Nimble Tongues

Kellman, Steven G.

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Translingual Memoirs of the New American Immigration

“Pour un écrivain, changer de langue, c’est écrire une lettre d’amour avec un dictionnaire” ‘For a writer, to change languages is to write a love letter with a dictionary,’ wrote aphorist E. M. Cioran, who changed languages anyway, from Romanian to French (39). It is difficult enough to put the right words in the right place in one language. “All you do,” noted sportswriter Red Smith, “is sit down at a typewriter and open a vein” (qtd. in Reston 94). How vain, then, are those who presume to write compelling literature in a foreign tongue. “No man fully capable of his own language ever masters another,” proclaimed George Bernard Shaw (254), who, despite the translingual accomplishments of Kamala Das, Isak Dinesen, Leah Goldberg, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Katia Kapovich, Yiyun Li, Bharati Mukherjee, Téa Obreht, Yoko Tawada, Ayelet Tsabari, Marina Tsvetaeva, and others, would probably have extended the pronouncement to women as well.

Though raised in Spanish, George Santayana wrote his poetry in English. Yet he declared that no poets can be great who do not use the language in which their mothers sang them lullabies. Nevertheless, Chaim Nachman Bialik became the greatest Hebrew poet of the twentieth century, though his mother tongue was Yiddish. Though the roster of translingual authors is long, switching languages is not easy. Yiyun Li reports that, during the difficult transition from Chinese to English, she attempted
suicide twice. “I disowned my native language,” she declares, with a
twinge of guilt. The switch was neither smooth nor complete. “It is hard
to feel in an adopted language,” she recognizes, “yet it is impossible in
my native language” (Li).

The tradition of authors who struggled to feel their way through an
alien tongue extends for more than two millennia. Latin literature is said
to have begun with Livius Andronicus, a Greek slave who wrote a Latin
version of the Odyssey. The Latin canon was in no small measure the cre-
ation of men who adopted the language of Rome even though they were,
like Seneca, Quintilian, Martial, and Lucan, from Spain, like Ausonius,
from Gaul, or like Apuleius, Terence, and Augustine, from Africa. The
thirteenth-century Catalan troubadour Ramon Vidal de Besalú moved
freely among Catalan, lemosi (Occitan), and parladura francesa (French).
Spanish American literature commences with Garcilaso de la Vega, a
native speaker of Quechua, who wrote his masterpiece, Commentarios
reales, in Spanish. The emergence of written literature in sub-Saharan
Africa cannot be understood apart from the role of English, French, and
Portuguese as translingual media.

English dominates current global discourse, and contemporary
translinguals as diverse as André Aciman, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie,
Rabih Alameddine, Breyten Breytenbach, Edwidge Danticat, Junot Diaz,
Cristina García, Xiaolu Guo, Mohsin Hamid, Li-Young Lee, Hisham
Matar, Miroslav Penkov, and Charles Simic have chosen it as their me-
dium of expression. If the United States is what, in a short book by that
title, John F. Kennedy called “a nation of immigrants,” (Kennedy) much
of its literature has been the product of linguistic migration. As early as
the eighteenth century, Phillis Wheatley wrote her poetry in English, the
language of the culture that enslaved her, not in her native Fulani, and
Michel-Guillaume-Jean de Crèvecoeur certified that he was an American
farmer, not a French one, by publishing Letters from an American Farmer
in English. (Two years later, in 1784, he reverted to his primary language,
publishing an augmented Lettres d’un cultivateur américain.) Later au-
thors who switched languages to American English have included literary
immigrants as varied as Felipe Alfau, Julia Alvarez, Isaac Asimov, Louis
Begley, Irving Berlin, Carlos Bulosan, Abraham Cahan, Marilyn Chin,
Ursula Hegi, Aleksandar Hemon, Khaled Hosseini, Henry Kissinger,

The American Dream promised penniless newcomers that, with pluck and luck, they, too, could, like Scotland native Andrew Carnegie, acquire vast wealth and power. It also promised access to the riches of the English language. Though he arrived in America with just a few English words in his pocket, Andrei Codrescu, variously adept at Romanian, German, Hungarian, and Russian, became a prominent Anglophonic poet. Ha Jin managed to win the National Book Award for a 1999 novel, *Waiting*, that, though set in the author’s native China, he wrote in English. Less than twenty years after leaving Leningrad, Joseph Brodsky, who began writing in English while continuing to write in Russian, was named poet laureate of the United States. Recent memoirs of immigration often provide the most explicit accounts of the ordeal of translingualism. The mere publication of a memoir in English constitutes proof that the migrant author has succeeded in forging a new identity.

