

---

# Involuntary Dissent: The Minority Voice of Translingual Life Writers

MARY BESEMERES

*The Australian National University*  
*E-mail: mary.besemeres@anu.edu.au*

---

With reference to Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation* (1989) and four other texts I examine how translingual writers represent experiences of bringing what Hoffman calls 'terms from elsewhere' into dominant cultural dialogues. Alongside Hoffman's memoir I consider Bulgarian-French philosopher Tzvetan Todorov's *Bilinguisme, dialogisme et schizophrénie* (1985), Indian-born US writer Ginu Kamani's *Code Switching* (2000), Russian-born Australian journalist Irene Ulman's *Playgrounds and Battlegrounds* (2007) and French-Australian novelist Catherine Rey's *To Make a Prairie it Takes a Clover and One Bee* (2013). For all the diversity of translingual trajectories these 5 texts represent, there are conspicuous parallels between their accounts of speaking in a 'minority voice'. My focus is on experiences of involuntary dissent, a form of ambivalent group membership, which constitutes a significant and critically overlooked aspect of translingual identity.

---

In *Lost in Translation* (1989), her memoir of migrating at thirteen from Poland to North America,<sup>1</sup> Eva Hoffman presents her impatience with American friends' seeming fixation on their mothers as a culturally marginal response:

An oppositional voice – a voice that responds to a statement with a counterstatement and says no, you're wrong, it's not the mother but the daughter who's at fault – is part of the shared conversation. But a minority voice – a voice that introduces terms outside the tensions of a particular dialogue, terms that come from elsewhere – is usually heard only as an irritating mosquito buzz on the periphery, an intrusion that the participants in the main conversation want to silence quickly and with a minimum of rudeness, so they can get on with the real subject. (Hoffman 1991, p. 266)

With reference to *Lost in Translation* and four other texts I examine how translingual writers (Kellman, 2000) represent experiences of bringing what Hoffman here calls "terms from elsewhere" into established or dominant cultural dialogues. Alongside Hoffman's memoir I consider four autobiographical essays: Bulgarian-French philosopher Tzvetan Todorov's *Bilinguisme, dialogisme et schizophrénie* (1985), Indian-born American writer Ginu Kamani's *Code Switching* (2000), Russian-born Australian journalist Irene Ulman's *Playgrounds and Battlegrounds* (2007) and French-Australian novelist Catherine Rey's *To Make a Clover it Takes a Prairie and One Bee* (2013). For all the diversity of cross-linguistic trajectories represented across these five texts, there are conspicuous parallels among their accounts of speaking in a minority voice.

My focus is on representations of experiences of involuntary dissent. By *involuntary dissent* I mean a painful incompatibility between someone's perspective on an issue and a consensus

regarding that issue within the very group he or she is addressing. This is a form of marginality rooted in language, in a subject's awkward response to discourses current in their adopted language (often crystallized in particular words) but not available in their mother tongue. In Hoffman's case, it involves an American discourse around mothers absent from Polish ways of talking; in Todorov's, a French discourse of *cosmopolitisme* foreign to his Bulgarian interlocutors; in Kamani's, an American code of verbal openness unlike any of the codes she mastered in Bombay as a multilingual speaker of Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi and English; in Ulman's, Australian talk of *boyfriends* which is unnervingly explicit compared with the conveniently vague Russian *mal'chik*; in Rey's, the resounding absence, from Australian conversations, of key French cultural reference points including *Mai 68* and the names of French public intellectuals.

These examples of involuntary dissent may resonate with other, not specifically translingual kinds of ambivalent group membership, like changing class identity and resulting tensions between family members, or frictions sparked by shifts between subcultures *within* a given "linguaculture" (Attinasi & Friedrich 1995, p. 33). I hope to show how involuntary dissent is nevertheless distinctive, and constitutes a significant and as yet unemphasized aspect of translingual identity. While languages are not viewed here as conduits to essentialized, unchanging cultures, but rather as complex, evolving and in Bakhtin's term *heteroglossic* phenomena, the translingual is understood as intrinsically *transcultural*. As argued elsewhere, memoirs like Hoffman's affirm that "a new language is experienced not just as new vocabulary but as new ways of talking, and therefore, of thinking, feeling, and behaving" (Besemeres 2012, p. 220-221).

In analyzing the treatment of minority voice and involuntary dissent in the texts, I draw as much on the writers' own formulations as on related theoretical concepts such as Bakhtin's *dialogism* or Charles Taylor's *webs of interlocution* – valuable as these concepts are. For this reason, I adduce some extended quotations from the texts, which are essential to my argument. Rather than presenting them merely as a form of supporting data, my aim is to respond to these passages, to engage them in dialogue. These particular works were chosen because all draw attention to experiences of discomfort with certain pervasive cultural discourses and of being reduced in the process to speaking in a virtually inaudible minority voice. The concept of involuntary dissent may resemble other, now overfamiliar concepts like immigrant alienation, but I argue there is something new here, namely, testimony to an exclusion of translinguals which non-translingual conversation partners are unaware of inflicting. The sheer similarity of these five reflections by authors from different language backgrounds writing at diverse cultural and historical moments is, I think, significant, and compelling.

