LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Mapping Mediterranean Borderscapes in Victoria Thompson's *Losing Alexandria: A Memoir*

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Abstract: This article explores the role of cultural, ethnic, and other borders and borderscapes in the memoir *Losing Alexandria* (1998), by the Alexandria-born Australian writer, actor, interpreter, and psychotherapist Victoria Thompson (see Thompson 2024a). As a story of a distant North African childhood that has continued to play a role in its migrant narrator's life, the text is a particularly interesting exploration of the various forms of border-crossings it displays. It is suggested that Thompson's memoir of her family and its life in multicultural and multilingual Alexandria in Egypt until the 1950s and their migration to Australia can be approached in the context of what border theorists such as Brambilla (2015a; 2015b) and Rajaram and Grundy-Warr (2007) call borderscapes, sites of different encounters that extend beyond the actual border and have particular effects on identity construction. Through an analysis of the memoir's diverse border-crossings, the article shows various borderscapes where identities are reconstructed in terms of space and time. Spatial identities are primarily linked with the bordering processes as experienced in Alexandria and throughout the migrations. The temporal border-crossings are present in the memoir's excavations of family and community memory and also in its exploration of history, mythology, and border beings and their role in the narrator's present. Through its focus on a borderscape between cultures and histories, the memoir emphasizes cultural plurality and polyphony, and challenges attempts at bordering that insist on the fixedness of identity.

Keywords: borders; borderscapes; memoir; Alexandria; migration; Victoria Thompson

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Introduction

This article explores the role of cultural, ethnic, and other borders and borderscapes in the memoir *Losing Alexandria* (1998), by the Alexandria-born Australian writer, actor, interpreter, and psychotherapist Victoria Thompson (see Thompson 2024a). As a story of distant North African childhood that has continued to play a role in its migrant narrator's life, the text is a particularly interesting exploration of the various forms of border-crossings it displays. An explorative and experimental memoir unnoticed by literary critics, the memoir has been praised by reviewers as a remarkable autobiographical text about Egypt and the pains of migration (see Thompson 2024b), as well as for its evocation of different senses, gossip, and family scandals (Skea 1998).

My reading of the memoir is based on the idea in contemporary border studies that borders are not mere fixed boundary markers generating binaries such as here and there, us and them, or host and migrant. Rather, they are more extensive spaces generating diverse encounters that involve acts of both bordering and debordering, and exclusion and inclusion, and organize identifications spatially as well as temporally. To use Henk van Houtum's phrase, a border 'is not a noun but verb' (2013: 2). In my reading, I will suggest that Thompson's memoir of her family and its life in multicultural and multilingual Alexandria in Egypt until the 1950s and their migration to Australia can be approached in the context of what border theorists such as Brambilla (2015a; 2015b) and Rajaram and Grundy-Warr (2007) call borderscapes, sites of different encounters that extend beyond the actual border and have particular effects on identity construction. Borderscapes are key spaces that involve interaction and generate diverse encounters between different cultures and variously positioned individuals.

I will suggest that Thompson's original home, the city of Alexandria – mythologized in modern literature by canonical writers such as C.P. Cavafy, E.M. Forster, and Lawrence Durrell as a space of cultural, ethnic, and sexual encounters – is a borderscape generating various meetings and border-crossings. Located on the border between East and West, Thompson's city provides a space for imagining identity in the conditions of the borderscape by offering both moments of 'belonging' and 'becoming,' to use the terms presented by the border theorist Chiara Brambilla (2015a: 20). Through an analysis of the role of the memoir's diverse border-crossings, I show how the text approaches various borderscapes where identities are reconstructed in terms of space and time. Spatial identities are primarily linked with the bordering processes as experienced in Alexandria and throughout the migration as part of its spatial border-crossings. The temporal border-crossings are present in the memoir's excavations of family and community memory and also in its exploration of history and mythology and their role in the narrator's present. Through its focus on a borderscape between cultures and histories, the memoir emphasizes cultural plurality and polyphony, and challenges attempts at bordering that insist on the fixedness of identity.

The relevance of reading Thompson's narrative of her and her family's migration and the lost home – geographically, culturally, and also personally – is evident in the several intertwined factors that have generated its multilayered representation of various borders,

borderscapes, and border-crossings. At the level of geopolitics, the memoir addresses bordering processes associated with the Eastern Mediterranean and Egypt in particular, revealing how the gradually strengthening processes of state-organized nationalism erodes the established multiculturalism in the country and leads to a homogeneous nation-state. In addressing the individual in the context of the impending migration, the memoir emphasizes the problems associated with displacement and the traumatizing effect of the journeying and life in another space. At the same time, however, it reveals cultural borders in the childhood space. The gaze at the past serves as a strategy to reinterpret the lost space of childhood in the contemporary context and its traces, rather than to present it as a mere site of nostalgia. In this sense the text confirms what Kate Douglas sees as a key feature in autobiographical writings focusing on childhood: while on one level they narrate a story of growing up, on another they 'reveal … more about what it is possible to remember and forget (culturally) at the time when the text was produced and circulated' (2010: 84). In reading Thompson's reconstruction of the past and its ambiguities, I aim to problematize a simplified understanding of it as primarily a nostalgic text by foregrounding the way its multiple spatial and temporal border-crossings generate new belongings and becomings, as is typical of borderscapes.

