



Article

“I Will Always Be Crossing Ocean Parkway; I Have Crossed It; I Will Never Cross It.” Marianna De Marco Torgovnick, *Crossing Ocean Parkway*

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Abstract: In *Crossing Ocean Parkway* (1994), scholar and literary critic Marianna De Marco Torgovnick—now Professor of English at Duke University—traces her story as an Italian-American girl growing up in a working-class Italian neighborhood of New York City that could not satisfy her desire for learning and for upward mobility. De Marco’s personal experiences of cultural border crossings finds here specific spatial reference especially through Ocean Parkway, “a wide, tree-lined street in Brooklyn, a symbol of upward mobility, and a powerful state of mind” (p. vii). Border crossing or trespassing inform this text. De Marco moved from an Italian immigrant milieu to a sophisticated Jewish community, via her marriage, and from a minority group to a successful career in academia. There are also crossings between being a professional, a wife, a mother, and a daughter; between being an insider and an outsider; between longing to be free and the desire to belong; between safety and danger, joy and mourning, nostalgia and contempt. In representing her younger self as “outsider” to her received community, she provides a sharp analysis of the tensions within American society.

Keywords: autobiography and memoir; Italian-American literature

In her memoir, *Crossing Ocean Parkway* (Torgovnick De Marco 1996), literary critic Marianna De Marco Torgovnick—now Professor of English at Duke University—traces her story as an Italian-American girl growing up in a working-class Italian neighborhood of New York City that could not satisfy her desire for learning. De Marco’s personal experience of cultural border crossings finds here specific spatial reference especially through the prominent role of Ocean Parkway, “a wide, tree-lined street in Brooklyn, a symbol of upward mobility, and a powerful state of mind” (p. vii). Ocean Parkway defined here as “ecumenical crossroads”, “the Jerusalem of Brooklyn” (p. 24), remains “an important boundary for ethnic groups, and an important rite of passage” (p. 24). For the narrator, it was an educational ground, as she puts it, “a training school, a dress rehearsal for the bastions of American culture” (p. 24). The Title and the Preface point to the crucial role of the street. Here, the author stresses that when she was young, Ocean Parkway marked a border for religious groups, separating Italian and Jewish neighborhoods. Ocean Parkway was also an alternative to Bensonhurst, the working-class Italian neighborhood where she was born.

Ocean Parkway is a monument to the grand urban planning of the nineteenth century [. . .] Broad and multi-laned, Ocean Parkway stretches across the borough, funneling traffic to and from Manhattan or downtown Brooklyn and the sandy plains of Coney Island. It is lined by rows of trees and [. . .] concrete paths divided neatly down the middle by benches for pedestrians or bikers taking a rest [. . .]. Ease and spaciousness are the essence of Ocean Parkway and the reason why, for Brooklynites, is a powerful state of mind (pp. 22–23).

Border crossings or trespassing inform this text, at various levels. The autobiographical narrative relates how De Marco moved from the Italian immigrant milieu in which she was born to a sophisticated Jewish community, via her marriage. It tells her readers of how she defied her mother's hopes for her future to pursue a successful career in academia. Furthermore, throughout the text, there are crossings between being an insider and an outsider; between the longing to be free and the desire to belong; between safety and danger, joy and mourning, nostalgia and contempt. Tellingly, boundary crossings extend also to genre: Memoir, film, critical theory, personal anecdote, social analysis, identity politics, and documentary account are all present; in addition, the very readable style keeps the informal and lyrical genre of the memoir. As the author stresses in the Preface, "crossings—expected and desired crossings, unexpected and even devastating ones—are more broadly the theme of this volume" (p. 8) where "a central concern [...] is that there are always crossings between personal history and intellectual life" (p. 9).

These crossings create fruitful contact zones. Within this field of study, Mary Ann Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* (Pratt 1992) constitutes a seminal contribution. Pratt takes her starting point from the work of anthropologist Fernand Ortiz, who was the first to introduce the notion of transculturation. According to Ortiz, "transculturation is a set of ongoing transmutations; it is full of creativity and it never ceases; it is irreversible. It is a process where we give something in exchange for what we receive; the two parts of the equation end up being modified. A new reality springs out from this movement. What is created is not, however, a patchwork of features but a new phenomenon, original and independent" (Ortiz 1995, p. 54). For Pratt, "contact zones" (Pratt 1992, p. 7) are "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt 1991, p. 33). I shall return to this issue later on.