According to the powerful metaphor of the melting pot, assimilation is both desirable and uncomplicated. Immigrants exchange their old-world customs and beliefs for those of an American identity, and the process is usually depicted as a narrative of triumph. Language, the medium that both facilitates and validates the transformation, is not often called into question. Speakers of Italian, Norwegian, Polish, and Yiddish beget monolingual Anglophones who balk at looking back. Memoirs produced by the massive influx of Europeans to the United States from 1880 to 1920 rarely focus on language, as if writing in English were transparently natural and appropriate. But for later translinguals, particularly those who arrived in the United States during the “new immigration” of the past three decades, language has become opaque and resistant. Rejecting the paradigm of the melting pot in favor of a multicultural model, they no longer accept the exchange of languages as seamless and beneficent. The very title of Cristina García’s 1992 novel about a family living in exile in Brooklyn, *Dreaming in Cuban*, suggests that it is language that shapes consciousness and defines self. And switching languages is not such an innocent transaction. Similarly, the titles of many recent memoirs foreground the ordeal of mastering a new language and problematize the medium they employ to tell their story. Eva Hoffman calls her book *Lost
in Translation: A Life in a New Language, Ilan Stavans calls his On Borrowed Words: A Memoir of Language, Firoozeh Dumas calls hers Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America, and Ariel Dorfman calls his Heading South, Looking North: A Bilingual Journey. All underscore how language has become a metaphor for personal identity and itself the subject of the story. “There is a violence in the very language, American English, that we have to face, even as we work to make it ours, decolonize it so that it will express the truth of bodies beaten and banned,” observes Meena Alexander in her 1993 memoir, Fault Lines (199). The English that Alexander, a native of India who has written in French, Hindi, and her mother tongue, Malayalam, employs is no longer transparent. Other translingual immigrant memoirs that could also be termed language memoirs include André Aciman’s Out of Egypt: A Memoir (1994), Leila Ahmed’s A Border Passage: From Cairo to America (1999), Galareh Asayesh’s Saffron Sky: A Life Between Iran and America (1999), Andrei Codrescu’s An Involuntary Genius in America’s Shoes (And What Happened Afterwards) (2002), Gustavo Pérez Firmat’s Next Year in Cuba: A Cubano’s Coming-of-Age in America (1995), and Luc Sante’s The Factory of Facts (1998). Even as they often culminate and exult in the ability to write in English, recent translingual memoirs interrogate their own medium.

However, for Carlos Bulosan, language is, like Flaubert’s ideal author, everywhere present but nowhere visible. Born in the Philippines to a family of struggling farmers, he set off alone for the United States in 1930 while still just seventeen. In his 1946 autobiography, America Is in the Heart, Bulosan recounts the bigotry, poverty, and violence he endured while toiling in fields and canneries along the West Coast. Less than halfway through the book, he learns the address of his brother Macario in San Luis Obispo, California, and begins to write him a letter. Bulosan has had very little formal schooling and disembarked at the port of Seattle speaking almost none of the local language. Yet now, after a few years in America, he is writing Macario in English. It is a dramatic moment, one that confirms the nascent writer in his literary vocation: “Then it came to me, like a revelation, that I could actually write understandable English. I was seized with happiness. I wrote slowly and coldly, drinking the wine when I stopped, laughing silently and crying. When the long letter was
finished, a letter which was actually a story of my life, I jumped to my feet and shouted through my tears: ‘They can’t silence me any more! I’ll tell the world what they have done to me!’” (180). Nowhere in his memoir does Bulosan mention even the name of his native tongue, Tagalog, which has simply been expunged from the record. Despite passing reference to difficulties in understanding and speaking English after he arrives in the United States, America Is in the Heart testifies to the author’s success in finding a local voice to articulate his experiences in the United States. The impassioned letter that Bulosan writes to his brother is an early draft of the entire book that he will write in English, one whose emphasis is on the hardships of labor, not language.

