



# Memory Studies: New Horizons

edited by James Beresford and Alankaar Sharma

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## Contributors

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# Editorial

James Beresford

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Rooted in and inspired by the work of Halbwachs (1992), Aleida Assmann (2011), Jan Assmann (1997, 2000), Nora (1996), and many others, memory studies has become one of the quickest growing interdisciplinary fields in the humanities and social science (Tamm, 2013). While at different points open to critique of its developments and suggestions for remedy (see Olick and Robbins, 1998), social scientific analysis of memory has been taken up in numerous disciplines; be they philosophy (Trigg, 2012); geography (Jones, 2011, Jones and Garde-Hansen, 2012); anthropology (Berliner, 2005); cultural studies (Loveday, 2014); amongst others. It has even gained its own journal *Memory Studies*, as well as a body of different handbooks and readers (see Erll *et al.* 2010, Kattago, 2015)

The foundation for this growth rests on a distinction between that now termed 'memory studies' and what is framed as a traditional, biologized and naturalised understanding of memory. This has been granted many names; the 'storage bin' (Rowlinson *et al.*, 2014) or 'original plenitude and subsequent loss' (Rigby, 2005) model of memory. All denote an understanding of remembering as an automatic practice of retrieval, as a natural process of recalling previous acts. Memory studies, in the humanities and social sciences, criticises this model through locating remembering *as social*. This scholarship elucidates how remembering the past is an act of narration bringing new realities into being rather than simply reflecting an objective past (Antze and Lambeck, 1996, Kantsteine, 2002, Kuhn, 2002, Loveday, 2014).

An early iteration of this was Halbwachs (1992) writings on collective memory. Collective memories are those possessed or reproduced by multiple actors (Adorisio, 2014, Assmann, 2000, Assmann and Czaplicka, 1995, Azizi, 2011, Coser, 1992, Halbwach, 1992, Loveday, 2014). This encountered criticism; some noting the problematic nature of the idea of collective derived from Durkheim's (1933) *The division of labour in Society*. However, it has been used in innovative and more



different ways acknowledging such initial pitfalls while at the same time modifying it (see Serazio, 2010, Szpunar, and Szpunar, Loveday, 2014), others modifying the idea slightly to look at 'collected memories' (see Kantsteine, 2002).

Early Ideas of collective memory and remembering have also been expanded and re-worked, showing them to be a component not total description of memory enactment. Tamm (2015) discusses this as a cultural turn in memory studies; moving from a disciplinary monopoly of sociology toward the entrance of cultural historians. Most notable in ideas of cultural memory Assmann develops (see Assmann, 2011, Assmann and Czaplicka, 1995).

Later writing expand on memory through understanding its relation to forgetting; arguing the **sybiosis and constitutive link** of the two has been marginalised in earlier scholarship. In this vein Connerton (2008) advocates for a re-envisioning of forgetting; stressing the need to stop understanding forgetting as a failure and see it as productive, doing things. Connerton (2008) created an extensive typology of different kinds of memory. This includes: forgetting as a repressive erasure; prescriptive forgetting; forgetting constitutive in formatting a new identity; structural amnesia; forgetting as annulment; forgetting as planned obsolescence; and finally forgetting as humiliated silence (Connerton, 2008). Others criticise the language of forgetting in memory studies. Singer and Conway (2008) argue that it enacts a false impression of total loss. Rather, they advocate, scholars should talk about accessibility, certain memories becoming less so do to social enactments (Singer and Conway, 2008).

While a fast growing and expanding field, memory studies is yet to become a mainstream and fully established, and has displayed discrepant degrees of growth in different disciplines. Despite it's growth, Segesten and Wüstenberg (2017) argue that memory studies has tended to be multidisciplinary rather than interdisciplinary. The connections between different disciplines that is need for further blossoming of the field is absent; instead most researchers work in the disciplinary silos of their own respective subjects. This special issue addresses Segesten and Wüstenberg (2017) call by showcasing the work of postgraduate and early career researchers, introducing some of the new work in the field to broader social science audiences; as well as mapping the disciplinary genealogies and spatial development of this. It focuses on how a growing but not fully developed field will be added to by the next generation of memory researchers.

**Struzziero Maria Antonietta** addressees explores enactments of memory a literary standpoint. Adopting Jeanette Winterson's memoir *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* as a point of analysis, the insights of memory studies (as well as psychoanalysis and trauma scholarship) here are used to understand the intricacies of the self representation the memoir performs. Drawing upon Lacanian theory, Antonietta concludes that vectors of desire and memory are employed to re-assemble different memory images.

**Katharine G. Trostel and Avigail S. Oren** astutely demonstrate the way memory studies can elucidate new orientations to studying the spatial. Focussing on the Venice Ghetto, Trostel and Oren use the idea of psycho-geography and look at how this geography in Venice can be studied to elucidate relations between Venice and other areas.

Drawing upon qualitative interview data, **Inci Unal** furthers this by looking to Turkey. Unal asking participants for their memories a particular institute where they lived. Unal centralises the Turkish elite and their civilising missions in the Republic's early years. These schools social position in the westernising of the Anatolian periphery requires significant focus.

**Anikka Toots**, coming from an art background, takes the case of Estonian memory politics within the 1990s. She looks to how technological developments allowed different patterns of memory politics within the Post- Soviet context.

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“The Wound and the Gift”:  
Rewriting the Wounded Self  
Through the Gift of Language. A  
Study of Jeanette Winterson’s Au-  
tobiography *Why Be Happy When You  
Could Be Normal?*

Struzziero Maria Antonietta

**ABSTRACT:** Jeanette Winterson’s *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011) is the autobiography of the writer whose life is marked by traumas connected with her abandonment at birth, her subsequent adoption, and a further rejection by her adoptive family when they discover that she is having a lesbian relationship. In the memoir, the paper will argue that the author tackles the hermeneutics of self-representation. She wishes to make sense of the personal past and to trace its trajectory as a means to discover the origin of the self and re-write it along different existential and psychological lines.

During her memory journey back into her past, Winterson relentlessly returns, and revisits, the traumatic events of her early life, still stored in her buried memories, allowing them to surface to her conscious mind. She gradually deconstructs her old self through a slow and painful interpretive process that, in the end, leads to psychic healing and artistic creation.

Winterson’s autobiography will be read in the light of memory and trauma studies; psychoanalysis, as well as Winterson’s *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985).

**KEYWORDS:** autobiography, memory, trauma, postmodernism



This paper examines Jeanette Winterson's autobiography *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011)<sup>1</sup> to discuss how she constructs a narrative of the self and articulates the essence of a specific *who* in a dynamic framework inside which, it is maintained, the protagonist turns out to be a subject in process, constantly shifting and undergoing change. In this perspective, the narration of her life story can be viewed as a performative action which reveals, and exposes, who she is, so a vehicle of discovery both of herself and the world.

This issue is approached through an analysis of the narrative structure of the text in conjunction with close attention to its architectonic themes of loss, memory, and desire. The aim is to bring to light the strategies and rhetorical devices at work in the textual construction of the self. In order to do so, the analysis will follow the writer's attempts to retrieve incomplete images, half-recollected or repressed fragments of memories when she retraces the past to decode it from the present. The discussion will focus on the relationship between memory and identity, a relationship that is problematic because, on the one hand, Winterson appeals to memory to determine the truth about her past. However, on the other hand, both 'memory' and 'truth' are unstable and destabilizing terms, and we cannot assume a direct correspondence between the past experience and *how* it is remembered in the present. Memory is slippery, it may distort or misrepresent events, especially when the psyche is dealing with trauma; its system of representation may fail or resist the enormity of the shattering truth that the subject is trying to recollect.

The discussion of Winterson's memoir will be grounded on the double theoretical framework of memory and trauma studies because the two areas intersect and are closely interwoven in Winterson's autobiography.

The recourse to memory studies is motivated by the nature of Winterson's text, which inscribes the writer's desire to revisit the past and (re)write the self. Memory informs our narratives, being the raw material of personal identity and of all human experience. It is the agent that mediates our access to past events, sometimes mere shadowy residues of unconscious psychical processes. Yet, the retrieval of such events is essential to reconstruct the life journey of the autobiographical self and reach deep within the personality to give it narrative form.

Trauma theory offers a cluster of ideas and discourses relating to the psychology of individuals. It helps explain the source of particular types of psychic distress or a traumatic event, the meaning that the human mind attaches to it, and how the narrative of the self can be affected by such an event. In this light, both theoretical

frameworks are necessary axes on which to ground the analysis of Winterson's memoir. In the field of trauma studies, the paper will draw specifically from the insightful contributions of those scholars who view trauma, not only as an event that can precipitate a crisis of identity but also as possibly sustaining, and being constitutive of, one's identity, thus contributing to articulate the narrative account of selfhood.

The paper will argue that in *Why Be Happy* there is a clear, constant conjunction between trauma, identity, and artistic creation. The traumatic events the writer has to face become markers of her identity and are transformed into art, being an important source of material for her whole oeuvre, from her first autobiographical novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (2001)<sup>2</sup> up to her last work of fiction, *The Gap of Time* (2015), a rewriting of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (1610–11). These events even direct the choice of themes as if, in the end, the very act of narration can offer her mastery over an otherwise dissociated narrative fragmentation of a self that is often dispersed across different discourses.

The close reading of the text will disclose that the protagonist has to face past traumas that, buried for too long in her subconscious, begin to resurface, to be painfully relived and revised. First, when she finds out that she has been abandoned at birth and adopted; second when, at a critical moment in her adult life, she discovers her adoption papers in a little box. This is an epiphanic revelation for her that detonates a private apocalypse and drives her in search of her biological mother, the missing object of desire and the helper she needs to heal her split self. It is a search that starts both her retrospective narration and her inward quest for a vision of self in the depths of her own psyche. The challenge that lies in wait for her is to articulate such traumatic experiences in a life-narrative that, retrospectively, appears muddled and opaque, and resists her desire for a meaning and a pattern.

The analysis of Winterson's memoir will unfold by addressing first, her early life, then her maturity, and her revisitation of these early years.

## The shape of memory: the wound

*What is memory anyway but a painful dispute with the past?*

J. Winterson, *The Gap of Time*, 11

*Why Be Happy* can be divided into three sections plus a brief "Coda". The first part, narrated in non-chronological order, consists of eleven chapters and covers the

years up to the moment when she is compelled to leave home for good to go to Oxford, upon Mrs Winterson's discovery of her lesbian identity,. It is roughly the same territory that she has already explored in *Oranges*. The second section is a dense two-page long unnumbered chapter titled "Intermission", in which she ponders over time's unraveling, art, and life, intentionally missing out her twenty-five years as a professional writer. In the third part, which contains the remaining four chapters, there is a "flash forward to 2007" (Winterson, 2011, p. 156), a period when she was facing once more loss and abandonment: the end of the relationship with her partner, her subsequent psychological breakdown and suicide attempt, and the death of her father, with whom she had resumed a fond relationship over time. These chapters are devoted to the theme of adoption and the search for the lost biological mother. The search begins when she stumbles over a birth certificate hidden among the effects of her adoptive father, a piece of paper that has momentous implications for her psychology and self-perception.

Winterson's is a typical quest narrative, for which she relies on the crucial role of storytelling as the structuring principle to articulate or represent identity. This view is also held by P. J. Eakin (1988), who maintains that autobiography is "both an art of memory and [...] of the imagination", adding that memory, necessary in the narration of the self, "is really a form of storytelling" (pp. 5-6). Winterson tends to privilege storytelling in much of her fiction first, because it had a vital role in her life, as she was brought up on her mother's stories and those of the community she grew up in. Second, because she believes in the power of narrative to treat trauma that actually deprives people of their voices and reduces them to silence. She uses storytelling both as a theme and as a structural paradigm in her memoir, a choice that attributes to life and identity a fictional dimension.

In order to tell her own story, the adult Winterson must confront the traumatic truth that as an adopted child, a foundational part of her story is missing. This awareness is at the basis of the urge to rewrite the text of the self in a narrative designed to make sense of the past, of herself and others. Through the backward gaze of recollection, Winterson attains a form of truth unavailable in the flux of the immediate and rewrites the text of the self in a narrative that celebrates its plurality.

The autobiography dramatizes her quest for identity through the conflict with her adoptive mother, who is a pivotal figure in her life. She is the Other that is a frequent presence in women's autobiographies, with whom Winterson has a dev-

astatingly disappointing, guilt-ridden relationship that leaves her emotionally and psychologically damaged. The writer engages dialogically with her: she struggles to escape from the dark narrative of their life together and constitute her own autonomous subjectivity, a struggle whose intensity pervades the whole text.

*Why Be Happy* is a journey deep into hell and back, where she speaks of what she had silenced in her debut novel, *Oranges*, a light semi-autobiographical work. The memoir is a fragmented narrative, organized into self-sustained units, constituted by a number of stories. They are held together by some motifs as well as by the cohesive power of memory that juxtaposes and fuses together a series of possibly discrete events that do not follow a clear continuous or sequential linear time-frame, a type of irregularity that frequently informs women's autobiographies. It is a metaphorical text, with a tendency for rapid shifts, that has much in common with poetry, including its musical, repetitive, formulaic quality, and the foregrounding of formal devices.

At the core of Winterson's autobiography is the wound she feels inside her, a memory-image that haunts the text with a sort of hallucinatory quality, a presence that signals an almost "pathological incrustation of the past at the heart of the present" (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 54). This open wound that has its root in her childhood drives her on a journey into her past, a process in which memory and interpretation play a crucial role. She constantly appeals to memory as a tool that might confirm, subvert or contradict her adoptive mother's 'truths', presumed statements of authority that, in her view, are glaring distortions and fabrications. Her act of recollection digs deep into the layers of memories, emotional landscapes of loss, isolation, and missed dialogues. She desires to fulfill a primeval fantasy of union with the mother's body, return to a safe place that she believes she has irretrievably lost, and feel no longer exiled from the maternal continent.

