



“Belonging” in Post-Communist Europe:¹ Strategies of Representation in Kapka Kassabova’s *Street without a Name*

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ABSTRACT IN ENGLISH

In her book *Street without a Name*, Kapka Kassabova, a Bulgarian author living in Scotland, combines a memoir of her childhood in communist Bulgaria with a travelogue about later return visits to her – now post-communist – native country. In this study, the discontinuous, fragmented and heterogeneous narrative of her autobiographical text is interpreted as an attempt to find an appropriate mode of sharing intimate knowledge of life in communism with a wider reading public in (primarily) Western English-speaking countries. It is demonstrated that Kassabova, writing from the perspective of an expatriate, emphasizes both the uniqueness of life in communist Bulgaria and the commonality of many experiences and values as well as their compatibility with those held by many people in Western countries. By employing a hybrid textual form, she succeeds in rendering her experiences as a child and teenager in communist Bulgaria and as a transnational migrant into the structures, metaphors and themes of a transnational “liquid modernity”, thus appealing to a broad multinational readership.

ABSTRACT IN GERMAN

In ihrem 2008 erschienenen Buch *Street without a Name* verbindet Kapka Kassabova, eine in Großbritannien lebende bulgarische Autorin, Erinnerungen

¹ Although the countries of the Eastern bloc called themselves officially “socialist”, arguing that they had not reached the state of communism, that is, a wholly classless society, I will, in this article, adopt Western terminology and refer to those countries as “communist”. I will do so to avoid the confusion that may arise from other uses of “socialist” as, for example, in connection with post-war capitalist welfare states in Western Europe. “Post-communist” here denotes the era starting in 1989. The term acknowledges that communism has had long-term effects globally.

an ihre Kindheit im kommunistischen Bulgarien mit Reiseberichten über das postkommunistische Bulgarien. In der vorliegenden Studie wird die diskontinuierliche, fragmentierte und heterogene Erzählweise des autobiographischen Texts als ein Versuch interpretiert, eine angemessene Form der Vermittlung intimen Wissens über das Leben im Kommunismus für eine breite Öffentlichkeit in (in erster Linie) westlichen Staaten zu finden. Dabei wird gezeigt, dass die Autorin einerseits das Besondere des Lebens im bulgarischen Kommunismus hervorhebt, andererseits aber die Allgemeingültigkeit vieler Erfahrungen und Werte dieses Lebens und ihre Vereinbarkeit mit denen westlicher (kapitalistischer) Kultur darstellt sowie, auf einer weiteren Ebene, die Perspektive der Emigrantin einnimmt. Insgesamt gelingt es ihr, ihre Erfahrungen im Kommunismus und als postkommunistische transnationale Migrantin in die Strukturen, Themen und Metaphern einer transnationalen "flüssigen Moderne" (Bauman) zu übertragen und somit eine breite Leserschaft zu erreichen.

Keywords: post-communist; autobiography; Bulgaria; fragmentation; modern nomads; intimate publics; shared knowledge

INTRODUCTION: LIFE WRITING BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT, EAST AND WEST

"Memory is never shaped in a vacuum; the motives of memory are never pure", writes James E. Young in his study on American Holocaust memorials (Young 1993, p. 2), reminding us that any act of remembering is embedded in the current state and situation of those who remember. Since the break-down, after 1989, of the state apparatus in most of the countries that belonged to the communist camp, the question of how to remember the communist past has been asked with urgency and has received a multitude of answers. The terrain of the communist past has been fiercely contested within and without the countries concerned, and life writing, like historical and literary writing, has been participating in the struggle over memory.

This struggle is not new, as, for example, Stefan Zahlmann demonstrates in his comparative study of autobiographical writing by the elites of the Confederate States of America after 1865 and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) after 1989. Zahlmann argues that in both cases, a society failed and was (re)incorporated into a larger nation state. The elites of the failed societies then felt both the need and the opportunity to present their own life's experiences as valid shared knowledge, but they also tried to go beyond the community of memory with their previous society

and show their life's affinity with the new society as well as the compatibility of their life stories with dominant forms of memory (Zahlmann 2009, p. 20). Beside the diversity of intentions Zahlmann discerns in the autobiographies, he also recognizes that the (post-) communist elites are anything but homogeneous groups, their members writing from a vast array of positions (p. 31).

