

Simona MITROIU (ed.), *Women's Narratives and the Postmemory of Displacement in Central and Eastern Europe*, Palgrave Studies in Life Writing, Palgrave Macmillan: 2018, ISBN 978-3-319-96832-2, 272 p.

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Memory studies cover a wide range of issues that have never become outdated and constantly bring into discussion new concerns and perspectives. A thought-provoking volume that challenges memory and postmemory narratives by revising the events of the recent past at the individual or collective level is *Women's Narratives and the Postmemory of Displacement in Central and Eastern Europe* edited by Simona Mitroiu. The study includes eleven essays that aim to identify how women's narratives are articulated in Central and Eastern Europe during the Second World War and post-war period. This cartography of memory and postmemory experiences focuses precisely on the phenomenon of mass displacement within the given political context. Hence, the book traces this poetics of memory of displacement following some patterns or cultural and political structures that connect all the stories on Central and Eastern European territory. There are several central questions, which give the articles a multi-layered quality. How do you tell the stories of the displaced? Which ones are the most reasonable and authentic form and language of retelling traumatic past experiences? What was the process of dealing with physical, mental, and emotional damage like? How do the next generations understand and react to such tragedies? How is identity affected and how is it perceived after being exposed to unstable historical circumstances?

All three parts, "Generations and Narratives of (Post)Memory," "Sites of (Post)Memory" and "History and (Post)Memory" tackle the central notion of *postmemory* linking the discussions introduced by scholars involved in the project, each of them coming up with distinctive approaches from a multidisciplinary perspective. Their research documents women's narratives based on personal life experience or debatable phenomena within their culture, discussing books or displaced writers that were forced to leave their homeland. Thus, the volume

embraces different voices, from a very intimate and touching confession to a reliable analytical study. The process of documentation depends on the type of study: some of the scholars that have written about personal stories even travelled to their ancestor's towns, performing a sort of pilgrimage to their own undiscovered past. Hence, it creates a "narrative of return" (26) that has been inscribed in the lives of those subjected to physical or emotional displacement.

The essays tackle the concept of *postmemory* which has been introduced in the 1980s by Marianne Hirsch's *Family Frames* in the context of Holocaust studies. The concept addresses the relationship between the individuals (parents or relatives) that experienced dramatic events and the second-generation or third generation, focusing on how these generations are able to comprehend and cope with these memories. This "indirect and fragmentary" (22) memory of the "post-"generation functions on two levels, engaging not only with factual knowledge about the past but also with emotions and one's imagination, as well. However, the issue of re-interpretation and re-appropriation of the past by the "post-"generation becomes more complex when it comes to the phenomenon termed "the fantasy of witnessing" (Gary Weissman), as the "post-"generation assumes the trauma as if directly experienced. Consequently, what is established is a constant dialectics of family narrative between predecessors and family members who have the duty to record their personal history, especially if they identify with it on a visceral level.

The opening chapter, "Women's Narratives and the Postmemory of Displacement in Central and Eastern Europe: Introduction" by Simona Mitroiu, provides a theoretical framework for later arguments by placing the issue of displacement in a broader context. The term *postmemory* is not limited only to the context of the Holocaust but it extends to other historical events where the generational chain is significant. The declared intent of the volume is that it "focuses on the willingness of European society to recuperate the stories of the past from the perspective of women and on the memory spaces created for alternative narratives" (2). Once the central question is announced, there are two important elements to be considered. Firstly, the testimony of the past refers precisely to past massive population movements in Central and Eastern Europe such as forced displacement, migration, loss of communities, repatriation, relocation because of war, Soviet occupation, genocide, and ethnic cleansing. Known as one of history's largest displacement of people, this period is described by Anne Applebaum as the "years of

refuges”. Secondly, Simona Mitroiu raises a complex and controversial question regarding the place of women’s narrative in academic research. She admits the importance of life narrative trying to justify the necessity of these particular memory discourses that have to be integrated into the institutional memory discourse. She asserts that the women’s role in transmitting the knowledge of the past occupies a minor place within the public discourse, being regarded as alternative narratives or even as “a counter-memory discourse” (15). The explanation for this underrepresentation is due to political agenda shaping public memory until 1989 and general post-1989 reluctance to handle the mistakes of the past. Therefore, on the grounds of this gap in the historical past, the present collection of essays intends to shed light on these alternative narratives helping to complete the public representation of memory discourse. This politics of memory also attempts to make visible within this memory constellation the mechanisms through which trauma is internalised by the succeeding generations, as well as how it is transmitted and integrated into a personal narrative history.

