
ARTICLE – RETHINKING MINOR LITERATURES

Webs and Threads and Shirts of Destiny: Textile Imagery and the Aesthetics of Transmission in Barbara Honigmann's *Ein Kapitel aus meinem Leben* (2004) and Katja Petrowskaja's *Vielleicht Esther* (2014)

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Daughter narrators in autobiographical and autofictional texts by contemporary Jewish women writers such as Barbara Honigmann and Katja Petrowskaja employ textile imagery to overcome traumatic ruptures and losses of tradition. The history of (Jewish) embroidery and needlework in general is being evoked and alluded to in their literary texts, often via the character of the grandmother. The act of translation from cultural technique to literary text enables the writers to reconnect with Jewish and female artistic traditions, establishing new transnational genealogies of female artistic creation. Honigmann's own female and Jewish version of Deleuze's and Guattari's 'minor literature' and Natalia Ginzburg's concept of a poetry of 'nothing much' advocate a commitment to a poetics of the domestic and the seemingly trivial with a decidedly subversive edge. Both aesthetic approaches turn exclusion from male genealogies of literary and religious authority into a strength, asking questions about truth, memory, belonging and the problem of both traumatic and cultural inheritance.

Tweetable Abstract: The use of textile and domestic imagery in the literature of contemporary Jewish women authors serves as a strategy to overcome genealogical and traumatic ruptures.

Antin's Spiderweb

Sometimes, when Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari are trying to explain what it means to be a writer of a 'minor literature', their language can become quite figurative: 'Writing like a dog digging a hole, a rat digging its burrow' (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, p. 18). I would like to add 'writing like a spider weaving its web', because it is remarkable how Jewish women authors in contemporary German literature, first and foremost Barbara Honigmann and Katja Petrowskaja, but also Viola Roggenkamp, narrate and transmit family history, trauma and postmemory, re-establish destroyed genealogies and fashion new female artistic traditions by

working with textile metaphors and by spinning large webs of intertextual and transnational affiliations.

Can (German) Jewish literature by female writers be considered a separate literary tradition with its own canon, its own history and characteristics? Can it be, as Barbara Honigmann claims, 'eine ganz kleine Literatur des Anvertrauens' (Honigmann 2006, 7–29) in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari, and yet in its own, exclusively female sense? And if so, what are its characteristics? Dagmar C.G. Lorenz lists mother–daughter relations, multilingualism, the topics of persecution and Jewish (Ashkenazi) culture as some of the most prominent subjects of this literature (Lorenz 1997, xii). Loss, grief and the rediscovery of a Europe that is full of Jewish sites of mourning post-1945 are its more recent themes, she claims (Lorenz 1997, 219). As a body of literature with its own traditions and intertextual links, but first and foremost with its own subversive quality, these texts are going against the grain of male genealogies with their own strong matriarchal narratives, against nationalism with their inherent transnationalism and against monolingualism with their multilingual quality. In these inherently subversive qualities, the texts share those of the 'minor' literatures such as a deterritorialisation of languages, the political significance of their scenes and constellations as well as the diversity of identities they show. Nolden and Malino even make the case not only for a German-Jewish female canon, but for a European (and Russian) one with their anthology of Jewish female writing after the Second World War. They choose to present the collection in four thematic categories: displacement, re-emergence, defiance and reinvention (Nolden and Malino 2005). This attempt to define a canon comes close to the concept of a 'minor' literature with its revolutionary qualities, its deterritorialisation of language and its 'possibility to express another possible community' (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 17).

The topic of female artistic creation and the importance of the spider as its mascot bring to mind the artist Louise Bourgeois and her enormous spider sculptures which she called 'Maman' to honour her ever-industrious mother. The metaphor of the spider seems to be linked to the topic of artistic female genealogies, as the story of matriarchal transmission is linked to the history of needlework. The spider and its web as an image not simply of connection, but more precisely of healing reconnection, of re-establishing a state of belonging after great ruptures, persecution and/or migration in the context of Jewish female writing, makes an early appearance in a text by Mary Antin. In her autobiography *The Promised Land* (1912), Antin tells the story of her family's emigration from the Russian Pale of Settlement to Boston, Massachusetts, a story that is meant to be about the triumph of becoming an American, but which is also very much about the pains and hardships of assimilation. At the Natural History Club in Boston, a young Antin follows a talk about spiders, disgusted at first, then fascinated:

[The lecturer] talked [...] about different kinds of spiders and their ways; and as he talked, he wove across the doorway, where he stood, a gigantic spider's web, unwinding a ball of twine in his hand, and looping various lengths on invisible tacks he had ready in the door frame. I was fascinated by the progress of the web. (Antin 1997, 255)

A couple of pages later, Antin describes her younger self escaping the crowds and poverty of her home in a Boston slum by going up to the roof at sunrise or at dawn:

In the pearl-misty morning, in the ruby-red evening, I was empress of all I surveyed from the roof of the tenement house. I could point in any direction and name a friend who would welcome me there. (Antin 1997, 265)

