

**“There is No World Outside the Text”:
Transatlantic Slippage in Eva Hoffman’s
*Lost in Translation***

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No, I’m no patriot, nor was I ever allowed to be. And yet, the country of my childhood lives within me with a primacy that is a form of love. It lives within me despite my knowledge of our marginality, and its primitive, unpretty emotions. Is it blind and self-deceptive of me to hold on to its memory? I think it would be blind and self-deceptive not to. All it has given me is the world, but that is enough. It has fed me language, perceptions, sounds, the human kind no geometry of landscape, no haze in the air, will live in us as intensely as the landscapes that we saw as the first, and to which we gave ourselves wholly, without reservation. (Hoffman *Lost in Translation* 74)

In Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation*, Poland is the landscape of desire, the starting point to which Hoffman can neither return, nor abandon. Indeed, the very blurring of locations, as Hoffman moves almost seamlessly from past to present, indicates the way in which spaces are influenced, if not infected, by other spaces. Hoffman follows in a long line of critics and writers who see places as though they were on a continuum of being. Ernest Hemingway, in his memoir of life in Paris, observes, “Paris was never to be the same again although it was always Paris and you changed as it changed” (182). Hoffman, too, discovers this odd double image, as the Poland of her youth—Paradise—is re-remembered by others and herself, as a continually evolving depiction of place. In the acknowledgements of his collected essays, *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, Canadian critic Robert Kroetsch claims that he “wear[s] geography next to [his] skin” and that he “speak[s] out of the play of surfaces against and with each other” (ix). These poetic phrases, buried in his list of thanks,

could as easily be applied to Polish-Canadian/American writer Hoffman. *Lost in Translation*, her first memoir,¹ examines the necessity of wearing geography next to one's skin, of the way in which the surfaces and depths of her beloved lost country and her grudgingly gained new one(s) slip against each other to form a palimpsestic narrative where America is a concept that obtrudes upon both Canada and Poland. Hoffman limns the landscapes of Poland, Canada and the United States in a style evocative of Virginia Woolf: she traces the space of childhood and young adulthood, alternating between a geographic and a linguistic structuring of her memories. This article explores the discourses of "here" and "there" invoked by Hoffman's multi-layered images, and maps the transatlantic, linguistic signs of Poland, Canada and the slippery concept of "America." I also argue that Hoffman's text, which critics often position in one or another of the defining geographical spaces in an attempt to circumscribe the memoir (sometimes for publishing purposes), actually offers a more nuanced, transnational reading of space. Hoffman herself has defined transnational literature as a site where "multiple cultural references collide and collude" ("New" 56), and her reader undoubtedly encounters a variety of cultural collisions in negotiating the memoir's meaning. These collisions problematize Hoffman's other assertion, that "there is no world outside the text" (182). This position, developed during her formal study of New Criticism, is ultimately undermined, precisely by reading Hoffman's memoir, in which the multifaceted world outside the text is skillfully created and re-created in a series of competing discourses about how memory itself is constructed and place is negotiated.

In the very first paragraph of the book, posing as her thirteen-year-old self, Hoffman observes that leaving Poland "is a notion of such crushing, definitive finality that to me it might as well mean the end of the world" (3). However, Hoffman's text reveals that the process of emigration—or, indeed, exile—can never be complete. It is always the subject of regrets, memories, and transitions. Indeed, Hoffman's text is not a chronological account of coming to the "New World," but instead is a tapestry of ideas, that flows like a transatlantic stream of consciousness narrative back and forth between Poland and Canada or the United States. As the

ship taking her from Poland pulls away, Hoffman notes that her “being is engaged in a stubborn refusal to move” (4)—yet move she does. What the book celebrates and analyzes is that very movement, even by way of its elliptical structure, which fluidly melds past and present. Such images reinforce the physical reality of the transatlantic tides which move in different directions, and which carry Hoffman both back and forth across this (imagined) oceanic space.

