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CULTURAL MEMORY IN EASTERN EUROPEAN WOMEN'S LIFE WRITING: AGENCY, PERSISTENCE, LEGACIES

Commenting on a visit to Ukraine from 2014, acclaimed Croatian author Slavenka Drakulić notes how shame and “repression in the form of silence”² affected the transmission of important knowledge about the harms of the old propaganda regime, especially among women, even within the family. This meant, according to Drakulić, that the young generation, who were the main promoters of social change through pro-European protests, “had to start learning about the past from scratch, because the battles they were fighting were against the remnants of the old totalitarian regime”³. Now, when the battle fought against cultural and memory erasure has turned into a war taking the toll of so many lives in Ukraine, the importance of preserving the memory of trauma and resistance in Eastern Europe cannot be overstated. This special issue of *Dacoromania litteraria* is intended as a contribution to this effort of preservation and reconstruction of cultural memory.

We propose to look at women's works of Life Writing as enclaves of experiential testimony from an eventful, scarring, and unstable century (covered in thirteen articles with a focus spanning from the early 1900s to the twenty-first century) in a conflict-ridden territory (Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe). In interpreting these works, we gauge the social progress that the twentieth century as a “century of women”⁴ has achieved against all odds (women's *agency*), the depth of the traumatic experience that women have overcome or are still working through (women's *persistence*), and the recovery (both in the sense of personal psychic healing and of salvaging cultural memory) that is going on or is still left to do (women's *legacies*). As we explain further, we see in Life Writing an essential component of cultural memory, with a unique ability to create an archive of counter-voices to official memory cultures. We use

¹ Laura Cernat would like to thank the FWO (Flemish Research Foundation) for its generous support of her project (1240823N), which made this work possible.

² Slavenka Drakulić, “A Sulky Girl in Ukraine: What People See or Don't See”, in *Café Europa Revisited*, New York, Penguin Books, 2021, p. 36.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

⁴ Sheila Rowbotham, *A Century of Women: The History of Women in Britain and the United States*, London, Viking, 1997.

the term “Life Writing” very inclusively to refer to works ranging from autofictions and autobiographical novels to works of auto/biography, memoir, artistic documentary, diaries or correspondence, written/recorded by both established writers and aspiring authors or amateurs, and intended both as private documents and as addressed to a wide reading public. Though the broad archive of Life Writing is gradually gaining visibility world-wide, parts of it being in many cases integrated in the canon⁵ of academic curricula and cultural events or debates, the work of theorizing it in a way that bridges the gap between Western and Eastern European models, without assuming that they are reducible to one another, is still underway.

As we undertake to participate in this work, we are aware that many studies on Eastern Europe confirm Drakulić’s observation about the impediments to a coherent recollection of the past, suggesting that memory in the post-totalitarian context is often difficult to transmit to those who did not experience history’s deprivations and strictures firsthand, either because an understanding of the context is perceived as inaccessible to the younger generations or to Western Europeans⁶ or because the propaganda machine of the former totalitarian regimes has been effective in its repression of memory, causing many people to censor themselves even in private writings, a phenomenon described by Matthias Schwartz, Nina Weller, and Heike Winkel as “missing memory”⁷. In addition to these factors, collective shame and the difficulty of drawing a clearcut line between victims and perpetrators⁸ have contributed to consolidating the obstacles in the way of remembering. Finally, what one of the contributors to this issue, Manca G. Renko, describes as a perpetual socio-political transition, “with no prospect of future ‘stability’”, has accentuated the memory crisis by creating a

⁵ See Aleida Assmann’s famous distinction between “archive” and “canon” from “Canon and Archive”, in Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning (eds.), *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2010, pp. 97-108.

⁶ See Simona Mitroiu, “Life Writing and the Politics of Memory in Eastern Europe: Introduction”, in Simona Mitroiu (ed.), *Life Writing and the Politics of Memory in Eastern Europe*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 3.

