

German Stories." *The Germanic Mosaic. Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Society. Contributions in Ethnic Studies* 33. Ed. Carol Aisha Blackshire-Belay. London: Greenwood Press, 1994. 45-55.

## The Cultural Hyphen: Transgression and Translation in the Narratives of Self of German-Speaking Exiles to Canada

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The language of translation envelops its content like a royal robe  
with ample fold [...] and thus remains unsuited to its content,  
overpowering and alien.  
Walter Benjamin (75)

In March 2003, I met Willie G. at the Canadian Jewish Congress Archives in Montreal. Willie G. was born in 1921 in Fürth, Germany. Although his family had been living in Germany for at least two generations, all members of the family carried a Polish passport, which had to be renewed regularly at the Polish Consulate in Munich. The family was Jewish, although not religiously observant, and the children grew up speaking only German: an example of "assimilated Jews"? After Hitler came to power, living conditions changed dramatically for Willie G.'s family, and after 'Kristallnacht,' leaving Germany became imperative. Just before the outbreak of the war, Willie G. was granted a visa to join his father in England, and eventually joined the Polish Army in exile, though he did not speak a single word of Polish. After the war, the Canadian government offered to take approximately 4,000 Polish war veterans to be employed as farm labor, and so Willie G. came to Quebec. His story is one of displacement and uprooting, of crossing borders and cultures. One of the most visible markers of displacement in Willie G.'s life seems to be his struggle with language. As he puts it:

As far as that goes, it's very interesting with languages: I'm a hybrid. German is my mother language, I spoke English in England, then I had to learn Polish in the Army, then I spent a year on the farm speaking a fairly good French already. And so,



you know, that is one of the different integrations, you know: First from German into Polish, from Polish into English, from English into French, you know, so that's one of the integration problems and you end up not speaking any language good. At the moment, I don't speak good German, I don't speak good French, I don't speak a good English.

In the interviewee's discourse, 'hybridity' appears as a central concept of self-definition and is typical for the feeling of existential and often tragic, geographic and cultural displacement. The new environment and the new language remain forever a somewhat 'unsuited' "robe with ample folds" (Benjamin 75) for the displaced subject.

The present paper is rooted in the interdisciplinary field of migration studies (Brettell and Hollifield), and deals with a specific form of involuntary migrants: refugees from National Socialism after 1933. This particular type of migration is often called 'exile.' The paper is part of an on-going research project in exile studies, and it is centered on German-speaking refugees in Canada, for whom the country of exile became a new home. Since Wolfgang Benz's groundbreaking, micro-historical work on "ordinary people," there has been a shift of paradigms within exile studies: social approaches as well as issues of acculturation, integration and identity negotiation, have been brought to the fore. The 2001 issue of the journal *Exilforschung: ein internationales Jahrbuch*, for instance, is entitled "Between Assimilation and Persecution, Acculturation and Jewish Identity." Conducted in part as an oral history, the project is based partially on personal interviews conducted between 1999 and 2003. Thus it aims at rendering the exiles' narratives and at resurrecting in the present the "voice of the past" (Thompson). Several oral history projects about exiles have been conducted in past years, for example, by Hempel and Backhaus-Lautenschläger. However, they often deal with well-known 'milieus' of exiles, like New York City. For reasons I will outline later, including the country's bicultural tradition and its official multiculturalism policy since 1971, I will argue that the Canadian case shows distinct features.

