

Peripheral to the past: Memory and microhistory

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the relations of center and periphery with respect to “second-generation” memory of the Holocaust. Arguing against the idea that first-generation memory is immutable and the center to which all other generation memories are peripheral, I propose a loosening of filial ties in favor of the supplementary functions of microhistory. Exploring creative genres, rather than an adherence to the accuracy of memory, may be a manner of engagement that allows us to reconfigure the destructive forces of “never forget.”

Introduction

The question of marginality or being peripheral to memory has troubled me perhaps more than anything else over the years. It amounts to one question really: How does one remember something that was latently but manifestly not one’s own?

At the time I wrote this article, I was in Washington, DC, at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) finishing *The Unread Novel*, a collaborative memoir, literary genealogy and microhistory of the György family of Székesfehérvár, Hungary. This was a family of integrated¹ Hungarians of the Izraelite faith whose lives and community were utterly destroyed by the deportations of June 1944. I am a Canadian Protestant child of a Hungarian Jewish Holocaust survivor who converted and disavowed her past. This essay itself is at once peripheral and central to the problem of my project—a family memoir based on a wealth of manuscripts and archival sources, but no direct oral transmission. My book is drawn from two

sets of primary materials, mostly from my mother's autobiographical fictions and my grandfather's archive, and now the seemingly infinite holdings of the USHMM, the online records of the International Tracing Service, Yad Vashem, the Wiener Library in London, the Shoah Foundation, and as-yet-undiscovered seas of archival sands. As I search for the personal in the historical, I negotiate constantly moving centers and margins of testimony and fiction, of history and memory, of macro and micro, of *l'univers concentrationnaire* and the György family, of Jewish and Protestant cultures. Individuals and families are subject to the central events, yet are by definition marginal to history and, increasingly, to first-hand memory.

Memory studies, as a discipline, emerged alongside the resurgence and death of personal memories of Holocaust survivors that garnered belated attention in the 1980s primarily in Europe,² North America and Israel.³ In each geopolitical context, the political and contested uses of the memories were quite different, but since then, the event itself has circulated worldwide, as Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider (2002) have argued, as "cosmopolitan memory." Questions, then, of to whom Holocaust memory belongs, who remembers what, for what reason and how these memories are evoked over time and generations are paramount to understanding how it is that we manipulate the malleability of memory and its potential for violent political deployment. "Never again" is the justification for Israel's slaughter of threatening Palestinians and, at the same time, the protest against it: "We should never let this happen again to others." The aggressively defensive and the moral both seem to draw from the same lessons of memory and history. Indeed, one of the early observers of this phenomenon, Yehuda Elkana, called on Israel to forget:

Today I see no more important political and educational task for the leaders of this nation than to take their stand on the side of life, to dedicate themselves to creating our future and not to be preoccupied from morning to night with symbols, ceremonies and lessons of the Holocaust. They must uproot the domination of that historical "remember!" over our lives (Elkana, 1988).

So, we are a generation caught between remembering and forgetting, where both take an active decision. How might we negotiate these positions, possibly decentering both? As a child of someone who chose to forget and as a researcher who has actively worked to "remember," I know memory is a place we can study for the tensions of center and margins, first, second and thirdness, aggression and victimization, that reverberate whenever anyone claims ownership of an inherited traumatic past.

In the absence of oral transmission, my reconstruction of family memory has been built from two archival caches. My grandfather, Oszkár György (born Grossman), was a Hungarian poet and translator whose papers ended up in the Fejér County Archive in 1956 twelve years after his deportation and death. He was destroyed, but his ephemera

was preserved in perpetuity. I know him only through his literary and documentary traces and have created a useable image of him wholesale through a largely (to me) inaccessible language. I was drawn to the rocky shoals of this project by the siren call of my mother's opaque memoirs (in which she obscured all identifying contexts) combined with my grandfather's unreadable archive, never quite feeling that the story was mine to tell. Yet, this history, in its retroactive reconstruction, is one that I now understand shaped my life, though never consciously. I have been peripheral to something centrally important about my mother and my childhood that can only ever be recognized belatedly. Belonging to the "second generation" (are all generations to be measured now by concentric circles rippling out from the sinking stone of the "event"?), I am taunted by Pierre Nora's claim that none of what I write has anything to do with memory, but is, rather, history masquerading as memorial practice. Can one exhume what has been buried or unconsciously experienced as anything but history? Emotional continuity, even if ruptured or torn, is the hallmark of memory; history thrives on the objective distance of discontinuity.

