow of estrangement' as Said put it¹, and it lingers inside me ever since. It is telling me that my point of entry into the world 'I left behind' is very limited. That I've been relegated into the 'outsider' category. That's the way I am seen now. The way I am accepted. This feeling that I've been *othered* in the place and by those I feel to be 'mine' simply refuses to go. I tried everything that is in my power to fight off the sense that in some fundamental way, by leaving, I have been erased not only from lives of the people I hold dear, but also from my own. The way I knew it. That is the toxic power of it. And every time I thought I freed myself from it, I would experience one of these 'pop up moments'. I am in my parents' flat. I came for my father's funeral. I am going over loads of telegrams of condolences. Not a single one mentions my name, let alone is addressed to me. It is as if I no longer exist. As if he was not *my* father. As if I never was. Erased. A single friend from Belgrade called me in London a day after my father died just to hear my voice and tell me how sorry she was. No emails, either. Silence. Vacuum. Yes, Mark was there with me all that time. But he hardly knew my father. He had met him only once, just before we were married, and just a few months before my father died. Apart from the raw emotion of sadness, there was an entire world out there that was tied into deep and complex feeling of loss, which was simply impossible to share. That whole thing about sharing and communicating is so difficult, in any circumstances, particularly

¹ Said, Edward (2000) *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.

I'd say when a distance is involved. The geographical distance brings with it the temporal and spatial problems in communication, which add an often crippling load of 'luggage' that we travelers take with us. Our journeying circumstances, however, often require us to 'travel light'. Otherwise we are in danger of sinking under their heavy weight. I don't think that modern technologies can address the core of this problem. I did try. I even gave little computer cameras as presents to my sister and some of my friends, hoping that the gadget, together with Skype, would help make our exchanges *natural*. As if I am there, I mean. But it does not work that way.

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I just finished setting up the 31-button memory system on a new phone I bought for my mama. She suffers from macular degeneration and I am trying to ease her communication problems caused by this partial loss of sight. This way, she does not have to look up any phone numbers, she just needs to press a single button. And that's it. Or is it? The last button on the phone is my phone number. In London. At my London home. But my phone, sitting on my desk in London, never rings. Not once, during all these years. I try reasoning with her every time I call. Why don't you call me when you feel lonely and would like someone to talk to? You just need to press that one button, the last one of the lot, it is very easy to find, you can't miss it. What is the difference between calling Nada at her flat on *Čubrina ulica* or me here, on Saint George's Drive? We both pick up the phone when it rings and we are there, ready to chat with you. My sister's plausible explanation of this behavior is that mama cannot imagine my setting. My sister is a psychologist, she knows about these things. She tells me that mama does not have this place on her mental map and hence the problem of remembering that she can talk to me if she feels like it. Right, I get it. What confuses me, though, is that London is not an unknown place to her, she can relate to it. Not only was she here for nearly a year, but she worked for three months in a building in Kensington, which is just a 10 minute walk from where I first lived in London, after coming from Canada to take up that job in Oxford. She walked down Kensington Church Street on a daily basis, back then. As I did, all these years after her. That was in 1954. My mama came to London and then later moved to Cambridge to be with my dad who was at the time on a scholarship there. He was researching for his PhD, and working with Maurice Dobb, the Marxist economist. Mama and dad spent an entire year on this island. Punting down the river Cam, and all that. I have their photograph taken on Piccadilly Circus, on New Year's Eve 1954. That place is surely on my mama's mental map, because she's been here. It is not as if she cannot relate to it, I mean. Which then puts my hairdresser on that map, too, as she is conveniently just around the corner from Piccadilly Circus. And if we are speaking of mental maps, mama has no idea whatsoever where my sister's hairdresser is located in downtown Belgrade, on a mental or a real map; on a map of any kind. And still, she calls my

