

Voicing Memories, Unearthing Identities

Studies in the Twenty-First-Century Literatures
of Eastern and East-Central Europe

Edited by

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Series in Literary Studies



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that precisely for that reason, the themes investigated in the following volume—memory and identity struggles—have proved their gravity in a new light.

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Germany, December 2022

Introduction: Literature, Memory, and Identity in the Twenty-First-Century Eastern and East-Central Europe

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An immense wave of interest in memory studies has developed over the past twenty years.¹ Beginning primarily as a socio-historical experiment, analyses of memory have influenced other scholarly disciplines, particularly literary studies, with its mutual dependence on remembering as a collective action representing recollected historical events. Identity—mainly expressed in literary narratives—was closely connected to acts of remembrance and representation. New generations of authors working in this paradigm thus began to excavate public and private memories precisely for the sake of *remembering* instead of *overcoming* the past, pushing scholars to find a place for historical imagination. This book addresses the issue of identity as a pivot in studies of memory and literature. In this context, it addresses the question of cultural negotiation as it took shape between memory and literature, history and literature, and memory and history, with the help of contemporary authors and their works from Eastern and East-Central Europe.

In the region, the framework provided by memory studies became highly valuable for understanding the overloaded interpretations of and conflicting perspectives on events during the twentieth century. The trauma of two world wars, the development of collective consciousness according to national and ethnic categories, stories of the trampled lands and lives of people, and resistance to the reign of authoritarian and totalitarian terrors—these trajectories left complex layers of identities to unfold. Here we take the

¹ Cf. Anna Lisa Tota and Trever Hagen, eds., *Routledge International Handbook of Memory Studies* (London–New York: Routledge, 2016); Astrid Erll and Ansger Nünning, eds., *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010).

literature of countries such as Estonia, Poland, Serbia, and Russia as our point of departure and explain its significance in terms of geographical, theoretical, and thematic perspectives.

GEOGRAPHICAL SCOPE: EASTERN AND EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE

What we call Eastern and East-Central Europe is the geographical entity stretched from the east of the German-speaking area to Russia and the Caucasus, in other words, the regions that witnessed firsthand two totalitarian political regimes of the twentieth century: National Socialism and Stalinism. Until 1989/1991, most of these areas remained parts of the Eastern Bloc. The direct experience of genocide, ethnic cleansing, political persecution, censorship, and propaganda shaped the entire region, resulting in collective remembrances that significantly differ from those constituted in the postwar era in what is broadly understood to be the “West.” In this way, the commemoration of the victims of Nazism—with a particular focus on the genocide of European Jews—is considered in the Western discourse the only memory duty with both unique and universal moral dimensions.²

This attempt at universality has often stood at odds with the collective memories of local nations and ethnic groups of Eastern and East-Central Europe, which became particularly visible after the fall of communism in those regions. As Ann Rigney asserts, associating any commemorative act with political meaning is not a simple outcome of unfortunate historical events but was installed, practiced, and therefore enforced throughout the latter half of the twentieth century:

[T]he collapse of communism in the late 1980s and the major expansion of the European Union that followed in 2004 undermined this emerging consensus about the centrality of the Holocaust and the idea of a “bad conscience” to any master narrative of Europe. [...] Critically, the difficulty of integrating the former communist countries into the larger European master narrative was compounded by the fact that the legacy of Stalinist dictatorship introduced a new focus of

² Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archive* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Giorgio Agamben, *What Remains of Auschwitz: The Archive and the Witness*. (New York: Zone Books, 1999); Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesellschaftstheorie und Kulturkritik* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1975); Theodor W. Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” in *Prisms*, ed. Samuel and Shierry Weber, ed. Thomas McCarty. (Boston: MIT Press, 1997).

memory that offered serious competition to the Holocaust as the dominant site of atrocity and victimhood.³

The abolition of censorship and the pluralization of the public sphere brought systematically oppressed and silenced voices and perspectives of minorities (Kashubians, Silesians, Rusyns, etc.) into sight. However, they simultaneously caused the reappearance of openly xenophobic discourses like blatant anti-Semitism and anti-Romism. One could also observe memory and identity conflicts at the very local level. Often, official interpretation or commemoration does not correspond to experiences shared by underrepresented groups. Minority perspectives thus question hegemonic memory discourses, and Silesian attempts to challenge the dominant Polish narrative would be an acute example of this.⁴ Recently, this new angle was even more nuanced with the colonial understanding of the communist past in the region too.⁵