In *Lost in Translation*, Hoffman (1991) offers a vivid image of how mothers are viewed by her Polish friends in New York, a viewpoint she finds she largely shares, despite the difference between her migration to Canada as a teenager and their more recent arrival in the United States as adults:

What's this thing Americans have about their mothers?' my Polish friends ask... Indeed, my American friends talk about their mothers a lot. The oppressive mother, or the distant mother, is an accepted conversational trope, like the weather or the stockmarket or the latest Mideast crisis. My American friends pay their mothers the indirect tribute of incessant and highly subtle scrutiny. ...

For my Polish friends, this is grist for cross-cultural satire. Only Americans can make so much fuss about something so... well, normal. A mother, for heaven's sake, is a mother. In Poland itself, you usually live with her until you get married, or sometimes until much later. After you move out, she comes over to help in the kitchen or with the kids. ... Things sometimes get uncomfortable in a small kitchen, and the mother and daughter, or son, quarrel. But basically, the mother is as familiar as the slippers in which she shuffles around the apartment ... The air around her isn't charged with gothic menace. (p. 265-266)

While Hoffman doesn't give us the Polish word for this slipper-clad woman who both helps and quarrels with her adult children in the kitchen, as a Polish speaker I feel sure it is *mama* rather than the more clinical term *matka*. Like the French word *maman* whose untranslatability into English is commented on by Hélène Cixous's translator Beverley Bie Brahic (2011, p. 171, p. 175-176) and by Christopher Prendergast (2013, p. 169-170) in relation to Proust, the Polish *mama* is used from childhood through adulthood to address and refer to one's mother. In this it differs from the English child-specific *Mummy/Mommy*, while being warmer than the more grown-up, avowedly unsentimental *Mum/Mom*. Earlier in her memoir, Hoffman contrasts the meanings of the English word *friend* with what she calls "friendship ... in Polish" (148), evidently referring to the Polish *przyjaźń* and its cognate *przyjaciółka* (female friend) (Besemeres 2011, p. 484-485) without actually naming them. I would argue her discussion here, likewise, mediates between a Polish word, *mama*, and the more impersonal English *mother*.

When Eva presents her Polish friends' view of talk about oppressive or distant mothers to her American friends, she is positioned as a reluctant translator:

As I translate back and forth, I get more defensive on behalf of my Polish friends, because I know that it's not only their views but their legitimacy I have to establish. A cultural dialogue moves between certain polarities: X and anti-X. The good mother gives way to the bad mother and then to the good mother again. Nobody involved in this exchange wants to hear that the mother shouldn't be a problem in the first place, and that what really matters is censorship. (p. 266)

Hoffman emphasizes both her desire to take part in what she calls "the shared conversation" (p. 266) and her unease at the marginal position she occupies as someone introducing "terms from elsewhere" (p. 266) – terms deriving from another linguaculture. As Hoffman describes it, a minority voice like hers will keep trying to be heard, but is likely to go silent – or censor itself – until a more promising opening appears in the conversation. The experience leaves her feeling not so much alienated as partially estranged, because she remains connected to the people she is speaking with, who have no awareness of excluding her.

Eventually, Hoffman writes, the strain tells, even if the underlying causes of the resulting disagreement are liable to be misinterpreted. She offers some examples of typical exchanges she had with student friends in graduate school in the United States. In one, a friend (referred to as M.A.F., My American Friend) says of a Hungarian postwar film, "it was a very smart comment on how all of us can get co-opted by institutions" (p. 205). Eva responds:

But it wasn't about all of us. It was about the Communist party in Hungary circa 1948.

**M.A.F.** Collaboration isn't the monopoly of the Communist party, you know. You can be bought and co-opted by Time, Inc., quite successfully.

**I[Eva]:** I think there may be just the tiniest difference between those two organizations.

**M.A.F.:** You with your liberal quibbles. I don't think your eyes have been opened about this country.

**I[Eva]:** For heaven's sake, don't you understand what went on over there? That people got imprisoned, tortured, hanged?

**M.A.F.** Don't get so upset, this was a Hungarian movie. You don't have to be loyal to all of Eastern Europe.

**I[Eva]:** I'm loyal to some notion of accuracy, which is more than I can say for you! (p. 205-206)

The debate ends with Eva declaring "this makes me want to emigrate" and her friend retorting, "Feel free" (p. 206).

