



Life Writing Trajectories in Post-1989 Eastern Europe

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In May 2011, the second IABA Europe conference, entitled *Trajectories of (Be)longing: Europe in Life Writing*, took place at Tallinn University, Estonia. The conference discussed questions regarding the possibility and productivity of specifically European modes and practices of life writing. Conference sessions focused on spatial mappings and sites of story-telling about Europe in life writing and their temporal dynamics with respect to major historical ruptures and transformations. The lines of inquiry focused, on the one hand, on how the modes and practices of auto/biographical representation were structured around a sense of belonging to or longing for Europe and, and on the other, on contestation, rejection and transgression of such modes of identification. Addressing the conceptual frame of Europe as a geographical, political, social and cultural entity, the conference papers explored the ways in which “life-mapping” constructs, confirms, contradicts, and erases borders within and in relation to Europe, also raising the question of Europe (and its possible Europeaness) within a larger and more fluid global framework.

Among the debates around trajectories of (be)longing present in a variety of historical and sociocultural contexts relating to Europe, those concerning the former Eastern bloc formed an important subsection. Plenary lectures and conference papers tackled from multiple perspectives the questions of Eastern European identity, the complex layers of memory, the tension between regional and national histories or the numerous contested pasts that Eastern Europe presents at the turn of the 21st century. The conference debates made visible the complex subjectivities—and the subsequent autobiographical acts rendering them—emerging in the former Soviet bloc after the Cold War in. They pointed to new configurations of identity and explored how these are formed along both temporal and spatial axes of identification in relation to one’s native country or region, axes which are often contested, controversial and conflicted. The location

of the conference, Estonia, and the increasing awareness of the relevance of studying the former Eastern bloc in a variety of disciplines, made the 2011 IABA Europe conference the first to bring together over twenty life writing scholars focusing on Eastern European related topics.

While historical studies, memory studies, anthropology, political science and economics-related scholarship have extensively addressed the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the transition of the former Eastern bloc countries to democratic societies, less attention has been paid to life writing and the way post-1989 changes are reflected in memoirs, diaries, auto/biographies *from* or *about* the countries belonging to the region. This cluster of articles, deriving from the Tallinn conference presentations, is an attempt to address the different post-1989 forms of life writing that are emerging in the context of the Eastern bloc.

The term Eastern Europe itself is a highly debated and contested one. Studies about what Eastern Europe is—how one can define Eastern and Central European identities, how and when we can talk about it as an entity, what or if there is something intrinsic to the region—are a domain of inquiry in itself. A large number of writers— Milan Kundera, Václav Havel, György Konrád and Czesław Miłosz the most well-known voices¹—have sought to define, debate or negate the Eastern European condition. Scholars emphasize the historical traumas characterizing the region (Garton-Ash, Judt), imaginative geographies (Todorova, Wolff, Goldsworthy, Darieva and Kaschuba), and more recently highlight the postcolonial nature of Eastern Europe (Hammond, Kelertas, Kovacevics, Moore).² Aware of these implications and shortcomings, this cluster of articles uses the term Eastern Europe in the accepted Cold War sense, namely the countries which came under Soviet influence after World War II. We are also interested in the increasing interconnections between the former clearly defined bloc and the larger global framework the region belongs to at the turn of the 21st century. Consequently, by using the adjective Eastern European for life writing coming from a wide array of countries, we consciously deploy strategic essentialism

¹ See “Budapest Roundtable” for a comprehensive list of writers engaging with the Eastern European identity in late 1989.

² It is beyond the scope of the present study to talk about the overlapping and differences between terms such as “Balkanism” and “Eastern European,” “Central” vs. “Eastern Europe” or to discuss the distinct identity of the Baltic States. On the postcolonial intimations of Eastern Europe see also *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, winter 2012, which dedicates a special issue to the topic. For other major studies on Eastern Europe see Janos, Neumann, Rupnik, Schöpflin (ed.), and the special issue of *Daedalus*. For studies on Baltic identity see, e.g., Kelertas, Aarelaid-Tart and Bennisch-Björkman.

that recognizes variances and does not eclipse vital differences within the region.

Life Writing Trajectories in Post-1989 Eastern Europe hopes to initiate a forum for further engagement with national traditions of life writing, their developments and significance after the fall of the Berlin Wall, their inter- and transregional, national and continental crossings in the aftermath of the Cold War. The cluster is meant to open up a dialogue on the critical implications of life writing published or written after 1989 in the former Eastern European countries and position its relevance within the field of life writing as well as its significance beyond it.