Abella and Troper have shown that Canada's attitude towards European refugees in the 1930s was less than satisfactory. Recently,

Puckhaber established that Canada accepted 4,891 German-speaking immigrants between 1933 and 1945 (40). Given Canada's immigration policy in those years, most of them can be considered refugees from National Socialism (Puckhaber 41). In addition to persons who individually found entry into Canada, mostly "through the backdoor" (Puckhaber 10), the interviewees mainly belong to two groups of exiles. The first group is composed of Jewish farmers from the Sudetenland, a region that was part of Czechoslovakia at the time: these men and women immigrated as extended family to the Hamilton area in Ontario in 1939 (Iggers and Iggers 31-43). The second group consists of Germans and Austrians who had initially found refuge in Great Britain. However, in view of Nazi Germany's military successes at the beginning of the war, the fear of a "fifth column" of saboteurs spread over the United Kingdom, reaching a peak in 1940. Articles about Nazi saboteurs in Belgium and the Netherlands fueled this fear to a great extent. Jong underscores "the contrast between the activities ascribed to the German Fifth Column and its actual work" (v). In reaction, Churchill decided to register and categorize all "enemy aliens" on British soil, and to intern some of them in May 1940, although they were in great part refugees from National Socialism themselves (Kushner and Cesarani). Some 2,000 men were sent overseas to Canadian internment camps, where they spent several months before being released in Canada (Draper). About half permanently settled in Canada after their release, while the other half returned to the United Kingdom or went to the United States (Koch).

The thematic focus of this project is placed on acculturation and the re-composing of identities, as the technique of the personal interview captures how the informants discursively construct their social and cultural identities, how they make sense of their lives. Conflicting simultaneous identities, bridges between past and present, interactions with the social environment appear to be key aspects of the narratives of self. Willie G.'s condensed formula appears emblematic: "Here I was, an 'Ostjude' with a Polish passport." In the narration of self, past and present appear intimately intricate. Identity is not chosen, but ascribed by others, and metonymically designated by the passport. Yet the identity carried by the passport – 'Polish' – contradicts Willie G.'s social and



cultural practice. To define his situation in Nazi Germany in terms that had a tangible meaning at the time, he resorts to the derogatory term of 'Ostjude' thereby resurrecting in his own discourse the hostile voices of the past.

The purpose of this paper is not to fit the interviewees' statements into a 'master narrative of exile' constructed around themes such as 'home,' 'leaving,' 'arrival,' or 'integration,' as is often the case in oral histories of migrants (e.g. Stave and Sutherland). The goal is to analyze how displacement and border crossings are absolutely central in all stages of the interviewees' lives. Following Grinberg and Grinberg's psychoanalytic diagnosis of "delayed traumas" afflicting migrants and exiles, I argue that forced migration leads to a fundamental narrative rupture. This rupture is constantly re-enacted in everyday life and has to be repeatedly overcome in order to regain a sense of identity. This can only happen through a translation of social and cultural codes—through a transgression of boundaries. How do agents make sense of their lives as they interact with their social, cultural and institutional environment? How are cultural traits and codes translated individually? First, I will analyze border crossing as both a real event that constantly determines the narratives' internal logic, and as a cognitive tool that retrospectively helps understand one's situation. Then I will focus on the interactive, face-to-face, dimension of identity, as identity is constructed dialogically and socially by constantly transgressing social and cultural borders. Finally, I shall underline how individual strategies of acculturation and identity re-composing have challenged dominant categories, thus crossing institutional barriers specific to postwar Canada.

### Border Crossing as a Real and Imagined Event

The perception of borders and boundaries is an operation of comparison, of partial recognition and distancing. In the interviews I conducted, several types of borders are mentioned: geographical, cultural, linguistic, social, and religious. Historical or social changes are often perceived by the agents – and hence narrated – as modifications in their world-mapping:

I was born in Fürth and we were Polish citizens living in Germany, even though my father was born in Germany already. But because his grandfather came from Galicia, which was the Austrian-Hungarian Empire so/ and Poland, after the war, became the successor state of this part, Cracow (Willie G.)<sup>1</sup>

Some borders are visible, and they are made tangible by objects like passports, while others are invisible but nonetheless perceived. Crossing some borders happens forcefully, 'transgressing' others, like a religious one, is the result of a decision: "I was from a secular family: that means we went to synagogue, but we/ you know, in the beginning, my father wasn't orthodox, but he became orthodox later on. And I, the moment I came to England, I became very secular" (Willie G.).

