

**Mothers, emotions and memory transmission in spaces
of conflict: some cases of literary mothers by Herta
Müller, Brigitte Burmeister and Arantxa Urretabizkaia**

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Introduction¹

The Romanian Nobel Prize author Herta Müller (1953), born to a Romanian-German family in Banat and exiled in Germany in the 1980s, the East-German author Brigitte Burmeister (1940), a novelist who grew up and began her career in the extinct German Democratic Republic, and the Basque author Arantxa Urretabizkaia (1947) problematize the transmission of cultural memory in the 1990s by approaching it with a significant emotional component and by focusing on experiences of loss in intimate spaces of motherhood in situations of political and social conflicts or violence. Müller, Burmeister, and Urretabizkaia can be interpreted as authors aiming at non-hegemonic memory, trying thus to break with the danger of falling into the repetition of structures of dominance and oppression when a subject is

¹ This work was supported by the University of the Basque Country (research project EHU15/09) and the Spanish Ministry of Economy (research project FFI2017-84342-P).

not aware of mechanisms of hegemonic memory.² Daring to remember from a non-hegemonic position is a common topic in their narratives.

In the first place, I will define some key concepts related to memory. Second, I will contextualize my contribution in the current theoretical and literary studies on memory and exile in the intersection with emotions in German and Basque literature, and on memory transmission at the intersection with emotions in mother-daughter relationships. The third part will focus on an analysis of the literary approach that Herta Müller, Brigitte Burmeister, and Arantxa Urretabizkaia employ to address the subject of constructing non-hegemonic cultural memory in spaces of traumata/taboo by exposing difficulties of memory transmission related to motherhood. This analytical basis will be the representation of the mother and her relationship to the conflict, trauma, and/or exile. Common aesthetic and ethical aspects to all three authors will be tackled and interpreted from a feminist perspective. Finally, general conclusions will be drawn and open questions for further research will be pointed out.

Concepts

Memory is —according to consolidated research such as the theoretical work of Maurice Halbwachs, and more current research by Aleida and Jan Assmann, for example, and Astrid Erll— a subjective and individual process intertwined with a cultural and collective dimension. Memory is a process of meaning-making from past experiences, knowledge, and

² Kathrin Schödel, “Kulturwissenschaftliche Gedächtnistheorien,” in *Rumäniendeutsche Erinnerungskulturen: Formen und Funktionen des Vergangenheitsbezuges in der rumäniendeutschen Historiografie und Literatur*, ed. Gerald Volkmer and Jürgen Lehmann (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 2015), 27.

identity, in which individuality intersects with a dominant collective process. According to Emile Durkheim, images of memory as well as memory practices are formed by society.³ Meanwhile, Maurice Halbwachs affirms that memories are not only acquired and given a meaning in society.⁴ Moreover, he contends that it is configured by each individual from his or her distinctive position as a unique group/society/culture member,⁵ resulting thus in multiplicity of memory. Therefore, subjectivity, multiplicity, process, and transference are inherent categories of memory.

Aleida and Jan Assmann complete this understanding of memory by adding three important components. In the first place, they point out that memory can be communicative or cultural, depending on the temporal and spatial atmosphere. Communicative memory is limited to a maximum of three generations and to daily life communication—in short, to a family transmission. Cultural memory, on the other hand, is the result of an institutional communication, distanced from daily life, surviving throughout the generations in a society, in the form of rites, monuments, and texts intended to transfer meaning from past experiences, knowledge, and identity. In second place, emotions gain relevance as meaning-making components. In the case of communicative memory, these take the form of emotional attachment, while in the realm of cultural memory emotions have a counterpart of reflectiveness and critical observation in the approach to knowledge, experiences, and identity transferred from a past that one has not witnessed directly or indirectly. In third place, Aleida and Jan Assmann find both

³ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2008), 10.

⁴ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed., intro., and trans. L.A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 38.

⁵ Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Francis J. Ditter and Vida Yazdi Ditter (New York: Harper Colophon, 1980), 48.

in communicative and cultural memory the central function of “the concretion of identity.”⁶ This is because, as Jan Assmann contends in the case of cultural memory, it “preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity. The objective manifestations of cultural memory are defined through a kind of identificatory determination in a positive (“We are this”) or in a negative (“That’s our opposite”) sense.”⁷

Memory has been further examined as to its linguistic component, which is considered consequently a discursive construct.⁸ This textual and discursive dimension of memory reinforces the idea of the need for meaning-making: Transference of memory needs the process of meaning-making from past experiences, knowledge, and identities in search of the basis for present identity. It is the topos of this mother-daughter transference of memory that offers an opportunity to reflect on important issues of memory.

Concepts such as meaning-making from past experiences, knowledge and identities in search of a basis for a present identity, and the role of emotions in this meaning-making process, are important in two ways: on the one hand, they are central categories of cultural memory and, on the other, they help interpret the selected works by Müller, Burmeister, and Urretabizkaia from a comparative and transnational dimension. They are dealing with these concepts in the interplay with the problematic, emotional mother-daughter communication and the contexts of exile and violence.