⁷ See Matthias Schwartz, Nina Weller, Heike Winkel, “After Memory: Introduction”, in Matthias Schwartz, Nina Weller, Heike Winkel (eds.), *After Memory: World War Two in Contemporary Eastern European Literatures*, Berlin – Boston, De Gruyter, 2021, pp. 2-6. See also the notion of “active forgetting”, borrowed from Friedrich Nietzsche in a recent study by Simona Mitroiu (*Women’s Life Writing in Post-Communist Romania: Reclaiming Privacy and Agency*, Berlin – Boston, De Gruyter, 2023, p. 5).

⁸ This feeling of guilt for participation in everyday communist life, which imbued the social fiber after the regime’s fall, is theorized by Simona Mitroiu (*Women’s Life Writing in Post-Communist Romania*, p. 8.) with a phrase borrowed from Paul Connerton, “forgetting as humiliated silence”. See also Ana Blandiana’s observation that the protesters in early 1990 felt “guilty not for what they had done, but for what they had not done” (Ana Blandiana, *Mai-mult-ca-trecutul [More-Than-Past]*, București, Humanitas, 2023, p. 13).

sensation of urgency regarding a focus on the present rather than the past. For all of these reasons the work of cultural memory is both urgent and important.

If it is true that we are living, as trauma theorists have been considering for decades, in what Shoshana Felman called an “age of testimony”⁹, where Life Writing with a traumatic core has become one of the main literary forms, this is happening because of a perceived “crisis of truth”¹⁰ that started even before the digital era. The paradox that shores the fragments of memory work against the ruins of a monolithic notion of historical truth, making trauma memorialization necessary and, by the same token, difficult, does not seem to have an expiry date. The discarding of Fukuyama’s “end of history” paradigm by Eastern European studies, highlighted, among others, by Agnieszka Mrozik and Anja Tippner in connection to the rise of late-socialism-themed autofiction¹¹, also means that the cultural work performed by Life Writing cannot be framed only through the grid of a retrospective relevance. On the contrary, analyzing women’s auto/biographical, autofictional, and diaristic writings from the early twentieth-century to the early twenty-first, and from various areas of transcultural confluence (from the former Habsburg Empire to the former Yugoslavia, as well as Lower Silesia, Transylvania, and other multiethnic areas), as this special issue does, contributes not just to the understanding of the past, but also to that of the present.

In this sense, Life Writing partakes in the open-ended work of cultural memory, a work that acknowledges how, in Gillian Swanson’s words,

a modern notion of the subjective has inflected the way we understand memory: not the fixed historical achievement of epic memory, but a fragmented field of perspectival knowledge, based on the intimate tracings of corporeal inhabitation, the alliance of gesture and encounter, and the expansiveness of reverie into that realm of intimate immensity, the possibility of becoming¹².

This insight about the multifocal and present-oriented nature of memory construction, reformulated by Maria Todorova, who considers “the politics of memory” to be a “work in progress”¹³, and by Hywel Dix, who presents cultural

⁹ Shoshana Felman, “Education and Crisis, Or the Vicissitudes of Teaching”, in Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, New York and London, Routledge, 1992, p. 5.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

¹¹ See Agnieszka Mrozik, Anja Tippner, “Remembering Late Socialism in Autobiographical Novels and Autofictions from Central and Eastern Europe: Introduction”, *The European Journal of Life-Writing*, 2021, 10, pp. 4-5.

¹² Gillian Swanson, “Memory, Subjectivity, and Intimacy: The Historical Formation of the Modern Self and the Writing of Female Autobiography”, in Susannah Radstone (ed.), *Memory and Methodology*, London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2000, p. 127.

¹³ Maria Todorova, “Introduction: Similar Trajectories, Different Memories”, in Maria Todorova, Augusta Dimou, Stefan Troebst (eds.), *Remembering Communism: Private and Public Recollections*

memory, especially in connection to autofiction, as “incomplete and inherently selective”¹⁴, is at the heart of contemporary memory studies, of which literature and Life Writing have become a prominent part. To approach the complexity of a field still in play, we have paid special attention to this fragmented and yet coherent nature of collective memory, not just in assembling articles that implement a diversity of methodologies and cover a diversity of contexts, but also by including, in many of the analyses, fragmentary works like diaries written in the heat of the post-WWI transition (see Renko’s article) or artistic travelogues that use flashback techniques to piece together the story of a found identity (see Leena Käosaar’s contribution).