The book is, as the subtitle “Life in a New Language” suggests, principally a memoir of dislocation. In it, Hoffman examines both individual words and whole languages in a bid to understand her own sense of exile; she uses literary criticism and theory to structure her responses to the “new” world, invoking structuralism, postmodernism, and theatre. This “New World” is an amalgam of Canada and the United States; indeed, Canada is at first vaguely interpreted and mistakenly associated with an “America” that erases its cultural specificity. Canada itself only invokes an undefined sense of a cultural desert: “There are vague outlines of half a continent, a sense of vast spaces and little habitation” (*Lost* 4). In contrast, Poland is written large, and lovingly, though Hoffman problematizes her own construction of Poland as “paradise” through an acknowledgment that Poland itself is an ever-shifting entity. A particularly poignant example of this is Hoffman’s reference to the city of Lvov.² Once Polish, Lvov becomes Russian and necessitates a move for her parents who were “trying as quickly as possible to cross the new borders so they could remain within their old nationality even at the cost of leaving home” (8). Poland is a country revisited in the text, both sentimentalized and exposed as unforgiving. Poland’s meaning is not simply wrapped up in paradise, but constantly alters until it becomes such a diffuse image that Hoffman cannot contain it. Hoffman uses the term “geography of emotions” to explain and explore her own feelings, acknowledging as she does so that for her Canadian contemporaries, Poland is a “gray patch of language inhabited by ghosts” (132). She finds her own poltergeist in Mary Antin, author of an immigrant narrative that she feels maps onto her own, despite the fact that Antin’s transatlantic tale is a Russian-American one; again, cultural and country borders are here problematized, and the

metaphorical maps she uses as guides do not necessarily relate to political geography.

It is formally appropriate that questions of “here” dominate Hoffman’s memoir, given that her first emigration is to Canada, a country that critics have argued is preoccupied with margins and dislocations, a place which, rather than loudly proclaiming a sense of its own location and identity (as perhaps its southern neighbor does), instead expends its critical energies on the tensions between “here” and “there.” Indeed, it has long been a commonplace that Canada’s primary question is “Where is here?”³ If contemporary critics unpack the assumptions behind Northrop Frye’s momentous statement, they nevertheless acknowledge the potency of the image, whether it is mythic or more pragmatically “real.”

Geography, again, becomes metaphorical, and Kroestch’s construction of it as skin links with Hoffman’s construction of it as emotion. Geography here extends beyond definable, if changing borders, and is not necessarily aligned to political nation-states; after all, Hoffman’s text frequently conflates Canada with the United States, and the short author biography in later texts suggests that Hoffman moved to “America” at the age of thirteen, a shorthand assertion that offers no national differentiation, and indeed encourages a misrecognition of place.⁴ From Hoffman’s perspective, one of the difficulties of being an immigrant is dealing with “the strangeness of glimpsing internal landscapes that are arranged in different formations as well” (265). It is therefore not surprising that external landscapes and divisions are not rigidly maintained. What further complicates Hoffman’s half-wished-for, half-resisted assimilation into the “New World” is her adolescence at the time of emigration. She is a child lost in the nuances and attitudes of a new culture, where dating, make-up, and the ways to conduct oneself in public all require performing a role to which she is unaccustomed. Hoffman’s own sense of national and personal identities become fragmented when she moves from being a Polish child, to a Canadian adolescent, and then to an American adult, and these various, indeed sometimes imaginary, identities bleed into each other to form the tapestry of her memoir.

I. If not Where, then Who?

R. Barbara Gitenstein argues that “critics who write of Hoffman try to confine or limit her identity,” but it is significant that in Gitenstein’s list of possible constructions of Hoffman (“Polish, Jewish, female and developing American”), the identity tag “Canadian” is not even mentioned (261). Indeed, Gitenstein refers to Canada only twice, in two short passages. In one, Gitenstein notes that

[a]fter her teenage passage in Canada, where she begins to learn the niceties of being a female in the New World and a modern visionary with a memory and nostalgia for the Old World, Hoffman comes to see herself as a special interpreter of America to her friends, her family and herself. (266)

