

## ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: TRANSLATING EASTERN EUROPEAN  
IDENTITIES INTO THE AMERICAN NATIONAL  
NARRATIVE

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The purpose of this study is two-fold: to examine the absence from current cultural studies on immigration and ethnicity of the Eastern European American as a conceptual entity, and to propose and implement a new methodology of reading immigrant autobiographical narratives that seeks to make transparent the cultural and linguistic processes of translation through which immigrants negotiate their identities in America. Part I provides the methodology and contextual framework I employ in the re-examinations of Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* (1912) and Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation* (1989). The historical contextualization focuses on two periods that determined conceptual shifts— the two decades of anti-immigration sentiment

that led to the Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924, and the decades following World War II, when post-Holocaust consciousness opened the door to the institutionalization of a Jewish identity that both encompassed and effaced the Eastern European one at the same time that Cold War politics hindered the development of an Eastern European immigrant space of articulation. A brief analysis of Flannery O'Connor's story "The Displaced Person" (1954) will underscore the dominant culture's difficulty in conceptualizing Eastern European difference and its place in the American national narrative. After arguing for the need that we differentiate between immigrant and ethnic narratives, I introduce the concept of "palimpsestic translation" and develop a critical paradigm that weds translation theory to the genre of immigrant autobiography and to narratives of immigration at large. Parts II and III contribute to the reconceptualization and partial reconstitution of the Eastern European immigrant American space through a close re-examination of Antin's and Hoffman's immigrant narratives as "palimpsestic translations." The two analyses address issues of historicity, literary and historical visibility, and translatability, as they pertain to and illuminate each text.

The conclusion briefly assesses the status of Eastern European American studies and outlines the contribution of my proposed reading paradigm to the resuscitation of a critical and theoretical interest in Eastern European American identities. Finally, I situate my study within the larger call for a reconsideration of the relationship between Translation Studies, American and Cultural Studies, and Ethnic Studies.

TRANSLATING EASTERN EUROPEAN IDENTITIES INTO THE AMERICAN  
NATIONAL NARRATIVE

by

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**PART I****1. Toward a historicized reading of the Eastern European immigrant space**

Although America has never extended its direct domination to Eastern Europe, its imperialist projects and international politics remain intimately intertwined with the fate of Eastern Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Literary representations and self-representations of Eastern European immigrants in America—as they emerge from immigration narratives and other literary texts—insist on the existence of such an inextricable connection. Besides offering the usual imaginative pleasures, these autobiographical and fictional characters illuminate, re-enact, and disguise some of the historical and political dialogues (or lack thereof) between the two trans-Atlantic spaces.

Often regarded by historians and other scholars as “third world” in terms of economy and governance, conferred an exclusive “second world” slot in the nomenclature of World Power, yet deemed dangerous and impenetrable by the first world, the communist Eastern Europe functioned, during the Cold War, as a transferable metaphor, serving to invoke any number of sentiments from anxiety and pity to scorn and fear. When deployed in contexts that examine the reverberations of imperialism and colonialism, the term “Europe” manages to co-opt and at the same time discount the region that approximates South-East and Central Europe.<sup>1</sup> One of

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<sup>1</sup> This space will be referred to as “Eastern Europe” throughout this study. Although the qualification “Eastern” is somewhat of a misnomer, as it blurs the geographical and political distinctions between East, South, and Central Europe, I will adopt it for one other reason besides its convenient conciseness: it encapsulates popular conceptualizations of this space from a Western perspective. In *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford:

the most deficient deployments of the Eastern European space takes place in Postcolonial discourses. Postcolonial scholars neglect to acknowledge the complications arising when Eastern Europe is included—even if inadvertently—within the concept of “Eurocentrism.” Thus, Eastern Europe is misguidedly ascribed to the same Eurocentric space from which imperialism and colonialism emerged, and which current theories have turned into a generative site of contestation.

By using “Europe” indiscriminately, cultural theorists and other scholars inscribe Eastern European non-imperialist histories onto a homogenized image of Europe as part of the imperial West. Eastern European countries, this facile equation implies, engaged in processes of conquest and cultural domination just as their Western counterparts did. Scholars might not *mean* to make this claim. In fact, if brought to task, many would probably agree that Eastern Europe’s experience with imperialism, internal colonization, and the Cold War place it at the periphery of, or outside Eurocentrism. Most likely, Eastern Europe is not even conjured in these scholars’ minds when they refer to “Europe.” The second world<sup>2</sup> figures as a negligible variable, a space that, in being neither center, nor margin, has not “earned”

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Stanford University Press, 1994), Larry Wolff argues that while during the Renaissance the division of Europe had been between the south and the north, the Enlightenment produced a conceptual re-arrangement of Europe along East-West coordinates, with the Ottoman Empire lands, which were deemed backward and uncivilized, as “Eastern”.

Americans too use the term to iterate the dichotomic relation between East and West, in which the former has been construed as primitive, traditional, communist, and generally peripheric, and the latter as modern, liberal, capitalist and central. The term “Eastern Europe” is itself an exonym, for its constituent peoples never refer to themselves by that name.

<sup>2</sup> Originally, the “first world” and “second world” were constructed as bi-polar categories that reflected the division of power between the industrialized capitalist world (led by the United States) and the industrialized communist world (led by the Soviet Union); the “third world,” a term coined by the French demographer Alfred Sauvy in 1953, designated countries and peoples non-aligned with either country and its sphere of influence, and who were subject to poverty and exploitation. Since the fall of the communist regimes, historians and other scholars have engaged in numerous debates regarding the notion of “second world,” which seems to have lost its theoretical and practical grounding.

their interest. Its antithetical positioning vis-à-vis the first world is abated or diluted by the more conspicuous antithesis posited by the third world. This necessary distinction between Europe as origin and center of Eurocentrism, and Eastern Europe as its oppressed margin, remains unexplored in the works of most scholars of American cultural studies.<sup>3</sup> This omission, I argue, implicitly denies Eastern Europeans their claim to the cultural and geopolitical space known as Europe, wipes out their specific histories, and overlooks their competing (specifically, non-imperialistic, non-Western) narratives.

This is not to say that Eastern European histories do not partake in Eurocentric discourses and that they do not share with Western Europe a Eurocentric view of the world. The very concept of nation, on which these histories thrive, is Eurocentric (Robinson 20). However, their histories do not speak of conquest and control, but of efforts to maintain autonomy and preserve the continuity of the national narrative in the face of economic and political unrest, oppression, and shifting boundaries brought about through contact with various imperial projects. Moreover, while true that the space broadly defined as Eastern Europe is marked by the legacy of empires other than the ones commonly associated with the postcolonial space, its history and current conjuncture are not completely dissimilar from those of nations that had suffered, for instance, British, French or American colonization. Though in Eastern

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<sup>3</sup> Eastern Europe is entirely absent in J. M. Blaut's *The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentrism* (London: Guilford P, 1993), José Rabasa's *Inventing America: Spanish Historiography and the Formation of Eurocentrism* (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1993), Arif Dirlik's "Is There History after Eurocentrism? Globalism, Postcolonialism, and the Disavowal of History" (*Cultural Critique* 42: 1-34, 1999), Peter Gran's *Beyond Eurocentrism: A New View of Modern World History* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1996), and, more recently, John Muthyala's "Reworlding America. The Globalization of American Studies" (*Cultural Critique* 47: 91-115, 2001).

European histories this process is generally referred to by other names, such as “occupation” or “foreign rule” or “direct sphere of influence,” Roman, Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, German, and, in more recent history, Russian imperial projects in this region have often taken the form of colonialization.<sup>4</sup> Yet post-World War II Eastern Europe shared many of the characteristics on which Du Bois predicated his inclusive notion of colonialism, such as physical and/or psychological violence, domination, economic exploitation, poverty, lawlessness, stealing and crime, starvation, disenfranchisement, and denial of participation in the political process, among others (229-36).

In its strictest sense, however, as when it refers to a nation’s economic, socio-cultural, and political control and exploitation of another, weaker nation, the notion of colonialism does not adequately describe the history of oppression that plagued the states behind the Iron Curtain. Empowered by its experience as an imperial power and by its ideological cachet (best captured by the verbal contract “the people for the people”), the Soviet Union envisioned itself as as capable a candidate for world supremacy as its Western counterparts. The power leverage Russia/the Soviet Union gained throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was used, on one hand, to stave off its partial identification with the Orient,<sup>5</sup> and on the other to create and

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4 Here the term is used in a more inclusive way than we encounter it in Postcolonial Studies; it designates the establishment of a colony in occupied or unoccupied territories. Many current Eastern European cities, for instance, had been at some point Roman, Greek, Turkish or German colonies.

5 During the Renaissance and especially during the Enlightenment, the French commonly referred to Eastern Europe as the Orient. Dostoevsky’s comment is of interest here: "In Europe, we are hangers-on and slaves, whereas to Asia we shall go as masters. In Europe, we were Asiatics, whereas in Asia we too are Europeans. Our civilizing mission in Asia will bribe our spirit and drive us thither" (qtd. in Malik 3 ).

disseminate its own version of colonialization—colonization “in the house.”<sup>6</sup> The Soviet superpowers rarely conducted direct interventions in their satellite states, choosing instead to monitor the implementation of communist ideology, and to nurture anti-capitalist insurgent propaganda from afar. The Eastern European communist governments, therefore, were only indirectly or not at all (as was the case in Yugoslavia) subordinated or accountable to the Kremlin. Semi- or totally autonomous in their internal affairs, insulated from the rest of the world, the communist leadership of these countries—which gradually devolved into repressive state apparatuses—consisted not of appointed outsiders, as in most colonized territories, but of elected or self-appointed nationals ranging from fanatical ideologists and devout architects of communist utopias to various types of opportunists. Consequently, these “nationals” showed little or no interest in what Partha Chatterjee terms “the normalizing rules of colonial difference” (10), i.e., the “preservation of the alienness of the ruling group” and the construction of their subjects as “radically different, and hence incorrigibly inferior” (33). If anything, the communist ideologies they espoused demanded that their power discourses neutralize any trace of hierarchical division, be it social, economic, cultural, or ethnic/racial. In this respect, Mohanty’s liberal use of “colonialism” to imply any relation of domination which relies upon a self-serving suppression of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) (94) aptly describes the situation in Eastern Europe. But “hemi-auto-colonialization” may be an even more apposite description of the colonizing

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<sup>6</sup> The phrase means to connote the Soviet power’s policies of self-containment and mediated subjugation of the nation-states of the Eastern Bloc, and to suggest a non-traditional, specifically Eastern European understanding of the term “colonialism.”

processes that took place, under varied forms and to varied degrees, in the countries of Eastern Europe. The communist autocrats systematically divested their subjects of common and private rights and, in the name of liberating (i.e., anti-capitalist) ideas and of their subjects' own good and interest, suppressed freedoms and forced them to "restructure" (read "civilize" and "re-form") their personal, ethnic, and national identities. Non-participation in this coercive process of self-colonization led to exclusions that often took the form of persecution, severe deprivation, or even death.

It is, perhaps, because of the particular and peculiar nature of this hemi-auto-colonialization that the Eastern European space has been neglected from examinations of colonial spaces. However, in their reassessment, recuperation, and reconceptualization of colonial and postcolonial spaces, theorists have inadvertently reiterated binarisms and reinstated the center-margin paradigms that they purport to dismantle. If Eurocentrism may be charged with "an inability to see anything other than the lives of those who are comfortably installed in the modern world" (114) as Samir Amin argues, current critics of Eurocentrism may be charged with approaching the topic with an inflexible agenda. By investing their interest in polarized power relations exclusively (e.g., victimizer and their utmost and direct victims, centers and their most visibly oppressed margins), scholars such as Amin and Edward Said<sup>7</sup> have disclosed the self-serving and elitist underpinnings of their attempts to de-colonize, via theorized (re)enactment, the third world. Said has supplied us, nonetheless, with a new way of thinking about Western conceptualizations of Eastern Europe. "Anyone

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<sup>7</sup> See Samir Amin's *Eurocentrism* (Trans. Russell Moore. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989) and Edward Said's *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

employing Orientalism, which is the habit for dealing with questions, objects, qualities, and regions *deemed* (italics mine) Oriental,” he argues, “will designate, name, point to, fix what he is talking or thinking about with a word or phrase, which then is considered either to have acquired, or more simply to be, reality” (72). To this we may add that this “fixing” may be the result of cultural mistranslation, or rather, botched or failed translation, an argument to which I will return later in the work.

## **Translating Eugenics into the Language of American Exceptionalism**

In its real or imaginary encounters with Eastern Europe, America maintained throughout most of the twentieth century a politics of othering / orientalizing. Its most visible aspects were the early twentieth century relegation of Eastern European immigrants to the status of inferior race, the dissemination of “red” threat propaganda, and the adoption of policies of containment (as laid out in the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, and the National Security Act in 1947) aimed at forestalling ideological, but also biological and cultural contamination.

As its history of immigration policy demonstrates, America has reacted to various waves and types of immigrants according to its own internal needs and foreign politics at the time, rather than through a coherent policy. Coined by Francis Galton (a cousin of Charles Darwin, whose 1859 *On the Origin of Species* spurred Galton to investigate the applicability of some of his cousin’s findings to the human species) in the middle of the nineteenth century and further popularized through the works of Joseph Simms, Henry H. Goddard, Richard L. Dugdale, and Herbert Spencer Jennings, eugenics found a fertile ground in the country’s scientific tradition and the middle class’s affirmative response to Darwin’s evolutionary theory.<sup>8</sup> Like most Western countries in which the social problems raised by industrialization and the demands of cheap labor threatened to outweigh its benefits at the beginning of the

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<sup>8</sup> Eugenic considerations have never again grasped the popular imagination as openly as they did in the first two decades of the century, though they have continued to inform the construction of the public sphere and the transformations of the American national narrative throughout the 20th century and into the present.

century, America too resorted swiftly to social scientists and their new theories in a frantic attempt to safeguard the soundness of the nation.

Calls for restriction on immigration started pouring onto the pages of various newspapers as early as the 1890s. Such an example was Francis A. Walker's 1896 campaign, in the pages of *The Atlantic Monthly*, for the protection of "the American rate of wages, the American standard of living, and the quality of American citizenship from degradation through the tumultuous access of vast throngs of ignorant and brutalized peasantry from the countries of eastern and southern Europe" (822). Guised as socio-economic concerns, such scare tactics are fraught with eugenic considerations. Thus, after remarking upon the considerable "improvement" of the American race between 1830-1860, when "the standard of height, of weight, and of chest measurement was steadily rising," Walker decries its subsequent decline, which he attributes to the upsurge in immigration and to the nature of the new immigrants. What is at stake, he claims, is not only the genetic makeup of American race, but the nation's welfare as a whole.<sup>9</sup> Eugenics found immediate adherence among America's leadership and became just as quickly a source of mainstream curiosity and anxiety, especially within America's urban areas. Eastern European immigrants' cultural difference and general poverty came to be regarded as a visible mark on the social body of the nation, a sign of corruption and imminent transgression. To many American-born, this signaled the need for individual and national redefinition along the lines of blood purity and select ancestry. Their fears that the nation was threatened

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<sup>9</sup> Not only do the "ignorant and unskilled foreigners" augment the population at frightening speed, Walker argues, but native Americans become "increasingly unwilling to bring forth sons and daughters who should be obliged to compete in the market for labor and in the walks of life with those whom they did not recognize as of their own grade and condition" (823).

by demographic, economic, social, and cultural change and courting “race suicide” (a phrase popularized by Roosevelt in a 1905 speech<sup>10</sup>) were partly rooted in and partly compounded by their understanding of genetic inheritance. One of the most relevant yet rarely discussed documents of the time is the forty-one volume federal document titled *Reports of the Immigration Commission*, also known as the *Dillingham Reports*, started in 1907 — the year more than 1.2 million immigrants were admitted into the country — and supervised by Senator William P. Dillingham. Published in 1911, the *Reports* concluded that the nation needed to regulate the number and type of immigrants allowed to settle in the United States (*Statements and Recommendations*, Vol. 41). It claimed that, unlike the superior races of Northern Europe (whose immigration rate had decreased 75% between 1882-1902 and whose admittance, it suggested, should be favored), those from Southern and Eastern Europe (whose immigration rate between the same years increased 475%) were biologically inferior and only inclined to take advantage of the greater wages instead of acculturating (33). One of the “Statements and Recommendations by Societies” amassed in the last volume of the *Reports* reads:

We do not hesitate to prohibit the importation of cattle from a foreign country where a cattle disease is prevalent. It is only in very extreme cases that we have ever taken such a step in connection with the importation of aliens, yet there are certain parts of Europe from which

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<sup>10</sup> Roosevelt’s idea will reach full-fledged expression in Madison Grants’s work of scientific racism, *The Passing of the Great Race* (New York: Scribner’s 1916). For illuminating commentaries on the intersection of eugenics, racial hygiene, and masculinity, see Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995), and Donna Haraway, “Teddy-Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-1936,” *Cultures of US Imperialism*, eds. Donna Haraway and Donald Pease (Durham: Duke UP, 1993) 285.

all medical men and all biologists would agree that it would be better for the American race if no aliens at all were admitted. (107)

The Immigration Restriction League, whose view the passage expresses, further requests that America be protected from “what George William Curtis called ‘that watering of the nation’s lifeblood,’ which results from [these immigrants’] breeding after admission” (107). On the other hand, as another restriction proponent (Hudson Maxim) suggests, “the strong, healthy and industrious should be admitted on easy terms (118).” In many of these documents, racial or eugenic arguments develop into contentions about morals and ethics. In his letter, Dr. T.J. Bassett, Principle of the DePauw University Academy, lashes at the “ignorant and criminal hordes which for several years have been flocking to our country from eastern and southern Europe” and which represent a “a great menace and require the most strenuous treatment” (122). Belonging to individuals and organizations from all over the United States, the dozens of commentaries gathered in this volume constitute a fairly accurate indicator of the preponderant attitude toward immigration from Southeast and Central Europe.

Though never declared as such, the *Dictionary of Races* which constitutes the fifth volume of the *Reports* is conceived as a treatise or taxonomy of “species” on which America is to base its judgments and make its selections toward regulating the future national character.<sup>11</sup> The word “race” is used to mean, but only loosely,

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<sup>11</sup> The Dictionary purports to be a tool for “students of immigration” and to help in “promoting a better understanding of the many different racial elements that are being added to the population of the United States through immigration” (2-3).

“nationality.”<sup>12</sup> Reading each entry, one understands that the choice of the former term over the latter is not accidental. After situating each group geographically and linguistically, the description delights in observations concerning physical traits such as head shape and cephalic index, height, and color of skin and hair, followed immediately by extrapolations about habits and character. The Slavic division, for instance, is characterized as “inequable or changeable in mood and effort,” which the document translates as equaling “fanaticism in religion, carelessness as to the business virtues of punctuality and often honesty, periods of besotted drunkenness among the peasantry, unexpected cruelty and ferocity in a generally placid and kind-hearted individual” (129).<sup>13</sup> Various biologists, sociologists, and anthropologists are often cited for support. The term “race” disguises an acute obsession with phrenology and eugenics; the *Dictionary*’s contrastive analysis<sup>14</sup> speaks of its desire to assert itself as an instrument of selection, a means of effecting change.<sup>15</sup>

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12 The Dictionary is compatible with the Bureau of Immigration’s recognition of forty-five races, thirty-six indigenous to Europe, and derives from Blumenbach’s 1775 five category classification of races into Caucasian (white), Ethiopian (black), Mongolian (yellow), Malay (brown) and American (red) ( 2-3).

13 Similar stereotypes permeate *Old World in the New* (New York: Century, 1914), written by Edward Alsworth Ross, a sociology professor at the University of Wisconsin. His chapter on Slavs is divided into sections such as "Excessive Alcoholism Among the Slavs," "Crimes of the Primitive Passions," "Slavic Brutality and Reckless Fecundity," and "The Alarming Prospect of Slavic Immigration."

14 Some contrastive assessments read: The Bohemian’s “weight of brain is said to be greater than that of any other people in Europe” (22); “The blond type of Europe is lacking, it is true, but some Georgians are long-headed, like northern races. The prevailing head form, however, is broader than that of the Russian, although the latter is broad-headed for a European” (33); “The Eastern Czechs, including the Slovaks, are among the broadest-headed of all the peoples of Europe, not excepting the Asiatic Tartars and Turks” (132).

15 Suggestively, the entire volume thirty-eight of the *Reports* is concerned with “Changes in the Bodily form of Descendants of Immigrants.”

The official impact of anti-immigration lobbying has been disputed occasionally, as has been the nature of the anti-immigration sentiment itself. While endorsing the view that eugenic beliefs may have inspired the immigration policies of the 1910s and 1920s, Carl Degler, for instance, contests the degree of influence that has been commonly attributed to social scientists. He argues that while the eugenics movement was diligently accruing its supporters, dissenting scientists such as Franz Boas, Herbert Spencer Jennings, and Alfred L. Kroeber were popularizing their radically different views as well.<sup>16</sup> Degler suggests that Social Darwinism only supplied an already deep-seated national fear of otherness with the permission to act on it. In other words, the promulgation of these new scientific findings may have spurred anti-immigrant feelings, but they may not account, alone, for the fact that the eugenical tide continued to swell, (d)evolving into a national tool for social and political reform.

It would indeed be unreasonable to claim that racial superiority/inferiority was invented by 19<sup>th</sup> century eugenicists. Beliefs that Blacks were intellectually and morally inferior had permeated both the popular and official thinking before then. Therefore, in considering Eastern Europeans, and especially Eastern European Jews “black,”<sup>17</sup> America was aligning them with exclusionary discourses that had already been absorbed into the popular consciousness. After announcing that America has become

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<sup>16</sup> Carl N. Degler, *In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>17</sup> The notion of Jewish Eastern European “blackness” is addressed in Sander Gilman’s *The Jew’s Body* (London: Routledge, 1991).

“the sewage from the cesspools of Europe,” one of the contributors to the *Dillingham Reports*, lawyer Allen G. Braxton, contends that although no races in Europe are “as unassimilatable (...) as the negroes are,” in many cases “it is only a difference in degrees” (124).

As Bhabha suggests in “Of Mimicry and Man,” the identification of a people as “black” enables the dominant group to differentiate them from the “white” English and exclude them from discourses of power. As Ruth Frankenberg remarks in her introduction to *Displacing Whiteness*, the concept of “whiteness” has shifted over time, and so has the primacy and significance of variables on which its conceptualization depended, namely nationality, class, gender, and region (20). Between the two wars, “whiteness” functioned as a system of meaning deployed to determine inclusion in the imagined “American” national community (Jacobson 103-110). This inclusiveness, Jacobson argued, depended upon the ascription of racial conflict as a “Negro problem” (103-10). Initially othered and racialized so they could be set apart from the white—Anglo-Saxon or Nordic—Europeans, and deemed unassimilatable, Eastern European immigrants “evolved” into “whites” upon the arrival of other immigrants of color, from Asia, Latin America, and Africa, starting with the 1940s.<sup>18</sup>

As Warren Zimmermann reminds us,<sup>19</sup> imperialism’s inherently racist grounding is clearly reflected in the aggregate of racial arguments American powers

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<sup>18</sup> In 1943, the Congress extended legibility for citizenship to Chinese immigrants (Repeal of Chinese Exclusion Act, December 17, 1943, 57 Stat. 600), and in 1946 to natives of India and the Philippines (Act of July 2, 1946, 60 Stat. 416).

<sup>19</sup> See Warren Zimmermann, *First Great Triumph. How Five Americans Made Their Country a World Power* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002).

have employed to explain why colonial subjects were not worthy of self-government. Similar arguments, harping on Eastern Europeans' inferior natures and backward cultures, were used in the first decades of the twentieth century to warrant immigration restrictions or emphasize the need for speedy Americanization—the latter evidenced, for instance, in the collection of essays titled *Americanization*, edited by Winthrop Talbot, or in the works of Emory Stephen Bogardus and Royal Dixon.<sup>20</sup> The unabashed call for unreserved Americanization that formed the sole concern of many sociologists, politicians, and sometimes whole organizations and societies attested to America's predominant fear of the otherness or cultural specificity of Eastern European immigrants' life in their new country.<sup>21</sup>

And perhaps nothing encapsulates the assimilationist spirit of the time in a more garishly pictographic and simplistic way than the pageant staged by the industrialist Henry Ford<sup>22</sup> for his workers: accompanied by patriotic music, immigrant men and women dressed in peasant costumes march toward a giant cauldron placed center stage; after they climb one by one into it and disappear there for a few minutes, they emerge on the other side of the cauldron, now clothed in American garb, beards and headscarves gone (Daniels 93). The cauldron poses as

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20 Winthrop Talbot, ed., *Americanization* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1915); Emory Stephen Bogardus, *Essentials of Americanization* (Los Angeles: J. R. Miller, 1919); Royal Dixon, *Americanization* (New York: Macmillan, 1916).

21 Tellingly, much of volume forty-one of the *Dillingham Reports* lays out strategies and solutions for an expeditious process of acculturation and assimilation.

22 According to Daniels, Henry Ford spent millions of his own dollars disseminating anti-Jewish propaganda in his newspaper, *Dearborn Independent*. A collection of Ford's ghostwritten columns was published as *The International Jew: The World's Foremost Problem* — a best-seller in Germany (PBS, "The Perilous Fight" <[www.pbs.org/perilousfight](http://www.pbs.org/perilousfight)>).

melting pot,<sup>23</sup> but the transformation it fosters shares nothing of the melting pot's potential for intermingling, mixing, and fusing. The American it churns out bears no traces of his/her previous otherness. Turned into cheap spectacle, such bid for Americanization underscores the dubious foundation of the proposition. Orchestrated by an owner of the aggregate of monopoly, the cauldron produces not immigrants divested of their otherness, but automatons, subjects "worthy" of capitalist beneficence, or de-personalized tools of production.<sup>24</sup>

In the midst of this unrelenting advocacy for complete Americanization, Randolph Bourne's boldly entitled essay "Trans-National America" (1916), a mordant yet constructive critique of America's blind determination and incongruous efforts to Americanize its new waves of immigrants, strikes a singular note. Bourne recasts the question of assimilation in terms of ethics and counsels that America reconsider its definition of "Americanism" and "assert a higher ideal" than that of the simplistic "melting-pot" (86). He argues for a "trans-national America" that learns how to nurture its immigrants' traditions and thrive on cosmopolitanism.

Though pro-immigration appeals such as Bourne's—whose line of persuasion intersected John Dewey's and Horace M. Kallen's—contributed invaluable arguments to the polemic, they did not deter the policy-makers. The Immigration Commission's recommendations found their way into a bill introduced by Dillingham

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23 In the 1890s, Frederick Jackson Turner popularized the image of the American West as a crucible where European immigrants would be "Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race" (Microsoft Encarta Reference Library), but it was Israel Zangwill's play "The Melting Pot" (1908) that coined the term.

24 To eyes accustomed to communist propoganda and practices, the scene recalls the transformation of individuals into proletarians.

in 1913, and influenced both the Immigration Act of 1917 (which regulated the selection of immigrants<sup>25</sup>) and the Acts of 1921 and 1924.

Between 1900 and 1921, when the Quota Act was formulated, over 14.5 million immigrants were admitted into the United States. The five page act of 1921 (signed by Harding during a special session of the new Congress, sixty days after it had been vetoed by Wilson) stipulated that for each nation (with the exception of those in the Western Hemisphere), 3% of the number of immigrants residing in the United States in 1910 were to be admitted into the country annually; the ceiling was 350,000.<sup>26</sup> Ethnic numeric limits were made permanent in 1924, when, in an attempt to lower the number of immigrants even more, the cap became 2% and the census year of reference 1890.<sup>27</sup> The Immigration Act of 1924 was not revoked until the Act of 1965, which abolished nationality quotas but established an overall ceiling of 170,000 on immigrants from the Eastern Hemisphere. By now, however, the Iron Curtain had made emigration no longer a viable option. The number of Eastern Europeans who reached American shores in the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century declined dramatically. Only approximately 612,000 people from the Soviet block countries were admitted between 1948 and 1956 either under the Displaced Persons

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<sup>25</sup> Immigration Act of February 5, 1917, 39 Stat. 874.

<sup>26</sup> Quota Act of May 19, 1921, 42 Stat. 5. The bill drafted by Dillingham proposed 5%, but the House of Representatives lowered it to 3% (Daniels 134).

<sup>27</sup> Immigration Act of May 26, 1924, 43 Stat. 153.

Act of 1948 or the Refugee Relief Act of 1953,<sup>28</sup> both of which operated outside the quota system, although the number was charged against other immigration allowances (Russell 47). In the 30s and 40s, during Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency and Breckinridge Long's administration in the State Department, nativist and eugenic considerations made the already restrictive legislation of the 20s even tighter, exposing the incoming immigrants to needless humiliations and often insurmountable bureaucratic loops and increasing the number of deportations.<sup>29</sup> Only a very limited number of Eastern European refugees and displaced persons fleeing the rise of Fascism and economic depression were admitted into the country. These two decades, with their much dwindled influx of South-Eastern European immigrants, provided many Americans with a respite from fears of "racial deterioration." It also gave anti-nativists a chance to extricate determinism and biology from explanations of social behavior and to prepare the shift toward cultural and economic paradigms.

In the late 1930's, anti-immigration sentiments started to take the form of anti-Semitism, which became entrenched at every level of society.<sup>30</sup> During the war, with the assistance of a secret police which he had designed for this particular purpose, and

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28 In the 1980 Refugee Act, the legal basis of refugee admissions to the United States was changed to eliminate the geographical (Eastern Europe and the Middle East) and ideological (anti-Communist) grounds for granting refugee status, in favor of a more humanitarian, encompassing one.

29 The immigration law of 1891 stipulated that deportation could be enforced only within a year after entry; by 1924, this has been extended to 5 years for most violations and to a limitless period for others (*Encyclopedia Judaica* 12).

30 Many universities, such as Harvard in 1922, put caps on the number of Jews it would admit or hire; many companies refused them employment, hotels wouldn't host them, and apartments for rent would be made unavailable (Daniels 131).

most probably the quiet support of President Roosevelt,<sup>31</sup> Long, the U.S. Department's person in charge with helping Europe's Jews, managed to cut admission of refugees first to half, then to about a quarter of the initially allotted quotas. Ninety percent of the quota assigned to immigrants from countries under Nazi occupation remained unused.

Although not an entirely new phenomenon, the specific targeting of Jews became a lot more common a practice starting with the mid-1930s than it had been in the earlier decades. At the beginning of the 1920s, one of the most extreme restrictionists in the House, Representative Albert Johnson, was drafting his anti-immigration bill under the fear that America would be soon overrun by hordes of "abnormally twisted" and "unassimilable" Jews, "filthy, un-American and often dangerous in their habits"<sup>32</sup> (Daniels 133). A decade earlier, however, the *Dillingham Reports'* recommendations had been less intent on singling out the Jews from the other Eastern Europeans; its *Dictionary of Races* corroborates the Bureau of Immigration's decision to place them in "the Slavic grand division of the Aryan family," despite evidence, the *Dictionary* notes, that Jews were "primarily of Semitic origin" and had preserved many "Semitic features" (73-74). In a document that revels in spotlighting difference, such deliberate gesture against differentiation is interesting.

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31 See *The War Diary of Breckinridge Long*, ed. Fred L. Israel (Nebraska: U of Nebraska P, 1966).

32 Johnson's bill proposing a complete halting of immigration for two years was rejected in favor of Dillingham's bill, which stipulated restrictions, but not cessation (Daniels 133).

The inclusion of Jews and other non-Slavic “races”<sup>33</sup> in the Slavic category appears to serve no other purpose than the essentialization of the Eastern European identity. The desire for a cohesive, legislatively manageable definition of the Eastern European immigrant seems to override all other interests in the institutionalization of biological, racial, and cultural difference.<sup>34</sup>

However, if the Jewish Eastern European immigrants had initially shared the burden of stereotype and resentment with the non-Jewish ones, in the 30s and 40s they became its foremost targets. There is no simple explanation for why or how the Jew came to epitomize, in the American imagination of this time, Eastern Europe’s most feared and often despised Other, a loose translation, or metaphor, of this Other<sup>35</sup> Europe. Though the inquiry transcends the purpose of this study, a few explanations are due, especially since they contribute to our understanding of the paradoxes underlying the attempts to define Eastern European immigrant identities in America.

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33 After acknowledging that, linguistically, Romanians should be placed in the “Romance group,” the *Dictionary* adheres to the Bureau of Immigration’s decision to place them in the Slavic group. “They are of the Balkan States, if not strictly in them,” and “[a]s immigrant type,” it concludes, “they may well be placed there [in the Slavic group]” (108).

34 In a passage which further insists on the Jews’ inclusion in the Slavic race, the *Reports’* authors argue that, very similar “in type of civilization” to the Poles, the Jews of Eastern Europe were “representative of the same expulsive causes” as the Poles (104). Instead of mentioning that Poles and Jews were emigrating from what had become Russian Poland, Prussian Poland, and Austrian Poland because of cultural and religious discrimination and ostracism, forced poverty, and/or inaccessibility to education (Haiman 3-4), the Reports suggests that we look for these causes in the two races’ “type of civilization” and character—and these, the dictionary insists, lack in some “stable qualities” (104-5).

35 Though it is most likely that the phrase Other Europe had been used prior to its appearance in Philip Roth’s Penguin series “Writers from the Other Europe” (founded in 1974), it was here that the phrase began to reveal to me its complex, problematic connotations. I later re-encountered the term in Garrison Walters’s *The Other Europe: Eastern Europe to 1945* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1988), where it excludes countries considered or which consider themselves Central Europe, and in Magdalena J. Zabarowska’s *How We Found America* (Chapel Hill, NC: U of North Carolina P, 1995), where it is credited to Roth’s series.

One offered explanation concerns America's changing attitude toward Poles and other Slavic immigrants as a result of its changing attitude toward their country of origin, combined with increasing proof of these immigrants' allegiance to America's dreams and interests. Along these lines, Wyrwal argues that Poland's independence, to which American and Polish-Americans contributed together, gained Poles prestige, and started altering their standing in America following World War I; the American patriotism they displayed during World War II, he suggests, solidified their position and thwarted old prejudices and stereotypes (412). Though convincing, such explanations provide only very limited view of the complex mechanisms that galvanize and regulate the process of national other-ing. Non-Jewish Eastern European immigrants' accelerated Americanization, manifest especially in the second generation, may have alleviated some of America's concern about the authenticity of these immigrants' adopted Americanness, but the argument of their major numeric decline after World War II seems equally convincing. To this we may add ethnocentric America's mistrustful attitude toward Jewish cultural resilience to unreserved acculturation, and toward Jewish modes of self-identification along ethnic and religious lines. The racial "residue" or insolubility that obstructed Jewish immigrants' full absorption into "whiteness," coupled with their determination to participate in discourses of Americanness as cosmopolitan or diasporic subjects (and thus resisting prescribed nation-based paradigms), threatened to alter America's nationalist identification along Anglo-Saxon lines.

Ostracized and declined the right to develop national ties in the Old World, Jewish immigrants were more predisposed to emigrate, and better equipped

psychologically and professionally to forge new lives in the New World. Many of them regarded their emigration as an inevitable Exodus and their arrival to America as a “reaching home.” But their cultural difference and their complicated relation to their place in the Old World—to which, as subjects of the nation-state, but living outside, or on the fringes of the nation’s consciousness, they did and did not belong at the same time—made them at least suspicious, if not completely undesirable, to the American-born. If nationalist Americans feared that many Eastern European immigrants’ strong allegiance to their land of origin made them incapable of becoming genuine American citizens,<sup>36</sup> and their long histories of conquest and subservience made them incapable of becoming autonomous individuals, they also feared that the strong communal self-identification and loyalty to “anti-progressive” traditions of the Jews posed an even greater threat. The concern had been clearly suggested in the *Reports*’ comments on the huge number of Slovak immigrants, whose situation was compared to that of the Jews. The document professes concern about the Old country being depopulated (for “[t]here are said to be already one-fourth as many Slovaks in the United States as in Europe”), but the real issue surfaces in the accompanying comment: “Slovakland is a political dream and probably an unrealizable one. It has no definite boundaries” (133). The assessment suggests imminent danger. The fear stems from what is perceived as Slovaks’ problematic relation to the national landscape: the Old World space Slovaks inhabit (and, dissatisfied with its offerings, leave) cannot be clearly delineated and thus contained

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<sup>36</sup> Many Americans shared the view that these “inferior” races of Europeans were only inclined to take advantage of the greater wages offered in America and help their own countries prosper.

and controlled by our imagination. Most importantly, the Slovaks are a nation in search of a country. If they are not stopped, the passage suggests, they might use America to build a Slovak nation.<sup>37</sup> In a similar seemingly benign tone, the *Dictionary* mentions elsewhere that the Jewish population of Poland owes its “unusually large” constituency to the initial hospitality shown by the Polish government to this race who turned Warsaw into “the chief Jewish city of the world”—“*until New York recently succeeded to that distinction (italics mine)*” (105), the writer adds, the tinge of panic and sarcasm hard to miss.

Also, fears of Jewish nationalism (which evolved into debates on Zionism<sup>38</sup>) were countered or juxtaposed with fears that, as a response to our human needs for communal identification, in the absence of a mother "nation," Jews would continue to forge durable ethnic and, implicitly, religious modes of self-identifications—in other words, that they would sustain their affiliation in the particulars of their modes of enjoyment (Zizek<sup>39</sup>), not just in the gradually-vanishing memory of the shtetl.<sup>40</sup> The

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37 In 1834, a group of exiles from Austria asked the Congress for land in Illinois to establish a new Poland. The petition was granted, but the land was ultimately abandoned and the original political exiles settled in New York, Albany, Philadelphia, Boston, and the Midwest. In 1854, a Polish group of immigrants founded a farming community at Panna Maria, Texas. In 1855, a family from West Prussia settled in Portage County, Wisconsin and founded Polonia (Boberg 123). The many Odessas and Cracows peppering the map of United States testify to various immigrant groups' attempts to re-construct, in one form or another, their original communities, if not original countries.

38 Naomi Cohen's *The Americanization of Zionism, 1897-1948* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis U P/U P of New England, 2003) discusses various attitudes (Jewish and non-Jewish) toward Zionism and offers a thorough analysis of the impact of Zionism on the shaping of a Jewish American identity.

39 Ethnic tensions, Slavoj Zizek argues, ensue in the clash between different modes of ethnic enjoyment. This enjoyment structures a community's way of life, their traditions and social practices, their rituals and myths, but also the ineffable “something” (which Zizek calls the “Nation-Thing”) that urges all members of the community to believe in it (*Tarrying* 200-206).

overriding image of an immigrant group is always constructed, via essentialism and generalization, out of its persistent differences. As non-Jewish Eastern Europeans' mark of cultural difference became increasingly inconspicuous and their pre-emigration forms of national identification receded in the niches of memory, the Jewish Eastern European came to simultaneously metonymize and substitute it. The racial attributes imputed to Eastern Europeans as an indistinguishable group earlier in the century were transferred onto the Jew, who became this Other Europe's measure of excess and, to a certain extent, its measure of insolubility to Anglo-Saxon "whiteness."

The Holocaust and America's involvement with it<sup>41</sup> transformed irrevocably how Americans approached and talked about eugenics. On the surface, the obsession with eugenics entered a remission phase; on the other hand, the Holocaust ignited a renewed interest. In the aftermath of World War II, in an effort to render their endeavors morally and ethically sensitive, proponents and enthusiasts of eugenics often cleansed its language of blatantly racist and discriminatory qualifications, making ideological affiliation, and later cultural difference, the base of discriminatory

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40 The works of Bellow, Roth, Malamud, and others, often intercept, narrate, or parody the crystallization of these diasporic modes of identification.

41 See Saul S. Friedman, *No Haven for the Oppressed* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1973) David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), and Deborah Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust* (New York: Macmillan 1986), on examinations of the American government's and American public's reluctant responses to the Jewish plight during the Holocaust. Interestingly, as James Young points out, the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. imposes—subtly, but emphatically—a different view on this historical encounter, one that accords with and reinforces the official national narrative. The photo-argument unfolding in the Hall of Witness opens with the scene of American troops liberating the Nazi camps of Buchenwald and Dachau, a sight presenting "both the shock of the Americans and the gratitude and relief of survivors" (Young 345).

attitudes. Efforts to exclude the Eastern European Other therefore did not subside, but simply took a slightly different form.

## Cultural and ideological paradigms of othering

In the 1940s and 1950s, the orientalizing of Eastern Europe was conducted on ideological rather than biological grounds although, as Rachel Buff points out, its “enduring ideological success (...) lay in the ability to conflate racial distinction and political loyalties” (qtd. in Carruthers 928). In America’s official legislature and popular imagination,<sup>42</sup> the communist Eastern Bloc’s subject was depicted as prejudicial to the public interest and subversive to national security. At the same time, eugenic and racial considerations continue to impact the American imagination and the country’s policy making into late mid-twentieth century. In the anti-communist crusading years of Hooverism and McCarthyism,<sup>43</sup> the European East was construed as similarly menacing, if much less exotic, than the Asian Orient, whose subjects had been systematically denied citizenship rights. Former U.S. ambassador to the USSR Walter Bedell Smith claimed that Russians were “set apart from other civilizations by a ‘Chinese wall’: The Slavonic language and character” (qtd. in Carruthers 928). As Carruthers points out, “even white Russians remained of questionable whiteness” (928).

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42 Susan Carruthers’s “Between Camps: Eastern Block ‘Escapees’ and Cold War Borderlands” (*American Quarterly* 57.3, September 2005: 911-942) aptly elaborates on Cold War constructions of Eastern European escapees/political refugees in the American media and pop-culture.

43 In *Many Are the Crimes. McCarthyism in America* (Boston: Little Brown, 1998), Ellen Schrecker traces the root and peak of anti-communist hysteria not to the McCarthy era, but to the fierce campaign of communist ousting conducted under the office of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover between 1946 and 1949. As she points out, The Smith Act of 1940, the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, the McCarran Internal Security Act of 1950, and the McCarran-Walter Communist Control Act of 1952 were attempts to halt and control the communist threat.

The McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 made few provisions regarding the plight of the Eastern European refugees/ escapees,<sup>44</sup> proliferating instead the “undesirable” categories by which asylum seekers could be rejected, and extending its graces only to “the disenchanted diplomat who chose to stay in the United States” (Evans qtd. in Carruthers 928). Besides instituting a practice of exclusion and/ or deportation vamped on ideological grounds,<sup>45</sup> the 1952 Act turned a new page in America’s imperialist narrative. In stipulating that 50% of each country’s quota for immigrant visas be set aside for the highly skilled or educated, it was bringing to fruition Hankins’ dream, a decade earlier, of an immigration consisting of the “cream” of all nations. Most of the Eastern European émigré who were to be granted political asylum in the United States over the next couple of decades were part of the select few.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, a 1953 National Security Council memorandum recommended that the 1953 Refugee Relief Act be used as a way to encourage defection of all USSR nations and “key” personnel from the satellite countries in order to inflict not just “material loss to the Soviet Union” but a “psychological blow on communism” (qtd.

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44 As Susan Carruthers points out, the category of “the escapee,” which, as the name suggests, focused on the fact of the escape alone, was the largest and least desirable category. It was created to distinguish between the small group of defector-refugees for whom the State Department maintained a separate program throughout the 50s (and often used as US intelligence or for Cold War propaganda) and those who had simply escaped from the Eastern Bloc, “including both displaced and merely disaffected personal from within those countries” (Godel to Cutler, October 19, 1951, qtd. in Carruthers 923).

45 The ideological grounds of exclusion were repealed in the Immigration Act of 1990, though they were resurrected by the Patriot Act of 2001.

46 The practice will continue in the Post-Cold War era. The Soviet Scientists Immigration Act of October 10, 1992 conferred permanent resident status to 750 scientists (and their families) from the independent states of the former Soviet Union and the Baltic states, provided that they worked in the biological, chemical, or nuclear technical field, or in high technology defense projects (<<http://uscis.gov/graphics/shared/aboutus/statistics/legishist/572.htm>>).

in Zolberg 123-4). Eastern European refugees were often tokenized and showcased in the American media to prove America's "investment in humanity" (Department of State qtd. in Carruthers 932) and contrast it with images of Eastern Europe as a threatening reign of terror.<sup>47</sup>

In both ideology and praxis, the communist Eastern Europe ran against every fundamental conviction and value that characterized the American capitalist system, especially its reliance on self-interest and individualism, so it is not surprising that Eastern Europeans were often represented as part of a subversive conspiracy that had a stranglehold on the nation's identity and wealth. The fear of what the Eastern European refugees/escapees represented often superseded their desirability as professionals and subjects of what Richard Fried has dubbed Cold War "pageantry" (qtd. in Carruthers 932). Those refugees who managed to reach the United States after finding sponsors who guaranteed them jobs and accommodation were still asked to produce a documented two-year history that corroborated "character, reputation, mental and physical health, history and eligibility" (Press Release<sup>48</sup> qtd. in Carruthers 929).<sup>49</sup>

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47 "Escapee" memoirs, such as Peter Pirogov's *Why I Escaped* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1950), Vladimir Petrov's *My Retreat from Russia* (New Haven: Yale U P, 1950), and Louis Fischer's *Thirteen Who Fled* (New York: Harper, 1949) dwelled on the terrors and squander of life in the Eastern bloc. The communist scare forms the concern of dozens of movies in the late 1940's and 1950's, among which are "The Red Danube" (1949), "The Red Menace" (1949), "I Married A Communist" (1949), "atomic city" (1952), "The Steel fist" (1952), "My Son John" (1953), "Runaway Daughter" (1953), "Man on a Tightrope" (1953), "Never let Me Go" (1953), "Silk Stockings" (1957) and "Jet Pilot" (1957).

