The Relationship between War, Migration, and Writing in Barbara Honigmann’s Oeuvre

This paper brings together two of this workshop’s themes: “war & culture” and “mobility, borders, and migration.” In fact, I would rearrange them as such: The Second World War precipitated mass migrations throughout Europe and beyond, which have in turn left a mark on German culture. Second-generation authors have been prolific on the war they did not directly experience but that nevertheless deeply affected them. I investigate texts by German-Jewish author Barbara Honigmann to explore the ways in which writing about the past entails a different kind of migration into a different place, time, and generation.

Using Astrid Erll’s “travelling memory,” I propose, through what I call the “poetics of the search,” that writing about the past is itself a form of migration in the general sense. According to Erll, not only people or “carriers” of memory travel, but so do “media, contents, forms, and practices of memory” because “memories do not hold still—on the contrary, they seem to be constituted first of all through movement” (2011: 11). The writing process for many second- and third- generation German authors is an ongoing search for connections to the past and is therefore a form of movement that we can read in their literature. Novels about wartime migration thus engage in a sort of migration as well. Migration is inherent to the “poetics of the search”—a type of traveling memory work that authors perform in the writing process. It is an open-ended, self-reflexive engagement with the past through writing, whereby authors negotiate connections to the past. As Barbara Honigmann writes about others’ wartime experiences, she negotiates Jewish identities on both personal and broader, transnational levels. At stake in the articulation of the relationship between wartime memory and migration is the ability to move Jewish identities beyond their reduction to the Holocaust. Viewed through a memory studies lens, Honigmann’s texts engage with and empower memories of forced wartime migration, namely by reimagining Jewish identities as productive, itinerant forces of connection among disparate memory narratives.
Barbara Honigmann was born in 1949 in East Berlin to Jewish Communists exiles who had re-emigrated there after the war. She emigrated from the former East Berlin to France in the mid-1980s where she began writing prose. Given Honigmann’s background, scholarship has been preoccupied with how to classify her, whether as a German writer (Bannasch 2013), European Jewish writer (Nolden 2013), or even a global Jewish writer (Eshel 2013), indicating her work’s resonance from national to global scales and for religious as well as national identities. *Eine Liebe aus Nichts* (1991) and *Soharas Reise* (1998), for instance, invite us to consider the relationship between writing and Jewish identity and, more broadly, the relationship between war, migration, and their continued relevance in cultural memory as evidenced by literature.

Migration is built into Honigmann’s work. She writes in France about Germany and in the German language and, through the writing process itself, migrates into other experiences at a generational, social, cultural, or religious remove. Judith Butler captures the kind(s) of migration that occurs in writing:

> An encounter with an other effects a transformation of the self from which there is no return. What is recognized about a self in the course of this exchange is that the self is the sort of being for whom staying inside itself proves impossible. One is compelled and comported outside oneself, one finds that the only way to know oneself is through a mediation that takes place outside oneself, exterior to oneself, by virtue of a conversation or a norm that one did not make, in which one cannot discern oneself as an author or an agent of one’s own making (2005: 28).

*Eine Liebe aus Nichts* migrates outward from a specific family past into a larger network of Jewish diaspora. Similarly, in *Soharas Reise*, Honigmann explores another facet of Jewish identity through her Algerian Jewish main character and thereby, on a broader level, provocatively decenters European Jewishness and the experience of the Holocaust.

In *Eine Liebe aus Nichts* the written negotiation of Jewish identity breaks out of the specificity of family memory and places it within the longue durée of transnational, transcultural, Jewish diasporic
memory. The autobiographical protagonist leaves East Berlin in the 1980s to emigrate to Paris where, as it turns out, her father had fled Nazi Germany. Yearning to start a new life in France, the protagonist nevertheless reflects on her elusive understanding of her Jewish identity and family past.

In Paris, the protagonist meets Jean-Marc, an American Jew who challenges her to articulate her Jewish identity and thus situate it within a broader, multi-faceted post-war European Jewish population. Jean-Marc is the child of Holocaust survivors who escaped to New York from Eastern Europe. Though revealing different spatial trajectories, the Paris sections of the novel contain intragenerational dialogue about related, but different, narratives of migration within a cosmopolitan network of Jewish diaspora.

The protagonist’s conversations with Jean-Marc about Jewish identity break down because of her national origin and what Jean-Marc points out as a contradiction: her parents’ choice to return after the war to Berlin, “wo alles begonnen hatte, an den Ort, von dem aus Hitler ihnen nachgesetzt hatte” (Honigmann 1991: 33). Jutta Gsoels-Lorensen notes the “failed conversations” in Honigmann’s oeuvre where each party tends to “remain in, rather than voyage out from, their respective affective, epistemological, cultural, historical and social territories” (372). Yet, these failed dialogues actually indicate the future element of Honigmann’s work, as she seeks out other strands of Jewish diaspora and engages them in her writing.

*Soharas Reise* reflects the multi-faceted Jewish population in Europe and beyond. The main character, Frau Serfaty, is a religious Jewish woman from North Africa who emigrated to France with her missionary rabbi husband and their six children. She befriends her neighbor Frau Kahn who is a German-Jewish survivor of the Holocaust. In this way, Honigmann approaches the German-Jewish past at two removes: through a main character from North Africa and within a French setting.

In this text as well, we observe barriers between the two women. For instance, Frau Kahn exhibits her ignorance by claiming it was “bei euch in Afrika…nicht so schlimm” (Honigmann 1998: 24), not realizing that Frau Serfaty and her family moved to France because of Jewish persecution in Algeria. Likewise, to Frau Serfaty, the Holocaust is “eine einzige große Erzählung” (Honigmann 1998: 24) that
has become the ultimate Jewish experience of suffering, but it is not her story. We are therefore viewing the Holocaust from a non-Euro-centric Jewish perspective, as Honigmann experiments with a view of the Holocaust from the (out)side as a North African Jew. The text therefore provocatively decenters the Holocaust as the Jewish experience, but this arguably constitutes the text’s future orientation because the women’s common yet different experiences of war and migration is ultimately a source of connection rather than competition for them: “…das [hat] aber keine Rolle gespielt, daß sie aschkenasisch und ich aus Nordafrika bin. ... Wir sind zwei Frauen, die ziemlich allein dastehen, und deshalb haben wir uns ein bißchen zusamengetan” (Honigmann 1998: 24). The friendship transcends the past as a determining factor for relations in the present. In this way, Honigmann introduces a new, perhaps liberating, model of Jewish identity through Frau Serfaty whose Jewish identity is unencumbered by the Holocaust as a defining trait of Jewishness.

Viewing literature about wartime migration through a memory studies lens reveals a more abstract form of migration. In the written process of negotiating her Jewish identity, Honigmann draws various memory narratives into an exchange that only seems to come about through migration. In one of her essays, Honigmann explains that, for her, writing confirms her existence in the name of posterity, through which she can still make “outward connections,” which, to me, suggests connections into the future (Honigmann 2006a: 29). What is stake for articulating the relationship between war, migration, and literature is the ability to move Jewish identities beyond their reduction to the Holocaust. Honigmann’s texts render Jewish identities as productive, itinerant forces of connection among disparate memory narratives.
Bibliography