sister to ask if she had that haircut she was planning on, but not me to ask the same question. To ring me, just like that, for a chat, out of the blue. And yet, every time I call, she is thrilled to hear me and my news. I also know that she worries terribly if I am out of touch for longer than what she feels is 'normal' or 'tolerable'. My journeying experience has thought me that mental and emotional maps do not necessarily overlap. But geographical and mental maps correspond, making spatial distance the key to how our daily lives are connected and our day-to-day existence communicated. The key to how they become *disconnected* and *not* communicated, I mean. The emptiness and the void this break creates has been a truly excruciating experience. All these maps and pop-up moments get in the way when I try to mop up my emotional backyard, stuck with feelings of the denial of over 30 years of my life and related identities that are so central to my sense of self. I need to do it, to free up so much needed energy to continue my journey way away from *home*.

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I never left to leave. I went on a scholarship to Oxford. Just for one term. And then I got another one from the British Council. For an additional term, in London. I moved from Oxford to London just before Christmas, 1992. By that time, I had already kind of acknowledged that the wars would not stop soon. My original plan to return, after my scholarships were over, no longer felt like a good one. Not because I thought that my life would be in danger. There was no war in Belgrade then. That arrived much later, courtesy of the NATO bombing in 1999. Around Christmas of 1992, however, I was preoccupied with the political realities that ripped my life and my country apart. I did not want, if I could help it, to return and live a life framed by my ethnic origin, as if nothing else makes us and 'our' states worthwhile. Besides, I never felt 'ethnic' and I do not now. I do not understand what that category and label convey *about me*. As a person. I feel it as violence. A brutal form of enforcement of meaning upon my sense of self. An invasion of my identity and the multiplicity of its elements. The way I feel they shape who I am. Of course the culture I come from, or, to be precise, the *cultures* with which I grew up and which formed me, are important to me. Fundamental. They inevitably colour the lens through which I see and 'read' the world and people around me. More importantly, still, many of these cultural codes make me feel *nested*, because they resonate in numerous ways with experiences, memories, stories and histories that are part of who I am. As much as many make me also feel deeply unsettled or just utterly detached, because they do not reverberate with anything in me. My language, of course, is also something that links me, as well as limits me, to a very specific group of people, allowing me to articulate myself in a way I cannot do in any other language. But that alone does not provide a vehicle for understanding. It certainly did not for me, I felt, at the height of the 'warrior craze' that engulfed the place I called my *home* country. Back then, I (naively?) believed that there was a world, a place, out there that allows for some level of 'democracy of selves', as my

dear friend Cynthia put it all those years ago, at one of her stimulating talks about identity and ethnicity.²

By that Christmas of 1992, when I was considering the no-return question, Pat had already entered my life. At the time, she and her family were on sabbatical in Oxford. Friendship with Pat triggered the idea of me doing a PhD in Toronto. I never thought of Canada before I met her, I must admit. Even as a place to visit, let alone as a place where I may go to live and work. It simply was not on my mental map. Any map, to be precise. This matter of mental and other maps and how they relate to borders, real and imagined, those acknowledged as political and others that pass as a-political, is a continuing bother in my life. Cutting across every single aspect of it. Popping up at every single step of it. The most difficult ones, I found during my journey, were not the state borders and their *official* border controls. This was not only because the states of the Global North, as they have been termed, were much less fortress-like back in the early 1990s, when my journey began, than they are now. And even so, as millions of others, I too had many wrestlings with states back then, their officials and their policies. Still, all my rights have always been state recognised. Either as an immigrant scholar or as a permanent resident or as a naturalised citizen. Not surprisingly so, of course, as I am a woman from the margins of Europe, well educated, professional. What has been a source of acute pain during all these decades, though, and what I am still grappling with, are those continuous bordering processes that are part of daily othering systems and misidentifying practices in our lives – particularly in the lives of *we*, who are labelled as ‘migrants’, ‘immigrants’, ‘emigrants’, ‘foreigners’, or ‘others,’ who are also coded as ‘ethnic’ or ‘racial’ or somehow ‘visibly’ different. And that is how one becomes *invisible*. Erased. As a person. As someone. As a life with a history and a meaning. Beyond any attempt to box you in and shelve you with ‘others’. These processes are precisely what is causing that never-ending wrestling with borders of meaning, understanding, and knowledge ever since I left home, in search for some level of ‘democracy of selves’.