The wound triggers off the process of remembering, driven by "a wish and a conviction that the wounds of the past be healed in the very activity of rescuing memory from the oblivion of forgetfulness and repression" (Kuhn, 2000, p. 184), a recollection that has a clear therapeutic aspiration. At the same time, the past that slowly surfaces demands to find representation in speech, ordering the mass of memory-images in some communicable form and giving this confusion an artistic shape. It is a psychological and existential journey, a liberating process that becomes difficult to stop as if the self wished to reconstitute itself according to

a biological scheme akin to the healing of wounds, and such a healing might be achieved by the very act of speaking and being heard.

Her quest has its prototype in the mythic patterns of spiritual journeys: the protagonist begins her search for self in a psychological Dantesque 'selva oscura', a 'dark wood',<sup>3</sup> in her memoir the literal darkness of the nights when she is locked out by her adoptive mother as a punishment. Then, sitting alone on the doorsteps outside her house, convinced that she is unloved, she is assailed and engulfed by fears which involve terrible feelings of division and loss of self.

Pushing against the linear temporality of a patriarchal narrative and shifting narration backwards and forward, she subjects memories to retrospective transformation and reinterpretation and begins a gradual deconstruction of her old self.

Winterson's memoir, the paper maintains, articulates the essence of a *bios*, where "the mind works with its own brokenness" (Winterson, 2011, p. 169), a narrative that honestly offers to our gaze the naked shards of her life. In this sense, her autobiography is performative of a life that unfolds, is profoundly transformed, and finally takes shape before our own eyes. The performative value of her narration finds supportive evidence in the fact that, in the end, rewriting the self, the story reveals the meaning of what "would otherwise remain an intolerable sequence of events" (Cavarero, 2000, p. 8), leaving behind a pattern that *is* her life story. In order to achieve such a unity of design, she *must* go back to her missing origins, the founding trauma of early separation from the love object that is the mother, be reconciled with the "lost child" (Winterson, 2011, p. 173) inside her and be healed "through being loved and loving others" (Winterson, 2011, p. 119). In this process of remembrance, a *core self* is formed, without which Winterson could not reimagine herself for a future of renewed creative and imaginative work. Thus, this process is essential for her, both as a human being and as an artist: remembering involves facing and working through her feelings of anger and destructiveness.

In her autobiography Winterson tackles the hermeneutics of self-representation, flouting the typical features of the genre and revising it from a postmodernist stance. In her revision, her treatment of narrativity and subjectivity interrelates the postmodern and the feminist/lesbian. In fact, her memoir structurally rejects the idea of a totalizing vision and the concept of a narrative centre, features that are also common to postmodernism. Besides, she does not construe and narrate herself as continuous through time, but as episodic, fractured and discontinuous,

once more in keeping with a postmodernist stance. At the same time, as a feminist/lesbian, she problematizes essentialist ideas of sexuality and gender. Against most traditional Western autobiographical practices, she does not erase the body from her text, rather the opposite. She moves it to the thematic and epistemological fore of her narrative. So, her autobiography demands to be read against the grain of conventional interpretations: first, for her disruption of the autobiographical form, with its flouting of chronological organization and narrative development. Second, because she claims the lesbian body as the autobiographical subject and the location of autobiographical identity.

## The wound and the gift

*These fragments I have shored against my ruins*

T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 'What the Thunder Said', l. 430

The repercussions that a traumatic event can have on a person's life is debated by Dominick LaCapra in his *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001). He uses the term "founding traumas" (p. 23) to refer to those traumatic events that can paradoxically become the formative basis of identity for an individual, allowing her/him to emerge stronger. The intersection between trauma and identity can be traced in Winterson's narrative in the recurrent memories of the dramatic events of her early life.

The abandonment of her biological mother and her subsequent adoption; the fanatically religious upbringing by her adoptive Pentecostal parents; the additional adolescent trauma of being forced to leave her adoptive family upon discovery of her lesbian relationship. These are all events that can be considered as "founding traumas" for Winterson, contributing to the psychological fragmentation, alienation, and madness that punctuate the articulation of subjectivity in her memoir. Winterson's life and personality bear the imprint of the original loss that is the spring of her search for an origin in the autobiography, as well as a haunting presence in most of her production through the ever-recurring themes of loss and deprived childhood.

The shaping function of trauma is given a central position in Winterson's narrative through the symbol of the 'wound'<sup>24</sup> the result of the abrupt severance from her

mother at birth. In time, this event hurt her deeper and deeper as Mrs Winterson would invent stories of "many bad mothers for [her]; fallen women, drug-addicts, drinkers, men-chasers" (Winterson, 2011, p. 220). However, the wound, seared directly into the psyche, also has a transformative power: it is not only a source of agony but "a key to being human" (Winterson, 2011, p. 221), as well as a spring to find the gift of her true self and her most authentic voice to assert her gender identity. This is a lesson that emerges from the variety of stories she is brought up with. From them she learns that there is "the nearness of the wound to the gift" (Winterson, 2011, p. 221); that the wound can be healed once she, the heroine of the quest, completes her return journey back home, to her birth mother, the "lost loss" (Winterson, 2011, p. 223) that had separated her from herself, a loss that, though mitigated, is never quite redeemed. So, the wound and the meaning-pattern it creates is a metaphor of the self, a trope through which Winterson tends to decode both the inner workings of her mind and external reality.

Her quest begins from her fractured mind and reaches even the abyss of a suicide attempt when, in 2008, she concludes that her time is up, and she needs to vacate life. However, at the depth of the dark night of the soul, she remembers John's biblical moral imperative, "ye must be born again" (Winterson, 2011, p. 168). As if obeying him, she feels not only reborn to a new sense of life but also consciously committed to it, despite its chaos and pain, and morally bound to make the best possible use of what she had been given.

Along this slow, painful process she has to confront and defeat the "violent rages" of a "furious vicious child living alone at the bottom bog" of Jeanette (Winterson, 2011, p. 171), that hides inside her and threatens the actual dissolution of the self. It is a presence similar to the "strange little creature [with] glittering eyes" (Brontë, 1992, p.10) who is Jane Eyre's double in Charlotte Brontë's eponymous novel, a creature that feeds on her and even refuses to let her live. In Richard D. Laing's view, the image of the doppelgänger reflects a split self, the result of society's tendency to categorize people and prescribe stereotypical roles, a tendency that breaks the *whole* person and divides the self (Laing, 1967). However, in *Why Be Happy* the doppelgänger is not a totally demonic or haunting figure, as in Brontë's. It has an essentially positive function in the end, because "she acts as a guide in the exploration of the wild places of the self, the acceptance of which is always crucial" (Rigney, 1978, p. 122). This *other* self has an ethical effect: it challenges

Winterson to face the past and accommodate it in the present through forgiveness and healing, avoiding the risk of being dragged back by painful memories. It helps her comprehend that her capacity to move forward rests on a healthy relationship with the past and reconciliation with it. Winterson will face this challenge also thanks to the loving presence of her new partner, the typical helper of a traditional fairy tale narrative, who also supports her search for her biological mother, Anne. She realizes that the old wars might come to an end and that before her lies an order that emanates from love. After this, she can resurface, phoenix-like, as a sane, fully-integrated subject.

Winterson openly admits that all her life she has “worked from the wound” because she is aware that “to heal it would mean an end to one identity- the defining identity” (Winterson, 2011, p. 223). This proves how the abandonment at birth was a founding trauma for her, formative of her innermost identity. She was marked out and made different by her childhood experiences, which will be healed but will not disappear. Even more, she appropriates such events, stored in her buried memories, into the fabric of the self and incorporates them within a narrative framework. It is an interpretive process that, according to Freud (1911–1913), leads to psychic healing. Besides, in her new life, there is also a further conquest: the awareness that she has always been wanted and loved. This new consciousness will finally help her deconstruct the image of the bad mother that Mrs Winterson had articulated in the stories about her biological mother. This realization generates forgiveness in her, even towards her adoptive mother, a feeling that redeems the past, unblocks the future, brings about a sort of rebirth and, with it, renewed creativity.

## Translating trauma into art: Re-writing the self

*We can mend what others broke*

J. Winterson *Why Be Happy*, 58

Winterson’s autobiography articulates a trauma narrative that hinges on her childhood experiences of abandonment and loss, expressed in the form of fragmentary nightmares and flashbacks, textualized in an intensely figurative language, replete with metaphor and metonymy, typical memory’s tropes. In the text, it is very clear

that there is an intersection between trauma, identity and art, and that her identity has been profoundly affected and shaped by certain events in her early life.

Winterson appears to feel the need to answer a sort of inner urge to draw on her personal experiences and to embrace an identity narrative at the root of which lie the traumatic effects of adoption, initially repressed in *Oranges*, then openly acknowledged and voiced in *Why Be Happy*, where they take a central position. In this light, both texts endorse Philippe Lejeune's (1989) claim that "the impossible quest of birth" is "the final object of any autobiographical endeavor" (p. 73), a quest that is now successfully accomplished. At last, this allows her to tell her own version of the story against her parents', a counter-narrative that uses the memory traces of the past as raw material for a new, more personal story that may heal her wounds. It is a creative act of vital importance for her: it gives her power and agency in a life narrative in which she is no longer at the margins, but at the very centre.

However, in the passage from *Oranges* to *Why Be Happy* there are some crucial transformations in relation to the trauma of adoption. First, in the fourth chapter of *Oranges*, "Numbers", her adoption is only referred to in passing when she mentions that she found her adoption papers while looking for a pack of cards, adding that this is the reason why she "ha[s] never since played cards" (Winterson, 2001, p. 73). Her remark appears to gesture at a trauma that she is repressing, yet unable to represent and voice it. Second, and consequently, in the same novel the quest for birth is problematized and made even more hopelessly exasperating by the absence of the person who might satisfy her quest and the obstinate silence of her adoptive parents, a silence that the novel mirrors.

So, on the one hand, *Oranges* reveals the young protagonist's most intimate life; yet on the other, it is opaque about this crucial event and declines the memoirist's confidence that the past can be revealed, a feature which Frank Kermode (1979) refers to as the "radiant obscurity of narratives" (p. 47). *Why Be Happy*, instead, registers Winterson's desire to achieve an in-depth retrospective understanding of the event that hurt her psyche, and that returns even after a lapse of time of twenty-five years. She needs to transform the meaningless strings of childhood recollections into significant memories, by which the autobiographical self can be firmly secured inside a cohesive narrative, and to define herself in relation to the traumatic episode. Besides, the text also inscribes the narrative of adult Jeanette who searches for her biological mother and the successful completion

of the quest. Consequently, her memoir is also a careful and extensive tracing of female development towards authorship.

Winterson, then, works up her life into art, a creative act that traces the birth, growth and development of the writer, the artist. In this sense, *Oranges* and *Why Be Happy* can be likened to James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916): both Stephen Dedalus and Jeanette are followed in their personal and artistic growth; both are rebels at heart; both leave family and religion behind, rejecting or being rejected by them, a radical choice that marks them out as special individuals whose profound sensibility transforms them into intense and solitary natures. However, whereas *Oranges* draws the portrait of the young artist up to the moment when she decides to escape home and religion, as happens in Joyce's *A Portrait*, *Why Be Happy* follows her growth to maturity, thus complementing the story that the former had started.

The theme of the quest for birth can also be found in *The PowerBook* (2001). In the same novel, there is the image of the wound as well as that of the 'treasure'-the 'gift' in *Why Be Happy*; this is the discovery of self and of love, a motif that is the linchpin of her oeuvre. Winterson's pursuit of self and love is the outcome of the emotional and psychological deprivation that she experienced in her childhood as an adopted child who felt unwanted and unloved. It is only by rediscovering the preciousness and value of loving and being loved that she can heal the wound the mind feels, that her psyche can find coherence, not disintegration. At that point, she can finally silence the damaged "demented creature" (Winterson, 2011, p. 173) that rages inside her, a sort of disturbing Kristevan *object* that "draws [her] toward the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4), constantly threatening the narrative with bursting.

However, despite the cautious conclusion, "I have no idea what happens next" (Winterson, 2011, p. 230), *Why Be Happy* traces a different trajectory in the final section. Though the return back home has to follow a blood-trail which entails revenge, it also brings about reconciliation, both with herself, her biological mother Anne, and even with Mrs. Winterson whom she defends against Anne's charge of cruelty, claiming: "She was a monster, but she was my monster" (Winterson, 2011, p. 229). In the process of coping with her traumatic childhood, in *Why Be Happy* she has come a long way since *Weight* (2006), where, when talking about her adoption she had written that anger was still burning inside her, and forgiveness not

contemplated yet. It is clear, then, that Winterson implicitly advocates the power of narrative to treat trauma. So, the memoir is her moment of disclosure in which the unspeakable finds representation in speech. The relationship between silence and speech is figured as liberating: it heals the self by the very act of speaking and being heard.

In the process of disclosing the truth about her birth, memory plays a central role because, "in psychical terms, remembering [...] is part of the properly human quest for origins" (Kuhn, 2000, p.187). Digging deep into the layers of memories, she remembers and relives the losses, the yearning, the emotional hunger that punctuated her life and comes to acknowledge that she has been obsessively writing "stories of longing and belonging" (Winterson, 2011, p. 160). So, the pivotal traumatic episodes of her past become both the site on which her identity is founded and material for her artistic creation. It is as if she were impelled to write by the injunction to remember, relive the past, and even reiterate the trauma. Winterson's constant revisiting the themes of loss and longing appears to be in line with what Freud (1911–1913) maintains, that when it comes to a psychic trauma, the compulsion to repeat is the means by which the traumatized individual remembers. However, her compulsion to return to her founding trauma in her case is not a pathological response to trauma. Rather, it is a sort of 'talking cure', as evidenced by her transformation of the traumatic traces in her psyche into intensely lyrical narratives.

