A little book containing thirty-odd pages of sturdy paper, it is bound with a grainy cardboard cover and embossed with the name of a country, a national symbol, and the word *passport* or its counterpart in another language. It might be red, green, blue, or black, depending on the issuing country, but it is always the same easily grasped size—according to an international standard first established nearly a century ago—and it always includes a data page containing a serial number, a photograph of the holder, and a range of personal details. When the edges and corners are noticeably worn, when the pages are creased and smudged, adorned with colorful entry stamps and sought-after visas, the document becomes a talisman for the global wanderer and the précis of a life story, whether for the privileged tourist or the desperate migrant. It possesses the strange power to control exactly where we may go and where we must not. A passport can offer the promise of secure passage to a new life far away; it can enable flight from the dangers, the restrictions, or just the mundanity of familiar surroundings; it can garner one a fast pass to the head of the line or unwanted scrutiny in the backrooms of officialdom. It can give us license to cross borders of every description—geographical, but also cultural, linguistic, economic, legal—in search of something unattainable at home, and then bring us safely back again.

In *Step across This Line* (2002), Salman Rushdie claims without irony (his native tongue as a global migrant and master storyteller) that “the most precious book I possess is my passport.” Although he acknowledges that such an assertion about a seemingly commonplace object...
might seem like hyperbole, it is no overstatement for him. Yes, the passport has its practical function as an indispensable travel document (do not lose it); yes, it may contain a photo of which we are not particularly fond (ignore it if you can); yes, it may lull us into a complacent sense that it will do its job and pass inspection by the border control officer (or now, the automated passport-control kiosk). But if we do give it some attention, the passport begins to accept much more psychic investment, to bear more emotional weight, becoming in the process a “precious” object carrying more than mere practical or material value. For Rushdie, this is largely due to the recognition that not all passports do their work so easily or unobtrusively. The novelist relates vivid memories of his first passport, an Indian one he carried in the 1960s, which stated in its pages that the bearer could visit only a painfully brief list of countries. When he received a British passport in his teens, he felt as if the world suddenly opened up to him, and soon enough the little book took him far away from home to a Cambridge education and the literary circles of London. It was also the book that told the story of his bifurcated Anglo-Indian identity most directly and concisely; it was the one book that accompanied the wandering writer everywhere he went around the globe; it was a book that, in demanding freedom of movement for its holder, declared a whole cluster of promises about what would be possible in his life.

A passport is thus the most personal of artifacts, and yet, as Rushdie’s story demonstrates, the little book takes on its private value only against the broader history of nations and empires. His possession of an Indian passport was engendered by the fact that, just a few months after his birth in June 1947, India gained its independence from the United Kingdom and discontinued the use of British Indian passports. At almost the same moment, the partitioning of the subcontinent and the founding of the new state of Pakistan placed an international border between Rushdie and much of his extended family. Soon passports would be necessary for reunions on either side of the frontier. But for decades the wider geopolitical order would not see fit to grant broad access to holders of passports from the newly sovereign dominion of
India, and even today other nation-states provide far less visa-free entry to citizens of India than to those of most Western countries.

To be sure, the passport is an object closely associated with the rise of the nation-state and the evolution of international relations, and has thus been continually implicated in the regulation of citizenship status, global migration, asylum seeking, national security, and related concerns. It is an object that assigns an individual an official identity and advances state efforts to monitor and control the movement of certain peoples and populations. This is the unyielding paradox of the passport: even as it promises independence and mobility, adventure and opportunity, escape and safe haven, it is also an essential tool of government surveillance and state power, ostensibly assuring homeland security and regulated traffic across national boundaries. It is, in other words, an object that occupies a place at the very nexus of the personal and the political.