A second reference is even briefer, simply noting that it was in Canada that Hoffman “begins to lose her sense of self—her ability to speak and be” (271). For Gitenstein, then, the contrast is between the sharply divided Old and New Worlds, rather than between the nations that constitute this “New World”; Canada is merely the transitional space that gets superseded by the United States. Given that Gitenstein’s article appears in a collection subtitled “American Women Writers of Polish Descent,” the elision of Canada is perhaps not surprising. It is also the case, as Danuta Zadworna Fjellestad notes that Hoffman herself is slippery in relation to the term “America,” which sometimes seems to encompass Canada and sometimes does not. Hoffman acknowledges the slippage early on: “America—Canada in our minds is automatically subsumed under that category—has for us the old fabulous associations: streets paved with gold, the goose that laid the golden egg” (84). Furthermore, as Jerzy Durczak points out, “Though the reader has occasional glimpses of the Canadian school, the Canadian society or the autobiographer’s family life, the bulk of the author’s observations has to do with ‘living in a new language’” (27). Thus, it may be Hoffman’s own construction of Canada as space of transit, or as part and parcel of continental “America,” that encourages critics to focus elsewhere.

Nevertheless, it remains surprising how few writers even acknowledge Hoffman’s transitional Canadianness. One article in *MELUS*, the

journal attached to the *Society of Multiethnic Literature* (which therefore might be expected to engage with the multi-national nature of Hoffman's identity), does not focus on Hoffman's "other" other nationality as a Canadian, at all, while another article from the same journal makes only passing reference to her Canadianness—and this occurs solely in the footnotes. Other articles focus on Hoffman's Jewish identity, on the genre of immigrant novels in general, or on the connections between Hoffman's narrative and Mary Antin's. Mary Besemer is thus unusual in explicitly isolating Hoffman's Polish-Canadian identity. Besemer justifies her usage of the term "Polish-Canadian" by noting that her article considers Hoffman Polish-Canadian "because her original emigration from Poland was to Canada" (327). Besemer then notes that she will refer to Hoffman's "'Polish' and 'Anglo' senses of self," and that the latter term covers both the American and the Canadian portions of this identity, thus then conflating her Canadianness with her Americanness, and stirring up other critical debates about the contested term "Anglo" (327). Furthermore, while Besemer offers a comprehensive account of Hoffman's national identity, this discussion also occurs in a footnote. Moreover, Besemer is likely to need to justify such a claim, given that the article is published in *Canadian Slavonic Papers*.

Perhaps the most extensive treatment of Hoffman's Canadianness comes from *Canadian Ethnic Studies*—again, the site of publication perhaps ensures such discussion. Eva Karpinski's critically acute, if at times scathing, discussion of Hoffman's memoir acknowledges Canada's "transitional" space for Hoffman, and engages more extensively with the country. Karpinski argues that, "Canada to her becomes a place of exile primarily because it is associated with linguistic uprooting" (128). It is, moreover, "a place inhabited by her *immigrant* self and her 'ethnic' parents" (132 *italics mine*). Karpinski clearly sees a self that moves beyond an immigrant status, yet paradoxically, she lambasts Hoffman for not attending sufficiently to the importance of her outsider status. It is worth exploring Karpinski's objections in more detail. Hoffman's passage runs thus:

I want to figure out, more urgently than before, where I belong in this America that's made up of so many sub-Americas. I

want, somehow, to give up the condition of being a foreigner.... *I no longer want to have the prickly, unrelenting consciousness that I'm living in the medium of a specific culture. It's time to roll down the scrim and see the world directly, as the world.* I want to reenter, through whatever Looking Glass will take me there, a state of ordinary reality. (*Lost* 202, italics mine)

Karpinski argues that, in this passage, Hoffman “confuses ‘ordinary reality’ with the ethnocentric ‘norms’ of American culture, thus implying that the immigrant reality is peripheral and somehow less real” (132). A different reading, however, may simply locate the desire to belong, the desire to exist not as a type, but as an individual—a desire endlessly deferred for a visible or aurally-identifiable immigrant. I would argue that Hoffman here wishes to locate the unthinking sense of place that individuals who have not been uprooted seem to maintain as if without effort. If such a place is more mythic than real, it is still a powerful symbol of one’s ability (or inability) to fix location. It is perhaps significant that Karpinski cuts the section in italics in her citation.⁵ The tensions between “here” and “there” are, in this passage, between two states of being: an idealized, unselfconscious sense of rootedness, and an overwhelming awareness of displacement. Such binaries structure much of Hoffman’s memoir. Nowhere is this clearer than in her positioning of her Polish childhood as “paradise” and her Canadian adolescence as “exile.”

