

# The absent female émigré: women's autobiographical writing from exile to exophony

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## DIPLOMSKI RAD

The absent female émigré: women's autobiographical writing from exile to  
exophony

(Smjer književno-kulturološki: engleska književnost i kultura)

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## 1. Introduction

This paper inquires into women's writing of a specific positioning: autobiographical narratives written in exile and *of* exile, begetting a linguistic shift and creation in the authors' non-native languages, a phenomenon known as exophony. Firstly, it must be noted the poetics of exile represent a productive field of study. Exiles and émigrés have been lauded as having a significant impact on literary history, yet what is often unexamined is the fact that those same exiles and émigrés predominantly figure as male authors. This unexamined universal-to-mean-male point of view is not endemic to the poetics of exile, as it reflects the androcentricity of the literary canon. However, the privileging of the male writer-(in) exile stands in clear antithesis to the most recent theoretical discussions of exile as a universal condition. Thus, this thesis raises the question: what about the female émigré and what can be discovered by studying her writing?

Noting the absence of female émigré writers when speaking of literary explorations of exile, however, does not equate their literal absence. They are excluded from major discourses, but their writing is by no means lacking. The four autobiographies here examined are Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* (1990), Nancy Huston's *Losing North: Musings on Land, Tongue and Self* (2002), Jhumpa Lahiri's *In Other Words* (2017) and Anca Vlasopolos' *No Return Address: A Memoir of Displacement* (2000). Deciding to bring together authors of different cultural backgrounds, Polish-born Jewish American Hoffman, Canadian-born Parisian Huston, English-born American, of Bengali origins Lahiri and finally Romanian-born Jewish American Vlasopolos, has been a deliberate choice. Combining these, at first glance, radically different authors has been done to illustrate the variety of exiled women's writing. What is more, the aim of the paper is to highlight the interrelatedness within these works through a connective, instead of a strictly comparative approach (Miller and Hirsch 8). In other words, the reading of the four autobiographies uncovers similar preoccupations that can be traced from one work to another, namely issues related to re-establishing a sense of self and one's own subjectivity following the rupture of displacement. What crystallises throughout the exploration of these issues is the experience of exile as a gendered phenomenon, where women confront new ways of constructing their gendered identity to successfully navigate their changed contexts. Exile can thus be seen as a productive space for women, a catalyst for change and development of the self in a relatively autonomous fashion.

Divided into five sections, this paper opens proper with the discussion of the three terms found in the title: exile, exophony and autobiography to establish how the terms will be used but also to introduce the main theoretical discussions related to each of them. To adequately comprehend laden terms like exile, apart from engaging with literary criticism, cross-connections are made with other disciplines like sociology, cultural studies, linguistics, and feminist criticism. Moreover, the authors' personal experiences and choice of self-definition found in the narratives are considered as valid theoretical positions. They are seen as makers of discourse by the virtue of having made connections in their autobiographies "that have not yet been made in the scholarly literature" (Pavlenko, *Emotions* 195).

The subsequent two chapters represent the core analysis of the paper, divided along the key concerns identified, namely the processes of becoming a woman and becoming a writer in exile. In the third chapter the autobiographies are divided in two sets, although such division also reoccurs throughout the paper due to the number of shared features between the texts. Grouping like narratives allows for better development of characteristics present in exiled women's writing. Hoffman and Vlasopolos' texts are analysed together as they describe adolescents becoming fully gendered subjects in exile, whereas in Lahiri and Huston's narratives adult women undergo a transformation in exile, experiencing a new sense of freedom when it comes to the normative roles of womanhood. Gender performativity and the mother-daughter relationship are the two axes along which the narratives explore the process of becoming women (anew). Finally, the fourth chapter addresses the theme of becoming a writer in exile. This becoming is seen as closely connected to finding a voice as a woman in exile, which proves to be burdened by authorial doubt and lack of authority. Insecurity with regards to one's voice is intertwined with the exophonic status of the authors. This chapter thus further examines the authors' particular relationship with language. Ultimately, the narratives exhibit that support and stability in exile is discovered through an interdependent existence with others, where finding one's voice is done through recognising and acknowledging those of others.

This paper does not aim to offer any definitive verdicts on exiled women's autobiographical writing but examines certain prominent characteristics recognised in the chosen corpus. The voices of female émigrés, in fact, are many and the following exploration of four of them, in all their differences and similarities, attests to the potential of studying and not excluding them.

## 2. Exile, Exophony and Autobiography: Theoretical Groundings

The necessity for critical examination of key terms and concepts, indispensable for the forthcoming analysis of the chosen corpus, stems from their overdetermined or underdetermined character in theoretical discourse. The terms exile, exophony and autobiography, which form a nexus at the basis of this study, have either been extensively articulated, making part of still ongoing debates in academic circles (as is the case with exile and autobiography), or they have been underexplored due to an excess of categories already in use (pertinent to the term exophony).

The aim of this chapter, however, is not to argue for a restrictive and definitive articulation of the terms in question but to explore the complexity of their usage and understanding, which will facilitate the close readings of the selected autobiographical works in the upcoming chapters. When the four women writers who are the focus of this study, namely, Lahiri, Hoffman, Huston and Vlasopolos, write in and of exile in an acquired language, and autobiographically, it becomes a specific positioning that acts as a constant undercurrent to other thematical and formal components of their texts. Therefore, it is paramount to understand what is meant by each of the three terms that denote, in essence, a condition, a determined point of view. Furthermore, the fact these conditions are so ever-present both implicitly and explicitly in the chosen narratives, suggests the authors themselves are producers of discourse and their lived experience can therefore be a valid point of reference, to be interpolated in the already existent theoretical discourse. The authors' diverse backgrounds and their equally diverse exile-to-exophony conditions will also be reviewed in this chapter, yet without the frequent tendency to overemphasise their differences. They will, instead, be placed in conversation with one other, following what Nancy K. Miller and Marianne Hirsch call a "*connective* rather than *comparative* approach," intended to see the continuities within each of their disparate histories and cultural divides (8). Indeed, there are conspicuous parallels between the narrated experiences of Lahiri, Hoffman, Huston and Vlasopolos, wherein exile, exophony and autobiography can be seen as having a distinct gender inflection. In other words, their narratives suggest exile is to a large degree a gendered phenomenon and writing about it autobiographically in an acquired tongue is an act through which women negotiate their identities. Thus, the role of gender within the exile-exophony-autobiography nexus will be addressed throughout the discussion of these terms, all with the purpose of theoretically grounding the forthcoming examination of the selected literary works.

## 2.1. Exile

Out of the three terms, exile is the most protean in character – it has been evoked and invoked with varying degrees of metaphor to describe diverse experiences, all of which, in essence, share an underlying condition of displacement and an ensuing sense of alienation. In the words of Thomas Pavel, it is truly a “cloudy” notion and “taken metaphorically, exile may stand for many things, in particular the pervasive feeling human beings often experience that they do not entirely belong in the sublunar world” (26). This idea of an almost universal sense of not belonging has been brought up in many discussions of exile to the point of it being defined a virtually quintessential marker of the modern and then postmodern world, in which “we are *all* strangers” (Wolff 5), “we are all migrants and exiles” (Nic Craith 3) as it were. Exile is a condition experienced “to a varying degree, by every member of contemporary society” (Bauman 36). The overlap between what is considered the (post)modern identity and exile cannot be denied.<sup>1</sup> Both share such markers as a sense of isolation, otherness, and marginality, yet such a conception – where the lines between the two are blurred to so high a degree that every subject of the modern milieu is an exile – is problematic. The result is a dissolution of meaning, universality leading to relativity, alike one Zygmunt Bauman recognises when it comes to rootlessness and strangeness (both of which fit within the semantic field of exile), as he argues “if everyone is a stranger, no one is” (39). In fact, the figure of the stranger can be replaced seamlessly with the figure of the exile for the contention to read: if everyone is an exile, no one is.

The indiscriminate usage of the label exile can in part be traced to a certain fixation on and romanticisation of exile noted in academic discussions, where the term has become in vogue (Wolff 47; Ahmed 1; Pels 64), even “sexy, glamorous, interesting” (Hoffman, “The New Nomads” 44). In other words, the notion of exile offers a wide terrain for theorisation, and theorisation it delivers, especially when interpreted metaphorically. Giving in to the temptation to turn exile into a metaphor is not unanimously supported, as Svetlana Boym, for example, underlines “exile cannot be treated as a mere metaphor” because it could, as evidenced, lead to “somewhat facile argument[s]” that almost everyone is an exile (513). Therefore, the

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<sup>1</sup> A more in-depth discussion of the shared physical and symbolic space between exile and the postmodern conception of identity is beyond the scope of this paper, for more see: Bammer, *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*; Rutherford, “A Place Called Home: Identity and the Cultural Politics of Difference.”

articulation of exile in a metaphorical key is one of the possibilities; however, it is frequently seen as inadequate. This can be seen by going back to Pavel, as he concedes to a more ‘legitimate’ understanding of the term:

Properly understood, exile is a subspecies of the more general notion of human mobility across geographic and political space. It implies the idea of forced displacement (as opposed to voluntary expatriation) that occurs for political or religious reasons rather than economic ones (as opposed both to slave trading and to voluntary immigration).  
(28)

From the outset, Pavel distinguishes exile as “properly understood” and its metaphorical articulation, what can be seen as ‘real’ exile and that which is not. By the same token, Edward Said makes a distinction between exile as an actual and as a metaphorical condition (373),<sup>2</sup> while Terry Eagleton in his study of exiles and émigrés does much to clarify he will not deal with “‘literal’ expatriates but with the social ‘exiles’” (18). In these understandings of exile there is a clear bifurcation: on one hand there is an imagined, metaphorical condition of exile, and on the other hand, there exists an actual, ‘true’ exile. To further clarify this major division, the most frequent interpretations argue that ‘true’ exile is forced upon a subject and ‘false’ exile is a voluntary decision, not exile as such but rather “voluntary expatriation” or “voluntary immigration,” as seen in Pavel’s definition. The dichotomy of forced (or involuntary) and voluntary exile, or the ‘true’ and ‘false’ exile, seems to be deeply rooted in the discussions of the term, and it could be argued that personal will or choice in the matter of migration offer the key to understanding what exile truly is.

