

Faith Fictions: "The Word between This World and God"<sup>1</sup>  
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"THE BURNING DRY WEED CAN INFLAME THE GREEN WEED": LESSONS FROM  
MOTHER CROCODILE

Birago Diop's *griot*,<sup>2</sup> Uncle Amadou, begins his tale:

"Golo [the He-Monkey] said that ... Dia, Mother Crocodile, had the best memory in the world. It seemed as if Golo were praising Mother Crocodile, but what he really meant was that Dia lived in the past."

Dia did have the best memory on earth, Uncle Amadou continues. "She heard many tales of animals and men. ... And Dia would remember everything she heard." Golo, meanwhile, out of vengeance, went around to tell all the animals that Dia was crazy. Most terrible of all, he convinced the baby crocodiles that Mother Diassigue was crazy, and they listened to him, because they were weary of the tales which she insisted on retelling them.

"Dia, Mother Crocodile, spoke to her children of hunters and of merchants. She told them of the warriors that their great-grandmama had seen pass and repass on their way to capture laves and look for gold many, many years ago."

"We must learn from the experiences of others," she explained. But they "listened and yawned." They were busy dreaming. "...[T]hey dreamed of countries where crocodiles were gods."

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<sup>1</sup> Title of a poem by Emily Warn, in *This Art: Poems about Poetry*, edited by Michael Wieggers (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2003), 131.

<sup>2</sup> "Storyteller, singer, and genealogist." Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Mother's Talk," in *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature*, edited by Obioma Nnaemeka (London; New York: Routledge, 1997), 26.

Then one morning, a flock of crows passed over the river announcing war. “The men from the West have declared war on the men from the East.” Dia pleaded with her children to leave the river. What does war among men have to do with us crocodiles, the strongest animals on earth? They asked. Dia replied, “My child ... the burning dry weed can inflame the green weed.” They did not heed, but instead closed their eyes and turned their heads as Dia left in sadness.

Then shots began to whiz by their ears. The other animals flee to the safety of the plains and woods. The men from the West arrived by the riverbank, and declared victory over the East.

“What gifts of conquest shall we take home to our wives?” “What better gifts than purses? Purses made from the skins of crocodiles!”<sup>3</sup>

Even in this gentler storybook translation and adaptation of Birago Diop’s parabolic tale by Rosa Guy, *stupidity* and *memory* “bleeds through” like a purposeful and masterful use of *pentimento* in works of art.<sup>4</sup> Hidden beneath the visible surface are layers of renderings which only discerning eyes might possibly see or painstaking reconstructive techniques might possibly reveal. Careful listeners of this tale are left to wonder, “Who ... is the real monkey? Whose stupidity is it finally?”<sup>5</sup> What are the tales of animals and men [yes, “men”], of warriors and slaves, of merchants and hunters, of the East and West which Mother Diassigue heard and remembered...really? And who are the ones left “brainless” in the end, for in Diop’s original tale, the “gifts of conquest” were crocodile *brains*, to heal the wound of a human prince.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Birago Diop, Rosa Guy, and John Steptoe, *Mother Crocodile (Maman-Caiman)* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> “*Pentimento* is the phenomenon of an earlier painting showing through a layer or layers of paint on a canvas.” Archie Smith, Jr. and Ursula Riedel-Pfaefflin, *Siblings by Choice: Race, Gender, and Violence* (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2004), 55.

<sup>5</sup> Trinh, “Mother’s Talk,” 26.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-28.

