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Lynn Mastellotto

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Dwelling in difference: narratives of arrival and accommodation

Lynn Mastellotto
Faculty of Education, Free University of Bolzano, Bolzano, Italy

ABSTRACT
At the intersection of life writing and travel writing, “relocation narratives” form a distinct subgenre of travel memoirs concerned with the everyday experiences of travellers who become settlers abroad through a process of voluntary migration and long-term foreign residency. This article examines works by two contemporary travel memoirists who recount a bilingual and intercultural education acquired through transnational relocation: first, Tim Parks’s Italian Neighbours (1992) and An Italian Education (1996); second, Pamela Druckerman’s Paris-based memoirs, Bringing Up Bébé (2012) and Bébé Day by Day (2013). More than chronicles of lifestyle makeovers by travellers who “go native” in foreign locales, these multipart memoirs map out a process of cultural accommodation over time, revealing that learning the language, interacting with locals, and raising children according to adopted cultural precepts are forms of deep immersion in place that can lead to the development of dialogical identities through ethical engagement with cultural differences.

KEYWORDS
Relocation memoirs; migration narratives; expatriate literature; life writing; narrative identity; dialogical narrative

Introduction

The global flow of people, capital, goods, services, and ideas helped characterise the twentieth century as a “century of migrations” (Clifford 1988), with the emphasis on the plural noun signalling how the defining experience of flux is embedded in a wide range of material and metaphorical practices, which have continued in the twenty-first century. Displacement as a theme in Western culture is a familiar terrain of analysis, particularly in relation to literary modernism and the central role of the exile/émigré writer in experiments with language, perspective and form. Critics such as Olsson (2007, 735) point to the centrality of the exilic experience in the development of Western literature, from Dante’s Divine Comedy to Camus’s L’Étranger. Edward Said’s well-known claim that “modern Western culture is in large part the work of exiles” and that, consequently, the past century can be called “the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration”, identifies displacement as the existential and cultural condition of the twentieth century (2000, 173–174).

Although expatriate writers are often labelled as “self-imposed exiles” or “voluntary exiles” and their works studied through the exilic lens of a metaphorical loss of origins
and its aesthetic implications for modernist narration (Nicholls 1995), this article takes a
different perspective by surveying expatriation from a wider perspective, one which
opens up the modernist treatment of expatriation beyond a focus on formal tropes and
figures (organicism, primitivism, exoticism, hedonism) to take into account the affective
and ethical dimensions of the expatriate life at the turn of the twenty-first century.
Drawing on Papayanis’s study of the literature of expatriation (2005), the defining
choice to live elsewhere is seen as one guided by an ethical impulse to remake one’s
life in accordance with a particular vision of “the good life”: in other words, a deliberate
act of displacement that triggers a long-term process of self-transformation centred on
the question, “How should I live?” By conveying interior journeys towards greater self-
knowledge and identity reformation as integral to the process of apprehending some
important life good, expatriate narratives follow a quest pattern in Youngs’s sense of “travelling
in search of meaning, purpose and belonging” (2013, 90).

Ross uses the term “settlement literature” (2010, 122), Alù refers to “villa books” (2010,
285), Parkins to “Tuscan farmhouse literature” (2004, 259) and George and Sattin to “home-
abroad books” (2002, ix) in identifying this form of travel writing that is not about travel per
se but about staying put. I prefer the terms “relocation narrative” or “relocation memoir”,
which shift the focus away from a specific destination or particular abode to the process of
dwelling-in-displacement and to the central role narrative plays in producing new textua-
lities of travel that represent transnational relocation. This is the literature of arrival, an
integral part of a mobility cycle that contains both the flux of travel and the fixity of settle-
ment. An act of physical displacement/dislocation simultaneously “places” or “locates” the
self in a new horizon of experience, one which displaces conventional self/other para-
digms narrowly defined by nationality, giving rise to complex identifications and identities.
For Tim Parks and Pamela Druckerman, the process of accommodating to life abroad dis-
places cultural certainties and national affiliations, leading to the emergence of dialogical
identities. Their relocation memoirs undermine a hegemonic, Anglocentric reading of
Others, offering instead multifaceted perspectives on the defining relationship between
the subjective self and physical place.

Deep immersion

The seemingly oppositional notions of routes and roots converge in the expatriate experi-
ence, revealing that travel contains both an impulse to move (flux) and an impulse to stay
put (fixity). Expatriation is a form of “dwelling-in-traveling” (Clifford 1992, 108) that fulfils
the axiomatic imperative of broadening the mind that is conventionally associated with
material travel, fostering an expanded sense of the world through the experience of
long-term foreign residency. Hulme refers to this practice as “deep immersion”, noting
that as travel writers immerse themselves in foreign cultures and languages for extended
periods they acquire “the sort of intimate knowledge which gives them access to people
and places unknown to short-stay travellers, let alone tourists” (2002, 97).

