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# English Through the Emigrant's "I": Lost in Translation by Eva Hoffman & Running in the Family by Michael Ondaatje

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English Through the Emigrant's "I":

*Lost in Translation* by Eva Hoffman & *Running in the Family* by Michael Ondaatje

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INTRODUCTION

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“Seeing ‘the entire world as a foreign land’ makes possible originality of vision. Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music—is *contrapuntal*. For an exile, habits of expression...in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment...Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally. There is a unique pleasure in this sort of apprehension, especially if the exile is conscious of other contrapuntal juxtapositions that diminish orthodox judgment and elevate appreciative sympathy.”

—Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile*

\* \* \*

Through the memoirs of Eva Hoffman (*Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*) and Michael Ondaatje (*Running in the Family*), I will examine the authorial decision to write in either a second language (in the case of Hoffman) or in the language of the colonizing power (in the case of Ondaatje). Much discourse has been devoted to what is obviously lost in the autobiographical translation of the migrated self. There exists a discursive tendency to romanticize what is lost in translation: mother tongue, homeland, authentic authorial self. I argue, however, that there is more to be gained through the communication of emigrant estrangement in the very *language* of estrangement, which, in the case of both authors examined here, is English. Despite conditional differences between the two authors (e.g., home country and relationship towards the English language), the overarching questions that drove me to begin research were the same in both cases: Why choose this distance—felt and manifested differently by each author—especially in the writing of one’s own life? Why opt for this linguistic ambiguity when operating within a genre (memoir/autobiographical writing) insistent on documenting and accounting for lived experience—or history—as accurately as possible? Why choose to represent one’s life and lost world in a language from which one feels a certain degree of estrangement? What is gained, or at the very least, what is illuminated, in the light that shines through this linguistic fissure? In my exploration into these authorial ambiguities, I will focus on Hoffman’s and Ondaatje’s memoirs in order to elucidate the (re)claimed linguistic power therein.

\* \* \*

Much of the literary discourse on Hoffman's memoir focuses not on her *use* of the English language but on her *disuse* of Polish; in other words, much of the criticism perpetuates an emphasis on absence and division while doing nothing to empower the exilic condition—nor does the criticism seek even to consider the language as empowering. For example, in “Re-Constructing the Self in Language and Narrative,” Anita Jarczok performs an analysis of Hoffman's memoir alongside the diaries of Anaïs Nin in order to examine how childhood migration to America affected each author's sense of self; Jarczok explores whether or not the estrangement “from their homeland and their mother tongue entailed the departure from themselves” (22). Jarczok's analysis—which, like my own, is focused on language—operates in a framework that renders both Nin and Hoffman somewhat hollowed without their native tongue. Jarczok's essay begins: “An exile loses home, friends, home culture and frequently an opportunity to express oneself in another tongue. When one loses a language, one, in a way, loses the self” (22). Jarczok goes on to assert that Nin and Hoffman underwent total reinvention during the writing process. Hoffman, according to Jarczok, wrote in English in order to provide “necessary detachment from her distressing experiences” (27), as if to suggest that the only reason for Hoffman's written English was exilic trauma—thus eliminating any possibility of exilic triumph.

While my chapter on Hoffman shares Jarczok's interest in linguistic and experiential detachment, my study maintains an altogether opposite stance towards detachment; rather than regarding Hoffman's detachment from her adopted English as a written shield protecting traumatized self, I argue that Hoffman's English is productively and self-consciously employed to bring her directly into her traumas. At no point during

the memoir does Hoffman soften or slur the articulation of problematic experiences. For example, on the very first page of her memoir, Hoffman describes her family's departure from Poland with objective precision and self-awareness; she steps outside of herself—and her native tongue—to describe her personal initiation into exile: “We can't be leaving all this behind—but we are. I am thirteen years old, and we are emigrating. It is a notion of such crushing, definitive finality” (3). Hoffman is indeed detached—from English, from experience—though I hope to show, through examples like this one, that this detachment sharpens, rather than dulls, her articulation of exile.

Jarczok's interpretation is neither misinformed nor unique; exilic discourse is indeed slackened by a critical tendency that perpetuates notions of nostalgia, exilic loss, and linguistic impossibility.<sup>1</sup> Many critics maintain similar interpretations of exilic writing, including Svetlana Boym (*The Future of Nostalgia*), Mary Besemeres (“Language and Self in Cross-Cultural Autobiography”), and Eva Karpinski (“Negotiating the Self: Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation* and the Question of Immigrant Autobiography”). In contrast to the critical proclivity towards nostalgic loss—as well as Hoffman's similar inclinations, for her laments about linguistic impossibility permeate the memoir—I hope to read Hoffman against Hoffman and, in so doing, challenge her disavowal of her own facility as an author. Instead, I tend to read along the same lines as Mary Soliday, who, in an article entitled “Translating Self and Difference,” notes that Hoffman ultimately “discovers a way of holding her Polish and English selves in creative

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<sup>1</sup> Applied linguist Aneta Pavlenko invokes Hoffman in *The Bilingual Mind*, in a chapter in which Pavlenko examines the conflict of inner voices and inner languages. Pavlenko observes that Hoffman “nostalgically recalls the childhood feeling of harmony when ‘Polish words described the world effortlessly’”; Pavlenko uses this example to underscore how Hoffman remains “out of sync” because “the link between the signifier and the signified” has been disrupted (300). While I, like Pavlenko, recognize the fracture between signifier and signified, I argue that this fissure renders Hoffman's written expression indeed *more* synchronous with her emigrant experience.

tension and is able to achieve a successful...translation of her difference” (521). Moreover, as Edward Said has it in *Reflections on Exile*, “only someone who has achieved independence and detachment, someone whose circumstances make it impossible to recapture that sweetness, can answer those questions” (148). Similarly, I emphasize Hoffman’s success in recapturing her past as well as in self-consciously bringing her immigrant self into written existence. I posit that her authorial triumph is achieved *because of*—rather than *in spite of*—this very detachment.

\*            \*            \*

In my second chapter, I treat Michael Ondaatje’s use of English throughout his memoir, *Running in the Family*—an autobiographical work as fluid in genre and narrative scope as it is in language. By employing an English as lush as colonial Ceylon itself, Ondaatje demonstrates that exilic language need not be overpowered by loss. To this end, I summon Said, who observes in *Reflections on Exile* that exiles’ attentiveness to their use of language—here he invokes Joseph Conrad, Vladimir Nabokov, James Joyce, and Kazuo Ishiguru—provoke their readers into an awareness of how language is about experience and not just about itself. Said continues, commenting upon the condition of the exile:

[I]f you feel you cannot take for granted the luxury of long residence, habitual environment, native idiom, and you must somehow compensate for these things, what you write necessarily bears a unique freight of anxiety, elaborateness, perhaps even overstatement. (xv)

Ondaatje is indeed “freighted” with anxiety, given his status as postcolonial subject returning to his native shores, writing from a dual perspective: that of a now-Canadian citizen—i.e., a voice from the West—and that of a Ceylonese/Sri Lankan postcolonial subject. Ondaatje recognizes the tension inherent to his postcolonial condition—“a tenuousness,” according to Ajay Heble, that is “appreciably reflected in Ondaatje’s decision to refer to the country as Ceylon”<sup>2</sup> (187). The language of *Running in the Family* seeks to underscore this postcolonial tension through a language and form as hybridized as postcolonial identity, though Ondaatje’s politics are subtle. Ondaatje’s authorial positioning is thus productively ambivalent: he is simultaneously deracinated from and at home in Ceylonese spaces, and this double perspective enriches—indeed enables—his narrative.

In an interview with Amitava Kumar, Ondaatje said that in his writing that he endeavors to privilege “[...]different points of view, various speakers, various narratives, so it’s more of a group conversation as opposed to a monologue. You want the politics of any complicated situation to be complicated in a book of fiction or nonfiction” (qtd. in Kumar). *Running in the Family* operates under this imperative, for multiple voices sing at once; the memoir is a composite of poetry, prose, archived documents, and transcribed conversations among Ondaatje’s family. Without assimilating these various voices onto a homogeneous plane of narration, Ondaatje’s memoir lyrically coheres while simultaneously revealing the motley—and, at times, tense—nature of Ceylon’s political history.

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<sup>2</sup> Ceylon is the colonial name for what is now, in the postcolonial period (since 1948), named Sri Lanka.



Ondaatje is often criticized for treating Sri Lankan politics with mere poeticism, for aestheticizing and simplifying cultural and political issues. These are understandable (albeit frustrating) misreadings, given Ondaatje's relatively modulated postcolonial sensibility (he is no Ousmane Sembène, Ali Mazrui, Ama Ata Aidoo, Arturo Arias, or Linton Kwesi Johnson; Ondaatje's writings are by no means polemical). That said, in his sophisticated reading of *Running in the Family*, Ajay Heble reminds us that Ondaatje's text "demands a more careful reading because of the subtle and telling ways in which its cultural phenomena are encoded" (184).

Arun P. Mukherjee, Professor of Indian and South Asian literatures at York University, is one of Ondaatje's harshest critics, attributing Ondaatje's success to his personal and authorial "sacrifice of regionality, his past and most importantly, his experience of otherness" (50). Mukherjee, during a comparative analysis of the poetry of Ondaatje and Cyril Dabydeen (an immigrant writer from Guyana, another former British colony), claims that Ondaatje's work

gives few indications of his Sri Lankan background. Ondaatje, coming from a Third World country with a colonial past, does not write about his otherness. [...] Intriguingly enough, there is no trauma of uprooting evident in his poetry; nor is there a need for redefinition in a new context; the subjects that occupy so many immigrant writers. (51)

Finally, Mukherjee lambastes Ondaatje for "siding with the colonizer," as well as for the "absence of any cultural baggage" in his writing (50). However, one must first note that Ondaatje belonged to the Burgher class, which was comprised descendants of European colonists from the 16<sup>th</sup> century and was situated at the upper echelon of Ceylonese

colonial society (Silva 104). The Burghers were the most Westernized ethnic grouping in colonial Ceylon; Ondaatje thus simultaneously belonged *to* and was distinguished *from* the rest of the Ceylonese community.

In *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje writes of Ceylonese heterogeneity: “Everyone was vaguely related,” a statement that Muhkerjee finds problematic in that it “provides the false impression that all or most Sri Lankans belonged to this group or lived like the Ondaatje’s lived” (50). Suwanda Sugunasiri responds to Muhkerjee’s charges, asserting that even Ondaatje’s appellation of his homeland as Ceylon (rather than Sri Lanka) indicates his “cultural baggage.” Moreover, Sugunasiri argues that Ondaatje’s representation of Ceylonese experience is—rather than “a denial of life” or a “false impression” of Ondaatje’s social milieu, as Muhkerjee claims—a “celebration of life, however decadent, colonial, or counterdevelopmental it appears from the national point of view” (56). Heble reads Ondaatje’s representation of the various Ceylonese milieus with even more generosity than Suganasiri, suggesting that

Ondaatje uses “everyone” as a way of aspiring toward a kind of confidence in reconstructing the belongingness of his family’s circle while recognizing, elsewhere in the same passage, the tenuousness of this community which...is unable to articulate its own national determinations. Thus, while a word such as “everyone” may run the risk of taking away from the referential, its force in *Running in the Family* resides precisely in its ability to compensate for, and recast a condition of, unbelonging through a myth of excess. (185)

My argument thus picks up where Heble's leaves off and qualifies his claim for Ondaatje's connective excess: I seek to emphasize that it is precisely *through* language and narrative style that Ondaatje interweaves his personal and national history. Ondaatje uses of English, "the language of the invaders," as the very means of navigating the tumultuous political, historical, and linguistic realms—or, to use the author's word, "moods"—of both colonial and postcolonial Ceylon. I posit that Ondaatje's effusive, connective language is a kind of postcolonial protest that opens up and illuminates the stories of Ceylon, thus bridging the cultural and linguistic gap that exists in (and is presented as a detriment to) much exilic writing.