The perspective of women writers who are at the centre of this study can be useful in this instance, as they can also be seen as valuable producers of discourse on the topic of exile. Lahiri’s *In Other Words* echoes the hierarchisation of the exilic experience. The narrator moved to Italy from the United States of her own accord, having decided after twenty years of learning Italian that she wanted to immerse herself in the language completely. She states hers is “[a] kind of voluntary exile” (37), later modifying that statement to assert “it wasn’t a *true* exile: far from it. I am exiled even from the definition of exile” (133; emphasis added). Hoffman supports that view of a unitary definition, the idea there is a true and a false exile, as she argues: “It matters enormously, for starters, whether you choose to leave or are forced to” and this

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<sup>2</sup> In this discussion Said’s notion of postcoloniality, inseparable from his theories, is used in a limited sense because it is not applicable to the chosen authors from a historical point of view.



distinction is seen to determine how one expresses their personal experience of exile, by calling oneself an expatriate, an émigré, an immigrant, or an exile (“New Nomads” 40). Although the particularities of individual circumstances of exile are significant and by no means to be overlooked, it is difficult to ascertain a clear distinction between what is enforced and what is not. In other words, exile is, once again, more complex than such a binary. Kate Averis warns against “establishing a moral order” of experiences (13) and employs the notion of “forced choice” as a more adequate descriptor, which includes both force and choice as exile’s constitutive elements (17). Looking once more to the narratives of exile, this notion of forced choice is almost explicitly voiced. The narrator in Vlasopolos’ autobiography speaks of “her [mother’s] desire to leave the country” (9), the family’s move from Romania to Europe to finally settle in the United States, being influenced by the growing oppression of the communist regime. A similar trajectory from Eastern Europe to the United States is present in Hoffman’s autobiography, as the narrator soliloquises: “What are the ceremonies for such departures – departures that are neither entirely chosen nor entirely forced, and that are chosen and forced at the same time?” (87). It could, therefore, be argued that what is at play is located somewhere in between – the migrations designated by the term exile involve both some degree of choice and some degree of necessity.<sup>3</sup> Speaking of a true and a false exile as such, although common, does not make a tenable argument to make and it would be more productive to look at exile as a condition which is not a binary, but exists on a spectrum. Accordingly, this could in part explain another recurring feature in the discussions of exile: the usage of varied designations, which are, in some cases, unmethodically employed both by theorists and writers.

Naturally, the different terms, be they emigrant, expatriate or émigré, diversify and complicate the discussion of exile. That being so, each of the additional terms brings forth another set of definitions and considerations,<sup>4</sup> yet what is of interest presently is how they interact and share in the literal and symbolic space of exile. It could be argued emigrants, expatriates, and émigrés tend to emphasise their type of displacement is in fact exile because the term is charged with a distinct emotional valence. Averis recognises this emotional dimension as she asserts there is a “nuance of trauma present in the term ‘exile’” (11), which other terms do not necessarily contain, while André Aciman describes it as a “condition [...] of pain” (13). A close reading of texts by the chosen authors confirms this, seeing as the

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<sup>3</sup> See Averis 11-19 for more on the false dichotomy between forced and voluntary exile.

<sup>4</sup> It is generally agreed that the diverse terms describe different psychological and social realities. For a more detailed but by no means exhaustive insight, see: Hoffman 40; Neubauer, “Exile: Home of the Twentieth Century.” 8-10; Said, *Reflections on Exile*, 181.

experience of displacement is often described as distressing: “a painful physical detachment” (Lahiri 125), an experience of “remolding [which] will hurt” (Hoffman, *Lost in Translation* 159), “a violence of loss” (Vlasopolos ix), a state of “uncertainty, nausea, and... dizziness” (Huston 90). The underlying emotional affliction makes of exile an impactful term, which resonates with expatriates and émigrés, leading them to self-identify as exiles as well. However, they do not claim the term exile without some reservations. To better illustrate what type of experience it is, the exile of expatriates and the like is often additionally characterised based on motivations or circumstances. Thus, for example, theorists distinguish between a political and a religious exile, seen already in the initial definition by Pavel (28), Said speaks of intellectual exile, which could overlap with cultural exile, so termed by Averis (68), then linguistic exile, a category often adopted when discussing second language writers like Joseph Conrad or Samuel Beckett (Almeida and De Vasconcelos Magalhães Vera 104) and so forth. These different types of exile are present in the chosen works of women writers, exemplifying the need to rethink a unitary and restrictive definition of exile.

Looking at the primary texts, Lahiri’s narrator speaks of “linguistic exile” (19), while Huston’s autobiography offers additional designations, namely geographic and social exile (the latter also used by Eagleton). Her narrator continues to explain she in fact inhabits both categories (Huston 10-15), which could suggest they present different layers of exile experienced by a subject, which are mutually constitutive, rather than being self-contained. Moreover, “people in exile” (8), in Huston’s text are also often designated as expatriates (9), attesting to the plasticity of the term. Vlasopolos’ narrative exemplifies the commonality between the varied terms: her “story of exile” (ix) details the experience of “years as emigrants then immigrants” (9). Finally, Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation* adheres to exile as the designation for the experience of displacement without further qualifying it. However, the term emigration is used alongside exile and the narrator does not exclusively self-identify as an exile, but also as an immigrant (134). Consequently, it could be argued the terms exile, emigrant, expatriate, and émigré are almost inextricably linked, be it through their habitual substitution or through specifying the type of exile so it could fit within other categories of displacement. What can be seen, thus, is the difficulty to strictly delineate the confines between exile and other terms. Jane Stabler aptly sums it up, arguing that “a systematic desynonymization of the categories of exile, refugee, expatriate, and émigré is impossible to sustain except in the most general terms, as their imaginative conditions overlap and run into each other” (5). Consequently, this study will not concern itself with regulating who or what can be deemed exile and for that reason the

usage of terms will coincide with how they are used by the authors themselves, whose experiences are characterised by common tropes, if not entirely common circumstances. It could be argued, then, that exile subsumes a range of experiences and lends itself to a metaphorical understanding, as put at the beginning of the present exploration of the term. However, there seems to be a jarring discrepancy between the widespread universalisation of the term exile in theoretical discussions and its personification. In other words, for all its universality, the figure of the exile is often understood as a male figure and the universal is equated with his point of view, which bears importance for exiled women writers and their narratives.

When considering a poetics of exile specifically, it cannot be ignored that the writer-(in) exile, much in line with the customs of traditional literary history, has by and large been a male author by default. As feminist critics have argued, the literary canon is androcentric and by that virtue a man's experience is centralised and considered to be *the* human experience. Although it cannot be argued that texts written by men absolutely fail to represent experiences of women (and vice versa), Rita Felski convincingly asserts: "we are accustomed to finding broader resonances in male bodies, to glimpsing the sublime in stories of heroic struggle and drawing existential metaphors out of images of male solitude" (17). Women's experiences in this framework are not given equal authority and, as Judith Fetterley argues, they are rendered powerless, "while being reminded that to be male – to be universal... – is to be *not female*" (xiii).<sup>5</sup> Herein lies the issue of the universality of exile, or rather its appearance of universality: it privileges a certain point of view, which is oftentimes not questioned in the discussions on exile. For instance, Stabler argues that "narratives of exile form some of the primary myths of Western literature... as told by Homer, Dante, and Milton" (ix). Eagleton posits: "the heights of modern English literature have been dominated by foreigners and émigrés: Conrad, James, Eliot, Pound, Yeats, Joyce" (9), while Kaplan adds more men to the list, "Nabokov, Beckett and Borges", albeit she in fact questions the model of the author-exile (*Questions of Travel* 25). Kaplan thus argues, echoing Felski, that Euro-American discourses privilege the "masculinised solitary figure", which became "a particularly cherished myth" (*The Poetics of Displacement* 9). The myth, it could be argued, prevails to this day, making apparent the gendered nature of

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<sup>5</sup> In her book, Fetterley analyses American literature but her observations can be applied to the literary canon as a whole. She herself states the chosen novels "stand for a much larger body of literature; their individual and collective designs can be found elsewhere repeatedly" (xxiv).

exile. Such a development is ironic to some extent, women being exiled from exile itself, when their otherness in the patriarchal schema displaces them and inhibits their belonging.

Looking beyond the prevailing discussion of exile, however, feminist critics have granted “women exemplary status as strangers and exiles” (Smith 6), noticing in their narratives that displacement “begins *before* the journey from home to elsewhere, begins indeed within the home and homeland and travels with the women as they face the difficulties of negotiating between new ways and old ways of living” (Friedman qtd. in Hirsch and Miller 6). The familiarity with exile does not make it any less disorienting but, as will be discussed, it can be seen as crucial for a woman’s self-discovery, which is closely tied to her self-expression. Thus, women’s narratives of exile demonstrate it is a productive site for re-negotiating identity, where the new environment forces them to confront issues of self-representation within a different matrix. It is in exile that the chosen authors speak concomitantly about becoming writers and women anew, as they explore how to find a voice, literally and metaphorically, in a new language.

## 2.2. Exophony

As opposed to exile, the term exophony has not been as widely employed to garner extensive debate. Consequently, it is necessary to explain the insistence on its application as the most appropriate term for the literature in question, together with the reasons for discounting other superficially adequate choices already in use in scholarly discussions: cross-cultural, intercultural, translingual, polyphonic, or immigrant literature.