Ross (2010, 122) notes how the “topos of life among the locals”, the narrative terrain of
recent expatriate writing, shifts the focus away from an account of movement to an
account of settled life in a new land, revealing how place-based epistemologies evolve
through sustained engagement with cultural differences over time. Similarly, Besmeres
(2005, 28) observes that “immersion narratives represent an attempt to communicate
with people of another culture on those others’ own terms” and, consequently, “focus on the experience of learning another language as a foreigner and cultural outsider – and translating the self in the process”.

Whilst some expatriates are short-stay travellers who move mainly within compatriot enclaves, never learning the local language or seeking to become cultural insiders in the host country, others like Parks and Druckerman engage more deeply with locals and local practices through sustained foreign residency. In fact, both authors have produced multipart memoirs documenting their experience of relocation and cultural accommodation over time. These are stories with a long finish: “becoming Italian” and “becoming French” for the respective authors involve long-term processes of self-transformation as they build new lives in new lands. Their re-settlement accounts map out an arc of accommodation as they move through various acculturation phases: first, a confrontation with place that focuses on cultural difference and novelty; second, a negotiation with place that juxtaposes contrasting cultural paradigms; third, an accommodation with place that involves deep and sustained engagement in local community over time.¹

Tim Parks – the Italian everyday

Tim Parks is no stranger to Italy. Born in Manchester in 1954, he has lived in northern Italy since 1981, first in Montecchio, a provincial town near Verona, and now in Milan where he works as a professor of literature and translation. Having earned the sobriquet “Mr. Italy” for his extensive writings about Italian society, politics and culture, as well as his translations of Italian literature, Parks is clearly an insider who knows Italy; not the airbrushed Tuscan idyll popularised in some expatriate accounts, but Italy in its complex and multifaceted realities, with its enduring enchantments and frustrations. He offers contextualised accounts and calibrated critiques that balance admiration and criticism in a voice that is uniquely engaged and detached, a narrative style he calls “ironic anthropology” (2012, 2).

Over the years, Parks has perfected this pitch: his memoirs offer affable accounts of Italians and “Italianness” that seem uncomplicated and unrehearsed because of their easy, confidential tone and the informal social commentary they convey. These light-hearted descriptions, however, belie a sophisticated style as well as a layered and textured insight into the country’s complex nature. His first memoir, Italian Neighbours (1992), recounts how the author and his Italian wife, Rita Baldassare, settle near Verona in 1981, charting Parks’s initiation into cultural differences within the context of condominium living, which provides a keyhole into the local culture. Its sequel, An Italian Education (1996), ostensibly about the milestones in his children’s lives as they progress through the Italian school system, is as much about Parks’s own education or re-education as he examines different cultural paradigms in seeking to understand what it means to “grow up” Italian.

Like Lawrence Durrell, who insisted that his books about the Greek islands were not travel writing per se but foreign residence books, Tim Parks is equally uncomfortable with the label “travel books”, claiming that his memoirs are more about arrival, about reaching a “point of no return” by deciding to settle in Italy and raise a family there. Upon reading the manuscript of his first memoir, Parks’s publisher claimed this was “not the kind of material that invites the English middle classes to dream of moving to Italy” (Crown 2012), thus signalling the non-touristic turn of his writing: his texts
appeal to readers more interested in everyday authenticity than in idealised accounts of la dolce vita.

Drawing on his deep immersion in the “pleasant and unpleasant” details of life in the Veneto ([1992] 2001, 328), Parks’s memoirs are less concerned with material movement and more with a settler’s movement into ever-widening spheres of belonging; he has fittingly been dubbed the “bard of Italian quotidianity” (Lee 2013, 2) for his attention to the minutiae of daily life in his adopted homeland. The variegated reality he observes, and in which he is embedded, comes to life in the autobiographical episodes he sketches – buying a house, tending a garden, attending condominium meetings, paying taxes, becoming a father, raising “foreign” children, navigating bureaucracy, deciphering myriad cultural practices ranging from food to football – episodes which offer an accumulation of impressions about Italy’s internal workings gathered through a process of deep immersion over time. Youngs (2013, 89) identifies the subjective quest as central to contemporary travel narratives, asking: “what quests remain to be embarked upon now that the ‘age of discovery’ is over?” Parks’s quest to understand Italy via immersion in everyday life practices is aligned with this subjective turn in contemporary travel writing.