The two scenes are clearly linked. What only the young Antin can see when looking at the city is a very personal network of friendships. The city is a web of connections, and being now in a

state of authority, as 'empress of all I surveyed', having lived through the pains of emigration and assimilation ultimately means to be connected.¹

It is not inappropriate to draw a link between Antin and the German author Barbara Honigmann, who identified with the story of Jewish emigration to the United States to an extent that makes one of her narrators say 'Ellis Island ist meine Heimat' (Honigmann 1993, 31). Elsewhere, the author calls Ellis Island a 'Zwischenort' and links this place to a quote by Georges Perec, listing 'einige von den Worten, die für mich mit dem Wort Jude unauflöslich verbunden sind: die Reise, die Erwartung, die Hoffnung, die Unsicherheit, der Unterschied, die Erinnerung' (Honigmann 2016, 17). For Honigmann, Judaism itself is a web, 'ein nie zu Ende gesponnenes Netz', 'das nie abgerissene Gespräch zwischen den Kommentatoren der unterschiedlichsten Zeiten und weit entfernten Geographien' (Honigmann 2006, 65); her literary and essayistic work takes part in this conversation and establishes new connections, a European Jewish web.

An important example for these created connections is that with Italian author Natalia Ginzburg, which Honigmann initiates by having a her own painting with one of Ginzburg's novels on the cover of her volume *Alles, alles Liebe*. Images of the textile, of webs, of threads, of designing, sewing and making or repairing clothes have their place in texts such as Ginzburg's novel *Lessico familiare* (*Family Sayings*, 1963) in which the author's Torinese Jewish family is persecuted and suffers traumatic loss of relatives and friends during the time of fascism and the Second World War. After the war, the return of the 'house seamstress' signals continuity and, finally, peace and solace: 'Mia madre chiamò subito la Tersilla, e quando ebbe la Tersilla nella stanza da stiro, davanti alla macchina da cucire, tirò il fiato e le parve che la vita potesse riprendere il suo ritmo antico' (Ginzburg 1963, 163).² This passage hints at the double function of the textile metaphor. Firstly, it connects the scene and thus the narrator and her text to a tradition of female art and often-suppressed communication that goes back to antiquity – as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out: 'Like Ariadne, Penelope, and Philomela, women have used their loom, thread, and needles both to defend themselves and silently to speak of themselves' (Gilbert & Gubar 2000, 633). Secondly, it highlights the needle and its work as techniques of healing and mending: 'The needle', as Louise Bourgeois put it, 'is used to repair damage. It's a claim to forgiveness. It is never aggressive, it's not a pin' (quoted in Parker 2000, xix). Studies such as Parker's *The Subversive Stitch* show that a daughter's domestic training in needlework – such as working on a sampler – strengthened and formed the relationship between mother and daughter (Parker 2000, 130), besides being a 'gradual initiation into full femininity' (87). It is thus a highly ambivalent activity, charged with emotion, 'shot through with as much guilt [and] hatred as [...] love' (130). On the one hand, needlework was a performance of 'wifely and domestic duty' (215), on the other hand, however, it

¹ It is true that the spider motif also carries strong and recurrent antisemitic connotations. Both Nazi and Soviet caricatures represented Jews as spiders covering entire countries or continents with their web (Schwarz 2005). Whether these aspects play a role in Antin's text, whether her spider is a conscious reappropriation of an anti-semitic trope, is hard to say, but it is not impossible. Jay Geller's study *Bestiarium Judaicum: Unnatural Histories of the Jews*, for instance, explores the literary animal figures and voices in the works of Jewish authors such as Heine, Kafka, Freud and Kolmar, finding that these animal figures are employed to negotiate their author's relationship with gentile society and modernity (Geller 2017). The Jewish cultural history of the spider adds even more layers to the complexity of the metaphor. Maybe Antin also knew the story from the Midrash, in which David is saved by a spider while on the run from Saul: When David hides from his pursuers in a cave, a spider weaves a web across the cave's entrance so quickly that Saul's men do not think anybody could recently have passed through. The story is supposed to explain why animals such as spiders and wasps are part of creation (Hirsch et al. 1906). An allusion to it could link Antin's text to its more traditional Jewish roots.

² 'My mother immediately called la Tersilla, and when she had la Tersilla in the ironing room in front of the sewing machine, she drew breath and it seemed to her that life could now continue in its ancient rhythm.' [Translation L.E.].

provided opportunities to guiltlessly withdraw into female circles ('sewing allowed women to sit together without feeling they were neglecting their families' (5)) and to artistically explore the potential of female heroines from the Bible (96).

The sewing woman may have been silent, but the images she created might have served as a container for all kinds of emotions. If second- and third-generation Jewish women authors – the daughters and granddaughters of survivors who are the so called first generation, marked by the rupture of the historical experience – show a tendency to use metaphors from the semantic field of needlework and other domestic activities traditionally associated with femininity, this is not to be understood as longing for a return of the lost world of the *Shtetl* and its traditional gender roles. Nevertheless, tracing the metaphors in the texts of writers like Honigmann and her intertextual allies, such as Ginzburg, can help us to see and understand the pathways of transmission forged by these authors.