Undoubtedly, using one term in place of the other could be seen as anything from trivial to essentialist. Chantal Wright’s work on exophony has been indispensable for the present discussion and she herself rightfully states that “the search for a label for this type of writing continues the tradition of terminological squabbling which has often prevented true engagement with these texts” (“Writing in the ‘Grey Zone’” 38). True engagement, however, can be achieved if the body of authors is clearly demarcated based on a set of shared features. By applying the term exophony, the constant repetition of reasons why a set of authors have been grouped together can be avoided. The contention underlying this study is that the experience of exile leads the focus group of authors to exophony – “the phenomenon where a writer adopts a literary language other than his or her mother tongue, entirely replacing or complementing his or her native language as a vehicle of literary expression” (Wright,

“Introduction” 9). If stopped here, one could argue the terms translingual or polyphonic writing could be used in place of exophony without any change in meaning – they foreground the use of multiple (*poly*) languages, looking beyond (*trans*) the monolingual paradigm. This argument, however, would be somewhat expeditious because exophony provides an added specificity the two terms do not possess. That is, the terms polyphonic or translingual cast a categorically wide net, which groups together extremely diverse literary works, the unifying factor being only the utilisation of more than one language, but even that, however, remains rather vague. Naturally, the contexts that led authors to use one language in place of or in addition to the other, in what capacity, and to which ends, are as diverse as the authors themselves. It is worth keeping in mind, biographical categorisation should be used with caution as it is oftentimes a detriment to thematic and stylistic features of the texts explored. However, in this case of women’s autobiographical writing the contextualisation is part and parcel of both thematic and stylistic preoccupations. The circumstances of adopting a non-native language and using it for literary expression is a biographical reality and a thematic preoccupation in the works of the four authors in this study. As such, the narrators speak of their experiences of exophony, which followed exile, thus becoming exemplars of the phenomenon while exploring it at the same time. The term exophony adequately describes the chosen narratives, whereas polyphonic and translingual writing are not as specific – they do not differentiate between native and non-native writing, nor do they remark on the interrelationship between the multiple languages utilised. Lahiri’s narrator highlights the importance of specificity as she longs for a tradition of writing to belong to:

When I think of authors who decided, for one reason or another, to work in a foreign language, I don’t feel I’m a legitimate member of that group, either. Beckett lived in France for decades before writing in French, Nabokov had learned English as a child, Conrad spent a long time at sea, absorbing English before becoming an Anglophone rather than a Polish writer. (191)

The sense of not belonging to a group as its legitimate member points to the limits of terminology used for writing in a non-native language. The emphasis here is on time spent in a context where the language of writing is habitually used, implying it is tied to a better proficiency and grasp on the chosen language. No less significant is the fact that the narrator is comparing herself to male authors routinely seen as bastions of the Western literary canon – the membership to which is exclusive as is. The concept of exophony, however, offers the

desired legitimacy and space to authors who perhaps do not fit into the prevailing ideas of bilingualism and the necessary proficiency levels needed for ‘serious’ literary endeavours. Returning to Wright, she provides the already mentioned specificity, continuing her definition of exophony with an important caveat: “The adopted language is typically acquired as an adult; exophonic writers are not bilingual in the sense that they grew up speaking two languages, and indeed do not necessarily achieve the type of spoken fluency associated with the term ‘bilingualism’” (“Introduction” 9).<sup>6</sup> This distinction is crucial since it is explored by the authors and seen in the four narratives: a chapter in Huston’s *Losing North* is titled “False Bilingualism,” while Lahiri’s narrator laments “I’m not even bilingual” (129). Similarly, in Hoffman’s text the protagonist is grappling with her second language, admitting “I have so little language” (*Lost* 181), and Vlasopolos’ memoir starts by affirming the primacy of the native Romanian, explaining that the remembrances are “distorted... in the translation from native to *other* tongue” (x; emphasis added). Huston and Lahiri moved from anglophone contexts to writing in French and Italian respectively in their adult years, and now publish work in both languages. Hoffman and Vlasopolos, on the other hand, can be paired up due to the fact they adopted their literary language, English, as adolescents and had fully established primary attachments to their childhood idioms – Polish and Romanian.

Childhood is, in fact, a recurrent motif in all four narratives and is analogous to the point of origin before exile. More precisely, it could be argued that childhood as the sense-making period in the lives of the narrator-protagonists is vital as it provides a framework not only for literary expression but for understanding subsequent life experiences. Exophony, creating outside of the confines of the native language used in childhood, as such presents a rupture in an established configuration (much like exile). From exophony derives, as Wright puts it, “a sensibility born of having lived one’s linguistic childhood elsewhere... an awareness of difference, of other ways of doing things” (“Exophony” 33). The awareness Wright brings up could be seen as cultural awareness, which oftentimes results in the application of categories cross-cultural or intercultural when analysing non-native writing. Both are relatively imprecise; they suggest narratives concerned with varied cultural contexts. Moreover, they could be applied to any form of travel writing, even including texts within the colonial and postcolonial

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<sup>6</sup> Demystifying folk linguistic views on bilingualism is not the scope of this study, yet it is important to note the autobiographical texts analysed here share in the limiting beliefs of who bilinguals are and what it means to be bilingual. Namely, they uphold the idea of an “ideal” bilingual, fully fluent in two languages, with the notion of a “perfect” balance between them as being of utmost importance. For a wholistic view on bilingualism, see: Grosjean, *Studying Bilinguals*, 9-13.

tradition, historically inapplicable to the chosen corpus. Relatedly, Craith uses one of the interpretations of the term intercultural writing to categorise “relations between cultural settings that are *largely equal*” (15; emphasis added). The notion of balance or equality between cultures is as ambiguous as the assumed equality between languages in bilingual contexts – such cases are rare and when it comes to culture the dominance of one culture is almost always present.<sup>7</sup> The four chosen authors make a point of narrating exactly the opposite experience than that of a “largely equal” cultural setting. They problematise the imbalance or dominance of one culture, rooted in a childhood spent elsewhere, in the moment it is found within a new cultural framework. The term exophony can therefore be seen as preferred because it acknowledges the existence of this imbalance, considering that the writers have acquired their respective languages of expression later in life.

Furthermore, the impact of elsewhere is only made apparent after some form of displacement, which results in another label used more widely than exophony – immigrant or emigrant literature. Although a good fit since immigration is a thematic concern in the four chosen works, it would imply disregarding the almost relentless insistence on exile as the preferred descriptor for the narrated experiences, as already discussed. From this follows the main issue of such a category: its tendency to appear thematically prescriptive rather than descriptive, meaning it imposes an identity without regard to whether it is necessarily embraced. Additionally, strict insistence on thematical similarity of the term immigrant/emigrant writing obscures the stylistic choices made, whereas exophony describes a linguistic state (non-native writing) from which follows a greater attentiveness to style. For Lahiri, Hoffman, Huston and Vlasopolos, writing in an acquired language takes on a specific form – all four writers turn to autobiography, which is seen as vital in the process of developing their subjectivity. In other words, through and by narration in a new language a (re)new(ed) sense of self is constructed since adaptation to different linguistic and cultural realities questions the fixedness of preconceived notions about the self, and the self in relation to others. The testimonial and self-reflexive style of autobiographies is fitting for exophonic subjects whose writing is predicated, as exemplified, on the awareness of difference. It could be argued this is doubly true for women autobiographers because they, along with other minorities, have been deemed different and thus their autobiographies can be seen as transgressive from the outset.

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<sup>7</sup> See Grosjean “The Bicultural Person: A Short Introduction,” 213-220.

### 2.3. Autobiography

Autobiography has been continuously on the rise in recent decades, so much so a new field, life-writing, emerged to cover the proliferating iterations of, fundamentally, people's life stories told in their own words (Novak 1). In this study autobiography will be used to denote a text in which author, narrator, and subject overlap, while being "clearly published as such, whether through its title or subtitle, or through the way its status as non-fiction is indicated by the circumstances or manner of its publication and presentation" (Gudmundsdóttir 2). The choice of writing an autobiography is more than fitting for Hoffman, Huston, Lahiri and Vlasopolos – the questions raised by the genre, ones concerning self-representation, identity and the relationship with the past are the same set of questions asked by writers in exile, especially those who turn to exophony. In this way the poetics of exile, the phenomenon of exophony and the genre of autobiography seem to converge, as the preoccupations raised are one and the same. Paul John Eakin inadvertently confirms this claim as he observes, "the writing of autobiography emerges as a second acquisition of language, a second coming into being of self, a self-conscious self-consciousness" (9). For the chosen writers, Eakin's claim is no mere metaphor since the route from exile to exophony comprises quite literally an acquisition of another language, and a re-invention in another cultural context.

It cannot be said, however, that re-invention is the same for all subjects, as Susan Stanford Friedman argues "the self, self-creation and self-consciousness are profoundly different for women, minorities, and many non-Western peoples" (34). These profound differences stem from ways in which identities are socially constructed and determined by the dominant culture, which dictates the male modes of subjectivity as standard, universal. Since the foundations of autobiography have been set by Saint Augustine and Rousseau, it could be argued the genre has been established according to male subjects, and subsequently it has also underpinned the centrality of a universal "masculine...Western and middle-class modes of subjectivity" (Anderson 3). Accordingly, women's autobiographical texts have been judged by male norms, excluding them from the accepted canon. Absence, however, does not signify a lack of production but reflects the tradition of judging women's autobiographical texts as "unimportant, crude or illegitimate" (Anderson 86). Therefore, the absent female émigré is not so much absent as she is writing independently from the autobiographical models set for her to follow, subverting the accepted logic behind what selfhood and self-representation look like.



The element largely indispensable in women's autobiographical narratives, which is not as often found in writing by men, is self-creation alongside and through others. A sense of interdependence and connection, mainly with other women, is seen as key for the development of one's own identity and consequently of finding one's voice as a writer. In her own corpus of women's autobiographical texts, Mary G. Mason also emphasises the importance of female relationality, as she rightly proposes: "the self-discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some 'other'" (210). The presence of another consciousness is even more pertinent for exophonic subjects, where the process of learning another language is hardly an undertaking done in isolation. Drawing on Aneta Pavlenko's study of language memoir, the feature of relationality is again highlighted. Female narrators as language learners, Pavlenko argues, "attempt to re-create themselves through others" ("Language Learning Memoirs" 228), with the process of language learning prominent in their autobiographies. On the other hand, men writing autobiographies in their non-native language "avoid talking about their own language learning and instead ponder upon more 'universal' and philosophical issues" (Pavlenko, "Language Learning Memoirs" 223), which follows the conventions of the autobiographical genre.

