

## Research Article

Kamal Sbiri\*

# Worlds of Transitive Identities

How Translation Becomes Metonymic in Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation* and Herta Müller's *The Land of Green Plums*?

<https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2017-0035>

Received August 31, 2017; accepted November 5, 2017

**Abstract:** In studying certain autobiographical narratives of forced migration and exile, the experience of being caught between two worlds is always emphasized. The forced migrant narrative provides different pictures of the journey from homeland to borderland, and highlights on the ruptures that identity undergoes, especially when the migrant seeks to link the pain of identity construction at a liminal phase. The experience of being lost is understood as a double movement, where in either case, identity loses its originality. Both the forced immigrant and her/his native speaker counterpart seem to exercise similar roles of translation, that is to understand and be understood. In my study of two contemporary autobiographical narratives of forced migrants, I would like to investigate how translation can help in conflating ruptures and identity construction in a transnational context. By leaning on Stephen Clingman's theory on transnational fiction and Said's contrapuntal analysis, I seek to emphasize the transitive elements that reside in the immigrant's psyche. Based on this assumption, I seek to argue that both navigation within the self and recognition of displacement as an experience of mobility encourage the forced immigrant to realize her singularity as transnational.

**Keywords:** autobiography, transnationalism, translation, metonymy, forced migration, mobility

## Introduction

The notion of representation is emphasized in many autobiographical writings as it helps in the unraveling of identity from the predicament of the past. Yet, different forms of representations in certain autobiographical writings are connected by the perpetual process of constructing a hybridized form of identity in its yearning to “negotiate identity in new transnational spaces generated by migration” (Nyman 94). In the mean time, narratives of forced migration and exile seek to highlight the syntactical ruptures that identity undergoes, especially when the migrant seeks metonymically to link the pain of identity construction with the process of being caught between two worlds. The experience of being lost is understood as a double movement. In saying so, both the migrant and the native speaker counterpart seem to exercise similar roles of translation but in completely different ways: one that is *becoming* (the foreigner) and the other that is *being* (the local). In her study of Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin* (1957) for instance, Mary Besemeres points out that things lost to the displaced migrant from his mother language are never found in neither the other's language he acquires nor in the “native English-speaking” counterpart's inability to understand him after all (“Self-Translation” 390).

Although representations of exile and forced migration have traditionally been dealt with politically (Nyman 39), spatial displacement and identity translation are frequently considered by narratives of forced migration. Yet what is lost in translation is not the self more than it is a life before the process of migration

---

\*Corresponding author: Kamal Sbiri, Ibn Zohr University/ Ait Melloul Campus Department of English Studies,  
E-mail: k.sbiri@uiz.ac.ma

is enforced, especially when the “metaphor of fidelity to an original” remains a suggestive reference “in the context of an immigrant’s life” (Besemeres “Language” 327).

What appear as dominant issues in various narratives by exile and forced migrant writers are the notion of *lost* between different worlds and identity construction far from *home*: to be a minor narrative within a major culture. These issues are articulated differently in both Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation* and Herta Müller’s *The Land of Green Plums*. These two narratives of forced migration offer different possibilities to overcome the limited space of representation by interrogating the notion of fixity through translation. The writers also choose to write—not in their mother tongues, but—using another language: English and German respectively. If English seems to offer a new life for Hoffman, German, which happened to be a minoritarian language, opens a new space of rewriting Müller’s identity, which is, using Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptualization, a space of deterritorialization. By leaning on Stephen Clingman’s theory on transnational fiction and Said’s contrapuntal analysis, I seek to emphasize the transitive elements that dwell in the immigrant’s psyche. Based on this assumption, I seek to argue that both navigation within the self and recognition of displacement as an experience of mobility beyond the self encourage the forced immigrant to realize her singularity as transnational. As I will show, only transnationalism can help in destabilizing the ruptures existing within identity through means of translation. When these ruptures are explored to be productions of forced mobility, being lost in translation foregrounds a critique to the split of identity. Both narratives offer multidimensional meanings to translation as a chain of metonymic relations that exist between the immigrant self and beyond.

## From Transition to Translation and Back

In his memoir “Between Worlds,” written fourteen years after the publication of “Reflections on Exile” in 1984, Edward Said charts the lines of his life between the world of Arabia and the world of America. These two worlds are far more paradoxical than complex, and created in him self-alienation and ruptures that bring up with it certain eccentricities he finds compelling to accept as “facts of nature” (“Between Worlds” 556). Language is one of these “natural eccentricities”; added to this, some complications that touched his identity construction, have generated a “perpetual self-invention” of identity. Said believes that the disparity between his “acquired identity” and the culture from which he “had been removed” motivates a productive debate that shifts the argument towards the contrapuntal analysis of identities living between different worlds, with many languages. This complexity of a life in between (by force of course) is further explicated in terms of language’s inability to accommodate identities in transit. At this point Said argues, that the language of transitions only makes matters worse:

Arabic, my native language, and English, my school language, were inextricably mixed: I have never known which was my first language, and have felt fully at home in neither, al-though I dream in both. Every time I speak an English sentence, I find myself echoing it in Arabic, and vice versa. (“Between Worlds” 557).