Earlier writings such as those by Esther Dischereit expose the problem of tradition and transmission in German-Jewish texts after the Shoah. In her mother-daughter-narrative *Joëmis Tisch. Eine jüdische Geschichte*, there is a strong wish to reconnect to Jewish religious tradition. 'Hannah's daughter', whose mother survived the war in hiding, wishes to make her own daughter experience the holiday of Purim: 'Nun will sie ihrer Tochter Purim zeigen.' The text closes with this wish and remains in the conjunctive mood: 'Noch immer sucht sie einen, der ihrer Tochter Hamam-Taschen bäckt. Dann würden sie sehr viele davon essen' (Dischereit 1988, 111). There is no community, simply nobody to bake Hamam-Taschen for the holiday in postwar Germany. The psychoanalyst Jacques Hassoun stresses the importance of a new concept of cultural transmission which includes ruptures, gaps and losses, for when apparently self-evident processes of transmission from one generation to the next are made impossible because of persecution, exile and migration. In such times of crisis, the need for transmission is especially strong, but instead of consisting of a simple and ritualised passing on of language and customs, practices of transmission such as translation, commentary, variation and interpretation are called upon and enable descendants to make a certain tradition their own (Hassoun 2003, 10, 13). These scenes and rituals can often only be identified in retrospect and differ from rites of passage, as defined by Arnold van Gennep (van Gennep 2005), which are standardised. If cultural transmission is being reflected and understood in this way, the narratives change as well and, according to Sigrid Weigel, have at their centre actions and scenes of transmission (Weigel 2006, 82).

Many of these scenes of transmission in Jewish women writers' texts are staged with the help of textile metaphors and images. Clothes and other objects are being made, threads being spun, embroidery being taught by a grandmother to a granddaughter along with the Hebrew alphabet. These could easily be dismissed as 'minor' topics within the literature of a minority, a female approach to writing about the drudgery of the domestic, a silent way, in the tradition of the great antique weavers such as Procne and Penelope, of speaking of female trauma, seemingly far away and excluded from the male narratives of battle and genealogy. As a particular form of *écriture féminine*, this writing moves away from the body; it is not so much done 'in white ink' (Cixous 2010, 48) as it is in pencilled lace, in threads and fragments of cloth. As Maria Roca Lizarazu notes in her analysis of Katja Petrowskaja's *Vielleicht Esther*, there is a shift from familial to affiliative postmemory (Lizarazu 2018, 172) and, very prominently, a shift from communicative to cultural memory. The narrator, who in the beginning of that novel leaves Berlin to research her ancestors' past, has conversations about this past with her parents and experiences the limits of communicative memory (her great-grandmother's name remains a doubtful 'vielleicht'). The change from an imagery and memory of the body (as in the texts of Esther Dischereit, for example) to the semantic field of clothing and needlework is perhaps an expression of this distance, as the third and fourth generation have

to come to terms with the disappearing of the generation of survivors. Textile and domestic imagery can be read as an attempt to (re)connect to lost or broken chains of transmission.

Housework has been dismissed as drudgery by feminist critics and thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir (and rightfully so), but philosophers like Iris Marion Young have also shown its importance as a technique of preservation and making of meaning (Young 2005, 142). In the Jewish cultural context, embroidery even went beyond the domestic realm, as mantles of cloth fabricated by women for the Torah of their respective synagogue were publicly received and blessed in Sabbath services from the seventeenth century onwards (Parker 2000, 164). As Ita Aber stresses in *The Art of Judaic Needlework*, embroidery is also mentioned in the *Book of Exodus* in the context of the construction of the Tabernacle, and Bezalel, charged by Moses with this task, carries divine protection in his name 'B'tzale El, under the shadow [of protection] of God' (Aber 1979, 2). Aber draws attention to the point that 'there is no other single artistic enterprise mentioned in the Bible as being under divine protection' (2). So, if Jewish women writers rely on the imagery of the textile, they reconnect their narratives with a tradition as old as the Bible. They thus write themselves into a tradition of exile, for which clothes are traditionally markers, that stretches from the fall of man to the biblical Joseph's marvellous coat (Thums 2013).

This is a way of writing that is at once highly particular to a specific historical situation – after the Shoah, reconnecting to lost cultural and religious worlds and traditions – and, on the other hand, much more general, as it exposes rhizomatic structures. Alternative models of genealogy are thus put forward, moving away from the model of the tree ('Familienbaum'), from the grandfathers and fathers, to great-grandmothers whose names are barely remembered, grandmothers whose handwriting cannot be deciphered and mothers whose artistic genius can serve as a model for the daughter-writer. The root-like scribbling of one grandmother (see further below) already seems the perfect illustration of the Deleuzian botanic image of the rhizome, a concept that highlights connection through its multiple nodes and many possible starting points.