Parks’s attempts to understand and comply with social codes of behaviour in his adopted home are prevalent in the initial phase of his relocation as he seeks to fare bella figura or give a good impression to his Italian neighbours. He distances himself from the colonial posture and discourse of the traditional “English Gentleman Abroad” (despite the subtitle of his first memoir) through warmth and good-humour in his social interactions, and through his willingness to fall in line with social expectations regarding normative behaviour in his host country. For example, although claiming “there’s something that spells death for me in obsessive cleaning”, he takes turns mopping the condominium’s marble stairs, making sure to “get [the] mop into the corners” and not “sweep dust under doormats” as this would not pass muster in Via Colombare (Parks [1992] 2001, 205).

When his neighbour, Vittorina, inquires whether Rita is ill since she is not doing the mopping herself (so foreign is the sight of a man doing housework), Parks replies:

I tell her how often I wish I’d been born into the world and values of fifty years before. She takes this perfectly seriously. And maybe it does have a little sniff of seriousness about it. (204)

References to his active role in housework and later childcare alternate with references to him having a “lovely Italian wife” (Parks 2011, 80–81), the latter seeming anachronistic and lending an ambivalent tone to his account. Modernity and tradition constantly overlap in Italy, as well as in Parks’s own ironic rhetorical style.

On another occasion, kept awake at night by the upstairs neighbour’s pacing as well as by the incessant barking of Vega, the dog next door, Parks resolves to confront Lucilla and pays a visit, but he is simply no match for his interlocutor: “there is simply no chink in her verbal armour, no hesitation into which one might thrust the dagger” ([1992] 2001, 106). After feebly hinting at the nocturnal noises, he leaves without having cleared the air, admitting that

Signor Tino just can’t bring himself to say what he wants to say. The way he can never quite make up his mind to poison that dog. (107)
Shifting from a first-person voice which privileges the pronouns “I” and “me”, Parks then speaks of himself in the third person, using the nickname he has been given. This shift signals the process of identity re-formation underway, hinting at the emergence of a more conciliatory Italian persona, *Signor Tino*, who is somewhere between an outsider and insider. In this first phase of acculturation, Parks seems especially keen to please others and not appear a cold or aloof foreigner; he forgoes individual self-interest in favour of group identification. Becoming part of a group, he later notes, “is precisely what any Italian education is all about” ([1996] 2000, Foreword).

In his second memoir, *An Italian Education* (1996), Parks further explores the Italian everyday by tracing the evolution of family life with their two small children. Their journey through nursery and elementary school drives the narrative momentum of this second memoir, whilst his own reflections on what it means for them to “grow up” Italian and for him, concomitantly, to become Italianised, provides its internal focus. He notes:

One thing about having children is that they remind you of so much. And having children in a foreign country gives you a new awareness of distance, a new dimension of your awayness. ([1996] 2000, 6–7).

Parks’s second memoir is less detached, more personal, presenting his active negotiation of the dimensions of this “awayness” as he shifts the focus from outward observation of cultural differences and the novelty these afford him, to an inward attempt to reconcile divergent cultural paradigms through a consideration of how national character is learned.

Much attention is given to the way “Italianness” is inscribed first and foremost through the language during the period in which Parks’s own children are learning to speak. *An Italian Education* is so rich in Italian words and expressions (all the chapter headings are in Italian) that Parks originally considered including a glossary to help the reader, but then decided against providing a literal translation which would offer “only an empty semantic shell”, a surface meaning which is “nothing more than the stony outcrop of a great mass of cultural bedrock beneath” (Foreword). Instead, Parks elucidates the meaning of the *frase chiave* or key phrases that frame each chapter by contextualising their usage through historical details and personal anecdotes, which reveal different facets of that “great mass of cultural bedrock” that shapes Italy.

One such phrase, *fare festa a qualcuno*, is untranslatable and reveals an Anglo-Italian cultural divide regarding how affection is expressed in family interactions. Parks states that among family members:

“Earned emotion” is not an idea I have ever heard mentioned in Italy. Any extravagance of sentiment is legitimate. ([1996] 2000, 224)

Parks sets two cultural paradigms in relief when he recounts a visit from his in-laws and the way they lavish their grandchildren with affection:

It would truly be hard to exaggerate the cooing and crying and sighing and kissing and nose-tweaking and exclamations and tears and tickles and cuddles that now have to take place. [...] It’s what the Italians enthusiastically call *fare festa a qualcuno*, which, literally translated, means “to make a party for someone”, and combines the ideas of welcoming them and smothering them with physical affection. Comparison of this expression with the slightly disapproving “to make a fuss of” speaks worlds about the difference between Italian and English approaches to such occasions. ([1996] 2000, 142–143)
Although his depiction of Italian effusiveness could be read as an ironic critique, further scenes recounting similar "Latin" displays of affection suggest his own approval and willingness to participate in expected codes of behaviour.

