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FORGET ME NOT: WAR, DISPLACEMENT, AND THE RE-CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY

These notes are an exercise in mnemohistory, and the product of a loneliness that is accustomed to being public. This searching, struggling, and probing toward the essence, toward the cause of anguish is a story of sediment, and a remnant of the years in exile. The act of retelling the story further confirms the problematic nature of my multi-layered and dislocated identity that undertakes Icarian flights in all directions. What follows is the result of an overwhelming tidal wave of memories and emotions, and my speech leaves its cask alienated and personal at the same time. It is the voice of longing for once known and now lost presence whose broken pieces still float through my veins. All I can do now is to try and be honest to myself and to others. My honesty, however, is shaped by the journey I had to undertake, and it is inescapably connected to all the pleasures as well as discomforts associated with movement across space, time, and through a multitude of languages. As Julia Creet and Andreas Kitzmann have rightly pointed out, migration is a condition of memory, indeed.¹ It is the movement (either voluntary or not) that creates a story and gives shape to memory. Along the way, the fragile balance between remembrance and forgetting is struck.

¹ Julia Creet and Andreas Kitzmann (eds.), *Introduction. Memory and Migration*, forthcoming with the University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2010.

The intention of this short text is to try to describe my experience of living outside of my native cultural and social framework. It is also an attempt to outline the dichotomy between the sweetness of the sound of I, which is born within, and its external echo. To borrow Charles Taylor's argument about the nature of modern identity, I also wish to emphasize the struggle for maintaining the capacity for authenticity - that is, the ability to find a way of being that is somehow true to oneself.² It is all about remembering and displacement, and about identities in flux. It is all about an orchard and an apple tree, and the obligatory presence of a serpent. It is all about a field from the Old Testament where Cain's psalm rules.

As Jan Assman pointed out, the truth of a given memory lays not so much in its factuality as in its actuality.³ It is the never-ending actuality of exile that fascinates me. Those of us displaced indeed live in a moment that lasts us a lifetime. That is the moment of departure, which becomes the plexus solaris of our daily existence. The departure represents not only the physical act of separation from the loved ones, but also initiates the process of the freezing of time. This was the two-way process that affected myself and those who stayed behind. I carried away memories of those dear to me and memories about my life at home. Those will remain with me forever, timeless and unchanged. Similarly, those that stayed behind remember me just the way I was on the day the train pulled out of the Podgorica train station.

In the early days of my exile the memories of home were drowning in bitterness caused by war. Every time I tried to speak or write about the former Yugoslavia I was overwhelmed by hopelessness. Back then the former Yugoslavia was the land of nationalism and hatred, a land of the Devil, of despair, of heart ailments, of hereditary high blood pressure, of hard-heartedness, of wasted bones, of apathy. It was the land of daily violence and nightly murders, of police informers and „knights” who carry the icon and the axe into heat-

² See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). Also see Amy Gutmann, (ed.), *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

³ Jan Assman, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 10.

hen darkness. It was the land criss-crossed by borders, a land of death. Because I spoke publicly and wrote against the war and nationalism I was branded a traitor. In my police file there was a note/instruction to the officers dated October 15th 1991, stating that I was armed and dangerous, and that I should be approached „with extreme prejudice.”⁴

Yugoslavia dissolved, my English improved, and it was time to replace broken dreams with the refuge of distant places. I will never forget the faithful day I stepped onto the tarmac of Heathrow Airport, severing the umbilical cord with the only home I knew. By early July 1992, I was living in London, sipping espresso in a cafe on the Chiswick High Road, and trying to decide what to do with my life.

In time, the bitterness subsided and was replaced by longing, and an effort to remember as much as possible. I now know that I am fighting a losing battle. After sixteen years of living in England and Canada, fragments are all that I remember about the place of my birth. Every sentence awakens memories of my youth and brings back faces of my parents. I see my father smiling. Ghosts of his white shirts on the wind suddenly appear through the washing lines and I could hear his voice that still says whenever I visit him: I hope you've had your coffee, we've just had ours. Again, I can smell the colors of my homeland. On some days that is the smell of a defeat.