Sewn into the Past: Honigmann's Female Aesthetics of the Fragmentary

It could be argued that, after the book about her father, *Eine Liebe aus nichts*, and the essay 'Von meinem Urgroßvater, meinem Großvater, meinem Vater und mir', Honigmann's book about the mother is an exploration of female genealogy. There are two genealogical models in Honigmann's work: male and female. In 'Mein Urgroßvater, mein Großvater, mein Vater und ich', Honigmann recounts a genealogy of Jewish male authors, scientists and journalists (great-grandfather, grandfather and father). She clearly states that there are no female role models in this family history of intellectuals and patriarchs ('they didn't write books', she laconically remarks of the women ancestors (Honigmann 2012 [1999], 50) which makes it difficult for her to position herself within this narrative. Moreover, she regards the path to assimilation chosen by her ancestors as a tragic mistake, and is therefore searching for new routes of transmission, fresh narratives of female creation to write herself into after the Shoah.

Within the tradition of German-Jewish assimilated scholarship and authorship, Honigmann at first found only one female role model for herself: the Jewish salonière, the great hostess and enabler of male artists, writers, politicians and dramatists in the tradition of Rahel Varnhagen. Honigmann states that she played a similar role for her circle of friends for a while in East Berlin during the 1980s (Honigmann 2002 [1999], 54). She eventually leaves the GDR for a more traditionally Jewish life *and* the life of a full-time author of her own books in Strasbourg. She thus fashions an autofictional narrator who is stepping out of a prefigured image of femininity – the image of the muse – to become an author in her own right. Textile imagery helps her to forge the female genealogy of creators in which she then places herself.

In Honigmann's autofiction book *Ein Kapitel aus meinem Leben* (2004), the central textile metaphor is not the web or network but the activity of sewing – more precisely, of sewing somebody into a piece of clothing. With *Kapitel*, Honigmann tries to approach both her mother's life as well as her own childhood and adolescence in East Berlin. The mother's reluctance to 'bring together the fragments of her life' (Honigmann 2004, 139) motivates the daughter-narrator to loosely trace this biography from the mother's time as a young communist in Vienna, her exile in Paris and London, as the wife of the British spy Kim Philby, and later as a member of the cultural elite of the GDR permanently at odds with the provincialism of East Berlin, up to her last move back to Vienna in old age.

Honigmann carves out her own position at the margins of German-Jewish tradition, and with direct reference to the theory of 'minor literatures' by claiming to be an author in the tradition of 'Eine ganz kleine Literatur des Anvertrauens' [a very minor, confessional literature]. This literature starts, according to Honigmann, with Glückel von Hameln's memoirs, reaches a peak with Rahel Varnhagen's letters and ends with Anne Frank's diary, written in hiding in Amsterdam before her deportation and death in Bergen-Belsen. This type of literature has a linguistic variety which includes the Judendeutsch of the Jews of Hamburg and Altona of the late seventeenth century as well as Rahel Varnhagen's German strewn with Yiddish, Hebrew and French and Anne Frank's Dutch. Its genres are the small ones of domestic life and the quotidian: the family memoir, written for children and grandchildren, private letters and diaries. This tradition, as Honigmann argues, comes to an end with Anne Frank, and yet she dares to claim it for herself: 'Ich bin noch da' (Honigmann 2006, 28). Writing in this tradition means to confide in the readers and to establish connections, 'Verbindungen, die mich auch festhalten' (29).

At the same time, Honigmann re-examines her mother's life and fashions her own line of female creativity and a poetics of the fragmentary in *Ein Kapitel aus meinem Leben*. This process takes place during a rare scene of intimacy and closeness between mother and adolescent daughter, during which the mother reminisces about her years of exile while sewing a dress for her daughter directly onto the body. Similar to other scenes of postmemory and yet very original, this can be read as a moment in which an emotionally charged past is being transferred from mother to daughter on various levels, both conscious and unconscious. The mother works herself into an ecstasy of creation:

Chaotisch, unvorhersehbar, also *genialisch* war meine Mutter auch bei den Kleiderkreationen, die sie für mich schneiderte. Sie fand einen Stoff, schnitt ihn ungefähr zu, warf ihn mir über und steckte, schnitt, heftete, nähte, säumte das Kleid dann *an meinem Körper* so lange, bis es fertig war. Genau wie die Pariser Couturiers das machen, behauptete sie [...] und so sahen die Kleider dann auch aus, einzigartig und unvergleichlich, ungewöhnlich und keiner Mode folgend, sondern sie kreierend, genialisch eben, ein bißchen *schief und krumm* [...]. Es waren die besten Stunden, die wir miteinander verbrachten, wenn sie mir ihre Kreationen verpaßte. Da hörte sie sogar auf, von Politik zu sprechen, und war ganz ihren ästhetischen Aufbrüchen hingegeben oder den *Erinnerungen*, wann sie einmal etwas Ähnliches wie das, was ihr gerade vorschwebte, gesehen hatte. Dann war sie euphorisch und im *Schöpfungsrausch* [...] alles hatte sich ihrer *Schöpfungswut* unterzuordnen, so lange, bis sie sah, *daß es gut war*, und sie mich, *in ihre Kreation gehüllt*, wieder in die Welt laufen ließ. (Honigmann 2004, 39, my italics).