\* \* \*

This thesis seeks to underscore the notion that exilic autobiographical expression ought to be considered as an act of opportunity and empowerment rather than as an inherently fallible enterprise. I begin with an analysis of Hoffman's memoir and end with a study of Ondaatje's; in so doing, I move from an example of empowerment by means of detachment to empowerment by means of attachment. Despite operating under nearly opposite authorial ethics, both authors accomplish the feat of rendering the English language the ideal vehicle for their own particular exilic autobiographical expression.

CHAPTER ONE

The Translated and Transmuted “I”:

Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation*

A young girl is standing on the prow of an enormous ship; she is being peeled away from her homeland; she is floating reluctantly towards a murky and mysterious, and essentially monolingual country in which she will be forced to carve an entirely new life: we can all recognize this classic sequence of emigration images. Thus begins Eva Hoffman's memoir, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, which chronicles her displacement with her family from Cracow, Poland to the other hard, and far more harrowing, C which awaits them on the other side of the Atlantic: Canada, a word which, for 13-year old Hoffman, "has ominous echoes of the Sahara" (4). And for young Eva, "Canada" means not only foreign land, but foreign language. English: an untranslatable echo.

A distinct longing for her native Polish permeates Hoffman's English-language memoir. Hoffman learned English upon her arrival in Canada as a 13-year-old girl. Her initial impression of the language is "harsh-sounding," though she eventually learns to love words like "'enigmatic' or 'insolent'—words that have only a literary value, that exist only as signs on a page" (105-6). Despite Hoffman's ambivalence towards the language, English will ultimately become the language of her quotidian experiences, her written career, as well as the language of her written self. Though the memoir is permeated by her own linguistic frustrations—a pining for the music of Polish, a lamentation over the harshness of English—Hoffman's use of English does not mark loss and is in fact quite far from a resignation, or even a compromise. In this chapter, I will explore the gains in Hoffman's opting for linguistic estrangement, especially given how often she elucidates—in English, let us remember—her love and longing for the Polish language.

In this chapter I will explore the negotiations—with authorial identity, writing style, memory—Hoffman underwent in order to write her memoir in English rather than her native Polish, the language in which her oldest and most fundamental memories were lived. How does Hoffman remember differently when the English words available are discordant with the recalled world of Poland and the Polish language? How does this linguistic distance influence authorial distance, if at all? Is the ‘I’ (or the eye) of memoir reduced, refrained, or re-claimed? I argue that despite the inarguable loss of her native language, Hoffman’s exilic autobiographical writing in English as a second language may in fact serve to intensify her authorial power. In mastering the English language of the Anglo-American culture into which she was forced to assimilate, Hoffman masters her history as well. Moreover, I insist that Hoffman’s language not only succeeds in recapturing her past, but allows her self-consciously to bring her immigrant self into existence; estranged language describes the estranging emigrant experience. Despite Hoffman’s lamentations and protestations about the impossibility of articulating her authentic self into the borrowed language of English, it is precisely that estranged language that offers her the ideal conduit for doing so, thus providing the critical distance to articulate all the more precisely, self-consciously, and performatively, her doubled, self-estranged self.

Language and autobiographical memory are Hoffman’s primary foci—not her Polish identity, nor her female identity, nor her identity as an assimilated North American intellectual. That much has been written about exilic memoir. The critical premium is often placed on exilic nostalgia and linguistic separation, rather than on the political, epistemological, cultural, and intellectual gains in using the adopted language in order to

communicate an exile's inevitable (and obvious) loss and distance. For example, Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia* explores how nostalgia operates for an exile like Hoffman, reminding us that "the word *exile* (from [the Latin] *ex-salire*) means to leap outside. Exile is both about suffering in banishment and springing into a new life" (256). However, Boym's argument takes a disempowering turn: "The leap is also a gap, often an unbridgeable one; it reveals an incommensurability of what is lost and what is found. Only a few manage to turn exile into an enabling fiction" (256). I want to instead explore the power gained through one's status as an exile on the periphery of the hegemonic culture, as well as its expression in enabling *nonfiction*. Rather than dwelling on linguistic forfeiture, I insist on the political and authorial power derived from the choice to write of oneself in a non-native language.

I posit that this enabling distance is made possible not only by the linguistic detachment of Hoffman, but the psychological detachment as well. In fact, Pavlenko calls the linguistic distance experienced by bilinguals the "emancipatory detachment effect" (280). Pavlenko explains, "the new, 'clean,' words and idioms are not imbued with anxieties and taboos, they do not erupt in heteroglossia of voices, images, and memories, they do not constrain the writer, do not impose". Hoffman is thus liberated to examine her life with the same objectivity with which she employs the English language. Her memoir is no less authentic for its being written in her second language—precisely the contrary: Hoffman's narrative voice is stronger for its distance—less idiomatic and automatic perhaps than that of a native English speaker, but more precise as a result. In *Lost in Translation*, Hoffman crafts her narrative with a precision that allows her "...to

talk about the dear and the painful, the holy and the profane, without throwing [herself] at the mercy of the language” (Pavlenko 280).

Hoffman’s memoir, despite its occasional dips into sentimentalism, is characterized by a critical stance—a posture as critical towards the author herself as it is towards her experience assimilating into North American culture. After all, the exile is predisposed to criticism, for her natural condition is that of an outsider (on the outside of the hegemonic culture). Late into the memoir, once Hoffman has grown into a savvy New York writer, an editor of a magazine asks her where she learned to be a critic. She first assumes, unthinkingly, that it is because of her university formation that she writes so shrewdly. But the editor disagrees: “‘No,’ he continues. ‘There’s something else.’ ‘I suppose it’s that I’m an immigrant,’ I said. ‘Ah, yes,’ he said. ‘That’s it’” (Hoffman 227). This is a rare moment in the text in which Hoffman does not belie her mastery, seeing “more clearly how useful [her] bicultural triangulations are in this enterprise [writing]” (Hoffman 226).

Hoffman regards her PhD in English Literature—from Harvard University—as the “certificate of full Americanization” (226). From the outset of the novel, Hoffman’s hunger for literature and knowledge is made plain. Hoffman ultimately has the sad realization that her family cannot afford the plethora of material goods with which they are constantly confronted in “the larger repositories of consumerism” (135). Hoffman resolves to mute her appetites: “I decide to stop wanting...this new resolution is built into the logic of my situation” (136). Despite her omission of material desire, Hoffman discovers that which doesn’t cost a thing: “internal goods,” she calls them (137). She continues:



If I know everything, if I understand everything, then even though I can't have a house with a patio opening out onto a swimming pool, or a boyfriend whom I like, in some other way I can have the entire world. Like Thomas Wolfe, I dream of reading everything in the library, starting from letter A. And like Ben Franklin, whose name I've never heard, I start devising programs of self-improvement. When, by accident, I come across some books on Zen, I feel as though I've found a confirmation of my own resolve. Yes, of course, detachment is the thing to strive for. (137)

Indeed: Hoffman is confirmed by her estrangement. More than something to strive for, detachment—from exilic experience and from language—becomes *the* authorial ethic informing the whole of Hoffman's memoir.

In this chapter, I will refer to Hoffman's memoir as a "language memoir," a term coined in 1994 by American academic and Francophile Alice Kaplan. Kaplan's own memoir *French Lessons* chronicles her self-motivated obsession with and transition into the French language. While Kaplan's approach to a foreign language differs from that of Hoffman's—Kaplan came to her second language, French, with desire rather than determined dejection—her term is nevertheless useful in discussing *Lost in Translation* and its place among other exilic autobiographical writings.

Kaplan defines "language memoir" as a memoir which explores "the contexts in which languages are learned, the motivations, the emotional tenor of the new and old languages, [and] the way language functions for each personality" (Kaplan 60). As Kramsch notes, writers of language memoir may be voluntary or involuntary exiles, expatriates, refugees, immigrants, or minorities—all of whose autobiographical

expression features “what is going inside in the head of the person who suddenly finds herself passionately engaged in new sounds and a new voice, who discovers the *chat* is not a cat at all, but a new creature in new surroundings” (59).<sup>3</sup> Language memoir chronicles the cross-linguistic transformation through which

new selves, new families emerge in a second language both as reactions and mirrors to the first one. [...] Sometimes the speaker longs for the old language, and sometimes dreads it; more often dread and longing for home coexist across the narrative. (Kaplan 59)

The spanning ambiguity that Kaplan evokes is precisely what dominates Hoffman’s memoir most dramatically, for Hoffman self-consciously oscillates between resentment of and romance with the English language. The dueling forces—and voices—in Hoffman’s memoir are the dominant English of her present moment and the dissolved (or, at the very least, dulled) Polish of her memories. However, *Lost in Translation* seems to resist a coherent form. The final paragraph of the memoir appears to resolve Hoffman’s linguistic frustrations: “The language of this is sufficient. I am here now,” she writes (280). However, this assertion belies the residue of Hoffman’s self-conscious ambiguity on nearly every preceding page of her memoir, as if to suggest that a single form can contain the multitudes of an exile.

Another term that circulates within cross-linguistic autobiographical discourse is “ethnic autobiography,” whose connotations and definitions very nearly align with “language memoir.” For *Lost in Translation* I prefer the latter. “Language memoir”, as a term, possesses a more universal and inclusive scope than “ethnic autobiography,” whose

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<sup>3</sup> Even though Kaplan is a Midwestern-born Anglophone, *French Lessons* straightforwardly qualifies as language memoir because of the premium placed on language as a conduit between cultures, memories, and selves; Kaplan is a self-described “voluntary exile” (59).

defining adjective (“ethnic”) seems only to perpetuate a divide that it seeks to dissolve, whereas “language memoir” includes *all* authorial efforts towards self-expression vis-à-vis language. Linguist Aneta Pavlenko reminds us that “of all narratives in the world, the one most important to us is the narrative of our own life—its loss shatters our sense of self” (169). Hoffman’s language memoir is one of many<sup>4</sup> that tries to account for the narrative arc of the author’s life, that tries to give words to memories of old, lost worlds and to retrospectively reflect upon bilingual experience through a bilingual’s refracted language.

Language memoir is an essential—and growing—genre given our 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century landscape of mass migration. As language continues to circulate the world with increasing intensity—in tandem with mobility and migration—language memoir will only grow as a genre. Language memoir seeks to give expression to those who, because of their ethnicity or, even more trivially, because of their accent, are often denied a voice (thus denied an *I*). Eva Hoffman is a prime example of an emigrant who, articulating herself better than many Anglo-Americans, now has the linguistic power to define herself—and her native country’s history—in her own terms, in the only language in which she can be globally heard. Gayatri Spivak, in a discussion of multiculturalism with Sneja Gunew, noted that “the question ‘Who should speak?’ is less crucial than ‘Who will listen?’” When a writer on the periphery faces—by means of writing—a hegemonic culture, “this audience will affect the construction of that writer’s identity by the choices it makes on reading the writer’s work” (qtd. in Fachinger 116). Beyond authorial

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Vladimir Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory*, Jean-Paul Sartre’s *The Words*, Nancy Huston’s *The Lost North*, and Jacques Derrida’s *Monolingualism of the Other*, to name only a few.

identity—even at the most theoretical level—estrangement from experience arguably leads to greater precision and mastery of its description. Paradoxically, detachment from experience (through Hoffman’s detachment from language) yields a greater authenticity of expression. However tenuous a term “authenticity” may be in autobiographical writing, I insist that Hoffman’s account is indeed closer to her lived experience because of—*not* in spite of—her distance from English.

