

BECOMING OF THE WORLD VERSUS IDENTITY POLITICS

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Introduction: Borders versus identity

I am not a “borderologist,” but I have recently had some interesting border experiences. One occurred when an exhibition I co-curated traveled on to Ireland, where it was divided over two venues: one in the Republic of Ireland and the other in Northern Ireland. The exhibition, 2MOVE, was devoted to the intersections between video as a contemporary, “democratic” medium of moving images and migration as a contemporary medium of moving people. The more than thirty works were divided up between the two venues, an old industrial building in Belfast and a modernist art venue in Navan. About five works were shown in both venues, as if to demonstrate that, in spite of the political divide, art cannot be entirely subjected to such divisions. The overlapping works constituted the border as a territory rather than a line, thereby turning the border into a space in and over which negotiations could take place.¹

My thinking about borders has been informed by this very notion of negotiable territory and emerged from a poignant academic experience. At her untimely death a few years ago, my late colleague and friend Inge E. Boer left the care of her unfinished work in my hands. While editing her book *Disorienting Vision* (2004), I discovered among her computer files unfinished material for a second book. This needed more intervention than just editing, but with the help of other friends we managed to publish that second book, which was entirely devoted to borders. This book, *Uncertain Territories* (2006), is a brilliant demonstration of a point that I wish to make here in the name of Inge: borders are not lines but spaces – territories that are contested and fought over, but shared spaces nonetheless. This is why the building of a wall is often exploited as a form of occupation. Some forms of occupation (colonialism, for instance) can generate a mode of resistance

¹ On the exhibition and the Irish venues, see Bal and Hernández (2008).

that may enhance survival. In a more cultural dynamic, the negotiation of borders can also be a model for interpretation.

In the practice that is so habitual to humanists like me, the fundamental poly-interpretability of texts and images can lead either to sharp divisions when it is denied or to illuminating and enriching results when it is acknowledged. These practices – of occupation, resistance, and interpretation – are all forms of negotiation. Finally, in the academic world, interdisciplinarity is an endeavor of negotiating borders. This negotiation is more important than many might think – even if one wishes to stay within a single discipline, the confusion that may result from a lack of terminological clarity is damaging to all academic endeavors, not just to explicitly interdisciplinary ones.

Here is a recognizable situation. A philosopher, a psychoanalytic critic, a narratologist, an architectural historian, and an art historian are talking together in a seminar about, say, “signs and ideologies.” They are all eager young scholars, excited, committed to their projects. The word “subject” comes up and keeps recurring. With growing bewilderment, the first participant assumes the topic is the rise of individualism; the second sees it as the unconscious; for the third, it is the narrator’s voice; the fourth thinks of the human confronted with space; and the fifth believes it to be the subject matter of a painting or, more sophisticatedly, the depicted figure. This could be just an amusing anecdote, if only all five did not take their interpretation of “subject,” on the sub-reflective level of obviousness, to be the only right one – not even an interpretation, but a naturalized self-evidence. They are, in their own eyes, just “applying a method.” Not because they are selfish, stupid, or uneducated, but because their disciplinary training has never given them the opportunity, or a reason, to consider the possibility that such a simple word as “subject” might, in fact, be a concept.²

No single participant questions the other’s use; each simply assumes that the other is confused and turns off the concentration button or, in the best of cases, gets upset. Each fictive participant in this familiar drama uses the pronoun “we” without specifying to whom it refers. The other members of the seminar who are listening just don’t get it and drift off. By the time the discussants realize there is a misunderstanding, the seminar is over. This idea – of borders as spaces of

² This example is derived from my own teaching practice and was described in my book *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (2002, 5–6)

negotiation, not lines serving divisions – underlies my contribution to this volume.

Once we establish this alternative interpretation of borders, it can usefully serve as a conceptual metaphor for other cases where divisions yield to negotiations and sharp lines to thick, poly-interpretable spaces. I want to demonstrate this usefulness with regard to the issue of identity. For quite some time now, I have followed how a concern with identity has been deployed to counter the universalist humanism that has for so long naturalized the dominance of what is best known as “whitemale” supremacy. I have participated enthusiastically in the negotiation of an unwritten, unspoken border that kept privileges on one side, according to identity. But like any other strategy, the strategy called “identity politics” needs to be carefully scrutinized each time it is applied. For, in the current constellation of the world, a focus on identity is beginning to show drawbacks, and no concept demonstrates that more clearly than that of borders, which is inflected in the tension between line and space.³

Attempting to combine these instances of border negotiation through the example of identity, I will make use of one of my own interdisciplinary pieces, in which I negotiate disciplinary borders as well as those between media. For a few years now, I have made videos as a way of increasing the level of complexity of my interpretations of cultural situations rather than single texts or images. One such video is the documentary *Becoming Vera*, in which I and two other researchers critically engage with identity. Taking up some moments from this film, I would like to offer a plea for a cultural life “de-limited” by identity, as Johan Schimanski and Stephen Wolfe have it in their book *Border Poetics De-limited* (2007).