At a very young age, she develops "a feeling of pride in being different. At school, teachers praised me for empathizing with books and having strong opinions; I was appointed 'school librarian,' so that I could spend several hours each day alone, reading or doing whatever I wanted" (p. 166). As a very young woman, she writes, "I was despised by my family as unfeminine and unseemly" (p. 25). However, she had a sense of "being special" and she "began to rather like [those] scenes of banishment at home" (p. 166). Later on, talking about the value of the Italian-American community, especially regarding women, she stresses, "I wanted to be done with that kind of femininity, that kind of conformity" (p. 153). In this respect, she feels in close affinity with other Italian-American women who broke free from traditions, like Helen Barolini and Louise De Salvo, who also wrote extensively about the complex relation with their cultural background.¹ In representing her younger self as an "outsider" to her received community, she provides a sharp analysis of the tensions within American society, and within the Italian-American community in particular. In the chapter "On Being White, Female, and Born in Bensonhurst" (included in *Best American Essays* 1991) (Oates 1991) she remarks, "Italian American in Bensonhurst are notable for their cohesiveness and their provinciality; the slightest pressure turns those qualities into prejudice and racism. [...] Their provinciality results from the Italian Americans' devotion to jealous distinctions and discriminations. Jews are suspect [...] the Irish are okay, fellow Catholics, but not really 'like us'" (p. 7).

Ocean Parkway in Brooklyn could be considered New York's Champs Elysées. Built in the 1920s, for many years it kept ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic communities apart; indeed, it does so even today. For Italian-Americans who aspired to connect with the world of the educated middle class, the trip across Ocean Parkway was a momentous journey across what was perceived as an impossible barrier. A few determined and talented Italian-Americans left the 'wrong side' of Ocean Parkway, but they were regarded as outsiders. Mariana De Marco was supposed to marry and settle in Bensonhurst,

¹ Second-generation Italian-American Helen Barolini often writes about issues pertaining to Italian-American identity. Her most famous novel is *Umbertina* (Barolini 1979). She is also the editor of *The Dream Book: An Anthology of Writings by Italian American Women* (New York: Schocken (Barolini 1985)). Similarly, Louise De Salvo, a Woolf scholar, wrote several memoirs. Her last was published the year of her death: *The House of Early Sorrows* (New York: Fordham, (De Salvo 2018)).

Brooklyn, as her mother wished. She did not. She married a Jewish man and thus moved out of the Italian-American community. The marriage turned out to be also a sort of escape: “When I married, I of course did marry a Jewish man, who gave me my freedom, and, very important, helped remove me from the expectations of Bensonhurst [. . .] he knew how important it was (as he put it) ‘to get past the Brooklyn bridge’” (p. 15). This was not an easy move as the “Jewish-Italian marriage is a common enough catastrophe in Bensonhurst” (p. 15). Eventually, she earned a PhD from Columbia University and became a Professor of English at a prestigious university. However, this story is also the story of the friction between residual cultural elements of her background and her desire for learning and freedom.

The emphasis on a line of demarcation, on a border, on its location and status, necessarily generates questions regarding an outside and an inside, a here and a there—often also a here, a there, and an elsewhere. Critical thinking, informed most notably by Jacques Derrida’s work², has destabilized notions of endings and beginnings, of boundaries and divisions, and has drawn our attention to the necessity of questioning any number of borders: Not only between outside and inside, but also between self and other, public and private, subject and object. The notion of border acquires a major role when transformations are considered from this new perspective. Whether geographic, national, territorial or symbolic, a border both separates and circumscribes. Yet borders are also crossings; they become a space where identity is at stake for those who cross them, come up against them, or move around and beyond them. Furthermore, borders are themselves moving. More importantly, perhaps, beyond their empirical reality, borders are ascribed a symbolic nature that allows them to be regarded as places for encountering otherness.