This unique positioning means that passports, these little books, have a capacity to tell stories like few—perhaps no—other documents in the historical archive: they offer a tangible record of our displacements, which is alternately personal memoir and travel narrative, but always caught up in the wider currents of cultural and political history. Rushdie’s early passports tell a story of the relationship between his formative identity and the collectives in which that formation inevitably took place. Years later, his British passport would also tell the story of his period in hiding from the fatwa brought against him by Iran’s Supreme Leader, who called for Rushdie’s execution after the publication of *Satanic Verses* (1989); and then, the story of his global celebrity, academic appointments, high-profile friends, and cultural exchanges around the world, after fears of the death sentence waned. Passports thus recite the seeming imperative that we must be “attached” to one place and only “allowed” to enter into others. They tell stories about some of the most consequential ideas of our time, such as “modernity,” “nation,” and “globalization,” though the narratives they offer are far more intimate than these lofty abstractions suggest. They remind us that, at some point in our history, human beings became dependent on the nation-state as a
source of identity and protection and that this dependence has only become more difficult to shake in this era of rapid worldwide travel and instantaneous electronic connectivity. As we will see, looking at these precious objects closely—reading these little books carefully—can help us to better understand the emotions and imaginings associated with mobility and migration in our ever more “globalized” epoch.

The rise of the modern territorial state in the eighteenth century gave new impetus to the delineation and control of international borders, along with new means to track and manage the mobility of its citizens. If the nation-state has not yet met its long-heralded demise, it is nonetheless part of an increasingly mobile and interconnected world, where the passport plays a crucial role in facilitating the flow of people and capital across frontiers. The September 11 terrorist attacks led governments around the world to harden their borders, with enhanced passenger

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**Figure 1.** Photo page of Salman Rushdie’s passport, 1974. Image courtesy of Stuart A. Rose Library, Emory University. By permission of Her Majesty’s Passport Office.
screening by trained security personnel, increased identification requirements, and other new surveillance techniques. The years since have also witnessed a rise in nativist and populist movements, exhibiting xenophobic attitudes toward new arrivals and calling for reactionary measures such as travel bans and border walls. But none of this has stemmed the flow. Perhaps no other statistic illustrates our age of global mobility better than the United Nations World Tourism Organization estimate that there were 1.5 billion international tourist arrivals in 2019, more than a twofold increase from the 681 million arrivals in 2000 and a sixtyfold increase from the 25 million arrivals in 1950, just as global travel began to recover from the devastation of the Second World War. Although reliable statistics on undocumented individuals are difficult to compile, most indices also mark a dramatic upturn in “irregular” immigration over the last two decades, to about 260 million border crossings in 2019. Never in the history of our species have so many been so capable or so compelled to cross these manmade lines; never in the history of the nation-state have those lines been more permeable. Not even a global pandemic could slow the pace of global mobility for long.

The less-little book that you now hold in your hands is about those who traverse frontiers, who travel over borders, who step across lines, and the documents they depend on to make these crossings possible. As Rushdie reflects on this theme, he notes the archetypal significance of traversing frontiers, citing an example from Persian myth: the avian god Simurgh summons the birds of earth for a congress in his home atop Mount Qâf, though only a handful of his feathered friends muster enough courage to travel so far. Their journey across the divide between here and there is not a matter of some base need but of religious devotion and divine obligation. The story allegorizes something Rushdie locates deep in our natures: an impulse he sees in Christopher Columbus navigating the Atlantic in search of a new world and (a less problematic instance) Neil Armstrong striding out onto the surface of the moon. This is an impulse we will witness repeatedly in the chapters that follow, whether in Marco Polo traveling the distant reaches of the Silk Road; in Sir Philip Sidney initiating the tradition of the Grand
Tour; in Mary Dods pursuing a life beyond the constraints of social expectations and gender norms; or in James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Willa Cather, Langston Hughes, Marc Chagall, Paul Robeson, Hannah Arendt, Ai Weiwei, Elon Musk, Yasiin Bey, Sarah Ahmed, and many others traversing the frontiers of the nation-state over the last century in search of novel ways of being in the world. Their journeys involve not just literal movements across geographical borders but metaphorical movements across other boundaries, between home and away, familiar and foreign, belonging and exclusion, sameness and difference, self and other. Their journeys necessitate moving beyond the limits within which they can claim the rights of nativity or citizenship—and thus they entail all manner of dislocations and dangers.