Through the awaking cultural awareness of a three-year-old girl who negotiates borders established by education, linguistics, gender, and nationality, mostly by ignoring their relevance, I speculate that too exclusive or tenacious a focus on cultural, ethnic, racial, and other identities erects more boundaries than it levels. Secondly, I contend that a messy mixture of identities not only enhances but in fact con-

³ The literature on issues of identity is too vast to begin offering introductions. Instead, I find oblique struggles with that notion more useful. I just wish to mention Spivak (1999) as a rich source for illuminating insights into the problem of identity. I have also attempted to elaborate the complexity of identity myself, most recently in *Loving Yusuf* (2008).

stitutes the vibrancy of cultural life. This is not to diminish the importance of identity, nor do I mean to idealize the indifference to it as a royal road to total freedom. I continue to see identity as a tool of oppressive and exclusive practices – which is precisely why, in the end, its reversal in identity politics inevitably remains in collusion with such practices.

I am emphatically not claiming that we can ignore identity. The film also shows the unavoidable *framing* of individuals – in this case, the framing of a child – that occurs simultaneously to their negotiation of borders. My goal is more ambitious than answering the question of the relevance of identity. I take the upbringing of this child, as well as our documenting of it, as two different but entwined cultural productions. In this essay, I intend to look at the issue of borders by way of Vera's complex identity and to examine the difficulty of a cultural production such as this film to “de-limit” identity through national categories.

Becoming Vera in Free Indirect Discourse

(Fig. 1: Vera under tree) Born of a Cameroonian father of princely status in Bamun and a French-born mother of high noble Russian descent, little Vera Loumpet-Galitzine grows up in a modest apartment in Paris – as a typical French girl. She goes to nursery school and to a ballet class, where a somewhat militaristic tune sets the rhythm of the little girls' movements and their traditional ballet costumes reinforce another aspect of Vera's identity: her “girliness.” Like a very “normal” child – and I use that word advisedly here, of course – Vera plays with other children and with her Barbie dolls, tells stories, and sings songs. As with all children, her most important toy is her imagination. Many of the self-made songs and stories echo what she has learned in school, at home, as well as in Cameroon.⁴

But some day, Vera's cultural unawareness had to change. Her parents were bound to transmit to her some of what they got transmitted to them, fragments of other cultures than that of Paris. The in-

⁴ *Becoming Vera*, digital video, color, 53 minutes (Cinema Suitcase 2008; distributed by V-Tape, Toronto). Directed by Mieke Bal, Alexandra Loumpet-Galitzine, and Michelle Williams. Although the film is based on real-life events and people, I discuss it here as if it were a novel or a fiction film. All statements about the people and events are inflected by my own interpretations, for which I alone am responsible.

tegration of those elements without conflicted fragmentation is a form of negotiating borders. We sought to capture that change in the film, as a documentation of how cultural transmission happens. The film's title refers not to the old idea of becoming as a transition to a permanent state, however, but more to an ontology of *instability*; more a Deleuzian Sahara with shifting waves than, say, the psychoanalytically inspired commonsense notion of identity. "Becoming" Vera is the child's way of negotiating the borders that the adults erect around her.⁵

I want to make two points regarding borders that underlie my view in the film and in the current discussion. Firstly, I consider the linguistic theory of *deixis* to be the single most clarifying theory in the humanities to explain the problem of identity and the borders that instate, confirm, and perpetuate it. Considering that not meaning but deixis is the essence of language – and, by extension, of communication – French linguist Emile Benveniste made a fundamental distinction between I/you, the first and second persons, and he/she/they, the third person (1971). The first two are bound up together and their positions are exchangeable; ideally, they must exchange all the time. The third person is excluded, talked about, and acted upon. By evoking the binary opposition us/they here, I certainly do not mean to present it as a given. In my work I have consistently combated the overwhelmingly predominant logic of binary opposition, and since borders, in whatever form or function, deploy the us/they logic to impose rigid binaries, they should be a primary target. Even more relevant is the notion of border itself. As a line, a border, be it political, geographical, linguistic, or cultural, keeps "them" outside and encloses "us" inside. As a negotiable territory, however, "they" enter into the purview of "us" and become partners in the turn-taking "we" and "you."