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS: BEYOND POLITICAL MEMORY

Adding to regional interests in memory studies, the popularity of the field centered on the concept of collective memory as an analytical tool and therefore concentrated on social approaches.⁶ This strong methodological inclination has been criticized for heavily highlighting the institutional and,

³ Ann Rigney, "Ongoing: Changing Memory and the European Project," in *Media and Cultural Memory/Medien und kulturelle Erinnerung*, eds. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin–New York: De Gruyter, 2014), 345. Rigney also notes that "[t]here was a tendency among commentators in the former West [...] to view the 'new' members of Europe as belonging to an earlier stage of development in an implicitly stadial narrative in which 'overcoming' ethnic and political conflict was taken to be an inevitable stage in modernization and European integration." *Ibid.*, 345. See also: Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Ljiljana Radonić, "Post-communist invocation of Europe: memorial museums' narratives and the Europeanization of memory," *National Identities* 19, no. 2 (2017): 269–88.

⁴ See Chapter 9 of this volume.

⁵ To attempt to use postcolonial theory to analyze the communist past is "to elaborate a critical language pertinent enough to represent the complex histories of dependence in a region." See Dorota Kołodziejczyk and Cristina Şandru, "Introduction: On colonialism, communism and east-central Europe – some reflections," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 48, no. 2 (2010): 113–116, here 113. There is also research focusing on postcolonial reading on post-communist literature. Dobrota Pucherova and Robert Gafrik, eds., *Postcolonial Europe? Essays on Post-Communist Literatures and Cultures* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

⁶ Wulf Kansteiner, "Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies," *History and Theory* 41, no. 2 (2002): 179–97.

thus, one-way transmission of historical memories. However, cultures of remembrance should be more broadly understood as processes of questioning the hegemonic construction and inflexibility of one's own identity. To use the terminology of Aleida Assmann, the politics of memory in the countries of Eastern and East-Central Europe struggle to this day between the politics of self-assertion (*Politik der Selbstbehauptung*) and the politics of regret (*Politik der Reue*).⁷ The former emphasizes and venerates the continuity between the past and present, whereas the latter focuses on rupture and change.⁸

The tension created by both approaches also contributed to diversifying nuanced reactions vis-à-vis political memory. The politics of remembering encompasses not only the official policies of a given administration but also becomes a non-homogeneous result of initiatives launched by public actors who possess sufficient cultural and social capital and interest in participating in memory debates. This process involves governmental and non-governmental institutions (cultural centers, scientific units, and NGOs) and individuals (journalists, scholars, writers, and artists). Contemporary Eastern and East-Central European literature simultaneously echoes and creatively reuses memory tropes. It has thus acquired a prominent role as a (counter-)player in current collective and cultural memory debates.

Based on the idea that the encounter between social sciences and literary studies is a step toward pushing the boundaries of academic disciplines, French historian Ivan Jablonka provocatively states: "History is a contemporary literature."⁹ If this statement holds some truth, it is possible to claim the converse, too: Contemporary literature becomes historiography. In fact, the literature of Eastern and East-Central Europe puts collective memory in fluid temporal transformation. The statement by Polish writer Jacek Dukaj confirms the point: "Judging by our literature, Poland has always existed more in the past and the future than in the present."¹⁰ Dukaj's idea describes the reality of almost all countries in the region. Consciousness of the linear

⁷ Aleida Assmann, *Ist die Zeit aus den Fugen? Aufstieg und Fall des Zeitregimes der Moderne* (München: Hanser, 2013), 308–11.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ivan Jablonka, *History Is a Contemporary Literature: Manifesto for the Social Sciences*, trans. Nathan J. Bracher (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018). Jablonka wrote an epic biography about his grandparents—who were persecuted as communists in prewar Poland and suffered in Vichy France as Jewish immigrants—to reconsider the boundaries between history and literature as a historian; see Ivan Jablonka, *A History of the Grandparents I Never Had*, trans. Jane Kuntz (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

¹⁰ Jacek Dukaj, "Wstęp," in *PL + 50: Historie przyszłości*, ed. Jacek Dukaj (Kraków: WL, 2004), 6.

development of time was disrupted by the location on the margins of Europe and witnessing both national and transnational tragedies. In this geographical realm, the question of 'what happened' takes on a significantly heavy, almost real presence, whereas the question of 'what could have happened' thereby acquires a special meaning as a matter of possibilities. At the same time, the present moment should be devoted to creatively maintaining the relationship between the past and the future.

