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World Wide Street

Suzanne M. Hall

Every year since 2004, I travel back to South Africa to visit family. It is an eleven and a half hour flight, usually made through the night, allowing the traveller to get from London to Cape Town without missing so much as a day. Except, like me, if you don't sleep well on a plane. Scrunched in an economy seat that perceptibly shrinks with each year, I mark the hours with in-flight movies and a good book. Around 3am I slink past the row of sprawling bodies to walk up and down the aisles, passing seats filled with passengers in various bodily states of oblivion and blankets that have slithered to the floor. Around 5am we are greeted by the full set of lights being put back on, the unpalatable aroma of egg that has been sitting in microwavable foils for the past 24 hours, and the determined cheeriness of the flight attendants.

At this point, having refused to take part in the breakfast charade, I resort to the in-flight magazine. I flick past restaurant and city reviews; offers on perfume, faux jewellery and giant packs of Toblerone; and finally, at the back, reach the map. The one element of curiosity offered in the 11 hour flight, contained in a single A4 image of destinations the airline flies to and from. At the click of a search engine we can find all thinkable articulations of our global age, and yet it is this map, full of its pinpoints, continental outlines and flight arcs, that evokes the wonder of it. London to Accra; Singapore to Perth; New York to Mexico City. Millions and millions of families, students, business people, leaders, crooks, writers, artists, doctors, nannies, all traversing the globe every day of every year.

So porous are our city borders that on any one day, airport passengers average 180,000 at Heathrow, 100,000 at Gatwick and 50,000 at Stansted. Six hundred thousand students arrive from outside of London each year, filling

the city's university lecture rooms and libraries with daily attendance. Four hundred thousand tourists peruse its galleries, jostle up and down Oxford Street, and have their pictures taken in front of Buckingham Palace. And that is just on one day. How could we comprehend the accumulation of generations of arrivals and departures in the making of the city? In 2004, I moved into a flat above the Walworth Road in south London. A year later, intrigued by the diversity of people who activate this linear ecosystem of retail and day-to-day convenience, I decided to trace the origins of independent proprietors on the street. I had in mind the connections of that airline travel map, and so, relying on a colleague's computer skills, we set out an image with a map of the world below and a map of the street directly above it. For two weeks we



A map of the origins and destination of the diverse proprietors on a south London street, surveyed in 2009.

Source: Hall, S. M. (2012) *City, Street and Citizen: The Measure of the Ordinary*, London: Routledge.

walked the Walworth Road, engaged in a face-to-face survey of the independent proprietors. My colleague Thresh pinpointed the worldwide origins of the 93 shopkeepers on the mile length street who were willing to participate in our survey, and drew a line to the corresponding shop. I elected to leave out any visual distractions: no colour, just a simple black and white tracing of one point connecting to another. What appeared in monochrome was no less captivating to me

than the airline original. On one London street at one point in time, an aggregation of origins of stunning diversity: Afghanistan, China, Cyprus and Northern Cyprus, England, Ghana, India, Iran, Ireland, Italy, Jamaica, Malawi, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Trinidad, Turkey and Vietnam.

There are many audits and tracings of this kind that one would like to see: workers in the NHS, for example, or London bus drivers, or even students and staff in my own university. I chose the street because it is so

commonplace, an everyday urban currency that each of us, no matter where we are from, has a familiarity with. The intention is to reveal what is common to our urban landscapes and how the everyday alters in an increasingly mobile world. Our survey reveals the diversity of people that is integral to the way day-to-day life in our cities works. To deny this commonplace conviviality or the porosity of the world in which we now live, would require holding, at all costs, to another truth. It would require a moral claim for the tightening of borders, accompanied by an expedient pragmatism that allows for a discriminatory system of access to those with high influence and income. To counteract the experience of living in the wider world, we would have to circulate a cynical apparatus of hierarchy based on a singular national allegiance above cross-border interdependencies. To make the distinctions of insiders and outsiders felt, there would need to be vans parading around London neighbourhoods with billboards demanding ‘Go home or face arrest’. But who would go that far down such a

dead-end street?

On my return flight from Cape Town to London I pass through the South African border control. Because I am a dual nationality citizen, I am required to travel in and out of South Africa with both passports, a minimal obligation which, on this occasion, I had forgotten to respect. As I handed the border guard my maroon UK passport, instead of my Springbok green-and-gold one, he frowned:

“You have forgotten your passport,” he stated.

“Yes,” I replied sheepishly.

“But you wouldn’t forget this one, would you?” he insisted. “*This* is the one you wouldn’t forget.”

In today’s world, we are all migrants of sorts. We perpetually travel across borders in airplanes, through mobile phone networks, along internet satellite signals. But as the border guard reminded me, we are not all equally migrants; some are permitted more access than others.

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