Combining these two claims, I want to discuss a film in which implicit, informal, and domestic, if not quite private, borders are both erected and ignored, transgressed, and negotiated at the same time. Going through some of these borders, I will try to point out what "cultural identity" can mean and how it is constructed and

⁵ On this conception of becoming, which recurs throughout Deleuze's writings, see in particular *A Thousand Plateaus* (1992). An excellent deployment of Deleuzian aesthetics in terms of becoming is offered by Mireille Buydens (2005).

transmitted in relation to borders that separate one national or ethnic identity from another. The complexity increases even more when we realize that the choice to film a child before the age of awareness posed, of course, its own cinematic problems of representation. How can you film the growing cultural awareness of a child so young, who does not speak about nor analyze cultural distinctions and encounters? This difficulty broaches the problem, but also the potential, of what in literature is called “free indirect discourse.” This narrative style consists of a form of interference between narrator’s text and actor’s text. Signals of the personal language situation of the actor and of the (im)personal language situation of the narrator cross without any explicit indications.

The concept of free indirect discourse can illuminate an aspect of the film that is a direct consequence of Vera’s stage of development. Without being able to ask her about it, we attempted to imagine what all these different places looked like to Vera. In this way, we as filmmakers reiterated a feature of Vera’s ostensive behaviour. While Vera projected her fantasies on fictional, sometimes magical creatures, we were bound to project our own vision of what we saw as a child’s naive vision onto her. What does she see, think, or imagine? No one can have access to her mind; we could only follow her gaze with empathy, trying not to impose ourselves – yet, even in play and in sleep, she was in the eye of a camera. The resulting vision merges hers and ours. (Fig. 2: Vera on a carousel)

Meanwhile, her parents explained their own intercultural situation and the potential implications for Vera. They have, of course, their own mixed feelings about the mixture they live and the ensuing drawbacks for their personal and professional lives. They are also aware of the histories of their respective families and ancestors. The father belongs to the elite of Bamun society and has a keen awareness of its cultural legacy. The mother, who descends from exiles of the Russian revolution, is a stranger to her own history and yet knows it emotionally from her parents, who in turn received that history by way of their own (grand-)parents. Here, with the help of our concept-metaphor of borders as negotiable space, we encounter the border between present and past as equally negotiable and “thick.”

Consider, in this respect, the reflection by Vera’s father, when he says that “contact” – a somewhat shockingly denying euphemism for

colonization – only *strengthened* the culture of Bamun, a traditional African kingdom that persists within the Republic of Cameroon. Resistance has clearly saved the kingdom from demise, but this resistance is bound to colonization and occupation – to the negative that resistance targets. The colonizer, in this case France, has thus strengthened instead of weakened the cultural autonomy of the Bamun. This is the more obvious as Bamun is a nation without political borders. Its subjects answer legally and politically to the government of the republic. Culturally and, in their own perception, also politically, however, they are distinct from the rest of the republic, and they speak a different language. Therefore, we can see the organization of the ritual revolving around Vera's enthronement, on which more shortly, as a "French-driven" assertion of Bamun cultural identity. Thus, the colonial situation itself initiates and necessitates a negotiation of borders. This border is also historical, in a "pre-posterous" sense, since it responds to an earlier situation of occupation.⁶

The cinematic free indirect discourse was powerfully put to work when we witnessed how, in Fumban, the capital of the kingdom, the barely three-year-old Vera was initiated as *nji mongu*, the oldest daughter of the *nji* (prince) of the Bamun. The ceremony took two full days. The dates coincided with the bi-annual festival Nguon, in which the king is ritually dethroned, criticized for his failures to resolve Bamun problems, re-instated, and celebrated, after which pre-colonial hostilities among peoples are being re-enacted. I cite two instances of the negotiation of borders, one historical, through Vera's father, and one in the present, through the little girl herself.

Vera's father, an anthropologist, archaeologist, and art historian, clearly looks upon his daughter's status in the Bamun tradition with a double gaze. Double, here, does not mean divided; his commitment to her status in Bamun is total, even if he seems not wholeheartedly convinced of the ethnographic "truth" of it all. This truth is, of course, subject to negotiation and depends on the person to whom he is speaking as first- and second person, respectively. He says:

⁶ The term "preposterous" refers to a reversed direction of historical reflection. This reversal, which puts what came first chronologically ("pre-") behind ("post") its later recycling as an after-effect, is what I call a preposterous history. It is a way of "doing history" that carries productive uncertainties and illuminating highlights – a vision of how to re-vision the past from today's perspective. See Bal (1999).

she must naturally play her role
even without knowing it
I asked the other njis
don't you think she's very good?
and they answered
“no it's not she who acts”

Perhaps Vera's belonging to Bamun will be negotiated by this striking integration of complete commitment with the skepticism of anthropological canniness. For us, this comment offered an opportunity to juxtapose the canny double gaze of the learned father with the equally canny behavior of the child, who could not have known about the Bamun beliefs concerning ancestral spirits.⁷