In stark contrast to the male genealogy of authors, the mother is portrayed as an ingenious, godlike female artist who creates, who conjures up form from fragments while recounting

memories. The 'ein bisschen schief und krumm', patchy and fragmentary quality of her creations is a recurring theme in Honigmann's oeuvre – a characteristic of an imperfect world after the expulsion from paradise, which points to her messianic thinking, as the patchy and the fragmentary will disappear. As Walter Benjamin writes, 'wenn der Messias kommt, von dem ein großer Rabbi gesagt hat, daß er nicht mit Gewalt die Welt verändern wolle, sondern nur um ein Geringes sie zurechtstellen werde' (Benjamin 1966 [1934], 263).

In her mother's 'aesthetic outbursts', with the dress sewn together in a fashion both precarious and ingenious, the writer finds a model for the fragmentary and sketchy form she gives to her own life-writing projects. While her mother was a communist and consequently believed in history taking a certain direction, the daughter, after the Second World War and the fall of the Iron Curtain, opts for a more fragmentary and tentative narrative. At the same time, her mother's complicated life and her evasiveness about its central chapters, such as her role as a spy, her marriage to Philby and her neglect of her own mother's last wishes can in this way be given a new form by Honigmann. Like a counter figure to the male geniuses of the family, the mother is revealed as her own artist who can create form, and that form being 'schief und krumm' is even more important than the context of her narrations and memories.

'Das Schiefe, das Ungraziöse, das Unmögliche, das Unstimmige' is the title of an acceptance speech Honigmann gave when she was awarded the Kleist-Preis in 2000. In this speech she brings together Kleist's ideas of the brokenness of the world and the image of the broken vessels in Lurianic Kabbalah. In a close reading of Kleist's famously hermetic essay '*Über das Marionettentheater*', Honigmann draws attention to her own writing's indebtedness to Kleist and his imperfect, fractured and messy world:

Ich denke, es geht um den Splitter. Der Splitter im Fuß des Jünglings ist eine Scherbe des *Zerbrochenen Krugs*, dessen Unversehrtheit man nicht mehr einklagen und nirgends wiederfinden kann, genausowenig wie das Paradies, weil ein Paradies das 'Davor', das 'Davor' aber verriegelt ist. Und da es eher unmöglich ist, die 'Reise um die Welt (zu) machen und (zu) sehen, ob es vielleicht hinten irgendwo wieder offen ist', müssen wir uns also abfinden und mit dem Splitter im Fuß leben, 'in Prosa wie in Versen'. Dann eben schief, ungraziös und unstimmig mitten in dem Scherbenhaufen aller Krüge, die wir zerschmissen haben und die nicht zu reparieren sind. (Honigmann 2006, 165).

With her imperfect creations, the mother seems to respect her daughter's verdict which brings together Kleist and the image of a creation always already broken, a Kabbalistic reading of Kleist which helps her accept that the truth about the past cannot be reconstructed or researched, and thus gives her the freedom to narrate. The daughter, sewn into her mother's creation, and the frenetic needlework itself are a reminder of the fates, the Moirai: The narrator is fatefully spun into her mother's past, the whole scene a strong image of the inevitability of postmemory and thus of the influence of parental trauma on the life of the child. The designs of the daughter, too, are deeply marked by the mother's story.

A brief look at another narrative about a powerful mother and parental domination shows the dark undertones of such a scene. In her last novel *Aracoeli* (1981), the Italian writer Elsa Morante conjures up a nightmarish vision:

Secondo un'antica storiella, esisterebbe, nascosto in una foresta, un sarto immortale, che di giorno dorme appollaiato su un albero come i gufi, e di notte va in giro per le camere di certi mortali da lui prescelti, ai quali cuce addosso, nel sonno, una camicia invisibile, tessuta coi fili del loro destino. Da quella notte in poi, ciascun prescelto –

senza saperlo – se ne andrà intorno cucito vivo dentro la propria camicia, né potrà mai, da allora in poi, mutarsela, o strapparsela di dosso: tale e quale che se fosse la sua stessa pelle. (Morante 1982, 45).³

Both Morante's and Honigmann's narrators are obsessed (in an essay, Honigmann calls it 'ständige[], vielleicht zwanghafte[] Konfrontation mit der auferlegten Familien- und Lebensgeschichte' (Honigmann 2006, 28)) with their parents' past and history, which is, at the same time, the history of the twentieth century.⁴ Their shirts of destiny (Schicksalshemden) indicate that they do not have much of a choice. But Honigmann has continued working with the clothes metaphor in more recent texts, albeit in a variation that moves the stress on female (maternal) genius to the image of the – independent – daughter as an artist of the everyday. When she returns to it in *Chronik meiner Straße*, it becomes a plea not only for celebration of the banality of everyday life, but for the decision to take one's life and art into one's own hands: to a friend who no longer wants to go painting with her because she finds regular practice boring, the narrator explains, 'so sei es nun mal: Erst kommt Montag, dann kommt Dienstag, "immer das Hemd zuerst und dann die Hose drüber", wie Büchner sagt, und wenn wir warten, bis uns die Muse küßt, da können wir lange warten' (Honigmann 2014, 43f.).