## FAITH FICTIONS

The theme of this annual meeting invites us to peel open, layer by layer, the “truth-telling function of fiction” when fiction “explores the hard issues and deep questions in life” and “brings us on holy ground, sacred territory.”<sup>7</sup> The assumption there is that, at its best, the narrative world of “fiction”—or as some might describe it, “imaginative writing”<sup>8</sup>—ever so indirectly catches us off-guard by laying bare those “intractable questions” of life which vexes the human experience, with which the best of world religions must wrestle, and, as gatherers of this conference would argue, through no better comprehensive vehicle than religious education writ large.<sup>9</sup>

The search for religious truth and depth in “fiction” invites definitions of what is “fiction” and what is “truth.” This paper “dances” around such definitions—the power and beauty of *indirection*, as writer, film-maker, and feminist theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha would say—by fusing the boundaries of narrative worlds and lift out bits of fictional truths from three pieces of writings “from the margins.” The first is the African folktale of Mother Crocodile, as “gossiped” by the storyteller Birago Diop. The second is a short story about consuming hunger and desire, as told by a ghostly narrator from beyond the grave. The third, the reflections of an immigrant from Cracow, an astute observant of life lost and found “in translation.” When juxtaposed, these narratives are like what Gerard Loughlin calls *faith fictions*, or narratives which “open before us ... possible world[s] that may serve to refigure our own,”<sup>10</sup> not unlike those biblical narratives which invite, and even command, the *re-employment* of our own lives.

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<sup>7</sup> See theme description.

<sup>8</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 1.

<sup>9</sup> See Carol Lakey Hess’s definition of religious education in “Religious Education: The Depth of the Field,” *Religious Education* 103, no. 2 (2008): 140-41.

<sup>10</sup> Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God’s Story: Bible, Church, and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge England; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 153.

## A NEW ROOT METAPHOR

In exploring the religious depth of fiction, we avoid the questionable distinction between the “historical,” “factual,” and “artistic” truth of fiction. Following Terry Eagleton’s survey of literary theories, one could say that fiction—like other forms of “creative” or “imaginative” writings—organizes language and reality in such a way that makes more *perceptible* the ordinary and habitual objects and activities of everyday life.<sup>11</sup> As we shall see, this description provides nice vocabulary for articulating fiction’s depth and truthfulness.

Perhaps one way to define “fiction” more concretely is to offer something on “story.” Hardly anyone would disagree with the proposition that human beings are *homo fabulans*, but how to define precisely that which human beings have a proclivity for is another matter. Here is one definition: “A story... is a narrative account that binds events and agents together in an intelligible pattern,”<sup>12</sup> the criteria for intelligibility being culturally constructed and socio-politically negotiated. And another: “Stories are privileged and imaginative acts of self-interpretation.”<sup>13</sup> As evident in the latter definition, the narrative mode of stories and storytelling—more than a literary genre—has been employed as what Jerome Bruner proposed to be the “new root metaphor” for understanding human identity and human meaning-making.<sup>14</sup> “Narrative deals with the vicissitudes of human intentions,” Bruner argued, and through such narrative mode we artfully negotiate and co-construct “meaning and reality” in our relating to one another.<sup>15</sup> Good stories, then, draw us to that creative openness to possible new worlds:

...‘[G]reat’ storytelling, inevitably, is about compelling human plights that are ‘accessible’ to readers. But at the same time, the plights must be set forth with sufficient subjun-

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<sup>11</sup> Eagleton, 1-3.

<sup>12</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, Richard Bondi, and David B. Burrell, *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), np.

<sup>13</sup> Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Actual Minds, Possible Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

tivity to allow them to be *rewritten* by the reader; rewritten so as to allow play for the reader's imagination.<sup>16</sup>

Literary theorists such as Obioma Nnaemeka would agree, calling our attention to the magical power of storytelling to “[tinker] with the limits of our notions of what is ‘ordinary’ and ‘believable’ . . . .”<sup>17</sup> Trinh drives the point home: storytelling “brings the impossible within reach.”<sup>18</sup> Truthfulness then is found not necessarily with facticity, but rather with the potential of the story to offer intelligible and even alternative “meaning-perspectives” for listeners/readers.