Approaching Borderscapes and Border-Crossings

Spatial literary studies has developed in recent years into various different directions such as literary topography, with an interest in real places and their effects in literary works (Finch 2011, geocriticism focusing on particular spaces – geographical sites – as conveyed in the arts (Westphal 2011), the study of literary landscapes (de Lange et al. 2008), literary urban studies (Ameel 2022), and border poetics devoted to the study of diverse borders and their functions in literature both thematically and technically (Schimanski and Wolfe 2017). Border poetics – and literary border studies more generally – is rooted in the cultural turn in border studies and aims to analyse the various roles and functions of different borders in literary texts, often with reference to geopolitical and cultural borders and border-crossings (see Schimanski and Wolfe 2017; Schimanski and Nyman 2021). What such work calls for and develops is explicit attention to the ways in which images and narratives mediate and negotiate borders in both public and private contexts, 'making visible the experience of those who live with and cross borders, especially ethnic and cultural minorities and migrants' (Nyman and Schimanski 2021: 2).

The emphasis on mobility and border-crossings, associated with migrants in the above quotation, is indicative of current ways of thinking about borders in contemporary border studies. Rather than fixed lines of separation, borders are identified as locations and processes generating and associated with different bordering and debordering phenomena and processes – the making and unmaking of borders. While borders are patrolled and managed, they are also porous and bring different communities together. For the border scholar David Newman, border phenomena extend from guarding the border to the way in which borders serve as sites of contact and transition (2007: 35-38). Rather than as barriers, Newman writes,

borders function as bridges and may transform into spaces where 'people or groups who have traditionally kept themselves distant from each other, make the first attempts at contact and interaction, creating a mixture of cultures and hybridity of identities' (Newman 2007: 38).

Such spaces are understood as borderscapes where interaction and encounters are key features. In P. K. Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr's definition, borderscapes are 'zones of varied and differentiated encounters' (2007: xxx). What this attention to borderscapes and their role in generating interaction and contact reveals is that different encounters with Otherness can be uncovered: they are part of the emergence of new or transformed identities in the conditions of the border resulting from encounters or the maintenance of borders. According to the border theorist Chiara Brambilla, borderscapes are spaces where the function of borders is to serve as sites of encounters, that is, as relational and moving spaces (2015a: 22), and they are locations where cultural encounters may lead to new affiliations and identities. For Brambilla, borderscapes are spaces where borders emerge as sites of interaction, revealing that there 'bordering processes have impacts, are represented, negotiated or displaced' (2015a: 22). They are 'paradoxical structures that are both *markers of belonging* and *places of becoming*' (Brambilla 2015a: 24; emphasis original). Rajaram and Grundy-Warr similarly underline the role of the borderscape as a site involving conflicts and solutions where new constructions of the political and the cultural emerge as a result of their status as 'fluid terrain[s] of a multitude of political negotiations, claims, and counterclaims' (2007: xxx).

The term borderscape is also useful in understanding that border phenomena often take place in locations other than the national border, that is, they travel, since borderscapes are mobile and transforming, rather than being fixed locations or mere geopolitical markers. Borders may follow moving subjects such as migrants, who leave their homes and travel and settle somewhere else. In such cases, European and other metropolises are parts of the extended borderscape, where different bordering processes and memories are evident and suddenly reappear in new spaces, as shown in Schimanski's understanding of the presence of border phenomena in various locations, both near and far from the border, that are connected with each other as parts of the extended, woven, partly deterritorialised space of the borderscape' (2015: 40). For Schimanski, bordering and debordering, negotiating the border and its effects, and countering its demands, occur in the extended borderscape, so they are not a mere 'effect of the border, but an assemblage in which bordering takes place' (2015: 40). Borderscapes, then, are discursive and material, and rather than mere representations they serve as performatives that participate in the politicized bordering processes with the potential to resist established binaries and monological views (see Nyman and Schimanski 2021: 9).

The roles played by geopolitical bordering and the contested nature of the Mediterranean borderscape in the twentieth century are embedded in Thompson's memoir and make it a relevant case for analysis. *Losing Alexandria* exemplifies Mediterranean and Egyptian processes of bordering and borderscapes, which reveal an increasing twentieth-century conflict between the state and its so-called foreign residents (e.g., British, French, Italian, Maltese, Greek, Armenian, Jewish), whose presence in Alexandria has contributed to the city's vibrancy and image as a site of diverse cultural and ethnic encounters. In Mary-Louise Pratt's (1992, 6-7) terms it is a contact zone characterized by cultural encounters and

mutual exchanger. However, by the 1950s, Egyptian nationalism as practiced by Gamal Abdel Nassar had developed into a rigid and exclusive politics that aimed at uprooting the long-standing and Egyptianized resident foreigners – known as the *mutamassirun* – from the nation through political, economic, discursive, and legislative practices (Gorman 2003: 172-176). Following the 1956 Suez War involving Egypt, France and Britain, Nasser's government wanted to challenge the West by taking over control of the canal (Tignor 2011: 266). Companies owned by foreigners were nationalized and integrated into the state's public sector, and French and British passport-holders were ousted (Tignor 2011: 268). The number of foreign residents in Egypt decreased from somewhat more than 200,000 in 1947 to fewer than half that number (Dalachans 2017: 3). The Jewish population diminished from ca. 80,000 after the Second World War to a mere few hundred in the 1970s (Tignor 2011: 268). The well-integrated Greeks who had lived in Alexandria and other parts of Egypt for millennia expected different treatment, but by the late 1960s the nationalist pressures and general discriminatory practices in employment led to many of them taking the decision to leave, and by 1967 their number had decreased to 17,000, whereas the figure had still been 48,000 in 1960 (Kitroeff 2019: Ch. 7).