Yet, the idea of memory implies centrality, first-hand experience expressed in direct testimonial fashion. In the contexts of these shifting margins and centers, my particular project has its own peripheral anxieties that are worth exploring in some detail. Those anxieties play out over a series of overlapping, rippling questions about story-telling, quasi-Jewish inheritance, "postmemory," microhistory and violence. We may think that being unfaithful to memory is a form of violence; however, it is also true that memory's demands for fidelity and fealty also enact violence.

Allow me here to further reflect on my introduction to *Memory and Migration: Multidisciplinary Approaches to Memory Studies* (Creet and Kitzmann, 2011) on the natural motility of memory and the anxieties that mobility causes for identity, particularly ones built on reclaimed or inherited memory. There, I asked what would happen if we studied not just the content of memory, but also its mechanisms, as if memory were the stuff of dreams—linking conscious memory with its unconscious doppelganger, its displacements, distortions, losses, projections and so on—as of consequence to the content itself. We have indeed taken this path with respect to national memories. We understand the concept of selective, mobile and contested memory well with respect to politics, in all of its negative connotations,⁴ but perhaps less well in the context of historically and emotionally mobile personal or familial memories, their reconstructions and their unconsciousness mechanisms.

As I argued, mobility does not mean that the content of memory becomes secondary, but rather that the content is not sacred. If we separate the idea of origin—or to keep with the themes of this issue of *Hagar*, the idea of periphery and center—from the authenticity of memory,

we can show that the manner in which memory travels is a quality of memory itself, not a flaw, not a lessening, not a shift in category, but constitutional, of memory, a constant constantly on the move, archiving itself rhizomatically (Crete and Kitzmann, 2011:6).

Memory is, I argued, “where we have arrived rather than where we have left” (Crete and Kitzmann, 2011:6). What then of “second-generation” or “postmemory” in this respect?

Identity is inherently a product of memory. One must remember oneself as something or someone in order to be that thing. As much as Judaism is a tradition of memory, it is also a history of forgetting, of assimilation, of destruction, of aggression, of disavowal, of rediscovery. Caesurae, erasures, lacunae and silences, the interruptions of Jewish memory as a traumatic mark of the Holocaust that must be overcome, have characterized much of the discourse of second-generation memory. I have been troubled by this discontinuity more than most, given my late apprehension of being Jewish and an unwitting child of a terrible history. I have struggled with the necessity (for me, but not so much my siblings) of reconstructing this hidden but inherited past, the legitimacy of my encounter with this history and this increasingly fraught identity. How does one deal with memory and a present manifestly not and yet one’s own? This anxiety is one that stems precisely from the idea that memory is a fixed quantity and quality, that legitimacy and responsibility adhere to the source of origin, even if that origin is obscured. If memory is a creature of the present, invoked by very present needs, as much as it is an incorporation of the past, then how do we negotiate these tricky relations between center and periphery with respect to the memory of the Holocaust and its generations? In this essay I will explore, albeit briefly, the nature of these anxious mobile memories of a disinherited “second generation” through untold stories, (non)identity, “postmemory,” and the historiographical performance of microhistory.

On being Jewish and not

People always ask: How did you find out you were Jewish? The idea of a hidden Jewish past once seemed exotic, but not so much any more. There have been some very famous examples—Tom Stoppard, Madeline Albright—and, less spectacularly, for Hungarians in particular, some very common stories. One of the first sources on this subject was an essay by three Hungarian scholars, Ferenc Erős, András Kovács, and Katalin Lévai, “*Hogyan jöttem rá, hogy zsidó vagyok?*” [How did I find out that I am Jewish?] (Lévai, Kovács, and Erős, 1985), drawn from a series of in-depth research interviews with Hungarians born shortly after WWII. I read it and

