

The Townspeople tell the story”: Collective Memory as Resistance in Ilya Kaminsky’s *Deaf Republic*

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Abstract

Research in recent years has shifted its focus to micronarratives; certain narratives have become more and more discussed, propagated, and remembered than others. This makes the preservation of cultural memory exceedingly important in terms of narratives that are undermined and discarded by the majority. The narratives of Ukrainian history and resistance, a country weary of war, are one such case. Ilya Kaminsky’s Deaf Republic is considered one of the greatest examples of resistance poetry. This article looks at the construction of collective consciousness and memory in the text and argues that preserving cultural memory (violent or otherwise) itself becomes an act of resistance in Deaf Republic (2019). This analysis aims to establish how memory (or specifically the act of remembering) acts as a form of resistance in this narrative by employing a storytelling arc within the greater narrative. Through the metanarrative nature of the text, the act of storytelling is employed to convert the act of remembering into an act of resistance. I primarily engage with Jeffrey Olick’s theory of “collective memory” while referring to other theorists in memory studies to explore how collective memory is constructed in the text through storytelling and how this construction becomes an act of resistance.

Keywords: Collective Memory, Resistance, Ukraine, Narratives, storytelling

Introduction

“On TV they don’t mention it —/the situation inside the earth,/nor the situation beyond the conversation./There will be no commentaries —/Absolutely none”, writes Anastasia Afanasieva, while describing the lack of visibility of the conflict in Ukraine¹. Like many other members of the Ukrainian resistance movement, Afanasieva’s lines spoke against censorship and erasure by mainstream media while representing Ukraine’s situation. The Ukrainian resistance movement has often embraced poetry as both a journalistic vehicle and a mode of resistance². These writings further serve as a way to resist the erasure of history, uprising, struggle, and cultural identity that occurs through the destruction of commemorative sites and monuments. Afanasieva’s poem also highlights how the lack of direct access to incidents in conflict zones can make them feel like distant realities that do not register as substantial incidents in our everyday lives and, therefore, memories. In fact, the beginning of Ilya Kaminsky’s *Deaf Republic* addresses how distance can act as a distraction from lived realities, as he writes: “in the street of money in the city of money in the country of money, / our great country of money,

we (forgive us)/ lived happily during the war” (Kaminsky 14). Thus, when mainstream media and discourses fail to acknowledge the realities and struggles of a zone of occupation, poetry acts as an alternative site for establishing counternarratives and resisting erasure from everyday discourses.

In terms of production, the text is considered one of the greatest examples of Ukrainian Resistance poetry. The world that Kaminsky builds in his seminal and celebrated work, *Deaf Republic*, acts as a parallel to the real-world Russian occupation of Ukraine. Kaminsky represents concerns about erasure and censorship, portraying silence as an act of political resistance and persistence against violence. Using the metanarrative mode allows Kaminsky to provide commentary while narrating a story, representing an alternate mode of resistance and memory-making. Rather than focusing on the sociohistorical context of the text’s own production, this article examines the text itself as a site of resistance. It argues that the text uses storytelling to showcase the power of narratives to foster slow change amid immediate large-scale violence and to serve as sites of resistance and commemoration. Thus, the text converts storytelling into a technology of remembering and thus, the act of remembering becomes a form of resistance. Despite not yielding immediate, tangible results, the text and the movement within it brilliantly depict the potential of narrative modes (or literature) to challenge dominant discourses and introduce counter-narratives that risk erasure. Although Olick’s framework serves as the central perspective for understanding the process of forming collective memory, both individually and collectively, *Deaf Republic* broadens this perspective by highlighting the importance of embodied experiences and ways of communicating and narrating. In dialogue with Assmann’s theory of communicative memory and Erll’s concept of cultural memory, the literary text can be studied not only as a narrative about remembering but also as a means of remembering.

Scholars in memory studies have noted that remembering is intrinsically connected to power, as those in power are entitled to select topics and forms of remembering that enter public discourse (Bosch 6). Thus, more often than not, mainstream mass media is mediated and censored, ensuring that the version received by the audience is the narrative more convenient to those in power. Garde-Hansen draws attention to this by citing representations of conflict (among other things) as key sites for gaining insight into how memory is mediated (38). Since mainstream narratives focus only on certain aspects of such events while others face erasure from history, victims of oppression and violence often embrace alternative modes of telling their stories that would challenge the existing and dominant narratives, thereby seeking visibility as well as the reconstruction and reconsideration of existing narratives. Thus, memory plays a significant role in most of our current academic discourses that engage with counter-narratives (in the form of cultural texts or artefacts) written as testimonies or as resistance to the dominant narratives (Bosch 7). In fact, Aymard suggests that “for our societies, as well as for the social and human sciences, memory is on the agenda, it has become a compulsory reference point” (7). Therefore, it is important to focus on the role of memory when engaging with counter-narratives and alternate forms of remembering to understand the politics and limits of remembering.