48 "New York Democratic Delegation Points Out Utter Failure of the Operation of the Refugee Relief Act of 1953," Press Release, May 16, 1955, Senate Research Files of William B. Welsh, D 362, Folder 13, Lehman Papers.

49 No Eastern Europeans escaping from behind the Iron Curtain possessed such documentation, obviously, so they often had to wait for two years in camps set up in West Germany, Austria, Italy, Greece, and Turkey and "prove to the most

Cold War discourses often linked ideological convictions to socio-economic conditions and made them mirror the biological fitness and health of a nation. A persuasive scare tactic dating back to the Marshall Plan (1948), the theory that disease and poverty constituted breeding ground for Communism, was still gaining momentum more than a decade later. Kennedy's inaugural address, as Louis Menand points out, was saturated with urgency regarding the nation's mission to contain Soviet Communism (119) and stave off any sources of contamination. By assuming the task of regulating the biological being of the nation, the state was re-articulating its belief in manifest destiny, this time using the language of biopolitics.<sup>50</sup> Its concerns with the soundness of the world was a concern with securing its health at home.

The association of the communist Eastern Europe with "disease" in Cold War discourses precluded the possibility of *knowing* or wanting to know this space. The embargo on disease and ideology became an embargo on potential knowledge. Containing this "diseased" part of Europe meant confining it to the workings of the mind, committing it to metaphor. If in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the unmistakable presence of East Sides had made it impossible for America to "wash out

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skeptical that they couldn't be Communists" (Phillips qtd. in Carruthers 929). Such camps, Phillips argues, conducted numerous screenings, interrogations, and medical examinations whose purpose was to "authenticate" these escapee's "fitness" and non-communist partisanship (Carruthers 929). As governmental documents unearthed by Carruthers suggests, some Cold War strategists were very adamant on trying to re-locate such escapees/refugees in Latin America or Canada (929).

50 The field of biopolitics was theorized and explored in the 70s and 80s in works of Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault, and, more recently, in those of Giorgio Agamben, Maurizio Lazzarato, and Meredith W. Watts. However, its origins may be traced back to the first decade of the 20th century. In an article signed by G. W. Harris that appeared in 1911 and, the term "biopolitics" is defined as: "a policy which should consider two aspects of the nation: in the first place, the increase of population and competition; in the second place, individual attributes of the men who are available for filling places of responsibility in the State" (197).

the memories of [Eastern] Europe” (Bourne 86), the gradual vanishing of this latter space behind the Iron Curtain enabled exactly that. In the Western imagination, this Other Europe became an approximate equivalent of what the Pale of Settlement had been for Russia: an appendix to Europe, a walling in as well as a walling out, of undesirable otherness. For more than half a century,<sup>51</sup> the two spaces (American and Eastern European) remained caught in an antagonism fed by suspicion, propaganda, and political secrecy.<sup>52</sup> Eastern Europe’s retreat into an unknowable space only augmented America’s apprehensions toward it.

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51 Although the beginning of the Cold War is commonly associated with the proclamation of the Truman Doctrine of March 1947 and the launching of the Marshall Plan, the birth of American anti-Russian sentiments dates back to the Russian Revolution.

52 Various American historians of the late 40s, 50s, and 60s recorded and examined U.S. attitudes toward communist Eastern Europe. Arthur M. Schlesinger’s *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949) is concerned with the threat communism posed to American individualism. In *American-Russian Relations 1781-1947* (New York: Reinhart, 1952), William Appleman Williams explains America’s radical attitudes toward the Soviet Union as grounded in a fear of ideological and economic rivalry (capitalist internationalism vs. communist internationalism). James T. Patterson’s *Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal* (Lexington: Greenwood P, 1967), Walter Goodman’s *The Committee: The Extraordinary Career of the House Committee on Un-American Activities* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1968), and Frank J. Donner’s *The Un-Americans* (New York: Ballantine, 1961) contribute insightful, if often partial, approaches to the topic.

## 2. The Eastern European immigrant Other in the American literary imagination: the Displaced Person

“The devil you know is better than the devil you don’t”  
(O’Connor 216; 227)

This study’s focus does not extend to representations of Eastern European immigrants in the literature written by non-Eastern European Americans. Such an examination would undoubtedly contribute to our understanding of the interconnectedness between non-fictional and fictional representations of immigrants, as well as provide insights into the relationship between representations of immigrants in dominant literary discourses and these immigrants’ self-representation. Though relevant to my concern with the gradual disappearance of an interest in the Eastern European American, this examination would constitute a project in itself. Nevertheless, a few comments followed by a critical exemplification might prove edifying.

Depictions similar to those permeating official and popular discourses surface in many literary texts written during the first part of the twentieth century.<sup>53</sup> Josephine Wtulich’s<sup>54</sup> examination of Slavic immigrants in American literature produced between 1900 and 1965 reveals the pervasiveness of stereotypes that emphasize their

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<sup>53</sup> Michael Gold’s *Jews Without Money* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1930) opens with an episode in which a “gang of little Yids” (7) confronts and assails the dominant culture’s ready-made perspective on immigrants, as well as its tendency to view immigrants as socio-ethnographic curiosities and spectacle. The immigrant children chase a sightseeing bus and pelt it with rocks, dead cats, and garbage, yelling “what right had the man with the megaphone to tell them lies about us?” (7).

<sup>54</sup> Josephine Wtulich, *American Xenophobia and the Slav Immigrant* (New York: East European Monographs, Boulder, 1994).

instinctual natures (128), beastliness (130), virility (131), sexual proclivity (132), and “deviancy” such as prostitution and alcoholism (135). Invariably, the characters are referred to as “Slovaks,” “Slavs,” “Poles” (or, derogatively, as “Pol(l)acks” or “Po(l)locks”), “Hunks,” “Hunkies,” or “Bohunks” (used especially in reference to peasants and laborers).<sup>55</sup> Though some of these terms, such as “Pole,” denote a larger degree of specificity than others, such as the generic “Slav,” they assume interchangeable qualities, generalizing, essentializing, or de-ethnicizing the Eastern European identities and their experiences in the New World.

As Thomas Gladsky remarked in *Princes, Peasants, and other Polish Selves*,<sup>56</sup> notions of Polishness have been constantly revamped and manipulated by host-nation writers “to suit the historical temper, national preoccupations, literary movements, and changing attitudes toward minorities” (4). During the first few decades of the twentieth century, Poles are commonly portrayed as “naïve, backward, and culturally eccentric,” though “non-threatening” (68). Some works, such as Edna Ferber’s *American Beauty*,<sup>57</sup> underscore their “strong angles, red blood, sinews rippling, pulses pounding” (Gladsky 69), thus casting them into symbols of national rejuvenation. As the number of Eastern European immigrants dwindles over the next decades, so does their presence in American literature. When they reemerge, starting with the 1950s, they have entered an “ethnic” phase of representation and figure

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<sup>55</sup> “Polack” appears to have been coined by Germans to refer to Jewish immigrants who had immigrated to Germany from Poland (Wtulich 15). “Bohunk” derived from the merging of “Bohemian” and “Hunk,” or, according to Wtulich, “Bohemian,” and “Hungarian” (15).

<sup>56</sup> Thomas S. Gladsky, *Princes, Peasants, and other Polish Selves* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1992).

<sup>57</sup> Edna Ferber, *American Beauty* (New York: Country Life, 1931).

prominently in the works of writers mostly of Jewish Eastern European descent, such as Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, I. B. Singer, E. L. Doctorow, Jerzy Kosinski, Vladimir Nabokov and, more recently, Askold Melnyczuk, Stuart Dybek, Steve Stern, and Rebecca Goldstein.

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Flannery O'Connor's story "The Displaced Person" (1954) delivers one of the most perceptive and, I would argue, apposite illustrations of America's attitude toward Eastern European immigrants. Though one may legitimately argue that we should not extricate the story from its setting—in this case, rural American South in the aftermath of World War II—I believe that O'Connor's preoccupations here, as in most of her writings, transcend the particulars of the chosen locale. Like most of America, Mrs. McIntyre's farm shows the first symptoms of Cold War hysteria, even if the manifestation takes here its own peculiar forms. On the same note, she and her hired help, Mrs. Shortly, through whose perspective the story is filtered, may be further than most Americans from developing a Holocaust consciousness, but they too are forced into witnessing it, even if in mediated and de-contextualized form. Moreover, their attitude toward the Polish displaced person<sup>58</sup> and his family (the Guizacs), while certainly context-determined, is also informed by a long history of anti-immigrant sentiments and racial and ethnic constructions of otherness.

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<sup>58</sup> Enacted by Congress on June 25, 1948, the Displaced Person Act aimed to alleviate the situation created at the end of World War II, when nearly eight million Europeans were displaced from their homes.

Although presented throughout the story as hard-working, honest, energetic, frugal, dependable, “scrupulously clean” (207), and exhibiting impeccable morals and ethics, the Guizacs cannot escape their status of suspicious outsiders. Dislocated, stateless, foreign, they are perceived as a threatening and ominous presence, especially in the context of the rural South, where connection to land/place and community engenders important forms of self-identification. Referred to as “Gobblehooks” before their arrival, the Guizacs have already been translated in Mrs. Shortley’s imagination into the infantilizing language of fairy tales. She is “struck” (198) by the “very peculiar” (198) fact that the Guizacs “look like other people” (198), and not like “three bears, walking single file, with wooden shoes on like Dutchmen and sailor hats and bright coats with a lot of buttons” (198), as she has imagined them.

The first contact between the Mistress of the farm, Mrs. McIntyre, and the Displaced Person, as he is referred to throughout most of the story, announces the onset of a developing cultural mis-translation: in Old World tradition, he kisses her hand, a gesture Mrs. Shortly interprets as “mess[ing] around” (199). The Guizacs’ lack of possessions situates them in a space that is emptied of materiality, and one that is immediately associated with muteness and lack of dimensionality. “‘They can’t talk,’ Mrs. Shortly concludes, wondering if ‘they’ll know what colors even is’” (200). The presence of the Guizacs on American land is superimposed over the newsreel image of a room piled high with dead, dismembered, and rotting bodies—a metonymic translation of the Holocaust that disgusts rather than pains Mrs. Shortly.

For her, the image epitomizes the Guizacs' homeland, namely an uncivilized Europe that is homogeneous and made visible only as a site of trauma and abjection.

The Polish refugee's displacement from this site of abjection and emplacement on American soil antagonizes Mrs. Shortly, whose ignorance and limitations inhibit any understanding of history and of the world outside the farm. She has "the sudden intuition that the Gobblehooks, like rats with typhoid fleas, could have carried all those murderous ways over the water with them directly to this place" (200). Through a perverse twist of logic that may well be the symptom of nationalistic reasoning, Mrs. Shortly converts victims into perpetrators, displacing the Polish immigrant once again.

If earlier immigrants had been transmogrified into "the cesspools of Europe" (*Dillingham Reports*, vol. 41, 124), the new ones are equated with the dissemination of terror and sickness.<sup>59</sup> In her persistent effort to dissociate herself from the Guizacs, Mrs. Shortly seeks detachment from the reality of the Holocaust as source of trauma and contagion. At the same time, the immigrants' ineffable otherness and its imbrication with images of terror and abjection constitute an addictive source of fascination. The Displaced Person never slips out of her vision, which keeps adjusting

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<sup>59</sup> The image of the human "cesspool" has not disappeared from the discourses on this period either. In 1947, the Texan Congressman, Ed Gossett, insisted that "[w]hile a few good people remain in these [Displaced Person] camps, they are by and large the refuse of Europe"—"bums, criminal, black-marketeers, subversives, revolutionaries, and crackpots of all color and hue" (qtd. in Carroll 107).

and repositioning itself so as to contain, neutralize, but simultaneously protract and penetrate his otherness.<sup>60</sup>

I argue that, besides its circumstantial association with terror, disease, and primitiveness, it is the impenetrability and ineffability of the Displaced Person's otherness juxtaposed with his elusiveness<sup>61</sup> and uncanny resemblance to the American-born that constitute a most powerful and operative source of anxiety and fear for Mrs. Shortly. Moreover, Mr. Guizac embodies the contesting and destabilizing powers of a difference that has not yet fully conceived of itself as difference and continues to act as if it were the norm. In other words, he does not participate in the conflicts of the narrative as ethnic, but as immigrant marked by another culture and by a history that confronts and threatens to dislocate America's vision of itself as sacred and invincible. His presence unsettles because it is both inextricable from history and dislocated from it.<sup>62</sup> Most tellingly, the newsreel image of the disintegrating bodies with which Mr. Guizac is associated is immediately interrupted by a commentator's voice proclaiming, "Time Marches on!" The intervention imposes an American perspective that is both an ironic annotation on the

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60 "[W]ith foreigners on the place," Mrs. Shortly ponders, "with people who were all eyes and no understanding, who had come from a place continually fighting, where the religion had not been reformed—with this kind of people, you had to be on the lookout every minute" (211).

61 At various times, Mrs. McIntyre and Mrs. Shortly turn to locate the Displaced Person only to find him "disappeared" (209) from their purview (209).

62 Unlike Astor, the Black helper whose very appearance emanates history ("eyes blurred with age" "hung behind cobwebs"), Mr. Guizac is described as "stiff" (226), his face "red," "bristled," and "as if . . . patched together out of several others" (234).

plight of Eastern European Jewry, and an insistence on asserting the necessity of the pedagogical continuum.<sup>63</sup>

The Guizacs' blurring of racial boundaries constitutes one of the most menacing and objectionable aspects of their presence. Unmarked visually, the Displaced Person's difference assumes far more treacherous and subversive powers than the African American helper's, for it can elude surveillance, resist classification, and strike without notice—hence, Mrs. Shortley's vigilant gaze, as if a particular angle or particular light might disclose the mark of difference that could finally fix Mrs. Guizac's identity.<sup>64</sup> The lack of qualifiable difference challenges the racial order because it challenges the normative referent of whiteness and “threatens” to substitute the more flexible ethnic and cultural constructions of otherness for the racial ones.

To Mrs. Shortley, the Displaced Person is not Black but he is not white either, not in the same sense that she or Mrs. McIntyre are white. Her mind and eyes try desperately to racialize his whiteness so she can distance it from her own. The urgent need for such differentiation is made apparent in Mr. Shortley's view as well. If he were to travel, he muses, he would go to China or Africa because “there you can tell right away what the difference is between you and them.” (247).

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63 Mr. Shortley's comment on the Europeans he encountered as a participant in World War I reinforces the belief in America's exceptionalist character: they were “all kinds then,” but “none of them were like us” (227).

64 “It's them little eyes of his that's foreign” (213), she mutters at one point, unconvinced, before remarking that he is just “full of crooked ways” (213).

This foreign, yet not foreign enough, Polish immigrant<sup>65</sup> functions as a “body” (207), an “extra” (237; 246), the very embodiment of the act of displacement. “He’s extra and he’s upset the balance here” (245), Mrs. McIntyre explodes as she feels Mr. Guizac’s surging resistance both to letting himself be known and to preserving his status of *displaced* person. As a mimicker of whiteness, as Mrs. Shortly and later Mrs. McIntyre perceive him, the Polish immigrant is “*a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” (Bhabha 85), and his ambivalence produces an “excess or slippage” that, according to Bhabha, ruptures the discourse and is transformed into an uncertainty that asserts itself as a partial—i.e., “incomplete” and “virtual” (Bhabha 86)—and metonymic presence. Mrs. Shortly associates Mr. Guizac’s camouflage with the devil (209) and finds herself “obliged to give new thought to a good many things” (210). She concludes that the “trouble” with people like Mr. Guizac is that “you couldn’t tell what they knew” (212).<sup>66</sup> Every time he smiled, “Europe stretched out in Mrs. Shortley’s imagination, mysterious and evil, the devil’s experiment station” (212). Unlike the knowable devil (the Black), the inscrutable one (the white Eastern European) calls for circumspection.

On one hand, Mrs. Shortly delights at the prospect of white immigrants displacing the Blacks, and of herself as the mediator of such displacement, as recounted in her vision of “ten million billion of [Eastern Europeans] pushing their way into new places over here and herself, a giant angel with wings as wide as a

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65 Interestingly, the *Dillingham Reports’ Dictionary of Races* describes The Pole as lacking “stable qualities” and occupying a space of in-between-ness: neither “an Eastern race” nor a “Western,” darker than the Lithuanians but lighter than the Russians (106).

66 “Who’s to say what they know and don’t know?”(213), she will reiterate later.

house, telling Negroes that they would have to find another place” (205). On the other hand, once the thought enters her mind, she becomes alarmed, almost terrified by the prospect of no “niggers” around (212- 214), so she reassures herself and Mr. Shortley that she aims “to take up for the niggers when the time comes” (214), “and that’s that” (215). Her motivation is anything but compassionate, despite her proclaimed “heap of pity” (215). The “fixed” presence of the Blacks confers and secures her own identity as superior and powerful. Mr. Guizac’s presence disturbs absolute racial distinctions, and is therefore an affront to Mrs. Shortley’s own whiteness.

Unlike Mrs. Shortly, Mrs. McIntyre does not fear being socially displaced by the immigrant helper,<sup>67</sup> but she too flinches at the Displaced Person’s lack of racial consciousness and transgressive gestures. He shakes the Black helpers’ hands, “like he didn’t know the difference,<sup>68</sup> like he might have been as black as them” (207), and arranges for one of the Black helpers, Sulk, to marry his niece in order to save her from the concentration camp.<sup>69</sup> She cannot afford to have her lazy, “half-witted thieving black stinking nigger[s]” (234) “exite(d)” (234) because, in her words, she cannot run the place without her “niggers” (235). Although her economic standing depends on the Polish immigrant, he is expendable in ways in which her “niggers,”

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67 She does not feel threatened in part because she does not conceive of his presence as emplacement, but as temporary relocation that can boost her material status.

68 When told by Mrs. McIntyre that all Negroes steal, Mr. Guizas is both “startled” and “disappointed” (208).

69 In the view of the white Southerners, such an association between a white woman and Black man would replicate an act of ultimate violence and shaming of the American tradition.

whose presence warrant her clout and privilege as a Southern white landowner, are not.

The American characters' favorite refrain, "The devil you know is better than the devil you don't," reveals its "truthfulness" through language. While lack of racial difference makes knowing the immigrant particularly challenging, his linguistic experience in more than one language makes him even more suspicious and impenetrable. "[K]nowing two languages [is] like having eyes in the back of your head," believes Mrs. Shortley, and since the foreign tongue is perceived as the Guizacs' only mark of unquestionable difference, she assigns it inordinate powers. Recast in terms of language, the conflict between her and Mr. Guizac is viewed as physical violence and visible contamination:

She began to imagine a war of words, to see the Polish words and the English words coming at each other, stalking forward, not sentences, just words, gabble gabble gabble, flung out high and shrill and stalking forward and then grappling with each other. She saw the Polish words, dirty and all-knowing and unreformed, flinging mud on the clean English words until everything was equally dirty. She saw them all piled up in a room, all the dead dirty words, theirs and hers too, piled up like the naked bodies in the newsreel. (216)

The violence she suppresses during her daily interaction with Mr. Guizac is unleashed and carried through on the battlefield of language, where she superimposes words<sup>70</sup> on corpses and her imagined victimization on the image of the Holocaust.

For Mrs. Shortley, the imagined community of America is conceived in English alone, and incidences of bilingualism threaten to disrupt its narrative continuum and violate its claim to purity. At the same time, the immigrant's attempt to appropriate the English language is deemed unacceptable since it enables him to disguise his difference. As Mr. Shortley concludes, wistfully, "letting all them people onto English" (248) makes it so much harder to tell the "difference between you and them" (247) in the absence of racial markers.

When, at the end of the narrative, with tacit complicity, the Americans witness the "accidental" destruction of the Displaced Person, they appear as unfazed as they had been at the view of the gas chamber. The Polish refugee has escaped the terrors of his homeland only to be mutilated to death under the wheels of an American tractor. The presence of the tractor—which, as Mrs. Shortley keeps reminding us, has displaced the mule—instantiates modernity, but, like the presence of the newsreel, it serves here to evidence a regress of humanity, thus complicating and challenging the equation of modernity with progress.<sup>71</sup> Instrumental in the death of the Displaced Person, the tractor becomes a metaphor for the exclusionary practices of modernity—

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<sup>70</sup> Her insistence that the conflict takes place between words, not sentences, suggests de-contextualization and lack of full articulateness.

<sup>71</sup> The moment of panic the American-born Mrs. Shortley experiences as newsreel and tractor bring the two worlds (American and Eastern European) within close touch is a symptom of modernity and evidence of its limitations.

and in this particular case, the exclusion targets the Eastern European immigrant. The irony is compounded by the description of Mr. Guizac as “an expert mechanic, a carpenter, and a mason” (207), endowed with “quick and accurate” motions.

The American characters’ violence toward Mr. Guizac reads as an attempt at pre-empting the prospect of their own displacement. As the tractor flattens Mr. Guizac to the ground, the eyes of the witnesses—White *and* Black—“come together in one look that froze them in collusion forever” (250). In their minds, his death is justified, though not one of them would be able to produce a rational justification. Just before Mrs. Shortly witnesses passively Mr. Guizac’s destruction, she concludes that what she resents most is that he hasn’t left “of his own accord” (249). Mr. Shortley remarks that though “the Pole never did anything the wrong way,” he was “all the same... very irritating” to his wife. As for himself, he concludes, in a non-sequitur fashion that intimates sexual abuse, “he hated to see a woman done in by a foreigner” (245). The conspirators’ dubious disinterest in the motive and/or implications of their act makes Mr. Guizac’s death ever more poignant and strange, an effect that, I argue, is intentional on O’Connor’s part. The story’s unaccounted for violence preserves the subtle and unclassifiable difference the characters deny the Displaced Person.

The story reenacts the displacement, racialization, and disappearance of the Eastern European immigrant following his encounter with a nationalist America on the brink of Cold War hysteria and Holocaust amnesia. The characters’ anxiety and frustration as they fail to subsume the Displaced Person’s difference to racial classification anticipates the shift to ideological constructions of otherness that will

inform Cold War conceptualizations of Eastern Europe as indoctrinated and impenetrable.

As a story about the relationship between seeing, witnessing, and the construction of otherness and destruction of difference, “The Displaced Person” becomes, inevitably, a reflection on, and critique of, our own stance as readers. Its obsessive preoccupation with the importance of what and how we see when we look draws attention to the epistemological powers of observation. On a different reading, the Polish immigrant is killed because his hosts cannot find the language and reference system that would enable them to translate his difference.

In indirect, yet pertinent ways, O’Connor’s problematization of difference anticipates my own concerns with localizing and conceptualizing Eastern European immigrant space. To her story’s implicit injunction that we learn how to read and translate Eastern European immigrants, I respond with a model of reading these immigrants’ own narratives that forces us to witness and understand their own negotiations of difference.

### 3. On sustaining distinctions between immigrant and ethnic literature

During the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, critics approached immigration and ethnic literature on identical terms using similar criteria for assessment—one that made assimilation and acculturation the litmus test. Moreover, these approaches rarely dissociated literary commentary from sociological extrapolations.<sup>72</sup> In the late 50s, they became more nuanced, but not sufficiently so, and the distinctions between immigrant and ethnic literature collapsed under the critics' efforts to conceptualize the multicultural makeup of America—from “melting pot” to “stew” to “salad bowl” to “mosaic.” In the early 60s, ethnic literature was deemed regional, parochial, and aesthetically impaired by critics such as Leslie Fiedler and Irving Howe (Aaron 64). This was, however, the decade that saw the beginning of a growing interest in ethnicity and of an on-going dialogue about the nature of ethnicity and its imbrications with culture, race, social class, economics, gender, and nation. In the 70s, with the rise of civil rights movements, re-conceptualizations of “difference” altered critical discourses to accommodate new views of ethnicity. Michael Novak, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan suggested “ethnic” patterns that fashioned a diverse but common society. These attempts and others converged in their efforts to carve a niche for ethnic, and, by extension, immigrant writings, in mainstream American culture. Immigration narratives—i.e., narratives recounting the immigration experience and exploring the immigrant

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<sup>72</sup> Critical receptions of Mary Antin's *The Promised Land*, as provided in Part II, are illustrative of this conflation of the literary with the sociological and anthropological.

condition—were incorporated in critical dialogues about the construction of ethnicity and ethnic difference in America.

In the 80s, Werner Sollors redefined “ethnicity” as a cultural negotiation of descent and consent, and his has remained the most deployed critical paradigm in approaches to Eastern European immigrant and ethnic narratives. His definition of ethnic literature as any fictional or non-fictional work “written by, about, or for persons who perceived themselves or were perceived by others, as members of ethnic groups” (7) advances a totalizing vision of ethnic literature. William Boelhower elaborated on Sollors’ idea of the immigrant’s ethnicity as fluid, a constant renegotiation of descent and consent, and, using the model of four Italian-American texts, devised typologies and patterns of transformation/Americanization that were to epitomize the experience of any ethnic group.<sup>73</sup> In his seminal *Beyond Ethnicity* (1986), Sollors encouraged a rewriting of U.S. literary history so that it would make poly-ethnicity (as opposed to Anglo-Saxon mono-ethnicity) and immigration central to its tradition. As Linda Hutcheon points out, he also initiated a debate about the relative merits of the inclusive model—i.e., mainstreaming, which would include all ethnicities in the same history—and the exclusive model—which would treat ethnic minority literatures separately. Sollors himself comes out on the side of the inclusive, rejecting the production of “sectarian and fragmented histories of American literatures (in the plural) instead of American literary history” (qtd. in Hutcheon 30),

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<sup>73</sup> See Boelhower, William. *Through a Glass Darkly: Ethnic Semiosis in American Literature* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987).

and encouraging instead the use of comparative approaches, a suggestion brought to fruition by critics such as Mary Young, Shirley Lim, and Inderpal Grewal.<sup>74</sup>

While Sollors's, Boelhower's, and other cultural pluralists' contributions remain indisputable, their approaches no longer hold the revisionist connotations they may have held two decades ago. Their perspectives on ethnic and immigration literature have now a lot more in common with Sacvan Bercovitch's notion of unity of diversity—or dissent as means of advancing toward consent<sup>75</sup>—than with the New Americanists' politics of “dissensus” (Pease 19).<sup>76</sup> Concerned with the status and function of ethnic literature in American letters and in the American popular imagination, these scholars have generally overlooked the importance of examining immigration literature for its potential to challenge and transform the ethnic space.

As Thomas J. Ferraro points out in his *Ethnic Passages: Literary Immigrants in Twentieth Century America* (1993), the genre of immigrant literature, which emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century, was engulfed into the more general category of “ethnic literature” in the period following World War II, and “replaced by multicultural representation” (1) in the recent decades. Ferraro notes that efforts to “bolster the reputation of ethnic writing” (1) have done little more than to legitimate

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74 See Mary E. Young's *Mules and Dragons: Popular Culture Images in the Selected Writings of African-American and Chinese-American Women Writers* (Westport: Greenwood, 1993), Inderpal Grewal's “Meatless Days and Borderlands” (*Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, ed. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kapla, Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1994) 231-54, and Shirley Lim's “Reconstructing Asian-American Poetry: A Case for Ethnopoetics” (*Melus* 14.2, 1987) 51-63.

75 See Sacvan Bercovitch's “The Problem of Ideology in American Literary History.” *Critical Inquiry*, 12.1 (Summer 1986) 631-53.

76 While not dispensing altogether with the pluralistic model, the New Americanists situate it outside consensual ideologies and holistic views of literary history.

and naturalize difference in relation to, and as the margin of, the American canon and the American national narrative. Though seemingly arguing the opposite, Sollors is actually in agreement with Ferraro when he remarks that “[i]n contemporary usage ethnicity has largely been transformed from a heathenish liability into a sacred asset” (33), in part because it has become accommodating enough to be “charged with different political meanings” (33). Reclaimed and valorized by descendants of immigrants for whom complete acculturation and assimilation had been the most beneficial, if not the only option, ethnicity has come to be also appropriated by non-ethnics seeking to mark their difference in visible and recognizable ways. Being an immigrant, however, has remained a much less desirable form of identification. Unlike the figure of the ethnic, that of the still-too-foreign and unknowable immigrant is embedded in too many political discourses inspiring mistrust and fear, as my brief commentary on Flannery O’Connor’s “The Displaced Person” has suggested.

As the term “immigrant” gives way, on the other hand, to the cosmopolitan, the transnational, the exile, the nomad, or the border-crosser—forms of identification that may define both the immigrant and the ethnic—the notion of “immigration” literature recedes further into the folds of the all-encompassing “ethnic” literature. With the rise of Postcolonial studies, under the theoretical umbrella of which the above-mentioned forms of identification have generally emerged, “immigration literature” seems to have become an obsolete phrase that fails to encapsulate the tensions that contemporary literary and critical trends depict and interrogate.<sup>77</sup> When,

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<sup>77</sup> In a later section I will return to the relationship between Postcolonial studies and the absence of a theoretical interest in the Eastern European immigrant space.

in *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction* (1996), a postcolonial scholar like Rosemary Marangoly George advocates the creation of a distinct “immigrant genre” (171), it is only because this would lessen the “burden and constraints that contemporary criticism has placed on the category known as postcolonial literature” (171).<sup>78</sup>

I argue that, since it is the immigrant and not his/her self-named alter ego, the exile, the transnational, or the ethnic subject *per se* who figures in the official nomenclature, and whose presence is sanctioned, problematized, and/or contested by the legislating powers of the United States, the theoretical locus occupied by the figure of the immigrant deserves special attention. The direct relationship between the immigrant and the legislation that regulates his/her presence within the nation produces a space of articulation that is significantly different from the space of ethnic articulation. The former determines a suspension of ethnicity which allows for contestatory gestures and critiques that have the potential to naturalize the immigrants’ various forms of identification and legitimize alterity. This view concurs with Bhabha’s argument that “[t]he representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of *pre-given* ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition” (2). “The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective,”

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78 While perceptive in its discussion of the place of immigrant narratives within Postcolonial literature, George’s advocacy for an immigrant genre fails to generate a persuasive argument. According to her, this genre is “marked by a disregard for national schemes, the use of multigenerational casts of characters and a narrative tendency toward repetitions and echoes—a feature that is often displayed through plots and covers several generations” (7). George continues this description of what clearly defines ethnic, not immigration literature, with an even more confusing qualification of it as “marked by a curiously detached reading of the experience of ‘homelessness’” (171).

Bhabha points out, “is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation” (2).

The immigrant’s entrance in the United States marks a moment of crisis, a collision between outside and inside which, though performed by millions, remains always singular in its destabilizing power and its effects on both the immigrant and on America. This is the locus where cultural contracts between the immigrant and the adoptive nation take place, and the nature of the contract <sup>79</sup> informs and shapes post-immigrant identities. As a relational space of interchange and negotiation, this locus can therefore produce the immigrant as exile, the immigrant as transnational, the immigrant as multilingual or translingual, the immigrant as border-crosser, and any number of other categories that are neither mutually exclusive, nor necessarily symmetrical.<sup>80</sup>

I therefore argue for the resuscitation of “immigrant literature” and “immigrant narratives” as categories that accommodate and explore varied forms of immigrant identification, distinct from “ethnic literature.” The categories of “ethnic literature” and “immigration literature” overlap in many apparent ways, such as in their general focus on the lives and experiences of various foreign-born or other ethnic or racial minority groups/individuals and/or their descendents. Insofar ethnicity is used as a term to describe the presence of cultural difference from the perspective

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<sup>79</sup> For a discussion of the three types of cultural contracts between immigrants or other minorities and dominant powers see Ronald L. Jackson. “Cultural Contracts Theory: Toward an understanding of identity negotiation.” *Communication Quarterly*, (50.3-4 [2000]): 359-367.

<sup>80</sup> By “not necessarily symmetrical” I mean to suggest the possibility of forms of identification that may involve one or more referents, such as nation, territory, language, culture, ethnicity, or race.

of the dominant culture, any immigrant narrative will contain ethnic elements.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, many recent (semi-) fictional narratives, especially cross-generational ones, straddle both categories, recounting the immigration experience as well as the construction of ethnic identities, sometimes in sequence form. One finds such merging of immigrant and ethnic in Askold Melnyczuk's *Ambassador of the Dead* (2001); Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo* (2002); Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989); Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) followed by *¡Yo!* and *Something to Declare* (1999); Gin Jen's *Typical American* (1991) followed by *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996); and Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) followed by *The Agüero Sisters* (1998). In many of these contemporary works, there appears to be less of a distinct delineation of immigrant and ethnic identities than in earlier twentieth century narratives. Some of the characters, such as Julia Alvarez's Yolanda, whose journeys between her native Dominican Republic and adopted America constantly complicate and defer her transformation from immigrant into ethnic, inhabits a post-immigrant space of articulation.<sup>82</sup>

At the same time, immigrant literature and ethnic literature enjoy distinctive characteristics and require different strategies of reading. The classic immigrant narrative recounts the story of an individual's or a family's emigration from their homeland, usually for economic, religious, or social reasons, their arrival in the New

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<sup>81</sup> In other words, a character like Reb Smolinsky, in Anzia Yezieska's immigrant narrative *Bread Givers*, is commonly seen as an exponent of Jewish Eastern European ethnicity.

<sup>82</sup> As Batia Boe Stoler points out, seen as a condition of ethnicity (or, I would argue, pre-ethnic identification), the term "post-immigrant" "maintains the relationship between ethnicity and immigration by locating ethnicity closer to its immigrant precedent, and the native homeland by extension, rather than to the assimilated generations" (9-10).

World, and struggles to achieve a version of the American Dream and/or become Americans. Even when critiquing the immigrant's situation in the adopted country, the narrative remains celebratory of America's inherent promises and of the immigrant's opportunity to take charge of his/her dreams. The changing of the character's name upon arrival in the Promised Land marks the beginning of a long process of (self-) translation and reinvention. The narrative stops as soon as the character has been acculturated or assimilated, a process closely interconnected with achieving social mobility, usually through education or material success. The former coincides with a process of linguistic mobility, though, for reasons I will expound in the next section, this achievement receives little visibility.

As rites of passages in the immigrants' quests, immigrant narratives may suggest the ways and degrees to which the immigrant will become an ethnic in America, but their focus lies within the temporal space that captures the process, not the end result. Paradoxically, however, though focusing on process, these narratives seem particularly concerned with closure, with reaching the point at which the immigrant has found an acceptable form of self-identification and a recognizable position within American discourses on assimilation. At the same time, such endings often appear strained and unconvincing (Mary Antin), improbable and exaggerated (Anzia Yeziarska), or abrupt and haphazard (Andrei Codrescu), as if to suggest that their very presence is a mere act of necessity, a fulfillment of narrative conventions.

To a large extent, discussions of ethnic texts begin where discussions of immigrant texts leave off, though, as already suggested, the ascension of the former to prominence does not necessarily imply the complete disappearance of the latter. In

ethnic texts, the partially or completely assimilated immigrants or/and their descendents continue to locate and define their place within mainstream America and within their ethnic group, thus contributing to the on-going (re-)construction of ethnic profiles. Here the immigrant is often a figure of the past, even if her history may be inextricably connected to her descendents' own relation to ethnic heritage and place of origin. The place of origin appears mostly in the form of nostalgia or cultural haunting, and the movement *toward* becoming American has been replaced with the story of becoming, being, or resisting being an American ethnic. Displacement and rootlessness no longer connote violent discontinuity, but instead have become tropes for ethnic difference and alienation.

In the case of Eastern European American literary texts, acknowledging the distinction between immigrant and ethnic narratives becomes particularly important. The tendency to read Eastern European immigrant narratives as ethnic texts pre-empts the possibility of recuperating some of the cultural difference that is being lost in the process of acculturation and assimilation. When read for their ethnicity—more specifically, as illustrative of what might be termed the Eastern European ethnic—most Eastern European immigrant narratives fail to impress. The assimilationist rhetoric, the monolingual enunciation, and the narrative movement toward complete Americanization overshadow the presence of ethnic difference. Most Eastern Europeans' autobiographical and fictional explorations of the immigration experience have sparked little interest outside ethnic communities and have gradually faded from

the literary imagination of the American-born.<sup>83</sup> This may also explain, at least in part, Ethnic Studies' lukewarm interest<sup>84</sup> and American and Cultural Studies' almost complete disinterest in making Eastern European American literary texts part of their on-going critical and theoretical conversations.

I argue therefore that it is within the literary space of immigrant writing that the Eastern European presence needs to be configured. As the two case studies will demonstrate, immigrant narratives situate Eastern Europeans in a space of negotiation that attests to their particularity while also foreshadowing their impending invisibility

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83 Among these works are Elias Tobenkin's *Witte Arrives* (N.Y.: Frederick A. Stokes, 1916), Joseph Anthony's *Rekindled Fires* (New York: Henry Holt, 1918), Thomas Bell's *Out of This Furnace* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1941), *All Brides Are Beautiful* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1930), and *The Breed of Basil* (New York: Robert M. Mc Bride, 1930); Michael Pupin's *From Immigrant to Inventor* (New York: Scribner's, 1923); Ben Field's *The Cock's Funeral* (New York: International Publishers, 1937), *The Outside Leaf* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1943), and *Piper Tompkins* (New York: Doubleday, 1946); Vera Lebedeff's *The Heart Returneth* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1943); Ruth Tabrah's *Pulanski Place* (New York: Harper, 1950) and Richard Bankowsky's *The Glass Rose* (New York: Random House, 1958). Of these works, only Bell's *Out of This Furnace* has received critical attention and has been reprinted a few times over the decades.

Other works, such as Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (New York: Doubleday, 1906) and Michael Gold's *Jews without Money* (New York: Liveright, 1930), achieved a fair amount of popularity and have survived to this day on some college reading lists, but mostly under the dubious "auspices" of proletarian literature. The excoriation of their, or their authors' left-wing commitments lasted long into the Cold War era, attaching, or rather repeatedly re-inscribing the ideological stigma on the face of Eastern Europe. This vilification was fueled by prominent critics such as Alfred Kazin, whose assessment that proletarian/radical writers not only showed disinterest in literature, but were "even a little contemptuous" of it (380) was later echoed by Daniel Aaron's charge that proletarian novels "violated almost every literary canon" (169), and Lionel Trilling's indictment of their "dreary limitation" that "overtook the imagination of what life is or might be"(21). Barbara Foley's *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U. S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 1993) provides invaluable observations on the politics informing responses to proletarian fiction, much of which was authored by writers of Eastern European origin.

84 The syllabi database provided by The Society for the Study of the Multi- Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS) has only two syllabi that list a work—only one each—written by an Eastern European American. The two tokens are Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* and Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers*.

as ethnics.<sup>85</sup> In order to better understand this space, I will approach it through the concept of palimpsestic translation, which I will expound in the following section.

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<sup>85</sup> In the language of cultural communication theory, they enter “ready-to-sign” or, at best, “quasi-completed” cultural contracts that motivate or force them to renounce much of their cultural particularities. The “co-created” contract, which benefits the immigrant/minority most, is the one capable of producing multiply-situated identities. See Jackson 359-367.

#### 4. Immigrant Narratives as Palimpsestic Translations

Before *Augie March* “I had written two very correct books. (...) I seem to have felt that I, as the child of Russian Jews, must establish my authority, my credentials, my fitness to write books in English” (Saul Bellow, “I Got A Scheme!” 72).

English “will always be for me real and foreign and therefore something that I have to make my own” (Bharati Mukherjee, *Stories* 35).

Abandoning Chinese meant also that “my goal as a writer had to change.(...) In English, we writers whose mother tongues are not English face a different kind of tradition and task ” (Ha Jin, *Stories* 79).

“You don’t want to work with or in a language that encourages your real or your imagined suffering, instead of objectifying and estranging it, making it seem foreign; you need a Plexiglas wall of a foreign language for that” (Mikhail Iossel, *Stories* 101-2).

“Although I promptly sensed America’s tendency to erase other people’s mother tongues, I always assumed that I would never abandon mine. (...) I am convinced that I embraced English with a secret hope. A hope of flight, of escape, exile. Yes, I thought I owed a self-exile to my land ” (Thomas Palakeel, *Stories* 133).

“I feel a certain uneasy self-consciousness when I use [English], as if I must always be on guard against making mistakes, because under a stepmother’ judgmental gaze, acceptance has to be earned rather than assumed” (Minfong Ho, *Stories* 163).

“I constantly translate as I write (...): first imagine what a character would say in Nepali, then try to find an equivalent in English that retains the Nepali flavor but makes sense to Western readers” (Samrat Upadhyay, *Stories* 179).

“I write my Spanish in English” (Julia Alvarez, *Stories* 218).

“I learned a great deal from reading Jacques Roumain because he captured so much of Creole in French. That’s what I try to do in English, so that our voices come across, so that people can recognize a different voice even if I’m translating myself when I write” (Edwidge Danticat, *Stories* 65).

“Writing in English is for me an act of claiming a place for myself—of announcing myself and this in-between space I occupy. For the last ten years I have written very little in Japanese, yet in writing one language I am writing the other, its rich shadow in the contours and rhythms of each, a dialogue between languages and loves. With every word I name a place both mine and other, negotiating both arrival and departure, for I am writing myself into a place where I belong and don’t belong, claiming it for myself. There I, too, become other to myself, yet more my own” (Kyoko Uchida, *Stories* 235).

The mottos prefacing this chapter provide brief glimpses into the various issues and concerns attending bilingual, multilingual, and translingual<sup>86</sup> writers' literary endeavors in "stepmother"<sup>87</sup> English. They reveal an obsession with the relational dynamic between native and adopted tongues and an intimate need for preserving the intimate core and cadences of native tongues. Even when they present translating themselves or composing directly in English as an act of liberation, empowerment, and reinvention, these writers often invoke the distancing powers and residual alienness of the adoptive tongue as shaping forces. Most importantly, their own commentaries often constitute the only testimony we have regarding the problems they face when writing in a non-native tongue, for the works themselves usually conceal any traces of bilingualism—unless they employ foreignizing strategies that make apparent the existence of translative processes and/or engage in visible acts of transference.<sup>88</sup>

An immigrant autobiographical narrative written in English (as-a-second-language) resembles a palimpsest which has replaced, but not completely erased, all anterior text(s). In some cases, when what has lasted is the mark of erasure alone, the

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86 While "bilingual" and "multilingual" are used here to denote the knowledge and command—but not necessarily the concurrent practice of --one or more languages besides the mother tongue, "translingual" adds to the notion of bi/multilingualism a sense of active engagement with and constant journeying between those languages, often within the same text. An ambilingual writer can use all of his/her languages with native proficiency. An equilingual can use all of his/her languages with equal, but not necessarily native proficiency.

87 The "stepmother" epithet has been borrowed from the title of the essay collection *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue* (Buffalo, NY: White Pine Press, 2000), edited by Josip Novakovich and Robert Shapard. "Second language," "adoptive tongue," and "godmother tongue" are also widely used to refer to a non-native tongue in which a speaker becomes proficient.

88 The word "transference," which is usually favored over the older term, "interference," refers to lexical, semantic, syntactic, morphological, and pragmatic/cultural transference from one language into another.

story of a successful erasure becomes the story of deciphering its motives in the language of faint indentations. A palimpsestic translation asserts itself concomitantly as literary original and as translation, though the translating processes are etched in layers that rarely transpire in the foregrounded work. “A re-Englishing of a Russian re-version of what had been an English re-telling of Russian memories in the first place” (Foreword 12-13)—is how Nabokov describes the composition of his *Speak, Memory*. As Nabokov intimates, the so-called “original” does not exist as separate entity but as process, as the workings of imaginary (con)texts that assist the translator-author in the writing of the narrative. The very notion of the palimpsest foregrounds the idea that all writing occurs in the presence of other texts, other writings.

Besides providing an important strategy of reading immigrant narratives written in English-as-a-second language, the concept of palimpsestic translation proves effectual in further theorizing the difference between immigrant and ethnic texts. An immigrant will have become an ethnic only after the translation activity has halted or ended, after a first draft has translated the immigrant into the American cultural landscape and/or assessed the possibility of translation. This is not to say that ethnic narratives do not engage in processes of cultural translation or that their protagonists no longer display fluid, impermanent, and transformative identities. Negotiations of cultural loyalties continue, but they take place *within* American discourses, at the margins of the American narrative. In ethnic literature, the immigrant identity has been already translated into acceptable, even when

challenging, forms or versions of ethnicity, be they multicultural, hybrid, or transnational.

In immigrant literature, on the other hand, linguistic and cultural negotiations accrue into a movement *toward* a sense of belonging to the American narrative. A simplified visual metaphor of the immigrant narrative would be that of a palimpsest whose earliest layers map the place of origin and the last ones mark the becoming of the ethnic. In an important, though limited sense, the Old World constitutes an original text which provides immigrants with a reference system that informs their process of self-translation in the New World. Moreover, it is here, in the Old World, in the imagination of the would-be emigrants, that the first and often boldest and most imaginative translation of the Promised Land begins. As Constantine Panunzio aptly points out, “one of the forces which makes for Americanization and one which is seldom recognized is found in the very idea of America [as an “acme of all dreams”] which the newcomer brings with him” (qtd. in Daniels 92). As Eastern European immigrant narratives clearly demonstrate, the incentive to Americanize is rooted, at least in part, in the desire to match up this dream/imaginative translation with the realities of America. All subsequent translations, as they emerge from the immigrant’s encounter with the real America, are gauged against this one. In this sense, immigrant literature devotes much of its attention to capturing the process of revising, critically and creatively, this “original” translation of the Promised Land and relocating it in the realm of the real.