was both comforted and discomfited that my experience was not so singular as I thought.⁵ According to Erős, Kovács and Lévai, a large part of the generation of Jews born in Hungary after the Holocaust had no idea that they were Jewish until they were teenagers or adults, and the information came as a dramatic revelation, often from someone outside the family as a taunt. This pattern held true for Hungarians abroad (I have met many others), stemming not from post-war, Communist-enforced heterogeneity, but from dis-identification with the segregating designation of *Zsidó*, a racial category created by the Hungarian state, and the shame of being so brutally expelled from a nation to which they were deeply attached. Not surprisingly, the indirect manner in which this “second generation” discovered the secret of their origins disturbed and charged what would have been an already complex relationship to their Judaism. As the authors surmised, silence on the question of being Jewish could mean for the child a conscious negation of its origins even if he or she was intimate with the evidence, or a family rejection that involved the “evacuation of all lived collective memory and the whole history of the family,” which nonetheless surfaced in unconscious fashion, particularly, for one interviewee, in dreams (Levai, Kovács, and Erős, 1985:64).

In another of my touchstone articles, Nadine Fresco, a French historian, and again one of the early writers on the consequences of being peripheral to hidden memory, writes in “Remembering the unknown”:

Born after the war, because of the war, the Jews I am speaking of here feel their existence as a kind of exile, not from a place in the present or future, but from a time, now gone forever, which would have been that of identity itself (1984:421).

The point these researchers emphasize is that belated knowledge of one’s Jewishness does not give one direct or easy access to that identity or its complicated history. One must grapple with both conscious and unconscious knowledge, acceptance and denial, and then still negotiate the chasms of memory and history, and the aggressions derived from both the disavowal and avowal of a memory of victimization.

My experience of finding out was akin to hearing a family rumor, which I did not quite believe at first and then found so utterly bewildering I put it away until all chance of addressing it directly was gone. The investigation of this inheritance has necessarily been a secondary and interpretative affair, where each mode of engagement and inquiry has allowed me to reincorporate and integrate things both unknown and familiar. I have come to understand the process as a literary genealogy, at once fictional, esthetic and historical, an enactment of the processes of memory itself. Let me begin with a “second-generation,” first-hand memory, the opening paragraphs of the book that will be *The Unread Novel*:

I used to hear my mother typing through the wall between our bedrooms, her red nails adding a staccato to the flurries of mechanical punches. On my twentieth birthday, she gave me a manuscript, by then a decade old, awkwardly titled “A path through puberty.” “You are old enough to read it now,” she said, without telling me what it was. I read it as autobiography, though it was clearly fictionalized. A bittersweet childhood, a highly sexualized adolescence, a cultured family, petty but long-remembered grudges, seduction at the summer cottage, and our narrator finds herself marrying far too young and somewhat tragically. Though detailed and evocative, the story was disjointed and lacked any sense of plot, development or context, as if the motivation for the writer, and the reader, had been removed. But the ending made the least sense to me. The protagonist, whom I assumed to be my mother, married a man who was not my father and hinted at a child who was not a sibling I knew. It confused me, and so I put it away.

I never asked my mother which parts were true, knowing that she wouldn’t have answered anyway. But I might also have willfully failed to understand. Fresco observes: “One pretends to pursue unrelentingly the reason for one’s parent’s silence, while, on the contrary, everything shows how much one avoids tearing away the veil from the forbidden” (1984:421). I must have sensed that the factual accuracy of her memoir was of little consequence, that my mother was an unreliable narrator and I an uninformed reader. She concealed far more than she told, but I in turn understood far less than she wrote.

It all started with a secret and a document, as so many of these searches do. My mother and I never talked about “it”; her memory died with her, though she left behind a broad paper trail that I might have followed much earlier had the signposts not been so contradictory. She contained her trauma by skirting around its edges, fictionally revivifying her family while obfuscating the causes of their loss. Reading her daybooks, annotated with notes that were never meant to be reminders to anyone but her, I see now that we were surrounded by people who knew her in quite a different context. Agnes, her sister, is in constant contact; Mrs. Neumann, her old Hungarian friend, she of the poppy-seed cake at Christmas, was a regular visitor; letters come and go monthly from Ödön, her uncle in Italy, her friend Zsuzsi Fabini in Budapest, her cousin “Dusi” and “Uncle” Imre (who, it became clear after her death, was her first husband). Imre’s sister, “Baba” Farkas, makes an appearance in Canada sometime in the 1980s. We were marginalized from her past while she was in constant contact with those who remembered her from another life entirely. She secured the world of her private sadness by never teaching us a word of Hungarian, though she remained deeply attached to its motifs and would cut out the stamps from her Hungarian mail

for us, monochromatic images of buses, streetcars, forklifts and square buildings, monuments to socialist industry; and others, colorful athletes and heroes, flowers and butterflies, remnants of a sentiment that had survived under Goulash Communism. And we too were proud of her heritage and ours. But when people inevitably asked when she had left Hungary, if she had left in 1956, I said yes—and yet it was an impossibility. My older sister Francesca had been born in London in 1950 and I was old enough to do the math. In grade 5 or 6 I wrote a story about how my mother had escaped by swimming up the Danube. It was my first attempt at inventing a usable past. I wonder now what she made of it.