Daniela Nelva (2008), in her study on East German literary autobiography after unification, also observes that many East German writers had both a will and a need to reflect on their role as intellectuals in the GDR (p. 33) and have produced highly idiosyncratic accounts of their arrangements within and with society, of which Christa Wolf's post-unification autobiographical writing, including her 2010 autobiographical novel *Stadt der Engel oder The Overcoat of Dr. Freud* is a prime example. In this autobiographical novel, her first-person narrator 'records' how, during a stay in Los Angeles, she confronts, and is confronted with, her GDR past. Nevertheless, the German situation has been very peculiar not only because of the circumstances of, and conditions created by, unification but also due to Germany's pre-communist, that is, fascist past and the attention which issues of collective and subjective guilt, complicity, resistance, memory and commemoration have received ever since the end of the Second World War, including renewed debates after unification.

These few introductory reflections about East German post-communist autobiographical texts already raise some major points that seem to be relevant for post-communist autobiographical writing in general. The need to remember and add memories of communism to the shared knowledge – shared among various kinds of communities, as we shall see – is complemented by the need to present life in communism in ways that are at least partly compatible with dominant "Western" life models, negotiating between what is felt to be a distinctive, almost exotic, communist past and the dominant patterns of life in western countries, wanting to do both emphasize difference and signal compatibility.

While, since unification, East German society has rapidly been transformed and "assimilated" to West Germany, other communist countries, especially those in South East Europe such as Bulgaria and Romania, embarked on a long and arduous journey towards a more democratic, more open and prosperous society. Since conditions in those countries were poorer than in East Germany and changes much slower, many people, especially young people, started leaving home and seeking opportunity elsewhere, which has resulted in a substantial Eastern European

diaspora in, for example, Great Britain² and Germany. From the – spatial, mental, emotional and linguistic – distance created by living as expatriates in Great Britain, Kapka Kassabova writes about her childhood in communist, and travels in post-communist Bulgaria (*Street without a Name*) and Vesna Goldsworthy (2006) publishes her memoir of life in Tito's Yugoslavia (*Chernobyl Strawberries*), while from Greece, Gazmend Kapllani (2010) remembers his life in Albania (*A Short Border Handbook*), to mention just a few examples. A look at the books and their reviews (e.g. Kassabova 2009a; Tonkin 2010) reveals that these autobiographers appear not only to grapple with the question of how to talk about the bygone world of communism in the 2000s but also with the plight of migrants which starts with the trauma of leaving. After their arrival in a Western country, this plight “continues with the migrant's obsession with success” and their precarious state of being “always somewhere between eternal flight and eternal return” (Kassabova 2009), yearning “both to fit and to stand apart” (Tonkin 2010), crisscrossing countries and borders in search of their place in Europe.

After this brief sketch of a framework within which autobiographies by expatriates from Eastern European countries may be understood, Kapka Kassabova's *Street without a Name. Childhood and Other Misadventures in Bulgaria* (2009) will be closely inspected with regard to the various elements of life narratives and the strategies she employs in representing her life as different and similar, as universal and unique, as post/communist and Western. I will explore in which moulds she casts her life in and after communism, which existing patterns of life stories she resorts to and with how much nostalgia or loathing she writes her life. After a brief introduction to her life and narrative, various readings of her text will be suggested.

KASSABOVA'S LIFE AND TRAVELS

Kapka Kassabova divides her life narrative into three parts, “Prologue”, “Childhood” and “Other Misadventures”. She was born and raised in a suburb of Sofia in the 1970s. In “Childhood”, she relates that both her parents were scientists, her father at the time completing a PhD in maths. She spent her childhood in kindergarten and school in Sofia, interrupted by holiday visits to her grandparents in Balchik on the Black Sea, which stand

² For statistics and trends of migration, see the publications of the European Migration Network and the Economic and Social Research Institute, financed by the European Commission, and the Research Reports of the International Network for Economic Research (INFER) such as, for example, Böhmer (2001), as well as publications by the Hamburgisches Weltwirtschaftsarchiv (HWWA).

