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and Sense of Self in the Narrative Art of Lucia Berlin\***

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## “Of Course I Have a Self Here”: Migration, In-Betweenness, and Sense of Self in the Narrative Art of Lucia Berlin<sup>1</sup>

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When people migrate and experience intercultural contact, they often find themselves performing different types of crossings as they dwell in between countries, cultures, and languages. This ambivalent experience of living among worlds, as theorists have put it, constitutes the condition of “in-betweenness.” According to Anne Sigfrid Grønseth, living in between is “a cognitive, bodily, emotional and existential human experience” for migrants as they “move between places, times and conditions.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, alluding to the fact that when people migrate, they do so not only across physical spaces but also across symbolic and metaphorical ones, MariaCaterina La Barbera defines migration as “the material and existential condition of being at the borderland, in-between, in transit.”<sup>3</sup> Using this framework, the present article analyzes the condition of in-betweenness in Lucia Berlin’s short story collection *A Manual for Cleaning Women* (2015). Through the close reading of four stories that foreground unique personal accounts of mobility, interculturality, and bilingualism, I study the subjective effects of these experiences and their impact on their protagonist’s identity and sense of self. In doing so, I discuss how migration affects the protagonist’s psyche and alters

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a modified version of the second chapter of my master’s thesis “Living in the Borderlands: Migration, *Mestizaje*, and Border Identity(ies) in the Narrative Art of Lucia Berlin,” Leiden University, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> “Introduction,” 1.

<sup>3</sup> “Identity and Migration,” 10.

her self-perception, causing her to experience—and remain in—a state of in-betweenness.

Lucia Berlin (1936–2004) was a US-American short story writer who spent most of her life traveling through and living in different Latin American and U.S. cities.<sup>4</sup> As Elizabeth Geoghegan puts it, Berlin “moved, albeit not quite seamlessly, between lives, between worlds.”<sup>5</sup> An almost unknown writer during her life, Berlin only was rediscovered and widely acclaimed in 2015. But despite becoming a literary sensation and receiving extensive media attention, Berlin has received limited academic attention. The existing scholarship on Berlin’s work focuses on the autobiographical and metafictional aspects of her writing, mainly tackling the similarities between her stories and her personal life.<sup>6</sup> An example of this approach aimed at a non-academic audience can be found in the foreword to *A Manual for Cleaning Women*, where Lydia Davis explains that “Lucia Berlin based many of her stories on events in her own life . . . Although people talk, as though it were a new thing, about the form of fiction known in France as auto-fiction (‘self-fiction’) . . . Lucia Berlin has been doing this, or a version of this . . . from the beginning, back in the 1960s.”<sup>7</sup> Against this backdrop, the present article offers an original contribution to the study of Berlin’s work by addressing her stories from the field of migration studies, enriching current scholarship on the literary representation of migration and the subjectivities of migrant women.

The four stories analyzed here, “So Long,” “Fool to Cry,” “Panteón de Dolores,” and “Wait a Minute,” can be read as a fragmented narrative about the same set of facts, characters, and events narrated by one and the same character-bound narrator and

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<sup>4</sup> Although the commonly used demonym for people from the United States is “American,” in this article I use the term “US-American.” The reason for this is that the former lacks accuracy and is often misleading: since America is an entire continent, an American could actually be anyone from North, Central, or South America. In brief, “US-American” is a more appropriate and non-imperialist demonym for people from the U.S.

<sup>5</sup> “Smoking with Lucia.”

<sup>6</sup> See for example Ellis, “The Short Autofictions of Eve Babitz, Lucia Berlin and Bette Howland;” Navarro Romero, “The Beautiful and the Dirty.”

