Migration, Language and Dialogue

Guest post by Gabriel Furmuzachi

Migration brings with it, no doubt about it, important changes in the lives of those who chose to leave. Identity is one these fundamental changes. One needs to find one’s place and one’s self in a new environment without the benefit of a tradition and without the support of one’s family, history and language. As an immigrant, one becomes another, one’s identity has to be reassessed, built up from scratch. We are not talking here about personal identity in the sense analytic philosophy considers it. Instead, our understanding of identity relies on narratives: we come to understand ourselves and our place in the world through stories we tell or are told about ourselves. The fabric of these stories gets torn once we decide or are forced to leave. We should strive to mend it and we think one can only do this dialogically. These are the issues we will try to discuss here.

We are going to quickly follow three accounts of immigrant lives. Then we will attempt to make sense of them by appealing to a couple of philosophical concepts, namely dialogue and cosmopolitanism, which we consider to be viable solutions to the difficulties brought about by migration.

The first account we’ll talk about is the one from Strangers to Ourselves by Julia Kristeva, the second, from Eva Hoffman’s autobiographical novel Lost in Translation and the third focusing on the immigrant stories documented by the Haitian/American writer Edwidge Danticat in her Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Writer at Work.

Kristeva

Julia Kristeva (1941) is a Bulgarian born French philosopher, psychoanalyst and literary critic. She left Bulgaria in 1965, at the age of 24. In 1991 she published Strangers to Ourselves, a book which takes us on a ride through the history of being a foreigner. The Greeks and the Barbarians, the Chosen People, St. Paul and St. Augustin, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, France and the European Union. The opening chapter is titled “Toccata et Fugue pour l’Étranger” and it is, as it rightly suggests, an abrupt introduction into the subject. An introduction which mixes personal considerations, literary criticism and historical as well as political elements. Strangeness, the “condition of being a foreigner”, Kristeva considers, is something which eludes analysis. She writes: “…settled within himself, the foreigner has no self. Barely an empty confidence, valueless, which focuses his possibilities of being constantly other, according to others’ wishes and to circumstances. I do what they want me to, but it is not ‘me’ – ‘me’ is elsewhere, ‘me’ belongs to no one, ‘me’ does not belong to ‘me’…does ‘me’ exist? (1991, p. 8).
Not being able to rely on the past, on their tradition, on their family and friends and, at the same time, not knowing how to cope with a shapeless future, immigrants have to make decisions, to take risks. It is very likely that this image of the foreigner is modeled on Kristeva’s own experience: she arrived in Paris in 1965 on Christmas Eve with only five dollars in her pocket, after her thesis director in Sofia brought her to the French embassy where she took and passed an exam to get a scholarship in France. Everything happened quite quickly, as she used the time when her college director (a full-blood communist) was in Moscow.

Kristeva considers that for someone living in a new linguistic community, their mother tongue, unusable, resembles a handicapped child: dear (because it is so intimately one’s own) but incapable of anything. It lacks the connections with the surrounding world because the “logic” of things has been altered. Her own words do not refer to the world any longer, the way they used to. They have to deal with: “Living with resonances and reasoning that are cut off from the body’s nocturnal memory, from the bittersweet slumber of childhood. Bearing within oneself…that language of the past that withers without ever leaving you” (1991, p. 15).

The theme of silence is ever present, and she writes that “Silence has not only been forced upon you, it is within you: a refusal to speak, a fitful sleep riven to an anguish that wants to remain mute.” In her view, an immigrant seems to be feeding on this silence, incapable of creating a feasible life story. As Kristeva sees it, coping with a new world can occur “either as an acknowledgement of the change as a loss which would never be refilled, or as a chance to provoke change itself, as if putting one’s identity through a test and pushing it to the limit” (Furmuzachi, 2007, p. 153) What is stable, what we evaluate strongly, our character is what will endure these tests. And what’s more, since one holds together all these changes with the help of narratives, the language in which they are made up, told and retold becomes important.

Hoffman

Eva Hoffman’s autobiographical novel Lost in Translation starts with her departure from Poland, together with her family, heading to Vancouver, Canada. She grows up in Canada (where she feels exiled and disappointed) and then moves to the U.S. to study and later teach. Lost in Translation stemmed out of her preoccupation with language and “self-translation”, as she calls it. She says in an interview that: “What I wanted to talk about was not just language but the conjunction of language and identity, and that to do that I needed a case study — and the case study I knew best was myself. It needed to be done from within a subjectivity since it was so much about subjectivity. I decided to write it as a memoir” (Zournazy, 1999).