One could object that the M.A.F.'s voice here is somewhat facile, the debate rendered one-sidedly (if mordantly). Yet there is a characteristic seriousness about Eva's engagement with her friends on political issues, which draws on a particular history. In writing of their different responses to the Hungarian film, Hoffman brings out how the divergence is the result of a loss in translation on many levels, a displacement of what counts as the "center" (132); what, for her friends, occupies a marginal space in their consciousness (killings and torture in Communist Eastern Europe) for her, looms large as something she can almost touch, being an immigrant from that part of the world, and the child of Holocaust survivors whose families were murdered there. In using a new language, non-native speakers often remain oriented to cultural understandings drawn from their first language(s), as linguist Michael Clyne has shown in his landmark study, *Intercultural Communication at Work* (1994). While both Eva and M.A.F. speak English in this exchange, Eva's English is freighted with a different cultural and political history, just as her interventions in debates about oppressive mothers carry the weight of life with Polish-language concepts such as *mama* (see Cora Diamond's account of Wittgenstein's notion of "life with concepts" [Diamond 1998, p. 264-266]).

Underlying Eva's dissent, both voluntary and involuntary, is a welling up of what Hoffman calls "immigrant rage" that her "version of things is automatically under suspicion and at a discount" (p. 204). This rage is defensive. Using a retrospective present tense that creates for the reader a vivid sense of immediacy with her narrated self's position, Hoffman elicits a hearing for the minority voice she found herself speaking in: "My sense of reality, powerful and vulnerable, is in danger of coming under native domination"; "I have to learn to ... find a common ground. It is my fear that I have to yield too much of my own ground that fills me with such a passionate energy of rage" (p. 204-205). As she so poignantly expresses here, to participate in the social life of a new speech community is to expose to casual dismissal one's deepest understandings of the world. In recent studies, Claire Kramsch (2009) and Aneta Pavlenko (2014) both call attention to the limits on intersubjectivity in translingual contexts. As Kramsch writes in *The Multilingual Subject* (2009), "Intersubjectivity can be achieved only if subjects can anticipate one another's behavior and thus trust one another. [...] However, with speakers [...] of several languages, who have been socialized in multiple cultural contexts, intersubjectivity is more difficult to achieve" (19). In *The Bilingual Mind* (2014) Pavlenko puts it more optimistically: "to reach intersubjectivity in a new language, we have to internalize new interpretive frames and to

read just the salience of already existing ones, learning, once again, what frames to use, with whom, how, and when” (227). Hoffman shows how profoundly unsettling, incomplete, and compromised this process can be.

Tzvetan Todorov’s essay *Bilinguisme, dialogisme et schizophrénie* (1985) has striking resonances with Hoffman’s reflections on speaking in a minority voice. Todorov emigrated from Bulgaria to France in 1963, aged twenty-four. His essay relates how, on a first return visit to Bulgaria in 1981, eighteen years later, he found himself in a state of what he calls linguistic “schizophrenia” (*schizophrénie*) between his recovered Bulgarian-speaking self (or *personnalité*) and his newer, Francophone one. In preparation for his visit to Sofia, where he was to take part in a Bulgarian Studies conference, he wrote a draft of a paper in which he extolled the virtues of cosmopolitanism and dismissed nationalism as a regressive impulse. When he came to translate the draft from French into Bulgarian, however, he realized how unintelligible it would be to his audience, for whom nationalist sympathies were integral to their beleaguered identity as dissidents in a foreign-imposed authoritarian state:

[T]he Bulgarian intellectuals to whom my discourse was addressed could not understand the meaning I intended. The condemnation of attachment to national values changes significance according to whether you live in a small country (your own) placed within the sphere of influence of a larger one or whether you live abroad, in a different country, where you are (or think you are) sheltered from any threat by a more powerful neighbor. Paris is certainly a place that favors the euphoric renunciation of nationalist values: Sofia much less so. (p. 210)<sup>2</sup>

The passage conveys how radically an imagined audience can change according to the linguacultural and geopolitical context of utterance. Whereas for intellectuals in a post-World War II Western European country such as France, *nationalisme* might connote fascism, in the East European Soviet satellite state of Bulgaria, talk of *natsia* signified struggle for liberation from Russian domination. In advocating cosmopolitanism and presenting nationalism as primitive, Todorov was, in Hoffman’s resonant phrase, introducing “terms from elsewhere”, terms from “outside the tension of a particular dialogue” (p. 266). Tantalizingly, the essay doesn’t reveal how he resolved this translation crisis.<sup>3</sup>

Todorov presents his experience as a limit case that undermines any simple celebration of what Guy Scarpetta (1981), drawing on Bakhtin, terms “unbounded polyphony” (p. 183):

[T]he returning exile discovers that he has an insider’s view of two different cultures ... As Bakhtin wished ... and as today’s advocates for unbounded polyphony claim, neither discourse, neither language truly contains the other by subjugation. I should have been living in the euphoria of disharmony. ... Each of my two personalities could manifest itself in one of my two languages. ... [Yet] the experience was one of malaise and psychological oppression. ...