out in her memory because there she saw herself discovering aspects of her later personhood, “the pleasure of solitude and the pull of the exotic” (Kassabova 2009, p. 26). From 1979, her family lived in an apartment in a huge, monotonous concrete residential complex, “Youth 3”, an “uninhabitable dystopia of concrete and mud” (p. 30), which became her home. Her parents pressed for her education because “[...] all you were left with was education. It gave you an inner world and the company of other educated people” (p. 43). They warned her of the “idiots in brown suits” (p. 44). She started secondary school in 1986 and, at 13 years of age, was accepted into the French College in Sofia, where the Comsomol was a farce and French native speakers taught French. Her first trips across borders took her to relatives in Ohrid, Macedonia (Yugoslavia) and later to East Berlin. In 1984, her parents went to work in Delft in Holland, experiencing “another world” (p. 75) and returning changed. She endured adolescence with the usual mix of rock music, parties and friends until 1989, when the wall fell and her family believed that “the 45-year-long theatre of the absurd” was over (p. 121).

Her Bulgarian childhood narrative is followed by the story of the family's migration to the UK in 1990, which lasted for 2 years and brought disappointment about the West (p. 127). They returned to Sofia to wait for a new visa, but meanwhile, Bulgaria had changed, “money was king”, education did not count and gangsters ruled (p. 132). This first part ends with their departure for New Zealand.

In *Other Misadventures*, Kassabova tells how, 14 years after having left for New Zealand, she went back to Bulgaria from Scotland to write a travel guide and how she revisited places of her childhood as well as touristy or historic places. If chronology is already frequently disrupted in her childhood narrative, her other misadventures form an even more fractured tale. They branch out in time and space when Kassabova moves back and forth between Sofia and other parts of the country, national, ethnic and family histories, when she travels with friends, relatives and strangers and remembers earlier return visits to Bulgaria.

She starts strolling through Sofia, recounting history, encountering people. Her Macedonian misadventures take her to Ohrid, where her grandmother came from, and she traces family history across shifting borders. After a visit to the Rila monastery, she turns south to the Greek border to Melnik (p. 186), where she is confronted with Bulgarian and Greek chauvinism and ponders over the role of the Great Powers who “ensured that the psychotic shifting borders cut right through families and minds, generations into the future (p. 195). Then she travels on through the Balkan range and the Rodopi Mountains. In Smolyan she reflects about Islamized Bulgarians and the region's history as

a “marriage of civilizations” (p. 231). Her journey takes her to Pamporovo and Trigrad, where she investigates the forced assimilation of ethnic Turks in the 1980s. On she goes to Plovdiv (p. 248); then she remembers a border-crossing from Turkey back into Bulgaria. When traveling on to Shumen, she again reflects on the forced assimilation of Turks in socialist Bulgaria (p. 267). The next leg takes her to the Black Sea, where she also revisits childhood Baltchik and remembers an earlier trip in 2004. She turns north to the Danube, the historical towns of Silistra and Ruse. Her last trip takes her from Sofia to Vidin, where she faces the memory of communist labor camps, after which she returns to Sofia. This highly reductive summary should, nevertheless, allow a glimpse at the different layers of history and memory, and demonstrate the messiness and fragmentation of both memory and text.

A CHILDHOOD AND COMING-OF-AGE STORY SET IN BULGARIA – THE EXTRAORDINARY ORDINARY

In the title and, repeatedly, in the text, Kassabova herself flashes the concept of “childhood” to the reader, arousing expectations of a childhood memoir. In her 2010 essay “From Bulgaria with Love and Hate”, she calls *Street without a Name* “a bittersweet memoir” and “an attempt to tell the universal story of the last East European communist childhood – that of my entire generation” (p. 70). With regard to the part “Childhood”, it can certainly be maintained that it contains the major generic elements of a childhood narrative such as family anecdotes, summer camp, descriptions of food from a child’s perspective as well as the general formula of “difficulties that are overcome”. Her use of “East European” helps, on the one hand, to encompass childhood memories set not only in Bulgaria but also, for example, in Yugoslavia and the GDR; on the other hand, she assigns her Bulgarian childhood the status of an exemplary communist childhood. Kassabova appears quite obsessed with the warping and mingling of subjective, Bulgarian, communist and “universal” or “ordinary” layers of her childhood; thus she reflects later:

I come from Sofia. I was initially happy, then with the onset of consciousness unhappy, then with the advent of adolescence wretchedly miserable, and finally, in the last throes of my incarceration, convinced I was born in the wrong place and had to escape at all costs. In other words, an ordinary childhood followed by an ordinary adolescence, followed by an ordinary emigration – more or less. But Sofia was not an ordinary place (p. 19).

