Refuge in a Moving World

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This chapter is based on a conversation between two well-known authors, Eva Hoffman and Jonny Steinberg, and the art historian and Director of the UCL Institute of Advanced Studies, Tamar Garb. Throughout their encounter, they explore the ways in which different forms of writing, including autobiography and non-fictional reportage, can challenge the monolith of the figure of ‘the refugee’ as it has been constituted in the context of contemporary Europe. They do so in particular through reference to Lost in Translation, written by Hoffman and published in 1989 as an autobiographical account of what it is to be displaced, describing the contours of a personal experience of movement and migration that can be traced to 1959, and Steinberg’s 2015 A Man of Good Hope, which chronicles the travels of Asad, primarily across but also beyond Africa. Through critical reflections on the process of writing about and through migration, the chapter provides important insights into migratory processes, movement and belonging across time and space.

Tamar Garb: Eva, I wonder if I could start by asking you to offer some opening reflections on Lost in Translation. What kind of story does it chronicle and how can issues of migration be thought about in relation to your book?

Eva Hoffman: I wrote Lost in Translation when I was living in the United States, and America is, of course, a country of immigrants and one that has produced a very large corpus of ‘immigrant literature’. However, this literature almost exclusively wrote of exterior journeys of hardships and triumphs, of making it or not making it. What I wanted to trace was the interior journey, and – having first considered whether to write a novel, essays on language or essays on exile in the work of Eastern European writers – I ultimately decided to write a memoir.
The memoir is particularly suited to combining representations of subjectivity and the external world. It was my intention to reflect on the intersection of the two, partly as a result of my immigrant experience. I was interested in exploring how language and culture – two forces that seem to be external to us – shape us and construct us, and how much loss of self we risk if we are without our language and cultural framework. The circumstances of this immigration – the political and the historical context in which they happen – are critical here. Although different kinds of migration and national movement are often compressed into unitary categories, these are highly heterogeneous, and these differences can have very powerful repercussions, including whether one is categorized as an emigrant, an émigré, an expatriate, a refugee or the contemporary nomad who travels around the globe back and forth.

Our particular emigration took place from Poland to Canada in 1959, at the height of the Cold War era. In the late 1950s, a more liberal government came to power in Poland and – at a time when most people were completely prohibited from travelling outside of the Soviet bloc – it allowed the Jewish population in Poland to emigrate. A lot of people decided to take advantage of this, for various reasons, leading to a significant process of emigration framed by the Cold War, in a very divided and bipolar world. However, it was somewhere between emigration and exile because the Jews were encouraged to leave at that point; it was not an expulsion, but there was an encouragement to leave. We travelled to Vancouver, which was the antipode of Krakow, from where we had left. Poland was a country that had recently been ravaged by two wars: the war of conquest against the Poles and the Holocaust, which took place largely on Polish territory although it was not a Polish project. It was a country stifled by a very oppressive regime and it was a country in a state of complete economic stasis and relative impoverishment. Vancouver was a new city, almost a frontier town, a boom town in a booming economy: it was all future and very little past. The contrast was extreme, as was the sense of rapture.

As we left on one-time visas, there was no going back; we assumed that we would never return, and my parents, in fact, never did. That kind of bipolar world, that kind of rupture, creates a split internal world. The past is suddenly on one side, the present on the other. One kind of identity, of self, is left behind, and a new self has not yet been created. For me, the project became to try to make myself at home in this new world, just as I had felt at home originally in Poland. For me this was crucially connected to writing and to language. I realized that if I wanted to feel at home, I needed a language that would inhabit me as deeply as Polish inhabited
me. This project of acculturation involved a process of self-translation, a translation into a new language and into a new cultural vein.

**Jonny Steinberg:** As you were speaking Eva, I was thinking about the connections between your experience and Asad’s, the central character in *A Man of Good Hope*.

Let me start with the question of who a refugee is. There are two rival answers to this question out there and I dislike both of them. The first is that refugees are people who have lost control over their circumstances. They are like flotsam in the ocean. Recently, after he performed *Hamlet* in London, Benedict Cumberbatch spoke to the audience about the refugee crisis. The reason people are getting on boats and drowning, he said, is because it is more dangerous on land. People are fleeing – they don’t have a choice. This is one image of people seeking refuge.

