Falling Silent
Holocaust Trauma and the Breakdown of Postmemory in Merethe Lindstrøm’s *Dager i stillhetens historie* (2011)

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**ABSTRACT**
This article argues that Merethe Lindstrøm’s 2011 novel *Dager i stillhetens historie* portrays a collapse of the familial memory transmission structures that are normally involved in the making of postmemory, as defined by Marianne Hirsch. My analysis of the novel describes how it represents traumatic memories related to the Holocaust and how it portrays the struggle of listening to traumatic memories. Further, I describe the character Simon’s retreat into the isolation of silence as an engagement with traumatic loss and an attempt to reconnect with his former identity and lost family. Lastly, I draw on Hirsch’s analysis of the role of photographs in familial memory transfer to analyze passages in the novel that show what I call the breakdown of postmemory.

**Keywords**
Contemporary Literature, Postmemory, Silence, Trauma, Holocaust Studies

Silence is complicated. As the absence of verbal exchanges between people—rather than simply the lack of sound—silence can mean and do many things. The historian Jay Winter describes silence as a signifying practice defined by specific social and political contexts, calling it “a socially constructed space in which and about which subjects and words normally used in everyday life are not spoken.” (Winter 2010, 4) Winter argues that, in itself, silence is morally neutral (10). Silence can be used to signify respect, but it can also be a form of neglect or disregard. A moment of silence can be used to commemorate loss, but also to avoid acknowledging something painful or to escape the uncomfortable. As with memory, spaces of silence exist on a collective, national and historical scale, and they can also be intimate, familial and private. The latter, small spaces of silence are often *about*
issues of larger social and historical importance, but as local spaces they are constructed
and enacted in the context of a particular family or small group.

Merethe Lindstrøm’s haunting novel Dager i stillhetens historie, which won the Nordic
Council Literature Prize in 2011, depicts several forms of silence with varying meanings
and functions, ranging from commemoration and mourning to avoidance and evasion. As
the novel alternates between past and present, it reveals the gradual development of a Nor-
wegian family’s silence about the wartime experience of the Jewish father. The novel’s aging
narrator is Eva, a retired schoolteacher married to the somewhat older Simon, a former
physician. The time and place of narration is Bergen in the early twenty-first century, but
there are multiple flashbacks to events in Europe during the Second World War and the
postwar decades.

This article will focus on two major instances of silence in the novel, both of which are
connected to Simon’s traumatic experience spent in hiding with his Jewish family some-
where in Central Europe during the war. First, Eva has over the decades anxiously imposed
a silence in her family about Simon’s traumatic past and identity, such that their three adult
children have grown up with no knowledge of it. They also know nothing of the baby Eva
gave up for adoption when she was a teenager. When Eva and Simon fire their Latvian
house cleaner, Marija, because of an anti-Semitic outburst, the reason for her dismissal
remains puzzling to their daughters.1 The second main instance of silence in the novel
occurs in the present (circa 2010), as Simon retreats into a continual, and multiply signifi-
cant, state of silence. Partly a post-traumatic reenactment and partly a belated attempt to
reconnect with his lost family, Simon’s silence can also be seen as a challenge to his wife to
speak about a past that she has been unable to address.

These silences emerge from the difficulties of communicating and listening to traum-
atic memories, even within the intimate space of the family. In the following, I examine
how Dager i stillhetens historie portrays a breakdown of the familial memory transmis-
sion structures that are potentially involved in the making of “postmemory.” The concept
of postmemory was developed by Marianne Hirsch to describe the relationship of the
second generation to powerful and often traumatic experiences, such as the Holocaust,
that preceded their births, but were transmitted to them by family members, often par-
ents. In The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust,
Hirsch explains that postmemory is not actual memory, but an affect-laden second-gen-
eration relationship to “experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories,
images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (Hirsch 2012, 5). She emphasizes that
postmemory is a transmission structure, or what she calls “a structure of inter- and
trans-generational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience” (6). Apart
from the specific case of the Holocaust, postmemory is more generally relevant to famil-
ial and historical traumas, because of the tendency of trauma to exceed a single moment
in time and to have belated effects on survivors in ways that can also impact the follow-

1. Marija is an important character for the novel’s themes of national belonging—a topic that clearly pertains to the
contemporary context in addition to the postwar period. Since 2004, Norway has been experiencing the largest
inflow of migrant workers in its history (Ødegard 2016). Simon and Eva also share a silence about their attitude
toward their house cleaner, Marija. This can be read as emblematic of a larger Norwegian silence or shame about
the difficult conditions of guest workers in the Norwegian economy.
Familial postmemory is not an automatic process that occurs simply by virtue of family membership. Rather, as Hirsch explains, postmemory relies on stories and photographs in “acts of transfer” that “transform history into memory [and] enable memories to be shared across individuals and generations” (31). In Lindstrøm’s novel, the family’s silences block the possibility of such transmission. Eva’s reluctance to share Simon’s traumatic experience means that the second generation, her children, have no relationship to it, or even knowledge of his identity. In the absence of familial transmission, whether through verbal narration or photographic images, the second generation in this Norwegian family is prevented from engaging in the postmemory work of imaginative reactivation. They do not even know the true identity and experiences of their father, or the truth of their own relatives who were lost in the Holocaust.