1. **Theoretical and literary studies on memory and mother-daughter transmission**

⁶ Jan Assmann, and John Czaplika, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” in *New German Critique* 65 (1995), 130.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*; Nicholas Pethes and Jens Ruchatz, *Gedächtnis und Erinnerung: Ein interdisziplinäres Lexikon* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2001), 13.

Astrid Erll's *Memory in Culture* takes as its subject matter the connection between culture and memory and its final aim is to present a proposal for theorizing and working with "cultural memory," by presenting concepts and methods for the study of memory in culture from a transdisciplinary and international dimension of memory research.⁹ Furthermore, Astrid Erll's and Ansgar Nünning's *Gedächtniskonzepte der Literaturwissenschaft* is one of the most important studies to offer a theoretical and methodological basis for studies of cultural memory in literary texts.¹⁰

The key role of emotions as a reinforcing factor in the process of generating and consolidating memory was already mentioned by ancient mnemotechnics and is also pointed out by Aleida Assmann.¹¹ Furthermore, emotions are described by Harald Welzer as operators that help us evaluate and classify our experiences according to their emotional impact and keep them in our memory.¹² In particular, research on generational novels written by women authors points out that they offer a new perspective by focusing on an alternative memory as the "hidden history of women's experiences of war and political turmoil."¹³ Marianne Hirsch has focused her conception of

⁹ Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture*, trans. Sara B. Young (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave: Macmillan, 2011), 10.

¹⁰ Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, *Gedächtniskonzepte der Literaturwissenschaft: Theoretische Grundlagen und Anwendungsperspektiven* (Berlin; New York: De Gruyter, 2005), 2.

¹¹ Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2011).

¹² Harald Welzer, *Das kommunikative Gedächtnis: implizites Gedächtnis. Eine Theorie der Erinnerung* (München: Beck, 2008), 150.

¹³ Valerie Heffeman and Gillian Pye, eds., *Transitions: Emerging Women Writers in German Language Literature* (New York: Rodopi, 2015), 8. Further studies on memory in German literature by women authors include Friederike Eigler, *Gedächtnis und Geschichte in Generationenromanen seit der Wende* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2005); Caroline Schaumann, *Memory Matters: Generational Responses to Germany's Nazi Past in Recent Women's Literature* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008); Katharina Gerstenberger, "Fictionalizations: Holocaust Memory and the Generational Construct in the Works of Contemporary Women Writers," in *Generational Shifts in Contemporary German Culture*, ed. Laurel Cohen-Pfister and Susanne Vees-Gulani (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2010), 95–114.

memory on the affective link generated toward the remembered past, referring especially to postmemory.¹⁴ Her most important contributions to memory studies are her conclusions about memory transmission in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the concept of postmemory as a strong emotional experience, as well as her focus on feminism and mother-daughter plots in German literature.¹⁵

As to relevant areas of research on Basque literature, motherhood related to memory transmission and nation-making in Basque literature is addressed by Gema Lasarte in her PhD dissertation “*Pertsonaia protagonista femeninoen ezaugarriak eta bilakaera euskal narratiba garaikidean*” (Characteristics and evolution of female protagonists in contemporary Basque narrative).¹⁶ Moreover, Mari Jose Olaziregi and Mikel Ayerbe also focus on the literary treatment of the Basque conflict and violence, history, and motherhood from the perspective of gender politics.¹⁷

¹⁴ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 33.

¹⁵ Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot, Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1989).

¹⁶ Gema Lasarte, “*Pertsonaia protagonista femeninoen ezaugarriak eta bilakaera euskal narratiba garaikidean*,” PhD diss., University of the Basque Country 2011, at <https://addi.ehu.es/bitstream/handle/10810/7847/Pertsonaia%20protagonista%20femeninoen%20ezaugarriak%20eta%20bilakaera%20euskal%20narratiba%20garaikidean.pdf?sequence=9&isAllowed=y> (last accessed September 15, 2018). In English, see Gema Lasarte, ed., *Ultrasounds: Basque Women Writers on Motherhood* (Reno: Center for Basque Studies, University of Nevada, Reno, 2015).

¹⁷ Mari Jose Olaziregi, “Literatura vasca y conflicto político,” in *Diablotexto Digital 2* (2017), 22-25, doi: 10.7203/diablotexto.2.10144 (last accessed September 15, 2018); for a further recent contribution see also Mari Jose Olaziregi and Mikel Ayerbe, “El conflicto de la escritura y la escritura de la identidad: análisis de la narrativa de escritoras vascas que abordan el conflicto vasco,” in *Identidad, género y nuevas subjetividades en las literaturas Hispánicas*, ed. Katarzyna Moszczynska-Dúrst et al. (Varsovia: Universidad de Varsovia, 2016), 45–66. In English, see Mikel Ayerbe, ed., *Our Wars: Short Fiction on Basque Conflicts* (Reno: Center for Basque Studies, University of Nevada, Reno, 2012).

This work seeks to focus on an analysis of the literary motif of mother-daughter relationships in connection with either individual or collective memory in the narrative by Herta Müller, Brigitte Burmeister, and Arantxa Urretabizkaia in the form of a contribution from a comparative and transnational perspective to the research carried out so far. It will allow us to gain insight into these narratives' impact on cultural memory in their respective societies at a historical point when each social system was forced to look back on its collective near past. Furthermore, this transnational perspective creates new possibilities for future studies on the role of contemporary literature in the raising of critical awareness through cultural memory.

