As a woman, my country is... : On imag(in)ed communities and the heresy of becoming-denizen

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As a woman, my country is …: on imag(in)ed communities and the heresy of becoming-denizen

Marsha Meskimmon

... as a woman, I have no country.
As a woman I want no country.
As a woman my country is the whole world.

Virginia Woolf, Three Guineas

Virginia Woolf’s striking lines from Three Guineas have not faded with age. If anything, they resound more clearly in our global present, a time in which movement between and across the boundaries of nation-states has become more commonplace (yet more vexed) and the need to re-imagine our belonging in the world more pressing.

Woolf’s rallying cry in 1938 for a feminist cosmopolitan imagination – as a woman my country is the whole world – came at a moment of extreme crisis in European history, when the rising tide of fascism in Germany, Italy, Spain and, of course, within Britain threatened to

2 Marsha Meskimmon, Contemporary Art and the Cosmopolitan Imagination (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).
destroy everything Woolf held dear. Her statement of world belonging, as a woman, was not a statement born of disembodied intellectualism or party political rhetoric, but an impassioned and embodied plea for peace and freedom in dark times.

The lines which follow Woolf’s eloquent statement of cosmopolitan belonging are less well-known, but no less poignant:

And if, when reason has said its say, still some obstinate emotion remains, some love of England dropped into a child’s ears by the cawing of rooks in an elm tree, by the splash of waves on a beach, or by English voices murmuring nursery rhymes, this drop of pure, if irrational, emotion she will make serve her to give to England first what she desires of peace and freedom for the whole world. 3

Some obstinate emotion remains. For Woolf, this ‘pure, if irrational, emotion’ is a visceral belonging to England, a belonging to her homeland forged through the physical experience of sound: the cawing of rooks, the splash of waves, the murmur of English voices. Her references to childhood are unmistakable; we acquire the obstinate emotion of citizenship as a visceral connection to place, a form of corporeal and affective belonging, even before we acquire formal language – a child’s bodily response to the murmur of English voices intoning nursery rhymes precedes her understanding of the stories being told and is, in the end, the more obstinate emotional affect.

Woolf’s passionate call to belong to the world is all the more moving in the context of her acknowledgement of her embodied and emotional attachment to her home. Her words are formed as a woman who understands and feels the power of a treasured homeland, without thereby pledging blind allegiance to the power politics of nations as they stumble towards brutality and injustice in the name of king and country. In these few lines, Woolf rejects the mute myth of unthinking citizenship and speaks the heresy of the becoming-denizen. 4

4 The term denizen comes from the late Latin deintus, or ‘from within’, and has been used to describe an ‘alien’ who has gained the rights and status of a citizen through the process of ‘naturalisation’. The phrase ‘becoming-denizen’ is my own; as this essay will make clear, I am interested in the ‘non-natural’ processes
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*the nation ... is an imagined political community
- and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.
No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind.*

Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*

The words ‘nation’ and ‘nature’ share a common root in the Latin *natio* (origin, breed) from *natus* (be born). As the events of the past century demonstrated all too clearly, the root is not innocent. Rather, the etymology of nation conspires to suggest an essential (*natural*) connection between blood and soil, lineage and location, such that the nation is understood as both a place and a group of people, intrinsically interconnected through homeland and birthright.

In exploring the diverse phenomena of which nationalisms are comprised, Benedict Anderson developed his compelling formulation of the concept of nation as ‘an imagined community’, a collective entity whose power derives from *naturalising* the seamless elision of identity and place. As Anderson’s work suggests, the many and varied forms through which these imagined communities have been articulated – not least through vernacular print culture, cartography and museum collection and curation – were most effective when and where they could draw sharp boundaries between the limits of a particular nation and its others while, at the same time, enabling the borders of the nation to seem so natural that they all but disappeared from view.

The imaginative fiction of the nation thus naturalised is a through which individuals come to belong, or come to be within, despite the exclusive legal conditions of citizenship that still pertain around the globe. Hence my figuration is ‘in process’, still becoming.


6 It is not a coincidence that the acquisition of citizenship is called ‘naturalisation’; as someone who has been ‘naturalised’ and holds dual citizenship, I can attest to the fact that these forms of official belonging are anything but ‘natural’, and even less so when one contends with the citizenship of one’s child.

