The Dashed Line of Immigrant Literature

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I.

The map of New York City presents a grid that flows wayward as distance grows. The intersections of streets and avenues mirror the interactions between people, both of which contribute to the formation of place or, as Henri Lefebvre names it, “production of space.” The lines created by this grid and each of its roads present a possible relationship between places and movement from one to the other. This “here” to “there” pattern outlines the motion of people throughout New York City, from borough to borough and street to street. This constant linear flow of people across the city is met with a different repetition that also persists—the marked influx of people from around the world.

Waves of immigrants from disparate places and times travel the city and participate in, to use Henri Lefebvre’s terms, an ongoing “production of space.” This engagement develops a larger conversation concerning the understanding of levels of access as well as the methods of measurement that are experienced throughout New York City. The immigrant identity represents migration as endless movement of the individual in their surroundings. This identity is not continuous or unidirectional—it is interrupted. Though it is local, it also incorporates elements from an outside context into the fabric of the city. These interruptions and in-between elements are what immigrant experiences in New York have in common. Immigrant narratives acknowledge the patterned distance that immigrant life offers toward the production of social space in the city, but also present this distance as an intrinsic marker of New York immigrant literature.

In “Walking in the City,” Michel de Certeau acknowledges the oscillations of New York as “a city composed of paroxysmal places in monumental reliefs. The spectator can read in it a universe that is constantly exploding. In it are inscribed the architectural figures of the coincidatia oppositorum formerly drawn in miniatures and mystical textures” (91). The metaphor is particularly apt for the friction that comes with consistent motion and linguistic diversity across the city, defining New York according to the constant movement of both its people and their negotiation of speech. The act of walking is interlaced with the use of language, building connections between paths taken throughout New York City and the experience of utterance in everyday life.

Where de Certeau highlights the role of interaction in the movement of individuals through space, George Simmel considers distance to be necessary to the creation of personal identity. He notes that “The unity of nearness and remoteness involved in every human relation is organized, in the phenomenon of the stranger, in a way which may be most briefly formulated by saying that in the relationship to him, distance means that he, who is close by, is far, and strangeness means that he, who also is far, is actually near” (1). Simmel’s “stranger” entangles that which is close with all that is far, negating accepted understandings of space in favor of a new contemplation of distance. De Certeau articulates the importance of an established connection between individuals and the language and space surrounding them, whereas Simmel points towards the gaps necessary to consider interaction. In his attempt to map New York through the negotiation of language and space, De Certeau ignores the distance created by the movement of immigrants into and around the city.

De Certeau’s “walking-as-speaking” matrix leaves out immigrant identities that are constructed from both the endless movement of migration and the ongoing distance present

between the individual and their surroundings. De Certeau makes use of “here” and “there” in order to depict locutionary, informative acts in the linguistic realm as well as actual movement across the city. While individual narratives in New York City contextualize the use of these spatial deixis, or referential terms, this narrow perspective misses the larger phenomenon of incoming and outgoing populations. Immigrant narratives are punctuated with pauses and gaps across both time and space. Throughout the history of New York City, people have arrived from places around the globe in response to changing sociocultural and political situations ss the globe, oftentimes in large amounts at a time, from specific places, according to changing environments at home. This is a central part of immigrant narratives in New York City and thus a necessary element to a survey of immigrant literature focused within New York City.

While each of the immigrant texts that follow acknowledge the patterns of migration in relation to historical events over the past one hundred and fifty years, together the selection seeks to consider the shared experience of distance. Jesus Colon’s work focuses the experience of Puerto Rican immigrants through the 1950s with air travel and independence from Spain. Throughout *A Puerto Rican in New York, and Other Sketches*, characters depict distance through the experience of being lost in the city, and unable to read signs, speak the language, or access the surrounding landscape. Sergei Dovlatov’s *A Foreign Woman* highlights the Russian immigrants that began to arrive in New York city from the Soviet Union. The departure from home has a layered experience for these characters as they navigate the Soviet structures of their country and the loss of their personal pasts. Louis Chu’s *Eat a Bowl of Tea* acknowledges the Chinese immigrants post-World War II as well as the effects of the Exclusion Acts and their repeal in 1943. Names, phrases, and cultural ideas translated between these worlds present the intersection of cultures and the gap recognized through the act of bridging disparate realms.