Exploring the chosen body of autobiographical texts is not an exercise in distinguishing features more prevalent in work written by women as opposed to men, but it is meant to identify and valorise often undermined forms of autobiography and their subjects. It must be noted, any one subject is constituted by several determinants like race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class, not only by gender. For example, the fact all four narrators are either successful academics or successful authors (or both), which is a decidedly upper-middle-class position, is not negligible for their autobiographic self-creation. All four authors, well versed in critical theory, employ allusions to other texts and authors and offer meta-commentary throughout their narratives. Theorising about their own lived experiences thus suggests a specific social positioning, that of the intellectual elite.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, choosing a country and a language, as Lahiri and Huston have done, is undeniably a product of privilege and any analysis which obscures that fact is weakened for it. At the same time, however, three of the four authors occupy a minority

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<sup>8</sup> As Jonathan Friedman argues: "In the works of the post-colonial border-crossers, it is always the poet, the artist, the intellectual, who sustains this displacement and objectifies it in the printed word. But who reads the poetry, and what are the other kinds of identification occurring in the lower reaches of social reality?" See: "Global Crises, the Struggle for Cultural Identity and Intellectual Porkbarrelling: Cosmopolitans versus Locals, Ethnic and Nationals in an Era of De-hegemonisation."

position: Hoffman and Vlasopolos are Jewish, which had largely contributed to their exile, while Lahiri is of Bengali origin, a visible sign of foreignness when in Italy. The differences among the authors in the corpus testify to the plurality of positions from which women write, making it clear there is no one representative Woman that speaks for all, but a variety of voices which may or may not converge. The forthcoming analysis, however, privileges gender because of its undeniable presence in the chosen women's autobiographies. It is a point of convergence and a visible preoccupation, and as such it is discussed by the narrators in the specific context of transitioning from one socio-cultural context to another. Thus, the chosen narratives are seen to explore what it means to become a woman in exile, where the performativity of gender per Judith Butler is intensified by the need to perform linguistically and adapt culturally. Another theme that resurfaces in women's autobiographical writing is the importance of becoming an author, which is, again, seen as a gendered issue as it is linked to authority (or the lack thereof) of one's voice. Feminist critics recognise this theme as symbolic of taking control and breaking away from traditional female roles. Writing an autobiography, argues Gunnthórunn Gudmundsdóttir, is a particularly powerful choice, "for if writing and being able to express yourself freely and independently can change your life, autobiography must offer that kind of liberation as well, since it is the ultimate tool for self-representation: telling your own story, giving birth to yourself, and thereby claiming agency and uniqueness" (123). It is autobiography, therefore, which gives female émigrés the perfect opening to regain a sense of self after multiple displacements.

### 3. Becoming a Woman (Anew) in Exile

Looking at autobiographies by Hoffman, Huston, Lahiri and Vlasopolos, it could be argued that what is represented is a process of developing one's subjectivity, through which a new sense of self comes into being. This development manifests itself as gendered, wherein the space from exile to exophony, which the protagonists inhabit, reveals the social construction of their speaking position, that of being, or rather, *becoming* a woman.

The emphasis is put on becoming a woman which, following from Butler, can be understood as an ongoing process made of performative acts ("Performative Acts" 521). Once in exile, the protagonists are made aware of the different ways in which gender is constructed in their new environments and are, in the case of Hoffman and Vlasopolos, guided through the process of becoming a woman "in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 22). Lahiri and Huston, however, are transformed into becoming women anew through the distance granted by the understanding of the linguistic and gender performance required of them. Performance is, in fact, a theme that emerges in all four autobiographies, where recurring tropes of pretence and masquerade interact with ideas of gender. Once in exile, the protagonists are made aware of gender identity as performatively constructed and they are required to learn the codes of their new cultural settings – Hoffman and Vlasopolos trading the European continent for the North American, while Lahiri and Huston's exile takes place in the opposite direction. The attitudes expressed towards performativity are divided along the same lines. That is, in autobiographies by Lahiri and Huston the newfound awareness of the performative quality of identity is seen as an opportunity for independence and gives the protagonists a sense of agency in constructing their subjectivity. On the other hand, Hoffman and Vlasopolos' narratives equate performance with insecurity and falsity, where having to conform to existing norms brings to the fore more conflicting emotions.

Apart from performance, the second theme of relevance to becoming a woman in exile is the relationship the protagonists have with their mothers, who can be seen as primary models of both gender norms and modes of subjectivity available for women. The mother-daughter relationship is principal in many autobiographies written by women, and it has been given great attention from feminist theorists throughout the years, making it an area that demands attention in "any discussion of gender and autobiography" (Gudmundsdóttir 118). Once again, a division between the chosen autobiographies emerges based on the specific circumstances of exile

described. Hoffman and Vlasopolos present narratives in which mothers are explicitly and implicitly present as characters, in exile with their daughters. Lahiri and Huston construct their texts without a physical presence of mothers as characters, yet with a strong underlying sense of opposition to the mother figure. Another dimension to the autobiographies of the latter two authors is given by the fact the protagonists' relationship with their respective mothers is given weight by their own embodiment of that role. Ideas of mothering, however, are not confined to the common referent but in these exophonic works also stand for mothering the new language of writing. In that light, it could be argued all four autobiographies provide insight into the role of the mother and, more importantly, show its influence on the ideas of gender and subjectivity construction.

What is noticeable thus far is that the four autobiographies lend themselves to a two-set division, which will be the approach followed in the forthcoming analysis. Such grouping within the corpus gives more space to connect ideas not present in all four works. The interpretative key dividing the two sets of autobiographies is the age at which exile occurs, or rather the life period that coincides with exile. In other words, becoming a woman and developing one's subjectivity in circumstances of exile is experienced by adults in Lahiri and Huston, while Hoffman and Vlasopolos describe the exile of adolescents. Age greatly affects the responses of protagonists to exile as well as their attitudes towards ideas of gender. Catherine Driscoll posits that adolescent girls are "defined as in transition or in process relative to dominant ideas of Womanhood" (Driscoll 7) and it is, therefore, opportune to analyse Hoffman and Vlasopolos' autobiographies first and then to look at Lahiri and Huston's texts. Doing so will highlight how the dominant ideas of being a woman learnt in adolescence present themselves in writing by adults in exile.

### 3.1. Hoffman and Vlasopolos: Adolescence in Exile

Hoffman's *Lost in Translation* and Vlasopolos' *No Return Address* are examples of life-writing which to a substantial extent follow the conventions of autobiography: they recount life events starting from childhood up to the moment of writing. Of special interest here is the period right after childhood, that of adolescence, since it overlaps with the central theme of exile and influences how the event is viewed by the then thirteen- and fourteen-year-old protagonists Eva and Anca. Adolescence is not only important because it marks the beginning of their exile but also because "the difficult negotiations and performances of feminine adolescence are crucial data for modern theories of subjectivity" (Driscoll 7). Furthermore,

given that adolescence is seen as a transition towards a normative becoming-woman, or rather “an assemblage of transitions... all of which are culturally specific, subject to interpretation and regimes of power” (Driscoll 58), adolescence in *exile*, in itself a transition full of difficulties due to cultural differences, can be seen as a double bind. The commonality of struggle between the two conditions is also noted by Wolff who suggests *Lost in Translation* is a “narrative of struggle in another language and culture (though it is also simply a record of the normal agonies of adolescence)” (13). In other words, both exile and adolescence can be seen as formidable for the protagonists, wherein they undergo transitions in line with a set of culturally established norms. However, due to exile (a not so normal agony that every adolescent faces), the two protagonists must learn to navigate new rules for performing their gender identity, all the while being reminded of their (no longer useful) primary models of womanhood, represented by their mothers.

For the adolescent protagonists exile is a gendered phenomenon – it is in exile they must reckon with becoming intelligible to others, which is done through becoming gendered subjects, becoming women. According to Butler, there is, in fact, no other way: “‘persons’ only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility” (*Gender Trouble* 22). The performativity that underlies this process of gendering comes to the surface since the space of exile does not construct gender equally to the Eastern European contexts of Poland and Romania. To that end, Eva wonders: “How am I to become a woman in an American vein...? The allegory of gender is different here, and it unfolds around different typologies and different themes” (Hoffman, *Lost* 190). Becoming a woman “in an American vein” or the “question of femininity” (179, 190) as it is called in the autobiography, poses a problem exactly because of the awareness of the differences between the two cultural contexts. That is to say, the gender performance is different, and Eva voices a distaste for the practices of femininity on show: “these elaborate preparations are somehow disturbing to me, as if we were in a harem and remodelling ourselves into a special species – ‘girls’ – so that we can appeal to that other, alien species, boys” (130). The preparations for a party, which include trying on clothes and putting on makeup, along with demonstrating appropriate ways to behave, are seen as excessive, with the emphasis on the strangeness of it. Although both girls and boys are described as “species,” only the noun ‘girls’ is situated in inverted commas. This further underlines it as a concept which needs to be constructed, it is something that needs to be fit into, and is not a given.

Danuta Zadworna-Fjellestad makes of the episodes of adolescent gender performativity an argument worth considering. She maintains the rituals of femininity Eva is instructed to perform, that is, to adopt to the American norms of becoming a woman, represent her “exile from her own gendered body,” which is “by far the most painful form of exile” (139). It is tempting to assume, as Zadworna-Fjellestad does, that exile which takes place occurs in the direction away from the gendered body. She argues that in Poland, Eva “never questions her own femininity” (Zadworna-Fjellestad 140), yet this could very well be attributed to the fact Eva was a child in Poland, and as such was not positioned as fully feminine, her body not fully gendered before puberty.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, in Poland Eva is familiar with the dominant codes of femininity and does not feel the necessity to question them. Thus, as far as the adolescent protagonist is concerned, it would be more accurate to argue that in exile her body is in the process of becoming completely gendered and therein lies the struggle. The exile that is taking place is one *into* a fully gendered body, rather than one from her own gendered body, as Zadworna-Fjellestad proposes. Vlasopolos’ autobiography serves to support this view – it echoes the transition from childhood to adolescence as exile into a gendered body: “As I left Romania and my childhood friends, I entered the fully gendered world of Western adolescence, which seemed in many ways a harder exile than the strictly geographic” (104). “The fully gendered world” Anca enters is significantly one of “*Western* adolescence,” not just adolescence. As such, going back to Wolff, the “normal agonies of adolescence” (13), cannot be regarded as all that normal, given that they are experienced in exile. They are more salient, both perceptually and emotionally, to the point that becoming women is seen as exile in both autobiographies.