The crossing of borders is a moment of initial transgression that forever structures one's personal story into 'before' and 'after,' in 'here' and 'there.' It becomes an existential moment of self-reflection, the beginning of a new narrative of self. It is only because one can look back and reflect upon one's life that one realizes what changes have taken place:

Wir sind mit/ nach Belgien geflogen. Nach Belgien geflogen, dann über England. In England bin ich erst drauf gekommen, wie schön es bei uns zu Hause war. Dass es so was Hässliches gibt, hatte ich nie gewusst. Also die Midlands. Alles verbracht und nichts Grünes und dann November. Und dann mit dem Schiff von Liverpool nach Montreal. Und als wir im Saint-Lawrence waren, da war es schon auszuhalten, aber die ganze Zeit davor war so miserabel. (Iggers Interview)

Here, the main theme is the crossing itself, as space is divided into a 'home' space, a 'middle' space (ironically enough the journey through the British *Midlands*) and the new, welcoming shores of Quebec. Not only does the event define the interviewees'



chronological and geographical universe, it also shapes the narrative itself. Displacement is a reality in the lives of the interviewees and there is material evidence that testifies to it, such as the remaining accent – in one's native tongue or in one's second language, and sometimes in both – and the very structure of the narratives that are constructed around this event.

At the same time, displacement becomes a cognitive filter through which the interviewees in their narration try to come to terms with conflicting cultural barriers or dual codes. For one interviewee, an ex-internee who worked for the Canadian Army after the war as a medical officer on the ship *Queen Mary*, the inverted journey across the Atlantic Ocean becomes a meaningful event in his life, through which he can take revenge on history:

And all of a sudden, several people came to the door, the captain of the ship with uniform, and his assistant in uniform and two or three elderly gentlemen in civvies. So the captain says to me: "Good afternoon, doctor, I'd like you to meet Sir John Anderson." "Sir John Anderson?" He was the Home Secretary in 1940 in Britain who interned us! He was given the responsibility of sending us to Canada and Australia. And so I was sitting here, across the Atlantic Ocean for the second time in my life, from East to West; the first time I was his guest, the second time, he was my guest. (Charles C.)

The stressed parallel of the two situations and the switch to the present tense build a bridge over space and time. Only the second crossing by ship gives the first one its full meaning. In spite of the fateful displacement of exile, the second border crossing was *meant to be*, so that the interviewee's life as a whole would *make sense*. In another narrative, it is the new environment of Montreal, Canada that serves as a yardstick by which to measure the old home of Fürth, Germany: "You see, Nürnberg-Fürth is like Montreal and Saint-Laurent used to be, many years ago, used to be apart, but now everything is, you know, grown together, so you don't see

no more borders" (Willie G.). In an operation of spatio-temporal comparison, the distance between Montreal and Saint-Laurent, and their respective status of metropolis/suburb, are paralleled to Nürnberg-Fürth. But through narrative means of actualization, like the phatic-conative "You see," Montreal-Saint Laurent actually stands for Nürnberg-Fürth.

Within the space of the interview, existential displacement is rendered through the narration of certain crucial episodes of one's life. Operations of transfer and translation take place, as the interviewee bridges past and present and the old world and the new. Crossing a border is both a structuring and sometimes traumatizing event, as well as a narrative means of creating coherence. The narrative does not simply represent the facts, it also participates in their making. In retrospect, the agents try to gain mastery over sometimes absurd and tragic events in order to regain a sense of identity, which can only be given by the coherence of the inner narrative. Neurologist Oliver Sacks points out: "We have, each of us, a life-story, an inner narrative—whose continuity, whose sense, is our lives. It might be said that each of us constructs and lives a 'narrative,' and that this narrative is us, our identities" (110). Yet crossing borders also leads to a renewed perception of one's cultural affiliations through contact and interaction with the other culture(s).