I struggle with owning what is the quintessentially Jewish memory of the twentieth century from a perspective both central (I am “second generation”) and not; I have only coded knowledge of that disavowed inheritance other than what I have come to avow on my own, and no family transmission of either Jewish culture or trauma other than what was oddly acted out and unspoken. I now know why she ate honey and apples.... I can only ever be peripheral to the (un)transmitted memory of Judaism and the Holocaust even as it is the condition of my existence. Let’s call it “shadow memory.” I am W.G. Sebald’s “Austerlitz” in his peregrinations, ellipses, allusions, metaphors and displacements, a Protestant that can never be anything but and a Jew who can never be anything but. To embrace either fully would be to disavow the other. In this state, the margins feel more comfortable and genuine than any central belonging. That said, I have access to one of the largest memory banks in the world. It’s hard to argue that any of us are peripheral to a history that has been so well documented.

I have never had the feeling that Judaism takes kindly to marginal belonging, and yet I am Jewish by definition and by obligation it seems. I am grateful for Jewish generosity towards me. I have been welcomed as a prodigal granddaughter, instructed, recruited and fed. I have had many first last suppers. I know that what or who constitutes a Jew has been debated to no end for the purposes of establishing both belonging and exclusion, and that the versions of being Jewish can be multiplied by the number of Jews in the world at any given time. According to the Mishnah and a contemporary fetishization of genetic genealogy, having a Jewish mother by blood, if not by denomination, makes me a Jew—reinforcing the notion of Jewishness as a biological if not a cultural inheritance. Does that rule count for mothers who disavowed their own Judaism? Would I want to be recognized as such? I am a suspicious genealogist, suspicious of my own need to belong, even though I have embraced my dubious inheritance as much as I can without committing myself to something akin to a conversion process that would be alien to my secular soul. Having no daughter to whom I could pass on this ambivalent blood, and indeed no nieces born of our female line, I can only document the end of a line.

The “second (last) generation”

Does being a product of the vagaries of survival give one direct access to that formative event? We privilege degrees or generations of remove with the assumption of some kind of direct or known transmission, even if necessarily a transmission of ruptures and trauma. In a culture of shared memory, being Jewish is enough. One is encouraged to assimilate the trauma: Kernels of stories can be expanded, missing family members rediscovered, historical aggressions internalized.

Almost every well-known, second-generation microhistory or literary memoir begins with what is known and tracks what is not—Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, Daniel Mendelsohn’s *The Lost*, Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation*—while the absolute unknown or imagined history treads the path of fiction or misdirection like Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated*, David Grossman’s *See Under Love* or W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*. In the case of silence, looking at the past “slant” (“Tell all the truth but tell it slant/Success in circuit lies.” Emily Dickinson) is the only option. “Deep memory,”⁶ whether factual or not, is the dark beauty that dazzles. To engage otherwise than esthetically would be at best disingenuous, even in the face of taunting validation. Memory comes in fictional guise in the realm of silence. The best of its fictional recreations come close to creating memory anew or at least mimicking memory’s circumlocutions so effectively that we care less about its mimetic relation to event. “Austerlitz,” an adopted war orphan brought up Christian who forgets (or never knew) that he was Jewish, is less a fiction to us than an embodiment of the uncanny imbrications of the unknown, rediscovered and “always was.” We are remembered by the things that remember us, recognizing in them vestigial implants, deliberately hidden.