## Theorizing the palimpsestic translation

Few attempts have been made to release translational phenomena from the grip of categorical distinctions between original texts and their translations. Almost all claims and theories regarding the nature, direction, and emphasis of the translation activity have revolved around the assumption that there is always an original text that precedes and subsequently births the translated text. Deconstructionists and, most recently, polystemic theorists (whose work draws on that of deconstructionists) have been among the few who have undertaken important steps toward reconsidering the terms in which the translation process has been traditionally discussed. Their work, though never exceeding the theoretical realm, has posited questions that, I argue, are of deep concern and relevance to the realm of immigrant autobiographical writing in English-as-a-second-language. As Edwin Gentzler notes in his survey of *Contemporary Translation Theories*, deconstructionists have suggested that a text's meaning is determined by the translation process rather than by (the existence of) an original and that, if anything, the "original" changes each time it engages in translation (145). While not offering a specific "translation theory" of its own, Gentzler further points out that deconstruction uses translation often "both to raise questions regarding the nature of language and 'being-in-language' as well as suggests that in the process of translating texts, one can come as close as is possible to that elusive notion or experience of *différance*" (146).

Jacques Derrida's observations on the interconnectedness between translation and deconstruction practices and his notion of *différance*<sup>89</sup> prove extremely useful in theorizing the notion of palimpsestic translation. A noun derived from the Latin verb *differe*—meaning both “to defer” and “to differ”—but altered graphically, a move (the second “e” changed to “a”) that creates no phonetic change but disturbs visual and semantic perceptions and brings the substantive form in the proximity of the disappeared present participle *différant*, the word forces us to consider and ultimately accept its syntactic, semantic, and graphic difference, and think about the relative losses, gains, and other implications enacted by such minimal alteration. An intentional mistranslation of sorts, *différance* seems to intimate that mistranslation is often nothing but translation with a difference, and that such unpredictable or surprising difference reinvigorates the language by pointing to its playful instabilities and infinite capabilities. Derrida is interested in “a play of forms without a determined and invariable substance,” and in the existence, in the practice of this play, of “a retention and protection of differences, a spacing and temporization, a play of traces” (*Margins* 15). As Genzler points out, Derrida's project is to reveal the play of masked yet still subconsciously discernable traces without necessarily suggesting the existence of some deeper underlying meaning. These traces are always differing and deferring, evading the act of disclosure by erasing themselves, disseminating, crossing over to another place (159-60). According to Derrida, it is in this play of

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89 See Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981), *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1978), and Claude Levesque and Christie V. McDonald, eds. *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation. Texts and Discussions with Jaques Derrida*, trans. Peggy Kamuf and Avital Ronell (New York: Schocken Books, 1985).

traces and not in the carrying over (from another language and/or another context) of a fixed meaning that translation manifests its most interesting work.

Itamar Even-Zohar, the founder and most tenacious proponent of polysystemic<sup>90</sup> translation, remarks that unfortunately so far “only actual text translations have been admitted as legitimate source for theoretical induction” (76), while problems concerning the system transference through which items are transplanted from one system to another have been ignored. He suggests that the problem of translatability be reformulated so as to investigate not the equivalency between source and target, but the circumstances and particular ways in which “a target utterance/text B relates (or is relatable) to a source utterance/text A” (76).<sup>91</sup> In order to understand what might have produced a certain kind of translation, one needs to acknowledge that “under certain circumstances constraints may operate not only in selecting from established options, but in producing options which did not exist before” (77).

Deconstructionists and polysystemic theorists have opened the field of translation to interdisciplinary articulations and have shifted its focus from a traditional search for paradigms and methodologies (for approaching the original and/or translated text) to a diversification of the conceptual framework in which translation issues could be discussed. To a large extent, this marks a privileging of

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<sup>90</sup> The notion of “polysystem” emphasizes the heterogeneous and dynamic presence of a multiplicity of systems and intersections of systems participating in what Even-Zohar calls “translational procedures” (73).

<sup>91</sup> “For instance,” he explains, “when a certain function in system A happens to be lacking in system B, one can explain why it does not show in the language-B text when it is a target text. But when, in spite of its existence in the target system, it does not show (as a result of interference), one then has no explanation to offer” (77).

philosophical over pragmatic issues. Following Foucault, Antoine Berman categorizes translations into those that naturalize (based on equivalence models) and those that engage in a Derridian play of signifiers:

Whereas the [former] perform only a semantic transfer and deal with texts that entertain a relation of exteriority or instrumentality to their language, the [latter] are concerned with *works*, that is to say texts so bound to their language that the translating act inevitably becomes a manipulation of signifiers, where two languages enter into various forms of collision and somehow *couple*. (285)

In the case of an immigrant text-as-palimpsestic translation, the “finished” product, the one crowning the vellum, obfuscates the play of traces, the “coupling,” and the other processes that take place before the naming occurs, thus suspending our awareness of the text as translation. In doing so, it makes invisible the politics attending the acts of inscribing one’s personal and larger histories in a language that can never fully re-trace or signify these histories, and within contexts that necessitate various types of translations themselves. Semantic, cultural, and epistemic instabilities lead to contextual ruptures. Through translation, immigrant writers attempt to suture the (con-)textual tissue of their histories with invisible threads, allowing the stitches only as much visibility as allowed or required by personal and historical circumstances. Even when made transparent, the translational processes that assist in the birth of the text are often regarded as integral part of the immigrant “saga” and bestowed minimal critical and theoretical attention. In other words, anecdotes about learning or using English are approached as part of the

autobiographical narrative's attempt to register its subject's journeying through stories of transplantation, assimilation, acculturation, and so on, and not as meta-references to the text's coming into being.

Just as certain cultures in certain historical periods possessed the right tools to wipe out all previous palimpsestic layers and produce a clean slate, so have certain circumstances of history succeeded in obfuscating the translational processes of various immigrant testimonies. And just as earlier texts were erased by the author's readers for economic, ideological, or political reasons, so were the traces of this translating activity. Ideally, our work should parallel that of modern historians employing infra-red and digital enhancement techniques to recover the erased texts. The result would resemble a hypertext that asserts and actively performs, in its acts of retrieval and simultaneous foregrounding, the text's dual entity as literary work and translation. But this equipment remains—perhaps quite fortunately—absent from the fields of critical and theoretical studies, which rely for such recoveries on interpretative and theoretical frameworks, contextual investigation, manuscript and other archival research, and a fair amount of conjectural analysis. If anything, the advance of technology has thwarted any hopes of recovering overwritten layers and lost traces. As Parts II and III will demonstrate, some of the investigative strategies used to approach Mary Antin's *Promised Land* (1912), such as archival research and manuscript examination have no applicability in the case of Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*. Hoffman's correspondence is not available to the public, and there is no

extant draft or manuscript of *Lost in Translation*— an ironic touch of which Hoffman may be well aware.<sup>92</sup>

Of course most, if not all creative works share palimpsestic qualities—each process of revision a layer glimmering unevenly through the final version, a latticework of deletions, insertions, and crosshatching that may or may not gain visibility and/or permanence. Translation is itself a revisionary process that services, ideally, both ethics and aesthetics. Its negotiating processes are further accentuated by cultural and semantic discontinuities and ruptures and can never escape the pressures of contextualization. James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* represents the best illustration of a palimpsestic text that makes visible its resistance to translation. A plurilingual text, it explores the possibilities of language and, in Gentzler’s words, “pushes the parameters of monolingualism to the extreme” (167). In the process of doing so, it refutes the politics of privileging target-oriented approaches that insist on coherent presentation and semantic meaningfulness.

In the case of most translations, however, the “definitive” text presents itself as the sum of the translator’s choices alone, rather than as the history of its omissions. This becomes especially consequential in the case of self-translated immigrant narratives that, having been written directly in English, lack an “original.” Since such self-translations preclude the possibility of revising (with the purpose of achieving the most felicitous equivalency), they invariably present themselves, and are read, as

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<sup>92</sup> Following a PEN event (in New York City, April 2005) celebrating the work and life of Czeslaw Milosz in which Eva Hoffman was taking part, I had the chance to talk with her briefly. When I asked her about the manuscript(s) and draft(s) of *Lost in Translation* she replied, smiling, that they were all on a disk that she had lost years before.

definitive texts.<sup>93</sup> The dangers inherent in the practices derived from such presentation/reading will be discussed momentarily.

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93 Such “histories of omissions” are present in the case of texts that have been translated multiply, by various translators and in various contexts. In this instance, each translated text represents an attempt at becoming a definitive text.

## **Rethinking Source-Text Validation in Translation Theory and Practice.**

### **“My tongue in the mouth of my friend”<sup>94</sup>**

“Translation” (deriving from “*translatus*,” the past participle of the Latin verb “*transferre*,” meaning “to transport” or “to carry over”) and “self-translation” might not be the most appropriate terms to describe the processes that inform, shape, and/or intervene in the writing of immigrant autobiographies in a second language. “Self-translation” in particular appears to refer, somewhat misleadingly, to the process of translating one’s “self.” While this understanding remains an integral, and for that matter, essential part of the intended meaning, as used in the context of my argument the term also means to suggest a conflation of authorship and translatorship; in the act of authoring their work, immigrant autobiographers perform various translating activities (cultural and semantic in particular), thus advancing a version of translation as co-authorship.<sup>95</sup> I have considered various other terms, such as “transformative mediation” and “auto-translation,” as well as borrowings such as “transcreation,” “transtextualization,” “transillumination” (coined by Haroldo and Augusto de Campos) and “regulated transformation” (Derrida), but ultimately dismissed them. Instead of inventing or of naturalizing a recent invention, which would have

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94 This is Gulliver’s translation of *Fluft drin Yalerick Dwuldum prastrad mirplush*, which he utters as a reply to one of King of Luggnagg’s answers (which Gulliver does not understand). “By this Expression,” he adds, “was meant that I desired leave to bring my Interpreter; whereupon the young Man already mentioned was accordingly introduced, by whose Intervention I answer’d as many Questions as his Majesty could put in above an Hour. I spoke in the Balnibarbian Tongue, and my Interpreter delivered my Meaning in that of Luggnagg” (Swift 166).

95 Gentzler notes the presence of this concept of translation as co-authorship in the work of Quebec feminist writer Nicole Brossard (197).

threatened to make my argument, in its already jargon-peppered articulation, even more elitist, I have opted for preserving the common terms and forcing them into opening their traditional meaning to new connotations. This seemed most appropriate especially since such theoretical and practical expansion is long due. The processes I describe with the terms “translation” and “self-translation” (in relation to analyses of immigration narratives) do not represent recent developments. To name them something new and other than “translations” would be to continue to ignore the implications of their having been left unnamed in the first place. I therefore use the notion of “palimpsestic translation” to transform and remap the theoretical and conceptual space in which the act of cultural translation takes place. This, in turn, will hopefully change the way we think about immigrant writing in a second language and its place in the American literary space.

In its most common understanding, “translation” implies a transference or conversion from one language into another, or from one medium/genre into another. In either case, the translator engages with two texts and two spaces, evaluating choices, prioritizing, negotiating literal and connotative meanings, contexts, and questions of translatability. A literary translation presupposes the existence of an original text (written or verbal) under the blueprint of which the activity of translating takes place. Ideally, the arching processes through which one text is made intelligible in a context different from the original respond to the demands and particulars of each context without altering the meaning of the original. Once the process of translation has come to an end, the original text has multiplied into two, each version containing and mirroring the other. Inevitably, translators bestow upon the original text and on

the act of translation their own visions and strategies, making the translated text also their own, a mirrored and mirroring image that preserves the substance and contours of the “real” object but transfigures some of its details, either by accident or choice. Motivated by more or less legitimate reasons and purposes, translators take licenses. Some end up replacing the original text with one that preserves the overall meaning but eliminates all the particulars. In most cases, the disappearance of these particulars is made invisible as well. Still others go as far as to “translate” without any knowledge of the source language.<sup>96</sup> The translated text depends for validation on its original source, and as long as some semantic equivalency is achieved, the translation is regarded as having achieved its purpose. Blatant incongruities may earn it the title of “bad” or “poor” translation, but it will not invalidate its status of translation.<sup>97</sup>

On the other hand, there are those who write directly in a second/adopted language,<sup>98</sup> working their way through similar processes of linguistic and cultural negotiation and acting therefore as self-translators, as is the case of the writers under discussion. At the same time, however, their writing reveals a superb command of

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96 Sometimes circulating under the less audacious (or perhaps impudent) title of “versions” or—much less frequently—“adaptations,” these “translations” represent a more or less creative recasting or reworking of other translators’ work. It would be worth investigating why and how this trend, which appears to be endemic to American letters, has survived and continues to survive in a culture increasingly obsessed by plagiarism and copyright laws.

97 Validation concerns surface during what George Steiner has described as the forth, and last process of the hermeneutic act of translation: restitution or reciprocity. According to Steiner, this completing phase, the “piston-stroke” (316), which aims at the restoration of the equilibrium between the original text and its translation (318), is preceded by three others: initiative trust, aggression, and incorporation (312-16).

98 I am referring to immigrants who arrived to the States speaking little or no English. Unlike English-speaking children brought up bilingually or multilingually, and for whom distinctions between mother / native tongue and second/stepmother tongue might be irrelevant, these immigrant started acquiring English only in their early or late teens.

their adopted language and close intimacy with its idiomatic and connotative nuances, suggesting that perhaps much of the writing proceeds from thought processes that take place directly in English. Even so, as these writers often confess, the English in which they inscribe their stories that can never fully encompass them, while its perfect mastering signals success as well as betrayal.<sup>99</sup>

Carving a life in English and inhabiting it as if it were their own becomes a continuous process, the autobiographies/memoirs representing at once testimony of such process-oriented endeavor and important stepping stones. Of the works under discussion in this study, Hoffman's exemplifies this most prominently, as Part III will demonstrate.

Even if not always consciously translating, or at least not in a sense that would make each of their sentences in English a translation from Russian, Polish, Romanian, Hungarian, or Yiddish, mother tongues they continued to speak in the family, Eastern European immigrant writers perform activities closely interrelated to those of translation. In their work of cultural mediation and negotiation, and especially in dealing with experiences and realities that occurred prior to the acquisition of the English language, they face the task of deracinating, carrying over, and re-contextualizing such experiences and realities in the language of the target culture. Such cultural translation, while not a *sine qua non* for all writing in a second language, *is* germane to any project of recording one's immigrant experiences and

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<sup>99</sup> Scholars have commented, over the years, on the contradictions and betrayals that permeate the task of translation, finding in the twinning of Italian's *traduttore* (translator) and *traditore* (traitor) more than punning delight. The act of finding an adequate equivalency for something that resists, by nature of its cultural particularism, translation, may be regarded as an act of more or less necessary betrayal.

transformations. These writers have to consider originating as well as target-culture contexts and establish parallels and equivalences that are not required in other types of autobiographical writing. However, unlike other translators' work, theirs goes unnamed and unacknowledged, a result of self-imposed and coerced effacements whose causes will be discussed below.

The absence of an "original" text makes such overlooking convenient. Unlike other translators, immigrant autobiographers do not work under the constraints of another's text. "Double-jointed, high-wire, Janus-faced explorers" (Purpura), they compose, adjust, and trans-figure their imaginary blueprint *in* and *as part of* the process of translating, turning the latter's constraints into creative outlets. This movement *toward*, and final rendering of one's story *into* a language of "hypothetical equivalencies"<sup>100</sup> flouts the view of the translation activity as that which comes after and second to the act of creation. In other words, the writing of the text and the translating occur almost simultaneously, and their concerted efforts toward validation are embedded in the acts of aggression, appropriation, and compromise through which the narrative moves forward.

There exists no palpable source text upon which the resulting text depends for validation, but the validation itself, which is connected inextricably to the dominant culture's expectations and demands, remains a significant consideration in the

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<sup>100</sup> Lydia He Liu uses the phrase to refer to the translingual practice of establishing and maintaining levels of hypothetical equivalence or make-shift translatability between the political discourses of two very different languages and intellectual traditions. In *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China, 1900-1937* (Palo Alto, C.A.: Stanford U, 1995) she focuses on the processes through which new words, meanings, discourses, and modes of representation arose, circulated, and acquired legitimacy in early modern China as it contacted/collided with European/Japanese languages and literatures. I borrow the term to refer to the "negotiated" English of Eastern European immigrant autobiographies.

creation of the final product. As discussions of individual authors will illustrate, this validation is connected to semantic accuracy only in a very limited sense. Purists of translation theory would argue that the absence of an original disqualifies these autobiographical narratives from the serious game of translation and their authors from achieving the status of translators. They might concede that these are translations only in a general or metaphorical sense, in the sense all creative acts are, especially those attempting to make sense of, or “translate,” the particulars of one’s life or culture. Innocuous as it may seem, this argument seeks to divest translation of its potential powers, and contributes to the preservation of a dangerous compartmentalization within the field of Humanities. Over the last two and a half decades, various translators and translation scholars (among them, Gideon Toury, Mary Snell-Hornby, Edwin Gentzler, Susan Bassnett, Andre Lefevre, and Douglas Robinson) have argued for an inclusive definition of the interdiscipline of Translation Studies that would accommodate literary translation, linguistic or technical translation, intralingual translation (i.e., within one language and usually between different dialects, through semantic or literary clarification), interpretation (as interlinguistic oral communication mediated by an interpreter), and intersystemic translation/interpretation (transplantation/adaptation/reworking of a text into another system of expression, such as film, painting, or ballet). Mary Shell-Hornby has offered an integrated approach that views the translational activity as occurring between cultures in all their complexity, and thus only subsidiarily between languages. In a similar vein, Bassnett and Lefèvre’s *Constructing Cultures* (1998) shifts the focus from the linguistic aspects of translation to the intercultural

communication translation mediates. In a similar treatment of translation as primarily an intercultural activity, Jose Lambert and Clem Robyns have redefined it as “migration-through-transformation of discursive elements (signs)” and as the “process during which they [the discursive elements] are interpreted (re-contextualized) according to different codes” (qtd. in Gentzler 193). In her analysis of a number of francophone North African texts, Egyptian scholar Samia Mehrez examines the plurilingualism inherent in any text written at the confluence of various cultures.<sup>101</sup> She remarks upon the process of defamiliarization through which the language of the Other comes to encode messages which are not readily decoded by the monolingual reader whose referential world continues to exclude, ignore, and deny the existence of other referential worlds that are crucial to a more global rather than “colonialist,” “imperialist” reading of the text (122). “The globalization of culture means that we live in ‘translated worlds,’” argues Sherry Simon (134). Her argument suggests that often translation inheres as much in the “original” as it does in its translation (Gentzler 195). As Andrew Benjamin has pointed out, in its post-Derrida phase, translation has come to designate a plurality of activities with a plurality of significations (Benjamin 35).

The work of feminist critics and translators such as Luise von Flotow, Barbara Godard, and Susanne Lotbiniere-Harwood has developed along “foreignizing” coordinates that scrutinize and/or subvert the ways in which translations have often

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<sup>101</sup> As Gentzler notes, Mehrez illustrates how in the works of many North African writers (such as Assia Djebar, Abdelwahab Meddeb, Tahar Ben Jelloun, and Abdelkebir Khatibi) subversive messages can only be deciphered by the bilingual reader, who automatically translates in the act of reading the French (195).

dis-gendered, “sanitized,”<sup>102</sup> or misrepresented original texts written by women.<sup>103</sup> In *Translation and Gender*,<sup>104</sup> Von Flotow focuses on the interconnection between feminist strategies and translation practices, and traces the origin of this overlapping in the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Answering the call of these earlier feminists (such as Cixous) for a new, or renewed language, Barbara Godard and Lotbiniere-Harwood have lobbied for translations that foreground difference and linguistic contamination and result in hybrid texts that disrupt passive consumption and draw attention to the gendered aspects of language and culture. Such gender-conscious translations encourage the use of footnotes, endnotes, prefaces, or any other explanatory interventions that can help contextualize and clarify the text.<sup>105</sup>

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102 For example, in her translation of Nicole Brossard's *Sous la Langue* (1987), Susanne de Lotbiniere-Harwood comes across the word “cyprine,” an archaic French term referring to female sexual secretions. Because “cyprine” has no equivalent in English, a fact that makes a significant, if indirect statement about the culture that deems the existence of such a word unnecessary, she decides to import it into English.

103 As Von Flotow points out, women translators have been recently engaging not only in recovering lost or forgotten texts by other women writers, but in retranslating, and thus recuperating works by de Beauvoir, Sappho, Labe, and others, that have been disfigured by previous (mostly) male translators. She provides the example of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, whose standard translation, by Howard Parshley, has left out about ten percent of the original, including the names of seventy-eight women politicians, saints, and artists, references to taboo subjects such as lesbian relationships, and even non-taboo subjects such as the everyday details of women's lives.

104 Luise von Flotow, *Translation and Gender* (Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 1997).

105 Such work may lend itself vulnerable to accusations of elitism and to the harsh criticism of other feminists, such as (the Brazilian theorist) Rosemary Arrojo and Gayatri Spivak, who have warned against the dangers of having “forgotten” or “suppressed” texts written by third world women overwritten, misappropriated, misconstrued and/or mistranslated by first world feminists.

In light of this current movement toward interdisciplinary inclusiveness and toward an emphasis on the imbrications between translation, culture, and gender, expanding the notion of translation to refer to the practice of writing in a second, “stepmother” language appears neither preposterous nor premature. Some may suggest that writing in a second language is a matter of bilingualism/multilingualism/ translingualism, an area of specialization (TESOL) that has enjoyed its own isolated niche in English Departments, often as a branch or extension of Linguistics. This strict compartmentalization of TESOL and Translation Studies, which widens the gap between translation practice and translation theory, baffles and entices, as does the fact that immigrant autobiographies—and more specifically, writings that record the experiences of entering, coping with, learning, struggling in, and/or living in a new language and culture—have not ignited the interest of either one of them, figuring instead almost exclusively on various curricula of Ethnic Studies, which is only tangentially interested in issues of translation and bilingualism.

## **Translation as divestment of agency and tool for Americanization**

Recent work in the slowly emerging field of Translation Studies has exposed translation as a practice fraught with unexamined political, social, and cultural implications, branching far beyond its textual features. Translation wields enormous power, both in the self-representation as well as the construction of various identities. As a number of translation theorist and Postcolonial scholars have recently pointed out, translation also powers the global cultural economy and global economic commerce, making itself indispensable in the corporate world and an irreplaceable tool in imperialist and colonizing projects. It may be precisely because of its potential to occasion revelations that challenge the ways in which this power has been used and to question “the authority of dominant cultural values and institutions” (Venuti, *Scandals* 1) that often shape or regulate translation practices that translation continues to occupy a disadvantageous position.<sup>106</sup> As Venuti further notes, translation’s marginal status in Anglo-Saxon culture may be also attributed to the prevalent view of translation as derivative, imitative, neither self-expressive, nor unique, and therefore an offense against the concept of authorship, which aspires to rise above all of these. Author equals unmediated—and thus untampered with—knowledge, and this illusion of absolute authorial presence in the translated text requires the translator’s self-effacement (*Translator’s Invisibility* 6-7).

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<sup>106</sup> Furthermore, the relative disinterest shown by Anglo-Saxon cultures in translating foreign literatures indicates an imperialist stance. As Venuti’s comparative statistics point out, though English is the most translated language worldwide, it is not much translated into. In the 1980s-1990s, translations represented 2%-3% of the total number of publications in U.S. and England, as opposed to 8%-12% in France, 14% in Germany, and close to 25% in Italy (Venuti, *Translator’s Invisibility* 12-14).

Significantly, in their attempts to capture some of the ineffability of the translation activity and materialize the translator's spectral presence, writers and critics have often resorted to metaphors. The act of translation has been associated with gardening (Walter Benjamin), matchmaking (Khaled Mattawa), play-staging (Hans Sahl), expropriation (Patrick Primavesi), colonial raiding and settling (Seamus Heaney), ventriloquism,<sup>107</sup> cannibalism, and blood transfusion and vampirism (Haroldo de Campos). Furthermore, it appears that the realm of metaphor-making is the only place where the translators themselves acquires corporeality. It is only as direct perpetrators or mediators of these metaphorized activities that translators lose their invisibility and are bestowed main agency.<sup>108</sup>

The translator's work is therefore always an import, a presence ineluctably divorced from what constitutes the national culture, the national narrative. A translated work has the word "difference" imprinted on it.<sup>109</sup> While enlisted in the service of many enriching purposes, difference functions primarily as a conduit for self-knowledge and self-consolidation. In other words, the translator's impulse to bring forth a work in a foreign language, as well as the reader's primary attraction to literature in translation originate in a desire for knowledge, not transformation. In

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107 Stan Smith discusses the notion of translation as ventriloquism in *The Origins of Modernism: Eliot, Pound, Yeats, and the Rhetorics of Renewal* (N.Y.: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994).

108 At the same time, as the Greek word *metapherein*, meaning "translation," suggests, a metaphor is already an attempt at forging resemblances across differences, so metaphorizing/translating the translator means moving him/her even further away from agency.

109 In *Re-belle et Infidèle / The Body Bilingual* (Toronto: Women's P, 1991) Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood argues that since women's discourse is already marked by difference, feminist translation is a "quadrasonic site," with the Self/Other emerging simultaneously in two languages and four sites (Gentzler 213).

translating and reading literature in translation we seek encounters with worlds potentially different from our own but that can teach us something about ourselves. To a large extent, our engagement with these texts becomes tantamount to assessing this difference, to using difference as a tool for defining “us” and “them.” To this end, the presence of difference may be as compelling or challenging as its absence. When the Other lacks the mark of difference that facilitates dissociation and clear demarcation of boundaries, her presence may be perceived as equally, if not more, unsettling.

In either case, translation, as well as self-translation can exercise much power in essentializing other cultures—not only because a translated text is always perceived as a mediated encounter with a more or less representative Other, but because in employing assimilative or domesticating strategies, translators themselves often distill the source culture to features and attributes they consider most intelligible to the target audience. We may argue that in translating herself *as* culture, the immigrant writer’s exploration and exploitation of the indigenous self replicates the dynamics of colonizing projects. However, the position of the native informant (the immigrant writing about the culture of origin) as self-selected and—for the most part—invisible translator has dual implications: while a potential conduit for cultural construction and/or appropriation by the dominant culture, she may also use the powers of translation to control and subvert such projects, and to participate in the construction of her own otherness. In this last respect, the native informant’s

translating activity takes the form of “strategic essentialism.”<sup>110</sup> Though preferable to essentialism, since it allows the Other the selection of those attributes through which she will be represented, and draws attention to the constructed nature of such representations, strategic essentialism cannot escape the danger of advancing truncated views of culture and otherness. These dangers become inevitable when immigrant narratives are read as definitive texts and not as integral parts of the palimpsestic work—in other words when they mask their cultural residues, intranslatabilities, or their other, subsequently unarticulated choices.

Foucault remarks that “[d]ifference is transformed into that which must be specified within a concept, without overstepping its bounds. And yet above the species, we encounter the swarming of individualities” (182). “What is this boundless diversity which eludes specification and remains outside the concept,” he goes on to ask, “if not the resurgence of repetition?” (182) It is this resurgence of repetition as manifested in the continuous back and forth movement between source and target and in the multiplicity (realized or not) of translations of the same text that staves off the prospects of essentialism. In the case of self-translated immigrant texts, the repetition obviously cannot occur in these particular forms. However, in re-contextualizing, as well as re-reading and re-interpreting these works as palimpsestic translations, we make them available to the resurgent powers of repetition. Our own activity becomes in a sense an act of re-translation.

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110 Coined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the term is discussed in her "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography" (*Selected Subaltern Studies*, eds. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, New York: Oxford U P, 1988) 13.

Until recently, American cultural and political institutions hardly credited translation's vital work and provided no welcoming contexts for translation problematization. Significantly, even today, an immigrant author writing in anything but English is not considered an American writer even if she is an American citizen and has spent most of her writing life in America, writing about American realities.<sup>111</sup> For Antin, as well as for Hoffman, the seductive prospect of almost-perfect translation, of inhabiting the English language as if they had been born into it, fulfilled a number of aspirations.

Translating, writers have often pointed out, is a self-revelatory process. It increases one's awareness of choices and the nature of these choices, and promotes a better understanding not only of the foreign language but of one's mother tongue(s); each language's complexity, uniqueness, as well as intranslatabilities, limitations, and inadequacies to articulate other cultures' specificities are all revealed in the process. And if translation represents a yearning for a deeper understanding of Language, self-translation doubles that yearning with a need to understand how the self and its transformations signify and are signified by each language.<sup>112</sup>

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111 One need look no further than the case of American Yiddish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer, whose works, all accessible to the general American public only in translation, are customarily placed in the vicinity of, but never quite within the space reserved for the American canon. Similarly, the Romanian-born exile Norman Manea has been recently hailed by American critics as one of the most important contemporary Romanian and Eastern European voices, although he resides permanently in the United States. He writes, however, only in Romanian, despite his perfect command of English. His identity as a writer is circumscribed to one language, while his geopolitical one to another, which makes Manea a Romanian writer and an American citizen.

112 Bilingual/multilingual/translingual writers are always confronted with problems of linguistic and cultural translatability. Their negotiations often engage with theories of linguistic determinism (suggesting that the language we use determines, at least in part, the way in which we view and think about the realities around us) and linguistic relativity (suggesting that distinctions encoded in one language are unique to that language alone) as laid out by Edward Sapir (1884-1936) and his student, Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941). See Edward Sapir, *Language* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1921) and Benjamin L. Whorf, *Language, Thought & Reality* (Cambridge, M.A.: MIT P, 1956).

As an intensification of the creative process at large, translation allows unexpected freedoms. At the same time, living in a borrowed language while still holding onto the native one entails constant confrontations with the impossibility of synchronizing the two languages, the realities they signify, and the self's attempts to inhabit or make sense of them all. The writing itself is constantly deferred and accentuated by the awareness attending these processes. To Gertrude Stein's counsel, "Why worry? Nobody knows how writing is written, the writers least of all," immigrant writers would have responded with justified disbelief, as did Anzia Yezierska, to whom the advice was directed.<sup>113</sup>

On actual as well as metaphorical levels, language constitutes both tool and subject in self-translated immigrant writings. However, while their authors cannot but share with post-structuralists/de-constructionists and post-modernists an acute awareness of the relationship between language and reality, they take only limited interest in discussing or exploiting the breaches between the Saussurian referent, signifier, and signified, Derrida's belief in the implacable discontinuity of any text, or the Lacanian psyche's obsession with the structures of language and desire. When they let such concerns surface to the fabric of the narrative, as Hoffman does in *Lost in Translation*, they present them as conjunctural pressures or historical anachronisms. The narrator yearns "to live within language and be held within the frame of culture" at a time when her fellow Americans "want to break out of the constraints of both" (197). Always on the verge of slipping between the fractures

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<sup>113</sup> Stern's advice appears in "What Makes a Writer," lecture delivered by Anzia Yezierska at Purdue University (May 4, 1965). The transcript is located in the Anzia Yezierska Collection, Box I (B1 F 7), at the Mugar Library, Boston.

within each language and those between languages, immigrant identities are in a sense incapable of fully rejoicing in the language's lack of precision, instability, and inherent fallibilities. In the process of articulating their becoming, immigrant writers need the blind faith in the language's power to hold them fully, irrevocably.

Language represents not only the most effective conduit of initiation into Americanness, but an obligatory one. In both Antin's and Hoffman's narratives, the struggle to become a writer is juxtaposed with—and in part derives from—the desire to take full control of the English language. Becoming a writer seems less of a choice and more of an absolute proof of citizenship. Their narratives grow out of the belief that an American writer is indisputably an American. Taking possession of the language means gaining better access to one's selves and transformations in the new world but, perhaps most importantly, being part of the national narrative. Neither Antin's nor Hoffman's narrators have illusions about their position within this narrative being anything but marginal; yet peripheries and borders, they suggest, signal some kind of belonging, and once you are *in*, anything is possible.

In their unerring commitment to English, immigrant narratives have generally strived to claim their rights as American literary works in their own right, and never as concurrent translations (or even quasi-translations), despite the fact that the language of their telling is a borrowed or adopted one. The Cinderella-in-rags status of translation and translators in our culture, along with other ethnocentric views and practices have influenced, if not shaped, such tendencies. The author-as-translator resembles a midwife whose task is indispensable but hardly credited. Afraid that her very presence may de-valorize her standing as author, the translator disappears behind

her own work. The degrees to which immigrant authors are willing to make their position as translators and the activity of translation visible may be read as barometric recordings of the dominant culture's attitudes toward translation.<sup>114</sup>

Venuti notes that since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Anglo-American translation theory and practice have been dominated by the conviction that translation should be self-effacing to the point of invisibility, leaving the impression that the text was originally written in the language into which it has been translated. The corresponding translation strategy seeks to produce a fluent, idiomatic text that erases every trace of foreignness. This fluency, Venuti points out, is achieved through an act of violence, namely “the reconstitution of the foreign text in accordance with values, beliefs, and representations that preexist it in the target language, always configured in hierarchies of dominance and marginality, always determining the production, circulation, and reception of the text” (*Translator's Invisibility* 18). In first world cultures, the term “translator” has come to refer almost exclusively to someone who brings foreign texts into her own culture. Though this appropriation benefits the translated culture as well, its main purpose is unquestionably self-serving, as already suggested. The translator's proficiency with her native language and close familiarity with her culture's values, expectations, and frames of reference turn the activity of translation into a reconstitution in the dominant culture's own image. The absence of other types of

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114 In “The Translation Turn in Cultural Studies” (*Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation*, eds. Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere, Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters, 1998) Bassnett records parallel developments in cultural and translation studies, each going through its own version of culturalism, structuralism, and post-structuralism, followed by a current internationalist phase. As this study suggests, these movements or “phases,” whose principles and ideas influenced other areas of the humanities and sciences as well, benefit from a better understanding if read alongside historical contexts from which they emerged and which they helped shape.

translation practices <sup>115</sup> bolsters this predilection toward defining translation along appropriative vectors.

If the ultimate purpose of translation is assimilation, as Venuti and Robinson have noted, so is the purpose of self-translation. For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, translations and self-translations of foreignness have shared in the desire to make the translated text intelligible and of interest to the dominant group. Immigrant writers composing directly in English often emulate, possibly to the degree of internalization, the assimilative and hegemonic practices governing the activity of translation.

This is the case of Mary Antin, whose English disguises perfectly the difficulties of achieving linguistic and cultural equivalency in the Promised Land. Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*, written in the most exquisite and natural-sounding English, recounts the "loss" to which the title alludes at the narrative level through anecdotes and examples of cultural or linguistic mistranslation or untranslatability. Unlike Antin, she opens the autobiographical space to the possibilities of discussing, and even theorizing, self-translation. Yet the language in which the stories are told, just like Antin's, betrays no foreignness, no residue of English-as-a-foreign-tongue. Moreover, neither of the two writers' bi/multilingualism surfaces in this narrative space

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115 It is very rare for an American to translate a national writer into a foreign language, and especially into a "minor" language. In minor cultures, on the other hand, translating one's national writers into English (or French, or any other widely-circulating language) constitutes a fairly common practice. This polarization replicates old cultural and political hierarchies of power; their persistence challenges the viability of globalization projects. Translation practice needs to move away from ethnocentric configurations that aim at assimilating the foreign without allowing the foreign to assert its specificity or without at least aiming at some cultural reciprocity that accommodates both gain and loss. Learning to approach the activity of translation as the articulation of the familiar into a foreign language can teach about loss and indirectly about the unethical underpinnings of gain.

which, by definition, should reflect and embody the complexity of their lives and experiences. As further discussed in Parts II and III, the almost complete absence of such bi/multilingual manifestations is closely connected to the suppressed existence of interiority and of domestic matters from these narratives. English translates the immigrants' transformation into a public figure, but proves inadequate when enlisted in the process of articulating those aspects of their personal identity that remain bound to their mother tongues and cultures.

As readers we are, for the most part, hardly aware of what is lost in translation, but for translators such sites of insurmountable loss constitute epistemological treasures. The losses and sacrifices, the maiming and substituting incurred in the process of translating make us aware of the limits of language and the limits of our experience. It is through them that we understand how much we rely on language to convey our specificity, our particularism (as gendered individuals, cultures, races, or ethnicities), how language reflects us and encodes us in ways we can only start to articulate. The meaning of any lexical/linguistic element is context-dependent, we realize, and this context is inscribed within the frame of a specific culture, specific time, specific history. Ironically, however, the more fluent and seamless the self-translated text, the less interested we are, as a culture, in unraveling its making and acknowledging its translating processes.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> We rarely think to attribute our enjoyment of a text to the quality of the translation, but do not hesitate to make translators accountable when the text does not meet our expectations.

Unless the work demands (through its “translated by” affix) recognition as certified/ “notarized”/ authenticated translation, we prefer to leave unacknowledged the work’s efforts to fulfill our expectations and needs by domesticating its inherent foreignness and reconstituting itself in our own language. To do otherwise would draw attention to the dominant culture’s complicity in encouraging the suppression of difference. It appears that, ironically, translation is only allowed to assert its existence as imperfection, as risk-taking.<sup>117</sup>

At the heart of this investigation lies a deep concern with translation ethics. If Venuti’s interest is in a translation ethics that “does not so much prevent the assimilation of the foreign text as aim to signify the autonomous existence of that text behind (yet by means of) the assimilative process of the translation” (*Scandals* 11), mine is in a translation ethics that acknowledges the existence of the translator in the production of immigrant autobiographies written directly in English, and aims to bridge the culturally and politically inscribed dissociation between translator and

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117 As a translator and, most recently, a beginning bilingual writer, I have always been acutely aware of the pains and joys of thinking, living, and writing in two languages. Since acquiring a second language (English) in my late teens, the experience of reading a work in translation has never been the same. As a monolingual reader immersed for years in British, American, and Russian fiction, I had never questioned the authority and accuracy of any translation, always assuming the presence of perfect equivalency. After beginning to read British and American works in original, I found myself approaching translated texts with a divided or rather double consciousness: enjoying the work as if it been written directly in the translated language, yet constantly wondering what reading it in original, with the cultural and linguistic knowledge of a native speaker, would feel like. However, issues of translation and multilingualism never crossed my mind during my first encounter with Antin’s *The Promised Land*; when they did, while reading Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation* and, later, Codrescu’s memoirs, the absence of an official endorsement of the work as translation (marked by “translated by”) made me dismiss any further considerations along these lines. Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002) triggered a small earthquake, allowing me to finally understand some of the previously inexplicable sources of my affection for immigrant writing, filling me with shame for the many blind spots of my reading practices, and opening a most necessary “can of worms” (or perhaps Pandora’s box) that proved most valuable and challenging in helping formulate this study’s investigative questions. That it took an almost caricatured imitation of an Eastern European’s English-as-a-second-language (as espoused by Alex, one of the book’s main characters) to awaken my awareness of Antin’s and Hoffman’s complex work as translators/mediators/ bilingual writers is in itself telling, as is the absence of any critical or theoretical approaches to these, and similar texts, as translations of sorts.

author, making the privileging of one at the expense of the other neither necessary nor desirable. In its reevaluation of immigrant texts in light of this ethics, my study encourages a reconsideration of the ancillary position of translators in our culture and insists on the importance of learning to read these texts as (self-)translations.

As already suggested, this study's main purpose is not to carve a distinctive niche for the Eastern European American and the narratives she has produced following immigration to America, but to examine their place and part in the discourses that have shaped and continue to shape the transformations of the American national narrative. To claim, against the often contrary proof of these works, a distinctive "Eastern Europeanness" that resists—or struggles to resist—and subverts America's impulses to domesticate difference would serve no purpose besides that of joining a fashionable trend in ethnic studies. Moreover, this would counter my own argument regarding the partial disappearance and invisibility of the Eastern European American. This does not mean to imply that Eastern European immigration narratives do not entertain subversive gestures and articulations, but rather that these are circumscribed to the immigrant condition *per se*, and are rarely enlisted in claiming the right to sustain and perform ethnic difference. A repertoire of multicultural performances and a linguistic archive, the immigrant as writer-translator is more than anything a negotiator of difference. Approaching these narratives as palimpsestic translations therefore opens the space for a possible re-theorization of immigrant identities as agencies instrumental in transforming the space of monolingual articulation that is the American narrative. Parts II and III of this study will examine the ways in which Mary Antin and Eva Hoffman exploit this potential in

their autobiographical (self-) translations. The appendix accompanying each examination offers a brief alternative view of the use of domesticating and foreignizing strategies of cultural and linguistic translation. Anzia Yerkieska and Andrei Codrescu, the two Eastern European immigrant writers showcased in these appendixes, do not completely reject the project of articulating their experiences in almost flawless English. However, unlike their contemporaries Antin and, respectively, Hoffman, their writing makes more decisive gestures toward displaying and sustaining, often through repetition, the mark of cultural and linguistic foreignness.

## PART II

### Mary Antin: Domesticating Translation as Americanization

“I could almost say that my conviction of immortality is bound up with the English of its promise” (Mary Antin, *The Promised Land*).

Mary Antin, born to Esther Weltman and Israel Antin on June 13, 1881, in the town of Polotzk, former Lithuanian territory and during the Antins’ time part of the Russian Pale of Settlement, has come to be identified with the autobiographical narrative *The Promised Land*, completed on April 10, 1910, serialized in the *Atlantic Monthly* during 1911-1912, and published by Houghton Mifflin in 1912, eighteen years after Antin’s arrival to the United States. Preceded by *From Plotzk to Boston* (1899) and followed by *They Who Knock at Our Gates* (1914), both of which it eclipsed in terms of public and critical acclaim, *The Promised Land* established Antin as a seminal immigrant voice during the most tumultuous mass immigration (1880-1920) that America had witnessed, and at a time when anti-immigrant sentiments were insinuating themselves rapidly into the public arena. As mentioned in Part I, the burgeoning of social sciences, especially of eugenics, spurred manifestations of national sentiment and tethered them to xenophobic, nativist, and other anti-immigrant discourses. Antin’s work needs to be read in this context *and* as a conscious and self-consciously construed response to this context. Such an approach allows insights into the pressures and constraints that contributed to the production of

the exemplary text of *The Promised Land*,<sup>118</sup> whose language of telling appears to match in clarity and transparency the conventional subject matter and flawless narrative structure. Yet to say that in its portrayal of a much desired and successfully accomplished assimilation and acculturation this immigrant autobiography presents itself as an effortless translation is both to state the obvious and to understate the condition of absolute translatability under which Antin composed her work. Besides language's consciously apprehended referential uses, we need to explore, as Helen Buss suggests, its discursive ability "to maximize some conditions of existence, to make their value real in the economy of a culture, and its ability to suppress and absent other conditions, to repress their existence into powerlessness and inarticulation" (229). In Antin's work, such processes are inextricably connected to issues of cultural and linguistic translatability.

In *The Promised Land*, English designates the nexus from which all claims to Americanness proceed. Not unlike John Dryden, who notes in the preface to his version of the *Aeneid*, "I have endeavoured to make Virgil speak such English as he would himself have spoken, if he had been born in England, and in this present Age" (qtd. in Venuti, "How to Read"), Antin makes her narrator speak such English as she herself would have spoken had she been born American. Since English-as-a-second-language, while still English, bears the undesirable mark of otherness, making the immigrant condition visible and traceable, references to the narrator's adoption of the American tongue are deferred to Chapter X ("Initiation"), more than midway into the

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118 This does not mean to suggest that, had she come to America fifty years later, Antin would have necessarily written a less assimilationist narrative, but that her success as an immigrant writer was, at the time, contingent upon her ability to configure her story within expected narrative paradigms.

narrative. Here they take the form of anecdotal recollections of an embryonic linguistic phase the narrator has successfully outgrown. Up to this chapter, the perfect English of the telling has worded the narrative so flawlessly that retrieving the story of its acquisition does little more than (re-)activate admiration for the narrator's successful substitution of English for English-as-a-second-language and, in an earlier stage, of the latter for the native Russian and Yiddish. Had we not been reminded that the language of *The Promised Land* had been absolutely foreign territory to Antin just a few years before she started writing her autobiography, we could have easily read the entire work without giving translation a second thought.

Reading contemporaneous critical responses to the *Autobiography of a Russian Immigrant* (the subtitle on the original dust jacket of *The Promised Land*), one gains an oblique yet important understanding of the incentive driving Antin to conceal any traces of linguistic and cultural foreignness. This is particularly significant since these early critiques instituted methodologies and models of reading that critics and teachers would employ for much of the century. What they did, in other words, was to map out the tenets of translatability within which Antin was expected to flesh out her story of Americanization. As the following discussion will underscore, these earlier critics' interest in *The Promised Land* as an ethnographic, socio-anthropological, and cultural text revolves obsessively around concerns regarding the Eastern European immigrant's capability to translate herself into the American narrative. Although the word "translation" is almost never mentioned, the narrator of *The Promised Land* is evaluated as translator and translated text, as marker of the foreign and eraser of foreignness.