In the decades culminating in the forced migration of the *mutamassirun*, displacing them from their homes, familiar landscapes and social networks, Egypt's nationalist politics and organized bordering, seen in its political and legislative practices, were supported with a nationalist discourse in which they were imagined as 'foreign and parasitic elements, vilified as enemies of the people, allies of imperialism and blood-sucking capitalists' and also excluded from nationalist narratives of history (Gorman 2003: 174). Since such juxtapositions and exclusions are common in discourses of bordering, the pains associated with the Mediterranean borderscape and the disappearance of its multicultural heritage, as seen in Thompson's work, are comparable to the pain caused by other violent forms of bordering encountered by irregular migrants attempting to reach Europe by sea at the present time.

As the following analysis shows, the larger contexts of Thompson's memoir affect the modes of its exploration of the border-crossing migration process from Alexandria to Australia and also its various effects such as displacement, trauma, and nostalgia, as shown in the text.

Imagining Borders in *Losing Alexandria*

In Thompson's memoir, borders, border-crossings, and borderscapes are present in various ways, extending from geography and gender to the thematics of memory and textual aspects. In this section I first address concrete acts of bordering as a means of power in Alexandria. Second, I discuss the negotiation of borders and formation of new identities within its borderscape. Third, I examine the ways in which the memoir is a border-crossing text in dialogue with other imaginings of Alexandria.

Borders and Bordering in Alexandria

As Thompson's memoir shows, bordering processes are constantly present and affect the lives of all inhabitants in the city, generating polarizations reflected in the representation of different locations within its space. Alexandria's specificity is emphasized as it is explicitly represented as a city with a particular history of being on the border and negotiating different worlds. Its location in-between Europe and Africa makes it a site of distinct cultural and civilizational encounters but also evokes the incommensurability of its two identities: 'It could be a Mediterranean city except it is on the edge of the desert, and the desert reaches into the heart of Africa' (Thompson 1998: 9). This ambiguity of the city is developed in its representation where the European and African elements are both present, but the former are foregrounded as markers of class and race. This section explores the functions and consequences of bordering, in the memoir and the subsequent section will focus on the ambiguities involved.

Bordering and polarization are shown in the representation of the topography of the city, which plays a particularly strong role in the text. Streets, parks, and buildings associated with the narrator's memories of the city as it once was are frequently referenced and attached to the narrator's childhood memories of walking its streets with her father, stopping to buy perhaps 'a glass of chilled juice from the *sharbat* man' (8), ice-cream or pistachios (8), or visiting its Europeanized seaside cafés and restaurants such as Pastroudis, Athineos, and Delices with its 'finest French-Swiss patisserie' (28). On such occasions, the city is divided into a location containing European consumers and native purveyors, the latter indicated by the use of ethnicized terms. Through such references to a leisured lifestyle, the text promotes an image of European middle-class life and boosts a sense of cosmopolitanism associated with the Europeanness of the city. Such representation, however, masks an imbalance of power and reveals how limited its apparent cosmopolitanism is when confronting the non-Europeans of the city, often encountered unexpectedly and connected with various markers of Otherness: 'We would … watch the Arabs fixing their nets, working on the *felluccas* or just sitting in front of their bubbling pipes. The sweet smell of hashish wafting into our nostrils, together with the other smells' (9).

The allegedly European multiculturalism of the city is strongly contrasted with the description of further borders between cosmopolitan Europeans and Egyptians as they are shown in the memoir. While it is possible for the narrator's aunt to 'become a Greek' (31) through marriage, it also demands that she moves to a particular section of the city. The presence of the border is shown in Alexandria's division into the Europeans' 'leafy suburb[s]' (55) and the shadier parts of the city, such as the Attarine Quarter, 'a corner of Ancient Egypt' (32), where 'the bisexual and child brothels' (32) are located: 'Going [there] was like stepping into another country. Here, unlike the broad boulevards where we live, everything is congested and overcrowded' (31).

The city, indeed, appears to contain two different worlds. The sense of Otherness as a source of danger lurking in the streets extends to the 'debauchery and excess' of King Farouk (37), represented in the text as unable to control his desire and as a source of sexual violence

threatening women walking alone outside: 'If he saw a young women he fancied, he would send out one of his goons to collect her, sometimes against her will' (38). As unsafe, public spaces in Alexandria are bordered and gendered, they also compel European women to retreat into domestic life and closed spaces in the manner experienced by the narrator's mother: 'My mother was not allowed to work, or study … She was forbidden to talk to any member of the opposite sex on her own. If a male friend or relative happened to call in my father's absence, she was supposed to talk through the grille of a little square cut in the heavy wooden door' (40). Indicating this double standard, the gendered borders of Alexandria turn women's domestic spaces into prisons or harems, ruled by jealous and violent patriarchs, whereas men such as the narrator's father have mistresses and open extramarital affairs in apartments acquired for such purposes (40). What Durrell has referred to as a 'City of Incest' (Thompson 1998: 20) is a part of Alexandria's hidden past that includes violence and sexual abuse involving children, with its signs visible in children affected by congenital syphilis, such the bald family friends Lilli and Vivvi (35). For the narrator, gendered borderings, domestic violence, and the lack of women's agency result in a feminist awakening, in the course of which her relationship with her father and the role of Alexandria as a home are both problematized.