### Identity: Transgression and Interaction

Just like the perception of borders, the feeling of 'belonging' is shaped by transgression. The experience of displacement forces the exile to re-think the parameters and boundaries of his/her identity. All of a sudden, one is put in a self-reflexive situation in which the limits between the social and cultural groups become visible. This transgression isolates the individual from his usual social embeddedness: "The individuation of the agent occurs in a moment of displacement" (Bhabha 185). This is especially true for the younger generation of exiles – those who had to leave before or during their teen-age years: "Für uns, ich meine, die ganze Jugend, ich meine, wenn man älter war, ist irgendwie so eine Welt zerstört worden, aber meine Welt hatte doch richtig/ gar nicht richtig



angefangen" (Gregory B.). In his reflection about multiculturalism, Charles Taylor, following a Bakhtinian impulse, describes the formation of one's identity as follows: "We define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us" (33). Identity thus appears as dialogically constructed, and individual identity in particular as partly constituted by collective dialogues. The "significant others," to use the term coined by George H. Mead, are the individuals or groups surrounding us, those we choose as partners in the dialogue.

The re-composed identity is then dependent on daily "face-to-face interaction" (Goffman, "Face Work" 5) with "significant others." Among the questions that reveal a sense of 'not belonging,' there are: "Ja wo kommst du her?" (Gregory B.), or "Jede erste Frage in Kanada, oder spätestens die zweite, war immer: 'What church do you go to?'" (Iggers Interview). In the process of identity re-composing, the influence of the 'others' is a determining one. The interpellation mechanism serves as a way of checking on one's belonging to the community. It implicitly reminds the newcomer of the collective norms, and at the same time, re-institutes them in an interactive, performative act. It is interesting to note how the interviewees themselves resort to a direct quotation of the interpellation, as if they were 'ventriloquating' the normative collective voice. The second interviewee goes even further in the act of 'ventriloquation,' as she switches from German to English.

In most of the interviews, the issue of language-based identity is referred to, as it appears to be the most immediate experience of a change. In that respect, the remaining accent revealed in the interaction with others is a life-long marker of difference, a material sign of displacement, a 'stigma' in the Goffmanian sense. Like a scar, a mark, or a physical handicap, the accent is a visible sign of social exclusion from the dominant group ("Stigma" 9). Language becomes the locus of a split identity. Even if integration into Canadian society is the ultimate goal, the 'others' – 'they', 'them' – will always know that one is not a native Canadian. Even after several decades spent in an English-speaking, or a French-speaking, environment, the accent is still heard and the flow of words is not always perfectly natural: "The words float in an uncertain space," to quote Eva Hoffman's eloquent phrase in *Lost in Translation* (108). At the same time, the

mother tongue has been affected by the interference with the 'other' language(s):

Ich habe einen deutschen Akzent im Englischen, und ich habe einen deutschen Akzent im Französischen, und ich habe einen irgendwie fremden Akzent im Deutschen, das heißt, wenn ich ein paar Worte in Deutsch sage, merkt man das nicht, wenn ich einen Vortrag in Deutsch gebe, dann merken die Leute, dass ich hin und wieder nachdenken muss, und das richtige Wort kommt nicht, und dann ist hin und wieder die Betonung auch nicht die richtige. (Gregory B.)

The accent forces the exile to constantly renew his loyalty to the country of adoption, as it always raises real or imagined suspicion: "I mean, they realized right away from my accent, I spoke a good English, but with a very/ still speak with a very broad German accent" (Willie G.).