Over a quarter of a century later, I am no longer convinced that such a place exists. Encouragingly, for journeying people like me, we do get a chance to meet people like Pat. Here and there. Despite the hegemony of the nation-state paradigms that shape our lives, and in spite of the categories that have been created to help us ‘understand’, but without enabling us to relate in any real sense of the word. This prevailing absence of a possibility to ‘co-construct’ reality and make sense of our ‘lived worlds’³, makes the importance of the people with whom it is possible to connect, precious. Those who hear you and see you the way you feel

² Cockburn, Cynthia (1997) “Dealing with Identity: Women in Cross-Ethnic Alliances”, Paper presented at the Centre for Gender Studies, University of Hull, UK, March.

³ I borrow here the notion of ‘co-constructed’ ‘lived worlds’ from Pearce, W. Barnett (2005) “The Coordinated Management of Meaning” In: W. B. Gudykunst, William [Ed.] (1983) *Theorizing about intercultural communication*. California: Thousand Oaks: 35-54

you are. Those who do not gaze at you. Although we became friends while both of us were in Oxford, that year, she and I actually met in Ostend, at a conference at which I was presenting a paper, in late September 1992. The paper presentation in Ostend was a stopover on my way to Oxford. Pat gave me her card during a chat we had after the panel at which I was presenting. She was at the college in Oxford to which I was heading. What a relief, I think to myself, I already have someone I know there. Two days after my arrival, we go out for a meal with a bunch of people Pat knows. That is how it started.

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It all started with the wars. In June 1991, I was in the Netherlands on a study trip organised by one of the Dutch environmental NGOs. It was a nearly two-week long trip. My colleague Aca and I were based in a small town just south of Amsterdam. From there, we were hoping to different parts of the Netherlands, meeting activists and learning about their projects. On the last morning of our stay in the town, before we were to travel to Amsterdam for a few final days of our tour, I went to a local bank. I wanted to take some cash out, on my credit card. I hand in my card to the person at the desk. He looks at it, then, he gives me a glance and says, 'Wait a moment please.' He disappears behind a glass door. It feels like ages before he returns. He proffers my card saying, 'I am sorry madam, but given the latest developments in your country, I am unable to give you any cash at this time.' I look at him as if he has just come down from another planet. I manage to ask, 'I am not with you sir, I am sorry, what is happening in my country?' 'The war, madam, it has started early this morning,' he says with a careful smile. I take my credit card and walk out. I navigate back to the hotel as if I was not the same person who walked those same streets just moments earlier. Aca and I manage to get ourselves out of the hotel and into Amsterdam. I call my parents from a phone booth. I demand to know what is going on! Anger is always the best cover for despair, sadness, and fear. I listen to my father filling me in with the facts. There were 'clashes' between the army and the Slovenian territorial forces, as a response to Slovenian unilateral declaration of independence yesterday, he says. There were casualties, I hear him say, as if in passing. Should I stay or return, I ask. My question is rhetorical. I have no intention of not returning. I flew back to Belgrade two days after that phone conversation with my father. I shall always remember that phone booth, in central Amsterdam. It marks the beginning of many phone conversations to come. Each filled with a hope that everyone is well or coping. Most of all, to re-connect, to share, to relate.

