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(POLISH) IMMIGRANTS IN THE (NON-POLISH) CITY: SPACE, MEMORY, GENDER

Post-war, Polish exiles often chose as their place of settlement cities in the New World, which unlike in Europe, their existence based on the continual creation of something new, rejecting history as an element upon which modernity is built[1]. This difference is particularly visible in the North American Pacific Coast, a terrain with a very short history, even in relation to the history of America. As it happens, it is precisely here that Los Angeles is situated, a city which according to Mike Featherstone and Scott Lash, constitutes a paradigm of both the contemporary city[2] and the "the fortress city"[3]. But let me begin with observations of Michael de Certeau, who in his book, *The Practice of Everyday Life*[4], begins his deliberations with a reflection on skyscrapers. From their upper stories, it is possible to see not only almost the entire city but also what Certeau calls the concept of the city. Living on this upper strata, people often have a feeling of "ownership" over the city, a feeling which distinguishes them from passers-by, easily losing themselves on the streets among the high-rises. The division of locals thus attains a three-dimensional character

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[1] *Theorizing the City. The New Urban Anthropology Reader*, Ed. S.M. Low, New Brunswick–London: Rutgers UP 1999.

[2] *Introduction*, in: *Spaces of Culture, City-Nation-World*, Ed. M. Featherstone and S. Lash, London: Sage Publications 1999, p. 3.

[3] S.M. L o w, *Introduction*, in: *Theorizing the City*, p. 10.

[4] M. de C e r t e a u, *Wynaleźć codzienność. Sztuki działania*, przekład K. Thile-Jańczuk, Kraków: Wydawnictwo UJ 2008.

and encompasses not only the neighbourhood but also the view stretching out before their eyes. In Vancouver, the biggest city situated on the Canadian Pacific, and to which the present considerations are dedicated, new immigrants, similar to the poorest inhabitants of the city, started life mainly in basement suites. Eva Hoffman, in her book *Lost in Translation* writes,

> For the first few days we stay at the Rosenbergs', we are relegated to the basement, where there's an extra apartment, usually rented out to lodgers
> (p. 102)[5].

Before the high-rises, differentiating inhabitants with access to a view, were erected, in Vancouver this difference was made by the formation of the terrain. Significantly richer than Rosenbergs the Steiners, who took care over Eva Hoffman's musical talent, lived in a home with a view, however it was the surrounding garden flora, which, above all, struck the young immigrant.

Its geographical location means that Vancouver, the biggest city in Western Canada, is seen from many places as simultaneously a concrete place and a "concept of a city". Eva Hoffman notes:

> Vancouver's Board of Commerce reputation, boasted of by its' citizens frequently, is that it is the second most beautiful city in the world after Rio de Janeiro. This is because Vancouver too combines the usually incompatible elements of ocean and mountains in a picturesque juxtaposition. The craggy Rockies come to the end here and, from some angles of vision, seem to plunge dramatically right into the watery expanse.
> (p. 134)

Vancouver is situated between the Coastal Mountains and the Pacific Ocean and is separated from central, agricultural Canada, by yet more mountains, the Rocky Mountain Range. At the west, the north and the east, the development of the city's geographic location is thereby limited, and at the south, limited still by the Ocean and human hand. Coming to Vancouver from the east, the path of the first Europeans, Hoffman expressly remembers the change in the Canadian landscape.

> The train cuts through endless expanses of terrain, most of it flat and monotonous, (...). By the time we reach the Rockies, my parents try to pull me out of my stupor and make me look at the spectacular landscapes we're passing by.
> (p. 100)

[5] E. H o f f m a n, *Lost in Translation*, London: Minerwa 1989.