\* \* \*

In 1959, Eva Hoffman boarded the *Batory* with her younger sister, Alinka, and her parents, leaving her postwar but nonetheless beloved homeland for an unknown Canada, a country for which Hoffman’s dubious imagination held only “vague outlines of half a continent, a sense of vast spaces and little habitation” (4). Throughout the memoir, the topography of Hoffman’s world inevitably expands as Hoffman finds her home—or at least, a revised version of one—in academia and the English language. Hoffman’s memoir is divided into three parts: “Paradise,” “Exile,” and “The New World”—an emigrant’s arc. Hoffman’s memoir ranges in authorial voice and in color—from a rose-tinted Cracow, to a shadowy Vancouver, to an iridescent adult life as a prominent figure among the New York City literati.

One must note that Hoffman occupied a peripheral status from birth; her exile was merely a different and not altogether new kind of “outside” existence Hoffman and her family were Jews in a largely Catholic Cracow; ironically, she was never considered entirely Polish until she came to the Americas, when her Polish identity was both

ascribed and internalized. In Poland, however, her Polish identity was always at odds with the anti-Semitism plaguing childhood. In an early chapter, Hoffman recounts an instance in which fellow school children struck her, screaming “Out with the Yids!” (35). Moving outward—westward—Hoffman was finally able to realize her Polish identity, for in America one is quickly assigned to one identitarian category or another, especially in the supposed “melting pot” that is New York City.

New York City as ultimate immigrant destination was not unique to Hoffman, for her ultimate residence was the same as millions of European immigrants during the greater part of the twentieth century. This was the century distinct for mass immigration, flooded by “waves of mostly poor arrivals into American society as New York is their first, if not their subsequent, place of residence” (Said xii). In a reverse trajectory, Hoffman lived in several places—both Canadian and American cities—before permanently landing in New York. The city nonetheless lends itself to her narrative as a kind of haven—“an imperial center whose currency is the international standard and whose language the Esperanto of the modern world” (Hoffman 251). Edward Said has a similar impression; in *Reflections on Exile*, Said considers New York City as “the capital of our time,” as it “remains...an immigrants’ and exiles’ city” (xii). But he also focuses on a particular tension in the immigrant’s New York City life:

It may seem paradoxical and even willful to add that the city’s centrality is due to its eccentricity and the peculiar mix of its attributes, but I think that that is so...New York’s strange status as a city unlike all others is often a troubling aspect of daily life, since marginality, and the solitude of the

outsider, can frequently overcome one's sense of habitually being in it.

(xi)

Hoffman, like most exiles, is no stranger to paradox, which seems to be not only a defining feature in both memoirs I examine in this study but, more generally, to the emigrant experience.

The memoir develops chronologically, in correspondence with the growing maturity of Hoffman's voice. Romance and nostalgia are perhaps inevitable features of an exile's narrative but nonetheless, at times, suffocatingly permeate the early chapters of Hoffman's memoir. "Paradise" chronicles her childhood in Cracow, for which Hoffman nurses an intense—and, at times, unbearable—nostalgia. Three paragraphs into her memoir, writing in the voice of her 13-year old self, Hoffman slips into Polish, thus self-consciously announcing English as an inadequate medium to articulate her childhood. On the second page, Hoffman describes her reaction to hearing the Polish anthem as the *Batory* pulled away from her homeland:

I am suffering my first, severe attack of nostalgia, or *teşknota*—a word that adds to nostalgia the tonalities of sadness and longing. It is a feeling whose shades and degrees I'm destined to know intimately, but at this hovering moment, it comes upon me like a visitation from a whole new geography of emotions, an annunciation of how much an absence can hurt.

(4)

The word *teşknota* appears several times more throughout the memoir—one of the few instances when English remains, for Hoffman, unsatisfactory, *not enough*. The nostalgia, or *teşknota*, that Hoffman invokes when remembering Poland is self-consciously

problematic—Hoffman is mindful that she is remembering a postwar “paradise” where “[...] husbands sometimes beat their wives. That’s life” (Hoffman 12). Here, we see the stark tonal counterpoint Hoffman plays throughout the memoir—a melody at once robustly romantic and almost scientifically detached. Often, the two tones converge; Hoffman diagnoses, rather than drowns in, her nostalgia. Hoffman is conscious of her warped, rosy remembrances, just as she is conscious of—and almost clinical with—every word she deploys:

...the wonder is what you can make a paradise out of...I grew up in a lumpen apartment in Cracow, surrounded by squabbles, dark political rumblings, memories of wartime suffering, and daily struggle for existence. And yet, when it came time to leave, I, too, felt I was being pushed out of the happy, safe enclosures of Eden. (5)

Boym describes nostalgia as “a sentiment of loss and displacement,” but also as “a romance with one’s own fantasy” (xiii).

There is an immense discourse devoted to the subject of autobiographical writing in the second language of its author. What I have found in my research, however, is that the discourse often puts the writer—in this case Eva Hoffman, but “writer” may refer to any author of autobiography in a second-learned language—in the position of the victim, of the powerless, of the linguistically demobilized or disemboweled. The existing criticism seems to exploit Hoffman’s *teşknota*. Hoffman writes: “*Teşknota* throws a film over everything around me, and directs my vision inward. The largest presence within me is the welling up of absence, of what I have lost” (125). Critics like Boym seem to dwell only on the absence, ignoring Hoffman’s crucial qualification: her vision is directed

inward and, I posit, continually and consequentially refined. Edward Said adumbrates this notion in *Reflections on Exile*, in which he not only isolates but insists upon the power in exilic perspective: “[E]xile can produce rancor and regret, as well as a sharpened vision” (xxxv).

Aneta Pavlenko’s *The Bilingual Mind* explores the cognitive differences experienced by bilinguals—a blanket term which, for Pavlenko’s purposes, includes multilinguals—in their respective languages. Pavlenko too explores autobiographical memory and how bilinguals remember differently in their respective languages. Hoffman, even without the lens of a linguist, dwells heavily on the transformation of her internal self upon her arrival in the United States. Young Hoffman experiences a splintering of self as a result of the growing influence of English. Falling asleep one night, Hoffman reflects:

I wait for that spontaneous flow of inner language which used to be my nighttime talk with myself. [...] Nothing comes. Polish, in a short time, has atrophied. [...] Its words don’t apply to my new experiences. [...] In English, words have not penetrated to those layers of my psyche from which a private language could proceed. I have no interior language, and without it, interior images become blurred too...I’m not filled with language anymore, and I have only a memory of fullness to anguish me with the knowledge that, in this dark and empty state, I don’t really exist. (107-8)

In this passage, Hoffman touches upon one of the primary thrusts of language memoir: the transition to English as an interior language. While Hoffman recalls a time in which



she lacked satisfying linguistic skills, “the dark and empty state” is soon to be filled with a new English replete with the layers for which young Hoffman longed.

The narrative arc of *Lost in Translation* might appear to be linear and straightforward, given that it is composed in three chronologically progressive parts. However, there is an abundance of asynchronous essayistic and improvisational riffs that punctuate Hoffman’s chronicle. These self-conscious sections are sprinkled throughout the memoir, treating and testing the questions that tug the hardest at Hoffman: language, identity, and autobiography itself. Ultimately, the problems that Hoffman ran up against in the writing of her memoir are universal to the genre—not only language memoir, but memoir itself. Walter Benjamin saw the task of the translator as revealing “the untranslatability and ‘coming to terms with the foreignness of language’” (Boym 257). Perhaps the task of the language memoirist is similar: to underscore the universal fracture between self and language, between self and world. In this sense, we are all migrants, removed at various degrees from language—which is rendered particularly slippery in a polyglot world—and experience.

Hoffman insists that the generation into which she was translated is, in fact, characterized by this very slippage: “It’s that very [American] mobility—upward, horizontal, and of some topological varieties not described in classical symmetry—that makes assimilation an almost outmoded idea” (195). While an undergraduate at Rice University, Hoffman diagnoses her American peers with a form of “angelism”:

a desire to become more immaculate beings...They want to be sexually liberated, emotionally cleansed, politically correct angels—and so they ricochet from one vision of Utopia to another, from a hope for

transcendence to disillusionment to the next hope for a more ultimate transcendence. (196)

While Hoffman concedes that she does not share the pain of earlier immigrant generations—ostracized, as they were, from the exclusive clubs and decent neighborhoods of impregnable, stratified societies—she finds the modern condition no less isolating for immigrants:

In a splintered society, what does one assimilate to? Perhaps the very splintering itself...I share with my American generation an acute sense of dislocation and the equally acute challenge of having to invent a place and an identity for myself...It could be said that the generation I belong to has been characterized by its prolonged refusal to assimilate—and it is in my very uprootedness that I'm its member. It could indeed be said that exile is the archetypal conditional of contemporary lives. (197)

At this period of her life, Hoffman equates herself with her American peers, with whom she shares the ability to marry, divorce, marry again, change careers, move across the country; they have in common “every fundamental fact of human activity” (197). However, while Hoffman may possess the ability to “ricochet” like her peers, she remains “on the outside” of their transformations (196). Hoffman describes the extreme behavior Americans as “elusive,” peering into them with the language of a scientist: “What do they think, feel, hold dear?” Ultimately, Hoffman concedes that although she may theoretically possess the freedom to enter spaces from which earlier immigrant generations were barred, “the joke is that there's no one there” (196).

Hoffman continues to live and write at a remove from experience because of what she describes as her “residual nostalgia,” which she suspects renders her unseemly to her American counterparts (197). In a passage—pregnant with ellipses—that directly follows Hoffman’s diagnosis of American dislocation, Hoffman diagnoses *herself*:

I am a Jew, an immigrant, half-Pole, half-American...I suffer from certain syndromes because I was fed on stories of war...At a party given by some old-moneyed Bostonians, I feel that their gracious smiles mask a perfect condescension...I haven’t escaped my past or my circumstances; they constrain me like a corset. (198)

Paradoxically, it is Hoffman’s precise and close-cutting language that liberates her memories. Said adumbrates Hoffman’s authorial anxiety in *Reflections on Exile*, qualifying that an exile’s use of language is necessarily arduous:

The novelty of our time is that so many individuals have experienced the uprooting and dislocations that have made them expatriates and exiles. Out of such travail there comes an urgency, not to say a precariousness of vision and a tentativeness of statement, that renders the use of language something much more interesting and provisional than it would otherwise be. (xxi)

Said thus foregrounds Hoffman’s fraught insistence on the precision and possibility of language. Early in the book, Hoffman dreamily imagines a language inclusive enough to encapsulate all lived experience. She recounts an experience as a young girl, playing with her mother, during which she began to mouth off nonsense syllables. When her mother asks her what it is she’s talking about, Hoffman responds, *with urgency*:

“Everything,” I say, and start again: Bramarama, szerymery...” I want to tell A Story, Every Story, everything all at once [...] and I try to roll all sounds into one, to accumulate more and more syllables, as if they might make a Möbius strip of language in which everything, everything is contained. I want articulation—but articulation that says the whole world at once. (11)

In another passage, Hoffman expresses desire for Nabokov’s autobiographical world—an allusion significant not only for its self-reflexivity (memoir-writing-in-the-making) but for Nabokov’s own contribution to language memoir. *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* is one of the most notable examples of not only self-translation but of self-in-translation. In 1951, Nabokov published his autobiography entitled *Conclusive Evidence* (an unintentionally ironic title, for Nabokov didn’t know at the time that this “conclusive” autobiography would undergo two more revisions and would receive two more titles). Concerning the writing of *Conclusive Evidence*, Nabokov has written that the memoir “...was being written with particularly agonizing difficulties, because [my] memory was attuned to one [musical] key—the musically reticent Russian—but it was forced into another key, English and deliberate” (Pavlenko 188). Then in 1954—dissatisfied, perhaps, with his first version—Nabokov self-translated *Conclusive Evidence* into his native Russian under the title *Drugie berega* [Other shores]. During the writing of *Drugie berega*, Nabokov found that many more memories surfaced in Russian that had not emerged during the writing of *Conclusive Evidence*.

