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## Gendered Postmemorial Legacy: Lily Brett's and Elizabeth Rosner's Poetic Renditions of the Holocaust

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This article explores Lily Brett's *The Auschwitz Poems* (2004) and Elizabeth Rosner's *Gravity* (2014), two female-authored second-generation poetic renditions of the Holocaust. Examining these works through the lens of postmemory, my goal is to shed new light on the intergenerational transmission of trauma from a gendered perspective, focusing on its connections with poetry. I argue that both anthologies share at the core of their narrative a gender-focused layer of meaning, which penetrates into a postmemorial experience that is to a great extent defined by this social construct. This essay fosters scholarship on postmemory by conceiving it as a double-edged process encompassing both aesthetics and a form of social activism, and informed by feminism, which is mirrored in the reconception and rethinking of both the female body and gender hierarchy.

Keywords: Lily Brett's *The Auschwitz Poems*; Elizabeth Rosner's *Gravity*; postmemory; trauma studies; Holocaust studies; poetry

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### Legado posmemorial de género: Las interpretaciones poéticas del Holocausto de Lily Brett y Elizabeth Rosner

Este artículo explora la obra de Lily Brett, *The Auschwitz Poems* (2004), y la de Elizabeth Rosner, *Gravity* (2014), dos antologías poéticas sobre el Holocausto de autoras de segunda generación. Mediante el análisis de estos trabajos desde el marco de la posmemoria, mi objetivo es aportar nueva luz en el estudio de la transmisión intergeneracional del trauma

a través de una perspectiva de género, examinando sus conexiones con la poesía. En este artículo se argumenta que ambas antologías comparten en sus narrativas una dimensión subyacente de significado centrada en el género y que conciben la posmemoria como una experiencia en gran medida definida por este constructo social. Este trabajo se centra en la disciplina de la posmemoria al concebirla como un proceso de doble filo que puede abarcar tanto la experiencia estética como un activismo social que, estimulado por el feminismo, queda reflejado en la reformulación y la reinterpretación tanto del cuerpo femenino como de las jerarquías de género.

Palabras clave: *The Auschwitz Poems*, de Lily Brett; *Gravity*, de Elizabeth Rosner; posmemoria; estudios sobre el trauma; estudios del Holocausto; poesía

## I. INTRODUCTION

This article examines Lily Brett's *The Auschwitz Poems* (2004) and Elizabeth Rosner's *Gravity* (2014), two female-authored second-generation poetic renditions of the Holocaust. Through the lens of postmemory, I hope to shed light on the intergenerational transmission of trauma from a comparative perspective, exploring poetry as a form of expression used to convey gendered experiences. I argue that, though stylistically, ontologically and figuratively divergent, both poets delve into Holocaust postmemory and underscore its profoundly gendered nature. Their works explore the unique struggle of female victims and survivors during the war and also after it had ended. Simultaneously, they examine their own childhoods and decades-long process of adjusting to trauma as a process that is substantially conditioned by gender.

Currently settled in New York, Brett was born to Polish survivors in 1946, in a displaced persons camp in Germany, and grew up in Australia. Her literary production includes both poetry and fiction, both of which constantly draw upon autobiographical material in order to explore Jewish-Australian identity through the lives of survivors and their descendants, concentrating on female characters. *The Auschwitz Poems* maintains a gender-focused narrative thread, offering a revealing insight into the unique nature of female suffering during the Holocaust and into the ways in which this gender-specific trauma has affected the poet. Although Brett's prolific and extended career has fostered worldwide readership, her work has stimulated little academic interest, with only a few publications exploring her representation of the *Shoah*<sup>1</sup> (Buffi 1996; Dowling 2004; Botez 2011; Drewniak 2021) and none of them attempting to gender it.

Based in California, Elizabeth Rosner is an American poet, novelist and essayist, daughter of German and Polish Holocaust survivors. Echoing Brett's work, Rosner's literary production also fuses figments of her imagination with the fragmented stories

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<sup>1</sup> *Shoah* is the Hebrew word for 'catastrophe', used to refer to the Holocaust.

told by her parents so as to come to terms with the family's traumatic past, exploring the ongoing wound and grief. *Gravity*, her most celebrated poetry collection, delves into the complexities of the inherited trauma, exploring her growing up as a second-generation survivor. Rosner's comprehensive and thorough enquiry into trauma has served as a foundation for scholars conducting recent investigations on the posttraumatic experience and intergenerational coping with trauma (Slodounik 2016; Wolf 2020; Možina and Erzan 2021). However, her work has not, to date, been examined from a gender-focused perspective.