The other image out there – the opposite image, really – is to say that refugees are cunning people out to take what is not theirs. They feign crisis because they want something better. They are deceitful.

I struggle with both of these ideas. The first says that refugees are owed hospitality because they have been robbed of some of the fundamental conditions that allow them to live human lives. They have experienced social deaths and we must take them in so that they might live again. That so often is just not true. In fact, migrants are able to move precisely because they have not experienced a social death, precisely because they still have the wherewithal of life, precisely because they can imagine and take action and betray and compromise and be bad to loved ones.

One of the things that I was trying to do in *A Man of Good Hope* is say that you should take this man in because he is so very human, because he is as complex as any figure you might encounter in bourgeois European literature. He is as dark, as capable of hurting others, as torn by existential questions.

Working month in and month out with Asad, I kept noticing the ways in which he and I were very different. One was in our respective relations to our own ‘pasts’. If you ask me about my lineage I can tell you who my parents and my grandparents were, but when it comes to my great-grandparents I am getting a little shaky and before that I know nothing. When I ask Asad about his lineage he reels off the names of the last twenty-eight generations of his father’s family, which is something that was hammered into his head when he was seven years old. It was a very striking difference between us. Another difference, which kept occurring to me, was the risks that he takes.

A little bit about his background on this: he was born in about 1984 in Mogadishu. Conflict broke out in 1991 when he was seven, and his mother
was killed. His father disappeared. He then lived this incredibly itinerant childhood across the Horn of Africa. Without being attached to any particular adult he entered very wily relationships with adults. At the age of seventeen he ended up on the streets of Addis Ababa and started making good as a street hustler, earning enough money to maintain a house. He has stability. He gives it up. He puts $1,200 in his back pocket and heads to Johannesburg. He has no idea what he will find there. He hopes there are riches to be made but he really doesn’t know. Nor does he really know how to get there. He doesn’t have a passport. He has to move illegally.

So that is one decision that from the beginning interested me. From stability, he moves into danger. In Johannesburg he accumulates money, and one of the things that he does is he gives half of his savings to a human smuggler and he gets air tickets to Brazil on a false South African passport. His idea is to travel from Brazil to Mexico, cross the US border and get arrested. He has this idea that the Americans will not deport him because Somalia is at war. Instead, he imagines, they will keep him in jail for a while and then give him a Green Card. He had no idea whether this was actually true; he had heard a rumour. In the end he doesn’t go. The night before his planned departure, the smugglers are caught and the trip is abandoned.

So, I was drawn to these differences between him and me: this deep lineage and his appetite for risk. They are intimately connected, I think. For a consequence of thinking about the deep past – imagining yourself at the end of twenty generations – is that you also imagine a deep future at the same time. Who will my descendant be in twenty generations? What will I have done in my brief time on this earth to shape their destiny? It would have to be something dramatic, would it not? Asad was seeking to trigger a revolution in the history of his lineage, to have his descendants live lives that his forbears could never have imagined. And to do that, he would have to jump into a new life, to take enormous risks.

So here is an image of a refugee, a wildly ambitious man who believes that his life will only have been worth living if he can change the future for generations of the unborn.

**Tamar Garb:** That is really interesting in the sense that this is what literature can do and what skillfully crafted narrative contributes. Potentially it extends the terms of the discussion. It enables us to individualize a story and perhaps produce an empathic relationship to a life told. I think both of you very graphically bring that out because, whether it is a form of self-narration or whether it is a form of description or an account of someone who has lived a life very different to yours, we get the opportunity to witness a life that is animated in prose and a journey that is followed with care. And we as readers are invited to follow these lives
with you. And yet both of you made very particular decisions in these two books to tell a story of self or a story of an other. I’m interested, Eva, to know how you figure as the subject of your narrative and why, for you Jonny, you appear to shield yourself behind the story of another.