For countries at war or in political unrest, collective memories of shared acts of violence or traumatic events become an integral part of the larger cultural memory and contribute significantly to the formation of a collective cultural identity (Assman and Czaplicka 128). The creation of such a cultural memory and its preservation as memory becomes a medium of resistance itself. Through poetry and literature, events are not just preserved but also distributed so they become part of collective memory. As pointed out by Astrid Erll, literature has “served and continues to serve – as a media of memory” (Erll 144). Referring to Ilya Kaminsky in the context of Ukrainian poetry of resistance, Charlotte Schevencko Knight (2022) conveys the

ability of words to survive demolition and destruction. Memory is both political and dynamic, and can thus be constantly refashioned and repurposed to serve certain purposes in spatial and temporal contexts (Mitchell 443). Even when the written word is censored, memory can be preserved in other ways. Knight elaborates on the acts of mass violence and mass destruction in which, in a single week, entire sites of cultural heritage were destroyed by Russian forces, and countless churches and mosques were left in ruins. However, Knight immediately refers to the act of rebuilding and reconstructing cultural identity through narratives. Amidst destruction, there is a movement of writers, particularly poets, documenting the war. Their words are one thing that the forces cannot kill, as they serve as a means of archiving and fighting against misinformation.

Unlike many other resistance narratives, in *Deaf Republic*, memory not only preserves trauma but also the possibility of agency. In the poems, as the townspeople tell the story, they simultaneously reconstruct the acts of violence and begin circulating a counternarrative that resists the violent forces. Knight writes about how Anna Akhmatova (born in Odesa) had to whisper lines of poetry to friends who would commit them to memory, thus preserving a reality of the Soviet Union that was not meant to be told. Through such acts, reconstructing memory becomes an active process of everyday resistance, in which every member contributes to the formation of collective memory. More importantly, the text complicates the idea that resistance is successful only when movements of resistance cause immediate, tangible changes. Resistance and its memory are not grand, celebratory, large-scale and coherent throughout the text. Yet memory persists in the text (fragmented and intangible) through storytelling and everyday acts of remembering that still retain the potential to mobilise and cause change. In the end, memory acts as a witness to both the violence and the possibility of resistance. Denying to erase the tangible memory of the movement of resistance in itself becomes an act of slow change and resistance. Although the actual movement of resistance and disobedience does not succeed, the legacy and story live on through collective memory, which is important even when the country has surrendered. The resistance is successful because of this, as the section “Yet on Some Nights” states: “Years later, some will say none of this happened; the shops were open, we were happy and went to see puppet shows in the park/And yet, on some nights, townspeople dim the lights and teach their children to sign. Our country is the stage: when patrols march, we sit on our hands. Don’t be afraid, a child signs to a tree, a door” (Kaminsky 71).

Analysis

Earlier works on *Deaf Republic* have focused on the multimodal text’s engagement with disability as a form of resistance (Mironescu 98). The citizens of Vasenka are not inherently deaf, but start acting so when a little deaf boy gets shot because he is unable to hear the troops. Thus, Kaminsky foregrounds his experience as a disabled individual to create the premise of a text which resists. At the same time, the text uses disability as a protest and a reaction to oppression. In other words, collective resistance occurs in Vasenka because people refuse to understand or make themselves legible to the oppressors. While abled bodies are prioritised in normative society, Vasenka presents an alternative world in which only the deaf can understand each other. As theories in crip-aesthetics suggest, “disabled poets can centre their own perspectives, experiences, and artistic inventions in ways that make an emotional and intellectual impact on the reader” (Heffers 3). Kaminsky’s experience and perceived reality become an alternative mode of resistance both in the narrative and its construction. However, it does not stop there as Kaminsky consistently foregrounds the need to keep narrating stories of both violence and resistance to it to push back against historical erasure.

The following analysis primarily concerns itself with the way storytelling serves as an effective tool for the dissemination of incidents that need to be remembered (Langer 1). Consequently,

it serves as a means of resisting erasure from the collective consciousness by persisting in collective memory. This analysis examines the mechanisms that enable collective memory formation in the text and how storytelling functions as a technology of remembering at both the individual and collective levels. Storytelling operates through two primary mechanisms of remembering: constitutive memory and communicative memory.