During that time I did not give up any of my French personality, and I acquired, or reintegrated, a Bulgarian personality that was every bit as total. It was too much for a sole being like me! One of the two lives would have to oust the other entirely. ... The equality of voices makes me feel the breath of insanity. Their asymmetry, their hierarchy, on the other hand, is reassuring. (Todorov 1994, p. 209–13)

Todorov perceives that as an expatriate in Paris he grafted a French-speaking personality onto his existing Bulgarian-speaking one, and this Francophone self now became integral to who he was, yet the Bulgarian-speaking self still remained intact, uncannily re-emerging on his return visit to Sofia. The resulting involuntary dissent he explores is the inverse of Hoffman's: whereas Eva was pitted against American peers for whom her Polish cultural perspective was foreign, Todorov found himself painfully at odds with his former compatriots. He describes his relief at speaking on the phone with a French embassy official in Sofia – returning to the “hierarchy” (p. 213) in which French was normative.

*Bilinguisme, dialogisme et schizophrénie* adds to the theme of involuntary dissent the related one of inescapable bad faith. Todorov writes of the “skeptical smile” of his Bulgarian interlocutors when he offers suggestions for how to cope with the difficulties in their lives, and how he tries to evade that smile, aware that it conveys the thought that he can take a “plane for Paris on Monday” (p. 211). In *Lost in Translation* Hoffman similarly recalls how at her PhD graduation ceremony in Boston, caught between her immigrant parents, a former boyfriend from Poland and her American husband, she feels she can't take a step “without bad faith” (1991, p. 227). Todorov and Hoffman alike suggest that a dissenting position may be forced on someone by circumstances, and conversely that a sense of agency may depend on having a likeminded audience. This implies an understanding of the self as fundamentally “interlocutive” in auto/biography scholar David Parker's term (2007, p. 6) (drawing on philosopher Charles Taylor's *webs of interlocution*), or as *dialogic* in Bakhtin's – unsurprisingly in Todorov's case given his role as a major exponent of Bakhtin's thought (his critique of *unbounded polyphony* notwithstanding).<sup>4</sup> In Bakhtin's (translated) words, “Each person's inner world ... has its stabilized social audience [...] I give myself verbal shape from another's point of view of the community to which I belong” (1984, p. 86). What is new in Todorov and Hoffman's writing is the perception that linguistic displacement cuts one off from that sustaining inner *social audience* and thrusts one onto the periphery of another, not yet internalized, speech community.

Commenting on Todorov's essay, critic Ada Savin (1994) rightly points out that the choice to favour one language over another is not equally open to all, such as those from historically marginalized ethnic minorities like Chicanos in the U.S.:

while Todorov, after an unsettling experience in his country of origin, seems to have found the key to a balanced bilingual self in a clear articulation between his two linguistic and cultural identities, [Chicano poet] [Lorna Dee] Cervantes has a more difficult task to face in that she is confronted day after day with an ambivalent reality which throws her identity into permanent question. (p. 218)

An “ambivalent reality” might characterize even situations where there is a clearly defined asymmetry between linguistic identities. Perhaps because it relates his experience so closely to the theoretical question of whether unbounded polyphony is possible, Todorov's essay seems to gloss over a significant aspect of his own translingual predicament. If his Bulgarian *personnalité* threatened to overwhelm his Francophone *moi*, the solution he found – to reassert the primacy of the French firmly over the Bulgarian – says something about the cultural environment he found himself in as an immigrant, and specifically the ahistorical, universalizing tendencies of the French structuralist approach to language paradigmatic in humanities scholarship at the time. Interestingly, his essay originated as a paper presented at a symposium on bilingualism in Rabat, Morocco, where the other speakers were articulating

struggles with French as a colonial language. Given this context, Todorov seems to have missed an opportunity to recognize the force of the cultural pressure he faced as a literary scholar in 1970s Paris to suppress his Bulgarian thought-world.

In presenting and explaining the perspective of his Bulgarian interlocutors within this essay, however, Todorov does obliquely make a space for it within the sphere of French academic discourse. Like *Lost in Translation, Bilinguisme, dialogisme et schizophrénie* illuminates a key dimension of translangual experience: living between languages entails an ongoing negotiation of different cultural viewpoints that remains largely invisible to those speaking the dominant language.