**Eva Hoffman:** As I indicated earlier, I was somewhat reluctant to write a memoir as I am not a writer of a confessional temperament. *Lost in Translation* is not a confessional memoir. It is a book about the experience of transculturation and self-translation, of coming into a second language and a second culture. That is what it explores, and it only includes the aspects of my trajectory which inform that. So it is highly selective. Nonetheless, the reason that I felt that I needed a memoir is because I needed to talk about this from *within*: I was tracing psychic processes rather than external dramas, and for that I needed a case study. And the case study I had was myself.

The reason for writing in the present tense – and I was actually freed to write it when I came upon the present tense – is firstly because, in my case, the narrative, the continuity of the narrative was disrupted by emigration. The narrative of Asad’s journey in *A Man of Good Hope* is a narrative of travelling from one place to another, it really is a literal journey and the drama of it adheres in this turbulent trajectory that he chooses to follow. In *Lost in Translation*, I wanted to write about this internal journey and the psychic processes which, in a sense, were always coterminous, were always present. At the same time, the sense of the past was extremely present. The memories weren’t the memories of the first stage of my life, growing up in Poland. They were very much preserved, very much part of the present, as I went on to reconstruct myself in a very different cultural and linguistic way.

With regard to hospitality, on one level my family and I were treated very hospitably: we were taken into safety both in Canada and subsequently in the United States. On the level of institutions, of official life, on what could be called political life, we were treated well. And yet what made this process of transculturation difficult was a lack of recognition: a lack of personal recognition. This was when I re-emigrated, and I went to the United States in 1963 and studied there.

During this time, America still had a very unified sense of itself – strong counter-cultures and culture wars had not yet emerged – and it considered itself to be the norm, with the ideology of immigration being the melting-pot ideology. Of course, it was the immigrants who were supposed to do the ‘melting’ and who were presumably grateful and happy to become American, as instantly as possible.

In a sense, I was, and continue to be, grateful. American institutions, especially American education, delivered on its promises. They
partly delivered upward mobility, and, for me, a sense of being allowed to become a part of society and to play a professional role within it. However, I also felt that if I underwent this transformation too quickly, or too automatically, or too externally, that my original identity would be colonized, in a way, taken over. I felt that there was a lack of understanding, at that time, not only about particular cultural differences but about the very fact of cultural difference. This was very difficult to explain to people, that there really are different relations of personality, different experiential maps, different forms of relationship, different qualities, different character traits and values. That culture gives you a first template for what it means to be a person, what it means to have a self.

This was really not understood until later, when there was an enormous swing of the pendulum that we can frame as a kind of privileging of otherness and of cultural difference. In this sense, I believe that what Jonny offers Asad is a kind of full recognition, through entering into a really inter-subjective relationship with him. It is Emanuel Levinas who argues that the recognition of another happens with an encounter with their face, through entering into the subjectivity of another person’s face. Jonny truly entered into Asad’s face, understands his expressions and gestures, and doesn’t idealize him in any way. In other words, Asad becomes a three-dimensional person in Jonny’s account, which is quite remarkable – a gift, and also very courageous.

**Jonny Steinberg:** That is very generous, Eva, but let me respond by being a bit more self-critical and then to say something admiring about your work. This question of recognition is very interesting. I am quite certain that when people migrate, when they move, they know that they are going to suffer a deficit of recognition where they are going. In a sense, they know that a part of them is going to die, they are going to be living in a world that doesn’t acknowledge them much. This is a very tough thing to be doing. And the question arises: Why do that? And I would argue that they are doing it for future generations, really. They are thus thinking over a long span of time. We will suffer a deficit of recognition so that the next generation, or perhaps the one after that, enjoys a surfeit of recognition.

That is complicated by the fact that they surely must know that their descendants, in the very course of being recognized, will lose their history; they will be Americans, not Somalis. At some point they will lose the language, the memories, the connections. And so people like Asad are preparing the ground for people who will in all likelihood forget him.