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It is a summer afternoon in 1990. My friend, Marko, has just left. I am very happy for him. He is going to the United States to do his Ph.D. He got a scholarship. He is

one of many friends and people I know who is leaving. He said he does not know if he'll try to stay there or return. We said goodbye to each other and promised to stay in touch. It is very quiet in my flat after Marko leaves. It is one of those late afternoons in summer when my windows are wide open. They are overlooking patios in front of the rows of small houses beneath. It is a quintessential Belgrade scene. A *Čubura* scene, to be precise.⁴ So nice. So calm. Some of my neighbors are having their afternoon coffees al fresco. I can hear the sound of a cup touching a saucer. It comes to me on a soft cushion of late afternoon summer sunshine. It wraps all around me. The sound reverberates throughout my body. I can feel it deep down inside me. Tears start rolling down my cheeks. I become aware of a thought: I could never leave here.

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I am very excited. I got a job in Oxford! It is a two-year contract. I am starting in June. Till then I have time to finish up the project I am doing at York University, pack up and go. Except that I am hesitant to let the flat I was renting go. I toy with the idea of sub-letting it while I am in Oxford, because I shall return to Toronto after my contract there is over in June 2001. I like this flat. It's within walking distance from Pat and Wenona. Ana and Don are almost my next-door neighbors. Sue is a stone's throw away. Then a rational me kicks in. I let the flat go. My last days in Toronto, I stay at Sue's house. She is at the farm. A few days before I am to leave, I tell Pat and Wenona how terrified I am of boarding a plane without having any keys in my pocket. They throw a farewell party for me at Wenona's house. It is wonderful and deeply touching. My friends are showering me with 'remember Toronto and Canada' presents: 'The Annex' book, from Valerie; the book on Canadian film, from Brenda. Wenona made photo diary of *my* and *our* places in Toronto. Offices and the corridors of York's research centres. Pictures of all their houses. My favourite local restaurant. The building where I lived. Pictures of all of us, at different occasions. The diary came with a bunch of keys. The keys to Pat's and Wenona's houses. I still keep them.

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It is one of our last days in Seville. It was a truly wonderful break for both of us. The discovery of long sunny days in January was a real treat. Just imagine, sitting in full sunshine at 5pm, under a tree full of ripe oranges, drinking a glass of a good local wine. There was a lot to see, many places to visit. On our last day, we go to a small, local museum dedicated to Sephardic Jews who once populated the part of the city we are staying in. Until they were forced to leave, that is. We go in. It is just two

⁴ A Belgrade district.

medium size rooms with not very many artefacts and panels explaining some of the history of the people who once lived here. They walked these same streets. These buildings were their homes. As we were about to exit, I realise that instead of walking out the way we came in, we need to walk behind a black drapery that was just to the left of the entrance. I alert Mark to my 'discovery' and disappear behind the heavy curtain. I find myself in a very small, dark, round space. Heavy black curtains are all around. I look up, attracted by a dim light coming from the above. I see keys hanging. Keys in all shapes and forms. Hanging in silence. Some in gentle motion, almost imperceptible. Suddenly it feels as if a mountain came down on me. Just then, Mark pops in. He is smiling. I grab his hand and lean on him. I am grateful that he is here. So grateful. We stand in silence and watch the keys above us. Each telling a story.

