**Borders with/in the mother**

Joe Mulroy: Why do you think he'll leave?

Frank Dixon: Because he slipped through and fell in a crack. Nobody likes staying in a crack because they're nothing. Nobody likes to be stuck in a crack

(excerpt from The Terminal -2004, 3’’)

**Crossing borders/crossing generations**

Borders have traditionally been seen as lines of division (Bade 1987, Ong 1999, Corrin 1992, Rogoff 2000), as the final line of resistance between a mythical ‘us’ and an equally mythical ‘them’; either a method of containment or a final barrier leading to ultimate liberation and freedom.

It was challenging to write this article while at the same time there is an immense refugee crises unfolding in Europe. But I though it is particularly important to discuss intergenerational trauma, borders and maternal in this context. Often I evoke Michel de Certeau's aphorism this days: ‘what the map cuts up, the story cuts across’ (de Certeau in Conquergood, 2004:311). We need to take account of ‘local context’ and transnational narratives while travelling between two types of knowledge: official abstract ‘maps’ and personal embodied ‘stories’. In doing so, we draw attention to the importance of the movement between different locations and histories. Susan Hiller when writing about her piece ‘Ten months’ contemplates on this complex territory and says: ’My “self” is a site for thoughts, feelings, sensations, not an impermeable, corporeal boundary. I AM NOT A CONTAINER… Identity is a collaboration. The self is multiple’ (1984:xiii).

Diary Entry, Day 4

I do not have many close relatives who have emigrated or lived in different countries during their lifetime. My entire family has always been happy where it was, proud of their origins and struggling with the demanding cultural and political conditions of the Balkan region. However, that struggle was constantly emphasised with my grandmother’s story about her father, the only one who left the country to go to Chicago in the USA. At that time, the beginning of the 20th century, it was an arduous journey, and one you would undertake if you wanted to disappear. Apparently he came back and stayed in Macedonia, though the conditions of his return were always puzzling and nobody wanted to discuss them. In secret my grandmother told us that if the Balkan wars had not been so cruel and if he had been less stubborn, all of us would probably be in the USA.

When I received my scholarship to attend the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, I went to see my grandmother. Having suffered a couple of strokes one after the other, she was struggling with dementia. When the news of my scholarship was shared at the table with our family, her eyes opened wide and for a moment she seemed to be quite her old self. She almost yelled in joy “I knew it, I knew that it would be you!” She then took me by the hand and said that it was my job to fulfil the dreams of my great-grandfather. She showed me a box of old photographs and a passport – memories that had not been shared with anyone before. The box was now mine, I deserved it. There were many reasons why Todor, my great-grandfather was a silent man and never talked about his life in the USA. He was extremely liberal with his daughters, who were educated to the highest level at a time when females were only allowed to attend the first two grades. He was fluent in Italian and English in a country that was on the wrong side of the Cold War wall (he passed the English on to my grandmother and mother in secret). And every day he silently questioned his decision to return.

It was a painful gift, a Pandora’s box in a way, a gateway to someone’s life story: so well kept. Even now it puzzles me that these mediated memories, an aged screen into a lost life, are such a strong burden for me. I am still struggling to understand why my grandmother thought that it was my job to fulfil his dreams and why until the day she died (just a couple of months after I left for the USA) the only things she remembered clearly were my name and my location. What was the process that linked all of us to this painful story of migration, borders and invisible liminality?

My research is part of my body, thus inevitably carrying its history. It is a very specific history, of a body that has been trapped in liminal spaces for a very long period (both in a geographical/historical sense, but also in a metaphorical and metonymical sense); a body that has been captured in “a world of multiple crises and continuous fragmentations” (Pena in Lacy 1995, p.103). The link between my body, theory and the tools that I use has become the most significant element of my exploration of borders. I cannot possibly outline my arguments without offering snippets of my personal experience through reflective writing.

Borders and mothers

Diary entry, Day 91

Living between two worlds can be demanding. Like an illness, you can’t escape from it. It is so deep in your body. It covers every border that protects you from outside. You can articulate yourself on the screen, but deep inside you know that the screen never articulates, it only imposes form.

Delivery at gate.

There are two gates. One in. One out. And me in between.

A: “We miss you so much”. Her eyes get tearful.

I can’t deliver the news.

B: “Maybe we will stay.”

A: “Stay where?”

B: “I am not quite sure….”

I am thinking of my great grandfather. How do you deliver a loss?

My project ‘Valid until…’ (2009-2011) is an in-depth research on the theme of borders and motherhood. “Valid until…” consisted of a series of autobiographical writing, performative photographs and videos taken during a period of 140 days. The period was symbolic, equal to one hundred and forty questions that I had to answer about myself, my children and my family in the visa application. This is a challenge that repeatedly occurs in my life. Coming from South East Europe (the ex-Yugoslavia region), my validity and legal status is constantly re-evaluated and subject to the scrutiny of the Western European authorities. The period of one hundred and forty days was a period of confirming the validity of my legal status in United Kingdom.

Borders can be built from outside, they can be physical and tangible, difficult to cross, but passable. I felt compelled as an artists to talk about the experience of motherhood as a highly political state, where the body is split and carries not only the child into this world, but also the cultural responsibility and intergenerational take on the borders that youngsters have to cross. As Tyler alludes, “theoretical and creative work on the maternal is central to the future of radical feminist politics [], thinking with, and from, the maternal generates alternatives to neoliberal discourses of reflexive individualism which have stultified political resistance to global capitalism“(2008:5). In my research and performative interventions I look at the relationship between the material realities of lived feminist motherhood and the stunning ways in which artist-mothers negotiate and translate their experiences with/on the border. Liss suggests that through feminist conceptions of interdependence, intersubjectivity, and the maternal self, the artist is capable of conceiving new social artistic projects that think (m)otherwise (2009:xix). This relates to philosopher Sara Ruddick’s foundational ideas on the concept of maternal thinking, specifically as she wondered, “what maternal concepts might introduce into political and philosophical discussions” (Ruddick in Bassin, Honey, and Kaplan, 1994: 30).