Since then, I wake up every morning into a language that is not mine, and try to make the best of it for the day. Living in-between languages means that the master of the extravagance of words and verbal acrobatics slowly loses those faculties. I am, nevertheless, still hoping that living within the strange echoes of the foreign language might help me learn more and appreciate its beauty. On the other hand, I am becoming obsessed with my native tongue and suffer from the nostalgia for the homeland of my own words. I am aware that sooner or later I will write in a „dead language”, a language spoken by only one person, a language frozen in some linguistic past. Following Derrida, everything I do only reinforces the omnipresence of my monolingualism.⁵ Such disorder of identity is the result of exile. Often, I console

⁴ In November 2005 the Montenegrin Parliament passed the law declassifying a number of documents and allowing the public access to previously secret police files. Thanks to that law I have learned about my file and the aforementioned note.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. By Patrick Mensah, (Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 5.

myself thinking of Henry Miller's advice to writers: live abroad and soon you will sense a new flow of energy that highlights the only language you are capable of expressing yourself in. So, every day I try to recapture from outside what I possess from the inside, possess so completely that I do not even know about it. I become alienated and detribalized. My intelligence becomes that of a clever immigrant who belongs only by clever adaptation and not by instinct. I never quite fit anywhere. To paraphrase Salman Rushdie, it is like standing naked in the street, shivering and envying others their brocades of belonging and identity.⁶

For years I thought that the physical and spiritual connection to the land of our ancestors, that sacro egoismo della patria, is what gives us strength. Today, the notion of homeland reminds me of a tree and its roots, and of the story about Anteus. It seems that such a concept is a rather conservative myth constructed in a way that keeps us immobile because each crossing of a border (boundary) is an act of bravery and disobedience. It presupposes flexibility and inevitably brings about the change of one's perspective. After so many years of living outside of my native cultural, social, and political framework, I think of my own past, tradition, and culture in a more critical fashion. Over the years, the old idyllic reflection in a Balkan mirror slowly faded away and turned into a gray spot like an old burn-mark that still hurts but heals in time. To me, the Balkans resembles a torso eroded by history and self-deception of its peoples that is finally washed onto the beach. You see I cannot stop thinking about it! No matter how hard I try to change that coded message will always stay a part of me. Some things will never happen and my heart is breaking loose. I will continue to be one of many people who eat memory for breakfast and seek the escape route from that deep and dark well of the past.

My exile was provoked by political repression. I assume this is true for many other exiles regardless of geography and time frame. Writings on the post-WW II expulsion of ethnic Germans from much of Eastern and Central Europe (Vertriebung) clearly shows the dominance of real-politics over the concerns for human dignity. It is true that to the victors go the spoils but victors in the WW II were seldom concerned with protecting the innocent. I do believe that exile is either

⁶ See Salman Rushdie, *Shame*, (London: J. Cape, 1983).

the product of force being exerted upon an individual (or a group) or the consequence of the unbearable choice. People rarely leave their country of origin because they dislike the climate. When forced to choose between political servitude, being sent to the front line or imprisoned for refusing to do so, exile appears to be the best available option. Others opted differently. For many of my fellow countryman being absorbed in the nation with a war cry was a nice way of forgetting one's own weakness and forcing others to forget it. It was obvious that from the outset of the nationalistic fever in the former Yugoslavia, there was uncertainty, ignorance, and greed. Alongside this – fear, and the need to define and contain it. The Tribe became Power. When you say Power, you say Party, Religion. For, like a Religion, the Party must have priests to protect its purity – founded on a misrepresentation and often on a lie. By the time this lie is exposed, the Tribe has become a closed fist according to the principle „Abiit ad Plures” (Latin: To join the majority; to die).

I never was, nor will I ever be willing to kill or to die for someone else's dream or nightmare. I prefer to be wretched on my own than to borrow from the nation by being absorbed in it. The echo of the ideological slogans that have mobilized many of my fellow countrymen never moved me. I always felt indifferent towards all those neatly dressed factory workers and those sharp looking defenders of the faith who marched down the avenues waving huge red flags. It is not so wonderful, as many think, to join them with great fanfare. I am more of a poetic disposition, dreaming about the Great Wall of China and giving myself away to the sound of Deep Purple and Ian Gillan's tones and to all those beautiful girls „under the raincoats in the park on hot days” (Michael Ondaatje). It runs in the family, I guess. I was aware that going into exile meant the exchange of one form of living death for another, but I had to leave.