Aside from both the difficulties raised by the ruptures and erasures of memory imposed by the decades-long totalitarian past and the methodological challenge entailed by the structural shiftiness, adaptability, and open-endedness of memory work, another important aspect that this special issue has taken into account when theorizing Life Writing consisted in the silences we encounter not only in the archives, but in the very texture of written or filmed documents, those silences that are perhaps not simply the effect of censorship, but are deliberately woven in as part of memory artefacts like documentaries, diaries, prison or deportation memoirs, domestic violence testimonies, etc. In light of this realization, we dedicated a section to these silences, omissions, and oblivions, to highlight that the need for evidence against perpetrators and for the memorialization of trauma has to be balanced against an equally important awareness of the irreducibility of traumatic experiences and respect for the privacy of those who underwent them.

Prominent scholars of trauma and cultural memory like Marianne Hirsch have warned in recent years against forms of “appropriative empathy”, promoting instead a “solidarity that is suspicious of easy empathy”¹⁵. This respectful form of empathy entails, among other aspects, an ability to listen not just to words, but also to silences, clues, and hints, to interpret not just narratives but also their contexts; this is also Drakulić’s call in the essay mentioned above, which starts from the readings and misreadings of the image of a Ukrainian schoolgirl from the 1960s in Soviet-style tights. In its specificity, the concrete example both invites and resists the work of cultural memory, creating what one of our contributors (Lola Sinoimeri) calls “common memory around the silences”.

How can one foster a type of contextually informed, non-invasive empathy in the process of testifying to the private effects of war, political imprisonment, deportation or displacement, domestic violence, constant political shifts, gender-

of Lived Experience in Southeast Europe, Budapest – New York, Central European University Press, 2014, p. 7.

¹⁴ Hywel Dix, *Autofiction and Cultural Memory*, London, Routledge, 2023, p. 1.

¹⁵ Marianne Hirsch, “Vulnerable Times”, in Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, Leticia Sabsay (eds.), *Vulnerability in Resistance*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2016, p. 84.

based discrimination, to name just some of the themes addressed by the texts analyzed in this special issue? In other words, how can a writer communicate the shattering personal impact of history while still carving out a space for privacy? One answer is provided by the very possibility of decoding these texts, in spite of the diversity of their generic, media, and disciplinary labels, as works of Life Writing. Addressing the complexity of framing traumatic experiences through self-narration, Simona Mitroiu recently challenged Philippe Lejeune's model of the identity between author, character, and narrator in autobiography, proposing instead that, when trauma is involved, "subtle narrative negotiations" between the three narratological entities occur, with the intent of "re-empower[ing] the narrator to regain control over the self-narration"¹⁶. By "acting as testimony about the past", Life Writing, Mitroiu claims, becomes an "essentially performative process that unveils the work of memory in a mediated and multifaceted way"¹⁷, transforming the authors into "performative subjects" or "autobiographical speakers"¹⁸ and thus creating a distance which at once protects privacy and charges personal example with collective significance.

This emphasis on "the role played by narrative voices in overcoming trauma through mechanisms of personal agency and resilience"¹⁹ explains how Life Writing can participate simultaneously in a discourse of witnessing and in one of empowerment, in a discourse of truth and one of expressivity. The ability to conjure and work through memories of atrocity while preserving and respecting silences is part of this screening effect that the act of written narration generates.