Since 1989, both the publication and writing of memoirs, diaries and auto/biographies in the former Eastern bloc has boomed. The reasons and contexts generating them are truly wide and often nationally specific. Common denominators would include the need for testimonial writing about suffering and injustice, a personal/collective urge to talk about a forcefully silenced past, as well as a reassessment of political figures or events. The significance and role life writing plays varies not only according to the national context, but to the historical and political events characterizing each Eastern European country in the aftermath of the Cold War (i.e., regaining independence, recreating the national pantheon, reassessing historical or political figures, lustration, transitional justice, etc.).

Keeping in mind the complexity and variety of contexts, one can, however, safely say that it is memoirs about the inter-war period, dissidents' life narratives, prison memoirs, intellectuals' diaries about the post-1945 period, post-1989 writing about the communist era, politicians' auto/biographies or just previously censored autobiographical materials that constitute a common presence in the portfolios of the major publishing houses across the region. National contexts and literary traditions have played a significant role in generating both form and terminology for the new publications. It would be fair to say that traditional memoirs, autobiographies and diaries tend to predominate in the 1990s while the first decade of the 21st century has increasingly caught up with the star culture (actors, musicians, CEOs, politicians, media gurus and the like, etc.) or what can be seen as global forms of life writing—successful autobiographical practices emerging elsewhere but easily circulated and appropriated in any national context. Highly experimental forms, abundant since the 1970s in Anglophone and Francophone life writing, although sometimes present in national contexts are yet to gain larger readership both nationally and internationally. At the international level the lack of translations and the asymmetries in literary circulation in the global market are to be taken in consideration as defining factors for

there being no well-known experimental forms of life writing from the former Eastern bloc.³

While the production of life writing after the fall of the Berlin Wall is truly impressive and keeps proliferating, the scholarship attending to it has hardly been commensurate. Literary studies of East and Central Europe have been mapped in works such as the monumental four volumes of *History of the Literary Cultures of East Central Europe*; the impressive *Columbia Literary History of Eastern Europe since 1945* or the concise *Columbia Guide to the Literature of Eastern Europe since 1989*. Discussion on memoirs, journals, and auto/biographies have largely been marginal, centering mostly on analysis of notable literary figures.⁴

The history study, *Narratives Unbound: Historical Studies in Post-communist Eastern Europe* (2007), a tour de force about historical debates and the methodological approaches attending to post-1989 historical revisions, offers a relatively comprehensive view about and references to life writing in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia, the six countries covered with ample analysis in the book chapters. Even so, historians' perspectives and the historical traditions characterizing national contexts are rather heterogeneous in terms of the relevance and focus they assign to memoirs, diaries, and auto/biographies in each country's revision of history. In the introduction, the editor, Sorin Antohi, posits an "autobiographical revisionism" as "tacitly accepted" in opposition to historical national revisionism, highly problematic and "excitedly rejected" (2007, p. xiv), but in the context of Hungary, Bulgaria, or Slovakia historians are significantly less engaged about the possible role of life writing for the historical studies. Cristina and Dragoş Petrescu find memoirs and diaries "crucial in shedding some light on the history of Romanian Communism" (2007, p. 359) and consequently provide both a critical and informative overview of the post-1945 titles. Ivan Elenkov and Daniela Koleva point to the booming life writing market and mention its "relevance" in Bulgaria, while also acknowledging that such materials have not yet been utilized; they themselves however make no further contribution and only mention major directions in life writing publications in the aftermath of 1989 (2007, p. 430). In the case of Hungary, Slovakia

³ See for instance Kingston 1975, Barthes 1977, Perec 1988, Djebbar 1993. The asymmetrical translation and circulation of literary texts is elaborated on by numerous comparative literature scholars see for instance Damrosch, 2003 and 2009; with reference to Eastern Europe proper see Casanova, 2005.

⁴ The same stands true for more recent studies see Corniş Pope 2010, Raabe 2009. Surprisingly enough, even Segel's *The Walls behind the Curtain: Eastern European Prison Literature* (2012) does not foreground life writing as the main means of recording the prison experience by Eastern European writers.

and the Czech Republic there are only brief references to one title or another worth analyzing from the historians' point of view.