As the quotation in my title suggests, “I will always be crossing Ocean Parkway; I have crossed it; I will never cross it” (p. 8), this text is an exploration of the nuances of border crossings. The act of writing plays a crucial part, and it is thanks to the writing process that Marianna learns to be *in the place* of crossing. In other words, she learns to navigate the border. Stephen Clingman first introduced and theorized this idea of navigating the border. In his exploration of the “transnational”, or the “transitive” and, I would add, transcultural imaginary (p. 32), he connected the idea of navigation with the border, as one cannot exist without the other. What links together the nature of the boundary, the grammar of identity and transcultural writing, is the idea of navigation. The transcultural is intrinsically navigational. Navigation, however, cannot be envisaged without the boundary. Clingman highlights the crucial paradox at the core of the transitive imagination: Navigation can occur because of the boundary, not despite of it. What is significant is how navigation transforms the nature of the boundary. In this process, the role of space is crucial:

the transition across these boundaries that produces meaning, and where meaning is not complete, or is deferred, then further navigations are both invited and required. [. . .] And so the boundary is also a horizon, a destination never quite reached. [. . .] The boundary of meaning, then, is a transitive boundary; the transitive is intrinsically connected with meaning; navigation depends on, and creates, the transitive boundary which itself may undergo change. In all these ways the boundary is not a limit but the space of transition (Clingman 2009, p. 22).

This is also valid for the grammar of identity. Difference within the self or between the self and other selves are not overruled in this conception. On the contrary, they become the basis of identity as a kind of meaning regarded precisely as navigation, exploration, transition. In fact, difference is not a hindrance to navigation; it constitutes instead ‘the very *ground* of its possibility and necessity.’ These points of encounter, differentiation, refusal, repression, combination constitute, among other things, the transnational imaginary, the very territory of transnational fiction, “a space of transition

² See in particular (Derrida 1979) “*Living On: Border Lines*” and (Derrida 1987) *The Truth in Painting*.

[...] a navigational space” (Clingman 2009, pp. 22–23). From this perspective, then, navigation cannot be considered without the boundary, and this is the essential paradox at the core of the transitive imagination: “navigation occurs not despite but because of the boundary” (p. 21).

Whether it concerns language, fiction, identity or location, navigation does not mean crossing or having crossed, but *being in the space of crossing*. It means *being prepared to be* in the space of crossing, in transition, in movement, in journey. It means accepting placement as *displacement*, position as *disposition*, not through coercion of others or by others to ourselves, but through “disposition” as an effect of the self, as a kind of approach (Clingman 2009, p. 25).

Clingman elaborates on what happens in particular with writing:

Along the journey of the sentence something may have happened to the identity, precisely because of what syntax enjoins and, in this instance, defines: the *self-thinking*, the *thinking-self*. [...] In addition, this happens not only in specific moments, but over the course of a lifetime, involving emotions and other subtle tremors of the self as much as does conscious thought [...]. The syntax of the self—its combinatory, unfolding possibilities—is a transitive syntax. It is a function of, and permits, *navigation* (p. 16).

Border crossing implies a crucial role of space. It is perhaps useful to remember that there is no meaning without space. It is the transition across these boundaries that generate meaning, and where meaning is not complete, or is deferred, then additional navigations are both invited and required. As a result, the boundary is also a horizon, a destination never quite attained.

The “ecumenical” or, we could say, interdenominational character of Ocean Parkway makes it a threshold, a “contact zone”, to use Marie Louise Pratt’s expression, among people of different origins and cultures. As a contact zone, Ocean Parkway allows, to quote Pratt, “the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect [...] a ‘contact’ perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats the relations among [...] travelers and ‘travelees’, not in terms of separateness [...] but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt 1992, p. 7).

De Marco’s memoir also points at areas where communication is scant. It looks into the lack of interaction within the family and in the workplace, and its drawbacks. It exposes and questions traditional ideas of home and the sense of bounded, reassuring security usually associated with it: “Home is a site of vulnerability for all of us—men, women, and children. Home is the last frontier” (p. 49). The idea of home that emerges and is problematized here is constructed around a model of inclusions and exclusions; home as a way of establishing difference, as ultimately distance becomes difference and creates an ‘us’ and a ‘them’.

De Marco recounts her rebellion and her desire to escape the cultural constraints of the Italian-American community. “Getting out of Bensonhurst meant freedom—to experiment, to grow, to change. It also meant knowledge in some grand, abstract way” (p. 11). Home becomes a place to escape from and to escape to. In fact, she cannot discard the past completely. This personal narrative shows, once again, that the self is a site of contradictions, of multiple locations and allegiances. As she articulates it, “You can take the girl out of Bensonhurst (that much is clear); but you may not be able to take Bensonhurst out of the girl” (p. 10). As Frank Macchiarola remarks in his review, “The trip across Ocean parkway was not made with the self-assured strides that now characterize Torgovnick’s pace. The trip was made with tentative steps, with small and cautious steps forward and back. But when the crossing was made it was not without an awareness of how much was taken across the boulevard” (Macchiarola 1997). Her connection with the past has never ceased “Bensonhurst has everything to do with who I am and even with what I write. ‘We never cease to be ourselves’ (Conrad, *The Secret Agent*). Occasionally I get reminded of my roots, of their simultaneously choking and nutritive power” (p. 11). Her own research relates to her position as an outsider in her community of origin, like her monograph on Modernism, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellect, Modern Lives* (Torgovnick De Marco 1990).