Austerlitz fantasizes about photographs that remember him, and Sebald invents for Austerlitz an archetypal character “Vera,” who does indeed recognize him. I went looking, as so many in my situation have, for old people who might remember what had been destroyed. And I found my “Vera” (*veritas*) in Vera Roberts, a friend of my mother’s who had walked every step of the way with her on that terrible journey. As we stood in the courtyard of a house on *Ósz útca* that had been part of the Jewish ghetto of Szekesfehervar—now housing a marginalized Roma community—Vera counted people on her fingers: “Your grandmother, great-grandmother, little Judit and the two girls, Magda and Csöppi [Agnes]. That was five.” Local, collected memory told me what my mother never did. They gave me photographs. “I wanted to hide her, your little sister, but your mother said ‘Not yet,’” said Zsuzsi. “I saw your grandfather, leading his people out,” said Tibor, making my broken grandfather into Moses. “I wasn’t there, but my mother was. She saw what happened on the platform at Auschwitz,” said Gams, telling me yet another version of a heartbreaking

moment. These were my photographs, these elderly people for whom my return came as a strange surprise. They looked at me to see if they could recognize something of someone they once knew; I craved their recognition, but knew it was only a name that got me in the door. I commandeered their memories for my purposes, creating, in effect, an oral transmission that I could then pass on to others in my family. Memory stops and starts; transmission is nothing so direct. One can worm one's way back into a photograph, into a story, into a memory. One can elicit memory and in the process drop a new stone into the pond from which the ripples will emanate even as the stone disappears.

If I have lapsed into figurative language here, this is no accident, for memory is figurative, always worked on by the belatedness of trauma (belatedness is its own trauma in this case), the processes of storage and the mechanisms of recall, displacement, condensation and screen memories.⁷ Encoding, storage and retrieval are the key operations of memory, which begs the question of the stability of the thing to which we are peripheral in the first place. The reification of first-generation memory, elevated as it is to the status of untouchable testimony, and justifying logics, is what sets in motion our anxieties about misremembering and appropriation. Over-identification is a problem of over-valuing. We have placed ourselves at the margins of memory by insisting on the unassailable firstness of our parents and grandparents their journeys, and on the importance of their every detail. I looked for authenticity in the memories of those who remembered and found instead rumors, justifications, romanticizations and nostalgia, all elicited by me and my questions and my camera, sixty years after the fact. True, I learned things, but I produced those memories and their retellings are now mine. I set memory in motion once again.

Much has been written about the idea of inherited trauma, "postmemory," second-hand experience, a continuity that defines us as a "generation." In her recent recapitulation of her influential idea, Marianne Hirsch writes that "postmemory"

describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they "remember" only by means of the stories, images and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right (2012:5).

Seem is a critical word for Hirsch, sensitive as she is to questions of appropriation even with respect to inheritance. Yet, even though Hirsch recognizes that silence was a common response to trauma, she elides, to some extent, the consequences of memory inherited without content or context, where the manifestations can be equally overwhelming, or perhaps even more so, without the *seemingly* direct access to memory not one's own.

The peripheral quality of disavowal is worth thinking about in the face of the hypermnestic impulses of Holocaust memory and scholarship as a whole. To elucidate: We have reached the point of saturation with respect to memory of the Holocaust in part because of the urgency that first-hand memory is at an end. The reasons have been well rehearsed and justified, particularly the impulse to fill in all the gaps in “memory shot through with holes” (Raczynow and Astro, 1994)—and yet, this impulse has produced its own margins. To enter the field of Holocaust memory, one must engage the minutiae of the archive (with which I am all too familiar), leave no detail unwritten, no memory unrecorded. I have written elsewhere about the death drive in this fantasy of recording everything in one of its most appealing tales, Danilo Kiš’ “The encyclopedia of the dead” (Creet, 2002). Unlike Hirsch’s formulation that we are overwhelmed by the memory’s of others, what we do not know can drive us differently in the sense the inherited unknown is a hidden self rather than a projection or appropriation of the other. The urgent avowal of the last few decades, personal and in much broader political spheres, may indeed be a reaction formation, not just a corrective, against earlier disavowals, familial, national and historical.

Even as we adhere to a notion of trauma as an unconscious process, always recognized or experienced belatedly, the idea of postmemory largely assumes conscious inheritance and identification, even if its manifestations are not always obvious. Our anxious need is to patch those holes, to fix memory in place, even as we recognize the impossibility of such a task.

Hirsch offers a kind of prescription:

For postmemorial artists, the challenge is to define an esthetic based on a form of identification and projection that can include the transmission of bodily memory or trauma without leading to the self-wounding and retraumatizing that is rememory (2012:86).