Questions of life writing in the former Eastern bloc have been central in the field of sociology and social anthropology within the disciplinary boundaries of biographical research. The focus has been on the construction of privacy as an important aspect of the post-Communist transformation (Miller, Humphrey and Zdravomyslova), and on the relationship between memory and history and the relevance of life writing in the politics of memory in the region (Aarelaid-Tart and Bennich-Björkman). Anthropological research engages less with memoirs, autobiographies and diaries but several scholars in the field are in favor of a more inclusive approach drawing on historical traditions of life writing (Golofast) and developing new research strategies that would do justice to the representation of "unique trajectories of individual lives" in relation to grand narratives of history (Skultans 2012, p. 39).

All in all, analysis and in-depth discussion of the impressive body of life writing from the Eastern European bloc are just emerging with the publication of monographs or edited volumes focusing on oral histories, biographies, personal narratives, Gulag, and Holocaust experiences. Articles in English scattered across a wide range of journals or edited collections (from ethnography to human rights studies) map in well-informed ways important sections of life writing production in the former Soviet bloc or discuss the significance of one major author/paradigm or another. Publications in national languages do exist, graduate courses and PhD theses are on the rise, yet these are difficult for scholars not speaking that particular language to access, rendering them harder to track or share, and consequently less visible.⁵

Nevertheless, scholarship in the field can hardly be said to offer a comprehensive critical overview of the impressive production of life writing written or published in the aftermath of the Cold War. Aware of the existence of a truly motley landscape—especially when self-publishing is common, transient publishing houses still mushroom, and established companies compete for the diminishing reading segment of the public by promoting life stories of overnight celebrities or ambiguous dissidents—we posit life writing originating from the former Eastern bloc an extremely rich and mostly untrodden territory able to shed light on the multiple subjectivities in the region, contested European identities, post-1989 transitions, shortcomings of national historical traditions, blind

⁵ For a tentative bibliography on scholarship on Eastern European life writing topics see "Bibliography of the Scholarship on Eastern European Life Writing" (forthcoming). We invite scholars to send references and contribute with their work.

spots in the discourse of nation building, and individual reappraisals rather than officially sanctioned version of the of the pre-, post- and communist period in Eastern Europe.

The following articles offer insights into a variety of national situations—Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, the Ukraine, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia—and enrich the debate on Europe’s configurations in life writing by bringing into discussion the Eastern European contexts. Elaborating on different concerns and foci of post-1989 life writing *from* and *about* Eastern Europe, the articles included in the cluster seek answers to the following questions:

- Along what axes of national, regional, continental or global dis/identification are post-1989 Eastern European subjectivities elaborated?
- What real or imaginative spatio-temporal mappings of Eastern Europe are at work?
- What memories/representations of communism and post/communism are circulated in such writing and to what end?
- How do life writing authors negotiate the multiple historical traumas on personal, generational, collective or (trans)national level?
- What reconfigurations of Eastern European exile, and affective attachments with the region does life writing propose?
- What life writing modes and practices are employed and to what end?

The first two articles in the current cluster, “Return Visits: The European Background of Transcultural Life Writing” and ““Belonging” in Post-communist Europe: Strategies of Representation in Kapka Kassabova’s *Street Without a Name*” offer answers to these questions with reference to exiles’ life writing. Alfred Hornung situates his insightful analysis of Canadian exiles’ autobiographies of return within recent discussions of transnational life writing and the constitution of transnational societies in a cosmopolitan world. Giving a detailed analysis of life writing by Anna Porter, Modris Eksteins, Janice Kulyk Keefer and Lisa Appignanesi, Hornung proposes four paradigms of return visits which he considers emblematic for the Eastern European context. He also highlights the role of their return visits with the subsequent recollection of childhood memories in the formation of transcultural identities emerging from Eastern Europe. Gabriele Linke’s article analyzes Kapka Kassabova’s strategies of self-presentation in order to show how the Bulgarian émigré mediates and “translates” her intimate knowledge and experience of communism to wider Western audiences. Drawing on Zygmunt Bauman’s “liquid modernity,” Linke illustrates how a post-communist individual struggles with “liquefied patterns of human interaction and dependency” (2000, pp. 6–8), after the “solids” of Cold War social institutions had crumbled. She points to the latent postcolonial nature of the post-communist identity

and argues for a transnational, deterritorialized self in Kassabova's case. More articles will follow.

The lines of inquiry we suggest here will be drawn and redrawn by further contributions. We have envisioned the present cluster as a first step towards and an invitation to an engaged critical discussion of the numerous life writing trajectories present in post-1989 Eastern Europe. We invite submissions as well as references to national scholarship in the attempt to make more visible the Eastern European presence in life writing. *The European Journal of Life Writing* provides the ideal format for an ongoing and open ended discussion as well as a sharing of bibliographies to which all interested scholars in the field are invited to contribute.

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