Bordering is also present in the colonial values affecting the narrator's childhood views, and she later recognizes that they have been a part of her growing up '[a]s a colonialist' and 'surrounded by prejudice' (89). There are several signs of Othering and exclusion in the description of the narrator's childhood. In addition to identifying Arabic as the language of (for her) the Other – 'I resisted learning it [Arabic] because it came from "the barbarians"' (152) – Arabs are associated with the colonialist tropes of drugs and laziness, dirt, and uncleanliness: 'The poor Arab defecates in the alleys – he has no toilet and no garbage collection, not that there is much to throw away. I keep my eyes on the ground, to avoid stepping on discarded offal, deal animal, shit and snot. Arab men are gross expectorators' (174). Similarly, Arab servants are 'plagued' by 'lice and fleas' (93), and domestic servants are frequently abused, at least verbally. Primitivity is associated with Otherness and is addressed in stories of female circumcision and the significance of virginity. The borders of class and race distinguishing Europeans from Arabs are absolute, as the narrator learns when she mistakenly kisses a servant and is reprimanded for doing so. To the narrator's mother, her daughter's tan is a sign of an unacceptable border-crossing where she becomes 'a scrawny Arab' (28): 'I go brown as a nut and am really indistinguishable from an Arab child' (28-29).

While the above examples have addressed borders from the perspective of the privileged cosmopolitan minority in the city, seeing non-European Others as inferior, the memoir also pays attention to the fact that Alexandria and Egypt are contested places. As part of Egyptian decolonization, European privileges are called into question and this leads eventually to the loss of Alexandria, forced migration, and displacement. The threat posed by nationalism is indicated in references to increasing antagonisms, violence, riots, and the burning of hotels in Cairo. A particularly grotesque scene mentions that next to everyday spaces, such as the café where the narrator and her mother often enjoy a 'café noir' and a 'pink *frappé framboise*' (36), an Arab mob is playing football with 'the severed heads of two

young British soldiers' (36). The family's decision to leave indicates their global dispersal and also the loss of those family members, friends, and neighbours who stay, generating a rupture between here and there, now and then, adulthood and childhood, and between reality and nostalgia.

The ambiguities and borderings associated with Alexandria mark the text and problematize a simplified reading of it as a nostalgic memory of childhood. In Douglas's view, many childhood autobiographies address their thematic by relying on nostalgia and idealization and in so doing transform the past into an object of consumption and privileging shared values (2010: 84-85). While the narrator's express wish to know more about her family's story displays similar traits, the memoir clearly shows that the values of the past are neither shared nor desirable. A simple return is not possible. Svetlana Boym (2015) has drawn a distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia. Whereas the former is often associated with nationalist imaginings and appeals to allegedly 'universalist values, family, nature, homeland, truth,' the latter recognizes that the home of the past is inaccessible and uses a lexicon that 'is ironic, inconclusive, and fragmentary' (Boym 2015). Thompson's nostalgia is clearly of the latter variety, questioning the past's status as a directive and choosing to represent it through fragments and stories. More recently, May Hawas has discussed the problem of addressing contested and conflictual pasts such as that of Alexandria, in the representations of which she sees traces of 'resistance nostalgia,' the use of particular tropes, and a silencing of some aspects of the past, thus identifying 'a nostalgia representation of an ideal cosmopolitan city' (2019). Characterizing nostalgia as human and global, Hawas concludes that such restructuring of memory can be validated by the 'social or political *objective*' (emphasis original) of narrative. In the case of Thompson, the past is not erased but the ambiguities and borderings characterizing the city are shown to challenge simplified memories of a space as a site of ideal cosmopolitanism. What emerges from the text is an attempt to rethink Alexandrian identity as a borderscape identity formed on the basis of encounters and border-crossings in the city. This is addressed in the following section.

From Borders to Borderscapes

In addressing Alexandria, the city emerges as a borderscape where border-crossings and encounters generate something new. To use the terms presented by Brambilla (2015a: 20), the city offers moments of both 'belonging' and 'becoming,' as will be shown in the following reading. Belonging, as represented in the text, is a feature associated primarily with the narrator's childhood Alexandria and its communities, seen in the detailed description of the city, its street life, odours, and tastes now lost, a world where 'life was languid and easy' (Thompson 1998: 134). This is where the narrator's nostalgia is evident, in locating her family in history and its continuous border-crossings throughout centuries reflected in the making of the multicultural city.