This analysis has four parts. First, I describe how Dager i stillhetens historie represents traumatic haunting related to the Holocaust, and I show how key scenes in the novel portray the struggle of listening to trauma and transferring traumatic memories. This difficulty is what lies behind the development of silences in Lindstrøm’s fictional family. Second, I describe Simon’s retreat into the isolation of silence as an engagement with traumatic loss and an attempt both to return to the scene of trauma and to reconnect with his former identity and lost family. The third section considers how the narrative contains the reverberations of Eva’s own haunting past, related to the son she gave up for adoption before she met Simon. In the fourth and final section, I draw on Hirsch’s inquiry into the role of family photographs in postmemory to analyze late passages in the novel in which characters attempt, unsuccessfully, to connect meaningfully with photographs of Simon’s lost relatives. These scenes are Lindstrøm’s dramatization of the challenges inherent to using photography as a medium of familial memory transfer. Throughout the analysis, I argue that this poignant novel depicts the breakdown of postmemory as a result of enduring familial silences about personal and historical trauma.
Eva refers here to Simon’s *taushet*, rather than his *stillhet* – the word in the novel’s title. Both words can be translated to English as ‘silence.’ To be *taus* is to say nothing or remain quiet, while *stille* refers to a lack of noise (or motion). Soon after Eva refers to

> tausheten hans som kom gradvis over noen måneder, et halvt år. Han sier kanske takk for maten eller ha det. Han er blitt formell som en hotellgjest, tilsynelatende kald som en tilfeldig passasjer du kommer borti på bussen. (16)

Eva likens Simon’s silence to an inner starvation and views it as something that makes him more formal, like a stranger or foreigner—which he in fact was in Norway when he moved there as a postwar refugee. His silence has an unsettling effect on his belonging in the home and even the country, turning him into a hotel guest.

Eva searches for a solution to Simon’s impenetrable silence and takes him to an elderly day care center on the recommendation of one of his younger physician colleagues, who assumes that Simon’s behavior is an indication of aging and perhaps dementia. However, the novel makes clear that Simon’s silence is to be understood as something else. Eva remarks that Simon occasionally returns from deep contemplation “som om det virkelig er en reise han har foretatt” (16). His silence has the effect of a movement through time and space, both a physical displacement and a return to the past. Eva ends this narrative segment with the following lines:

> Jeg trenger å fortelle det til noen, hvordan det kjennes, hvorfor det er så vanskelig å bo sammen med en som brått er blitt taus. Det er ikke bare følelsen av at han ikke er der lenger. Det er følelsen av at du selv heller ikke er det. (17)

While prompting Eva’s own need for articulation, Simon’s withdrawal into silence also has an uncanny effect that blurs the line between presence and absence in a place. Eva describes the liminal sensation his silence inspires in her as “grensen mellom underverdenen og vår egen” (17). It is not only Simon who seems to be a ghost, a haunting and haunted figure of uncanny dislocation, but also Eva, whose sense of presence and belonging is thrown into question.

Following this initial description of Simon’s retreat into silence, the novel provides more information about his past. Eva recalls that Simon told her years ago about a childhood memory during the Second World War, when as a ten-year-old boy he and his family were in hiding for months somewhere in a city in Central Europe (22). Simon remembered feeling claustrophobic and imprisoned with his family in a tiny loft, where they had to remain quiet to escape discovery by the Nazis.

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4. Toril Moi (2013) explains these terms helpfully in an article on Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler*: “Norwegian distinguishes among three terms, the adjectives (and related nouns) *stille/stillhet* and *taus/taushet* and the verb å tie. The verb tie emphasizes the act of saying nothing. Like the German *schweigen*, it often implies that something is deliberately withheld (“*kan du tie*?” means “can you keep a secret?”). In comparison, to be *taus* is to say nothing, to remain silent or quiet, but without any necessary implication of knowledge withheld. … *Stille* stretches beyond human beings to bodies, landscapes, machines, cities, and nature. It indicates the absence of noise and, often also, like the English ‘still’, the absence of motion” (440).