Winterson's obsession with stories of parents and children; of origins and adoption; of loss and love seems to justify the view that she inclines towards a form of self-narration, thus encouraging a reading of her works as autobiographical texts. However, at the same time, on many occasions, she has voiced her aversion to such a reading of her work, both in interviews and essays, as she does in *Art Objects* (1996). Here, she shows her allegiance to Eliot's theory of impersonality, what she calls "his cry against autobiography" (Winterson, 1996, p.184), adding that "Art must resist autobiography" and "free [...] the writer from the weight of her own personality" (Winterson, 1996, pp.106, 187).

The question of autobiographical writing is a problematic issue in relation to Winterson, as she keeps refusing this interpretation for her work. However, despite her objections and her refusal to consider *Why Be Happy* a memoir and preferring to call it a "cover version", it is undeniable that the book has the basic features of an

autobiography, even though it bears the imprint of her postmodernist touch. She uses the creative power of the imagination to transform facts into a different kind of reality because she maintains, “if we can fictionalise ourselves [...] we are freed into a new kind of communication” (Winterson, 1996, pp. 49, 60). It is an encoding process in which the act of recollection translates life into a semiological code. For Winterson, writing life entails writing a story of the self in process and reading oneself as a fiction.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, in *Why Be Happy* Winterson uses the vectors of memory and desire to reassemble the different memory images evoked during her psychological journey, reconstruct her hidden story, and move on from it. The self that gradually comes to life from the recollected past is a dispersed and traumatized subject that recovers its original plenitude only once she is able to fill the original gap at the very heart of herself and to find wholeness in love. It is a typical Lacanian subject created in the fissure of a radical split, driven by the incessant desire to recover what has been lost; “a being that can only conceptualise itself when it is mirrored back from the position of another’s desire” (Mitchell & Rose, 1982, p. 5). The lack and the experience of loss stimulate Winterson’s creative potential, empowering her to write her counter-history and articulate it in her *own* highly original language, not her adoptive mother’s, a defiant, liberating action that has a cathartic quality. So, though the damage done to her would always be her reality, she embraces the oxymoronic “painful joy” (Winterson, 2011, p. 42) with exhilaration and looks to her future life full of expectations.

*Why Be Happy* is a text to which Winterson brings a different kind of voice: it is a narrative of ruptures, gaps, repetitions, fragmentation, intertextuality, devices typical of memory texts. On the one hand, it heightens the emotional and affective impact on readers, opening up new narrative possibilities of addressing the trauma paradigm. On the other hand, it encompasses what Kristeva (1984) calls the pre-Oedipal rhythms of the semiotic (pp. 49–50): breaking up logocentric discourse and challenging essentialist gender assumptions, Winterson inscribes a fluid and plural subjectivity that embraces the polyphonic possibilities of selfhood. In doing so, she breaks down the hegemony of formal autobiography and speaks her

identity in a resonant, profoundly original voice of her own. Engaging the genre of autobiography with inventiveness and ingenuity, she refigures the self through the perspectives of her own experience, a creative gesture that inscribes a woman's life-story that is both alive and vital.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Hereafter referred to as *Why Be Happy*.
- <sup>2</sup> Hereafter referred to as *Oranges*.
- <sup>3</sup> The reference is to the famous opening tercet of Dante's 'Inferno', the first part of his *Divine Comedy* (1308–1320).
- <sup>4</sup> Trauma derives from the ancient Greek word τραυμα meaning "wound".

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# The Venice Ghetto at 500: Site-based Approaches to Memory Studies

Katharine G. Trostel and Avigail S. Oren

**ABSTRACT:** This essay traces the expansion of memory studies as a discipline through the lens of the Venice Ghetto and reveals how a particular memory-space can be used comparatively to study other, far-flung spaces. The Venice Ghetto has a site-specific history and local regime of memory. But, as an archetype whose blueprints have been used globally, we can also deduce patterns of memory that can be applied to the psycho-geography of other site-specific places. After visiting the Ghetto during the summer of 2016—the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its founding as the world’s first ghetto—we have taken a more psycho-geographical approach to teaching the relationship between space and memory, with the objective of bringing the field of memory studies into the globalized, twenty-first century.

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The 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Venice Ghetto in 2016 inspired an outpouring of scholarship, commemorative exhibitions, and public discussion of the legacy of religious discrimination and segregation.<sup>1</sup> The Venice Ghetto Collaboration, founded by an interdisciplinary and mutually supportive working group of humanities scholars interested in a set of shared questions, develops projects that examine both the specificity of the Venice Ghetto and the symbolic power of ghettos more generally. The Collaboration recently launched its first digital project, “Approaches to Teaching the Ghetto in a Global Context.” This tool, developed to help teachers create and tailor courses on the broad topic of ghettos, is divided into modular units, each of which provides a set of learning objectives and suggested reading assignments. Beyond teaching the history, conditions, and



lived experience of the Venice Ghetto, we want instructors to encourage students to consider the connections between the physical spaces of global ghettos and the way that historical ghettos are imagined, remembered, and memorialized.

The term “ghetto” originated with the founding of the Venice Ghetto in 1516. In the midst of a war, the Republic of Venice allowed Jews to move to their island city so that the state could more easily borrow funds from Jewish moneylenders. To prevent Jews from “contaminating” or converting Venetian Christians, however, they restricted their residence to a small island in the neighborhood of Cannaregio that had formerly been the city’s copper foundry—*il ghetto*, from the Italian root *gettare* meaning “to cast” or “to throw.” This was not the first time that Jews were forced to live in a segregated, confined and guarded space, but as other cities in the Papal States like Rome and Florence likewise began establishing Jewish quarters, they referred to these areas by the name “ghetto” (Goldman & Trotter, 2018).

From the Venice Ghetto’s founding until the gates finally fell in 1797, the Ghetto was a densely crowded but also intensely vibrant space. Jews were allowed to practice their religion and established several synagogues; they also governed their own communal affairs, ran commercial enterprises, creatively renovated what little space they had and supported artistic and literary production. They nonetheless lived under the scrutiny of the state, paid exorbitant taxes, and rented from exploitative landlords who neglected their buildings (Sennett, 1994). After the Napoleonic invasion that brought down the Venetian Republic, Jews steadily abandoned the ghetto and scattered throughout the city (Bassi, 2013). A Jewish presence nonetheless remains; a small number of Jewish residents still live in the neighborhood’s tall apartment buildings, several kosher restaurants operate along its narrow streets, Chabad occupies a storefront, one congregation still worships in the largest of the Ghetto synagogues, and the Jewish Museum of Venice anchors the large Campo di Ghetto Nuovo.

“Approaches to Teaching the Ghetto in a Global Context” reveals how the Venice Ghetto, as a particular memory-space, can be used comparatively to study other, far-flung spaces. The Venice Ghetto has a site-specific history and local regime of memory. It is at once a memory space and a living space, where visitors see the past and the present in juxtaposition. Observing residents and tourists entering and exiting the old walls illuminates the difference between past confinement and the present freedom of movement. The density of buildings and people

highlights how confinement affected Ghetto dwellers, but the endurance of Jewish residents and Jewish institutions also reveals how confinement created lasting traditions, networks, and structures that supported and sustained the Ghetto's community. The Ghetto is an archetype whose blueprints have been used globally, however, and exploring the physical space of the contemporary Venice Ghetto also reveals patterns of memory that can be applied to the psycho-geography of other ghettos across time and space.

How has the Venice Ghetto as a kind of global metaphor come to influence other sites and eras as an organizational model for cities, as a simultaneous symbol of exclusion and inclusion, as a marker of difference? The term "ghetto" traveled to the United States with Jewish immigrants, who referred to their densely but (mostly) voluntarily populated Jewish neighborhoods as "ghettos." As Jim Crow laws in the South and restrictive covenants in northern cities segregated African Americans into urban neighborhoods, "ghetto" increasingly crept into black discourse as a descriptor of these neighborhoods because the term drew a useful political parallel between anti-Semitism and racial discrimination. Although the strategies used to restrict Jews and African Americans to certain residential spaces differed widely, the results were similar: a cycle of disinvestment, decaying housing, and the foreclosure of economic and educational opportunities reinforced arguments for why the majority should isolate the minority. In this way, to restore the memory of the ghetto as a physical space—not just a policy or abstract descriptor—opens up comparative potential (Oren, 2018).

As part of opening memory studies up to new comparative possibilities, the study of history and literary places must now account for physical space. Our working group seeks to uncover the many stories that have attached themselves to this place and expands upon the idea of a traveling ghetto that has come to mean different things in different spaces and different historical contexts. Our research plots the traces that still mark the Jewish quarter and expands this exploration to embrace a conception of a "memory space that travels." Our discussions engage with questions of authenticity and of porous borders, the importance of tactility, and the layering of meanings that have attached themselves to the word "ghetto." This article in part addresses a tension that is found in memory studies itself: between those memories that are intimately bound to place—site-specific remembrances that orbit a particular space—and the inherent mobility of memory in the twenty-first century.

On the one hand, we collectively ask what it means to inhabit a space using more than our sense of sight. How do we encounter place through the tactile and experience its daily, social rhythms? Robert Bevan, in *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War* (2006), argues that our connection to architecture is key to preserving our cultural memory. Drawing on the seminal work of Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (1989), Bevan, too, argues that memory dwells in place, that it "... takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects" (Nora, 1989, p. 9). However, Bevan builds upon Nora's work to ask what might happen when these memory sites are destroyed, or in this case, radically altered over time. He notes that certain spaces inspire a call to remember—an observation that is particularly relevant with respect to the globally iconic site of the Venice Ghetto. Bevan writes that these sites of layered memory can "result in an especially strong power of place—a psycho-geography, an 'awareness' of the past (rather than an architectural avatar of a petrified spirit) that is dynamic, handed down by the people rather than recorded on the very stones" (p. 16). But, Bevan warns, "If the touchstones of identity are no longer there to be touched, memories fragment and dislocate" (p. 16). As our working group's discussions have highlighted, the Ghetto today is very different than the lived, communal space of 1516. The vibrant Jewish community that once inhabited its walls has dwindled in numbers, but its symbolic resonance as a global metaphor continues to mark its importance as a "touchstone for memory." Our Collaboration explores the possibilities of maintaining and encouraging a dynamic and palpable relationship to this site—understanding that the Ghetto itself can function as a container for memory—while simultaneously considering how it might also serve as a model for memory work across time and space.

For, in addition to recognizing the importance of maintaining a relationship to the physical site of the Ghetto itself, our group seeks to emphasize that this place has implications for memory work that move beyond the literal gates of the Ghetto. In *Memory Unbound: Tracing the Dynamics of Memory Studies* (2016), editors Lucy Bond, Stef Craps, and Pieter Vermeulen consider the defining characteristics of what it means to do memory studies in the twenty-first century—a moment in which memories are conceived of as fluid, flexible, and mobile. Their book is organized around what they identify as the four key concepts of "memory dynamics": that memory is transcultural, that it is transgenerational, that it is transmedial, and that it is transdisciplinary. Our project is in dialogue with these new developments

in the field, as we consider how the Ghetto of Venice might serve as a model for the practice of collective memory work that is at once rooted in a particular place, and at the same time mobile. As Bond et al. (2016) describe:

Memory, it is safe to say, is not what it used to be. Previously thought to be anchored in particular places, to be lodged in particular containers (monuments, texts, geographical locations), and to belong to the (national, familial, social) communities it helped acquire a sense of historical continuity, memory has, in the last few years, increasingly been considered a fluid and flexible affair. In a globalized age, memories travel along and across the migratory paths of world citizens. In a digital age, they are forwarded from cameras over smartphones to computers and back in unpredictable loops. In the process, they redefine the relations between different generations, as geographical and medial transfers affect the uptake of memories by people who can no longer be said to simply inherit them. Meanwhile, the study of memory spans and complicates the boundaries between academic disciplines, generating a multifaceted and evolving field of research (p. 1).

Memory in the twenty-first century “circulates, migrates, [and] travels”; “it is more perceived as a process, as a work that is continually in progress, rather than as a reified object” (Bond et al., 2016, p. 1). As we argue, the Venice Ghetto itself might be thought of as a blueprint for this kind of memory work, where place-based memories are carried across time and space. Visitors to the Ghetto of Venice encounter a site that provides a model for examining key theoretical questions both inside and outside of its physical borders: What is the meaning and historical significance of the Venice Ghetto 500 years after its founding? What has the space come to mean in the context of the contemporary landscape? How has it traveled across space and time to other sites and regimes of segregation?

In order to address some of these questions, in July of 2016, a group of early-career humanities scholars met in Venice for a workshop and conference. The theme, “The Ghetto of Venice: The Future of Memory in the Digital Age,” asked participants to examine the complexity of the Ghetto as a concrete space and as a global metaphor. Over the course of a week, workshop participants met to discuss foundational texts on the Venice Ghetto by historians, literary scholars, and ex-

perts in memory studies. Outside of the classroom, participants took advantage of the commemorative exhibits throughout the city, which displayed representations of the Ghetto in art, architecture, and photography.

For the historians participating in the workshop, the visit to Venice's ghetto grounded the scholarly abstraction of the historical space in an architectural reality. Benjamin Ravid (1992), one of the foremost scholars of Venetian Jewish history, defines a ghetto as a space that is compulsory, segregated, and enclosed. This definition synthesizes the conditions of state power, religious discrimination, and built environment that Ghetto dwellers experienced in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. Without visiting the Venice Ghetto, however, it is difficult to grasp what the lived experience of a compulsory, segregated, and enclosed neighborhood was for the Jews of the Venice Ghetto in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Although scholars like Ravid emphasize the discomforts that accompanied living with so many other Jews in such a constrained area, it is difficult to visualize just how small the Ghetto is. By walking its streets, visitors can count the unusually high number of doors into each building, an indication of how densely families must have been packed into that space. Conversely, the main campo (square) of the Ghetto stretches far wider than one would guess from the historical accounts. Venetian Jews would have depended on that open, public space as an escape from the crowdedness and heat of Ghetto apartments.

