

## THE SHORTLIST

# Three New Memoirs Reveal the ‘Vertigo’ of Life in the Diaspora

By Dan-EI Padilla Peralta

June 1, 2021, 10:04 a.m. ET

## NUESTRA AMÉRICA

### My Family in the Vertigo of Translation

By Claudio Lomnitz

445 pp. Other Press. \$27.99.

First published in Spanish in 2018, Lomnitz’s family memoir is an immersion in the Ashkenazi Jewish diaspora. The vertigo teased in the subtitle holds true both for the book itself — the author based this version off of an English translation by Vincent Barletta — and for the challenges it documents, of sustaining kinship and community across four continents and six languages that also include Yiddish, Russian, German and French. A professor of anthropology at Columbia University and a columnist for Mexico City’s *La Jornada*, Lomnitz writes a multi-generational story from the perspective of a descendant “born in a sea of linguistic dispossession.” Rooted in the material and structural deprivations of 20th-century imperialism, this dispossession has the horrors of the Shoah at its core.

In the face of murderous anti-Semitism, Lomnitz’s maternal grandparents, Misha Adler and Noemí Milstein, come to exemplify a cosmopolitan ideal that’s not an airy abstraction, but a pragmatism born out of the need to secure the well-being of those lucky enough to escape Bessarabia in time, and to honor the memories of those who could not. The ideal is staked to the book’s title, a nod to the 19th-century Cuban poet José Martí’s notions of hemispheric unity, and to the world-building of the Peruvian journalist José Carlos Mariátegui, who was a friend and mentor to Lomnitz’s grandparents.

Running businesses, founding newspapers, opening schools: That’s how Adler and Milstein and their families knotted together a sense of community across a geography of displacement that extends from Eastern to Western Europe, to Peru, Colombia and Venezuela — and in time, Chile, Mexico and the United States. Lomnitz was raised with “a philosophy very much opposed to complaining and that cultivated flexibility and adaptation instead.” The memoir brims with testimonies to the intellectual work of Adler and Milstein and so many Jewish *desterrados*, in establishing new forms of community that transcend the nation-state. Lomnitz’s fluent integration of memoir and reportage — reminiscent of Daniel Mendelsohn’s “The Lost” — carries forward this intellectual tradition of emancipatory political vision: In diaspora we come together.

## CRYING IN H MART

### A Memoir

By Michelle Zauner

239 pp. Knopf. \$26.95.

If this coming together in diaspora involves the daily realities of eating and mourning, Zauner's gutting account of coming to terms with her mother's death, and coming into her own as a Korean American, is peerless. I never thought a book could have me rushing to the pantry for snacks one moment and ugly-crying the next, but here we are. For the musician behind *Japanese Breakfast*, memories flutter around every bite and crunch she eats.

Food is Zauner's lifeline to her Korean mother, Chongmi, who died of cancer in 2014. At the time, Zauner had just emerged from a tempestuous adolescence, spent feeling "half in and half out" as a second-generation immigrant in suburban America, and was finally beginning to appreciate the delicate trans-Pacific bonds that held her and her mother together. "You know what I realized?" Chongmi says on one of her daughter's visits home from college: "I've just never met someone like you." The line is heartbreaking not only because it captures the disorientation of raising a child an ocean away from home. It also makes Zauner feel "as if I were a stranger," as though mother and daughter "wandered lost without a reference point, each of us unintelligible to the other's expectations, until these past few years when we had just begun to unlock the mystery, carve the psychic space to accommodate each other."

Confronted with the incommensurability of loss, Zauner finds a new language for unsettling the "complicated desire for whiteness" that closed in on her from an early age. As for Lomnitz, so too does Zauner find that the vertigo of being suspended between cultures brings at once confusion and clarity. But Zauner's memoir makes a powerful case for a new language: the language of archive. She painstakingly and tenderly assembles the flavors of love and grief for fermentation in a kimchi refrigerator, to weather time as a memorial to parental devotion. "She was my champion, she was my archive," Zauner writes of Chongmi. "She had taken the utmost care to preserve the evidence of my existence and growth, capturing me in images, saving all my documents and possessions. She had all knowledge of my being memorized." Of course, an archive only survives if you work to preserve it.

## **MY BROKEN LANGUAGE**

### **A Memoir**

By Quiara Alegría Hudes

316 pp. One World. \$28.

For those who've come of age within the Caribbean diaspora that runs along America's I-95, Hudes's memoir of growing up in North Philadelphia with a Puerto Rican mother and a Jewish father will ring absolutely true. A Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright, Hudes brings this world alive in all its glory, ping-ponging between the linguistic multiplicity of urban immigrant life and the zombie enclosures of monolingual whiteness. There's breathing "holy in the slot" to bring a Nintendo cartridge back to life. Blasting Juan Luis Guerra's album "Bachata Rosa," bought at Sam Goody, with its "clarion trumpets, power-synth hits, Afropop vocals — the old world, new world and middle passage braided like cornrows." And, at the heart of it all, an immigrant mother who moves between the worlds of community activism and the inner life of the spirit.

In "Not Like a Native Speaker: On Language as a Postcolonial Experience," the literary critic Rey Chow poses the question: "Does having a language mean coming into possession of it like a bequest from bona fide ancestors and/or being able to control the language's future by handing it down to the proper heirs?"

“My Broken Language” is such a flawless demonstration of Chow’s strife with linguistic inheritance that it nearly broke me. In the moments after I finished reading, first came the aphasia of wonder at a book that exceeds you; and then, swiftly crowding out the silence, the cresting roar of my own Afro-Caribbean ancestors shouting *Ogún Balenyó* in unison. In school, Hudes is annoyed by her classmates’ comparison between magical realism and Western classical mythology: “Sensual is different from magical, I thought. The Greeks were then, I thought. The Orisha are now.” The thought is prophetic.

Life in the vertigo of diaspora, particularly if you’re second-generation, will leave you with a bottomless feeling of obligation. “Perhaps mom’s survival had paved the way for my articulation,” Hudes writes, and the question becomes how to do right by that articulation, how to ground it artfully in the intimacies of family and local memory without ever losing sight of the broader struggles: against racism, settler colonialism, imperialism; all in pursuit of the America that is already ours.