This natural border, The Rocky Mountains, was not easy to cross for those settlers arriving here before the railway was built. Vancouver, or, rather, the terrain, on which they later built the city, was hidden at the west, from the side on the ocean[6]. To this day, the beaches and coasts on this side of the cape bear the name Spanish Banks, and the city takes its name from the surname of the captain of an English ship who discovered this place in 1792. In keeping with his Dutch origins, he had Van at the beginning of his surname. The city only truly began to take shape later, however, around 1860, in connection with the gold rush. In its own history, it was first a centre focused on lumber, and then became an important business port in the 1920s. Today, it is a tourist centre. Of all the names commemorated in its recorded history, one of the most essential, it turns out, is that of Gassy Jack, who established a popular bar during the gold rush period. Based on his name, the historic part of the city was named, Gastown, which was also transmuted into the motif of a steam clock. Today, homes on this one street retain their own old facades, behind which are built modern "internal" buildings. A completely new creation is thereby coming into being, that is, a cross between a mosaic and a palimpsest composed of diverse styles and cultures.

In the example of Vancouver some of the elements added to such a palimpsest in turn add a clash of the equal in the network of streets placed in the geographically turbulently formed landscape of the Coastal Mountains, Mount Baker, the delta of the Fraser River, and the Pacific Ocean with its shoreline bay.

The only thing that recalls history and situation of place is the names – Downtown points to the location in North America, prettiness is contained in its English language names: Fairview, Mountainview, Mount Pleasant. Geography, too, is reflected in its names: in Lost Lagoon and False Creek. The history of the city – in Coal Harbour, Stanley Park, and First Nations' history – in Capilano, Tsawassen, Deadmen Island. In terms of preserving memory, the word seems to prevail most with architecture: increasingly, words are becoming the only medium and sign of the past.

Vancouverites do not think about their city in categories of "their own" place; many of them are not even familiar with its history. Changing architectures does not favour its preservation, but the literature tied to it is starting to develop right before our eyes.

[6] Cf. www.vancouverhistory.ca as well as http://www.tourismvancouver.com/vancouver/about-vancouver/history/ [access: 20.01.2014].

Michael de Certau observes that a walk around the cities, for locals, can be similar to an act of speech (he compares language to the ability of walking), thus in order to understand the contemporary city, one must observe the paths of its inhabitants. Returning from school to the Rosenbergs' home for the first time independently (albeit together with her sister) was not easy for Eva Hoffman, despite that they carried a card bearing the address, which they showed to passers-by as a means of asking for help.

> We wander the streets for several hours, zigzagging back and forth through seemingly identical suburban avenues
>
> (p. 105),

Hoffman records in her memoir. She recollects moving through the city as follows:

> I walk through those streets not seeing anything clearly (...) I miss the signals that say "city" to me: the varying densities that pull people toward a common center of gravity, the strata of human, as opposed to geological age. The pulse of life seems to beat at low pressure here. The city's unfocused sprawl, its inchoate spread of one-family houses, doesn't fall into any grid of mental imagery, and therefore it is a strain to see what is before me.
>
> (p.135)

Basing the narration on her own experience, Hoffman describes walking, or, rather, losing her way in the city, as a visual impression, comparing it to another experience of a distorted vision, which she encountered for the first time during a football match. Not knowing the rules of the game, she did not know how to follow the ball and, in the end, she could never visually grab a hold of it, by this, noting that it was possible to keep her eye on the ball only when she had for herself, an earlier impression of its possible trajectories.

The risk of earthquakes meant for Vancouver for a considerably long time, an unimpressive city skyline. Hoffman describes downtown, the only space, in her estimation, meriting the appellation of a city, in the following way:

> (...) Vancouver circa 1960 is a raw town, not much older than the century, and with an outpost flavour still clinging to it. Downtown consists of a cluster of low buildings, with some neon displays flashing in the daytime, which hurt my head because I'm so unaccustomed to them. There are few people in the commercial area, and even fewer on the endless net of residential streets that crisscross each other in eerie quietness.
>
> (p. 134)

At the beginning of the 1960s, living quarters, even those situated not far from the (business) centre of the city, consisted of single-family homes; in this way, the urban space that Eva Hoffman encountered in Vancouver decidedly differed from her native Cracow.

