



SCIENTIFIC FINAL REPORT

Regnr Östersjöstiftelsen: 2015-0031

Project manager: Liz Kella

Project title: Remembering Poland and Eastern Europe: Nostalgia, Memory, and Affect in Diasporic Women's Writing

1. Purpose of the project

The project's aim has been to examine, in a series of articles, representations and understandings of Eastern and Central Europe in fiction and autobiographies from the 1980s to the present, written in English by female authors who emigrated from the region, or whose parents emigrated from Eastern and Central Europe after WW II. Articles have focused on neglected writers with a Polish Jewish background: Eva Hoffman, Lisa Appignanesi, Helen Fremont, Anne Karpf, Irene Oore, as well as the Swedish-Polish writer Emilia Degenius and, forthcoming, Margit Silberstein. Some of the works or writers originally seen as part of the project turned out for various reasons to be less useful for inquiring into key questions concerning gender, nostalgia, affect, and memory. The project has explored questions such as the way that women writers of (primarily) the Polish diaspora experience and write about belonging, displacement, and traumatic histories or how intimate relationships are affected by emigration, immigration, or history. The issue of generational, postmemorial transmission of Holocaust history and memory has been key to the analyses.

2. The three most important results of the project and what conclusions can be drawn from them

Autobiography and memoir, like fiction, can be complex literary representations of self in relation to others. The authors examined in this project, writing in English and, in a later addition, in Swedish, demonstrate their interest in narrative form and the relation between form, affect, and ethics. Frequently seen as transmitters of personal histories and sometimes traumas, the works attest to the aesthetic and ethical complexities of representations of Poland and Eastern Europe during the Holocaust and, to some extent, of Communist Poland.



Though the articles are separate inquiries, taking a long view of them together raises interesting conclusions and possibilities. One important finding of the project concerns the ways that postmemory experiences of the Holocaust can impinge upon and reverberate in fictional texts such as Eva Hoffman's *The Secret*—a work of Gothic science fiction (Wasson and Adler 2011) which ostensibly has nothing to do with this historical atrocity. My analysis of this work shows that mother-daughter relations of matrophobia and matrophilia (Rich 1976) may be at least in part conditioned by the specifics of Holocaust history, a point made in other analyses as well. Moreover, Holocaust history can be said to intrude not only in explicit narratives of personal or family history, but may exert an implicit influence, in a highly mediated fashion, on texts or genres which may be thought to be the very opposite of historical, auto/biographical, or truthful. This raises somewhat perennial questions about truth and fiction, which become urgent in the context of the Nazi genocide and its aftermath.

Second, Noah Shenker's *Reframing the Holocaust* (2015) is an important work in Media/Holocaust Studies which proposes the importance of developing “testimonial literacy” for listening to or regarding primarily videotaped testimony. He defines testimonial literacy as “an eye and ear for sensing the layers, ruptures, and tensions that mark the processes of giving and receiving accounts of the Shoah” (2). This approach clearly parallels close reading practices in literary studies—of closely attending to breaks, silences, and narrative ruptures, as well as to paratexts and contexts for the dialogic or cultural production of testimony. My literary analyses have to some extent contributed to this connection between literary studies and media studies by also considering the written breaks, silences, and narrative choices made by postmemory authors who write their own stories, but also those of their families, and of considering these in relation to ideas about secondary witnessing—a concept usually reserved for oral or visual recordings or live interviews. Continued dialogue between these fields, I think, can enrich our understanding of what auto/biographical texts can or cannot do, and may help evaluate the contribution these postmemory auto/biographical accounts may make to Holocaust studies.

Another result concerns bringing attention to the narrative strategies that postmemory daughters use to write about their East European mother's gendered experiences of Holocaust survival. The return to a historically specific form of matrophobia, connecting it to situations in which second-generation daughters try to understand and represent



maternal sexual agency and vulnerability in contexts of exposure and survival. In line with the results of research showing the nonjudgmental, respectful attitude of adult children of survivors towards their parents (Jacobs 2016), I show how narrative silences, breaks, and parallel plot or character development are important strategies for postmemory daughters to represent their openness to their mother's potential choiceless choices (Langer) and elicit empathy in the reader.

3. The project's contribution to the international research frontline

This project's initial focus on gender and affect quickly brought questions of motherhood and mother-daughter relations into focus. While research and theory on how gender influenced experiences of the Holocaust, and while the field of Holocaust Studies has grown steadily since the late 1980s (Hirsch 2012; Ringelsheim 1997; Hedgepath and Saidel 2010), less work has focused on gender and second-generation or postmemory writers. I have been attempting to bring renewed attention to these dynamics and their representations in literature in ways that resist pathologizing survivor parents, by drawing out the historical and social parameters of the concepts of matrophilia and matrophobia (Rich 1976). Additionally, in a submitted article, I develop an idea about what I call domestic listening and how we might conceptualize the stories that mothers tell their young and later adult daughters about their life experiences, including traumatizing experiences of war and genocide, and what it means for daughters to listen to such stories. To what extent can daughters pass on the histories told by mothers? Can this writing be understood as a form of deferred and mediated testimony or secondary witnessing? Such questions have gained in importance since, as many have noted, survivors become deceased, but they are also gaining urgency as children of survivors age. Important work has begun on third generation writers, but it is important to continue to examine works by second-generation writers, as they also continue to be published by mature authors.