To keep a check on these changes, she writes. Of course, she vacillated between using English and using Polish. English, on the one hand, seemed to be far away from her intimate thoughts and feelings, unable to describe them best. Polish, on the other hand, seemed to be the echo of a vanishing world, with little reference in her own environment. Her decision to use English for her writing was a gamble and a hope. “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…This language is beginning to invent another me” (Hoffman, 1998, p. 121). And later: “…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’” (Hoffman, 1998, p. 121).

Only a better grasp of the language in which she lives can give her a better picture of the world and thus a stronger sense of being here, among others like her. The process of learning a new language came together with a re-discovery of her Self which needs to be articulated, put in a story, told to the others and told to herself. It is the same person who speaks English and teaches at Harvard and the Polish girl who just started to understand the world around her, although it seems that the English Eva Hoffman is “arranged, shaped and articulated in quite another way.”

Slowly “translating” her Polish life into her English life she manages to go over the silence of which Kristeva talked above. This process proves to be very important. She could have chosen silence and could have attempted to live in an enclosed community, using a petrified language and speaking it with few people, hoping to maintain the idealized image of a virtual paradise which only existed overseas, in her childhood Poland. Instead, she decided to come to terms with the new environment and acknowledge it as such.

“Like everybody, I am the sum of my languages,” writes Hoffman.

Danticat

Danticat’s Create Dangerously is a series of essays dealing with Haitians who immigrated to the US. Most of those she writes about are involved with the act of creating, whether it is writing, photography or art. Danticat is also a writer and a journalist, and she gives us an insight into how she deals with her own life abroad and how she interacts with other Haitians, following their stories of loss, their tragedies and hopes. We have thus an artist at work on two levels. “Create dangerously, for people who read dangerously. This is what I’ve always thought it meant to be a writer. Writing, knowing in part that no matter how trivial your words may seem, someday, somewhere, someone may risk his or her life to read them” (Danticat, 2011, p. 17).

Danticat’s account is not a lighthearted one. The stories she tells are infused with sorrow and pain, with tragedy upon tragedy, with violence and death. For her, “The nomad or immigrant who learns something rightly must always ponder travel and movement, just as the grief-stricken must inevitably ponder death” (Danticat, 2011, p. 22).

Putting the act of leaving in the context of immigration on a par with grieving and death, Danticat manages to convey in a relatively short sentence a wealth of meanings and symbols. The grief-stricken mourn a loss but are also thankful to still be alive. Death is a reminder which always plays its game on the others and never on oneself (when it does, there is no self left). Likewise, for an immigrant, being on the move is both a curse and a benediction. In search for a better life or, often, just for trying to keep being alive, one abandons one’s own narrative, one plunges into a new world without a history, relying just on a shadow of who one used to be.
Danticat gets to know immigrants who were lucky enough to land in a country where they could have another go at making a life but who have also brought with them memories of destruction. They cherish this second chance they had been given as good as they can. But she also writes about the silence into which the immigrant is always in danger of falling: “But what happens when we cannot tell our own stories, when our memories have temporarily abandoned us? What is left is longing for something we are not even sure we ever had but are certain we will never experience again” (Danticat, 2011, p. 64).

Danticat manages to bring to life all the people she talks to, or writes about, whether they are Haitian immigrants or her own relatives who remained in the country, even though some of them do not want to tell their story to her (since she was the journalist) or were at first at least reluctant to open. She succeeds in having a dialogue with them and thus learning about their hardship and misfortunes. And also about their new lives. She discovers that once she gains their trust, speaking to them in a language they are comfortable with, people have things to say and want their stories to be shared and remembered.

Later she says that: “One of the advantages of being an immigrant is that two very different countries are forced to merge within you. The language you were born speaking and the one you will probably die speaking have no choice but to find a common place in your brain and regularly merge there” (Danticat, 2011, p. 99).

Even if her tales are tales of sorrow, her writing leaves a positive impression because, after all when we create, we create “as though each piece of art were a stand-in for a life, a soul, a future…. We have no other choice” (Danticat, 2011, p. 26).

**The Need for Dialogue**

To make a quick recap: we have, on the one hand, the image Julia Kristeva gives us of the immigrant shaping her life, as it were, in the shadow of what’s going on around her, longing for the life she left behind and collapsing into a sort of stasis on steroids in her new world. Then, we have Hoffman’s discovery of a new world and her attempt at appropriating them, making them her own by immersing herself into the adopted language. And finally, we have Danticat’s stories of Haitians who managed to leave a life of violence behind but still carry with them the scars that made them who they are.