The need for re-empowerment, highlighted by the discourse of Life Writing, also presupposes a complex equation between agency, gender, and vulnerability. If there is a shared silence imbricated in the texture of the life narratives of female survivors of trauma, this could easily be misread as a sign of powerlessness and a limitation of agency or even of the ability to heal. However, the traditional framework that used to link women, perceived as a vulnerable category, with silence, perceived as a sign of that vulnerability, is crumbling down and making room for more sophisticated interpretations. In the introduction to their edited volume on *Vulnerability in Resistance*, Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay vehemently oppose the "dominant conceptions of vulnerability and of action", which "presuppose (and support) the idea that paternalism is the site of agency, and vulnerability, understood only as victimization and passivity, invariably the site of inaction"²⁰. Instead, Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay propose to

¹⁶ Simona Mitroiu, *Women's Life Writing in Post-Communist Romania*, p. 43.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 42.

¹⁸ Sidonie Smith, qtd. in Simona Mitroiu, *Women's Life Writing in Post-Communist Romania*, p. 42.

¹⁹ Simona Mitroiu, *Women's Life Writing in Post-Communist Romania*, p. 43.

²⁰ Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, Leticia Sabsay, "Introduction", in Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, Leticia Sabsay (eds.), *Vulnerability in Resistance*, p. 1.

imagine “vulnerability [...] as one of the conditions of the very possibility of resistance”²¹. Distinguishing the defeatist discourse of victimhood from the positive assertion of vulnerability, these authors favor those approaches that “do not dismiss the induced vulnerability to which many women are exposed and try to offer alternative resources for self-empowerment, collective agency, and protection”²². If we understand vulnerability, along these lines, as “relational and social”²³ rather than as an essentialist feature of certain groups, we can start to grasp how speaking about trauma and recovery through Life Writing leaves room for the shared unsaid.

The same framework allows us to bring into focus the references to physicality and bodily trauma (from domestic and carceral violence to the devastating effects of socially-induced anorexia) which abound in this special issue, without fostering a reductive view of female embodiment. Speaking of women's bodies as exposed to potential threats, and of their writing on these aspects as the difficult negotiation of an age-old taboo, can often acquire the resonances of a facile lament about the feminine condition. What elevates the texts under scrutiny here above that elementary level is, on the one hand, precisely this awareness and acceptance of the need to start from one's vulnerabilities not as limitations, but as the grounding of a discourse on rights, on empowerment, and on legitimate social claims, and, on the other hand, the way in which female embodiment is the source of specific political struggles, as revealed by the examples in this corpus about domestic violence (discussed in Fanni Svégel's essay), carceral abuse (touched upon by Snizhana Zhygun and Andrada Fătu-Tutoveanu), the humiliations of carceral hygiene deprivation (see Ioana Moroşan's piece and, again, Fătu-Tutoveanu's) or the self-subjection to starvation practices as a result of social standards (analyzed by Olga Słowik). Even when we speak, like Zhygun, about works in our corpus as “narrative[s] of unresolved trauma, reflecting a woman's inability to talk about what she experienced”, the effect of recognition and the possibility of shared memory remain, and so does the value of these confessions of vulnerability as acts of resistance.

Once we think, with Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay, of vulnerability as relational, and once we also remind ourselves of the link made by Paul John Eakin, in his by now canonical *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999), between the relationality of identity in general and the need to think Life-Writing along the same relational lines²⁴, we can approach women's memoirs, fictions,

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 2.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

²⁴ Paul John Eakin, “Relational Selves, Relational Lives: Autobiography and the Myth of Autonomy”, in *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1999, pp. 43-44: “all identity is relational, and [...] the definition of autobiography, and its history as

autobiographies, autofiction, and diaristic writing with a new vision of the ability to reclaim embodiment without being reduced to it, as well as a capacity to acknowledge past traumas and present threats without shame or guilt.