The movement between the two different languages was not a linear movement for Said. In comparing himself to Joseph Conrad, Said suggests that the transition between the two languages is primarily a spatial one. This spatial transition entails a whole vocabulary of cultural differences and political conflicts that stands between the world of Arabia and that of America. The “spatiality of language” becomes an aspect of spatial conflicts, of legitimating the forces of alienation as a doctrine of forced immigration. His space of inclination does not belong in the epistemological and ontological vocabularies of Western imagined communities.

Because of this relational force, Said begins training himself to speak in English with the aim to accommodate the borders and transition them to a temporal stage of inbetweenness. To this, his alienation from the native is seized, without necessarily ever “to aspire to being British” (“Between Worlds” 558). The epistemology of translation presumes that Said has passed through the process—of what William Hanks and Carlo Severi suggest in their “Translating Worlds”—“From relativity to indeterminacy and incommensurability” (3). These three concepts are discussed in their linguistic forms to reflect, at the level

of the individual, on the disruption that vibrates in the individual, the language, and the mechanisms to understand the syntax of identity (Clingman 17). In this respect, Said seems to avoid being in the state of indeterminacy but only when he reaches the phase of incommensurability: a phase where one feels the urgency to generate a new state of singularity able to accommodate the two spatial roots into rhizomatic routes.

Said admittedly emphasizes that the importance of upholding the two different spatial and temporal axes of identity (one that is Western, global, and professional, and another which is Eastern, national, and cultural) is bound to the construction of home. Therefore, and by assuming the voice of American academia, he believes in thinking and writing, “contrapuntally, using the disparate halves of *his* experience, as an Arab and as an American, to work with and also against each other” (“Between Worlds” 562 emphasis added). Working contrapuntally between the two worlds requires that one has to articulate the past liable to forget as a result of being lost in English (translation) without necessarily accepting “the principle of annulment” as an émigré (Said, “Between Worlds” 562). Said in this particular conclusion is metonymically mediated through translation, where translation is the element that stands for the transitive immigrant.

In 1989, Eva Hoffman published her memoir *Lost in Translation*, where she narrates the trajectory of her life in exile: a young girl from Poland living with a foreign tongue between different worlds. Hoffman does not seek a liminal position, being in the threshold of a foreign language, because in claiming such position, at least “structurally,” the immigrant remains “invisible” (Turner, “betwixt” 47). However, the aim is to master the language, because it is through language that she can imagine the world she desires. At one moment, Hoffman seeks moving towards the space of distinctiveness where language functions as the mode of this transition. Admittedly, the notion of reality that Hoffman constructs is relational and can only be understood from the way she reads books. Since books “capture the essence of reality,” Hoffman needs to change being lost in translation for articulation of existence. Existence is also bound to expressions, and, by the same token “[n]othing fully exists until it is articulated” (Hoffman 9).

Learning the language is intrinsically associated with the construction of identity. The very aspect of learning is another step towards transitive boundaries seeking to move beyond the lines of demarcation. The more distinct words she learns allow for a thorough integration within the receptive society, and integration also permits clearer perceptions of the social world. Expressions, she argues, give “birth to a new shape in the world” (29), and based on this, existence of newness is thus articulated. The fact of newness that emerged is a de facto process of identity construction without complexions. This emergency is also viewed as a healing process to the lost home-land and its mother-tongue.

Losing home and language predominate the experience of forced migration that drives towards learning a new language. Indeed, and similar to Said’ view of exile, learning was viewed as a therapy. Hoffman insists that:

therapy is partly translation therapy, the talking cure a second-language cure. My going to a shrink is, among other things, a rite of initiation: initiation into the language of the subculture within which I happen to live, into a way of explaining myself to myself. But gradually, it becomes a project of translating backward. (272)

This quintessential association between learning a new language and explaining the self amounts to two different processes of redemption and replication. Redemption exists in the way that Hoffman persists on viewing English as a “difference that . . . defines and controls itself” (Sten Pultz Moslund 178). This notion of difference also permits a permanent instability and the flux of identity. Sometimes this difference blocks the dynamic forces of segregation, especially borders (Moslund 178) and changes it into a more fluid notion of bordering (cf. Brambilla 2015). The “project of translation,” thus, is in a state of becoming. It is a project that aims at accentuating stability in restoring difference outside the contact zone. Becoming is an act of substitution, a metaphor of translation.

Having drawn attention on the very early stage of susceptibility to mobility and changeability of identity, I would like to argue that detachment from one’s roots also encourages a potential bordering that helps in generating difference within identity. This is clearly indicated by Michael Cronin in his *Identity and Translation* (2006) where he suggests that one need not be inclined by the forces of origin. “The ways

in which people represent themselves to each other and themselves is not just a function of different histories,” but the product of the world structure and the devices it uses to encourage others “to participate in the economy and society” (2).