Significance accrues to the passport largely because it is the key prop in the modern ritual of border crossing. “At the frontier,” Rushdie writes, “liberty is stripped away—we hope temporarily—and we enter the universe of control. Even the freest of free societies are unfree at the edge, where things and people go out and other people and things come in, where only the right things and people must go in and out.” Here we must identify ourselves: our documents proclaim our names and nationalities, our birthdates and birthplaces; the border control officer supplements these details with questions about our activities and intentions, our resources and destinations. The officer examines the document we hand over, looks closely at the picture, at the face of the holder, asks a few more questions. The nation-state he represents offers a form of hospitality that Jacques Derrida calls “conditional,” generating interrogations, tensions, dramas related to who we are and where we come from. We are wise, in these circumstances, if we play along with the routine and present ourselves as plainly as possible: no reason to add to the drama with political opinions, smart quips, seditious irony, or anything else that might attract attention. But we are also liable, in these circumstances, to sense our own estrangement from our homes and ourselves: Am I so easily reduced to a set of dates, place names, and biodata? Do I have any ownership over my identity? Am I somehow someone to be feared? Do I have anything to fear? It is telling that the passport
inspection ritual makes an appearance in just about every major work of
travel literature from the last century—from Robert Byron’s *The Road to
Oxiana* (1937) to Paul Theroux’s *The Great Railway Bazaar* (1975), Bruce
Chatwin’s *In Patagonia* (1977), Pico Iyer’s *The Global Soul* (2001), and
Elizabeth Gilbert’s *Eat, Pray, Love* (2006)—as an unavoidable, and
often anxious, episode in any journey across borders. Here, in this inter-
stitial space between one domain and the next, the passport makes its
promises to shield us from harm and accompany us to the other side.

In *Joseph Anton* (2012), a memoir of his years living in hiding under the
fatwa, Rushdie tells a story of the passport ritual gone wrong. Shortly
after arriving at Benítez International Airport for a literary fair in
Santiago, Chile, on a hot, airless day in 1993, the novelist and his compan-
ion (and future wife), Elizabeth West, were surrounded by local police,
relieved of their travel documents, and ushered off to a nearby law
enforcement building for questioning. This was at a time when Chilean
security forces were still under the control of the brutal Augusto
Pinochet. As Rushdie recounts the episode, his detention resulted from
a struggle between competing factions within the security forces over
whether he should be admitted to the country with a death sentence
hanging over his head—whether he should receive protection from a
nation-state of which he was not a citizen. Held for hours in a small
room, with armed guards posted outside, the writer and his partner made
repeated requests for the return of their passports, which had no effect
on their Spanish-speaking captors. The dire circumstances briefly turned
comic when their guards wandered off and Rushdie decided to “take a
little stroll” through the streets of Santiago, though he was soon inter-
cepted by an English-language interpreter who respectfully, but stub-
bornly, demanded his return to the holding room. The situation was
only defused when a staffer from the British embassy arrived to retrieve
the world-famous author and his companion and deliver them to their
hosts in the city.

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This episode involving Rushdie’s “precious book” can be viewed as a recent, and rather extreme, example of what American literary scholar Paul Fussell has called “the passport nuisance” (borrowing British novelist and travel writer Norman Douglas’s phrase). For Fussell, “that ritual occasion for anxiety so familiar to a modern person, the moment one presents the passport at a frontier,” is emblematic of a new kind of experience arising shortly after the First World War, when passport requirements were standardized and universalized for the first time. In his classic study *Abroad: British Literary Traveling between the Wars*, Fussell points to a telling instance of “the passport nuisance” in a brief memoir written by D. H. Lawrence, which describes his year-long relationship with the “half-gentleman and debtor” Maurice Magnus. In 1916, before meeting the English novelist, the colorful American had run off to join the French Foreign Legion, only to run away from his regiment and eventually run afoul of Italian authorities for his financial misdeeds after the war. In the spring of 1920, Lawrence accompanied Magnus on a steamship voyage from Italy to Malta, where he witnessed the American’s consternation while queuing up for passport inspection. The roguish Magnus, who had managed to swindle his way into fine hotel rooms and first-class train cars across Europe, was reduced to a nervous wreck during the bureaucratic routine. But as soon as he passed “examination”—“Yes, he passed all right. Once more he was free”—his trepidation was quelled and his demeanor again became “quite superb and brisk.”

