



Re-rooting marigolds and methodologies: Unpacking the ambivalent proximities of Eastern European whiteness

Posted on July 30, 2024 by Špela Drnovšek Zorko

[vc_row][vc_column][vc_column_text css=""]Since the evening of our meeting, morning for most of its other participants, summer has come to Kobe. The rainy season was later than usual this year – although that is becoming more usual, too – and this time I remembered to be grateful for every overcast day that delayed the onset of the Japanese summer. Now the marigold and parsley seedlings huddling on the sun-exposed balcony are much on my mind. An unexpected gift, they are still awaiting the delivery of a larger planter and the dubious sanctuary of deeper, moister soil. As I peer at them anxiously I am reminded of marigolds as I have known them in the past, planted firmly in the rocky soil of a village garden in Slovenia.

I will return to the garden shortly – being fundamentally cyclical, gardens

are forgiving of such things. But first, to that evening of the reading group, itself full of gentle generosity and elliptical loops, which gave the gift of coming anew to my own thoughts. For several years now I have been thinking, speaking with others, and attempting to write about how the concepts of 'race' and 'whiteness' surface for people in the context of being (or being seen as) 'Eastern European migrants' and in reference or opposition to this category. I have observed how 'race' and 'whiteness' are part of the explanatory resources available to 'newer' migrants for making sense of themselves in a so-called multicultural society, a means of relating in racial terms and terminologies that is itself part of the changing conditions of how 'race' is understood collectively in the UK and elsewhere, including in its many connections to material resources and historical trajectories. I have also stumbled across these concepts in what I interpret as more affective responses to encounters of various kinds: on streets, in schools, in friendships and intimate partnerships, in overheard conversations, in art galleries.

I have tried to pay attention to the joints between the two – the 'interpretive resource' approach and the 'affective encounters' approach, to put it crudely – and to their internal contradictions. To put it more precisely, I have repeatedly found that racialised 'Eastern European' subjectivities routed through transnational and translational space can carry all kinds of political orientations and projects, and therefore vastly different ways of welcoming or rejecting kinship with others as co-travellers in (historic) time as well as through (migrant) space. At times, all this has felt like a generative project – it puts my thumb on a knotted muscle. Other times, it seems only to reinforce binary thinking, 'welcoming' and 'rejecting' as opposites. Each instance I happen across of how thinking along with others can happen in unexpected ways is balanced by my own disclaimer of its probable political inefficacy – in the long run.

The long run. But how long are we thinking of exactly? One of the participants in the session raised a deceptively simple question: how far back in history do you go? It was a good question, and it sparked in me another one, about how far into the future we go, too. When we speak of solidarities between 'migrants', or between those being pitted against each other under the divide-and-rule logics of the many hostile

environments... What are the temporalities that matter? And how fleeting an encounter is too fleeting to count?

I have no clear answers to these new questions (or old questions in a new guise), and they occurred to me too late to pose them to my fellow discussants. So: back to gardens, which peopled our conversation in surprisingly recurring ways. Perhaps it is the way of things that when we take pains to speak of routes, roots will find their way. Encouraged by a participant to think of the shared labours of fieldwork (work in actual fields, rather than the anthropologist's metaphor) between workers who have come to Britain by different routes, and thus brought with them different knowledge of digging up roots and wielding hoes and teaching others to do the same, I thought wistfully of the many paths untaken during the cordoned-off interval we call 'research'. My second thought was for that rocky vegetable garden nestled against an old apple tree, and the many other gardens and fields patchworking the village I grew up in. I thought of stories I have not yet got around to grappling with, of how history from the days-when-my-father-was-little was made near and proximate in the years after Slovenia's independence, a subversive but partial education in political madness, and just how much of that historical retelling has to do with literal fields – and beetles. How much it probably has to do with the questions I have spent years asking others: about how to unapologetically step in and out of our own histories when we need to, to better see others around us doing the same.

But that is a story for another evening, when the marigolds have drunk their fill. Now I am only left with the task to thank all the reading group participants for their hospitality on a late tsuyu night, and for coming along with me in the short run.

Photo © Takashi Hososhima, Marigolds in Inokashira Park, Tokyo, Japan.

le title="Reading group event details" open="true" css=""]Date: 3rd July 2024

Title: (Re-)routing as Methodology: Unpacking the Ambivalent Proximities of Eastern European Whiteness with Špela Drnovšek Zorko

Speaker: [Špela Drnovšek Zorko](#)

Chair: [Josefine Baark](#)

Minutes by: [Claire French](#)[/vc_toggle][vc_toggle title="Selected minutes"
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Špela is introduced by the chair, Josefine Baark

Špela:

So, I was a little nervous ahead of time due to having a slightly shy relationship to the “decolonial” – I never want to claim that what I am doing is wholly decolonial!