Visiting the Ghetto also reveals how the built environment and the lived experience of the Venetian Ghetto were co-produced and mutually constitutive. Today, at the entrances to many homes, there are indentations in the stone doorframes where non-Jewish residents have removed a mezuzah, a decorative box containing a scroll of parchment on which the most important Jewish prayer has been written. Jews place these at the entryway to their home to fulfill the biblical commandment to inscribe the words of the prayer on the doorposts of their homes. With the mezuzah, the Ghetto's Jews built Judaism and Jewishness right into the walls, the same walls that contained them and kept their Judaism from contaminating their Catholic neighbors. Compulsory segregation and enclosure protected certain aspects of Jewish observance and expression, like placing the mezuzah on the doorway, while at the same time the Ghetto negated the necessity of performing Jewish identity because the Ghetto's walls already marked Jews and Jewish space. Seeing such a tactile example of what it meant to early-modern

Jews to be compulsorily segregated and enclosed by the Venetian state makes this abstract definition real and physical. Scholars and students exposed to the psycho-geography of the Ghetto empathize more deeply with the decisions of the historical actors that lived there.

For scholars of literature participating in the workshop, the Venice Ghetto prompted an important question: what is the relationship between space, memory, and storytelling? How can we reanimate places through the act of narration? Todd Presner, David Shepard, and Yoh Kawano (2014) describe what they call “thick mapping,” a practice with which we are very much in dialogue. “Thick maps are conjoined with stories, and stories are conjoined with maps,” the editors explain, “such that ever more complex contexts for meaning are created ... In this sense, ‘thickness’ arises from the never-ending friction between maps and counter-maps, constructions and deconstructions, mappings and counter-mappings” (Presner et al., 2014, p. 19). Furthermore, Presner, Shepard, and Yoh (2014) assert that histories take on more meaning the more they “interact” and “intersect” with one another (p. 35). As our group connects the many instances in which the Ghetto is revisited in literature—both the original site of the Venice Ghetto and those spaces inspired by this model and paradigm of urban segregation—it is possible to trace networks, instances of interaction and intersections, knotted histories that span both time and geography.

By pulling various literary works that have been inspired by the actual site or organizational principals of the Venice Ghetto into conversation, a bigger picture emerged. Examples of literary works that touch upon the legacy of the Venice Ghetto (included on our syllabus) are wide-ranging: Chilean-Jewish author and human rights activist Marjorie Agosín’s *Cartographies: Meditations on Travel* (2004); Prague-born author Egon Erwin Kisch’s *Tales from Seven Ghettos* (1934/1948); and British writer Israel Zangwill’s short story, “A Child of the Ghetto” (1898). These stories represent webs of memories that have traveled from the tangible site of the Ghetto through the bodies of visitors that touched and were influenced by their passage through it. These projects are ripe for the transmedial work of Story Mapping, as the passages from literary texts enter a digital realm. Characters’ footprints, once encoded on the page of the text, are now made visible on geocoded maps. We can read poems about the Ghetto in the Ghetto, and record these acts of reading on smartphones, locating the practice with cartographical specificity. We

can tag, circulate, and share photographs and video, creating a network of experience around the site of the Ghetto to be experienced remotely.

For example, by mapping the movement of Agosín-as-narrator's passage through place, one can trace the complexity of ways in which Jewish spaces, including that of the Ghetto, are revisited, re-inscribed, entangled, and recycled in her poems. In *Cartographies* (2004), Agosín visits sites of Jewish importance globally, while she simultaneously works through her experience of exile in the period of the Chilean post-dictatorship. In this literary reflection, the space of the Ghetto, as well as globalized Jewish spaces as a broader category, become ways of thinking through the more expansive themes of exile, displacement, national belonging, and exclusion. Through her prose-poems, Agosín complicates the idea of a static geography, weaving personal place-based memories into a complex web of Jewish sites of global significance. Reflecting upon her travels across four continents, she explores both the category of exile and a certain longing for home. We can use this work to think about the re-inscription of meanings of place, and how sites of memory can come to embody overlapping stories that span both space and time. Juxtaposing these literary works with the reflections of historians, sociologists, and other humanistic disciplines paints a bigger picture of the importance of this particular and grounded place, and the myriad ways its legacy and its memory can be explored in the classroom context.

The workshop concluded with a two-day conference where participants presented their research on various aspects of the Ghetto, beginning the work of fostering a truly interdisciplinary conversation centered on the importance of place-based memory and scholarship. The members of this workshop went on to form the Venice Ghetto Collaboration in order to support this work. Through the lens of the Venice Ghetto, we continue our efforts to think about issues such as transcultural and intergenerational transmissions that are so central to the contemporary field of memory studies. How can the legacy and importance of this place-specific site live on for future generations, despite a dwindling Jewish community living within its borders? By bringing together a community of scholars in various humanistic disciplines, we have fostered a sense of transdisciplinarity in the Collaboration's work. Our desire is to continue producing research and pedagogical tools that make the ghetto, rooted in the Venice of 1516, relevant to the space of the global, twenty-first-century classroom.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> One of the most important intellectual achievements of the 500th anniversary of the Ghetto was the production of the exhibit catalogue entitled *Venice, The Jews, and Europe 1516–2016*. The exhibit was located at the Doge’s Palace from June 19–November 13, 2016.

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# Remains of a former village institute in Turkey: Memory at the border of Voluntary and Involuntary

İnci Ünal

**ABSTRACT:** The paper focuses on Village Institutes, schools that were established in the early years of the Turkish Republic and had an integral part in the nation-formation process of Turkey. The purpose of this paper is to inquire how a former Village Institute in a Tatar village is remembered by its graduates, village inhabitants, and people who are nostalgic to the enlightenment ideals these schools represented. The paper is based on an ethnographic study, which includes interviews conducted with the former students, the elderly in the village, and the members of an NGO called YKKED (*Yeni Kusak Köy Enstitülüler Derneği*) “New Generation Village Institutes Association”. This paper investigates the voluntary practices to remember these schools, yet also discusses the possibility of involuntary memory in modern times by approaching the ruins of the former Village Institute as an affective space.

**KEYWORDS:** Turkey, Tatar, identity, village, nationalism, education, memory, affective space, nostalgia, material culture

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How do we remember the past in present conditions? Do the politics and poetics of today change how we see yesterdays? How does material culture relate to our perception of the past? Can memory still create stillness in the progress and forgetfulness of modern times? Based upon these questions, in this paper, I will present my research about the ruins of a former village institute, a school which



holds a significant place in the history of Turkey and discuss memory and nostalgia in and for modernity within this framework.

Village institutes are schools that were established in the early years of the Republic of Turkey, with the idea of educating the youth in the villages of Anatolia and engaging the minority population in these villages with the ideals of modernity. My own village Hamidiye, a Tatar village in Eskisehir, was home to the first village institute in Turkey, *Cifteler Köy Enstitüsü*, which was later transformed into a teacher-training academy and is today reused as a vocational high school for agriculture while most of the buildings on campus are in ruins. In order to understand the relationship between memory and material culture, I will approach this school as a regional site of memory and focus on how it is remembered today by its graduates; the nostalgia it creates both for the former students and the Tatar community in the village; the non-discursive sensations its ruins arouse; and the role of archival efforts that aim to protect the remains and memories of the school by bringing the possibilities of the past and present together. With the intent of developing a multilayered perspective, this paper uses an analysis of written records on village institutes as well as ethnographic research, including interviews with the graduates who stay connected to the school through a non-governmental organization called YKKED (*Yeni Kusak Köy Enstitüleri Derneği*) “New Generation Village Institutes Association”; the village inhabitants who have seen the school in its many forms and still encounter it in their daily lives; and finally with my father who guided me through the ruins of the school as a graduate of the academy himself.

In this paper, I will first explain the distinguishing characteristics of village institutes, how they reflect the civilizing mission of the Turkish elite in the early years of the Republic and why they are significant in the history of Turkey. This background information is necessary for understanding the political views and nostalgic feelings of the actors who aim to revive the teachings of these schools. Alongside this, I will draw upon the interviews I conducted as well as my experiences in the village and with the non-governmental organization to grasp the nostalgia of the graduates and village inhabitants for the former village institute in Hamidiye. I will argue that despite the controversial mission of these schools, it is still remembered fondly due to the grievances about the current political conditions and longing for a modernity ideal not fulfilled completely. For this reason, I will explain how the Tatar village inhabitants and graduates highlight their present grievances in-

stead of past and remember the past in glory by either suppressing their former bad memories or labeling them as personal as opposed to systemic grievances. In this nostalgic evocation of the past, I will claim that their memories of the school are at the border of voluntary and involuntary, objectivized and subjective. These actors' memories of the school of Hamidiye are deeply connected to their longing for childhood days in the village, which are remembered involuntarily through the senses aroused by the ruins of the school; at the same time, their memories uncloak their past and present grievances in the politics of Turkey, which is why they take the act of remembering as a duty against the threat of cultural amnesia and turn their nostalgia into action through the books they publish or events they organize.

## Village Institutes: Civilizing the “Anatolian Other”

“It would be impossible for you to go alone, I am not even sure if there will be anyone *I know* who still stays in the village...and I grew up there” (personal communication, December, 2016). That’s what my father said when I told him about my intentions of going to our village for research. He had not visited the village since we left Eskisehir to move to Istanbul eleven years ago; therefore, when he agreed to come with me, he was both excited and anxious at the same time, for our journey together has been a journey to his childhood as well. The avenue which greets the visitors at the entrance of Hamidiye was covered in snow when we arrived, which made the village look even less familiar under its white blanket. My father was shocked by how much had changed since he left, how taller the willows had become, but calmed down before long and started to describe his years in the village to me. The stories from his childhood, his days at the school, and his experiences as a Tatar peasant boy have helped me make sense both of the history and material culture of the former village institute.

When my father was sharing his experiences as a student in the teacher training academy in Hamidiye, he repeatedly told me: “I want you to understand the difference...The kids raised in these schools were amazing, like a firework! The new generations were coming like a thunder, civilized, well-informed, cultured... They blocked it” (personal communication, December, 2016). To assert the difference of these schools from the education system of today, he described his sports,

literature, history, and art classes. He explained how they would produce their own paints and canvases in the atelier for the painting class, or how every single student knew how to play a musical instrument. But apart from all these, he insisted on the importance of knowing and sharing the history of village institutes, since for him the foremost value of these schools lied in their civilizing mission which became the reason why they were abolished.

Village Institutes, schools that were established in several villages of Anatolia in 1940, are *sui generis* in the educational history of Turkey due to their pioneering role in the cultural, technological, and literary development of the villages as well as the ideologies they represented. The “learning by doing” method (Kocak & Baskan, 2012) of these institutes is considered unique as a schooling practice, in addition to their self-sustaining policy which includes the joint work of teachers, students and villagers for constructing the buildings or providing food for the staff and students (Vexliard & Aytac, 1964, p.44). However, the reason for the nostalgia for these institutes is less their teaching method than the ideals they became the symbol of: mainly the enlightenment ideals of the early Turkish Republic. These ideals are embedded in the efforts of the Turkish elites in this era for civilizing the society, which includes the use of education as a tool for this goal (Arayici, 1999, p.268) and has its roots in the modernization process of the Ottoman Empire.

Ussama Makdisi (2002) focuses on the repercussions of Western portrayals of the East in the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century by explaining the Turkish-Ottoman elite’s “explicit resistance to, but also implicit acceptance of Western representations of the indolent Ottoman East” (p.768) and their idea of an Ottoman modernity which aimed to bring the empire into coeval position with the West. He explains the Turkish-Ottoman elites’ projection of themselves in a Muslim modernized self by defining their degraded Other within the empire, which was the Arab periphery that became the “Ottoman man’s burden” (p.777) for changing into a modern Ottoman identity. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, there appears a similar sense of response to orientalism in the Republic of Turkey. In a similar manner, the Turkish elite of the early years of the Republic undertook a civilizing mission with an attempt to “westernize” the society, which necessitated secularizing the conservative society they inherited (Zurcher, 2004, p.185–86). Within this context, I argue that Turkey also formed its own Orient as a response to the western representations of itself by casting the role of being “backwards” to

the “uncivilized” masses in Anatolia while distinguishing the Turkish elite as the “vanguards of civilization” (Gurpinar, 2012). In this regard, the Anatolian periphery appeared as the Oriental Other as opposed to the modern Turkish citizen, which made it necessary for the latter to penetrate into the lives of the former with a civilizing mission.

Promoting a national identity was crucial for counterbalancing the internalization of western ideas and thinking; however, Anatolia was falling behind to adopt the “Turkish historical thesis” as well as the national identity (Zurcher, 2004, p.191) and the Turkish elite was unable to address the rural population in Anatolia which constituted 80% of the population at the time (Kucuktamer & Uzunboylu, 2015, p.393). Moreover, the policymakers were convinced that the regions which spoke Kurdish, Arabic, etc. had to be ‘Turkified’ for the sake of creating a unified Turkish identity (Karaomerlioglu, 1998, p.64). Village institutes enabled the Turkish elite to reach the rural areas of Turkey, improve the villagers in scientific, social, cultural and economic fields, and raise teachers who could spread what they had learnt to other villages of the country.