5. Eva writes at one point that she had even heard people calling her husband “the refugee” long after the war, a remark that suggests that difficulty of Simon’s integration into the Norwegian national community.
Tausheten var pålagt dem, han, broren, foreldrene og de to andre som holdt til der. Kroppene deres hadde allerede vent seg til en dempet måte å bevege seg på som aldri senere slapp taket, men ble en del av dem, av kroppspråket deres. (22)

In this situation, subtleties of expression became crucial, looks could transmit thoughts, and conversations could take place in the nuanced argot of small facial gestures. The family had only each other in the hiding place, creating a complex combination of intimacy and constraint. Eva writes that “tausheten var innebygget, del av et kretslopp innenfor disse rommene” (23). It sometimes required a degree of violence in the stifling of speech. If Simon or his brother became upset and began to scream,

ble det holdt et håndkle foran munnen på ham, og følelsen av å kveles i dette håndkleet, som ble brukt mindre som en straff enn av nødvendighet, holdt ham fra å gjenta det. (23)

The adult Simon, telling this memory to Eva, confides that he still sometimes awakens from a nightmare with the feeling of being gagged by this handkerchief – a bodily sensation that clearly indicates the traumatic nature of the memory. Simon's trauma pertains both to the fearful situation of quasi-imprisonment at a vulnerable age and to the specific act of being forcibly silenced by a handkerchief.

Simon did not find out about the extermination of his extended family in the Nazi camps until years later when letters began to arrive in Norway. Eva explains that

Det var bare takket være skjulestedet som han hatet sånn, at de var blitt reddet, han og foreldrene, broren. De andre er strøket ut av historien. Venner han lekte med, jenter han likte, naboer, mannen i butikken, lærere, klassekamerater, hele morens og fares familie, alle er borte. Han følte skyld. (32)

Simon spent his childhood in Central Europe in the context of an entire community that was later demolished in the Holocaust. The arrival of letters from a surviving relative seems to have triggered intrusive traumatic memories, which, along with his survivor's guilt, became a source of suffering. A key feature of traumatic memories is that they are implicit and automatized. The psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk explains that “traumatic imprints stealthily force themselves on us, not so much as stories or conscious memories, but as emotions, sensations, and ‘procedures’—things that the body automatically does” (van der Kolk 2015, xvi). For Simon, dreams and waking memories would resurrect the locations and procedures of trauma: “Forestillingere like klare og gjennomsiktige som dagslys, gjengivelser av hendelsene ... Skjulestedet, innestengtheten, den lyttende stillheten” (Lindstrøm 2011, 33). At times in the course of their marriage, Simon would sink into periods of depression and lose all energy—a mood state that a psychotherapist might be able to conceptualize in relation to his past trauma. However, Eva was the only one who knew about how his wartime past was relevant to his mental health. Even their children were not told the whole story: “Jeg har ikke fortalt dem det, om solformørkelsen. Om slektningene, alle menneskene fra fortiden hans som er borte” (34).

One of the most important scenes in the novel, which links the elderly Simon's performative silence to Eva's repressive silence, occurs in a narrative flashback to a time when the children were young, on a day when the family was driving back from their summer cot-
tage by the sea. Eva remembers Simon driving the car on a bright and sunny afternoon. She became disturbed by the fact that he wanted to talk about troubling thoughts of his past and his vanished community. Eva, who just wanted to enjoy the idyllic trip home from the summer cottage, writes that hearing about this topic “var som å kjøre inn i en tunnel, stenge lyset ute” (35). She tells Simon that they should not talk about it now; he quietly asks when they will talk about it, and she turns to look at the children sleeping in the backseat. The elderly Eva explains that she wanted to keep things separate, and to keep the children “utenfor den mørke tunnelen” (35).

Simon then asks whether Eva wants the children to grow up without knowledge of his Jewish identity and family background. He claims that they are going to want to learn more about it eventually, just as he desires to discover more about his lost family. However, it is too stressful and horrific a topic, and Eva wants to protect the children from the black hole at the center of her husband’s life. She asks, “Hvorfor nå, hva skal det være godt for, tror jeg at jeg sa. Det er ikke noe igjen, hvorfor skal du fortsette å lete?” (36). Simon then mentions some photographs he once saw of children on the way to the gas chambers, which he had tried to show Eva. He cannot stop wondering how anyone could commit such an evil act as killing a child. This goes too far for Eva, who thinks, “det var noe taktløst over det, som om han var indiskré, grov, som om han hadde fortalt noe upassende. Det passet ikke inn” (37). The final sentence presents a nuance hard to capture in English, as “passe inn” can mean to be appropriate or to fit in, belong, or match one’s surroundings.

Eva’s objection is that her husband’s experiences, in addition to making a breach of etiquette, do not belong in this context, the vacation car ride with the children sleeping soundly in the backseat. Her response was to silence him: “Jeg hysjet på ham. Ikke dra det mørket inn hit, sa jeg” (37). Simon responds that he cannot understand how anyone could stop thinking about it.