Nevertheless, I suggest that Brett's and Rosner's poetic works provide an enlightening framework to ignite the gendered reflection on postmemory. Because the authors each emphasize their mother's experiences, their matrilineal heritage and their own identity as second-generation authors and women, I intend to foster scholarship on postmemorial Holocaust literature through the comparative analysis of Brett's and Rosner's poetic renditions, particularly by offering a gendered insight into the intergenerational transmission of Holocaust trauma and its connections with poetry.

## 2. THE SECOND GENERATION: THE LEGACY OF TRAUMA

Exploring how trauma is passed on to the second generation is essential in order to investigate postmemorial literature, whose authors prove to be haunted by the same issues that unsettled their parents. Following Bina Nir, children of survivors inherit their parents' trauma through an unconscious process that leads them to over-identify with their post-traumatic selves, interiorizing their parents' distress and eventually feeling as if they experienced the Holocaust in their own flesh (2018, 4). As the second generation tries to approach, assimilate and comprehend their parents' experience, an impenetrable barrier divides them. In fact, Lawrence Langer's "principle of discontinuity" claims that "an impassable chasm permanently separates the seriously interested auditor and observer from the experiences of the former Holocaust victim" (1991, 14), thus suggesting that survivors remain emotionally and ontologically detached from their children.

Nevertheless, according to Ernst van Alphen (2006), it is precisely because of this impenetrable frontier separating them from their parents that children of survivors feel compelled to find a way of establishing some kind of intergenerational continuity. As specified by Susan Gubar in *Poetry after Auschwitz* (2003), this urgent desire for continuity is what leads second-generation authors to creative writing, which can help them come to terms with the barrier separating children from parents. To accomplish this purpose, poetry seems the most suitable means of expression as it is not constrained by the fluidity and closure of prose narrative, and can thus more consistently incarnate the psychological fragmentation that derives from such a distressing experience as the Holocaust (Gubar 2003, 7-8). Following Gubar, second-generation poetry tends to be characterized by

the shortness of verse; its deliberate placement of words in lines that do not necessarily accord with syntactic breaks; the use of rhythm or rhyme; the compression of a plethora of details into fewer and therefore more charged terms and images; the reaching for analogies, albeit inadequate ones; the suppression of logical, narrative links (149-50).

According to Marianne Hirsch, second-generation authors engage in the work of 'postmemory', which explains the response children of survivors have to the trauma of their parents. The second generation grows up immersed in the narrative and images of their parents' traumatic past, and this inheritance is so powerful that the other's experience materializes in memories for the child in their own right (2001, 9). Second-generation postmemory is a form of remembrance that is defined by being experientially, chronologically and ontologically distanced from the Holocaust past of the first generation, and therein lies the might of postmemorial writing: "postmemory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through representation, projection and creation—often based on silence rather than speech, on the invisible rather than the visible" (2001, 9).

Hence, postmemorial Holocaust poets turn to creativity and imaginative language to acknowledge the impossibility of fully assimilating the experience, surrendering fragments and pieces of that unfathomable story while underscoring how profoundly the Holocaust has shaped their lives and identities as members of the second generation. Finally, examining the work of postmemory, as reflected in second-generation Holocaust poetry, proves enlightening because it can provide a deeper and more nuanced insight into how the author uses versified language to cope with the passed-on trauma, to reconnect somehow with their parents and to struggle to overcome the complexities and paradoxes of representation that are inherent to the *Shoah*.