Still, this view does not deny the spatial circumstances as determinants to the metaphor of origin. The notion of home has always been an important implication that places the forced immigrant in a liminal position. Evelynne Ribert stresses the importance of spatial sensibilities and imaginaries shaped by the notion of home. In her reference to Maurice Halbwachs, she argues that many migrants “experience a certain number of ruptures” including the change of place, forcing them to procure new standards to dwell in the new setting (63). While these spatial discussions of origins seem to be important to the translation of identities already in transit, they are so close to threaten against the enchantment of pure origins. At this specific point, I must stress that any reference to transit or transition in this article is not viewed as a poetic desire toward travel and forced mobility. The notion of transit refers to every meaningful movement (as indicated by Tim Cresswell, 2006) that lead to mobility, be it refugee, exilic, diasporic, or migrant (Cresswell 12-16). Thus, any quest for the original outside home—language, identity, or culture—is only viewed as an attempt to fix the singularity within the limits of metonymy.

The notion of metonymy designates an approach to legitimating the self toward its transition and it entails both positive and negative transitions of singularities. In his “Putting Hierarchy in its Place,” Arjun Appadurai criticizes the anthropological constructions of certain labels that freeze the *other* metonymically, and the ways in which difference is positioned to its utmost, by favoring the scientists (the foreigner) over the locals. Even though Appadurai focuses his critic on the era of high colonialism, his argument is a protean one. By emphasizing the anthropologists’ confinement of the “varieties of human consciousness” within the boundaries of “cultural unites” (36), he concludes that the term “native” has drastic negative connotations in the modern thought. A native by definition belongs to a group of people who happen to live farther from the center, the west. This categorization results in the freezing of every single native metonymically by attributions of immobility and confining him/her to incarceration (Appadurai 35-7). A “native” has two main attributes: the first is related to spatial belonging, and the second is the confinement to and by those places (36). It is this “physical immobility” that distinguishes the natives from the anthropologists, in a fashion that places academics (seen as positive outsiders) as mobile and the natives as immobile. And as he puts it, that these “outsiders, these observers, are regarded as quintessentially mobile; they are the movers . . . the natives are immobilized by their belonging to a place” (37). By way of reference to contemporary immigrants’ identities, they are viewed as immobile natives within the border zone of the receptive country only because of their attachment to their native places. Even when they move to another place, Appadurai does not see this as motion, but as an escape “to another equally confining place” (37). Metonymy is synonymous with immobility, fixity, and representation.

To counter this position of immobility, Law and Mol resorts to the notion of the “immutable mobile” (3). By way of reference to literature, Law and Mol understand the transition of national literatures through the imagined community as aspects of “the immutable mobiles . . . to remind present-day national audiences of the aesthetic preeminence of their forebears” (1). Yet this version of mobility is *already* combined with the notions of root and place, where “the different components hold one another in place,” (Law and Mol 3). This touch cannot afford to challenge the ontological perceptions of otherness that mobility at a certain moment comes to represent. Against this backdrop, Michael Cronin argues for the concept of “mutable mobile.” Cronin suggests that in order for mobility to change and reciprocate to spatial and temporal differences, the space in itself must be fluid “one where connections holding the object change gradually and incrementally . . . which means that the object is both the same . . . and different” (27). This fluidity in space proffers mediation and negotiation, and in consequence the self can begin a process of translation within itself (Cronin 12).

If there is any argument to extrapolate, it is worth making it clear: the notion of identity proposed by both Said and Hoffman does not protect against the self as representative of the “metonymic freezing,” especially when identity shares the whole morphology of representational meanings in a fixed chain of associations. This chain serves its representative group of people by their incarceration in meaning. Of course, that the question of loyalty to the origin does not function as a personal method to negotiate identity,

particularly when the curse of origin follows the immigrant. In order to escape the metonymic freezing Said alludes to the concept of the “contrapuntal” critique of hegemonic controversies. This combination can be prompted by using the social and cultural features of both origin and exile simultaneously to work with and against each other. To reach this level of concreteness, one needs first to acknowledge what Clingman terms as the “syntax of the self” (11-16) for transition to take place within the self and in relation to others (Clingman 11). This process assumes that the self moves from the frozen position of singularity into the multiplicities of identity; and identity that thrives on translation, transition, and navigation. I must recall here the argument made by Maria Tymoczko who explains how translation from the source text to the target language can be metonymic in the same way as the self becomes transitive:

[t]ranslators select some elements, some aspects, or some parts of the source text to highlight and preserve; translators prioritize and privilege some parameters and not others; and, thus, translators represent some aspects of the source text partially or fully or others not at all in a translation . . . By definition, therefore, translation is metonymic. (55)

Selectivity plays a significant role for the process of identity construction can take place. The notion of metonymy suggested by Clingman is becoming a trope that functions to liberate both identity and fiction from the pain of “race” and “origins”: this is the type of relationship that exists between the syntax of fiction and the syntax of the self, and which helps in understanding the perceptual experience of both navigation and transition of translated identities.