In his discussion of the difficulties of distinguishing between fact and fiction in autobiography, Ihab Hassan trenchantly asks, “Isn’t memory sister to imagination, kin to nostalgia, desire, and deceit? Isn’t memory sometimes even an agent to mendacity, meant consciously to mislead or manipulate history?” (30). Thus Hoffman’s memories of her homeland must always be seen through the screen of doubt, their constructed nature foregrounded. She herself admits that

[t]o some extent, one has to rewrite the past in order to understand it. I have to see Cracow in the dimensions it has to my adult eye in order to perceive that my story has been only a story, that none of its events has been so big or so scary. It is the price of emigration, as of any radical discontinuity, that it

makes such reviews and re-readings difficult; being cut off from one part of one's own story is apt to veil it in the haze of nostalgia, which is an ineffectual relationship to the past, and the haze of alienation, which is an ineffectual relationship to the present. (242)

It is to her credit that Hoffman acknowledges her own process of reinscription as both a willed and a willful one. She is not, as some critics have mistakenly believed, unaware of her own manipulations. Indeed, her careful linguistic and structural plotting of a sense of exile and emigration attests to the fact that, if anything, she is hyperaware of the creation and construction of her memories. As Hassan notes, "'paradise' is made in the mind, precisely to be lost and perpetually regained" (68). Such awareness is crucial to Hoffman's own construction of her Edenic Poland, a Poland which is irrevocably lost to her, especially after a visit "home" in which her childhood friend suggests that she is at least half-American now.

The near "double-consciousness" that Hoffman experiences as a returning stranger—that iconic position so closely allied with Canadian postcolonialism—is implicitly contrasted to her Poland of childhood, which appears (in places) as whole and unreflective. Marianne Hirsch, herself a multiply-displaced immigrant, criticizes Hoffman's stance in this respect, arguing that she wants Hoffman to acknowledge that "in Poland, as a child, she was already divided" (76–77). Hirsch's difficulty comes with her mistaken assumption that Poland is "unequivocally" located as paradise in Hoffman's text. Indeed, Hirsch asks a series of piercing questions:

What does it take for Hoffman to consider this place paradise? Why would she want to recapture a childhood that rests on such [an anti-Semitic] legacy? Hoffman's denial is painful to read, yet it is basic to her construction of her narrative and her world, of her self.... With her evocation of childhood plentitude, Hoffman has displaced the reality of the war, of the anti-Semitism she admittedly still experiences, but which she simply dismisses by calling it *primitive*. (77 italics in original)

Hirsch's passionate discomfiture with Hoffman's text is compelling, but, as Besemeres rightfully notes, her criticism of Hoffman is flawed: "Hoffman's declaration about childhood's non-dividedness should be read not as an absolute or descriptive statement but as an experiential one, relative to her own life 'in' the Polish language" (330). Moreover, Besemeres also observes Hirsch's own conflation of places within the Polish landscape, an elision that makes a powerful argument, but not an entirely accurate one. Yet perhaps Hirsch needs a more complete answer to her questions of how Cracow can be constructed as paradise. The text offers one: it is a paradise constructed of "shimmering light and shadow, with the shadow only adding more brilliance to the patches of wind and sun" (Hoffman 38). Despite superficial appearances, this is no pollyannaish stance, but a carefully considered one, which evokes the play of light and dark in order to hollow out a more deeply felt understanding of a sense of homeland and place.