### 3. GENDER AND HOLOCAUST LITERARY STUDIES

In 1984, Joan Ringelheim issued the first warning about the invisibility of women within the historiographic and literary canon of the Holocaust. Ringelheim pointed out that reductionist generalizations about the circumstances of the victims had been assumed by scholars for years, as a result of their failure to consider the fundamental implications of sex. She defended the need for a feminist approach that would reexamine women's conditions of survival and death as inextricably connected to their biological nature. Despite the critics, Ringelheim laid the foundations for the new gendered approach that would develop in the following years. As a result, the first investigations focusing exclusively on the experience of women began to emerge, starting from the premise that the memory of the Holocaust, skewed by a perspective too focused on the experiences of men, could not be completed until the voices of women were equally heard.

One of the pathbreaking works was Tydor Baumel's *Double Jeopardy: Gender and the Holocaust* (1998)—whose title emphasizes the double nature of these victims. This anthology proved groundbreaking because it concentrated on exploring the heterogeneous religious, sociocultural and ideological nature of this collective. After her research, Jewish women could not be construed as a monolithic entity anymore, but rather as a profoundly heterogeneous one, this diversity being central to gendering the Holocaust. Throughout the decades, Gender and Holocaust Studies have evolved into a highly multilayered scholarly field, drawing upon contemporary feminist theory during recent years. For instance, Sonja Hedgepeth and Rochelle Saidel's anthology (2010) sheds new light on significant, yet under-researched, subjects such as forced prostitution, rape and sexual abuse, abortion and sterilization.

In the same line, Zoë Waxman's landmark *Women in the Holocaust: A Feminist History* (2017) seeks to contribute to a richer understanding of women's experiences both during the Holocaust and in its on-going aftermath by delving into various layers of gender, which is defined by the author as a culturally and socially conditioned construct. More significantly, Waxman states that her work "is also, quite explicitly, a feminist history. In other words, it is predicated on the assumption that feminists are right to see gender not only as universal but as a system of oppression—a system that operates to subordinate women" (18). Finally, it is essential to mention historian Anna Hájková, a leading researcher on sexual violence during the *Shoah*, who has inquired into the intersections between taboo, stigma and sexuality in the Holocaust (2018; 2021).

Gender and Holocaust Studies have expanded into a multifaceted and interdisciplinary field that aims to underscore the unique experience of woman both in and after the *Shoah* as a means to obtaining a richer comprehension of this historical event. It began as a counter-cultural, counter-scholar and anti-canonical attempt to censor and overcome the excessively male-biased hegemonic perspective, but has now found its place within the discipline of Holocaust Studies. Canonical landmarks share common roots by gendering the Holocaust through the exploration of the female experience by means of historical documents and testimonial accounts, focusing on the idea of recovering female voices, and thus placing great emphasis on survivors' writing.

Gender and Holocaust Literary Studies embody a well-established, consistent and deeply embedded research field in the Anglophone scholarly world. Hence, the examination of second-generation female authors proves crucial to gender Holocaust postmemory. Rosner's and Brett's renditions share common roots in that both works evolve through an underlying gendered-focused narrative, allowing the reader to penetrate into a postmemorial experience that is conditioned by a significant double-edged nature, thus differing from their male counterparts', and deserving of further scrutiny. This endeavor to unveil the latent narrative of a gendered Holocaust postmemory becomes more stimulating because of the form of expression chosen by the authors. Following Reed (2013), poetry can be used to convey and claim gendered

experiences in order to challenge crucial dichotomies and to represent the author's bodily experiences, triggering political activity and consciousness raising.

Sandra Faulkner's extensive research on the use of poetry in qualitative research practice has shaped Poetic Inquiry, a feminist methodology rooted in the idea that "poetry has the power to highlight slippery identity-negotiation processes and present more nuanced views of marginalized and stigmatized identities, to demonstrate embodied experience" (2020, 18). As such, then, the poet's personal experience, embodied and universalized, can be used to censor and subdue institutionalized systems of oppression and social inequality, triggering a form of feminist activism. Relying on Faulkner's methodology, my purpose is to discern whether Elizabeth Rosner's *Gravity* and Lily Brett's *The Auschwitz Poems* permit a feminist reading of the postmemorial experience.