A similar double allegiance shines through Vera's behavior, as especially camera operator Nanna Verhoeff has captured with great intimacy. What her father proudly commented on as her being “good,” and the elders of the community consider to be her ritual occupation by the ancestors' spirits, for Vera amounts to exercising her position in deictic exchange in two ways *simultaneously*, thereby negotiating her border position. She sits still for hours while the women and men of her father's people dance around her. Her eyes are turned inward, suggesting – but without certainty – that she is spending that long time fantasizing. (Fig. 3: Vera's inward gaze) But just when the images suggest a small girl who is made the object of a rather intimidating ritual, in other words, a “third person,” Vera's self-absorbed face suddenly lights up in a smile to someone outside the frame. Clearly, she is both “inside” the situation and distanced from it when it suits her. During a later moment of the ritual, this happens again, this time followed by her pulling faces at the person off-screen, and thus clearly asserting her turn as the “speaking” first person.⁸ (Fig. 4: Vera smiling to off-screen)

⁷ To give a sense of the rhythm of the subtitles in the film, all quotations follow the format and line division of the subtitles. In the film, in order to render the flow of oral speech, no capitals are used except in proper names. Hence, only proper names are capitalized in my quotations.

⁸ Verhoeff was positioned within the circle of dancers, so that she was able to capture Vera's interaction with the off-screen – the first person/second person exchange – in a close-up of her face. A second camera filmed the dance from outside the circle, turning the entire group into something like a “third person.” The edits represent attempts to show the delicate balance: Vera's agency is

In this way, free indirect discourse provides us with a tool to turn the film into a means of understanding the operations of identity as a negotiation of borders. At the same time, this concept helps us read the film itself, enabling us to understand why identity cannot be considered otherwise. This over-determined identity borderland explains why I have turned to filmmaking as a mode of analysis. It is, precisely, that double insight – the coinciding insights in and through the film – that makes it possible to grasp a level of complexity that is hard to pin down otherwise. The conclusion so far has to be that Vera, while unaware of the issue of identity, nevertheless is a master of negotiation. This is also visible during her journey to the other side of her cultural inheritance.

Vera's Negotiations

In addition to the free indirect discourse that is achieved by means of the projection of agency through camerawork and editing, Vera's reaction to her initiation also reveals that identities cannot be taken wholesale – they are neither whole nor unified. The older notion of identity would inevitably lead to a view of Vera's identity as "fragmented" or, as the American discourse has it, "hyphenated." She would be French-Cameroonian-Bamun, for example. Instead, she remains singular, but through time she either endorses or rejects the identity the ritual bestows on her. She is not fragmented in this scene but over-determined as *both* Bamun and French; she is simultaneously subjected and capable of agency.

Some months later, her mother, who is also an anthropologist and an art historian, took Vera to Russia for the first time, to encounter her maternal heritage. In Moscow and the surrounding area, she visited the estates of her mother's ancestors, who were exiled during the revolution. This visit meant a lot to Vera's mother, who has deep feelings about her cultural background in spite of its remoteness. Here, Vera runs around in the setting of historical socialites described and sometimes mocked by Pushkin, where strict social rules determined gendered lives. A hospital, a railway station, a town, and a palace, all named after her mother's family, cannot but astonish the little girl. Thus, as in Fumban, it is her *class* identity that is mirrored to her along with her cultural identity. Her Frenchness, in contrast, is bound to a

reduced, but the moments at which she gets to exercise it occur at the end of sequences, before breaks.

class “normality” from which the two other aspects of her background set her apart.⁹

Clearly, for Vera all this seems easily integrated into her rich fantasy world. She dances, sings, and runs around. In contrast to what was implied in the vision of the elders in Fumban, she takes matters into her own hands. In Russia, she looks at paintings and sculptures in the stately homes her mother shows her, but onto these pieces of fiction she projects her own imagined stories. These, in turn, are clearly influenced by her cultural surroundings. In a painting of Cleopatra, for example, she points out the black man in the background. (Fig. 5: Vera pointing to black background figure)

This relative autonomy – the power to negotiate the boundaries proposed to her – plays out most clearly in Vera’s forms of *address*: an incipient offer of exchange between first and second person. The smile outside the frame in Fumban was one example of this. That smile, which asserts her autonomy from the very ritual she seemed to undergo so submissively, extends the boundary of the temporary confinement of the frame to include the outside – literally, the outside of the frame. If one is interested in border negotiation when watching the film, two things are rather striking. On the one hand, there are many such moments of negotiation, where Vera deals with her mixed identity in ways that counter fragmentation in favor of integration – and not assimilation – by choosing who her “second persons” are. The scene evoked above, where she smiles to the off-screen, is a clear example of this, but there are many others. Once we look through the lens of border theory as a practice, Vera’s call to her mother to wait for her is as powerful as her refusal to follow her mother when she is busy talking to a stone lion. On the other hand, one notices the pressures put upon her by adults to internalize class and gender boundaries and the ways in which Vera negotiates these. When her mother points out that a beautiful old hospital they visit is called Galitzine, Vera seems half interested, half bored, but still asks why. Thus, she facilitates her mother’s nostalgia for her unknown past while negotiating the attached upper-class identity, which she diminishes through boredom.¹⁰

⁹ Honesty obliges me to add here that this visit to Russia occurred because of the film, so that we as filmmakers cannot avoid a certain collusion in this clash between class identities.