The psychiatrist Judith Herman writes in her classic *Trauma and Recovery* that “the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma” (1992, 1). The scene in the car encapsulates this dialectic, as Eva censors Simon and prevents him from articulating his traumatic past and revealing his Jewish identity to his children. Eva stifles not only his attempts to work through his experiences, but also his transfer of the memories to the children. Her censorship is motivated by her own discomfort and a fear of exposing her children to trauma; she doesn’t want Simon’s darkness to infect their family or to become part of their identity. Her need to ensure calm comes from a fear of what has been called trauma’s “contagion.” Cathy Caruth notes in *Trauma. Explorations in Memory* that such a fear of the traumatization of the listener can remove “the only possibility for transmission” of the memory. Eva, understandably, cannot meet “the challenge of the therapeutic listener,” which Caruth describes as listening for the event, but also hearing “in the testimony the survivor’s departure from [the event]” (1995, 10). Simon wishes to transmit his history of trauma and, at the same time, to depart from his isolation within its intrusive and haunting presence. His social isolation is reinforced by his family’s absence (his parents died not long after the war) and by his situation as a Jewish refugee in Norway. Although highly assimilated, to the point of correcting other people’s Norwegian, he has been cut off from the family he suffered with as well as the culture and community he lost.
The sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel argues in “The Social Sounds of Silence” that silence is often enforced not by violent prohibition, but by a “pressure to disregard” and a taboo against speaking (2010, 33‒34). In this scene, Eva solidifies a taboo and exerts pressure, although she cannot be described as a harshly repressive censor. Lindstrøm depicts her censorship as taking the more mild form of tact (“det var noe taktløst over det”). Zerubavel suggests that tact is a soft version of taboo (35). Due to her protective armor of tact and her fear of being traumatized as a listener, Eva stifles Simon’s articulatory process of working through, which is what would allow him to better distinguish between past and present, and to move into the future (LaCapra 2014, 22). Eva may even unintentionally re-traumatize Simon by figuratively muffling his speech and returning him to the memory of being gagged by the handkerchief.

In the years and decades after the scene in the car, the repressive silence continues and intensifies in this family. Being silenced is obviously difficult for Simon, because he cannot stop returning to the “dark tunnel” of his traumatic loss, repeatedly triggered by the arrival of new information about his relatives. For Eva, on the other hand, it becomes over time “overraskende enkelt ikke å si noe, ikke fortelle, forbli taus” (Lindstrøm 2011, 37). Eva and Simon continue to postpone telling their daughters: “Jeg tror vi ventet for lenge. På et tidspunkt var det blitt for sent.” (38). This extension of the silence follows the principle that “silence becomes more prohibitive the longer it lasts” (Zerubavel 2010, 39). Of course, Simon must in some ways participate in this process; silence is a collective endeavor that requires cooperation of at least two in a joint avoidance of speech (36). However, in the car ride passage it is Eva who puts her own fear of traumatic contagion and wish to maintain the Norwegian family idyll above Simon’s need to develop articulations of his experience and identity for his children. She expects him to leave the past behind when it will not leave him alone.

Eva is, in this scene, the agent of forgetting, while Simon might want to forget, but cannot move beyond the haunting experiences. We can sympathize with Eva’s dilemma, as the question of how and when a survivor should share information about a traumatic experience with children is by no means simple. Judith Herman addresses this issue in Trauma and Recovery. When the survivor has come to terms with the meaning of the trauma, they are already at what Herman considers the third stage of recovery, which involves reconnection with ordinary life and others. (The first two stages are the establishment of safety, followed by remembrance and mourning). At the stage of reconnection, “the survivor may consider how best to share the trauma story with children, in a manner that is neither secretive nor imposing, and how to draw lessons from this story that will protect the children from future dangers” (Herman 1992, 207). However, in Lindstrøm’s novel, this is not a conversation Eva and Simon are capable of having.

Later passages in the novel tell about Simon remembering his family, childhood, and hometown before the Nazis occupied it. He continues to want to tell his children about his past, but the constructed familial silence has a prohibitive effect on both parents. This taboo eventually leads to resentment in Simon and a guilty conscience in Eva. One aspect of the elderly Simon’s multivalent retreat into silence is its function as a reproach to Eva. In a revealing passage, Eva likens the conditions of Simon’s silence to a game the children used to play:
In addition to calling the silence a “pact” that should not be broken, this passage underscores the signifying dimension of Simon’s silence, both in intention and in effect a challenge to Eva to speak. The analogy highlights the immaturity of the game they are playing, but also the seriousness of Eva’s inability to break the silence.