Sholem Alechiem's *Motl Peysi the Cantor's Son* provides insight into the migration of Eastern European Jewish populations after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II and the pogroms that followed. Motl and his family mirror the linguistic interstices of immigrants as they move from one language to another, often using phonetic transcription. Nadine Pinede's "Departure Lounge" positions readers amongst Haitian immigrant populations in the early 2000s. Through a trip back to Haiti the narrator interacts with the space that grows with the loss of language through distance.

The intervals between marked points in immigrant literature drive the progression of actual dashes in the plot, meant to frame the narrative, creating a syncopation across experience in the spatial, temporal, and linguistic realms. These breaks in measure serve as interstices, or intervening moments—as if they were spaces between atoms. The resulting dashed line allows immigrant narratives to speak to and of the liminal space, often represented as a breath held or an extended instant in the character's journey through time, as a moment of contemplation and halt, rather than active progression on the way to their ultimate destination. The gaps between marked instances in the plot define the nonlinear shared experience in immigrant narratives of New York City across various cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

II.

The spaces that form between marked moments in the plots mark the master narrative of immigrant experience in New York City. In physics such spaces are referred to as interstices, making up the distance between atoms and structuring disparate points of matter. These interstices allow us to stitch together the intertextual relationship between individual works of immigrant literature across spatial, temporal, and linguistic realms. This dashed line connects the immigrant experience of New York City by mirroring its history of immigration. New York City

is defined by the movement of people into the city from places far and wide and across time, often left with nothing but their language. In his lecture, "Language as Otherland", Joseph Brodsky explains the relationship between language and loss: "exile could be regarded as the most absolute existential situation (or as the nearest approximation to it) when there is nothing to rely on for support except language" (Brodsky). This reliance on language speaks to the importance of immigrant literature as well as the need to understand the common trends across individual works.

A survey of immigrant narratives in New York City must consider the shared relationship between the possibility of existence, the ability to communicate it, and the spaces accessible to immigrant communities. The distance displayed within immigrant narratives reflects the collective experience of immigrants in New York City. George Simmel explains this unity of difference:

> In the case of the person who is a stranger to the country, the city, the race, etc., however, this non-common element is once more nothing individual, but merely the strangeness of origin, which is or could be common to many strangers. For this reason, strangers are not really conceived as individuals, but as strangers of a particular type: the element of distance is no less general in regard to them than the element of nearness (3).

This intersection of individuals according to the space between them, their languages, and surroundings outlines the need to consider the links that join disparate immigrant experiences throughout the history of New York City. As well, independent immigrant experiences become shared according to a common foreignness with the city itself. The movement of people into New York City is often depicted in waves across time, highlighting immigrant communities according to the lands from which they come. This method helps to contextualize immigration

patterns as they relate to place of geographical origins, but also perpetuates those geographical delineations in New York City. By considering individual works of literature together, across these waves as well as beyond them, the interstitial spaces can speak to the larger, shared existence of immigrant communities beyond the mere details and habits of their lives. From this scope the immigrant experience, and the narratives that spring forth, is defined by the distance their movement acknowledges and the interstice in which they remain.

III.

Motl, Peysi the Cantor's Son chronicles the life of a young boy and his family from Kasrilevke, Sholem Aleichem's fictional shtetl, throughout their travels to America and as they transition to life in New York City. Motl, nine years old and full of honest insights, details in simple terms the impalpable nature of America in the eyes of many immigrants:

> We're off to America! Where is that? Don't ask me. I only know it's far away. It takes forever to get there. You have to reach a place called Ella's Island where they take off your clothes and look at your eyes. If your eyes are alright, come right in! If they're not, you can go back to where you came from (172).

The distance between his Eastern European village and the shores of New York City is beyond measure, and time is only acknowledged in terms of "forever." Rather than depicting his family's travels as traversing a map or around the world, Motl describes their movements in terms of here and there. Though these adverbs frame locative acts, the family occupies an ongoing, interstitial space. Michel de Certeau also uses this understanding of space to intermingle "linguistic and pedestrian enunciation" (99). Where de Certeau's walker, by interacting with the space, defines both near and far as well as here and there, Motl's family is outside of these realms of definition. De Certeau relies on an element of access in his

understanding of navigation, as well as a level of delineation in his understanding of speech. Immigrants have no path or direction on either the spatial level or in the patterns of enunciation.