In her writing, she deliberately mixes the subjective and the universal, the outstanding (or, in a wider sense, exotic) and the ordinary, describing

Sofia as both a typical Cold War city (p. 20) and an extraordinary place. This reflects a dilemma many autobiographers have faced, which is how to maintain the unique, personal character of her/his life story while at the same time present it as exemplary to members of the same community, that is, fellow Bulgarians, and of “foreign” communities such as Britons. This takes us back to the necessity and desirability of compatibility, which was discussed earlier.

In the light of Kassabova's concession that her childhood was ordinary, that she was happy, for instance in East Berlin (p. 67), and that her Bulgarian past “was not of the miserable variety” (p. 4), it is not quite clear where the “hateful mood” (p. 4) comes from in which she leaves the country. Nevertheless, in the course of her narrative, she offers some explanations. Her unfulfilled longing to follow the “pull of the exotic” may be one reason, and a subjective one. Another important cause of her hateful mood may lie in her general inferiority complex, which she also calls the “poor cousin syndrome” (p. 60). She already experienced the feeling of being the poor cousin as a child in Yugoslav Macedonia (p. 60), in East Berlin and with the Dutch family. Her family always felt ashamed of their poor standard of living when they had foreign guests from the West (p. 65), and the feeling of inferiority kept haunting her at the start of her life as an émigré in the West, especially Great Britain, where she was treated with condescension. The inferiority she felt as a Bulgarian in the communist era and her painful experiences had to do with the imbalance of economic and political power among East European countries and between East and West.

This inferiority complex has certainly been a characteristic of East European identity and resulted from the shortages, restrictions and control that were part of the social system of communism. Nevertheless, some patterns of life such as curtailed life chances and deeply ingrained feelings of inferiority as well as the appreciation of education resemble working-class and post-colonial diasporic childhood memories and contribute to the compatibility of the childhood experience in communism with other experiences that were made and narrated in capitalist societies and for which both narrative forms and a reading public already existed.

INTIMATE KNOWLEDGE – SHARED KNOWLEDGE

In the previous discussion of the ordinary and extraordinary in Kassabova's re-construction of her childhood in communism, it turned out that she employs well-established and widely accepted elements of a childhood memoir, but beside her sharing some generic conventions of autobiographical writing, Kassabova also attempts to share the actual intimate

knowledge of life in communist Bulgaria with a wider, that is, international, and especially Western, public. The warm reception *Street without a Name* received in UK and other Western countries as illustrated by the three pages of international reviews reprinted in her book indicate that she succeeded in communicating her knowledge of communist and post-communist Bulgaria to both insiders and outsiders, creating an “intimate public”. This phrase, coined by Lauren Berlant in *The Female Complaint* (2008, p. viii), can be applied to autobiographical writing and publishing because it offers a route on which intimate, private knowledge can be spread and shared with a reading public, creating an intimate public.

Ioana Luca (2011) has already delivered a first interpretation of Kassabova’s text under the aspect of intimate publics, but Luca looks at intimate publics *in* communist Bulgaria, stating that “[i]ntimate publics under communism imply shared unhappiness and suffering but offer refuge and a less alienating world through the ‘collective’, the public [...]” (p. 77), both of which she traces in Kassabova’s life writing. She also acknowledges that Kassabova writes at “the intersection between private stories and public histories with reference to the cultural translation of the Eastern European past” (p. 79), which indicates that Luca at the end of her analysis widens her perspective to allow an inclusion of the reading public in the epistemic systems of the intimate publics.

The latter line of thought is the one I follow here, going beyond a portrayal of intimate publics in communist society and turning to the intimate public created by the publication of Kassabova’s narrative in order to develop an understanding of autobiographical writing in terms of epistemology. I agree with Luca that Kassabova’s text already mixes intimate with public, that is, historical, sociological, cultural and political knowledge. This mixing is symptomatic of her project, in which she communicates both her intimate life experience as a Bulgarian child and later émigré as well as a wealth of – usually little-known – historical facts about Bulgaria to an English-speaking reading public in Great Britain, Bulgaria and elsewhere. She claims that she wrote *Street* for a British audience and had it initially published in Britain, New Zealand and the United States (Kassabova 2010, p. 72). By spreading knowledge about Bulgaria and her life in communist Bulgaria in English, she not only tries to heal herself and her Bulgarian inferiority complex but also tries to restore Bulgaria to an acceptable place in Western consciousness and systems of knowledge and its rightful place among the cultures of Europe, all of which carry their own burdens of history.