Romanian immigrant M. E. Ravage titled his 1917 memoir An American in the Making, and mastery of English was crucial to Ravage’s success at making himself not only into an American but also into a professional writer. However, the memoir makes but a single, oblique reference to the language its author spoke before acquiring English. During his first few days in New York, Ravage is hawking chocolates to Christmas shoppers along Fourteenth Street when another peddler suddenly addresses him “in my native tongue.” Ravage asks the stranger “how he had recognized me for a Rumanian” (69), and the reader is left to infer that the author’s native tongue is Romanian. Five chapters later, however, he refers to Yiddish, which he knows well enough to teach his friend Esther, as “the humble mother tongue” (117). Whatever their order of priority, though, it seems that both Romanian and Yiddish preceded Ravage’s command of English, which he acquires by attending lectures and classes in the evenings, after shifts at the shirt factory. He recounts being stumped by John Milton’s poetry, but, in less than six years, Ravage is fluent enough to offer himself as a tutor in English, at twenty-five cents an hour.

A more recent memoirist might have reflected on the peculiar qualities of Romanian, Yiddish, and English, how they are mutually untranslatable, how English enables specific thoughts and creates a different identity than is possible in either Romanian or Yiddish. Yet for Ravage, language seems to be a neutral tool. Picking up one, he discards another, without waxing sentimental over the music and meanings that are unique to Romanian, Yiddish, and English, respectively. With the same resolve he brought to
finding work and housing, he applies himself to overcoming the obstacle of language. He takes a class in elocution at the University of Missouri, recites long passages from Mark Twain, and jots down unfamiliar words he overhears in conversations. For Ravage, English is a simple test of fortitude, not the intricate instrument for recalibrating identity—among Russian, French, and English—that it is in Vladimir Nabokov’s memoir, *Speak, Memory* (1951, 1966). But the publication and warm reception of *An American in the Making* proved that he passed that test.

The classic assimilationist memoir, Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land*, recounts how an anxious girl from a shtetl in the Russian Pale became an ostensibly sanguine American woman. That transformation is conceived largely through language, the novice Anglophone author’s proudly won ability to “think in English without an accent” (282). Antin’s autobiography is in effect a linguistic palimpsest, an elaboration and reconception of an extensive letter that a precocious fourteen-year-old wrote in Yiddish to her maternal uncle, Moshe Hayyim Weltman, across the Atlantic, then translated into English and published, as *From Plotzk to Boston* (1899), when she was eighteen. However, the final English version, published as *The Promised Land* in 1912, obscures its author’s ordeal of translingualism, the fearful process of acquiring and articulating a new self through a new language.

*The Promised Land* both embodies and celebrates Yiddish-speaking Mashinke’s metamorphosis into Mary, the young woman who conquers Boston through English, “this beautiful language in which I think” (164). It is the tongue she praises without a trace of treason, of guilt over abandoning her *mame loshn*. Extolling the medium in which she has chosen to write, Antin says of English, “. . . in any other language happiness is not so sweet, logic is not so clear” (164). Suppressing any doubts about the virtues of the melting pot, Antin tells her sweet story of success in clear and happy English. Borrowing a term more often used to describe racial camouflage, Hana Wirth-Nesher calls Antin’s strategy “linguistic passing, where erasure of Hebrew and Yiddish would be her submission to the nativist pressures and linguistic policies of her day” (57). By contrast, Anzia Yezierska, who left the Russian Empire for New York at almost the same time and almost the same age as Antin left for Boston, explicitly dramatizes the ordeal of switching from Yiddish to English. In her 1920 story collection *Hungry Hearts*, the Jewish immigrant Shenah Pessah
demonstrates the same exhilaration as Antin’s but not yet her linguistic command. “I got yet a lot of luck,” Shenah Pessah declares. “I learned myself English from a Jewish English reader, and one of the boarders left me a grand book. When I only begin to read, I forget I’m on this world. It lifts me on wings with high thoughts” (Yezierska 8).