These particularities of village institutes started to disappear from 1947 onwards because of the restrictive measures of the state (Arayici, 1999, p.275) which led to the transformation of these schools into teacher-training academies in 1954 and gradual degeneracy after that period. The reason for the loss of state interest in the continuance of these institutions is controversial. Some argue that the increasing literacy level resulted in the decrease of votes for the ruling party (Gunduz, 2016, p.260), which induced them to withdraw their support from the project. Others contend that the educational principles of these schools led them to be labeled pejoratively as “communist nests” in the society (Kucuktamer & Uzunboylu, 2015, p.396). Some even go further to argue that the “backward” population collaborated with “the West” to block the progression that institutes pave the way to, due to their modernizing and civilizing role (Karaomerlioglu, 1998, p.62). This conspiracy theory regarding the abolishment of these institutes can find occasion even in one of the most widespread newspapers in Turkey, as in this quote from one article among many:

Every graduate of the village institutes had an impressive intellectual background. But as Europe came out of war, it looked at Turkey and saw that it had

a working educational project that would improve the country a lot, so decided to ruin it...along with the internal powers that helped it, of course. (Izci 2012)

As seen in this example, Europe appears as a uniform, coherent unity, along with the “internal powers” which refer to the “backward” segments of the society that aimed to block the progression of Turkey.

The nostalgia for village institutes today reflects, in a sense, this longing for modernity in present sociopolitical conditions, in which the “backward” and “non-secular” segments of society are considered to be in power. The political arena in the post-1999 era, integral to today’s sociopolitical conditions, can be interpreted as the re-emergence of the political actors that represent the Anatolian periphery, who could not be “enlightened” or “civilized” through the modernization project of the Republican elites. “In the post-1999 period in Turkey, we observe two shifting hegemonic positions in the Turkish political discursive field: namely, the popularization of elitist state nationalism, and the formation of neo-conservative and neo-liberal political Islam” (Kucuk, 2009, p.100), which also explains the position of the Justice and Development Party that has been in power since 2002. Considering that the Republican elite regards Islamic fundamentalism as one of the biggest threats against the Turkish modern national identity, because of its contradiction with the notion of secularism, some perceive the rise of political Islam as the rise of the reactionary powers in Turkish society. Esra Ozyurek (2006) defines this transformation as the increasing visibility of Islam in public places and party politics since the 1990s and explains the secular block’s yearning for a pristine past and their way of privatizing the secular state ideology of the early Republican days. She describes how the latter “sought modernity in the single-party regime of the 1930s”, which sheds light on the nostalgia for the village institutes that represent these values of modernization as well.

Although there is a significant literature on the unique characters of these schools and their founder, romantic portrayals of those times, or their influence in civilizing the youth (see for example, Turkoglu, 2000; Makal, 1979; Tonguc 1970), there are not enough studies on the influence of these education policies and modernization processes on the minority students or the villages they were founded in. To understand the relationship of these actors with the institutes and their nostalgia for the bygone days, in the next chapter I will focus on the memories of

the graduates and village inhabitants in Hamidiye and how they see the past in present conditions.

## Nostalgia for the past – How is the past remembered in present conditions?

“They are going to waste themselves, poor kids. What good could come from this kind of an education, what can they possibly learn like this, what are they going to be when they graduate?” (personal communication, December, 2016). My father’s memories of the teacher-training academy aroused nostalgia not only for his past as a student but also for the opportunities the school offered its students, for he compared the conditions of the vocational high school with that of village institutes as we walked around the school (Figure 1). For most of the graduates of the village institute or the teacher-training academy, the essence of the school was lost long ago, along with its high-quality education and spirit. My father told me that the value of the school decreased after the village institutes had been transformed into teacher-training academies, but the principles and opportunities of the former were sustained in the latter for a period of time, as he remembered his days as a student fondly. He compared his own education to the one that current students have as we paid a visit to the new greenhouse that the vocational high school had opened for their students to learn agriculture (Figure 2). “Look at this greenhouse. It’s not even built on soil, it’s on sand. Poor kids think they are going to learn something. They will ruin these kids” (personal communication, December, 2016). His pity for the



Figure 1: Photograph of the main building of Yunus Emre Vocational High School, taken from the official web-site of the school: [yunusemreaol.meb.k12.tr](http://yunusemreaol.meb.k12.tr)



Figure 2: Photograph from the interior of the greenhouse, taken by the author

students or his critiques of the vocational high-school were related to his critique of the educational policies of the current government; and his nostalgia for the past was deeply connected with the unfulfilled wishes village institutes symbolized: civilizing, modernizing and educating the youth. These unfulfilled wishes and the symbolic role of village institutes could be considered in relation to the concept of “uchronia” that Portelli (1991) introduces, which depicts an “alternative time” that could have been possible if things worked out differently. In a similar manner to my father, the graduates of this school that I have talked to perceive village institutes as a missed opportunity that could have transformed the society into “civilized”, “modern” nation-subjects. Considering their grievances of the present conditions and the way they perceive themselves as “modern, well-versed individuals” as the graduates of these institutes, their longing for an alternative present becomes even more clear.

While describing the relationship between modernization and Girls’ Institutes of the early Republic, which were founded with similar intentions and in the same time period with village institutes, Aksit (2005) explains how these girls were expected to bring the ideas of modernity to their homes and describes it as a way to carry the creation of collective memory into the households. In a similar manner, the influence of the former village institute in Hamidiye is not only seen on the graduates but also on the whole village community. I had a chance to inquire about the relationship between the school and the village inhabitants at the next stop of our journey, which was the coffee house of the village that can be regarded as the gathering place of the male villagers of Hamidiye. The coffee house is central to the village, where men come together almost every day to talk, play card games, watch TV, and drink tea (or sometimes beer). Due to the gender segregation in the village, the coffee house is considered a public house for men, while women usually get together in houses. This segregation is common to most of the villages in Turkey and requires more inquiry, however, for the integrity of this article as a whole, I do not intend to go further into this discussion. Although it is well accepted, this norm is not that strict in Hamidiye, considering that I was able to drink soda and watch my father play card games with his friends there when I was a little girl, and I was welcomed again during our visit for my research. When we entered the coffee house, my father was relieved to see some of his old friends and introduced me to them since I became almost a stranger to the village over

the years. After the initial introduction, my father started to get reacquainted with his old friends while I had a chance to talk to the regulars of the coffee house.

The village inhabitants in the coffee house had nostalgic evocations of the past when I asked what the school meant to them, and compared the village institute back in the day with the high school of today. As the school used to have a deeper connection with village life and people, it held a significant position in the lives of the community. For the villagers, the degeneration of the school caused the children of the village and their families to move to cities for better education and has been one of the factors for the dissolution of the integrity or the depopulation of the village. While talking about their relationship with the school, the inhabitants not only belittled the education of the vocational high school but also devalued its teachers. An 80-year-old teacher, who has lived in Hamidiye for the most of his life, argued that the “teachers of the vocational high school did not know the true meaning of their occupation” (personal communication, December, 2016). According to him, the jobs of the teachers should not be constrained to the classroom, but they should also be motivated to educate the local people around the area. In this respect, he argued that village institutes occupied a different place within the educational history of Turkey, as these schools gave importance to educating the village inhabitants along with the students.

Here, we used to sit and talk in the coffeehouse with the teachers. Back then, they used to come here almost every day to spend time with the peasants. They knew that what’s important is to educate local people. Today, I don’t even know the teachers of the vocational high school personally. They don’t come to the coffeehouse, they don’t talk to us. They run to their shuttles when their shift is over. (personal communication, December, 2016)

His critique of the teachers of the vocational high school was not only a longing for a more ‘organic’ and ‘communal’ life, but also a longing for the days in which education was perceived as a means to civilize and educate the masses in rural areas, as promoted by village institutes at the time. Pierre Nora (1989) argues that “our relation to the past is now formed in a subtle play between its intractability and its disappearance, a question of representation” (p.17). His claim of looking at the past in relation to its disappearance is relevant to the comparisons made

by graduates and the village inhabitants between the village's and the school's past and present. The way people remembered their past was deeply related to their present beings, histories and subjectivities, which influence the way they approached the material culture as well.

With the help of these educational policies of the early Republic and their reflections on the everyday life, Aksit (2005) claims that the different languages and ethnic backgrounds of the Ottoman Empire have been forgotten throughout the years, for these communities started to relate their backgrounds with a Turkic past. She argues that the contradictions of gender, class, or ethnicity with the ideals of the nation-state were solved through the silence of the students about their conflicting sense of self. This situation can be well observed in my village Hamidiye, which is significant for being a Tatar village since the 1770s. Tatar ethnicity and language are known for belonging to a Turkic family, however the particularities of the culture have been lost into a modern Turkish identity today. In this respect, I contend that the contradictions faced by the village inhabitants and graduates of Hamidiye were solved not through silence and forgetfulness but misconception. Whereupon, they related their past grievances about the disappearance of their language and culture with the personal misconducts of certain teachers or family members rather than the policies of the early Republican state. Today, both Tatar graduates and village inhabitants remember village institutes and teacher-training academies fondly. Due to the relationship between remembering village institutes and longing for the disappearing ideas of enlightenment represented by these schools, the interviewees' memories of the school reflect mostly and dominantly the positive aspects of their past. Although these graduates and village inhabitants were not reluctant to talk about their memories of the village institute or teacher-training academy, non-pleasant stories came to light only towards the end of our conversations. When I asked them about their Tatar identity, the graduates told me how they almost forgot speaking Tatar language after the school and how their children do not know the language at all. One of the graduates of the teacher-training academy, a 60-year-old Tatar woman, remembered a long-forgotten memory when I asked her what it was like to be from a minority culture in these institutes.

I have almost forgotten about it until you asked. You know, our parents used to speak in Tatar language when we grew up. That's why we had specific accents

when we spoke Turkish and sometimes few Tatar words used to slip out too. One of our teachers, oh that horrible woman, forced us to put a coin in a jar every time a Tatar word came out of our mouths. (personal communication, December, 2016)

Many graduates told me how their parents stopped speaking Tatar language at home as well. “Because our parents did not want us to be ashamed for not speaking Turkish good enough or be bad at school because of language” said one of the graduates and added “You know Tatar people, they think too much about how they will be seen by others” (personal communication, December, 2016). Although these graduates are upset about the disappearance of their language, they do not blame the village institute but find specific teachers or parents guilty about it.

Ahiska (2010) makes note of the “historical patterns of forgetting”, as in the case of the Tatar population, and explains “the involvement of force in the prohibition of memories and in the fabrication of a national memory, and the impact of denial and repression on everyday life by way of building a certain habitus” (p.8–9). In this sense, Tatar graduates of the village institute and village inhabitants have nearly forgotten their non-pleasant stories regarding these schools, reflect the fabricated narratives of the early Turkish Republic into their daily lives and approach the past with its glory. Lowenthal (1985) suggests that “Nostalgia is memory with the pain removed. The pain is today. We shed tears for the landscape we find no longer what it was, what we thought it was, or what we thought it would be” (p.8). Indeed, both the village inhabitants and the graduates of Hamidiye focus on their present grievances about the state policies and ideologies while looking at the past as it is deprived of anything wrong. Furthermore, even if they are saddened by the loss of their language or culture throughout the years, they do not blame the Turkification and modernization policies of the early Republic but point at certain people of their own private history for the wrongdoings, as for them village institutes arouse nostalgia with the pain removed.

For Pierre Nora (1996), people mourn for the past as they long for sensibilities they can no longer reach in the present and contends that “Memory is constantly on our lips because it no longer exists” (p.1). He argues that in modernity “real memory” has been replaced by history, as people have lost their sensibility and embodiment of the past. To explore the question of how the former village institute is remem-

bered in present conditions further, in the next section I will focus on the material culture of the school in Hamidiye, the concern of cultural amnesia in modernity, and how people dutifully work to remember and remind this glorified past in Eskişehir.

## Voluntary memory – Village institutes in written records, anniversaries and associations

When the school bell rang at noon to mark the end of the school day, I had a chance to see how the students and teachers interacted with the buildings of the former village institute. Some students made a snowman right in front of the former atelier, the rest snowballed right next to the old bathhouses, while the buildings of powerhouse and furnace were the areas around which the teachers smoked after class. Moreover, most of the walls of the buildings of the former village institute were covered with graffiti and scribbles (Figure 3). Nature found her way around, covering the buildings with snow and shrubbery, as well as students and teachers who found their way around by making those places part of their daily lives and creating new memories. The material culture of the former village institute was taken for granted by the teachers and students of the vocational high school. The



Figure 3: Photograph from the exterior of the former laundry plant, taken by the author.

life in the buildings used by the vocational high school carried on carelessly, and the ruins were just regarded as part of the natural habitat. Assmann (2014) talks about how nature may de-historicize places if nobody intervenes and also regards the reuse of buildings as an effective way of forgetting the history of the spaces (p.135). In the case of the school of Hamidiye, both nature and the appropriation of the buildings have a role in explaining the indifference towards the ruins of the school. I believe that the reason for this forgetfulness lies in the progress and structural changes, which as Connerton (2009) says, triggers the type of forgetting which is characteristic of modernity (p.5). Following Assmann's and Connerton's insights

I argue that the history of the material culture can be forgotten if nobody voluntarily tries to remember it, although, as I explain below, a potential for involuntary eruptions of progress is always possible.

While considering whether there is an urge to remember these schools and the ideologies they represented collectively, I discovered the non-governmental organization YYKED (*Yeni Kusak Köy Enstitülüler Derneği*) “New Generation Village Institutes Association”, an organization that reflects the reactions of the secular segment of the society. It was founded in 2001, corresponding to the post-1999 era when neo-liberal political Islam emerged and replaced the elitist national identity. One of the old friends of my father was an active member of the school, who recommended me to come to their office and make note of their efforts and activities. The YYKED is a non-governmental organization, founded for resurrecting the values of village institutes, withstanding against the forgetfulness of modern times, and working for an alternative future derived from their past and present grievances. The establishment of this new organization aimed to gather people who think alike and is a response to the threat of cultural amnesia against the values of village institutes. In their founding declaration, the association states the reasons for their establishment as follows:

We, as sons, daughters, grandchildren, ideological partners of the graduates of village institutes, will carry the values, enrichments and intellectual accumulation of this era into the new age...For making intellect and science prevail in our society, for a democratic society, for a society that is freed from bigotry, we will combine the enlightenment ideas of 1940s with science, technology and art, enrich them with new values and present them to our society. (“Kurulus Bildirgesi”, 2001)

Their statement makes it clear that they not only aim to resurrect the values of these schools, but they also have a purpose for new generations. They aim to create an alternative future by transforming their mourning for the unfulfilled desire of civilization and modernization into action. Theirs can be regarded as “restorative nostalgia” in the sense that these actors try to “rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps” (Boym, 2001, p.41), aim to use the past for transforming the present and their nostalgia for forming new relations.