As she explains, “Eventually I write the book I like the best about ‘primitive’ Others as they figure within Western obsessions: my identification with ‘the Other,’ my sense of being ‘Other,’ surfaces at last” (p. 16). Again, she posits herself as an Outsider. In this study, the civilized West’s fascination for the primitive reflects a shiver of transcendental homelessness, a kind of absolute alienation from the self, from society. In this process, the search for home is paramount: “The metaphor of finding a home or being at home recurs over and over as a structuring pattern within Western primitivism. Going primitive is trying to ‘go home’ to a place that feels comfortable and balanced, where full acceptance comes freely and easily” (Torgovnick De Marco 1990, p. 185).

To return to Marianna’s desire to escape, it may be useful to remember that the word “transgress” derives from the Latin *transgredi*, whose meaning has a spatial origin. It is associated to crossing a river, or to the other side of a boundary, or moving from one topic to another. “The *transgressio* could also be an infraction: one does not cross a boundary without departing from the norm” (OED). Nevertheless, the Romans gave priority to its spatial meaning: To transgress means to step outside one’s space and enter a foreign one. As Bertrand Westphal notes in his forefront study on the role of space in literature: “transgression is coextensive with mobility” (p. 45); it involves those who reject the static and the sedentary. In literature, the effects of this transgressivity are often reflected in minority discourse. The field changes depending on the approach. For Juri Lotman (2005), it is “semiosphere”; for Deleuze and Guattari (1987), “territory”; for Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), feminist and Chicana activist, it is the borderlands or *la frontera*. “But–Westphal remarks—in all cases instability is the distinctive feature” (p. 45). Transgression is a process that accompanies movement and motive. In this perspective, space becomes fluid and blended: “Transgression corresponds to the crossing of a boundary beyond which stretches a marginal space of freedom” (Westphal 2011, p. 47). Going back to her neighborhood many years later makes Marianna feel uneasy; she reduplicates the experiences of her youth, defying the community’s rules of behavior:

I have been in Bensonhurst less than a week but I have managed to reproduce [. . .] the conditions of my youth. Knowing the rules, I have broken them. I shake hands with my discreetly rebellious past, still an outsider walking through the neighborhood, marked and insulted—though unlikely to be shot (p. 18).

A boundary of course also creates patterns of exclusion and inclusion to which De Marco refers throughout the text. The notion of home so cherished within the Italian-American community, with its association with shelter, comfort, nurture, and protection, is pointed at and undermined at the same time. As Rosemary Marangoly George has so forcefully argued, “Homes are not about inclusions and wide open arms as much as they are about places carved out of closed doors, closed borders and screening apparatuses” (Marangoly George 1996, p. 18). Home is not a neutral place, Marangoly stresses: “It is community. Communities are not counter-constructions but only extensions of home, providing the same comforts and terrors on a larger scale” (p. 9). In a chapter titled “The Politics of the ‘We,’” first published in the collection of essays *Eloquent Obsessions* (Torgovnick De Marco 1994), De Marco notes how:

There is a kind of ‘we’ that seems utterly convincing—rounded, magisterial, confident—and enough to make you want to die if you can’t be part of it. This ‘we’ is more than a pronoun. In fact, the pronoun is only the most obvious marker, the sign and symbol of how the circle of culture gets drawn: who’s in, who’s out; why; and to what effect (p. 137) [. . .] Who uses the ‘we,’ and how they use it matters. It is a state of mind that establishes who counts and who doesn’t, what can and cannot be thought and done (p. 150).

Subjects are constituted by their relations with ‘home’. Here, the received notions of home and the ambience of safety, security, and individualization that the word has gathered around itself come into scrutiny. In theorizing on these issues, Biddy Martin and Chandra Mohanty have disassembled received notions of ‘home’. As they see it, “‘Being home’ refers to the place where one lives within

familiar, safe, protected boundaries; ‘not being home’ is a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself” (Martin and Mohanty 1986, p. 197). In the following passage, De Marco explicitly looks at the tensions she herself experiences between the longing to belong and the yearning to be free:

When Italian American daughters rebel, their ‘I-ness’ comes through loud and strong—but so too does their remembrance of the ‘we.’ They feel the lure of family and community—the thrill of self-sacrifice. The ‘I’ is a heady release conflicted by a potent nostalgia. I want the ‘I’ with its hunger for difference and freedom. But I want the ‘I’ to linger along with the ‘we’—to be part, somehow, of our collective memory (p. 153).