#### 4. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF BRETT'S AND ROSNER'S RENDITIONS

Elizabeth Rosner and Lily Brett tackle analogous issues connected to postmemory, but their poetic styles are distinctly different. Each poet has a unique way of rendering the postmemorial Holocaust experience, their poetry unfolding in creative, multi-layered and multifaceted paths. Whereas Brett's diction stands out for her singular ability to embody the harshest reality of the concentrationary experience with ghost-like, abrupt, staccato and bare language, Rosner engages in a serener and more complex versification, salient characteristics being her figurative diction, intricate imagery and refined tropes. However, in their artistic process of reconstructing and imagining the Holocaust, both authors claim a close feeling of kinship and thus their co-ownership of the Holocaust trauma: when their poetic personae visualize their mothers' war experiences, these lyrical *alter egos* reexperience the trauma and struggle to assimilate it through this testimony, hence echoing survivors' own reaction to trauma (Laub 2000, 82) and demonstrating that they too, in turn, are survivors themselves. In contrast, when the poets focus on their personal lives, emphasizing how Holocaust trauma has shaped their identities until they achieve posttraumatic growth, their past is embraced as legacy and empowerment, asserting that they can also be the owners of a story that has only been vicariously experienced.

The exploration and comparison of both anthologies may allow us to comprehend how the poets' creative reimagining of their mothers' pasts functions as a cognitive tool in their struggle to bridge the disconnected worlds of mother and daughter through the idea of a shared, gendered trauma that is intergenerationally transmitted. In an effort to overcome the ontological and emotional detachment separating the poets from their mothers, both anthologies construct dialectic spaces in which longing, silence, connection and disconnection constantly collide in a poetic attempt to explore their matrilineal heritage. Rosner's "Foreign Tongues" epitomizes this conflict enlighteningly:

Hopelessly I long to go backwards,  
 reclaim the early chances when my mother sang  
 in Russian and Polish as she bathed me  
 and tucked me into bed at night. The same  
 melodies her mother sang.

She says I held my hands over my ears  
 and refused to listen (2014, 21).

The ideas of mother tongue and voice are closely associated with her mother's identity and to the act of motherhood itself, as it echoes through generations. While the poet evokes a quotidian, domestic episode from her childhood, her verses become imbued with a sense of yearning to step back in time and reclaim this lost part of her mother's identity, which she should have inherited but, as a result of the trauma, it was silenced. In coherence with "Foreign Tongues," Lily Brett's "By Yourself" also conjures up scenes from the poet's childhood so as to delve into this intergenerational impenetrable chasm:

Your teeth  
 rattled around  
 your mouth  
 for years

you'd shout  
 in your  
 sleep

about  
 children  
 children with  
 holes in their cheeks

your red hair  
 a queer scream  
 around your motionless face

you'd sit / by yourself  
 somewhere else

you  
 couldn't

touch me  
mother

you  
had to  
hold yourself (2004, 175).

Echoing Rosner's poem, the images of the poet's mother screaming as she sleeps or giving an agonized cry with her otherwise "motionless face" also emphasize the idea of a silenced voice that, what is more, seems connected to motherhood. Indeed, the notion of broken motherhood, visualized through the eyes of her traumatized mother, is the central theme in *The Auschwitz Poems*. "Children II," one of the earliest poems in the anthology, illustrates this focus:

You  
mother  
would have

like  
all  
the other  
mothers

gone  
with  
the  
children

held  
their  
hands

hushed  
their  
cries

smoothed  
their  
hair

pulled



a pullover  
into place (2004, 161).

In *The Auschwitz Poems*, Brett needs to imagine, visualize and convey every ordeal that women had to endure in the camps, as if this reexperiencing of genuinely female trauma were her only chance to connect with her mother. In "Children II," specifically, Brett recreates her mother's suffering upon arrival at Auschwitz, as she learns the truth about the mass murder of children in the gas chambers. By explicitly addressing her and reconstructing her ordeal, the poet individualizes her mother and claims her unique self, resisting the dehumanizing ethos that prevailed in the concentrationary universe. Yet, simultaneously, her mother's suffering transforms into the experience of every other deported woman; and, by exposing this feeling of shared motherhood that binds women on the brink of death, Brett impregnates her poetry with a sense of universal transcendence.