<sup>7</sup> “Foreword,” x.

focalizer. In each story, the narrator is a middle-aged US-American woman whose name is not disclosed and whose sister Sally, a US-American living in Mexico City, has terminal cancer. To take care of her ill sister, the protagonist has quit her job, moved out of her home in Oakland, California, and relocated to Mexico indefinitely. As my analysis will show, although each story is set at a different point in time, they complement each other and tackle the same topics. In all four stories, the prospect of Sally's death intertwines with the mental, emotional, and sensorial impact of having a new life both in a foreign country and in a different language. In the following sections, I argue that moving to Mexico affects the protagonist's sensory perception, psyche, and, in particular, her identity. I claim that one of the many consequences of the protagonist's relocation to a new sociocultural environment and changing of languages is a feeling of geographical, cultural, and linguistic dislocation, resulting in the loss of both a sense of belonging and a sense of self. In the final section of this article, I connect the in-betweenness of migration to the fragmentation of the protagonist's identity, which I argue is reflected in the fragmentation of the narrative itself.

### **Life In Between Worlds: A Starting Point**

In Berlin's stories, the experience of living in between Mexico and the U.S. is the starting point for a number of other experiences of in-betweenness, ambivalence, and contradiction. Of these, the experiences in between cultures, between languages, and between life and death are the most predominant. Throughout the stories, the protagonist constantly reflects on and tries to understand the overall condition of in-betweenness in which she finds herself and the persistent feelings of confusion and discomfort that derive from it. She observes her immediate surroundings through the eyes of a foreigner, describing what she finds beautiful and strange about Mexico City by contrasting it with the familiar environment in the U.S. that she has left behind. The following quote from "Wait a Minute" sums up the protagonist's in-betweenness and serves as an introduction to her predicament: "The *camote* man whistles in the street below and then you help your sister into the *sala* to watch

Mexico City news and then U.S. news with Peter Jennings.”<sup>8</sup> As the fragment shows, the protagonist not only writes using both English and Spanish, the two languages she speaks, but also refers to two different national newscasts that, in turn, symbolize—and explicitly refer to—the two different worlds that come together in this sequence of stories: the US-American and the Mexican. These two worlds encompass a set of dualisms: two cultures, two social systems, two languages, two systems of knowledge, and so on.

During the protagonist’s time in Mexico City, she not only experiences life in a foreign country but also spends her days providing care and support to her ill sister. Consequently, in all four stories the protagonist recounts that she has been emotionally affected by migration as much as by her sister’s illness, describing moments and situations in which she has felt bewildered, gloomy, and displaced. These emotional states are expressed through the protagonist’s reflection on her sensory perceptions and the multiple contrasts she perceives in various issues. One of the most prominent causes of the protagonist’s perplexity is the imminence of Sally’s death, which contrasts with Sally’s apparent vitality and the closeness of the pair’s relationship. This state in between life and death occupies a significant place in her narration. In “Fool to Cry,” the protagonist describes her sister as full of life and sensuousness:

Everyone stares at her, fascinated . . . Everyone knows she is dying, but she has never looked so beautiful or happy . . . it is as if the sentence [of death] had been a gift. Maybe it’s because she fell in love with Xavier the week before she found out. She has come alive. She savors everything. She says whatever she wants, does whatever makes her feel good. She laughs. Her walk is sexy, her voice is sexy. She gets mad and throws things, hollers cusswords . . . She is strong, radiant now; her zest is contagious.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Berlin, *A Manual*, 381.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

Although a central theme of the four stories is Sally's illness, the protagonist narrates that her sister does not appear to be sick. Furthermore, the protagonist explains that even though Sally's health and voluptuousness gradually but inevitably fade, their relationship does not deteriorate. In fact, as time passes and Sally's condition worsens, the sisters' friendship becomes stronger than ever before, a development that stands in striking contrast to the prospect of death. At the beginning of "So Long," the protagonist describes her life with Sally as follows: "I have lived in Mexico City for almost a year now. My sister Sally is very ill. I take care of her house and children, bring her food, give her injections. I read to her, wonderful books. We talk for hours, cry and laugh, get mad at the news, worry about her son out late."<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, this intimate routine creates a symbiosis between the sisters. Referring to this emotional and sensorial connectedness, the protagonist says: "It is uncanny, how close we have become. We have been together all day for so long. We see and hear things the same way, know what the other is going to say."<sup>11</sup> This bonding becomes especially important when the protagonist remarks that their time together in Mexico City is their first experience of true sisterhood, which she compares to the unique sensation of love: "She and I have become close, sisters. That's been like falling in love."<sup>12</sup> However, as a negative consequence of this closeness, the protagonist feels she is losing her individual identity.