Aneta Pavlenko attributes the resurfacing of Nabokov’s childhood memories to the congruence between the memories and the language in which they were lived: “the

use of the childhood language triggered new memories, akin to the Proustian madeleine, and allowed for elaboration of those only sketched in English” (189). Finally, Nabokov underwent yet another translation—he self-translated his Russian back into English. The final version, *Speak, Memory*, appears to be one of Hoffman’s greatest influences within the genre of language memoir.

Nabokov’s immediate correlation to Hoffman is clear: how is one to write in one language what was lived in another? Hoffman herself questions the way in which she crafts and positions herself within her own narrative, referring to Nabokov with unqualified admiration:

I wish I could breathe a Nabokovian air. I wish I could have the Olympian freedom of sensibility that disdains, in his autobiography [...] Of all the responses to the condition of exile, his is surely the most triumphant, the least marred by age, or inferiority, or aspiration. His observations are those of an entirely free man. (197)

While Hoffman admires Nabokov, several of her own recollected passages are written just as she describes those of Nabokov— “a world of prismatic refractions, carefully distinguished colors of sunsets and English scarves, synesthetic repetitions and reiterative surprises” (Hoffman 197). Hoffman, by way of effusive nostalgia, indeed enters a feminine variation of a “Nabokovian world” (197). Yet she disavows her own success at doing this—she lucidly and beautifully disavows her ability to write a lucid and beautiful memoir. Perhaps the title, *Lost in Translation*, is the most explicit example of Hoffman’s tendency to negate her authority. Anxiety is a common writerly symptom of the exilic condition. For example, in his essay “Reflections on Exile,” Said diagnoses Conrad as

having had a similar proclivity, an “unmistakable mark of the sensitive émigré’s obsession with his hopeless attempts to make satisfying contact with new surroundings” (142). Said continues, claiming that “[...] Conrad took this neurotic exile’s fear and created an aesthetic principle out of it [...] Paradoxically this radical limitation on the possibilities of language doesn’t inhibit elaborate efforts to communicate” (143). Hoffman’s anxiety thus impelled her obsession with precision: a fastidiousness of language employed, perhaps, in order to mitigate exilic disorientation.

By disavowing her own authorial success, Hoffman hews to the paradigm of exilic writing (which was adumbrated by Conrad). Hoffman consequentially frames herself with the same exilic handicap Boym identified as “diasporic intimacy”, which she describes as being “not opposed to uprootedness and defamiliarization but is constituted by it...[and] is spoken of in a foreign language that reveals the inadequacies of translation” (252). Boym notes, too, that “displacement into a different cultural context challenges the conceptions of art itself as well as the forms of authorship” (256).

For example, when Hoffman moves to New York as a young woman, following her undergraduate studies in Texas, she is displaced into yet another cultural context—“the Babel of American voices” (219). It is within this foreign context that Hoffman begins to view her internal self as Other: “Since I lack a voice of my own, the voices of others invade me as if I were a silent ventriloquist. They ricochet within me, carrying on conversations, lending me their modulations, intonations, rhythms. I do not yet possess them; they possess me (220).” While Hoffman indeed challenges her reliability and her authorial motivations, I posit that she ultimately masters (linguistically, textually,

culturally) more than she gives herself credit for—at least, more than she expresses throughout the text.

The splintering between the present (English) language and the past (Polish) loss is just one of the several fissures laid out in Hoffman's memoir. While Hoffman shares with Nabokov a deep preoccupation with language and autobiographical memory, Hoffman's authorial voice is problematized given her identity as a woman writer. In *Lost in Translation*, Hoffman largely identifies the pain of cultural assimilation as an inevitable effect from her early lack of English skills, only glimpsing—quite peripherally—the influence that her gender may have had on her experience. For example, Hoffman rarely elucidates what it was like to be a young female intellectual during the 70s. Hoffman's most extensive, lucid, and astute observations regarding sexuality take place upon her arrival in Vancouver. Hoffman, merely thirteen years old, is aggressively thrust into a Western conception of female adolescence that is vastly more elevated and cosmeticized than its Polish counterpart. Hoffman observes notions of femininity that are polished and refined—quite literally, as one of the clearest recollections depicts Hoffman getting her underarms shaved by Mrs. Lieberman, a fellow Polish emigrant who has been “in Canada long enough to consider [her]self well versed in native ways, and who seem[s] to find me [Hoffman] deficient in some quite fundamental respects” (109). With each additional Westernization, cosmeticization, augmentation, transformation, and “amelioration,” Hoffman's sense of an already pervasive displacement soon becomes downright mystifying, alienating. Hoffman is able to look at herself from the exterior, and thus takes objective account of her own mental and physical shrinking:

My shoulders stoop, I nod frantically to indicate my agreement with others, I smile sweetly at people to show I mean well, and my chest recedes inward so that I don't take up too much space—mannerisms of a marginal, off-centered person who wants both to be taken in and fend off the threatening others. Alienation is beginning to be inscribed in my flesh and face. (110)

The transatlantic translation of female “beauty” has shifted from pale skin and thick eyebrows to bra-framed breasts, curled hair, and over-applied lipstick; and Hoffman’s accounting for this transformation in English suggests that only beauty standards—*not* language—have been lost in translation.

Marianne Hirsch, a Polish emigrant writer whose life’s trajectory is eerily similar to Hoffman’s, experienced a similar cultural dissonance. Hirsch summons the research of Carol Gilligan, whose work studying female adolescence invokes the same kind of language we use when discussing emigrants and aliens. Hirsch writes:

Gilligan describes this underground world as a ‘remote island’, implying that every transition into female adulthood is a process of acculturation to an alien realm or, one could say, an experience of emigration? The lessons of femininity acquired during adolescence, therefore, require a move into a different culture with a different language. Girls must unlearn what they knew as they gain...new skills and new selves. (74-5)

In this sense, Gilligan and Hirsch rightly draw the parallel between the transition from girlhood to adulthood and the transition from one language to another. But how are these



inexorable metamorphoses altered when lived by one who comes from both ambiguous islands? I call upon Hirsch again:

But if for American girls, to move into adolescence feels like emigrating to a foreign culture and learning the new language of femininity under patriarchy, what additional pressures confront girls like Hoffman and myself who, in addition to learning the language of patriarchy, literally had to learn English and acclimate to American culture? (75)

Hoffman works along two parallel registers: Hoffman comes from a non-hegemonic culture, yet she is writing in the hegemonic language; she also writes as a woman in a man's authorial world, searching for authentic voice within an unmistakably phallo-logocentric context of writing. "It's painful to be consciously of two worlds," Hoffman writes (163). Fortunately, Hoffman's painful self-consciousness is precisely what endows her autobiography with the richness and complexity necessary in attempting to represent the ambiguous, amorphous exile experience.

Hoffman concludes her second section ("Exile," which chronicles her time in Vancouver) with a reflection on her chosen form and its desired function. Hoffman justifies her structure as a means of representing her own fluctuating, slippery, and plural identities:

Who is sure of purposes, meanings, national goals? We slip between definitions with such acrobatic ease that straight narrative becomes impossible. I cannot conceive of my story as one of simple progress, or simple woe. Any confidently thrusting story line would be a sentimentality, an excess, an exaggeration, an untruth. Perhaps it is in my

intolerance of those, my cherishing of uncertainty as the only truth that is, after all, the best measure of my assimilation; perhaps it is in my misfittings that I fit...From now on, I'll be made, like a mosaic, of fragments—and my consciousness of them. It is only in that observing consciousness that I remain, after all, an immigrant. (164)

An immigrant's consciousness is detached, painfully self-aware—as self-critical as it is outwardly critical. As Hoffman concludes, objectivity towards both language and culture—native (abandoned) *and* new (adopted) language/culture—is what distinguishes an immigrant's narrative. Paradoxically, it is precisely this detachment that renders *Lost in Translation* so close to an immigrant's experience and so powerful as autobiographical expression.

Empowered by the prospect of “spiritual individualism,” language-learning becomes an act of possession for Hoffman—the mastered language and literature thrusting Hoffman one step closer to a mastered self, “a fully realized being” (139, 137). Jacques Derrida most notably confronts the issue of linguistic possession in his autobiographical essay, *Monolingualism of the Other*. Derrida no doubt influenced Hoffman's reflections on language, for he, too, was displaced and forced to abandon his mother tongue; moreover, he was the iconic literary theorist of her day. In 1930, Derrida was born into a Sephardic Jewish family in French-colonized Algeria. He thus attended French schools, spoke and wrote in French, and ultimately studied and worked in Paris for the majority of his life. However, he was forever haunted by his mother tongue, Arabic, in much the same way as Hoffman: both are plagued by a phantom language. For Hoffman, Polish is the ghost on every page.

In *Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida examines his own relationship with the French language, its effect on his postcolonial identity and his writing, as well as the dynamics of cultural-political inclusion and exclusion. Derrida writes that “the proliferating lexicon of deconstruction and so on and so forth belong, by virtue of almost all the tattooing on their bodies, to that deal [*donne*] with which one must explain oneself” (71). And *in what language* must one explain? For Hoffman, the answer is ultimately in English, though her arrival was by no means obvious. Derrida alludes to the same kind of scission upon which Hoffman, upon being gifted a new diary—both authors share an exilic variety of self-division. Derrida pleads: “In what language does one write memoirs when there has been no authorized mother tongue? How does one utter a worthwhile ‘I recall’ when it is necessary both to invent one’s language and one’s ‘I’?” (31). The suspension between self and written self is similarly observed by Hoffman when her friend gifts her the diary; Hoffman is unsure of what language to use, especially as she has begun to view Polish as a dead language, “the language of the untranslatable past” (120). She ultimately chooses to write in English, though the ambiguity of her decision is clear:

The diary is about me and not about me at all. 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. It exists more easily in the abstract sphere of thoughts and observations than in the world...This language is beginning to invent another me. However...it seems that when I write in English, I am unable to use the word “I.” I do

not go as far as the schizophrenic “she”—but I am driven, as by a compulsion, to the double, the Siamese-twin “you.” (121)

Hoffman’s “I” eventually becomes not only present, but insistent as she grows into language and into writing. This double doubling—a linguistic and written distance—emancipates Hoffman from the un-“authorized” identity of the linguistically dispossessed. Through writing, experiences take shape—albeit, as Hoffman describes, in deliberate abstraction.

Through this example one observes that, as with the English language, Hoffman’s experience becomes yet another amorphous thing to be mastered and contained in clear, detached expression. In the aforementioned description of her childhood formation (137), Hoffman also—perhaps unknowingly—articulates and justifies her underlying authorial ethic: manipulation of language and lived experience by means of detachment and deconstruction. Petra Fachinger notes that Hoffman’s “ode to education” calls to mind 18<sup>th</sup> century male autobiographers like Benjamin Franklin, who glorified American educational institutions and embarked upon programs of self-improvement, “similar to those that turned Jimmy Gatz into Jay Gatsby” (Fachinger 118). Hoffman most deeply treats the subject of American education in her reflections on her undergraduate years, during which time her self-image and her perspective on literature were illuminated by literary theory.