Identity is the product of a constantly renewed interaction between the cultural groups in contact, an exploratory pendular movement that crosses cultural boundaries. In an autobiographical article, Helmut Kallmann, who belongs to the group of ex-internees, gives the following definition of identity: "Ist Identität eine Sache der persönlichen Wahl oder eine objektive, vom Willen unabhängige Tatsache - Jude, Deutscher, Kanadier? Ich glaube, zwischen drei Arten der Identität unterscheiden zu können: unfreiwillige, erzwungene und selbstgewählte" (20). Each of the components of identity follows specific rules. The involuntary identity is given by the early environment (family, mother tongue), the forcefully imposed identity is linked to institutional intervention, and the chosen identity is a way of resisting and of creating 'elective affinities.' Part of the individual strategy of identity re-composing is to play with those categories, according to time and place. The interactive component of identity construction leads to shifts in modes of identification. Identity is always multi-layered and strategically, and hence discursively, oriented, and it needs to be clarified either from a position of marginality or by an attempt at aligning with the center.



An important point must be given particular attention here: the interview itself is a space of face-to-face interaction. It becomes the space of a retrospective construction of meaning through memory and phrasing, and the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee is part of this process. Both agents have specific agendas that are negotiated and translated into specific efforts of 'face-work.' More than once I have been asked about my own background. My typical answer is that I am half German, half French, raised in one country, but first spoke the language of the other country. Paradoxically, stepping across a border opens up a space of in-between-ness. By putting myself in such a space so familiar to the interviewees I hope, of course, to be able to elicit 'insider' information that is significant to both the interviewee and the interviewer.

Identity appears as a discursive and ephemeral stabilization of a series of identifications that occur when one is in contact with cultural norms. Acculturation is a never-ending and open-ended strategy of alternative affiliations. Aware of boundaries and limits, the agent crosses the borders of social and cultural groups whenever he/she feels it is necessary. According to the degree of sociability, this process can be either painful or smooth. Flexibility in the process of social and cultural identification does not necessarily mean a loss of social and cultural identity:

Heute ist man also Quebecer, oder man ist Kanadier, und ich bin also Quebecer. Aber wenn ich im englischen Kanada bin, mach ich da sofort mit, und in Toronto gebe ich Vorträge über Quebec, versuch das den Leuten zu erklären und hier bin ich ganz bereit auch Deutscher zu sein, ja, für mich ist da irgendwie nicht, ich meine, wenn man das Privileg hat, gebildet zu sein, Zugang zu Büchern zu haben und wenn man ein Intellektueller ist, dann kann man sich das auch leisten. Und da kann ich ohne weiteres hier mitmachen und wenn also die Einigung Deutschlands hier vom deutschen Konsulat gefeiert wird, im November, da geh ich dann auch hin, natürlich. (Gregory B.)

Cultural norms are produced, translated and appropriated on an individual level. Through their meaningful practices, social agents challenge some of the political and institutional categories that are usually thought of as given. In the Canadian context, where various cultural areas are interacting, this process acquires a particular dimension.

### Translating Institutional Categories

Alongside the 'objective' data about acculturation or integration, such as the degree of linguistic proficiency, the socio-professional status, and the participation in networks, agents experience acculturation in differentiated ways. For one of them, the acculturation process was experienced at the level of the classroom:

When I went to school in England, and that's where the acculturation comes in, you know, I had to change my whole outlook on life, from Berlin to Oxford. For instance, we were always in the same classroom in Berlin, but they had mathematics in one room and English and Latin, history and geography in other rooms, so I was quite confused the first day. And so, nobody said anything, nobody said anything. And there were a great number of unwritten rules in the school and you had to find out the hard way what you could and what you could not do. (Charles C.)

Changing the approach to acculturation is already a way of challenging institutional categories as they appear in censuses or statistics. In the interviewee's narrative of self, cultural transgression was experienced as a set of unwritten rules in school.