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It is one of those boat restaurants, one of the floating ones. There are many places like this in Belgrade now, because the city is on two rivers, Sava and Danube. The rivers meet in Belgrade at that beautiful spot, which is an important landmark of this city I love. The restaurant we are in is on the Danube. On the edge of Zemun, a very special part of Belgrade that lands itself graciously onto the river. At one point in time, this part of the city was the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The river Danube that we now see over our wine glasses was the inter-state border in the past. Now, it is just a river. A beautiful one, at that. Calm and wide. As if it was never separating a threatening empire from an aspiring new, independent state that was just a swim away. And yet, although gone, it is still very much there, the border, I mean. In very many different ways, call them real or imagined. My mama comes from this 'over the river Danube' part. All places have different markers that make them *unique* in our minds. Throughout my life, whenever I was with my mama in our car or on a bus, the moment we cross the river, her accent changed, slipping into that comfy slipper of her youth, transferring her back to the sandy beaches of Danube in her mother's birthplace. As I tell this story, Mark is sitting opposite me, next to his close friend Stanka. She is...sadly was, Mark's friend in Belgrade. She died recently, suddenly and unexpectedly. Much too early. The thought of Mark having a friend in Belgrade independent of me, was always very important to me. Comforting, somehow, because that friendship was linking him to the city I call *mine*. It felt as if he has a bit of his own life here too. Their friendship dates back to the 1980s, when both of them were Post-Docs at Yale. After they left there, they kept in touch. I am telling my story in English, because of Mark. Although Stanka and the rest of my friends at the table all speak English, we soon and without noticing it slip into *our* language. We laugh a lot. It is truly a wonderful afternoon. And a very long one, too. On our way back home, I hug Mark and say: I am very sorry. I just don't know how it all happened. I did try, you noticed. I was translating the most important bits every now and then. I didn't expect that it was going to turn that

way, because both Stanka and I were there. I am so sorry. Smiling, Mark replies: Oh, don't worry. I had a great time. The atmosphere, the food and the wine were excellent. I enjoyed watching you all. The body language was intriguing. And I could get the jest of it, here and there, remember: *Ja razumem, ali slabo govorim*.⁵ With a wide grin on his face he continues: you know what I noticed while watching you sitting opposite me for all those hours? Your body language here is so very different from when you are in London. There, you are like a fish out of water. A tight hug and a gentle kiss follow.

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I am at our local Farmers' Market, choosing a 'homemade' fruit tart that I am going to take later today to my friend's place. I savour every moment of it, thinking how I am going to enjoy the cake and the company at the potluck party that afternoon. My friend and I go way back. Come to think of it, she is my oldest friend in London. We met in Belgrade, in the late 1980s, at the University; she was doing research and was interested to meet likeminded women social science scholars. It was the time of a great turmoil in the country, politically and otherwise. It was actually the beginning of the end. The last act of it, to be precise. As it was becoming increasingly irritating, unpleasant and scary to live there, the place was also starting to become an attractive research spot. Anyhow, that is how we first met. We kept in touch, and as I later ended up being in London and also Toronto, we became friends. She was a great support to me. In all kinds of ways. Personally and professionally. She offered me a warm hospitality and welcome, every time I was in London or passing through it, on the way from or to Toronto. We linked each other to interesting people we knew. Our areas of scholarly interest have always overlapped, and we did a few talks and workshops together, too. She came to visit me in Toronto. I introduced her to my friends and colleagues from York. My parents had her over for dinner one evening while she was in Belgrade, researching. On the evening of that dinner in Belgrade, I was in Toronto, having one of my ordinary days. That is also when she met my sister and entertained with a couple of my close friends and colleagues, whom she also came to know. She tasted my mama's cooking. This is to say that we have a kind of history together and from a range of contexts. Including, how shall I put it - my *native* one. She is the only English friend of mine who has known me for such a long time and in all these 'shoes'. Who knows my family and some of my Belgrade friends, including my dear university professor and a mentor of much of my research I did while there. Mark is the only other English person on this island who knows my family and some of my dearest Belgrade friends. But as often in life, my London friend and I were seeing each other much less than before. Partially, because both of us travelled a lot for

⁵ I understand, but I am not fluent.