The first insight into this labyrinthine process is offered by the New York-based scholar Hannah Klige, whose Polish-born Jewish family history is shaped by the Holocaust. Her essay, “The Transmutative Turn: Legacies of Loss and Love at the Source,” describes how she reconstructed her family saga by visiting historical sites and archival holdings in Poland, Germany, Italy, and Israel. Her investigative work pieces together a detailed account of her mother’s experiences in a very nostalgic but at the same time painful tone. She recognizes that this journey back in time made her more aware of her mixed legacy and reshaped her sense of self after feeling for many years like an outsider, a child of immigrants. For this reason, she passes on this story to her daughter, sensing a very strong intergenerational bond between the three women.

A more in-depth analysis regarding the intergenerational transmission of memory is discussed by Saha Colby in “*Narrative Achieves an Amplitude: Research-Creation, Postmemory, and the Aesthetics of Transmission*”. The author retells the story of her grandmother who left Ukraine for a German labour camp, then fled to Canada. This is accomplished by placing the concept of *postmemory* in a practical framework and not just a theoretical one where family histories are perceived as academic projects. Colby opens her article by discussing Walter Benjamin’s understanding of the storyteller, who argues that “experience has fallen in value”

(68) within academic writing. Therefore, she pleads for a “return of biographical and autobiographical studies” (68), especially because a story is not just personal but cultural and historical, as well. Tackling the difference between art and scholarship, Colby introduces the concept of “research-creation” that reconciles artistic expression with scholarly investigation by combining them in comprehensive creative and academic research practices.

The next chapter provides an interesting perspective in a dialogue between Linda Warley, a Canadian of mixed English and German heritage, and Eva C. Karpinski, a Polish Canadian. Much like the previous chapter, their research, titled “Entangled Memories of Expulsion and Resettlement in Post-1945 Germany and Poland: Dialogue in Two Voices,” struggles to chart their past in order to explain how this kind of inheritance shapes the subjectivities of the succeeding generations. However, unlike Sasha Colby’s experience, the present authors perceive the memory of the past as a burden that inhabits them and affects their identity. They remember their childhood memories at a visceral level, immersed in the “internalized violence” (92) of the stories about the war and its aftermath. Therefore, such a quest for their ancestral places has liberated them from these “acquired memories like a deposit” (N. K. Miller) in their bodies.

Alina Sufaru’s paper, “Eva Hoffman’s *Exit into History*: Shifting Subject Positions”, questions the notions of homeland and exile by bringing into discussion Eva Hoffman’s book *Exit into History: A Journey through the New Eastern Europe*. The study aims to investigate the process of self-determination and self-identification in relation to returning to the homeland. The daughter of Polish Holocaust survivors who emigrated to Canada after the Second World War, Eva Hoffman describes the rift and discontinuity within her own identity owing to her brutal displacement at the age of 13. Her home is perceived “as a land of childhood sensuality, lyricism, vividness, and human warmth” (112) and returning there turns into an obsession. Writing about her lost home while relying on imagination and fragmented memories, Eva Hoffman tries to reconcile with her Otherness by confronting this *detritorialization* of her identity. One engaging aspect theorized by Alina Sufaru in relation to the process of recovering one’s identity by returning to the motherland is connected to the notion of nostalgia. Using the distinction between reflective and restorative nostalgia as described by Svetlana Boym, the essayist analyses Hoffman’s

tendency toward restorative nostalgia, emphasizing the impossibility of completely reconstructing the past.

What happens when the “transgenerational space of remembrance” (Hirsch) interferes with the silence and reluctance from one’s own family? The difficulty of recovering the past due to a troubled mother-daughter relationship is depicted in “Inherited Displacement and Relational Remembering in *Once My Mother* by Sophia Turkiewicz” by Katarzyna Kwapisz Williams. The author investigates the phenomenon of “relational remembering” (129) by re-establishing a connection with *motherline* by means of commenting on S. Turkiewicz’s documentary *Once My Mother*. As in the previous essays, the narrative of displacement explores the difficulty of performing the past because of gaps in both the archives and in human memory, the burden of narratives of expulsion that affects the next generations and makes them feel responsible for the memory inherited, as well as the negotiation with one’s own emotional response to loss, anger, separation, resentment, and loneliness.