Karpinski offers another critique of Hoffman's "personal mythology," as she calls it. She argues that, in the memoir, childhood is "coded" as "the place of the familiar" whereas adulthood "connotes fragmentation and divisiveness, splintering and insecurity" (128). The most important words here, I believe, are "mythology" and "coded," in that they specifically indicate the constructed nature of Hoffman's version of her childhood. If Hirsch faults such binaries, Karpinski recognizes their self-conscious use. Furthermore, as Marianne Friedrich notes, "the paradise motif provides an ideal supportive structure due to its inherent potential to *build oppositions*" (164 italics in original). This "supportive structure" is deliberately invoked, as Hoffman's text moves from a structuralist position through many different levels of literary and cultural criticism to arrive at a post-structuralist, postmodern stance towards identity. Fjellestad identifies the movement thus: "The book speaks of the results of the loss of what poststructuralist wisdom would call a romantic illusion of unity and center and of the costs and rewards, the joys and terrors, of being thrown into the postmodern world of constantly shifting boundaries and borderless possibilities" (136).

Hoffman's text engages with the myth of wholeness in order, I believe, to acknowledge that childhood is full of illusions; her text allows them

a space, even as or when there is another, ironic voice behind such idyllic memories. A clear example of such dual-coding occurs in her recollection of a summer holiday in Bialy Dunajec, a small village near the Tatry Mountains. The village is considered “primitive” by the city folk who elect to spend their leisure time there (17), yet overlaying any sense of having to *put up* with “roughing it” is the “good, strong smell of raw wood and hay and clear mountain air” (18). Here we have a clear sense of the primitive as close to nature, and therefore “good.” The journey to Dunajec is expressed in similarly idealized terms. Hoffman is “hypnotized” by the train and sees “golden haystacks baked by the sun, and the peasants unbending from their work to wave at the passing-by train” (18). This Edenic version of the Polish countryside is a highly stylized one, with peasants acting out picturesque and folksy scenes, rather than toiling hard with little reward. Indeed, even the work they perform seems a rich part of a child’s happy life. To consider this carefully-crafted idealism as less than consciously constructed is to fall into Hoffman’s critical trap. As she bluntly acknowledges at the beginning of the book, “the wonder is what you can make a paradise out of” (5). Here then, as elsewhere, Hoffman is overtly conscious of the *desire* for plenitude, as well as the myth behind such wish for wholeness.

Hoffman’s use of binaries—admittedly and perhaps strategically disrupted through her conflation of the United States and Canada—follows not only from an immigrant-tale template in which Old and New Worlds are explicitly compared and contrasted, but also from her own education in structuralist and then post-structuralist thought. Indeed, it is perhaps this overt awareness that motivates Hoffman to undermine any sort of binary opposition, even as she herself sets them up. If the immigrant template calls for a text which sees the Old World as “bad” and the New World as “good,” she calls her Old World “Paradise” and her New World “Exile.” If the immigrant template of a resident of a former Communist country calls for a denunciation of the Old World political view, Hoffman “complicates the popular picture by focusing on the charms and blessings of the System and the terrors and curses of the Promised Land” (Fjellestad 136), going so far as to use the image of the smiling peasant—a Communist propaganda tool, if there ever was

one—for her own ends. Hoffman's memoir is thus more than a personal narrative; indeed, her inclusion of cultural and literary analysis makes it possible to isolate lines which come as if from literary criticism, rather than biography, and it is to her linguistic and theoretical structuring of "exile" that I now turn.

II. Words and the World: the Literary Interpretation of Exile

As a child, Eva reads *Anne of Green Gables*, the archetypal coming-of-age story of a girl in Canada: "As long as I am reading, I assume I am this girl growing up on Prince Edward Island; the novel's words enter my head as if they were emanating from it. Since I experience what they describe so vividly, they must be mine" (28). In this passage Hoffman constructs herself as a naïve reader who wishes to sink into a "realist" text and be transported. She goes on to comment, "I love words insofar as they correspond to the world, insofar as they give it to me in a heightened form" (28). As yet unaware of the contingency of meaning, or of Saussure's theory of linguistic signs, Hoffman allows words to stand in for real things. She even goes so far as to evoke her own, nonsensical language in order to tell "A Story, Every Story, everything all at once" (11).