But this project all began while I was still at SOAS, researching people from Yugoslavia who had moved to the UK. I became more and more interested in how socialist Yugoslavia was deemed relevant in very particular contexts, and those contexts were maybe situations where people were trying to assert a sense of worldliness in the wake of their marginalisation in multiple ways. Both of being radically thrown out of any concept of normality and normal life by war, and by other kinds of ruptures as well. What I found most interesting about those conversations were the very different articulations of race and the ideas of coevalness or worldliness they held.

Then I became interested in how migrants’ understandings of race and coloniality/decoloniality are capable of carrying quite different kinds of political orientations. So, I’ve tried to track this in various ways, ethnographically, and through interviews and through a more cultural analysis framing, by looking at ‘Eastern European migrants’ understandings of these concepts and at the racial grammars of the so-called ‘off white’ [reference to the book title *Off white: Central and Eastern Europe and the global history of race*].

Despite being ethnographic, my chapter in the book is very much a historical approach to whiteness in the region as well as how it travels and mutates. I wanted to use it as an opportunity

to think about how the people that I've spoken to over the past several years think about the relevance of history – not just of the places they come from, but also the places where they live, such as the UK, when positioning themselves alongside other migrants or racialised communities. I framed it in relation to Brexit because I was doing the project at that time. Also, the idea of 'Eastern European migrants' as a category is one I treat very loosely, or rather, I try and always contextualise it and in relation to the UK context – where I think there is a lot of context to be had! But also, what do people then do with this category?

My goal was to extend a postcolonial historical lens that has been applied to make sense of contemporary British nativism and contemporary British racism to the trajectories of people from the place we call Eastern Europe, without trying to make anything a matter of equivalence. That's where the relational aspect is interesting to me. In the end, I think this extension of the postcolonial lens turned out to be in large part methodological. I borrowed from Paul Gilroy to think about routedness and route work as a way of unpicking how Eastern European migrants locate themselves in the UK. But in doing that, I discovered that there were many different ways that Eastern European whiteness was narrated in relation to a whole bunch of other racialisations. And I think I wrote the chapter to try to figure out for myself whether trying to understand these different white identities through the concept of route work can help illuminate the various interpretive labours that history is asked to perform.

As I said at the beginning, I'm not sure to what extent I would identify this as a decolonial methodology, but I am very, very keen to hear your thoughts and insights.

Josefine:

I'm an art historian and I have also thought a little bit about how the people you interviewed spoke about their history?

Špela:

A lot of people that I spoke to said that British people don't know anything about Eastern European histories. Sometimes it was the little it was the very kind of tiny conversations or tiny moments that opened up people to bigger questions.

At some point when writing this chapter, one of the editors, Catherine Baker, who is a historian, was saying how interesting it is that a lot of the time people are taught to have a de facto historical lens when learning about Central and Eastern Europe or the Balkans, the sense that, oh, this region is steeped in history, there's a kind of thickness to history there. Which of course often has merged or verges on unhelpful historical narratives about 'ancient ethnic hatreds'. So, I feel like applying a lot of what I saw in the past five, ten years in the UK a move towards applying this kind of thick historical awareness to contemporary Britain. Of course, with so many omissions and so many people rejecting any sense that history matters But I felt that when compared to, say, 2010, the Brexit era had a much more history-conscious vibe to it. It's a very technical term, 'vibe'! Putting these two together, and asking how 'Eastern European' historical sensitivities came into contact with this this awareness that 'oh, Britain is really not over its past' -maybe taking the two together could tell us some things about 'race'.

Reader:

It is interesting to hear the specificity in terms of the European continent then to move to the experience in the realm of the UK and to contrast and compare. When I hear discussions of identity in the continent of Africa, I often hear unspecificity and a delocated hearing that tethers location and places it to the homogeneous. So that's here unspecificity and a delocation. Do you think this might be disrupted? I don't know about Gilroy's methodology, but could this be a means towards this end? What

disruption sounds like, so to say.

Špela:

I think for me, the example of the 'half Eastern European, half British', white friend who derailed a conversation about racism in the UK by bringing up that the etymology of the word 'slave' is 'Slav' is for me a delocated hearing of history. Because it doesn't make those connections with time and place that could turn into something, something politically useful. So it's used to shut down rather than to open up. At the same time, I think some people offer very generous hearings. I am interested and curious about those kinds of shared histories – a sort of unfreedom, to put it in a broad way, and whether they can together form an acknowledgement of injustice in the present. I think in my more optimistic moment, I think that that is a potential methodology that could disrupt mainstream readings. But I'm not sure if it's what happens most of the time.