SIMON/SHIMON: FIDELITY TO TRAUMA AND THE VANISHED PAST

Winter schematizes three impulses in silence: the liturgical, in which refraining from speech enables those experiencing loss to engage with grief in their own time and in their own ways; the political / strategic, in which not speaking about something is a strategy to ensure a peaceful or calm transition, and the essentialist, in which only people of a certain identity have the right to speak about a violent past (2010, 5–7). While Eva’s silence can be considered strategic—she aims to avoid traumatic contagion and preserve a calm future-orientation in the Norwegian family—Simon’s silence has a “liturgical” element. It is a self-isolating engagement with grief and dislocation, and it can also be seen as a way to return to his trauma and invest it with greater significance.6

One tendency of trauma theory in recent decades has been to think of trauma as something inassimilable to ordinary speech or narrative representation. Caruth defines the “danger of speech” as a risk that the integration of trauma into a comprehensible story will “understand too much” and thus trivialize the trauma or make it banal (1995, 154). In a somewhat critical description of what he terms a “fidelity to trauma” in Writing History, Writing Trauma, LaCapra describes

the melancholic sentiment that, in working through the past in a manner that enables survival or reengagement in life, one is betraying those who were overwhelmed and consumed by that traumatic past. One’s bond with the dead, especially with dead intimates, may invest trauma with value and make its reliving a painful but necessary commemoration or memorial to which one remains dedicated or at least bound. This situation may create a more or less unconscious desire to remain within trauma. (2014, 22–23)

Simon’s late-in-life silence both commemorates and re-embodies the forced circumstances of the wartime hiding place. He invests this trauma with value precisely because it was a shared experience with the lost family. In the absence of viable speech options for working-through, due to Eva’s tactful taboo, Simon’s silence can be seen as a way of returning to and remaining bound within the traumatic past.

Reading Simon’s retreat into silence as a form of fidelity to trauma should not blind us to the fact that it is maladaptive and prevents him from full engagement with the present.

LaCapra has criticized the tendency of some trauma theorists to give trauma “the aura of the sublime or the sacred” and to resist any notion of working-through (2014, xxiii). He rejects what he sees as a recent tendency in the humanities to misunderstand the notion of working-through as “cure, consolation, uplift, or closure and normalization” (xxiii). Against this critique of working-through as a simplistic and ethically suspect redemption, LaCapra emphasizes that it is “an open, self-questioning process” that does not aim to transcend or normalize trauma (xxiii). Similarly, Herman emphasizes that “resolution of a trauma is never final; recovery is never complete” (1992, 211). Indeed, issues that were in some ways resolved at an earlier life stage may blaze up later in life, as new events resurrect traumatic memories (211). Post-traumatic symptoms can experience a resurgence even after previous resolution. This seems to be what happens to Simon in the novel, repeatedly: after the letters from relatives begin arriving, but most recently after the anti-Semitic tirade of Marija, the Latvian cleaner whom the couple welcomed into their home and befriended. Along with memories and flashbacks, Simon’s need to mourn and commemorate his lost family returns, but in a time and place when he is isolated and disconnected from his childhood language and culture.

Long before his retreat into silence, Simon wished to rebuild a connection to his lost family, sometimes in ways that directed his attention away from Eva. In a flashback to a time in the late twentieth century when the children were almost adults, Eva and Simon spend a week in Berlin visiting Irit Meyer, a surviving second cousin. Eva remembers feeling superfluous during the visit, as Irit and Simon talk together, making connections not only about the wartime experiences, but also about family time before the war. Speaking together about a shared childhood experience at a vacation resort, they build a bridge into a past neither of them could access alone. Eva describes how “de frigjorde seg fra alle årene og fant tilbake til noe annet som de en gang hadde vært” (89). Their collaborative work of memory brings them back to scenes and events they had forgotten individually, and resurrects aspects of their identities long lost, or buried under devastation, creating an intimacy closed off to Eva.

As Irit describes a prewar vacation resort, old memories are resurrected in Simon of barely remembered relatives, whose names Irit helps him recall. Irit has been active in an organization that searches for ”såkalte feilplasserte som Europa var full av etter krigen” (90). Irit and Simon discuss the victims of the Holocaust, and Eva feels excluded. She writes,

Tremenningen, eller kusinen som jeg hørte ham kalle henne, som om han prøvde å bringe henne nærmere enn hun egentlig var. Kanskje det er dette som er vanskelig å forstå. Jeg er sjalu. (90)

In addition to feeling superfluous to this nostalgic remembrance, Eva also becomes jealous of Irit’s survivor connection to her husband and of the closeness established by their exclusive access to a distant past that did not concern her. The fact that the past involved another culture, language, and country further estranges Eva.

Simon’s unearthed identity becomes crucial in this passage, as Irit says that he “har fått navnet sitt tilbake” and calls him by the Yiddish name Shimon (90). Eva observes that “ansiktet hans forandrer seg mens vi er der, han glir inn i det gamle språket og historiene
fra oppveksten” (90). Simon becomes *Shimon* in conversation with Irit, in front of Eva; he takes on a different name, face, and language. This is less a transformation into a new identity than a repossession of a past identity, from which Simon had been dislocated. There is potential for healing in this conversation. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman emphasizes the importance of reclaiming an earlier history and life from before the traumatic event, as part of the process of recovery (1992, 176). One might therefore assume that Eva would be at least vicariously excited about Simon's chance to reconnect with a relative from before the familial and cultural catastrophe of the Holocaust.