Hoffman’s vision was doubly sharpened by her exile and the concurrent movement of Anglo-American New Criticism during her academic formation. New Criticism—as formulated by I.A. Richards, William Empson, John Crowe Ransom—originally burgeoned in the 1920s and continued for several decades after (Said 122).

However, throughout the middle decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century leading to the 1960s, New-New Criticism—associated with figures as diverse as Jacques Derrida, T.S. Eliot, and Roland Barthes—proliferated American academia at precisely the moment at which Hoffman was an undergraduate at Rice University. New New Criticism stressed close-reading (*explication de texte*) in order to reveal literature as a self-contained and self-referential object. New Criticism—as well as Structuralism and Deconstruction, its theoretical heirs—thus rejected the author’s “biography, history, and pathos in the form of various fallacies” in order to analyze how a work’s structure and content functioned independently (Said xviii). During Hoffman’s undergraduate years she developed a skill for criticism that, she observed, came easily to her:

I soon find that I can do very well in my courses. I believe this happens not only despite but also because of my handicap: because I have so little language. Like any disability, this one has produced its own compensatory mechanisms, and my mind, relatively deprived of words, has become a deft instrument of abstraction. (180)

Hoffman thus learns to penetrate texts with precision and detachment—prioritizing a texts’ blueprints rather than its decoration, precisely the ethos of the structuralism at the heart of New Criticism. Hoffman’s predisposition thus perfectly accorded with the academic ethos of her milieu. She continues:

The education I receive at Rice is almost entirely formalistic... In a history course on the Renaissance, we don’t need to remember what sequence of events led up to the Reformation; instead, we’re asked to contemplate the

nature of retrospective knowledge, or whether an accurate interpretation of the past is possible. (181)

Hoffman treats the writing of her own life with the same contemplative distance as New Critics, for her retrospections—even when nostalgic—are written with similar formalism and detachment. New Criticism’s premium on detachment was thus an empowering notion for Hoffman. In writing her life doubly distanced (by the nature of both language and exile) Hoffman wrote herself into a discourse that tends to overlook the subversion—linguistic, cultural, and political—that underlies exilic expression in the hegemonic language. This is to say that exilic writings often give way towards a criticism focused on irremediable loss. In contrast, Hoffman’s memoir is an estranged—and paradoxically intimate—representation of exilic experience.

*Lost in Translation* reflects the nature of the dislocated exile and the deconstructive gap of language itself, while, most importantly, proving that this deconstructive gap is empowering—not a loss, and, to return to Boym’s reductive language, *not*, “at most, an enabling fiction.” Instead, Hoffman carved into her experience with language and did so with surgical precision—or, more simply, with the sensibility of a New Critic—and thus produced an empowering nonfiction. In *Lost in Translation*, Hoffman gains mastery over the language whose “harshness,” thirty years earlier, did nothing but shrink and silence her. In the language of the hegemonic culture, Hoffman’s exilic autobiographical account unwittingly ensures that nothing—no memory, no identity, and no language—need be lost in emigration.

CHAPTER TWO

The Rumored Language of Homeland:

Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*

\* \* \*

“I saw in this island fowls as big as our country geese having two heads...and other  
miraculous things which I will not here write of.”

—Oderic (Franciscan friar, 14<sup>th</sup> century)

“The Americans were able to put a man on the moon because they knew English. The  
Sinhalese and Tamils whose [sic] knowledge of English was poor, thought the Earth was  
flat.”

—Douglas Amarasekera, *Ceylon Sunday Times* 29.I.78

\* \* \*

These quotations serve as the epigraphs to Michael Ondaatje's memoir, *Running in the Family*, along with, on the left-hand page, a map of Ceylon:<sup>5</sup> a country which "falls on a map and [whose] outline is the shape of a tear" (147)<sup>6</sup>. Writer Christine Weston elaborates this image further, however, insisting that "the sense of something as small as a teardrop fades with one's first glimpse of it from the air, for then the great central massif thrusts in brilliant, tumultuous green upward" (Weston 3). In *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje depicts Ceylon from constantly telescoped perspectives: the memoir is nestled in nuance but simultaneously expansive in its narrative scope.<sup>7</sup> Ondaatje's Ceylon oozes with histories, connective memories, and otherworldly legends; his Ceylon is also necessarily situated within the framework of pre- and post-independence politics (Heble 186). In the opening pages of *Running in the Family*—in which Ondaatje writes of sprawling maps, swirling dreamscapes, and "Asian Rumours" (19)—we hear the key melodies of this small volume: cartography and geography, the diaspora of English, the writing of the self and of collective/familial history, as well as the power and politics

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<sup>5</sup> Present-day Sri Lanka. In this chapter, I will be referring to the country as both its colonial name, Ceylon, and its appellation since 1948, Sri Lanka, depending on context. During close-examination of *Running in the Family* and of the nation's colonial history, Ceylon will be singularly used (staying true to Ondaatje's own unequivocal usage in his memoir, which is itself reflective of his "tenuousness of his relationship to Sri Lanka" [Heble 187]). When discussing elements outside the text, Sri Lanka or Ceylon may be used.

<sup>6</sup> Sri Lankan Postcolonialist scholar Neluka Silva suggests that this poetic association in fact foregrounds the opposing forces of colonizer and colonized; she writes that this "seemingly innocent comment can be read as an allusion to the complexities of the interrelations between the colonizer and the colonial subject" ("The Anxieties of Hybridity" 73-4). I will take up this issue of colonial/anticolonial tension later in the chapter.

<sup>7</sup> My effusive language here—and throughout this entire chapter—is deliberate, at the risk of deviating from a more conventionally detached mode of criticism. Through this stylistic choice, I seek to actively convey the ebullient ambiance of Ondaatje's prose, for such linguistic fullness is, as I argue in this chapter, at the heart of Ondaatje's very ethic of writing.



inherent to writing *in* the colonial language (English) *of* a formerly colonized homeland (Ceylon).

*Running in the Family*, published in 1982, is the semi-autobiographical amalgam of two journeys Ondaatje took to his home country, Ceylon, for the first time in twenty-five years. The world illustrated in *Running in the Family* is one of dreams, myths, interlaced histories, and homeland legends. The text is divided into seven large titled sections, each of which contains smaller titled sections. These sections are not fragments, but accumulative pieces—a bricolage reflecting Ondaatje’s map of memories.

In an interview with Amitava Kumar, Ondaatje invokes Donald Richie, an American writer who spent most of his life in Japan writing of Japanese culture and, most notably, Japanese cinema. In his own writing, he says, Ondaatje aspires to the condition of Japanese film:

[I]t is made up of collage or bricolage, it is made up of lists, and suddenly when you stand back from the lists you begin to see the pattern of a life. [T]here is a more profound element of truth coming out of the discovered pattern in a collage or the list, by discovering the story as you go along, or as the Japanese say, by ‘following the brush.’ (qtd. in Kumar)

Ondaatje continues, observing that “...history is collage, it is a juxtaposition of the good and the bad and the strange, and how you place those sentences together changes the whole mood of history” (qtd. in Kumar). Indeed, *Running in the Family* operates by the same principle as collage, juxtaposing seemingly disparate elements to establish a particular “mood of history.” Western autobiographical tradition fuses with Ceylonese oral narrative tradition: Ondaatje portrays a world of plurality and paradox, and I insist

that Ondaatje's authorial power is derived from—not hindered or obfuscated by—such multitudes. *Running in the Family* thus belongs to both of Ondaatje's worlds—his past Ceylon and his present Canada.

During his return visits (one in 1978, the other in 1980), Ondaatje conducted research, remembered and reminisced with members of his family, and wove together rumors, histories, and genealogies to form a “composite”—the author's word—impression of Ceylon, an island “courted by invaders who stepped ashore and claimed everything with the power of their sword or bible or language” (64). What I explore in this chapter is the manner and consequence of Ondaatje's use of English, “the language of the invaders,” to illustrate the fabled, faraway country he left for the West. I posit that Ondaatje's effusive language is a kind of postcolonial protest that renders the stories of Ceylon open and illuminated, thus bridging the cultural and linguistic gap that exists (and is presented as a detriment) in much exilic writing.

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Michael Ondaatje was born in 1943 in Kegalle, Ceylon, about fifty miles west of the capital, Colombo (Spinks 1). Ondaatje was the second son to parents of Dutch, Tamil, and Sinhalese origin; his parents were prominent members of the Burgher class, which was situated at the upper echelon of the Ceylonese colonial society and “whose lineage blurs the distinctions of race and history” (Silva 104). The Burghers were descendants of European colonists from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, and were “traditionally the most Westernized ethnic grouping in colonial Ceylon” (Spinks 1). One can thus note that even

from birth, Ondaatje was placed at a social remove—his Anglophonic, upper-class social milieu being at once derived *and* distanced from the Ceylonese community.

In 1954, Ondaatje moved to England to continue schooling at Dulwich College in London. Ten years later, at the age of nineteen, Ondaatje emigrated to Canada, where he has since flourished as one of the most prominent literary figures in the country. That said, he is an undeniably international writer—bound to no single cultural, national, or literary identity, despite the Canadian citizenship he acquired in 1965 (Forssander-Song). After all, Ondaatje says of himself and his work, “I am a mongrel of place. Of race. Of cultures. Of many genres” (McCrum). Ondaatje’s hybridized, multi-genre, polyphonic voice is apiece with the reality of the postcolonial subject, as well as our globalized world.

In order to examine comprehensively the postcolonial nature of this text, I must first elucidate the colonial history of the “island that always did have too many foreigners” (80). The first Europeans to reach Ceylon were the Portuguese, arriving in 1505 in search of cinnamon, the enchanting scent that wafts throughout Ondaatje’s memoir both in poetry (“The Cinnamon Peeler”) and prose (“The Karapothas”) (Raghavan 22). Ondaatje describes the colonizers as

...the beetles with white spots who never grew ancient here, who stepped in and admired the landscape, disliked the ‘inquisitive natives’ and left. They came originally and overpowered the land obsessive for something as delicate as the smell of cinnamon. Becoming wealthy with spices. When ships were still approaching, ten miles out at sea, captains would

spill cinnamon onto the deck and invite passengers on board to smell Ceylon before the island even came into view. (80-81)

After the progressive decline of Portuguese power, the Dutch obtained rule in 1636. Despite prolonged conflict with the Dutch colony, King Rajsinha Kandy remained independent until 1760 when conflict arose between the two groups. Ultimately, the Dutch won the war and imposed Dutch sovereignty upon Kandy and all the Ceylonese coastlines (Lambert). However, the British came into the picture in 1796 in the hopes of conquering Kandy—a quest finally accomplished in 1815. Ceylonese nationalism burgeoned during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the Ceylon National Congress was formed in 1919. Finally, Ceylon “threw off the yoke of British imperial rule” and was reborn as Sri Lanka in 1948 (Spinks 2). Sri Lanka is an island of immigrants (largely comprised of various Tamil sectors from India) and, due to its extensive and elliptical colonial history, remains a country whose postcolonial identity is plural and ambivalent (Raghaven 18).