This relational aspect of identity construction through Life Writing is particularly prominent in Leena Käosaar's text, which uses Adriana Cavarero's theory to unpack the complex dynamics between self and others in life narratives. Käosaar describes the "desire to be narrated" as the source of an "existential unity" in otherwise fragmented narratives. However, relationality is not always a transparent category, as Sinoimeri emphasizes in her argument about resisting Western war-voyeurism. The agency residing in being able to select the ways in which one speaks and the aspects that, though passed under silence, remain embedded in Life Writing documents and thereby relatable for people with similar experiences, is complemented by the agency that comes from accepting one's situational and relational vulnerabilities as part of a shifting network of power relations rather than thinking of them as belonging to the core of one's condition in a way that distinguishes and isolates it from other gendered or political positions. As Butler explains, "vulnerability indicates a broader condition of dependency and interdependency that challenges the dominant ontological understanding of the embodied subject"²⁵, alerting us to a shared human feature of needing support and needing protection rather than making this feature more prominent in some cases than in others.

Understanding vulnerability in this agential framework leads to replacing the notion of "resilience", still frequent in trauma studies and in Eastern European self-presentation, with the more flexible and capacious idea of "persistence". Resilience, as Sarah Bracke put it, "revolves around shock absorption"²⁶, and has become tainted by its increasingly common use by political and economic authorities in connection to confronting a constant crisis, for which the responsibility is delegated to the "resilient", which is to say those expected to cope with disaster and praised for their inner "strength". In a similar vein, Butler diagnosed the discourse of "resilience", in an MLA presidential address held during the Covid-19 pandemic, as "bound up with older versions of individual or collective heroism"²⁷. In this view, "the term 'resilience' often implies that people

well, must be stretched to reflect the kinds of self-writing in which relational identity is characteristically displayed".

²⁵ Judith Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance", in Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, Leticia Sabsay (eds.), *Vulnerability in Resistance*, p. 21.

²⁶ Sarah Bracke, "Bouncing Back: Vulnerability and Resistance in Times of Resilience", in Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, Leticia Sabsay (eds.), *Vulnerability in Resistance*, p. 54.

²⁷ Judith Butler, "Stumbling, Errancy, Persistence: The Struggle for the Humanities", MLA 2021 Presidential Address, <https://www.mla.org/Events/Convention-History/MLA-Presidential-Addresses/2021-24-Presidential-Addresses/2021-Presidential-Address>, 11'50"-12'00" (our transcription). Accessed November 21, 2023.

just bounce back from violence, trauma, injury, and loss, that it's all a matter of good cheer, stiff upper lips, entrepreneurial innovation, or pivoting. Resilient people and institutions are apparently those tough enough to emerge from hard times with renewed powers"²⁸. By naming "the ability [...] not to be damaged in an irreversible way"²⁹, resilience "focuses on the exemplary forms of surviving loss, deflecting attention from preventable loss and the structures responsible for that"³⁰. Butler proposed "persistence" instead, as a concept which "names a power beyond singular selfhood, a collaborative and collective power to lay claim to life, to equality, to a future horizon; it [persistence] asserts the value of a life precisely when the conditions for self-preservation, the social conditions in which lives are differentially valued, are frail, or absent"³¹.

It is in this sense that we want to contribute to refocusing the discourse of trauma in Eastern European women's Life Writing on something that goes beyond resilience or the old "suffering and resistance narrative" (Kõresaar and Jõesalu, cited in Käosaar's article), tracing an experience where life and self-expression are asserted precisely against conditions that put them under a radical threat – asserted in such a way as to create not a naïve trust in a capacity to suffer and recover, but a conscious choice to preclude the conditions of future suffering.

Literature's role in this narrative of persistence is partly to stand as a sign for what has been lost and to encompass that loss, metonymically, in the naming of losses and silences, in the testimony it brings from those places where voices seem lost without trace. For instance, Romanian political prisoner Lena Constante's mental exercise of composing rhymed children's stories and poems as a form of meaningful escapism during her seven years of solitary confinement (analyzed by Ioana Moroşan in her contribution about Constante's memoir), or Aglaja Veteranyi's eponymous counter-fairy tale turned leitmotif about a child boiling in polenta, which similarly upholds storytelling as a deliberate distraction from the constant threats of a nomadic and exilic childhood (discussed in Larisa Prodan's article on Veteranyi's autofictions), represent vivid illustrations of how persistence is embedded in the practice of carceral or exilic Life-Writing. Persistence is understood then as the very basic but at the same time essential work of living through the hours which Constante at some point lists by sheer number, the work of continuing to tell an absurd tale because one's life has been reduced by abusive power regimes to a state of utter precariousness, the work of existing when one is expected to disappear or when no conditions are created to support that existence.