It is interesting that you say that I recognize Asad, because when the book was almost finished I gave it to him to read and he found it
unreadable. He found it too painful to read. And he did not want to recognize what I saw. He did not like, at all, the idea of his struggles and his life laid down on a page. He could talk to me about them because the very process of speaking has agency. He could anaesthetize the experience as it was coming out of his mouth. Whereas to see it by somebody else’s hand, not in his control, the whole catastrophe of it was not just painful, but also not useful. Here is somebody thinking about the present and the future. He only thought about the past insofar as it could be used as a pragmatic resource. He wanted bits and pieces of it, not a clear sighting of the whole thing. And so here was I, thinking that I had, as Eva said, given him this enormous attention, this enormous care, this enormous recognition, having created a record, and yet he didn’t like the record at all.

_Tamar Garb_: Did he feel betrayed?

_Jonny Steinberg_: No, not at all. He didn’t find the record untrue. It just wasn’t useful for him. One reason for writing what I write is that I live in a country that I don’t understand. It is a country with deep wells of very different experience. We pass each other on the streets and know almost nothing about what animates each other. As such, part of my aim was to enter into lives that are very foreign to mine and yet are caught up in my fate, and to try and understand them from within as much as I can. The way to understand a strange life from within, I think, is to ask: Why do people decide what they decide? Why would somebody chose to leave his wife, to leave a place where he is doing okay? I think that my self is an enquiring self rather than an included self. I don’t write anything like memoir because I don’t really trust myself to write honestly about myself. I think that writing about oneself with honesty is a very difficult discipline that most people do not have. And I think it’s a discipline that Eva very, very uniquely achieved in _Lost in Translation_. It is a rare ability to write about oneself with that depth of truth.

_Tamar Garb_: It is interesting that you have used the historical present when you write. It is about the reconstruction of that past that we come to inhabit in the present and we seem to witness this as if you are experiencing it now. I think that is very interesting in terms of the way that both of you write and how the present tense is used to chronicle something of the past, how it brings that into a vivid relationship with the present.

But I wanted to ask you both, having been fascinated by your accounts of coming from countries in which people don’t understand each other or which we ourselves fail to comprehend: How unique is that? Is there any place where one understands the people that are around one? There might be shared cultural forms and rituals that we recognize, and yet, increasingly, that is not the case: we live in very fractured spaces,
very divided societies. In light of this, is this construction of the self and the stranger something that the world we are now inhabiting prompts us to confront more and more graphically? Is this as particular to our times as we may experience it as being?

Eva Hoffman: Indeed, it may not be as unique as we experience it as being, and yet it is new to us and perhaps it is evidencing itself in more extreme forms than it did before. For example, Poland had a very long commonality of cultural history in which the word multiculturalism didn’t exist. They didn’t think of themselves as multicultural, although my parents came from a town that was inhabited equally by Poles, Ukrainians and Jews. My parents both knew four languages just by the virtue of growing up there, so this was quite a normal condition, as has historically been the case across many parts of the world. This was the case in a pre-national context, which prompts us to acknowledge the significance of living with diversity within a national society.

Conceptualizing and enacting hospitality and recognition become complicated when we leap from the individual to the collective. There is no dispelling that difference: the kind of recognition that you give Asad cannot be given collectively, it cannot be accomplished collectively. What can be hoped for is being treated as an equal citizen with the same rights and responsibilities as everybody else, being included in this sphere of citizenship. It is unknown if these very particular differences can be recognized in practice, but we can demand that they should be recognized.

As we live with these very different societies, we may benefit from thinking about the French Enlightenment idea that a person could have their privatized religious ethnic identity at home but be a citizen in public. We need to learn how to allow ourselves and each other our particular identities, our specific pasts, our individual cultural experience, while simultaneously maintaining a sense that we share a society in common, we need to learn how to have mutual regard for each other but also for the society that we want to nurture and share. This remains unresolved in the unhappy leap from individual recognition and individual affection that Asad experiences from quite a few people, to the collective misery of non-recognition that comes when violence thrives in a South African township in which the Somalis are systematically attacked, persecuted, victimized, killed.