Ondaatje’s first European ancestor arrived to Ceylon in 1600,

a doctor who cured the residing governor’s daughter with a strange herb and was rewarded with land, a foreign wife, and a new name which was a Dutch spelling of his own. Ondaatje. A parody of the ruling language...Here. At the center of the rumour. At this point on the map.  
(64)

This map serves to objectivize—to anchor in the coordinates of time and space—the country that was so often misconstrued by colonial powers as possessing a mystifying exoticism. By opening his memoir with a map—quite literally, as the hardcover edition opens up to a full two-page map of variegated blues—Ondaatje insists on the facticity of

this place despite its rumored and often misrendered history. In a section entitled “*Tabula Asiae*,” Ondaatje writes of the “false” maps on his brother’s wall in Toronto: “These maps reveal rumors of topography, the routes for invasion and trade. [...] The island seduced all of Europe. The Portuguese. The Dutch. The English. And so its name changed, as well as its shape” (64). Ondaatje continues:

Old portraits of Ceylon. The result of sightings, glances from trading vessels, the theories of sextant. The shapes differ so much they seem to be translations—by Ptolemy, Mercator, François Valentyn, Mortier, and Heydt—growing from mythic shapes into eventual accuracy. Amoeba, then stout rectangle, and then the island as we know it now, a pendant off the ear of India... This pendant, once its shape stood still, became a mirror. It pretended to reflect each European power till newer ships arrived and spilled their nationalities, some of whom stayed and intermarried. (63-64)

Though Ondaatje invokes *tabula rasa*—“blank slate” in English—through his title for the encompassing chapter (“*Tabula Asiae*”), the maps and mysteries of Ceylon are exactly the opposite of blank, having long been scribed, described, and rescribed. Silva writes that Ondaatje’s images relating to cartography and topography—

whether geographic or ethnic—are always contentious; Ondaatje’s self-consciousness about the impossibility of fulfilling his desire to resolve his anxieties about lineage and history metaphorically enacts the tensions and political transactions that get played out at macro-level. (71)

For instance, “at macro-level,” the memoir is punctuated with postcolonial tension between native Sri Lanka and its European invaders. This splintering is most clearly

brought to surface in “The Karapothas<sup>8</sup>,” a chapter nestled within a larger section entitled “Don’t Talk to Me About Matisse<sup>9</sup>,” which is the most overtly polemical section of the memoir. In “The Karapothas,” Ondaatje pulls the loose threads of Ceylonese identity that he spends the rest of the memoir weaving together.

The first three sentences of the section set out a seeming paradox: “I sit in a house on Buller’s road. I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner” (79). There exist in Ondaatje’s memoir many instances in which colonial perspective is *seemingly* privileged—this irony thus underscores the essential and unshakeable ambiguity of the postcolonial condition. For example, the epigraphs to “The Karapothas” are sourced from three authors inextricably associated to the Western canon: Edward Lear, D.H. Lawrence, and Leonard Woolf, all of whom published during the Ceylonese British colonial period. Moreover, the epigraphs are largely negative misrepresentations and judgments of Ceylon, thus establishing immediately a contrasting dynamic of “us” (Ceylonese people) and “them” (the colonizing power). For example, to open a poem entitled “Sweet Like a Crow,” two epigraphs exemplify the dichotomy of Ondaatje’s worlds: first, a dedication “for Hetti Corea, 8 years old” and, second, a quotation from Paul Bowles, American traveler and musician. Bowles’ quotation reads: “The Sinhalese are beyond a doubt one of the least musical people in the world. It would be quite impossible to have less sense of pitch, line, or rhythm” (76). The music of the Ceylonese cannot be easily translated into such Western terms of value like “pitch,” “line,”

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<sup>8</sup> We find out two pages into the chapter that “karapothas” is a kind of insect, and is often the word used to call foreigners.

<sup>9</sup> Also the title of a poem by polemical Sri Lankan poet Lakdasa Wikkramasinha.

“rhythm”; yet Bowles makes his judgment on the Sinhalese with the authority of the Orientalist: “beyond a doubt.”

If the essence of Orientalism is “the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority” (Said, *Orientalism* 50), then Ondaatje’s poetry is an act of subversion in which the constraints and limitations of the Orientalist are exposed; Ondaatje, the Oriental, belies the supposedly “positive doctrines”—by which Said means “a set of constraints upon and limitations of thought”—of the Orientalist (Said, *Orientalism* 50). For example, the poem “Sweet Like a Crow” begins: “Your voice sounds like a scorpion being pushed,” a line whose subject is as ambiguous as Ceylonese postcolonial identity. The poem continues along this metaphorical route, comparing “your voice” to a diverse South Asian material world: “like wind howling in a coconut / a vattacka being fried / like Air Pakistan curry / like a hundred pappadans being crunched” (76-7). In this poem Ondaatje juxtaposes Bowles’ Western standards of music to a geographically rooted framework for sound (Telmissany, Schwartz 33). Refusing to transmute the poem according to Bowles’ Western value categories, Ondaatje presents us with an alternate universe of value and sound—the sound of “a whole village running naked into the street and tearing their sarongs” (77).

Such juxtapositions and confrontations of cultural value properties reveal the ambiguities of Ondaatje’s own identities as Canadian and Ceylonese, as Western tourist and returning native. He and we are challenged by any number of questions: how is his writing of Ceylon as a present-day Canadian citizen different than an Englishman’s, a colonizer’s? What purpose does his homecoming serve? And does he truly view himself as prodigal? How *does* Ondaatje position himself within the larger scope of history and

narrative tradition? These questions are not resolved in this chapter, which is—like the Ceylonese postcolonial experience—fraught with contradictions. However, in order to illuminate these questions, Ondaatje moves between countries, between hard and soft C's: from the hard C of Canada to the soft Ceylonese C—the C of seas, of swirls, of sweats, of succulents and soft sounds (21, 22, 81, 183).

Postcolonial conflict is borne out throughout this chapter in various ways, as Ondaatje contemplates the possession of one's homeland (via narrative), exoticism, native resistance, the Sinhalese alphabet, and the origins of Ceylonese written tradition. In challenging these questions, Ondaatje relates to Othello (significantly the only black protagonist of Shakespeare's oeuvre): "We own the country we grow up in, or we are aliens...Othello's talent was a decorative sleeve she [Desdamona] was charmed by. The island was a paradise to be sacked" (81). Ceylon, like Cyprus, was plucked—even "smelled...miles before the island came into view" (80)—by colonizers/foreigners, an Other entity with whom Ondaatje begins to identify during "The Karapothas" exploration of the possibility of possession of all sorts—linguistic, national, ethnic. Ondaatje continues to list all the items that were plucked, by "possessors," from Ceylon. Around twenty items are *inventoried*—not just alluded to. The words must be *read*, the extensive theft *felt*. We read, feel, and see the gravity of the dispossession and repossession, the line-by-line loss:

Every conceivable thing was shipped back to Europe: cardamons, pepper, silk, ginger, sandalwood, mustard oil, palmyrah root, tamarind, wild indigo, deers' horns, elephant tusks, hog lard, calamander, coral, seven kinds of cinnamon, pearl and cochineal. (87)



To invoke the Japanese saying: Ondaatje is making the reader follow his brush (Kumar).

After the end of the list, Ondaatje includes a sentence fragment of his own—the only italicized full phrase of the section—“*A perfumed sea*” (87). An intertextual echo can be heard in this phrase—yet another seemingly inapt invocation of the Western tradition at the very moment of postcolonial critique. The phrase comes from the first stanza of “For Helen” (1831), by Edgar Allan Poe:

Helen, thy beauty is to me  
 Like those Nicéan barks of yore,  
 That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,  
 The weary, way-worn wanderer bore  
 To his own native shore

Having returned to his native shore—through the writing process of shoring himself against his ruins<sup>10</sup>—Ondaatje confronts several impossible questions: Is he thus comparing himself to Helen, a captive, powerless? Or does he view himself as her captor? I posit that Ondaatje comes to possess his homeland by his writing, the writing of its histories, by “touch[ing] them into words” (22). Though Ceylon is often presented—by hegemonic culture—as a colonized island that stripped natives of authority, agency, and voice, Ondaatje offers us an alternate image. In Ondaatje’s language, Ceylon resists

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<sup>10</sup> Here I have borrowed the language of T.S. Eliot, for the final stanza of *The Waste Land* splinters off into linguistic disorder: “*Poi s’ascose nel foco che gli affina / Quando fiam ceu chelidon—O swallow swallow / Le Prince d’Aquitaine à la tour abolie /* These fragments I have shored against my ruins.” This poem ends with the Sanskrit “Shanti, Shanti, Shanti,” an Eastern spiritual benediction, thus giving the East the last word: “The Peace which Passeth understanding.” Similarly, Ondaatje ends “The Karapothas” with the poem of Wikkramasinha; in so doing, Ondaatje privileges the perspective of Sri Lanka. This is an especially important authorial decision given that this chapter begins with quotations by three British writers whose work was tainted with exoticism and empire.

and “disgraces” foreigners. In much of the syntax in which Ondaatje details colonial power, the island remains the subject, the foreigners the object. For example:

This is the heat that drove Englishman crazy. (79)

Ceylon always did have too many foreigners. (80)

Ondaatje unabashedly resents and undermines foreigners in the encompassing chapter (“The Karapothas,” 78-102), but we must remember that “foreigner” is the word which Ondaatje ascribed to himself on the very first page (79). Ondaatje continually questions his own right to write his old world, to depict through narrative “those relations from [his] parents’ generation who stood in [his] my memory like frozen opera” (22). In so doing, Ondaatje self-consciously problematizes his role as exile to represent the country from which he was dislocated.

Ondaatje learns of Lakdasa Wikkramasinha, “a powerful and angry poet,” through Ian Goonetilleke, the director of the Peredeniya library. At the time of Ondaatje’s visit, Wikkramasinha had recently drowned in the same river where “tourists go to sunbathe,” a harsh juxtaposition repeated throughout “The Karapothas”—the indigenous Ceylonese versus the colonizing Other (85). Wikkramasinha wrote polemical poems, one of which is called “Don’t Talk to Me About Matisse,” which Ondaatje uses both to end “The Karapothas” *and* as the title for the enveloping section. The chapter closes on Buller’s road—exactly where the chapter began—as Ondaatje sits with the Wikkramasinha poem, which he reads with dual vision, endowed as he is with the eyes of both the native and the foreigner. This moment in the text “emblemizes the inseparability of [the memoir’s] poetics and the politics of ex-centricity” (Heble 176). The poem goes:

“Don’t talk to me about Matisse... / the European style of 1900, the tradition of the studio / where the nude woman reclines forever / on a sheet of blood / Talk to me instead of culture generally— / how the murderers were sustained / by the beauty robbed of savages: to our remote / villages the painters came, and our white-washed / mud-huts were splattered with gunfire.” (85-6)

In this poem, the conflict between the colonial power and the native Sri Lankan is explicitly antagonistic. Despite the general ambivalence inherent in the memoir, Ondaatje made a choice here to end “The Karapothas” with Wikkramasinha’s words, rather than the British epigraphs that began the section—not a reconciliation, but a restoration (a word which embraces *re-story*). Colonial language mastered and manipulated by the mouth of the colonized is, at least for Ondaatje, a violent revision of—not a reversion to—Ceylon’s colonial history.

The tension between the necessity for and the oppressive power of English is stressed when Ondaatje visits Goonetilleke. Goonetilleke shows Ondaatje a book on the Insurgency that, Ondaatje observes, had to be published in a Western European country because of Sri Lankan censorship. Ondaatje takes note that ,

...[a]t the back of the book are ten photographs of charcoal drawings done by an insurgent on the walls of one of the houses he hid in...thousands of insurgents were killed by police and army. While the rivers moved to sea, heavy with bodies, these drawings were destroyed...the book is now the only record of them...The artist is anonymous. (85)

Ondaatje goes on to describe Goonetilleke and, in so doing, alludes to the fraught Ceylonese relationship to the English language:

He is a man who knows history is always present, is the last hour of his friend Lakdasa blacking out in the blue sea at Mount Lavinia where tourists go to sunbathe, is the burned down wall that held those charcoal drawings whose passionate conscience should have been cut into rock. The voices I didn't know. The visions which are anonymous. And secret. (85)

But these visions are not always secret—*they are often just translated*. Ondaatje describes Goonetilleke's study, which is filled with “the books he has to publish in other countries in order to keep the facts straight, the legends uncovered” (85). In this short passage, Ondaatje converges facts and legends, West and East. Moreover, herein lies the postcolonial truth: that without English, the figures of Ondaatje's past would have remained frozen.