In accommodating the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson’s concepts of metonymy and metaphor as two principle syntactic features designing the construction of meaning within a sentence, and by way of illustration, to the construction of identity (syntax of the self), Clingman concludes that identity inclines more to contiguity (transition and translatability) than to the static position of its origin (14). The implications of this transition are paramount, especially when related to identity. Since metonymy is transitive, “a metonymic version of identity allows exactly for such combinations and transitions” (15). This way, identities are never “substitutive” specifically “where such substitutions flatten out and congeal all difference into singularity” (15). Clingman here suggests a transitive self beyond notions of representations that fix identities within the ‘reformatory’ of meaning. This version of identity is very demanding, especially when accepting the statement that:

[t]he condition of the migrant is the condition of the translated being. He or she moves from a source language and culture to a target language and culture so that translation takes place both in the physical sense of movement or displacement and in the symbolic sense of the shift from one way of speaking, writing about and interpreting the world to another. (Cronin 45)

Between travel and identity thus stand both transition and translation. The relationship between the two poles rests within translation as a challenge where meaning can only be conveyed in working through similarity and difference (Yengoan 41). In a similar vein, Anne Malena explains that migrants and translation share similarities in many ways: their detachment from the familiar environment, and their suppressed transition towards the “target culture” (like translation), migrants “most likely will have to learn or perfect their skills in another language in order to function in their new environment; their individual and collective identities will experience a series of transformations as they adjust to the loss of their place of birth and attempt to turn it into a gain” (Yengoan 9). This process best describes Salman Rushdie’s perception of migrants as “translated beings” (13), which aligns with the wider scope of Homi Bhabha’s proposition of the migrants’ becoming as “translational cultures” (212); a view that confirms the proposition—introduced by Clingman through the concept of navigation—of textual productions of identities as an effect of migration.

As argued above, the transformation of identity, especially the exilic, requires two different, yet connected instruments of translation and navigation. Both concepts function to direct the identity towards its mutable mobility, while navigation compromises the ruptures existing within the self and with others caused by the process of “translated beings” textually. Within this framework, it should be noted that the relationship between translation and identity has been, and still is, a contested topic. Inevitable links to the politics of space and textuality has been, among other things, an issue of contestation in the collection

of essays edited by Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi (2002). This edited book focuses on the association of textuality, originality, and postcolonial productions of hybrid identities through translation. What the contributors of this volume seek to emphasize is an economy of multiplicities, where translation, once viewed “to perpetuate the superiority of some cultures” (16), is now expected to help understanding the complexities of singularities in relation to others. Of course, translation “does not happen in a vacuum, but in a continuum; it is not an isolated act, it is part of an ongoing process of intercultural transfer” (Bassnett and Trivedi 2). And because of this, both the immigrant’s identity and her/his textual productions are meant to proffer multiple transfers of identity productions; of local and minor language transfer; of historical productions; of social and cultural testimonies; of so many navigational tools toward a transnational self—the self that crosses all borders existing on route towards a self-recognition and becoming.

## The Production and Reproduction of Transnationalism in Herta Müller’s *The Land of Green Plums* and Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation*

The process of producing translated identities out of the experience of forced migration and exile is a vibrant example of how translation and navigation function to challenge the experience of displacement. The constant transit(ion)s between home and elsewhere creates a textual zone characterized by forced transformation that the self seems not able to adept at resolving its covert outcomes. The forced migrant identity can be viewed as liminal and “ambiguous, neither here nor there, betwixed and between all fixed points of classification” (Turner, “Darams” 232). The sense of being liminal is perceived in three different dimensions: the physical, the symbolic, and the spatial (Nyman 21). Border patrolling represents the physical dimension as the forced immigrant is prohibited from entering the other’s nation-state. The symbolic construct of liminality is represented through the narrative structure of the forced migrant as ruptures remain the main aspect of displacement. Since the forced immigrant identity is “constructed through movement,” being home is mostly (dis)placed by the fact of its “dislocation in the space of the other,” and this concludes the third aspect of liminality: spatial (Nyman 21). These three aspects of liminality are weaved into both Hoffman’s and Müller’s narratives. To counter this sense of liminality, I suggest that the self recurs to the impulsive strategies of becoming: navigation. It is impulsive because the identity is fixed through the predominant assumptions of roots that give way to the movement toward the new routes existing both spatially and textually. This approach is complex, but important to claim new constructed identities. This can be clearly articulated in paying close attention to how both identities, of Herta Müller’s main characters in *The Land of Green Plums* and Eva Hoffman in her *Lost in Translation*, change.

Herta Müller’s *The Land of Green Plums* tells the story of four young people living in Romania, who left their provinces in search of better chances in the city. The novel follows their struggles to survive through the terrible conditions of Ceaușescu’s Romania. This story seems to be a translational movement and a divergence toward/from Müller’s past experiences of being minor related to her Romanian legacies of borders. Müller is—who is thought of as having the attributes of an immigrant—a Romanian-born German writer, and the winner of 2009 Nobel Prize in Literature. The reason she received this prize rests in her endeavors to depict “the landscape of the dispossessed.”<sup>1</sup> The act of dispossession that she seeks to depict is turned to be a process of self-dis/position, as Müller herself struggles to thrive in her minor German language of the Romanian heritage.