Without a map of New York City and unable to participate in utterance across individual moments, immigrants interact with the world across a variable spaces—distances that are perceived although they cannot be measured. Within theses interstices, immigrants develop alternative modes of navigation and communication, reconsidering the markers of space and time. Jesus Colon illustrates this in his book *A Puerto Rican in New York and Other Sketches*, a collection of short pieces that follow Puerto Rican immigrants across daily life in New York City. These literary sketches offer a perspective of the factories and the politics of labor, but also present clearly how easy it is to get turned around in a foreign land. In "The Day My Father Got Lost" two brothers bring their father to work alongside them in hopes of getting him a job, but he is not needed. The father decides to go for a walk and, knowing no English, chooses a window as a landmark: "he took the department store window and all that it contained as the sign where he had to return to after he got tired of whiling away time walking around the streets near the factory" (46). Though he walks down the sidewalk of New York City, the father negotiates within his own interstice, producing his own space, which changes as he looks more closely: "lo and behold! The display that he had memorized so thoroughly was changed" (47). The world around him, including the window to the department store, is all foreign to him, offering him a spatial language he has no access to but must navigate.

This capacity of disorientation is framed by the linguistic and spatial gaps that mark immigrant narratives which are too often as lost in translation or completely outside of context. It

is only from within a foreign space and through existence in an interstitial realm that physical borders cease to exist, and only from the perspective of an outsider that the boundaries of spatial and linguistic lines can be referenced.

IV.

While the streets of New York City create a challenge in immigrant narratives, the immeasurable distance between home and the new spaces they occupy frames a larger experience of being lost. The lines blur and the spaces intermingle across time and place, creating a gap that keeps immigrants from ever arriving in New York City and feeling able to be "home". Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* outlines the immigrant experience of Chinatown through the eyes of Ben Loy. The intersection of Chinese culture and perceptions of America define the relationships between individuals and their surroundings. Ben Loy walks down Mott Street, but sees his home in China:

> Suddenly the surroundings took on an unfamiliar appearance. He was a stranger in a strange town . . . He began to run but it was no use, for he could not distinguish the roads and the causeways between rice paddies from the mass of blackness that surrounded him. Many times he lost his footing and stumbled onto the submerged fields (207).

The boundaries of place, country to country, blur together—spatial understanding or delineation fall to pieces. Ben Loy is enveloped in a liminal space between New York City in a moment and Ben Loy's home of the past. He suddenly becomes a stranger in both his present moment and in his past. He stumbles through the rain, losing his understanding of place and time. The loss of definition between his adolescence and his adult life gestures toward the loss of time central to immigrant narratives.

The loss of structured time entangles the present moment of immigrant experience with a past life, but also provides immigrant narratives with the ability to see time from a distance. In Sergei Dovlatov's *A Foreign Woman*, the narrator depicts the Russian immigrant community in New York City through the experience of Marusya Tatarovich. The novel shifts back and forth in time to capture the convoluted relationship Marusya has with her past as well as her present. When her old love comes to New York City, all of time intersects in a single moment: "Marusya and Lyova walk past the window. Their future is there, beyond the corner, in the indifferent bustle of New York's streets. The past is looking at them and paying the waitress" (101). Immigrant narratives use situations like this to highlight the space between the past and future and consider the existence of a present in immigrant experience. While Marusya's past maintains corporeal form through the appearance of her past love, there is a distance between them that is not measurable. Marusya perceives her future as an ongoing movement just out of sight.

This breakdown of time is also reflected in the definition of moments across time in immigrant narratives. As Marusya navigates interactions with others in New York City, she is unable to outline individual happenings and exchanges. Instances that often seem marked, or static, begin to float in and out of reality, as if they are possibilities. Here Marusya thinks of her first moments with Rafael, her new love:

> Marusya remembered only the outlines of his long-standing presence. A smile on the stairs. (She may have taken Rafael for one of the building workers.) Roses thrown in her direction from a battered car. Four penny-candy pieces offered to Lyova. The strong scent of men's cologne in the elevator. Crowding between doors. A lifted hat. Velvet jacket, a cigar, beige trousers. A fake diamond ring. A tie the color of dashed hopes (58).