In practice, literature helped preserve the memory, for future generations, of those who were persecuted and lost their lives too early. Even in countries with an unquestionably hegemonic status (such as Russia/the Soviet Union in the concerned region), the lack of political freedom and freedom of speech burdened literature with this additional task of remembrance. In the opening to her poem *Requiem*, the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966) commemorated the victims of the Great Terror in the 1930s in the Soviet Union:

In the fearful years of the Yezhov terror, I spent seventeen months in prison queues in Leningrad. One day somebody 'identified' me. Beside me, in the queue, there was a woman with blue lips. She had, of course, never heard of me; but she suddenly came out of that trance so common to us all and whispered in my ear (everybody spoke in whispers there): 'Can you describe this?' And I said: 'Yes, I can.' And then something like the shadow of a smile crossed what had once been her face.¹¹

Throughout the twentieth century, as shown in the case above, voicing one's account took on a particular communal role in representing both the individual and the collective. This trend has become increasingly evident in the twenty-first century, as the questions of identities have begun to gain more and more significance.

SEARCHING FOR A NOVEL LINK: MEMORY STUDIES AND LITERARY STUDIES

In twenty-first-century literary works from Eastern and East-Central Europe that thematize the question of memory, one can recognize new strategies, first and foremost, a vast need to (re)explore one's own identity, both individual and collective. It includes reconsiderations of one's transculturality/transnationality, investigations into a genealogy of people, things, and places (especially when their fates have remained unknown for years due to political reasons or

¹¹ Anna Akhmatova, "Requiem," in *Selected Poems*, trans. D. M. Thomas (London: Penguin books, s.d.), 87. Cf. Alexander Etkind, *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

personal traumata), as well as a rising interest in gender and queerness issues, not seldomly resulting in narratives that insightfully challenge and question already existing memory paradigms and taboos, both universal and local.¹²

Among such reconsiderations, one unique case is literature that openly delves into the identity struggles of the second and the third generation of Shoah survivors in very local, East-Central European contexts.¹³ Together with the subjects of language, religion, and nationality (Ukrainian, Polish, Hungarian, etc.), they also include questions about the long-term consequences of ideological and political choices made by people's (grand)parents that in the authoritarian/totalitarian regimes could affect whole families (e.g., involvement in communist rule, or, conversely, participation in the anti-communist dissent). As Deborah E. Lipstadt and Eva Fogelman point out, "[i]n Eastern Europe many children of survivors grew up as children of Communists rather than children of Jewish Holocaust survivors. It would not be until *glasnost* in the U.S.S.R., and the Solidarity movement in Poland that confrontation with the past began, and survivor families were able to grieve over the dead and embrace their true identities and their links to a past that was destroyed."¹⁴

On the formal level, one can observe the appearance of ego-documents (memoirs, travelogs) and pieces of prose that consciously and creatively play with epistemological uncertainty and memory gaps—"Those speaking may be fictitious, but what they say is real. [...] It's the stories that can be authentic or not"¹⁵—as well as attempts to blur the distinction between the private and the political. Literature plays with collective memory paradigms by making up alternative versions of the past ("what could have happened if...") in

¹² See the longer poetic piece by Božena Keff that concerns the taboos of maternity and mother–daughter relationships in the shadow of the Shoah: Božena Keff, *On Mother and Fatherland* (Cambridge, MA: MadHat Press, 2017).

¹³ Similar attempts to connect memory with identity can be found in: Jade McGlynn and Oliver T. Jones, eds., *Researching Memory and identity in Russia and Eastern Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

¹⁴ Deborah Lipstadt and Eva Fogelman, "Children of Jewish Survivors," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 9, ed. Fred Skolnik (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2007), 386. In her nonfiction book *Secondhand Time*, Svetlana Alexievich evokes the story of a Jew who, as a teenager, was in a Soviet partisan troop and had to hide his identity: "The partisan commanders had secret instructions from Moscow: Don't trust the Jews, don't let them into the regiments, annihilate them. They considered us traitors. We learned the truth about all of this thanks to perestroika." Svetlana Aleksievich, *Secondhand Time. The Last of the Soviets*, trans. Bela Shayevich (New York: Random House, 2016), 200.