Berlant elaborates that a public sphere can become intimate when “the consumers of its particular stuff already share a world view and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common

historical experience" (Berlant 2001, p. viii). Furthermore, she characterizes an intimate public as "a space of mediation in which the personal is refracted through the general", which makes it, for consumers, a place of recognition and reflection (p. viii). If the characteristics of Berlant's concept are concretized for the, hypothetical, readership of Kassabova's book, then the broadly common historical experience is established by the experience of life in the last decades of the Cold War in Europe, the division of much of the world in two uneven camps as well as some shared features of life in Europe such as youth rebellion and rock music. Detailed knowledge about life in the other camp was scarce on both sides of the Iron Curtain, though for partly different reasons. The intimate public of Kassabova's readership can partake in the experience and knowledge of (expatriate) Bulgarians, that is, "nondominant people", and this experience "provides anchors for realistic, critical assessment of the way things are" (Berlant 2008, p. viii). In this light, the complexity and circularity (p. viii) of the cultural process of publishing and reading can be recognized in the case of *Street without a Name*.

This epistemic approach is equally applicable to the elements of travelogue that shape "Other Misadventures". Kassabova claims she was writing "all in the tradition of English travel literature" – because there was no Bulgarian travel literature – and for a British audience, performing an act of "self-othering" (Kassabova 2010, p. 72). She summarizes that it took 20 years and foreign languages to tell the Bulgarian story (p. 73). This may, again, be read as part of her search for an adequate narrative form and the struggle for a compatible way of narrating her life, which she finds in the use of existing genre elements and of the English language as, I suggest, a *lingua franca*, a language free and liberating but also ambiguous with regard to its functions within power structures, a language that empowers but also effects losses of knowledge. Nevertheless, Kassabova's narrative can only work on the basis of shared knowledge and compatibility of experience as well as narrative form, and at the same time this sharing of experience can also be considered an achievement which allows an expatriate from an East European country to enrich (Western) knowledge, gain recognition and affirm her own belonging, however problematic or complex it may be.

FRAGMENTATION – MIGRATION – LIQUID MODERNITY

In the previous arguments, the central place was held by the peculiar circumstances of life in communist Bulgaria and the interplay between subjective, communist and universal elements of childhood and between shared and intimate knowledge in Kassabova's narrative. Henceforth, the

focus will shift to the formal qualities of the text and the fragmented character of its second part in particular, which corresponds to Kassabova's restless life since the 1990s and her cultural and mental location as an émigré and diasporic Bulgarian, which, nevertheless, remains intertwined with her struggles with the Bulgarian communist past.

Although her book is divided into "Childhood" and "Other Misadventures", both parts are connected by recurring places and persons, who are relatives and friends who shaped her childhood and whom she revisits. Both parts have a roughly chronological structure which is constantly disrupted when layers of memory unfold in connection with a person, an experience or the history of a place. New chapters sometimes start in a new location, and it remains open on which time plane some parts of the story play out. For the outsider-reader of her travel narrative, she produces a web of border crossings and almost crossings,³ of Bulgarian towns and villages in all states of decline and growth, of chance encounters and of family reunions; she switches from the disinterested voice of the historian to personal memories, self-reflection and descriptions of her state of mind and emotions. Although she starts and ends in Sofia closing a spatial circle, her narrative is neither linear nor decidedly circular, and its parts refuse to fall neatly into a structure and chronology.