> The Steiners' house, which overlooks both the sea and the mountains of Vancouver's harbour, is surrounded by large expanses of grounds and garden
> (p. 111),

writes Hoffman. In a letter to a Cracovian friend, Hoffman underscores the rural (or suburban) character of the city with amazement, noting,

> I am sitting at a window looking out on a garden in which there is a cherry tree, an apple tree, and bushes of roses now in bloom. The roses are smaller and wilder here, but imagine! All this in the middle of a city!
> (p. 116).

Let us note here, that in the European tradition in which she was raised, the view from one's home windows distinguished those who had windows at the front of their homes, from other inhabitants, in that the "front" meant the street.

If the literary novels can be believed, it is a familiarization of the city space through walks, venturing out into unfamiliar parts of the city, and returning back all the while attracting unto the city a sense of foreignness. Giving a sense of freedom and ease of movement around the city was, however, above all, the domain of men[7], allow me to add here – white men. As Elizabeth Wilson has noted, women, as with minority groups, children, and the poor, are still not full citizens in the sense that they never obtain full and free access to the streets..... they survived, and also flourished, in the crevices of the city, by negotiating its contradictions in their very own, particular way...[8]

Although there is also no way not to notice (at least theoretically) the beauty of Vancouver, immigrants who feel foreign to its expanse, longing for their own homeland and city, walk through the parts they know all the while treating this city as only a stop on the road (to a better life). Many of those who do not find their own, assured place in this city subscribe to Eva Hoffman's observation.

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[7] M. Featherstone, S. Lash, *Introduction*, in: *Spaces of Culture,* p. 3.

[8] E. Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1991, p. 8.

> As I walk the streets of Vancouver, I am pregnant with the images of Poland, pregnant and sick. (...) The largest presence within me is the welling up of absence, of what I have lost.
> (p. 115)

The story of this city is, in a meaningful degree of immigrant narration, thus able to envelope sadness and a fragmentary nature in the background, resounding in Eva Hoffman's words:

> Vancouver will never be the place I most love, for it was here that I fell out of the net of meaning into the weightlessness of chaos
> (p. 151).

The paths of Vancouver's inhabitants show, above all, how much people living close to one another are able to belong to different spaces, that their paths can remain entirely separate, not converge, nor cross in daily affairs. There are few common places. They include hospitals, schools, and institutes of higher learning, and, in addition, some places of work, business, and parks. Multiculturalism in Vancouver does not depend on the diasporas being complicit in its constant creation, nor need the basic national group be marked as "eternal" inhabitants of the city, as such simply do not exist. With its mosaic of races and nationalities, and even its mosaic of people rich and poor, Vancouver is a city many times over hailed as the best place to live in the world; notwithstanding, here, too, the biggest neighbourhood of those living in poverty in North America is also situated here. Incidentally, these same cities of the west coast have created their own epithet of skid row, an area of excluded and derailed people, dependent on drugs or mentally ill. And this does not entail the ghettos, spatially separate, in other parts of the city. The borders between the rich and the poor are generally very, very fluid, but, at the same time, impassable. Presently, in old, impoverished neighbourhoods, high rises are emerging with fronts turned toward the ocean and backs turned toward the few remaining roadways to post-war era hotels for the poor. New complexes, separated from other neighbourhoods, are often kept under watch by private firms, imparting a "fortress city" character to the area, of which Los Angeles is a paradigm. Here, too, this occurs not always through apartment complexes, but also through city neighbourhoods, or suburban parts of the metropolis; contours are formed, which confer structure onto social relations, bringing about communities based on gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, or class, and also adopting spacial identities. Social groups, in turn, become their

own physical mark on the urban structure through the formation of communities (...) and segregation – in other words, through congregation, raising boundaries and creation of distance[9] as Susan Feinstein observes.