¹⁵ Mikhail Shishkin, *Maidenhair*, trans. Marian Schwartz (Rochester: Open Letter, 2012), 24. Cf. Katja Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, trans. Shelley Frisch (London: 4th Estate, 2018) and David Albahari, *Götz and Meyer*, trans. Ellen Elias-Bursac (San Diego: Harcourt, 2004).

speculative fiction and genre fiction.¹⁶ Simultaneously, authors are aware of the crucial paradigms of memory scholarship, particularly those that have been successfully adopted by literary criticism and literary studies—such as ‘postmemory’—and make use of them consciously and creatively.¹⁷

Along with fresh topics and theoretical and formal approaches, the twenty-first century also brought new technologies that have allowed a reconsideration of mnemonic and archival tools and practices and rethinking such notions as the ‘library,’ the ‘exhibition,’ or the ‘archive.’¹⁸ In one instance, the Auschwitz Memorial Museum regularly posts a photograph of one former prisoner who was born on that day and provides a short note about their fate on their social media channels: “12 August 1941 | French Jewish girl Annie Nakache was born in Constantine, Algeria. She lived in Toulouse—a daughter of a swimmer Alfred Nakache. In January 1944, she was deported to #Auschwitz with her parents. She was murdered in a gas chamber with her mother, Paule.”¹⁹ At the same time, over the past three decades, digital cameras and recording and storage devices have become accessible (which also means affordable) for almost anyone, enabling new ways of active participation in commemoration actions. Mainly social media platforms and content management systems that offer intuitive user interfaces allow laypersons to share their family stories, memoirs, and discoveries and to also discuss them publicly. Considering internet platforms have already established their literary poetics (‘Tweets’, i.e., posts on Twitter, require similar rigid brevity as aphorisms or haiku),²⁰ one can see how the digital era connects literature with memory practices.

¹⁶ Cf. Igor Ostachowicz’s ironic horror novel *Night of the Living Jews*: Igor Ostachowicz, *Noc żywych Żydów* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo W.A.B., 2018).

¹⁷ On the concept “postmemory,” see Marianne Hirsch, *Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

¹⁸ Aleida Assman, “Canon and Archive,” in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, eds. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008).

¹⁹ Auschwitz Memorial/Muzeum Auschwitz, “12 August 1941. French Jewish girl Annie Nakache,” Facebook, August 12, 2022.

²⁰ Cf. poetological analyses of Twitter and Facebook contributions: Ingunn Lunde, “Hashtag Poetics: Political humour on Russian Twitter,” *Zeitschrift für Slawistik* 61, no. 1 (2016); Rebecca Romdhani, “Minor genres and marginal realities: Kei Miller’s blog posts and Facebook notes,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 54, no. 1 (2018).

AIM AND STRUCTURE OF THE VOLUME

Literature functions as a compelling medium and creative force of remembrance and identity-making.²¹ Hence the following volume's task is to introduce and analyze contemporary authors' attempts to engage with various mnemonic practices. The book offers case studies from Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Poland, Russia, and Serbia, with some cross-national or trans-regional (Upper Silesia), ethnically diverse (including Jewish) perspectives. The articles deal with literary works from twenty-first-century viewpoints and exhibit how diverse authors could find strategies to work around monolithic identity-making processes through the flexible use of temporal frameworks, stretching the past into the present and sometimes into the future, or the other way around.

Voicing Memories, Unearthing Identities is divided into sections based on three different aspects of the literary approach to make sense of the self. As the book's title suggests, its aim was, first and foremost, to collect the *voices* of people exercising private and public remembrance. Through this practice and its setbacks, the identity/identities of the authors/protagonists *unearth*. Thus, one can see stages between voicing and reconfirmation step by step. To this end, the book is organized into three parts. The first of them, *Creating Identity*, includes articles that analyze the creative dependence between writing literature and fabricating identities. "Creating identities" is, admittedly, a standard feature of literary culture, yet the volume's contributors reinvestigate this question with the help of conceptual maneuvers such as the 'futures past,' the 'lie,' 'forgetting,' or 'archival writing.' Justyna Tabaszewska, for instance, examines a few works by Polish authors to illustrate how alternatives for our future could be conceived vis-à-vis historical events. She argues that works like Jacek Dukaj's anthology *PL+50. Histories of the Future* (*PL+50. Historie przyszłości*, 2004) and Ziemowit Szczerek's novel *Victorious Republic* (*Rzeczpospolita zwycięska*, 2013) demonstrate how the visions of the past frame stories of the future as "an active component of collective memory."²² Jennifer Döring's article presents comparative analyses of three contemporary Russian authors (Lyudmila Ulitskaya, Mikhail Shishkin, and Andrei Gerasimov), referring to the concept of the lie as a powerful tool for both forgetting and preserving 'the truth' in specific circumstances. All authors portray the lie as a social venture passing on stories from one generation to another. A similar notion concerning generational memory is investigated by Alena Heinritz. In

²¹ Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

²² Jacek Dukaj, ed., *PL + 50. Historie przyszłości* (Kraków: WL, 2004); Ziemowit Szczerek, *Rzeczpospolita zwycięska: Alternatywna historia Polski* (Kraków: Znak, 2013).

her article, she explores the importance of archives and documents in the context of the post-communist memory culture while analyzing prose by Kéthévane Davrichewy, Kateřina Tučková, and Lyudmila Ulitskaya.