In 1959, sixty-five years after Antin left Polotzk, Eva Hoffman, too, sailed across the Atlantic to a new life, first in Canada and later the United States. Like Antin, Hoffman was thirteen years old when she left Europe. As Hoffman tells her story, in English, she still feels nostalgia for what she left behind, not least a language. And she employs the Polish term tęsknota to identify this sad longing, and to indicate that her English lexicon is still not entirely adequate to encompass her emotions.

The implied reader of Antin’s The Promised Land is exclusively Anglophonic, and the book comes equipped with a glossary to assist in pronouncing and understanding the relatively few foreign terms, in Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, and German, that Antin employs. The fact that such common words as icon, ruble, Purim, vodka, Torah, and pogrom are thought to require translation suggests how hermetically monolingual is the culture in which Antin would now position herself. She reveals none of the anguish or regret that later translinguals would express. When she enrolls in a Chelsea public school, Antin cannot even name the days of the week in English, yet she dismisses the enormous linguistic challenge she has to take on with the pronouncement “I was Jew enough to have an aptitude for language in general, and to bend my mind earnestly to my task” (Promised Land 163). Of the Jewish language that she abjures, Yiddish, Antin says nothing.

Hoffman, by contrast, accentuates the ordeal of switching languages. On the ship from Gdynia to Montreal, she resists the English lessons that another passenger offers. And when the family settles in Vancouver, she is distraught over how imperfectly the local language fits her universe: “. . . the problem is that the signifier has become severed from the signified,” she explains in the academic English she later mastered. “The words I learn now don’t stand for things in the same way they did in my native tongue” (106).

Instead of the seamless transition from one language to another that Antin claims to have enjoyed, Hoffman finds herself suspended, inarticulately, between Polish and English: “Polish, in a short time, has atrophied,
shriveled from sheer uselessness. Its words don’t apply to my new experiences; they’re not coeval with any of the objects, or faces, or the very air I breathe in the daytime. In English, words have not penetrated to those layers of my psyche from which a private conversation could proceed” (107). Whereas Antin’s accomplished autobiography is testimony to her mastery of English, Hoffman’s dwells on the tribulations and imperfections of translingualism. “Shuddup,” reports Hoffman (104), is the first word she understands in English, a forbidding tongue that leaves the newcomer temporarily mute, and permanently at a loss.

From its title to the final paragraph, in which Hoffman recites the recondite names of flora in a Massachusetts garden, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* problematizes its own medium and uses language as a metaphor for talking about the first four decades of a woman’s life. “Like everybody,” concludes Hoffman, “I am the sum of my languages” (273). It is the problematic transition from Polish to English that constitutes the great drama of Hoffman’s life and the central theme of her published life.

Hoffman adduces the distinctive Polish *polot*—“a word that combines the meanings of dash, inspiration, and flying” (71)—and the peculiarities of the English *friend* (148) to argue that linguistic systems are not interchangeable. In effect endorsing the Sapir-Whorf thesis, the doctrine of linguistic determinism by which each language is unique in the way that it governs a speaker’s apprehension of experience, Hoffman is aware that Polish enables certain thoughts and emotions she can never have in any other language and that English imposes perceptions and conceptions she might otherwise resist. When, as a present for her fifteenth birthday, Hoffman is given a diary, her decision to construct a daily textual self in English rather than Polish is as momentous as the first letter that Bulosan writes to his brother in English. However, proceeding “as if the totality of the world and mind were coeval with the totality of language” (217), Hoffman lacks the linguistic innocence of either Bulosan or Antin. For Antin, achieving her dream of becoming an American means setting her agile mind to memorizing English vocabulary and then expunging Yiddish. But for Hoffman, translingualism leaves untidy traces. Polish obtrudes through her English, with a reminder that languages are never exactly commensurate, that each always processes experience in its own
unique way. Antin would have her readers believe that language is merely instrumental, a tool that can be adapted or discarded not only without trauma but also without distorting thought. But for Hoffman language is so fundamental and problematic that it serves as a metaphor for many of the other anxieties that she experiences. *Lost in Translation* is suffused with the melancholy awareness that no single tongue suffices to digest the universe. Her English, unlike Antin’s, is inflected with a mournful sense of its own inadequacy.