Just like the narrator of Wilhelm Raabe's *Chronik der Sperlingsgasse*, the narrator of *Chronik* is sitting at her window, 'halb in Träumen und halb in Gedanken' (Honigmann 2015, 152). The parental history seems to fade into the background, but the figure of the mother still haunts the text. Instead of the mother's hat which the narrator was holding on to in *Ein Kapitel* and which she later lost, in *Chronik* she is fiercely guarding an old Viennese shopping bag, calling it 'eine Art Fetisch' (Honigmann 2015, 123). The mother's one-sentence tales of an epic past have now become quotes running through the daughter's mind on her way through her neighbourhood ('sieh mal, die Asten blühen, jetzt fängt der Herbst an' (Honigmann 2015, 122)). The topics of transitoriness and separation of parents and daughters are vivid throughout the text, sharpening the daughter's eye for parallel or similar constellations. Lost children and abandoned parents are central to most of the episodes in fact. There is a neighbour who commits suicide, leaving her family behind (Honigmann 2015, 47); there are the grown-up sons of a neighbour who cry for their mother when she passes away (68); Victor Hugo's poem about the death of his daughter Adele is quoted (83). The most miserable and loneliest character in the text is probably an elderly Bosnian woman whom the narrator helps to cross the street: 'Ihr Sohn sei schon vor langer Zeit nach Bosnien zurückgekehrt, ihr einziger Sohn. "Andere Kinder – nix! Nix Familie – Rien"' (86). Even though Jewish characters and survivors in particular are in the narrator's focus and represent broken genealogies, other experiences are included and narrated in the sense of Marianne Hirsch's concept of affiliative postmemory. Concerning the old Bosnian woman, the narrator remarks that she was 'going under in a sea of strangeness' (Honigmann 2015, 86), looking to reach the other side of the street ('das andere Ufer der Straße' (86)).

The connection between trauma and its expression via the textile arts is long established and has a distinctly female connotation. There is the story of Philomela who, having been

³ 'According to an old story, there is an immortal tailor hidden in a forest who during the day sleeps in a tree like an owl and at night goes through the bedrooms of some people of his choosing and, while they are asleep, sews them into an invisible shirt, made from the threads of their destiny. From this night onwards, each of those so chosen goes about – without knowing it – sewn into his shirt, and he can never, from now on, change it or take it off his back: as if it was his own skin.' [Translation L.E.]

⁴ Elsa Morante (1912–1983) was the daughter of a Jewish mother who raised her children as Catholics out of fear of antisemitic persecution.

raped and mutilated, weaves the story of her sufferings into a dress for her sister Procne. Recent texts by Jewish women writers reproduce this striking link between trauma narrative and textile imagery. In Viola Roggenkamp's novel *Familienleben* (2004) about a Jewish-German family in Hamburg in the late 1960s, the mother of the narrator sews new dresses for all the dolls in the household every year at Christmas – to both celebrate childhood and mourn the children lost in the Shoah. When the protagonist, Fania, has to do needlework for school, her mother, a survivor of the Holocaust, experiences discrimination and antisemitism at the shop where mother and daughter go to buy the necessary cloth ('Gminder Linnen', Roggenkamp 2004, 154) for a tablecloth and napkins. The shop assistant feels provoked by the mother's asking for a discount and aggressively informs her that 'wir sind hier doch nicht auf einem Basar [...] Wir sind in Deutschland und nicht unter Betrügern und Gaunern' (Roggenkamp 2004, 157). The mother confronts the shop assistant and all the bystanding customers by invoking the Jewish history of the store and calls the assistant a 'mieses ponim' before she leaves and collapses in a taxi. The narrative then shifts completely from this dramatic scene of traumatic recall to one of transmission and education as Fania brings her 'Gminder Linnen' to her grandmother, who teaches her to cut it, sew a tablecloth and then embroider this with the letter Shin from the Hebrew alphabet (Roggenkamp 2004, 158). The tablecloth becomes a central item at the Saturday breakfast table where the family shares wartime stories of love, survival and betrayal.

There is not just an emphasis on clothes and textiles, the book is preoccupied with the whole field of the domestic: old, barely readable recipes, activities such as grinding coffee, cooking, doing the laundry – descriptions of all these things point to what I call a poetics of the seemingly trivial and banal, of 'nothing much'. 'Aus nichts' is a recurring phrase in Honigmann's work. Her sewing mother Litzky liked to create form 'from nothing'. The daughter only has fragments of stories about her mother's life: the story of a hat bought in Paris, of the dogs she owned and loved. The same formulation can be found in Natalia Ginzburg's autobiographical novel *Lessico familiare* [*Family Sayings*] in a passage where the narrator records the moment she understood that poems were 'made from nothing', out of simple things and phrases that one can find anywhere. I believe Ginzburg's 'poesia di niente' is surely a role model for Honigmann.⁵ The seeming simplicity of Ginzburg's style and the apparent naiveté of her narrators, employed by the author to escape the bombastic language of Italian fascism and its cherished authors, can readily be re-encountered in Honigmann's texts which, as Amir Eshel posits, are narratives about the ends of the totalitarian ideological narratives of the twentieth century (Eshel 2013, 186). Hence, the daughter-narrators in Ginzburg's and Honigmann's autofiction texts can be considered revolutionary in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of a 'minor literature'. They constitute new possible communities and widen the range of things that can become topics of canonical literature, expanding the images and scenes through which history can be assessed and told.