The borderscape of Alexandria consists of several layers and makes use of different forms. Its multicultural histories of borders and cultural encounters are signified onomastically on its map. British, Italian, Greek, and Arabic place names are all present in the narrator's

seaside walk, extending from 'Bulkeley, San Stephano, Stanley Beach, Romance, Glymenopoulos, Bacos and Victoria, all the way to the spouting Rocks of Sidi-Bishr and the King's summer palace at Montaza' (9). Similarly, its inhabitants include Copts, French Algerians, and Germans, as well as Jewish and British residents, while the Egyptians tend to remain unnamed and excluded, as mentioned above. In describing this way of life, the text is often multilingual and challenges linguistic borders as it frequently uses phrases from languages other than English, thus using the nostalgic trope of imagining Alexandria, as suggested by Hawas (2019). Such code-switching is shown to be a general practice in the social circles of the narrator's family background, and it is not limited to the use of French terms for the various delicacies that Mama is fond of (Thompson 1998: 28), For example, even decades later when living in Manly, Australia, the narrator's father's cousin Milena sprinkles her English with French and Italian phrases in a way that locates her in the atmosphere of the city and its sociolinguistic practices:

> He was a big man with an impressive moustache. *Trés charmant*. And this Regina Kramer who married Toto. And Wanda and Vilma Vivante. Look at those beautiful hats. So elegant. *Figure che scomparsono*. You know what that means? You haven't forgotten your Italian, *cara*? (71)

A city of encounters such as this reveals that the history of the narrator's family has involved a series of becomings. The narrator tells of her multicultural and multilingual family history, which is rooted in Spain, Gibraltar, France, and Italy, and in so doing writes her heritage into a number of (colonial) European histories as mentioned in the memoir (52) that come together in this particular location, generating particular forms of border-crossing identity. This history is encapsulated in a photograph of her grandfather and his brothers that shows various becomings through the 'four half-Jewish boys of British nationality … at a German school in Alexandria' (46), all of whom are 'fluent in seven languages' (47) and perform various stereotypically presented ethnic identities:

> Teddy, the eldest, … looks German and his temperament is Germanic, stern and autocratic. … Wilfried takes after their English grandmother … and is very gentle, cultured, full of feminine sensibility and British stoicism. Henri has the mannerisms and looks of a Frenchman. … The youngest is Albert. He looks like a slightly built young Italian. (47)

In other words, the borderscape generates becomings that are actively performed by the participants, allowing them to cross borders of ethnicity and language to benefit from the opportunities offered by the city and its modes of interaction. Rather than fixed identities, this space of in-betweenness promotes something else, as is recognized by the narrator: an Alexandrian is 'A hybrid. A bit like me' (2). In her view, they benefit from border-crossings and form 'a peculiar group of people, sophisticated Europeans who also chose to adapt, for convenience or other self-serving motives, certain customs from the colonized country' (52).

Hilariously, the hybrid multicultural heritage of the family is described in terms of grandfather Henri's unprejudiced liking for sweets from any culinary culture: 'Turkish delight, Swiss chocolate, French pastilles, Italian nougat, stuffed dates' (52).

Similar hybridity is evident in the memoir's construction of Alexandria's sonic borderscape, which accommodates the sounds of different communities. Sonic borderscapes can be seen as locations where difference and similarity are addressed in the contexts of national and cultural borders, as suggested by Nyman (2021: 218). In this memoir the sounds associated with particular communities appear to interact with each other, forming not a cacophony but a plurality of sound, as is shown by a description of daybreak in the city. The muezzin's call to morning prayers from outside the building intermingles with the sounds at home, involving different languages and musics, including Churchill's address on the BBC, followed by Vera Lynn, French programming with Edith Piaf and news from La Radiodiffusion Française, Marlene Dietrich's 'Lili Marlene,' and Egyptian popular music sung by Oum Kalsoum (Thompson 1998: 189-90). The sonic borderscape constructed out of these different communities is an assemblage of sound that characterizes the multicultural and multilingual life in the Alexandria of the time, including its various cultural encounters and becomings.

The borderscape is shared by the different ethnicities of the city as it generates an identity of Alexandrianness that travels with the migrants and places it in an extended borderscape. The significance of belonging to the community is evident in a scene set at the Hilton Hotel in Sydney in 1996, where the narrator and her aged father are served by an Egyptian waiter who is aware of their origins. The memoir reveals the need to belong:

> He greets us respectfully as if we are all still in Egypt, a hundred years ago. He knows who we are, where we come from. We are pleased to see him too, although we don't show it. But we exiles are always looking for someone who knows us, who confirms our existence by reminding us of our past. The city survives now only in our memory and in the memory of others. (3)

This passage confirms what Nira Yuval-Davis sees as the key aspects of belonging, namely that it is based on social locations, emotional needs, and attachment (2006: 199-200), recognized here by the sensitive waiter and his way of addressing the narrator and her father in the extended borderscape.

In the memoir, shared memories of a city and attachment with family history are the means employed to construct community in the present, and not simply in the past. One sign of this is the way in which the memoir uses family photographs and stories as a means to generate belonging by understanding and attaching oneself to the shared past and its continuing impact on one's life. For the adult narrator these are the only ways for her to understand the role played by her early experiences and the peculiarities of her family history. Looking at a family album with her father's cousin Milena in Sydney in 1996, she learns about the later experiences of the dispersed family and also about the cosmopolitan history of Alexandria, including such characters as the German war criminal Rudolf Hess, a schoolmate

of her grandfather. Similarly, a visit to another dispersed family member in Britain reveals silenced family connections to British poets and clarifies the troubled father-daughter relationship. Yet exile and loss of home are something that the narrator finds central to her life experience as a migrant, which she presents in universalizing terms: 'The search for lost horizons goes on, for it is motivated by a vague, unfulfilled longing each of us carries all our lives. A longing that can never be fulfilled' (Thompson 1998: 247).