Reader:

I do know from my experience as a young teenager, people were coming from Yugoslavia into Lincolnshire to work in the fields. And so I was, I was working in the fields with a little family and being a part of a gang workforce farming potatoes. I found myself to be the only brown person amongst a bunch of people that were from Eastern Europe and a couple I got to know pretty well, a father and son. I think it was 20 pence a row, and it took about an hour to work one row. So, they were really, really bad wages, even in the late 80s, it was horrible, right?

But the father and son shared their understanding of agriculture – growing crops and maintaining the field. And as I look back on those memories. I think that my ancestors were taken from Gujarat to East Africa by the British. And in India, they were agricultural workers, and they were blacksmiths. And the reason

why they were taken is because they had metal skill, metallurgical skills, so I had this feeling that inside me I had this intergenerational presence in my DNA, if you will, of agriculture and crop growing. But I found myself in a space where that had been disjunctured, disjointed.

Špela:

I come from a country where proximity to farming is intergenerational - even if you go to the city, it is very likely that you will have family in the country cultivating. One of my earliest memories is having a little plot to cultivate, but I think for a time, especially coming to the UK in my early 20s and feeling I was not at all interested in dirt and cultivating, I would have thought, 'oh, that's such a romantic image, you know, I don't want to talk about that, everyone will think Eastern Europe is just people working the land like a more primal version of what the UK is today'. And then it took me a little while to figure out that there were many things that I wish I knew how to cultivate better, also in the field or in the kitchen garden. And I think looking back on it I would have liked, to have done more of the kind of research that happens when you're not speaking - when you are working with your hands, with the hoe, and it's what I'm much more drawn to these days. That was a really lovely intervention to think with. Thank you.

Reader:

How far back do you take history?

Špela:

As far back as it takes! In terms of research parameters?

Reader:

It was partly rhetorical, I suppose. I have just written a review of the literature. I was looking at Cedric Robinson and how he writes about anti blackness. In my research, I use anti blackness to interrogate climate change policy and discourse. And I was thinking about racial capitalism and how he says, 'well, actually we think about the colonial entity as 1490.'

But racism in Europe was an earlier concept, especially with Roma, with gipsies and with Slavs who were enslaved and oppressed. So, there's a there's a much older history and I wondered how that may be relevant. How far back do you go?

Špela:

You say it's rhetorical, but I think it's actually really relevant. For some of the discussions that I had with the second interlocutor I mentioned in the chapter, we spent quite a while talking about that, about how far do you, how far can you say history affects you in the present? And she was the one who said, you know, actually I went away from that conversation thinking that I should read something about it, especially that slave trade that Cedric Robinson also writes about, that I think he also sees as a precursor as a training ground, if you will, for transatlantic slavery. I think there are such interesting ways to draw on those proximate histories to resist forms of colonial domination in the present. But I also think there are so many ways to draw on that history, to establish yet another exceptionalism and victimhood, and I think, I'm going to generalise hugely, but I think we are seeing more of a move towards that on the political level. Falling back on histories of discrimination against white slaves or white people to justify projects of keeping out everyone who's trying to come to Europe, for instance, or to justify anti-Roma politics or anti-Semitic politics. So, I think there are so many moving parts here and I wish for more conversations that didn't have this - I

want to say this politics waiting in the wing, but of course it depends on what politics we want to bring into it. But, at the moment I'm a little pessimistic about this on a massive scale, just because it's been instrumentalised by really, really very right-wing governments.

Reader:

I was wondering if you could expand on how you drew from the routedness theory in your methodologies.

Špela:

I draw from routing as a verb mostly to think about how people end up where they are. Routing as a verb helps me to think about the kinds of connections that people make about how they've ended up where they are.

I think that working with the idea of routedness, for me at least, invokes less linear journeys than are sometimes made or thought about, especially in the context of post-socialist Eastern European migration to Western Europe and the UK, the kind of post-2004 narrative of, suddenly free movement allowed this population redistribution from the poorer and less developed regions of Europe to the ageing and developing, almost over-developed regions of Europe. I wasn't necessarily finding that interpretation to be crucial for people I spoke with, especially when it came to thinking about how they position themselves in relation to other communities in the UK. So, for me route work is a methodology of noticing how we are all carried.

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