As soon as it appeared, *The Promised Land* was acclaimed nationwide, and its dissemination throughout public libraries and other educational institutions turned it almost instantaneously into a referential text. By the end of its publication year, it had been revised into a book for schoolchildren: *At School in the Promised Land or The Story of a Little Immigrant*. The *New York Sun* reported it as one of “the most called-for at various libraries” (qtd. in Sollors, “Introduction” xxxii), and as late as 1949 schools used it as a teaching text in civics classes (Yans 23). Reviews appeared not only in literary journals, but also in *Journal of Education*, *Medical Journal*, and *Life and Labor*. Only a couple of months after the book’s publication, *Outlook* remarked that few books had impacted the public in more immediate ways (502).

The general enthusiasm with which the book was received does not surprise. At a time when the eyes of the nation were settling nervously on the daily influx of uneducated, underprivileged immigrants into the country, Antin’s narrative offered a most propitious respite and uplifting diversion. Not only did it alleviate many fears by inscribing a smart, trustworthy face onto the alien masses, but it also promised to “enkindle the latent patriotism in many a native American” (Louis D. Brandeis qtd. in Sollors, “Introduction” xxxii). Mary Antin was by no means the only Eastern European woman writer who was recording her immigration experience at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the 1980s, Norma Fain Pratt’s invaluable research resuscitated <sup>119</sup> the writing life of over fifty such writers who had been

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119 Pratt, Norma Fain, “Culture and Radical Politics: Yiddish Women Writers, 1890-1940” (*American Jewish History* 70. 1, 1980) 68-90. Some of the writers Pratt discusses include Hinde Zaretsky, Esther Luria, Anna Rappaport, Fradel Stock, Yente Serdatzky, Celia Dropkin, Anna Margolin, Rachel Holtman, and Kadya Molodowsky.

completely ignored by literary critics and historians. Their background and experiences were similar to Antin's, and so were their concerns with their transformation and position in the New World. However, they fashioned their stories in Yiddish, which limited readership to the Yiddish-speaking literary scene and placed them on the cusp of unassimilability. As their case illustrates, proving oneself American and claiming American citizenship in a language other than English warrants at this time little or no national recognition. Unlike these other women writers, Antin became a candidate for iconization in Arthur Guiterman's rhymed praise, and, in review after review, she was compared in her patriotism to Benjamin Franklin, Jacob Riis, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and James Weldon Johnson (Sollors, "Introduction," xxxii).

The *New York Times* celebrated *The Promised Land* as a "record of the experience of a *typical American* (italics mine)" ("The Immigrant" 228) and welcomed the chance America had to see itself through the eyes of an immigrant—thus obliquely announcing that despite her successful Americanization, the heroine of *The Promised Land* remained an Other. *The Independent* admired the "*felicity of expression*" (emphasis mine) with which Antin described "the richer terms of the New World" ("The Promised Land" 445) while, on an opposite note, Elizabeth Woodbridge decried in the pages of *The Yale Review* Antin's inauthentic portrayal of America (175). Such responses reveal a keen interest not in *The Promised Land* as a literary text, but in the opportunities it provides for national self-definition and, more specifically, for national self-aggrandizement. The text of *The Promised Land* is itself

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the Other in contrast to which and in relation to which the national narrative establishes its solid grounding and clearly delineated boundaries. This is suggestively captured by the self-assured and supercilious tone with which Woodbridge announced: “We are, in very truth, through [Antin’s] eyes looking back into the middle ages” (176). In referring to Antin’s non-American past as “middle ages,” Woodbridge imprints on the Eastern European immigrant narrative a residue of historical and cultural intranslatibility that makes the immigrant’s desire to assimilate incongruous with its means. Antin’s portrayal of America is “inauthentic,” the critic insinuates, because her translations of America and Americanness employ a frame of reference that operates outside the American narrative.

The republication of *The Promised Land*, in 1969 (by Houghton Mifflin again, with an introduction by Oscar Handlin), could not have been more strategically timed, set as it was against the ethnic revival of the late 1960s, when the national consciousness was brought to bear witness to the transformative crisis that permeated the American institutions and the concept of Americanness. Along with Abraham Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) and *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896), *The Promised Land* started being taught as a seminal text in Jewish literature courses. By 1985, when Princeton University Press reprinted the volume, the original 1912 publication had gone through thirty-four printings and sold eighty-five thousand copies. However, read mostly as sociological testimony and tokenized in literary histories, evaluations of *The Promised Land* have remained, for the most part, locked in prescribed, inflexible paradigms.

Werner Sollors's substantive and eloquent introduction to the most recent edition of *The Promised Land* (Penguin, 1997) does justice to the complexity of the book: a "psychological chronicle," but also "the sociological account of the transformation of an East European Jewish immigrant into an American citizen," the narrative "blends introspective analysis and philosophical self-questioning with political commentary, biographical with historical narrative, and a sense of unusual individuality with a repeatedly staked claim of social representativeness" (xiii). However, with few exceptions, and for almost a century now, critics have approached Mary Antin and *The Promised Land* on disarmingly similar terms, praising or chastising it for what it has been commonly agreed to represent: the emblematic immigrant story of successful Americanization and fruitful bridging of the Old and New Worlds. Responses appear to vary depending on the historical, political, and cultural conjunctures that define American national identity at any given moment. Thus, Antin's assimilationist rhetoric was acclaimed by the immigrant-wary Americans of the first decades of the twentieth century and panned by pro-multicultural, transnational Americans of the most recent decades. Many of Antin's contemporaries disparaged the autobiography's "programme of the extreme individualist" that threatened to "swing off into a hard and ruthless egotism" (Woodbridge 175). Repelled by its "I-I-I" refrain, *American Hebrew* dubbed it "an orgy of egotism" (Jacobs). On the other hand, in more recent years, feminist critics such as Mary V. Dearborn, Betty Bergland, and Helen Schwartz have emphasized Antin's involuntary complicity in the de-individualization and de-ethnicization of her Americanized heroine and, indirectly, of the Eastern European immigrant.

However, it is precisely at this disjunctive confluence of representativeness and “extreme individuality,” I argue, that *The Promised Land* allows its subversive vein to become transparent. In claiming representativeness, Antin assumes a double responsibility: that of transposing her own experiences on the people for whom she speaks, which involves a process of translating backwards, from her own exemplarity to a source narrative that is by nature partially untranslatable, as well as that of adjusting the particulars of her own story to encompass the realities of those whose lives she translates into the language of the New World. In a letter to Ellery Sedwick, the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, in which a serialized version was published in 1911, she writes that the book is less “[her] possession than a solemn trust” for which she has to account carefully (*Selected* 54). The narrator urges readers to square their socially enforced sentiments about immigrants with the experiences mediated by the text of *The Promised Land*. Her story compels because it both meets and surprises, in just the right dosage, the expectations of her contemporary audience. Its details, confessed doubts, and tentative gestures establish verisimilitude and authenticity, while its impeccable command of English and self-assured tone suggest the presence of a reliable native-informant. Not only did “[a]ll the processes of uprooting, transportation, replanting, acclimatization, and development [take] place in [her] own soul” (3) but, an offspring of the Middle Ages, she has become a product of the twentieth century, “thrilling with [her] contemporaries’ latest thoughts” (3), as she intends “to prove” (3). Nowhere does the narrator describe herself more clearly as translator-mediator but also as self-translated text.

As interpreter servicing the New World, Antin can and does manipulate the representation of herself and the Old World according to the norms of the target culture. As a translator of the Old World, which itself functions here as palimpsestic layer resembling an original text, she acts as a mediator and produces important knowledge for the American readers. Since most of her American contemporaries tend to fear and distrust this source text, her job is to render it intelligible. She therefore voices the difficulties of her performance only to the extent to which such revelations can enhance the merit of having overcome any odds. Her flawless use of domesticating linguistic translation renders the text almost seamless, a fact that serves her goal, since it eliminates the opportunities for interruption and questioning.

Following the processes of being uprooted, transported, and replanted (3)—a description of the emigration/immigration trajectory uncannily similar to Walter Benjamin's view of translation —Antin undergoes processes of “acclimatization and development” (3) that shape the ways in which she will represent herself in American language and culture. Attuned to the dangers of being misread and misinterpreted, she makes sure to enter the autobiographical space well versed in the American idiom and in the smooth assimilationist rhetoric of her American compatriots. Speaking the language of your interlocutor, she knows too well, secures you a firm footing and ups the chances of winning an argument.

However, despite its persuasive rhetoric, Antin's work failed in its scope of lobbying for open immigration<sup>120</sup> and for making a case for the Eastern European

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120 Antin's almost complete social and literary withdrawal in the 20's may have been at least partly informed by her dismay and frustration.

immigrant in particular. Moreover, a simple glance at the titles under which *The Promised Land* was reviewed prior to and then during the Cold War suggests that, if anything, these concerns fell out of the critics' focus after the 1940's. While critical commentaries from 1912 to the 1920's focus on Mary Antin as immigrant, the post-World War II critiques discuss her work almost exclusively in conjunction with various Jewish issues.<sup>121</sup>

On one hand, the shift encapsulates the story of the "taming" of *The Promised Land*. Initially a political, change-instigating text that employs assimilationist rhetoric to stake a claim for the immigrant in America, it becomes, in the hands of later literary criticism, a depoliticized ethnic text whose significance resides mostly in its potential to account for and illustrate America's cultural diversity. On the other hand, this epistemological and hermeneutic shift reflects contextual developments in American politics, as sketched out in Chapter I. More specifically, the literary and historical trajectory of Antin's text throughout the twentieth century parallels and mirrors much of America's attitude toward Eastern Europe: its initial sociological and economic interests and concerns, its increasing reticence and ensuing silence, and its tensioned relationship during the Cold War.

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121 1912-1920s titles: "How One Immigrant Girl Discovered America" (*Dial*, 1912), "A Russian Immigrant's Story" (*The Public*, 1912), "Keeping the Promise of the Promised Land" (*Survey*, 1913), "How Shall We Look at the Immigrant?" (*Christian Work*, 1912), "Mary Antin and Her Tale of an Immigrant" (*New York Sun*, 1912), "The Rise of an Immigrant" (*New York Post* 1912), *Our Foreign-Born Citizens: What They Have Done for America* (Annie E.S. Beard, 1922); post-World War II articles and books that include analyses of *The Promised Land*: "The Jewish Writer in America: Assimilation and the Crisis of Identity" (Allen Guttman, 1971), "The New Man and the Mediator: (Non-) Remembrance in Jewish-American Immigrant Narrative" (Gert Buelens, 1994), "Mary Antin's *The Promised Land*: The Jewish Origins of the American Self" (Michael Kramer, 1994); "In(ter)dependent Selves: Mary Antin, Elizabeth Stern, and Jewish Immigrant Women's Autobiography" (Wendy Ziegler, 1999).

In the absence of new, post-World War II Eastern European immigrant texts that would have drawn the attention of the newly formed academic institutions of Ethnic Studies, Antin's autobiography continued to enjoy a certain amount of attention, especially in the late 1970s to early 1990s. Transposed over the opaque and homogeneous space that came to be known at this time as the Eastern Bloc, the "transparent" narrative of *The Promised Land* created the comfortable illusion that this space was somewhat knowable and accessible. Woodbridge's metaphor of the "middle ages" was superimposed, at this time, with the metaphor of the "red scare," deeming the space behind the Iron Curtain as backward and potentially even more dangerous than America had fathomed it half a century earlier. Unwittingly, Antin's narrator became a native informant whose account of the Old World was used to freeze Eastern Europe in an anachronic historicity.

Read as a well-wrought proselytizing of unconditional acculturation and effacement of ethnic particularism, *The Promised Land* may be justly accused of having forfeited the East-European immigrant's chances of being considered a serious candidate in the context of the 80's resuscitation of interdisciplinary scholarship and recontextualization of gender and ethnicity. Thus, Dearborn charges the narrator with having "thoroughly internalized the dominant culture's vision of the ethnic and the foreign" and the book with "stagger[ing] under the weight of gratitude" (34). Helen J. Schwartz regrets that Antin "fails to acknowledge or analyze adequately the problems of marginality evidenced in her autobiography" (61). Joyce Antler decries the fact that Antin ignores the economic forces that exploit the immigrant, and sees her as nothing more than a narcissistic apostle of Americanization (25).

On the other and, *The Promised Land's* exemplary articulation has inspired critics to essentialize the immigrant condition. Thus, Albert E. Stone writes in 1981 that "*The Promised Land* dramatizes the historical experience of Americanization in frankly mythic terms," and that Antin "represents herself as the prototypical immigrant transformed into a new self" ("Introduction" 4). After remarking upon Antin's lack of "incisive social criticism," Schwartz praises her for "provid[ing] a sensitive and idealistic chronicle of immigrant experience in the early twentieth century" (61-62). James Craig Holte concludes that "Mary Antin provides an example of Americanization at its best," and Mary V. Dearborn recognizes in *The Promised Land* "an immigrant classic" (10).

Such essentializing readings assume an understanding of "experience" that is limited to Raymond Williams's definition of it as knowledge or a particular kind of consciousness gathered from past events (126). Unfortunately, such conceptualizations, as Joan W. Scott points out,

preclude inquiry into processes of subject construction; and they avoid examining the relationship between discourse, cognition, and reality, the relevance of the position or situatedness of subjects to the knowledge they produce, and the effects of difference on knowledge.  
(28)

Stone Mediatore (drawing on Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty) further argues that critics and theorists who identify experiences with a particular group risk naturalizing exclusionary definitions of that group (116-34). In Antin's case, readings of her "autobiography" have managed exactly that—the

naturalization of the category of the Eastern European Jewish immigrant. In my reconceptualization of Antin's autobiography as a palimpsestic translation, I will observe Scott's advice for a historicizing of experience and of the subjects it produces. Antin's writings, I further insist, collaborate with the reader in "mak[ing] visible the assignment of subject-positions" (Spivak, *Other Worlds* 241). As a narrative of experience functioning simultaneously as original and translation, *The Promised Land* will therefore be regarded "at once always already an interpretation and in need of interpretation," a space "always contested, always therefore political" (Scott 37).

Though much more attuned to the unexplored aspects of *The Promised Land*, recent critics have continued for the most part to focus on the book's assimilation of the dominant discourses, its internalization of nationalistic rhetoric, and its abrasive genuflecting at the altar of the American national narrative. In the 1980's and 1990's, a few scholars (such as Dearborn, Bergland, Sollors, Aránzazu Usandizaga, and Magdalena Zaborowska) undertook reevaluations that drew attention to the subversive underpinnings of Antin's assimilationist rhetoric. Unfortunately, however, except for Zaborowska, feminist critics condemning Antin's decision to exclude from her autobiography topics such as romantic love, motherhood, and marriage have failed to fully consider Antin's decision in the context of her historical circumstances and in view of her self-assigned role of cultural translator and spokesperson for the immigrant cause. Generally, recent critics have not been particularly forceful in examining the socio-political issues with which Antin invested her narrative, and have shown even less interest in addressing the relationship between Antin's

historical context and the cultural and linguistic translating strategies she employs in *The Promised Land* and *They Who Knock*. In fact, most critics examine Antin's work without even acknowledging that its English is not that of a native speaker, implicitly suggesting that this factual detail is too self-evident and inconsequential to be noteworthy. My approach insists on raising and sustaining this awareness. Antin's choice of writing in English, her diction, and her efforts to write off the distinction between native English and English-as-a-second language shape not only the formal qualities of *The Promised Land*, as reflected in the assimilationist rhetoric, declamatory tone, and tightly wrought structure, but also the ways in which Antin self-translates herself, linguistically, semantically, and culturally, as immigrant and American-in-the-making.

Antin's effusive diction, exaggerated optimism, and unconditional celebration of America recur with such sustained frequency that after a while they cannot but strike as slightly disingenuous. This deliberate amplification of domesticating strategies demands a foreignizing reading, a reading that mistrusts and questions fluency. I will substantiate this argument through an assortment of textual and conjectural analysis, as well as contextualized readings that reference *They Who Knock*, Antin's correspondence, and other related writings. Together with the manuscript and the published version of Antin's autobiography, these other materials form a palimpsestic narrative that comprises the "definitive" version of *The Promised Land* but also changes the way we read it. It is through this palimpsestic approach that we can access some of the translational processes involved in the production of *The Promised Land* and attempt a partial decomposition and, when possible,

recuperation of its overwritten<sup>122</sup> layers. My examination, therefore, hopes to broaden the context within which Antin and her work have been generally placed, and to propose a model of reading that accounts for Antin's use of domesticating strategies and simultaneously underscores these strategies' foreignizing potential. My contextualized reading suggests that Antin's immigrant narrative makes apparent an oppositional consciousness that works toward destabilizing the essentializable truths that it appears to formulate. A far more consciously alert and savvy narrator than she has been granted, Antin has planted her immigrant narrative with clues waiting to be examined. They point to the processes by which identities are ascribed, resisted, or embraced, and whose success depends, according to Spivak, precisely on their [the processes'] invisibility (*Critique* 241).

Antin's strategies should therefore be read in this necessarily obscuring light. She may point to, but may not spell out, the encoding to which she has subjected her writing and the needs that have made such encoding necessarily invisible. These encodings provide clues to what has been left untranslated, what has been mistranslated or partially translated, and what unearthing the native, non-American origins of various autobiographical utterances may entail.

Probably one of the most telling details in this respect concerns Antin's first book-length publication, *From Plotzk to Boston* (1989). Written originally in Yiddish and as a series of letters the thirteen-year-old Antin composed and mailed to her Uncle Berl in 1894, the year the family traveled to America, the book in its present form was first published in 1899, with the help of Philip Cowen, then editor of

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122 The word "overwritten" means to suggest both the overly polished and decorative aspects of Antin's work, as well as its veiled, "written over," or deleted layers.

*American Hebrew*. The most recent edition (1985) contains a new introduction by Pamela S. Nadell, Israel Zangwill's "Forward" to the first edition, and Mary Antin's prefaces to the first and second editions. Zangwill's praise of Antin's "capacity to handle English" ("Forward" 8) and Antin's acknowledgement of Mary S. Dillingham, without whose prodding "the little sketch would never have been translated into English" (16) intimate that the translation of the letters that became the text of *From Plotzk to Boston* belongs to Mary Antin. In *The Promised Land*, the narrator declares she translated the letters as a result of her father's "teasing" and "for the benefit of a friend who did not speak Yiddish" (134), then adds, rather confusingly, "for the benefit of the present narrative, which was not thought of thirteen years ago"(134). In his introduction to *The Promised Land*, Sollors suggests that Antin translated and "adapted" ("Introduction," xix) the letters with the help of Rabbi Solomon Schindler ("Introduction," xix). In any case, neither Nadell nor any other critics have identified the translator for sure, shown interest in the text as translation, or even acknowledged the need to do either. Antin's own reaction seems to undercut any desire to pursue such interests. She destroyed her "smelly" letters when the English version was published, finding her "chief satisfaction in tearing up the oil-stained (Yiddish) original, *a sheet at a time* (italics mine)" (qtd. in Sollors, "Introduction," xxii).<sup>123</sup> It would be hard not to read Antin's gesture in symbolic terms, as performance meant to erase the original against which and through which the translation achieves validation. The perverse pleasure evoked by the adverbial phrase "a sheet at a time,"

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123 A copy of the letters, which she obtained from her uncle Bern upon her visit to Vilna, in 1910, is archived at the Boston Public Library (Sollors, "Introduction" xxii).

however, appears oddly staged, a triumph made less convincing by its insistence on being noted, on being seen as performance.

A similar effect is achieved in the pages of *The Promised Land*, where the narrator professes to be embarrassed by her “childish manuscript” and “grateful at last for the calamity of the overturned lamp [which damaged the original letters]” (134), though she then goes on to excerpt extensively from this first book, often without any qualifying commentary. The chapter titled “Exodus” consists largely of transplanted passages from the translated *From Polotzk to Boston*. “Oh, what solemn thoughts I had! How deeply I felt the greatness, the power of the scene!” sets off the last excerpted passage, whose every word exhales excitement and awe. Its last paragraph, whose beginning reads, “I would imagine myself all alone on the ocean, and Robinson Crusoe was very real to me” (142) segues right into the last sentence of the chapter, “And so suffering, fearing, brooding, rejoicing, we crept nearer and nearer to the coveted shore, until, on a glorious May morning, six weeks after our departure from Polotzk, our eyes beheld the Promised Land, and my father received us in his arms” (142). Sentences translated from Yiddish and sentences conceived directly in English are seamlessly stitched together to reconstitute the dramatic effect of this mythic moment of deliverance. However, a comparative examination of the “Crusoe” passage, as it first appears in *From Plotzk*, and is then reproduced in *The Promised Land*, reveals that the autobiography has been “spared” a middle paragraph that undercuts the exaggerated euphoria and the sanguine tone:

I thought of tempests and shipwrecks, of lives lost, treasures destroyed, and all the tales I had heard of the misfortunes at sea, and

knew I had never before had such a clear idea of them. *I tried to realize that I saw only a part of an immense whole* (italics mine), and then my feelings were terrible in their forces. I was afraid of thinking then, but I could not stop it. My mind would go on working, till I was overcome by the strength and power that was greater than myself. What I did at such times I do not know. I must have been dazed. (70-71)

The passage disappears during the transfer from the translated, and therefore the already once-removed space of *From Plotzk* to the Americanization space of *The Promised Land*. The brief admittance of “tempests, shipwrecks,” “lives lost,” and “treasured destroyed” wills itself into silence as the Exodus account seeks a fitting place in the American narrative. The epiphanic moment that makes Antin aware of the incomplete and deceitful nature of an account which would leave unacknowledged its history of loss brings the epistolary narrative to a momentary standstill. Its absence from the text of *The Promised Land* guises the rupture, but also functions as an oblique indictment of the domesticating powers of the immigrant autobiographical space.

**“America is no Polotzk”<sup>124</sup>: Autobiographical<sup>125</sup> articulations in translation**

In a chapter titled, suggestively, “I Remember,”<sup>126</sup> the narrator confesses that the deep-red dahlias on which she constructed the reality of her grandfather’s garden are not dahlias at all, but poppies. However, she concludes,

Indeed, I must insist on my dahlias, if I am to preserve the garden at all. I have so long believed in them, that if I try to see poppies in those red masses over the wall, the whole garden crumbles away, and leaves me a gray blank. I have nothing against poppies. It is only that my illusion is more real to me than reality. (66)

This confession draws attention not only to the negotiable nature of identity, but also to the discursive nature of the process and its interconnectedness with the subject’s positioning within various systems of referentiality—for example, the garden, grandfather’s home, Polotzk, The Pale, Russia, America, but also the real and the imaginary, original language and translation. The construction of subjectivity engages both memory and language, and the narrator’s misremembering of her past

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124 The sentence is repeated at least three times in *The Promised Land*, on pages 154, 196, 213.

125 I have considered terms such as “auto//biography” (Liz Stanley and Pauline Polkey), “autobiographics” (Leigh Gilmore), “autography” (Jeanne Perrault and H. Porter Abbot), “autogynography” (Shari Benstock and Donna C. Stanton), “self-biography” (Felicity Nussbaum), “authobiography” (Donna Perreault), “meta-biographics,” and “autonarrative,” among others, but ultimately dismissed as not sufficiently adequate. To a large extent, Antin’s text represents inconclusive negotiation of many of these terms.

126 This chapter, the third one in the manuscript, became the fifth in the published version. As the narrator warns at the end of chapter four, the process of “remembering” starts to undergo an important shift, recollections henceforth being sieved through the narrator’s subjectivity alone, without the contribution of family and acquaintances, as in the previous chapters.

produces a version of reality that has been fixed by translation and can no longer be de-translated. Once translated into dahlias, poppies cannot translate back into poppies. Antin enlists her adoptive English in the creation of an “illusion” that can overwrite but at the same time preserve the importance of the original, thus making dahlias not so much a mistranslation but a way of eluding translation. The poppies of her grandfather’s house do not re-emerge as poppies because their connotations cannot be carried over into the American language and American landscape. The narrator must insist on dahlias if she is “to preserve the garden at all” (66) not only because under the transformative powers of memory the dahlias have already displaced the poppies, as a first reading suggests. She must do so also out of faithfulness to the original / the garden itself, which would lose its personal connotations and history in translation. This passage is therefore crucial to an understanding of Antin’s strategies of cultural and linguistic translation. Beneath the childish, almost flip tone there lies the grave voice of the translator who admits to the impossibility of completing the task of re-producing her past into a new language, but gives a taste of the original. The reality of her grandfather’s house that is also her birthplace is embedded in a palimpsestic layer made partially accessible only through transformative, “free” translation.

Antin concludes the passage in typical extrapolative fashion, “And so do we often build our world on an error, and cry out that the universe is falling to pieces, if any one but lift a finger to replace the error by truth” (66). With usual irony, she cautions against the pitfalls of any interpreting experience, intimating that her own story may well be built on error, or illusion. On a few occasions, she suggests that the

error maybe one of omission and therefore of truncated information. “There are things that impel me to write my childhood history which may not appear” (Ms. 2) begins a passage that has been paper veiled in the manuscript.<sup>127</sup> It then continues with a sentence that, though extant in the manuscript, is absent in print: “But I cannot forgo the historian’s privilege of giving his own interpretation of this work” (Ms. 2). The historian may refer both to the reader-as-historian but also to Antin herself, as the narrator’s self-description as “conscientious historian” (66) suggests. This privileging of a historian’s point of view designates the immigrant autobiography as a public, de-personalized space conceived in anticipation of the future.<sup>128</sup> Antin seems convinced that the ways in which she translates herself as Eastern European Jewish immigrant and American-in-the-making will inform the historical narrative of immigration and influence the fate of later immigrants.

It does not surprise, therefore, that as both commissioned (by Josephine Lazarus, Antin’s husband, and other mentors) and authorized autobiography (“sanctioned” by Roosevelt and well-established literary “authorities” such as Israel Zangwill, Ellery Sedgwick, Charles Hurd, and Alonzo Rothchild), *The Promised Land* embraces the genre’s inner premises and conventions at the same time that it questions them. Antin’s immigrant status preconditions her admission into the writers’ guild, ascribing autobiography as the only publicly “authorized” subgenre through which one could seek voice legitimization. As Antin’s epistolary writing and

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127 A piece of paper has been pasted, literally, over the rest of the passage. The notion of palimpsestic writing gains physical coordinates in this and other similar instances in *The Promised Land*.

128 Even her first composition, titled “Snow” in the autobiography, appears in manuscript as “The History of a Snow-crystal” (Sollors, “Explanatory Notes” 303).

the 1910 manuscript of *The Promised Land* often suggest, Antin is aware of the large degree to which, as an immigrant writer, she is socially and politically conscripted to adopt the autobiographical form, and of the degree to which this position is locked in marginality. Her concern with the “penalties of premature autobiography” that bookends the manuscript version (Ms. 3; Ms 413), however, has been removed from the printed version, to allow the narrative its prerequisite seamless. “Unless you soon discover the value of this history, derived from one or the other of the conditions recognized as justifying premature autobiographies, you cannot read very far,” (Ms. 3), the narrator warns, adding, “But even at the risk of influencing your judgment [paper pasted over] by the suggestion, I want to state the *raison d’être* of this narrative as I see it” (Ms. 3). The semi-transparent paper scrap that conceals the answer to this promise flaunts the need for self-censorship. What lies underneath has already been crossed out with a solid X forbidding entrance to the original text. In the appendix to *The Promised Land* she will declare, once again, that the autobiographical impulse was “born, to be sure, of certain outer circumstances” (295), but provide no further clarification. One concealment draws attention to the next, making the presence of such absences tantalizing. The traces themselves need suffice, Antin intimates, allowing always just enough room for conjecture and doubt. “A proper autobiography is a death-bed confession” (2)<sup>129</sup> the narrative proceeds right after we have been denied access to the explanation regarding the autobiography’s *raison d’être*, and it would be hard not to read into it. Its proximity to the withholding

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129 This sentence has been preserved in the published version, but the context of its manuscript appearance accentuates its significance.

feeds into the speculation that knowing what Antin was so adamant about not confessing or un-writing may have occasioned important revelations. Unlike the narrator's earlier counsel that we read the narrative as recording the birth and maturing of only one of Antin's many selves, this declaration cuts to the bone, firm and resolute: To regard *The Promised Land*, or any other such "premature" confession, as truthful autobiography would be imprudent, if not truly unwise.

At the same time, Antin uses the genre of immigrant autobiography to problematize the concept of immigrant writer as domesticating translator. To this end, she uses the points where the American autobiography and the immigrant autobiography intersect as ports of entrance into a rhetorical space in which the relationship between the immigrant and the national identity could be reconfigured, and the notion of immigrant writer as ethnobiographer-translator deconstructed. More than a writer, Antin wants to become an *American* writer—a writer whose immigrant voice constitutes one aspect of Americanness, not a paradigm against which the latter seeks definition, and whose English is that of a native speaker, not the accent-pocked English of her co-immigrants. To this purpose, she takes command of the English language, juxtaposes her personal (immigrant) history with the "Washington narrative," and strives to emulate Benjamin Franklin's autobiography in its emphasis on self-reliance and progressive development through self-discipline and abnegation. Like Franklin, she focuses on self-education, and on the remaking of oneself into an emblematic figure—a process that she regards as fundamentally American.

At the time Antin writes, the immigrant autobiography offers native-born Americans a site in which to vicariously experience, but also scrutinize and control,

the immigrant's otherness. The immigrant writer's life matters insofar as it teaches exotic or simply hidden histories and traditions and accompanies them with memorable details and images; stories of hardship, unnecessary suffering, and uprootedness are expected, for they invite comparisons that incite in the native reader both sympathy and self-gratification. Woodbridge, Antin's contemporary, corroborates this idea when she remarks that *The Promised Land* is an important reading for the student of social change and for the "lover of the curious and the picturesque" (176). On the other hand, it is the representation of this otherness as translatable that ultimately qualifies it as a legitimate subgenre.<sup>130</sup> At the most immediate level, Antin's *The Promised Land* brings these two dictates together perfectly. While foreign enough in its account to interest the native ear and to legitimize the genre of immigrant autobiography, its foreignness is non-threatening and dispensable.

Antin's decision to interlace the narrative with Yiddish, Hebrew, and Russian terms and to appendix *The Promised Land* with a glossary that provides translations, semantic clarifications, and a key to pronunciation signals a serious, if not always apparent, concern with matters of translation and translatability. Unlike Hoffman, whom historical circumstances allowed, if not encouraged, to discuss matters of inter-linguistic and inter-cultural translation, Antin cannot afford to elaborate on them. In a text that generally settles for nothing less than unaccented, all-American clarity of expression, these instances of multilingualism stand out, especially when not

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<sup>130</sup> Antin's acquiescent nature did not always succeed in comforting the nativist. Barrett Wendell complains in a letter that the Russian Jewish immigrant Antin "has developed an irritating habit of describing herself and her people as Americans" (qtd. in Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity* 88).

accompanied by translation. At times, the translation is, however, incorporated within the body of the narrative, as when the narrator explains the meaning of *rebbetzin* / female teacher (29), *lamden* / scholar (28), '*S' gehert a kasse?* / Ever hear such a question? (92), or *wohl gelehrent* / well educated (90). In another instance, the narrator mentions one of her nicknames—"Zukrochene Flum" (55)—only to declare that she is not going to translate it since "it is uncomplimentary" (55).

Antin's translating strategy, which straddles the foreignizing and the domesticating without adhering fully to either, appears closely connected to Antin's cultural self-consciousness about the place and function of her work. In her implicit insistence that these Hebrew, Yiddish, or Russian words be read as part of the American speech, Antin reiterates her view of an America that embraces the immigrant, and of an American narrative that seeks not only to incorporate the immigrant one but let itself be transformed by it. When followed by their translation, the foreign words function as mediating agents between the narrator's native tongues and cultures, and her adopted ones. They give a taste of difference but in the same breath counter whatever anxiety such difference might produce by providing an English equivalent or a semantic clarification.

However, if Antin's purpose is, above all, to instruct her American fellows about language difference and language commonality and to legitimate herself as a "translator of cultures" ("Introduction" xxi) as Sollors believes, her performance suffers from carelessness and inconsistency. Her treatment of foreign words and her use of translation reveal an unsettling arbitrariness. The "Glossary" lists some of the proper names that appear in the book but not others, explains words such as "wedding

canopy,” “foreign passport,” and “icon” (which she also explains on page 8), but not “skull-cap” or “Pale,” and it includes some of the words that have been already translated or defined in the text. On the other hand, as Antin’s correspondence (dated June 6 and July 5, 1911) with her editor Ellery Sedgwick clearly demonstrates, she is adamant about preserving as many foreign words as possible. Advised to eliminate “the Russian terms”<sup>131</sup> from her story “Malinke’s Atonement” (Sedgwick to Antin, June 6, 1911), Antin compromises in the same way she will in *The Promised Land*, namely by cutting down on the number and by providing some parenthetical translations for others.

What may appear as negligence on Antin’s part may be in fact a strategy of drawing attention to the possibilities and impossibilities of foreign articulation and multilingualism. As Antin’s manuscript clearly demonstrates, she was extremely meticulous in crafting her writing, a fact that transpires in her correspondence with her editor as well. The idiosyncratic use of translation may also reflect Antin’s own complicated attitude toward her native and adopted languages. While she dutifully fulfills her role of interpreter of the Old Country’s life and culture, she cannot fashion herself as foreignizing translator and her autobiography as foreignizing translation without putting in jeopardy the project of Americanization. The price she pays for failing to inscribe foreignness and cultural intranslatability in the discourse of Americanization is also the price immigrants pay for divesting themselves of their ethnic and cultural specificity. The latter can no longer recover the loss, as the narrator suggests through the example of her mother and father, whose efforts to

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131 By “Russian terms” Sedgwick most probably meant Russian, Hebrew, and Yiddish.

retrace their steps back to their Old World faith and traditions are unsuccessful (195). As for herself, “whose life has borne witness, whose heart is heavy with revelations it has not made” (195), she no longer has the language that can articulate “the price” (195) of this loss. Her silence, however, speaks “for thousands; oh, for thousands!” (195).

Antin does seek a satisfactory position within available alternatives. As the presence of the occasional foreign words and of the glossary indicates, she does not erase all the traces of her Eastern European Jewish immigrant otherness from the dominant discourse, thus proposing a conceptualization of immigrant subjectivity that is at once contained within the national metanarrative and an extension of it. That at times the two overlap, making the same sampling of foreignness part of the autobiographical text *and* part of its extension, may be significant. The “Glossary” thus qualifies as the indispensable supplement with which Bhabha identifies minority discourse: it marks both lack and addition, and functions as a negating referent that destabilizes the master-discourse by antagonizing its implicit power to generalize and by contesting its genealogy of origins (155). At one level an example of domesticating translation, the “Glossary” also reads as an assertion of authority and a negotiation of foreignness. Antin integrates translation issues in ways that will appease the American readership and, she trusts, compel reappraisals of the immigrant’s linguistic and cultural contribution to the continuous transformation of the national narrative.

Antin’s framing of *The Promised Land* with an “Introduction,” a “Glossary,” and an “Appendix” should be read as an act of empowering self-mediation through

which she assumes the authority customarily assigned to male literary mentors and dominant culture “authenticators.”<sup>132</sup> Most importantly, however, in drawing attention to the necessity of supplementing the text of *The Promised Land* with amendments and explanations, Antin calls for a foreignizing methodology of reading that, unlike those endorsed by New Criticism, takes into consideration extraneous material and explores traces leading beneath and outside the text. Her use of self-mediating supplements subverts the seemingly all-domesticated narrative of *The Promised Land*.

Though less apparent, Antin’s work of mediation shapes the Russian section, where she acts as interpreter and lobbyist for the other Eastern European immigrants and as exemplary American-in-the-making. This first part of *The Promised Land* documents economic hardship, religious persecution, and the daily life of the Polotzk community and of her family in particular. The ethnic identity that emerges is primarily communal, and only adjacently individual. The stories concerning her grandparents and parents, her sister Fetchke, Uncle Solomon, Cousin Rachel, Aunt Hode, Henne Rösel, Leah the Short, and David the Substitute, among others,

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132 Both Jules Chametzky, in “Some Notes on Immigration, Ethnicity, Acculturation,” (*MELUS* 11. 1 ), and Mary Dearborn, in *Pocahontas’s Daughters. Gender and Ethnicity in American Culture* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986) have discussed the (sub-)genre of early twentieth century immigrant autobiography within the tradition of mediation, suggesting that literary sponsorship and mentorship, as well as authenticating devices such as prefaces and glossaries meant to translate and/or authorize a text for the dominant culture, ultimately obstruct the text, and threaten to transform it into an historical event. According to Dearborn, this is exactly what happened in Antin’s case (36-37) — an argument which the history of her critical reception seems unfortunately to corroborate, for more than anything else Antin has become a brief entry in literary histories. This is ironic in light of the narrator’s confession, in *The Promised Land*, that for years she harbored the secret desire to achieve enough posthumous fame to have her name in an encyclopedia (202). The narrator envisions her fame and future existence as indispensable to the continuum that defines the national narrative. To this purpose she even studies out the exact place in the encyclopedia where the name would belong (not far from Louisa M. Alcott’s, she hopes) and considers annexing a middle initial so the name would sound less “chopped off” (202-203).

interweave to construct an ethnic narrative whose persuasiveness lies within the sweeping power of its polyphonic orchestration, and whose coherence draws on the relational nature of its composite vignettes. At the same time, in making *her* story *their* story, Antin acknowledges the underpinning assumption of any autobiographical project—the belief in the emblematic particularity of one’s life. “My life has been unusual, but by no means unique. And this is the very core of the matter. It is because I understand my history, in its larger outlines, to be typical of many, that I consider it worth recording” (3). At the same time, the “many” of Antin’s past are absorbed into the overbearing presence of the present “I” and ascribed simultaneous agency. What emerges is a text that constantly draws attention to the conceptual and practical ramifications of juxtaposing the national discourse with the minority discourse. Through her use of typology, for instance, Antin insists that since each immigrant is a new Pilgrim and each Pilgrim a kin to the Founding Fathers, otherness is always located within the American national identity. Unfortunately, this inherent otherness gets eliminated in the process of translating the national narrative, whose foreign origins are often concealed by the metaphor of the Virgin Land and whose traces of foreignness are subsumed to notions of “diversity” and absorbed into the controlling metaphors of the melting pot, salad bowl, or mosaic.

In the recounting of the immigrant’s pre-emigration life in the Old World, Antin recreates this discursive space of difference as a source text that will be abandoned, or rather overwritten in the process of the immigrant’s reinvention in the English language. This “original text” captures cultural particularities that will be relinquished, suppressed, or lost in the process of Americanization, but which survive

as a palimpsestic layer. Denied power of referentiality, this space of difference interjects only rarely the story of Americanization, usually only to remind that “America is no Polotzk” (154, 196, 213), and to note the absence of a meaningful equivalency between the two spaces. When her educated father ends up selling refreshments on Crescent Beach, it does not even occur to young Antin “to compare his present occupation with the position for which he had been originally destined” (153), and when the Old World system of ethics embedded in religion loses its power of referentiality, the Antins watch the disintegration of their family home powerlessly (213). The “heart-sore” immigrant parent “forgets exile and homesickness and ridicule and loss and estrangement” (213) and, in order to see his/her children “moving as Americans among Americans” (213), lets them reinvent themselves into English and into concepts of Americanness that remain incomprehensible to him/her because they do not translate back into familiar linguistic and cultural systems of reference.

Antin is well aware that her past and present require different kinds of translation and that her choice of material to be translated needs careful selection. It is interesting, in this regard, that incidents of law breaking, faith breaking, bribery, and mischievousness permeate the Pale of Settlement section, but are conspicuously absent from the American section. In the 1910 manuscript of *The Promised Land*, for instance, the first “American” chapter, “The Promised Land,” starts with an autobiographical detail that, most significantly, has been (self)-edited out of the printed version: the father forges Antin’s age, making her two years younger, so she could benefit from two extra years of education. Antin will recycle this revelation that

would have “tainted” the exemplarity of her Americanization story in her last work of fiction, the story “The Lie” (1913).

Then, in the chapter titled, suggestively, “The Tree of Knowledge,” the narrator recounts her “lapses from righteousness,” and the “artful manner[s]” and “trick[s] or sly speech” (107) by which she escaped punishment. In another instance, when she does speak the truth, she loses a customer.<sup>133</sup> Her stealing of sugar from the Chinese tea-box, the carrying of a handkerchief beyond the house-limits on Sabbath, and her general predilection for hyperbole add to the chain of transgressive stories that involve various members of the community, including her father. The “American” section of the book, on the other hand, allows no room for deception, complicity, and lying. Instead, laws, principles, morals, and conduct are constantly invoked to assist the invention of the American self.

The coexistence of these somewhat dramatic opposites in the text of *The Promised Land* plays a strategic part in the semantic economy of the text and in the narrative progress of the autobiographical story. They draw attention to the incompatibility of the two systems of reference between which the translation takes place. Instrumental in ensuring survival and fostering individualism within the confinements of the Pale (“We starving captives of the Pale,” the narrator recalls, “we did as do the hungry brutes” [21]), transgression and deception lose their justification when transplanted to the democratic landscape of America. Experienced in Yiddish,

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<sup>133</sup> When the customer complains, on one occasion, of the poor quality of the tea she has just been delivered, the young Mary replies, “[T]his is the tea my mother always sends you. There is no worse tea” (117).

Russian, and Hebrew, they find only a linguistic equivalent in the English of the New World.

At the same time, and perhaps most importantly, these offenses become negative denominators in contrast to which identifications with the American national identity are constructed. The narrator's confession that the current "honest first person...*was* something of a fraud," make her "conversion to veracity" (108) only so much more powerful and irresistible. This promise of transformation establishes one of the essential premises of *The Promised Land*: this is the story of "a consciousness...expanded," and "of a self-consciousness intensified" (101), so trial and error are expected to assist the narrator in her transformations. As Craig Holte remarks, the "conversion" narrative is intrinsically connected to the genre of immigrant autobiography (28-31), and so Antin appears to follow diligently the prescription once again.<sup>134</sup> As the "Appendix" points out, the first four chapters of the Russian section were the only ones "done consciously" and "worked over" (298), "with a sense that such and such matters ought to be included" (296)—a detail that underscores the significance Antin assigned to the persuasive capabilities of her Russian story and reveals the irony of Woodbridge's view of it as more authentic and organic than the American story (175-76).

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<sup>134</sup> However, as the same critic aptly points out, she challenges its "rags-to-riches" pattern by focusing on the spiritual and intellectual, rather than materialistic, developments of its subject. Moreover, as Zaborowska notes, Antin undermines the conventions of the conversion narrative by refusing to conclude her narrator's personal transformations with the expected happy ending. She dissociates herself from her earlier incarnation, the critic suggests, not because she is completely "made over," as the opening sentence of the book claims, but because, unhappy with the script she has had to follow, she decides to resist its prescribed ending (64).

Moreover, as the following discussions will demonstrate, a number of episodes in the American section signal the lingering presence of the “dual conscience” that the narrator confesses to have developed as a Jew in the Pale, where it “allowed [her] to do to the Gentile what he would call a sin against a fellow Jew” (23), but which she claims to have formally repudiated in the process of reinventing herself as an American. This dual-conscience translates into double consciousness as Antin strives in the New World to match self-perception with self and with the recognition of that self by others.

## **Translating the “I”: Dreaming in private English, de-translating national statistics**

As already suggested, for Antin an “illusion” holds its own version of reality, and the relationship between the two is one of reversed translation, from “illusion” as projection or imaginatively translated reality back to actual reality. In other words, it is her dream of America and her vision of what an American should be that she brings to bear upon the realities of America, and not the other way around. What the immigrant child thinks and feels in America “is a reflection of the hopes, desires, and purposes of the parents who brought him overseas” (157). The young Antin crosses the Atlantic armed with a vision of America that has been already translated into the language of personal and communal aspirations. This vision she will follow, in her own words, with “utmost assiduity” (156), till she should “dream [her] dreams in English phrases” (156). The determination is recounted retrospectively, after the narrator has come to pass “as an American among Americans” (156). What assists her in her passing is a perfect command of English, as suggested, a few pages later, by the chapter titled “Initiation” and devoted to Antin’s initiation and progress in the acquisition of English. “Eager to find out how the common world looked, smelled, and tasted in the strange speech” (163), she accelerates in her “lingual gymnastics” and soon comes to prove what a “Russian Jew can do with an adopted language” (166) by having one of her compositions published in the *Herald*.

An encomium on the English language interjects the account with the excuse that the narrator will “never have a better opportunity to make public declaration of [her] love for the English language” (164):

I am glad that American history runs, chapter for chapter, the way it does; for thus America came to be the country I love so dearly. *I am glad, most of all, that the Americans began by being Englishmen, for thus did I come to inherit this beautiful language in which I think* (italics mine). It seems to me that in any other language happiness is not so sweet, logic is not so clear. I am not sure that I could believe my neighbors as I do if I thought about them in un-English words. I could almost say that my conviction of immortality is bound up with the English of its promise. And as I am attached to my prejudices, I must love the English language! (164)

As her later work, *They Who Knock* clearly suggests, Antin's take on America's history is substantially more nuanced and critical than transpires in this passage. There she confronts America's Eurocentric configuration with its imperialist history. What interests here, however, is the incisive and crafty alignment of America's origins with English, and of the latter with her own linguistic and cultural location. English is presented not only as the language of her thinking but also as the ideal system of reference for the construction of Americanness. She is an American by virtue of her full belonging to the language in which the American narrative has been articulated from its inception. Being an American is inextricably connected to experiencing the English language and the cultural history of the English language as an American-born would. To become an American writer, she "must love the English language" (164) and weld her "conviction of immortality" to "the English of its promise" (164). This, I argue, is Antin's most persuasive justification for

domesticating translation, as well as her silent acknowledgment of duplicity with the hegemonic discourses that charge foreignness with un-Americanness.