Making poetry 'out of nothing' can of course also be read as an allusion to Genesis, to the story of divine creation and thus, maybe, as a hint that this tradition of women's writing is not as private and domestic as it may at first seem – or rather, that it turns household chores into acts of creation and world-building in their own right.⁶ Thus, this seemingly humble poetics, with its attention to little things and to domesticity, characterises the daughter-narrators of current female Jewish literature in the German language. Daughter-narrators

⁵ Honigmann herself confirmed this in an interview I conducted with her in September 2015. In this conversation, which was mainly on the topic of exile in her work and about *Chronik meiner Straße* (2015), she mentioned her admiration for Ginzburg and the Italian author's literary creation of a 'family language which lives on for generations', cf. Bischoff 2016.

⁶ On this aspect, see also Feller 2013, 109.

turn their apparent weaknesses (of often being the smallest and youngest in the family, of being excluded from male genealogies of authorship and religious authority) into a strength. The humbleness of the daughter masks *auctoritas*, and her 'ganz kleine Literatur des Anvertrauens' treats the big questions of truth, history, memory and traumatic heritage. As long as the biblical story of creation is alluded to in this literature of daughters, paradise remains as an almost omnipresent metaphor of exile, lost childhood, loss of religious belief and of belonging. This connection between domestic activity or, more precisely, sewing, and (artistic) creation gains meaning in the context of the history of needlework and its role in female education, but it is by no means only to be found in a female canon. One need only look at Bruno Schulz's 'Treatise on Tailor's Dummies', a story from his collection *The Cinnamon Shops* (1934), in which the narrator's father holds forth in the presence of two busy young seamstresses and their tailor's dummy on the topic of creation and poetry (Schulz 2008 [1934], 50–84); or consider the role of dresses in Maxim Biller's short stories about his parents. In Giorgio Bassani's novel *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*, the two fathers and their different prayer shawls represent fatherhood as well as the paths of tradition and assimilation (Bassani 1980, 43–4).

Katja Petrowskaja's Threads and Roots: Crocheting/Translating the Past

Katja Petrowskaja's *Vielleicht Esther* (2014), a volume of travel and search narratives, constitutes another attempt at (re-)constructing a lost family novel. In the first part of the book, the narrator leaves Berlin from the main station in search of her Jewish-Polish-Ukrainian-Russian family history. Her travels take her to Warsaw and Kalisz, where her ancestors lived, to Kiev, her childhood home, and finally to Salzburg and Mauthausen after the traces of her Ukrainian grandfather who was a prisoner there in the Second World War. The narrator comes from a position of loss, of lack and insecurity as to what can be known – as the title of the volume with its tentative 'vielleicht' suggests. She uses classic symbols of genealogy such as the tree and dreams of bringing the 'Familienbaum' back into bloom by telling the stories of lost family members (Petrowskaja 2014, 25). Yet the text stages a subtle shift from the imagery of the family tree, rooted firmly in the soil of some nation or other, to that of the Luftwurzeln. While using the metaphor of the scribbled but unreadable, lace-like message from her family's past to emphasise the impossibility of researching and recreating it without translating, inventing and imagining parts, the narrator also 'reads' her grandmother's lines as loose threads and, eventually, likens them to aerial roots. Narrating one's belonging based on the concept of aerial, portable roots rather than nationalism has a long and honourable tradition in Jewish exile literature, with such texts as Hilde Domin's poem 'Ziehende Landschaften' or Arnold Zweig's journal *Orient* in which he, too, employs Heinrich Loewe's concept of aerial roots (see Bischoff 2015, 206–7). Both Honigsmann and Petrowskaja work on the idea of aerial roots to express their concepts of rooted mobility. In *Chronik meiner Straße*, Honigsmann's narrator one day discovers a small tree on her balcony ('Eines Morgens aber, als ich die Balkontür öffnete, sah ich einen kleinen Baum dort liegen' (Honigsmann 2015, 32f.)). She never finds out how it landed up there but keeps it as a reminder, 'daß es so viele Dinge auf der Welt gibt, die wir überhaupt nicht verstehen können' (33). Instead of representing genealogy and an idea of 'natural' belonging to a place and a culture, this little tree highlights the narrator's choice to stay in a state of transit. Petrowskaja's narrator also uses the concept of roots, noting that both her grandmothers, in spite of their 'Blumennamen' Rosa and Margarita, were unable to take root in the concrete of the Kiev building where the family lives after the Second World War (Petrowskaja 2014, 21), while the Ukrainian grandmothers of her friends all had gardens. The botanical metaphor of root-taking in the solid ground of national identity is replaced in Petrowskaja's narration by textile images, by the activities of crocheting, weaving, the image of fine lace and finally by that of the thread itself.

