

## Dances with identity

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I watched games played amongst the pages of my passport. Power-games of control, confiscation, impositions. Demands of loyalty to “causes”, “identities”, “nationalities” “sides”, I didn’t subscribe to, mostly opposed, creating my own, finding myself a lone voice, in the wilderness, speaking to the wind scattering my words to even more remote locations, occasionally brushing against minds, causing momentary echoes of joy, followed by short-lived passions, abandoned for *real-politik* causes, providing material gains but no solutions.

People of war-torn countries like mine are constantly classified, declassified, defined, redefined, accepted, rejected. Flux, fluidity, quicksand of ideas, grounds, borders, identities, ethnicities, faiths, nationalities, moralities, ethics, societal and individual values, geographies... we become experts in defining and redefining ourselves and others at speed. We become chameleons. We become experts in detachment, in learning to live without permanence, securities. Nothing will endure. Un-attachment, transformed into detachment seeps through the cracks, lest it causes pain. Shallowness settles. Superficiality becomes the norm. Lack of morality the ultimate aspiration. Self-delusion that all is beyond one’s control, becomes the convenience of the final resting place. And necrophilia rules OK!

“What is this stamp?” he gruffly asks holding my passport as though it is infested with vermin. Dangling at the tips of his fingers... should I respond to what he already knows? I just look at him waiting for the show, wondering how he will act it out. When I don’t take the bait he looks up, weighing my insolence. I give nothing away. Secure in the knowledge that that passport is mine and represents me, legitimately. He can do very little about it. I know he is impotent to do anything about it. He goes through his moves, psyching himself up, weighing his punch line. “This is illegal!” growls and waits for my reaction. I give him none. “You should not have this, this is the property of the Cyprus government!” the authoritative voice declares and proceeds to look at it closely, scrutinises the seams, stitching, photo, stamps of the worlds I’ve travelled in which I suspect he will never dare go to... “I know,” I say after he has ran out of things to stretch, pull, bring up close to his eyes, all designed to create anxiety, panic in me, “and it is legally mine.” And I wait. I don’t scare easily. Having got an answer from me, he continues, “You go *there*? Why you go *there*? That is under occupation. You should not go there!” I decide to play so that I can get out of the sphere of such an imbecile, “As you can see, I go *there*.” After a suitable silence, “My mother and sister live there,” I say. “And what are you doing *here*?” is quickly thrown at me, accusatory, with enough nuance to suggest that as a “Turk” I don’t have a right to be *here*, I am on the wrong “side”, I might be a spy... a traitor! I am beginning to be more interesting for him. “My grandmother and grandfather live *here*, in Limassol. They refused to go *there*!” I use the word “refuse” deliberately, because that’s exactly what they did, despite all their daughter’s, my mother’s, pleading to go to Nicosia. “What are we going to do there?” asked Grandfather in confusion. “Where would we live? We know no one. We have our trees here, our little house. We are too old. We want to stay here. We have good neighbours. Let those who are young go,” he had insisted. They were in their seventies. EOKA had burnt down their house in Platres, in 1964. He had barely escaped having been alerted by his “Greek” taxi driver friend who told him EOKA was coming to

burn down his house that night. Grandmother had already gone to clean the hotel in Limassol where cabaret artists from all over the world, entertained and sexually satisfied the hunger of all ethnicities, for “foreign” women.

Their first forced migration was during the late 1920s famine, searching for work when they left their village in Paphos and went to Platres, to the mountains, to build roads and hotels as labourers. My grandmother, the construction labourer before she became the washer-woman for the British Army officers and the cleaning lady for their torture rooms. Neither could read or write. But I didn't tell the passport controller their story. He is no longer cock-sure. He enters the feet-shuffling phase of the performance. I watch. I supply the address, ages of grandparents, where I will be staying for how long, knowing full well and saying so, “I can stay as long as I want.” But I am a lecturer at a college in London and I have to return. The show has ended; he knows it, despite his futile efforts to extend the performance. He lays my passport, a sacrificial lamb by now, on his table and takes a stamp, scrutinises it closely and with zeal bangs it on various pages. He is relishing it. “You cannot have these! Not in this passport! I am cancelling them.” ‘CANCELLED’ it said in red ink on all the entrances and exits from *there*. He hands me my passport extremely satisfied with his “solution” to the problem. I laughed when I looked at it. “If you can solve the Cyprus problem as easily as this, please continue cancelling each other's stamps; it would be great! Fight it out on the pages of my passport!” was my parting shot.