work, but also simply because ‘life got in the way’, as they say. I arrive at her place on the day of the party, we are all in that kitchen I love so much. I am happy to be there and to see her. After all that time! It feels *so* good. There are people I don’t know, of course, or some who I cannot quite place, although I do remember knowing them. I am in conversation with a few women who I don’t think I know, but we’re quite happy chatting. My friend, kindly as a host, joins us and says: Oh, sorry, do you know Maja? Have you met before? Maja is a refugee from Serbia, she says with a smile and disappears to the other end of the kitchen to attend to some other guests. The faces of the women I was chit-chatting with up until then suddenly changed into solemn expressions. At the sound of the word refugee, I cease to exist as a person they saw and were chatting to, seconds ago. Some of them manage to mutter: Oh, is that so?! Others to ask since when I am in London. In an instant, all possible connecting points between us as people, as friends of a mutual friend, are gone. I feel this swift shift in our communication with every inch of my body. It tenses. To the breaking point. My stomach rolls up into a ball. My mind cries out: Oh, no, not that violence again! My friend of all people?! Why label me in that way? Why try to squeeze my long, well walked feet into that tiny shoe?! Why you imagine me in *that* way?! I thought I was a friend. That we go back for quite a while. That we like each other as *persons*. That we have things in common as people. Women. With this monolog running inside my head, I hear myself saying: I am a sociologist and that is how the two of us got to know each other some decades ago. I am originally from Yugoslavia, which I happen to leave as the wars were starting. I came here on a scholarship nearly two decades ago. Since then, I lived and worked in Toronto for quite a few years. I live in London now, with Mark whom I met here, after moving back from Canada to start a job here. This ends it, as each of us finds a good excuse to mingle away from that particular spot in the kitchen I love so much, in my friend’s house.

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I am nearing the end of Hugh Street, and just as I was to cross the road there and continue by the UK Passport Office towards Victoria to catch the tube to go to work, a woman appears in front of me and asks for local directions. She does not know how to get to a small street near here, at the heart of Pimlico, which is my neck of the woods in London for well over a decade now. I don’t need *A Passport to Pimlico*, I think often to myself when passing by the UK Passport Office on the way to Victoria. What a handy film title to remember every time I am reminded of my decision not to apply for British citizenship, but to remain a ‘Canadian’ living and working in the UK. I don’t need yet another acquired citizenship. To what state I belong now, is a purely practical matter; Mirsad put this so nicely, back then, when

I interviewed him while doing my research in Rome.⁶ I have to have someone's passport to be able to continue my journey. With the UK Passport Office on my regular daily route to tube and local busses, I am reminded of it quite often. It came to me again on the day that woman stopped me and asked for local directions. As I started my sentence and before I was actually able to tell her how to get where she wants to be, she was gone. Before disappearing out of my sight completely, she gave me that hand gesture as if to tell me not to waste her time, while her voice declared: Oh, you are a foreigner. Now. Living on this island for quite a while, I know well that accent is everything. In certain circles. That right one. Or slight variations of the right one. What all makes it, the right one. Accent tells it all. Except that it may leave you lost and without directions.

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It was a truly wonderful evening. As it always is with our dear friends. They were actually first *my* friends, before becoming *ours*. I met them as soon as I arrived here. They kindly invited me for supper, within a week of me landing on this island. It was one of these Toronto-London-Oxford connections, transnational ones, as they are called now. Before we just referred to them as contacts or simply friendships. And these, I tell you, are essential. Absolutely vital. Wherever you go. Mind you, these kind of connections are not any less important if you stay put. Who you know is precious, indeed. Anyhow, we were at our friends place, having one of these well-known stand up, just before you are to leave chats at the front door, one of the ones that can last forever. Both of us fully wrapped up, with our winter coats on, and all. Ready to leave, but not quite. We all do this, isn't it? But then at one point we finally are ready to go. I embrace my friend to kiss him, and I hear him say: It was so nice to see you, and you are so East European in that coat. Good to know, although the coat was bought in Rome! I say, laughingly, in response. After some more warm goodbyes, Mark and I are on the street. Ah, this was such a nice evening. It is always good to see them, I say, before we descend in one of these comforting silence moments to contemplate the mixture of good stores, vibes, food and wine we just shared with our friends. Then I had that *ping* moment. What was that about my coat? The thought of it, the coat I mean, brings me swiftly into Rome, and to my very dear Roman friend Grazia. To that long weekend in November, during my sabbatical, when I went to see her and catch up with her after quite some time. Grazia was one of the first people I met in Rome, first via email contact, then in person, back then, when I started my research in Rome as part of my project in Oxford. There was that almost immediate bond between us. We keep in touch and see each other, when we can. Sadly, not often. During that get together long weekend in November, we popped into a department store in central

⁶ Korac, M. (2009) *Remaking Home: Reconstructing Life, Place and Identity in Rome and Amsterdam*. Oxford, New York: Berghahn Books.