Dovlatov turns a single meeting infinite possibilities by conflating ways in which they may have met, each encompassed by distance. In immigrant narratives, marked moments—memories seemingly fixed in time—mutable. This has the effect of measuring the gap between people, place, and time rather than defining the experience itself. Marusya remembers meeting Rafael by recalling the space between them, and often without his presence. The use of objects and actions to signify the relationship highlights the way that immigrants experience themselves, and others—as strangers. The issues of definition allow immigrant narratives to consider existence as questionable, allowing for the chance that specific moments may have never happened.

While Marusya actively interacts with the past, moving away from her previous home, the narrator of Nadine Pinede's "Departure Lounge" travels toward a foreign land that was once her home as she considers the loss of her family's past. Just before her departure to Haiti the narrator considers all that has been lost to the past, including family and language, customs and understandings. Amidst this erosion, her past and present continue to interact: "I dreamed she was crossing the street, only it was a street in Haiti, and she was waving over at me to join her, but my street was in New York and there was too much traffic. When it was finally safe for me to cross over, she was gone" (85). The physical distance between New York City and Haiti disintegrates, once again illustrating the gap that develops between immigrants and their homes as time goes on. Two streets merge across time and vast waters, and yet the distance is so far that the past is gone before she arrives.

V.

De Certeau's depiction of movement and utterance relies on structures of space and linguistic frameworks but it requires participation by the walkers across the city. Immigrant narratives illuminate the interstitial spaces created through language negotiation framed by the

act of translation. Language use measures distance in immigrant narratives not only through issues of access, but through interlingual negotiation and redefinition. The loss that defines the immigrant experience in spatial realms extends into linguistic interaction. This distance from home is reflected in the relationship that immigrants develop with their first language. In his 1976 talk, "Language as Otherland", Joseph Brodsky describes the effects of spatial and linguistic distance:

> When you are so far off anything you can call a base or ground, you are subjected to a much higher pressure which comes from both outside and within". Through a number of contemplations he continues, "you realize that with every next line, with every wave-looking thought you are drifting further and further off what you could call the shore […] It is your otherland, although there is no way to build a house on it: it moves.

Language serves as a reference to home, but it also reproduces the vast distance between immigrants and their past.

Immigrant narratives present the idea of "America" as fleeting, often seen in the attempts to name or define the place. In *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, Louis Chu's characters use language and associations that have been brought from China as they navigate New York City, beginning with their arrival. Louis Chu's characters refer to America though the colloquial terms "Golden Mountain" and "Beautiful Country." Chinese immigrants believe these labels to be true because of what they hear before they find themselves in New York City. While "Golden Mountain" originally referred to the California Gold Rush during the 1850s, the term became a generalized reference to the land of wealth and opportunity. America is also referred to as "Beautiful Country," a title created through transliteration. Because of the Chinese character system,

transliteration is performed through phonetic matching rather than by moving directly between alphabets. The spatial distance between places can be seen through the issues of translation and disparate linguistic systems.

While immigrant narratives highlight the ideas and associations that individuals bring with them as they come to New York City, they also present new concepts that must be communicated. In *Eat a Bowl of Tea* the active negotiation between English and the Sze Yup dialect frames developing interactions between individuals and between Chinese culture and New York City. While America is referred to in English and according to understandings gained in China, understandings of immigrants are expressed in Sze Yup by both Chinese immigrants and those still in China. Chinese men who have immigrated to America are called the Cantonese term "gimshunhock," but Chinese people raised in or assimilated into Western culture are called "jook-sing." These references present the distance that immigrants inhabit by entangling the space traveled with their crosslinguistic experience. Through the continued use of Cantonese, these names reinforce both the connection and distance between Chinese immigrants from their language and home. These are words they carry with them as they arrive in America, but they are also defined by the movement of immigrants into America. While Louis Chu's characters use Sze Yup to refer to members of their own immigrant community, they also translate idioms from the dialect into English throughout the novel. For example, in the story "Green Hat," a Chinese marker of a wife's infidelity accompanies Ben Loy throughout the novel, whereas cursing in general (e.g., "go sell your ass") reflects the interactions of Chinese immigrants at the time.

In the introduction to the book, Jeffrey Chan asserts that "the linguistic sensibility that lies behind these Sze Yup curses accurately reflects the combative nature of these bachelors" (2). By intertwining the narrative with Cantonese terms for Chinese immigrants and the translated

Chinese cultural markers, *Eat A Bowl of Tea* details the interstitial spaces central to the linguistic experience of immigrants in America and the way that their language outlines the isolation that immigrants experience in their own Chinatown. Across immigrant literature, liminal spaces are framed by these interlingual acts.