The truthfulness of stories has certainly not been lost on religious educators. In their inter-disciplinary project, *Teaching the Bible in the Church*, Christian educator Karen B. Tye and biblical scholar John M. Bracke spell out what it means to invite readers (and learners) to the “intercultural” experience of engaging the biblical texts.<sup>19</sup> They offer a helpful definition for fictional truthfulness:

When we are engrossed in a novel, we don't usually ask if it is ‘true,’ true in the sense that the characters were actual persons or that the tropical island is at some precise location or that there is a beach with white sand just as the novelist describes it. Rather, we *surrender* ourselves to the story and allow ourselves to enter into it. We *imagine* ourselves on the beach . . . we *identify* with some persons in the story but find other characters quite odd. . . . Good stories, or good poems for that matter, *draw us in* and invite us to explore the world that their texts create. We can read biblical texts in the same way. [emphasis added]<sup>20</sup>

A good story draws us in, causing us to identify, to imagine, to surrender. There lies the power of the biblical narratives for the believing community, as Gerard Loughlin posits, following Paul Ricoeur's narrative theory: “The truth of the gospels would be the truth of Aristotelian poetry: the presentation of a possible world for our dwelling, a possible way of re-making our world.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>17</sup> Obioma Nnaemeka, ed., *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature, Opening Out* (London; New York: Routledge, 1997), 7.

<sup>18</sup> “Mother's Talk,” 28.

<sup>19</sup> (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 120-121.

<sup>21</sup> Loughlin, 147.

This hermeneutic fusion of present reality and future possibility—when that which is seemingly “ordinary” and “human” *makes more perceptible, more visible, and within reach* something which is “extraordinary” and “holy”—is what liturgical theologian Andrea Bieler and New Testament scholar Luise Schottroff call *sacramental permeability*.<sup>22</sup> Like *pentimento* on a canvas, sacramental permeability tinkers with our assumptions about what is believable and possible, and lures us to something beyond what eyes and ears might experience in the “first order.” The result is birth into Eucharistic life.<sup>23</sup>

There is not a kind of warm-fuzzy sentimentality to this, for storytelling, as Nnaemeka argues, is about survival.

#### *SURVIVRE: STORYTELLING IN ORDER TO LIVE*

Storytelling is about survival, writes Nnaemeka, and to survive (*survivre* = *sur*: over, above; *vivre*: to live) is to “outlive/survive the event in order to engage in its telling.”<sup>24</sup> Citing the words of Chinua Achebe in the latter’s latest novel *Antills of the Savannah*, Nnaemeka goes further to suggest that the storyteller “creates the memory that the survivors must have—otherwise their surviving would have no meaning.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, a storyteller retells the memory because s/he survived; his/her listeners, in turn, survive *if* they learn from the story; together, their stories of survival make transparent the profundity of being alive. “[T]hose who fail to learn do so at their own peril,” as in the case of Diassigue’s baby crocodiles.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Andrea Bieler and Luise Schottroff, *The Eucharist: Bodies, Bread, & Resurrection* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 5.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *The Politics of (M)othering*, 7.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

Trinh T. Minh-ha's analysis of *Mother Crocodile* points us to the layering—or the “bleeding through”—of meanings behind a story about metaphorical brainlessness which eventually leads to literal brainlessness. In the layerings, it is a story about many things: about the “stupid” dismissal of memory; about wisdom—how it is defined, engendered and gendered, passed on, received, and rejected; about dreams of being “gods”; about the crisscrossing of worlds (animal and human), in which exploits of power and domination make “green grass burn” and cause rivers to turn red. It is a story set in a land where “East” and “West” are not really generic, abstract places. It is a tale in which there exist many narrators, or “gossips,” as talkers of tales are often labeled—from Diop, to Amadou the griot, to Diassigue, who not only observes the “movements of life” herself, but also inherited some “dangerous memories” from great-grandmamas who have witnessed the exploits of humans and animals. Rather poignantly, these dangerous memories of violence are told *not* to incite more violence. They are like the “dangerous memories” defined by Thomas H. Groome: the “personal or communal memories with an endless capacity to disturb complacency and birth new life,” such that “[w]hen we return to them, they challenge our compromises with the status quo, help us to remember what we should not forget, and inspire recommitment to who we ought to be....”<sup>27</sup>

