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Cities of migration

How do outsiders negotiate the new urban space in which they arrive? How do they make it their own?

Irena Maryniak: I have never moved much — though I did spend seven years living in Hungary — and on the whole I hate movement. Partly, I'm sure, because my parents, as war refugees, were so haunted by it. So my remarks may tend to be academic. But let me try to give some kind of framework to our discussion.

We're sitting in a room in one of the biggest, most vibrant cities in the world. Equally, we all know that being in London is predominantly about tension, motion, stimulation, timing, and money. So what is a city?

In an actual sense there is space. There are roads, buildings, public areas, work spaces, living spaces, institutions, and so on. There is the whole thing of purveying essentials — water, gas, electricity, transport, systems of social welfare. But the notion of "city" is so huge and associated with so many things, some of which are material, some of which are more to do with aspiration or hope or creative freedom, that you're left with the whole question of how to express the idea of a city, any city? Is it a community? A bazaar? A mechanism of social control? Is it just a chaotic, ungovernable hodgepodge? Does it have any identity of its own? Or is it merely a backcloth for one displaced self in conversation with other displaced selves?

And how do we deal with its ambivalences: the fragmentation yet integration of spaces, the included exclusion, cultural retreat, and assimilation. Is there any point in trying to understand a city as a whole when it's such a mixture of fragments?

In some ways, I find it quite helpful to think in terms of tensions: a tension between fixity and movement: brick, tarmac, and steel on the one hand, flows of traffic and communication on the other. Putting down roots, establishing yourself on the one hand, getting about, negotiating difference, staying up to speed on the other. Stability and density on the one hand, permeability and mobility on the other.

And here's another thought: the perimeters of city mobility can be very closely linked to urban identity. If you're a middle-aged woman from rural Ukraine working unofficially as a cleaner with little English, you'll face a different set of constraints in moving around a city than if you're a single, childless, well-paid British professional. These two people will live in different

geographies as well as different cultural spaces. And this has to describe a form of urban segregation and disconnection — one has all the space, the other doesn't.

So what of new arrivals who have often seemed to crowd into inner cities while the existing population moves out — to suburbs or country retreats? Because of course cities are made of migrants; they grow and expand because of movement in from other spaces where jobs are scarce or where life is restricting, uncomfortable, or dangerous. But what does movement away from a fixed and trusted centre to a fractured urban environment, which is only partially understood, do to people? And what if that movement has been forced? Do reordered lives create new identities and new languages, new ways of exchanging information? Where does memory fit in, the interplay between past and present, the urge to recreate what has been irredeemably lost?

Loss has been called an enriching motif of modern culture. It has also been said, often, that in many ways the identity of the last century was shaped by exile, displacement, loss of certainty, loss (I suppose) of self. Cities are without any doubt sites of great innovation and of the exploration of new ways of thinking. They can give us new cultural identities, they can influence existing identities, they can touch and transform the self, as peoples and cultures intermingle.

But equally the urge to recover self can be very strong, and cities can shield you from change and transformation — and perhaps from time too — by creating the diasporic communities and cultures we're here to talk about. In the Polish diaspora, made up of refugees and migrants who came to this country during and after the Second World War, it has proved possible for people to live in London for 40 years with no more than the bare rudiments of English. People I know recast their personal lives in a mirror image of home and have lived for decades, in reasonable contentment, on the peripheries of the mainstream. Even as a child of the diaspora you weren't really here, but you weren't over there either. You lived in what the poet Czeslaw Milosz once called "an ideal space". A kind of myth. You might get the qualifications, you might do the job, but emotionally, you were elsewhere.

Watching this over the years I've come to wonder if exile is not a constant state of migration: you're shifting all the time, you're neither here nor there, there is a constant interaction going on between your memories, your inner life, and an exterior that often fails to acknowledge the reality or value of your memories. You live between absence and presence. The past imposes itself on the present and the temptation may be to reject the present. Especially if that present assails you with sights and smells that are unfamiliar, and voices that are indifferent or incomprehensible. Here is how a woman deported from Poland to Soviet Russia, then Central Asia, who then moved on to what was (at the time) Rhodesia, and finally to Britain describes her arrival here:

My brother met us at Southampton and took us to a flat in Brighton. When we arrived I sat down on the sofa and wept. I couldn't stop. No matter how terrible things had been until then you could always speak your own language. Now I was completely cut off. We had left the British refugee camp too soon. We should have stayed on. You're isolated from people you understand, you don't know any of the customs. You can just about say "thank-you" and "goodbye" and that's it. *This was the worst thing of all.*

Of course, in a more general way, the contact of personalities in cities is transitory, and superficial, though also less restricted, less bound by convention and less predictable than elsewhere. The ties that bind us as urban strangers have to be the ties of polity — we're united, if at all, by some kind of acknowledgement of the rights and obligations of our common citizenship.