Consequently, Ondaatje must experience an inherent and undeniable tension in writing in the same language that colonized and oppressed the generations of ancestors of which he writes. Near the end of the book, Ondaatje returns to his motivations for returning to Ceylon, his responsibilities in writing his story (*history*): “We see ourselves as remnants from...earlier generations that were destroyed. So our job becomes to keep peace with enemy camps, and with the ‘mercy of distance’ write the histories” (179). The *collective* distance (“we see” is used, rather than “I see”) to which Ondaatje refers is temporal, emotional, artistic, linguistic. Though he speaks neither Tamil, the language of his surname, nor Sinhala, Ondaatje's employment of English is nonetheless influenced

by, and attuned with, the echoes of these other languages. Moreover, English is perhaps most suited to communicate Ondaatje's and Ceylon's pluralities, given the plastic nature of the language whose history is comprised of linguistic—and often colonial—borrowings, bindings, and bendings.

Ondaatje does not consider English an adopted language, but he is not sure that the language is his own, either (Ferrer, Mateu). In an interview with the Catalan translators of *Anil's Ghost*,<sup>11</sup> Isabel Ferrer and Melcion Mateu, he considers the latent influence of the three languages that saturated his childhood, and remembers learning English alongside Sinhala and Tamil:

I didn't move from Sinhala to English, it wasn't that, but there was some kind of dual thing going on, and what happened was that I lost Sinhala and maybe it slipped subliminally into English. Maybe a sound thing or a kind of mongrel act took place between the two languages and the two became one in some way. (qtd. in Ferrer, Mateu)

Despite Ondaatje's seeming unison between his three childhood languages, the use of colonizer's language by colonized subject is inevitably fraught and, as such, has been widely debated in postcolonial discourse. Some, like Salman Rushdie and Chinua Achebe, view its use as empowering—even necessary—in the struggle for the articulation *of* the colonized *by* the colonized. Others, like Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, fiercely denounce it. Achebe, in a speech entitled "The African Writer and the English Language" (1975), posed the question: "Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's?" Though Ondaatje was born into English by way of

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<sup>11</sup> Published in 2000, *Anil's Ghost* is a novel by Michael Ondaatje that follows a Sri Lankan girl as she emigrates to Britain and then to United States.

his social milieu, questions surrounding the political ramifications of the use of the colonizer's language nonetheless remain pertinent to Ondaatje and to *Running in the Family*. Ultimately, Achebe answers his own question unambiguously, unapologetically defending his use of English: "There is no other choice," he writes. "I have been given a language and I intend to use it" (62). Achebe ultimately insists upon the centrality of the English language to Nigerian experience, rendering English not oppositional but in fact integral to the representation of African reality.

Thiong'o, by contrast, expresses his desire for African writers to write in their own national languages, in order to use their mother tongues "to carry a literature reflecting not only the rhythms of a child's spoken expression, but also his struggle with his nature and his social nature" (qtd. in Ashcroft 267). Achebe responds to Thiong'o, insisting that "the difference between Ngugi and myself on the issue of indigenous or European languages for African writers is that while Ngugi now believes it is *either/or*, I have always thought it was *both*" (qtd. in Ashcroft 268). Ondaatje operates under the same ethic as Achebe, opting for linguistic addition and convergence rather than stark division. Like Achebe's, Ondaatje's English is necessarily revamped in order to parallel the world to which it refers—"still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to fit new surroundings" (Achebe, qtd. in Ashcroft 264). Ondaatje's language is not conjugated for the native English speaker. Passages often sound as if they have been translated, textured as they are by the "mongrelized" music of the many languages—Tamil, Sinhala, English—that hum through the memoir and its author.

Ondaatje writes from a geographically and politically slurred space—neither here nor there; neither West nor East; neither Canadian nor Ceylonese—precisely *because of*

empire. In his introduction to *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said insists that “all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic” (xxvi). I would qualify his statement: this heterogeneity is especially fundamental for colonized cultures. Ceylon is thus a place of palimpsest—an island whose legibility cannot be singularly or unambiguously understood. Instead, *Running in the Family* maps out the mixedness inherent to postcolonial Ceylon. Ondaatje clearly presents himself as a product of Ceylon’s hybridized history. His familial connection to the island is colored by colonialism, his lineage a marbled hue among Ceylon’s technicolor histories.

Bordering lands and alphabets—balanced between countries on opposite sides of the map—Ondaatje captures a double perspective in the writing of Ceylon from both above and within. Yet this doubled and to some extent distanced perspective allows, paradoxically, for a closer (re)presentation of Ceylon, for it is a country whose character is derived from its hybridity. As Homi K. Bhabha has argued, postcolonial hybridity “offers certain advantages in negotiating the collusion of language and race in a world of disparate peoples who are the result of colonial miscegenation” (qtd. in Silva, “Situating the Hybrid ‘Other’” 109). Robert Young qualifies this notion, positing that postcolonial hybridity “...implies a disruption and a forcing together of any unlike living things, grafting a vine or a rose on to a different root stock, making difference into sameness” (qtd. in Ashcroft 158). Postcolonial hybridity—whose narrative representation is realized in Ondaatje’s memoir—is not arrived at without violence, an irreducible postcolonial condition most notably explored in Frantz Fanon’s classic essay “On Violence.” The confrontation between the colonizer and the colonized subject is necessarily violent,

Fanon asserts, for it is “the encounter between two congenitally antagonistic forces that in fact owe their singularity to the kind of reification secreted and nurtured by the colonial situation” (2). The colonizers “graft” their culture onto the natives, a violent act in itself; the anticolonial response is violent in necessarily equal measure, according to Fanon.

There is thus a seeming contradiction between the hybridity and antinomy of the postcolonial experience. Postcolonial subjects are hybrids in the sense that they have no choice but combine their various identities, which is to say their indigenous identity and that of their colonizer. The postcolonial identity is necessarily accretive—layered with languages and selves; neither identity is mutually exclusive. However, postcolonial politics often positions these identities as antinomies: indigenous populations *in contrast to* colonial powers; local language *versus* colonial language. In fact, Fanon claims that the colonial situation must be politically divided in two: “The dividing line, the border, is represented by the barracks and the police stations” (3). Ondaatje must navigate, then, this division, must represent this division, without simplifying or subtracting the ineluctable complexities of the colonized subject. For example, in the first section of his memoir, Ondaatje intimately invokes Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*: “[S]he had been forced into prudence in her youth—she learned romance as she grew older—the natural sequence of an unnatural beginning” (22). This could be seen as a rather puzzling reference to be found so early in an opening passage in which the sound—push this sentiment one step further and one arrives at the *languages*—of Canada and the Western world is described as harsh and alienating. However, this Austen reference is vital in understanding the fundamental ambiguity of and tension in Ondaatje’s role as a Canadian citizen whose primary subjects are romanticized Ceylonese memories, myths, and



histories. To invoke Salman Rushdie's indispensable essay "Imaginary Homelands"—published in the same year (1982) as Ondaatje's memoir—"cross pollination is everywhere; and it is perhaps one of the more pleasant freedoms of the literary migrant to be able to choose his parents" (21). Thus in keeping with the spirit of accumulative, cross-pollinated narrative, Ondaatje's allusions to British texts are presented alongside Ceylonese texts, his appreciation for one aspect of western culture alongside his critique of another. Featuring Ceylon's colonial history, within which his family's history is nested, Ondaatje's narrative is necessarily full of such contradictions and complexities.

Ondaatje would seem to share Said's objective in *Culture and Imperialism*: "My principal aim is not to separate but to connect." Said continues, insisting that "cultural forms are hybrid, mixed, impure, and the time has come in cultural analysis to reconnect their analysis with their actuality" (14). Similarly, Ondaatje lands on the principle of addition and accretion as a means through which he may depict the postcolonial identity. In Ondaatje's memoir, the dynamic is additive rather than divisive: the indigenous population *alongside* colonial power. Seeming contrast is thus integrated into Ceylonese identity, and Ondaatje contrives his narrative as such, decidedly resisting—and rejecting—essentialist definitions of genre, nationality, and identity. *Running in the Family's* photographs, pieces of prose, poems, conversations, and dreams accumulate, and are mingled and meshed into a literary form as generically diverse as Ceylon is ethnically diverse.

The word "memoir" is too restrictive to hold the sprawling stretches of Ondaatje's written world(s). John Thieme notes that the 'numerous modes of discourse are juxtaposed within the dominant pattern of a discontinuous narrative' in order to reflect

‘the arbitrariness of generic classification’ (137). Thieme observes that Ondaatje’s rejection of a fixed-form narrative reflects the fact that “both individual and national identities are formed through a series of random, and frequently bizarre, accretions” (137). The “frequently bizarre” encounter between colonized and colonizer is accordingly reflected in *Running in the Family*, for the text is comprised of many different sections, perspectives, and narrative modes. Like the Ceylonese postcolonial identity, the text is accretive without being homogenized—a deliberate choice of the author to not reduce “difference into sameness” (Ashcroft 158) Herein lies the essence of Ondaatje’s approach: hybridized visions mirror his motley authorial voice, for language is just as slippery as identity. During the writing of the book—a process to which, on each self-conscious page, the reader bears witness—Ondaatje melts his isolated, frozen figures onto paper as into collective remembrance.

We must also consider that agglomeration and accumulation are essential aspects of personal history—memory itself. This accumulation is comprised pieces—or “rumours”—of memory that are indiscriminately amassed. Salman Rushdie writes of his time spent recalling his “India of the mind” (an India of the 1950s-1960s) before he began the writing of *Midnight’s Children* (10). He observed that “it was precisely the partial nature of these memories [...] that made them so evocative [...] [T]he shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were *remains*” (12). Or, in Ondaatje’s language, “*rumours*” (19).

Western autobiography, as Aneta Pavlenko notes in *The Bilingual Mind*, renders experiences and memories into a coherent narrative that abides by well-established conventions. Pavlenko elucidates that European-Americans place themselves in a self-

focalized context, “describing themselves in terms of their inner thoughts, feelings, preferences, personal attributes, and beliefs” (187). Thus, the shape of Western autobiography is fundamentally and unapologetically centered on the self, constructed in order to define or singularize the speaker. Western autobiography has often been framed around “defining moments,” which are technically known “as turning points,” an English term coined by John Ruskin in 1851 (Pavlenko 179). Pavlenko concludes that “the adoption of personal memory for self-definition is inextricably linked to the Western concept of the autonomous self” (183). The “autonomous self” whom Pavlenko describes has been written again and again by Western memoirists and novelists since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. On the novel side, Daniel DeFoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* is a prime example of autonomous selfhood, as famously discussed in Ian Watt’s study of the novel’s coterminous rise with distinctively modern ideologies, chief among them individualism. On the memoir side, Europe’s individualistic impulse may be seen in the autobiographies of Stendahl (*Memoirs of an Egotist*), Charles Dickens (*Autobiographical Fragment*), and Vladimir Nabokov (*Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*)—to name merely a few. Whether in the form of modern Western realistic novel or memoir, self-accounting is the literary expression of the ideology of individualism.