The American classroom occasions important questions regarding the possibilities and limits of linguistic and cultural translation. In order to translate her Jewish Eastern European immigrant identity into the American narrative, the narrator faces the task of revisiting her history and her relationship to her place of emigration. As a Jew in the Russian Pale of Settlement, she suggests, she had felt fixed into an irrevocable translation of otherness. Ostracized and disenfranchised (“[W]e Jews in Polotzk had no national expectations” [179]), she came to dwell in a “dual conscience,” painfully aware of the social and psychological ramifications of her prescribed condition as “Wandering Jew” (3). The sound of the American anthem elicits revelatory self-interpellations: “Where had been my country until now? What flag had I loved? What heroes had I worshipped? The very names of these things had been unknown to me. Well I knew that Polotzk was not my country. It was *goluth*—exile” (178). The questions provoke a momentary crisis in the process of translating both nationhood and subjecthood. “Country,” “flag,” and “heroes” denote the signs under which the concept of nationhood is constituted. Not unlike statistics, which, according to Antin, “began with the symbol and stuck to the symbol” (73), these “signs” also draw attention to the act of symbolization through which the nation (as narration) constantly affirms and re-affirms its continuity. In proposing a definition of American identity positioned within similar coordinates (“country,” “flag,” “heroes”), they normalize the act of translation, dictating the terms in which the immigrant has to invent himself/herself in the new language and culture. Not surprisingly, when the

sixth-grader Antin sings the national anthem, her voice overpowers everyone else's, and when she hears a neighboring class rehearsing it, she is "faint with suppressed enthusiasm" (178). When asked to read aloud from the big, heavily-bookmarked volume (175) recounting the "inimitable" and "irreproachable" life (176) of George Washington, awe makes her voice shake and the book tremble in her hands (175). Such hypertrophied emotions and laudatory diatribes abound in her recounting of "the thrill and wonder" of becoming and being an American (175). When Mary stands up in school to sing "America," she "shout[s] the words with all [her] might" (177). "[I]n the garden of America" (278), hers is "the whole majestic past, and [hers] is the shining future" (286). When verbally humiliated and mocked while trying to make rent money by selling door-to-door subscriptions for the *Boston Searchlight*, she blames herself, and she does it with so much zeal that her self-deprecation necessarily arouses sympathy. While the narrator never qualifies her younger self's over-eagerness and unconditional belief in America as disingenuous, her choice of presenting young Mary in such exaggerated tones intrigues. This domesticating self-translation is too insistent in situating itself within assimilationist and nationalist rhetoric not to make us suspect it of anxiety about not being able to "pass." In other words, this English of unconditional exuberance translates the character's desires and yearning to feel at home in the English language and in the Promised Land, rather than the actual experience of inhabiting both or either one as real home.

At the same time, Antin may be suggesting that it is precisely through the welding of available rhetoric and imaginative invention that the immigrant can carve a place for self-translation. The narrator uses the language of American rhetoric with

the same self-assuredness and imaginative compulsion with which she had “translated” the Psalms and the Genesis in her childhood. In love with “the full, dense, solid sound” of Hebrew, she took her cues from its rhythms, a few translated words and images, and, drawing on her own imagination for details, stunned the “ignorant listeners” (92) with her performances. “[A]nd who can say that my visions were not as inspiring as David’s?” (92) she says of her “free” translations, whose faithfulness is to the spirit, rather than to the letter of the Hebrew text. Later, as she recounts reading her father’s letter, sent just as he is about to board the ship for the New World, she admits to infusing it with her own rhetoric, her own dream and translation of “America” (114).

The travails of trying to fully inhabit her new language are detailed in the episode describing the composition of a poem she writes for the occasion of the Washington celebration. While the English dictionary provides definitions for “lofty sentiments” and “abstract truths” (180), the absence of an equivalent experience in her Russian past makes it particularly difficult for young Antin to craft these new sentiments into inspired poetic form. The process was “really very *discomposing* (italics mine)” (179),<sup>135</sup> she confesses. “I *dug* the words out of my heart, *squeezed* the rhymes out of my brain, *forced* the missing syllables out of their hiding-places in the dictionary (all italics mine)” (179-80). The description captures the difficulties of trying to inhabit and manage a new language. Furthermore, the strenuous processes of

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135 In “discomposing” the Washington myth in the process of “composing” it, the narrator draws attention to the rhetorical fissures of the national narrative. This foreshadows the narrator’s dissenting posture years later when, perturbed by the incongruity between Washington myth and reality, she laughs at “the impossible meter, the grandiose phrases, the verbose repetitions” of her poem, and throws her only copy into the wastebasket (181).

“digging,” “squeezing,” and “forcing out” situate the act of translation in the realm of despair and necessity, and point to the unbridgeable gap between appropriated language and experienced language. Mary uses the English words “tyranny,” “freedom,” and “justice,” but their power of signification in English does not match their power of signification in her native tongues. In each language, a word such as “freedom” bespeaks its own history, and to recontextualize “freedom” in a poem dedicated to Washington requires more than linguistic equivalency. “May I never again know such travail of the spirit as I endured during the fevered days when I was engaged on the poem” [180]). To allow her heart to “proclaim itself to the world” (180), she has to wrestle with “the loftiest sentiments” and “the most abstract truths” (180). The language that describes the loss of the exilic condition and the reshaping of oneself into a *citizen* and a *patriot* conveys the laborious and to a certain extent dissonant nature of these processes. As Bhabha would argue, her desire to “imitate” language produces “one void in the articulation of the social space—making present the opacity of language, its untranslatable residue” (166).<sup>136</sup> Mary, however, seeks to conceal this void of articulation and the cultural residue it might reveal. Asked by her teacher how she could think of those [patriotic] words, she comments that obviously “none of them thought of the dictionary!” (183). She does not want people to whisper ““That’s Mary Antin. She had her name in the paper,”” but ““This is she who loves her country and worships George Washington”” (188). For the narrator of *The Promised Land*, the publication of the poem (at which the *Transcript*’s editors laugh

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136 A relevant example is found in Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep* (1934). At the end of the novel, language becomes the embodiment of the untranslatable residue of language, an outward manifestation of its opaque, excessive, disruptive qualities.

and which the *Herald's* editors grab far too quickly) represents her entrance into the privileged space of citizenship *and* Americanship, and a proof of the exemplarity of her self-translation. At the same time, the poem becomes a most essential self-pronouncement of authorship. It is as American writer, and not as translator, that she can now speak. Thus, writership and citizenship conflate to create a space that allows the narrator of *The Promised Land* to address her audiences with authority and entitlement.<sup>137</sup> A few years later, in the Boston Public Library she will take much pleasure in reminding herself that she is there, and has the right to be there, and feel at home there (266).

Though in many respects Antin's imagined America conforms to the one she encounters, in other respects it diverges from it. For the protagonist of *The Promised Land*, as for many other real or fictional Eastern European immigrants (such as Sara Smolinsky in Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers*, or, half a century later, Eva in Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*), education is closely interrelated with the process of individualization and with assisting the immigrant in becoming his/her "own person," as Yezierska's characters often put it. Unsurprisingly then, Antin's criticism of the teaching of geography, which "began with the symbol and stuck to the symbol," and consisted mostly of statistics (173), targets not only matters of methodology, but also the politics that shape it and its effects on the American-in-the-making: "The relation of physiography to human history—what might be called the *moral of geography*

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<sup>137</sup> It may be this notion of authorship/authority that Antin has in mind when she anticipates, in a letter to Zangwill (May 21, 1901): "It will not be very long before some of my stories will be published—not printed, but published (*italics mine*)" (Selected 34). Significantly, although From Plotzk to Boston has brought Antin positive attention, she refuses to market her subsequent work as "author of From Plotzk to Boston," as her husband and friends advise her. "I want to conquer the editor by my own merits, not by the ghost of my former artificially puffed-up notoriety," she tells Louis Lipsky (Selected 43).

(italics mine)—was not taught at all,” the narrator remarks, “or was touched upon in an unimpressive manner” (174). This, Antin suggests, runs against the very grain of America’s claim to individualism and particularized attention. Most importantly, it defines the narrow window through which America views its immigrants. In disregarding the immigrants’ relationship to their place of origin, for instance, America closes her eyes to the difficulties they may face when transplanting their lives and dreams onto new ground. However, to translate geography into mere place is to de-historicize and de-politicize the very concept of “Promised Land,” leaving unexamined its origins and vectors across centuries. In *They Who Knock*, Antin comes back to this observation to connect and discuss it in conjunction with, and as a criticism of, America’s imperialist projects. Moreover, this view on statistics invites an ironic re-reading of the narrator’s advice, in the last chapter of *The Promised Land*, that the reader seek for her “outward adventures” in “any volume of American statistics” (281), as well as of her introductory remark, “My life is a concrete illustration of a multitude of statistical facts” (2). Statistics, she will further argue in *They Who Knock*, do not index “the alien’s worth” (76), and their interpretation by fact-minded bureaucrats is “a matter of personal opinion” (75-76) that erases the substance of hundreds of thousands of lives and belittles the principles on which the American nation was founded.

As both books suggest, Antin sees America’s emphasis on statistics as playing a major role in the mercantilization of American idealism and in the construction of essentialist immigrant identities. As Antin intimates, immigrants are translated into numerical data that is then further translated into the language of the dominant culture

by “interpreters” who may have sufficient knowledge of the target culture, but who are for the most part ignorant of the source culture. This mechanical translation resembles a process of transliteration that fixes the original in a relative equivalency. By being already translated as countable bodies, as mere statistics, Eastern European immigrants are discouraged from translating themselves freely and imaginatively into the language of Americanness, being instead cast as Americans-in-the-making or unassimilatable ethnics. Antin therefore takes on the task of interrogating the dominant power’s use of statistics as a way to effect meaning and goes on to counter this practice by constantly complicating the concept of immigrant “I.” After she qualifies immigrant officials, schoolteachers, settlement workers, and other “unprejudiced and critical observers” (144) as “maiden aunts” to her “second infancy” (following her American re-birth), she continues: “Their statistics I might properly borrow to fill the gaps in my recollections, but I am prevented by my sense of harmony. The individual, we know, is a creature unknown to the statistician, whereas I undertook to give the personal view of everything. So I am bound to unravel, as well as I can, the tangle of events, outer and inner” (144).

The seamlessness of *The Promised Land*, deceiving as it may turn out to be under close reading, indicates that the recollection “gaps” (144) have been “managed” successfully, thus preventing the intervention of statistics. Unlike Eva Hoffman, who half a century later will claim such gaps and crevices as indicative of the impossibility of perfect self-translation, Antin needs to cover hers. She does so through excessive assimilationist rhetoric, perfect English, and careful selection and, when necessary, fictionalization, of the autobiographical material. The declared “sense of harmony”

reads as a euphemism for the narrator's determination to translate the processes of subject formation in a way that will cohere and convince.

In the "Appendix" to *The Promise Land*, the narrator disputes the possibility of such "sense of harmony":

If you enjoy remembering things, don't put them on paper...[W]hat will be left of your magic memories when you have caught them and put them on paper? Facts—dead facts that you can share with your neighbor...[D]o not go into the business of writing your life's story unless you are willing to exchange quivering butterflies for dried specimens (297-98).

The tone suggests a certain amount of resentment derived, perhaps, from the painful awareness that when entering the textual realm through an adopted language memories and subjectivity undergo an irreversible ossification. Although Antin ventures to register this sense of personal loss and self-betrayal, she remains undeterred from her project—perhaps because she knows that it is only within the confines of an "authorized" text and in America's official language that she can make a persuasive case for the immigrant.

She has already established in the first paragraph of the "Introduction" that the above-invoked "sense of harmony" is an act of necessity rather than truthfulness "I am absolutely other than the person whose story I have to tell," she starts. "I could speak in the third person and not feel that I was masquerading. I can analyze my subject, I can reveal everything, for *she*, and not I, is my real heroine" (1). A page

later, however, she claims the “I”’s life to be “illustrative of scores of unwritten lives” (2).

By turning the subject into an object of investigation, yet enlisting it under the signifier of the “I,” Antin proposes a double referent for her first-person narrative. Throughout the narrative, the “I” will split even further, calling into question the possibility of unifying author, narrator, and protagonist in a one story of transformation and Americanization. In doing so she exposes and confronts the conventions of the immigrant autobiography, which assume a close interrelation—ideally, a relation of interchangeability—between the three. Though author, narrator, and protagonist have the same place of departure, the same original “text” that belongs spatially, temporally, and culturally to the Old World/Pale of Settlement/shtetl of Polotzk, and linguistically and culturally to Russian/Yiddish/Hebrew, their transformations and self-translation in the contexts and language of America are not identical. Unfortunately, Antin only suggests the split, without further elaboration.

The trifurcation of the “I” becomes, however, an important means of salvaging the “I” from the dangers of being overwritten and/or turned into statistical body. According to Andrei Codrescu, the autobiography’s main role is that of subverting the biography written by the state:

The individual is someone with a recorded birth, marriage, school attendance, property deeds, employment record, and death certificate. The individual is the writing that defines him. It is not possible to be an individual without a biography. It is illegal to be an individual

without a biography. The state sees to it—through the recorded infrastructure-- that each individual has a unique biography. (*The Devil Never Sleeps* 135)

“The only way to subvert one’s official biography,” Codrescu suggests, “is to rewrite it” (136). *The Promised Land*’s autobiographical translations of the “I” overturn the translation proposed by the state and its literary accomplices.<sup>138</sup> Insofar the body itself is a “biography authored by the state” (*The Devil Never Sleeps* 137), as Codrescu argues, Antin’s ostentatious re-gendering of this body—whose corporeality itself she hardly ever records—further subverts the state’s attempt to translate it within prescribed systems of meaning.

The distance the narrator of the “Introduction” interjects between herself and the “I” under whose authority and from whose perspective the story is spun is not the distance that commonly governs autobiographies written in the third person—as this one purports to be (1). She needs the distance *not* so she could better “view the self under construction” (Codrescu, *An Involuntary Genius* 8), but in order to construe a *particular* self and then write it off. This particular self embodies the story of ideal Americanization and flawless translation. Conceived as a third-person character, this self is less vulnerable to essentializing, and may always assume fictional prerogatives and claim partial inaccessibility. This, in turn, allows Antin to distance herself from this self when the time comes—more specifically, when the translation into America’s assimilationist discourse has been completed. The “Introduction” records

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138 As a self-written biography, *The Promised Land* seeks to preempt biographers’ assigned or self-apportioned authority to read and interpret the other’s life.

this moment, framing the narrative with a sense of obligation and reluctance that run counter to its overall tone. The narrator confesses she will tell her tale “in order to get rid of it... and never hark back any more” (3). The narrative is conceived in anticipation of the moment when she can “write a bold ‘Finis’...and shut the book with a bang!” (3).

The narrator of the “Introduction,” however, is at best a mediator between the narrative “I” and the other “I”s who control and intercede in the translative acts through which the autobiographical narrative emerges. “I think I have thoroughly *assimilated my past* (italics mine)—I have done its bidding—I want now to be of today. It is painful to be consciously of two worlds” (3), the narrator affirms. This consciousness will nonetheless choose to dwell in the past for the next hundred and thirty-some pages. The writer Antin does not seem to share her narrator’s claim to “forgetfulness” either. While revising *The Promised Land*, she publishes another Polotzk story, “Malinke’s Atonement,” and before the latter is even out she sends Sedgwick another story, “The Amulet,” telling him that “[her] head is full of Polotzk” and asking him if he is willing to feed his audience more Polotzk (*Selected* 65). Antin-the-narrator’s claim to have “assimilated [her] past” remains wishful thought or perhaps a necessary ruse meant to convince the American reader of the absence of foreign residue in her becoming an American. As an immigrant, Antin cannot legitimize her new life in a new language without referring to and re-experiencing her past, her “original,” even though her reinvention in English requires that she disregard the original. In this sense, Russia and America, and their corresponding halves of the book, do not represent the two poles of the protagonist’s conversion, but two parallel

narratives that, like unfaithful translations, intersect, transform, and deform each other.

Antin's insistence, in the appended "How I Wrote *The Promised Land*," that we read this autobiography as a text discontinuous with life itself further calls into question the accuracy of this self-translation. Here she markets the text as a necessary yet not necessarily truthful or self-defining product. After mentioning her "imperviousness" to all "literary advice" and to other people's urges to write "the story of her life," the narrator declares that "[t]he inner impulse came at last—born, to be sure, of certain outer circumstances—and [that] that was when [her] early experiences marked themselves off from what came after, as the foundation may stand out from the superstructure"<sup>139</sup> (295). It was only "in the fullness of time," after "the foundation was in place," that she "was ready to take account of the blocks that composed it" (295). Once again, she draws attention to the constructed nature of this narrative ("foundation," "structure," "blocks") and suggests that its narrating consciousness has betrayed or has been betrayed by the current consciousness, which remains, deliberately, outside the narrative. What has translated into this immigrant account has been carefully selected, as all material used to build a foundation must be. I would argue, however, that the text of *The Promised Land* functions less as a

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<sup>139</sup> At the most immediate level, the "superstructure" she refers to represents the ten years or so that remain unaccounted for in the book. By the time she starts working on *The Promised Land*, Antin's life has taken important turns that get no mention in the book: she has published *From Plotsk to Boston*, had been married for almost ten years to Amadeus Grabau, a professor of paleontology at Columbia University, moved to New York, enrolled at Barnard College, had a breakdown, and had a daughter.

“foundation” on which the entire “superstructure” depends than as a palimpsestic manuscript whose relation to its constitutive layers remains extremely complicated.

In her examination of *The Promised Land*'s photographs and their role in signaling the contradictions that lie beneath the surface of the narrative, Bergland justly remarks that the vision of becoming American never translates into an image of adulthood and full maturity. “Democracy for these American ‘citizens’ never moves beyond the schoolroom” (69), she comments on the Chelsea school picture that illustrates the chapter titled “‘My Country.’” The narrator of the *The Promised Land*, however, accounts for the absence of the “superstructure” in a most unusual manner: after alluding to “sudden qualms of reluctance” and confessing that she cannot bear to expose yet the “yesterdays” which “lie in a quick heap,” the narrator adds that “[a]nything that [she] might add of [her] later adventures would be a repetition, in substance, of what [she] has already described” (281). Besides, she intimates, this would represent an act of transgression, a “crossing [of] the line of discretion” (281) that she is decided to resist. Instead, she proposes, “Let us say that from the Latin School on I lived much as my American schoolmates lived, *having overcome my foreign idiosyncrasies* (italics mine), and the rest of *my outward adventures* you may read in any volume of American feminine statistics” (281). Nowhere does the narrative so explicitly define itself—and, on the surface, incriminate itself—as translation as in this passage. In fact, here lies the autobiography's *raison d'être* that the narrator has been so reluctant to confess: *The Promised Land* is an act of necessity because it is an act of necessary translation and self-translation. It establishes Antin's eligibility as American citizen and American writer, while enabling her participation

in the continuous transformation of the concept of Americanness. As a litmus test of proved translatability, it allows Antin to subsequently move outside the economy of translation and into a space of full articulation that no longer requires negotiations of foreignness. *The Promised Land* represents the translation – which the narrator describes as “overcoming”— of “foreign idiosyncrasies” (281) into a domesticated and domesticating space. The “outward adventures” (281) to which the narrator alludes take place outside the confines of the book,<sup>140</sup> in a space that does not know the pressures of cultural and linguistic translation. That this space itself may be recorded as statistics does not sound promising. The fact that these are no longer “immigrant,” but “American feminine” (281) statistics, on the other hand, signals the narrator’s future positioning within national discourses.

Despite the promise to stop short, the narrative thrusts forward, tentatively, courting the above mentioned transgression. Claiming to have in mind the reader, whom she “trained...to expect the fullest particulars” (281) the narrator concedes “to add a few details.” The “details,” however, turn out to be tongue-in-cheek. She names as current favorite abode “a tent in the wilderness” where she would be happy “to answer further questions” — a scenario that recalls the secret, confident space with which she tempts Zangwill in a letter by promising to let him hear some “true stories.” She then re-ignites the interest with “And is this really to be the last word?” only to smother it again in intriguing non-specifics, such as “a long chapter of the romance of Dover Street is left untold,” or “I could fill another book with anecdotes,”

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<sup>140</sup> Earlier in the book, the narrator declares that “that part of [her] life which contains the climax of [her personal drama]” she “must leave to [her] grandchildren to record” (195).

or “I might quote from my journals,” and “touching poems, in which I figured as a heroine of two worlds, and build up the picture of that *double life* (italics mine)” (282). To this we may add the unsettling, thought-provoking confession that has been left out in the published version of the book:

If, on a later occasion, when I became aware of two blue eyes of innocence looking into mine, and two rosy lips forming their first words of love, and I began to search my heart, to see if I were worthy to receive them, I found specters lying long forgotten, goblins, ugly shapes—that is matter for my private confessions; it does not belong to this history of a person that I have ceased to be. (qtd. in Sollors, “Introduction” xlii)<sup>141</sup>

This disavowal of desire and full articulation points to a subtext, a layer that has been consciously veiled or overwritten. On one hand, the absence of this alter-text points to *The Promised Land* as the site of an ambivalent identification. On the other, in drawing attention to the necessary exclusion of this other, “private” text from the “authorized” space of *The Promised Land*, the narrator suggests that her subjecthood interests and can be accommodated within the space of literary production only insofar as it represents itself as completely domesticated translation, as de-othered and dis-gendered Other. The contrived and deliberately unconvincing ending of *The Promised Land* defers narrative foreclosure. An American by self-proclamation but

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141 That allusions to romance and to less-than-exemplary traits (“ugly shapes”) should be conveniently removed from the “authorized” text is only significant. Sollors remarks that “the printed edition followed the logic of this argument [“this is matter for my private confessions”] and simply cut the reference” (xlii). By delineating separate spaces for “public confessions” and “private confessions” and by censoring the latter, this editorial intervention disrupts the logic of autobiographical writing while also exposing the mechanisms behind the production of exemplary immigrant texts.

also by virtue of law, conduct, belief, education, citizenship, and even by cultural formation, the narrator remains nonetheless a “citizen in the making”—not only because this *is* the only space reserved for immigrant autobiographical writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, but because the suppressed, overwritten, or untranslated layers of *The Promised Land* make it a provisory and never fully explored text. Like all translations, *The Promised Land* does not and should not know finitude.

### Epistolary negotiations: “Everything I Write Is Autobiography”

As a new frame of reference and necessary supplement to her literary narratives, Antin’s correspondence proves most illuminating, especially in its meta-commentary on the composition process and in its revelation of a slightly different Antin than the one emerging from the pages of *The Promised Land*. Most importantly, however, Antin’s letters, especially those to her “literary guardian” (*Selected* 40) Israel Zangwill often constitute rewarding forays beneath the “official” version and into the palimpsestic layers of her manuscript, where most negotiations take place and where one gets a glimpse of what has been lost in the process of translating an immigrant identity into the discourse of Americanization. The epistolary self that emerges from the pages of *Selected Letters* (ed. Evelyn Salz) is less cohesive and less self-domesticating than the narrative self that addresses us in *From Plotzk to Boston* and *The Promised Land*. The voice is at once more tentative in its devotion to exemplarity and more confident in its dissenting gestures.

Soon after the publication of *From Plotzk to Boston*,<sup>142</sup> in a letter (February 5, 1899) whose deferential tone strikes too discordant a note not to be read as disingenuous, she tells Zangwill how “anxious” she is “to retain” the positive opinion she and her first book have made. “And I know that I can do so only by being, as nearly as possible, the girl you and my friends would have me” (*Selected* 7), she declares, the tone intimating resentment and weariness. She signs her letter “your

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<sup>142</sup> Antin’s correction of the misspelling of her birthplace (Polotzk, not Plotzk) in the proof copy was disregarded, and she finally decided to leave it that way. The persistence with which this erroneous transcription of her origin insinuates itself into print is indicative of the official belief in the sameness of foreignness. It also reenacts, on a small scale, the dominant power’s tendency to manipulate and re-ascribe its subjects’ identity.

quondam ‘schoolgirl’” (*Selected* 39), and it would be impossible to determine if the implied docility carries irony, self-derision, or something else.

A year later, a dejected, (self)contentious Antin indirectly accuses Zangwill of being, like all other “wise men,” complicit to silence and dishonesty. “I do not write, because every word I write one day sounds false the next,” she essays, adding, “I have a right, a sound right to be discontent” (*Selected* 31). The motive of her dissatisfaction and frustration remains unnamed – it is only referred to as “the want which I will not name,” and “the one word I am waiting for” (*Selected* 31). Ironic references to her “‘good fortune’” (i.e. the positive reception of her book), which she can “only bear” and which is as “uninteresting and void of life” as the privileges and actions it has brought about (*Selected* 31), coupled with the fact that the letter is a response to Zangwill’s laudatory remarks about her book, suggest that Antin might be receiving her success and/or reading her friends’ complimentary responses in very different terms than one might expect.

“I wonder whether you would think that my head does need any twisting around,” a twenty-year-old Antin writes to Zangwill on May 21, 1901, this time in an almost belligerent tone. “There are some who do believe this, Mr. Zangwill, and they are in disease because my head refuses to be twisted away from the direction it faces obstinately” (*Selected* 33). In 1903, a frustrated, angry Antin who suffers from writing anxiety addresses Zangwill in an even less-than-reverential, bitter tone, taking him to task for not being frank with her:

With all your sponsorship and good advice and kind little interviews you haven’t done me any very fundamental good.... [Y]ou wrote me

only to give me advice—to criticize my letters—to discharge your duty as my literary guardian.... I do not even read your books and you haven't the opportunity to return the compliment. (*Selected* 40).

She ends the letter with an affirmation of her identity as a writer, which she views as distinct from that of the married woman she has recently become: “This [writing this letter] makes me feel as if I were still Mary Antin. Well, as far as you are concerned, at any rate, Mary Antin is the same as I” (*Selected* 40). This recalls the problematized, fluid subjectivity with which the narrator of *The Promised Land* announces the terms of her autobiographical self-translation: “I am absolutely other than the person whose story I have to tell...I could speak in the third person and not feel that I was masquerading” (1). Years later, in a letter to Randolph Bourne dated August 1913, Antin refers to her writing as “not itself a part of life,” and to herself as “reporter” (*Selected* 74). In the same letter, however, she declares, “*Everything* I write is autobiography” (*Selected* 74). Once again, Antin both identifies with and dissociates herself from her self-written narrative. The life she has constructed in English, she may be suggesting, is hers only to the extent to which she can claim it as a “story” she can “report,” as “not itself part of life” but part of the autobiographical space reserved for her in the American national narrative.

As early as 1902, Antin envisions *The Promised Land* as a fictional work. She tells Zangwill “confidential[ly]” about the “great novel” (“a *great* novel—or no novel”) she plans, and which is already “wonderfully shaping itself” (*Selected* 38). Almost a decade later, she still recoils at the possibility of titling her book *Autobiography of Mary Antin* (letter to Sedgwick dated August 1911, *Selected* 57),

and in most related correspondence she refers to it not as “autobiography,” but rather as “my story.” Antin sees the autobiographical space as allowing her only a partial, and partially accurate, translation of her life and subjectivity, and the fictional space as the more accommodating of truthful translations.

In a letter dated 1901, she lures Zangwill with “textbooks not prescribed by any school committee” and “stories that were never heard in the schoolroom” and that could only be told if they “were to get very confidential, *very*” (*Selected* 34). “Do you like stories, Mr. Zangwill? Do you like *true* stories (italics mine)?” (*Selected* 34), she asks, temptingly, but only to recant just as mysteriously right away: “You must not be troubled by my half-told tales. My conscience is in perfect peace, I assure you” (*Selected* 34). In an earlier letter she had mentioned she wanted to write some stories but she was not sure “whether they [would] be the kind that are good to print” (*Selected* 29). Years later, these suppressed stories continue to run parallel to Antin’s writing, alive only in her memory and worded only in the language of silent resistance. Less than a year after the completion of *The Promised Land*, she will tell Sedgwick that the book is so nearly off her mind that “the old stories” start buzzing again in her head. “I love my stories, the untold ones” (*Selected* 66), she adds, cryptically.

The epistolary exchange strongly indicates that Antin leaves these treasured stories untold so they would not blemish the exemplarity of her protagonist’s narrative of Americanization and hamper her defense of the Eastern European Jewish immigrant’s capability to translate herself flawlessly into the language of Americanness.

As Keren R. McGinity rightly concludes upon examining Antin's manuscripts and correspondence, much of the editorial censorship and self-censorship in *The Promised Land* panders to a "predominantly patriarchal Gentile" audience, which it hopes to win over. A letter (August 8, 1911) addressed to Sedgwick, for instance, shows an Antin who is strategically planning her pro-immigrant case starting with the first sentences of *The Promised Land*:

I need not point to you that in all this chapter [the first of the Russian story] we are on delicate ground. Anybody who is going to put in a plea for the Jew needs to choose his words most carefully. *This part of the story ought to be told so that the reader should not have time to think between paragraphs.* (Selected 57)

Several letters reveal also that Antin succumbs only reluctantly to her editors' and other literary friends' pressures that she flesh out her Americanization story and condense the Old World one. Two separate letters written the same day illustrate her concern with the editorial decisions regarding the first section. In the morning letter she pleads, "I hope you will not cut too much of Chap. I...If you are inclined to cut out on p. 31, Chap. I, the paragraph about prisoners escaped from the Pale, I beg you to leave it for the sake of the Jewish readers—for the sake of my father" (57-8). In the afternoon letter, she expresses her dissatisfaction at not having "use[d] to the full the opportunity afforded one by Chap. I to answer certain popular criticisms of the Jew" (58) and ends by commenting that, while glad to concede to Sedgwick's "omissions" in the serialized version, she "should be inclined to reinstate [those passages] for the book" (59).

“I understand that you want to use more of the American than the Russian material,” she writes to Sedgwick on July 31, 1911, and continues,

You have very much the same idea as Mr. Alonzo Rothschild. He proposed that I sum up the whole Russian matter in one chapter...and concentrate on the theme of the immigrant in America, calling the story ‘My Country’! It would make an intense story, but it would leave *me* out of the book, and some of the best things in the book, if I am my judge, only count because they are true of an individual; namely, the author. (*Selected* 56).

The distinction Antin makes between the Russian and the American sections of the book baffles, for it inverts the expected power dynamics: Why would Antin consider the polyphonic and panoramic narrative of the first part to be the one about the individual called “the author,” as opposed to the book’s second part, the “I-I-I” story of Americanization that focuses almost exclusively on Antin-the-protagonist? What are we to make then of the “I” “grown too big” for its own history, who concludes *The Promised Land* by proclaiming herself “the youngest of America’s children” into whose hands is given “all her priceless heritage, to the last white star espied through the telescope, to the last great thought of the philosopher” (286)? By associating herself more directly with the first part of *The Promised Land*, Antin contends that the stridently solipsistic voice of the second part has spun its self-centered stories toward construing not a narrative of individual affirmation, but one that purposefully eludes/conceals/erases the “I.” Does this suggest a reading of the eighteen photographs Antin has chosen to illustrate the book and in which the author

never appears as central figure, neither in the Polotzk story, nor in the American one (Bergland 55), as evidence that the delineation and distribution of individual and communal identities in the two sections is not as clear cut as it may seem? Though she does not provide any answers, Antin suggests once again the possibility of a subtext that can be accessed only by a subversion of the normative reading. Image and word do not translate into each other and do not reinforce each other's argument as we may expect. Instead, the photographs offer an alternative story that confronts and challenges the written narrative. Antin the individualist appears only once, in the Polotzk section, together with her sister, and both her homes—the birthplace in the Pale and the “new home” in Boston—look dreary and lifeless. The only individual portraits appear in the Polotzk section, not in the American one, which reads mostly as a recapitulation of her new country's civilizing and Americanizing resources: the Chelsea public school, the library, the Natural History Club, the railway tracks. The intersystemic translation of the photo-argument into textual argument makes visible the presence of an undervoice whose story of ethnic identification undermines the rhetoric of unconditional assimilation.

The chapters dedicated to the American section—which in the final manuscript occupies approximately the same number of pages as the “Russian story”—document the narrator's successful assimilation into the American culture. However, some of Antin's letters to Sedgwick written during the serialization of *The Promised Land* in *Atlantic Monthly* reveal a consciousness constantly wrestling with the implications of her choices as cultural translator, American-in-the-making, and immigrant writer.

She tells Sedgwick that although he is not the first to accept *The Promised Land* “as an attestation of American democracy, still [his] word is the first official guarantee that the people will listen to what [she] has to say” (July 19, 1911, *Selected* 52). A further comment (“Since I am called to the forum, I pray that no error passes my lips. This is the only success I long for” [52]) underscores the fact that Antin conceives of her project as a political gesture and of herself as a spokesperson. Savvy but not unscrupulous, she has understood the politics of lobbying and the importance of male allies. Her correspondence reveals that her enthusiastic support of Roosevelt and of the Progressive Party can be largely ascribed to their endorsement of open immigration.

In a letter to Sedgwick (August 8, 1911), she expresses her disapproval of the title “My Country” for the American section, because “Mr. Rothschild [who suggested it] meant it to be written with quotation marks” (*Selected* 57). Aware of and displeased with the obvious connotations of such a choice, she finally agrees to adopt it. “My Country” becomes the title of Chapter XI, which is at once the most rhetorically flamboyant, and the most inviting to alternative interpretations. “Naturalization, with us Russian Jews,” the narrator argues here, “may mean more than the adoption of the immigrant by America. It may mean the adoption of America by the immigrant” (179).<sup>143</sup> The reversal of power is so awkwardly and so tentatively uttered that it is almost self-effacing. It signals, nonetheless, the disruption of the national discourse on immigration and the possibility of reversed translation. America

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143 In another passage, commenting on her sister Frieda’s less fortunate destiny in the New World, she wishes her father had given “America (sic!) more time with [her] sister” (218).

as target culture—that is, as culture into which the immigrants translate themselves and to which they ultimately renounce their otherness—becomes America as source culture—that is, as culture that immigrants translate into their culture of origin, which thus becomes a target culture. Given the fact that the Western tradition of translation practices privileges the target culture and its normalizing powers, this reversal signals the possibility of subsuming Americanizing discourses and practices to discourses of difference. In this momentary shift between margin and center, the immigrant becomes the negotiator, the gazer, the parental authority, and America the scrutinized object, the reliant child required to adjust and transform herself. And if, as Richard Kearney contends, “the tendency of a nation toward xenophobic or insular nationalism can [indeed] be resisted by its own narrative resources to imagine itself otherwise—either through its own eyes or those of others” (26), this reversal is vested with powers of contestation and liberation that can make the domesticating translation not a requisite for Americanization, but a choice.

### **Foreignizing attempts: (Dis-)gendered and (de-)ethnicized translations**

Though most instrumental in resuscitating interest in Antin and *The Promised Land*, feminist readings, such as those advanced by Dearborn and Salz, view Antin's autobiography as a male-mediated, male-authenticated, and thus necessarily an impotent text. Such critiques impose on Antin's autobiography a normative reading, a reading informed by what Spivak would call the narcissistic first world feminist agenda, which is modeled on alliance politics between heterogeneous groups and thus fails to account for the discrepant differences and discontinuities of 'other' places (*Critique* 112-17). Usandizaga, however, does acknowledge the narrator's contradictory position within a tradition of female silence and invisibility in Western literature (38), and argues convincingly that the autobiography's ending "confirms the writer's incapacity to integrate a specific woman's destiny in the context of the fabulous expectations she allows her character to imagine for herself" (45). As a Jewish East-European immigrant in a first world location, Antin cannot escape being cast as racialized, ethnic, and threatening Other. Gendered self-identifications, she knows, would only further complicate her attempts to overcome such representations. From the perspective of the dominant culture, her position as an East-European Jewish immigrant woman is closer to that of the non-gendered subaltern than to that underprivileged American woman. As Sidonie Smith notes, in early twentieth century America, ideologies of race and ethnicity take precedence over those of gender (*Poetics* 51).

Unsurprisingly then, the female body does not inhabit the inscape of Antin's *Promised Land*, and domestic concerns do not participate in the project of

Americanization. Moreover, there is nothing in this idiosyncratic coming-of-age story that announces the female body's sexual or even simply physical burgeoning and maturation—no corporeality, no politicization of sexual difference, no gendered performance, no mention of sexuality except for the occasional benign remark about being a young woman and about friendships that “enrich [one's] womanhood” (198). The narrator sees herself as a “very tomboy” (215), and finds feminine garb a “trouble” (220).

At the same time, the domestic sphere plays an indispensable, if indirect role in the heroine's narrative of progress. The narrator's sister (Frieda) and her mother are committed to the “dreary marches of a humdrum life; sensing sweet gardens of forbidden joy, but never turning from the path of duty” (198). Frieda, who is only a couple of years older than Mary, has to toil all day bent over the needle (199), remain unschooled, and age prematurely so that Mary can go to school and pursue her dreams. Frieda's narrative of domesticity (198-199; 263) unfolds on its own, but also supplements Mary's narrative of Americanization. Her industrious spirit and capacity for self-sacrifice and endurance adjoin Mary's ambitious, audacious, and self-reliant spirit to create a perfectly-wrought immigrant—one whose exemplarity could constitute a most persuasive argument for immigration. Yet the two destinies, one unfolding within the confines of Old World traditions of female domesticity, and the other emulating the story of American male independence cannot merge into one.

To a large extent, Mary's success is achieved at the expense of Frieda's, and many other women's lives. “I cannot believe but that her sacrifices tasted as dust and ashes to her at times,” the narrator muses, expressing admiration but also regret for

her sister's life of quiet desperation and the "talent" she has developed for vicarious enjoyment (198)—a talent which, the narrator "never in this life hope[s] to imitate" (198). Frieda sews her sister's graduation gown at the same time that she sews her own wedding dress, and in doing so she becomes instrumental in the shaping of two divergent destinies. One suturing weds the immigrant woman (back) to her "Old-World fate" (218), while the other signals adaptation to the norms and expectations of the target culture and, perhaps, the beginning of the "fulfillment of [America's] promise to women" (218). Significantly, the "wonderful dress" Frieda sews gives Mary "most trouble" as she steps up the graduation stage to read her composition (220). Along with her gloves, shoes, and "flowing sash," it makes her so self-conscious that she no longer knows where her body begins or ends (220). Femininity and education, the narrator suggests, remain irreconcilable within the realm of possibilities available to immigrant women. The dichotomy is reiterated in Anzia Yeziarska's *Bread Givers*, whose narrator, Sara Smolinsky, feels like a "dolled-up dummy" and is "unable to breathe" after applying lipstick and rouge (183).

As Zaborowska aptly points out, *The Promised Land* "subverts the traditional narrative of a woman's life in its forsaking of the domestic sphere for the male world of success, narcissism, and heroic self-making" (65).<sup>144</sup> However, it does so not because of a particular interest in the act of subversion, but because insisting on preserving the language of domesticity and femininity would preclude the possibility of Americanization. To the extent to which each translation entails an act of

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<sup>144</sup> As Patricia Sparks points out, "A woman publishing her life story was by definition trespassing in masculine territory, both by leading a life that others would want to know about and by demonstrating boldness in writing about that life" (54-55).

irreducible violence that points to the necessity of interruption and of performing some kind of loss,<sup>145</sup> Antin's enacts the displacement of the female body and the (temporary) loss of the language that articulates it—in this case, the Russian and Yiddish that continue to shape Frieda's womanhood.

The *immigrant* female body,<sup>146</sup> therefore, cannot translate fully into the American national discourse of Americanization—or, rather, it cannot translate *as* female body unless it preserves loyalty to the source culture and its norms of domesticity, thus relinquishing the right to individuation. As George Gusdorf,<sup>147</sup> James Olney,<sup>148</sup> and Jeffrey Mehlman<sup>149</sup> have remarked, individualism constitutes a necessary precondition for the early twentieth century autobiography. This individualistic paradigm for the self, Susan Friedman further argues, is a reflection of privilege that excludes those who have been denied by history the illusion of individualism (75). Antin defies this exclusion by translating herself into the registers of male selfhood. In their denial of relation, connection, and femininity (Chodorow 169) such registers offer a most acceptable ramp for individual affirmation.

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145 Though this point has been reiterated by various translator and translation theorists, one of its most emphatic articulations appears in Walter Benjamin's essay, "The Task of the Translator" (1921).

146 I use the phrase "female body" in a rather broad sense that incorporates but is not limited to physical inscriptions of femininity.

147 Georges Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" (*Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, trans. and ed. James Olney, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980) 28-48.

148 James Olney, *Metaphors of the Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972).

149 Jeffrey Mehlman, *A Structural Study of Autobiography: Proust, Leiris, Sartre, Levi-Strauss* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1974).

Moreover, since at this time the Western mythologies of gender “conflate human and male figures of selfhood, aligning male selfhood with culturally valued stories” (Smith, *Poetics* 51), her dissociation from female discourses is but an attempt at voice legitimization and cultural inscription. She uses the power of male prerogatives to superimpose the immigrant autobiography over the quintessentially American one, a project that becomes most apparent in retrospect, when reading *They Who Knock*, Antin’s gospel for open immigration. In the latter, she evokes Franklin’s notion of the “self-made man” and claims it as the most central phrase “in the American vocabulary of approval,” one that “sums up our national ideal of manhood” (76).<sup>150</sup>

This notion of “manhood” Antin retranslates into a conceptual space that could be reclaimed by either gender. In *The Promised Land*, the immigrant and the citizen are generally referred to as “he,” while the nation is always ascribed female gender.<sup>151</sup> At times gender shifts occur, forcing the same sentence into accommodating a conflation of male-female referents. When the narrator describes, for instance, the “quiet influence” and comfort of Miss Dillingham’s “gray eyes searching [hers],” she adds that this empowering exchange “had to be repeated many times, as anybody will know who was present at the slow birth of *his manhood* (italics mine)” (216). As she suggests in both *The Promised Land* and *They Who*

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<sup>150</sup> Significantly, Theodore Roosevelt’s address on “The Duties of American Citizenship” (delivered in Buffalo, New York, on January 26, 1883) starts with the remark that “the first essential for a man’s being a good citizen is his possession of the home virtues of which we think when we call a man by the emphatic adjective of manly” (<[http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/presidents/26\\_t\\_roosevelt/psources/ps\\_citizen.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/presidents/26_t_roosevelt/psources/ps_citizen.html)>).

<sup>151</sup> We may speculate here that her desire to belong to the nation is also a desire for the recuperation of the female body.

*Knock*, she herself aspires to become a self-made man, i.e., “the noblest product of [the American] democratic institutions” (*They Who Knock* 76). To this purpose, she seeks identification with Roosevelt’s cult of masculinity.<sup>152</sup>

In a letter dated April 29, 1913, in which Roosevelt asks Antin for a photograph which is to illustrate, along with portraits of Jacob Riis, Frances Kellor, and Jane Addams, the ideal American in his own autobiography, he declares her “an American in whom [he] so deeply believe[s]” (*Selected* 151-52). A visual translation of accomplished Americanization in Roosevelt’s autobiography, Antin’s photograph functions also as a technique of effecting meaning, much like the taxidermy used during Roosevelt’s “Teddy-Bear Patriarchy”—as Haraway dubs the period impacted by Roosevelt’s politics—to conserve and ascribe permanence to a particular notion of Americanness.<sup>153</sup> Read alongside Roosevelt’s lifelong attempt to preserve the vitality, virility, and purity of the American nation by staving off and neutralizing any possible source of decay, the inclusion of Antin’s photograph in his own autobiography, and of her book in “one of the most honored places in [his] library” (May 23, 1914; *Selected* 152), reads as an intervention against an endangered body

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<sup>152</sup> Roosevelt’s cult of masculinity and his regard of the vitality of the male body as symbolic medium for national restoration are convincingly discussed in Amy Kaplan’s essay “Black and Blue on San Juan Hill” and Donna Haraway’s “Teddy-Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-1936” (*Cultures of US Imperialism*, eds. Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease, Durham: Duke UP, 1993).

One of Antin’s letters to “Colonel Roosevelt” (dated December 10, 1912) shows Antin using the male authority to further her goals, and to enhance the authority of her own voice. After thanking him for sending her his thoughts on the “immigrant girl question,” as she had requested in a previous letter (dated December 4), she informs him that she had quoted him in her own public talk “as a proof of the fact that the necessity of looking after the unprotected foreign girls was looming up in the minds of people who have much to do with shaping our immigration policies. It made a point, I can assure you” (*Selected* 73).

<sup>153</sup> Haraway argues that this notion of Americanness is perfectly captured as process and outcome in Carl Akeley’s African Hall in the Museum of Natural History (237-292).

politics, and, to a certain extent, as evidencing the possibility of restoring the national vitality of the nation from within.<sup>154</sup> Antin professes to be proud to be included “photographically” in his book, which she admires for the “inevitableness of its moral” and which, she trusts, would change all of Roosevelt’s enemies into friends (August 29, 1913, *Selected* 75).