Constitutive Memory

The multimodal text is divided into two acts, each consisting of monologue scenes (individual poems) of varying lengths. Each of these monologues is either narrated in first-person singular (Alfonso Barabinski in Act One and Momma Galya Armolinskaya in Act Two) or in first-person plural, which pieces together the movement of resistance in Vasenka. Almost taking the form of an oral narrative, the collective voice of the people of Vasenka seems to be disseminating a legend, a legacy created when “each man [became] a finger flipped at the sky” by literally refusing to listen (Kaminsky 11). *Deaf Republic* resolves the tension between the micro and macro narratives by putting the micro against the backdrop of the macro; by putting what could be forgotten against what might be scribed in history. This is reflected in the narrative through the conflation of the voices narrating the story: the voice of the people integrates the voice of the individual, working against the grand narrative, devoid of affect that would become part of public discourse and eventually collective history.

Resistance occurs because, much like deafness, this narrative spreads across the town, through the people (who may or may not have actively engaged in the movement), initiating the construction of collective memory. However, a shared choral voice alone is not enough in the establishment of such a narrative. Including Alfonso’s voice and personal experience becomes crucial, as it extends Olick’s idea of how collective memory operates at the individual level (Olick 384). Through the juxtaposition of the two voices, the distinction between the personal and the political, and the private and the public, is blurred, reflecting how such distinctions cease to exist in zones of conflict (Goodhand 226). Individual events and everyday acts are equally important as larger attempts to resist, because they influence each other. For instance, Alfonso’s lovemaking with his martyred wife and the birth of their daughter Anoushka occur between “two bombardments” to familiarise the audience with their lives beyond the occupation and the resistance (Kaminsky 23). By creating an affective attachment between the characters and the audience, Alfonso’s stories create more impact on the listeners than a disengaged grand narrative (Lopez et. al. 2). Furthermore, it enhances the effect that the story of the second bombardment has on Alfonso: his descent into insanity due to the inability to grieve.

The link between individual and collective memories elaborates on Olick’s idea of constitutive memory, as the text reveals that collective identity does not emerge despite individual experiences but rather through their aggregation. Both collective and individual experiences become significant constituents of the story being told, as well as devices that push it forward. As the story continues in the second part, the townspeople connect Momma Galya’s monologues to the first story, in which she adopts and saves Anoushka and carries on the legacy of resistance her parents started. Galya’s monologues capture the growth of a child during a revolution, while her caregiver uses subversive methods to continue resisting and eliminating the soldiers (Kaminsky 51-52). In “The Little Bundles”, Galya expresses how preserving the resistance has conflated with Anoushka’s growth amidst all odds: “Anoushka, your pajamas—they are the final meanings of my life.// To get you into your pajamas, Anoushka! /So much to live for” (58). Once again, the individual and the collective memories conflate to contribute to the townspeople’s larger narrative about Vasenka’s deaf republic. Thus, the text employs “constitutive narratives”, a concept proposed by Robert Bellah and his colleagues. Olick’s own argument expands this, stating that in such a view, individual and collective identity are two

sides of a coin rather than distinct phenomena (Olick 342). Thus, we see storytelling from both individual and collective experiences, piecing together a constitutive narrative that contributes to the formation of a collective memory. While Olick's theory helps us understand what makes telling the story an act of collective memory, Assmann helps us understand the reasons for its sustenance. The construction of the story to constitute both becomes an effective way of creating collective memory while also preserving the affective continuity, which is crucial for oral narratives to sustain (Assman 3).

The choral narratorial voice throughout the text is conscious of providing evidence of the town's collective experience of extreme violence. The employment of such acts in the construction of the story being told ensures that the narrative is taken seriously. It conveys the idea that the story has become a shared memory among the townspeople, even if they did not directly participate in the action. For instance, indicating the conflation of identities as everyone witnesses the acts of violence, "Anonymous" strips the choral "we" and accounts: "There were too many bodies and not enough people— too many ears and no one attached to them" (70). Subverting the way grand narratives are structured, the story provides multiple modes of access points and forms to the same narrative, in different versions, thereby further assisting the collective memory to come into being. It records collective memory as well as the acts through which it is being recorded in the first place, by the individual and the collective. Thus, the townspeople's narrative, juxtaposed with individual stories, complicates Olick's claim about the unpredictability of group reactions through individual responses (Olick 342). In other words, while Alfonso's individual response cannot anticipate or encompass the townspeople's response, both are necessary to comprehend and remember the incidents that occur due to the occupation in Vasenka. Instead of claiming objectivity to sustain and obscure the brutal realities as grand narratives often do, memory is formed and preserved through an inclusive approach to collective memory in the text.