Once she is in exile, however, she understands the inability to articulate everything, and her critical literary language takes over. She becomes a "living avatar of structuralist wisdom" fully aware that "words are just themselves" (107). In fact, she sees as one of her biggest problems the experience that "the signifier has become severed from the signified" (106). Moreover, she understands that immigrant stories are just that, stories, "models for immigrant fates" which most likely feel unnatural to those that live them (95). She goes as far as to incorporate an example of an immigrant story within her larger narrative of immigration—the story of Irena, a young woman who plays out her love on board the ship carrying them from Europe to North America, only to be "sold" into marriage upon reaching the "promised land." Here, Hoffman again reveals how things only "mean" contingently. After all, what is political freedom in such an environment? Moreover, Hoffman makes this "story" part of her own story; she notes that Irena "completes the novel I'm temporarily living in perfectly" (89) and she later imagines

contradictory fates for her heroine, who fittingly disappears into Canada without a backwards glance.

Hoffman suggests that life becomes a series of translations, not necessarily between two different languages, but “from the word back to its source” (107). For the young woman who revels in language—her own childhood language—there is the sudden disconnection that comes from experiencing words only in their “literary value,” words “that exist only as signs on the page” (106). Further, in her exile from language, Hoffman learns through *text* rather than experience. Given a diary, she makes a conscious decision to write in English: “I learn English through writing, and, in turn, writing gives me a written self. Refracted through the double distance of English and writing, this self—my English self—becomes oddly objective; more than anything, it perceives” (121). Indeed, this distinction becomes crucial for the rest of the text, as Hoffman moves from Canada, to Rice University in Texas, to Harvard University for graduate school and on to New York. What she does not leave behind in these perambulations is her sense of being an immigrant. Indeed, as she notes, “being ‘an immigrant,’ I begin to learn, is considered a sort of location in itself—and sometimes a highly advantageous one at that” (133). In this context, though, Canada itself is never transformed into a homeland, a place of comfortable return, because it was there that she “fell out of the net of meaning into the weightlessness of chaos” (151).

If in Poland she read the narrative of a young girl’s life in Canada as realism, Hoffman cannot, in America, read an immigrant’s tale with such abandon. Mary Antin, her alter ego, “amusing poltergeist” and “ancestress,” is unraveled by her newly-aware structuralist and poststructuralist objective, perceiving self (162). Taking the stance of a resisting reader, she unpicks the triumphalist tone of *The Promised Land* in order to interrogate the “trace of another story behind the story” (162). With great irony, she notes the similarities between their tales, yet observes that Antin focuses on triumph and assimilation, whereas Hoffman—a spectacularly successful woman by any definition—appears to revel in her own maladaptions, her own sense of dislocation.

Perhaps appropriately, Hoffman uses the language of pop psychology and contemporary theatrical performance to explore her dislocation. In

inventing and reinventing herself, she finds her own desires as are uncontrollable as “an infant’s id” (160). Moreover, she invokes the idea of a “Canadian superego,” secretly observing Polish immigrants that conform, or at least behave as though they do (141). Her text is interrupted and infused with interpolated dialogues between the versions of herself, and existential passages that speak of fragmentation and loss. In one example, the young Eva imagines what she would have been like had she never left Poland, how she would have looked, how she would have acted:

But you would have been different, very different.

No question.

And you prefer her, the Cracow Ewa.

Yes, I prefer her. But I can’t be her. I’m losing track of her.

In a few years, I’ll have no idea what her hairdo would have been like.

But she’s more real, anyway.

Yes, she’s the real one. (120)

Yet even this “real” Eva is constructed, as an adult version of Hoffman acknowledges over a hundred pages later. In her internal struggle, various Evas coexist, and none are awarded an identifiable tag that clearly differentiates the Polish “Ewa” from the “American” Eva, though the reader is able to disentangle who is who:

Leave me alone. It’s you who’s playing the charade now. Your kind of knowledge doesn’t apply to my condition

I’ll never leave you quite alone...

But I don’t have to listen to you any longer. I’m as real as you are now. I’m the real one. (231 ellipses in original)

This linguistic and existential construction of the “real” across the transatlantic space indicates slippage as well as demarcations of identity. In her travel book-cum-memoir *Exit into History*, Hoffman suggests that every immigrant has “a second, spectral autobiography, and in my revision of my own history I would have stayed in Poland long enough to become involved in the oppositional politics of my generation” (36).