We must then, in Hirsch’s formulation, esthetically externalize what is internal, inherited, but not first-hand, in order to illuminate and contain a mostly conscious over-identification with parental trauma. But, in the case of disavowals, secrets or remnants, unspoken memory merges in the unconscious with dream material, surfacing through its esthetic manifestations and research drives. We do not necessarily control the esthetic process as a way of containing trauma, but sift through a hidden self’s esthetic manifestations as a way of understanding its content, as we would in the process of trying to understand a dream. For those who must generate the identification to begin with, the process is rather like divination. Dreams estheticize unacceptable material, longings, losses and aggressions that we cannot know or acknowledge consciously. A silent parent’s trauma is rather like that: deep loneliness and rejection, untouchable sadness never named, inexplicable cultural and sexual aggressions. Silent expressions

are never straightforward, nor their inheritance intelligible. When people ask me what I think are the consequences of growing up with a survivor, I don't have an answer. How can one trace the consequences of something never articulated and never named? The esthetic process then becomes one of discovery, as well as a structuring and containing force. I read my intellectual interests as I would tea leaves, divining content from disciplinary pulls, subject fascinations and generic experiments. My career has been characterized by more mobility than most in my interests in historiography, literature, queer theory, Holocaust studies and memory studies; and in expressive genres, in history, literary criticism, translation, documentary film and literary nonfiction. It has only been in retrospect that I have understood how each tropological turn in interest and expression was driven by a need to engage in a mode of inquiry, a particular mechanism of thought, incarnation and retrieval, as much as the content itself. One tells a very different story in each genre and each genre accesses the unconscious and its contents differently.

Memorial pursuits gain legitimacy by their story-telling merits, their narrative or visual pleasures or displeasures. The creative brilliance of writers and artists who have found ways of communicating absences, voids, traumas and gaps in tension with intimate details, dates, names, places, acts, agencies, is a strategic response to the feeling of being marginal to the past in both of its great embodiments, history and memory. The memory of the Holocaust is nothing but postness, even for the first generation itself, given the necessary belatedness of traumatic memory and the reformulation of event and its meaning over the past 70 years. And we are all peripheral to history in our individual specificity. While we might debate Adorno's dictum that poetry after the Holocaust is barbaric, a dictum refused in particular by writers such as H. G. Adler (Adler, 1999), for the "second generation," poesis, in the broadest sense of "making," reconciles memory and matter. Our obsession with the detail is our claim to the historical; imbedding it in creative forms, suspending any easy relation to an actual past, is our mediation with the ghostly specters of memorial inheritance—and disavowal, both a parent's and one's own.

On microhistory and memory

"Postmemory" is by necessity on the margins of history, as it is on the margins of memory. Obsession with details is the hallmark of absent memory; failure to ever find enough, or enough proof, is the ultimate foil. Yet are these projects of remembrance not essentially historical, as Pierre Nora has argued? Yes, they are. We are generating history in a manner that is either supplement—or central—to the aims of greater historical projects, that is, to create knowledge that is generalizable. But the process of doing so involves an intense engagement with historical details that have little

significance in the larger historical sense and yet great significance in the processes of working through inconsistencies that point to parental inconsistency and our need for absolute avowal. Whether a parent wore a yellow star or not in a particular photograph taken in a very particular time and place, and why they do not remember doing so or not—this is one of Hirsch’s pressing questions—depends on knowing the significance of a class of people who were marked in obvious and less obvious ways and in the contemporary stakes of that marking. Why it matters is another question. A sense of being marginal to memory demands that we place our parents in the most traumatic of situations—that we force them to remember, literally or esthetically, the things that allow us to work through our own relation to inherited trauma. My anxious avowal comes not so much from my mother’s set of defenses, including conversion, lying and hiding, as it does from trying to right my misrecognition. What I refused to see, my own disavowal, is what I am working out through the accumulation and esthetic arrangement of historical detail, (re)producing melancholia and unnamed loss as conscious knowledge and feeling.