¹⁰ Nostalgia, in my book, is not by definition a negative term. See below, and Bal (1999, 64–75).

This leads me to another instance of trans-temporal negotiation of the border between the present as the outcome of the lifetime and the past situated before one's life. This accounts for some of the mixed messages Vera receives concerning her identity. Nostalgia, longing, and other feelings nurtured by exile and the threat of extinction can be escapist and idealizing, but they can also help one cope with psychic loss. During this project, we discovered the strange chance encounter between Vera and Pushkin, a few glimpses of which are shown in the film. There is an anecdotic over-determination at play in this context, which allows me to bring up a structural negotiation of borders between identities – a compulsory one, not voluntary but inherent in history instead.

Awareness of cultural background is clearly an issue for Pushkin, as his masterpiece *Eugene Onegin* demonstrates; as our film documents, it is inevitably going to become an issue for Vera. But what the child cannot articulate, the literary genius can fold into his writings. This makes “border poetics” a sorely necessary academic field in the humanities. As it happens, the greatest Russian poet and the inventor of Russian as a literary language was of African descent, through his great-grandfather. When I asked around about Pushkin's background, most people in the know told me this ancestor was from Abyssinia, now Ethiopia, and belonged to a princely family. I have not found any substantiation of the latter claim, but neither do I have reasons to doubt it. As to the former, this was, it turned out, most probably untrue. I began to suspect the entire Ethiopia story served purposes other than historical truth. Perhaps the princely origin served to obliterate the subsequent slavery story, and the Ethiopian descent was “the more northern the better” version of his racial genealogy.¹¹

Searching further out of sheer curiosity, I came upon an extensive, well-documented article in which the author places Pushkin's great-grandfather Ibrahim Gannibal firmly in the area that is now Cameroon, “just south of Lake Chad” (Lounsbery 2006, 273 n. 29). Her primary source is an article by Dieudonné Gnamankou (1997a) devoted to the subject of Pushkin's African heritage. A more extensive

¹¹ The princely status in no way contradicts the slavery story. On the contrary, a princely child would fetch more on the slave market than an ordinary child, as he could be expected to be well-educated.

article by the same author (1997b) attributes the “discovery” of the Cameroonian location to Nabokov.¹²

Although the sources on Pushkin’s background that place his great-grandfather in what is now Cameroon are convincing, I am more interested in the reasons that the Ethiopia (“Abyssinia”) version came up and, more so, why it is still widely current. The exact location is of no relevance other than the anecdotic coincidence that Vera, too, is half-Cameroonian. But the deeper reason concerns the negotiation of identity as space, not division. Here, a comparison with little Vera becomes relevant. Moreover, a complicity of philology in the erection of identity boundaries as lines has a self-reflective relevance here. “Abyssinia” came up due to a wrong lead in an old source (Gnamankou 1997b, 227 n. 3). Such things happen. But why it persists as a “legend” is more relevant. To understand this, Lounsbury’s article offers an excellent context, in which I distinguish two aspects. Her goal is to demonstrate how the figure of Pushkin “was relevant to African American culture for reasons including but not limited to his race” (2006, 249).

Lounsbury analyzes early nineteenth- to late twentieth-century criticism, journalism, and novels about Pushkin to argue that it was the American racial laws and their underlying contradictory taxonomies in particular that excited the imagination. This is the first aspect that makes this context relevant here. Racial taxonomies are a prime instance of the harm done by the binary thinking that takes borders as lines or even walls instead of spaces. The mixed descent of a figure of Pushkin’s stature, whose great-grandfather also was reputed to have stood up for the emancipation of (white) serfs – an allusion to which occurs in *Onegin* – presents the complexities of racial thinking and in particular the racialization of class. Moreover, Pushkin was very proud of both sides of his ancestry – his Russian as well as his African noble descent (Binyon 2003, 3–4).