Fussell describes the passport “ritual” at the Maltese port as a “debased” version of the mythic journey across the threshold that divides home from the wider world beyond: “For the hero, it is a moment of triumph. For the modern traveler, it is a moment of humiliation, a reminder that he is merely the state’s creature, one of his realm’s replaceable parts.” In this regard, the scholar suggests, the return home is even worse for “the modern traveler,” enduring the sustained scrutiny of a customs and immigration official, who briefly confiscates the passport as he thumbs through a registry of political dissidents, escaped criminals, and other offenders against the state to cross-check the name on the document.
When Hollywood first turned its attention to the border control ritual, it did so with this debasement very much in view, playing the new passport regime for laughs and thereby countering, if not exactly allaying, our anxieties with mirth. *Monkey Business* (1931), the third feature film starring the Marx Brothers, finds the four siblings stowed away on an ocean liner steaming across the Atlantic toward America. The long sea voyage gives them plenty of time to get up to their trademark high jinks: insulting the captain, tormenting the passengers, and generally running amok throughout the ship. These antics rise to a crescendo when the ship finally arrives in New York and the passengers line up for passport inspection and visa stamping: without travel documents of their own, the brothers resort to misdirection and bribery to disrupt the workings of state bureaucracy. But when their initial attempts fail, they turn to a frantic ruse. Each of the siblings, in turn, attempts to pass himself off as one of the paying passengers—the iconic French entertainer Maurice Chevalier—whose passport they have somehow managed to pinch en route to America.

Predictably, as the brothers force their way one by one to the front of the line, the passport officials are neither convinced by their resemblances to the passport photograph nor impressed by their attempts to sing Chevalier’s hit, “You Brought a New Kind of Love to Me.” The situation reaches a kind of manic absurdity when Harpo (with his wild eyes and mop of curly blond hair, so unlike Chevalier’s placid features and slicked dark mane) mounts the passport inspection table and struts about, jauntily wagging his cane, before jumping down and wildly tossing official papers in every direction, as an officer tries to restrain him. Demanding his passport, another passport officer is handed a pasteboard, a washboard, and then finally the Chevalier passport, which the stowaway somehow produces from the depths of his baggy coat. Since the mute Harpo cannot sing Chevalier’s tune, he instead lip-synchs to the sounds of a phonograph that has been strapped to his back, though as the machine winds down and the record slows the charade collapses altogether. A brief wrestling match with the officers ensues, ending only

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when Harpo puts one of them in a headlock, knocks off his service cap, and proceeds to imprint his bald head with a visa stamp.

Waiting in a long line at customs and immigration—at JFK airport or Paris’s Charles de Gaulle or Dubai International or wherever—half-dazed from jetlag, we might have fantasized about disrupting the proceedings in a similar way. The comedy of the scene lies precisely in the incongruity between the highly ordered structure of the passport control process and the uninhibited actions of the Marx Brothers, which transform this modern ritual into an anti-rite by parodying, mocking, and utterly deriding it. Nonetheless, all of the “monkey business” performed by the brothers does stage a rather serious critique of the passport regime that had taken hold around the world by the time the film was made. In its carnivalesque reimagining of the border control ritual, the scene announces a protest against the administrative processes of the nation-state that demands not only to know our identities but also to regulate our mobility and migration. If only momentarily, the reeling objections of the Marx Brothers rock the Ship of State, their comic routines undoing its bureaucratic routines, as we laugh in recognition at the contingency and conditionality of its power.