2. Memory transmission in narratives by Herta Müller, Brigitte Burmeister, and Arantxa Urretabizkaia

Herta Müller, Brigitte Burmeister, and Arantxa Urretabizkaia offer an innovative perspective on the topic of “memory” related to taboo areas in their respective societies. Eva Hoffman and Marianne Hirsch have theorized about rupture in memory transmission as a direct consequence of traumas, the Holocaust, exile, and diaspora.¹⁸ The literary motif of rupture in memory transmission is used in all three selected authors as a chance to raise awareness about the emotional process of cultural memory making and concurrently advocate for multiple and non-hegemonic memories in line with new narratological perspectives on memory.

It is significant that in different cultural contexts of conflict, violence, and exile, specifically in the Romanian-German, post-unification

¹⁸ Eva Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust* (London: Vintage, 2005); Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*.

German, and Basque cases respectively, (common) topics, strategies, and aesthetic patterns play determinant roles when envisaging memory configuration. In the 1990s Romania, Germany, and the Basque Country witnessed major political, social, historical, and literary change. In Herta Müller's case, the 1990s meant that Ceausescu had been deposed, executed, and officially the post-communist era had started. Moreover, it meant that she could approach, from her position in her German exile, the Romanian reality from a new albeit still problematic, setting when it came to dealing with the Romanian past.¹⁹ That same decade, meanwhile, Brigitte Burmeister faced the problem of confronting, like many other citizens of the extinct German Democratic Republic (GDR), her personal memory up to 1989 and the cultural memory of the extinct GDR, condemned by West Germany after the Berlin Wall came down in 1989 and Germany was reunified in 1990.²⁰ At the same time, Basque society was also experiencing a new era. Specifically, it was experiencing political and sociological changes related to violence and terrorism, with a more open pronouncement of public opinion against the massive and bloody attacks of the violent separatist organization ETA (Basque Homeland and Freedom), a social pact (termed the Lizarra Pact) among different Basque civil and political organizations designed to put pressure on the Spanish government to engage in a peace process, and a temporary ceasefire by ETA.²¹ In this new framework, Basque society became more open to discussing the problem of terrorism and violence, a topic that started to be central

¹⁹ Simona Mitroiu, "Recuperative memory in Romanian post-Communist society," in *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 5 (2016): 751, 771, DOI: 10.1080/00905992.2016.1182144 (last accessed September 15, 2018).

²⁰ Wolfgang Emmerich, "Wendezeit (1989-95)," in *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR* (Berlin: Aufbau, 2000), 435–526.

²¹ See William Douglass and Joseba Zulaika, "Basque Political Violence and the International Discourse of Terrorism," in *Basque Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (Reno: Center for Basque Studies, University of Nevada, Reno, 2007), 139–142.

in many narrative works as a means of deconstructing the myth and taboos about the terrorist underworld.²² Thus, all three selected authors are female novelists who write in their respective social and literary contexts dealing with memory and memory transmission in situations of exile and/or conflict and violence. Their literary approach to the subject works by exposing the difficulties of memory transmission related to problematic emotional communication and motherhood in spaces of conflict, exile, and/or violence.

The starting point in Müller's *Herztier* (1994) —published in English as *The Land of Green Plums* in 1998)— is the suicide of a young student, Lola, in Ceausescu's Romania. Thereafter, it addresses the efforts of the first narrator (Lola's college roommate) to investigate this taboo case and the motives for the suicide, in order to construct her roommate's silenced memory. In this construction process of Lola's memory, the first-person narrator's research on Lola's life will trigger her own metatextual process of memory construction, a self-exploring process concerning her own memory construction, her own identity, her intimate sphere of closest friendship with Edgar, Georg, and Kurt, her own conflicts with her mother, her family, her village, and the abusive Romanian secret police, the Securitate.

The main topic in Burmeister's *Unter dem Namen Norma* (1994) is the loss of identity on the part of the protagonist Marianne after the extinction of the GDR—specifically, the loss of legitimation for the existential social values of her former existence and the loss of her *Heimat* (cultural, social, and private Homeland) as a consequence of the fall of the GDR. Feelings of exile in one's own city, Berlin; disorientation in the new social, economic, political, and cultural coordinates of the Reunified

²² Olaziregi and Ayerbe, "El conflicto de la escritura y la escritura de la identidad," 45.

Germany; uncertainty about the future, feeling torn apart between, on the one hand, staying in East Berlin following a life path more in line with the past and inner essence and, on the other, joining her husband Johannes who has opted for a new life in West Germany: these are all emotions associated with the main protagonist, Marianne. It is in this context that Marianne's imaginary dialogues with her imaginary daughter, Emilia, play an important role as an analytical and emotional process of restoring the self-censored emotional memory of the GDR.

Urretabizkaia's *Koaderno Gorria* (1998)—or, in English, *The Red Notebook* (2008)—deals with a mother's desperate attempt to recover contact with her children, a thirteen-year-old girl, Miren, and a ten-year-old boy, Beñat, abducted seven years before and taken to Venezuela by their father while she was hiding in the French Basque Country as a consequence of her underground activity in ETA. The situation of the mother's forced separation from her children and, as a result, the children's tragedy of having been deprived of their memory, are the direct consequence of the mother's political and underground military activism. In these circumstances, her red notebook—which she writes with the aim of having it delivered to her children—is to be interpreted as an act of restoring her own memory and that of her children of their very early years, a truth silenced by the father during those seven years in Venezuela.