So let us then think about where history and memory come into contact at the margins. Microhistory, the reconstruction of individual or familial sagas as a way of telling a greater history, as families emblematic of their times, is a possible answer to the dilemma of postmemory as history and appropriation. It solves the problem to the extent that historically sound research can act as a supplement to memory. Here history is a supplement in Derridian terms to memory, as something secondary to that comes to serve as an aid to something “original” or “natural.” Strange to think perhaps of history being the supplement to memory when, prior to the acceptance of microhistory as a valid historiographical approach, memory was considered peripheral to or the raw material of history. Peripheries and centers are always relationally unstable and are capable of strangely inverting.

Memory is closer to figurative language born of passion, as Jacques Derrida reads Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and history is the linguistic fixing of the mobility of memory. By dispelling the notion of origins, the origins of language, the origins of memory, we move closer to understanding how it functions as a trace, but not an origin, in the present. Historical recuperation is a reaction to dispersal. Memory, as I argued in the introduction to *Memory and Migration* (Crete and Kitzmann, 2011), is dispersal, always moving from an original that never existed in the first place. As Derrida writes: “for the essential predicate of the state of pure nature is *dispersion*; and culture is always the effect of reconciliation, of proximity, of self-same [proper] presence” (1998:274). We use history, research, the archives, the seemingly inexhaustible gathering of details to supplement memory, in effect to contain it, to keep it from dissipating into nothingness. We define the margins of memory by history. Where memory ends, history begins; through history we hope to reconstruct and reconstitute

the origins of memory, producing signs that are only ever metaphors of absent origins. So how then do we understand microhistory, that genre which seems to so closely manifest our desires as we stand on the margins of memory and history?

One of my favorite writers on the subject of microhistory is Harvard historian Jill Lepore. In an article that made me think deeply about my framing of my project, "Historians who love too much: Reflections on biography and microhistory," Lepore (2001) sets out to answer the question of whether microhistorians have more or less sympathy for their subjects than biographers. That question does not particularly concern me here, but in the process of answering it, Lepore outlines four propositions with respect to microhistory, one of which gives a clear and now almost standard definition of this historiographic enterprise: "however singular a person's life may be, the value of examining it lies in how it serves as an allegory for the culture as a whole" (2001:141). Resolving small mysteries about a person's life, about their agency, we create portals to larger cultural issues, yet the relationship is always metaphorical—an allegory.

Microhistory lends itself to the family and to a kind of feminized memory, as Carlo Ginzburg tells us about the work of Mexican historian Luiz González:

To counteract the objections aroused by the word microhistory, he [González] suggested two alternatives: *matría* history, suitable for evoking that small, weak, feminine, sentimental world of the mother which revolves around the family and the village; or *yin* history, the Taoist term that recalls all that is "feminine, conservative, terrestrial, sweet, obscure and painful" (1993:12).

Feminizing microhistory suggests (objectionably, perhaps, but quite accurately) its minor status in the majoritarian, masculine world of history proper. Yet, historically, we know Mnemosyne as prior to history, the mother (with Zeus) of the muse of history Clio. Possessing Mnemosyne, according to Hesiod, legitimizes authoritative speech. Understanding history as the supplement of memory, then, where memory is both prior to and the condition of history, places memory and its constant dissipation at the forgotten center of history rather than at history's excluded margins. Accretion and substitution are the undecidable modes of the supplement. Microhistory is then an accretion to memory as it fleshes out the story and a substitution as it replaces pure absence with presence, silence with writing, the ephemeral with that which can be catalogued and taken for authoritative.

What Derrida makes clear is that the supplement is a thing in its own right. So we who write microhistory as a way of engaging the myriad emotional, identificatory and historical problems of postmemory are both adding to and supplanting an original. We are writing and embodying something new. We are "a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence." We cumulate and accumulate

presence. “It is thus that art, technè, image, representation, convention, etc., come as supplements to nature and are rich with this entire cumulating function” (Derrida, 1998:145). At the same time, as Derrida so elegantly holds aloft the contradiction:

But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself in the-place-of; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence. Compensatory [*suppléant*] and vicarious, the supplement is an adjunct, a subaltern instance which takes-(the)-place [*tient-lieu*]. As substitute, it is not simply added to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness (1998:145).