The storytelling that takes place *because of* and *as a result of* survival is an action of sacramental permeability. Done within the believing community, it is an activity which jogs the memory of the physical body and the communal Body of the liberating acts of God, releases our “eschatological imagination” to hold tightly together “the reality of brokenness and a hope of wholeness,” and lures us in to participate in the emplotment of possible new worlds in which violence and suffering exist no more.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Educating for Life: A Spiritual Vision for Every Teacher and Parent* (Allen, Tex.: T. More, 1998), 359.

<sup>28</sup> Bieler and Schottroff, *The Eucharist*, 6-7, 158f.

For what might happen if we forget...or are forgotten? To grapple with this question, we turn to *Hunger*, the title novella of a collection of short stories by Lan Samantha Chang.

#### HUNGER: TO REMEMBER, FORGET, AND NOT BE FORGOTTEN

“Behind this painted wall, beneath this layer of new sheathing, hides the story of our lives together. I have been silent many years, and my daughters have chosen to forget, but our family story lingers here.”<sup>29</sup> So the story’s narrator Min begins. With reflective details, she brings us back to the first moment when she met her future husband, Tian Sung, that “strange” man who spoke “confident English,” who walked into the restaurant where she worked carrying a violin case, made her feel “warm” for the first time by “following the line of her face” with his “dark eyes,” and left forgetting the hat bearing his name—as clear a sign as any of the *yuanfen* found in Chinese myths (*yuanfen*, “that apportionment of love which is destined for you in this world”<sup>30</sup>). We wonder whether refusing to admit that she had secretly kept his hat was the first of only a few attempts at taking fate into her own hands, for as it unfolds, we see a story that “waits under the floor,” “[slides] into the crawl space,” “[winds] around the stubborn beams and girders”—as windy and hidden as the life/lives that lived it.

In *Storied Lives: The Cultural Politics of Self-Understanding*, George C. Rosenwald and Richard L. Ochberg describe the cyclical nature of “new living action,” in which consequences result from stories, but also lead to the generation of new stories.<sup>31</sup> *Subjectivity* is defined as a “restlessness of desire,” that which opposes the “stable and stabilizing patterns of socialization”; and the stories produced with such desire and restlessness are like “still photographs” of the

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<sup>29</sup> *Hunger: A Novella and Stories*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 14.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>31</sup> George C. Rosenwald and Richard L. Ochberg, *Storied Lives: The Cultural Politics of Self-Understanding* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 272.



“ceaseless groping toward fulfillment and completion” that is life.<sup>32</sup> That is what we can detect in each character of Min’s story.

In Min’s husband, Tian Sung, we sink at the weight of a man’s desire to follow a “flagrant and extravagant” dream, which led him to turn his back despite hearing the words, “I am no longer your father. You have no right to ever think of us.”<sup>33</sup> We witness an all-consuming hunger in this tragic hero who swims out to the sea, with his violin case held above his head, to be picked up by a boat transporting immigrants for double the price. We follow his movements in and out of that soundproof practice room which he built, into which he locks himself (and out of which he leaves his young wife)—a space that is shared later, only too painfully, with his two daughters whom he is fiercely determined to mold into perfection. In Tian we recognize the ceaseless groping for memories which he was forbidden to hold, for recognition which always manages to slip from his nimble fingers, and for some amount of “forgetfulness that is essential to moving on.”<sup>34</sup>

In Min’s elder daughter, Anna, we see a young girl looking hungrily at the intensity with which her father poured all of his hopes and dreams onto her younger, “prettier” sister Ruth. We recognize that image of someone who lacks “the self-acceptance that might one day give her beauty or serenity.”<sup>35</sup> And even as she matures in poise and “watchfulness,” we see someone who still gropes for that permission to meet a lover’s eye. Meanwhile, in the carefree Ruth we see “a doll’s expression: porcelain, lovely, inhuman.”<sup>36</sup> We recognize that wanton confidence when a daughter knows that she is born her father’s child. In Ruth we spot raw talent, raw beauty, and raw desire, and witness how in the end, she becomes like a figure “carved from colorless

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 265-66.