Instead, she revisits Poland—here as elsewhere—in an attempt to make sense not only of the country she has left behind, but the person that she might have become as well. Also set out as theatrical dialogue are conversations between one version of herself and M.A.F., “My American Friend,” a nameless Everywoman; these dialogues point to a postmodern sense of identity as process, not product, and, perhaps more to the point, performance, not being. Hoffman’s text moves among genres as quickly as she moves between continents, setting down only momentarily in one style before hurling herself in another direction.

At Rice University, she is taught New Criticism, a form of literary criticism that feels inherent to her own understanding of the function of a text, “Luckily for me, there is no world outside the text; luckily, for I know so little of the world to which the literature I read refers” (182). In exploring American literature, she prefers once again to focus on the word, the “world” being too remote, too unknowable, to capture successfully. New Criticism, she argues, “is an alienated way of reading meant for people who are aliens in the country of literature” (183). Here, form and content, literature and life intermingle, and offer mirror images that reinforce Hoffman’s sense of exile. It is only when she becomes a teacher of literature herself that she jumps back into a space almost akin to her childhood where words become “beautiful things—except this is better, because they’re now crosshatched with a complexity of meaning, with the sonorities of felt, sensuous thought” (186). It is fitting, then that Hoffman experience this moment of epiphany when she is reading and interpreting T. S. Eliot, himself an American national transplanted to England.

New Criticism and other analytic methodologies are never enough, though, for a complete understanding of her own “here” and “there” tensions, though she plunders the discourse of Foucault, Bakhtin, and others in her search for a literary description of exile. She refers to Theodor Adorno, Vladimir Nabokov, and Milan Kundera with ease, locating in their dislocations a sense of camaraderie. As Fjellestad notes, “She is conscious of her *experience* of a linguistic construction of her self” (139 italics in original). She is, moreover, conscious of others’ constructions as well.

Karpinski maintains that Hoffman's narrative never gets beyond "a nostalgia trip, a piece of cultural anthropology that flaunts cultural generalities" (133). Furthermore, she argues that "[d]espite her appropriation of poststructuralist rhetoric, she is still committed to the concept of essential selfhood whose experience can be of universal value" (133). I would argue, however, that Hoffman rejects the universal time and time again, and this rejection is one of the key facets of her memoir. Nowhere is this more apparent than in her refusal to concede to her friends' decisions to draw universal connections from specific texts. While she and M.A.F. both find a particular Hungarian movie powerful, M.A.F. extrapolates its plot to encompass the notion of everyone's co-option in the system. Hoffman reacts angrily: "But it wasn't about all of us. It was about the Communist party in Hungary circa 1948" (205). She fiercely notes, "I'm loyal to some notion of accuracy, which is more than I can say for you! The world isn't just a projection screen for your ideas, highly correct though they may be" (206). If such language bespeaks the righteous indignation of youth, it also sets up a running argument about the importance of specificity; the myth of universality must indeed be abandoned. Clearly, there *is* a world outside the text, despite earlier protestations otherwise, and clearly, Hoffman's literary sensibilities reject a casual transference of meaning across space and time.

At the same time, the fabricated nature of Hoffman's early construction of North America ("streets paved with gold") is revisited near the end of the book, where Hoffman's Polish compatriots gather in New York, and ironically reconstruct a Polish-inspired vision of the United States: "Someday you'll get there, and then you'll see what it's like. Tall men in cowboy hats, producers throwing deals at your feet, a swimming pool in every penthouse, and a TV with remote control in every room... I tell you, it's quite a country, America" (259 ellipses in original). This description is followed by the statement, "Oh well, maybe I'll apply for a visa to go there, I hear they're easier to get these days,' Jurek says and raises his glass" (259). Already inhabiting *an* America, Hoffman's Polish friends step back ironically to reinhabit the fantasy version of it, to acknowledge the gap between the actual country and their transatlantic versions of it. Hoffman even compares and contrasts the differing

interpretations of space that immigrants from various countries hold. She compares a Polish friend to her cleaner, Maria; for her unnamed friend, “the world is too small to sustain the fabulous America of people’s dreams; there is no America any longer, no place the mind can turn to for fantastic hope. But for Maria, who nurtures no fantastic hopes, it’s still America you emigrate to—this all-too-real America” (261).⁶