But does this come to immunise us from the claims and needs of other personalities? Are close, intimate ties based on private relationships eroded in favour of the networking that has to be done?

Cities are spaces of connection between different worlds and diverse experiences, where places and times meet and rub shoulders, and where everyone has to cope with proximity, sensory overload, and the loneliness of being so much among strangers. They are places where you are constantly in search of a new language in which to interact and exchange information.

Language is the great bugbear of all new arrivals — even more so perhaps than geography and codes of practice. To many people who have come because they were forced to, language may be the only home they have. And outside that home, initially at least, there is a communication vacuum. You may not be able to put thoughts into words, your intelligence seems curtailed, and your mind may be locked in past trauma.

When you are in that frame of mind, it can take a while to recognize the possibilities offered by the new kinds of interaction that happen in the urban environment. There is the problem of recognizing who people are, and where they might fit in, when you don't know the codes of practice and can't read the faces, or the prompts of style or brand, that may, often very misleadingly, tell us something about one another. And as a new arrival, how do you enter the flow of power, money, and ideas that make a city?

This is a question that gets us into the realm of public space, that exclusively urban sphere, which has something to do with perceptions of the common good and something to do with what we allow to be seen by strangers. The public space, until recently at least, has been regarded as something opposed to the private, sheltered space defined by family and friends. And today as never before it seems to have a new ambivalence: are parks, shopping areas, cafés, theatres, and restaurants places of recreation or death traps? Are they places of open discourse or surveillance?

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the idea of public spaces grew up, there may have been a sense (rightly or wrongly) that the family was or might be a refuge, a place of higher moral value than the public realm — the swelling, madding crowd.

Oddly enough, this kind of hugely dated perception is very familiar to my own diasporic experience and, most probably, mentality: that sense of safety within, coupled with a belief that outside, things are done differently, that somehow people have different kinds of relationships out there that are based on exploitation, not real affection. Understanding, empathy could only be shared with someone of the same diasporic experience.

For years, we the children of the diaspora believed this, and to some extent our experiences would prove it to be true. We sensed, and were taught in Polish schools, churches, and the clubs and associations we joined, that the

mainstream, the public arena, might be a place where tight or long-term bonds and relationships would disintegrate. As indeed they sometimes did. Is this an experience exclusive to the diaspora I knew? Does this kind of perception make a diasporic community irredeemably cosseted and immature? And was it specific to a mid-twentieth-century Cold War diaspora from central and eastern Europe, introduced into Britain and, to some extent, allowed to recreate its own, conservative mini-state at a time of huge liberalisation and social change? Clearly we were introverted, there can be no doubt of that, and there is a sense, too, in which we were psychologically caught in Neverland. But were we alone? Was this an "historically and socially specific" case or is it a common experience? How much, as diasporas, do we share? These are things I would truly love to know.

Salil Tripathi: I was struck by one of your comments, Irena. It was about the loneliness amongst strangers, When I think of cities, there's an old song from the 1970s, Bollywood I think, which talks of exactly the same thing: the pleasures of being in a city, alone in a crowd. On the one hand it could be intimidating, on the other it's very nice to blend in where nobody else knows you. Three years ago, I wrote in *Index on Censorship*:

Manhattan is full of serendipitous discoveries. One evening in April, when I'd gone to see my friend Bharati from Bombay, I ran into P Sainath, the journalist who wrote a classic study about drought and development issues in India. That was the first pleasant coincidence. The next afternoon, I was in East Village. I recounted the story to my friend Suketu Mehta, who simply shrugged with the air of someone who had ceased to be surprised by such things. I mentioned I was planning to go later that evening to the opening of an art exhibition of Jahangir Sabavala, the distinguished septuagenarian painter from Bombay. Suketu couldn't make it but said "You'll enjoy it. Everyone will be there." Suketu is the author of *Maximum City*, which has been on various shortlists including the Pulitzer and the *Guardian* First Book Award.

I wasn't so sure. After all, Manhattan has hundreds of art galleries. Still I headed for the gallery to, well, meet everyone; and so it was. I met Jeet Thayil, an old friend from Bombay who worked as a reporter under duress to pursue his real interest in poetry; a bearded painter who turned out to have taught art at the school I attended in Bombay, except that he had migrated to the US in the year I started Montessori school; and then there was this woman that Jeet and I thought we had definitely met before, but she said, "Well, I have a very Bombay face, you know, and everyone thinks they have met me." In the end she turned out to be Maitri, whom I hadn't met before but was at business school with my wife.