I turn now to three essays in English which offer related approaches to the theme of involuntary dissent and minority voice: Ginu Kamani's *Code Switching* (2000), Irene Ulman's *Playgrounds and Battlegrounds* (2007) and Catherine Rey's *To Make a Clover it Takes a Prairie and One Bee* (2013). Ginu Kamani's essay appeared in Meri Nana-Ama Danquah's edited volume, *Becoming American: Personal Essays by First Generation Immigrant Women* (2000). Aneta Pavlenko has drawn attention to Kamani's ironic treatment of assimilationist discourses in the United States, "mocking the idea that one can put race, class or gender aside and become a 'free American'" (2001, p. 218). I focus here, rather, on how Kamani represents her experience as a multilingual, transcultural adolescent.

Kamani's essay relates how she emigrated with her family from India to the United States in 1976, when she was fourteen. In Bombay, as the daughter of a merchant-caste family she spoke four languages in different contexts: Gujarati with relatives, Marathi, the language of the state of Maharashtra and of the family's "household help" (2000, p. 97), Hindi, the national language, and English, the language of school, which she tells us she used "gleeful[ly]" to "exclude" her "dour grandmother" (p. 97). It was only when she arrived in the United States that she found herself expected to "explain" herself, define herself as "Indian", and, as Kamani eloquently puts it, "forc[e] sense out of Otherness" (p. 98). Unable to satisfy her questioners on subjects like "wild animals and thick jungle", "hash" or "arranged marriages", or to "wipe off [their] skeptical looks", "in this atmosphere of casual dismissal until proven articulate" she began to "generalize in a monolithic fashion about India" (p. 98). Kamani's account of the dismissive, skeptical responses she met with from her schoolmates resonates powerfully both with the "skeptical smile" Todorov encounters as a returning expatriate in Sofia (1994, p. 211) and with Hoffman's "version of things automatically under suspicion" (1991, p. 204).

Kamani writes of how disconcerting she found what she calls the "American cultural mandate" to "'come clean' on information, ignorance, feelings, speculations, judgments, fears and desires" (2000, p. 100). She notes with keen irony that to speak openly about oneself "is still largely taboo in India, and considered bizarre, with personal information generally used deviously against the fools who reveal it" (100). She explains that within Indian culture "a large component of talking is equated with shame. Talking is heavily circumscribed, as it must be, in a culture marked by hierarchies, roles, self-censorship, and the constant anticipation of the needs of others" (p. 100). Kamani highlights the role of non-verbal communication in her Bombay upbringing, and particularly the significance of gaze: "I depended so much on eyes to magnify both silent and verbal transmissions, that communication from my American peers often left me in a dissatisfied limbo" (p. 99). Such a dependence on interaction by means of the eyes was presumably at odds with ways of thinking encoded in (American) English turns of phrase like, on the one hand, *eye contact* (purposeful and mutual) and, on the other, *staring*, considered an intrusion into someone's

*privacy*. Pavlenko has shown how *privacy* functions as an “interpretive frame” in American English (2014, p. 237-242).

Something of an adolescent’s tone still colours Kamani’s narration when she writes: “In high school, the people who showed the greatest interest in me were my teachers, drawn to my unusual combination of being a foreigner, a straight-A student with high self-esteem, and having complete disregard for my dumbed-down, smoking, drinking, fashion-obsessed schoolmates” (2000, p. 100). Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation* faces more squarely the possibility that disdain for peers in this context might be, at least partly, a mechanism for coping with loneliness. Hoffman writes of her thirteen-year-old immigrant self, “Since I don’t have the ordinary pleasures of sociability, of play, I turn inward with a vengeance. [...] Underneath my carefully trained serenity, there is a caldron of seething lost loves and a rage at the loss” (1991, p. 138-139). By contrast, in the passage from *Code Switching*, Kamani moves from presenting her teenage dissent as a consequence of cultural shift and of enforced self-translation to a view of it as entirely voluntary (a lofty “complete disregard” for her “dumbed-down” fellow students). As an account of the troubling effects of negotiating cultural differences in a multilingual adolescence, however, Kamani’s essay remains compelling, offering further insight into the experience of involuntary dissent.

Irene Ulman’s essay *Playgrounds and Battlegrounds: A Child’s Experience of Migration* (2007) is one of a volume of essays by Australian bilinguals titled *Translating Lives*, to date, the only such collection to focus on translingual experience in Australia.<sup>5</sup> Ulman first emigrated from Russia with her parents and brother to Israel, aged ten; from there her family moved to Australia when she was twelve, in 1976. She recalls greeting her first migration to Israel as a ten-year-old with “openness and optimism” (p. 46). The new cultural codes she encountered on the Israeli school playground demanded, above all, a readiness to fight, with both words and fists: “aggression was normal” (p. 47). Initially, she tells us, she was thrown by this expectation, her habitual mode as the daughter of a Russian Jewish family in Leningrad being that of what she calls “a well-behaved girl (to use the Russian phrase, *iz intelligentnoy sem’yi*), or ‘one from a family belonging to the intelligentsia’” (p. 47). Ulman relates how she nevertheless managed to adopt the new combative style required of her, learning to convey to other children that she was *b’rogez* (in a state of anger), to punch her opponents if she felt insulted by them, and also to send intermediaries across the playground with an offer to *lehashlim*, or make peace (p. 47). Two years later, once she had “happily absorbed” these confrontational norms, her family moved again, this time to Australia (p. 47).