Communicative Memory

The text consists of multiple interweaving narratorial voices that communicate with each other, further contributing to the development of a collective memory. Thus, in this storytelling mode, "every individual memory constitutes itself in communication with others" (Assman and Czaplicka 127). Olick states that "[the] clearest demonstration of the genuinely collective nature of remembering is the degree to which it takes place in and through language, narrative, and dialogue" (Olick 343). This is achieved effectively only through the narrative's storytelling mode. Storytelling is perceived by critics to be one of the most natural forms of communication (Langer 1). The monologues are each a poem in themselves, capturing the intense personal and public moments through their language. At the same time, as storytelling enables the coverage of numerous instances of everyday life and communication that connect to the larger narrative further leads to the production of what Assman calls a "communicative memory." Assman defines it as "For us the concept of 'communicative memory' includes 'varieties of collective memory that are based exclusively on everyday communications'" (Assman and Czaplicka 126).

Interestingly, the formation of a counter-republic based solely on deafness makes the concept of preserving memory through everyday communication even more intriguing. The text also uses sign-language illustrations in between the poems to connect the narrative while resisting traditional forms of communication. In some sections, the signs lack subtitles that highlight the text's claim on how "silence" is a construction of the hearing. It serves as an act of resistance and co-creation, manifesting further through a language they understand. The perpetrators of violence (the soldiers) speak a language that no one in Vasenka understands (Kaminsky,

“Dramatis Personae”). As crip aesthetics/disability poetics state: “Conventions, rules, and norms can shape poetry – not just rhyme and metre, but line breaks, line arrangements, and limiting poems to written linguistic modes” (Heffers 3). The “Notes” section establishes that this communicative memory transcended language, as it says: “In Vasenka, the townspeople invented their own sign language. Some of the signs are derived from various traditions (Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, American Sign Language, etc.). Other signs might have been made up by citizens, as they tried to create a language not known to authorities” (Kaminsky, “Notes”). The same section also points out the second reason, stating, “The deaf don’t believe in silence. Silence is the invention of the hearing” (Kaminsky, “Notes”). In other words, the townspeople who are resisting (and telling this story) are protesting through deafness. By preserving memory through an alternative mode of communication, the resistance movement refuses to be restricted by language, yet no one succumbs to learning the language of the perpetrators. Within the story itself, this language is used to keep communicating the truth and to continue resistance through everyday acts. One such instance is present in Momma Galya’s story, where she states: “I teach his children’s hands to make of anguish/a language—/see how deafness nails us into our bodies. Anushka/speaks to homeless dogs as if they are men./speaks to men/as if they are men/and not just souls on crutches of bone” (Kaminsky 63). Through the premise of deafness and silence, an alternative language emerges that can communicate counter-narratives and be used to resist the oppressor without resorting to a shared language. While silence operates as a mechanism of resistance, it also serves as a reminder of the violence that produced it in the first place. Thus, right at the juncture of the end of Galya’s story and the epilogue of the narrative, Kaminsky writes, “We are sitting in the audience, still. Silence, like the bullet that’s missed us, spins—” highlighting that the choice to remain silent and watch from a distance itself is a privilege (70). The town’s silence, however, is not passive, as it carries the weight of violence that has happened and can happen. Despite the risk, the townspeople do not just watch the events unfold; they keep telling the story to ensure their experience is remembered.

Conclusion

Olick states that at the individual level, “being able to write a note or record a message or take a photograph vastly extends the capacity to ‘remember,’ not simply by providing storage space outside of the brain but by stimulating our neurological storage processes in particular ways [...]” (Olick 342). *Deaf Republic* uses storytelling to stimulate these storage processes. Memory is not simply preserved against the dominant narrative but established as a counter-collective memory. The article demonstrated how storytelling employs both constitutive and communicative memory formation, thereby reconstructing and preserving memory. It functions as a technology of remembering, both at the collective and individual levels, becoming an act of resistance. The ambiguous ending of the resistance narrative further underscores the importance of storytelling in constructing collective memory. In the absence of tangible, large-scale results of resistance or sites that commemorate it, resistance lives on in the collective memory through storytelling.

Notes

¹Anastasia Afanasieva (b. 1982, Kharkiv) is a Ukrainian poet and translator whose work engages with themes of memory, displacement, and lived experiences of social and political upheaval. She is the author of several poetry collections and has received major literary recognitions, including the Debut Prize and the Russian Award. Her poetry has been translated

into multiple languages, and she is also the translator of Ilya Kaminsky's *Music of the Wind* (2012).

²Afanasieva's poem "On TV the news showed..." is featured in the collection *Words of War: New Poems from Ukraine* along with other poets who extensively cover and articulate the experience of the Ukrainian people during the Russian occupation and war of resistance. The poems of the movement provide insight into the lives of people suffering everyday violence and precarity being situated in a zone of conflict, covering themes and feelings beyond mainstream discourse. The entire collection is available digitally at: <https://www.wordsfor-war.com/>

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