Parks notes that real resentments or grievances are suppressed in “this wonderful spettacolo of affection, this carefully choreographed festa” in which everyone puts on a good show of getting along together ([1996] 2000, 147). Parks, in fact, questions whether Italians could imagine family life differently, suggesting they would be unable to appreciate a story like King Lear and would wonder why “Cordelia didn’t put on a bit more of a show for her foolish old father”; he observes: “For there are times when a little falsehood is expected of you, and can be engaged in quite sincerely, because appearance has a value in itself, indicates, precisely, your willingness to keep up an appearance” (148).

Signalling the tension between appearance and reality within family and social dynamics – the pressure to “put on a good show” for the sake of getting along – Parks acknowledges that in Italy keeping up an appearance is a form of “predictable and required theatricality” and is a “way of helping people to live well” ([1996] 2000, 437); rather than being perceived as insincerity, it is a form of social etiquette. In Italian Ways (2013), Parks echoes these observations from his earlier memoirs, insights distilled over thirty years, claiming:

In every aspect of Italian life, one of the key characteristics to get to grips with is that this is a nation at ease with the distance between ideal and real. They are beyond what we call hypocrisy. Quite simply they do not register the contradiction between rhetoric and behaviour. It’s an enviable mind-set. (2013, 25)

Seeking to translate various facets of the Italian mindset for international readers, Parks draws on knowledge and experience accumulated through a deep immersion in the Italian everyday over three decades.

The insights Parks gains through sustained foreign residency enable him to make visible the cultural scripts underlying Italian behaviour and thus symbolically bridge the Anglo-Italian cultural gap for readers. Whilst Besmeres (2005, 38) critiques Parks for “clearly retain[ing] some of the disapproval that he identifies in the English words ‘fuss’ and ‘spectacle’” and claims that his account “marks him as an outsider” and “translates readily into a cynical, ethnocentric reading”, I believe Parks occupies a more ambivalent position, continually rubbing up against different cultural viewpoints as he recalculates his own position as cultural outsider/insider in Italy along a continuum of shifting identifications.

As a parent raising “foreign children”, Parks is doubly aware of operating within a field of shifting signifiers whose interplay is the cause of much existential anxiety (for him). Watching his son Michele as he sleeps, Parks reflects:

Looking at him, I reflect that at birth, as Stefania is just born, the child’s experience must be more or less universal. At what point then do they actually become Italian? ([1996] 2000, 94)

Parks’s writing on/of Italy is a way of working towards some kind of answer to this question. By recording episodes of daily life, he seeks to understand and clarify the process of acculturation.
Whilst ironically stating, "The story of my fatherhood has been that of a long strategic retreat from the systems I hoped to impose", Parks accepts that such a transformation is inevitable:

If my children are inevitably acquiring an Italian education, they force me to acquire one too. At least up to a point. (237)

Pinpointing the degree of his Italianness is impossible because his identity shifts along with his identifications; he is, in his own words, continually “falling between the stools of two cultures”. After thirty-years in Italy, Parks reflects: “You’re never quite a native, but you’re no longer a stranger” (2013, xv). This degree of embeddedness in Italian life over time produces a migrating sensibility that blurs any neat I/they binary distinction based on nationality or culture. Rather than betraying cultural condescension toward his subject, in unpacking the cultural scripts that underpin Italian social ways Parks demonstrates a dialogic perspective that seeks to bridge a cultural divide and enable cross-cultural understanding.

**Pamela Druckerman – French manners**

Pamela Druckerman moved to Paris with her British husband in 2002, had a daughter then twin boys in quick succession and wrote about the experience of raising a young family in a transnational context in her bestselling book *Bringing up Bébé* (2012). The subtitle to the American edition – *One American Mother Discovers the Wisdom of French Parenting* – suggests a whole-hearted embrace of French parenting practices and, in fact, Druckerman has been criticised in the American press for her perceived uncritical acceptance of French manners. However, a close reading of her text reveals that she juxtaposes competing cultural paradigms and uses her journalistic skill to probe their respective sources and contexts. Druckerman sums up French parenting as a combination of unyielding expectations and an insouciant approach, explaining how a cadre or frame sets firm limits for French children on such matters as food and sleep, but also gives them “tremendous freedom within those limits” ([2012] 2014, 70). This is a difficult mix to achieve, especially for a foreigner who cannot rely on any instinctive understanding of the balance of rights and restrictions underpinning such complex cultural practices.