Yet we might also sense in the episodes above that the passport ritual can be more than a mere nuisance. What Fussell does not tell us about the aftermath of the scene witnessed by Lawrence in Malta changes the mood of the whole affair dramatically: Magnus, who faced criminal prosecution for fraud in Italy, as well as general persecution for his homosexuality, would later commit suicide by ingesting hydrocyanic acid rather than submit to extradition. He was a desperate fugitive at the mercy of two sovereign powers. But, like any passport holder, he faced particular pressure as he passed from the domain of one nation-state to another, requiring him to proclaim his personal and national identity, to open himself to inspection and interrogation. We are all vulnerable at the frontier, though some of us are much more so. The anxiety Magnus feels epitomizes the emotions of many travelers facing the ritual of border crossing, as whatever sense of individual sovereignty we hold on to confronts this plainspoken assertion of state sovereignty. We are answer-
able to bureaucratic procedures that may often seem mundane or tedious but can escalate to the level of tense drama (or tragedy or comedy or tragicomedy) as the passport holder is deemed safe or dangerous, legitimate or illegitimate, free to pass or subject to detention and deportation. The emotions associated with this drama—anxiety, angst, desperation, or relief and perhaps even gratitude—adhere to the passport.

Although he does not remark on the life-or-death significance of the episode in Malta, Fussell nevertheless concludes that “the wartime atmosphere which nourished the passport as an institution hangs about it forever,” suggesting not just that “human creatures are conceived as personnel units” by our governments but that we are subject to historical vicissitudes far beyond our control.6 This sense of vulnerability and contingency, brought on by the horrific clash of nation-states in the First World War, is conspicuous in one of the great works of fiction inspired by the conflict, Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). The plot of the novel pivots on whether its young American protagonist, Frederic, can flee the destruction and bloodshed of the Italian campaign with his pregnant British lover, Catherine. As the couple make plans for their escape to neutral Switzerland each is asked, “You have a passport, haven’t you?”7 During the war, the passport had become a key means for the nation-states involved to identify their own citizens, while keeping spies, saboteurs, and other potential threats out. For the lovers, the document comes to represent the opportunity (but also a potential obstacle) to leave behind the terrifying world of the conflict, which, as Frederic tells us in an iconic line, is all too ready to kill “the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially.”8

To put this all another way, the very possibility of saying “a farewell to arms” depends on their passports. When Frederic and Catherine make their attempt to escape the war—by rowing across Lago Maggiore to the Swiss shore on the other side—they are confronted by armed soldiers and brought to a customs house. There, the lovers are told to produce their passports and asked a litany of questions that might still sound familiar to our ears: “‘What nationality are you?’ . . . ‘Why do you come here?’ . . . ‘What have you been doing in Italy?’ . . . ‘Why do you
leave there?’”9 The neutral country is hardly welcoming. As we know, the
hospitality of the nation-state is always conditional, even in times of
peace, receiving guests only when they have been asked to guarantee
their identities and testify to their intentions. In Hemingway’s novel, the
officials eventually allow the couple to enter the country, but require
them to relinquish their passports, obtain provisional visas, and report
to the police wherever they go in Switzerland. Although Frederic and
Catherine have made their escape across the frontier and away from the
war, there is still something ominous in these demands: their passport-
less status, deprived of the protections offered by the document, por-
tends their inescapable fate in the thrall of powerful nation-states and
their internecine conflicts.

_A Farewell to Arms_ offers us a clear view of just how prominent the
passport had become at the intersection of personal desire and state
power. A few years later, Graham Greene’s novel _The Confidential Agent_
(1939) would commence from the insight that the passport had also
become central to specifying the self—to dictating the identity of the
individual in official terms—even in the furtive realm of espionage on
the eve of the Second World War. Attempting to disembark after a third-
class passage across the English Channel, Greene’s protagonist (identi-
fied only as “D”) is detained by police officials at Dover because his face
does not seem to match the photograph in his passport. Years of strife in
Spain, including imprisonment, near death in an air raid, and the mur-
der of his wife, have rendered D’s visage almost unrecognizable even to
his own eyes: “He looked down at it; It had never occurred to him to
look at his own passport for—well, years. He saw a stranger’s face—that
of a man much younger and, apparently, much happier than himself.”10
Taken aside for questioning and provoked by the official to inspect his
face in the only reflective surface available—the glass protecting “a pic-
ture of King Edward VII naming an express train ‘Alexandra’”—he has
to confess that the official’s doubt is not unreasonable.11 The photograph
in the passport becomes more legitimate than the all-but-anonymous
individual it is supposed to represent. Moreover, as English literary
scholar Leo Mellor points out, D is also compelled to compare himself
to the twin emblems of the British Empire in the picture behind the
glass—its royalty and its technology—and he is found wanting.
Suddenly, confronted with these various images, he discovers that his
identity is no longer under his control, but is now dependent entirely on
his document: “the object in his hand makes him into a thing.”