Like Hoffman, Padma Hejmadi resisted English. According to her 1999 memoir, *Room to Fly*, Hejmadi, who was born in southern India, refused to attend school at age five because, a native speaker of Konkani, a mother tongue without a script, she rejected being forced into literacy in English. Growing up in a polyglot household in which four languages (Hindi, Tamil, English, and Konkani) were spoken on an average day, she diagnoses herself as “afflicted with a lifelong interior astigmatism” (21). The highly literate English in which she eventually articulates her memories is haunted by the haphazardness and inadequacy of her chosen language as well as by “the infinite vocabularies of silence” (93).

Ariel Dorfman begins his memoir when a last-minute change in plans kept him from his job in Chile’s presidential palace, at the moment that a military junta stormed the building and killed its occupants. *Heading South, Looking North* crosscuts between chapters that scan its author’s fifty-six years and those that recount in detail the violent fall of Salvador Allende, leader of Latin America’s first popularly elected socialist government. The book basks in quickened memories of “the best years of my life” (246), a fervent time when Dorfman—alienated in crucial ways from each of the three countries he has called home, Argentina, Chile, and the United States—felt connected to others in an ardent effort at social transformation. In his memoir and in everything he has written since 1973, insists Dorfman, he bears witness to the wrenching experience of idealism betrayed.

Yet betrayal of a more fundamental sort is the true theme of *Heading South, Looking North*. If indeed *traduttori, traditori*, translators are traitors, Dorfman’s life—faithful to two languages and three nationalities—has been a sustained act of treachery. Beyond its value as a document of the Allende debacle, Dorfman’s book, begun in Spanish but
completed and published in English, is an exploration of duplicity—“the anxiety, the richness, the madness of being double” (42). It is the fluent testimony of a man whom circumstances and stubborn ambition have made into “a bigamist of language” (270). *Heading South, Looking North*—a schismatic title that would have been as meaningful in reverse, as *Heading North, Looking South*—is another work that not only traces but, in its very mastery of the verbal medium, demonstrates the identity of an author who lives between languages.

He remains an outsider, a “wanderer in love with the transitory” (6). In the United States, Dorfman is Chilean, in Chile *norteamericano*; to the general population of each society, he is an unassimilable anomaly, a relatively affluent, cosmopolitan, Jewish intellectual. The United States that entices Dorfman is a society publicly dedicated to personal reinvention, to jettisoning prior memories and languages, and the young man’s repudiation of part of his past is most apparent not only in his abandonment of Spanish but also in his temptation to betray his own father. During the McCarthy hysteria over Soviet subversion, he comes close to informing his devoutly patriotic teacher that Adolfo Dorfman is a Communist. Eventually, though, Yankee xenophobia becomes too intense for the family to remain in New York, and they relocate again, to Chile, where Dorfman’s dormant Spanish awakens. One of the most striking passages in the book describes how Castilian syntax and lexicon infiltrate Dorfman’s being, transforming him into a Chilean, while an Anglophonic self maintains its discrete identity: “I was not aware of what was happening to my mind: it was a subtle, cunning, camouflaged process, the vocabulary and the grammatical code seeping into my consciousness slowly, turning me into a person who, without acknowledging it, began to function in either language” (115). In Spanish, he writes a scathing, best-selling indictment of Yankee imperialism, and he vows “. . . to renounce English along with the America of the North and its empire and its culture, renounce and denounce and try to suppress henceforth the man inside me who had spent his life identifying through that language, speaking and writing himself into personhood in that language” (101). *Heading South, Looking North* demonstrates the failure of that resolution, that neither the English Dorfman nor the Spanish Dorfman can be permanently suppressed. Written in lucid English prose (a Spanish version
followed), it is an affirmation of its author’s bilingual identity, of a life suspended between North and South and English and Spanish.