Some years ago, when I was a new émigré in Canada, I learnt an old saying of the immigrants from Eastern Europe. In their phases of resignation, they would murmur: „Once you cross the Ocean, you'll always be on the wrong side of it.” I believe that such nostalgic lamenting is neither specific to any region or people, nor an exclusive product of modernity. The feeling of loss that resonates from it had been pronounced through centuries and in many languages, and over many continents. What is shared to this day is the intimacy of exile because

everyone displaced ponders over same questions. Specific language of loss, and a memory of it as well as a particular geography of displacement only reinforce the shared experience. The remembered and the forgotten are in constant communication with each other and that buzzing of a beehive of memory gives meaning to life outside of the protective cocoon of a romanticized Heimat.

Back then I failed to grasp the full meaning of this lament. I moved from England without knowing much about Canada. I was told that people here are calm and friendly, that they drive carefully and obey the traffic signals. And most important of all: no one asks where you come from. Only your speech betrays your origins. Now, sixteen years and two countries later, I do understand. It is all about learning. Learning how to bare the fact that you left your homeland. Learning how to forget and forgive. Learning about different cultural code, different logic and a way of life. Learning how to be flexible.

Each step I take, and each time I move, this new Canadian space demands that I conceptualize myself in relation to it. One could not exist without locating and simultaneously subjectifying and positioning oneself. For me, this is a daily struggle. I have to rename the place/space in order to name myself. I, thus, am a Montenegrin-Canadian, trying to hold on to both ends of the hyphen. That is my existential condition. Indeed, a hyphen is a description with historical connotations, personal meanings, and cultural resonance drawn from our conscious environment but reflective of our subconscious selves. Each (French-Canadian, Serbian-Canadian, Irish-Canadian, Japanese-Canadian, etc.) has its own story of spirits, demons, tribal fires, and ancestors, which through enfiguration are molded into history. While naming this new space I am appropriating a story, and locating myself within history, thus, claiming ownership of all three: space, story, and history. I do, however, believe that this is much more than a simple appropriation by a newcomer who longs for a safe port of call. All three (space; story; history) appear to me new and unique. What gives them meaning is the movement of memory: my own experience of exile and my own journey of self-discovery. It is, therefore, a process of creating the new and unique (my) space, (my) story, and (my) history. Because of what is remembered, these signifiers of identity often resemble the matrix – lost homeland and recuperated memories. Because of what is forgotten along the way, they are also impregnated with new meanings.

I want to believe that through naming I am free to choose (am I really?) to be the same as others in this new multicultural space or to be different. I want to believe that I do have a choice. The question is how am I to use such a choice? Through what language I should express it? Should my choice be an expression of my memories about the past and my sense of belonging to the „old country”? Should I approach this new (Canadian) space / place/ territory / landscape in a different way: as an experience of the first kiss: new, unique, and detached from the past? Should I resort to my mother’s tongue in naming my Canada, or should I use Latin to tell the story, and name the space *insula nova undecimo die Junius nubibus revelata*?

I live within the pieces of my native sound-castle, with a few memorabilia that are bound to wash away in time. I take refuge on this *insula nova* - in a home away from home, distanced from my own people and deprived of my own language. Of course, you would argue, my language remains with me wherever I go. Even Derrida said that monolingualism is our natural condition! Moreover, following Jacques Lacan’s observation that „no language can speak the truth about truth,” it would be naïve of me to believe that naming space and appropriating it by imposing on it memories of my ancestors, could endow me with anything but a temporary and unstable sense of ownership. If anything, history teaches us that naming space does not always guarantee eternal existence of people and memories of them, let alone provides safe harbors for our fragile identities. The different names given in different times to spaces/cities/town in central Europe and the Balkans remind us of how brief were efforts in appropriating space through naming it according to tribal, ethnic, national, or religious criteria. Kolozsvár used to be Klausenberg, but now it is called Cluj Napoca. The town once known as Hermannstadt is now softly referred to by Romanians as Sibiu. What the Szeklers call Szekelyudváhely is to Romanians Odorheiu Sigisheara, Roman Apulum, their Alba Iulia a.k.a. Karlsburg and Gulafehervár.⁷ But what to do when the language we

⁷ Ken Smith, „Hungarian Quartet,” in *Shed: Selected Poems*, (London: Bloodaxe Books, 2002), pp. 264-266. Also see Srdja Pavlovic, „My Beloved Landscape: Naming the Self in the Balkans,” in Susan Ingram, Markus Reisenleitner, and Corneli Szabo-Knotik (eds.), *Floodgates: Technologies, Cultural (Ex)Change and the Persistence of Place*, (Wien: Peter Lang, 2006), pp. 123-132.

are born into becomes a tool of memory and not of everyday life? What to do when it becomes a linguistic burden; useful only as a reminder that „true” life is (was) somewhere else? It is like carrying the bones of ancestors with me in a bag: they are white with silence. They do not talk back.