In becoming part of the national narrative — for which Roosevelt’s autobiography functions as a synecdochical translation — Antin brings her powers of contestation to what Bhabha designates as the “continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical” (145). Antin’s claim to be representative, which entails speaking for, speaking about, and speaking as, provokes a crisis within the process of signification through which the national narrative is constructed. In its enunciations, the claim threatens to inscribe otherness as an indispensable supplement—i.e., a plus that compensates for “a minus in the origin” (Gasché qtd. in Bhabha 155)—and to erase the nationalist premise of a pre-given or constituted origin in the past (Bhabha 144-45). Through her contesting presence in the pedagogical continuum, Antin has to potential to naturalize the immigrant as the “minus in the origin” whose reiterative power denies the national narrative the prospect of perfect translation. This task she will make a priority in her largely forgotten and ignored book, *They Who Knock at Our Gates. A Complete Gospel of Immigration* (1914).<sup>155</sup>

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154 In Roosevelt’s eyes, Mary Antin is an embodiment of “the various public questions” with which she has “become peculiarly identified” (letter to Antin, April 29, 1913).

155 Unlike Antin’s other publications, this work has not been reissued and has not benefited from critical attention. To the more than two hundred reviews of *The Promised Land* that Antin’s husband, Grabau had collected in a scrapbook, only a couple of brief acknowledgments of *They Who Knock* (in *New York Times Book Review*, *Dial*, and *American Review*) were added.

An immigrant jeremiad and cautionary tale about America's dangerous tendencies toward envisioning itself as an "original" Anglo-Saxon narrative rather than on-going translation, *They Who Knock* seeks to superimpose the pro-immigration discourse over the discourse of national interest. After praising the immigrant's industry, frugality, loyalty, and "pioneer endowment" (61), Antin suggests that America's own adaptability to the demands of modernity depends on its capacity to emulate the immigrant's willingness and resourcefulness in translating himself/herself according to the demands of a new language and culture. Immigrants are equated with social and economic progress and cultural rejuvenation, and the "old stock" Americans with stagnation and cultural ossification (62). "What we get in the steerage," she proclaims, "is not the refuse, but *the sinew and bone of all the nations*" (63). Antin's vision of a trans-national America preserves some of the idealism informing the ebullient rhetoric of *The Promised Land*. However, the authority she establishes through the publication of the latter allows her to re-articulate her vision in much firmer terms. The "I" which embodied an individualized collectivity of immigrants in *The Promised Land* evolves into a "we" that places Antin on the "inside," not as translation, but as part of a national narrative whose authority draws on being "not-other." Secure in the folds of American authorship, she can now look back at *The Promised Land* as a work of cultural translation engaged in domesticating the immigrant story so that it would conform to the norms of the target culture and

deliver the request for immigrant translatability.<sup>156</sup> Retrospectively, therefore, *The Promised Land* reads to Antin as an inescapable prerequisite and a fulfilled obligation, a palimpsestic layer that has outlived its purpose. This becomes apparent in her visceral response to Woodsmall's accusations of ingratitude toward America, following a talk Antin delivered in Colorado Springs in 1916:

I am so entirely of your opinion [“that an expression of gratitude for what America has done for the immigrant” should precede “any criticism of America’s handling of the immigration problem” (78-9)], that I have filled three hundred sixty-four printed pages with my acknowledgements of America’s noble achievement in this field. I refer you to my *story* (sic!) *The Promised Land*, a copy of which you will probably find in your local library. *You will notice by the date of the publication that my praise of America preceded by several years my criticism* (italics mine). If, after having made *my cordial acknowledgements*, I proceeded, like any other American, to study and think and criticize, it is only what you would expect of any of your fellow citizens who are eager to see that the full measure of virtue is extracted from our *peculiar American institutions* (italics mine), for the good of all of us. (*Selected* 79)

Having made her “cordial acknowledgements” in *The Promised Land*, Antin can now criticize and challenge the hegemonic institutions that make mono-

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156 A letter dated 1915 subtly draws attention to the immigrant’s lack of choice and real agency. Here, she thanks Thomas A. Watson for his heartfelt comments on *The Promised Land*, and more specifically for “car[ing] to learn how it feels to be made an American (italics mine)” (*Selected* 77).

culturalism and the Anglo-Saxon tongue the normative forces of Americanization. In *They Who Knock*, she holds America responsible for its own deviations from, and betrayals of the original “text” of the Founding Fathers, and deems open immigration a most viable strategy for redressing the damage.

The preponderant use of the generic “immigrant” indicates that the narrator means to make a case for the Immigrant with capital “I”; national and ethnic specifications only enter the discourse in anecdotal form.<sup>157</sup> Furthermore, she transposes the figure of the ostracized, dejected Jew onto the Immigrant, arguing that all “those who are excluded when our bars are down are exiles from Egypt, whose feet stumble in the desert of political and social slavery, whose hearts hunger for the bread of freedom” (98). In universalizing the condition of exile to contain all immigrants who, motivated by social and political injustices, seek freedom and betterment in the Promised Land, she seeks to counter the burgeoning fear that the immigrant’s ethnicity and race will erode the American national character. Besides forcing the American-born reader to consider privileged and underprivileged immigrant groups together, the de-ethnicization of the immigrant figure discourages the use of “scientific” discourses and statistical measurements that seek to translate each immigrant group’s difference and specificity into narratives of cultural (in)solubility and (un)assimilability. Returning to her concern with statistics, she decries the fact that “our [American] mind” is perverted by “conflicting reports of commissions and committees, anthropologists, economists, and statisticians, policy-

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157 Southern and Eastern European immigrants are sometimes referred to as “new immigrants,” though generally they are circumscribed to the broad category of “immigrants.”

mongers, calamity-howlers, and self-announced prophets,” and that the fate of the nation is decided by “lobbyists, not [by] patriots”(9).

Antin’s familiarity with such fact-gathering efforts and the subsequent use of selectively collected data to translate the immigrant’s worth is reflected throughout *They Who Knock*, in the form of various retorts.<sup>158</sup> One interesting instance is the presence of Joseph Stella’s drawings of Pittsburg immigrants. Though the results of this survey documenting the degrading conditions of immigrant steel workers were published between 1909 and 1914, some of Stella’s sketches had appeared starting with 1905 in *Outlook* (Greenwald 138-140), where Antin must have seen them. Two of these “ethnic” portraits, executed as illustrations for a survey of the Pittsburg area sponsored by the Russell Sage Foundation, were originally captioned as “British Born” and “The Strength of the New Stock.” Antin re-titles them “A Fresh Infusion of Pioneer Blood” and “The Sinew and Bone of All the Nations.” As Maurine Greenwald observes, the distribution of light, facial expression, and clothing, among other things, inscribe each ethnic subject to a particular type, such as the tragic, suspicious Russian Jew, the hungry and aged Slav, or the spirited Italian (Greenwald 139). Significantly, Antin re-narrates the two photos in a language that refuses to translate ethnicity and to acknowledge “new” and “old” immigrants as distinct types. The re-translated illustrations reinforce Antin’s argument that *each* immigrant is “the sinew and bone of *all* (italics mine) the nations” (63). In a similar vein, she suggests that each immigrant ship legitimizes, through its necessary repetition, the beginning

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158 Although the *Dillingham Reports* are never named, many of her arguments read as direct ripostes to some of the key issues addressed in the federal reports, such as the immigrant’s moral and ethical conduct, intellectual potential and aspirations, and relation to economy and to urbanization.

of the American narrative. “The ghosts of the Mayflower,” she essays, “pilots every immigrant ship, and Ellis Island is another name for Plymouth Rock” (98). Her vision of America anticipates Richard Kearney’s definition of the nation as “a narrative construction to be reinvented and reconstructed again and again” (26). In Antin’s version, however, the immigrant presence alone can ensure that this construction never claims completion. The continuous translation of America’s founding principles in the language of its changing realities is guaranteed by the participation of dissenting difference and otherness.

As most immigrant writers whose pre-American history locates them in an oppressive, underprivileged space, Antin anchors her immigrant discourse in “a nostalgia for ‘democracy’” and in “a vision of pluralist inclusion, a diversity in unity, a global progress based on the Enlightenment”—attributes, according to Brennan, of cosmopolitan writing (38). She wants America to recognize the inherently cosmopolitan possibilities of the immigrant condition and inscribe them in its own narrative of self-identification. Antin suggests that the limitations of her own translation from a Russian Jew into an American, a world subject, and a representative of “a future world reality” (Brennan 38) have resulted, at least in part, from America’s failure to fully acknowledge its origins and history and to envision itself as Other. Its monolingual narrative is both symptom and effect of the refusal to see itself through the eyes of another and decipher itself in the tongue of another. At the same time, read alongside, *The Promised Land* and *They Who Knock* enact, justify, but also reprimand the Eastern European immigrant’s production of

monolingual, de-ethnicized narratives in response to America's demand for domesticating translation.<sup>159</sup>

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159 Her criticism of America's pressures and self-criticism regarding her own belief in Americanization will turn bitter, as it transpires clearly in the correspondence that "records" her decades of silence, years in which she grows "steadily poorer...and richer in personal freedom" (1927, letter to Boston Public Library). In 1925 she contacts Houghton Mifflin about what she now calls contemptuously "The Knockers," asking them to stop releasing it: "Why do you still circulate that . . . piece of rhetoric, *They Who Knock?* Who buys it? It is out of date!" (qtd. in Sollors xiv). In a letter to Mary Austin she calls it "an amazing mixture of naivete and rhapsody" (*Selected* 101). In 1926, Antin appeals to Houghton Mifflin to intervene with the *Boston Herald* and stop that "patriotic hash" (*The Promised Land*) that they "serve" on Washington's birthday (*Selected* 107). In a satiric self-portrait addressed to Dale Warren, she mocks the paper's reading of *The Promised Land*, and offers a parodic, bitter reading of her own life, an early "nice obituary" (*Selected* 107). She affirms that "no one can be found sufficiently informed, or sufficiently prophetic, to read us the riddle of M---A---'s ten year silence." She follows the mention of *The Promised Land* with "—started a deluge of immigrant autobiographies etc.—affected legislation etc.—translated etc." and frames the mention of *They Who Knock* with "more blaa, blaa about The Knockers—that unique document in defense of Americanism at any cost—compared by a reviewer to old Amos—repented of by the author—etc." (*Selected* 108).

## Appendix: Anzia Yeziarska

I want to give America not the immigrant you see before you—starved, stunted, resentful, on the verge of hysteria from repression. I want to give a new kind of immigrant, fully grown in mind and body—loving, serving, upholding America. (Anzia Yeziarska, “The Immigrant”)

Anzia Yeziarska (c. 1885-1970), a Jewish Russian immigrant writer much more prolific and widely read than her contemporary Antin, seems less concerned than the latter with producing an exemplary immigrant narrative that betrays no linguistic foreignness. Like Antin, Yeziarska envisions the immigrant as a cultural translator engaged in “bridging the understanding” between the two worlds (“America and I,” *How I Found* 152), and in reacquainting the American-born with her forgotten or suppressed history.<sup>160</sup> Yeziarska’s conclusion that between “[the immigrant’s] soul and the American soul [there are] worlds of difference that no words could bridge” (“America and I,” *How I Found* 152) underscores the limits of emotional, cultural, and linguistic translatability, as they relate to the immigrant’s challenging task of translating and reinventing herself in English and in America, and to America’s resistance to immigrant articulations of otherness. Yeziarska’s (semi-) autobiographical works engage in probing and exploring these “worlds of

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<sup>160</sup> Like Antin, Yeziarska sees in the immigrant the originator of the American narrative and the force behind its continuous transformation, an argument through which she advances her unconditional support for open immigration. Thus, the protagonist of “America and I” associates herself both with the Pilgrims and with the “last-comer” knocking at America’s gates, “his gifts unwanted” (*How I Found* 153).

difference” in a much more overt and insistent way than Antin’s. Her self-translations and translations of immigrant difference make active use of foreignizing strategies both at the level of linguistic articulation and in matters of content, defying the need for palimpsestic layering.

Not surprisingly, she was disparaged by her contemporaries for her “artless” (Stoer), “clumsy” (Prescott) and “jerky” (Angoff 11) writing style. An anonymous reviewer noted the “colorful barbaric tapestry” and “raw poetry” of her style (*New York Times*), while Orville Prescott deemed her writing “inadequate (...) as a literary performance,” “exasperating” in “its clumsy structure,” “confused and disorderly, gushy and sentimental,” “mak[ing] a complete hash of chronology and ignor[ing] the usual milestones of autobiography” (Prescott). When some critics found value in these same qualities, it was because they consolidated Yeziarska’s status of foreigner, immigrant, and “Other.” Charles Angoff associates her work’s uncouth qualities with her “authentic Jewishness” (11-12), while an anonymous reviewer sees in the “raw,” “barbaric” texture of her immigrant voice an opportunity for Americans to evaluate their own voices “more clearly” (*New York Times*). In the mid-60s, Milton Hindus suggested that Yeziarska’s “careless,” “stumbling block,” and crude English (139) contributed to her success since it revealed a larger degree of fictionalization (than Antin’s writing) and courage to take license. Hindus’s attribution of such improbable intentionality is intriguing, especially in its assumptions about Yeziarska’s relation to the English language and about her work as translator-author. He

suggests that her departures from standard American English are interesting only insofar as they reflect intentional imitations or impersonations of immigrant talk.

I argue that, on the contrary, Yeziarska insists on conflating her position as American immigrant writer with that of cultural translator, and often collapses the distinctions between fiction and autobiography. The diction of her most autobiographical narratives, such as *Bread Givers* (1925), *All I Could Never Be* (1932), and *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* (1950), makes visible the linguistic “contamination” of dominant discourses with immigrant speech. Unlike Antin, who forces her narrators into American English, Yeziarska allows hers to speak immigrant English, thus replicating on the page the inventive but also discontinuous rhythms of their lives in the New World. Her characters’ “fractured” English, inflected with Yiddish vernacular and literal translation of idiomatic Yiddish expressions, gives authenticity to the immigrant story and invites readers to acknowledge the presence of another culture and of another mode of thinking and being in the world. A foreignizing strategy, this marking of the text with traces of bilingualism and hybrid articulation<sup>161</sup> mimics and reflects the duality and hybridity of many of Yeziarska’s protagonists. In her mirroring of form and content, Yeziarska underscores the interconnectedness between language and identity, between translation and cultural assimilation. She domesticates or foreignizes the

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<sup>161</sup> Her narrative is laced with “oi!” “weh!” “nu!” and “shah!” with “moisheh,” “schlang,” “kooshenierkeh,” “yentehs,” and “chzufeh,” but also with the hybrid “teacherin” and “Americanerin.”

language of the telling in such a way as to reflect her characters' place within the journey toward Americanization. In Yeziarska's semi-autobiographical narrative *Bread Givers*, for instance, the English becomes more Americanized, less marked by foreignness, and more crafted as Sara Smolinsky, the protagonist, distances herself from her father and Dover Street, two crucial embodiments of resilient ethnicity, and assimilates into American life.

Yeziarska's protagonists, almost invariably immigrant women, find themselves experiencing and trying to make sense of the disparities between America's claims of ethnic accommodation and its coercive incentives for complete assimilation, between patriotic rhetoric and everyday realities, between the pressures for monolingual articulation and the right to fullness of expression. Unlike Antin, Yeziarska returns obsessively to love, sex, femininity, and the female body, and to the complications that arise when immigrant women attempt to integrate such concerns in their journeys toward Americanization. The happy resolutions which she forces on almost every story<sup>162</sup> are so implausible that they achieve an opposite effect, making us read such endings as ironic comments on the impossibility of fulfilling endings. In other words, when the immigrant woman's disheartening and taxing struggle for independence and "personhood" slips unexpectedly into romantic love, domestic bliss, or the perfect coupling of Old World passion and New World materialism, Yeziarska "domesticates" the ending in a way that seeks to

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<sup>162</sup> Magdalena Zoborowska's "Critical Ends and Happy Endings" (in *How We Found America*. Chapel Hill, NC: U of North Carolina P, 1995) provides an eloquent and thorough discussion on this topic.

foreignize the narrative as a whole. In coining Yeziarska “one of the great *refusniks* of the world” (xi), Vivian Gornick captures most succinctly the foreignizing undercurrent of Yeziarska’s narratives of Americanization.

### **PART III**

#### **Un-cursing Columbus:<sup>163</sup> Eva Hoffman and the post-modern domesticating translation**

"When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less.' 'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.' 'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master - that's all'" (Carroll 190). This short exchange between Alice and egg-shaped Humpty Dumpty encapsulates many of our post-modern concerns about the language's ability to enunciate and accurately signify our changing reality. In the process of articulation, Humpty Dumpty's last words suggest, we juggle denotative and connotative meanings and make them inhabit and qualify various contexts. At the same time, in choosing one connotation to be master, we prioritize certain views of the world and certain realities at the expense of others.

When recording past and present experiences in a new language and culture, immigrant autobiographers embark on similar journeys of negotiation. However, in the act of translation, these concerns and negotiations are endlessly complicated by the writing subject's uneven and often problematic relationship to the languages, cultures, and realities engaged in the process. Moreover, the privileged view, or

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<sup>163</sup> "Curse on Columbus!" Anzia Yezierska's characters often exclaim, echoing the Yiddish "Oy vey! Ah broch tzu Columbus!" / "Oy, a klug tzu Columbus" that resounded through the Lower East Side in the first decades of the twentieth century. (In Dominican folklore, someone mentioning the name of Columbus--"Fucú de Colon!"--must immediately cry out "Zafa!" to undo the curse.) More often than not, the expletive represents a spontaneous indictment of America's unfulfilled promises or/and of its incompatibility with ethnic modes of being.

“master” connotation invoked by Humpty Dumpty is inextricably connected to the socio-political and cultural contexts at the confluence of which the translating takes place. *Lost in Translation*, Eva Hoffman’s autobiographical narrative, exposes the shaping influence of these contexts and reveals the ways in which the process of translation both confounds and clarifies the immigrant’s relation to the source and target cultures.

Hoffman’s family, the Wydras, left Cracow, Poland, in 1959 (“Not in the worst Stalinist years, but still during the Cold War,” she points out [“Between Memory”]) when the ban on emigration, under which most of the Polish population lived, was lifted for Jews (83). She was thirteen, just like Antin, and after a few transitional years in Canada, which she recounts in “Exile,” the middle section of her autobiography, she arrived in the States in the mid-60s. Though the narrator of *Lost in Translation* does not spell out what exactly prevented the family from immigrating directly to America, the historical discussion I provided in Chapter 1 (pages 35-39) enables insight into possible explanations and helps contextualize the significance of the Wydras’ choice (or, rather the lack thereof). We find out that the family was encouraged to emigrate to any country that would take them, and they winnowed their choices to Israel and Canada, the two places from which they received letters of support and sponsorship. They opted for the latter—namely, for the no-war land of milk and honey in which streets are paved with gold, the goose lays golden eggs, and people can grow rich and happy (84). For the father, the vision of becoming “a man of means in the American way, a man of substance” (84) is particularly alluring. What they are opting for, as this common description of the Promised Land suggests,

is in fact America. The notion of Canada is conflated with the vision of America, which carries for them all the “old fabulous associations” (84). For young Hoffman too, Canada is “automatically subsumed” under the category “America” (84). A transitory stop, an ante-room to and extension of the “real” New World, Canada is more than anything else a space that enables a gradual immersion into Americanness. Although the experiences take place in Vancouver, it is Faulkner and Malamud, The Lower East Side immigrants and “The Ed Sullivan Show” that excite and shape the narrator’s imagination. Alinka, her sister, is “striving for a normal American adolescence,” she notes, and the detail suggests that while Canada might be the name of where they live at that moment, America is the state of mind which they inhabit and which inhabits them. Sarah Phillips Casteel’s charge against literary criticism that has applied the term “American” indiscriminately in reference to Hoffman’s experience on either side of the border (288) fails to consider the narrator’s own propensity toward obliterating such distinctions. The Wydras believe they are immigrating to the Promised Land and end up, by necessity, in Canada. Late 1950s America is less than welcoming to Eastern European refugees, especially when they happen to be Jews and have been ushered out of an East Bloc country that has closed its borders to all its other citizens. Lingering anti-Semitic sentiments and fear of communist infiltration<sup>164</sup> have ensued in immigration policies and stipulations that make it almost impossible for these immigrants to settle in America.

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164 Only three years before the Wydras’ departure from Poland, a CIA report (approved for release in 2001) predicting a worsening of Cold War tensions read, “[w]e shall be compelled to continue warding off a diabolically clever opponent whose ingenuity and resourcefulness, unfortunately, is growing” (“The 20th CPSU Congress in Retrospect,” Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, <[http://www.cia.gov/csi/books/princeton/cia\\_srs\\_1.pdf](http://www.cia.gov/csi/books/princeton/cia_srs_1.pdf)>)

The title of Hoffman's autobiography, *Lost in Translation*, echoes Robert Frost's definition of poetry as that which is lost in translation, and its subtitle, *A Life in a New Language*, while further accentuating the idea of loss by suggesting semantic and cultural discontinuities, also announces the emergence of an identity capable of incorporating both loss and transformation, the translatable and the untranslatable. "It is painful to be consciously of two worlds" (3), Antin had noted in her "Introduction" to *The Promised Land*, before announcing her resolution to be of one world alone. Like Antin's, Hoffman's autobiography, published in 1989, seventy-seven years after *The Promised Land*, emerges from this state of painful awareness, yet unlike her forerunner, Hoffman makes this divided consciousness the subject of many introspective explorations and a tool for interrogating the shaping forces of historical circumstance.

As the following analysis will illustrate, though Hoffman remains acutely attuned to the role of foreignizing approaches in preserving and inscribing cultural difference, she veers toward domesticating fluency in the process of autobiographizing her life in English.<sup>165</sup> Her choice may be read as an attempt at resisting the injunctions of her historical circumstances, but also as a yearning for a self-translation that responds to a personal need for coherence and unity. "I love language too much to maul its beats" (118), she says, adding, a few pages later, "It's as important to me to speak well as to play a piece of music without mistakes.

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<sup>165</sup> As already suggested in Part I of this study, until very recently, English translations of foreign texts, as well as writings in English-as-a-second language, have tended to erase all traces of foreignness and to leave out instances of untranslatability or force them into inadequate equivalencies. This process has been referred to by Venuti and other translation theorists as "domesticating" a text to make it "fluent" in the target language and culture (English and, respectively, American).

Hearing English distorted grates on me like chalk screeching on a blackboard, like all things botched and badly done, like all forms of gracelessness” (122). Toward the end of the narrative she declares, almost apologetically, that in order to find “her true axis” she simply needed to “assimilate and master the voices of [her] time and place” (276).

Read alongside each other, *The Promised Land* and *Lost in Translation* share a common, teleological trajectory: they progress sinuously, negotiating consent and descent (and veering toward the former) within the accepted conventions of Eurocentric discourse and conforming to typologies promoted by critics such as Sollors and Boelhower as common to most immigrant and ethnic groups.<sup>166</sup> Yet Hoffman intimates that her choice serves a contrary purpose to Antin’s, for while her predecessor’s propensity toward coherence suggests, at least on the surface, compliance with the demands of her time, her own defies the entropy of the postmodern times to which she belongs. Her rebellion against the circumstances of her time, such as it is, takes the form of refusing to celebrate her marginal position, as her peers would have her do, and choosing to pursue instead her dreams of becoming one with the American narrative through impeccable translation. Yet this reading, Hoffman would most probably argue, is prescriptive, since this desire for perfect translation is rooted much deeper than in the impulse toward resisting her American generation’s resistance to *status quo*. *Lost in Translation* is a palimpsestic translation

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<sup>166</sup> Even after she has mastered the English language and assimilated quite well, the narrator is sometimes convinced that her lack of “typological fitness” will betray her and “no one will ever recognize [her] as one of their own” (244). Though by lack of “typological fitness” she most probably means to suggest the presence of unmistakable traces of foreignness, Hoffman may be also alluding to the immigrant typologies advanced by critics such as Sollors and Boelhower, with whose work she must have been familiar.

and a palimpsestic autobiography, a work inextricable from the translational processes and the meta-intertextual processes that birth it. Hoffman tries to experience and absorb—and in the process rewrites and overwrites—the stories of other Eastern European immigrants who struggled for a sense of belonging in the New World. Their identity, like hers, carries the imprint of cultures and histories that emphasize the importance of collective identity, descent, and rootedness, while the New World to which they arrive maps itself as a collage of narratives privileging individualism, consensual / dissensual affiliations, and mobility.<sup>167</sup>

She therefore scrutinizes their successes and failures, their adaptations and mal-adaptations, as well as the implications of preserving or relinquishing ethnicity and cultural specificity, trying to determine and understand her own place in this continuum. At the same time, as an American individualist in the making, she also learns “to measure [herself] against nothing” (139) and to listen to her inner, personal demands. The result is a story of Americanization spoken by a hybrid character-narrator in the smooth, unaccented English of domesticating translation.

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<sup>167</sup> Eastern European cultures grew out of their national landscapes, which were reflections and extensions of their inhabitants' communal identity and history, as well as sources of national pride and thus incentives for boundary guarding. These nations are conceived in kinship (blood relations) and are the product of a collective imagination. The imagined community of the New World, on the other hand, is the product of individual imaginations. Americans participate in the life of the nation by partaking in shared notions of Americanness (such as individualism, and democratic freedom and responsibilities), rather than through commitment to blood relations and land. This is because America is still the youngest nation, and its history has not undergone all the processes of distillation and sedimentation older nations have, but also because America is a nation built by outsiders, by people who chose or were compelled to unhinge themselves from existing blood and land ties and search for a better life in the New World. Most immigrants came here for physical and spiritual nourishment that had been denied in their countries of origin, which were saturated with histories of war, oppression, persecution, and border changing. There they had been trapped in the irrational cultural boundaries of their class, ethnicity, and religion, so once in the New World they looked for new ways to forge ties and establishing a sense of belonging. In the Old World most had seen themselves as subjects (and thus as preservationists and defenders of an inheritance), whereas in the New World people were defining themselves as citizens (who contributed, individually, to the continuous creation and definition of the nation). This was the most liberating change to which they had to attend in the New World.

Unlike Antin, Hoffman weaves the contextual constraints of her time into the fabric of the narrative and reveals their workings. Equipped with the New Critic's eye for significant detail, the Post-structuralist's skill at dissecting and deconstructing any claim to unity, and the New Historicist's awareness of contextual determinacy, she finds use for each approach, lending her narrative vulnerable to criticism from all sides but often also anticipating and rebutting such criticism. In the process of translating herself against the backdrop of post-modern America, she is made aware and makes us aware of the impact that dramatic shifts in historical context and consciousness have had on immigrant narratives. After underscoring the uncanny similarities between Antin's and her own story, Hoffman remarks that "this ancestress also makes me see how much, even in my apparent maladaptations, I am a creature of my time—as she, in her adaptations, was a creature of hers" (162), an idea to which she returns a couple of pages later:

She, like I, was affected by the sentiments of her time, and those sentiments made an inveterate positive thinker of her. The America of her time gave her certain categories within which to see herself—a belief in self-improvement, in perfectability of the species, in moral uplift—and those categories led her to foreground certain parts of her own experience, and to throw whole chunks of it into the barely visible background. (164)

To become an American, Hoffman suggests, is to belong to "the world of utterly individual sensibility, untrampled by history, or horrid intrusions of social circumstances" (197). It is to this dissociation from historical circumstance that she

attributes Nabokov's success in becoming an American and an American writer,<sup>168</sup> though she later amends this view by suggesting that Nabokov's de-historicized response to the condition of exile is the product of aristocratic privilege, itself a historical circumstance. Unlike him, she sees herself as "a creature formed by historic events and defined by sociological categories," "a Jew, an immigrant, half-Pole, half-American" suffering from syndromes deriving from the particulars of her personal and collective histories (198). Hoffman seems fully aware that in writing from the position of the Other she engages in translating herself as cultural construct,<sup>169</sup> thus enabling essentialist readings of her narratives.<sup>170</sup>

"The tongue am I of those who lived before me, *as those that are to come will be the voice of my unspoken thoughts* (italics mine)" (169), Antin announced in *The Promised Land*. Hoffman will indeed discover in her predecessor's writing "volumes of implied meaning" that circumstances did not encourage Antin "to expand upon" (163), as well as hints to "another side of the story" (163) and traces "of the story behind the story of triumphant progress" (163). As already discussed, in the process of translating herself into the American space of her time, Antin suppresses all other stories at the expense of the one that echoes the promises of American citizenship. To

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168 "I wish I could define myself," the narrator confesses, "as Nabokov defines both himself and his characters—by the telling detail, a preference for mints over lozenges, an awkwardness at cricket, a tendency to lose gloves or umbrellas" (197).

169 In his article, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Stuart Hall defines cultural identity as "one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self,' hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves,' which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" (394), but also as "a matter of 'becoming' as well as being.' It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history, and culture" (394).

170 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has coined the phrase "strategic essentialism" for this process through which the Other "selects" the cultural attributes through which she will be represented ("Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography" [13]).

a certain extent, and within the particulars of its own tale, Hoffman's autobiography becomes a conduit for, and a translation of Antin's "unspoken thoughts," especially in its obsessive self-contextualization and meta-commentary. Hoffman's narrative enters in direct conversation with *The Promised Land* only in the very last pages of "Exile," just before setting off into "The New World," as if to suggest Antin's text as possible template and/or *scriptio inferior*<sup>171</sup> of *Lost in Translation*.

Hoffman's decision, on the other hand, to make visible the presence of palimpsestic layers bearing the traces of such stories does not necessarily constitute an act of resistance or rebellion except perhaps in a synchronic, de-historicized reading that dismisses the fact that, unlike Antin, Hoffman can afford to reveal the process of Americanization as fraught with obstacles and losses. She dwells on the gray areas between her old and new languages and cultures, constantly undermining the perfect language of her telling with the painful story of its becoming. However, though much concerned with the violence inherent in any act of linguistic, semiotic, and especially cultural translation, Hoffman appears equally concerned with recounting her story in a language that bears few traces of such violence. Her writing mirrors the fluency of domesticating translation even as it engages in critiquing its crippling effects. As her comments on Antin's choices (or lack thereof) suggest, these may be the very categories within which Hoffman is compelled by her times to tell her tale. Antin had to foreground certain parts of her experiences and "throw whole chunks of it into the barely visible background" (164). Hoffman, on the other hand,

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171 Over time, faint remains of former writings that had been washed from parchment or vellum reappear enough so that scholars can decipher this text which they call *scriptio inferior*, or "underwriting."

may detail tribulations, inconsistencies, and ambiguities underlying her experiences in ways in which Antin couldn't, but has to do so still in perfect English—in other words, from the position of a perfectly assimilated immigrant. Hoffman's "unspoken thoughts" may differ from Antin's, but they too are awaiting, latently, to be voiced. Hoffman will articulate some of them in her later works, *Exit Into History* (1993), *Shtetl* (1997), and *After Such Knowledge* (2004), which explore the world of twentieth century Eastern Europe, with its anti-Semitism (but also many individual acts of infinite kindness toward the persecuted Jews), local and national upheavals and tragedies, and Holocaust and communist legacies. Her remark, in *Shtetl*, published eight years after *Lost in Translation*, that "we need to stop splitting our own memories and perceptions in half, and pushing away those parts which are too distressing for owning or acknowledgement" (257), echoes her previous comment on Antin having to discard "chunks" of her story, but also hints to a similar "splitting" in her own autobiography. As Sarah Phillips Casteel points out, here as well as in her other works, Hoffman "sets out to correct some of the nostalgic tendencies"(296) that had rendered Poland as too much of an idyllic place and had marginalized the Holocaust's impact on Hoffman's family history. Asked about the too cursory treatment of the Holocaust, Hoffman explained that for a long time she didn't think of herself as a child of survivors, just as her parents didn't think of themselves as survivors.<sup>172</sup> Equally, if not more importantly, she couldn't have addressed these issues in *Lost in Translation* the way she did in *Shtetl* because, she confesses, "the

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172 It was the "noisy Second Generation phenomenon," and the "cultural discourse" it dictated that provoked her into addressing these issues (Hoffman, "Between Memory").

problem of being an immigrant covered over the problem of being a child of survivors” (“Between Memory”).<sup>173</sup> She needed to construct a personal self out of the fragments of her own experiences (Polish and American) before being able to open this self to larger narratives, to the stories and histories of familiar places and people.<sup>174</sup> Though fully Americanized in more than one way, Hoffman has retained the immigrant predilection for triangulation—with America, Poland, and her Jewish heritage taking turns as reference points for the “I” –and to a large extent each book following *Lost in Translation* (including her novel, *The Secret*<sup>175</sup>) instantiates this process of anchoring and translating oneself through and in relation to other, at times conflicting or diverging, (hi)stories.

Like her predecessor, Hoffman arrives in the New World desiring nothing more than to fit in, or rather to be “taken in” (196). She imagines that college in Texas will help her lose her “foreignness” and become a genuine American. “Being American means that you feel like the norm” (202), an American friend tells her, but in 1969 the norm is the counter-norm. “I want to live within language and be held within the frame of culture” a freshly arrived Hoffman confesses, while noticing, with bafflement, that her fellow students “want to break out of the constraints of both

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173 “There is no way to this part of the story [her parents’ experiences in the Holocaust] in proportion,” says the narrator of *Lost in Translation*. “It could overshadow everything else, put the light of the world right out. I need seven-league boots to travel from this to where I live. And yet, this is what I must do” (253).

174 Shtetl was an attempt at integrating the Polish and Jewish parts of herself, just as *Lost in Translation* had been an attempt to integrate the Polish and American parts (Hoffman, “Between Memory”).

175 Set in the year 2020 and concerned with the relationship between Elizabeth and Iris Surrey, and the latter’s discovery that she is Elizabeth’s clone, not daughter, *The Secret* (2001) transplants Hoffman’s obsession with identity and doubleness into the realm of fiction (or, more precisely, science fiction).

language and culture” (194). The American generation to which she yearns to belong is characterized by a “prolonged refusal to assimilate” so, ironically, it’s through her uprootedness and residual foreignness that she belongs to it (197), through her maladaptations rather than adaptations.

“[I]nstead of a central ethos,” she says, alluding to Antin’s America, “I have been given the blessings and terrors of multiplicity” (164). “And what is the shape of my story, the story my time tells me to tell? Perhaps it is the avoidance of a single *shape* (italics mine) that tells the tale” (164), she concludes. “Any confidently thrusting story line would be a sentimentality, an excess, an exaggeration, an untruth” (164), she adds, intimating that her fragmentary telling, such as it is, be read as being at least partially dictated by the postmodernist transformation of the American literary space. The professed non-linearity does not carry over in practice, or at least not to the extent one might expect. Hoffman’s story does indeed keep bi/trifurcating and post-modernly reflecting upon itself, reprimanding its own tendencies toward linear narrative progress, perhaps trying to anticipate the critique of new generations of readers disenchanted with such unimaginative, if nonetheless genuine leanings toward the coherent rendering of one’s disjointed life. The narrative slouches, slowly and unconvincingly, toward an exemplarity which, unlike the one demanded from Antin, would have to spell out, now in the late 1960s, resistance, de-centralization, and fragmentation. Nonetheless, *Lost in Translation* ultimately achieves semantic fluency and narrative coherence, despite its professed desire to resist them.<sup>176</sup> It boasts a

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<sup>176</sup> Resisting such fluency may be even harder than achieving it. Though a fervent proponent of what is now known as the “foreignizing” approach, Nabokov couldn’t bring himself to apply it to his own work. He insisted that translators be literal and use lots of footnotes, “footnotes reaching up like skyscrapers to the top of this or that page so as to leave only the

beginning, middle, and end, a tripartite structure that, I will argue, betrays symmetry even as it attempts to invert the conventional model, and only a slightly disarranged, not scrambled, chronology.

It remains unclear, however, if this coherence is, after all, another response to historical circumstance, or a defiance of it. The New World to which Hoffman arrives insists on experimentation and fragmentation, but the word “shape” suggests the limited extent to which such experimentation is to enter the making of an immigrant tale. Her American generation’s propensity toward fragmentation remains endemic to—or perhaps a condition of—the margin, mimicking but never exacting substantive change. Like Hoffman, the fellow Americans who share, but by choice, her marginal status, “slip between definitions with acrobatic ease” (164). Yet evading definitions is not the same as changing them. Hoffman steps into a culture that “splinters, fragments, and re-forms itself as if it were a jigsaw puzzle dancing in a quantum space” (164). Though reductive, her comparison aptly depicts the provisional nature of this fragmentation and the inescapable narcissism attending the processes of re-configuration. Puzzle pieces do not allow permutations and cannot trade positions, despite the semblance of mobility and equal power which they enjoy in their pre-assembled state. Once it falls into its requisite place, each piece resumes a position defined in relation to adjacent pieces, as well as to center and margin, foreground and background. Freshly reconstituted, the national narrative will have perhaps revitalized, but not transformed itself. Each set of cultural terms, the narrator will

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gleam of one textual line between commentary and eternity” (“Problems of Translation”<sup>43</sup>). Yet the collaborative translations, with his son Dimitri, of his own earlier novels (written in Russian) embrace the domesticating approach.

observe, “necessarily determines the terms of the subsequent rebellion, and the rejections carry in them the seeds of what is rejected” (221). Therefore, belonging to the counter-culture generation of the 60’s ensures only a provisional, and somewhat inauthentic, positioning within the American space: Hoffman is embraced by the margins only because she’s already there, as (immigrant) Other, as site of difference, as embodiment of the oppositional stance. “In the midst of all this swirling and fragmenting movement,” she observes, “the very notion of outside and inside is as quaint as the Neoplatonic model of the universe” (196).<sup>177</sup> She knows, however, that soon the 60s “outside” will become once again “inside,” but as an Eastern European Jewish immigrant she will continue to occupy her marginal position of Other. The more she comes to know about America, the more she feels like a “quantum particle trying to locate [herself] within a swirl of atoms” (160) and confused about “what that place might be” (160). Told again and again that she has to invent such a place, just as she has to invent her identity, she turns to language to carve a place for herself and construct her American self. Initially, language (as a system of articulation) reveals its scaffoldings as unreliable, being the first to betray her. The arching processes of translation through which she tries to find her initial bearings confuse and intrigue her, making her painfully aware of the power of language, its often ungraspable intricacies, its infinite challenges. She understands early on that language will be a crucial instrument, one through which she will “overcome the stigma of [her]

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<sup>177</sup> Years later, while journeying through post-communist Eastern Europe, she notes that the further one travels from the country’s capital the less “afflicted” and damaged the landscape and the people that inhabit it. “One of the salient divisions in our world,” she is beginning to think, “is not between North and South or East and West, but between the capital and the provinces” (331).

marginality [and] the weight of presumption against [her] only if the reassuringly right sound comes out of [her] mouth” (123).<sup>178</sup>

Hoffman’s strategies of self-translation, just like Mary Antin’s, reflect and complement the predilection for target-oriented approaches that have dominated the practice of translation in the twentieth century. In such approaches, “the audience ultimately takes priority, insuring that the verbal clothing the translator cuts for the foreign work never fits exactly” (Venuti, “How to Read”). In the case of autobiographies written in a second language, the absence of an original text renders the “misfitting” almost invisible. This focus on the target culture, and especially on the ways in which the translated text can make itself recognizable and accessible to the target culture’s audience or readership, has lead, almost invariably, to the adoption of domesticating approaches that erase all traces of foreignness. The emerging translation, Venuti argues, has therefore functioned as a form of Americanization.<sup>179</sup> In the case of immigrant autobiographies written in English as a second language, I argue, such domesticating self-translation has served similar ends. “Had I written my books in Romanian, I would have written them differently” (*Stories* 46), Andrei Codrescu once remarked, suggesting that the autobiographical

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178 This recalls John Dryden’s words in the preface to his version of the *Aeneid*: “I have endeavoured to make Virgil speak such English,” asserted Dryden, “as he would himself have spoken, if he had been born in England, and in this present Age” (qtd. Venuti, “How to Read”). For Venuti, this statement is emblematic of the general direction Anglo-Saxon translation practices have taken since the seventeenth century.

179 This observation was made by Venuti in the opening remarks of “Translation as Americanization,” a PEN World Voices virtual translation forum that took place on April 19, 2005, on <[www.wordswithoutborders.com](http://www.wordswithoutborders.com)>.

matter itself suffers transformations as it anticipates the translation norms of the target language and culture.

The aim of this analysis is not to exculpate *Lost in Translation* from its apparent fluency, or from failing to re-inscribe memorable particularism or specificity onto the Eastern European American immigrant narrative. Instead, I hope to provide a contextualized understanding of Hoffman's propensity toward inter-lingual domestication and a reading of her autobiography as palimpsestic translation. It is the authority of fluent English, Hoffman suggests, that lends both validity and visibility to the recounting of the journeys through which she has come to feel at home in the adoptive language. At the same time, her forays into the layers of the palimpsest "foreignize" the text by revealing the violence and displacement intrinsic to the translative processes through which such authority can be achieved.

As a trained reader and literary critic who seems almost painfully aware of the participatory role of the audience/readership in (re-)constructing the identity of the autobiographical self, Hoffman knows only too well that her own story will be perceived as representative of other stories, other immigration experiences, and read both synchronically and within the historical circumstances of her time. She anticipates and speaks to such potential readings in the parallel she draws between Antin's stories and her own and between the two autobiographies' contexts of production. Her demand for a historicized reading of *Lost in Translation*<sup>180</sup> is reiterated later in the narrative, in the form of meta-autobiographical commentary that

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<sup>180</sup> According to Venuti, this demand for a historicized reading represents an essential element in the approach to a text as translation.

conveys the pull and push of historical circumstance along or against those of private yearnings. Hoffman's historicizing of her own autobiography is made possible by the literary and critical milieu in which she writes, but also by the personal "location," very different from Antin's, from which she assembles and enunciates her story. Unlike Antin, who is writing *The Promised Land* from the position of a young immigrant claiming American citizenship through the validation she seeks to gain as an exemplary immigrant and fluent American writer, Hoffman is composing hers from a much more firmly established position. An American citizen with a degree from Rice and a Ph.D. in literature from Harvard, which she sees as her "certificate of full Americanization" [226], though she adds her Polish name, Wydra, to the signature, as well as the editor of *New York Times Book Review*, she has acquired a keen sense of intertextual inescapability and an informed insight into the configurations of the American literary landscape.<sup>181</sup> While both Antin and Hoffman show interest in what Spivak has declared a most crucial question in any discussion of multiculturalism, namely "Who will listen?" ("Questions of Multiculturalism" 194), Hoffman seems also preoccupied with "How will they listen?" She has garnered enough knowledge of literary history and critical practices to know that she cannot escape the scrutiny of a constantly diversifying audience who will read her story through and against both old and new paradigms, intent on constructing readings that cohere at all costs—or, in other words, that strive to translate even the inchoate into some coherent critical and/or theoretical discourse or another. Her training has made

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181 Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman, Melville, T.S. Eliot, James, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Salinger, Mailer, Updike, but also Antin, Nabokov, Kundera, Malamud, Roth, and Milosz provide key reference points in Hoffman's attempts to situate and understand her own voice within past and current, canonical and immigrant/ethnic literary traditions and paradigms.

her aware not only of the historicity of her own voice and autobiographical narrative but also, in Shirley Lim's words, of the fact that "differences in cultural contexts create significant differences between readers' expectations and authors' intentions, between the untrained readers' conventional, culture-bound responses and the trained readers' ethno-sensitive interpretations" (56). As Hoffman observes, "[i]n order to translate a language, or a text, without changing its meaning, one would have to transport its audience as well" (273).

### **“Mind the Gap”<sup>182</sup>: Translating the Cold War “Other”**

Translating herself and her experiences into the American language entails strenuous, never fully satisfying processes of linguistic, semantic, and cultural negotiation. There is no perfect linguistic equivalency that the narrator of *Lost in Translation* can employ to adequately translate her cultural particularity. Moreover, her attempts to translate herself for herself as well as for her American peers are complicated and hampered by the fact that, at least in a cultural sense, she has already been translated—through discourses of otherness that are both generic and specific, in a language that acknowledges differences but subsumes them to its own needs for semantic and cultural legibility and perfect fluency. From her American peers’ perspective, the immigrant “location” corresponds to a notion of permanent otherness that is constantly refueled by the particulars of each group that comes to inhabit it at one time or another. Thus, the narrator is “enough of a curiosity” to get her “fifteen minutes of fame so often accorded to Eastern European exotics before they are replaced by a new batch” (133).

In one instance, the narrator’s peers’ and teacher’s attempt to know her—or, more precisely, to know her as Other, as Polish Jew and as former Communist subject—becomes an interpellation, revealing the impossibilities of self-definition within such a problematic “location.” Poland is a square on the map, a distant spot, but also an area “coeval in [her] head with the dimensions of reality” (132), not exactly part of Russia, the center of the universe suddenly no longer only the center of the universe

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<sup>182</sup> 'Mind The Gap', the announcement reminding passengers of the open space between platform and carriage when a train arrives in the London underground system, has entered popular culture, becoming synonymous with London and Englishness.

but its periphery as well. Her exasperation turns vehement under the pressures of having to articulate an answer, especially since the “location” that corresponds to “being ‘an immigrant’” (133) asks that she embrace the “terrors of multiplicity” (164) and speak from a number of subject positions: as a displaced subject of a former Communist country, as an ethnic Pole, a Jew, and an aspiring American, with and without analytical distancing.