Lost in Translation is, as Karpinski rightfully notes, composed of a privileged narrative voice; its discourse *is* that of Western autobiography. What Hoffman does with the immigrant narrative, however, is extend it beyond her own “essential selfhood” through the very discourses of power and criticism that she invokes. Poland, Canada, and the United States become both particularized places, and metaphorical ones in her capable hands. Paradise, Exile, and the New World correspond to these countries respectively, and yet even these designations slip and tumble into each other. Poland is both the “gray patch of land” imagined by her Canadian classmates, and the whole globe imagined by her adolescent self. Hoffman is eventually, however, able to see it as her classmates do, as “a distant spot, somewhere on the peripheries of the imagination, crowded together with countless other hard to remember places of equal insignificance” (132). This realization, in turn, recalls her first view of Canada as “an enormous, cold blankness” (4). Two views, at the same time similar in perspective yet diametrically opposed, mark her moment of realization that reference points necessarily shift.⁷ Indeed, as Hoffman notes, “The reference points inside my head are beginning to do a flickering dance. I suppose this is the most palatable meaning of displacement. I have been dislocated from my own center of the world, and that world has been shifted away from my center” (132). The world is larger than she is; its center is not her and never will be. Indeed, “there is no geographic center pulling the world together and glowing with the allure of the real thing; there are, instead, scattered nodules competing for our attention” (275).

Hoffman is searching, through words, for her “blank white center” (275), but paradoxically, it is only through black marks transgressing this white space that any story can be written at all. As this article has shown, what Hoffman does in her memoir is inscribe Poland onto a

transatlantically produced Canadian and American literary landscape. She asserts connections and disruptions between all three countries, relocating specific geography within a linguistic and emotional geography, juxtaposing for instructive comparison the worlds inside—and outside—the text.

Notes

- 1 Hoffman followed publication of *Lost in Translation* with her travel memoir *Exit into History: A Journey through New Eastern Europe*, an account of her return to Poland after the fall of Communism. The book begins by noting that “Poland has taken a leap away from me, not in distance, but in time” (1), indicating Hoffman’s continuing engagement with emotional rather than literal geographies of place. She has also published *Shtetl: The History of a Small Town and an Extinguished World* and *After Such Knowledge: Where Memory of the Holocaust Ends and History Begins*, as well as one novel, *The Secret*, and various essays, including “The New Nomads” in Aciman’s *Letters of Transit*.
- 2 After the Soviet invasion, German soldiers occupied Lvov in the Second World War. It was the site of several pogroms, and by 1942 more than 65,000 Jewish occupants had been deported from the Lvov ghetto and murdered. Political changes two years after the publication of Hoffman’s text now situates Lvov within the independent Ukraine.
- 3 The question comes originally from Northrop Frye: “It seems to me that Canadian sensibility has been profoundly disturbed, not so much by our famous problem of identity, important as that is, as by a series of paradoxes in what confronts that identity. It is less perplexed by the question ‘Who am I?’ than by some riddle such as ‘Where is here?’” (220).
- 4 See, for example, the Vintage editions of *After Such Knowledge*, *Shtetl*, and *Exit into History*.
- 5 Just as I have cut some of the words Karpinski quotes. The missing words are as follows: “I no longer want to tell people quaint stories from the Old Country, I don’t want to be told that ‘exotic is erotic,’ or that I have Eastern European intensity, or brooding Galician eyes. I no longer want to be propelled by immigrant chutzpah or desperado energy or usurper’s ambition” (Hoffman 202).
- 6 This discussion can be compared with Josef Skvorecky’s exploration of nations, in his novel *The Engineer of Human Souls*, where he writes, “I also know about their real country, the one they carry in their hearts” (299), referring to immigrants’ views of their native Czechoslovakia, or to Hoffman’s own *Exit into History*, where, visiting an impoverished part of Warsaw, she is told she is visiting Poland’s Harlem.
- 7 Hoffman notes in *Exit into History* that for the “new” Eastern Europe, engagement with the “West,” for example, includes both Japan and Hong Kong (25),

revealing again the contingency of meaning that is not necessarily connected to geographical “reality.”

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