However, Eva goes from feeling superfluous to feeling threatened and claustrophobic as she overhears Simon becoming *Shimon*: “det kjennes som om jeg ikke får puste i den lille leiligheten, i nærheten av fortiden” (90). She leaves the apartment to catch some fresh air in a park for a few hours, but when she returns, she sees herself reflected in the uncanny space of the entrance hallway.

Jeg ser at hele veggen er dekket av små firkantende speil, malerier, ornamente, et jugendaktig uttrykk. Jeg går langsomt opp trappene og betrakter en mosaikk av mitt eget ansikt, det som virker som en uenådelighet av utgaver, alle av den samme oppgangen, av speilbilder og en forlengelse av trappa som tilsynelatende fortsetter til taket. (91)

Eva continues to react to Simon’s traumatic past and his Jewish identity as a “dark tunnel.” It is something that both increases her vigilance about traumatic contagion and destabilizes her own sense of self, as suggested by the multiplication of her reflections in the endless entrance hallway mirrors. Eva’s claustrophobic rupture in this passage is linked to a phenomenon Anthony Vidler has called “the spatial uncanny,” which is displayed in the “abyssal repetitions” she perceives in the mirrored architecture of the stairway (1992, 37).

In the years after this visit to Berlin, Simon continues to be haunted by memories of a lost relative, a young male cousin whom he can only recall indistinctly. Eva describes this ghost-cousin in territorial terms, as a trespasser that has “tatt bolig i ham” (Lindstrøm 2011, 95). The cousin is a shadowy figure that exists in many different-aged versions of itself at the same time, tormenting Simon in dreams and even waking visions (95). She writes:

Det hender Simon synes han ser fetteren når han er våken også, sier han, ser ham et eller annet sted, i en bakgrunn, i et hjørne av sitt eget synsfelt, men når han prøver å snu seg, viskes han ut. Dette spøkelset, denne inntrengeren. (96)

The eerie return of a figure from his past is both transformative and tormenting for Simon. The ghost-cousin is an indication of his survivor’s guilt and a reminder of the counterfactual: what his fate could have been if not for the hiding place in the loft. In addition, the ghost-cousin has an uncanny and disrupting effect on Eva, who in this passage connects the terms “ghost” and “intruder,” suggesting that Simon’s traumatic past is something invasive in her life. The loaded term “inntrengeren” is also associated with an unresolved episode at the very start of the novel that introduces the motif of intrusive presence, in which Eva lets a stranger into her home only to watch him leave through the backyard.
EVA, OR AMBIVALENCE

My discussion of Lindstrøm's novel has so far focused on Simon's past trauma and Eva's role in silencing his therapeutic articulations and memorial acts of transfer. However, the novel complicates simple notions of culpability. Eva is an ambivalent narrator who experiences haunting emotions of guilt, vigilance, and estrangement for reasons related to her own past experience, in particular giving up a son for adoption when she was a teenager, years before meeting Simon. Although she is a secular person with no religious belief, Eva visits churches on occasion, apparently looking for some method of managing her guilty conscience or a sense of social connection and recognition. She tends the grave of an anonymous and forgotten young man, bringing flowers and clearing away the cluttering weeds (55). Eva's preoccupation with young male strangers is eventually explained by the revelation of her backstory; she kept the child for a few months after his birth, but then gave him up for adoption. In her retrospective narration and her memories in the present, this event, like much else, is veiled in uncertainty (55). She insists that her feeling should not be called missing the child, because she did not know him. However, she thinks about him and often wonders if she recognizes him in a stranger's face or a young man in public, who might be the same age as the adopted son (56). Her maintenance of the anonymous young man's grave may be seen as Eva's attempt to connect her past loss to a tangible act of remembrance in the present.

Eva recounts that Simon was furious when she finally told him about the son she gave away for adoption, several years after their marriage. He called it “unaturlig” and claimed that a woman would always feel a sense of loss and regret after doing such a thing (57). Simon's own desire for a son seems to be mixed up in his callous response to Eva's adoption story. The general effect of this response was to make Eva feel deficient for not providing a chance for Simon to become a father to this son, but also for not experiencing the loss in the clear-cut way that Simon stipulates. While Eva fails Simon by not meeting the challenge of being a therapeutic listener and not enabling him to pass on an integrated story of his trauma and identity to the children, Simon fails Eva by disregarding and silencing her ambivalent feelings about the experience of giving away her son. Each spouse has had a disempowering effect on the other; they are alienated from each other and from their surroundings.

Further, they are each alienated from their own past identity. Much later in the novel, Eva describes a photograph of herself as a teenager with the child, wondering whether she can discern any trace of guilt or shame in her much younger face. That past is a dream for this narrator, “fjern og uklar” (194). Eva does not have full access to her own feelings from long ago, so she looks at the photograph of herself as an outsider who can only speculate on the subject's interior life. In the present too, the retired Eva is alienated from her own emotional life, desires, and purpose. She continues to tend to a stranger's grave as if it belonged to her in some way, writing, “ingen spør meg om hvem jeg er her for. Egentlig vet jeg det ikke selv heller” (194). Giving up her son for adoption was an upsetting event that remains unresolved in Eva's present feelings and behaviors. However, Eva's haunting past, which has an isolating and disconnecting effect, has been overshadowed by her husband's trauma.