The heterogeneous texture of her life story *cum* travelogue may be a result of the various "I"s: There is the Bulgarian-British travel writer who explores new places and passes on her observations, enriched by historical facts; there is the "I" of the adult who revisits the sites of her childhood, reconstructs her childhood and interprets it with hindsight; and there are moments when the British travel writer and the returning Bulgarian émigré clash, when she feels like an "imported adult personality" on whom the country of her childhood wreaks havoc (Kassabova 2009, p. 303). What causes this rupture are not only the gaps between her Bulgarian past and her present but also the old and new layers of Bulgarian history which she unearths on her travels and which further dissolve the material and emotional shape in which she had remembered the country of her childhood. Such new old layers are the forced assimilation of Turks, communist labor camps, widespread nationalism and nationalistic border policies. The ordering pen of the narrating "I" is not able to narrate in a clear shape the country which is all flux, a complete mess, beloved but "unliveable" (Kassabova 2010, p. 73), nor its inhabitants nor herself. She writes that she

³ The political borders she crosses and/or discusses are the Turkish, Greek and Macedonian borders. Additionally, the difficulties of getting a passport and visa for stays in the Netherlands, UK and New Zealand are reported.

realized that it was impossible to be “just a tourist” hoping to put herself back together (Kassabova 2009, p. 303).

This kind of fragmented writing may be approached from the perspective of narrative psychology as outlined by Vilma Hänninen and Anja Koski-Jännes (2010). Traditionally (e.g. Bruner 1987, Crossley 2000), this approach has rested on the assumption that people have a “culturally pervasive tendency to mentally organized their life by construing it as a linear, temporally unfolding story in which they, as relatively unitary subjects, act as protagonists” (Hänninen and Koski-Jännes 2010, p. 103). Hänninen and Koski-Jännes argue that autobiographers’ intention behind the use of non-canonical forms may be “to create an anti-narrative which would help [them] find a personally convincing new self-narrative” and “to leave the past behind and yet to avoid premature commitment to a new self-narrative” (p. 103). Especially the latter assumption appears to be strikingly plausible in connection with Kassabova’s life and times and her position in between many things such as eras, nations, social formations and languages. Her life narrative in the contours of life in communist Bulgaria does not fully account for her life, but neither does her experience in post-communist Bulgaria nor in the UK or elsewhere. *Street* certainly does not give the impression that Kassabova has committed herself to a new coherent self-narrative. Considering that, as Hänninen and Koski-Jännes claim, the search for narrative coherence in one’s life may become “a gross hindrance” to understanding oneself and non-canonical forms of life writing may actually be quite normal (Hänninen and Koski-Jännes 2010, p. 104; cf. also Eakin and Strawson 1999), the absence of a traditional coherent life narrative in *Street* can be read as a “normal” expression of Kassabova’s ongoing search for a fitting narrative model and her avoidance of a premature commitment rather than as a shortcoming and abnormality. It remains arguable to what extent a new coherent self-narrative may later be possible and desirable.

A related point is Kassabova’s obsession with in-between states, which expresses itself in her interest in border crossings and borders, about which she writes that they “[...] in the Balkans haven’t been friendly places since the Ottoman Empire dissolved into a mess of cocky nationalisms, and people began to be herded across the new borders like cattle” (Kassabova 2009, pp. 256–257). Nevertheless, she remembers the border crossings more than the actual borders, and she recounts that Bulgarian borders saw not only 300,000 Bulgarians leaving in 1989 but had earlier also witnessed the shooting of more East Germans who had tried to escape than on East German borders. The crossing of physical borders in Kassabova’s writing may also stand metaphorically for the crossings of cultural and mental boundaries which characterize her and anyone’s

life as an émigré. In some of her childhood stories, the issue of borders is enriched with meanings related to Bulgaria, the communist camp and beyond. Although borders can be understood as a metaphor of the constructedness and unreliability of difference and belonging, Kassabova still associates Bulgarian borderlands mainly with powerlessness, pain and exclusion rather than with the possibility of renewed contact and exchange.

Kassabova's description of her many (near) border crossings privately and as a travel writer are part of her interpretation of her own life as unsettled and transnational, characterized by "several passports, foreign spouses and ex-spouses, dynamic careers, borrowed identities. And fractured psyches" (Kassabova 2009, p. 332). She muses that she "moved countries three times" (p. 187) and confesses that she had not "felt settled anywhere since [they] left Youth 3" (p. 141), the much hated apartment complex she grew up in.