In the state in between Mexico and the U.S., between life and death, it is therefore significant how attached the sisters become. The protagonist's notion of selfhood is altered as she becomes a substantial part of Sally's life and leaves her own life behind. For this reason, the protagonist repeatedly reflects on her mixed feelings about being Sally's caregiver while residing in Mexico City. She finds local customs enduringly strange and admits to feeling both fascinated and annoyed by the many differences between Mexican culture and her own. This sense of strangeness is expressed in the text through the protagonist's constant feeling of physical closeness

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<sup>10</sup> *Id.*, 252.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*, 230.

with others. In Mexico, she explains, she never gets to be alone; she is always in the company of Sally, relatives, friends, or strangers. Feeling a need to be on her own, in “So Long” she notes: “I miss solitude . . . In Mexico there is never not anyone else there. If you go into your room to read somebody will notice you’re by yourself and go keep you company. Sally is never alone. At night I stay until I am sure she is asleep.”<sup>13</sup> At the beginning of “Fool to Cry,” she adds:

Solitude is an Anglo-Saxon concept. In Mexico City, if you’re the only person on a bus and someone gets on they’ll not only come next to you, they will lean against you. When my sons were at home, if they came into my room there was usually a specific reason. Have you seen my socks? What’s for dinner? . . . But in Mexico, my sister’s daughters will come up three flights of stairs and through three doors just because I am there. To lean against me or say, *¿Qué honda?*<sup>14</sup>

This fragment contains one of the protagonist’s many comparisons between Mexican and US-American customs: in Mexico, she thinks, people behave differently, coming up to “lean against” her wherever she goes. Similarly, in “Panteón de Dolores,” the protagonist compares her sister’s personality with her own, saying that her own character is “more Mexican.” She explains that “Sally and her children have lived here for twenty-five years” and “Sally adores Mexico, with the fervor of a convert. Her husband, her children, her house, everything about her is Mexican. Except her. She’s very American, old-fashioned American, wholesome. In a way I am the more Mexican, my nature is dark . . . Most days I don’t even notice that period when the room has sunlight in it.”<sup>15</sup> The protagonist goes on to say that Sally, unlike herself, “sees beauty and goodness everywhere, in everyone. She loves her room, all the

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<sup>13</sup> *Id.*, 249-50.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*, 221. *¿Qué honda?* is colloquial Spanish for “what’s up?”

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*, 248.

souvenirs on the shelves.”<sup>16</sup> By essentializing both the Mexican and US-American characters, the protagonist tries to identify the prominent features of the two conflicting worlds around her, form an opinion about them, and thus understand the state of in-betweenness in which she finds herself. Likewise, by stating that everything about Sally is Mexican “except her,” the protagonist conveys that although her sister was not born in Mexico, she grew into Mexican culture and way of life. However, based on the protagonist’s perceptions of Mexico, she thinks Sally is too “wholesome” and cheerful to be a Mexican.

This kind of comparison between characters and customs, which can be found throughout the four stories, can be seen as an attempt by the protagonist to comprehend and cope with her geographical, cultural, and linguistic dislocation. Karim G. Dajani defines dislocation as “the removal of a person from a location organized by a particular set of cultural practices and placing them in another location organized by a substantially different set of cultural practices.”<sup>17</sup> By cultural practices, Dajani refers to shared ways of seeing, understanding, and behaving. As Dajani explains, relocation from one’s original home and community can affect a person in profound and fundamental ways. This dislocation can shock and alter the ego, producing “perceptual distortions, cognitive confusion and emotional turbulence.”<sup>18</sup> This sensory and affective response, in turn, can “generate serious problems like depression, alienation, confusion, excessive anger, frustration and other intense negative emotions.”<sup>19</sup> Dajani’s explanation provides a framework for understanding the protagonist’s transformations as she repeatedly claims to feel overwhelmed by her new life in Mexico. Cultural dislocation affects her senses and her psyche, causing her to experience emotional turmoil to the point that she feels not only stressed but also angry about Mexican culture. Intertwined with the protagonist’s sense of dislocation is her distress at Sally’s illness.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> “Cultural Dislocation,” 16.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*, 19.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.*, 18.