The demands to present oneself for inspection, to be compared to an
estranging photograph and a standardized description, to be interro-
gated regarding origins and aims: all this contributes to a sense of being
at the mercy of nameless officials and overbearing governments. Rushdie
also writes of how, during his time hiding from the fatwa, he read The
Confidential Agent and marveled at the economy of the effect it achieved
by beginning with this simple device: “A man does not look like his pass-
port photograph, and that’s enough for Greene to conjure up an uncer-
tain, even sinister world.” In its riotous, inverted way, the passport
scene in Monkey Business also draws our attention to the power of the
passport in certifying the identity of its holder. To gain safe passage
across international borders, travelers have to prove not so much the
authenticity of their papers as their own coincidence with those docu-
ments—a function that not even the manic efforts of the Marx Brothers,
supplemented by disguises and masquerades, can subvert. Indeed, their
raucous behavior can also be seen as a frenzied response to the sense of
anxiety and alienation generated by the passport control ritual, which
still has the capacity to “conjure up an uncertain, even sinister world” for
us, if only for that brief moment when we hand over our documents,
smile cautiously at the passport control officer, and hope for the best.

Perhaps we should not be surprised that border crossings and passport
controls would become something of a staple—and often a source of
high drama—in Hollywood films. This is nowhere more evident than in
movies about US citizens attempting to escape the perceived horrors of
rogue regimes overseas. And nowhere is this more viscerally rendered
than in the 1978 film Midnight Express, which tells the “true” story of an
American college student, Billy Hayes (Brad Davis), and his attempt to smuggle several kilos of hashish through the Istanbul airport in 1970. The foolhardy young man arrives at passport control in a barely concealed panic, sweating profusely, the only soundtrack his rapidly accelerating heartbeat; the stern customs officer takes a slow pull on his cigarette, inspects the passport, and assesses Hayes with a sidelong glance. The young man makes it through the checkpoint only to be detained a few minutes later as he attempts to board his plane. The remainder of the film serves to underline the stakes of the passport ritual, as Hayes is subjected to a (largely fictional) living hell of physical torment and deprivation in a Turkish prison.

We have moved from nuisance to nightmare. A similar scenario plays out in the 2012 Ben Affleck film Argo, based on the story of the so-called Canadian Caper—a covert mission to rescue six US embassy staffers from Tehran in 1979, shortly after the culmination of the Iranian revolution. This time, however, the anxious passport scene plays out at the end of the film, when the staffers attempt to pass themselves off as Canadian filmmakers (using fake Canadian passports) who have been in Iran to scout locations for a Star Wars-like sci-fi film. Cue tense music and close-up after close-up of worried glances from the Americans as they approach the airport checkpoint. Although they are waylaid by passport control officers and ushered into a backroom for questioning, the staffers manage to board their flight by using of a copy of Variety magazine and some storyboards from the imaginary film to corroborate their identities. In classic Hollywood fashion, Argo reaches its dramatic climax when the officers discover their error and attempt to chase down the taxiing jet before it can carry the Americans away to safety. Even as their narrow escape offers a sense of closure and relief, it reminds us again just how fraught with peril the passport ritual can be.

In these films, the frontier turns out to be a site less of mobility and migration than of stress and surveillance (as well as xenophobic distress regarding Americans abroad), where bodies are subjected to enhanced policing techniques, with only their precious travel documents to protect them. If we cannot rely on Hollywood for cultural sensitivity or
historical accuracy, *Midnight Express* and *Argo* do tap into the hopes and fears that cling so closely to these documents. Although passport problems may not always land the traveler in a dark prison cell awaiting some ancient, and always inventive, form of torture, they do threaten to strand the traveler in a kind of modern purgatory with no escape in sight. In this sense, the airport-as-frontier becomes a kind of intermediary zone where the traveler is handed off from the legal protections of his own nation-state to those of a foreign government (and then back again at some later date), but only if the transactions are successful. Steven Spielberg’s 2004 film *The Terminal* shows us what can happen if they fail: a new kind of nightmare for the passport holder. The film is based in part on the real-life story of Mehran Karimi Nasseri, an Iranian refugee who spent more than eighteen years living in Terminal One of Charles de Gaulle airport after his passport was stolen in 1988. But *The Terminal* casts Tom Hanks in the lead role as Viktor Navorski, a man from the made-up Eastern European country of Krakozhia (Кракожия), who is stranded at JFK airport after his passport is invalidated by the collapse of his government back home. He is thus the generic “foreigner” requesting hospitality at the frontier.