7 Invoking the term ‘fiction’ here, I am indebted to the work of Genevieve Lloyd and Moira Gatens (cf. *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza Past and Present* [London: Routledge, 1999]) and to Jacques Rancière (cf. *Film Fables* [New York: Berg, 2006], pp. 157–71), who take ‘fiction’ to be a significant articulation of political agency,
performative construct, deriving its mythic power from the reiteration of norms that precede the entrance of individuals into the group and prescribe the limits of their identification within it. When the institutions and activities that naturalise the nation’s boundaries are working well, citizenship, like gender, is experienced as ‘second nature’, a (nearly) seamless identification between subject and place.

However, the imaginative fiction of citizenship comes into sharp relief when the borders are tested from within or beyond the limits of the sovereign state: *no nation imagines itself as coterminous with mankind*. For Virginia Woolf in 1938, a citizenship limited to the boundaries of the political nation-state was in direct conflict with the articulation of her identity as a woman, a pacifist and a cosmopolitan, and so her heretical writing moved toward treason: *As a woman I want no country.*

*Myth has in fact a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us.*

Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*

Roland Barthes’s elegant semiotic deconstruction of the cover of *Paris Match* (June–July 1955), which showed a young black soldier in French uniform saluting the Tricolour, is so well-known as to occupy the status of a myth in its own right – pointing out and imposing semiology as a key form of analysis within the field of visual culture. But returning to Barthes’s text from a slightly different angle reveals other dimensions that are useful here: in particular, the conjunction between the myth of citizenship, the imagined community engaged by popular media and the significance of embodied subjectivity and photography to both.

It is not surprising that both Barthes and Anderson turned to popular (vernacular) print media as critical to the construction of important to the construction of the social imaginary and indicative of our responsibility towards others.

the imagined community of the nation or the mythic image of the citizen. But while Anderson spoke very little of the illustrated nature of the popular press, Barthes focused his semiotic analysis on the photographic cover. Arguably, photographies and lens-based practices (whether documentary, mass media, fine art or domestic forms) are the media most closely associated with the visual construction of the nation and national identity, both historically and in contemporary culture.9 As the Paris Match cover demonstrated so well, photographies can naturalise citizens in one swift click of the shutter.

But what refused to conform or ‘disappear’ within the photograph (in Barthean terms, the punctum), what exceeded the seamlessness of the myth it sought to convey was the body of the young soldier, experienced by Barthes in the barber-shop as racially different. Thus, though the analysis of the function of the image remained coolly academic and systematic, the photograph itself resonated affectively with the scholar, making Barthes aware of his own, and the young soldier’s, embodied and situated difference.

Nearly half a century after the young soldier appeared on the cover of Paris Match, the Swedish artist Annica Karlsson Rixon developed the photographic series Annika by the Sea (1999–2001). The series consists of seven photographic portraits of women who, like Karlsson Rixon, were born in Sweden in the 1960s and named ‘Annika’. The women each stand by the sea, facing Karlsson Rixon, and look directly at the camera while photographed. When shown, each portrait is titled with the full name of the sitter, the specific seaside location and date, for example: Annika Öhrner by the Skagerrak/Kattegatt, Skagen, Denmark, September 2000 and Annika Lundgren by the Pacific Ocean, Malibu, California, USA, January 1999.

The eloquent simplicity of Annika by the Sea belies its sophisticated negotiation of photographic conventions, concepts of identity and issues of location. There is a logic that connects these sitters – they are women from the same generation, they share a national and cultural origin, an identifiable citizenship and, of course, a name. As

9 Though it is not within the scope of the present essay, suffice to say here that the histories of photography associated with, for example, colonial exploration, travel literature, social documentary, domestic/family archives and news gathering are inextricably embedded within the construction of national identities.
portraits, they share a monumental format and a background device, a device-as-conceit that reiterates a Nordic cultural mythology centred on the significance of the sea. The series *could* articulate an imagined community, it *may* construct a natural or essential connection between citizens and nation. But I want to suggest instead that, just as the series brings this into view, it counters it and this action opens the limited territory of the essential citizen to the open horizon of what could be called an embodied becoming-denizen.