The next time I was over *there* the passport controller gave me a visa to enter the other half of my country on that same passport because it no longer represented the newly created country. He cancelled the stamps of the *others* and told me it was no longer valid as it did not represent *them*. The new administration of the power elites created by the invasion, produced a new passport, recognised by no other than the invading country. They demanded I obtain *their* passport and hand in to them my existing one decorated with the reciprocated CANCELLED stamps. I refused. Thus earning the label once more, of a traitor and disloyalty to my ascribed ethnic group.

During the 1970s and early 1980s a campaign of imposed identities raged in the Cypriot-Turkish communities as part of Turkification. I faced constant accusations of denying my identity, ethnicity, nationality, by those attempting to discredit my work in Cyprus and London. “Cypriot” my answer to identity, sparked fury, ridicule, bullying amongst nationalist zealots demanding to know the colour of blood I was carrying in my veins (a reference to a verse of a nationalist poem) and why was I ashamed to call myself a Turk? As it is well known, you are proud to be a Turk! I mocked such primitive but dangerous hysteria by saying my blood was the same colour as the Black man sitting next to them, red, but wasn't sure what colour theirs was; perhaps it was blue! Similarly, the response “Cypriot” elicited being addressed in Greek by Cypriots and questioned my insistence on speaking in English, (I also speak Greek) leading to assumptions of rejecting my Greekness. My comment, “Not all Cypriots are Greek!” would be met with confusion, quick fluttering of eyelashes and frozen smiles.

By 1983, with the creation of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), again only recognised by Turkey, all those who had ridiculed me and endangered my life for identifying myself as a Cypriot, had changed identities. They were now loudly proud to be “Turkish-Cypriot!” “Cypriot” was part of the new game of identity, necessary to cash in on European and other funding entitlements. Recognition as a separate state with visa and travel rights for its citizens in the world, their target. It was not to be. To this day, it is not recognised, prompting its “citizens” to find their own solutions, i.e. obtaining, by whatever-means-possible, passports of the Republic of Cyprus. New moves are afoot to rename the “country” in the north, new steps in an old dance with identity...

By the same year I was going through another transformation of identity and citizenship. The British Nationality and Immigration Act (1983) was due to be implemented in 1984. As a Republic of Cyprus passport holder for twenty years and resident in the UK, I was losing the right to automatic British Citizenship and residence. It was becoming

discretionary. I could be deported on the flimsiest excuse once interviewed and researched. To where? The north or the south of Cyprus? Which was my country? And what of the twenty years of activism, the latest of which was supporting political refugees from the 1980 military coup in Turkey, just as I had worked with the “unrecognised” refugees of the 1974 invasion of Cyprus. One-third of the population was displaced; 9,000 arrived in the UK. Helping them with visas, finding accommodation, support networks, further education. And what about my work I was passionate about, in education with young apprentices, unemployed young people, women, underachieving young people from all the black and bilingual communities, anti-racist work, developing policies and approaches to multiculturalism, multilingualism, equal opportunities?

And as an anti-loyalist I didn't want to swear allegiance to the Queen, a new condition of citizenship. An application before the deadline of implementation would circumvent that. And my political and educational activism in London and north and south Cyprus was well known by military and political circles. Exposing and writing about taboo subjects, assassinations, rapes, looting, implicating government ministers and the military and an anti-militarist, anti-nationalist stance campaigning for peace and not war-mongering, had earned me a place on the front page of the fascist paper in the north as a traitor, making me a target for violence and threats to my life on the north and south. In such situations a British passport would be an advantage to get me out of the country of my birth and enable me to contribute to exciting and innovative developments in London, my country of adoption and globally.

My new identity came with heartache. I was asked to collect my passport from the Immigration and Nationality Department at the Strand. Collect it in a few hours, the voice on the phone had said. I went into an Italian coffee house near by for the wait, across from the London School of Economics where students had occupied the building in 1968. As a revolutionary student at Cardiff University, I had tabled a motion at the Student's Union to support the LSE students, barely in my first three months as a first year student. I didn't even understand what an amendment was. I remember students rushing into the hall to hear me speak, to the surprise of cynical student union officers; the motion was carried. A few years later, I met some of those who had occupied the LSE before steel gates were erected in corridors as part of riot control measures learnt in prisons, militarising civil society, now at its pinnacle, licensed by anti-terrorist legislation supported by sophisticated surveillance technology. That day, holding a British passport in my hands, was one of the most alienating experiences in my life. I could not identify with this new identity, new definition of myself. I kept thinking this is not me. I felt a stranger. I was certain of being a Cypriot, with all its complications; being British and its assumptions was so far away from how I felt.