Spaces connected with racial or ethnic identities expressly protrude onto the layout of the city plan in as much the same measure that gender spaces, in practice, restrict themselves to homosexual communities (or gay-lesbian). Heterosexual women, as well as children – for reasons rather obvious – somehow constitute social minorities, not building their own identities spatially. The daughters, or rather the members of the so- called one and a half generation born in Poland and who came to the new countries in the early 1960s, unmistakably recognized the loneliness, isolation and vulnerability of their mothers, but while understanding their difficult position, they described them from the feminist angle which was not understood by the previous generation. In *Lost in Translation* Eva Hoffman wrote:

> Their husband's ambitions (…) do not always extend to making their wives happy, and stories of marital meanness are passed on regularly. (…) Neither of these women does anything to defend herself: they're not used to crossing their husbands, and they are hardly surprised by outbursts of male temper. That's how men are, and, of course, they have never even glimpsed ideas of ideological self-reformation or "working on a relationship". Still, in Poland they might have had the pressures of neighbourly gossip and censure on their side; here, for all their fancy dresses, they are more helpless, more alone with their problems. (…) and without being fully incorporated into a different system of social rules, they do not get the benefit of the local code of civility.
>
> (p. 143)

Thus, it may precisely be women's memoirs and narrations reflecting on memories of childhood that make up the most essential collection of literary texts, building a network of memories relating the spaces of Vancouver, and perhaps it is precisely writing that offers them a space in which they find their own identities. The rest clearly emerges in their bibliographical narration through what Feinstain describes as borders and distance.

It is, after all, also characteristic, that in Hoffman's memories, there appear no inhabitants representative of social minorities in Vancouver. The same gap by which, say, East Indians or Orientals fail to appear in her narrative, also emerges through the lack of addicts and poor people living on the streets. This void is even more apparent in that the home in which she lives with her

[9] S.S. F a i n s t e i n, *City Builders: Property, Politics and Planning in London and New York*, Oxford: Blackwell 1994, p. 1.

parents is located on Main Street, the same street on which today's Chinatown and skid row are located.

Our walk takes us up Main Street, a ramshackle, low-built part of town that seems a no place, thrown up randomly, without particular order or purpose. There are sprawling parking lots, patches of narrow, wooden houses, and nameless one-story cement structures, which look as haphazard as if the city itself has turned into a junkyard here. But there are also some window displays – which I'll later recognize for the poor, wrong-side-of-town affairs that they are but which now have the power to mesmerize us with their unfamiliar objects (p. 134) writes Hoffman.

Devoid of any memory of the locals, so she describes neighbourhoods inhabited by Chinese occupants and by the poor. Remaining physically in the space occupied by "the white man", socially withdrawing into a small group of Vancouver's Polish Jews, the young immigrant psychologically isolates herself from the image of the Other, from anything other than her own feeling of otherness in relation to an undefined North American norm. People from "her" circle, about whom she writes on more than one occasion, do not concern themselves with spacial identities; they rent or buy homes in various parts of the city depending on their financial situation. A community of culture determines their community, in the sense of the term traditionally understood as vested in by Johann Gottfried von Herder; in other words, as a homogeneous, linguistically unified, autonomous "island"[10], whereas participation in it is confirmed by taking part in rituals, the most important of which are parties and social gatherings. Physical distance and a lack of a neighbouring community did not, however, allow for social regulation according to early norms, a point which Hoffman, too, took note of[11].

Vancouver is not a city without history, however, and one could rightly say that it has as much history as the ethnic groups within it. The first white man who set foot on the territory of present-day Vancouver was Simon Fraser, a prospector working for a trading firm that amalgamated rather quickly with "The Hudson Bay Company". "The Bay," today a chain of many department stores, was once a huge trading company, focused on goods from trappers, (that is, fur) and, by virtue of its wide administrative structure, constituted its own kind of equivalent to a government. In fact, the company unified the whole territory on which Canada is situated today. By Hoffman's account,

[10] F e a t h e r s t o n e and L a s h, op. cit., p. 10.