Installed in Copenhagen in 2003 as a billboard project for the exhibition *Women2003*, the visual presence of the series emphasised
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its conceptual movement between interconnection and difference. The repetition of the images connected the sitters, yet, simultaneously, each portrait was absolutely singular. The visual presence of the women portrayed is emphasised by their pose and returned gaze, complemented by the specificity of name and location in the titles. These ensure that the women imaged in the work retain a strong sense of individuality, one that is only enhanced when the portraits are shown as billboard images, given the ubiquitous use of ‘woman’ in advertising as a fragmented and depersonalised object.

*Annika by the Sea* sets out the possibilities of imagining community or constructing national, generational, cultural and gendered collectivity, without collapsing difference through essentialising myth. The works materialise a network of women, reveal rather than occlude...
the constructed nature of community and collectivity, and suggest that correspondence of name, age and national origin is no guarantee of identity. Framing collectivity in and as difference, while pointing to the photographic strategies through which nation, homeland and citizenship are visualised, *Annika by the Sea* navigates through the same territories as the *Paris Match* cover of 1955, but with very different results. The young black man is forcibly inserted into an economy of the same – nameless, in French uniform, saluting but not returning our gaze, he becomes an object for a fixed and conferred sense of citizenship.

The Swedish Annikas who stand at the edges of the fluid and connective currents of the seas return our gaze, are named and located in many different countries in the world, and materialise a mobile and open relationship between place and identity. Like Woolf, they are not ‘rootless’ – they come from somewhere, they share something between them – but this does not foreclose their movement or their relationships to new places. Women by the sea, their country is the whole world. The networks forged through the series *Annika by the Sea* between Karlsson Rixon, her sitters and the myriad places in which they make themselves at home are creative fictions of belonging. They are the work of denizenship and they re-work photography’s seamless production of nation through the agency of embodied and mobile subjects in the world.

*Ruth Lister, *Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives*¹⁰

In exploring citizenship from a feminist perspective, Ruth Lister argued that binary concepts of place that conventionally oppose local and global, private and public, domestic and foreign, have little to offer

women as they seek to negotiate gender-specific forms of belonging that operate across and between such spaces. Her conception of citizenship as both a status and a practice works likewise, bringing together the institutional structures that predefine national identity through homeland (citizenship as ‘status’) and the open-ended potential of individuals to imagine and create new forms of community, connection and belonging in many different places.

Nowhere could the concept of homeland, citizenship and belonging be more contested than in Jerusalem where, in 1948, the city was divided, with the western half coming under Israeli rule and the eastern under the authority of Jordan. At the time of partition, more than 70 per cent of the inhabitants of West Jerusalem were Palestinian; their forcible removal enabled the resettlement of the space by Israeli Jews.

In 2008–09 the Palestinian artist Alexandra Handal produced a photographic series entitled No Parking Without Permission. Most of the images were taken between March and May 2008, during which time Handal undertook to ‘drift’ through West Jerusalem, walking the streets that were once Palestinian neighbourhoods but which she knew only through the window of a moving car, or through oral testimonies, a place described in absentia, as a lost homeland. Handal’s dérive through West Jerusalem was not a simple stroll. As she wrote:

for a Palestinian, drifting in Jerusalem is politicised and loaded with emotional ramifications. Through numerous walks, I explored these areas by looking through all sorts of barriers, fences, gates and bushes in an attempt to remove the distance and be/come closer to the spaces...  

The resultant series of works recorded her ambulatory explorations of the neighbourhoods of West Jerusalem and each is titled with a specific time and place notation, such as No Parking Without Permission, Jerusalem, Greek Colony, 03.05.08, 10.53. The declaration of time and space in the titles of the photographs reinforces their status as a form of indexical evidence of the artist’s movements, of her traverse of this

un-homeland, where barriers maintain a highly exclusive citizenship [Plate 37].