When one of the grandmothers starts scribbling in old-age, the narrator notices that grandmother Rosa's hypergraphic and undecipherable pencil marks resemble lace:

In den letzten Lebensjahren schrieb Rosa unablässig und in großer Eile an ihren Memoiren, mit Bleistift auf weißem Papier. Das Papier vergilbte schnell [...], aber Rosas Erblindung war schneller. [...] Oft vergaß sie, ein neues Blatt zu nehmen, und schrieb mehrere Seiten auf dasselbe Papier. Eine Zeile ragte in die nächste hinein, eine weitere legte sich darüber, sie [...] verknäulten sich im Bleistiftgekritzeln, gehäkelte und gewebte Spitzen.

[...]

Rosa kritzelte mit ihren Zeilen gegen die Blindheit an, sie häkelte die Zeilen ihrer entschwindenden Welt. [...] Jahrelang dachte ich, sie ließen sich entziffern, [...] bis ich verstand, dass Rosas Schriften nicht zum Lesen gedacht waren, sondern zum Festhalten, ein dick gedrehter, unzerreißbarer Ariadnefaden. (Petrowskaja 2014, 61, 62).

How can the narrator, a young woman from Kiev living in present-day Berlin and researching her Russian-Jewish-Ukrainian family history in the fragments of stories that comprise *Vielleicht Esther* decipher, read and understand the messages from her grandmother? She wants to respond, but finds herself 'mit leeren Händen vor der Computertastatur' (Petrowskaja 2014, 67). The change from the grandmother's scribbling to the granddaughter's keyboard already provides a valuable hint that some kind of translation needs to take place. In order to tell the grandmother's story, to document her disappearing world and to make herself the heiress of these narratives, the granddaughter, given the obscurity of the writing, has to translate – and to use her imagination. The mythical 'Ariadnefaden' is being spun out of love in order to save someone. This thread can also be read as a hidden intertextual nod to Walter Benjamin's *Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert*, where the narrator links his first experience of love to the figure of Ariadne, encountered at the Tiergarten (1987 [1938], 23). Grandmother Rosa is transferring love and the granddaughter is receiving the message; the latter then proceeds to enter a process of translation which leads from the pencil scribbles to the metaphor of lace and wool and finally to the text typed on a computer. Nobody is *actually* doing any crocheting or knitting anymore; it is only the textile metaphor that retains a trace of the female tradition of needlework.

The image of the thread can be read as a replacement and an equivalent of the root. Grandmother Rosa has no roots; instead she has pencilled threads which are being cast out in an attempt to hold onto something or to somebody. At the same time, the image points to her years of flight, loss and persecution during the Second World War. Furthermore, if the thread made of pencilled letters replaces the root in the system of Petrowskaja's text, then the library replaces the garden. The narrator states that in her childhood in Kiev in the 1980s, everybody had a garden, 'wir aber nicht [...] Wir hatten Tausende Bücher' (Petrowskaja 2014, 234). With a great variety of intertextual references in the text, the narrator pays homage to this library with its Russian, Ukrainian, European and Soviet classics and fairytales. A manifold and astonishing network of references is the result of her writing from this library. Starting with allusions to *Anna Karenina*, the classic Russian canon more broadly and the importance it held for Russian Jews, the narrator then moves towards a wild display of references, forging connections between Dante and Tolkien, Aleksander Blok and Goethe in – one could argue – a rhizomatic structure, defying old hierarchies and genealogical or national patterns. The variety of texts and authors called upon seems to answer to the feeling of emptiness the narrator confesses to at the beginning of *Vielleicht Esther*. As a weaver of webs, she has command over this variety and, through it, opens up the possibility of multiple connections. Putting down roots can be an active and free process, and the narrator is both an heiress to

the European canon she invokes and to her grandmother's Luftwurzeln and the subversiveness of this 'minor' concept.

How to be an heiress to a women's minor literature? Honigmann and Petrowskaja answer thus: Reinvent your genealogy, applying the rhizomatic paradigm; spin a web of intertextual allies, of mothers and grandmothers, from all kinds of literatures. Pay attention to the knitting, the sewing and the weaving, particularly to the 'nothing much', the paraphernalia of women's domestic lives. Read the unreadable. Translate. And turn threads into your roots.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the AHRC-funded OWRI project, 'Cross-Language Dynamics: Reshaping Community' and in particular the Institute of Modern Languages Research for generously funding the publication of this article.

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How to cite this article: Ekelund, L 2020 Webs and Threads and Shirts of Destiny: Textile Imagery and the Aesthetics of Transmission in Barbara Honigmann's *Ein Kapitel aus meinem Leben* (2004) and Katja Petrowskaja's *Vielleicht Esther* (2014). *Modern Languages Open*, 2020(1): 15 pp. 1–13. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.302>

Published: 04 June 2020

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