Müller’s disposition reminds us of Kafka’s use of a minor language seeking the position of becoming. The concept of minor literature first introduced by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* where they view Kafka’s fiction (through the transformation of the main characters) as a work of deterritorialization (17). Accordingly, minority literature is a designation for new approaches to give voice to literatures of dispossessions and immigration so as to “attack the major language from within its structure

<sup>1</sup> More about the inaugural speech of the Nobel prize can be found here: [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2009/press.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2009/press.html) 08/10/2009

of meaning” (Sbiri, *Voices from the Margin* 7). Based on Deleuzian formation, and in her using German language, Müller seeks to draw a clear picture of her life in a translated world. Through the movement of minor characters in her fiction, Müller seems to deterritorialize the status of immobility and reach a space of transition where she can negotiate her identity within the deterritorialized culture. What can this suggest according to Deleuze and Guattari, is that “only the possibility of setting up a minor practice of major language from within allows one to define popular literature, marginal literature, and so on” (18).

Herta Müller was forced to leave the minor space of German-speaking Romanians in Romania for Germany in 1987 after she was dismissed from her job as a translator for her refusal to collaborate with the Securitate. She was born in Nițchidorf, Timiș County, Romania, as the daughter of a Swabian farmer. At this specific point, it can be viewed that multiple processes of deterritorialization are at work. Her movement from Romania to Germany, her being a Romanian speaker in Germany, and the fact that she belongs to a ‘minor’ group, all have contributed to “setting up a minor practice of major language.” These multiple processes of deterritorializations have affected her sense of liberation, which Müller finds in a translated language. Spatial movement also grants access to minor practices of a major language. With this in mind, Müller succeeds in showing her characters as both dispossessed and capable of deterritorialization, (dis)placement, and navigation.

The novel begins with the narrator (Lola’s roommate) telling the story of Lola, unprepared to live in the city, and her roommates in a women’s university dormitory in Romania. Lola moves to the city for the purpose of studying the Russian language, however, and as a result of a brutal sexual encounter that Lola is not capable to endure, she is found dead, having hanged herself with a belt. Lola’s name is dismissed from the Communist Party membership and declared a traitor. Her diaries are left with the narrator to later translate them for the world. For Lola, death is only an escape from the massive subservient activities that she has to undergo. And for her roommates, death itself is the state of becoming where the narrator and her friends engage in activities that soon cause interrogations by the *securitate*.

Contact among the four friends remains through different means of communication, that the securitate already controls. We see their miserable lives; their engagement in basic jobs shows the level of their impoverished descent as a minority group living in Romania: Kurt is a supervisor in an abattoir and the narrator translates German manuals in a factory. Oppressed by the regime, the characters discuss their potential escape to Germany. With Georg being the first to escape, he is found dead after falling from a hotel window. Kurt remains in Romania, whereas Edgar and the narrator immigrate to Germany with their passports. What is impressive in Müller’s narrative is that narration ends the way it begins that “When we don’t speak, said Edgar, we become unbearable, and when we do, we make fools of ourselves” (1 and 242). This passage clearly signals that the surviving characters cross borders and reconstruct their identities. It also shows that only through movement that identity can be revised.

The choice to either stay (home) or leave for the exile is not a spatially based decision. In either case, the existence in a “collective fear” remains the characterizing element of the process of homing (Glajar 146). This state of psychological and cultural instability further complicates the social status of the immigrant in exile. Similar to Müller’s characters, it is argued that German Romanians who already moved to Germany have to meet the challenges of “a double process of identity negotiation: on the one hand, they have to cope with the past and reevaluate their positions and the roles they played during Ceaușescu’s dictatorship,” and on the other hand, they need to adjust themselves to their new realities (Glajar 146).

The feeling of foreignness inside the “home” country (imagined community) is dramatized in Müller’s fiction as one that is based on the difference between first and the second-class citizens. Walking with Tereza, the narrator compares the nation and globalization to the country and the world in a subliminal way: “I felt the difference between this country and the world. It was bigger than the difference between Tereza and me. I was the country, but she was not the world. She was only what people in this country thought of as the world when they wanted to flee” (118). The only moment when the word world happens to represent reality is when people dream of deterritorialization as an escape rather than a solution to fixed identities. Yet the narrator also sees that the notion of the country she seeks does not, at any level, corresponds to the notion of home. Whereas the notion of home is redolent of mobility and transitive, metonymic identities, the country is the spatial representation of home that corresponds to fixity and metaphor.

The narrator also believes that only by navigation toward the country, becoming home, that she can express her singularity within the majority. The narrator “still believed that in a world without guards, people would walk differently from the way we do in our country. Where people are allowed to think and write differently, I thought, they will also walk differently” (118). The act of walking, again, is not a representation of freedom, but a metonymic navigation toward character’s liberation. Walking is a movement that gives credence to mobility, and, in so doing, the characters within the novel may reach the position of mutable mobile, but this can only work after paying dues.