The Abyssinian story must be read in counterpoint to the ambition to appropriate Pushkin for the enhancement of black culture. This makes the story suspiciously defensive. While there were serious

¹² An article by J. Thomas Shaw on Pushkin’s own writings on the subject does not help to situate his background geographically, but brings the relevant fragments together and offers interesting insights into the depth of the writer’s awareness of his heritage (1993).

stakes in that ambition – particularly strong in an era where writing was considered a precondition for the full recognition of one’s humanity – the opposite claim was, according to Lounsbury, an attempt to bleach Pushkin’s origins. “‘Abyssinian’ meant ‘not really black’ or even ‘fundamentally Caucasian’” (2000, 48).¹³

This may no longer be such a contentious issue in modern-day Europe, or so we would like to think. Nevertheless, Vera is clearly drawn to Pushkin on account of his physique. Again, Vera’s agency comes to the fore in her negotiation of the identity issue in that encounter. The funniest embodiment of the encounter with Pushkin in *Becoming Vera* is the child’s response to the writer’s bust in the Pushkin Museum. (Fig. 6: Vera pointing out her bunches, comparing them to Pushkin’s bust) The bust is bright white, while the portrait has exaggerated African and childish features. Vera identifies enough with the white marble figure to compare notes on their hairdo. Incidentally, this awareness of her hair entails not only an awareness of her African roots but also of her femininity, as well as of her age – of growing up and “becoming” Vera. This intertwinement of her different identity aspects is in itself a negotiation, assuming identities in the plural as a thick field.

Pushkin, the genitor of the Russian literary language and a key figure of national identity for a white-peopled nation that maintained the custom of slave-like servitude into the twentieth century, was black. Pushkin, in other words, is a doubly relevant model for multicultural societies. We have tried to give shape to this complexity by means of editorial interventions that pertain to the visual free indirect discourse mentioned above. Another example of such an intervention occurs when Vera’s mother recounts her own family’s connections with Pushkin’s. She explains how the Pushkins came to the church on the Galitzine estate because they did not have a church of their own. Alexandra’s great-great-grandmother, however, barred the young Alexander from courting her daughters. In this context, Alexandra mentions the possibility that slavery was the background of Pushkin’s ancestor’s arrival in Russia:

by the way, they say that Pushkin

¹³ The issue is even more confusing, I learned, with such phonetically close Russian words as “arap” for black, “rap” for slave, and “arab” for North African.

who was a ...
descendant of a young Cameroonian
who was probably taken in slavery
to the court of Peter the Great
was courting the young Galitzine girls
hence my great-great-grandmother had
refused him access to Viazomy house

At that moment, Vera covers her eyes as if horrified by the story of slavery. (Fig. 7: Vera covering her eyes in horror) When her mother continues suggesting the great-great-grandmother's probable racism and/or classism in this interdiction, Vera sits on the stairs making indignant faces. The editorial intervention visualizes our interpretation of Vera's projection here. What authorized this in our minds was Vera's explicit comparison of Pushkin's hairdo with her own.

While she is being surrounded by Russianness and her noble ancestry is driven home to her, Pushkin's bust offers Vera room for negotiation by means of the psychic identity-shaping tool of identification. The bust is a target of identification for the little girl, but not as the depiction of someone who is quintessentially Russian; rather, she recognizes Pushkin as African. An African identity is clear in the bust, especially in the curly hair – and it is precisely that type of hair that is also Vera's one and only clearly "African" feature. Vera's hair, densely curled and golden blonde, comes up several times in the film. It is remarked upon, complimented, braided in African style, and changes several times. In the little scene with the bust, she is clearly proud of her bunches, or "Afro-puffs." Vera is slowly becoming aware of her background; in this particular scene, for instance, she overhears the adults talking about it. Her growing sensitivity surfaces in a place of rules and regulations, where borders are being erected, maintained, and perpetuated. The awareness that is emerging is simultaneously her space of negotiation, where she can exert her agency by adhering to the deictic principle. This is how she is able to access the borders between the alleged fragments of her identity as a space that allows her to dissolve such restrictive structures.

Vera as Border-Poet

The great Slavist Caryl Emerson claims that Pushkin was especially creative when living in exile, and this capacity for the creative imagination when outside resources are lacking has clearly been projected onto his most endearing heroine, Tatiana in *Onegin*. Vera, too, turns all her experiences into a fantasy. Vera talks to stone, china, and bronze animals. Some of those experiments involve the negotiations of her cultural identity in convoluted ways, extending the spaces delineated by its borders. In Paris, for example, she watches her favorite Indian dancer movie. Right after watching this film, which supplements her cultural baggage with both stereotypical Indianness and stereotypical femininity, she dresses up in her princess costume and hums the melody of the Bollywood film while rocking her doll. Even at this young age, she is not a simple passive recipient of cultural nourishment but actively engages it instead. At the same time, both the film she watches and the doll she cradles contribute to set that extended identity realm off against the other one that she is increasingly accessing: that of gender.