If I have resorted to the language of literary theory to resolve a historiographic question, it is because history and memory seem to exist as binary orders of thought still, despite twenty years of debate that have paired them inseparably. Memory is heavily used as a conduit of the historical; video testimony is a commonplace way of making human scale the larger historical message of most Holocaust museums. Walls of talking heads and photographs of the lost, the murdered, the tortured, the excluded are the handmaidens of history, but still marginal and sentimentalized. What if history is the supplement, the mark of emptiness that produces little relief? What if memory is the imagined originary, only ever to be forgotten? Perhaps the future of understanding the notion of postmemory is to give up entirely on the marginalizing division between generations, between memory and history, and understand them to be always already supplements to each other. In this manner we might also give up the valorization of memory to which we can only position ourselves as peripheral and post—and our embrace of its violent manifestations in the present.

NOTES

- 1 László Csosz, one of the authors of the recently-published *The Holocaust In Hungary: Evolution of a Genocide* (Vági, Kádár, and Csosz, 2013), argues that there is a difference between “integrated” and “assimilated,” though “assimilated” is the word we generally use. While assimilation suggests that a group gives up all independent identification, taking on the host country’s language and cultural and religious practices, integration describes a group who fully participates in the cultural, political and business life of a nation but retains its own practices as well. Csosz says that integration, rather than assimilation, is a more accurate concept to

describe the position of the Hungarian Jews in the twentieth century. These two terms have their own resonances with respect to margins and center, treading not-so-visible lines between belonging and difference, which, as we well know, can become unbridgeable fissures.

- 2 On the notion of contested memory in Europe, see, e.g., Assmann (2007); Deák, Gross, and Judt (2000); Lamberti and Fortunati (2009); and Mithander, Sundholm, and Velicu (2013).
- 3 The 1980s saw the Israeli school system embrace the memory of the Holocaust as the generation of survivors began to die. For two chronologies of this shift and the political context in which it took place, see Ofer (2013) and Resnik (2003).
- 4 We can look to Hungary as one of the prime examples at the moment where deflection, distortion and forgetting allow the country to memorialize its status as a victim of Germany, its Axis ally, at the very same time that the Hungarian bureaucracy enthusiastically deported the majority of its Jewish population. At the other end of the memorial spectrum, Israel's instrumental use of the memory of victimization to justify lopsided violence against Palestinians has made many Holocaust victims question the legacy of "never forget." See, for example, a letter published August 23, 2014, in the *New York Times* (as an advertisement) by forty Holocaust survivors who condemned the Israeli assault on Gaza. As they argue, "'Never again' must mean NEVER AGAIN FOR ANYONE!"
- 5 The peripheries have their pleasures, as we know from other peripheral identities. Marginality in queer and post-colonial discourses from the heydays of identity politics provided important political perspectives on centrism of every kind, giving marginality cultural cache. As much as the margins demand recognition from the center, much is lost in the process of moving toward sameness.
- 6 In her essay *Days and Memory* (2001), Charlotte Delbo distinguishes between two kinds of memory, *mémoire ordinaire* and *mémoire profonde*, which Lawrence L. Langer, in his introduction to Delbo's trilogy *Auschwitz and After*, translates as "common memory" and "deep memory" (Delbo, 1995:xi). Delbo writes:

Deep memory preserves sensations, physical imprints. It is the memory of the senses. For it isn't words that are swollen with emotional charge. Otherwise, someone who has been tortured by thirst for weeks on end could never again say "I'm thirsty. How about a cup of tea" (2001:xvi).

Deep memory could be triggered for Delbo by the smell of rotting potatoes, a sensation that could never be put into words, while common memory was that which could be articulated as history, as an event that had past. Obviously, deep memory takes on an unconscious quality, a necessary forgetting that allowed survivors to

function again the present. Deep memory, or “sense memory” (see Bojadzija-Dan, 2011), comes not as the memory of a historical event, but as an insistent present.

- 7 Belatedness is a core idea in trauma theory. Freud and subsequent observers have grappled with the idea that, in the moment of fright, we cannot form a coherent narrative of events. The psychoanalytical concept of “afterwardsness” (*Nachträglichkeit*) is a repressed experience which only becomes a trauma *after the event*. Though part of his thinking as early as the 1890s, Freud elaborated on this idea in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in his work with World War I veterans (Freud, 1976). See also any number of commentators on belatedness, especially Cathy Caruth (1996). Interestingly, for Jean Laplanche (via Lacan), the notion of “afterwardsness” moves both forwards and backwards, engaging with the enigmatic inheritance of the (parental) other.

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