In all three cases, then, the emotional dimension linked to the rupture of mother-daughter memory transmission is offered as a key realm in which conflicts considered to be “external” (that is, social, political, and cultural) can be approached, analyzed, and reflected on from an alternative and holistic perspective, in order to create spaces for non-hegemonic and multiple memory. Their arguments for rethinking

cultural memory, its formation, and its transmission, by focusing on the very intimate sphere of a ruptured mother-daughter communication and memory transmission, underlines the predominant role of emotions not only in memory formation but also in coming to terms with traumatic and conflictive experiences of the past.

Furthermore, by connecting the public and the intimate spheres, and by underlining the problem of a rupture of memory transmission and of mother-daughter communication, Müller's, Burmeister's, and Urretabizkaia's contributions are to be interpreted as a conscious and conscientious practice of so-called "soft memory". Alexander Etkind coined this term, in opposition to "hard memory," for a compendium of primarily texts (literary, historical, and narratives) that contribute to society's debate on memory sites in each culture. In democratic societies, consensus needs to be reached for soft memory to become hard memory.²³ In this context, all three authors understand their task as writers as making their readership especially aware of the determinant role of immediate reflection on the formation and configuration of communicative memory, on that very stage of soft memory that will lead to a certain cultural memory in the future. Through their work in the aftermath of major social transformation, they offer literary instruments to open up a social debate on memory. As a literary strategy to acknowledge several layers of painful experiences in the past, all three authors use intimate spheres to approach the construction (and deconstruction) of memory related to experiences of loss in mother-daughter relationships.

²³ Alexander Etkind, "Hard and Soft in Cultural Memory: Political Mourning in Russia and Germany," in "Memory/History/Democracy," special issue, *Grey Room* 16 (Summer 2004), 36–59.

2.1. Memory transmission and Motherhood

Opting not to follow the Victorian pattern of motherhood in traditional Western European societies and conveying on their mothers the social function of perpetuating traditional values and hierarchical structures (both considered key elements of memory transmission), Müller, Burmeister, and Urretabizkaia are clearly in line with a feminist agenda. Their mother-figures are in conflict. On the one hand, they are overwhelmed by external settings, powerless figures, in exile, and finding it hard to communicate with their daughters. Yet, on the other, Müller, Burmeister, and Urretabizkaia present the mother-daughter relationships as challenging spheres to develop transgressive perspectives not only on motherhood, but also on silenced memories.²⁴

In Herta Müller's *Herztier/ The Land of Green Plums*, the narrator and her closest friends, Edgar, Kurt, and Georg, find a very significant feature in common among their mothers in contrast to their SS fathers. They are sick women in pain and they communicate emotionally with their children by verbalizing their symptoms:

When we talked about our mothers, rather than our SS fathers, who had come back from the war, we were amazed that our mothers, who had never met in their lives, all sent us the same letters, full of their illnesses. . . . All these illnesses had been lifted out of our mothers' bodies and lay inside the letters like the stolen organ meats of slaughtered beasts inside the compartment of the fridge.

²⁴ Karin Bauer, "Körper und Geschlecht," in Herta Müller. Ein Handbuch, ed. Norbert Otto Eke (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2017), 208; Olaziregi, "Literatura vasca y conflicto político," 23–24.

Our illnesses, our mothers thought to themselves, are a knot with which to tie our children (LGP 45–46).²⁵

As a sick body with strong connotations of death in life and an incapacity for emotional bonds, the mother figure is very often silent, presented as torn between the violence inherited from and impregnated by the male, reactionary, and violent Romanian-German enclave in Banat and the instinctive silenced love for her daughter. This image is central in several passages of the novel in which the narrator is not the daughter herself, but an omniscient narrator who portrays scenes between “the child” and “the mother.” In fact, it is this omniscient external narrator who first offers the reader an image of the protagonist’s mother, tying her daughter to a chair to violently cut her nails:

A child refuses to let her nails be cut. That hurts, says the child. The mother ties the child to a chair with the belts from her dresses. The child’s eyes cloud over, and she starts to scream. The mother keeps dropping the nails-clippers onto the floor. Blood drips onto one of the belts, the grass-green one. The child knows: if you bleed, you die. The child’s eyes are wet; they see the mother through a blur. The mother loves the child. She loves it [sic] like crazy, and she can’t stop herself, because her reason is as tightly tied to love as her child is to the chair. The child knows: the mother in her tightly tied love is going to cut up my hands (LGP 6–7).

²⁵ References to quotes from Herta Müller’s *Herztier/The Land of Green Plums* will be indicated with LPG and the page number in the text.

In this surrealistic and repeated scene (also in LGP 32, 117) of the mother-daughter relationship, with special focus on body parts such as fingers, nails, and eyes, the mother-figure is enigmatic and polyhedral. A powerful contrast is generated in the scene between the imposing image of the mother and the narrator's reference to her crazy love, in which she is presented as a mother irrationally and inevitably subject to a violent love.