My father's friend, a 60-year-old graduate of the teacher-training academy who introduced me to the organization, was proud to be a member of this organization and also eager to inform me about their activities and mission. She told me, "There is also an anniversary event you should attend. We come together as graduates on the first Sunday of July, every year at the school. It is our duty to do this. At least once a year!" (personal communication, December, 2016). For her, attending these anniversaries or other events of this association should be practiced as a duty towards the institute that raised her to be the person she is today, which is why she insisted that I had to persuade my father to become a member of the organization as well. She explained to me how she took it very seriously to remember the stories of village institutes since these values are disappearing today. Nora (1989) says that "Lieux de mémoire originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally" (p.12). There is a similar understanding of memory in the practices of the YKKED and the views of the active graduates who attend these events.

In order to understand the motives and perspectives of other members who take an active role in resurrecting the disappearing values of village institutes, I participated in a meeting of the Eskisehir branch of this organization and conducted interviews with the members. There were eight people in the small office of the branch gathered together for an emergency meeting on a snowy day. All of those in the room were graduates of the teacher-training academy, which they defined as the 'new generation village institute'. After an introduction from the president of the Eskisehir branch of the NGO, an 83-year-old graduate of the Cifteler Village Institute took the floor, who was the one to demand the emergency meeting. He was preparing a book about the foundation and closure of the village institutes with a specific emphasis on the one in Hamidiye, including the memories of the graduates of both the village institute and the teacher-training academy. His intention was to explain the transformations of the school, what has changed from the day it was founded until the closure of the teacher-training academy.

Much valuable information was lost along with our respected graduates of the village institute. My purpose here is to protect the memories of you, who gradu-

ated from the teacher-training academy. Your children, grandchildren, will look at this book and say ‘So, that is how the school was like when my father studied there.’ (personal communication, December, 2016).

He argued in the meeting that the new book would be written from an “institutional perspective”, for he aimed to distinguish his books from memoirs or subjective, personal written records. He thought that the written records should present objective truths about the past, because of “the need for documenting and protecting the history of village institutes”. A discussion about how “facts” produced by written records might not be objective is beyond the scope of this paper, however it’s worth noticing that the archival efforts for the protection of these memories are expected to be neutral and objective, and they represent the kind of archival memory in modern times that Nora (1989) discusses. However, the relationship between documenting the past and the feeling of responsibility towards the future generations should not be disregarded in these archival efforts and the practices of the association, which could be defined as a ‘spectral response’. As Ahiska (2006) suggests:

An archive, in fact, stands at the border of history and memory. On the one hand, it provides exteriority, a trace for accounting for the past and, therefore, becomes an objectivized site for writing history; on the other hand, an archive has subjectivity in the sense that it provides a spectral response to those who are in search of the past time...It is as if one expects the dead in the past records to speak and answer one’s questions about the present and the future...the spectral response does not only bring the past into the present, but it also gives a promise to the future, as it bears a responsibility for tomorrow. (p.21)

With this responsibility for tomorrow, the activities of YKKED involve publishing books, magazines and articles about the history of the institutes, organizing scholarships and competitions for maintaining the spirit of village institutes, and organizing local or national events for the graduates of village institutes and teacher-training academies (“Faaliyetlerimiz”, n.d.). For understanding how village institutes were represented in the written records, I analyzed the books offered to me by members of the organization to help me understand the history and

memories related to village institutes and teacher-training academies. During my inquiry, I realized that these written records not only document the nostalgia for these schools on paper, but they also express a need for change and transformation in the society. In one of the books, the current situation of the former village institute in Hamidiye is described as follows:

...with its powerhouse that is about to wrack, its tailrace that no longer carries water, its old willows that have lost their colors and vividness, its fall of water weir whose gurgling lingers in the past, everything reflects the sorrow of abandonment. (Kucukcan, 2012, p.29)

The author calls for action to resurrect the buildings and memories of this school. The book reflects the nostalgic view of the glory of the village institutes, accompanied by a deep sorrow for the abandonment of its buildings. For the author, the abandonment of the institute is deeply connected to the abandonment of the values of village institutes, which he fears to be lost along with the institutes themselves. He argues that:

If what is left of the Cifteler Village Institute of Eskisehir, the city which has two universities today, gets lost in this desolation, the first thing the next generations do will be to turn their questioning glances onto our universities. (Kucukcan, 2012, p.33)

This sentence clearly reflects the fear of cultural amnesia, loss of the memories of village institutes and their values; for the author argues that forgetting them will drive the next generation to question the importance of education and universities altogether. The call for saving the Çifteler Village Institute is also a call for change in the sociopolitical conditions of Turkey, in order to “save” the youth.

The remains of the Cifteler Village Institute is a regional site of memory and as Assman argues “the culture of memory is not only a responsibility that is delegated to the state but also a democratic concern of civil society” (2014, p.143). I suggest that, because of the indifference of the state and new generations – who are not familiar with village institutes – towards the remains of the values and buildings of the school, these graduates try to do their part to bring the past into the

present. The role of this non-governmental organization should be seen as a way civil society gets involved in the culture of memory and aims to shape the present with its engagement. However, is it really true that nothing is left of the former village institute in Hamidiye today? Is memory in modernity constrained with dutiful remembering and archival efforts, as the sensations or embodiment of the past is no longer in question? With these questions in mind, in the next section, I will trace the affective sensations the ruins of the school may arouse, and discuss the possibility of involuntary memory in modernity.

## The school as locus – Its role in evoking involuntary memories

There is an ongoing debate in memory studies about the possibility of resisting the progress and forgetfulness of modern times and whether memory can create stillness in this flow of change. For Pierre Nora (1989), there is a distinction between “real memory” and history; the former refers to an affective, magical kind of memory that emerges unconsciously, whereas the latter is the representation of the past in modern societies which takes the act of remembering as a voluntary act to be compulsorily conducted within a continuous temporality (p.8). On the other hand, authors like Benjamin (1969) or Seremetakis (1994) suggest that there is opportunity to find rupture in the continuum of history or there are alternative epistemologies in modernity and problematize the clear-cut distinction between history and memory. In my opinion, the boundary between these two notions is ambivalent, for remembering in modern times is caught between spontaneous moments of stillness and conscious practices of reconstructing the past through archival efforts or intellectual production. Although the material culture of the former village institute is taken for granted by the students and teachers of the vocational high school or taken out of its past context and history through forgetfulness and appropriation, I contend that there are still involuntary sensations aroused for those visiting the ruins and especially for graduates like my father who had a deeper connection with this space.

Cifteler Village Institute, later known as Yunus Emre Teacher-Training Academy and today known as Yunus Emre Vocational High School, bears within it “layered commensal meanings and histories” (Seremetakis, 1994, p.10), considering its

place in the memories of teachers, students or villagers from different generations. Two buildings of the former village institute are used by the vocational high school for agriculture today, one for the classrooms and one for the dormitory. The rest of the campus is spread to a large area of the village, including the former theater hall, bathhouse, ateliers, furnace and powerhouse of the institute (Figure 4), all



Figure 4: Photograph from the interior of the former powerhouse, taken by the author.

with broken windows and walls and peeling paints. Seremetakis (1994) suggests that “The sensory landscape and its meaning-endowed objects bear within them emotional and historical sedimentation that can provoke and ignite gestures, discourses and acts” (p.7). The influence of the sensory landscape of Hamidiye was evident in my father’s gestures as well, which made him nervous but animated and

filled him with stories to tell throughout our entire journey. While approaching the abandoned buildings disguised in snow and filled with dust and wind, I had an uneasy feeling, unlike my father who colorfully recounted the earlier periods of the



Figure 5: Photograph from the interior of the former theater hall, taken by the author.

places. I felt as if we were seeing different things when we looked at the ruins; I was seeing the present state of the spaces, but he was reliving his past memories by looking at the same place. My father found a “stillness in the material culture of historicity, against the flow of the present” (p.12) which was out of my reach. While we were at the theater hall, I asked him what he thinks about the broken upholstery and the mats drooping drearily from the ceiling (Figure 5). Uninterested in talking about the present conditions of the building, he moved on and started to describe how the theater hall used to smell urine on the weekends

when he was young. He told me that two movies were screened on the weekends, available to everyone in the village; children were left no choice but to wet themselves in those days, as the hall had no toilets, and they did not want to pay again to go out and come back inside. While listening to the stories my father vivaciously told, I realized that these spaces were naturalized for my father who spent his years there and formed memories that arrive involuntarily to him, in spite of the transformations the school went through. The stillness that my father found himself in, with time at a standstill, also shows how the “history is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous empty time, but time filled by, the presence of the now (Jetztzeit)” (Benjamin, 1969, p.261). There, while looking at the broken upholstery, I was also able to see that there is a possibility to detach from the progress and transformation reflected on the school brought by the continuum of history.

It was also possible to see my father’s projection of his ‘self’ onto the school, which can be considered a locus for him (Connerton, 2009, p.20). Considering that my father was in connection with the school since his early childhood through the movies or plays the village inhabitants attended, and later through his years there as a student, one can talk about the shared history of the school and my father’s sense of self. For him, the school actually shaped him into the person he is today. The influence of the place on my father’s self became more clear when I asked what the school meant for him. He told me that the most important role of the school was that it turned a peasant boy into a modern, well-versed individual, which he realized when he attended the university after the academy to be an ocean-going captain:

They [his friends who grew up in Istanbul] were always surprised about the things that I know. Peasant boy, how come you know that actor, there is no way that you could have seen his play! But well, I did. All the movies would be presented in our theater hall, right after the big cities. Our village would be the first stop of the theater plays when they went on a tour. Peasant boy, please don’t tell me that you can play mandolin as well! They were surprised by everything I know. But everyone in the teacher-training academy would play an instrument, do sports, watch movies, theaters, everything. They don’t expect it from a peasant boy, of course. I noticed that I am no less than them, I was not simply a peasant boy. (personal communication, December, 2016)

His personal growth is intertwined with his years at the school, and his personal history is reflected on the material culture itself, as he could still see where he played the mandolin on the stage for the first time or where he watched that specific actor's play.

The material culture of the former village institute can be considered as a sensational environment which has the potential for evoking memories involuntarily. Yael Navaro-Yashin (2009) describes affect as "the non-discursive sensation which a space or environment generates" (p.13) and underlines, "If persons and objects are assembled in a certain matter, I would argue that this is not because they always, already, or anyway would do so. Rather 'assemblages' of subjects and objects must be read as specific in their politics and history" (p.9). Keeping these ideas in mind, I claim that the memory of village institutes cannot be discussed without referring to the politics and history of these schools or the subjectivities of the people I have talked to. Concordantly, my father's connection with the place in terms of building his sense of self cannot be thought apart from the penetrating nation state that helped him create his "modern, well-versed" self. Even though the ruins cannot be approached as an affective space without their relation to the subjectivity of the person who encounters it, it is not possible to disregard vivid memories that reminded my father of the smells, visions, and feelings of his childhood. These aspects of our journey reflect the times of stillness in modern times when memory can still be approached through involuntary remembering, gestures, acts and sensations. Following these observations of my father, it can be asserted that there is an intimate relationship between place and memory. Encountering a place that is loaded with memories and stories always already evokes prior senses and feelings for someone who can relate with this place through his subjectivity, which reveals the relationship between space and involuntary memories.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that village institutes should be approached in relation to the civilizing mission of the Turkish elite in the early years of the Republic. In this respect, these schools had to be examined through their role in westernizing the Anatolian periphery and integrating it into the Turkish national identity at the same time. In my research, it was possible to observe how Tatar village inhabit-

ants and graduates were integrated into this national identity and enlightenment framework. Thereupon, while remembering the past of the former village institute, they focused only on the positive aspects of their memories and looked at the past in relation to its disappearance. Although most of the Tatar people in my research had almost forgotten their language or had other unpleasant stories about the school, they typically emphasized their present grievances instead while remembering village institutes fondly. Their present grievances involved not only the disappearance of their language, but also the depopulation of the village, loss of the communal life of both the teachers and the villagers, and the disappearance of the enlightenment discourse. Within this context, they connected most of these grievances to the degeneration of the village institute, which was integral to the education, gatherings, and cultural activities of the village. Moreover, I think that these grievances are also related to the discrepancy between the modernity that village institutes were supposed to pave the way to and the modernity they live in; because the latter carried along forgetfulness and cultural amnesia with it, and threatens to erase the values and history of the village institute. Today, the type of modernity that the former village institute promised represents an *uchronia*, an alternative time that could have been possible if things worked out differently.

Despite this flow of change in modernity, I argue that memories of the former village institute of Hamidiye are at the border of voluntary and involuntary. In this regard, both my father's memories that were aroused involuntarily and the institutional form of voluntary remembering that characterizes the YKKED should be taken into account. The former is worth noticing, because both in the gestures that were provoked during my father's encounter with his childhood and in the stillness that he found that allowed him to bring his past into the present, one can see that there is still a possibility in modernity to detach from the continuum of history and progress. However, it is also necessary to make note of my father's subjectivity and the influence of the enlightenment discourse on his sense of self, which he expressed clearly when he explained how he was transformed into a "modern, well-versed citizen-subject". Therefore, I think that affectivity and subjectivity, as well as history and memory, should be drawn together to understand the relationship between memory and material culture.

