

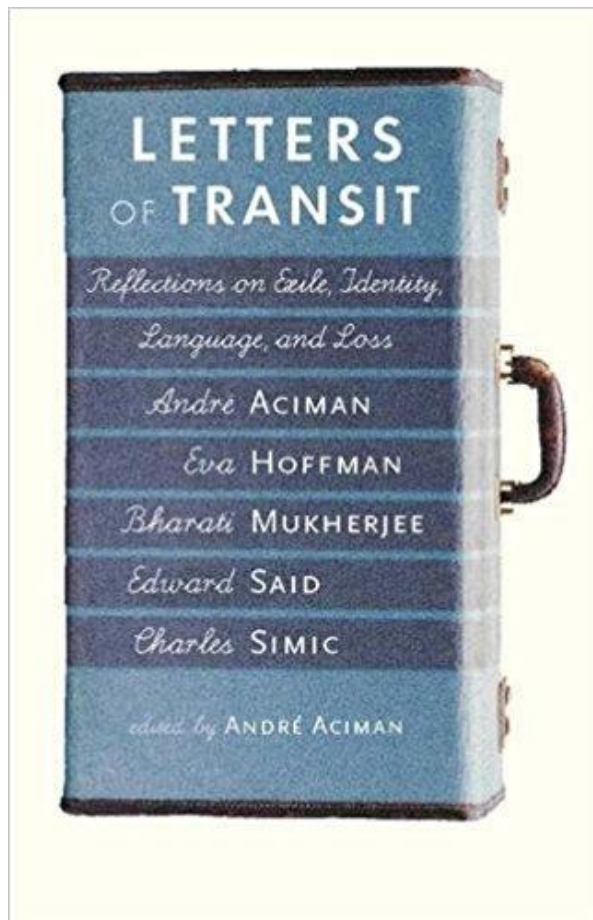


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Letters of Transit: Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language, and Loss edited by
Andre Aciman

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LETTERS OF TRANSIT: REFLECTIONS ON
EXILE, IDENTITY, LANGUAGE, AND LOSS
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Within the range of studies available on the subject of exile, *Letters of Transit* brings to light the individual responses dealing with nostalgia and finding a new voice. In this book, five authors present their meditations on exile, loss, and the meaning of home. As mentioned in the Foreword, these writers hail from different regions and backgrounds, “Yugoslavian in exile (Charles Simic), or a Bengali in exile (Bharati Mukherjee), or a Pole in exile (Eva Hoffman), or a Palestinian in exile (Edward Said), or an Alexandrian in exile (Andre Aciman)” who settled in the United States of America.

Literature on exile almost always includes the aspect of displacement and within this predicament, geographical dislocation is just one estrangement among the multitude that the exiled undergo on this journey. The state of

transit occasions varied perspectives on recreating home and the role of memory in such a recreation. The book begins with Andre Aciman’s narrative on loss and settlement. His essay ‘Shadow Cities’ conceptualizes change as something that takes away the markers of the past while the exiled individuals like “Narcissus leaning over a pool of water, find themselves at every bend, every store window, every façade.” As any change arouses the fear of unfamiliarity, the new home is accommodated, while keeping alive the traces of the past. These roots are built upon certain imaginings. The essay attempts to reach an understanding of how an individual

penetrates a city and forms a bond with it by either reminiscing about the worlds left behind or through the worlds which are incidentally found as the author finds himself “no less a figment of time than the city is a figment of space.” Enquiry into recurrent loss and finding of a new reality leads to the second essay by Eva Hoffmann ‘The New Nomads.’ The essay straddles between two facets of exile, one that is enveloped in deep throngs of detachment from one’s land and other that is exciting and gives a sense of new explorations. Through a postmodern view which considers fragmentation, uncertainty, and dislocation as ubiquitous, Hoffmann highlights the exile that each individual goes through because of being unanchored in an unstable reality. In doing so, a ‘chiaroscuro contrast’ is created where the traumatic experience of exile becomes fundamentally vital for self-reflection. Sustained reflection on the transformed scenario of exile with cross border communication and travel brings forth the conception of a shared world where the strong presence of nation as a unified force is no longer binding. But, even within the changing premise of exile, the dilemma between alienation and assimilation remains unresolved. In this essay the author deals with the conception of a shared world that paradoxically necessitates the experience of being exiled which, in turn, reaps meaning from the ‘tree of life.’

How one stays afloat in a new environment, detached from one’s native culture, is a concern addressed in the essay ‘Imagining Homelands’ by Bharati Mukherjee. Delineating the distinct position of exiles, expatriates, immigrants, and repatriates, the essay weaves the narratives of settlement. Mukherjee discusses the formation of identity for an immigrant who seldom adapts to the foreign culture. The acceptance of the status of immigrant is a stamp of exclusivity, which can prove to be an ‘uplifting narrative’ but always deters one from being a ‘part’ of the new world. The essay presents distinction between the experiences of an exiled, who is apprehensive of his identity from that of an expatriate, who willingly forsakes his/her native land. This duality whether to modify oneself for the sake of settling in or to maintain individual dignity is successfully debated in the essay ‘No Reconciliation Allowed’ by Edward Said. This book particularly focuses upon the internal exile that every individual, and especially an author goes through. To render the wounds productive for a creative output requires perpetual struggle of an artist. The biographical tone of Said’s essay concentrates upon his displacement both in terms of physical movement and language. The severity of loss upon the appropriation of a new world and a new language is expressed in the works of art as the living reminders of the fate of an exiled. Through constant references to Adorno, Said maintains that he learnt, “reconciliation under duress is both cowardly and inauthentic.” The preferred mode of conduct for the author is a private life of self-reflection instead of a provisional sense of ‘permanent ownership.’ It is not considered a mandate for an exiled to either remain attached to a lost past or to build a new identity to accommodate to present. By building a private narrative, Said proposes a life of constant re – invention of oneself as the ‘real’ always remains a temporary construct. It lends an individual to a puzzled state where the past gets somewhat blurred amidst foreign space and culture. Last essay in the book entitled ‘Refugees’ by Charles Simic points to the arbitrary nature of being situated in a place and the impact of new modes of living. The author here does not recount going through the usual dilemmas of separation as he glides through the new culture of America. The essay presents an instance of assimilation for an exiled individual through ‘anonymity’ and ‘difference.’ It narrativizes the quest of existence when the intellectual pretensions of an exile are left for day to day sustenance and adapting to the new environment.

This book has accounts of ‘Otherness’ and of the attempts of bridging the gaps between loneliness and communion. As presented in the book, the condition of an exile can only be

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exonerated through acceptance, either of oneself or of the space. That is, the predicament of an artist in exile can be unscrambled through artistic expression such as writing, through which the artist comes to terms with his/her own fears and dilemmas and hence is able to recover from them. But, the enigma of social and political estrangement, with the related elements of pain, separation, and loss of the old world are mildly explored in the book as compared to the discussions over settling in. In his the poem 'Land' Agha Shahid ali expresses that, "If home is found on both sides of the globe, home is ofcourse here – and always a missed land." This pain of being in perpetual exile for an individual despite living at 'home' is the subject that the book struggles with in its scope. The discourse is certainly about being in transit but the myriad shades of belonging reserve a special place in the book.