Abstract

Workshop: The Power of Memory
The power of memory: women making herstories in the 20th century
Women in Amber and Mothers in Songs: Internments in Women’s
Memories (Wakako Yamauchi and Agate Nesaule)

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The books by Japanese American writer Wakako Yamauchi Songs My Mother Taught Me: Stories, Plays, and Memoir (1995) and Latvian American author Agate Nesaule A Woman in Amber: Healing the Trauma of War and Exile (1995) are based on women’s memories of immigrant and exile experiences. Yamauchi was writing her stories out of her awareness and experiences of historical racism and when alongside dominant stereotypical images of Japanese men and women in American culture the women’s literature was becoming salient in the Japanese American cultural agency. In contrast, Nesaule’s book belongs to very few memory narratives published in America and representing an East-Central European woman’s perspective. Both books contain testimonies of women’s survival, resistance and memory in structures of oppression for women that intersect with history as material and psychic legacy of dislocation. The shared theme of both books is pain of displacements, dispersions and “diasporic journeys” (Brah 183).

Both writers belong to diasporas with distinctive historical experiences, and their journeys contain individual particularities. Their personal identities were constituted in composite transformations of their communities into specifically converted and ‘situated’ collectivities in an American ‘home.’ Race becomes an embodied marker of difference in Yamauchi’s stories of Japanese American acculturation. In Nesaule’s narrative a journey from ‘East’ to ‘West’ stamps invisible differences of ‘whiteness’ shaping her private self behind ‘melting into the pot.’ In/visibility evolves into a common trait of race and ethnicity as the markers of entry and difference in the rituals of melting/belonging. The image of journey and the conversion plot evolve as central for both writers to transcend the boundaries of a ‘specific experience’ constructed in a ‘particular memory’ of a racial/ethnic woman. In their narratives Wakako Yamauchi and Agate Nesaule address the issues of diaspora and nation, tradition and belonging, trauma and cure. Apart from the fact that both writers belong to the generations of displaced people, apart from the fact that they use the plots of origin and travel in the narrative strategies, they write from/about forced ‘homing’ enclosures - the internment camps for Japanese American people and the spaces of detention/emigration for Baltic/Latvian exiles.

Yamauchi’s and Nesaule’s narratives are sad stories of the mother-daughter relationship, and the tropes rendering otherness, invisibility and absence of the mother are central to them. Mothers as figures of difference and abjection in conversion plots emerge in the writers’ remapping of their own ‘daughterly’ genealogy and memory.

Questioning of the national construction of identity across its home and exile experiences is evoked from how and what the daughter remembers in her mother’s life. For example, Nesaule makes her narrative into a confluence of mother-daughter memory narratives. They are textual
enclosures until transformed into a re-memory narrative in which daughter’s journey/nation’s exile is differently imagined and interpreted. This re-memory of a mother’s life takes a diasporic community to its composite origins beyond the emphasis on binary oppositions as “the basis of political cleavage and social division” (Brah 184).

The comparative analysis of the chosen narratives addresses such questions as how the crossroads of gender, identity, and authority in memory writing consolidated in different cultural situations is re-conceptualized in contemporary exile, in immigrant women’s texts. In drawing patterns of forced migrations, both writers address the traumas of displacement and internment as gender-specific experiences. The complexity of the mother-daughter relationship dramatically affected with the forms of violence such as war and racism is a central juncture of representation and self-representation in both books.

On the one hand, the analysis of the books should not attempt to view them as individual products of global issues. The focus should be rather “on the processes that produce the personal and make it historically and politically unique” (Lionnet 4) in what Francoise Lionnet calls the métissage of cultures. On the other hand, the redrawing of national, literary, cultural frontiers and re-considering “of definitions of geographic and linguistic identity which have regulated the discipline of comparative literature” (Higonnet 3) have been evoked by the readership as recent migrations bring new diasporas, new displacements, new borders. In this context historical experiences of exile cultures, immigrant communities, diasporas, shifting, scattered, dispersed, invite the métissage of the forms of literary thinking about their genealogies across commitments of fixed origins and political constructions of borders.