On the other hand, the YKKED's practices of recording and documenting the memories of village institutes can be defined as "archival-memory", and the aim of

the graduates for maintaining the values and histories of the school through anniversaries can be regarded as “duty-memory”. I approached these actions both in terms of the role of civil society in the culture of memory and as derived from “restorative nostalgia” that corresponds to the use of the past to transform the future and the resurrection of the values of village institutes for future generations. Consequently, following Ahiska, I contended that these archival efforts of the organization bring a “spectral response” into the present and “reconcile the conceptions and possibilities of the past with the conceptions and possibilities of the present” (Ahiska, 2006, p.22). Therefore, even the institutional form of voluntary remembering, offered by this organization, problematizes the boundary between past and present, history and memory.

Pierre Nora (1989) claims that modern memory is archival and experienced voluntarily as a duty with the responsibility of remembering; therefore is no longer collective or spontaneous (p.13). In opposition, I argue that there isn't a clear-cut difference between “real memory” and history (p.8), but that this boundary is ambivalent. On the one hand, in modernity there is the act of remembering as a duty, voluntary memory, remembering as “history that binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progressions and to relations between things” (p.9); on the other hand, there are still nostalgic excursions to the past, involuntary revelation of sensory memories, and expose of performances through acts, discourses or gestures in the sensory environment. As Seremetakis (1994) contends, “social transformation is uneven. And it is this unevenness, the non-contemporaneity of the social formation with itself, that preserves and produces non-synchronous, interruptive articles, spaces, acts and narratives” (p.12). It is because of this unevenness of social transformation that a place like the ruins of a former village institute can both evoke non-discursive sensations for my father and also motivate the members of the YKKED to create institutionalized, “objective” knowledge about its history; and it is because of this possibility for detaching from the flow of change that the memories of the former village institute are at the border of voluntary and involuntary, objectivized and subjective.

Lastly, I would like to mention a few limitations of this paper, along with the aspects that require more research. First of all, I would like to state that I intentionally did not indicate the names of the participants or reveal the identities of the interviewees, for the sake of privacy. Secondly, it is crucial to make note of the state

of emergency in Turkey in between July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016 and July 18<sup>th</sup> 2018 that hindered some aspects of my research. For instance, because of the state of emergency, the manager of the vocational high school stated clearly that I could not be doing research or recording anything within the boundaries of the school; thus, my research lacks conversations with the current teachers and students of the school who could have provided a different insight about the topic. Lastly, I believe that there is a need for more research in the other villages of Anatolia that were home to village institutes, and the influence of the civilizing mission in the early periods of the Republic on other minority cultures.

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# The Family Album: From Personal Stories to Memory Wars in Estonian Art

Annika Toots

**ABSTRACT:** This paper analyses some of the aspects of the relationship between memory and art in post-Soviet Estonia. Focusing on artworks from the 1990s that use photographs from family albums as a medium for different kinds of memory, this paper aims to highlight the intricate relationship between memory and photographs, especially in the process of the construction of (a new) identity, which inevitably includes forgetting and collective amnesia. In this paper, subjects such as personal memories and death are seen as a form of protest in Estonian art. In addition, while analysing artworks from the 1990s and their recent re-presentation, this paper finds that there has been a shift in the perception of the Soviet past in recent years. While during the 1990s, the process of memory making excluded all the connections to Soviet past, in recent years, the Soviet past and the Soviet aesthetics have become something exotic for a new generation of young artists.

**KEYWORDS:** photography, family album, identity, post-Soviet memory, present pasts

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*Family photography can operate at this junction between personal memory and social history, between public myth and personal unconscious. Our memory is never fully “ours”, nor are the pictures ever unmediated pictures of our past.*

*Looking at them we both construct a fantastic past and set out on a detective trail to find other version’s of a “real” one (Spence, Holland, 1991: 13–14).*



*All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt (Sontag, 2008: 15).*

*Memories are among the most fleeting and most unreliable phenomena of all (Assmann, 2011: 238).*

## Family Photographs and Memory

Photography has been considered, and still is, enigmatic. It has been constantly developing, finding its way into our daily lives, but after all, it is still just a flat surface that has the ability to ignite our senses and memories, take us to another space and time, make us mourn or manipulate with our minds. While family photographs in an album construct the identities of individuals, photography also functions as a medium for constructing collective memory, thus being an important tool for totalitarian regimes, such as the Soviet occupation in Estonia. During the occupation, photography mainly served the hegemonic powers; however, since Estonia's re-independence in 1991, photography has played an important role in the arts and has now been considered almost the most prominent art form for a bit less than the last 30 years. Many works of art, since 1991, have taken advantage of photography's innate connection to memory, in order to create alternative or counter-memories, or simply, to question photography's ability to keep memories alive.

This article aims to analyse some of the aspects connected to the uses of photographs from family albums in Estonian art in the 1990s. The development between photographic art and (collective) memory is followed here through four works of art from the 1990s, although one of them is actually an exhibition. The common theme in these works is the notions of death and collective amnesia. These works have all been created in the turbulent years of the 1990s; however, almost all of them (except for the exhibition by Ly Lestberg) have been displayed again at exhibitions in recent years, giving them new meaning and new importance.<sup>1</sup> All of them construct a personal narrative, which at the same time has a collective and public importance, in this deeply personal content lies a protest

against the official constructed collective memory<sup>2</sup>. The main question here is how can art relate to memory and challenge its mediums? And what is the role of photographs from family albums in the construction and deconstruction of different memory narratives in art?

Family photographs play an important role in the construction and the persistence of different memory narratives. Marianne Hirsch has noted that after its invention

photography quickly became the family's primary instrument of self-knowledge and representation – the means by which family memory would be continued and perpetuated, by which the family's story would henceforth be told (Hirsch, 2012:7)

If all else is gone, there will be only oral stories and other material mediums of memory, such as photographs from family albums. Family photographs have the same function as the painted portraits had before the invention of photography in the beginning of the 19th century. They are meant to be a material and ever-lasting proof of someone's existence; to give immortality to the mortals. Photographs are considered to be the indexical record of reality and even when digital photography has reduced this belief, family photographs are still a very big part of a person's life. A person is being photographed from the first days of their lives until the day the mortal body is laid down to rest.

The profound connection between photography and death reveals itself very distinctly in the post-mortem photography. Post-mortem photographs are those of the deceased. They are reminders of one's mortality, at the same time objects of grief and mourning. The practice of photographing the deceased was once quite common, but has become rather unusual nowadays.<sup>3</sup> It was a way to keep them in the world of the living, as an artefact, as a material memory. Whether they were representations of death or grief, they were always meant for personal use, even when the photographs themselves were placed in public places. The turn in the mentality and the perception of death came in the middle of 20th century. Death became a taboo and the tradition of making post-mortem photography stopped (Linkman, 2011), nowadays a glimpse of these post-mortem images can have a rather uncanny effect.

These eerie post-mortem photographs usually find their way into the contemporary culture as curiosities, many of which have lost their primary referent, and are found from flea markets or other places. Susan Sontag has written in her essay “Melancholy Objects” that “a photograph is only a fragment, and with the passage of time its moorings come unstuck. It drifts away into a soft abstract pastness, open to any kind of reading” (Sontag, 2008: 71). She refers to the fact that photographs that have lost their owners are open to any kind of interpretation. In their nature photographs are very unstable and this ontological quality has been used by many artists that have taken advantage of the complex relationship between a photograph and the notions of time, memory and death. The works discussed in this article rely on this relationship as well; it is their core, it gives them their power.

While discussing the relationship between family pictures and memory, Hirsch has pointed out that artists and writers have used family photographs in their work as “modes of questioning, resistance and contestation” (Hirsch, 2012:7). They use the ontological qualities of a family photograph to go beyond their conventional use and disrupt their use as evidence and documentary materials. Photography and memory have been closely woven together by the ideas of Roland Barthes in his *La Chambre Claire: Note sur la photographie* (1980). In his view, photographs and memory are always connected to the past, a photograph is always a representation of a that-has-been, the *ça a été*, which has evoked the belief in the connection between a photograph and truth, a photograph and reality. Marianne Hirsch calls it the burden of Barthes’ *ça a été*, but simultaneously it is the very reason why and how contestation and resistance in art using (family) photographs becomes even possible.

## Memory Politics and Art

However, it’s not only the complex connection between photography and memory that gives importance of these works. It actually lies in the way memory becomes a tool in the construction of nations and ideology. It is in the connection between private and collective memory and the hegemonic powers; and how art responds to these conditions. In Estonia, during the Soviet occupation, personal stories and memories were considered a threat because they didn’t conform to the official memory and narrative. The totalitarian regime tried to manipulate and erase in-

dividual memory and substitute it with an ideologically constructed one (Pääbo, 2011, Hinrikus, 2009). This occurred on the individual level, as well as on the collective level. There were complex processes that took place within the archives, for example, in which all the (visual) materials that somehow didn't correspond to the ideology were hidden in carefully guarded restricted collections. Photographs, as a medium of memory, had to present the official truth or they were discarded, locked up or destroyed. Until the 1990s, and during the Soviet occupation, photography and video mainly served the needs of hegemonic powers or were used to document everyday lives, and were not considered as artistic mediums. However, this attitude towards photography changed, and during the 1990s photography and video became very popular and powerful mediums of art.

The development of photographic art in Estonia resonates with the memory politics of the newly independent country, which was building a new identity. When Estonia regained its independence in 1991, it faced the task of rethinking the past and creating a new identity. This was especially since the events of the WW II had been remembered on the terms of the Soviet ideology. There were many memory debates in the beginning of 1990s. It was called the "crisis of truth" and people were driven by slogans such as "to give the people back their history". This resulted in a very popular and systematic collection of people's life stories. The collection of these stories and personal memories was part of the attempt to fill in the blank space, or the rupture, as the Soviet occupation was perceived.<sup>4</sup> While one part of the society was concerned with reclaiming the memories and filling in the blank space that had been occupied by the Soviet regime, the other part was concerned with the idea of the return – the return to normality, to historic roots and to Europe (Lagerspetz, 1999: 17–28). In this way, the Estonian society in the 1990s was simultaneously drawn in two different directions. One was the direction of progress, focusing on future and being part of Europe. The second was more concerned with reconstructing the past and claiming the memories. The memory work that was done during the decade involved art and public spaces, monuments and institutions, among others, and led to several memory conflicts.

The two directions – one being concerned with the past and the other looking to the future – can be very clearly seen in Estonian art in the 1990s. There were exhibitions that were concentrating on science, technology and future, such as the annual exhibitions of Soros Center for Contemporary Art, and on the other

hand, there were very influential events centered around memory, history and identity, such as the Saaremaa biennials organized by Peeter Linnap and Eve Kiiler.<sup>5</sup> In Estonia, there is no tradition of classical photography being taught at the art academy before the 1990s, photography emerged into the arts at a very turbulent time, bringing in influences from the Western postmodernist art – such as working with archives and appropriation. When a laboratory of photography emerged at the Academy of Arts, a group of like-minded students gathered around it and were introduced to this new approach to the photographic image, as well as to structuralism, post-structuralism and the ideas of Michel Foucault, including his “archeology”, and other subjects on memory and identity. Thus, addressing the issues of past, memory or archive in the photographic art is usually associated with the Linnap’s School<sup>6</sup> – named after Peeter Linnap who was an active lecturer and artist at that time.

This way, photography and memory became their main means of addressing the issues that were present and ardent on the level of the society. The photography laboratory at the Academy of Arts was called “Faculty of Taste” and its students became obsessed with photographic materials and personal stories, which was partly due to the fact that, as mentioned, during the Soviet occupation archives were carefully guarded and personal memories had no place in the dominant collective memory. By exploring these new mediums in art – photography and video – these young artists took advantage of the notion of truth, or the truth value, that has been given to photographs, and created semi-fictional narratives of their own lives, of their past, and the lives of their close ones. By touching some personal subjects in their works, such as memory, identity, sexuality and death, they spoke a universal language and revealed personal stories that for long had been denied in many aspects, and now had gained importance. With some of them embodying only very hidden and almost invisible hints of the condemnation of the regime, they still became a form of contestation and resistance for touching upon subjects from the private sphere.

## Death as Resistance

As confirmed by the quotes by Susan Sontag and as it is known from the writings of Roland Barthes, death is considered to be an essential part of photography. A

photograph always depicts something that has been. Barthes considered death to be the very core or *eidōs* of a photograph (Barthes, 1985: 15) – they are representations of a lost time. Or, testify to time’s relentless melt, as Susan Sontag has put it (Sontag, 2008: 15). This is what closely ties photography with memory and memory to photography. But death in this current context has a wider meaning, too: during the Soviet occupation death was a taboo, it belonged only to the last pages of the newspapers, unless it was a head of state or government (Kõivupuu, 2010: 111–112). The Soviet regime promoted atheist propaganda and atheist concept of death, while detaching from the church and religion, declaring that after death all that remains is a name and children, who will carry on their parents’ work (Järve, 2010: 6–8). So it isn’t a surprise that after the collapse of the regime, interest in such personal subjects, such as death, increased – especially in the arts. For example, in the work *My Father* (1996) by Piret Rääni, which uses photographs from family album and other kinds of documents to tell a personal story.

The core of this work is death, or to be more precise, suicide. Using photographic materials from her family archives, Piret Rääni constructs a visual representation of her father. The photographs depict her father’s everyday life – working at a theatre as an actor and being with family and friends. These personal and nostalgic common pictures are accompanied by short and harsh statements such as: “[h]e believed that the KGB was following him”, “[h]e didn’t know who to trust”, “[w]e don’t know if he imagined it or not”, “[i]t drove him mad” and “[h]e hung himself”. In this case, the artist is creating a sort of a post-mortem image of her father, something that would stop him from disappearing into the oblivion, but by constructing his presence, she is actually visualizing his absence instead – with every new exhibition the constructed presence becomes another proof of endless absence.