Her teacher’s definition of “communism” is bookish and abstract, while her classmates’ seems informed by Austin Powers. The ninth graders complement the teacher’s reductive “Communism is a political philosophy based on the idea that there is no private property and everything should be shared equally between everybody” (130) with “[I]sn’t Communism evil?” “Don’t they kill people over there?” Asked to describe what life under Communism is “really like,” the narrator bristles with frustration:

Really like? Really, I’ve never seen Communism walking down the street. Really, there is life there, waters, colors, even happiness. Yes, even happiness. People live their lives. How to explain? In my classmates’ minds I sense a vision of a dark, Plutonian realm in which a spectral citizenry walks bent under the yoke of oppression. The very word “Communism” seems to send a frisson up their spines, as if they were in a horror movie; it’s the demonic unknown. (132)

To their visions she retaliates by suggesting that freedom is useless when one behaves like a conformist, as they do (17). An already likely candidate for inadequate translation, given its abstract nature on one hand and its historical overdeterminacy on

the other, the term “communism” proves partially untranslatable. How can she express what communism was *really* like when such explanation relies on lived experience that, while resonating with historical implications, remains deeply personal? And as Hoffman intimates, there is no way to translate such multifariously-lived experience without essentializing or mistranslating. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that in the American imagination “communism” has already been translated. Steeped in the language of Cold War rhetoric, in which it equates “threat,” “enemy,” and “anti-democratic,” this translation has already lodged itself firmly within the national lexicon and consciousness. The Americans’ understanding of it is as abstract, narrow, and reified as Hoffman’s notion of capitalism before she came to the United States.

An exchange between the narrator and her American Friend captures the impossibility of finding a common ground and a language that can bridge the disparities between their views. After watching a Hungarian movie, they realize that they both like it, but for different reasons. These reasons, however, have nothing to do with taste and everything to do with politics, cultural differences, and lived/unlived experiences. The American Friend suggests that the movie is a comment on “how all of us can get co-opted by institutions” (205), while the narrator finds this extrapolation impertinent in its tendency to belittle, if not completely obliterate, the harsh realities of life under communism, and the particular forms they took in each country. The movie is about the Communist party in Hungary around 1948, and not about being co-opted by some American Time, Inc. (205), the narrator insists—a distinction that she finds absolutely essential but which her American Friend

interprets as provincial, jingoistic, and equally essentializing. What the American Friend takes from the movie is not an objective understanding of this Eastern European space, but pre-packaged knowledge that alerts her to the dangers posed by communism. Shown, presumably, to remind Americans of the insidious powers of communism, the movie works its scare tactics on the American Friend. To the narrator's comment that "people got imprisoned, tortured, hanged" over there, the American replies, "this is a Hungarian movie. You don't have to be loyal to all of Eastern Europe" (205). The American is accused of being blind *to* distinctions and of having turned the world into a "projection screen" (206) for supercilious ideas and theories, while the Eastern European is accused of being blinded *by* distinctions and of claiming monopoly over certain experiences, such as collaboration and institutionalization. (205-206).

Cold War politics obfuscates and informs translation here by prescribing the terms and paradigms to be used. For the narrator, to move beyond such fixed terms would mean to summon up history, personal experience, and a whole array of particular contexts, and to engage them in the hope of allowing *some* understanding, some insight into what communism was *really* like. Any attempts to define communism are doomed to essentialize, truncate, and deform the experience of living it. On the other hand, since the American Cold War myth about the uniformity of Eastern Europe deems "definition" a sufficient enough tool for approaching this space, the American Friend feels justified in employing it in her evaluation.

"The re-emergence of Eastern Europe used to be such a simple issue. The communists were gone, and everyone was free to be like us. Accustomed to seeing

those beyond the Iron Curtain as somehow homogenous, we expected them to become free uniformly as well” (xi) reads the tongue-in-cheek beginning of Philip Marsden’s review of Hoffman’s *Exit into History. A Journey Through the New Eastern Europe* (1993), the account of her journeys through Eastern Europe immediately after the demise of the communist regimes. When Hoffman sets out on her travels she is aware that the very notion of “Eastern Europe”<sup>183</sup> is to a large extent a fiction (xiii), and that this “fiction” has served as the Western world’s indispensable Other—“glimmering, craved, idealized,” or/as well as “dark, savage, and threatening” (x). To a large degree, *Exit into History* manages to dispel the dichotomy and its accompanying fictions even as it occasionally creates others, through the selective foregrounding of certain aspects of each country and of certain individual stories that appear to have representational status.

Interestingly enough, the narrative voice of *Exit* places Hoffman inside the “we” of the American narrative and at the fringes of the Eastern European one, just as the voice of *They Who Knock* had situated Antin within the authoritative discourse of the dominant power. When Hoffman declares that “Eastern Europe has served *our* (italics mine) needs” (x-xi) for a demonized/romanticized Other, the self-inclusive “we” (i.e., the West) may not be accidental. After all, “her” Poland had stayed “arrested” in her imagination, just as it had stayed “arrested” behind the Iron Curtain

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183 It is because of the already “fictional” nature of the notion of “Eastern Europe,” Hoffman suggests, that she is not too enthusiastic about engaging with current debates aimed at restoring the distinctions among Central Europe, (Central) Eastern Europe, and (Central) Southern Europe.

(x).<sup>184</sup> As she declares in the opening pages of *Exit into History*, Hoffman returns at the end of the Cold War because she wants to re-visit this part of her world before it starts transforming (and before her imaginary Ewa enters the new phase of her life), but also because for decades the Poland she had carried within her belonged to “childhood fantasies and projections” (x). As she insists on a number of occasions, the memory and language of her Polish life belong to a space of intimacy and organic unity that resist being co-opted into her American self. Insofar this American self is a *public* self that requires distancing and produces the autobiographical “personage” (270), the “Polish” resistance is also a resistance to the very act of autobiography.

For Hoffman, just as for Antin, the autobiographical space lends itself to the immigrant in the form of a public place, one layered with “acquired voices” (275) and inescapable “distances” (267). Hoffman sees her public self as her “most American thing” (251), while her private self remains for a long time inseparable from her Polish past. In America, “[t]he large facts of geographic distances and the smaller facts of the distances between apartments and offices and houses inform the most intimate distances between us,” the narrator observes, adding that “[i]n the distended and foreshortened perspectives of the American spaces, others tend to become puzzling Others—and so do our own selves, which grow in strangeness and uncertainty in direct proportion to the opaqueness of those around us” (267). Distance is the fulcrum on which the autobiographizing of the immigrant experience relies, not

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184 To think of Poland as/in terms of “Eastern Europe” is to step outside its realities and translate it into the language of Western perceptions, since Polish people (living in Poland) would most likely identify themselves as Poles, not as Eastern Europeans. Like most exonyms — such as “Dracula,” of whom I had heard for the first time in the West, though I am familiar with Vlad the Impaler — “Eastern Europe” is a “free” translation of an original that resists facile equivalency.

so much by choice as by lack of alternatives. The distancing produces self-alienation, and it is precisely this self-alienation, which she later associates also with self-control (269), that urges the immigrant to self-analyze and recount her/his story. Because the narrator's mother "stays close to herself, as she stays close to home," thus resisting self-alienation, she pays the price of not being able to write her autobiography: "She can only be herself; (...) She doesn't see herself as a personage; she's not someone who tells herself her own biography" (270). When the daughter tells her to defy her despondency by taking control of her feelings, her mother replies, mystified, "What do you mean? (...) How can I do that? They are my feelings" (269). The daughter speaks from the position of a subjectivity that has been partially translated from Polish and partially constructed directly in English and within the American culture. Her mother has stayed close to her Polish "original." When the narrator tries to see herself from both sides, she feels caught "between stories, between the kinds of story we tell ourselves about ourselves" (268). In the Polish story, fate is interconnected with circumstance, and in the American one with character. "Between the two stories and two vocabularies," she observes, "there's a vast alteration in the diagram of the psyche and the relationship to inner life" (269).

To see yourself as a personage, the way Hoffman does and her mother doesn't, means to select from the chaotic yet familiar array that constitutes your life those elements that can be translated into a choate story or narrative. Yet even if perfectly fluent, or rather especially when perfectly fluent, such a translation of fragmentation into coherence is always limited and limiting, an act of partial expropriation. It bridges the self with its literary projection (the personage), and may

bring them in a dialogical relation, but it cannot convey the difference that resists translation, and cannot translate the split itself. What we read is that which has been successfully translated; the rest has been made inaccessible or partially inaccessible by the non-democratic powers of translation, by its ability to disregard or subsume difference and simultaneously eliminate the traces of its actions.

It follows that the price of *Lost in Translation*, whose narrator does see herself as a personage, is self-imposed alienation and partial self-betrayal. Although Hoffman never claims, like Antin, that she is “absolutely other than the person whose story [she has] to tell”(1), she alludes to the possibility of a split not only between narrator and author, which literary conventions compel us to acknowledge anyway, but also within the registers of the first person narrative voice. When, on their first day of school, she and her sister Alina are re-named—Eva and Elaine—and their last name, Wydra, mispronounced, “a small, seismic mental shift” (105) takes place, making them strangers to themselves. The translation of their name, like most translations, is an imitation, an inexact reflection of their being that *refers* to them the way “identification tags” (105) do, but fails to *be* them.

The gap that opens when Hoffman’s name is translated into English will never close up and she will never have only one name again (272), but as Polish gradually turns into “the language of an untranslatable past” (120), the Polish Ewa becomes trapped in it. The Polish Ewa of Eva’s later imaginings—that is, the projection of who Ewa would be over the years, had she stayed in Poland—is not the ghost who often comes to haunt the protagonist in ethnic texts, or the disturbing double or divided self of German romanticism, but an interlocutor engaged in the narrator’s efforts to

translate backwards, into Polish, and into an alternative future. More than a decade after Hoffman's arrival to the States, the American Eva and imaginary Polish Ewa literally still hold council, bringing each world that informs them into conversation.

Yet to fabricate a current "Ewa" out of the memories of a much younger one and through the lenses of an already partially Americanized Eva is a doomed, if inescapable project. After a while, the American Eva starts losing track of her Polish twin though the latter will remain, paradoxically, the "more real" one (121). "In a few years, I'll have no idea what her hairdo would have been like" (120), she muses, perhaps half-jokingly, though it is the loss of such small details that discontinues the process of translation. When, back in Cracow, eighteen years after her departure, Hoffman faces the question of what she would have become had she remained here, she can only construct an answer using the "basic blocks of a hypothetical history" (240). Based on what she remembers of her Polish past, she tries to project her future and translate it within the frame of culture and the particular circumstances of the eighteen years she has been absent, but concludes that she cannot "create a real out of a conditional history" (241). Just how impossible such a projecting translation is she doesn't find out till she returns to Eastern Europe after the fall of communism. Here she reads the lives of friends and relatives left behind as clues to her own virtual life. However, despite numerous attempts, she finds it impossible to reconstruct a life out of almost thirty years of *unlived* communism and from a position outside the "meta-narrative," as she dubs the communist dictatorship that ended in 1989. From her position of first-world privilege, and, one may argue, from within the American

“meta-narrative,”<sup>185</sup> she would have to be able to imagine herself as Other, and then translate this otherness into a language (Polish) that, although perhaps still deeply familiar, has lost its powers of signification.

Early in her new life in a new language, the narrator seems to accept the divide between the American Eva-in-the-making (to whom she refers as “I”), and the imagined Polish Ewa (to whom she refers as “you”) whose life trajectory remains invisible and unpredictable behind the Iron Curtain and within the distancing tensions of the Cold War. Initially, “you” is reserved for the Polish self alone but then, for a while, Hoffman relinquishes the first person pronoun altogether, choosing to refer to herself as “you” (121). This “you” comprises a self that both reflects and refracts the “I” and is a lot more elusive in its embodiment of sameness and difference than “she” would be. At the same time, to refer to oneself as “you” is to interpellate the self under construction—which is, in this particular case, one in the process of being translated into a new language and new culture. Unlike the “you” designating her Polish double, this second “you” produces a distance indicative of a subjectivity that cannot yet be fully translated in English.<sup>186</sup> This “you” may be read also as a direct address to the American reader who is being challenged to experience his/her own otherness and to live, with Hoffman, the tensions and joys of multiple identification.

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185 Like Antin, Hoffman questions at times the mythological narratives and fictions that have produced an America-as-Virgin/Promised-Land and of Americans-as-chosen-people, but fashions her own story of Americanization along these coordinates.

186 In a comparative analysis of mirrors and mirroring in Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation* and Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, Judith Oster contends that it could be said of Kingston, though not of Hoffman, that the conventions of her culture may have prevented her from asserting herself as “I” (73). While partially true, this argument suffers from cultural relativism.

The “I-as-you” draws attention to the fact that the construction of the immigrant “I” is a personal as well as a collaborative effort between the immigrant and America.

The “you” morphs into “I” at the expense of self-alienation, a price Hoffman has to pay not only for autobiographizing her life and thus creating a “personage” out of the details and intimacies of her life, but for becoming American. Since her imagined community of the New World is created in the English language and can only be inhabited through language, she has no choice but to enunciate her story in only one of the languages that define her. She believes she can become one with the nation if she loses her accent and feels the language on her tongue as if it were her own — or, in other words, if she learns to speak and think in English as if it were her native tongue. And this entails a lot more than finding perfect linguistic and semantic equivalents for her Polish thoughts and the new, American ones.

## Translating Cultural Negative Capabilities

Cultural discrepancies and asymmetries bring their own problematics to the process of translation, but at a more immediate level it is the speech itself, the very enunciation of sounds, words, and full sentences, that demands perfect polishing. This Hoffman resolves by insinuating herself in the interstices of the English language to make it her own. She wants English's distinctive music, its harmonies and discords, so she finds herself listening to people speaking this "foreign tongue, English" (123) to decipher the "degree of their ease or disease, the extent of authority that shapes the rhythms of their speech" in whatever dialect or variant of language they use (123-24). She becomes obsessed with words and starts gathering them, "like a squirrel saving nuts for winter" (216). She cannot live forever "in a windy, unfurnished imagination," she decides, so she struggles "to accumulate a thickness and weight of words" (217). She "swallows" words and "hunger[s] for more" (216). At times, her voice, burdened with the newness and alienness of these words, "betrays [her], buckles, rasps, refuses to go on" (217), shifting location in her throat, emerging "tight and chocked" (218). Other times, invaded by the voices of others which ricochet within her, some sticking to her ribs (220), she feels like a "silent ventriloquist" (220). These descriptions, with their implications of linguistic cannibalism and ventriloquism,<sup>187</sup> convey the consuming and subsuming, transformative and traumatic

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<sup>187</sup> Translators have been often associated with ventriloquists, though the parallel does not do justice to their work. "The translator is no stand-in or ventriloquist for the foreign author," Venuti argues, "but a resourceful imitator who rewrites the original to appeal to another audience in a different language and culture" ("How to Read a Translation"). Immigrant autobiographers, on the other hand, engage in the process of ventriloquising their life when their enunciation, like Hoffman's, emerges from an interior location where original and "translated" text merge and original and target languages vie for precedence.

aspects of the translation activity, which is presented as almost having a life of its own. However, it is in the cultural idiom, in phrases such as “‘Hair of the dog that bit me’ (...), ‘pork-barreling’ (...), ‘He swallowed it hook, line, and sinker’” (217), that the “cultural sensibility” of America is most vivid, and so Hoffman takes great pains to feel at home in such unfamiliar and often incomprehensible lexical clusters.

Years later, once the English language has “entered [her] body” and “incorporated itself in the softest tissue of [her] being”<sup>188</sup> (245), she can call her lover “Darling,” “my dear,” and feel the words “brimming with the motions of [her] desire,” “curv[ing] themselves within [her] mouth to the complex music of tenderness” (245). Her desire for perfect translation might be a longing for a better understanding of language in general, but it is also a yearning for a perfectly domesticated translation that comprises the maximum amount of authority and power. “Linguistic dispossession is a sufficient motive for violence, for it is close to the dispossession of one’s self” (124), the narrator essays, determined to never abandon her “immigrant rage” (203) to the frustrations and impotence of inarticulateness. She has become only too familiar with this frustration, her own as well as others’. She hears it in the repetitive, inarticulate outburst of anger firing almost nightly on the street below her New York apartment, in which she glimpses “infuriated beating[s] against wordlessness, against the incapacity to make oneself understood, seen” (124). And she had experienced it herself when, for a while, Polish started slipping away because it did not correspond to the new realities, and English hadn’t yet become

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188 The image suggests, of course, thorough assimilation of English, yet it does so in a language that reveals the abusive and parasitic aspects of the process.

more than a mere linguistic crutch. She experiences an “acute sense of dislocation and the equally acute challenge of having to invent a place and an identity without the traditional support” (197). Later, the thought that she might be missing parts of the language induces “a small panic,” as if “such gaps were missing parts of the world or [her] mind—as if the totality of the world and mind were coeval with the totality of language” (217). The sense of losing language, she declares in an interview with Harry Kreisler, was a very potent lesson in the importance of mastering it. Significantly, the first word Ewa understands in English is “Shuddup,” its dramatic injunction too overwhelming not to lodge itself within her and not to instigate an urgent desire to rebel.<sup>189</sup>

One of the most significant discoveries that the narrator’s engagement in the activity of translation induces is that language is *more* and *less* than the imagined community of the nation. Instead of lending coherence to her desires for unity and belonging, language makes her aware of the insurmountable divides within herself and the impossibility of belonging to the American national narrative outside the parameters of fluent translation.<sup>190</sup> In the diary the narrator receives for her birthday, she starts writing in English, and it is not emotion she records, but “thoughts”

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189 This recalls the scene in Michael Gold’s *Jews Without Money* (1930) in which a female teacher calls Mike a “little kike” and washes his mouth with (non-kosher) soap for having cursed. Her attempt to silence and de-ethnicize Mike make him only more aware of the potential and power of language.

190 Here Hoffman both illustrates and complicates Bhabha’s model of the binary split between the pedagogical imperative, which makes English sole articulator of the nationalist pedagogy, and the performative ability of the immigrant subject to disrupt the coherence of hegemonic English. See Bhabha 145.

(121).<sup>191</sup> She learns English through writing, and, in turn, writing gives her “a written self” (121). This “written self,” enunciated in her “public language” but also in what is supposed to be “the solitude of [a] most private act” (121), is and is not she. The writing means to capture the person the narrator would have grown into in Poland and in Polish. In other words, it means to translate what the narrator perceives as her Polish subjectivity into the English language, and construct a renewed self that is continuous with her Polish one. What emerges, however, is an impersonal self that attests to the impossibility of anticipating such development and of translating such continuity, especially when the target language has not yet acquired the registers of interior, private dictions.

What writing “gives” her, therefore, is a self born out of approximate equivalencies, a construct that exists more in the abstract than in the world (121). “Refracted through the double distance of English and writing,” the narrator notes, this “English self” becomes “oddly objective; more than anything, it perceives” (121). “When I write,” the narrator declares, “I have a real existence that takes place midway between me and the sphere of artifice, art, pure language” (121). For a while, this “impersonal self” becomes “the truest thing about [her]” (121). It is in the voice of this refracted self, which she calls her “cultural negative capability” (121) and which carries the traces of resistance to first person singular, that *Lost in Translation* reaches us. Its tonal self-assuredness, invigorating optimism, and agile juggling of

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<sup>191</sup> “I set down my reflections on the ugliness of wrestling, on the elegance of Mozart, and on how Dostoyevsky puts me in mind of El Greco” (121).

personal detail disguise dialogic concerns that critics like Fachinger are looking for and cannot see.<sup>192</sup>

As a literature student at Rice, the narrator excels in the “laboratory” of New Criticism, which requires little knowledge outside the text, “no privileged acquaintance with culture, no aristocratic, proprietorial intimacies of connoisseurship” (183). “An alienated way of reading meant for people who are aliens in the country of literature,” New Criticism accommodates her own alienness without augmenting it (183). She becomes an expert in the “business” (182) of symbolic patterns and recurring motifs and in detecting irony and paradox (182), and feels the welcome of “the democratizing power of literature” (183). Her success as a critic of literature at Rice, and then Harvard, happens, ironically, because of the “verbally deprived condition” (181) which allows her to avoid getting stuck in detail, her facile juggling of the swiftly acquired academic discourse, and the “immigrant” perspective she brings to the text. She “triangulates” to her private criteria and her private passions, and “from the oblique angle of [her] estrangement” (183) she garners insights that remain inaccessible to her fellow students. Hoffman’s examples of such readings reveal the workings of interpretation as translation, and the latter’s imbrications with cultural experiences “born out of the intersections of language, place, and self” (Robinson 24). That this Polish immigrant would be struck by Holden Caulfield’s immaturity and end up chastising him for his “false and coy naiveté” tells,

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192 Fachinger claims that Hoffman simply “interrupts biographical chapters with essayistic meditations on the difficulty of living ‘between’ two languages and her struggle to achieve fluency in English” (116), but misses the significance of these “interruptions.” They constitute pivotal concerns, the real fulcrums of Hoffman’s autobiography, while also functioning as means of destabilizing the autobiographical conventions.

of course, much more about the disruptions that take place at the junction of this canonical American text and the narrator's past cultural experiences than it does about Salinger's fictional work.<sup>193</sup> In this instance, Hoffman plays the role of an interpreter as translator of the cultural difference instantiated by *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Nonetheless, though literature brings her closer to an understanding of the American imaginary, it does not provide her with the particulars that would allow her to "translate backwards" (184), into the reality of America. Not unlike many other literary translators who preserve only the overall spirit or rhythm of an original text,<sup>194</sup> American literature manages to translate only America's "general spirit: the spirit, precisely, of alienness, of a continent and a culture still new and uncozy, and a vision that turns philosophical or tortured from confronting an unworded world" (184). "Mimesis," the narrator remarks, seems to work in only one direction, with life "refus[ing] conveniently to mirror the art in which it's seemingly mirrored" (184).<sup>195</sup>

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193 When I first read *The Catcher in the Rye*, at the age of sixteen and while a student in Romania, I had a very similar interpretation, though my opprobrium was mixed with a helpless envy for Holden's puerile idealism. Read in light of the communist ideology forced upon us at the time, he was nothing more than a societal parasite, a loser in need of serious reformation. The socialist education system made it impossible for a sixteen year old to waddle in reveries or not know, already, the shape his/her future would take, so I obviously coveted Holden's luck. The presence of Salinger's book on our school curriculum may be baffling, especially since, had Salinger been Romanian and Holden a Romanian teen, the author would have been sentenced to house arrest and his work confiscated and probably publicly burned. However, *The Catcher in the Rye*, like the popular show "Dallas" (which was, for the most part, the only view of American life we were allowed), were meant to be used as anti-capitalist and anti-American propaganda. Ironically, instead of disclosing the corrupted or/and vacuous core of the American Dream, as supposed to, they made it only more desirable.

194 These translations are often referred to as "free" (as opposed to "faithful") translations. The "original," in this case, is the unmediated and unworded reality of America.

195 Ha Jin's words on the discrepancy between academic, "learned" English and "real" English add another insight into the difficulties of transitioning from immigrant English to American English. "To write poetry and fiction in English, I had to relearn the language, since I had studied mainly academic English before. It was difficult, and sometimes a word or a phrase

This rupture between literature and reality parallels the one occurring in the process of translation, between Polish, which becomes the language of hypothetical reality and thus of the imaginary, and English, the language of everyday life, but also the language from which translation needs to proceed. *Lost in Translation* is the product of an arduous and taxing endeavor to make such “translation backwards” possible. That the narrator ends up enlisting the help of a shrink is an irony that is not lost on her—she tells her mother it must mean that she has “arrived” (267) and now finally belongs to the American middle class, but then confesses that this therapy is at least in part “translation therapy” (271), and the “talking cure a second-language cure” (271). The seething anger with which she approaches her shrink, demanding “an American cure” for her “American disease,” which she describes as “anomie, loneliness, emotional repression, and excessive self-consciousness” (268), is anger at the sense of displacement brought about by the acquisition of English. She had wanted English to become the language of interiority, but had not expected it to transform this interior so radically in the process. It is English, with its vocabulary of self-analysis and peculiar relationship to one’s inner life, that enables her to gain self-control, self-confidence, ambition, a sense of purpose, and detachment (270), traits that she sees as marks of her Americanness, but English does so at a price she can only suspect. What she knows in English, it seems, overwrites what she knows in Polish; the reverse of the inarticulateness which she feared earlier may be an

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would take me a few weeks to get right. I had begun to learn English at the age of twenty-one, so I wasn’t sure whether I could write in English” (*Stories* 79). Ha Jin mentions Nabokov and Conrad as two models of such successful transitioning, but forgets that both had become multilingual much earlier than at the age of twenty-one.

impeccable, opaque articulateness. Underneath the overpowering monologue of English, Polish eventually becomes “a buzz, as of countless words compressed into an electric blur moving along a telephone wire” (272).

Hoffman declares herself unable to delight in each language’s potential to determine certain thoughts or emotions but not others, for such delight would defer the possibility of achieving coherence. Self-translation consequently leads her into “translation therapy” and this in turn takes the form of a project of “translating backwards” (271):

The way to jump over my Great Divide is to crawl backward over it in English. It’s only when I retell my whole story, back to the beginning, and from the beginning onward, in one language, that I can reconcile the voices within me with each other; it is only then that the person who judges the voices and tells the stories begins to emerge. (272)

Hoffman suggests that besides constituting a prerequisite for Americanization, the need for a fluent, suturing translation responds to internal necessities. This description of the project—whose outcome, we assume, is *Lost in Translation*—appears in the very last pages of the book, after the “crawling backward” over the “Great Divide” has been successfully accomplished. Once again, the meta-commentary insists on the difficulties of this translation project while also erasing most of its traces. Hoffman may well be aware that translation transports the original to a place from which it cannot be de-translated, or translated back into the original. The “American cure” provides her with a language of introspection and self-analysis that can help her articulate this painful knowledge, but cannot help her recuperate the loss. “If I tried

talking to myself in my native tongue, it would be a stumbling conversation indeed, interlaced with English expressions,” she observes, adding, a page later, that “Polish insights cannot be regained in their purity; there’s something I know in English too” (273). Her Polish is now “infiltrated, permeated, and inflected by the English in [her] head” (273). The effects of her bilingualism are both crippling and enhancing, since “[e]ach language modifies the other, crossbreeds with it, fertilizes it,” but also “makes the other relative” (273). Only a page earlier the narrator had announced that the voice emerging from the process of translating backwards will have sutured the splits and quieted the contradictory voices, reaching the onset of a much desired coherence. Thus, when in her “translation therapy” she travels back and forth over the rifts, it is not so she could heal them, but to see that the “I—one person, first-person singular” has been on both sides (273).

### **Double-voiced in-betweenness and bicultural triangulations**

This buoyant, affirmative spirit that claims to have conquered the Great Divide should be taken with a grain of salt. The two-page comments that supposedly substantiate this self-proclaimed “thesis” confound rather than convince. They suggest that the suturing has been achieved through painful compromises, through sins of deletion and omission, and at the expense of irrecoverable losses. At times, the comments go as far as to contradict the existence of a unified voice: “I am the sum of my languages,” the narrator announces, “though perhaps I tend to be more aware than most of the fractures between them, and of the building blocks” (273). When the fissures pain her, they make her feel alive (273). “Everything comes together, everything I love, as in the fantasies of my childhood; I am the sum of my parts” (226) she had announced, triumphantly, following her graduation from Harvard,<sup>196</sup> only to declare herself, a few paragraphs later, “gripped by fear” and only able to perceive “the cracks between the parts” (227).<sup>197</sup>

Here, as well as elsewhere, the narrative accommodates contradictions, ambiguity, and inconclusiveness,<sup>198</sup> as if to impress that *this* is the only truthful site

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196 Significantly, the linguistic reconciliation precedes the one taking place at the level of self-hood.

197 This recalls the scene in Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep* in which David keeps catching sight of himself in the street windows. He pretends that when the reflection disappears between windows, thus making him invisible to himself, he is no more (377-79). At other times, however, he urges himself, “Be two Davys.”

198 In the context of her manifest concern with prescriptive readings, as captured in her assault on New Criticism, this leaning toward dissonance and double register may also be read as a conscious effort to pre-empt stale or fixed interpretations of her work. However, to say that Hoffman’s chromatic narrative is speckled with red herrings would be an exaggeration. She seems a lot less interested in subversive diversions than she is in ensuring that the narrative reflects as truthfully as possible the contradictory and confounding aspects of any attempt at perfect translation.

of enunciation, the only place from which the immigrant can voice her story. This voice performs a cleaving of sorts, splitting the narrative and holding it together with the authority bestowed only to unaccented, fluent dictions. Being an immigrant is “a sort of location in itself—and sometimes a highly advantageous one at that” (133), she feels at the beginning of her life in the New World. From the immigrant’s perspective, this “location” is neither center, nor margin. Here is where binaries collapse, and reference points do “flickering dance[s]” (132), shifting and incessantly re-organizing the temporal and spatial coordinates that assist in the process of identification. Such instability is both disconcerting and liberating, its polarizing effect leading to endless processes of triangulation. Significantly, when asked by an editor where she learned how to be a critic, the narrator blurts out “Harvard,” but then realizes it is from being an immigrant, and from the “bicultural triangulations” that come with such status (226-7).

“From now on,” Hoffman had announced before the middle section, “Exile,” segued into “The New World,” “I’ll be made, like a mosaic, of fragments — and my consciousness of them. It is *only* in that *observing consciousness* (italics mine) that I remain, after all, an immigrant” (164). The narrator tries to balance the acute awareness of unattainable unity with the pleasures of inhabiting the spaces between languages and between her own constitutive fragments. The fissures, fractures, cracks, gaps, holes to which she refers on numerous occasions puncture the narrative, offsetting the autobiography’s strenuous thrust toward seamlessness and opening a space of in-betweenness that instantiates the immigrant locus *per se*. It is through

these holes, which she compares to Looking Glass portals, that the narrator can travel below the surface of her own narrative. In fact, direct references to Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* appear more than once, announcing brief descents into the layers of the palimpsest. The narrative voice, however, grants very limited insight into these "underwritten," sub-textual worlds, suggesting that their liminal status is "the price of emigration, as of any radical discontinuity" (242). Once, having stepped through the Looking Glass in the company of her Polish friend Marek, the narrator discovers a place "where the past regains a plausible reality" (226), as memories move out of the storage of the imaginary and into the realm of articulation.

It is in its discussions of in-betweenness that Hoffman's narrative best captures the problematics of translation. This suspended state of identification, when the narrator's Polish has atrophied, its words no longer coeval with experience, and English has not lodged itself in the layers of her psyche (107), corresponds to the borderline moment when translation reveals itself as rupture, as violence. At the risk of being reductive, I would argue that this moment captures the immigrant conditions at its "rawest," before it morphs into an identity that allows definitions purporting perfect assimilation or multiple/trans-identification. For Hoffman, this is the moment when her interior language collapses and her experiences fall "through a black hole," taking her with them (108). And in this "dark and empty state"—portal and ante-chamber to Wonderland—she is neither Polish nor American, ceasing for a while to exist (108). She "can't afford to look back" and "can't figure out how to look forward" (116). "Betwixt and between," she is "stuck and time is stuck within [her]" (116). "The welling up of absence" (115) which becomes, at this time, her leading

activity, accrues incongruous, almost clashing connotations, redefining the space of in-betweenness as gestation, as process, but also as a space of infinite loss. Caught in the active movement of “welling up,” “absence” becomes something other than lack, something on the verge of becoming, although its substance and contours remain indefinite for now. Described as “pregnancy” but also “phantom pain,” as “private heaviness” but also “pregnancy without the possibility of birth” (115), this absence seems to correspond to the moment when both realities—of the source and target language—resist representation, rendering the “carrying over” performed in the act of translation impossible. The gendering of this moment of thwarted potency speaks of the impossibility of translating the immigrant female body in the language and expectations of the target culture. Significantly, in Hoffman’s *Promised Land* inscriptions of female subjectivity are almost as rare and inconspicuous as they had been in Antin’s more than half a century earlier.

Still a girl when she left Poland, she is now a woman, but the transformation of one into the other has been interrupted and complicated by a considerable shift in cultural and linguistic referents. She therefore doesn’t understand how she could possibly extract from herself what she’s been (115), since her past does not yet exist in English. Though experienced as stasis, this moment of complete dislocation is transformative. It marks the point after which translating herself in the language of America will advance along a slightly different vector: one that will have to incorporate Poland, her Polish past, and the Polish language itself. Ironically though, as she acquires, over the years, the diction necessary to perform the translation, Poland continues to recede into the past, and so does the narrator’s Polish life, the

“original text” from which such translation would have to proceed. Access to this “original” becomes increasingly mediated and partially distorted by the altering forces of time, memory, and imagination. Like many immigrants, she is to a large extent paralyzed by nostalgia, which in her case takes the specific, untranslatable form of *teşknota*. When Hoffman goes back to Cracow, eighteen years after she arrives in the States, she realizes that Poland is only a plane ride from the East Coast, and that “the distended, uncrossable, otherworldly distance [she] had created had been the immensurable length of loss and longing: a distance of the imagination” (241).

It is from this space of in-betweenness that the narrator of *Lost in Translation* claims fragmentation, but also gives us coherence; claims an antipodean position from Antin’s story of triumph, but situates her own professional and spiritual success very much in its vicinity; distrusts language, but comes to feel perfectly at home in it; and sees herself at once inside the adopted culture and outside it, assimilated though partially inassimilable.<sup>199</sup> This multiple-positioning is symptomatic of what Bakhtin has called hybridization—that is, “the mixing, within a single concrete utterance, of two or more different linguistic consciousnesses, often widely separated in time and social space” (429), and of Bakhtin’s notion of double-voice—that is, “another’s speech in another’s language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way,” and situated in an “internally dialogized relationship” (324). The two—or maybe three, though references to Yiddish are fairly sparse—different linguistic

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<sup>199</sup> According to Bergland, this multiple positioning, which she sees as germane to the ethnic/ immigrant autobiography, “enables us to see the concrete effects of multiple discourses in the culture, and thus permit a better understanding of cultural construction of difference” (157).

consciousnesses that work together toward constructing the autobiographizing voice of *Lost in Translation* achieve hybridization, though the language of the telling itself does little to exemplify this hybridity. In a comparative essay on Eva Hoffman and Richard Rodriguez, Petra Fachinger dismisses the existence of double-voicedness and hybridization in Hoffman's work, contending that the various dichotomies proliferating in *Lost in Translation*, such as between collective and individual self-identification, public and private selves, Old World and New World, or masculine and feminine, entertain no dialogical relationship. While true that Hoffman does not seem particularly interested in "dialogizing the dominant language by self-consciously resorting to 'ethnic form and language'" (Fachinger 112), this is because *Lost in Translation* is not an "ethnic autobiography," as Fachinger presumes, but an American *immigrant* autobiography concerned primarily, as the name suggests, with an *immigrant's* transformations in, and transformative relationship with, America.

While also true that Hoffman does not "refract" the conventional discourse by "rewriting (...) the autobiographical conventions" (Fachinger 112), she does question them — though perhaps too subtly to qualify, from Fachinger's perspective, as "double-voice." Moreover, it is not so much in its relation to autobiographical conventions that *Lost in Translation* manifests its hybridity and doubleness but in the dialogized tensions between various private and public languages, especially as they lend themselves to the process of translation, along the coordinates of the translatable or the untranslatable, the already translated or the awaiting-to-be-translated.

The learned English, which the narrator acquires from the top down, through literature and mimic, secures her an entrance into the folds of American literary

citizenship, but does not make her feel fully at home or one with herself. To the already existing temporal and spatial distance from the place of emigration in which the immigrant finds herself/himself, America imposes its own aggregates of cultural and psychological strategies of distancing. The very concept of “Culture,” which has become indeed so indispensable to our current critical and theoretical discourses, appears to the young Hoffman alien in its pervasiveness and unpredictable manifestations. “The Culture” has become, in America,

a curious monster, a thing that throbs and vibrates out there and bellows. Everyone I know measures the Culture, gauges it, diagnoses it all the time, because, after all, the monster might enter the living room, and so it’s important to be on the lookout. The culture is becoming more conservative, more progressive, more celebrity obsessed, more materialistic, more sentimental. Each shift is carefully observed; the beast may, after all, lurch or bite, or co-opt us, make us more like itself, a graceless, lumpish, philistine things. The Culture is a dangerous seducer; one must resist its pull. (220-21)

The metaphor-making, the personification, the metonymic sweep point to the distance between narrator and the lived realities of such Culture. Interpretative figures of speech, Smith argues, are always “cast in language and always motivated by cultural expectations, habits, and systems of interpretation pressing on [the autobiographer] at the scene of writing” (*Poetics* 47). These “cultural scripts of signification,” she further argues, “reflect privileged stories and character types that the prevailing culture, through its discourse, names as ‘real’ and therefore ‘readable’” (*Poetics* 47).

Smith's assessment accurately describes the process of translating oneself into a new language and culture as well. Hoffman's figurative language is an attempt at familiarizing the unfamiliar, a strategy for containing and understanding the American concept of Culture. To translate Culture into a seducer-monster means also to engage in a reductive, though necessary, process of essentializing.

The American concept of Culture, the narrator suggests, demands translation in ways in which the Polish one did not, for American life itself seems to be patched together of cultural matters. "Gimme a break," the narrator says to a pushy vendor, and upon further analysis the phrase—just like other, interior "conversations," such as about conducting one's career, eating without getting contaminated, or dealing with passive-aggressive lovers (221)—discloses the underlying sovereignty of the Culture. She remarks, half-jokingly, that perhaps "behind [her] back and while [she] wasn't looking [she] acquired a second unconscious, an American one, made up of diverse cultural matter" (221).

It is a first world privilege, Hoffman suggests, to indulge in self-consciously observing Culture's centrifugal forces and fashions. Hoffman does not say it, but this Culture, and its implicit injunction that one be always aware of culture as Culture delineate a Western, Eurocentric space of articulation. That here culture turns into counter-culture and counterculture back into culture comes as no surprise, though this false sense of decentralization places the very notion of resistance in a position of inescapable relativity. Immigrants remain trapped in ethnocentric cultural discourses even as they are attempting to disrupt them. In the Old World, Hoffman had turned her clearly assigned otherness (as Jew and female) and the equally clearly defined

Soviet network of rules and terrors into sources of personal strength. Eating Jewish bread, refusing to say her prayer at school, or to weep with the others at the death of Stalin, were markers of difference but also acts of resistance and transgression that she experienced as self-defining. Thrown into the throes of post-modern ethnocentric America, she stumbles upon boundaries that are constantly shifting and therefore are more difficult to manage and/or transgress. Lost between the two systems' networks, she falls "out of the net of meaning into the weightlessness of chaos" (151).

Americans' obsession with culture branches into a disconcerting concern with identity. The pervasiveness of identity-talk in both formal and informal circumstances determines the terms in which one is to view and report or record her life. Yet such a concern is itself a cultural matter and an expression of Americans' ontological relation to the American space. In Polish, the narrator observes, the "human territory" is covered by "observation and gossip" (263), and "identity" is not "a category of daily thought, not an entity etched in [one's] mind in high relief" that calls for "systematic analysis" and may bring about "self-reform" (263). Not only is the "internal landscape (...) arranged in different formations in America" (263) than it was in Poland but, she notes, the very desire to glimpse at such interior landscape borders on the incomprehensible and untranslatable. She remarks that her American friends scrutinize "the vicissitudes of their identity very carefully: now it's firm, now it's dissolving, now it's going thorough flux and change," seeing themselves as "pilgrims of internal progress, heroes and heroines in a psychic drama," whereas for her Polish friends identity is "something one simply has" (263), something that does not require translation in the language of psychoanalysis. When her Polish friends

listen to Americans' analytic musings in which "everything needs to be explained, from the ground up, to [one]self and to others" (264), "they think they're being told nothing. To them, this is not self-revelation but the speech of specters, of smoke" (264).<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Significantly, as the narrative progresses, stories of cultural difference are displaced onto "other" Polish subjects. Does the narrator herself think of American self-analysis as "speech of specters, of smoke" as well? The voice is refracted once again, this time in the language of other, often invisible, characters. The narrator, we are to recall, has retreated into the observant, written self the English language has carved for her.

### **Cultural untranslatability: hypothetical equivalencies**

Inter-lingual translation, even when aided by intra-lingual translation in the form of detailing the particulars of a certain emotion or trait with the purpose of clarification, does not suffice. Self-narrating one's immigrant life requires inter-semiotic/inter-systemic and hermeneutical translation—more specifically, the translation of one system or set of cultural terms into another, as well as the translation of methodologies and strategies necessary for approaching and understanding each cultural system. “A culture talks most about what most bothers it,” notes Hoffman, remarking that Poles talk compulsively about the Russians and their politics, while Americans worry incessantly about who they are (264). Cultural differences often forestall the possibility of perfect, or near-perfect, translation, even when linguistic equivalency is readily available. To simply translate what Poles and Americans each say is to reveal very little about the significance of their utterance. Such literal translation would fail to convey the cultural particularities that inform and shape what they each have to say. The incommensurability of Polish and (American) English maps out cultural differences whose resistance to translation constitutes the core drama of the narrator's transformations in America. In a foreignizing approach, such resistance would be reflected in the language of the narration itself, in the form of untranslated idiom, syntax and diction reproducing the rhythms of the original, and footnotes detailing the difficulty or impossibility of achieving equivalency. Though the narrator claims polyglot fashioning (“I am the sum of my languages” [273]), the voice makes audible little besides perfect English. Spoken about, multilingualism

does not materialize in the language that seems to claim it. Moreover, with the exception of “teşknota,” which disrupts the fluency of English in more than one occasion (4, 20, 28, 91,115), the few other Polish words, such as “dorozhkas” (10), “kogelmogel” (50), “recepta” (50), “banieczki” (50), and “polot” (71), all appear in “Paradise,” the first, “Polish” section of the book.<sup>201</sup> These Polish words point to a *scription inferior* of the palimpsest, a latent “original” from which *Lost in Translation* could and to an extent does emerge, through processes of triangulation and subsequent translation. On the other hand, although Hoffman does not destabilize the fluency of her English with many such “untidy” traces, she often foregrounds the kind of additional commentary foreignizing approaches advocate.

Two Polish words, “teşknota,” and “polot,” benefit most thorough explanations: “teşknota,” with its connotations of nostalgia, sadness, sorrow, and longing which appear to be the integral units of that one word each nation claims as ultimately untranslatable,<sup>202</sup> and “polot,” which complements but also balances the ineffable, almost abstract “teşknota” with its connotations of “inspiration and flying,” “flair,” “spontaneity,” and even “a bit of recklessness”(71). The narrator experiences “teşknota” (4) in the form of a “premonition of absence,” “an annunciation of how much absence can hurt,” “a visitation from a whole new geography of emotion” (4), a

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201 Does Hoffman, with her handful of Polish words interlaced sparingly in the first part of *Lost in Translation* take a more or less daring step than Antin, who had appended her fluent translation with a rather consistent dictionary of Russian and Yiddish? Neither approach describes a salient attempt at foregrounding difference (the “foreignizing” strategy), though Hoffman’s text forces a taste of it, while Antin’s makes such taste optional. On the other hand, *Lost in Translation* followed *The Promised Land* by seventy-seven years, so evaluating such choices outside the respective contexts of production would be erroneous.

202 *Teşknota*, *toska*, *dor*, and *duende* are often said to capture something quintessentially (and therefore untranslatably) Polish, Russian, Romanian, and Spanish, respectively, despite their common definition.

filling up with longing for something that cannot be named (20), a feeling of blood on fire (28), an experience that is both hypnotic and discomfiting (91), a “pregnancy with the images of Poland” (115), and a “welling up of absence” (115). “Polot” is something one desires to have both in personality and in action. It’s the best compliment one can receive for a composition exercise, an admirable character trait, and a prerequisite for being a good musician, but also something occurring, unpredictably and epiphany-like, at the intersection of particular circumstances, such as “Chopin’s A Major Polonaise coming over the loudspeakers in the last heroic moments of the Warsaw uprising, as bullets and grenades ricocheted through the streets” (71). An immigrant’s cultural shock, as the narrator’s attempts to explain these Polish words implies, is to a certain extent the shock of discovering the limits and constraints of language. It is within language that life starts to cohere and, as Hoffman insists, “[no]thing fully exists until it is articulated” (29) — an idea further illustrated by her comparison of language to a fine net that is supposed to contain reality. “If there are holes in [the net], then a bit of reality can escape, cease to exist” (217). It follows that a language and culture that do not own more than a hypothetical equivalent for “teşknota” will not easily foster or accommodate the indefinite longing and metaphysical angst associated with it. To be unable to translate “teşknota” and “polot” into English means to deny the emotions and experiences signified by the two words the right of articulateness. Felt most acutely in the process of translation, linguistic absences are indicative of larger, culturally-grounded absences. Together they open a space, or rather a fissure, for what Hoffman has referred to elsewhere as the immigrant’s second, “spectral” autobiography.