Through belongings and attachments, the borderscape generates new identities and becomings that are both historical and contemporary, revealing how the past extends into the present but does not totally determine it. In the case of Alexandria, such becomings are evident in the portrayals of the narrator's family history, where her grandfather and his brothers, as mentioned above, represent several different border-crossings. However, in order to underline the perception that identities lack clear borders in a borderscape, the narrator looks at a photograph of 'a woman with sleek dark hair and a languid expression' who is 'wearing a beautiful long dress with a rose pinned to the satin sash at the waist' (72). She is surprised to hear that its ostensibly feminine object is in fact her Uncle Albert. Alexandria makes such border-crossings possible, generating non-mainstream sexualities, as can also be seen in references to gay writers such as Cavafy and Patrick White and their Alexandrian lovers: 'In a city where European sophistication and subterfuges mingled with primitive urges and cruel practices, sex could be an unknowable and dangerous game' (89). While such a statement is partially Orientalizing and contributes to the sexual mythologization of Alexandria, it also confirms that colonial borderscapes may function as sites of ethno-sexual encounters where Western constructions of sexuality are challenged by non-normative practices that are not policed to the same extent as, for instance, in Britain (see Aldrich 2003).

Migration to Australia generates further becomings that challenge former identity positions, indicating that the borderscape extends to the new location, such as life in Australia and its new culture that allowed women to work. In the new setting, the narrator has a new educational experience when the nuns running her former school are transformed into professional teachers without 'austere, anxiety-inducing glances' or 'manipulation through guilt' (155), thus leading to a career and independence. Abandoning the values of her father, she later trains as an actor, although this is strongly resisted by her father, for whom all 'actresses are whores' (163-164). In so doing, the narrator crosses a further border, from sheltered family life into independence, thus challenging the conventional gender roles of her community that have crossed into Australia with the family. The new space also enables the narrator's mother to acquire a new identity and work for her living. What Australia permits is a critique of the double standard that plays a central role in the memoir, addressed in particular in her father's open extramarital affairs in Alexandria and his dominating behaviour at home, given that he does not allow the mother to speak with other men (see 39-40). This feminist critique surfaces in the story of the narrator's mother's transformation in Australia, when she takes a job and divorces (but later also remarries) her unfaithful husband: 'She became strong, and people were drawn to her more than ever' (284). While the space of the borderscape is a tragedy for many Alexandrian exiles in the memoir, who learn that 'what they have left behind can never be replaced; that it will be missed terribly; and that it will haunt them and follow

them the rest of their lives' (146), for women such as the narrator and her mother it is a space of empowerment with new opportunities and becomings. The borderscapes of the novel serve as sites that generate and permit the performance of new identities that challenge the fixedness of bordered identities. In the following section attention will turn to further transformations the memoir associates with the borderscape.

Borderscape Texts and Border Beings

As Rosello and Wolfe (2017: 7) suggest, texts involved in aestheticizing the borderscape rely on earlier imaginings of the border such as border myths and narratives, which makes them part of intertextual networks that also cross borders textually. As I will show, in Thompson's memoir such border-crossings are both temporal and textual, demonstrated by the oscillation between the past and the present in the borderscape(s) associated with Alexandria, a process in which intertextual relations play a key role. This is evident in the memoir's invocation of historical figures and literary texts, which range from Cleopatra and Julius Caesar to modern writers such as Forster, Cavafy, Durrell, and White, all of whom convey a particular relationship with the city. The use of these different texts and histories shows how Alexandria is multilayered and embedded in more than one historical narrative:

> I did not know then that this was the lost harbour of Odysseus on his marvellous journey and that a temple to Neptune had stood on this promontory, the Cape of Figs. Or that Cleopatra's palace lay below our shadows, on the bottom of the harbour, to be resurrected as I began writing this book. (Thompson 1998: 8)

Through the presence of these histories, myths, and intertextualities 'resurrected' by Thompson, the memoir becomes an example of border-crossing textuality. In this context, intertextuality is understood as a border trope that problematizes the idea of an autonomous text and shows how the border-crossings leave their own marks in the text. Through these references, the memoir presents an alternative version of canonical Alexandrian texts associated with the modernist heyday of the literature of the city (see Rodenbeck 2001). The memoir opens with Cavafy's 'The God Abandons Antony,' a poem whose speaker urges Mark Antony to 'say goodbye to her, to the Alexandria you/are losing' (Thompson 1998: n.p.) – which is echoed in the book's title – and is aware of the impending defeat and death, which in turn serves as a poignant marker of the loss of the city with its vibrant culture. Another text that plays a key role is Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*, whose central character Justine is openly compared to the narrator by her husband's family, thus identifying her in an exoticizing and Orientalizing manner (Thompson 1998: 18). In addition, Alexandria's writers, such as the philosopher Hypatia, are repeatedly alluded to, the latter perhaps because of her border-crossing activity as a woman philosopher who – fatally – challenged established religious and cultural practices in the fifth century.