Just as Parks attempts to understand how his children “become Italian” by distilling key cultural concepts contained in catch phrases, Druckerman similarly unpacks key French phrases in order to reveal what it means to grow up French. Whilst Parks’s chapter headings are untranslated Italian phrases, Druckerman provides a transliteration of some French *mots-clefs*, presumably so as not to alienate her Anglo readers. First is the standard *bonjour* whose simplicity belies a complex social code. She observes:

While the *maternelle* [pre-school] brings us all more into French life, it also makes us realize that French families observe social codes that we don’t. It turns out that in French there are four magic words: *s’il vous plaît* (please), *merci* (thank you), *bonjour* (hello), and *au revoir* (good-bye). Please and thank you are necessary but not nearly sufficient. *Bonjour and au revoir* – and *bonjour* in particular – are crucial. I hadn’t realized that learning to say *bonjour* is a central part of becoming French. ([2012] 2014, 156–157)

Druckerman notes that saying *bonjour* is crucial upon climbing into a taxi or when a wait-ress approaches your table in a restaurant or when addressing a salesperson:
Saying *bonjour* acknowledges the other person’s humanity. It signals that you view her as a person, not just as someone who’s supposed to serve you. ([2012] 2014, 157)

The same rule applies to children when they enter someone’s home, as she explains:

In the US, a 4-year-old American kid isn’t obliged to greet me when he walks into my house. He gets to skulk in under the umbrella of his parents’ greeting. […] Part of what the French obsession with *bonjour* reveals is that, in France […] The child greets therefore he is. […] It cements the idea that kids are full people in their own right. ([2012] 2014, 157–158)

Not using such codes of politeness is a sign of being ill-mannered and having poor upbringing.

For every rule that imposes a social limit or sets a firm expectation for behaviour in France, there is also the recognition that rule-breaking is inevitable; consequently, small transgressions are tolerated. Druckerman notes:

Another French word that infiltrates our English vocabulary is *bétise* (pronounced beh-teeze). It means a small act of naughtiness. When Bean grabs an unauthorized piece of candy, or pitches a pea on the floor, we say she’s “doing a *bétise*”. *Bétises* are minor annoyances. […] We’ve appropriated the French word because there’s no good English translation of *bétise*. In English, you wouldn’t tell a child that he’s committed a “small act of naughtiness”. We tend to label the kid rather than the crime, by telling him he’s misbehaving or being bad. ([2012] 2014, 162)

She provides an example of a *bétise* when her daughter says “*caca boudin*”, a swear word that little children use which is considered socially acceptable. Alongside the rules and limits, it is generally felt that children need some freedom too; this transgressive phrase gives kids autonomy and power without being really offensive.

On the other hand, Druckerman observes with incredulity and awe the uncompromising French approach to setting sleep patterns for very young infants, the majority of whom sleep through the night (faire ses nuits) by four months. Central to this method is “The Pause”: when a French baby cries in the night the parents wait, listen, go in, and carefully observe the child for a few minutes. They know that babies’ sleep patterns include movements, noises and two-hour sleep cycles, in between which the baby might cry. Left alone, babies might “self-soothe” and go back to sleep, learning to connect sleep cycles ([2013] 2014, 292–293). Whereas many Americans might dash in and immediately pick up the baby (waking it up further), French babies are taught to sleep through the night from the outset by parents who believe in their capacity for self-reliance. Learning to sleep according to a fixed schedule and learning to wait are important aspects of a child’s life in France. French mothers invest time imparting a set of strict rules, *le cadre*, so that child rearing does not become an all-consuming activity leading to maternal stress and depression.

Druckerman similarly observes how the French approach to food and mealtimes act as “an invisible, civilizing force at their tables” ([2012] 2014, 4). She notes that French children, unlike American children, are not presented with a special “kid’s menu” or permitted “mono-diets” based on a narrow range of their food preferences, but instead eat whatever their parents are eating, including fish and vegetables (5). While observing French families eating calmly and convivially in restaurants, she notes that French children seem to sit contentedly waiting for their food to arrive then eat everything without a fuss. In contrast, she recounts her and her husband Simon’s own experience of dining out with their
18-month-old daughter as a special “circle of hell”. Imploring the waiter to bring them everything – appetisers and main courses – at once, they rush through their meal, eating separately in order to take turns chasing their toddler who will not remain seated. Meanwhile, on the other side of the cultural divide,

[t]here’s no shrieking or whining. Everyone is having one course at a time. And there’s no debris around their tables. (4)

Druckerman reflects that, “quietly and en masse, French parents are achieving outcomes that create a whole different atmosphere for family life” (5).