For a reading of Kassabova's life story that goes beyond narrative psychology and the author's subjectivity, it appeared natural to branch out in the direction of philosophy and cultural theory and anchor Kassabova's life and text in a larger context, that is, in recent discourses on modern nomads because Kassabova's self portrait fits their description. In her writing on nomadic ethics, philosopher Rosi Braidotti proposes that "[r]emembering in this nomadic mode is the active invention of a self that is joyfully discontinuous, as opposed to being mournfully consistent" (Braidotti 2006, p. 169). This statement's resemblance to the revised assumption of narrative psychology discussed above is striking: Ruptures in life courses should be accepted and embraced rather than glossed over in pursuit of an ideal of coherence. Nevertheless, Braidotti makes a more general claim, not restricting her argument to narrative constructions, and she may have in mind well-to-do cosmopolitans rather than unsettled Eastern Europeans. Kassabova has certainly actively invented herself and written her life in a discontinuous mode, but, if we think of her image of a "fractured psyche" and the title word *Misadventures*, her story certainly does not sound "joyfully discontinuous". Furthermore, in her attempts to find words for her mental state of dislocation in time and place, she resorts to metaphors of travel such as the "psychic jet lag" (Kassabova 2009, p. 303) and of the house, with the "mental furniture" disarranged, the walls gone, a fragmented window, whereas her revulsion against the Bulgarian past breaks out through her description of the smells, or rather stink, of her hotel room (p. 303). The decidedly negative connotations of the metaphors chosen confirm that she refuses to harmonize her memories.

The attempt to re-evaluate discontinuity and free it from its negative connotations unites revised narrative psychology and the theoreticians

of modern nomadism, but, as Kassabova illustrates, the joys of discontinuity are rather a moral postulate and utopia than a general reality for migrants. In the light of Kassabova's life narrative, it remains questionable if experiences of strongly felt inferiority and powerlessness, of exclusion and loss of belonging can be re-valued so easily. Modern nomadism cannot be fully understood without reference to a nomadic life's specific historical constellations such as, in this case, the cultural location of communist and post-communist Bulgaria in relation to wider historical and geographical contexts. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that it is possible to reject a normative life model that requires coherence, continuity and stability and to accept and embrace existing alternative, that is, discontinuous, life models.

Kassabova's *Misadventures* participate in "the quest for an adequate style" which Braidotti links with the nomadic mode and its discontinuities (2009, 170). Other writers about modern nomads such as Heiner Hastedt emphasize that it is important for them to accept ambiguities and to learn to think in ambiguities, but he at least acknowledges the persisting longing for clarity (Hastedt 2009, p. 120).

From the modern nomad Kassabova's search for an adequate style to tell her story, it is only a small step to Zygmunt Bauman's concept of liquid modernity (2000), which is another metaphor for the nomadic, ambiguous way of life which emerged when the "solids" of totalitarian communist (as well as some old capitalist) institutions (Ray 2007, p. 75) broke up and the "solids" of the late capitalist globalized economy offered little structure for the individual's life. This raises the question if Kassabova's life narrative may be read as an illustration of how a post-communist individual struggles with "liquefied patterns of human interaction and dependency", as Bauman calls them (2000, pp. 6–8), after the "solids" of Cold War social institutions had crumbled. Kassabova herself reflects about the "solid" of the Berlin Wall:

I was happy. Like most people on our side, I had internalized oppression. The Wall was already inside me, the bricks and mortar of my eleven-year-old self. The Wall [...] was a collective state of mind, and there is something cosy, something reassuring in all things collective. Even a prison (Kassabova 2009, p. 67).

These certainties of the – questionable – opposition between inside and outside vanished completely once the wall came down, but life outside could not bring the freedom it had promised, as Zygmunt Bauman argues (1995, pp. 73–74). Kassabova's reflection shows that she is aware of the – again, questionable – solidness of the socialist camp and its institutions, of the reassuring aspects of this solidness and its almost complete loss. After

this prison dissolved, no new institutions or collective states of mind have emerged to give life solidity. With Bauman, it can truly be said that her life politics had been in a fluid state since she left Bulgaria and that she had been thoroughly rethinking “old concepts that used to frame [life’s] narratives” (Bauman 1995, p. 8). At this point, it should be mentioned that solid notions of gender such as the normativity of heterosexual marriage were also destabilized in the process of Bulgaria’s transformation and Kassabova’s migration (for example, Kassabova 2009, p. 332).