Literature's other role, aside from naming and integrating the loss and silence, and aside from evoking this safe space of fantasy, is to renegotiate women's place

²⁸ *Ibidem*, 12'00''–12'20''.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, 12'20''–12'24''.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 12'49''–12'59''.

³¹ *Ibidem*, 6'44''–7'05''.

not only in a temporary economy of prestige, but also, more importantly, in a retrospective network of values. Natalija Stepanović's "Perpetually Peripheral", an essay on neglected Croatian 1960s feminists Sunčana Škrinjarić and Divna Zečević, Manca G. Renko's work on post-WWI female authors from the former Habsburg territories, and Ioana Moroșan's work on Lena Constante all reveal (and deplore) an enduring privileging of male role models in the respective literary fields they analyze, or, with a phrase that Stepanović borrows from Sidonie Smith, the imposition of "men's life scripts"³².

There is no full consensus among our contributors on the ways in which women's autobiographical writings become marginalized: some, like Renko, consider, with Linda Anderson, that autobiography itself is dominated by Western middle-class men, and thus derive the marginality of female Life Writing from a cultural gender bias, while others, like Moroșan, consider the association between autobiography and a problematic notion of femininity, identified by Jennifer Milligan as specific to interwar France, as still dominating the public perception in post-1989 Eastern Europe, and therefore account for the marginalization of both genre and gender through their mutual connection. However, they all agree on the structural need to increase the visibility of women's auto/biographical writings as staples of cultural memory in Eastern Europe. Echoing Domna C. Stanton's lament, from three and a half decades ago, that female voices had been systematically erased from the Life Writing canon³³ (which in turn built on Virginia Woolf's similar observations more than half a century earlier), some of our contributors foreground the work of unearthing existing works of Life Writing and of revealing their contemporary relevance.

Admittedly, the landscape of Life Writing practice and scholarship has changed significantly since studies like Stanton's *The Female Autograph* or Smith's *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography* came out, and today women's auto/bio/fictional work from Early Modern times to the present is much more acknowledged, studied, taught, and re-mediated. A lot has also been done to make Eastern European Women's life stories known in an international setting, but mostly in the framework of post-communist studies. By adding some perspectives which frame the memory of earlier historical periods like the beginning of the twentieth century in Romania (see Anca-Simina Martin and Stefan Baghiu's article), the experience of WWI (see Renko and Alina Bako's contributions), or the persecution and deportation of Ukrainians in the 1920s and 1930s (see Zhygun's essay), we hope to participate in a broadening of the cultural memory frameworks applied to this field. Combining historical case studies with recent

³² Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1987, p. 7.

³³ Domna C. Stanton, "Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?", in Domna C. Stanton (ed.), *The Female Autograph*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 6.

ones also serves the recalibration of power negotiations in the literary and cultural field, going beyond women's right to be heard and earn cultural capital and moving towards the acknowledgement of their already existing autobiographical and autofictional presence. Martin and Baghiu contribute to this feminist unearthing by reevaluating the literary work of early Romanian feminists Sofia Nădejde and Elena Bacaloglu, whom even contemporary specialists in the field had relegated to the margins of the female canon. Alina Bako also suggests such a reconsideration of female contributions when she calls for reading Romanian modernist Hortensia Papadat Bengescu's novel of war testimony next to other works of the European literary canon such as Virginia Woolf's novels and essays, in spite of Papadat Bengescu's ambivalent assessment by the critics of her time. This undoing of past erasures is at least as important as the work of carving out a space, a voice, and a right to speak in the present.