Müller’s fiction openly declares the two characters’ achievement in reaching Germany as a success, and by way of reference to Müller herself, she has succeeded in leaving Romania for Germany. A life in between, or as Said points out, between worlds, is the new spatial position that Müller begins to experience along with her characters in *The Land of Green Plums*. Müller at first was forced to meet with the challenge of being a minor voice living in Germany. After being a minor voice in her (home) country, she remains obscure in the (other) country. The ethnic label that I mentioned earlier has followed her since her arrival in Germany. Her refusal of an ethnic migrant title, and her aspiration instead to a political exilic position has forced the recognition of a sense of *becoming*: a global, transnational citizen. This succinct new label is probably what pushes Müller to struggle for a position within German academia:

In Germany, she continued to write novels and essays on Romanian topics, seemingly shying away from German realities after a first, much criticized attempt in 1989, when Rotbuch published *Reisende auf einem Bein*, a novel based on the experiences of an Eastern European immigrant in Germany. German critics approached her work hesitantly, revealing a limited insight into the Romanian or German-Romanian context. (Glajar 118)

In binding the Romanian ties within German society, this is a technique of becoming that destabilizes the major language from within. Also, it is an act of bordering, where Müller navigates through her Romanian roots in order to reach different routes toward the new world of order. This appeal to navigation suggests that Müller seeks to move from one position, where her identity is fixed, into a position of motion, mobility, and metonymic touch. By the same token, with characters—by the end of the novel—repeating the same phrase they utter at the beginning, this suggests not a fixed identity, but the multiplicity of traumas in/outside the borders. Of course, as it appears, that sameness characterizes words, but identities are translated differently. This repetition of “When we don’t speak . . . we become unbearable, and when we do, we make fools of ourselves” differs both spatially and temporally. The first time this phrase is mentioned represents fixity and *being*, and therefore it stands as a metaphor for repression. The characters were five at first, yet by the end of the novel only two succeed in their border crossings, and *becoming*.

The act of crossing borders effectuates a translational process of identity through navigation. This is clearly indicated in the ways that the German audience and critics begin to accept Müller’s literature as that of a transnational fiction, where navigation, metonymy, and mutable mobility are its main characteristics. Brandt and Glajar extensively elaborate on this new position:

Three years later Herta Müller became the first German-speaking author from Romania to win the Kleist Literary Award. Faced with this change, German critics have been forced to acknowledge the cultural diversity of writers in German. The resistance to the inclusion and integration of these authors of multicultural backgrounds into the canon of German literature becomes obvious in the way critics approach and analyze their texts. (2)

Müller believes that only through writing can one reach a wider audience and the space of transnationality. This is clearly indicated in a speech given in the Stockholm City Hall in 2009, that “literature speaks with everyone individually—it is personal property that stays inside our heads. And nothing speaks to us as forcefully as a book, which expects nothing in return, other than that we think and feel.”<sup>2</sup> Müller’s identity, and therefore her writing, are informed by the act of translation. She thinks in one language, and writes in two.

<sup>2</sup> Herta Müller, speech held at the Nobel banquet in the Stockholm City Hall, December 10, 2009 <[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2009/press.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2009/press.html) >



Is touch, navigation through the past, something negative? Of course not, especially if we consider that both translation and transnationalism are two movements that inform identity construction. Müller in this regard thinks that writing the past is a moment of writing spatial events that stand temporally far from contemporary reach, but the very idea of navigation through the past only informs facts of belonging (Brandt and Glajar 10). Bringing up the past for her is similar to when “talking about authors such as . . . Imre Kertész, the time criterion is not brought up because the spatial distance makes clear that they don’t belong” (qtd. in Brandt and Glajar 10). Yet she comes to this country only for her belonging to be negotiated.

The notion of movement that Müller makes is contrapuntal, and it becomes meaningful especially when identity navigates towards other selves, after recognizing her singularity. The changes thus operate at different levels: at the level of the individual, Müller succeeds in recognizing herself as a minor voice that functions metonymically with other minor voices to avoid the freezing of a minority language within a specific space. Just as this recognition follows a series of mobilities within the self and with others selves, Müller’s writing forces the German audience (major narrative) to reconsider her fiction as transnational and not as a metaphor of travel (as an ethnic literature). The notion of touch that Müller builds with her past is meant to negotiate her identity both spatially and temporally. With all these considerations in mind, it can be argued that Müller has generated a metonymic space for minority narratives, as she can start the process of negotiation. A space that has for so long been the specific domain of grand narratives and hegemonic cultures, is now liable to drastic transformations due to navigation, mobility, and transition.

Identity has also become transitive, in the sense introduced by Clingman, and it needs other differences without claiming that difference is definitive. This is ultimately observed in the memoir of Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation*. The fact that Hoffman is forced to go to Canada categorizes her within the “strangely compelling” yet “terrible to experience” province of the exile (Said, “Reflections on Exile” 173). This province is deemed a space imbued with an “unhealable rift” exerted in-between root and route of “the self and its true home” (Said 173). This sense of displacement remains an assertion of place and its commodities from memory to language. Language, especially, has been an indicator of either inferiority or exteriority within and beyond the nation-state. This is clearly elaborated the moment Hoffman expresses the ruptures that a foreign language causes to the immigrant: “I know that language will be a crucial instrument, that I can overcome the stigma of my marginality, the weight of presumption against me, only if the reassuringly right sounds come out of my mouth” (123).