Learning to be on their own, to be self-reliant, to cope with frustration and control their emotions is regarded as a core life skill for French children: besides self-soothing in the night, French babies are taught to wait “long stretches from one feed to the next” (59) then, when they are older, they wait until the 4 o’clock goûter for sweets and cakes (66). Children get used to waiting until their mothers finish their coffees, their conversations and other activities that should not be interrupted by their impulses and desires; instant gratification is not the French way, Druckerman notes (63). The difference in French parenting and in child behaviour related to food habits is indicative of different social norms which, as an American mother abroad, she is eager to understand and assimilate. De Solier and Duruz note that “the material culture of food, and its associated practices and taste formations, have long played a key role in the creation and maintenance of social identities based on ethnicity, nation, gender and class” (2013, 4). It is especially revealing to see how food culture plays a central role in the identity reformation of expatriate mothers. The domestic consumption of food is a means of producing and regulating family life and relationships within the family. French mothers are nurturers but are also individuals with separate lives, and children are taught to respect this.

Learning to wait, Druckerman observes, “is a first, crucial lesson in self-reliance and how to enjoy one’s own company” (55). To believe in it you need to also believe that a baby is capable of learning and is able to cope with frustration, an attitude that comes down from Rousseau to Françoise Dolto, a paediatrician and psychoanalyst, regarded as the modern “Titan of French parenting” (89). Druckerman notes that in the 1970s, Dolto helped change the traditional, authoritarian notion that French children should be “sage comme une image”, should be seen but not heard, by encouraging parents to educate children to be well-behaved and self-controlled as well as able to express themselves (88). According to Dolto, speaking to them is key: “children are rational beings capable of understanding the world and respecting limits when these are carefully explained by a caring adult” (95). From this perspective, parenting is about boundary setting and social training for self-control, a core life skill.

While parents in America at this time were being told by Dr Spock to rely on their own instincts and to treat children with flexibility and permissiveness, Druckerman reflects that Dr Dolto in France was advocating a more systematic approach based on the belief that parents should trust in their children’s ability to behave rationally and, consequently, should impart a system of expected behaviours. This cultural parenting gap is highlighted during an episode Druckerman recounts in which her 10-month-old daughter pulls down all the books on a shelf. The pattern of misbehaviour is regularly repeated until one day a visiting French friend kneels down and calmly but firmly explains to the child “we don’t do that” and then shows her how to replace the books “doucement” which she does (96–97).
As a result of believing the child could understand language and could learn to control herself and do things with care, the little girl changed her actions. Druckerman had previously thought “good behavior” was not so much a learned social skill as a matter of temperament and luck, but she changes her parenting precepts upon observing how French mothers model expected social manners and teach these to children from a tender age. Druckerman observes a different notion of maternal nurturing at play, one not based on satisfying immediate needs but on imparting responsibility: the responsibility of eating at prescribed times, of coping with frustration, and of behaving in a polite manner. French mothers model restraint rather than indulging children’s whims; this notion of nurturing implies forming a child’s behaviour, not satisfying needs on demand.

These cultural differences in parenting are not merely incidental, but instead are formative experiences for Druckerman who is invested in learning her new mothering role in her new environment. In becoming a mother abroad, far from her own family, Druckerman cannot rely on a network of familiar child-oriented services or practices. Instead, she plunges into a new culture of childcare – new services, new assumptions, new practices – which is both disorienting and, at the same time, instructive. That Druckerman must unlearn American parenting precepts to learn new French ones illustrates the extent to which the mothering role is socially constructed. By thinking one way of mothering seems “natural” (i.e. American style) and another way “foreign”, Druckerman signals the social embeddedness of particular patterns and their imprinting on individuals. Learning to be a mother abroad involves her juxtaposing two different socially constructed roles and seeing how these constructs can become her own.

Druckerman’s ability to set the American and French approaches side-by-side and examine their different norms and values is an intercultural competence she acquires over time as she grows into her mothering role abroad. Through dislocation, Druckerman experiences mothering practices through a dual lens, questioning her cultural certainties. In Tim Parks’s formulation, she is not quite a local but no longer a stranger either, occupying a liminal position between cultures. Edwards and Graulund refer to this indeterminacy as the simultaneously “orienting and disorienting” practices of travel (2012, 3). Transnationals are neither fully cultural insiders nor outsiders in their adopted homelands but are in the process of re-orienting their linguistic and cultural identities.

