Academic Research Report

with regard to the implementation of project PN-II-RU-TE-2014-4-0051 (project no. 173 / 2015)

for the period October-December 2015

Project title: Intergenerational Dynamics of Vulnerability in American Trauma Narratives

(project coordinator: Dana Mihailescu)

The aim of the first stage of the project implementation (October-December 2015) was to carry out preliminary documentation so as to establish the main concepts and research tools to be used in the project. We commenced by undertaking individual and comparative analyses of intergenerational legacies of vulnerability in American narratives as they result from distant or recent major traumatic events, focusing on such tragic happenings as those occurring in the wake of the Triangle Company Fire from New York on March 25, 1911, the tragic events during the Holocaust reflected in the American media and in the consciences of survivors who emigrated to the United States, or tragic events during the Cold War. To that end, in this stage of the project, we carried out research by accessing the resources available in Bucharest libraries (Central University Library - Ana-Maria Gavrila, Dragos Manea, Roxana Oltean; The Romanian Academy Library – Mihaela Precup) or, for the Holocaust, we researched testimonies and documents in the archives of the “Elie Wiesel” Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Bucharest (Dana Mihailescu).

The individual and collective analyses of intergenerational legacies of vulnerability we undertook during this first stage of our project have resulted in the following research outcomes: (1) an oral presentation at an international conference; (2) the publication of a book on intergenerational legacies in Jewish American media and literature; (3) two articles accepted for publication in a journal indexed in international databases and in a ISI-AHCI-indexed journal; (4) starting a series of lectures for early career researchers about the impact of vulnerability on American culture; the purpose of the series is to create a forum of early career Romanian and international researchers who discuss and archive their exploratory work-in-progress and lay the basis for the development of future cooperation. Below we give the details of each of these research outcomes.
Oral presentation at an international conference:


The starting point of Dana Mihailescu’s presentation was the upsurge of scholarly interest into Holocaust survivors’ memoirs reflected in the recent publication of two anthologies, Literature of the Holocaust edited by Alan Rosen (Cambridge University Press, 2013), and Holocaust Literature. A History and Guide (2012) by David Roskies and Naomi Diamant (Brandeis University Press, 2012). While sensitive to exploring Holocaust literary testimonies of various generations in different languages and national canons and on various forms of memory deployed in such works depending whether they were written during or after the Holocaust, neither of these works ponders on ghost-written Eastern European Holocaust survivors’ narratives published in the U.S. or Canada especially from the 1990s onwards. In order to fill this gap in scholarship, Dana Mihailescu’s presentation examined the contribution brought to the study of vulnerability and traumatic memory related to the Holocaust by two ghost-written memoirs of two Romanian Jewish women who survived the Holocaust, Sara Tuvel Bernstein, whose memoir about surviving the war at the age of 20 after being taken to Ravensbruck camp, The Seamstress (1997), was written by Louise Loots Thornton and the author’s daughter Marlene Bernstein Samuels, and Leah Kaufman, whose memoir about surviving the Holocaust as a 9-year-old taken to Transnistria, Live! Remember! Tell the World! (2005) was written by Sheina Medwed. Some of the main questions addressed by the article are: Why can one affirm that ghost-writing is not a simple appropriation of survivors’ experiences and denying these ones’ voices? In what way do the paratexts and metatexts contribute to the message of these testimonies and to the type of vulnerable identity they transmit? How can ghost-writing and survivors’ direct testimonies inform each other in ways that sustain a nuanced understanding of vulnerability which undergirds intergenerational transmission and cultural memory?

Publication of a book on intergenerational legacies in Jewish American media and literature:


The volume Regimes of Vulnerability in Jewish American Media and Literature examines regimes of vulnerability from the end of the nineteenth century until post-Holocaust times, as rendered in Jewish
American magazines, movies, literary texts and graphic narratives, ranging from the well-known movie *The Jazz Singer* and highly-acclaimed narratives of Delmore Schwartz, Will Eisner and Miriam Katin to the more obscure and short-lived magazine *The American Jewess* or the less scholarly analyzed literary works of Katharine Weber and Susan Geroe Simpson. The volume shows that the evolution and shifts of regimes of vulnerability for the Jewish American community over time have been the result of various generations’ engagement with the precariousness of their group in relation to mainstream Americans but also with that of their generation in relation to previous generations inside their community. The book ultimately proposes a critical approach that moves beyond a tendency to reify the narrow binary according to which strength stands for power and invincibility versus vulnerability which is equated with weakness, helplessness and victimhood. Instead, the volume clears a path for more nuanced accounts of vulnerability in which affinities and tensions function concomitantly to make and unmake the concept and thus, hopefully, to carve a space for innovatory ethical and humanitarian vantage points.

(3) Two articles accepted for publication in two special issues guest-edited by top scholars from the United States, Great Britain and Taiwan, one in a journal indexed in international databases, the other in an ISI-AHCI-indexed journal


  Dana Mihailescu’s article examines how Liana Finck’s 2014 graphic narrative *A Bintel Brief. Love and Longing in Old New York* contributes to historical studies and artistic representations of the early twentieth century encounter between Eastern European and American values by her engagement with some letters of Jewish immigrants to the United States addressed to *The Forward* and her pondering on their relevance in the present and on the legacies they bestow on the third generation to which the artist pertains.


  The article identifies the specific characteristics of child survivors’ memoirs as reflected in the writings of Aharon Appelfeld, born near Czernowitz in 1932, and deported to Transnistria in 1941. The article addresses the following core question: is the structure of child survivors’ memoirs similar to that of
Holocaust memoirs written by adult survivors or is there a tendency to focus on certain aspects centered round vulnerability given the young age the authors had during World War II?

(4) Starting a series of lectures for early career researchers entitled *Dynamics of Vulnerability and Traumatic Affect* ([http://americanstudies.ro/?article=338](http://americanstudies.ro/?article=338)). The purpose of the series is to create a forum of early career Romanian and international researchers who discuss and archive their exploratory work-in-progress and lay the basis for the development of future cooperation.

On 16 October 2015 we organized a first presentation within our series of lectures held by Susanne Knittel (assistant professor of comparative literature at Utrecht University, the Netherlands: [http://www.uu.nl/staff/SCKnittel/](http://www.uu.nl/staff/SCKnittel/)). Entitled “*The Transatlantic Eugenics Movement as a Site of Memory*”, Susanne Knittel’s presentation analyzed the concept of eugenics during the Nazi period in transatlantic perspective, starting from the term of the “eugenic Atlantic” theorized by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder in their book *Cultural Locations of Disability* (University of Chicago Press, 2006) in order to pinpoint the convergence of seemingly disparate discourses about race and disability. To that end, Susanne Knittel examined the Nazi "euthanasia" program during and contemporary issues concerning genetic engineering and assisted suicide, highlighting types of vulnerability they impinged on people with disabilities and emphasizing how ideas of progress and human improvement carry with them mechanisms of repression, othering, and exclusion that must be resisted.

Project coordinator,

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