Of her attempt to adapt to Australian children’s codes of behavior as a Russian- and Hebrew-speaking twelve-year-old, Ulman writes:

My idea of Romantic love was [...] bookish, and suddenly I was quite alienated by the sexual behavior of the kids my age who acted as though they were a different species to me. I watched their hugging and kissing and I had no reference points for any of it. I had no way of checking how twelve- and thirteen-year-olds behaved in the other two countries I related to – Russia and Israel – and in the absence of concrete information I concluded that twelve- and thirteen-year-olds were different in Australia. [...]

I found the words “boyfriend” and “girlfriend” threatening because they were more direct in their implications than I thought was the case with their equivalents in Russian. [...] The Russian equivalents – “boy” and “girl” (*mal’chik*, *devochka*) [...] do not have that unambiguous clarity of “boyfriend” and “girlfriend” that I had such trouble with when I was thirteen. (p. 48-49)

The contrast Ulman draws here between the frankness of the English words *boyfriend* and *girlfriend* in line with the sexual behavior of Australian teenagers and the more muted and ambiguous Russian terms *mal'chik* and *devochka* brings to mind the celebrated response of a Russian woman in a Soviet television audience who told U.S. host Phil Donohue that “We don’t have sex in Russia” (as cited in Wolfe 2005, p. 185). Interestingly, it also echoes Eva Hoffman’s account of her initial struggles as a teenage immigrant to understand the intricacies of the concept of “dating” in Canada, whereas in Poland, she and her peers “ran around in boy-girl packs and didn’t have a ceremonial set of rules for how to act towards the other sex” (1991, p. 149). The close congruence of Ulman’s and Hoffman’s reflections on boyfriends and dating suggests an unsurprising affinity between adolescent cultural codes in 1970s Australia and 1960s Canada, rather than confirming that sexual reticence is peculiarly Russian (or Polish).

Although the twelve-year-old Irina portrayed in *Playgrounds and Battlegrounds* found herself “alienated” by the new styles of interaction on the playground, understandably, she still very much wanted to belong (2007, p. 48). Ulman writes wistfully that whereas in her first migration, to Israel, she had been able to translate herself (in Hoffman’s metaphor) into a new cultural valency, this second migration left her “an observer, not a participant” (p. 49). Falteringly and with continued internal resistance, the young Irina/Irene began to copy the new language’s unfamiliar and unwelcome idioms to try and pass for a normal teenager.

While copying others’ speech led gradually, over the years, to becoming more fluent and confident, Ulman suggests there was no straightforward resolution of the linguistic and cultural cognitive dissonance she experienced. She goes on to write:

there are two words that stayed with me for years which I associated with being a migrant and an outsider: People said I was “different” and they also said I was “interesting”, or the things I said were “interesting”. Well, I hated being different and I especially hated being interesting. Both those words were pejorative and communicated cold alienation. In fact, “different” meant “alien” and “interesting” meant “weird.” (p. 49)

Even now, Ulman finds that there are colloquial Australian phrases that she struggles to use confidently and with a sense of ownership. Her way of managing this uncertainty is to put on “an exaggerated Australian accent”, “as if quoting someone else or using someone else’s voice” (p. 51-52) as she tellingly puts it. She reflects that it is this lingering misgiving that she sounds “fake” (p. 51) when speaking with other Australians and an “irrational fear” that her Australian-born daughters Rivka and Shoshana will miss out on “childhood English” as she herself did (p. 53), which has persuaded her to let English prevail as their main family language, even though originally she and her Russian partner Sergei had intended to raise their children bilingual. In the term proposed here, Ulman does not want her daughters to grow up, as she has done, speaking in a minority voice.

The most recent essay discussed here, which I close with, is French-born author Catherine Rey’s *To Make a Prairie it Takes a Clover and One Bee* (2013). Partly inspired by the example of her grandparents from rural Charentes who emigrated to Australia on the eve of World War I and lived there for much of their young adult lives, Rey chose to settle in Australia in 1997, aged thirty-nine, leaving behind a marriage and a career as a French schoolteacher. While relying on English in her work as a literary academic in Perth and

Sydney, she continues to write novels in French, such as *Lucy comme les chiens* (2001), which are then translated into English by others. Unlike her fiction, this autobiographical essay was written by her in English, and it deals head-on with the implications of her language choices as both immigrant and writer.