Alongside agency and persistence, the theme of legacies, linking past and present to future potentialities, animates the interventions in this special issue. Our last section in particular privileges the themes of legacy and post-traumatic (social or personal) recovery through a therapeutic process of communicating the experiences, although in some cases this communication is fragmented or interrupted. Either by engaging with memory transmission skeptically, like Brigitte Rigaux-Pirastru does in her intervention on the postmemory of displacement in German-Polish autobiographical cinema, where she calls attention to the fractures in a deliberately rosy and harmonious picture of transgenerational and transnational dialogue, or by emphasizing the message of healing that some narratives of trauma ultimately evoke, like Olga Słowik does in her account of anorexia memoirs, the papers collected here help us reflect on the affordances of Life Writing for thinking the future. Feminist legacies are addressed not only in these explicit ways, but also implicitly, by challenging received ideas about Eastern European specificity and belonging. A perfect example is Viivi Luik, the Estonian author analyzed by Leena Käosaar, who uses the pretext of a long stay in Italy to retell her life story as a fated journey to Rome, thus revisiting the question of Europe as a dream and an aspiration for the members of the former Eastern Bloc.

If these three intertwined notions – agency, persistence, and legacy – circumscribe the issue's thematic cohesion, methodologically its main strength lies in the ability to subvert and challenge the epistemic homogeneity in the field of Life Writing and memory studies by not just bringing local examples into dialogue with Western scholarship, but also building on theory coming out of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, which in many cases has not been translated yet, and which is used alongside the Western paradigms of understanding and interpreting cultural work. In favoring this close interaction between Western-imported models and the theoretical models of cultural critics with firsthand experience of the inner dynamics of particular Eastern European fields, we respond to a call for epistemic

diversification launched a few years ago by scholars such as Chen-Bar Itzhak, who drew attention to the imbalance between the relative democratization of World Literature and the enduring Western hegemony in literary theory, and called for a “World Republic of Theory”³⁴ corresponding to the World Republic of Letters, one where, for instance, “Lithuanian critique”³⁵ would be on an equal footing with the symbolic capital of French critique. Relying on a combination of Western and Eastern European secondary sources, our contributors are able to situate their objects of study in more nuanced ways, avoiding both “methodological nationalism”³⁶ and submission to a Western theoretical hegemony. Moving swiftly across languages and paradigms, their analyses connect the particularities of the local (too often hastily reduced in Eastern Europeans’ aspiration to become simply “standard Europeans”³⁷) with broader frameworks of understanding, both local and international, contributing to a much needed epistemic decentralization.

Another advantage of working across paradigms is a stronger critical spirit. Works that pertain to cultural memory, especially foreign ones, are sometimes easily applauded without taking into account their potential weaknesses. In the meantime, some of our contributors do not hesitate to challenge the construction of a cultural memory artefact that brushes over real historical tensions (as is the case with Karin Kaper’s documentary in Rigaux-Pirastru’s view) or to highlight the contrast between works that cater to an “international gaze”³⁸ and its traumatic voyeurism and works that respect the silences imbricated in any trauma victim’s confession (as Sinoimeri brilliantly does). These constructive delimitations and criticisms contribute to a nuanced view of memorialization processes.

In addition to the epistemological pluralism and the critical spirit, a methodological priority in selecting the papers has been the diversity of the corpus, not just in terms of geographical coverage (we tried to include representative case studies from several subregions of Eastern Europe broadly defined, from the former Yugoslavia to Ukraine, the Baltic states, and Poland) and of historical span (we moved from early twentieth-century examples to the early twenty-first century), but also in terms of really bringing into focus the transcultural dimension

³⁴ Chen Bar-Itzhak, “Intellectual Captivity: Literary Theory, World Literature, and the Ethics of Interpretation”, in *Journal of World Literature*, 5, 2020, 1, p. 82.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 86.

³⁶ For a critique of methodological nationalism in memory studies, see, among others, Chiara de Cesari, Ann Rigney, “Introduction”, in Chiara de Cesari, Ann Rigney (eds.), *Transnational Memory: Circulation, Articulation, Scales*, Berlin–Boston, De Gruyter, 2014, pp. 1-25.