Such figures from the past and from pre-existing texts perceptibly transform the memoir into a border-crossing text that enters the past to generate a dialogue between the

narrator and other stories and storytellers of Alexandria. The key chapter involving textual crossings is 'City of Plague' (98-127), which will serve as the key point of attention at this stage of my analysis. In this chapter, set in Venice during its 1996 film festival where the narrator has travelled with her filmmaker husband, the expected reunion of a group of friends transforms into a narrative of illness, complete with 'sprouting' blisters and high fever. Driven by pain, the narrator drifts into a borderline state between dreams and reality, moving between wakefulness and sleep: 'I waltz in and out of the real and the unreal, the fanciful, the reflective, the illusory, the shadowy' (100).

The images of the borderscape and its uncanniness, and its resemblance to other places and times, is emphatically present. In addition to frequent use of Italian words and phrases that serve to defamiliarize the English of the text, there are concrete markers of the borderscape, since the narrator identifies in its cityscape a number of traces of the Moors such as minarets (101), which in turn underlines the similarities between Venice and Alexandria, with the consequence that blurring of this kind generates an uncanny effect of doubling – 'The city follows you' (106). Similarly, placed within this chapter is also a memory of the uncanny palace in Vicenza, Italy known as *La Villa dei Nanni*, whose eccentric statues trouble the narrator as they are 'out of proportion, squat and ugly … dwarf-like,' producing a grotesque effect (105) that replaces the real with its shadow and the human with its unnatural double. The episode also repeats and revisits the unidentified illness that the adolescent narrator has experienced during the family's migration journey from Port Said to Australia in 1954, linking the trauma of displacement with the uncanniness of the dream(s).

There is, however, still more to the imagery of the borderscape in the chapter. This is revealed in the portrayal of the dream in which the narrator enters alternative pasts and becomes involved in dialogue with historical figures from the past of Alexandria, especially the ghosts of Cleopatra, Cavafy, and Durrell. These ghosts can be regarded as what Görling and Schimanski refer to as 'border beings,' often markers of trauma who are 'in-between life and death and … in-between geographical borders' (2017: 119). Their role underscores the uncanny features of the borderscape and questions the naturalized borders of the everyday.

All three border beings take the narrator back to Alexandria, which – like Venice – is 'a city of plague' and induces the kind of pain 'that makes you instantly think of killing yourself' (100), and thus they have specific functions in the memoir's critique of bordering and power. The first hallucinatory discussion is with Cleopatra, the most significant of the three, and it can be read in the context of representations of her in which the female monarch has often been regarded as inverting the established gender order. As Maria Wyke puts it in her analysis of representations of Cleopatra, she is often envisaged as a 'seductive spectacle' (1997: 98), but some films such as Cecil B. Mille's *Cleopatra* (1934) suggest that the 'social order could be disrupted by modern women's claims to political and sexual freedom' (97). In contrast to the objectifying sexualization of Cleopatra in Western popular culture, Thompson imagines her as an autonomous woman who makes her own decisions. Her image is also different, as she is described as resembling an angel and is stripped of her Orientalist regalia and wigs (Thompson 1998: 106).

The discussion between the narrator and Cleopatra revolves around gender, sexuality, and power. Julius Caesar is a 'narcissist' (109), 'an ageing rake' (107), and 'obsessed with fucking' (108), whereas the 'lovable, sexy, witty, charming, exuberant' (107) Mark Antony, because of his specific political motivation, abandons Cleopatra. Caesar's nephew Octavian is represented as 'obsessed with destroying me [Cleopatra] and my child' (109). By means of the various relationships, Thompson reinserts Cleopatra's historical position into the present and marks it as potentially subversive of the existing gender order: 'Men have always tried to trivialize me' (107), a statement that the narrator identifies with. The memoir's feminist perspective is supported by an exchange of words in which Cleopatra emerges as a philosopher and animal rights activist, as shown in her response to the narrator's questions concerning the meaning of life: 'Our purpose is to evolve. Not to just evolve, but to evolve onto a higher plane and to go on evolving … to infinity' (111). The comment suggesting that the individual gains greater awareness by crossing into a different level of existence is also relevant for an understanding of border-crossing as a marker of becoming, to use Brambilla's (2015a) term. According to the memoir, there are no borders but simply 'endless, endless possibilities' (Thompson 1998: 112).

The other border beings in the chapter, the ghosts of the canonical male authors Cavafy and Durrell, appear as more ambiguous figures whose morality and motivation are under critique. While their writings are important to the narrator and both writers are referred to as lovers of Alexandria (25), the authors' real-life attitudes and behaviour pose a moral problem in the text. Cavafy's literary Alexandria is constantly present in the memoir and is part of the city's cultural identity, from the opening poem to the quoted erotic poem 'One Night' (1915) that focuses on sexual encounters in a room above a taverna, but the author remains an enigma and represents abuse of power. For the narrator of the memoir, Cavafy's sexual encounters with young boys emerge as something to be abhorred , and in the dream she challenges the poet: 'I thought you said you loved children and yet you caused them pain…' (Thompson 1998: 114). However, the poet evades the question: 'I am sorry, dear lady. What can I say? Well I'd better leave. Goodbye' (114).