Violence is also present in the mother's discourse, which will, however, undergo an evolution toward emotionalization. Her reproaches and accusations against her daughter for leading an immoral life in the city and for having rebelled against the Ceausescu apparatus (LGP 177), hers is the voice of collective oppression and the silencing of her own voice and pain, just as Herta Müller recalls the unwillingness of her own mother to talk about her traumatic past as a deportee for several years in the Ukraine after the World War II.²⁶ After the death of the narrator's father in the novel, the mother-figure gains in presence and importance. However, she is characterized as a traumatized figure in an obsessive act of winding alarm clocks in a desperate search for reassurance. Moreover, the remarkable presence of her voice in the form of passages from letters to her daughter in the city with daily news from the village (LGP 68–69, 128) is perceived by the narrator as linked to an oppressive collective voice expressed through meaningless emotionless letters. The mother remains silent about her own emotions, only very rarely and indirectly, expresses pain,²⁷ and lacks any emotional proximity to her daughter. This generates a metaphorically, psychologically and affectively absent mother, which only underlines an ineffectual emotional communication with her daughter,²⁸ and is also a key feature of Müller's "poetic of the gap," namely her aesthetic challenge to grasp in written language what cannot be

²⁶ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 117.

²⁷ The mother's repeated formula of referring to her back pain at the beginning of every letter conveys the idea that the sentence has lost its semantic content, that the relationship with her body and her pain is not spontaneously transmitted.

²⁸ Adriana Răducanu, "Herta Müller and Undoing the Trauma in Ceaușescu's Romania," in *Episodes from a History of Undoing: The Heritage of Female Subversiveness*, ed. Reghina Dascal (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2012), 94.

pronounced. It is only at a later stage, when in *The Land of Green Plums* both mother and daughter are about to leave Romania for Germany, that the mother is able to emotionally open up and describe the spontaneous reactions of her body to external stimuli: “my heart was racing” (LGP 231).

Later on, once mother and daughter have settled separately in Germany, it is in their epistolary communication in exile that the silenced part of the mother-figure comes to light. This opens up an option for emotional communication between mother and daughter, and the former, rather than being a voice of the Banat’s collective memory, starts to construct her own memory through discourse:

I [Mother] am not used to asphalt. It makes my feet hurt, and my brain. I get as tired here in a day as I do back home in a year. It is not home, other people live there now, I [narrator] wrote to Mother. Home is where you are now (LGP 235).

Thus, it is once the mother is in exile —when she constructs and verbalizes a more authentic connection to her own body and puts into words her new location far from Banat in Romania— that the most direct and clear dialogue between mother and daughter is possible, interestingly enough on the concept of “home” in relation to the past and the present.

Their epistolary communication in exile in Germany is, for the first time, based on empathy, emotional proximity, and reciprocity, which leads to a free exchange of different perspectives on memory and thus co-construction of memory.

The Red Notebook presents the story of an absent mother too, in this case an imposed physical absence. It is initially a temporary absence, caused by the mother's need to hide in the French Basque Country, leaving her husband and two children behind; thereafter, it becomes permanent and completely out of her control, when her husband suddenly disappears with their children Miren and Beñat. The title of the novel alludes to the red notebook in which the protagonist, referred to only as Mother, and prey to complete uncertainty about the current life of her children in Venezuela, writes a long letter. As Mother explains in the notebook to Miren and Beñat,

I know only one thing for sure, and it is enough to make me write this lengthy work: if you call the woman who lives with you *mamá*, it is because your memory of me has been stolen from you, and with it your childhood and maybe even the Basque language itself (RN 9–10).²⁹

It is remarkable that in Mother's discourse memory, childhood and mother tongue belong together and represent her children's most basic identity rights.³⁰ Thus, Miren and Beñat, having been robbed of their early memories, represent a much more general dimension in

that they are deprived of their identity and of their basic rights, which the protagonist aims to restore. Because the deprivation of her children's identity is the direct consequence of Mother's political destiny, the protagonist is represented as a woman experiencing a strong conflict between political commitment and motherhood. This collision occurs to the detriment of

²⁹ References to quotes from Arantxa Urretabizkaia, *The Red Notebook*, trans. Kristin Addis (Reno: Center for Basque Studies, University of Nevada, Reno, 2008) will be indicated with RN and the page number in the text.

³⁰ "That's why I started writing this, to protect your rights, not mine" (10).

motherhood and of memory transmission in this very emotional mother-children communication. The motherhood experience of the protagonist is represented as a fight with powerlessness, as a collision between the physical and forced absence imposed on her by the father-figure and her impulse to reach her children emotionally again by means of her red notebook and with the help of L..