If casting Hanks, “America’s Dad,” in the role of Viktor Navorski and providing him a fictional homeland blunts the political commentary of the film, *The Terminal* nonetheless seeks to make a general, though sanitized and sentimental, statement about the fate of the unwanted guest in the current world order. The film opens with images of canine patrols making their way through a baggage claim area as uniformed agents rearrange the passport inspection lanes and take their places behind the security desks. These scenes of national security in the post-9/11 airport are soon disrupted by roiling crowds of recently deplaned travelers, spilling through the baggage claim area and into the passport control queues. When Navorski presents himself to the officer at the passport control station, the limits of hospitality quickly become apparent. After a terse “Welcome,” he receives the standard interrogation—“Purpose of your visit? Business or pleasure?”—but as Navorski mumbles something (in a bastardized Bulgarian devised for his character), it becomes clear that
the foreigner, the guest, does not comprehend the language in which he is interrogated. To make matters worse, when his passport is scanned into the computer network by the officer, it brings back an “IBIS hit”—that is, the document has been flagged in the Interagency Border Inspection System, which provides the United States law enforcement community with information about criminal history, terrorist ties, and other security concerns. A team of Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers quickly appears and escorts Navorski to one of their proverbial backrooms, where the uncomprehending Krakozhian is subjected to further interrogation: “What exactly are you doing in the United States, Mr. Navorski? Do you know anyone in New York?”

Viktor Navorski is no savvy former-CIA assassin like Jason Bourne. The hero of The Bourne Supremacy (2004) intentionally triggers an IBIS hit with a flagged passport in order to infiltrate the backrooms of Naples International Airport: once there, he mutely resists questioning, then assaults an American consular agent and copies the SIM card from his cell phone, all so that he can listen in on CIA communications. This inversion of the usual border control scenario (a kind of action-movie update of Monkey Business) plays out the fantasy of the lone individual resisting the control of state power by turning the passport regime against itself. But it is just that, a fantasy, and a particularly American one at that, even though this brand of rogue individualism would seem to represent a distinct liability in “the war on terror.”

The passport registry that Fussell identifies as a part of the “passport nuisance” has evolved into a network of national security databases that may well, at some point in the near future, achieve the aim of creating a single interconnected digital archive of all passports, capable of tracking them with complete visibility as they move around the globe. The passport is no longer a self-contained object, with all vital information clearly inscribed in its pages; instead, it is increasingly a networked object, linked to databases via microchips and antennas—with all the concerns about personal privacy, information security, and identity theft that such connectivity entails. Meanwhile, techniques of
cataloguing the body of the traveler have also become more and more sophisticated, developing from subjective descriptions and irregular photographs to electronic fingerprinting, retinal scans, facial recognition, and other biometric data gathering. A great deal of anxiety has stemmed from the dystopian implications of these new protocols at the border, which have significantly augmented the tools of state power used to monitor the individual traveler. Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben sees these protocols as a sign that, after September 11, we have entered into “a new biopolitical era” of state control and management of our bodies, now increasingly prey to extrajudicial force: the new security paradigm initiated by a state of emergency has become a regular governing technique. In 2004, the same year that both The Terminal and The Bourne Supremacy were released, Agamben protested what he calls “biopolitical tattooing”—the requirement that those entering the United States on a visa must have their fingerprints and photographs on file—by refusing a post at New York University, rather than submit to the new measures.15