The theme of estrangement in the novel pertains not only to the breakdown of communication in the family, but also takes on a larger resonance of national belonging. In
another passage, Eva describes the feeling of having become strangers not only to each other, but also to oneself and in one's home and nation. She recalls a trip to the mountains that she and Simon took years before. On the way home, they pass a bygdetun, an outdoor museum of a small farming settlement. Eva asks to stop because of a positive childhood association she has with such a location. This type of museum space can be considered a Norwegian national site of memory, in addition to an autobiographical site of memory for Eva. When they visit the bygdetun, however, Eva feels detached from the environment and unable to recapture the excitement. She wonders if passersby are looking at her and Simon with uncertainty rather than with a welcoming gaze. She writes that the pleasure she had been trying to recall had vanished, and “I stedet var jeg den fremmede, vi var de to fremmede, som hadde sneket oss inn på et område der vi ikke hørte hjemme” (103).

PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE BREAKDOWN OF POSTMEMORY

Although Eva and Simon become more familiar with Simon's past through the visit to Berlin with Irit Meyer—and even though they are both haunted by it in differing ways—knowledge of this past never gets transmitted to the second generation. We have seen that the family’s avoidant silence prevents the intergenerational acts of transfer involved in postmemory. Simon's retreat into silence is catalyzed by his awareness of the failure of this very transmission; seeing that his children will have no connection to his Jewish identity or his traumatic loss, Simon recreates the silence that was a compulsory feature of his family's hiding. His fidelity to the trauma, achieved at a bodily level through the reenactment of this silence, becomes more important than any attachment to his living family or surrounding community.

This concluding section turns to passages in Lindstrøm's novel in which the main characters attempt to make connections to photographic images of Simon's lost relatives. Family photographs play a central role in Hirsch's account of the transmission structure of postmemory. “More than oral or written narratives,” she writes, “photographic images that survive massive devastation and outlive their subjects and owners function as ghostly revenants from an irretrievably lost past world” (2012, 36). Unlike public historical images, family photographs tend to diminish distance, bridge separation, and facilitate identification and affiliation. When we look at photographic images from a lost past world, especially one that has been annihilated by force, we look not only for information or confirmation, but also for an intimate material and affective connection. (37)

Such ghostly images do not speak or remember for themselves—postmemory requires imaginative investment and projection from the second generation to activate its potential. Archival memory needs to be individualized in the context of the family (or affiliative group) to become part of meaningful postmemory (37). Photographic images become what Hirsch calls “screens,” or spaces of projection for the viewer, in order to “open a window to the past” (37). And, of course, the second-generation viewer requires basic knowledge of their familial relationship to the person in the photograph—something lacking in Lindstrøm's fictional family.
As a narrator, Eva is preoccupied by liminal and transitional spaces and figures, by partial recognitions and uncanny resemblances, and by what we might call the threshold of communication. We have seen that she did not possess “the magic word” to end the game of silence with Simon, and many other instances in the novel turn on words that are about to be spoken, but are not, or memories that are about to crystallize in a distinct form, but do not. The most important of these thresholds is the one that both Simon and Eva approach, but do not cross—transmitting the truth of Simon’s past to their children. We can see this approach to the threshold in a passage that explains Simon’s turn to silence.

Simons silence can be called a choice because it allows him to reconnect with his lost family, via a shared traumatic memory, when other recollections of the past are fading and becoming difficult to access. His “journey” into the past begins when he can no longer grasp these memories in a personally resonant sense. They seem distant and off limits—“utstilte, urørige tablåer.” The exhibition metaphor signals the threat of a transformation of memories into museum objects in a glass case. This is a change from embodied living memory to dead archive—a form of forgetting. Silence, both liturgical and post-traumatic, becomes Simon’s method of reconnection in the face of this threat of vanishing.

At another moment, Eva uses the metaphor of a memorial plaque to make a similar point about the distance and inaccessibility of Simon’s past. She explains the act of looking at photographs of the lost family members with whom Simon has become preoccupied.

Eva perceives the relatives not only as no longer living, but also as removed from contact with the living by the “shuttered and restricted” quality of their photographic capture. Her description of the family members as trapped in archival memory suggests that they might as well be strangers to her. Eva cannot find the affective connection to the images that would in Hirsch’s words “bridge separation” and “facilitate affiliation” (2012, 37).