This in-between status can be frustrating, as Druckerman notes:

Though Paris is one of the most cosmopolitan cities on earth, I feel like I’m off the grid. In French I don’t understand name dropping, school histories, and other little hints that, to a French person, signal someone’s social rank and importance. And since I’m a foreigner, they don’t know my status either. (23)

She worries that her daughter might be “internalizing the rules a bit too much”, stating that although she is thrilled that Bean is “growing up bilingual”, she is simultaneously “ambivalent about Bean growing up French” (161). Despite her ambivalence, Druckerman herself seems to readily internalise these rules, arguably in an effort to fit in in her adopted home.

**Cosmopolitan openness and intercultural competence**

Through the experience of relocation and long-term accommodation, Parks and Druckerman achieve an intercultural competence: they acquire a new language, become familiar...
with a new place, develop a cross-cultural vision and attitudes that value local practices, engage in bilingual interactions that demonstrate an evolving intercultural awareness and respect for difference, and unlock the dialogical potential of travel writing deeply embedded in place. By explicitly foregrounding their experiences of identity reformation, their memoirs destabilise a monological, Anglo-expat reading of others, offering instead a cosmopolitan orientation which sees difference as multifaceted. Defining cosmopolitanism as “an intellectual and aesthetic openness to divergent cultural experiences” in which a “willingness to engage with the Other” is demonstrated through a “search for contrasts rather than uniformity”, Hannerz (1990, 239) signals openness and engagement with diversity as core values in this ethical orientation.

In addition, Amit proposes that the consonance or disjuncture of cosmopolitan consciousness is not a simple either/or question: “the issue becomes less a matter of the simple presence or absence of inclusive consciousness but of the degree of inclusiveness, self-awareness and the consonance or disjuncture between this consciousness and the actual experiences of travel” (2015, 553) and he questions “the degree to which [cosmopolitan] privileges can blunt the edge of full engagement with difference” (2015, 556). This question is central to understanding whether and to what extent transnationals like Druckerman and Parks can overcome circumscriptions of class and ethnic status to achieve self-transformation, the kind of self-transcendence that Delanty (2006) identifies as central to cosmopolitan engagement.

The two cases presented in this article reveal varying degrees of cosmopolitan engagement with cultural difference. As long-term expatriates, both Druckerman and Parks address the local/global dynamics inherent in relocation, but with varying degrees of intra-subjective awareness and inter-subjective engagement. Szerszynski and Urry claim that cosmopolitan predispositions involve “a willingness to take risks by virtue of encountering the Other” (2002, 470), yet it is questionable how variegated these encounters are for Druckerman. Her engagement with cultural difference is limited to a circumscribed Parisian circle of élites: the rich, cultured bobo class (bourgeois and bohemian) who can afford to pay a babysitter to take their kids to sports classes or cultural activities on a Saturday while the parents have tea with friends. Conspicuously absent from her account are fast food family meals, watching television, or shopping at the supermarket rather than at the organic farmers’ market. Druckerman seems to offer a view of the French everyday that is somewhat detached from real life, presenting an idealised lifestyle based on a selection of self-referential affinities. Consequently, Druckerman’s interactions take fewer risks by remaining insulated within a class bubble in which multiplicity and complexity are attenuated, thus blunting the edge of full engagement with difference. Hers is a modest form of cosmopolitanism as her engagement with cultural difference seems more strategic in Skey’s sense of furthering her own instrumental goals (fitting in /belonging in Parisian society) rather than progressive aims or values (2013, 241).

For Druckerman, adopting a French parenting style may be a means of cultivating “distinction” in Bourdieu’s ([1979] 1984) sense of a social process in which people distinguish themselves from others through the exercise of particular “tastes”. This process of distinction through lifestyle choices is partly shaped by one’s belonging to what Bourdieu describes as “class habitus”, an embodied class-culture, in which lifestyles emerge as the result of particular material circumstances and class dispositions. In expressing her individual preferences for the wisdom of French parenting, I wonder, in the end,
whether Druckerman is celebrating cultural difference or co-opting it as a way of establishing a marker of her “distinction”.