In Durrell's case, the matter is slightly different. His writing – and *The Alexandria Quartet* in particular – has been praised earlier in the memoir – 'I find *Justine* painfully brilliant' (17) – and a recurring fantasy of the narrator has been to learn 'to know Lawrence Durrell' (19). The early chapters of the memoir contain a fantasy sketch in which the narrator meets with Durrell in his house in Provence, imagining herself 'listening to him, wide-eyed, head tilted and resting on the back of my hand' (19), ready to surrender to him sexually. The Durrell of the dream, however, emerges as an aggressive misogynist, which can be linked with his description of Alexandria as a whore. Rather than being a 'writer of exquisite prose and poetry' and a 'debunker of false and repressive sexual beliefs' (115), Durrell is a vulgar woman-hater, addressing the narrator as 'BITCH! CUNT!' (115; capitals original). His ghost also refers to the discussion as constituting the narrator's attempt to psychoanalyse the writer, that is, as her venture to exert power over the male mind: 'I didn't come here to have *a deep and meaningful* with you. A woman is the last person on earth I would want to be intimate with' (116; emphasis original). In these cases, the use of intertextuality connects the memoir with key

writers associated with Alexandria, but by refusing to accept their versions she presents a countermemory (Foucault 1998: 369-391) of the city. Working from a critical and feminist position, her narrative provides an alternative version of the past that unfixes those promoted in the more dominant stories.

If border beings are, as Görling and Schimanski (2017) suggest, markers of trauma, Thompson's memoir sees traumas as both individual and cultural and associates them with the silenced histories of Alexandria as a borderscape. To counter the traumas of bordering and loss, knowledge and stories are offered as potential solutions, as is reflected in the narrator's archival work through various fragments of the past, family photographs, and family stories, now almost forgotten. Rather than being a site of nostalgia and alleged harmony, Alexandria emerges as plural and polyphonic, refusing fixed meanings and remaining open to change and transformation – an evolution that does not stop with migration and displacement. The trauma can be addressed by revisiting the past through stories, as is also hinted at in the narrator's continual references in the memoir to psychoanalysis.

If the haunting trauma(s) associated with Alexandria and its people are addressed historically rather as mere personal traumas, the image of the ghost can be seen in an interesting light. Such spectral figures can be read from the perspective of history and memory, as was proposed by the philosopher Walter Benjamin. For Benjamin (1970: 257), the past is accessible only through fleeting images, and the appearance of ghostly figures as flash-like images is associated with moments of danger. Such images may appear at such moments suddenly, when the past – history – enters and disrupts the present, generating textual irruptions (*Einbruchstellen*), locations 'where something interrupts, breaks in, intervenes' (Nägele 2002: 24; see also Richter 2002: 5-9). Thompson's chapter figuring the three ghosts is a clear irruption into the text, challenging the narrative logic of the memoir through the temporal and uncanny border-crossings represented in a section separated from the main body of the text. On the basis of Benjamin's (1970) idea of the intertwinement of textual and historical irruptions, the narrator's encounter with the historical figure of Cleopatra is a textual indication of a more extensive and unavoidable role played by the past in the present.

In addition, the particular representation associated with Cleopatra in the scene – 'You look more like an angel' (Thompson 1998: 106) – contributes to a reading of the episode as a marker of inevitable historical change and transformation. As Benjamin (1970: 259-260) suggests, the figure of the Angel of History, as represented in Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*, which was once owned by Benjamin, looks back at past disasters but is unable to act, having been moved further away from Paradise by a storm. In this context, Cleopatra signifies the various catastrophes of Alexandria and the historical inevitability and violence of de/colonization, forced migration, and displacement. Her experiences of loss and death are repeated in further storms that the Angel of History cannot prevent. The borderscape becomes a site of encounters, conflicts, and transformation, where new belongings are formed in such a way that human agency may be limited. While the forces of history generate displaced, diasporic, and refugee identities and global traumas, the memoir shows that their effects may be negotiated by revisiting and rewriting past experiences.

Conclusion

Using borderscapes theory, this article has presented a reading of Virginia Thompson's memoir in which her childhood home, the city of Alexandria in North Africa, emerges as a borderscape within which both bordering processes and attempts to generate new identities are co-present. In addition to addressing the role of various cultural and ethnic borders regulating and separating the city's inhabitants from each other until well into the 1960s, and given the forced migration – or displacement – of the city's multicultural European population to places such as Australia, I have also attempted to address the various ways in which the memoir negotiates such borders through its imaginings of communities and identity transformations which have been defined, respectively, as belonging and becoming by borderscape theorists such as Brambilla (2015). In the concluding analytical section, the focus was placed on further elements associated with the borderscape, such as ghosts (border beings), which in turn link the memoir with other stories and myths involving Alexandria. A borderscape reading of Thompson's *Losing Alexandria* has been shown to be productive in understanding the processes involved in constructing history and memory in relation to a place with a contested past and numerous conflicts. Since its past is not that of innocent nostalgia but of the kind that plays a different role in conflicting histories, the intertextual and mythical elements used in the narrative reveal that borderscapes are extended textual and geopolitical spaces where histories collide and contribute to the often involuntary and traumatizing formation of new identities.

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