[11] I discuss this subject in a book-chapter entitled "Becoming Familiar with Loneliness. Female Immigrant Discourse of the *Second World*".

"The Bay" department store also played an essential role during the 1960s in transforming emigrants into Canadians.

> The profusion of objects at Hudson's Bay – Vancouver's shopping Mecca – throws me into a yearning and revulsion that are simultaneous and correlative with each other: perhaps this is what used to be called a state of lust, or more generally, sin. Ah, to have money to buy these leather purses, these rayon blouses, these sweetish perfumes! We spend useless hours trying on dresses in wrong sizes, just to see how they look. When some item goes on sale, we get excited: perhaps we can afford it. We rarely can. Nevertheless, we finger and look, trying to distinguish leatherette from leather, costume jewelry from real silver. But the things threaten to crush me with their thinghood, with their inorganic proliferation, with their meaninglessness. I get headaches at Hudson's Bay; I come out pale and depleted.
>
> (p. 136)

For young Eva Hoffman, The Hudson's Bay is thus a place of initiation into a culture resting on an insatiable desire for the ownership of objects, on urges developed in societies in the lack of any tradition tied to culture, forming a variant, a substitute – of shopping and trips to department stores – replacing outings to the theatre, to concerts, or exhibits (also absent in the new emigrant's account).

In light of its ethnic composition, the inhabitants of nearby California call contemporary Vancouver "Hongcouver" or "Van-Kong". Early Chinese immigrants, primarily men, sent their own hard-earned money to wives and children left behind in China. Their concubines also handed over their earnings and children to wives in this faraway country. The situation began to change only relatively recently, initially in connection with the "Cultural Revolution" in China, and later through the takeover of Hong Kong by the People's China and mass immigration of the population of Hong Kong to Canada, particularly to Vancouver. Currently, and ever more expressively, similar processes are occurring in the city such as those described in the example of Miami, America, where Cuban immigrants set the ethnic tone of the city.[12]. As in Miami, where the lingua franca is Spanish, in Vancouver bilingualism does not mean the presence of French, one of the official languages of Canada, but the Chinese languages, Mandarin and Cantonese, which are ubiquitously present in the public space.

[12] A. Portes and A. Stepick, *City on the Edge: The Transformation of Miami*, Berkeley: U of C Press 1993.

Another strong ethno-religious group in Vancouver are the Sikhs. For many years, in order to prevent their immigration, women, first and foremost, were forbidden arrival to British Columbia; this, in turn, obviously prevented the establishment of Sikh families, and, by the same token, permanent settlement. In 1920, the law changed, however, allowing the arrival of women and Sikhs could start bringing their wives and young children to Canada. With a diverse religious and non religious composition newcomers from India, currently are usually called Indo-Canadians, to avoid a question of religious affiliations. This is also a community particularly known for a large number of criminal gangs. Vancouver, being a port-city, is traditionally wrought with drug smuggling and dealing; for city inhabitants, this means that gang wars are not a theory, but part of daily life. Let us add here that multiculturalism and tolerance is connected to the ideology and culture of the middle class; the poor environments of "coloured" immigrants more easily inscribe themselves into the schema of the "city fortress" in which particular groups fight for privilege and territorial influence[13].

A Polish history also exists in Vancouver, but so too do Vietnamese, Filipino, German, Swedish, Japanese, histories and many, many others... Only, do these comprise a shared history or are they mere repetitions of one another, albeit with variants, similar to those observations made by Eva Hoffman on the subject of the national-exilic diasporas by which she found herself in Vancouver? The description of a party in one Polish-Jewish home, for her, also means an occasion for general considerations.