The insistence on learning the other language is not only a question of integration and belonging in a foreign nation. It is a conspicuous element toward the establishment of new routes for her singularity in relation to other singularities. Difference, according to Kwame Anthony Appiah, is a feature that one needs to learn wisdom from, and because people are different, “there is much to learn from our differences” (xiii). Also, Hoffman’s language paradigm is one of conviviality leading to a possible, livable life. Yet with the risk of viewing Hoffman’s approach as cumulus rather than communitas, which is a passive return to the initial status of displacement rather than engaging in challenging the representations of the new space (McLeod 9), it can be argued that, sometimes, seeking to live within the difference can be a choice even if this difference may lead to change within identity.

This sort of changeability is positive. In recalling Clingman’s call for transitions and navigations within the self as *a priori*, difference remains an aspect of transnationalism. In line with this, John McLeod defends this argument by stating that while it is absolutely right to start thinking about what human beings have in common rather than brood on our differences, putting one’s trust in the hospitable transformation of habit seems a rather inactive response to the ever-increasing circuits of exploitative global power (9). This is not a predefined, alternative proposition that can easily be reached. By considering that the “singularities of those not like us are not as freely available to consciousness” (McLeod 9), I would see that Hoffman’s approach to language is pertinent.

The question that sometimes opens up the debate in relation to identity and its transitive forms is: how can the singularity of the borders of a language, the transformation of the self, (may be acculturation as well) retain the memories and faculties of the original? Or, said otherwise, is there anything that exists objectively in this modern world of liquidities? Hoffman believes that without a contrapuntal work on both roots and routes (with preference given to the latter), that without the ability to navigate through the self in

relation to other selves, the ability to transform into the transnational identity can be blurred. Hoffman does not believe in patriotism, since she is denied access to this lawful sort of loyalty, but this does not undermine her position as a rooted identity in East-Central European imagined communities. As the argument goes, Hoffman insists that the country of her childhood lives within her

with a primacy that is a form of love. It lives within me despite my knowledge of our marginality, and its primitive, unpretty emotions. Is it blind and self-deceptive of me to hold on to its memory? I think it would be blind and self-deceptive not to. All it has given me is the world, but that is enough. It has fed me language, perceptions, sounds, the human kind .... no geometry of landscape, no haze in the air, will live in us as intensely as the landscapes that we saw as the first, and to which we gave ourselves wholly, without reservation. (74-75)

The notion of touch with landscape is what makes borders moving, mutable, and transitive. That is why, for instance, McLeod was very critical of the notion of cosmopolitanism, because for him, it only foreshadows the future of identities as promising with the aim of forgetting the past and its atrocities (8-9). It is somehow through the past that translation functions as a mode of transitive self. It opens different venues within singularities and further pushes for other alternatives to live as a transnational within the landscape of immigration. Hoffman is not lost in translation; however, she seeks for other propositions of navigations, which she finds through her rooted Polish language. Translation corresponds to the transversal construction of identity.

## Conclusion

By way of sum, the metonymic representation of translation parallels the metonymic presentation of identity in transition in many forced migrants' narratives. Hoffman's world, for instance, seems to be subject to differences as well as similarities, and so is translation. And because of this process of metonymic navigations, the self seeks to choose among other selves only that which contributes to its autonomy and recognition without necessarily viewing that difference is all. The multiple complexities generated from exile produce ruptures within identity and a sense of dissimilitude towards the foreign language, which can sometimes be healed through the interplay existing between the self and its other the moment deterritorialization is at work (Barbour et al. 10). As expressed in both Müller's and Hoffman's narratives, this sense of language dissimilitude proves even more problematic when the self begins a process of negotiation between the worlds of two languages. The process is never linear but is mostly reversed to claim past signified objects, which gain importance only through translation from the source language and culture. This can be viewed in the ways the forced migrant performs her/his understanding of the other's feelings with recurring to the original.

Also, the movement between languages illustrates the intricacies of a psychological journey within the self, leading towards the interrogation of the world beyond that self. One way to think of this psychological journey and the interplay between identity and language is to attempt to access the ambivalent space of singularity, where the self insists on navigating within and beyond contrapuntally. When translation fails to solve the intricacies of a foreign language, to be lost in translation is yet another linkage between the self and its different other. Hoffman expresses this notion of loss of the self in translation, and language becomes seriously a "gap" where roots and origins become mere representations of Hoffman's original loss. Thus, the concept of translation is becoming more fluid for forced migrants, and constitutes meanings of loss and deformity to the original.