³⁷ For a critique of this attitude, see Sorin Antohi, “Narratives Unbound: A Brief Introduction to Post-Communist Historical Studies”, in Sorin Antohi, Balázs Trencsényi, Péter Apor, *Narratives Unbound: Historical Studies in Post-Communist Eastern Europe*, Budapest and New York, Central European University Press, p. ix.

³⁸ Dragana Gavrilović Obradović, *Writing the Yugoslav Wars: Literature, Postmodernism, and the Ethics of Representation*, Toronto, Canada, University of Toronto Press, 2016, p. 139.

of memory (with works like Renko's, Rigaux-Pirastru's, Sinoimeri's, or Prodan's) and its transgenerational dynamics (especially, but not only, in Pirastru and Renko's texts), as well as the diversity of media (not only written works but also, in Rigaux-Pirastru's case, film) and of disciplines (with Svégel's study of peasant women's memoirs, elements of anthropology and sociology complemented the strictly defined cultural memory/Life-Writing perspective).

This four-fold diversity ("transcultural, transgenerational, transmedial, and transdisciplinary"³⁹) responds to and reiterates, on a smaller scale, the model proposed by Lucy Bond, Stef Craps, and Pieter Vermeulen in their edited volume *Memory Unbound*. Our explorations outside the confines of discipline, form or medium, geographical and generational boundaries, are complemented by our interest in understanding gender in its intersectional relation to class (hence Martin and Baghiu's focus on portrayals of the servant class in novels of the early twentieth century, as well as Svégel's study of autobiographical works by peasant women). Intersectional and dynamic criteria are applied at many levels of the special issue.

To navigate the complexity of the diverse approaches, we have organized the contributions around a triad of trauma-related responses related to our understanding of agency, persistence, and legacy: witnessing, enduring, and recovering. Under "Witnessing" we have grouped those articles that prioritize women's positions as agents of memory, keeping records of tumultuous times that affect them mainly through their connection or comparison with others: Manca G. Renko's work on the impact of political transitions after WWI upon women's lives, Anca-Simina Martin and Stefan Baghiu's study of early Romanian feminism's engagement with the figure of the female servant, Alina Bako's reading of Papadat-Bengescu's WWI novel (inspired by the modernist author's own wartime experiences as a nurse), Natalija Stepanović's reconsideration of two neglected Croatian feminists who recounted their lives from the position of a middle ground between "vehement Party members" and "dissidents" with impressive dignity and perseverance, and Larisa Prodan's reading of Aglaja Veteranyi's nomadic autofiction, where the author casts her younger self in the role of a witness to a world she does not yet understand. Under "Enduring", a word in which we insist on hearing both connotations (of suffering and of lasting through time), we have grouped articles that analyze extreme traumatic experiences recounted in women's memoirs, focusing on situations in which the persistence of life, not to mention of Life Writing, is only possible through negotiating a different pact with memory and temporality, which reframes the

³⁹ Lucy Bond, Stef Craps, Pieter Vermeulen, "Introduction: Memory on the Move", in Lucy Bond, Stef Craps, Pieter Vermeulen (eds.), *Memory Unbound: Tracing the Dynamics of Memory Studies*, New York and Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2017, p. 2.

duration of trauma and the endurance of the written word as sides of the same coin. These life narratives (of deportation in Zhygun's essay, domestic abuse in Svégel's, political prison in Fătu-Tutoveanu and Moroșan's articles, and war trauma in Sinoimeri's contribution) are the site of a constant tension between the need to tell and the need to forget, which accounts for the fragmentariness of some of them. Finally, under "Recovering" (understood as recapturing of information or memory, but also as healing), we have organized those articles where postmemory or questions of memory transmission are at stake (Rigaux-Pirastru's text), where healing per se becomes a trope for resisting social pressures (Słowik's essay), or where the broader reflections on identity recovery are at stake, putting into perspective Eastern Europe's integration into the widened European horizon (Leena Käosaar's article).