> This is an imitation of Canadian conversation – polite, constrained, bland. It's also conversation without a context. Although this small group is practicing an earnest attempt at assimilation, they have hardly entered into the web of Canadian life. They would all say that they love their adopted country; they've made good here, after all, they have more wealth and peace than they could have dreamed of in Poland. But their love is oddly isolationist: they are not interested in Canadian politics, or the local culture, or even their neighbours, with whom, they'd be the first to say, they have nothing in common.
>
> (p. 141)

Such isolation is, in Hoffman's estimation, particularly incomprehensible in the case of women, who do not work professionally, but spend the majority of their time in the home and still have neither time nor desires to establish

[13] Cf. B. P a r e k h, *Rethinking Multiculturalism, Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, London: Macmillan Press 2000.

contacts among neighbours. Despite the many differences, similarities also exist in the situations of women from different cultures. Literary and historical narrations clearly show that the emigration of men differs little among themselves, whereas differences in politics in relation to the immigration of women constitutes a most essential difference in recorded histories. Men arriving in Vancouver come into a shared public sphere, even if subject to ethnic or class segregation. For women, building a domestic and private space thus became the main goal of political emigration.

The community of Vancouver is living evidence of such difficulties as those underscored by post-colonial researchers in connection to multicultural and intercultural terminology, which overlaps the lack of any centre with the permanent existence of minorities, and, inasmuch, constant marginalization. It may be that the answer to these terminological errors is creating itself thanks to participation in shared social spheres and the "hybridization" of traditions. In contemporary Vancouver, hybridization is a notion that becomes easy to understand while looking at people in a given neighbourhood. Inhabitants of this city come from every corner of the earth, some even from more than one. They carry within themselves different traumas, different histories, are members of different cultures, and many of them are still searching for their own identity. The city, with its unknown locals and fragmented ethnic history, does not connect, does not yet have the identity-forming capabilities of say New York (particularly its artistic groups). Polish culture and literature have searched for similar (although also very different) solutions to dilemmas by concentrating on local narratives, so-called little homelands. Contemporary Vancouver does not lend itself to such possibilities. There is a lack of shared narration, of an undergrowth of palimpsestic values to which everyone can appeal. The concept of a city without history, with its continual self-invention and creation of itself anew, has not as yet produced a culture which would allow such a narration. It may be, however, its germination is arising from the very crevices of the urban narratives of social minorities, above all, immigrant women narratives, based on memories of a network of meanings which do allow such a community.

(POLSCY) IMIGRANCI W (NIEPOLSKIM) MIEŚCIE: PRZESTRZEŃ, PAMIĘĆ, GENDER

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Autorka rozprawy poddaje szczegółowej i wieloaspektowej analizie emigracyjne doświadczenia wygnańców z Europy Wschodniej osiadłych w nowoczesnej, multikulturowej metropolii. Materiałem literackim, stanowiącym podstawę rozważań badaczki, jest książka Ewy Hoffman *Lost in Translation*, która pozwala jednocześnie ukazać specyfikę sytuacji kobiet w nowym i zarazem obcym kulturowo środowisku. Przyjęcie takiej perspektywy umożliwia ukazanie wielokrotnie niedostrzeganych elementów właściwych wykluczającemu dyskursowi oraz stanowi ważny punkt wyjścia dla dalszej analizy różnych sposobów jego oswajania i przezwyciężania.

Słowa kluczowe: Ewa Hoffman, imigranci, Vancouver, kobiety.

(POLISH) IMMIGRANTS IN THE (NON-POLISH) CITY: SPACE, MEMORY, GENDER

S u m m a r y

The author analyzes many aspects of East European exiles' challenges posed by settling in modern North American multicultural cities. The academic reflection departs from Eva Hoffman's book *Lost in Translation* that allows seeing the specificity of women's situation in a new, culturally challenging environment. Introducing the gendered perspective brings previously unnoticed elements of new immigrants lives to focus, and provides an important point of departure for further analysis of various aspects of studies of Polish diasporas abroad.

Key words: Eva Hoffman, immigrants, Vancouver, women.