This leads to another aspect of liquid modernity, which concerns the old, deceptively solid concept of the nation and its critique. In her life and travel narrative, Kassabova appears obsessed with borders, and her identity politics results in an ambiguous identity of post-nationalism. Traveling to the Macedonian, Greek and Turkish borders of Bulgaria, tracing their history and facing her own anxieties, she gathers overwhelming evidence for the arbitrariness of national borders and the devastating effects they have had on people’s lives. Kassabova calls “the whole idea of nationality [...] a stupid joke” (Kassabova 2009, p. 195) and claims that it is possible, even “inevitable to live between – no, among nationalities” (p. 144). She describes her life as culturally divided in space with no single loyalty and concludes that “[...] there is something suspect about single loyalties anyway, since they lend themselves so easily to Revival Processes” (p. 273). With this, Kassabova transposes her communist and post-communist life into the discourses of liquid modernity and post-nationalism, expressing her disgust whenever she encounters new, revisionist Macedonian, Greek and Bulgarian nationalisms (for example, pp. 195–196). Braidotti characterizes exactly this situation when she suggests that the post-nationalistic sense of diasporic, hybrid and nomadic identity can be translated into the political notion of “flexible citizenship” (Braidotti 2006, p. 79), that is, for example, citizenship across national boundaries (p. 81). In this respect, Kassabova arises from her writing as someone who has accomplished some kind of flexible citizenship.

With her likening of Bulgaria’s geographical shape to “an animal hide spread out, with the head end looking to Europe and the rear end sitting at the Black Sea” (Kassabova 2009, p. 199) and speaking of Bulgaria’s national dream of Europe (p. 320), Kassabova describes and endorses the Bulgarian (and her own?) status as a nation between East and West and its longing to belong to a transnational Europe in the face of its “painfully insecure self-perception as a European country” and a second-rate nation (Kassabova 2010, p. 67, 69). This description points towards another discourse which Kassabova’s appears to tap in her search for patterns and metaphors applicable to her situation, which is postcolonialism with its focus not only on power imbalance and inequality but also on hybridity,

transculturality, language and more. Although Kassabova does not count as a postcolonial subject in the original sense, she shares with them a transnational, deterritorialized identity, a feeling of inferiority in her new host culture and alienation from her home land.

CONCLUSION

Although my search for an adequate approach to reading post-communist expatriate life writing did not result in a definitive model, it can nevertheless be considered successful because it led to multiple answers, revealing the impact of the present on the writing of the past on the one hand and the text's reliance on well-established elements of genre such as childhood memoir, emigrant life and travelogue on the other. The impact of the present is certainly not limited to Kassabova's circumstances of life as an expatriate and opportunities of publishing in Britain and other countries. Rather, it is suggested that discursive strands of current cultural criticism such as postmodernism, transnationalism and postcolonialism have informed her writing, which becomes most obvious in her essay "From Bulgaria with Love and Hate". By constructing her life mainly through fragmented and discontinuous narration and with references to nation, nationalism, borders, self, other, emigration and other such concepts, she creates a narrative that is compatible with multiple current discourses in West and East and comprehensible to multiple readerships. Casting her childhood in communism, migration to Western countries and return visits to post-communist Bulgaria in such textual and linguistic moulds, she renders her story appealing to Bulgarians at home and in the international diaspora as well as to English-speaking readers interested in transcultural topics and writings. Her struggle to remember her communist past and share her memories is also a struggle for international recognition and a space in the archive of shared knowledge maintained by dominant English-speaking western culture.

With her academic background, Kassabova certainly belongs to an elite that is capable of communicating some of their experience of communism in a form that is neither nostalgia nor total condemnation but rather transposes the (solid) communist past into liquid transnational modernity. Nevertheless, Kassabova does not quite find the lightness which theoreticians like Braidotti tend to expect from modern nomads. In her text and life, liquefied life meets the resistance of the many new "solids" and the old ones that are still there. Nevertheless, from her childhood in communist Bulgaria and her experience of inferiority and lack of freedom, which she shares with, for example, many post-colonial migrants or working-class people, Kassabova extracts an insight of equally

wide currency and compatibility as she claims that her communist experience “[...] wasn’t a happy one but it gave those of us who care a touch of humanity and compassion” (Kassabova 2010, p. 78).

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