The struggle of the transition into womanhood is often portrayed in social situations, the preparations for the party being an example. Doing gender for adolescent girls is also understood in relation to boys in a given social setting – Eva and her friends are getting ready to appeal to boys, that is, they are performing gender based on the dominant views of womanhood, those which are placed within a heterosexual matrix. Anca is guided to becoming a woman in exile by her peers, again in the context of a party: “they enlightened me about the spring ritual designed to begin teaching women to work against one another for the distinction of being selected by men” (Vlasopolos 187). The “spring ritual” in question is the school prom and much like the party Eva attended, it works as an educational space for adolescent girls

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<sup>9</sup> On the differences between childhood and adolescence as related to gendering and corporeality, see Driscoll, “Puberty”, 79-104.

when it comes to doing gender, teaching what (and who) is acceptable and desirable, in accordance with the prevalent norms. Becoming women for the two protagonists is a more conscious process and, based on the ironic undertones that mark the narration, not one they are entirely supportive of. More generally, a life in a new language exacerbates the awareness of the performative nature of identity, illuminating rites and practices seen as common-sense by the members of that particular culture. To that end, Eva announces: “I am enraged at the false persona I’m being stuffed into” (Hoffman, *Lost* 119). In exile, Eva’s point of reference is still what she had learnt in Poland so everything from the language to the customs of her new environment is seen as unnatural; it requires conscious effort and is thus deemed false. On the other hand, Anca underlines the skill necessary to make it in exile, she wishes to live “at least as a skilled chameleon” (Vlasopolos 125). It could be argued that taking on a chameleonic quality is analogous to being aware that identity requires a continuous performance, in accordance with the setting inhabited. As the narratives unfold, the two adolescent protagonists become more fluent in the language and in the ways of their environments, creating a conflict between being faithful to one’s origins and replacing them to conform to new norms. This internal conflict is made visible through the representation of the contradictory mother-daughter relationship.

In both autobiographies mothers accompany their daughters in exile; however, their transitions seem less concrete than those of their daughters. In other words, the mothers are portrayed as more tethered to the “old world” and as such it could be argued they are a constricting force for the daughters’ successful development. As Gudmundsdóttir notes in her study of women’s autobiographies, the common implication is that to become women, to develop their own subjectivity, the protagonists must break away from their respective mothers (110). At the same time, the mother’s presence is almost unavoidable – the physical presence is as salient as the mental one, as it infringes on the daughter’s point of view.

To understand the mother solely in opposition to the daughter would be misleading. Such stark antithesis is not productive, especially in the case of Vlasopolos’ autobiography, which is in large part relational since she recounts her mother’s life story through her own. Closeness and a sense of commitment are, therefore, important to note in both autobiographies. The two sentiments co-exist, as evident from Anca’s viewpoint: “She would mock my attempts at assimilation, not realizing how torn I was between being faithful to what I saw as a higher, more civilized mode of behavior and wanting to be, at least at moments, like everybody else”

(133). Wanting to be like everybody else as opposed to being faithful to her cultural background, to her mother, creates a push and pull dynamic. Ultimately, it is resolved by choosing an independent path from the mother, aligning herself to the new codes demanded by exile: “Inevitably, I picked up cues about American culture that my mother did not notice or, having noticed, rejected” (133). As was already discussed, Anca realises the necessity of becoming chameleonic, made easier by her age, which “impinges on... her response to the host culture, sense of exile from the old, and relationship to... her parents as fellow migrants” (Besmeres 247). Mary Besmeres suggests that Vlasopolos’ autobiography underplays the chasm between mother and daughter, obscuring “the cultural gap that divides Anca from Mimi, who continues to identify as a Romanian immigrant, where her daughter has, in some sense at least, ceased to be an immigrant” (239).

A parallel can certainly be drawn between Eva and her mother in Hoffman’s autobiography. In exile, Eva is seen as more receptive to the new culture and language, while her mother rejects it, creating feelings of contradiction within Eva: “My mother says I’m becoming ‘English.’ This hurts me, because I know she means I’m becoming cold. I’m no colder than I’ve ever been, but I’m learning to be less demonstrative” (Hoffman, *Lost* 147). Eva’s mother notices her daughter is moving away from their shared cultural context, a change that also indicates a growing distance between them. “Becoming ‘English’,” therefore, creates contrasting feelings, since adaptation is necessary, but it also means separation. Eva understands her mother’s precarious position in exile, in relation to her not yet adult daughter: “here, she has lost her sureness, her authority” (146). Meanwhile Eva’s confidence grows as she decides on her own becoming in exile: “I’ll be made, like a mosaic, of fragments — and my consciousness of them” (165).

The narrator’s consciousness extends far beyond the awareness of identity as fragmentary. Hoffman’s autobiography is filled with meta-commentary, “references to psychoanalytical theory, structuralism, post-structuralism and postmodern philosophy” (Polouektova 443). It is, thus, unsurprising that the subject of gender and the mother-daughter relationship in particular, is addressed explicitly, with humour: “A mother, for heaven’s sake, is a mother” (Hoffman, *Lost* 269), and earnestness: “For as time goes on, my own relations with my mother become... well, more psychological. She becomes the mother-in-my-head, a figment of my psyche and imagination with which I struggle mightily and in a vacuum” (270-71). Once more, it is as if the two autobiographies are in conversation with one another, as



Vlasopolos' narrator reveals that over the years "something inside me would rebel... curiously always in my mother's voice" (159). The now adult narrators are testifying to their mothers' presence as almost all-pervasive, inhabiting their thoughts. It could be argued that although feeling alienated by the growing distance created by their approaches to the exilic condition, the two, now adult, protagonists identify with their respective mothers, having internalised their voices. Identification does not relegate their own subjectivity but establishes it in relation to the mother, situating it within a genealogy of women. Luce Irigaray points out that it is exactly this genealogy which roots women in their identity (421). Thus, it could be said, becoming women in exile is a process that considers the origins (as symbolised by mothers) and the new cultural codes that inform how to "do gender". In the two autobiographies by Hoffman and Vlasopolos, it is described as process of conciliation and redefinition, negotiating which pieces of the mosaic, in Eva's words, to hold on to and which to let go of.

### 3.2. Huston and Lahiri: Adulthood in Exile

Even just a perfunctory look at Lahiri and Huston's autobiographies testifies to the "multifarious location of postmodern autobiographical writing" (Kaplan, *Poetics* i). Firstly, the two authors do not follow the customs of chronologically detailing life events, as is the case in autobiographical writings of Hoffman and Vlasopolos. Instead, the autobiographies are structured as a series of loosely arranged reflections, with an emphasis on language announced in both titles. Moreover, the titles make the exophonic nature of the two works known by the play on words: Lahiri's *In Other Words* introduces a text that is written in Italian, while Huston's *Losing North* is a French saying used to mean to lose one's bearings, "forgetting what you were going to say" (Huston 2). The strong emphasis on language in both texts is closely related to identity construction in the new context of exile, where language is seen as "the medium by which and through which the 'self' is constructed" (Benstock 29). By choosing language to be "not only the tool but the subject" (Lahiri 221), the two authors recount their adulthood as greatly shaped by their languages of choice. This includes their ideas of gender, where becoming women in exile is tied to linguistic performance, which is in turn connected to gender performativity. Furthermore, there is a certain levity and playfulness in the narratives not seen in the two autobiographies analysed prior. One could argue, with struggles of adolescence behind them, Lahiri and Huston see their chosen exile as a space for reinvention. Their voluntary exile suggests a new independence and an intentional flight from the old, also visible in the portrayal of the mother-daughter relationships. Thus, the autobiographies

demonstrate that, in these two cases, becoming women in exile can be seen as a move away from the normative roles of womanhood (even if nominally), and a move towards personal transformation.

Lahiri and Huston's autobiographies show an awareness of age as constitutive to their experience of exile – being in exile in the period of adulthood shapes their views on almost every facet of this type of displacement. Lahiri asserts her positioning as an adult (37, 113), maintaining the linguistic switch to Italian gave her a “more adult gaze” (215), while Huston argues “and it's not *at all* the same thing to have lived in a country for the first twenty-five or another twenty-five years of one's life” (6). Age is one of the important factors influencing the experience of exile and the consequent strategies employed for negotiating the necessary adaptation in a new context. It could be argued that the awareness of performativity, which is at the basis of this negotiation, is more pronounced in autobiographies by Lahiri and Huston, when compared to those by Hoffman and Vlasopolos.

As adults who were integrated into one cultural system, the difference between the old and the new is met with a better sense of understanding and acceptance. To that end, Huston writes: “A person who decides, voluntarily, *as an adult*, unconstrained by outside circumstances, to leave her native land and adopt a hitherto unfamiliar language and culture, has to face the fact that for the rest of her life she will be involved in theatre, imitation, make-believe” (19; emphasis added), with Lahiri repeating a similar metaphor, claiming that “in the theatre of spoken Italian I think that I, too, have a role, a presence” (139). Theatre and role-playing permeate both autobiographies and these metaphors can be extended to gender performativity. Indeed, Huston makes the connection explicit in her text: “All things being equal, women are generally better at linguistic camouflage than men (...). Women are born actresses. They know all about adaptation; it's a part of their identity as women” (21-2). Huston here echoes a not uncommon line of reasoning: “[t]rained in the rules of femininity, accustomed to ‘putting on a face,’ to presenting themselves for the gaze of others, they know full well that gender is a product of art rather than nature. Women, in this light, are artful and self-conscious, highly adept at role-playing and performance” (Felski 75). It could, thus, be argued that becoming women in exile is just another in the line of adaptations expected of women, and one, in their adult age, they undertake as experienced in self-transformation. Viewed in this light, the process of gender performativity in exile can be seen as stimulating for women, since it represents a possibility of creating themselves anew. In Lahiri's autobiography almost all

reflections are mediated through the lens of learning Italian, but the contextualisation is of note: “There was no need to learn that language. No family, no cultural, social pressure. No necessity. (...) An independent path” (153). Since the desire to learn Italian was not motivated by any external factors, there is no wonder it is equated with independence – it represents a personal choice, honoured and fulfilled, which brings “a stunning clarity, a more profound self-awareness” (Lahiri 113).