Thus, she asks herself: “Am I really just mad because Sally’s dying, so get mad at a whole country?”<sup>20</sup>

### **Life In Between Selves: The Relationship Between Language, Culture, and Identity**

To better understand the protagonist’s plight, it is worth considering that besides being relocated to a new sociocultural environment in which she is indispensable to her ill sister, she must communicate in a different language. Let us remember that although the protagonist knows Spanish, she is a native English speaker. I therefore argue that one of the main causes of the protagonist’s bewilderment and sense of self-alienation is that she must lead an entirely new life in a language that is not her mother tongue, altering her self-perception and eroding her sense of identity. For this reason, she recurrently thinks about the different languages to which she is exposed and the different identities that are attached to them. After describing the closeness she and Sally have developed, the protagonist narrates: “I speak Spanish with her and her children, everybody.”<sup>21</sup> And then, as if it were a consequence of living both in another country and in another language, she goes on to observe:

I feel I have vanished. Last week in the Sonora market I was so tall, surrounded by dark Indians, many of them speaking in Nahuatl. Not only was I vanished, I was invisible. I mean for a long time I believed I wasn’t there at all. Of course I have a self here, and a new family, new cats, new jokes. But I keep trying to remember who I was in English.<sup>22</sup>

In this fragment, the protagonist reflects on her individuality specifically in terms of language, thus bringing to the fore the complex relationship between language, culture, and identity. According to Vera da Silva Sinha, Ana Moreno-Núñez, and Zhen Tian, “Language has an inextricable connection with cultural

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<sup>20</sup> Berlin, *A Manual*, 249.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*, 253.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

identity and cultural practices, which in turn shapes personal identity.”<sup>23</sup> As they explain, “Language is the cord that ties the individual to their community” and culture, and it reflects the “socio-political values and world views” of said community.<sup>24</sup> The language we speak is connected to our origins and the culture or cultures we are familiar with; consequently, it shapes us and our perceptions of the world. What happens, then, when we are suddenly bereft of our native language and culture? As the fragment from “So Long” quoted above shows, the protagonist is immersed in a multilingual and multicultural foreign context, making her feel estranged and struggle to remember *who she was* before migrating. When she goes to the Mexican market, the protagonist finds herself surrounded by otherness in the form of “dark Indians” who speak a local indigenous language that she does not know. The reason for the protagonist’s sensory confusion and feeling of having “vanished” is that she is located in a completely unfamiliar environment where people only speak foreign languages, making her own language useless. Because her presence in the market seems to go completely unnoticed, the protagonist feels “invisible” to the point of believing she is not there at all. In other words, she has lost her sense of self.

Iain Chambers asserts that “language is not primarily a means of communication; it is, above all, a means of cultural construction in which our very selves and sense are constituted. There is no clear or obvious “message,” no language that is not punctuated by its contexts, by our bodies, by our selves.”<sup>25</sup> This idea allows us to understand that the importance of language goes far beyond its utility for expressing and exchanging information. Language is intimately linked to our notion of self, “constitut[ing] our sense of identity, place and belonging.”<sup>26</sup> Juliana Díaz Baldocchi claims that, since humans are inherently social beings, communication with others is a constitutive part of personal identity. As she puts it, “the notion of the self is dialogically constructed through interrelationships with others, through language in a relation to

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<sup>23</sup> “Introduction,” 1.

<sup>24</sup> *Id.*, 2.

<sup>25</sup> *Migrancy*, 22.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*, 4.

social and cultural forces.”<sup>27</sup> Here, the importance of others lies in the fact that they play an active role in self-awareness. The relational and dialogical aspect of identity is particularly relevant in migration contexts since shifts in identity are a consequence of relocating. Díaz Baldocchi asserts that “identity for the migrant is recomposed as it fluctuates from a past native tongue and culture that is left behind, and a new language that constructs and defines the new self in a new place.”<sup>28</sup> In essence, identity changes as the language we speak changes.