For another interviewee, a theologian, developing a 'Brückenpersönlichkeit' (a bridge personality), and systematically taking sides with the 'Ausgeschlossenen' (the excluded), is a form of personal resistance against political and institutional categories (Gregory B.). Individual statements appear as refractions and personal translations of dominant discourses. For the theologian, political commitment and ecumenism are ways of challenging what



he calls the "un-political cosmopolitans whose home is the market". He combines personal ethics – 'mitmachen' (to participate) as the criterion of social belonging – with an institutional, macro-political framework specific to Canada. The rivalry between Anglo-Canada and the Province of Quebec is central to his discourse. At the risk of an over-simplification, the Quebec issue can be summarized as a conflict between two visions: one that defines Quebec as a nation that historically constituted Canada versus one that sees the Quebecois as an ethnic group among others. Beyond the historical dimension of the conflict, the issue became even more acute in the context of the policy of "multiculturalism within a bilingual framework" (Trudeau 8546).

Multiculturalism in Canada is not only a reality, it also became a leading political concept and a financial issue in the 1970s and 1980s (cf. Li). Heritage programs were started and ethnic identities became visible. Canada officially rejected the 'melting pot' concept in favor of a diverse 'mosaic.' On the one hand, this policy gave birth to various cultural manifestations, on the other, it formed a set of fixed ethnic identities. The interviews reflect the complexity of this debate, as they center on the problematic terms of "hyphenated Canadian" and "hyphenated ethnics." For Willie G., these terms are derogatory, used as markers of discrimination. They are, however, 'meaningless' to him as he explains:

Meaningless, because you take/ in that building, because you speak to somebody, you just don't know who he is, or where he comes from. Either they/ their French is/ I know that he's not a Canadian-born, because when he speaks French, he speaks Parisian French, that's how I differentiate between a Canadian-born and, and, and somebody, you know. But if you speak to the children of these "hyphenated ethnics," you wouldn't know where they come from, you see.

In a somewhat contradictory manner, difference on the basis of ethnicity is at the same time acknowledged and refused. Willie G.'s discourse reflects the dialectic of multiculturalism. Though he is

very aware of differences, as crystallized in an accent for instance, these differences are nonetheless insignificant to *him*. He refuses and challenges the globalizing discourse of multiculturalism, where differences are made visible only to be equalized. To fight the fixedness of hyphenated identities, he points to the dynamic process of integration, evoking the second generation.

### In Lieu of a Conclusion

The interviews with exiles show that the narratives of self are productive sites of cultural translation. The production of culture takes place at the point of negotiation between individuals, groups and institutions. Acculturation appears thus as an open-ended process of negotiation where representations are constantly shaped by face-to-face interaction. Boundaries between 'here' and 'there,' 'we' and 'them,' are constantly crossed in the process of adaptation. The existential and forced border crossing that the exiles from Nazism have experienced can be seen as an initial moment of self-reflexivity. The crossing leads them to an initial moment of transgression and individuation in which cultural norms had to be re-defined and identities re-composed. They re-invent their "everyday life" by using pragmatic 'arrangements,' those 'micro-resistance' mechanisms programmatically defined by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. As a result, culture appears as an everyday, performative practice of values, procedures and gestures in a context of social interaction. Analyzing the narratives of self is but one mode of examining this practice of culture.

I have tried to voice the emergent categories of analysis as they are used by the interviewees themselves. This leads me to remark upon how difficult it is to write about individual phenomena of cultural translation and transfer without being either too impersonal or too unrepresentative. Although I have quoted from several interviews, I have allowed one voice, Willie G.'s, to express itself more than the others'. Always at the fringe of social and cultural groups, always 'stigmatized,' his extraordinary personal trajectory is emblematic, but not exceptional. Not only are 'liminality' and 'hybridity' modes of perception of our 'post-modern' condition, they are also existential and historical situations. The hyphen



('Bindestrich') that characterizes the identity of 'hyphenated Canadians' serves both as a bridge between the Canadian present and the German past ('Binde-'), and as a marker of difference within Canadian society ('-strich').

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Quotes from interviewees are taken from the transcripts of oral interviews. Transcription is an attempt at rendering, though imperfectly, some features of orality. Most of the time people do not speak in full sentences. Oral speech differs from written speech, and hence some conventions for transcription exist. The slash, for instance, indicates that the informant corrected or interrupted himself.

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