Tamar Garb: In this regard Jonny, how do you understand that hostility, that xenophobic rejection of the outsider or stranger? Is it hostility based on economic competition as many commentators have been saying, or is it an ethnic hostility? Or is it just part of a general hostility against immigrants in a vulnerable and fragile environment?
Jonny Steinberg: Asad goes to South Africa because he has been told that there is money to be made, and there is. The problem is that money is to be made in the peripheral settlements of South African cities among the very poor. A foreigner with a cash business among poor people is very vulnerable, and Asad experiences a great deal of violence. Why? It is very comforting to assert that people like Asad are scapegoats, that the violence committed against them has nothing to do with them. And yet I am not sure if that is enough.

Here is a stranger in our midst. He doesn't belong. He has no desire to belong. He is here for nakedly instrumental reasons. He wants to make some money and then move on. That is what he is performing in front of you, day in and day out. You watch him have nothing to do with you but take your money. He does not share in your collective myths, in your anguish, in your suffering. He shows you, all the time, how little you and he have in common.

There are few culturally homogeneous places in the world, that is true. But that does not mean that every place in the world is as heterogeneous as the next. There are parts of the world where difference is felt in much more extreme ways: places where people have lived side by side for many generations and they understand one another as little as they did five or six generations ago. They are making zero-sum claims on the same history. This is not unique to South Africa, as it is true of many places.

Tamar Garb: A kind of hopelessness seems to emerge throughout this conversation. On the one hand, you have suggested that only the politics of citizenship can provide the frameworks in which human beings can be safeguarded. So the rule of law is there to protect people from violence and exploitation, and we believe that the rule of law must be in place for this reason. However, both of your reflections on very different historical and geopolitical circumstances note that, even if one is welcomed with open arms and hospitality resides, there is always the possibility of a failure of recognition, which leads to a deep form of alienation, or an internal kind of crisis of self and self-recognition.

Eva Hoffman: In my case, I believe that much has changed since the period of our immigration to North America: there is greater understanding and acknowledgement of diversity in the United States and in certain other countries as well. There was almost a swing of the pendulum for a while, in which having a minoritarian identity was positioned as privileged, romantic, glamorous. There was a body of postmodern theory that privileged the qualities of being displaced: fragmentation, displacement, outsidersness, and so on. As such, it was represented as a glamorous condition, and people identified themselves readily with their ethnic identities and ethnic pasts. It appears that an understanding and a
greater tolerance for strangers has taken place in the last fifty or so years; it appears that dealing with diversity takes practice, and these countries have now had several decades of practice and something has been learnt through the process. South Africa has had a very different history in this respect, of course. I would suggest that what still needs to be learnt is to be less timid and less cautious about talking to each other, to give each other the kind of recognition that we would give to ourselves. In other words, what we need is to be engaged in a candid conversation with each other, in which we recognize each other not as oppresser and victim, but as humans – members of different groups who need to live in the same society. We need a much more robust dialogue, because otherwise there is a danger that, while prejudices against various groups may have lessened, many people live in very fragmented circumstances and this is not good for building a society.

**Jonny Steinberg:** In my case, I am going to be more pessimistic. Tamar, you ask whether all we have is the rule of law, and I think that if only we had the rule of law, it would go quite a long way. I think that in societies that hit a certain threshold of inequality, in societies that are particularly unequal, you don’t have the rule of law. Because the rule of law requires equality of recognition. In a country like South Africa, and not just South Africa, equally in a country like Brazil or Colombia, you have the rule of law at very most for the top 50 per cent of society. I don’t think that the bottom 50 per cent get much access to the law.

**Tamar Garb:** Law provides the framework, then, for the possibility of recognition. Without the law to protect and frame the fragility of life, the possibility of empathy and engagement with strangers as like subjects becomes that much more difficult. But if the story of Asad tells us anything, it is that this is possible, even in the most challenging of circumstances. I must take some hope from that.

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Notes

1. For other approaches to ‘writing’ in/through/from displacement explored in this volume, see Haile (on ‘voice’ and ‘silence’), Qasmiyeh (on ‘Writing the camp: writing the archive’), Davies (on representations of displacement in graphic novels and testimonial comics) and Niccolai (on writing and producing theatre as a response to displacement).

2. On markets run by and for migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees in South Africa, also see Tayob, in this volume.

References