Investigating language as a place of belonging, Irmina van Niele analyzes the cultural displacement that occurs when people migrate and move “through and across linguistic worlds.”<sup>29</sup> According to van Niele, one lives and grows up inside a language, and therefore one is that language.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, one is not quite the same person in different languages; one has a specific self imbricated with each language. Migration involves constant changeovers that challenge a person’s notion of selfhood. The most significant of these may be switching between languages, a process that is neither neat nor easy. As van Niele explains, “language is a cultural construction within which our identities exist; we cannot simply finish with one language and start with another, abandoning our previous identity.”<sup>31</sup> Van Niele claims that “language utters culture, through cultural thought-patterns expressed in words. The difficulty with translation is that it aims to transfer a particular set of thoughts, experienced by a particular self and in a particular place, into another language, while *different selves operate within these different languages*” (emphasis added).<sup>32</sup> Here, translation is considered a practice not simply of finding equivalent meanings in different languages but, moreover, of finding equal ideas conceived by different identities. The notion of multiple, different selves is as predominant in van Niele’s theory as it is in Berlin’s stories, demonstrating that being immersed in a foreign environment and

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<sup>27</sup> “A Translation of the Self,” 97-8.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.*, 98.

<sup>29</sup> “Wandering Words,” 221.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.*, 211.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.*, 210.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.*, 213.

having to communicate in another language can deeply affect a person's sense of self.

Let us take a closer look at the last part of the fragment from "So Long" quoted earlier: "Of course I have a self here . . . But I keep trying to remember who I was in English."<sup>33</sup> In addition to the protagonist's *current self* in Mexico, with its related affects and lifestyle, the protagonist has *another self* that exists in English and belongs to the U.S. Notably, she refers to this self in the past tense, as if English had become the language of the life and identity she left behind. With a new life in Spanish, she also has a new identity. These two selves coexist as integral parts of the protagonist's subjectivity; together, they constitute the narrator. But because they are embedded in different cultural frames of reference—the Anglo-American and the Latin American—these two selves are divergent. The protagonist has, indeed, two different identities, or, to put it in the words of Edwina Barvosa, a "decentered and multiple subjectivity."<sup>34</sup> Barvosa's theory, like van Niele's, belongs to a paradigm that regards individuality "not as a self-unifying system, but rather as a collection of selves that operate independently in different contexts."<sup>35</sup> This paradigm can be applied to Berlin's protagonist as she lives between two conflicting worlds and constantly reflects on her *selves* as if she were made up of "a mixture of different and contradictory identities."<sup>36</sup> As I explain in the next section, this state in between identities shapes not only the protagonist's psyche and self-perception but also her narrative construction.

### **The Fragmentation of the Narrative: A Consequence of In-Betweenness**

The experiences of in-betweenness and dislocation explored in the previous sections of this study are not just reflected in the content of Berlin's stories but also embodied in the fragmented structure of the narrative, which makes constant use of comparisons and flashbacks,

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<sup>33</sup> Berlin, *A Manual*, 253.

<sup>34</sup> *Wealth of Selves*, 13.

<sup>35</sup> *Id.*, 59.

<sup>36</sup> *Id.*, 58.

plays with chronology and scenery, and interpolates Spanish words. In part, this occurs because the protagonist and Sally spend their precious last moments in Mexico City analyzing each other’s past. Crucially, the protagonist mostly remembers another state of in-betweenness: a period when she had two romantic relationships at the same time and was undecided about which man to choose. These two men were opposites in many ways, different partners who represented distinct lifestyles and prospects in two different countries. Thus, this first in-between experience, this intersubjective space between individuals, also took place in between Mexico and the U.S. Living between worlds in Mexico City reminds the protagonist of earlier ambivalent experiences. As the protagonist delves into these experiences, the narrative shifts between her current life, her previous life in the U.S., and even earlier experiences elsewhere in Mexico. Memories bring her back to the present only to push her back into the past again. As each association leads to another and each in-between state follows another, the protagonist makes more comparisons between the two countries where she has lived.