In her professional life, however, she elicits her Italian surname. All her important books, like *Gone Savage*, go under Torgovnick only. Indeed, she shares this choice with other well-known academics of Italian origin, like for example, Sandra Gilbert (2003), Linda Hutcheon (1998), and Cathy N. Davidson (1993). They all write about the weight of their culture of origin, and the ways they negotiate the “inter-reference between two or more cultural traditions” (Fischer 1986, p. 194).

Fred Gardaphé, a well-known expert of Italian-American writing, thinks De Marco does not distance herself enough from the parochialism of her community, their prejudices, or rather racism, like the one against African-Americans. Gardaphé believes she “makes no effort to explore either the roots of those racist qualities or the fact that not all Italian Americans shared those qualities” (Gardaphé 2004, pp. 126–27; see also Franklin 2009). I think De Marco is very critical of the insular and provincial imprint of her culture of origin. She is not a sociologist, to whom Gardaphé turns to find answers and more in-depth explanations (like the sociologist Jerome Krase (p. 127)). I believe *Crossing Ocean Parkway* is transcultural in its character and points to the dangers involved in being aware solely of one culture. The latter attitude is typical of the Italian-American community, especially when it comes to her parents’ generation. As she explains, “Bensonhurst is a neighborhood dedicated to believing that its values are the only values; it tends towards certain forms of inertia [...] Difference is not only unwelcome, it is unacceptable” (pp. 7–8).

The positive aspect inherent in being aware of two cultures has been discussed also within the community of Italian-American scholars. Pellegrino D’Acierno (1998), for example, noted that this double vision is a trigger of creativity. In this line of thought, Helen Barolini adds: “For cultural duality is not only ambivalence, it is also advantage: to draw upon two identities, cultures, and languages is to draw riches as well as dissentiousness once it is recognized in a positive way and so used” (Barolini 1999, p. 255).

It is Palestinian American critic, Edward Said, who theorized in depth about the advantages of being simultaneously aware of more than one culture, an awareness that Said sees as unique, indeed indispensable, to the role of the intellectual. Being conscious of two worlds at one time, he argues, allows for, what Said calls, a “plurality of vision”, an “awareness of simultaneous dimensions” (Said 1984, p. 53) which enables tolerance, that is, the acceptance of difference, and more importantly, endorses cultural relativism (see Torgovnick De Marco 1996; see Franz Boas).³ Torgovnick stresses elsewhere that conveying different perspectives into a text, as an interdisciplinary mode of writing does, “brings with it the benefits of defamiliarization. It can break through to powerful insight” (Torgovnick De Marco 1996, p. 202). It is perhaps worth quoting Said at length, on this issue, from *Representations of the Intellectual*:

³ Boas also introduced the ideology of cultural relativism, which holds that cultures cannot be objectively ranked as higher or lower, or better or more correct, but that all humans see the world through the lens of their own culture, and judge it according to their own culturally acquired norms: “... civilization is not something absolute, but ... is relative, and ... our ideas and conceptions are true only so far as our civilization goes” (Boas 1887).

... while it is an actual condition, exile is also for my purposes a metaphorical condition. By that I mean that my diagnosis of the intellectual in exile derives from the social and political history of dislocation and migration [...] but it is not limited to it. Even intellectuals who are lifelong members of a society, can, in a manner of speaking, be divided into insiders and outsiders: those on the one hand who belong fully to the society as it is, who flourish in it without an overwhelming sense of dissonance or dissent, those who can be called the yea-sayers; and on the other hand, the nay-sayers, the individuals at odds with their society and therefore outsiders and exiles so far as privileges, and honours are concerned. The pattern that sets the course for the intellectual as outsider is best exemplified by the condition of the exile, the state of never being fully adjusted, always feeling outside the chatty, familiar world inhabited by natives, so to speak, tending to avoid and even dislike the trappings of accommodation and national well being. Exile for the intellectual in this metaphysical sense is restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others. You cannot go back to some earlier and perhaps more stable condition of being at home; and, alas, you can never fully arrive, be at one with your new home or situation (Said 1997, p. 53).