However; this is not a nostalgic altar for the artist’s father, but rather a search for a new visual language and an intriguing play with words and images. In his latest study on art and archives, Ernst van Alphen has pointed out that images, in their nature, are unstable (van Alphen, 2014: 27). Memories are unstable also. While exhibiting this work during the 1990s, Piret Rääni changed the text that was accompanying the photographic materials from the archives, thus giving the work, and the photographs, a new meaning each time. Using words like “KGB”, or talking about things like death and suicide, something that was unheard of and even dangerous during the Soviet occupation,<sup>7</sup> was definitely new and exciting and can

be considered a form of protest against the ideology of the totalitarian regime.

Piret Rääni belonged to the same group of critically minded young students who were influenced by Peeter Linnap's love for postmodernism and photography. Piret Rääni herself has said that for them, these young students, at that time, it was all a game. They were playing with new mediums and new identities. Yet, her work *My Father* is more than just a test of new mediums. It is a work in which private and collective memories intertwine. From one side it tells a story about the influences of totalitarian terror on people, referring to the psychological traumas caused by the conditions of Soviet occupation. On the other side, it also characterizes the artistic practices of the 1990s, while addressing the issues and taboos that had been suppressed during the Soviet occupation. This work, while first exhibited in 1996, is still relevant, since in the last few years it has been exhibited again at several exhibitions, as part of a way of rethinking and conceptualizing the 1990s as a decade of paradigmatic changes.

Another example of the relationship between photography, death and personal stories in the Estonian art of the 1990s, is Ly Lestberg's 1998 Haapsalu City Gallery exhibition *Nothing*. This is another autobiographical self-definition narrative – the centre of it is the artist herself. The exhibition is a construction of memory and identity through photographic materials from the artist's family albums. The photographs depict the artist in her early years – as a happy and carefree young child – as well as as a grown-up woman. The centre of the exhibition is, rather eerily, a photograph of a seemingly sleeping, but actually of a dead child – the artist's aunt who had died at a young age.

The photo of the dead child functions as a rupture in the otherwise reassuring personal story of growing up, a visualization of the time's relentless melt, as the exhibition covered 30 years of the artist's life, bringing together the what-was, what-could-have-been and what-is. There is a subtle presence of a trauma, of melancholy and mourning, which is perhaps the trauma of the process of growing up and the life not being the way it was imagined in our childhood. The exhibition is a *memento mori* – a subtle reminder of one's mortality and life's fragility. The photographs from the family album testify to the time's relentless melt.

For Roland Barthes, as well as for Ly Lestberg, and for many others, there is a hope for finding some truth about the past in family pictures. In its essence, a photograph is destined to tell a family's story, they are the evidence of the past events,

the “that-has-been”, as Barthes has put it. In Ly Lestberg’s exhibition the photographs from her albums refer to the events in her life that have shaped her identity, or rather the memories of those events, making it a search for and analysis of the artist’s identity. As implied in the quote by Patricia Holland and Jo Spence (1991) – looking at family photographs is to construct a fantastic past and to work as a detective to find another “true” version. As we know, memory is a constant process, negotiation and re-negotiation from the perspective and needs of the present moment as pointed out by Aleida Assmann (2000), and which also explains how our memories of some events constantly change and evolve.

This exhibition is not a very typical exhibition for Ly Lestberg who is mainly known for staged photographic art and nudes, but who is still been constantly interested in the issues of the passing of time and identity, though mainly with sexual identity. In a way, both of these subjects, death and sexuality, are a form of protest; because that kind of search for one’s identity and construction of one’s memory is something that wasn’t possible during the Soviet occupation. Yet, even in 1998 this exhibition sparked some criticism. The audience felt too uncomfortable in this overly personal story, which still aimed to touch some general human subjects, such as childhood, dreams, growing up and the trauma of death. It was even considered to be arrogant – perhaps because the audience wasn’t used to this kind of sharp reflection on one’s past and present. This also implies to the fact that even though it is considered that private issues, such as death, were a taboo during the Soviet occupation and not so much after the independence, this wasn’t always the case.

A more critical approach to the relationship between death and photography can be found in the work *Grandfather* by Mari Laanemets. In this work, the indexical qualities – the photograph’s function as an indexical record of reality – has been put to the test. *Grandfather* is a collection of photographs from a family album, which aim to construct a story of a man who is claimed to be the artist’s grandfather. The photographs depict a man in all kinds of very common daily activities from sitting at a birthday table with other guests to holding the hand of a small child and riding a bicycle. But on each photograph the face of the man has been erased by scratching it off. The story that accompanies this work suggests that this act of erasure had been done by a little girl who’s grandfather is depicted on these photographs. The grandfather had died and the little girl, firmly believ-

ing in the connection between the photograph and reality, scratched out the face of her grandfather on each photograph in the family album. If he was no longer alive – how could he exist on photographs? Photographs are magic in the way they capture the reality; yet, the way they crystalize moments which become lost in the passage of time, creates confusion and also possibilities for different interpretations.

The scratched out face functions as a rupture between reality and image. It is believed that the flat surface of a photograph has a special connection to reality, that it is a proof of what is and what has been. It is believable that the power that has been given to photographs could confuse someone such as a little girl. It is not easy to damage a photograph – the act seems violent. When we look at a photograph, we don't see the flat surface, the paper of the screen – we see through it – we see people and spaces. It is that psychological connection between the photograph and reality, that makes every kind of act of physical intervention on the surface of a photograph particularly violent and powerful, uncanny and eerie, at the same time. Another example of this is ripping apart or burning former lover's photograph, as if that gesture would erase the past or hurt someone for real.

The work by Mari Laanemets is a reminder that even the materialized memories are fleeting and disappearing. It's also an intervention – an intervention to the constructed connection between a photograph and reality, between a photograph and the memory it carries. In the words of Marianne Hirsch this kind of interventions, “these forms of resistance not only contest but actually reveal the power of photography as a technology of personal and familial memory” (Hirsch, 2001:193). Mari Laanemets' work challenges the photograph as a medium of memory and for this it has been an emblematic artwork in the history of Estonian photographic art. Even though the work itself consists of a simple gesture, many younger photographic artists have been encouraged and influenced by this work, by its boldness and its affect – by the way it questions the values and power as a medium of memory that has been given to photography.

## Notes on Forgetting

The works discussed previously have been mostly personal stories addressing the taboos and subjects that were silenced during the Soviet occupation, or works

that are challenging photography as a medium of memory, as in the case of Mari Laanemets. The last work included here has a bit of a different background – even though it still uses personal family photographs, its aim is to highlight collective forgetting or amnesia; Peeter Linnap's (1993) *Summer 1955*. Peeter Linnap is an artist and professor that has been already mentioned in this paper as the leader of a group of critically minded art students in the 1990s. *Summer 1955* is a work that connects personal archives, photographs from a family album, to the memory debates, and the collective amnesia resulting from them, that were part of the construction of a newly democratic country in the beginning of the 1990s. Rather than confirming the main narrative, it reveals other layers in the process of memory making.

*Summer 1955* is collection of old family photos that the artist found on the attic of his father-in-law. These black-and-white grainy photographs, taken presumably in 1955, depict young Estonian men in Soviet army uniforms, on an empty green field, posing with revolvers. These are not official photographs, but made for personal use, for a personal album. The men on these photographs are very relaxed, their arms reached out with a gun in a very playful manner, like the protagonists of a Western. The series also consists of a view of the surroundings – a sunny countryside. Peeter Linnap took these found images, enlarged them one meter high and exhibited them as a work of art. Firstly, the way these were exhibited – family photographs as works of art – was definitely new and contemporary. But secondly, there was something even more powerful in this work than the mere way it was presented – it was the past that came back haunting.

When this work was exhibited, the Estonian society was systematically working on moving away from the Soviet past. The Soviet occupation was considered as a rupture, something not inherent to Estonia or Estonians, a disturbance in the existence of Estonian republic, and the Soviet era identity, or being connected to it in any ways, was something to be ashamed of (Kõresaar, 2005: 107). Having fun while being in the Soviet army was definitely something that otherwise would have been silenced; however, it is hard to disclaim or silence something that is one meter high and on an exhibition wall for everybody to see. In the ways in which this work made it uncomfortable for the society that was trying to forget certain aspects of its past, we can see an example of what Walter Benjamin (1969) called brushing the history against the grain – an example of an artist that is digging in the past and materializing the past that otherwise would have been eliminated or

erased from the dominant narrative which assured that Estonians were the victims and Russians were the perpetrators. Obviously, that was not always the case. Between black and white, there are also many shades of grey.

Memory consists of different processes, such as remembering and forgetting, which have been considered to be intimately intertwined even by early Greeks.<sup>8</sup> It was Borges who had a character named Funes, who appeared in his short story *Funes el Memorioso* (Borges, 1979), and who was unable of forgetting, which drove him mad in the end. It is impossible to remember everything and forget nothing. In this sense, memory is a constant process of remembering and forgetting and in order to build an identity, it might be necessary to forget some things of the past. In the context of this artwork, the Soviet past had not completely been forgotten, but there was a certain way that had been established in which it had to be remembered. Anything else, a deviation, was not acceptable.

This quite scandalous work by Peeter Linnap not only exemplifies the selectiveness of collective memory but also brings out the conflict between different memory narratives. It brings attention to the way how and on what conditions some events of the past are being remembered and how their meaning and interpretation is in constant change. It was Maurice Halbwachs (cited in Tamm and Petersoo, 2008) who pointed out that even if we remember things alone, the what and how we remember things is always influenced by the social environment we belong to. This is how collective memory is constructed. This work shows the other side of the coin – the act of remembering is always also an act of forgetting, or as Andreas Huyssen has noted: “every act of memory carries with it a dimension of betrayal, forgetting, and absence” (Huyssen, 2003: 4). Collective amnesia is a part of every kind of collective remembering.

## The Exotic Past

The artworks that have been dealing with personal stories and with subjects that were taboos during the Soviet occupation, and the work that is offering an alternative memory to the officially constructed one, have a lot of similarities. First of all, all of these works refer to the unstable and dynamic nature of the memories, and show that even the material mediums of memory are unreliable in their nature. The first three works discussed here used personal subjects and taboos, such as death,

as a reaction to the psychological repressions of the Soviet occupation, which had silenced personal stories and subjects. However, the last one (by Peeter Linnap) was a reaction or an intervention (or perhaps a reminder) to an already established narrative of the re-independent country, where the Soviet past was erased and forgotten – and drawing attention to the collective amnesia of the Soviet period.

Similarly to other countries that had suffered suppressions by a totalitarian regime, memory became a form of protest in Estonia.<sup>9</sup> The use of family photographs became a common artistic practice to address different memory issues – to create counter-memories or alternative memories, to challenge the mediums capability to carry and present certain memories, and to brush the history against the grain – to use the words of Walter Benjamin again – and shift the dominant narrative by revealing untold stories and deliberately forgotten memories. It is also important to point out that contrary to the general belief, working with memory is not something that characterizes solely the art of the 1990s, it's a tendency that by no means shows signs of disappearing. These works are just a small selection from the 1990s, but rethinking and working through the Soviet past continues through the different mediums of art. As mentioned in the beginning of this article, almost all of these discussed works have been exhibited again at different exhibit.

But in this shift lies the important question of finding the balance when dealing with a traumatic past – the question of the obligation or duty to remember, and the burden of the past that might keep us from moving forward. The question of holding on to something and letting go. All of the memory work that has been done during these years of re-independence is meaningful especially for the people who had suffered repressions and using the visual language of an era that has caused death and distress should be sensitive and respectful. But new generations always want to break free from the old customs, beliefs and traditions – and currently, that's what makes the Soviet past so exotic, different and appealing. Yet, no doubt, in order to let go, to get rid of the burden, first, the past has to be acknowledged.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The work *My Father* by Piret Rääni was exhibited at two exhibitions in 2015: at *1995* curated by Anders Härm and Hanno Soans at the EKKM in Tallinn and at *From Explosion to Expanse. Estonian Contemporary Photography 1991–2015* in Tartu Art Museum. The latter exhibition also included the works by Mari Laanemets and Peeter Linnap, which have also been discussed in this article.

- <sup>2</sup> Collective memory is used in this article as defined by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in the beginning of the 20th century in his *La mémoire collective*. In his theory memory depends on the social framework, which shapes the perception of the past. In his view memory is something that is constantly constructed, reconstructed and modified to conform to the prevailing way of thinking in a society (Halbwachs, 1992, pp. 38–40).
- <sup>3</sup> Although there are companies, especially in the US, that provide this service for example for families who have lost their children, as a proof that the child has been in the world and as an object of grief.
- <sup>4</sup> Both the Soviet occupation and the re-independence in 1991 have been interpreted as cultural traumas. See Aareleid-Tart, (2006) and also Kõresaar (2005)
- <sup>5</sup> Saaremaa biennials were international art festivals that took place in 1995 and 1997, both of them presented mainly photography and installation art, and focused on the issues of history and identity.
- <sup>6</sup> This is an informal name of the students that were influenced by the teachings of Peeter Linnap at the Estonian Academy of Arts during that decade. Another phenomenon that is connected to this Linnap's School is the [mobil]gallery group consisting of students that worked mainly in photography, video and installation art and was the most active in the middle of the 90s.
- <sup>7</sup> Interview with Piret Räni, Tallinn, Estonia 27.03.2013
- <sup>8</sup> The mythical figures of Lemosyne and Mnemosyne marked forgetting and remembering as equal parts. (Whitehead, 2009: 13)
- <sup>9</sup> For memory as a form of protest see also Nora. (2011)

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