In this peripatetic and scattered narration that moves between the present and the past, the protagonist also worries about the future. One reason for this restlessness is that she no longer considers her former country—the country where her sons and ex-husband live and to which her former identity belongs—to be her “home.” She has lost her sense of belonging there. As a consequence, she asks herself where she will go after Sally dies: “I’m here for an indefinite period. But then what, where will I go?”<sup>37</sup> The protagonist’s uncertainty resonates with Chambers’ notion of an “impossible homecoming” and his idea that migration “involves a movement in which neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain.”<sup>38</sup> Adding to this idea, La Barbera observes that “the process that begins when one leaves his/her own country never ends, and it generates an unfinished condition of not yet belonging ‘here’ but no longer ‘there.’”<sup>39</sup> This is a condition of

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<sup>37</sup> Berlin, *A Manual*, 244.

<sup>38</sup> *Migrancy*, 5.

<sup>39</sup> “Identity and Migration,” 3.

in-betweenness. The perpetual displacement these authors describe is consistent with the migration experience of Berlin's protagonist and its representation in the four stories. Since the protagonist continually moves across worlds, she finds that neither time, space, sense of belonging, nor sense of self is fixed. This is why the four stories are organized as separate yet complementary segments of a fragmented narrative that is recounted by one narrative voice that constantly travels between places, times, languages, cultures, and identities.

It is precisely because the protagonist lives between two different worlds, no longer knowing where her home is and feeling as if she has lost her sense of self, that she repeatedly admits to feeling overwhelmed. She confesses: "I am terrified, I am losing all sense of what is . . . precious, true."<sup>40</sup> Overloaded with a myriad of sensations, she feels disoriented and lost. Discussing this feeling, Grønseth asserts that the experience of migration and its concomitant in-between state must be understood as an all-encompassing condition because it is "embodied in people's senses of self, well-being, emotions and consciousness in everyday living."<sup>41</sup> This condition permeates all aspects of a person's life; for this reason, it also permeates the narrative a person might create. I therefore conclude that the fragmentation of Berlin's stories is both a representation and a consequence of the protagonist's persistently discomfiting and confusing condition of in-betweenness. It is in an attempt to make sense of her particular migration experience that the protagonist travels back and forth between the present and the past, her new life in Mexico and her former life in the U.S., and her identities in Spanish and English. In doing so, the protagonist pinpoints the many cultural contrasts she perceives and builds a comparative portrait of Mexican and US-American cultures.

### **Conclusion**

My analysis of Berlin's stories has shown that the notion of in-betweenness as a mental, emotional, and sensory space is key to understanding the subjective effects of migration, interculturality,

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<sup>40</sup> Berlin, *A Manual*, 244.

<sup>41</sup> "Introduction," 2.

and bilingualism. Following Grønseth, who considers migration “not only as geographical movements from here to there, but also as movements that constitute an embodied, cognitive and existential experience of living ‘in between’ or on the ‘borderlands’ between differently figured life-worlds,”<sup>42</sup> I have argued that moving to Mexico affects the psyche, identity, and narrative of Berlin’s protagonist. One of the many consequences of her migration experience, I have shown, is a feeling of geographical, cultural, and linguistic dislocation. Another consequence, I have shown, is a loss of a sense of belonging and a sense of self. As I have discussed, Berlin’s stories foreground the psychological consequences of mobility and relocation, offering a realistic and personal account of migration from a first-person female point of view. Berlin’s stories, which have received scholarly attention only recently, enable a rich analysis of the subjectivity of migrant women and offer insight into what Tony Capstick describes as “the sometimes disorienting, sometimes stimulating experience of migration.”<sup>43</sup> Migration, I have argued, is much more than just the process of moving. More importantly, it is a state of the self in between—or rather, a state of the *selves*.

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<sup>42</sup> *Id.*, 1.

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