Here, again, Vera negotiates the strictures that identity might impose on her – gender as a line rather than a space – through her fantasy. This brings her in Pushkin’s orbit. I will evoke just one example. She is undisturbed when, at the end of the film, she receives an imaginary telephone call from two imaginary bandits just as she is about to fall asleep. (Fig. 8: Vera talking to bandits) I offer the following little triologue as an instance of the practice of border poetics, which demonstrates the forceful agency Vera derives from her practice:

(*to the bandits*) bandits, what's come over you?

I tell you to stop it!

Alexandra:

to whom are you speaking?

Vera:

(*to Alexandra*) I'm talking to the two gentlemen

(*to the bandits*)

yes yes but ...

(*to the others in the room, and louder*)

when I am on the phone

one doesn't make noise!
(to the bandits, on a tone of polite conversation)
yes, I'm fine
(changing tone)
but what are you doing
near Buka's street?
(impatient)
no, we are NOT in Paris
we are in Moscow!
no, not at all!
no, we are not in Fumban
after this we go to Paris

In this stunning play with fantasy, reality – and, specifically, her multi-national background – becomes an ingredient for the imagination, with the addressees serving as the anchors of both domains. The bandits, obviously, enter Vera's imagination from reading and television. But in shifting addressees, Vera also changes her discourses, showing a fine sense of what is appropriate in certain situations. "Yes I'm fine" is a learned phrase of politeness. The bossy request for silence is a case of role-playing. Her shifts also show, however, that she is not simply absorbed in her imaginary world. On the contrary: she is skillfully negotiating a great number of borders at the same time.

The extent to which reality is an ingredient for fantasy becomes clear when Vera mentions the three place names between which her life evolves in this conversation: Paris, Moscow, and Fumban. She knows very well where she is and where she will be going next. Yet, Buka's street – which is in Paris – has been absorbed into her Moscow time, without doubt because Buka belongs to the Moscow side of her cultural experience. Vera knows she is fantasizing, but does so with gusto nevertheless. This gives her a mastery over reality that warrants her commanding tone to the people around her. It also prevents her cultural identity from overruling her.

Another instance of this canny double look demonstrates as much. When visiting her grandfather's grave at the Russian cemetery near Paris, thereby adhering to a Russian custom she is unaware of, Vera conjures up a phantom. But how seriously does she believe in it? In terms of her emotions, Vera is clearly not frightened, even if the im-

polite phantom answers her polite welcome by threatening to eat her. Then, reality intervenes once more. The phantom comes from Paris and is “very white.” She acknowledges her – imaginary – fear and the safety offered by her mother. Vera, here, is master of her story.

This mastery is clearly visible in the visual medium she participates in using. Vera looks into the camera, or, rather, as is usual in home movies, talks to the person holding the camera, with whom she has built up a friendly I/you relationship. With her canny look, she assumes a position somewhere between an actress and a poet. The intimacy with the camera operator and the swift shifts in roles she performs demonstrate that her identity is neither whole nor unified, but the constant stake of a negotiation of borders in what is clearly a space, not a line. (Fig. 9: Vera looking at camera while telling phantom story)¹⁴

Indeed, later in the film, in Cameroon, when she is sitting on her father’s knees and tells a story about witches, she addresses that intimate interlocutor on a meta-poetic level. She insists that the story is not comparable to Snow White, as her father suggests. The dialogue is quite revealing of what is at stake in the way she negotiates the frames that confine her:

Vera:

she was very kind
she didn't have a witch's hat
she had pretty bunches
in her black hair

Germain:

like Snow White?

VERA (continuing her story):

and colours on her hair
(answering her father belatedly)
so, that's not the same thing
it's my own story

I made it up

you have to look at the story with me
(continuing her story)

the ladies I saw ...

¹⁴ On the special nature of the relationship of figure to operator in home movies, see Van Alphen (2007).

The black hair is doubtlessly derived from the hair color she sees around her. The bunches in the nice witch's hair are obviously derived from Vera's own mirror image and her compelling incipient awareness of her femininity. But Germain's attempt to frame the story into the snow-white "classic" is not successful.