All these accounts, as many, many others we can read about or hear (if we are willing to) or even experience ourselves point out this *in limbo* status in which an immigrant very often gets stuck. And all three of them put at the center a shift in the ability to communicate, to sustain a dialogue in a new language and in new surroundings. Why is it that the stories we tell about ourselves are so important? Because we shape our identities through them. Our identities are built in community with others by sharing a tradition and a language. As soon as one is left without them, one feels uprooted, confused, empty and speechless. One can only try to find one’s place within the new
culture by building up one's uniqueness in a continuous dialogue with the other, attempting to find new ways to re-knot the threads of their own interrupted story.

The tradition, the social customs with which we grew up, the habits we all slowly developed make up the fabric of our outer selves, considers Charles Taylor, the Canadian philosopher in *The Sources of the Self* against which we define our own inner selves. We are only then happy when we manage to recover this inner authenticity.

In this context, the idea of multiculturalism come to mind as a possible way out. Historically, multiculturalism surfaced as an answer in the attempt to cope with this disjuncture because identity so conceived needs to be *recognized* and thus the struggle becomes a political issue. However, more often than not, cultural diversity, i.e. multiculturalism, tends to be a kind of “ornament to liberal pluralism”, as Fukuyama put it, and usually involves being able to sample different kinds of food and displaying colorful traditional dresses which, together, should shake up the cultural homogeneity of various societies.

Multiculturalism alone does not bring much in the way of a guarantee for a dialogue between cultures since it only has *tolerance* at its core. And without dialogue it is extremely difficult to talk about re-discovering your inner authenticity in a new environment. People do not live their lives independently of each other but in a constant dialogue with each other. A self is always engaged in exchanges with the other selves and with the world around it. And without a firm grasp of who we are we will not be able to authentically take part in the social and political life of the country that adopted us.

Dialogue is the centerpiece of cosmopolitanism. Kwame Appiah, in his work on *Cosmopolitanism*, argues that there are two dimensions to the version of cosmopolitanism he suggests: the *first* one is that we have obligations to others and the *second* that “we take seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance.” (Appiah, 2010, p. 15).

I want to hold on to at least one important aspect of the objectivity of values: that there are some values that are, and should be, universal, just as there are lots of values that are, and must be, local. We can’t hope to reach a final consensus on how to rank and order such values. That’s why the model I’ll be returning to is that of conversation—and, in particular, conversation between people from different ways of life. (Appiah, 2010, p. 21)

The boundary of our state should not be the boundary of our moral concern. Not everybody has to be a part of the same nation in order for the cosmopolitanism to work. There is a set of rules (human rights, for example) and we should never compromise on that, but beyond these rules we can and we should all be different and be able to enjoy this difference. In turn, everybody has to find a way about how they are going to do it (as an example: the incest taboo in Ghana has a different explanation than in the western world, although it is banned in both societies). And we should not exclusively focus on the human rights, which amounts to telling people what you think they are doing wrong. That’s a recipe for sending any immigrant back to her corner where she
could continue to keep silent. Instead, we should try to learn from another through dialogue, we should always try to be talking without already having an agenda. “Cosmopolitans suppose that all cultures have enough overlap in their vocabulary of values to begin a conversation. But they don’t suppose that we could all come to agreement if only we had the same vocabulary” (Appiah, 2010, p. 73).

In other words, members of each society (as long as it can keep tabs on the universal human rights) should be able to enter in dialogue with members of any other society, exchange views and learn from each other, not merely to tolerate each other (multiculturalism) but to understand each other’s views of the world.

To return to the examples we talked about at the beginning, we should be able to see that, even though dialogue is sought more often than not, difficulties relating to language change and worries about the immediate future and about one’s place in the new surroundings make it very difficult and sometimes even impossible.

Hoffman was one of the fortunate examples. In her book she ponders on the way language works and how, through it, she gives us an account of discovering herself in ways otherwise impossible. Alas, not everybody has the tools and the penchant for such inquiries.

Kristeva reminds us viscerally that the danger of losing ties with the world and with the people around you is very likely to happen in your position as immigrant. An immigrant can easily end up swamped with “things to do”, with a continuous attempt at mending different traditions, with negotiations between two ways of being and functioning.

Danticat shows us the willingness to talk, to make your voice heard, knowing that what you have to say can change not only your own life but also the lives of the people who are left behind, who still have to endure the hardship of living under an oppressing political power.

We would like to end with a poem from one of the greatest poets of our time who passed away not long ago: Derek Walcott.

**Love after Love**

The time will come
when, with elation,
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror,
and each will smile at the other’s
welcome,
and say, sit here. Eat.
You will love again the stranger who was
your self.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart to itself, to the stranger who has loved you all your life, whom you ignored for another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,
the photographs, the desperate notes, peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.

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References