Born in Mexico City, Ilan Stavans became a citizen of the United States in 1994. But, though he wrote his 2001 memoir, *On Borrowed Words*, in English, he calls Yiddish his mother tongue and Spanish his father tongue. The book follows its author’s restless rambles in Europe, Israel, and Cuba and through infatuations with Marxism, Judaism, and several women. However, as its subtitle stresses, *On Borrowed Words* is *A Memoir of Language*, and it is in and through words that its author finds himself, lost. “I was a wandering soul, inhabiting other people’s tongues” (224) declares Stavans, brilliantly fluent but never at home in Yiddish, Spanish, or English.

The immediate effect of the liberalizing Hart-Celler Act of 1965 was a massive increase in immigration to the United States. A long-term consequence was the flowering of translingual memoirs decades later. Too numerous to encompass in a single chapter, the new newcomers are more wary than their predecessors about the project of acculturation and, specifically, about switching languages. Born in Belgium in 1954, Luc Sante was five years old when his parents moved to New Jersey and forced him to set aside his native tongue for the language of an alien environment. Sante became a professional writer in English, though his 1998 memoir, *The Factory of Facts*, says of his two languages, French and English, “one is a wound and the other is a prosthesis” (269).

“The fact that I / am writing to you / in English,” writes poet Gustavo Pérez Firmat, in English, “already falsifies what I / wanted to tell you” (*Next Year* 126). A native of Cuba relocated to Miami then Ann Arbor and Durham (he moved to New York after publication of his memoir), Pérez Firmat published two autobiographies, one in English and one in Spanish. So did Esmeralda Santiago, who was born in Puerto Rico in 1948 and moved to New York when she was thirteen. For her 1993 memoir, *When I Was Puerto Rican*, Santiago found herself unable to render into English such distinctive Puerto Rican concepts as *dignidad* and *jíbaro* and instead kept them in Spanish, with a glossary in the back for the benefit of monolingual Anglophones (*When I Was*). For the Spanish version of *When I Was Puerto Rican*, published the following year, as *Cuando era puertorriqueña*, Santiago added a special preface that discusses her linguistic
predicament: how she is torn between two tongues, Spanish and English, and can express certain feelings only in her native Spanish (Cuando).

Thirty years after abandoning Iran for California at the age of seven, Firoozeh Dumas can mock her mother’s malapropisms and recall how her father “had two left tongues” (9). Writing confidently in American English, she can afford to call her flippant memoir Funny in Farsi, but for many others the ordeal of being wrenched from one language and thrust into another is no laughing matter. Growing up in Malacca amid a polyglot mêlée of Malay, Chinese, and Hindi, Shirley Geok-lin Lim is reminded by her British teachers that “English was only on loan, a borrowed tongue which we could only garble” (121). The English with which she wrote her 1996 memoir, Among the White Moon Faces, is not garbled, though it is cast into the anxious role of subject as well as medium.

Skepticism about the very possibility of genuine translingualism is perhaps most vividly embodied in Marjorie Agosín, a literary transplant who was in her late teens in 1974 when her family moved from Chile to the state of Georgia. However, despite residence in the United States of more than forty years, she cannot bring herself to write in English. Agosín’s memoir, The Alphabet in My Hands: A Writing Life, was published in English translation before the Spanish original, but by the time she came to write it, in 2000, she had come to accept her identity as “a Jewish writer who writes in Spanish and lives in America” (155). Recognizing that she will never be at home in English, she writes, “The English language never took on the texture of my soul, the feel of my skin” (151). Though she is, for practical purposes, bilingual, Agosín declares, “For me, life between two cultures was no life at all” (152). Nevertheless, for most of the other translinguals who have employed English to record and reflect on their experiences of dislocation, life exists within, between, and beyond their languages.