Vera's distinction centers on hair – which, as we have already seen, is her own feature of distinction. Moreover, she teaches her father a lesson in fiction writing when she explains to him that he must follow the narrator's lead. In this way, she develops her self-confidence as a girl (and, hence, as a prospective woman), as someone of African descent (her bunches), and as a speaking subject (her story to be endorsed) so that she can continue her path of "becoming" Vera. This, then, is her negotiation of any strictures whatsoever. To speak with Deleuze, her becoming is based on the transformation of borders from stable lines into shifting spaces; it follows a "Sahara" aesthetic. Vera's canny address to the viewer tells us that such mixtures are not naïve or romantic, but a savvy way of dealing with confinement by treating borders (in gender, class, or culture) as spaces to navigate, thus constituting, or "becoming," oneself.¹⁵

Exile, Nostalgia, and the Dissolution of Borders

Across generations, equally distant on both sides, Vera and Pushkin are neighbors in Russia, compatriots in Cameroon: the configuration, although anecdotal, is striking. But less anecdotally, between *Becoming Vera* and *Onegin* these places play a crucial part in producing another kind of negotiation of borders, when a shared emotion infuses both texts. This emotion concerns the relationship between a person and a place. Colonialism has been one form of assaulting that relationship; exile is another. The history of both of Vera's parents is marked by such assaults.

Consider the following passage, which is often cited as one of the passages where Pushkin reflects upon his background:

¹⁵ For the term "Sahara aesthetic" see Buydens (2005, 110) based on Deleuze (2005). I find it fascinating that the rejected classic (Snow White) is such an emphatic story of whiteness. See Bal (1999, 209–30) on an artwork by Carrie Mae Weems that indicts the fairy tale for its racial categorization.

and there, beneath your noonday sky,
my Africa, where waves break high,
to mourn for Russia's gloomy savour,
land where I learned to love and weep
land where my heart is buried deep.
(Eugene Onegin 1.50.10–4)

For Pushkin, it took an exile to Odessa to feel the pull of Africa. But this Africa, further south from Odessa and an “imagined homeland”, no doubt, serves as a springboard to be able to “mourn” for Russia.

In addition to throwing the individual back on his or her own imagination, exile generates *longing*. This longing is always already ambivalent, since the place to which access is barred by exile is also the place of hostility – the place guilty of the exile’s exclusion. This ambivalence is an even greater resource for the imagination. In the “my Africa” passage, the place of exile stands between a place of *roots*, never known, and a place of *longing*, from which the poet was exiled. Taken at face value, the passage suggests that exile from the north generates longing for the southern roots, which, in turn, become the basis for a *longing-back*, so to speak, for the north: a kind of sentimental triangle. But what Pushkin really expresses here is the longing anchored in the intercultural state *per se* – a longing that is inherent to this space of negotiation.

In the film, we quote Pushkin’s passage as an oblique comment on something Alexandra says towards the end of the film. Evaluating why, for her, this visit to Russia with her daughter had been so important, she says:

in a way it's Vera who brought me back
to Russia
and Cameroon has prepared me to
go back and love Russia
so my personal circle is completed

If we realize that Alexandra is as French as Puskhin is Russian, and that Cameroon is her “third place” as Odessa is for the poet, the *Onegin* passage suggest that Alexandra misses one element of her geo-

graphical triangle: she fails to include France. Unless, that is, we consider Vera herself Alexandra's "French connection."

Nostalgia is not simply an unproductive emotion here, nor is it a product of ideological manipulation. In both Pushkin's and Alexandra's words, it becomes a resource that helps negotiate the borders exile has erected. It is through the emotional experience of the irretrievable lack – in both cases, a past that was lost yet also a past that they ever really "possessed" – that a kind of balance can be achieved. The "third place" provides the wedge to open up a dyadic structure that would run the risk of either being confining or of generating idealization.

Johnston translates poetically, "land where I learned to love and weep, / land where my heart is buried deep". "Land" foregrounds the semantics of exile and nostalgia. The verb "learning" invokes the learning done by the child throughout the year we followed her. Learning is both the "nurture" aspect of the "nature-or-nurture" question and presupposes a "becoming," a development of subjectivity in interaction between the personal and the social, or, in other words, between private and public influences. Learning also mostly follows prescriptive paths laid out by national school systems. This is visible when the viewer compares the dance class in Cameroon and the ballet lesson in Paris.

Alexandra's feeling of longing for her ancestors' Russia is much quieter, mediated as it is by time, space, and life experience. She uses the word "complete" to describe the circle – I have called it a triangle – of exilic nostalgia. Pushkin's "Africa" is Alexandra's Cameroon; a place *she* has come to know and love in her adult life and that *he* reached through stories and imaginary identification with a great ancestor. Cameroon "has prepared me to go back and love Russia" is, then, a quite precise contemporary expression of the sentiment that Pushkin expressed in his fabulous verses two centuries ago. (Fig. 10: Vera pointing Moscow out on map)

The current cultivation of "roots" that encourages a certain kind of nostalgia is systematically at odds with Vera as she is being staged in the film. Even at three years old, she demonstrates that she is quite capable of negotiating the borders of multiple nationalities. She is, then, not only a poet-in-becoming but also a teacher who guides us through that real but invisible space where all forms of identity are

negotiated, so that they can be helpful rather than confining. It is in this way that Vera beautifully practices border poetics.

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