Memory restoration can be understood in Mother's case as a double subversion. The denial of any private and emotional dimension to a political female fighter, in the eyes of many people a "person of great renown, a woman of wider authority" (RN 120), comes not only from the father-figure, but also from the other main female adult figure in the novel.³¹ If the father-figure has inflicted the physical absence between Mother and her children, it is a female gaze that will often judge Mother's notebook harshly. L. appears torn between empathy for Mother³² and a recurring skepticism about the content of the red notebook: while L. reads it, her reactions range from questioning the veracity of the facts presented by Mother in the notebook and casting the shadow of obsessiveness on Mother's testimony (RN 27), to judging Mother's dramatic tone and expression of deep motherly love, and feeling shame for judging Mother (RN 29). While the father-figure incarnates

rupturing the transmission of family memory by abducting the children, L. represents the questioning of the authenticity of the non-hegemonic memory claimed by Mother, an apparently spontaneous reaction while reading the Notebook that derives from the hegemony of the public image constructed around the woman fighter for the freedom of her country. The condemning gaze on Mother's self-representation and memory is also a consequence of the fear of acknowledging a completely new dimension of Mother's identity—her powerless motherly side in pain,—as the third-

³¹ In opposition to L.'s external empowered characterization as a free, liberated woman with a solid professional career as lawyer, the general third-person narrative frame of the novel nevertheless shows L. as a figure frequently dependant on the male gaze, fantasizing about her lover as Superman rescuing her in Venezuela (RN 27).

³² "she [L.] no longer has enough light. Her eyes feel swollen and she has a lump in her throat. . . . L. shakes her head because she doesn't want to cry" (RN 14–15).

person omniscient narrator concludes: “This is why the notebook scares her [L.], because it is showing her a hidden side of someone she thought she knew well” (RN 38).³³

The endangered transmission of contested memory is also problematized in *The Red Notebook* through the loss of the mother tongue: the communication between mother-children, originally in Basque, is ruptured not only as a consequence of physical separation, but also because once in Venezuela the father has no longer transmitted the Basque language to Miren and Beñat (RN 35, 73). Mother verbalizes her concern about the red notebook, written in Basque, becoming a mere hieroglyphic for her own children. The metaphor illustrates the incarnation of memory transmission as a communicative situation between two divergent universes, eventually with background references and memory sites that are just too different. The narrative offers two possible solutions for that problem. On one hand, the notebook could be translated into Spanish, which puts at risk the potential success of the contested memory because L. has often has an impulse to adjust, in that

process, certain expressions about the public image of the powerful woman fighter to “the person she [L.] knew before reading the notebook” (RN 124). On the other hand, there is the endeavor of recovering the mother tongue, as represented by the daughter Miren’s position. Her awareness of having lost her mother tongue due to the father’s decision, and her willingness to recover it as part of her individual and collective memory, is illustrated in her insistence on reading the notebook in the original form and her refusal to receive any additional explanations from

³³ Interestingly, L.’s reading the notebook triggers not only her struggle to acknowledge her friend’s emotional motherly side in pain, but also L.’s own self-exploration and construction of her own family memory: reflections about her parents and the communication with them (RN 31, 64), about her own perspective on motherhood (RN 31, 64), and about her last failed relationship. L. undergoes a farewell process, accepting it as part of her memory, feeling free rather than lonely, and hoping for the past to come back (RN 54).

L. about the personality of Mother (RN 119). That way, there is a successful transmission of Mother's memory, which is paradoxically shown reinforced by the circumstances of the rupture, as Mother reflects: "A mother who has not known the hiatus that we have suffered surely would not remember her children's early childhood as well as I do. Perhaps when what happens in later years becomes a memory, other memories get displaced, like how a drop falling into a full bucket pushes out another" (RN 73).

The novel is thus a very clear example of the confrontation of Mother's memory transmission with the hegemonic patriarchal discourse and gaze. Her red notebook is a transgressive instrument to restore her children's authentic memory and to create a personal space in order to build her own voice as a mother, to explore and re-explore herself on all levels (woman, lover, mother, fighter), and evaluate and reevaluate her past both as a fighter and a mother for the next generation.

The transgression of Brigitte Burmeister's mother-figure in *Unter dem Namen Norma* (Under the Name of Norma) lies in the subversion of the traditional mother-daughter relationship and of the conventional truth-rationality correlation in mother-daughter communication. In the first place, Marianne (the mother-narrator) represents a disoriented

person in the context of a new beginning in German reunification (UNN 8–9).³⁴ She is consequently processing the conflict of coming to terms between her past existence in the now extinct GDR and her present in the East Berlin of the 1990s. Rather than being a woman according to the

³⁴ References to quotes from Brigitte Burmeister's *Unter dem Namen Norma* (Under the Name of Norma) will be indicated with UNN and the page number in the text.

traditional pattern of motherhood, ready to transmit the cultural memory of her ancestors to the next generation, she is unprepared for memory transmission, as she is herself in a process of problematic memory construction, and is finding it difficult to make sense of the recent past in Germany:

dachte ich so, wie soll ich mich genau erinnern, wenn in meinem Gedächtnis nur Anhaltspunkte aufbewahrt, alle Verbindungsstücke verloren sind, auch der Aufenthalt an Ort und Stelle sie nicht wiederbringen, nichts uns zurückführen würde zu unserer damaligen Wirklichkeit, so daß wir mit ihr konfrontiert wären (UNN 109).³⁵

The city is plunged into constant change after reunification, street names are changed overnight back to the old names before the time of GDR, neighborhoods witness a constant flow of newcomers, and the vast majority of Marianne's environment is leading a new life following the (professional) Western model. As a contrast, Marianne seems to be one of the few people to raise questions about the relationship between past and present in the reunified Germany. In her introspective process

of analyzing remembered and forgotten memories, as well as the limits and fragmentariness of her own memories, Marianne discovers the uniqueness and fragmentariness of memories in general. The divergence of her own memories with those her husband Johannes has of the same

³⁵ "So, I thought, how can I remember exactly, if only the reference points are stored in my memory and all connections are lost. Not even staying at the place and spot would restore them, nothing would lead us back to the reality of that time, so that we could confront it." (Translation Garbiñe Iztueta)

shared moments (UNN 104–105) shows her that filtering and letting remembrances disappear belongs to memory configuration and is determined by unconscious emotional forces.