All Viktor Navorski wants to do is to see a bit of the city: to go, as he says in a few memorized phrases, on a “Big Apple tour,” which includes “Brooklyn Bridge, Empire State, Broadway show Cats.” But the steadfast CBP officer, Thurman (Barry Shabaka Henley), has already asked Navorski to relinquish both his return ticket and his passport. The scene is initially played for laughs, but it becomes gradually more poignant as it unfolds (a woman’s scream in the background reminds us that the backrooms of the airport are a place of jeopardy), reaching a climax when the officer extends his arm to collect the passport from Navorski, who mistakes the gesture for one of hospitality and attempts to shake the outstretched hand. When Thurman corrects him and points to the document—“No, no. Mr. Navorski. That. Passport”—the traveler reluctantly presents it to the officer, who has to forcefully jerk the precious book from the grip of his counterpart.16 We immediately cut to a close-up of Thurman slipping the burgundy-colored Krakozhian document into a plastic envelope for safekeeping by the authorities of the
nation-state. Navorski is now marked as “simply unacceptable”—a “citizen of nowhere,” he is later informed—who does not “qualify for asylum, refugee status, temporary protective status, humanitarian parole, or non-immigration work travel or diplomatic visas,” though he still fails to understand what he is told. With no valid passport, no recognized status, and no functioning nation-state to call on for help, he will remain stranded at the frontier – this no-man’s-land with no way out.

Much of Rushdie’s writing is concerned with the delights and distresses of mobility, with the transformative effects of travel and migration, with the experience of encountering both open hospitality and defensive hostility at the border. No doubt the most fanciful example of frontier traversing in his fiction is to be found in the opening pages of *The Satanic Verses*: we encounter his protagonists, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, plummeting from a great height toward the English Channel
after their hijacked jetliner has exploded en route to London Heathrow. Here is a modern myth of border crossing. As they tumble through the atmosphere, like “bundles dropped by some carelessly open-beaked stork,” each character undergoes a miraculous rebirth: Gibreel, the famous and flamboyant Bollywood star on his way to visit a lover in London, transforms into his namesake archangel; Saladin, the Indian-born, British-based voice actor returning from a gig in Bombay, metamorphoses into a horned and hooved devil. Equally miraculous, as Saladin clutches onto Gibreel, the latter begins to sing and flap his arms as if they were angel wings, thereby slowing their descent and bringing them to a soft landing in the Channel. Eventually, the two wash ashore on a snowy English beach, the only passengers from the ill-fated flight to survive.

Of course, this is not the whole story. The novel takes place amid the xenophobia of the Thatcher era, not long after the passage of the British Nationality Act of 1981, which dictated that only UK citizens had a right to live there—throwing the fate of residents from the former British colonies up in the air, as it were. It should be no shock, then, that a team of policemen and immigration agents soon apprehend Saladin and demand his passport, even as they laugh derisively at his unlikely account of survival. Through a miraculous frontier crossing, Saladin has avoided the passport ritual at Heathrow, and yet, even in these fantastical circumstances, the passport nuisance-turned-nightmare remains part of the narrative.

How did we get here? How did the world arrive at this universal requirement and what have been the consequences for how we traverse geographical and cultural boundaries? What impact have passports had on the emotions and imaginings of those who use them and are, often reluctantly, defined by them? How have these documents inflected the way we feel about home and away, travel and migration, belonging and dislocation, citizenship and exclusion, national conflict and international cooperation? What can the passport tell us about the uneasy intersection of the personal and political over the course of its long history? These precious books, held close to our vulnerable bodies as we
cross borders, carry with them intimate stories about us that, nonetheless, testify to our place in much larger narratives. They speak to the aspirations, uncertainties, and spiraling movements of individuals who have long since come to rest; they give material form to the rights and privileges, restrictions and pressures, that steered these movements. But even as the archive of our passports and their various precursors makes visible where we have come from, it also provides a glimpse of where we are going, as the pace of international travel and global migration continues to accelerate, carrying us toward more and more pressing questions about our place in the world. To investigate the cultural history of the passport, then, is to consider something crucial about the promises of mobility, structures of feeling, and instruments of state power that, perhaps more strongly than ever, affect us today. So let us embark on our journey and cross over the frontier.