By contrast, Ondaatje’s composites focus not on an individual, but on a collective, thus more closely aligned with the Eastern tradition of storytelling. In her inquiries into the development of autobiographical memory, Pavlenko assigns narrative schema and the role of language as primary vehicles of a culture’s conceptions of selfhood. Cross-cultural differences in narrative-socialization and life-storytelling can account for this variation in perspective and narrative priority, which is to say authorial foci—for the

West, narrative priority is placed on the individual whereas, in the East, narrative priority is concerned with the collective (Pavlenko 176).

In 1993, anthropologist Birgitt Röttger-Rössler conducted fieldwork among the Makassar in Indonesia in order to gather their various life stories, but the very notion of an *individual* “life-story” proved too foreign an objective to pursue among the Makassar. Interestingly, as Pavlenko recounts, “not one villager was willing to speak about his or her own life, not even some episodes of it”—even those with whom Röttger-Rössler had developed a close relationship (Pavlenko 177). Ultimately, Röttger-Rössler was forced to abandon her initial aim (to gather what Westerners would consider “autobiographies”) and to shift the focus to storytelling in conversation, storytelling that tends toward the collective rather than the individual. Pavlenko explains:

Western life stories are told to ‘make a point about the speaker’, while in East Asia, and among the Makassar of Indonesia, personal narratives are told to make general points about the ways of the world. (183)

The Latin American *testimonio*—testimonial narrative—is an analogous non-Western form of storytelling that collectively represents the whole—community, tribe, village, family—rather than the singular, the individual. Moreover, testimonial literature is produced from the margins of a colonial situation by the oppressed people in order to reclaim cultural agency from the hegemonic (Western) narrative tradition and its “versions of truth” (Gugelberger & Kearney 4). George Yúdice writes that testimonial literature seeks to emphasize “popular oral discourse. [...] [T]he witness portrays his or her own experience as a representative of a collective memory and identity...in the cause of setting aright official history” (qtd. in Gugelberger & Kearney 4). Ondaatje’s narrative

operates similarly, especially given its inclusion of multiple voices. For example, in a chapter entitled “Lunch Conversation,” an exchange is transcribed from a tape recording—multiple *versions* of stories are lightly tossed around among interjecting voices—and the spirit of collective narrative is consequently exemplified:

Wait a minute, wait a minute! When did all this happen, I’m trying to get it straight... (105)

Wait a minute, wait a minute, *when* is this happening? (107)

Anyway, there seems to be three different stories that you’re telling. (108)

No, *one*, everybody says laughing. (108)

*One story for all.* In this brief, whimsical section—which itself passes as quickly as the juggled subjects of conversation—we observe the jovial lightness with which Ondaatje fabricates his narrative. The voices accumulate power like a flurry of Ceylonese wind, “a blaze of heat, frantic with noise and butterflies” (17). “Lunch Conversation” may also be seen as delineating Ondaatje’s approach to language—accretive, cornucopic, overflowing.

Ondaatje writes at one point: “Aunts. How I have used them...they knit the story together, each memory a wild thread in the sarong” (110). Ondaatje’s memoir thus accords with the non-Western narrative tradition of giving privilege to cultural, *communal* impressions that create a fabric of voices rather than individual memories. *Running in the Family* is fashioned into a garment which clothes a nation—not merely one individual. In a passage in which Ondaatje and his family visit St. Thomas’ Church, Ondaatje describes the beauty of man’s ultimate smallness and collective worth (just contrast this to Robinson Crusoe’s essential singularity):

To kneel on the floors of a church built in 1650 and see your name chiseled in large letters so that it stretches from your fingertips to your elbow in some strange way removes vanity, eliminates the personal. It makes your own story a lyric. So the sound which came immediately out of my mouth as I half-gasped and called my sister spoke all that excitement of smallness, of being overpowered by stone. (65-6)

By endowing his memoir with an elastic sense of time and an elliptical narrative route, Ondaatje opts to flood the reader with Ceylonese plurality.

Another ancient example of indigenous expression—similar in its anonymous rumor—is the 5<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.E. graffiti poetic tradition. Poems were scratched onto the rock face of Sigiriya, “short versions to the painted women in the frescoes which spoke of love in all its confusions and brokenness” (84). Ondaatje continues:

Poems to mythological women who consumed and overcame mundane lives. The phrases saw breasts as perfect swans; eyes were long and clean as horizons. The anonymous poets returned again and again to the same metaphors. Beautiful *false compare*<sup>12</sup>. These were the first folk poems of the century. (84)

In this passage, Ondaatje embraces the folk history—a class of people with whom his lineage has little connection—of Sri Lanka that otherwise occupies very little space in the

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<sup>12</sup> Behind this small phrase hides yet another reference to the Western literary tradition, placed ironically alongside Ondaatje’s invocation of indigenous Ceylonese culture. I draw our attention to the last lines of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 130: “My mistress when she walks treads on the ground. / And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare / As any she belied with false compare.” In this sonnet, the speaker describes his mistress as a woman with a dark complexion. Here, Ondaatje’s invocation of this woman seems also to unveil an allusion to Ceylon, for colonized lands are often described with feminine language—Ceylon was, after all, “the wife of many marriages” (64). Ceylon’s history is as riddled with rumor and comparison as the mistress, whose eyes are “nothing like the sun.”

memoir. Through the invocation of the Sigiriya frescoes Ondaatje is carving *himself* into the indigenous culture that is thousands of years old. As evidenced by these passages, *Running in the Family* is a contribution to the history of Ceylon rather than an autobiographical declaration on Ondaatje's behalf.

Ondaatje continues writing himself into the ancient expressive tradition, for "The Karapothis" is subsequently followed by four poems that are inspired by, and clear echoes of, the Sigiriya caves. In "Women Like You"—whose epigraph indicates that it is inspired by "*the communal poem [of] Sigiri Graffiti, 5<sup>th</sup> century*—he writes: "Hundreds of small verses / by different hands / become one / habit of the unrequited" (93). These poems are peasant poems; here Ondaatje yokes himself to the indigenous vernacular culture of Ceylon.

The images of cartography and carvings thus underlie a much larger fixation on paper: Ondaatje explores handwriting, language, the physical act of writing and journaling, as well as the origins of Ceylonese narrative expression. The writing process is central to Ondaatje's homeward exploration, for the act of writing is itself yet another form of discovery, posture, *portraiture*:

I still believe that the most beautiful alphabet was created by the Sinhalese. The insect of ink curves into a shape that is almost sickle, spoon, eyelid. The letters are washed blunt glass which betray no jaggedness. Sanskrit was governed by verticals, but its sharp grid features were not possible in Ceylon. Here the Ola leaves which people wrote on were too brittle. A straight line would cut apart the leaf and so a curling

alphabet was derived from its Indian cousin. Moon coconut. The bones of a lover's spine...How to write. The self-portrait of language. (83)

This passage reveals *Running in the Family's* overall preoccupation with the materiality of language and the physicality of writing. After all, it is Ceylonese sensuality that generated the Sinhala language itself: the materials of the tropics enabled its creation. Language matched the place, just as Ondaatje's motley English seeks to mimic post-colonial identity. *The collective-portrait of Ceylon.*

After the last sentence of the previous passage, there is a single, un-translated character whose meaning functions, perhaps, as a full phrase in what the reader can only assume is Sinhala. We are left to wonder at the visual emblem's sweeping shapes—we are what is lost in translation. In this way, Ondaatje's "portrait of language" is deliberately abstract, for these sentences/characters are endowed with a meaning solely for the author and for those privy to his *own* forsaken language. For once, the Anglophone is at the disadvantage. I say "for once" because, as exemplified by the Amarasekera epigraph which credits Americans' space travel to their possession of the English language, English *is* the language of power, the "universal" language. However, Ondaatje does not take a disadvantaged position. Instead, he ultimately redeems English and softens the postcolonial tension inherent in his condition. With accumulation—rather than fragmentation—Ondaatje demonstrates how English remains in communion with his ancestral home, and how both impulses (the English language and indigenous Ceylon) are not oppositional but are paradoxically reciprocal.

Ondaatje describes Ceylon in summer: "It is delicious heat. Sweat runs with its own tangible life down a body as if a giant egg has been broken onto our shoulders...heat



walks the house as an animal hugging everybody” (79). The language of *Running in the Family* is much the same, *touching*—“hugging”—that which it describes. Language itself is the means by which Ondaatje most explicitly attempts to resolve the dialectical tension between postcolonial antinomy and postcolonial hybridity, between colonial loss and postcolonial abundance, between “attraction and repulsion” (Ashcroft 159).

The discourse surrounding exilic writing tends to maintain a somewhat dystopic and nostalgic view on language itself. In other words, the exile is as estranged from her experience as she is her language; she is on the outside of a native culture and a second language, and she can touch neither<sup>13</sup>. While much exilic writing mourns loss of identity *and* loss of language—for, in situations of immigration/exile, a mother tongue is often lost as well as one’s homeland—Ondaatje’s narrative operates under an opposite principle. Rather than distance, Ondaatje’s language emphasizes connection. Rather than lamenting the impossibility of representation, like so many exilic writers, Ondaatje revels in the warmth of his language and the richness of collective representation. Ondaatje places a demand on the reader to follow his wayward routes, to attune herself to the pitch of his fused language. Ondaatje’s ‘I’ is not singular but, rather, multiple *eyes*—a kaleidoscopic Ceylonese vision reflective of the country’s coalesced cultural history and narrative traditions.

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<sup>13</sup> Edward Said employs similar language in *Culture and Imperialism*, which he refers to as “an exile’s book”; he writes, “Ever since I can remember, I have felt that I belonged to both worlds, without being complete *of* either one or the other” (xxvi)

## CONCLUSION

In this analysis of Eva Hoffman's and Michael Ondaatje's memoirs (*Lost in Translation* and *Running in the Family*, respectively) I hope to have underscored why the authors' distance from English has paradoxically allowed for a closer representation of the migrated autobiographical self. Both authors' manipulation of English serves to underscore the redemptive qualities of writing in English. Through a study of both memoirs, I have emphasized the potential for empowerment through an exile's autobiographical expression and, more specifically, through their manipulation of the English language.

As I have demonstrated, Hoffman's *Lost in Translation* operates in a framework of overall detachment—from experience, from language, from herself—that serves to strengthen her memories and, consequentially, to make more precise their written manifestation in memoir (despite the critical penchant in the discourse on exilic autobiographical writing to position this distance as detriment). Because Hoffman learned English late into her life, she approached the language with cognitive distance (called the “emancipatory detachment effect” in linguistics) as well as theoretical distance enabled by the concurrent rise of New New Criticism during Hoffman's formative years at American university. All factors contributed to Hoffman's ability in mastering an estranged language in order to describe the estranged emigrant experience. Though Ondaatje had English from birth, unlike Hoffman, he nevertheless approaches the language with a similar degree of difference—Ondaatje is writing *of* his homeland *in* the language that colonized it, thus positioning himself in an inherently tense postcolonial

condition. *Running in the Family* oscillates between a representation of postcolonial tension and postcolonial hybridity, which is a manifestation of Ondaatje's own ambiguity with regards to his authorial identity: personal and (decidedly *not* "versus", as these forces are not oppositional, but reciprocal) collective; West and East; poetry and prose; Lakdasa Wikkramasinha and Jane Austen.

Both Hoffman and Ondaatje master English so as to render their memoirs close representations of their exilic reality. Although they are *from* and writing *of* drastically different worlds and experiences, there exists a universal exilic condition that is indeed empowered through the process of its autobiographical articulation in English. I hope that this thesis serves, in any degree, to provide a counterpart to a discourse so bent on the loss and linguistic impossibilities of exilic memoir.

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