<sup>33</sup> Chang, *Hunger*, 28.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 49.

stone.” “You were loved,” she is told, to which she could only mutter, “I know...[b]ut I don’t trust that kind of feeling.”<sup>37</sup>

Finally, in the narrator and protagonist, Min, we detect a ceaseless groping the moment she sets foot onto the soil of New York City in 1967 as an immigrant from Taiwan. Narrative psychologists may point out the culturally gendered scripting of heroic myths, in which, more often than not, female protagonists are depicted as “selfless, socially embedded heroine[s], being moved in many directions, lacking the tenacious loyalty demanded of a[n] [ego-enhancing] quest.”<sup>38</sup> However, in Min, we see a heroine who is both subject (“actor”) and object (“acted upon”) in her story; although a “supporting actress” to her husband’s ambition, she is one without whom there would be no story. She is woman grappling for a *yuanfen*—that apportion of love—which might include being a part of her Tian’s world of desires. On the one hand, she secretly punctures a diaphragm in hopes for a son, all the while consciously aware of her own succumbing to that cultural myth; on the other hand, she brushes past her husband to squeeze into her Ruth’s hand seventeen fifty-dollar bills which she had carefully saved, one for each year of her daughter’s life, right before the latter storms out of their lives. Toward the end, Min discovers for herself a fierce determination to hang on, even as “all the unspoken thoughts of thirty years had been turned loose inside [her] body” in the form of cancer.<sup>39</sup>

“When the moment came, I kept my eyes wide open, focused on my daughter’s face.”<sup>40</sup> It is the decisive narrative moment in which we finally learn that our narrator had been speaking from beyond the grave. Although she might have the power to bend her Anna’s thoughts through

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>38</sup> See Mary Gergen, “Life Stories: Pieces of a Dream,” in *Storied Lives: The Cultural Politics of Self-Understanding*, edited by George C. Rosenwald and Richard L. Ochberg (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 131.

<sup>39</sup> Chang, 105.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 106.

ghostly whispers, Min conceals herself, and lets her “desires seep through the rooms.”<sup>41</sup> In the end, this ghost of memory confesses her own fear: “that there might come a time when no one on earth will remember [their] lives.”<sup>42</sup>

*Hunger* as a novella organizes language and reality in way that heightens the poignancy of the “vicissitudes of human intentions [and desires] over time” (Bruner). In the characters we see “still photographs” of the human condition, laying bare and yet remaining layered enough the nuances of human love and loss, of pain and hope. The vocabulary of faith is decidedly absent, and yet the ceaseless probing and groping for spirit, meaning, self, and other, as taken on by each character, *make transparent* something profound in what might seem ordinary or habitual in human existence. There lies the quality of “sacramental permeability,” and the persuasive power of the narrator and her story (and author) to lure us in while affording us a critical distance from the world of *Hunger*.

Min’s confession at the end gives language to our own fear of a time when no one on earth will remember who we are. A theologically astute ear might hear a challenge to reflect on those who have *already* been “disremembered,”<sup>43</sup> and the pedagogies of confession, repentance, and “emancipatory hope”<sup>44</sup> that would enable us to encounter a God “who will not forget and who embraces our amnesia.”<sup>45</sup>

The poignancy of memory and forgetfulness which we see in *Hunger* underscores the *negotiated* nature of lived experience and of the stories that recount it. To explore further this di-

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>43</sup> See Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, *Teaching as a Sacramental Act* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004), chapter 4.