Yasemin Yildiz recognises the potency of exophony exemplified in Lahiri’s autobiography, as she asserts that in some cases “a foreign language is a gateway to liberation and pleasure and provides new perspectives on the world and new experiences of it” (203). Accordingly, Huston offers a bridge between the newfound freedom in another language as it interacts with performing identity: “the fact that I’m perpetually ‘playing’ at being a francophone has given me a healthy distance from all other roles in life, including those of writer and mother” (27). Taking up another language and adapting to the French culture is seen as play, a performance, which is ultimately positive and pleasurable, as Yildiz argues. Moreover, the new perspective given by the foreign language is related to “all other roles in life” in general, to then specify the two roles of writer and mother. The emphasis on these two roles is hardly surprising, the themes of becoming a writer and the mother-daughter relationship as they intersect with gender appear time and again in autobiographies by women authors (Gudmundsdóttir 2). Here, however, the narrator is a mother herself, and a daughter of an absent mother, hardly mentioned in the narrative. Lahiri’s autobiography follows a similar principle, an adult daughter who represents herself in opposition to her mother, all the while being somewhat removed from that role. Instead of mothering in relation to their children, both autobiographies offer extended metaphors of mothering their new language, where the relationships with their own mothers are pushed aside. Thus, in a new language, distanced from the role of daughters (and mothers) they become women anew.

For the adult narrators of these two autobiographies, identification with the mother does not provide a stable footing in exile, as was the case in autobiographies by Hoffman and Vlasopolos. The approach is diametrically opposite: to develop their subjectivity the narrators detach themselves from their mothers, claiming to take a wholly different, independent path from them. The words in Huston’s text can certainly be applied to both, on their quest for autonomous self-definition, as she proclaims: “My plan is to invent myself, day by day, year by year” (53). The relationship of the narrators with their respective mothers can be seen as the

site of the first displacement, which, as is often argued, for women occurs even before their move from “home to elsewhere” (Friedman qtd. in Hirsch and Miller 6). Huston’s mother left when she was six years old, which is discretely mentioned in the narrative: “to reassure myself and perhaps even to survive, I had to learn to convincingly conjure up the love of the person who is usually the very symbol of proximity and presence – but who, in my case, was far away and permanently inaccessible” (87). The “very symbol of proximity and presence” is, with little doubt, her mother. Furthermore, the detachment that characterises the mother-daughter relationship is seen in the daughter’s wilful exile, her turning away from her mother tongue and trading the long-time interest in piano for the harpsichord: “I see English and the piano as motherly instruments. (...) What I was running away from when I turned my back on English and the piano seems quite clear” (50). The emphatic image of running away from the primary attachment is also present in Lahiri’s text. While her mother did not leave, she represents her Bengali origins, as opposed to the American upbringing and the English language Lahiri grew up with, when her parents moved to the United States. In that sense, the narrator sees Italian as a choice of her own – not imposed by her mother, nor by her American upbringing: “I think studying Italian is a flight from the long clash in my life between English and Bengali. A rejection of both the mother and the stepmother” (153).

It could be argued the mother tongue in these two texts, which is a “gendered and affectively charged kinship concept” (Yildiz 6), becomes almost interchangeable with the figure of the mother. Moreover, following from Gudmundsdóttir, writing an autobiography can be seen as giving birth to oneself, which “renders the mother's role obsolete and therefore symbolically kills her off” (122). Thus, instead of nurturing the mother-daughter relationship to develop one’s (gender) identity, both protagonists ‘mother’ their languages of choice. To that end, Lahiri’s narrator cuddles her Italian “like a newborn,” and she compares the process of translating her text from English to Italian to being “the mother of two children” (119). Huston’s text further explains the mothering of the other language: “The words say it well: your native or ‘mother’ tongue, the one you acquired in earliest childhood, enfolds and envelops you so that *you* belong with *it*, whereas with the ‘adopted’ tongue, it’s the other way around – you’re the one who needs to mother it, master it, and make it belong to you” (47). Mothering their chosen languages, both narrators voice their desire for authority in their self-invention, where they can instil their own rules. It could be argued this creative power is not only tied to their vocation as writers but as women as well, since in exile they have a sense of autonomy related to the expression of their gendered identity. That is, having a choice in how

they express themselves (in what language) makes them more aware of the possibility to be/come different women, not *their* mothers, and not *just* mothers.

Hoffman, Vlasopolos, Huston and Lahiri all recount their experiences of exile as closely connected to their becoming gendered subjects, becoming women. As established, the preference for the term ‘becoming’ rather than ‘being’ comes from the understanding that every facet of identity is made, in process, rather than a given stable entity. That being so, becoming women in exile for the four authors does (as expected) differ and one of the lines of division is the age at which they have started their exile. For the two adolescents, in the narratives of Hoffman and Vlasopolos, the process of becoming women is coloured by “struggle for proper femininity, or the struggle to retain a sense of self in the face of expected femininity” (Driscoll 58). As the narratives advance and the adolescents turn into adults, performing their gender identity in accordance with the new cultural systems and the resulting contradictory mother-daughter relationship are accepted as a by-product of exile, a necessity “to win in this new world” (Vlasopolos 133). On the other hand, Lahiri and Huston’s narratives offer an insight into exile as a deeply transformative space for adult, fully gendered subjects. Already part of the gendered world, the two narrators focus on creating a distance from their gender roles to take up a new language as one would a child. They relegate the relationships with their mothers to nurture a new language, and with it a new perspective of the world, transforming themselves into women anew.

#### 4. Becoming a Writer: Women's Voice(s) in Exile

In autobiographies by Hoffman, Huston, Lahiri and Vlasopolos exile can be seen as a catalyst for creative expression. Exile leads the writers to exophony, and thus it is in exile that they either become writers or rediscover their occupation as something wholly new. For them, writing becomes a way of not only consistently using a new language to better adapt to their country of exile but to explore their ideas of selfhood in the new context. In other words, becoming writers in exile for these autobiographers is related to understanding and (re)creating oneself. It is opportune to return to the metaphor proposed by Gudmundsdóttir, in which she sees writing an autobiography as a way of giving birth to oneself and one's story. In view of this, a sense of freedom and independence is implied in the process of writing, where the autobiographer is the final arbiter of their own experiences (123). Furthermore, as was discussed previously, giving birth to oneself suggests reducing the role of the mother and what she represents, together with detaching oneself (with varying degrees of success) from performing one's gender identity in accordance with normative principles. Subsequently, becoming a writer can be seen as intertwined with questions of gender identity.

More precisely, what is being problematised in telling one's story is the position of the woman writer. Indeed, all four narrators tackle the difficulty of not feeling authentic and authoritative as writers, often undermining their own voices. Furthermore, the exophonic status of the authors must also be taken into consideration when discussing anxiety as linked to expression in a non-native language. Anxiety of authorship takes on a different form in exile, where authors face linguistic and cultural adaptation, causing a separate set of insecurities and apprehensions. However, one of the ways the feelings of inadequacy are mediated is through connections with others. Finding one's voice is made easier through relationality (mainly with other women), where interdependence informs the writers' identities and aids their expression. Women's voice in exile is, thus, not universal but depends on their specific circumstances, while being created alongside the other who they come in contact with. As such, autobiographical giving birth to oneself is not necessarily a solitary project after all, but a series of relational acts through which the writers gain confidence both in themselves and in their craft.

#### 4.1. Finding a Voice: Anxiety and Authorship

When facing texts by women writers that exhibit a sense of apprehension about the creative process and concerns about the authority of one's voice and one's capabilities as an author, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar remain invaluable points of reference. Their seminal text *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* famously articulates the "anxiety of authorship" experienced by women writers, which largely colours their artistic self-definition (49). They explain that in the culture where literary authority is patriarchal, women feel alienated from their male predecessors, whose circumstances of creative expression are significantly different:

On the one hand, therefore, the woman writer's male precursors symbolize authority; on the other hand, despite their authority, they fail to define the ways in which she experiences her own identity as a writer. More, the masculine authority with which they construct their literary personae, as well as the fierce power struggles in which they engage in their efforts of self-creating, seem to the woman writer directly to contradict the terms of her own gender definition. (48)

Unable to identify with male writers and unable to write with the authority they symbolise, as it is not equally granted to their gender, women authors feel an "anxiety of authorship," which "requires them to deny the power and self-assertion implicit in their art" (Federico 2). Despite the fact Gilbert and Gubar recognise this anxiety in much literature written by women before the twentieth century, the strong, even haunting, presence of male authority figures is not negligible even in contemporary works. Accordingly, in all four autobiographies, there are references to male precursors who are seen as authoritative and often unreachable, be it in terms of literary achievement or style. While it could be argued that referencing male writers is done to establish a relation with those writing in specific, that is, exilic circumstances, the texts, however, suggest there is more to it than claiming literary lineage. The aim here is not to inscribe inferiority into women's writing where there is none (oftentimes hailed as a routine fault of feminist literary criticism), but to emphasise the almost reflexive turn to certain male authors, who then shape women's writing and experiences of authorship.

Reading the autobiographies by Hoffman, Huston, Lahiri and Vlasopolos, one can individuate a recurring theme of naming (and oftentimes comparing oneself to) the greats of the literary canon, who are exiles, multilinguals, or both. Hoffman's narrator lists the writers

of exile Nabokov, Kundera, and Milosz as “world’s experts of mourning,” (*Lost* 116), going on to voice a longing for expressing herself like Nabokov: “I wish I could define myself – as Nabokov defines both himself and his characters – by the telling detail...” (198). Eva thus wants Nabokov’s skills regarding not just literary expression but self-expression too. Huston’s text repeats the names of some of the authors who are cornerstones of the canon like Kundera, Beckett, and Kafka, as they embody the “transcendent subject,” free of “non-chosen bonds” (52), a subject position and social relation historically not afforded to women and men in equal measure. Once more, Nabokov is invoked in Lahiri’s autobiography, together with Beckett, and Conrad as authors who (to some degree) share the same condition of writing. That said, Lahiri does not feel as a “legitimate member of that group” (191), reflecting Gilbert and Gubar’s argument that women oftentimes feel separated from male literary history and subsequently lack authority in their creative efforts. Such view is directly expressed when Lahiri’s narrator asks rhetorically: “What does it mean, for a writer, to write without her own authority? Can I call myself an author, if I don’t feel authoritative?” (83).

Questioning one’s own authority as a writer and writing without any authority is confusing and can be seen as a struggle for any writer. In Gilbert and Gubar’s view it is a revisionary struggle for women writers, as they seek legitimisation of their writing, not provided by male writers. This argument can be seen in practice in two autobiographies as they demonstrate the importance of a female “ancestress” whose existence works as a validating agent (Hoffman *Lost* 163). Thus, Hoffman’s protagonist feels “particular affection” for the writer Mary Antin, who published her own story of exile that took place from Eastern Europe to America during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Antin seems to Eva “some amusing poltergeist” (163) and as such she recognises herself and her experiences in another, validating her writing efforts. Identically, Lahiri in the afterword to her autobiography recounts her discovery of the Hungarian writer Ágota Kristóf, who wrote in French about her struggles with learning that language in exile. In her she sees an example and her writing leaves her “reassured, less alone” (227), even though she acknowledges disparities between them. The treatment of male as opposed to female predecessors here is notable, as is the overall positive influence of the latter.