Rome to use the toilet. We found it in a corner of a section of the floor with women's coats on sale. Convenient, I agree, in every sense of the word. When I came out, Grazia was trying on a coat and saying: Look, this one looks very nice, don't you think? I need a coat, I think I am going to buy this one. As she was still busy looking herself in the mirror, I did a quick browsing round and this soft, black coat, with big collar, caught my eye. I tried it on and I loved it. I immediately remembered, as if to give myself a permission to buy it, that I bought my last coat in Toronto all these years ago, well over ten, it must be. I am going to buy this one, I say to Grazia. We both laugh about this totally unexpected turn of events, and head for a glass of prosecco, at *that* nice place we both love. I always light up when I think of Grazia, I think to myself at the moment when I hear Mark: What was that thing about you being East European? What on earth you have to do with Eastern Europe? Geographically or politically? Did you get that, he asks? Sorry, what was that? I was just thinking about Grazia, and my coat, and Rome. Here is our bus. Let's just hop on it and go home. I am tired. I really am tired.

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As I walk, passing a shop window in Belgrade, running from one research meeting to the next, a corner of my eye catches it. That colour! That orange colour. That specific shade of it. What is it? As this question forms in my mind, I walk back to the shop window. It is a kind of carpet. Exactly the kind I would like us to have in the hallway of our building. To run it over the grey, wall to wall one, that is already there. I look at my watch. I won't be late for my next meeting if I pop into the shop to see it properly. When I actually touch it, I am even more convinced. That's it. I have no doubt, whatsoever. It is pure wool, handwoven. Long and narrow, exactly the way it should be. It will fit perfectly. What a match. And it will light up the entire hallway. It will brighten it, and bring a new life to it. It is that rare, quite special colour. Exquisite. Not easy to find at all. My fingers run over it. It is soft, it has that silky feel to it. I feel an urge to put it next to my cheek. To wrap myself up into it. It feels so tender and inviting. And yet, it is quite hardwearing stuff, too. It will take well, very well, I can see that, all that wear and tear that normally goes on in main corridors. I set my mind on it. I check if they have more than one in stock to avoid any unpleasant surprises when I come back later, after my meeting, to buy it. It is not big, I'll role it up and fit it easily into my suitcase. Can't wait for Mark to see it. I know he'll like it. A day after I return to London, we take the carpet down to the communal area of our building to try it there. We take one side of it, each. Before it was to touch the ground, Mark says: It won't fit. No, it does not fit. It kind of disappears in it. As he is saying this, we lay it down. I say nothing. I walk down to the main entrance to look at it from there. Even the colour, that glorious colour, does not show here at all, a note runs through my mind. We role it up in silence and go up to our flat. Mark hears the silence and says: Why don't we put it in the living room? It'll be nice there. I say nothing. I sit down and within seconds I find myself

crying. Uncontrollably. It all came out. The power of it is overwhelming. It is also liberating. What exactly is liberating about all this, I hear a question forming in my mind, as I am gasping for air, while taking paper tissues from a box that Mark swiftly supplied, as if to remind me that he is here, with me. He touches my arm, but says nothing. We sit in silence for some time, interrupted only by a sob. Here and there. Then I hear myself saying: Do you know what I have realised just now? That orange carpet in that hallway. That is me, here on this island. There is something in the shape and the style of this place that eats me up. In some strange way, it is liberating to know it. That allows me to draw a map with my own border controls.

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