In the second place, we are confronted with an imaginary motherhood, even though the imaginary nature of the daughter is not clear at the beginning. Truth and irrational fantasy are connected concepts in the mother-daughter relationship in *Unter dem Namen Norma*, as it is by means of the fantasized daughter, Emilia, that protagonist Marianne discovers the deepest truths about herself. The daughter Emilia is presented as the abrupt voice that makes the protagonist and narrator Marianne wince, and further as the squeaky hoarse voice that does not talk much (UNN 116), though it does reveal the most important truths for Marianne. It is this imaginary daughter-figure Emilia, and not the mother, who acts as a trigger of memory in a context of historical and cultural forgetfulness about the GDR, in a context of forgetfulness about its sites of memory: as possible proactive solutions to Marianne's context of disorientation, forgetfulness, and loss, Emilia encourages her to write a chronicle of her neighborhood, to create an office of coordination for nostalgic Germans and those denying their past, a lost and found office of memories, a counselling office to help with "where to get out of Germany and how" (UNN 123).

In the mother-daughter imaginary dialogues, Emilia represents Marianne's inner voice trying to awaken the paralyzed Marianne in the aftermath of reunification and encourage her to focus on the future.

These dialogues thus construct an intimate space for a dialogical opinion-forming on the extinct GDR and on the concept of memory, and a questioning of the so-called *Ostalgic* vision: Emilia expresses her disagreement with the constant discussion and stories about the past, with the constant comparison between past and present (UNN 121–122). The imaginary daughter offers a critical diagnosis of Marianne's paralyzed existence as well, identifying a lack of projects and hopelessness in her

mother. In addition, this very intimate context of fantasized dialogues creates the necessary space for free strong feelings (feelings of frustration, weakness, and failure, as well as a feeling of inadequacy for her past, present, and future), and for the emotional memory of the GDR, which is usually silenced in the social, cultural, and professional daily life of the Reunified Germany of the 1990s. Thanks to this imagined mother-daughter relationship and their communication, a transformation of the mother-figure from object into subject is possible. This begins to take place after Marianne becomes aware of and expresses verbally her own emotions about the historical and existential change. A further signal of this transformation is the legitimacy of setting free all kinds of emotions aroused by the past and the present in order to build a balanced memory.

Finally, in the closing passage of the novel, the mother Marianne wants to hear her imaginary daughter's certainties about Marianne's future: "[ich] wünschte dabei, dass zuguterletzt Emilia käme, mir im Mondlicht die neuesten Figuren vorführen und mit ihrer unmöglichen Stimme verkünden würde, anscheinend sei mir doch noch zu helfen" (UNN 286).³⁶ The imaginary daughter guides the disoriented mother, thereby subverting the traditional mother-role as a guide for her daughter.

2.2. Embodiment and discursivity of memory transmission

The special focus on body parts in the mother-daughter communication is present in all three novels. It is interesting to recall that Jan and Aleida Assmann draw attention to the relevance of body representations in communicative memory, because adults in a family pass on the bodily and

³⁶ "[I] wished that Emilia finally came, made an exhibition of the newest pirouettes in the moonlight, and announced with her impossible voice that apparently there was still hope for me" (Translation Garbiñe Iztueta)

affective connection to determinant events of the past to their descendants.³⁷

Herta Müller's main body metaphors related to the mother-daughter relationship are the eye, the finger/nail, and the back in pain in *The Land of Green Plums*. Müller's use of the eye and the gaze as a symbol of power and social control is recurrent in her narrative.³⁸ The surrealistic and cannibalistic image of the mother violently cutting the fingers and nails of her daughter and eating them (LGP 8) offers an image of destructive and amputating motherhood alongside the powerlessness of the young generation in the suffocating universe of the Romanian-German rural enclave of the Banat. In addition, the recurrent symptomatic image of the mother's back pain serves to confer the idea of illness and suffering directly related to guilt, as a consequence of the burden carried out by mothers as messengers of a corrupt memory.

Urretabizkaia's *Red Notebook* character L. embodies the Mother's eyes and voice in Caracas, with Mother being represented in her exile as blind and mute (RN 21–22). According to Mother's entries in her red notebook and the dialogues remembered by L., Mother considers the

lawyer her voice in Venezuela in order to reestablish communication with her children, and the ambassador of her love (RN 15). The metaphor of needing "different eyes" in order to "rebuild the broken bridge" (RN 21) between Mother and her children illustrates the idea that restoration of

³⁷ Aleida Assmann, "Memory, Individual and Collective," in *The Oxford Handbook to Contextual Political Analysis*, ed. Robert E. Goodin and Charles Tilly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 213–214.