4. New research questions that the project has led to

The planned focus on postmemory writing in English was a larger field than I had expected. While some of the original ideas for specific articles turned out not to be productive, this aspect remains important and continues to grow. Contrary to what one might think, new texts continue to emerge, by second and third generation writers, and



some survivors remain active. This is also the situation of postmemory writing in Swedish. The years over which this project has taken place has seen the publication of numerous memoirs in Swedish, by both male and female writers with a background in Eastern and Central Europe. These works have not generated much scholarship as of yet. A couple of such texts have been incorporated into this project, placed into the context of English-language writers.

5. The contribution of the research to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe

The project connects English-language texts from the US, Canada, and the UK to the multilingual regions of the Baltic and Eastern Europe. The literary texts as well as the project analyses demonstrate the continued relevance of complex European histories to immigrant lives as well as to academic fields of inquiry. The incorporation of Swedish-language texts has added to the complexity, calling attention to the dispersion of surviving Polish Jews after the war and, to a lesser extent, after the fall of communism. In terms of the English Department, this research played into the development of an advanced, team-taught course in autobiography given VT 19 within the Teacher Education program, contributing to an understanding of the region's importance even within English.

6. The contribution of research to multidisciplinary knowledge formation

The project is undoubtedly a literary one, using the methods of literary analysis. However, the articles also mobilize critical and theoretical frameworks from other disciplines, such as Gender Studies, Media Studies, and Holocaust Studies. This is particularly apparent in the analyses of Irene Oore's *The Listener: In the Shadow of the Holocaust* as well as to that of Lisa Appignanesi's and Emilia Degenius's work, in which I connect ideas about secondary witnessing to ideas about postmemory writing.

7. Dissemination of the results of the project within and outside the research community

Conference presentations



2016. "Discovering the Past? Memory, Postmemory, and Affect in Autobiographies by Emilia Degenius and Lisa Appignanesi." Conference on History, Memory, and Nostalgia: Literary and Cultural Representations. Vilnius University, Department of English Philology, Lithuania.

2017. "Matrophobia and Uncanny Kinship: Eva Hoffman's *The Secret*." Conference on The Uncanny in Language, Literature and Culture International. London Centre for Interdisciplinary Research and the Interdisciplinary Research Foundation, 19 August 2017, London.

2018. "Suspect Survival: Matrophobia in Postmemory Generational Writing." MESEA (Society for Multiethnic Studies: Europe and the Americas. 30 May-2 June 2018, Graz, Austria.

2018. "Suspect Survival: Matrophobia in Postmemory Generational Writing." Close Relations: A Multi- and Interdisciplinary Conference on Critical Family and Kinship Studies." 24-26 Oct. Center for Gender Studies, Uppsala University, Sweden.

Research activities:

2019. CBEES Advanced Seminar. Discussant in seminar with invited speaker Dr. Dana Mihailescu, University of Bucharest, Romania. Feb. 11. "The Thrusts of Ghost-Writing Eastern European Survivors' Memories of the Holocaust in Post-Cold War Western Societies: On Sara Tuvel Bernstein's *The Seamstress* and Leah Kaufman's *Live! Remember! Tell the World*."

Project presentations:

2016. Kella. CBEES. Project presentation, Feb 1.

Peer-reviewed, published articles:

Kella, Elizabeth. "Affect and Nostalgia in Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*." *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia*. 50 (2-3), 2015: 7-20. Open Access. <http://sh.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:894215/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

Kella, Elizabeth. "Matrophobia and Uncanny Kinship: Eva Hoffman's *The Secret*." *Humanities*. 7, 2018. Doi: 10.3390/h7040122. Open Access. <http://sh.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1264809/FULLTEXT01.pdf>



Kella, Elizabeth. "Suspect Survival: Matrophobia in Postmemory Generational Writing."

American, British and Canadian Studies, 33, 2019: 89-117. Open Access.

<https://www.sciendo.com/article/10.2478/abcsj-2019-0017>

Chapter publication:

Kella, Elizabeth. "Postmemory and Copresence in Lisa Appignanesi and Emilia Degenius: Life Writing of the Polish Diaspora." *History, Memory and Nostalgia in Literature and Culture*. Ed. Regina Rudaitytė. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018, 136-156.

Submitted article:

Kella, Elizabeth. "Listening across Generations: Irene Oore's *The Listener: In the Shadow of the Holocaust*." Submitted June 2021 to open access, peer-reviewed journal.

Accepted chapter, forthcoming 2022:

Kella, Elizabeth. "Writing the Mother: Daughterly Affect in Margit Silberstein's Postmemorial Autobiography, *Förintelsens Barn*." For publication in a volume: *Motherhood and Mothering: Literary, Medical and Media Narratives*.