The next chapter, “Non-human Displacement: Narrative Remediations of Autobiography and Postmemory in Herta Müller’s Writing” by Mihaela Ursa discusses Herta Müller, a controversial Romanian-born German writer, whose novels focus primarily on the power of memory. Firstly, Ursa provides context to her research by examining the status of feminist ideology among Romanian women writers in relation to communist era trauma and national identity within peripheral culture. After discussing Müller’s “non-engenderness of self,” the scholar calls attention to three forms of displacement in her novels: through senses, memory, and speech. Ursa advances the hypothesis of non-human displacement that characterizes the discourse of postmemory. Her reading of *The Land of Green Plums* and *The Hunger Angel* demonstrates how Herta Müller remediates places of memory through her identity and autobiography, while also identifying displacement in speech because of linguistic estrangement and fracture between language and life.

The following chapter, “Dubravka Ugrešić: Boundaries of (Post)Memory, Self, and Nation” by Vanja Polić, delves into narrative strategies that involve memory-making in the ficto-critical work of the Croatian-Dutch novelist Dubravka Ugrešić. The author traces Ugrešić’s negotiation with her sense of self impacted by the breakup of Yugoslavia in 1990. Polić highlights how storytelling becomes one of the key strategies of coming to terms with past traumatic events in Ugrešić’s work.

Her writing juxtaposes personal history with official history by constantly questioning and subverting the discourse of society, politics, and culture. The discursive nature of identity and its crisis alongside a strong transgenerational female solidarity are explored in two fascinating novels: *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* and *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*.

Although trauma may block the possibility of memory transmission, representations of tragic events finally emerge at a certain point. Such disruptions of social memory that generate a division of mnemonic labour appear in Małgorzata Głowacka-Grajper's study "Gender-Structured Transmission of Post-Displacement Memory on Contemporary Poland". The recuperation of the past within a gendered framework is applied to the resettlement from the Kresy territory, underlining female participation in preserving traditions within the community. Furthermore, the author makes an interesting distinction embedded in the narration of displacement by explaining two types of memory: ideological and sentimental one.

A political overview of Albanian socialism opens the collaborative effort of four scholars (Davjola Ndoja, Shannon Woodcock, Eriada Çela, Edlira Majko) whose contribution is a methodological apparatus useful for analysing women's experiences of displacement in Albania. Their research materialized in "Postmemory and Women's Displacement in Socialist Albania: Historical Methodologies as Response" is composed of three sections that document postmemory from recent perspectives, insisting mostly on a historical approach. The deeply patriarchal Albanian society, where gender roles are legitimized through tradition, is confronted with "the displacement of femininity" (223). The scholars shed light on women's experiences under Party persecution between 1944 and 1992, providing testimonies of the victims. Their postmemory narratives become a valuable gender case study that shifts the perspective on women's displacement from past to future awareness.

Vikki Turbine's "Inheriting and Re-imagining Rights: Assessing References to a Soviet Past amongst Young Women in Neoliberal and Neoconservative Russia" study offers a multifaceted approach to how young women from post-Soviet generation perceive and re-interpret the Soviet past, as well as how they are using it in their "citizenship ideals and future imaginaries" (253). The research reveals how echoes of Soviet agenda collide with ideals of neoliberal narratives, arguing in favour of a critical look at the hotly debated concept of Soviet nostalgia. In addition to this, Turbine describes the nuances of patriotism emerging from idealistic Soviet life that

can alter one's position on the past and certainly endanger the stability of the present. A significant section is represented by interviews conducted between 2005 and 2014 with non-activist young women, reflecting opinions on everyday rights and political engagement in provincial Russia.

To sum up, the present volume proposes a large variety of approaches to the politics of memory in Central and Eastern Europe, contributing with valuable insights on roots and routes of the past. Personal stories are intertwined with academic writing in comprehensible and conscious research, not losing sight of the structures of remembering because identity defines the next generations and could be easily manipulated.