Parks, on the other hand, seems to dwell in difference more deeply; his story landscapes are engaging paracosms that convey place distinctly and credibly through textured details. In his third memoir (2003), for example, Verona is given depth and definition through the hard edges of the Bentegodi subculture he describes; he does not airbrush its imperfections or erase the hard lines that define the structure and habits of this specific community. With a precise and penetrating eye for detail, he paints a multi-dimensional portrait of Italy, Italians and Italianness. Whilst the subtitle of Park’s first memoir, *Italian Neighbours: An Englishman in Verona* (1992), places him within a literary tradition of travel writing by the “Englishman Abroad”, over the span of thirty years in Italy and three memoirs, his non-touristic engagement with his subject is apparent in depictions of Italy which sidestep stereotypes that would ridicule or reduce his subject, signalling instead his deep immersion in its complex and shifting nature. His willingness to adjust his critical lens and to recalibrate his cultural impressions based on new findings over the arc of his multipart memoirs signals a migrating sensibility, one that is at once curious, intelligent, self-reflective, and constantly evolving.

**Conclusion**

These memoirs are, in fact, arrival stories with a twist: there is no moment of definitive arrival or complete assimilation and integration in the conventional sense. Nor do their texts reproduce the archetypal pattern of return to the place of origin and re-integration in society there, the final step in the expatriation-repatriation cycle. Instead, the relocated selves are always evolving, the settling-in process always unfolding (even after decades of foreign residency), and the moment of final integration always incomplete since cultural accommodation is a lifelong project. Transnational relocation requires a mobility paradigm in which routes and roots are not seen as inherently oppositional but, instead, co-exist, overlap, contest and, at times, complement each other. As transnationals Parks and Druckerman occupy a liminal position by perpetually living between two cultures, maintaining a foot in both worlds. Robbins signals how transnationalism is, in fact, a “density of overlapping allegiances” (1999, 250) since migrants cultivate multiple identifications between their home and host countries, affinities that are not simply resolved over time but rather accrue in complexity and give rise to hybrid identities, identities fundamentally defined by difference.

This focus on identity reformation draws on a vast philosophical literature, which recognises that the process of identity-making involves continual self-transformation, a process in which alterity plays a pivotal role. Identities are dialogically constructed through difference: one defines oneself based on the recognition of what one is not in relation to others; according to Said, “the Other” acts as “a source and resource for a better, more critical understanding of the Self” (2004, xi). Encounters with others facilitated through relocation provide opportunities for Parks and Druckerman to engage in identity (re)construction in ways that do not simply reproduce a fixed self/other logic but which, instead, treat these terms as dynamic, contested and contextualised. This links their travel memoirs to broader debates about the ethical value of narrative and its enabling of perspective-taking, empathy, moral inclusiveness and respect for Others.
The cases of Druckerman and Parks demonstrate how contemporary expatriate writing can provide a powerful lens through which to examine how identities are dialogically reconstructed through contact with linguistic and cultural differences made possible through dwelling-in-displacement. Their memoirs contribute to a discourse of displacement that destabilises conventional categories associated with travel (home/abroad, every day/holiday, local/foreigner) recognising the possibility for more complex and nuanced encounters between selves and others facilitated through travel. Rejecting the claim that Anglo travel writing is inextricably implicated in forms of colonialism/neo-colonialism, Edwards and Graulund address how its generically hybrid nature allows for a nuanced “critical vocabulary for a politics of contemporary travel practices” (2012, 8). Viewing travel writing overall as a genre capable of critiquing its own motives and forms, relocation memoirs, in particular, offer good potential for narrative explorations of authors’ migrating sensibilities through long-term foreign residency and a critical cosmopolitan engagement with difference.

Notes
1. I am drawing here on Edward C. Knox’s use of the term “literature of accommodation” in his study of twentieth-century nonfiction by American writers in France who tell the story of their quest to prove themselves worthy or suitable in their new cultural contexts. Knox uses the term “accommodation” instead of adaptation or integration to draw attention to the “nuances of congruence and reconciliation, of allowances made and recognition of a new norm to which to adhere” (2003, 95).
2. See, for example, Ruth Margalit in The New Yorker (February 14, 2012) and Elaine Sciolino in The New York Times (February 24, 2012).
3. Writing about paracosms, David Brooks (2012) claims “It’s a paradox that the artists who have the widest global purchase are also the ones who have created the most local and distinctive story landscapes. Millions of people around the world are ferociously attached to Tupac Shakur’s version of Compton or J.K. Rowling’s version of a British boarding school or Downton Abbey’s or Brideshead Revisited’s version of an Edwardian estate. Millions of people know the contours of these remote landscapes, their typical characters, story lines, corruptions and challenges. If you build a passionate and highly localized moral landscape, people will come.”
4. See, for example, Bennett (2001); Giddens (1991); Nehamas (1998); Nussbaum (1990); Taylor (1989).
5. See, for example, Appiah (1994); Desforges (2000); Hall and du Gay (1996).
6. See, for example, Hakemulder (2000); Hunt (2008); Nussbaum (2010).

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