Rey explains that English cannot be her “creative language” as unlike French it has no connection to the “intimate space” in her mind “where thoughts come to life”; her writing is stimulated by encountering words in her mother tongue that release whole fragments “of the buried past” (p. 238). Yet, she also affirms, her “English graft” has enriched her French, as the move into an Anglophone environment freed her as a writer from concern with the possible reactions of the French literary world to her “baroque style” (p. 241). Perhaps this is what her essay’s enigmatic title seeks to convey – that in moving to Australia she carried her creativity with her in embryonic form (a clover and one bee), travelling light, and finding fertile ground in a new, translingual context.

Yet when it comes to speaking in English, Rey remains, she says, resolutely on the outer. Listening in on conversations that she is ostensibly part of, she can “nod” and “pretend” (p. 239), but when she fails to get a joke or an unfamiliar cultural reference, she is found out. Her own sense of humour “dies”; she is unable to “play with” English (p. 239). In her account of these interactions, Rey evokes a remarkably similar sense of exclusion from what Hoffman ironically terms the *real subject*:

Double alienation and double pain when my turn to speak comes: beyond the words, I am referring to some historical fact – the May 1968 revolution, for instance, when French society was turned upside down. A mention of Daniel Cohn-Bendit, nicknamed “Danny the Red”, would be immediately understood by my peers, my people, my friends and my generation. At work I might like to quote the name of a respected art critic, George [sic] Didi-Huberman, or a famous contemporary author I admire, Pascal Quignard, but they are only respected or famous “over there”, in my home country. (2013, p. 239-240)

Just as Todorov brings out the relativity of meaning in ostensibly widely shared concepts like *nationalism(e)*, Rey shows how household names are still often relative to place, culture and the language of utterance – despite the existence of international mass media and the rise of a globalized celebrity culture. When Rey goes to speak in English, her “inner world’s” “stabilized social audience”, in Bakhtin’s potent phrase (1984, p. 86), remains French: “my peers, my people, my friends and my generation” (2013, p. 239-240). In Australia, in her English-language interactions, these stabilized inner interlocutors are only imagined, not re-made and realized through the give-and-take of conversation with other speakers.

Rey goes on to compare her own frustration with the more marked (if again, not necessarily intentional) sidelining experienced by Iranian and Iraqi immigrants to Australia. I quote this passage in full as it is a particularly eloquent account of the predicament of speaking in a minority voice, as both a translingual and a transnational immigrant:

Iraqis and Iranians who work with me experience the same lack of understanding: they speak, but their speech drifts away. Nobody acknowledges what has been said. No one reacts. They have nevertheless referred to an important name, a major historical event, a war, a massacre everyone knew – but *only* important “over there”. Iraqis know better than I do what war, massacre and forced exile mean. If they mention the name of a

famous Sufi mystic respected by every single person in their motherland, they experience the same silence. No one in Australia has ever heard of it. Me neither. I have caught the involuntary look of despair they immediately wipe off their face. Listeners behave as though they have blown wisps of smoke. There is a polite silence and just the smoke of our words blowing from our mouth. Silence. No echo. No resonance. Transparent swirls: this is our speech. Us, immigrants, people who have migrated to Australia at a mature age, people with a past – we silence our past as we have learnt this cruel rule: immigrants have no past. (p. 240)

The speakers' "wisps of smoke" and listeners' "polite silence" here (p. 240) very closely resemble the "irritating mosquito buzz on the periphery" described by Hoffman, which others want to "silence with a minimum of rudeness" to get on with the "real subject" (1991, p. 266). Although Rey recognizes the "involuntary look of despair" on the faces of her Iraqi-born colleagues and fellow translinguals she is also inevitably aligned with the other Australians present who fail to acknowledge their speech: "No one in Australia has ever heard of it. Me neither" (2013, p. 240). Contrasting voluntary migration with forced displacement, linguist Magda Stroińska cautions that the "implications of the loss of language and identity in exile" "may be seen as a luxury when so many people lose not just their identities but their lives" (2003, p. 98). While sensitive to this distinction, Catherine Rey shows that translingual immigrants and refugees may *both* be excluded from established cultural dialogues, in ways that, for refugees, intensify the trauma of their "forced exile" (2013, p. 240).

To conclude, each of these texts, Hoffman's, Todorov's, Kamani's, Ulman's and Rey's, serves as a spur to reflection on questions of how to communicate - and address - viewpoints that are neither mainstream nor oppositional in a familiar vein; on how to engage terms from elsewhere in a shared conversation. They convey how oppressive such shared conversations can be for those on their margins. And they demonstrate how some translinguals are able to move from positions of involuntary dissent to a more active form of dissent that calls on others to rethink their assumptions, and may spark a much-needed new conversation.