Frightened by the power of silence and the vastness of the Canadian space, I am trying to fill it up with names and voices from my past, and anchor myself within it, as if subconsciously trying to define my own thoughts and ideas about myself. Like an ant, I am rushing to reach the top of a shaky pyramid of grass and dirt with the hope that my effort in thickening its walls would provide security and stability for my uncertain identities. While struggling to define myself by the shape, size, height, and thickness of those walls, I am feeding a Janus-faced beast called notion of commonality (tribal, ethnic, national, supranational). At least for a short period of time I become space, and space becomes me, but all I am doing is endlessly naming and re-naming myself and anchoring my notion of belonging and home deep inside an imaginary landscape of multiculturalism.

Like all emigrants I also dream of remedying my longing for home by re-creating collage of past lives in a space I remember as once being „inhabited” by those lives, and now vacant. Such re-creation usually has no real bearing onto my past life, but is constructed out of hopes, imaginary relationships with space and its silence, and possesses many elements of a fantasy. It resembles that what Socrates called a divine madness. Like Callimachus, the famous third century B.C.E. cataloguer of the ancient Alexandrian Library and the author of *Pinakes*, I am also nostalgic, since nostalgia is a longing for an ideal presence that is no longer and might have never been.⁸ Such sentiments are not only expressions of loss, but also of displacement. Moreover, it is a love affair with one’s memory of past lives and a fantasy that is frozen in time.

⁸ „I wept as I remembered how often you and I had tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky.” Callimachus on nostalgia. See Donald G. Davis and Wayne A. Wiegard (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Library History*, (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994). Also see Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, (New York: Basic Books, 2001), *Introduction*, pp. XIV-XVI.

Our relationship to space / place is inherently personal. It is the art of naming – a subtle but nonetheless everlasting struggle between spaces and identities, between our immediate environment and us - that defines this relationship. It is all about persistent appropriation coupled with our unwillingness to admit or our inability to grasp human ephemerality, and the fact that we are only the percentage of the reckoning.⁹

This relationship consists of two major building blocks that, at the start of a journey, differ somewhat from one another. The difference could be defined as that between my beloved landscape and the landscape of my beloved. The former signifies notions of space in terms of geography (territory), which is imagined (recognized) as ours alone and has symbolic and strategic value. This is a tale about a tree, its roots, and its branches. It is also a dream of the colors of (my) paradise; imagining a beautiful and exquisite female who shall, at the end, fall prey to one of the warring parties. The latter is the projection of the idea (ideal) of home, belonging, and softness of women skin, wrapped in a warm blanket of the memory of good old days. In other words, it is a portrait of an imaginary geography of the soul and an effort to change the nature of time and materialize it so that we could revisit past much in the same manner we are able to walk through the old neighborhood once again.¹⁰

In the end, the differences evaporate and the two notions merge. I find myself stranded an ocean away from my Ithaca; away from my beloved island on which my beloved shall forever remain unreachable. Thus, the island becomes a symbol and a substitute for both: longing for space and for the intimacy of social poetics of a collective. Forever out of reach, the island is my beloved landscape and the landscape of my beloved. My relationship with it is a romance with all the twists and turns of a Hollywood blockbuster: love, affection, sensuality,

⁹ Modern-day alpinists often refer to climbing high mountain peaks as „bagging the peak.” The doctor-recommended physical exercise of overcoming natural barriers in order to maintain a healthy lifestyle is, therefore, motivated by a thrill of conquering, and such effort is awarded not only with medals, a leaner body, and a desirable shape, but it is also followed by an overwhelming sense of satisfaction of appropriating.

¹⁰ Srdja Pavlovic, „Prica na Zici ili Ocajanje je Majstor Stila,” in *Iza Ogladala: Eseji o Identitetu i Politici Pripadnosti*, (Podgorica: CID, 2001), p. 27.

betrayal, anger, revenge, regrets, blood, and tears. It is a tale of picking up scattered remnants of my former self and putting back together the puzzle of identity in a slightly different way. It is simultaneously an archeology of belonging and the re-composition of being: the traces of past lives that are hastily sewn together in order to fit as best as they could within the new imagined homeland.

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