In no time, in this twilight hour, at an art gallery in Manhattan, it turned into an evening that could so easily have belonged to Nariman Point, Bombay, 1986. It was easy to feel that I was at home again, even if this home was not a place but time, and the city was Manhattan, the world's melting pot, not Bombay, India's melting pot.¹

I grew up in Bombay and since then I have lived and worked in five other

cities for periods ranging from a few months to years. In each of these cities I have encountered the Indian diaspora, seeking to reclaim me with its grocery stores in Little Indias, its video shops and Bollywood posters, its newspapers from home and Alfonso mangos in season, its Lijjat Papads and the smell of turmeric.

The stores sell nostalgia, a connection with the past trying to help the immigrant or the expatriate adjust to the new land. Here the landscape around you has changed. The streets are suddenly cleaner and supermarkets are well stocked and there's snow on the street and no servants and it is expensive to call home all the time but the fridge is full and there's a car in the garage. The world is suddenly bafflingly different outside but you can remain the way you were in your own mind and in your own kitchen.

Little India helps you achieve that: Gray Street in Durban, Serangoon Road in Singapore, 26th Street in Manhattan, Jackson Heights in Queens — called Jaykishan Heights by Indians — Ealing or Southall in London, Modi Street in Hong Kong. Little India is where the diaspora meets to indulge in nostalgia. There are posters advertising Bharat Natyam dancing classes and faded copies of *Stardust* magazine, announcements of visiting gurus and swamis and the familiar face of the shop owner, the hardworking Gujarati, who is a one-stop Google and sometimes works faster than Google itself. He connects myriad strands of people within the US's Indian network like the collectors and mavens of information that Malcolm Gladwell writes about in *The Tipping Point*. He feels he has performed his karmic duty by introducing a homesick student to the lady who'd like to earn extra income by letting a room in her house to someone reliable; by linking the man with an eligible, aged daughter with the family looking for a bride for a cousin back home in India, all from a good family of course, no scandals, same caste even.

In a sense, that little India is fossilised, its world view set in a period during which most of the Indians left home for the New Land, which is why in Mauritius you hear traces of the Bhojpuri accent that has refused to submerge in the most sanskritised Hindi that now dominates the Gangetic Plains of India; and in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, Hindus ritually pierce their bodies and carry impossibly large idols called kavadis during Thaipusam, a festival rarely seen in southern India these days; and in parts of the UK, parents want to compel their young daughters, born and bred in Britain, unquestioningly and obediently to marry the groom they have chosen for them, because parents know what is best for their children. There are horrendous repercussions, too, when feudal minded, caste-obsessed parents force these daughters to marry men untutored in modernity; but there are good things that emerge out of such fossilisation, too.

Back in the 1990s, Hindus in Durban threw out Hindu preachers from the subcontinent and Muslims did likewise with Muslim preachers when they tried to spread their Ayodhya poison — the campaign within India to build a temple on the site of a mosque in northern India — to people of Indian origin who had moved to South Africa a century before. Saira Essa, an actress I came to know in Durban, told me, "We told them to get lost. We had far bigger issues to worry about in the new South Africa: the position of minorities, the fight for justice for all the people of colour. Just who did these preachers think they were fooling when they tried to divide us into Hindus and Muslims? Don't they know Gandhi started a struggle here, that he was invited by Muslim businessmen? We told them you take your hatred back to India. Break your mosques and temples there. Leave us alone."

Saira's India, which is now in the distant past, is the kind of India I belong to and which I miss. [Written when the Hindu fundamentalist BJP was in power, Ed] That's how Bombay was in 1982 when I left it first to study in the US. But it had changed when I returned in 1986 and by the time I left it again in 1990, it had begun to move inexorably in the other direction, which is why that evening in Manhattan was so important. It had brought together my diaspora, the kind of people who once belonged to my Bombay but who are now in Manhattan. We had been clinging not to a place but to a sense of time and era. Indeed, we could all have returned to Bombay and perhaps met again at the Jehangir Nicholson Art Gallery at Nariman Point, but it wouldn't be the same. The time which was important to us had gone, the Hindu nationalists and Marathi chauvinists who dominate Bombay's political space have already renamed my city into parochial sounding, insipid Mumbai, and Salman Rushdie, the Badshah of Breach Candy, has also moved to Manhattan.

¹ *Index on Censorship* 3/2002, "Diasporic diary in Manhattan")

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