Vlasopolos’ autobiography follows the same pattern of naming male predecessors, as the very first sentence of the first chapter reads: “I am not Philip Roth, and this is not Portnoy speaking to his therapist” (1). Why open one’s autobiography in such a way but to emphasise one’s position in the literary hierarchy and the perceived comparative value of works? The



following sentence clarifies: “Even without it I know, as I rapidly pass my mid-forties, that I will not be the voice of the age or one of its foremost poets, critics, novelists, or colorful characters” (1). Although this could be read as a sobering piece of self-awareness from the author, it could likewise be indicative of a larger trend still prevalent among women writers, one of undermining their own voices when compared to their male counterparts. On the other hand, towards the end of her autobiography, Vlasopolos’ narrator perhaps offers the most direct reproach to the (male) writer as symbol of authority, as she comments on an excerpt of Joseph Brodsky’s writing: “with a stroke of the pen or the light tapping of fingertips on a keyboard, a famous figure can overwrite history without risk, for the ‘people’ and especially their ‘wives’ have no equal access to readers” (198). The message here is clear: not everyone’s words have the same influence or even the same opportunity to be influential. That being the case, the ‘wives’ in the occupation of writing – women writers – have often felt a lack of authority with regards to their work. This feeling becomes more pronounced in exile, where the chosen autobiographers engage in exophony.

A shared feature between all texts is a clash between wanting to speak but not being able to, or being aware doing so is inadequate to some degree. Huston’s narrator compares this condition to that of a child: “In a foreign country, you become a child again, in the worst sense of the word. You’re infantilized, reduced to *infans* – that is, to silence; deprived of the faculty of speech” (61-2). Lahiri seconds this notion, her narrator admitting: “I grope my way, like a child, like a semiliterate” (55). Furthermore, Vlasopolos’ protagonist Anca feels in exile “the duplicity and rage of the oppressed; tongue-tied by self-consciousness and fear” (125). Hoffman’s narrator similarly speaks of the rage that is a product of silence: “blind rage, helpless rage is rage that has no words” (125). This experience of silencing and infantilisation is tantamount to the views of female authorship by early feminist critics, including Gilbert and Gubar, where “[t]o be female, then, is to experience a condition of exile,” to be “marked as lesser beings, demoted to the status of children...” (Felski 68). Anger grows because of this condition, and from this type of reading emerged the figure of the enraged madwoman, the author’s double, who is liberated from the silence by the very process of writing (Gilbert and Gubar 77). It could, therefore, be argued writing an autobiography is one such liberatory undertaking, escaping the silence to give voice to one’s experiences. Putting in writing that which was impeded from being spoken. One must pause, however, when considering the figure of the madwoman as a valid model for female authorship in general, as Felski argues. Over the years it has reached a status of “feminist monomyth” where the framework is applied

unsystematically, “onto a many-voiced and many-sided history of women's writing” (Felski 70).<sup>10</sup> In the context of exile and exophony, the anxiety of authorship, the lack of authority and ultimately the choice to resort to writing regardless of the former factors could be linked to processes explainable by linguistics.

Studies on multilingualism and emotions acknowledge “bilinguals’ apprehension and anxiety about non-normative linguistic elements in their own speech as compared to the imaginary standard,” termed *schizoglossia* (Pavlenko, *Emotions* 27). Not only is this type of language anxiety present in language learning and use, but it also implies a doubling – the view that bilingualism stands for a splitting (*schizo-*) of identity, a presence of two incompatible identities. One would not be at fault to think back to the figure of the author’s other identity, the madwoman with her repressed anger. However, what is repressed in this framework is a language, and with it a culturally determined view of reality (Pavlenko, *Emotions* 27). Thus, when expressing anxiety and apprehension about their writing, the autobiographers in question do not deal with only literary history and its traditions, but the language of writing itself. Hoffman’s narrator emphasises the importance of authority as connected to language: “That authority – in whatever dialect, in whatever variant of the mainstream language – seems to me to be something we all desire” (124). In this light, the rage connected to the lack of said authority can be seen as experienced not because of the social position of women but because of the social position of the exilic subject. In exile, the question of language, or rather speaking the language in a certain way, is crucial as it dictates the way you are perceived and the way you navigate the new context.<sup>11</sup> Huston testifies to this: “Even if you physically resemble the natives, which of course is not always the case, they single you out at once. All you need to do is pronounce a single word, and they know you’re not from here” (61). On the other hand, when it comes to writing, the apprehension and lack of authority, although present, seem less potent. Indeed, the autobiographies uncover the key difference between orality and writing, where finding one’s voice is arguably an easier feat if done through taking up the pen.

Explicit favouring of the writing process as the tool for self-definition, as opposed to oral expression, is most vividly on display in Huston and Lahiri’s autobiographies. Huston’s

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<sup>10</sup> For a short overview of the most common critiques of Gilbert and Gubar’s framework, see Felski, 69-71 and Federico 9-10.

<sup>11</sup> On the notion of the native speaker as an ideal of language production to be followed and an “arbiter of grammaticality and acceptability of language” (Paikeday qtd. in Kramsch 362), as opposed to a non-native speaker, see Kramsch: “Guest Column: The Privilege of the Nonnative Speaker.” 359-369.

narrator expresses her “preference for the written word. On the page, at least, I can correct my mistakes, insert a word here, delete one there... On the page, moreover, my accent is inaudible” (27). Similarly, in Lahiri: “When I write, my appearance, my name have nothing to do with it. I am heard without being seen, without prejudices, without a filter. I am invisible. I become my words, and the words become me” (145). Writing, at least before being published, is experienced by these authors as less hindered by linguistic and cultural judgements. Writing does not expose like speaking does: “When I speak, I’m awkward in using such homely familiarities; I still feel the presumption in it. But in writing, I claim every territorial prerogative (Hoffman, *Lost* 220). Vlasopolos’ autobiography is the only one in the corpus that does not give the same weight to language as the others do. Besmeres notices this as well, suggesting the language aspect of Vlasopolos’ exile is underexplored due to her different affective attachment to English – her two years of exile in Europe that preceded settling in America, as well as her mother’s decision to forego Romanian once there (247). Indeed, Vlasopolos’ narrator acknowledges her mother’s role in finding her voice: “My very act of writing without fear I owe to my mother, who left her own habitation of language to give me voice” (205). The adult narrator recognises finding her voice was made possible by her mother’s renunciation of her native tongue. What is more, finding a voice as a writer, expressing oneself without fear, can be seen as an interdependent process, where gaining confidence involves other people. It can be argued the authority in writing, therefore, is borne through the act of connection in the new language, pointing towards the importance of such relational acts for writers in exile.

#### 4.2. Finding a Voice Through Others: Female Relationality

The interdependent and relational nature of identities becomes more apparent in exile, where re-establishing a sense of self is contingent on cultural and linguistic adaptation, best trialled in contact with others. Friedman asserts the often overlooked “role of collective and relational identities in the individuation process of women and minorities” (35). In fact, she argues, women’s autobiographies in particular underscore “a consciousness of self... very much *with* others in an interdependent existence” (41). This is reiterated by Mason, who emphasises women autobiographers have a tendency to relate to another consciousness in their process of self-discovery. She suggests it is “this grounding of identity through relation to the chosen other,” which aids self-expression in women’s life-writing (210). Therefore, it could be argued the insecurity that comes with finding one’s voice in exile is ultimately rewarding since

it invites other voices in, creating space for welcoming the other and reinventing the self as a consequence of that contact.

At first, Hoffman and Vlasopolos' autobiographies offer images of feeling voiceless and apprehensive to express themselves, but these images change with the progression of the narrative as they find their respective voices through relating to others. These connections teach them about interdependence and direct them towards a better understanding of themselves and the new world around them. "Since I lack a voice of my own, the voices of others invade me as if I were a silent ventriloquist," states Eva (Hoffman, *Lost* 222), while Anca admits "I'm left with the voices I'm trying on, stilled yet resounding inside the walnut shell of my moveable domain" (2). The narrators similarly describe the lack of authority, feeling as if others are infringing on their self-expression: the silence of the ventriloquist and the silence of the shell both result in the resounding of others' voices. However, further on in the narrative the imagery changes, from hollowed-out spaces to metaphors to do with threads and webs, standing for connections that are formed between people. Threads, nets, the weaving and interweaving of them can be seen as gendered metaphors, as textile work is most often associated with women. Accordingly, the connections the authors describe are with other women, with whom they metaphorically take part in "women's work" of weaving – creating bonds with one another. Thus, Hoffman's narrator explains:

We've woven intricate designs for each other, and have subjected them to close mutual investigation. To a large extent, we're the keepers of each other's stories, and the shape of these stories has unfolded in part from our interwoven accounts. Human beings don't only search for meanings, they are themselves units of meaning; but we can mean something only within the fabric of larger significations. Miriam is one of the people through whom I've gained a meaning here. Starting so far apart, we have, through painstaking back and forth, forged a language in common. We keep describing the flow of experience to each other with the impetus to truth, and thus we keep creating new maps and tapestries of a shared reality. (*Lost* 283).

The extended metaphor of weaving is insisted upon and the images of creating "intricate designs," are situated within a larger context, that is "within the fabric of larger significations," to finally fashion whole "tapestries of a shared reality." Creating a common language was not easy, as finding one's voice, "a meaning," is not easy, in fact it comprised "painstaking back and forth." Through her friend Miriam, Eva manages to create something new and meaningful

and realises the interdependency implicit in creating meaning for oneself. Pavlenko explains such creation of meaning as “reinvention through friendship,” which she “encountered in several female narratives” (“Language” 228). Although her research sees such reinvention as more closely connected to language learning, it can certainly be applied more broadly. Not all autobiographies in this corpus put the same emphasis on language. However, all of them highlight interpersonal connections and interdependence, which are seen as “as the key features of contemporary Western female autobiographies” (Pavlenko, “Language” 230).