In the second part of the volume, *Conflicting Identity*, the reader will find three chapters that deal with conflicts in identity molding. Today, we are aware of identities' fluid nature: their multiple facets are not free from apparent contradictions, and, moreover, not all elements of identity are level. One of the most striking uneven relationships in this regard is the Jewish–Polish juxtaposition throughout the twentieth century: the Jewish population in Poland, although speaking Polish and sharing specific social visions of the era, was seen (and saw itself) as the Other. Karolina Kołpak focuses on this very Jewish–Polish confrontation: The author claims that the term 'conflict,' often describing the historical relationship of the two ethnic groups normatively, hinders proper comprehension of the minority-majority imbalance. Her extensive analysis of Szczepan Twardoch's novels *The King of Warsaw* (*Król*, 2016) and *The Kingdom* (*Królestwo*, 2018) demonstrates that the Silesian author managed to show the asymmetry of the Poles and the Jews in interwar Warsaw.²³ Transitioning from the interwar era to the communist era, one will find Melinda Harlov-Csortán's article about another dark phase of Eastern and East-Central European collective memory. According to Harlov-Csortán, contemporary Hungarian writers and filmmakers (Péter György, György Száraz Miklós, and Márta Mészáros) touched upon the question of historical rupture in post-socialist memory. In their works, the lack of accounts of the past and deliberate silencing illustrates the difficulties of generational transmission of memory visions. The prose of contemporary Polish-Jewish authors (Agata Tuszyńska, Piotr Paziński, and Mikołaj Grynberg), analyzed by Elisa-Maria Hiemer, adds an intriguing layer to such struggles. Hiemer argues that for Jewish citizens, the lack of strong Jewish memory in Poland and the overall Polish national perspective (the combination of heroism and victimhood) became an additional obstacle in the process of identity formation. Identities are being shaped and shaken, but there are efforts to restore them throughout the changing times.

The three chapters from the last part of the book, *Preserving Identity*, cover a more comprehensive range of mnemonic practices that aim to ensure the consistency of the narratives. Philine Bickhardt's analysis of David Albahari's novel *Götz and Meyer* (*Gec i Majer*, 1998) explains the synthesis of differing testimonies of the Shoah between divided subjectivities.²⁴ The novel offers an extensive account of the perpetrator's view, but it is precisely thanks to such a

²³ Szczepan Twardoch, *Król* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2016).

²⁴ David Albahari, *Götz and Meyer*.

step that ‘the unspeakable,’ i.e., the account of the victim, can be reconstructed. Here, Bickhardt argues, “[i]magination ‘fills’ the gap left by the witness and the document,” the gap between the subjective and the objective. While purely textual attempts to preserve identities retain their scope, modern technology allows us to tackle this issue differently. Kseniia Tereshchenko and Antonina Puchkovskaia present the possibility of reinterpreting Gulag literature in the digital world. Their digital humanities project entitled “Notes from the Camp” focuses on the Gulag literature of Estonians, which was often overshadowed by the work of the same genre but written in Russian. Since Gulag literature, as a hybrid form of fiction and non-fiction, has complex cultural implications, the authors emphasize the importance of accessible resources to continue working on the memories of the Gulag, pointing out that the living collective can vary even within one country and one community. The chapter by Monika Glosowitz showcases such examples of the women’s herstories of Upper Silesia, a historic mining region of contemporary Poland. Highlighting contemporary women writers such as Anna Dziewit-Meller and Joanna Fligel, Glosowitz points out that there is a way in which Silesian women’s expression would not be an insignificant part of official national myths (neither Polish nor Silesian nor German) but could become counter-narratives to the forced gender hierarchy in the economic dynamics in the region.

In sum, the chapters in the following book address a fusion of three academic fields: memory studies, Eastern and East-Central European studies, and literary studies, and invite further interdisciplinary dialogues on remembrance, oblivion, and recollection.

APPENDIX: UKRAINIAN ESSAYS

The editors started planning this volume in 2021, and the authors finished writing their chapters long before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine began. While the book accommodates several diverse voices from different parts of the Eastern and East-Central European region, the feeling that the volume lacked a vital component could not be shaken off. Adding to the original volume’s manuscript, we decided to include short essays on memory and literature that were kindly offered to us by four Ukrainian literary scholars. By having these variegated texts appear in one book, we wish to express our solidarity with the people whose voices have yet to be heard and whose search for identity via memory is to be continued.

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