

The problem with airports starts when I fly to London for the first time. I'm visiting my romantic partner, and when the border guard asks me what brings me to the UK, I make the rookie mistake of answering honestly.

You know you can't just stay here, he says. If you want to stay here, you have to apply for a visa at home. You can't apply from here.

I have a return ticket.

I have an apartment I'm going back to, a job I love, an MA programme I'm finishing.

I'm just here for a week, I tell him.

He does not look convinced.

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The problem with language starts earlier. Really it's always been there, but it starts in earnest the first time I really fall in love. I know how I feel and I feel wonderful, but the words to describe it - boyfriend, girlfriend, various pop-cultural iterations thereof - all feel wrong.

They don't feel like me. Like what I'm doing, like who I am.

So I settle for my love. Sometimes my person, the person I'm seeing, the person I'm with. But mostly, my love.

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The problem with visas starts with my second UK one. This is a spousal visa. To demonstrate that I deserve it, I have to pay a large fee and submit a pile of documentation. The documentation is of a personal nature. It contains photos, pages of skype calls and smses. It includes letters that include words like husband, wife. I am no more comfortable with these words than I was with boyfriend and girlfriend, but now, my right to entry, my right to my relationship, my right to remain, my right to the rest of my life is deeply entangled with them.

It is not enough to write "my love, my person, my partner."

I need to use other language. Language the Home Office will understand. Language UK Borders will understand.

My relationship must be articulated through official language. My relationship must exist in an officially recognised structure. My feelings on these matters, like the private nature of my photos, my phone records, are irrelevant.

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I am someone who loves to travel. These days I try to limit my flying for environmental reasons, but when I first began to travel internationally, I was transfixed by the magic of air travel. To be picked up in one country and put down in another 7 hours later having crossed an ocean felt like magic. I grew up in a small town where I dreamed of travelling to other countries and now somehow I was doing it. Airports were these intoxicating gateways. I could feel their particular energy start to pulsate in my veins as I approached the drop-off point for departures. I feel it now as I'm describing it. My palms are sweaty. My heart's beating faster. It's exciting at the airport, sometimes a bit stressful, but above all it's exhilarating. It's festive too, a bit. I always dress up when I fly.

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Somewhere around 2012, the airport problem and the visa problem begin to intersect.

I have a new visa. This one is still based on my relationship, but it's via an unusual route for a third-country national in a relationship with an UK national. That's what I am by the way. Apparently.

I have this visa by what's known as the Surinder Singh route. Like me, Surinder Singh was a third country national in a relationship with a British national. Singh and his partner lived in Germany, where he had a visa as a family member of an EU citizen. When they returned to the UK, he was allowed to enter as a family member of an EU citizen, because his partner had activated her rights as an EU citizen by living in Germany. Did you get that?

There are three distinct advantages to getting a visa via the Surinder Singh route:

- It is much cheaper to obtain than a UK spousal visa
- It is much faster to obtain than a UK spousal visa
- You don't have to be married to get one and the category is "Family Member of an EU citizen", which for some reason makes me feel more like a human being in my own right and less like an addendum to my partner's existence than "spousal visa" does.

Of course this visa is now a thing of the past thanks to Brexit. When was a thing, unsurprisingly, the Home Office and UK Borders and Immigration didn't love it. UKBI in

particular didn't seem to understand how it worked. When I held this visa, my return trips to the UK frequently ended in unpleasant conversations that at times edged towards interrogation. Like a good millennial, I duly recorded these incidents on Facebook:

Take 1:

Another flight into London, another encounter with passive-aggressive, poorly informed border staff. What kills me is that I've had this visa since 2011. Does this particular border guard really think that SHE is going to be the one to discover that I've somehow been issued the wrong document four years into the validity of the visa? Surely there are only two things border guards need to determine: 1) is the visa issued by a valid authority? 2) does it belong to me? Otherwise, they're basically saying they have no confidence in the Home Office.

Take 2:

Border Guard: where have you just flown from?

Me: Prague.

Guard looks at my Family Member of an EU Citizen visa.

Border Guard: and is your EU family member Hungarian?

Me: Prague is in the Czech Republic.

Border Guard looks embarrassed.

Take 3:

Flying back into London tonight from Trieste, where I was representing the UK at an international theatre festival, I was thinking how much less stressful it is to fly in now that I have Permanent Residency. Then I got interrogated by a border guard who made me feel sub-human. Unwelcome unhome, yet again.

Believe me, airports are much less exciting when they include encounters like these. Each time I had one, and I had them more often than I did not in those years, it would usually take the entire journey into London to recompose myself, to calm the internal sense of discombobulation, the roiling, as if the space between my navel and my solar plexus was occupied by a raging, angry sea. I seethed. Occasionally, I put on my sunglasses and quietly wept. Quite possibly, I scared the odd person on public transport. On these occasions, I would often think about the fact that I am white and a native English speaker with two postgraduate degrees, holding the passport of a nation deeply in cahoots with the UK. I could afford - by which I mean I had a credit card - to pay a solicitor to instruct me to attach a highlighted copy of the immigration law detailing the validity of the Surinder Singh route to the permanent residency application I filed after my first one was refused. If my highly privileged experience of UK immigration was this distressing - and, believe me, it was distressing - what does that mean it's like for others?

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I got my first British passport three years ago.

I thought it would solve all my problems, at least when it comes to airports.

It hasn't.

Partly because of Brexit, but also because having two passports presents its own complexities. I can't enter the United States on my British passport, but flying out of the UK on an American passport gives me a weird feeling. It's like I'm expelling myself from the place I live to enter the place where I was born, a place I was always anxious to leave. Like girlfriend, it's never sat right with me. Administratively I am both British and American, but in truth, I feel like neither. I've gotten into the habit of presenting both passports, the red one and the blue one, when I check in. Like here, deal with all of it, deal with all of me. The both and the and. You choose. I'm not going to.

Neither passport has solved the language problem, which, like border guards, tends to hang out in airports. The journey from check-in to take-off is a gauntlet of gendered address far worse than girlfriend or wife. Once I counted the number of times I was called ma'am in a single trip through Heathrow. It reached the double digits. On that occasion, I messaged Heathrow on Facebook to ask if they had considered training their staff in the use of gender neutral language. I pointed out that the filtering of all passengers through the gender binary was particularly jarring given that it was pride month and the terminal was festooned with rainbow flags. They thanked me for my feedback.

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Airports and visas are such blunt instruments. They see the world in black and white. Granted, denied. This queue or that one. It's all very either/or.

I am so not an either/or type of human. Are you? Is anyone?

Language too can be a blunt instrument. When wielded by officials, when deployed indiscriminately. Luckily, though, unlike visas, or airports, when it comes to language we each have some say in how it goes, at least some of the time. Our personal usage, the ways we define ourselves, the ways we think about others, these can make space for greater complexity. They can make space for both/and.

I am not either/or.

I am both/and.