<sup>44</sup> See Evelyn L. Parker, *Trouble Don't Last Always: Emancipatory Hope among African American Adolescents* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003).

<sup>45</sup> Bieler and Schottroff, *The Eucharist*, 183.

alectic of telling and living, and the critical hermeneutical nature of story-telling and story-listening, we turn to Eva Hoffman's memoir, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*.<sup>46</sup>

## LIFE IN TRANSLATION

The line between “factual” or “historical” truth and “narrative” or “artistic” truth gets blurred in the genre of memoirs. “Life stories,” we are told, are representations of what narrators consider to be essential truths about themselves, constructed at a particular point in the life course.<sup>47</sup> As an imaginative (not to be conflated with “imaginary”) account reflecting the narrator's authorial identity and significance, a life narrative draws us in, causing us to identify, to imagine, to surrender. And that is what Hoffman artfully did in her memoir *Lost in Translation*.

“It is April 1950, I'm standing at the railing of the *Batory*'s upper deck, and I feel that my life is ending,”<sup>48</sup> writes Hoffman of her memory of having to leave Cracow—her “Eden”—at age thirteen to settle in Vancouver, Canada. An established presence among New York's literary world, Hoffman organized language and reality into a narrative account (as opposed to an encyclopedic chronicle) of a life journey from border to border—both geographic and metaphorical—and of the ambiguity in (re)constituting past, present, and future. In three parts, she writes of “paradise,” “exile,” and “the free world,” without a specific vocabulary of faith. And yet we can sense that this is an account of a spiritual searching—an “odyssey,” as it has been described by literary critics, but perhaps more ordinarily, a narrative of crafty meandering from world to world by an astute observer of life.

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<sup>46</sup> (New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 1989).

<sup>47</sup> See Dan P. McAdams, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self*, 1st ed. (New York, N.Y.: W. Morrow, 1993).

<sup>48</sup> Hoffman, *Lost in Translation*, 3.

Perhaps the authorial positioning of a memoir allows Hoffman to be more reflective and self-reflexive than the character Min in *Hunger* to grapple with the polarities of life even as she exploits them. Thus, on the one hand, as an immigrant, she dwells in *teškonota*, “a word that adds to nostalgia the tonalities of sadness and longing,” while on the other, she tells herself in the end to “be here now.”<sup>49</sup> Life in Cracow? It was life “under Communism,” life “squeezed into three rudimentary rooms with four other people, surrounded by squabbles, dark political rumblings, memories of wartime suffering, and daily struggle for existence.”<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, there was life, and “Communism” doesn’t walk down the street, and people live their lives, and it was “Eden.” And so “the wonder is what you can make a paradise out of.”<sup>51</sup> The cultural, religious, and ritualistic significance of being Jewish may be lost to her at times, and she admits being devoid of images of God to “visualize” and to “love” like her Christian friends do. However, what stayed with a young Hoffman is what the best of religious instruction would want to offer: “They’ll tell you that you are worse than them [because of your Jewishness],” her mother told her. “[B]ut you must know that you are not. You’re smart, talented—you’re the equal of anybody.”<sup>52</sup>

Hoffman’s is a narrative about identity continually found and unfound, as she astutely observes the absurdities, inconsistencies, and hypocrisies of identity and cultural translations, covering themes which could be said to be prototypical of “immigrant narratives”—although they do not always fall within the criteria of intelligibility of the dominant cultural scriptwriters. Predictably, she writes with sharpness about displacement, linguistic dispossession, double vision, immigrant rage, and the bitterness of witnessing immigrant lives conceding to deracination

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 4, 280.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 131-32.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 32.

for the sake of belonging. With an impish sarcasm of one who knows too well and has seen it too often, Hoffman exposes the self-contradictions of lives being scripted by “the fable of pure success,” citing another immigrant narrative, that of Mary Antin, born in the Russian Pale in the 1880s, who would only admit in the preface of the latter’s story:

‘...[T]he emigration became of the most vital importance to me personally. All the processes of uprooting, transportation, replanting, acclimatization, and development took place in my own soul. I felt the pang, the fear, the wonder, and the joy of it. I can never forget, for I bear the scars. But I want to forget.... The Wandering Jew in me seeks forgetfulness. I am not afraid to live on and on, if only I do not have to remember too much.’<sup>53</sup>

When stamps of identity—like the stamps on her passport—presumes fixed categories, boundaries, and clear-cut demarcations between past and present, Hoffman revels in double visions and multiplicity:

...I have been given the blessings and the terrors of multiplicity. ... We slip between definitions with such acrobatic ease that straight narrative becomes impossible. I cannot conceive of my story as one of simple progress, or simple woe. Any confidently thrusting story line would be a sentimentality, an excess, and exaggeration, an untruth. ... Perhaps a successful immigrant is an exaggerated version of the native. From now on, I’ll be made, like a mosaic, of fragments—and my consciousness of them. It is only in that observing consciousness that I remain, after all, an immigrant.<sup>54</sup> (164)

Thus, with that “observing consciousness,” Hoffman relishes the ability to oscillate between rotating axes of identities, though *not* without acknowledging the pain of having lost the illusion of having had *a* center.

Inspiringly, Eva Hoffman leads us to the possible world of “cross-fertilization” for a life in betwixt and between:

No, there’s no returning to the point of origin, no regaining of childhood unity. ... When I speak Polish now, it is infiltrated, permeated, and inflected by the English in my head. Each language modifies the other, crossbreeds with it, fertilizes it. Each language makes the other relative. Like everybody, I am the sum of my languages—the language of my family and childhood, and education and friendship, and love, and the larger, changing

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<sup>53</sup> Cited in Hoffman, 163.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

world—though perhaps I tend to be more aware than most of the fractures between them, and of the building blocks.<sup>55</sup>

What's more, this cross-fertilization of language and identity is made possible when the act of translation “proceeds by the motions of understanding and sympathy; it happens by slow increments, sentence by sentence, phrase by phrase”—in short, it happens in relation.<sup>56</sup> It is the movements of inter-dependence which might allow for a believing community to imagine more radically what it means to be one in many, to trade in the sentimentality of “confidently thrusting storylines” in exchange for more ambiguous, more amorphous narratives of lives becoming and lives in relation.

#### TENTATIVE CONCLUDING WORDS...

In the tale of Mother Crocodile, we see what is at stake for survival in storytelling. In *Hunger*, we witness the ceaseless groping that comes with love, desire, and loss. In Hoffman's memoir, we come to a better appreciation for identity and community in constant flux, in constant negotiation. In all three stories, worlds crisscross: the political world of animals and that of humans—a cosmology that blurs boundaries; the world of this life and life beyond—both physical, both spiritual; the cultural worlds of past, present, and future. These stories describe and interpret lived experience. They are imaginatively descriptive, and yet there is a persuasive element in how they provoke our thinking and action. Critical consciousness of the politics of storytelling directs us to these seemingly “ordinary” stories, as opposed to the canons of so-called high literature (at least more recognizable and desirable by some). Our conviction is that these so-called ordinary accounts of the human experience and human condition—these writings “from the margins”—also have the power to mirror our lived realities while offering possibilities

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 273.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 211.

to “refigure our world.” Like “faith fictions,” they teach, but more so through a logic of narrative truth that leaves the reader/listener in the *ambiguity of indirection*. As it is said, those who have ears, let them hear...

The constraints of time does not allow for more specific questions of educational and pedagogical implication. However, we pause here for a few obvious one: In the believing community, who gets to tell stories? Who gets to tell *the* story/stories of the community? Who are the keepers of stories? What enables and impedes the telling of alternative stories? And finally, what stories are invoked when we hear the words of that one narrator and protagonist who continually speaks to us from the grave, “Remember me”? Many a times, when the believing community does not heed these questions, we do so at our own peril.



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