Toward the end of the novel, Eva uses photographs to approach the threshold of communication, resolving to show her daughter Helena photographs included with a letter Simon has written. These images include not only the relatives from Eva’s side of the family, whom the daughters have known about their whole lives, but also relatives from Simon’s family, pictures from Simon’s life before the war, and pictures of Simon as a young Jewish child. She writes,
Vi kommer til å sitte her ved bordet i morgen, Helena og jeg, og legge fotografiene utover. Jeg ser det al-lerede nå. Fortiden, alle disse livene, de utgjør en mosaikk. Som med de fargede glassrutene i kirken når lyset skinner igjennom og gjør motivene klarere. (208)

In Eva’s imagination, the photographs will have a power of radiance and clarity, effortlessly conveying the story of the lost lives to Helena. The images will also convey something new about Simon's psychology—“motiv” in Norwegian can mean both “motif” as a design feature and “motive” as a reason for a behavior. But Eva doubts whether she will find the words for what she knows she must tell.

Eva does not go through with the plan to communicate—she cannot find the magic word that will break the silence, even with the aid of images. Instead, she writes, “Nå ligger de der, de gamle fotografiene og bildene, de utførlige brevene fra Irit Meyer, brevene som for lengst har sluttet å komme” (208). This scene shows the details of a postmemory transmission structure that remains permanently stalled. Postmemory requires both Helena’s knowledge of the past and an affective investment that turns the photographs into “screens” for imaginative and creative projection. But the work of postmemory is left unrealized, as the long-awaited transmission of familial history does not occur. Instead, the novel presents an image of an unused archive on a tabletop.

Even though Eva imagines the photographs in terms of light, clarity, and revelation, (“de fargede glassrutene i kirken når lyset skinner igjennom”), in the same passage she also voices a pointedly anti-photographic sentiment, about the limitations of the power of photography. Eva describes her feeling while looking at one of the old photographs of a young boy.

Han sitter litt sammenkrøpet, og uttrykket er visket ut av bevegelsen eller av det som virker som en erodering, oppløsning av bildet, det er i ferd med å gå i stykker … Nå man ser på det, tenker man at det på en eller annen måte skal forklare noe. Men det er bare et fotografi. (208)

Eva shows an awareness of the failure of her project. She invests photographs with a revelatory power to explain and illuminate, but at the same time she views them as mere photographs. The subjects they capture are, in Eva’s description, affected by the material ruin of the medium itself. The boy’s facial expression is made illegible by the damage to the photograph, which is falling apart and serving as an imperfect medium of transmission. Eva’s reservations about the power of photography are also connected to her act of looking at the photograph of her younger self with the child she gave up for adoption; her own past self in that image was also removed from contact and connection.

Eva’s contradictory attitude toward photography in this passage captures something of the problematic relationship the photographic image has to the past and to memory. In his famous essay on photography, Camera Lucida, Roland Barthes describes the photograph as “literally an emanation of the referent” and “a certificate of presence” (1981, 80, 87). It verifies the past reality that something or someone has existed. However, Barthes also insists that the photograph does not “call up the past” and that there is nothing Proustian about it (82). Further, he even describes the photographic image as something that violently blocks memory or imaginative amplification, calling it “full, crammed” and a “counter-memory” in which “nothing can be refused or transformed” (89, 91). Hirsch expands and modifies
Barthes’ insights in *The Generation of Postmemory*. She writes that photographic images allow us to see the past, “but also to try to reanimate it by undoing the finality of the photographic ‘take.’ The retrospective irony of every photograph consists precisely in the simultaneity of this effort and the consciousness of its impossibility” (2012, 36–37). Lindstrøm shows Eva making the effort to transmit memory to her daughter, while at the same time recognizing the impossibility of reviving a photograph so that the past will become present and tangible.

In the end, Eva does not even show the photographs to her daughter; she does not cross the threshold. A reader of the novel might wonder how Helena would experience these images. Would she see them as “mere” photographs upon learning of her paternal relatives for the first time, or would it open a new window to the past and a new understanding of her father in the present? Lindstrøm’s choice of narrative perspective is once again crucial: the novel, narrated by Eva, doesn’t show the daughter’s perspective, but leaves the potential of postmemory stalled, unrealized, and unresolved. Helena and her sisters belong to the second generation without knowing it. They have a traumatized and silent father, but not the background knowledge to understand why he is that way, or to take responsibility for further engagement with and transmission of the family memories.

The intimate, familial contexts of silence in Lindstrøm’s moving novel originate in the aftermath of the collective historical trauma of the Holocaust, but reach across decades into the early twenty-first century, with quiet reverberations. The effect of these silences—both Eva’s repressive silence, and Simon’s self-isolating one—is to block the intergenerational structure of familial postmemory. While Lindstrøm illuminates the specific forms and functions of silence in this Norwegian family, her novel also points to a more widespread and typical breakdown of communication in families with strong traumatic memories. By portraying the complexities and difficulties of communicating about trauma in this particular fictional case, Lindstrøm gives us a powerful view of the subtle ways that traumatic historical events like the Holocaust may echo—or fall silent—in the spaces of familial memory.

**LITERATURE**


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