I think it is particularly potent to think of Gloria Anzaludia here and her suggestion that borderlands are loaded with meaning. While borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them, a borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. Anzaludia’s borderland is in a constant state of transition. As described by Cixous, the borderland was for her marking the zone of not belonging as a child. She poetically depicts:

I went toward France, without having had the idea of arriving there. Once in France I was not there. I saw that I would never arrive in France. I had not thought about it. At the beginning I was disturbed, surprised, I had so wanted to leave that I must have vaguely thought that leaving would lead to arriving. [ ] In the first naïve period it is very strange and difficult to not arrive where one is. For a year I felt the ground tremble, the streets repel me, I was sick. Until the day I understood there is no harm, only difficulties, in living in the zone without belonging. (1998 :169).

In the current refugee crises maternal is at the same time visible and invisible, so talked about, so public and so deeply incoherent. In general terms with maternal I refer not only to the material and embodied experience of pregnancy, motherhood and lactation of migrant mothers captured by media, but also to identities and meanings of mothering, the ongoing emotional and relational work of being with children and others, the daily material practices of childrearing, the social locations and structural contexts within which this women mother. Indeed, to the whole range of embodied, social and cultural meanings, practices and structures associated with reproduction and parenting in crises.

Irene Gedalof introduces the theoretical approach that pivots on the notion that migrant women’s reproductive work can be characterized as a kind of ‘juggling between two worlds’. For example, Ruba Salih’s work on Moroccan migrant women in Italy (2001, 2003) provides much fascinating detail of the complexities of home for migrant women and the material and emotional work that goes into maintaining transnational links and identities. Yet I feel that this theoretical framework does not go far enough in terms of practical application. While it allows us to recognize that migrant women are involved in complex and dynamic work when they mother, it still leaves us with a sense that this work occurs between two, relatively stable sites of belonging, the ‘here’ and the ‘there’. While this certainly captures part of the processes of making home in which migrant mothers are engaged, it does not quite get at the messy, dynamic nature of the reproductive processes and practices involved (talking daily on Skype with the family ‘there’, shifting between languages, answering in the right language, crying, leaking, vomiting in a foreign space, in a foreign culture). The question is not only how migrant mothers are constrained by pre-existing structures in their agency, but also, how we understand both structures and agents of belonging as messy and dynamic entanglements of constraint and enablement, being and becoming, movement and inhabitance. Some of the work on migration by feminist geographers has expanded this insight by drawing on a more fluid and dynamic concept of ‘place’ (Massey, 1993) and the intricate relationships between body, place and identity (Dyck, 2006). The point of the matter is that we live in a world which is organised along multiple axes of mobility, circulation, flows of people and commodities (Cresswell,1997:368). Displacement is a central feature of the postmodern era (Probyn in Braidotti, 2006:78).

**Where is my home mummy?**

The image above is a text (or rather a statement) my daughter wrote to me when she was 5 and a half. I told her that we won’t be able to go back to Macedonia over Easter, because I am too busy at work and her father can’t get days off. She appeared rather accepting of this announcement, but half an hour later, when I went to the kitchen I saw this statement written on our dinning table “ Dear mum and dad, when I grow up, I will live in Macedoanuia” (hence the English phonic spelling). First it made me laugh and giggle, until the evening, when I started fretting and rethinking all my life decisions. The past is not as separate from the present. I am reminded of this when making decisions for my children everyday, on multiple occasions. The past is constantly broken down and reintegrated into the present. How to find a way to tell you, my daughters, why I am doing this. A string of letters about my joy and pain, ambivalent motherhood on the border. In “Valid until …” her voice and body encompassing mine; traversing the physical boundaries. Us in transitional spaces, us at home, us in a liminal limbo waiting for visas. Endless drawings of houses, endless questions of where we belong, endless memories of where we don’t belong.

And going back to the present moment, yet another immigrant crises unfold in Europe. It is an imperative in this media frenzy to use strategic first-person voices (my own, hers, my daughter’s, her daughter’s, my family’s, all the families that are on the borderline). My thinking on “voice” here bears an affinity with that of feminist law professor and writer Drucilla Cornell: “I use ‘voice’ in contrast to muteness that makes feminine ‘reality’ disappear because it cannot be articulated. Muteness not only implies silencing of women, it also indicates the ‘dumbness’ before what cannot be ‘heard’ or ‘read’ because it cannot be articulated” (1991:3). This links to Jane Bacon’s concept of “voice of her body” where she asks the crucial question of how a woman artist can be sure that the (artistic, academic, personal) ‘voice’ she has is being received in the way that is important for her. She further suggests that in order to answer this, the artist needs to attend a careful process of inner listening and allowing that provides the ground from which she can move to find her body/self (2010: 72). In this moments of desperation and grief we just to have to find ways on how to empathetically be in the place of the other and inside one’s self, how to care for another and one’s self. The visual, conceptual and artistic exploration of borders and motherhood are necessary to renounce patriarchal, sexist, and racist attitudes that separate body from the mind, the intimate from the political, and human beings from each other.