## REFERENCES

- Attinasi, J. & Friedrich, P. (1995). Dialogic breakthrough: Catalysis and synthesis in life-changing dialogue. In B. Mannheim & D. Tedlock (Eds.) *The dialogic emergence of culture* (pp. 33-55). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*. C. Emerson (Ed. and Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Besemeres, M. & Wierzbicka A. (Eds.) (2007). *Translating lives: Living with two languages and cultures*. St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press.
- Besemeres, M. (2011). Emotions in bilingual life narratives. In V. Cook & B. Bassetti (Eds.). *Language and bilingual cognition* (pp. 479-506). New York: Psychology Press.
- Besemeres, M. (2012). The ethnographic work of cross-cultural memoir. *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 25 (2), pp. 219-230.
- Brahic, B. B. (2011). Translator's notes. In H. Cixous, *Hemlock: Old women in bloom* (pp. 169-185). B. B. Brahic (Trans.). Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Clyne, M. (1994). *Intercultural communication at work: Cultural values in discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Diamond, C. (1998). Losing your concepts. *Ethics* (January), pp. 255-277.

- Danquah, M. N. (Ed.) (2000). *Becoming American: Personal essays by first generation immigrant women*. New York: Hyperion.
- Hoffman, E. (1998). *Lost in translation: A life in a new language*. London: Vintage. [First edition 1989]
- Inglis, A. (1983). *Amirah: An un-Australian childhood*. Melbourne: Heinemann.
- Kamani, G. (2000). Code switching. In M. N. Danquah (Ed.). *Becoming American: Personal essays by first generation immigrant women* (pp. 95-103). New York: Hyperion.
- Kellman, S. G. (2000). *The translingual imagination*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Kramsch, C. (2009). *The multilingual subject*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- MacCarter, K. & Lemer, A. (Eds.). (2013). *Joyful strains: Making Australia home*. Melbourne: Affirm Press.
- Parker, D. (2007). *The self in moral Space: Life narrative and the good*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Pavlenko, A. (2014). *The bilingual mind and what it tells us about language and thought*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Pavlenko, A. (2001). Language learning memoirs as a gendered genre. *Applied Linguistics* 22 (2), pp. 213-240.
- Prendergast, C. (2013). *The triangle of representation*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rey, C. (2001). *Lucy comme les chiens*. Cognac: Le temps qu'il fait.
- Rey, C. (2013). To make a clover it takes a prairie and one bee. In K. MacCarter & A. Lemer (Eds.). *Joyful strains: Making Australia home* (pp. 232-242). Melbourne: Affirm Press.
- Riemer, A. (1992). *Inside outside: Life between two worlds*. North Ryde, NSW: Angus & Robertson.
- Savin, A. (1994). Bilingualism and dialogism: Another reading of Lorna Dee Cervantes's poetry. In A. Arteaga (Ed.). *An other tongue: Nation and ethnicity in the linguistic borderlands* (pp. 215-223). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Scarpetta, G. (1981). *Éloge du cosmopolitisme*. Paris: Garsset.
- Stroińska, M. (2003). The role of language in the re-construction of identity in exile. In M. Stroińska & V. Cecchetto (Eds.), *Exile, language and identity* (pp. 95-109). Frankfurt: Peter Lang.
- Todorov, T. (1985). Bilinguisme, dialogisme et schizophrénie. In J. Bennani et al. *Du bilinguisme* (pp. 11-26). Paris: Editions Denoël.
- Todorov, T. (1994). Dialogism and schizophrenia. (M. Smith, Trans.). In A. Arteaga (Ed.). *An Other Tongue: Nation and Ethnicity in the Linguistic Borderlands* (pp. 205-214). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ulman, I. (2007). Playgrounds and battlegrounds: A child's experience of migration. In M. Besemeres & A. Wierzbicka (Eds.). *Translating lives: Living with two languages and cultures* (pp. 45-55). St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press.
- Wolfe, T. C. (2005). *Governing Soviet journalism: The press and the socialist person after Stalin*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

<sup>1</sup> Hoffman, then Ewa Wydra, first emigrated with her parents and sister from Poland to Canada in 1959, moving to the United States in the mid-1960s to study at Rice University.

<sup>2</sup> Quotations are from Michael Smith's translation, *Dialogism and Schizophrenia* (1994).

<sup>3</sup> See Pavlenko (2014, p. 206-209, p. 228) for an insightful discussion of Todorov's "volte face" on the question of nationalism.

<sup>4</sup> See Pavlenko (2014, p. 209), footnote 3.

<sup>5</sup> Australian memoirs by Amirah Inglis (1983) and Andrew Riemer (1992) have explored translingual aspects of the authors' lives, as have individual autobiographical essays within recent edited collections, such as Catherine Rey's chapter in Kent MacCarter & Ali Lemer's *Joyful Strains* (2013), discussed in this article.