Female friendships are also notable in Vlasopolos, “sustaining friendships, friendships with girls, unusual for me” (181). Accordingly, the narrator describes her friendship with Barbara, Lore, Claire, with whom she found stability: “webs of friendship, like nets stretched over the sawdust under trapezes where acrobats perform their flights, have let me bounce gently when I fall, have buoyed me so I could somersault and land on my feet and bow smiling” (197). Here, similarly to Hoffman’s autobiography, the imagery of threads is present. In this case, webs and nets are seen as connective and supportive structures for the narrator. The choice of comparison with the acrobat is significant in the light of performing one’s identity in exile, a feat that, as described, includes falls. Once again, the division of the corpus in two (Hoffman and Vlasopolos, as opposed to Huston and Lahiri) suggests itself as natural. Comparatively, the autobiographies written by the latter two authors are less direct in detailing the influence of others on developing their own voices. By exploring their attitudes towards language, however, they follow the same pattern of relating conversations with friends, who support and validate their efforts for self-expression.

It could be said Huston and Lahiri’s autobiographies are representative of the varied levels on which exophonic writing takes place. *In Other Words* details Lahiri’s first foray into writing and publishing in her non-native language Italian while Huston’s *Losing North* has been written at the time when the author has been living in France for twenty-five years, with many published works behind her. As such, finding a voice for the two authors might seem a very different endeavour, however the two autobiographies demonstrate common features. They both centre language as a site of connection with others, a necessity for building community in exile and thus for developing a sense of self.

The consciousness of the key role language plays is clear as Lahiri’s narrator states: “Learning a new language is the fundamental way to fit in with new people in a new country. It makes a relationship possible. Without language, you can’t feel that you have a legitimate,

respected presence” (141). Huston agrees that language is crucial “if you’re serious about your wish to become part of a foreign country” (21). Lahiri describes how she became part of her new country as she made friends with two Romans, Claudia and Marco. The friendship is described as a relationship akin to that of parents and children: “They correct me, they encourage me, they provide the words I lack. They speak clearly, patiently. Just like parents with their children” (25). Firstly, the affective, familial comparison underscores the importance of the friendship, but it also speaks to the insecurity of the narrator and her need for support. Furthermore, the insistence on the repetition of the pronoun “they” serves to reinforce the role of the friends in the relationship. Their role does not diminish but becomes less authoritative in the continuation of the narrative, as the narrator reveals: “With friends I can talk for hours, at times for days, without having to rely on any English word. I’m in the middle of the lake and I’m swimming with them, in my own way” (135). The focus here shifts, now it is on what the narrator is capable of alongside her friends. What is more, the imagery of the lake and swimming together is reminiscent of Vlasopolos’ description of being buoyed by her own friends in her condition of exile. In Lahiri’s autobiography the imagery of crossing the lake is introduced at the very beginning, and as such it is significant of her journey in Italian. Following from that, swimming with her friends in the lake suggests complete immersion, through which the narrator succeeds in expressing herself.

The notion of support by the chosen other is not always expressed in such clear terms, which can be seen in Huston’s autobiography. In her series of musings on the condition of exile, however, she is seen as sympathising with others who share her condition and is provided encouragement by those who do not. For instance, in a debate about “French words and expressions” the narrator, “as a foreigner, felt unable to use in conversation,” her “dear monolingual friends A. and S.” maintained for every example given: “Oh, that doesn’t count” (44-5). The narrator is exasperated by this turn of events exclaiming: “They didn’t believe me! They didn’t understand!” (45). Although this could be taken as an example of cultural (and linguistic) miscommunication or misrecognition, what can be inferred, however, is the friends’ unanimous belief in the narrator’s linguistic abilities. To her insisting she cannot use a series of expressions they replied with support, dismissing the examples she deems unfitting for her to use. As such, the encouragement given by the narrator’s friends is perhaps not entirely acknowledged but it exists, nonetheless. On the other hand, meeting a Scotswoman who speaks French fluently she feels an instant mutual understanding, and the encouragement once more is not direct, as it is derived from sympathy. After the woman explains the French language

does not have any emotional pull for her, the narrator consequently reveals more of herself. Twice she admits “I sympathised,” and after the woman continued, the narrator claims: “Here again, I sympathised intensely” (48-9). This episode in Huston’s autobiography speaks to the value of recognition of self through the other, the importance of saying “this woman, like myself” (48). In that vein, Claire Kramsch asserts “we only learn who we are through the mirror of others, and in turn, we only understand others by understanding ourselves as Other” (18). What Kramsch argues can be discerned in all four autobiographies, where, in essence, one’s sense of self develops through seeing with another’s eyes: in differences (Eva and Miriam) and parallels (the Scotswoman and Huston), buoyed up by an affirming perception of who we are and what we are capable of (Anca and Lahiri and their respective groups of friends).

Becoming a writer, or rather, the position of the woman writer is discussed in the four autobiographies as an issue related to questions of authority, literary tradition, and language itself. Conscious of the underlying pressures represented by the established male writers, the four autobiographers reveal insecurities with regards to their own voices and the legitimacy of their stories, underlining the gendered aspect of authorship. The anxiety of authorship, however, has an additional source, one related to the exophonic nature of the autobiographies in question. Writing in a non-native language compounds the lack of authority or feelings of inadequacy related to one’s voice, which is explored in most detail in Lahiri and Huston’s autobiographies. Nonetheless, these feelings of insecurity are greatly aided by relating to others, to such a degree that the authors recount the supportive and encouraging acts of their friends as affirming their sense of self. Most evident in Hoffman but present in all four texts, the narrators describe that through others they find their own place in exile and with it their own voice as writers.

## 5. Conclusion

Through the analysis of autobiographies by Hoffman, Huston, Lahiri and Vlasopolos this paper has attempted to outline certain features of women's writing that takes place in the specific context from exile to exophony. This has been done in hopes of bringing more attention to what is still, to a substantial degree, an underexplored area of research. In other words, the question of locating female émigrés and studying their work has been motivated by their frequent absence from discussions on poetics of exile, dominated by male authors. It is not only exile, however, which defines these texts. The nexus of exile-exophony-autobiography is crucial for any genuine engagement with these works because the terms represent the undercurrent of all the questions explored, ones related to selfhood and self-representation. Moreover, what has been noted in the analysis of the autobiographies is a marked gender inflection of the topics discussed. That is, when the four authors narrate their exilic experiences in a non-native language and through an autobiographic lens, they necessarily deal with issues related to gender and gender identity. Namely, they describe what it means to become a woman in exile and how this is interrelated with becoming a woman *writer* in exile.

The two major subjects of preoccupation in the chosen corpus deal with the process of becoming a woman and a writer. Exile greatly affects both 'becomings' as it destabilises certainties related to performing one's gender identity and securely claiming authority and authorship of one's works. Firstly, it has been identified that becoming a woman is, naturally, diverse across the four texts. However, the point of convergence is the age of the authors as they enter the exilic condition, which then affects how they approach becoming gendered subjects in the new socio-cultural context. Hoffman and Vlasopolos, as adolescents, have a greatly different perception of their gendering in exile to the adults Lahiri and Huston. The first pair narrate the struggles of performing their gender identity according to the new cultural norms. The acceptance of them and subsequent adaptation of the young narrators and their awareness of the performative nature of identity makes them approach their becoming woman with a degree of confidence. This is seen as creating friction in relationship with their respective mothers. In fact, the mother-daughter relationship is another staple theme of women's autobiographical writing, and two adolescents show the progression of that relationship from rejection to identification and even internalisation of the mothers' voices as they become adults. On the other hand, Lahiri and Huston's adult narrators find freedom and independence from normative gender roles in exile, which they come to understand as a space for reinventing the



self. The reinvention includes the mother-daughter relationship. In both narratives language takes precedence as an object of nurturing and mothering, making thus the traditional mother-daughter relationship almost obsolete. Once again, this development is seen as declaring preference for autonomy, giving birth to oneself, and thus becoming women anew.

The process of becoming women in exile in these narratives highlighted the need for self-definition of the authors on their own terms. Consequently, it is through autobiography that women writers have the chance for developing their voice and subjectivity. Nonetheless, the texts demonstrated some impediments to that project in the form of anxiety of authorship and language anxiety. Hoffman, Huston, Lahiri and Vlasopolos all look to male predecessors in their work, which creates feelings of apprehension and invalidity related to their creative expression. Language anxiety is also seen as an explanation to the lack of authority they display in their narratives, due to the exophonic status of their works and their unsettled position (in their own eyes) as bilinguals. What results as crucial in finding their voices in exile is their capacity for relationality and the recognition of interdependence as needed for self-discovery. Hoffman and Vlasopolos are seen to find meaning in close friendship with other women, who offer them encouragement in realising their identity in exile. As was the case throughout the two texts, the privileging of language in the autobiographies by Lahiri and Huston suggests a different type of relational acts – support through validation of language skill and ability.

Finally, it bears repeating the chosen four autobiographies suggest tendencies in women's writing in and of exile but do not stand for a universal female émigré's voice. This paper has strived to follow a connective approach to draw out common themes and preoccupations, yet it is necessary to affirm that the differences in women's experiences of displacement are present, both within this corpus and at large. Thus, the plurality of women's voices and narratives of exile is fertile ground for further research, which could undoubtedly uncover varied ways of constructing the self.

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## Abstract

This paper explores the often-overlooked writing by female émigrés. It examines four autobiographies written about and within the condition of exile and in an acquired or non-native language, a phenomenon known as exophony. These three terms, exile, exophony and autobiography, represent the basis from which the narratives take shape and underpin all other thematical and formal components. The texts here analysed are Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* (1990), Nancy Huston's *Losing North: Musings on Land, Tongue and Self* (2002), Jhumpa Lahiri's *In Other Words* (2017) and Anca Vlasopolos' *No Return Address: A Memoir of Displacement* (2000). The chosen corpus testifies to the particularity of the female exilic experience and demonstrates it is a productive condition in which women have the possibility to re-negotiate their identities within a different socio-cultural matrix. The two key concerns that arise in the narratives are the processes of becoming writers and women anew, as they explore how to find a voice, literally and metaphorically, in a new language.

Key words: exile, exophony, autobiography, gender, Eva Hoffman, Nancy Huston, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anca Vlasopolos