In *Motl, Peysi the Cantor's Son* the relationship between the characters and the English language begins before coming to New York City, but the ability to speak becomes a necessity immediately. New names for known objects are met with new words for things never known, and the significance of words according to language is often baffling. While his mother learns how to buy meat at the deli, Motl and Elye try to understand how to tell time:

> The klak hangs on a wall. Elye says it's called a klahk because it goes klik-klahk. A klahk that fits into your pocket, he says, is a vahtsh. 'So why is it called a vahtsh?' I ask. 'What should it be called?' Elye says. "A tahk,' I say. 'Why a tahk?' Elye asks. 'Because it goes tik-tahk,' I say (Aleichem 282).

Motl presents his interactions with English words by spelling them phonetically, incorporating his family's and his own accent. This visual referencing of English illustrates the general confusion that Motl has about the choice of wording and the methods of usage. It depicts the distance between English and his understanding of the world.

Translation develops a space between languages in which active negotiation takes place; it is central to immigrant narratives as so much of immigrant experience is tied to the desire to communicate. Aleichem offers readers a clear perspective of this space through the eyes of his child narrator. Motl's wide-eyed view navigates the gaps in utterance actively according to the process of language acquisition, mirroring the navigation required of immigrants across the larger narrative.

Rather than considering language acquisition in a new land, the narrator of Nadine Pinede's "Departure Lounge" considers the language that is lost as immigrants immerse themselves into the culture and language of New York City. In her adult years the narrator looks back at the associations she and her brother had with Creole as well as the limits to which they were able to interact with their family's home language:

> Even so, no matter how hard they tried, each passing year felt like the tide ebbing, making them strangers to their own homeland. Philippe and I ended up speaking English at school and at home, and hearing Creole only when my parents spoke to each other. We always understood what they were saying, even though we couldn't speak the language ourselves. The technical term is auditory comprehension, not the same thing as fluency. (87)

The years are described as a tide, slowly pulling them farther away from their home. This is presented as a distancing from the language of their family and a growing space that restrains their ability to communicate with Haiti or other Creole speakers. It does not end with a complete separation between their lives in New York and their homes lost. Rather, they hold Creole at a distance just outside of reach; a realm developed by their immigration and acclimation to a new world. This is not so much a loss of translation as it is a linguistic experience of linguistic and spatial distance.

VI.

Acts of translation and issues of interpretation frame the experience of immigrants throughout time, but the loss of time in individual moments of immigrant life offers a perspective beyond linguistic navigation or understanding or space. Distance ceases to exist in immigrant literature, or acquires a different value, gradually making the homeland one has left nearly as

"foreign" as the new world. While Jesus Colon's characters find themselves lost amongst the streets of New York, the characters in Sergei Dovlatov's *A Foreign Woman* become lost in relation to their past and home. Louis Chu's characters use the interaction between English and Cantonese to mirror the motions back and forth across space, while Nadine Pinede's narrator in "Departure Lounge" considers the linguistic representation of loss in the process of immigration. Sholem Alechiem outlines motion as central to the immigrant identity and ultimately the defining reference to distance across immigrant narratives in New York City. Motl explains this ongoing movement as he and his family cross the Atlantic Ocean: "You take a turn around the deck with your hands in your pockets and you're traveling to America. You stop to have a drink and you're traveling to America. You sleep in a bed at night and you're still traveling to America" (240).

These narratives depict a city as a place without boundaries. Immigrants rely on psychic maps and trajectories that may have no relation to space and time. Characters find themselves separated from their communities, sometimes shifting their cultural identities or, on the contrary, struggling to hold on to their pasts. They interact with the possibilities of entanglement with the city and experience distance even while walking its streets, often weighed down with the elusive idea of success. The traditional narrative plot is shaped by events that take place in specific times, the master narrative of the immigrant experience in New York City is largely shaped by what occurs between time. In many immigrant narratives, these spaces are critical for characters' daily movements. The literature created by immigrant communities in New York City enables readers to inhabit these spaces—to understand how it feels to be a geographical, cultural, and linguistic outsider.

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