Donna Haraway's feminist epistemological project also emphasizes the crucial importance of what she also calls, following Said, "double-vision". In Haraway's elaboration of this point, she considers a woman's liminal condition to be an excellent example of a kind of subversive practice: "to live on the boundaries, to write without a founding myth of original wholeness" produces, she maintains, "liminal transformations" (Haraway 1988, p. 589).

De Marco's multiple belongings emerge with the writing of this personal narrative. As Susanna Egan, author of *Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography*, remarks, "self-construction depends upon creating new spaces between languages, cultures, and places that are impossible to regain or to achieve [...] These liminal spaces present creative, highly politicized opportunities for self-construction in mirror talk" (Egan 1999, p. 27). The academic memoir in particular flourished in the 1990s and since then has involved scholars in ethnography, law, economics, and literary studies. They have attracted much critical attention "especially for their ideological challenge to traditional, disciplinary discourse" that rendered them a kind of "reflective writing", as Margaret Willard-Traub remarks. They are contributing to reshape the intent of scholarly writing more broadly (Willard-Traub 2007, p. 188), thus creating a genre that reaches to a wider, nonspecialist readership. In so doing, these texts "transform academic work so that it speaks to the public, as well as to other experts [making] academic work into socially useful knowledge" (Trinbur 1993, p. 6).

In these texts, "autobiography and scholarship complement each other" (Davies 2009, p. 1). From the point of view of genre classification, they do not fit into established categories. In this memoir, as in many others of its kind, the prose moves across generic boundaries, as the text includes personal narrative and reminiscences as well as cultural and literary criticism. Nancy Miller in her *Getting Personal* wonders about "the point of personal criticism" (Miller 1991, p. 19). She remarks that these memoirs work "more like a relay between positions to create critical fluency. Constituted finally in a social performance, these autobiographical acts may produce a new repertory for an enlivening cultural criticism" (Miller 1991, p. 25). In defense of the memoir, which has seen many detractors, and as an explanation for its success, Miller notes that the genre helps you to remember; it is "an aid to memory. [...] In this sense what memoirs do is support you in the act of remembering. The memoir boom, then, should be understood not as a proliferation of self-serving representations of individualistic memory but as an aid or a spur to keep cultural memory alive" (Miller 2002, p. 14).

As for the specificity of autobiography, it has been difficult for critics to pinpoint the generic traits of this protean literary mode. As far back as 1980, a well-known expert, James Onley, noted, "Autobiography, like the life it mirrors, refuses to stay still long enough for the genre critic to fit it out with the necessary rules, laws, contracts, and pacts; it refuses, simply, to be a literary genre like any other" (Onley 1980, pp. 24–25). Alice Kaplan, author of a language memoir and a student of Paul De Man at Yale, recalls her professor's fascination with autobiography, which he considered "an

impossible genre” (Kaplan 1993, p. 173). For De Man, self-knowledge depends on figurative language or tropes. Celeste Schenk reminds us that genres are “cultural constructions themselves”. Furthermore, they operate not according to an ideal type but are instead “overdetermined loci of contention and conflict” (Brodsky and Schenk 1998, p. 282).

Critics like Egan have stressed their porous generic boundaries. These texts, as Egan remarks:

[...] position themselves in transition, on border, and in process [...] resistant to ‘pure culture.’ They move among genres with an imaginative ease that suggests all borders are permeable. Personal information and narrative as well as cultural history are embedded in the ironies of speculation and theory. Theory becomes autobiographical, as do political and cultural commentary, criticism, fiction, poetry and film (Egan 1999, p. 122).

A final note on the personal aspect of this narrative. When growing up in Brooklyn, Marianna soon enough experienced the values of being an outsider. The tension between the ‘we’ and the ‘I’, nonetheless, remains. In the Epilogue, she recounts the loss of her father. She realizes that her father had been her ally in *Crossing Ocean Parkway*. “He was pulling for me underneath—though not always and not uniformly. He was proud of my bookishness and sensitivity. But he was an Italian American male—so he worried about them too” (p. 165). According to Nancy Miller, academic autobiographies have in common “the buried bodies of our past selves: the newly buried bodies of the parents who read to us and walked us to school. The loss that keeps on giving; the embedded child who never fully grows up, never completely leaves home” (Miller 2009, p. 178). As Marianna comments on the death of her father: “When a parent dies, you also cross from one state to another. All my life I have defined myself by rebellion against Bensonhurst. But the grounds for rebellion are running out” (p. 174).

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