³⁸ Morwenna Symons refers to the use of the symbol in *Niederungen* (Nadir) in *Room for Manoeuvre: The Role of Intertext in Elfriede Jelinek's Die Klavierspielerin*, Günter Grass's *Ein weites Feld* and Herta Müller's *Niederungen* (London: Maney, 2005), 123–125.

ruptured memory, and the further working on the consensus of cultural memory needs several non-hegemonic gazes.

In *Unter dem Namen Norma*, Emilia is constantly represented as an unexpected voice, which very often gives Marianne a start, as well as an elegant ballet-dancing, pirouetting figure (UNN 119–121), contrasting with the paralyzed mother figure who moves clumsily in the new German context of unification (UNN 109, 119). Marianne's tearful eyes in her dialogues with Emilia are a symbol of her accepting her own negative feelings at an apparently booming, optimistic time, that is, a symbol of her confronting the self-censored emotional memory of the GDR.

In addition to the strong bodily dimension of memory, a multidimensional and multiperspective textual nature of memory is stressed. Memory is constructed in all three cases as an intricate temporal and textual composition, in which different types of texts and discourses are employed and no lineal discourse is possible.

Müller's narrative plays with different unidentified narrative voices, which makes the reading process a challenging task. The distant and ruptured mother-daughter communications are compensated by the narratological proximity effect of several diaries, letters, and long telephone conversations. These very textual instruments are also recurrent in *Unter dem Namen Norma*, in addition to the book Marianne is translating, her chronicle, and the fantasized dialogues with Emilia that are presented as real. This variety of textual types can be seen as a

gesture of reconciling a wide range of different meanings, from the most factual to the most irrational. *The Red Notebook* also presents different levels of communication, different voices and points of view on the story by means of various textual forms and by including the topic of translated texts. In addition to Mother's discourse in her red notebook addressed to her children, the novel consists of a heterodiegetic narrator relating L.'s

experience in Caracas, her process of reading the notebook, her reactions to it (questioning Mother's interpretation of facts, judging Mother's emotions), L.'s diary-like notes in a black notebook, and translating the red notebook in a brown notebook.

The meta-textual play is very significant also as a means of underlining the complexity of memory as a deciphering and constructing process based on many subjective discourses: reading intimate documents such as diaries and letters written by others but also by themselves, reflecting on the read texts, and translating and transmitting them for others. These are the meta-textual tasks that belong to memory construction and processes of self-exploration in Müller's, Burmeister's, and Urretabizkaia's novels. Marianne in *Unter dem Namen Norma* and the anonymous protagonist of *The Land of Green Plums* are professional translators, and L. in *The Red Notebook* is at one point also involved in translating the notebook. An interaction between, on one hand, real and, on the other, unreal, surrealistic and imagined scenes, especially in Müller's and Burmeister's novels, challenges the idea of the existence of a unique rational memory and an exclusively fact-based construction of cultural memory. All these components in Müller's, Burmeister's, and Urretabizkaia's novels indicate their contribution to giving voice to an alternative, questioning memory in post-communist Romania, Reunified Germany, and Basque society in the 1990s.

3. Conclusion

The Land of Green Plums, *Unter dem Namen Norma*, and *The Red Notebook* invite the reader to remember the past of communist Romania, the GDR,

and the Basque Country from a non-hegemonic position. This non-hegemonic position is expressed through the perspectives of mothers and daughters in problematic relationships in direct correlation with a context of sociopolitical conflict, trauma, and/or exile.

Hirsch affirms that “the break in memory transmission resulting from traumatic historical events necessitates forms of remembrances that reconnect and re-embody an intergenerational memorial fabric that is severed by catastrophe.”³⁹ These three authors show the exploration of the necessary new forms of remembrance. They create spaces of intimacy in which traditional patterns of mother-daughter relationships are subverted, mothers are demystified, difficulties of emotional communication are linked to the silenced pain of situations of conflict, and the reader is invited to a meta-reflection on memory transmission. Cultural memory is represented at an early stage as a communicative process in which meaning is created on the basis of very diverse discourse types and perspectives, with a special emphasis on the emotional, bodily, and discursive dimension. Müller focuses on the need to maintain some distance in order to reach a sincere, open, and empathic intergenerational communication, and it is no coincidence that only when both mother and daughter have left Romania do they reach such a stage in their relationship. Burmeister suggests irrational and emotional mechanisms

of memory as an alternative form of processing the cultural memory of the extinct GDR, represented in the figure of the imaginary daughter. And Urretabizkaia offers the chance to debate about the merits of a society that mutilates cultural memory by silencing challenging female memories.

Based on the conclusions of the present chapter, it would be interesting to analyze other narrative works by Müller, Burmeister, and Urretabizkaia in order to identify further narrative strategies to

³⁹ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 32.

problematize non-hegemonic memory. Moreover, the comparative analysis of other forms of embodiment and discursivity of memory in the works of these three authors would complete the initial approach of this study. Last but not least, comparing the contributions of Müller, Burmeister, and Urretabizkaia to works by younger women authors could help to clarify, somewhat, the debate on Etkind's "soft memory" as regards communist and post-communist Romania, the GDR, and the recent violent past of the Basque society.

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