The titles further link the works with the conventions of photo-documentary, in which detailed information contained in titles has been used to underscore the indexical veracity of photographic documents and thus demonstrate their historical value. However sceptical we may now be of such devices, it is significant that the images in *No Parking Without Permission* are constructed in such a way as to emphasise their historically specific temporality as experienced through the embodied vision of a particular person – a Palestinian woman walking. The myth
of a timeless homeland, whether lost or regained, discourages the emergence of new forms of belonging in favour of eternal and essential birthright. Refusing to articulate a vision of West Jerusalem as a myth (outside time), Handal’s photographic record, by contrast, begins to map the path of the heretic, the one who chooses or takes a different view, in time, through her body.\(^{12}\)

If the information given in the titles of the works links them to documentary, their visual qualities are more akin to the conventions of domestic photography, traditionally the purview of women. Backyards, potted gardens, outdoor dining tables and chairs, children’s toys, a dollhouse – these are the objects that define the spaces Handal saw when she walked through these neighbourhoods. Ironically, these views would probably not be much different had these neighbourhoods not forcibly changed occupancy after 1948; the immediacy of domestic existence is remarkably durable and enduring.

I want to suggest that what makes the photographs of No Parking Without Permission provocative in terms of nation and citizenship neither resides solely in their everyday domestic content, nor in their nominated location within historical time and space. Rather, it is the combination of these familiar photographic tropes with the haptic visual qualities of the images that is compelling. The works capture the artist’s ambulatory looking through barriers – fences, gates, hedges – at these very ordinary scenes. The camera does not fix the view, in any sense of the term; we are obliged to negotiate visually a position that is both within and outside, both in and of a particular time and space and yet displaced from it. In the visual work our bodies must do to look at these images, we become aware of the discomfort of the artist’s viewpoint, of her ‘trying to look’, of seeking to belong in the spaces, but not quite getting there.

In No Parking Without Permission, the camera does not provide a seamless return to a mythic homeland, but only an imperfect and corporeal construction of a new relationship with this very real place. Yet the photographs of the series do articulate a relationship to the space; Handal’s ‘drift’ through West Jerusalem – walking, looking, photographing – is, to paraphrase Lister, a politically participative practice, arguably a practice through which new forms of citizenship

\(^{12}\) Heresy comes from the Greek hairesis, ‘taking’ or ‘choosing’. 
may emerge. In *No Parking Without Permission*, photography is deployed in such a way as to construct a nascent experimental politics of embodied vision and this, I would argue, goes beyond the political confines of the *natus* of nation with its *natural* citizenship towards the agency of denizenship, the creation of powerful and empowering fictions of belonging across complex and contested homelands.

*Freedom ... is not a state one is in or a quality that one has, but it resides in the activities one undertakes that transform oneself and (a part of) the world.*

Elizabeth Grosz, ‘Feminism, Materialism and Freedom’

Virginia Woolf’s impassioned plea for a feminist cosmopolitan imagination was also an acknowledgement of the obstinate emotion of an affective belonging to home, a home remembered and felt in and through the body. I do not take this to be a contradiction. The practices of making oneself at home in the world refuse the myth of essential authentic identity based on homeland and birthright, but they embrace embodiment, the affective qualities of belonging and forms of experimental collectivity in and through difference. The imaged and imagined communities thus described are not contained within the sharp limits of the historical nation-state, nor are they forms of naturalised citizenship.

I prefer the figure of the becoming-denizen to describe the active practices of belonging, of making oneself at home in multiple locations across and between the present limitations of citizenship that constrain (sometimes forcibly), but never wholly contain, the potential for creative change: *As a woman, my country is the whole world.* And if citizenship is instantiated through the powerful tools of myth, which point to and impose its limits, then the becoming-denizen is articulated

through heresy, through practices premised upon choosing, taking and constructing against the grain.

In developing the concept of the denizen, I am aware of its legalistic use to denote a ‘naturalised’ citizen, but I am also cognisant that it has more fluid and multivalent uses, a number of which are resonant with the ideas being explored here. Denizenship signals movement rather than fixity, and suggests that the ways in which we make ourselves at home in the world and create a sense of belonging in and across many different spaces are as significant to our identifications (and identities) as any determinate ‘homeland’ or defining origin point. Such a shift is critical in thinking about locational identity as always in process and it emphasises the activities of belonging, the work of denizenship rather than the assumed rights of citizenship. This work takes place with others – denizens do not make themselves at home by force, rather there is mutuality in denizenship. And if the concept of the denizen is a much more open and mutable concept of how human subjects interact in making themselves at home, it is also more than human and admits of the complex ecologies through which we are able to belong in this world. The obstinate emotion evoked in Woolf by the ‘cawing of rooks in an elm tree’ and ‘the splash of waves on a beach’ was not, I am suggesting, purely coincidental to her becoming denizenship; it was integral.