Words that do benefit from an English equivalent prove to be equally problematic. The cold, homogenized milk Hoffman drinks in America has little in common with what she has known as “milk” in Poland and in the Polish language (106). “Culinary” translation deserves perhaps its own study, since it is precisely in relation to food that Eastern European immigrants often start to articulate their ambivalence toward the promises and realities of American life.<sup>203</sup> For most Eastern Europeans, food is inextricable from the notion of home and from a sense of belonging to a particular place and culture. It grows out of the national and local landscape and permeates daily practices, concerns, relations to others, and to traditions.<sup>204</sup> “Most Eastern Europeans,” Codrescu notes with irony, “come to America to eat. They may claim “freedom” as their lofty reason, but they say it with their mouths full” (*An Involuntary* 193). He continues with a description of the confusion and quiet despair that follow the immigrant’s realization that American abundance and packaging are as alluring as they are deceitful, and that same foods are

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203 Such references to culinary sites of difference and the inadequacy of linguistic translation pepper the autobiographical accounts of Eva Hoffman, Andrei Codrescu, Sven Birkerts, Dan Antal, Anca Vlasopolos, and Slavenka Drakulic, among others. Outside the literary realm the obsession with food “untranslatability” is even more prevalent. In my encounters with other Eastern European immigrants I discovered this to be one of the most common conversational topics. There is nothing more disappointing than finally sinking your teeth into that gloriously big and red strawberry to discover it hollow, white, and completely tasteless. Whenever I imagine the American Dream turned American Daymare, this is the shape it takes. (“Curse on Columbus!” for tricking me out of nostalgia with deceitful shapes and colors.)

204 In communist Romania, food came to represent the measure of all things—one’s social status, one’s “connections” and networking skills, one’s (much praised) ability at outwitting the system, one’s patience and dedication (as required by interminable lines that promised “something,” though nobody knew exactly what till a truck showed up, or not, many hours later), one’s heart and character (as reflected in one’s offering of the little she/he had to others), and, not in the least, inventiveness and creativity. There was no better way to judge a woman’s gifts and domestic abilities than by the number of dishes she could produce out of just one or two items (such as beans and potatoes). Procuring, trading, and preparing food occupied much of one’s daily life. Grounded perhaps in a fear of pending starvation and in a desperate attempt to preserve some sense of normalcy, if not prosperity, food-related activities became unofficial, and somewhat subversive, national hobbies.

not the same foods in Romanian and English, for they do not taste, look, or feel the same. “The robust chickens of their native backyards have given way to amphetaminated monsters of tasteless meat in plastic packages” (193). Grumbling without really knowing what they grumble about—“since most of them believe they have come [here] for freedom” (193)—these immigrants fall into the gap between “thwarted desires and their pronouncements” (193). Here translation is made impossible by the cultural inadequacy of linguistic equivalency.

Young Hoffman’s sudden awareness that “words are just themselves” emerges from her attempt at establishing perfect equivalencies. She experiences first-hand post-structuralists’ argument about the arbitrariness of language and the deconstructionists’ belief in the interactive play and chain of signification that precedes the naming, but unlike them she cannot delight in the jocular aspects of such discoveries. “Words in their naked state,” she further notes, “are among the least satisfactory play objects” (107). Their resistance to signification is a “desiccating alchemy, draining the world not only of significance but of its colors, striations, nuances—its very existence” (107). What she experiences is a “loss of a living connection,” a betrayal that reveals itself most poignantly in the act of translation. The word “river” is no longer “energized with the essence of riverhood, of [her] rivers, of [her] being immersed in rivers,” as it once was in Polish; it has become “a word without an aura” and without “vital sound.” In the absence of “accumulated associations,” its English equivalent “remains a thing, absolutely other, absolutely unbending to the grasp of [her] mind” (106).

Translation difficulties run deep beneath the layer of connotative discrepancies, revealing again and again the cultural imbrications of any attempt at linguistic translation. “Even a relatively intelligible person, like Lizzy, poses problems of translation,” Hoffman remarks. “She—and many others around me—would be as unlikely in Poland as gryphons or unicorns” (175). Since in trying to make sense of the world the mind resorts to the familiar, it is only natural that the narrator would transport the target culture back to the source culture in her attempt to name what she sees. An inevitable phase in the process of acquiring a new language, this comparative back and forth intensifies one’s awareness of the minute particularities of each culture and of the impossibility of adequate translation. The narrator wonders if Lizzie is as smart or spunky or attractive as her Polish friend Basia, only to realize that “the terms don’t travel across continents” and that “[t]he human mean is located in a different place here, and qualities like adventurousness, or cleverness, or shyness are measured along a different scale and mapped within a different diagram” (175). So Lizzie cannot possibly translate into Basia and Basia cannot translate into Lizzie, not even in terms as “universal” and seemingly translatable as “smartness,” “attractiveness,” and “spunkiness.” “You can’t transport human meanings whole from one culture to another,” Hoffman concludes, “any more than you can transliterate a text” (175).

In their movement toward an original source of meaning and back to the corresponding reality that needs to be named, these arching processes do more than to assess the impossibility of achieving equivalency: they reveal the constructed nature of those corresponding realities and the relative nature of their particulars. In doing

so, they provide insights into the mechanisms of othering and suggest strategies for countering our tendencies to “fix” differences. When the narrator and her American friend Lizzy decide to understand each other’s otherness, they have to do so “with a will” (175). They “run into misunderstandings with the rude surprise of rams butting into each other in the middle of a narrow bridge” (175), but this intra-lingual inter-cultural translation helps them make themselves “intelligible” to one another.

On other occasions, the two systems of references between which the activity of translation takes place intersect briefly but do not overlap. Her sudden awareness, at the age of fourteen, that she has been “dislocated from [her] own center of the world [Poland], and that the world has been shifted away from [this] center” (132) produces not only cultural, but also semantic shifts. Polish may still be her “mother” tongue, but as the connotations of “mother” change in English, so do the meaning of “mother tongue” and the narrator’s own relation to it.

When an American friend, Penny, confesses that she is envious, the narrator tries “laboriously to translate not from English to Polish but from the word back to its source, from the feeling from which it springs” (107). In this early, structuralist stage of her translation activity, she believes in the existence of some primal, original meaning that can be only partly accessed through language. A word such as “envy” claims to name some universal emotion that she should be able to experience, but which she doesn’t. She doesn’t really know what Penny feels when she says “envy,” though the word “hangs in a Platonic stratosphere, a vague prototype of all envy, so large, so all-encompassing that it might crush me” (107). If she wants to really understand Penny’s emotion she cannot rely on the connotations the literal translation

of “envy” has in Polish—and for now that is the only frame of reference within which she feels at home. Therefore, she can translate the word the way an interpreter would, by establishing a quick, acceptable equivalency, but while such linguistic translation may provide necessary surviving mechanisms and enable communication, it cannot satisfy a deep understanding of the word as it is informed and shaped by cultural context. It is in moments like this that the narrator becomes most aware of the importance of cultural specificity. In order to understand, even in broad, essentializing terms, the meaning of Penny’s “envy,” she needs to understand the particularities of that experience in the context of the American culture.<sup>205</sup> Together with the connotations of Penny’s personal experiences with “envy,” these particularities endow the word with “accumulated associations” (106) that alone can ensure an adequate translation. In their movement between source and target cultures, translative arching processes engage in comparing and negotiating the equivalency—or possibility of equivalency—of such “accumulated associations.” What ends up being inscribed in the “definitive,” English version of the text is “envy,” but this word is the same *and* different from the Polish “envy.”

In another instance, three college girls who divine that the Russians are going to invade America through Cuba try to involve the narrator in their enterprise (of preparing for a guerrilla warfare) because, they believe, she is endowed with clairvoyance and telepathy, abilities she is repressing because she was “brought up under that horrible ‘system’” (174). The poems they have written for the occasion

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205 According to Slavoj Žižek, each culture’s particularism—which he dubs the national “Thing” and which he approximates to Lacan’s notion of “jouissance”—resists universalization, but functions, nevertheless, as a “particular Absolute”—the trenchantly particular and inflexible way in which a community organizes its “enjoyment” (*Tarrying* 200-206).

predict their ascension to another planet as the cataclysm spreads over the world (174). Attempting to describe her schoolmates, the narrator realizes that they aren't "crazy in the way [she] understands that word," that what she would have qualified as "crazy" in Polish does not resemble the behavior of the three girls who seem otherwise perfectly normal. They have nothing in common with the Polish man who would howl and scream with bestial abandon behind windows, or with Pani Grodzinska's sister who would shred newspaper all over the room (174-5). The narrator decides to defer the naming, for to call the three girls crazy would mean to unsettle the familiar systems of reference that anchor her imagination and her understanding of the world. For now at least, words insist in maintaining the particular connotations of the original, and this persistence is itself a form of resistance to domestication. Years later, after learning that "[e]ach culture breeds its own kind of derangement," she concludes that her colleagues were just "go[ing] crazy with a surfeit of moral fervors" (175). In this, she notes, they were no different from the Rotary Club member who, after showing her his large house and his collection of guns, tells her that "if the Commies ever come this way, there'll be at least some boys in Texas who will know how to defend their country" (175). This second example extends her understanding of the episode involving the three colleagues, and, together, they work toward defining this particular, non-Polish, kind of derangement. In concluding that she "can't make any sense of [such manifestations] whatsoever" (175), the narrator announces the limits of linguistic and cultural translatability.

On the other hand, as "crazy" gains the connotations it needs in order to adequately signify the three American girls' craziness, and "envy" to signify Penny's

envy, the two words lose the precision and sense of irreplaceability they had in signifying Pani Grodzinska's sister's craziness and Basia's "envy." In re-enacting, in these "theorizing" commentaries, the process of inherent loss, *Lost in Translation* compels us to acknowledge the impurities and insufficiencies of any language, as well as the limiting consequences of monolingualism.

"A rose / by any other name would smell as sweet," ventures Shakespeare's Juliet. The narrator of *Lost in Translation* begs to differ. In Polish, she notes, the words for "boy" and "girl" "embody within them the wind and crackle of boyishness, the breeze and grace of girlhood: the words summoned that evanescent movement and melody and musk that are the interior inflections of gender itself" (245). Yet the comparison to English needs to take into consideration temporal factors, thus resulting in an *asymmetric* equivalency. To say that the English translations of the Russian words "boy" and "girl" are empty signifiers would be anachronistic and deceptive, since by the time the narrator arrives in the States she is too old to experience the two words from the inside. The meaning of almost any linguistic element is context-dependent and this context is inscribed within the frame of a specific culture, specific time, specific history. She therefore substitutes them with "man" and "woman," transporting the two Polish words not only spatially, but also temporarily and contextually. The word "woman," to which she belongs only in English, should have the heft and fullness "girl" had in Polish. Yet "[i]n that neutral and neutered [American] speech," she concludes, "man" and "woman" "were neither masculine nor feminine; they did not arise out of erotic substance, out of sex" (245). Though translated into English, the two words designating "man" and "woman" do

not translate the emotional charge they might have translated in the Polish language; worse, they do not resonate in any other way either: “How could I say ‘darling,’ or ‘sweetheart,’ when the words had no fleshly fullness, when they were as dry as sticks?” (245) For now, whatever it is that the narrator would like to convey to her lover remains untranslatable.

The Lybian American poet and translator Khaled Mattawa suggests that the translator's job is to provide a dancing partner for the original. Hoffman's illustration of the difficulties of establishing equivalencies suggests that such partners often fail to synchronize, each responding to the music with rhythms and moves rooted in their respective traditions and cultures. Moreover, English enables certain thoughts and emotions that she cannot have in another language, just as Polish enables others. The narrator takes immense pleasure in acquiring an English botanical lexicon for which she hadn't come to own a Polish equivalent (forsythias, delphiniums, hyacinths), just as she had earlier delighted in evoking the untranslatable resonances of *teşknota*. English, Polish, and Yiddish cultivate different gardens<sup>206</sup> that need to be tended each on its own terms. But the pleasure of experiencing the world monolingually is an almost perverse pleasure, an indulgence, for the lack of Polish equivalence arrests, if only momentarily, the narrator's project of translating backwards (so she can move forward). In order to re-visit and reconstruct her Polish self through her American identity and re-examine her belonging to the American space through the memory of

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206 This recalls Walter Benjamin's metaphor of translators as gardeners who tend to the seedlings of the original so that they grow and flower in the new ground.

her Polish selfhood, the narrator needs a language that can prove reality fully translatable.

## Domesticating the site of difference

At the end of *Lost in Translation*, the narrator claims to have arrived at a pivot on which she “can stand more lightly, balanced between the past and the future, balanced in time” (280). Hoffman does not seem to share George Steiner’s view that translation can perform exchange without loss (302), but has not given up on Louis Kelly’s belief that in its thrust toward dialogue translation achieves a balance between “I and thou” (214),<sup>207</sup> between Eva and Ewa. However, as this chapter’s examination of *Lost in Translation* has already suggested, such claim to balance and harmony may be both truth and lie. When, in the Cambridge garden, signifier and signified unite in the form of azaleas, forsythias, and delphiniums (“The names are beautiful, and they fit the flowers perfectly”), the suturing is possible only because the narrator had never known flower and name together in the Old World, because “For now, there are no Platonic azaleas, *no Polish hyacinths against which they are compared* (italics mine)” (280). Here English functions neither as language translated into nor language translated from, but as language disengaged from all translation processes—the language of something that the narrator experiences in English alone. Nonetheless, the “observing consciousness” that records this almost epiphanic moment remains on guard, as suggested by the opening phrase, “for now” (280), and reinforced by the last two sentences of the book, whose terse and hurried movement toward closure points to the temporary nature of this balance: “The language of this is sufficient. I am here

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<sup>207</sup> Hoffman might have been familiar with Steiner’s *After Babel* (1975) and Kelly’s *The True Interpreter* (1979), both of them current and quite popular in the 80s. Postcolonial translation theorists have often taken issue with such idealist, Eurocentric perspectives on the power relations involved in translation.

now” (280). The narrator seems ready to enjoy the privilege of living outside the demands and pressures of translation. At the same time, read in conjunction with the beginning of the previous quotation (“For now, there are no Platonic azaleas”), these last sentences enlist *Lost in Translation* in a translation project whose trajectory aspires toward Noam Chomsky’s Ur-language (that subsumes all others) or Benjamin’s “pure language” / “*reine sprache*” (which is neither source nor target language). “Perhaps any language, if pursued enough, leads to exactly the same place” (274), she had noted a few pages earlier, though it is only now, in light of this affirmative temporality, that “the same place” comes to encapsulate not only primordial loss (274), but an ideal language that can articulate “the whole world at once” (11). As a child in Poland, she had wanted to “tell A Story, Every Story, everything all at once, not anything in particular that might be said through the words [she knew], and [she tried] to roll all the sounds into one, to accumulate more and more syllables, as if they might make a Möbius strip of language in which everything, everything [was] contained” (11). The desire for absolute fluency is therefore rooted in a desire for leaving nothing unworded or untranslated.<sup>208</sup> In her pre-linguistic translation stage, the narrator appears to be closer to Benjamin’s notion of “pure language” than ever, so paradoxically, in its attempts to recuperate some of this lost unity, *Lost in Translation* also moves further away from it. In re-enacting the re-birth of one’s self and one’s story in a second language, the text mimics the activity of

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208 This story of perfectly fluent self-translation, Hoffman suggests, should benefit from a historically contextualized reading, but not be reduced to it. The narrator’s later desire to live within the folds of the English language and become one with it needs to be read also as an extension of her childhood belief in a language that could articulate the whole world at once.

deconstructing, or unlearning, a language by retracing the virginal experiences of language forming.

What gets lost in translation, the narrative suggests, can never be fully captured in words, for if it were, we might be able to prevent or defer the loss. Has the life in a new language to which the subtitle refers displaced this irrecoverable loss? The narrative seems to suggest only an ambiguous answer. The gaping space between title and subtitle, between what is lost and what is gained, represents the very space the narrative strives to suture, despite its recognition that such suturing is essentially impossible. The losses and the gains do not stand comparison. Like Lizzy and Basia, losses and gains exist within contexts that “do not travel continents” (107) and their meanings should not be expected to be transported from one culture into another any more than a Polish text should be transliterated into English. In the absence of equivalency, translation remains a doomed yet absolutely necessary task, for it is through and out of the obstinate probing of this impossibility that the new life (in the English language) emerges. To articulate your self in a new language, Hoffman suggests, you have to experience and live with loss, for such an invention entails much more than language proficiency and translation skills—it involves various processes of re-casting or re-inventing yourself in a new culture, and to a large extent *as* a new culture. This re-invention could result, of course, in other forms of identification than the hybrid one instantiated by Hoffman’s autobiography. In recent years, various immigrant writers—though not too many of Eastern European descent—have proposed trans-national or post-national forms of identification as doable and perhaps much more desirable alternatives. Tempting as it is, critiquing and

evaluating *Lost in Translation* against/in relation to such other, trendier alternatives would be unproductive and ultimately irrelevant.<sup>209</sup> In fact, since the publication of *Lost in Translation* in 1989, Hoffman has made numerous gestures toward such forms of trans-national and post-national identification herself. In her (already cited) non-fiction and fiction books that cover Eastern European and American local and national grounds, connecting them through Holocaust and Cold War memories, through personal and communal histories, and through projections into a global future, she continues her search for an ideal locus of enunciation, a voice that can do justice to the realities it articulates, and a way of feeling at home in the world. The holder of two passports, American and Canadian, she has traveled throughout Central and Eastern Europe, interviewing people and assessing the post-communist climate, and for last decade or so has resided part of the time in the United States and part of the time in England—or, as she likes to say, disclosing a tendency toward cosmopolitan affiliations, in New York and London (“Between Memory”).

In his memoir *A Fly in the Soup*, the Belgrade-born American poet Charles Simic says, “Immigration, exile, being uprooted and made a pariah, may be yet the most effective way(s) devised to impress on an individual the arbitrary nature of his or her existence” (4). An elaborate recognition of the joys and sorrows of occupying this immigrant position, Hoffman’s autobiography is a negotiation against such arbitrariness. And if this narrator’s autobiographical account demonstrates an

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209 In an interview, Hoffman declares that for herself, but also for many other people of her generation, “the division and the distillation of one part of identity” felt artificial, while “synthesis and reconciliation” did not (Hoffman “Between Memory”). Here, as throughout her autobiography, Hoffman cites the forces of historical circumstance as instrumental in shaping one’s subjectivity and modes of self-identification.

unsettling amount of structural coherence and linguistic and semantic fluency, it is because the autobiographical act itself becomes a *don quixotesque* attempt at ordering the inexorable multiplicity of one's life under the constraints of linguistic and cultural translation. For Hoffman, as for Antin, the necessity of the autobiographical act is born out of the experience of emigration/immigration and the desire to overcome its possibly crippling effects through perfect translation. Asked if being an immigrant had helped her find her own voice as a writer, Hoffman declared that had she not been an immigrant, she would have probably never become a writer. The traumatic experience of dislocation forced her to examine and re-examine everything and also gave her a unique vantage point, "a kind of oblique angle" on the world left behind as well as on the world arrived into ("Between Memory").

Insofar as Hoffman's autobiography is an invitation to be read as a "definitive," or in Humpty Dumpty's words, "master" text from which the traces of all other potential texts have been eliminated and the "oblique" angles deftly concealed, it becomes complicit in the invisibility of the Eastern European American. In 1813, Schleiermacher<sup>210</sup> was calling for a translator who was never fully at home in the foreign language and who sought to evoke in the reader an experience like his own—that is, the experience of someone for whom the foreign language was simultaneously legible and alien. Almost two centuries later, Venuti envisions the ideal translated text as "a site where a different culture emerges, where the reader gets a glimpse of a cultural other" and is reminded of the gains and losses inherent in

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210 Friedrich Schleiermacher, "On the Different Methods of Translation" (*Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*, eds. Rainer Schulte & John Biguenet, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992) 136-55.

translation, and of the unbridgeable gap between cultures” (*Translator’s Invisibility* 306). Despite its reluctance to be that ideal site where cultures not only meet, collide, and hybridize, but also preserve their untranslatability, *Lost in Translation* remains a most important autobiographical commentary on the immense potential and power of translation. The narrator’s perfect English has dissolved “the stigma of [her] marginality” and “the weight of presumption against [her]” (123), has assisted her in securing a successful social and professional position, becoming an American writer, feeling at home in the New World, and narrating the transformations of her multifarious selves into a coherent, if hybrid and double-voiced, first person singular.<sup>211</sup> Her impeccable narration, domesticating in its fluent and idiomatic English, deprives us from actually experiencing any jarring fragmentation. The body-text “footnoting” and meta-commentary, on the other hand, undermine the narrative’s smooth veneer by constantly recalling the losses, sacrifices, and compromises inherent in any difference-effacing translation.

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211 And perhaps it is the always already corrupted nature of any dominant discourse that allows Hoffman to claim herself as multitude (i.e., “mosaic” and “sum of languages”) without making fragmentation and multilingualism an integral part of the enunciation.

## Appendix: Andrei Codrescu

If Hoffman uses the blurring of margin-center boundaries occasioned by her generation to insinuate herself into the folds of the American national narrative and become one with it, Andrei Codrescu<sup>212</sup> chooses a locus of permanent dissent that allows him to challenge this narrative and its domesticating powers. To Hoffman's space of in-betweenness, he proposes an un-co-optable Outside<sup>213</sup>—not an escapist, solipsistic third space, as the name might suggest, but a militant yet unaligned position from which the writer can engage critically with any number of realities without succumbing to the hegemony of any one of them. By situating himself simultaneously inside and outside the American national narrative, Codrescu exercises his prerogatives as a transnational citizen of America and as a transnational and translingual writer.

Hoffman's self-conscious and carefully crafted narrative finds a counterpart in Codrescu's, whose disjointed and deliberately cacophonous and repetitive narrative draws attention to itself and to the need for traces of foreignness. Entertaining yet

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212 Codrescu escaped communist Romania in 1965, arrived to the States during the late 1960s, has since published over two dozen books of poetry, fiction, memoirs, essays, and screenplays, and has been for years a most refreshing and often controversial commentator on The National Public Radio.

213 This self-created Outside shares much with Bakhtin's heteroglossia—that diversity of languages, voices, perspectives, and meanings generated by differences which can deny single control or authority and “insure that there can be no actual monologue” (Bakhtin 426). Codrescu insists that “taking a position on behalf of the outside, any outside (of language, of culture, of various establishments and mainstreams) is vital” (qtd. in Vianu) and encourages resistance to any kind of authority: of government, police, institutionalized religion, factual history, and even factual personal history. “My religion,” he declares, is “Creolisation, Hybridization, Miscegenation, Immigration, Genre-Busting, Trespassing, Border-Crossing, Identity-Shifting, Mask-Making, and Syncretism” (qtd. in Vianu).

serious, inflecting idiomatic English with Eastern European Jewish humor, Codrescu has insisted, both in his verbal “performances” and in his writings, on preserving his accent. Structurally too, his work replicates the destabilizing effect of foreignizing strategies of translation.

Though Codrescu sees language as instrumental in sustaining cultural distinctions, just as Hoffman does, he does not seek a linguistic identification with the nation. For him, the American language is only an introduction to America’s constantly shifting cultural landscape and, as he declares in an essay, he is “less concerned with language than with the physical fact of becoming Homo Americanus” (*Stories* 46). If anything, he declares in *An Involuntary Genius in America’s Shoes* (2001), in some ways he felt more at home in America before he acquired its language, since English made him “lose his familiarity with [him]self” (344). In *The Disappearance* (1990), he notes,

I saw myself, and still do, as the ambassador of Romanian poetry, or at least a conveyor of certain Balkanic mysteries of great importance. I did not stop being a Romanian poet when I became an American one. The Romanian language became my covert dimension, a secret engine, like childhood, while American English covered all aspects of my lived life. In this deep interior I maintained this core of crisis, prayer, high diction in the Romanian language. My daily language, American English, received both fuel and poetry from this core. (46)

Romanian, Codrescu’s “covert dimension” and “secret engine” (46), functions as a foreignizing strategy that prevents his American English from achieving perfect

fluency. “The reality of a life,” Codrescu argues, “is refractory to language,” and therefore “[t]he job of language, sensibly employed, is to defend reality against the telling” (352). In order to “defend his [own] life against language(s),” this self-fashioned, trans-lingual Scheherezade has no choice but to keep talking. It is the talking itself, the tongue working to ensure the reality is never fixed by language, that makes the use of foreignization strategies possible. Asked by some recent immigrants, “now we are here what should/ we do with our accents,” Codrescu replies, “Do like me,” “keep talking” (*it was today* 93).

However, in Codrescu’s work it is not translanguaging *per se* but the translanguaging imagination that foregrounds difference and creates a connective network between source and target cultures and within the real and the imaginary globe. “Well, it happened again,” begins one of Codrescu’s autobiographical essays (“Romania: The Varkolak”) that recounts a plane trip back from Romania. The Americans, Germans, French, British, and Austrians around him all speak Romanian, or so he believes. He claims to understand what they are saying—though what they are saying does not make much sense, he adds—so he entertains the idea that perhaps “every language is really Romanian and it is only the funny faces that people make which makes it come out in English or French or whatever” (*The Devil* 97). Beyond the comic undertone of this proposal there lies a vision of languages permanently contaminating each other.

Codrescu’s personas’ engagement with processes of cultural translation and re-translation doubles as socio-cultural and political critique of both the source and target/adopted culture. This critique explores cultural and semantic intranslatabilities

with non-partisan irony. “Even the royal onion, that sun of the peasant, has become only a clothe-horse with no heart [in America]. After this revelation and betrayal, an immigrant’s life goes rapidly to pieces. A downslide begins, redeemed by nothing” (*An Involuntary Genius* 193). Those familiar with Andrei Codrescu’s commentaries on National Public Radio will place this sampling of exaggeration and irony in the context of his unmistakable voice. The English word “onion,” Codrescu proposes, is not only deceitful, but threatens to destabilize the meaningful relationship between the immigrant and the “royal onion” of his origin, and between the immigrant and the language of interiority. The “royal onion” is not only “that sun of the peasant,” but the cultural untranslatable forced into translatability through linguistic approximation. “In the abyss left by the true onion, lie the inarticulate” (193), Codrescu declaims.

This space of inarticulateness, which immigrant autobiographies commonly inhabit but rarely theorize, is also where Derrida’s *différance* takes place. “In the limits to which it is possible or at least *appears* possible, translation practices the difference between signified and signifier” (21), Derrida argues in *Positions*. Translation may be able to “practice” or enact the difference between signifier and signified, but the immigrant’s commitment to such a process of translation threatens to hold him affixed to the margins, in a process of permanent deferral. This is exactly the predicament in which Hoffman imagines the immigrant as translator. All she/he gains, she argues, “is a terrible knowledge, without any of the consolations that wisdom usually brings” (107). For Codrescu, on the other hand, the deferral allows the possibility of constant renewal, re-positioning, and subversion.

Codrescu's project of self-translation has so far birthed five memoirs as well as other semi-autobiographical poetic and essayistic works. His memoirs tend to recycle the same material, each time as if for the first time, each time as if the always-discontinuous identity engaged in the process of writing alters not only the process of remembering, but also the factual, raw materials of which pasts are made. With Derrida, he shares the belief that translation transforms the original as well. If for Hoffman "[t]ime stops at the point of severance," and "[t]he house, the garden, the country you have lost remain forever as you remember them" (115), arrested in nostalgia, for Codrescu the space of origin is constantly transformed by the target language and culture. His compound identity as a Jewish Hungarian Romanian American Jew alters whenever changes take place in the national or diasporic spaces that accommodate these identifications, in any form and permutation. "To the extent that my compatriots have changed," he says, "they have granted me a new identity" (*The Devil* 99). His American identity constantly readjusts to incorporate these changes, as well as those dictated by the transformations of the American space. One of the last sections of *An Involuntary Genius* begins with the innocuous "He noticed a discoloring of the natural universe" (154) and goes on to tease with a sweeping follow-up: "He had translated himself into American" (154). As this "promised land" reshapes under the influence of Whitman, Ginsberg, Coca-cola, or the computerized drive of the "electronic Superstate" (*Disappearance* 197), so does Codrescu's own identity, becoming, each time, "[a] new map of the world (...) in the making" (*Disappearance* 57).

*The Life and Times of an Involuntary Genius* (1975) is written in the third person—so he could “view [from a distance] the self under construction” (*An Involuntary Genius* 8)—with a long epistolary section in the second person, and is addressed to Codrescu’s mother. In the digressive *In America’s Shoes* (1983), which he has dubbed his “elaborate identity card,” he addresses himself to the State. A third one, which remains unpublished, collages “everyone else’s point of view” (*Devil* 139). *The Hole in the Flag* (1991) recounts the immediate aftermath of the Romanian revolution and the ways in which this historical shift compels Codrescu to revisit and “edit” his life. The socio-cultural and political critique of (semi-)autobiographical essays gathered under *The Disappearance of the Outside. A Manifesto for Escape* situates Codrescu in relation to East and West, “inside” and “outside,” totalitarianism and democracy, and various spaces in-between. *An Involuntary Genius in America’s Shoes (And What Happened Afterwards)* (2001) morphs, alters, and expands the first two memoirs.

To Humpty Dumpty’s comment about prioritizing one view, Codrescu would most probably retort that no connotation will be master. A perfectly imperfect citizen of America, he seems most at home in “the interrogatory, interstitial space” (Bhabha 3) that congregates transnational, hybrid, multicultural and multilingual identities that remain partially untranslatable yet fully engaged in the acts of translation and self-translation.

## CONCLUSION

### **Between representativeness and essentialism**

The endeavor undertaken in this study is both inherently flawed and absolutely necessary. On one hand, to reconstitute, out of the recesses of literary history, something that we would hail as the “Eastern European American narrative” is neither entirely desirable nor possible. For one thing, in its unavoidable tendency toward essentializing and generalizing, such a process would subsume and erase the particulars of various (multi-) ethnic identities associated with this category. Moreover, for reasons associated with the nature and politics of immigration, class, education, and cultural expectations, such particulars are not necessarily reflected in the body of literary texts written by Eastern European Americans.<sup>214</sup>

Though to a large extent the Eastern European American narrative space may be conceived as an intermittent history of erasures, absences, and silences, capitalizing on these aspects will not provide a satisfactory answer to the question, “What *is* the Eastern European American narrative?” On the other hand, any attempt at answering with a definition would have to employ essentialist reasoning. Despite the linearity, cohesiveness, and order that the generic heading (Eastern European American) may inspire, the reality that it means to signify is largely disjointed,

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<sup>214</sup> Literary texts that address the particularities of the Romanian or Bulgarian immigration experience, for instance, are rare or/and fairly unavailable, relegated to hard-to-come-by first, and only, printings. Furthermore, as already suggested, the number of non-Jewish Eastern European immigrant narratives written during the first half of the 20th century remains negligible compared to the Jewish one. Shaped by a strong tradition of intellectual rigor and commitment to letters, Jewish narratives have straddled the exigencies of literature and socio-cultural anthropology most successfully, and therefore have had the most impact on American conceptualizations of Eastern Europe in general and of the Eastern European American literary space in particular.

provisional, and in a constant process of transformation. As already suggested, “Eastern Europe” is above all an exonymic, Western discursive construct. Homogenizing Eastern Europe’s otherness into a teleological narrative that is itself the product of essentialism would compound the inherent flaws of this project. Therefore, the two autobiographical narratives showcased in this study should not be regarded as epitomizing Eastern European American literature, defining the Eastern European immigration experience, or as advancing, or “fixing” a particular notion of Eastern European Americanness. Each text speaks, to a large extent, to and about the contexts in which it was produced and received, and each resonates with, but does not substitute for, the imagined or real communities of other Eastern European American immigrant groups. Each text’s engagement with these varying contexts and critical discourses generates a version of Eastern European American identity that remains particular to itself—even when it openly claims representativeness, as in the case of *The Promised Land*, or acknowledges the other’s influence, as does *Lost in Translation*.

### **The current and the ideal place of Eastern European American studies and their necessary confluence with Translation Studies**

In their attempts to envision and formulate viable strategies for the future, scholars of American and Cultural Studies have been constructing revisionist arguments that seek to address and redress various historical, cultural, and ethical injustices. Among other things, they have engaged in the conceptualization of various forms of individual and group identification and of various spaces, and have

speculated on the ramifications of globalization or anti-globalization projects. However, in these and other engagements, they have customarily failed to consider the ways in which the space known as “Eastern Europe” figures within such critical and theoretical scaffolding, and to credit early Eastern European immigrant texts for their groundwork in the area of immigration literature.

In fact, though recent developments in national and international politics have generated reevaluations and reconfigurations of U.S.-Eastern Europe relations, they have hardly impacted the academic field of Humanities. Over the last decades, New Americanists have (re)invested American Studies with strategies and contexts that had been suppressed or simply never included in its area of concern, exploring now the relationship between the literary and the political, and bringing disenfranchised groups into these conversations (Pease 31). However, the Eastern European Americans—real, imaginary, and literary—have benefited little from these revisionist examinations.

As Donald Pease has pointed out, during the Cold War, the field of American Studies was closely related to liberal anticommunist consensus (24). Since the lifting of the Iron Curtain, interest in Eastern Europe and reevaluations of the Eastern European American space and its production have been scarce<sup>215</sup> and often fraught with Cold War assumptions. In its reluctance to examine the sources and effects of the Eastern European invisibility in American scholarship, American Studies

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215 To a certain extent, the theoretical impasse and slow resuscitation of an interest in this area mirrors Eastern European countries' own struggles with self-definition after the demise of the communist regimes. Interminable periods of transitions and often failed attempts to seek recognition and self-identification through participation in the “authorized,” global discourses of organizations such as E.U. or NATO have marked the democratic wasteland of post-1989 Eastern Europe.

perpetuate the silence imposed by nativist and other methodically fueled anti-immigrant movements, and replicate Cold War dynamics and politics.<sup>216</sup>

More often than not, popular and academic American discursive engagements with this space conceive of it as “post-communist” rather than “post-Cold War.” Like “post-capitalist” and unlike “post-colonial,” “post-communist” diverts attention from power relations, placing the emphasis on the disruption of a particular ideology and mode of production. This emphasis inhibits constructive criticism by casting the spotlight on a defunct institution (the former communist state apparatus). Furthermore, to qualify the current state of Eastern Europe as “post-communist” is to sanitize the American academic discourse and enforce a version of history that erases America’s imbrications with this space. Restricted, post-communist perspectives tend to assess this space and its peoples’ traumatic experiences in relation to the communist legacy alone.

These broadly-sketched omissions, inadequate representations, and need for change framed the overarching concerns of this study and inform my approach to Eastern European immigrant identities and their place in American Studies scholarship. A general tendency toward truncated conceptualizations of this space suggests that research in this area may necessitate the kind of interdisciplinary work that has not been possible so far. In its current configurations, the American academia

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<sup>216</sup> Cold War politics encouraged popular perceptions of the space behind the Iron Curtain as alien, amorphous yet rigid, impermeable, and chillingly homogeneous, a fear-eliciting counterpoint to the diverse, individualistic, fluid America. The term “Eastern Bloc” seemed aptly chosen to evoke this space. Over the last decade and a half, orphans, gypsies, shocking news, and good old Dracula—an exonymic metaphor, since the myth was generated in the West and then transposed over the Eastern European space—have been often brought forth to “fix” this blandness and enable mystification.

does not encourage the necessary topical and theoretical transgressions that would make such projects possible.

As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points out in *Death of a Discipline*, the divides between Comparative Literature and Area Studies, Ethnic Studies, Gender Studies, and Cultural/Postcolonial Studies need to be renegotiated so as to permit an inclusive approach to culture—an approach that makes the humanities and the social and political sciences integral parts of its contexts and strategies.<sup>217</sup> “Planetary Comparative Literature” (84), Spivak’s coinage for the discipline that would emerge from such negotiations to include European, Asian, African, and Hispanic cultures within and outside the American cultural landscape, encapsulates the ideal breadth of such a “para-disciplinary” (82) field. Even if idealistic and probably unrealizable, Spivak’s model provides invaluable thinking ground for a reconfiguration of Comparative/Area/ Ethnic/Cultural/American Studies that could benefit the study of the Eastern European American narrative space as well.

In a discipline reformatted so as to cross but also problematize the boundaries that have circumscribed each of these disciplines, examinations of Eastern European-American issues would extend beyond the limits of studies in cross-national and cross-cultural literary contexts (Comparative Literature), multicultural contexts (Ethnic Literature), or within foreign “area” frameworks (Area Studies). Literary productions by or about Eastern European Americans would have to consider the contextual import of American immigration policies and popular attitudes towards

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<sup>217</sup> Such an approach would answer much of James Clifford’s call for an adequate understanding and reevaluation of the “unresolved historical dialogues between continuity and disruption, essence and positionality, homogeneity and differences (cross-cutting ‘us’ and ‘them’)” (Clifford 108).

Eastern Europeans, as well as of Cold War and post-Cold War imperialisms, Soviet colonialism and postcolonialism, and self-colonialization. To this I would add another component that has been largely ignored and relegated to a separate niche, despite its unquestionable imbrications with each of the mentioned academic areas: Translation Studies.

Post-World War II cultural pluralism proved accommodating of various aspects of ethnic identity, but language was not one of them. Moreover, the numerical decline of new immigrants between 1924 and 1965 meant a diminished influx of foreign languages. By now, the second and third generation immigrants whose parents had reached America most often speaking only their native tongue(s) had assimilated into the American culture, becoming, for the most part, monolingual. Decades later, American studies, Cultural Studies, and Ethnic Studies are still reluctant to engage in multilingual issues and make foreign-tongue accommodations. I argue that the discipline of Translation Studies, which so far has entered critical and theoretical conversations only with Postcolonial Studies, would benefit the study of the Eastern European American narrative space, regardless of whether the scholarship takes place under the umbrella of Ethnic Studies, American Studies, Cultural Studies, or through a multi-disciplinary or trans-disciplinary approach.

As argued in Part I of this study and reinforced through exemplification in Parts II and III, translation issues cannot and should not be extricated from the emigration/immigration experience, even if the literary narratives that recount the experience deliver it monolingually, in unaccented English, and even if this English does not present the same complications as when it enters negotiations as instrument

of colonization *per se* (as it does in Postcolonial Studies). If recording one's life in a language that she/he shares with her/his colonizer presents both recorder and reader with any number of epistemological, hermeneutical, and ethical questions,<sup>218</sup> so does recording one's life in an adopted language, though here the rupture of contextualization produced in the act of translation is less violently inscribed.

The processes of immigration and translation both involve shifting contexts, crossing boundaries, and negotiating difference, and their outcome can be measured along similar assimilation / domestication scales. Moreover, language acquisition and bilingual negotiations overlap with and inform the process of cultural acquisition and cultural negotiations through which immigrants inscribe their place and define their identities in America. Despite all this, previous and current reading practices tend to overlook the fact that significant forms of cultural particularity are manifested in language alone, and that the English of immigrant narratives reflects and embodies cultural negotiations only to a very limited extent. Our encounter with the literary immigrant Other in our own language alone limits our experience in ways that we may not be able to change, but need to be aware of. To a certain extent, an immigrant narrative written entirely in English is already a symptom of assimilation and a sign of its end result. At the same time, the lack of linguistic inscriptions of difference is

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218 These issues have been explored in Eric Cheyfitz's *The Poetics of Interpretation: Translation and Colonization from 'The Tempest' to 'Tarzan'* (1991), Tejaswini Niranjana's *Siting Translation. History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (1992), Douglas Robinson's *Translation and Taboo* (1996), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), and the collection *Between Languages and Cultures* (eds. Anuradha Dingwaney and Carol Maier, 1995), in particular in Anuradha Dingwaney's "Translating 'Third World' Cultures," Lawrence Needham's "'Goody Two-shoes': Translated Tales of Resistance in Matthew Lewis's *Journal of a West India Proprietor*," Jacinto R. Fombona's "Writing Europe's 'Orient': Spanish-American Travelers to the 'Orient' and Mahasweta Sengupta's "Translation as Manipulation: The Power of Images and Images of Power."

itself a trace of translation, a grace note on the politics of constructing difference that needs to be closely examined.

Though concerned with the lack of Eastern European linguistic markers in immigrant narratives, this study does not lobby, however, for foreignizing translations and for a multilingual America, especially since the likelihood of the latter prospect is nil, and the desirability of the former arguable.<sup>219</sup> I have hoped, instead, to develop a context and a reading approach for English-language literary narratives written by bilingual and translingual immigrant writers and to address the need for a multilingual reading sensibility toward immigrant texts.<sup>220</sup> More specifically, my task has been to formulate and illustrate a paradigm of reading Eastern European immigrant narratives that contextualizes and situates the literary production of this space at the intersection of Translation Studies and Immigration Studies.

My examinations of Mary Antin's *Promised Land* and Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation* suggest that, to a large extent, the Eastern European is produced in the suspension of translation, a suspension that creates a narrative space that bears few translational traces and manifests itself as process alone. The concept of palimpsestic translation was used to delineate this space and enable its reading.

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219 I share Robinson's belief that, despite the unquestionable desirability of non-domesticating translation practices in the current conjuncture, foreignist theories of translation remain inherently elitist and less practical than we may wish them to be. Reading a foreignized translation would reproduce the pleasures but also the frustrations of reading T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* or Ezra Pound's *Cantos*.

220 The multilingual America envisioned by Sollors and other Americanists engaged in promoting a multicultural turn in American Studies will not be possible before we learn to problematize translation wherever translational processes are present. I would argue that, in turn, immigrant writers will feel discouraged from allowing linguistic insights into their native culture's specificity and their own bilingual or translingual forms of identification as long as we prove unwilling or unequipped for the task of reading such works.

To a large degree, the narrative produced from the Eastern European immigrants' encounter with America resembles Bhabha's "interrogatory, interstitial space" (3) that congregates varied forms of identification, such as hybrid, multicultural, transnational, multilingual, or translingual. In the case of Eastern European immigrant narratives, however, these forms of identification bear the strong mark of easily available assimilationist, monolingual models. Nonetheless, these identities too are in one sense untranslatable and in another fully engaged in the acts of translation and self-translation, and their double positioning can be best understood if we "move the location of cultural difference away from the space of democratic *plurality* to the borderline negotiations of cultural translation" (Bhabha 223).

My study concludes that the invisibility of distinct Eastern European American literary identities may be regarded as a matter of (self-)translation and reception.<sup>221</sup> Approached through the concept of palimpsestic translation, the Eastern European American immigration narratives showcased in this study allowed glimpses into the story of their silent presence or disappearance, and exemplified the dominant culture's influence in shaping such stories.<sup>222</sup> While successfully rendering herself a citizen and an American writer through her almost flawless use of the English language, Antin may have translated her experiences too much and too well, thus

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221 Our tendency to leave out discussing *The Promised Land's* English-as-a-second-language may be rooted in a fear of dwelling on the obvious, but in doing so we write off the implications and effects of Antin's choice and ignore those narrative traces that allude to them.

222 In his 1919 argument against bilingualism and thus against allowing immigrants to preserve their mother tongue(s), Emory Stephen Bogardus claims that "the exertion to be understood [in English] expedites the process" of Americanization (221). His perspective encapsulates a most common attitude toward bilingualism throughout the twentieth century.

contributing, though unwittingly, to the cultural essentializing and the invisibility of the Eastern European identity. Hoffman continued in the line of Antin, though more self-consciously so, disclosing the inadequacies and dangers, but also the inescapability of the domesticating approach. Unlike Nabokov, Brodsky, and, more recently, “Borderlands” writers such as Gloria Anzaldua and Ana Castillo, Antin and Hoffman did not push the limits of monolingualism and of their other tongues, and did not foreignize their narratives with overt linguistic inscriptions. In examining Antin’s and Hoffman’s narratives in terms of their use of domesticating or foreignizing translation practices, I was nonetheless most interested in the motives for, and implications of, these practices, than in deploring the absence of sufficient foreignizing and de-familiarizing strategies.

After suggesting, in his commentary on the writing of *Lolita*, that his novel be read as “a record for [his] love affair” with the English language, Nabokov concludes with the following confession,

My private tragedy, *which cannot, and indeed should not, be anybody’s concern* (italics mine), is that I had to abandon my natural idiom, my untrammled, rich, and infinitely docile Russian tongue for a second-rate brand of English, devoid of any of those apparatuses—the baffling mirror, the black velvet backdrop, the implied associations and traditions—which the native illusionist, frac-tails flying, can magically use to transcend the heritage in his own way. (“On a Book” 317)

Nabokov's "private tragedy" (317) is not as "private" as he coyly intimates, and its public confession amends the view that such matters "cannot and...should not" (317) become anybody else's concern.

The American national identity might never forgo the desire that it be conceived in language and that it be conceived monolingually. On the other hand, as transnational, hybrid, bilingual, and multilingual identities begin to step out of the realm of theory and into the real world, the notion of "American writer" might expand to include definitions that do not deem the national language the *sine qua non* and that make multilingual accommodations. Immigrant narratives that, by deviating from habitual patterns of self-translation, manage to partially defamiliarize and unsettle the hierarchy of values in the receiving culture may eventually alter readership expectations as well.<sup>223</sup> A genuine interest in linguistic mobility and multi-/translingual vocality may therefore help broaden the contexts and reading practices through which we approach American literature, and may benefit on-going efforts for the restructuring and internationalization of American and Cultural Studies.

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223 The inspiration for this argument derived from the PEN World Voices Translation Forum moderated by Venuti and hosted by wordswithoutborders.com on April 19, 2006.

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