At some point, the forced migrant recognizes the painful operation s/he undergoes, similar to when translation becomes "a mutable immobile." This process emerges when comparing two different texts, showing that the original has transitioned into another language and fails to remain persistent to its originality (Cronin 28). Comparison does not work since a combination, a transitive self already emerged from within the (original) self to contribute to the navigation towards other selves: a symbolic liminality. There is a risk, however, that silence cannot remediate and sometimes forces the self into its own marginalization, especially when the feeling that the language of the other keeps invading that self. Yet translation can heal the wounds of origin/ality, since the notion of becoming prevails any narrative of minoritarians. Words no

longer stand for the same things, and the relationship between the signifier and the signified is becoming blurred, never replaced by the new vocabulary (Suzanne 134), only to sever the obsession of translation that makes of identities transitive forms of language.

## Works Cited

- Appiah, K. Anthony. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. London: Penguin, 2006.
- Appadurai, Arjun. "Putting Hierarchy in Its Place." *Cultural Anthropology*. 3. 1 (Feb., 1988): 36-49. Web. 16 June 2016 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/656307>>.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Barbour, Sarah, et al. "Introduction: Subjectivity, Memory and the Body in a Diasporic Context: A Multidisciplinary Perspective." *Diasporas, Cultures of Mobilities, 'Race'*. PoCoPages (2). Eds. Barber Sarah, et al. Montpellier: PULM, 2015: 9-16.
- Bassnett, Susan and Harish Trivedi. "Introduction: of Colonies, Cannibals and Vernaculars." *Postcolonial Translation*. Ed. Susan Bassnett and Harish, T. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Besemeres, Mary. "Self-Translation in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin*." *The Russian Review*. 59.3 (Jul. 2000): 390-407.
- , "Language and Self in Cross-Cultural Autobiography: Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*." *Canadian Slavonic Papers*. 40: 3-4 (1998): 327-344.
- Brandt, Bettina, and Glajar Valentina. "Introduction." *Müller, Herta: Politics and Aesthetics*. Eds. Bettina Brandt and Valentina Glajar: Linclon and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2013: 1-12.
- Cresswell, Tim. *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Cronin, Michael. *Identity and Translation*. New York: Routledge. 2006
- Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Trans. Dana Poland. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.
- Glajar, Valentina. *The German Legacy in East Central Europe as Recorded in Recent German Language Literature*. New York: Camden House.
- Hoffman, Eva. *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*. New York: Penguin Books. 1989.
- Law, John and Mol Annemarie. "Situating Technoscience: An Inquiry into Spatialities." *Heterogeneities*. (2011). Web. 30 July 2017. <<http://www.heterogeneities.net/publications/LawMol2001SituatingTechnoscience.pdf>>
- Malena, A. "Presentation." TTR: *Traduction et (im)migration*. 16. 2 (2003): 9-13. Web. 13 June 2016 <<https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/ttr/2003-v16-n2-ttr869/010713ar.pdf>>
- McLeod, John. "Sounding Silence: Transculturation and its Thresholds." *Transnational Literature* 4. 1 (November 2011):1-13 . Web. 20 June 2017 <<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>>
- Moslund, S. Pultz. *Migration Literature and Hybridity: The Different Speeds of Transcultural Changes*. New York: Palgrave: 2010.
- Müller, Herta. *The Land of the Green Plums*. Trans. Michael Hofmann. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998.
- Nyman, Jopi. *Displacement, Memory, and Travel in Contemporary Migrant Writing*. Leiden: Brill/Rodopi, 2017.
- Ribert, Evelyne. "Between Silences and Rewritings: Two Approaches to Memory Construction by Spanish Refugees and Economic Immigrants in France." *Diasporas, Cultures of Mobilities, 'Race'*. PoCoPages (2). Eds. Barber Sarah, et al. Montpellier: PULM, 2015: 63-80.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands*. London: Granta, 1991.
- Said, Edward W. "Between Worlds." *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Ed. Edward W. Said. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003. 554-568. Print
- , "Reflections on Exile." *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Ed. Edward W. Said. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003. 173-86. Print.
- Sbiri, Kamal. *Voices from the Margin. Rethinking History, Identity, and Belonging in Contemporary North African Anglophone Novel*. Joensuu: University of Eastern Finland. 2012.
- , "Writing Refugee in the Era of Displacement: Reflections on Poetry." *Transnational Literature* 4. 1 ( November 2011): 1-11. Web 15.04. 2014 <<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>>
- Stern-Gillet, Suzanne. "Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*." *New Comparison*. 16 (1993): 131-38.
- Turner, W. Victor. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. London: Cornell University Press, 1974. Print.
- , "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*." *The Proceeding of the American Ethnological Society*. 1964: 4-20. Web. 16 July 2017. <<http://www2.fiu.edu/~ereserve/010010095-1.pdf>>
- William F. Hanks and Carlo Severi. "Translating Worlds: The Epistemological Space of Translation." *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4. 2 (2014): 1-16. Web. 15July2017<<https://www.haujournal.org/index.php/hau/article/download/hau4.2.001/1078>>
- Yengoan, A. "Lyotard and Wittgenstein and the Question of Translation." *Translating Cultures: Perspectives on Translation and Anthropology*. Eds. Rubel, P. and Rosman, Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003: 25-43.