In *Three Guineas*, Woolf’s affective belonging to her homeland coincided with her desire for international peace and freedom and these led to her call, as a woman, to other becoming-denizens to look beyond country to the whole world. As Elizabeth Grosz argued, feminism has not had a simple relationship with the concept of freedom as conventionally understood in post-Enlightenment European political theory. Premised on transcendent individuals whose rights are assured through nation-states, freedom has commonly been seen as a commodity; but, as Grosz countered, freedom ‘is not a property or right bestowed on, or removed from, individuals by others but a capacity or potentiality to act’. This is not a denial of the very real legal, social and economic parameters within which subjects exist and are facilitated (or not)

14 Grosz, ‘Feminism, Materialism and Freedom’, p. 152. In her essay, Grosz uses the work of Henri Bergson to think through a materialist (immanent) and temporally changing concept of the individual so to rethink the idea of freedom.
in their potentiality to act, but it is a counter to the logic that sees individuals as having freedom (to be) in favour of understanding subjects as enacting freedom through agency as they become.

It is here that the experimental practices of belonging, as the agency of the becoming-denizen, run counter to the attainment or naturalisation of the citizen; in making oneself at home in the world, peacefully, the denizen articulates the heresy of freedom over the acquisition of commodity-citizenship. This heresy is an imaginative fiction, but not an abstract fantasy. The experimental practices are material, the subjects who enact them are embodied and their effects are located and specific. They do not negate the often brutal realities of the limits of nation and citizenship in a global world, but they choose to speak otherwise. They develop alternative and creative forms of belonging, forms I would suggest are the start of denizen ecologies.\(^{15}\)

In 2009 Charlotte Rea produced the photographic project *To Forget*, comprised of a combination of texts, photographs taken in Japan by Rea and reprinted photographs of Japan taken by Rea’s grandfather who spent time there while convalescing from injuries suffered during the Korean War (1950–53). The project is focused upon the Zainichi Korean community in Kyoto, permanent resident Koreans who first established the community in 1910. The term ‘Zainichi’ is telling; the ‘zai’ refers to temporary domicile, a permanent impermanence, a never-attainable citizenship.

*To Forget* constructs a multiple narrative of the experience of the denizen. Seemingly centred on the Zainichi community who are present, yet veiled, in both the images and the texts (one text even telling the story of a Zainichi man who refuses to be photographed by Rea), *To Forget* is also a tale told between the artist and her grandfather, both of whom used photography to record and relate to their temporary residence in a very foreign land. His photographs imagine the space as a postcard; the pagoda and assymetrical branch in one are remarkably recognisable ciphers for Japan as a circulated, international image of nation. These are very unlike Rea’s images, taken more than fifty years later, which betray a contemporary cityscape, replete with incidental

\(^{15}\) The term ‘denizen ecology’ is one that I am developing in a new project on contemporary art and transversal forms of citizenship.
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detail, or focus upon small incidents or seemingly unimportant features of Kyoto.

Significantly, however, in a textual passage within the work, the grandfather is confused as to the origins of the photographs:

Locations and people exchange places with each other, as he attempts, and fails to recognise. More than once he becomes confused: ‘I thought you’d taken some of these, but you couldn’t have done, could you?’

In the remembering and forgetting of the grandfather and granddaughter, enacted by the narrative of their looking through photographs, the work unfolds places, times, subjects and identities. The photographs and the texts are here and now, now and then; from the material traces of the past, the present emerges. The origin of this place and its visual image in photographs is no guarantee of authenticity of relationship or identity. Rather, the activity of these anglophone
‘foreigners’ trying to make themselves at home within the fragmentary materials of photographs and partial memories articulates better than any documentary evidence the complex denizenhip of the Zainichi Korean community who continue the process of making themselves at home a century after arriving in Kyoto. The refusal of the man to be photographed was fitting; the imagined community of the Zainichi defies fixed imaging and emerges at the edges, in the open sky and flowing river. Grandfather and granddaughter connect as becoming-denizens across generations of experience; their refusal ‘to forget’ is heresy, but it also promise. It is the promise of the work of the becoming-denizen to transform herself and a part, however small, of the world.