In the same line, the notion of a universal and shared motherhood, transcending all boundaries, also lays at the heart of Rosner's *Gravity* (2004). More significantly, this motherhood evolves into a reconciliation force mediating through different generations and historical sides. In "Speaking to One of Germany's Sons," the poet imagines talking to the descendant of a Nazi: "Don't our mothers wish that our sleep be sweet and / untroubled, that our hands not tremble when we stretch / them toward one another?" (92). This universal motherhood, thus, becomes for her the epitome of healing, of overcoming and, eventually, of the notion that lays the foundations for posttraumatic growth. Ultimately, in both anthologies, though each in its own way, there is an underlying layer of meaning placing motherhood at the heart of the narrative. This notion, furthermore, reveals a double-edged nature connected to trauma: shattered by the Holocaust, motherhood is a constant source of sorrow; reassembled by the poets, it becomes a crucial element to cope with the wound and finally achieve posttraumatic growth.

Throughout this endeavor, breasts acquire profound significance in both poetic universes. In Brett's anthology, breasts embody the triple violation perpetrated upon the female body: abuse of the victim's uniqueness, of her gender-specific identity and of her sexual agency. The first and second violations are explored in "Breasts," a poem picturing the effect of starvation on the female body, as it transforms the victims into an asexualized and indistinguishable mass:

It was strange  
the way  
the breasts  
changed

first  
the flesh  
fell

as though  
dropped  
from shock

breasts  
old and young  
hung  
facing the floor

till  
they  
disappeared  
existed no more (2004, 164).

In “Another Selection,” Brett visualizes emaciated women whose fate is about to be decided by the Nazis: “Mengele looked / while the Kommandant / lightly whipped / the thin nipples / shriveled around / their empty bags of breasts // rows and rows / of wrinkled pink tips / sitting on bowed ribs” (164). In these verses, the perpetrator transforms breasts into objects of shame and sexual torture, thus reflecting a sphere of suffering that was unique to deported women. Brett resorts to breasts to convey the paradox to which only women were subjected during deportation: though asexualized and dehumanized by the Nazis, their bodies remained sexual objects at the perpetrator’s permanent disposal. This truth, in fact, has been highlighted by prominent feminist scholars, such as Zoë Waxman: “[F]rom the very beginning until the very end, women remained women: both in their sense of self and in the way they were treated by camp guards. Gender, in that sense, was the last thing to survive the camps” (2017, 91). Brett’s verses, in this regard, also hint at the gendered nature of women’s victimhood.

Yet, in Brett’s poetic universe, not only do breasts embody an extremely gender-specific Holocaust trauma, but they also become the epitome of resistance and shared motherhood, as “Renya’s Baby” suggests. Her baby

was  
sucking  
quietly

on  
the  
breast

and  
missed

the  
gas

[...]  
they  
found  
her  
attached

to  
the  
dead breast

before  
loading  
the  
trolley

that  
serviced  
the ovens

they  
split  
her  
head

hurled her

on  
top  
of

another  
mother (2004, 169).

In this poem, breasts symbolize survival beyond the concentrationary horror, as they initially allow the baby to evade the gas and live. The poet then seems to anthropomorphize that nourishing and life-sustaining organ, highlighting the idea of the breast dying before the baby does. Through the use of this synecdoche, emphasizing the “dead breast” rather than the dead mother, Brett transforms it into an autonomous

character in her poetic universe, into a life-giving entity that resists in spite of all the violations inflicted upon it. Finally, the last lines visualizing the baby being burnt on top of another mother enlighteningly capture that expanded notion of universal motherhood connecting all women who experienced the Holocaust.

In harmony with Brett, Elizabeth Rosner also attaches major significance to breasts in her poetic rendition, although the word does not appear explicitly in her narrative. Rosner does, however, insistently reflect on breast cancer, the disease that claimed her mother's life and that she also suffered from. This illness functions as a narrative thread providing a space for dialogue between her and her mother: like Brett's evocations of the violations perpetrated upon her mother's breasts in the concentration camp, Rosner also concentrates on a form of suffering that is genuine to this female organ. Like in Brett's poetic universe, in Rosner's *Gravity* this anguish becomes a means to establish the perpetual dynamics of connection and disconnection between mother and daughter. And, more significantly, the contemplation of breast cancer also binds all women who suffered the *Sboah*, because, as Rosner stated in *Survivor Café* (2017), "BRCA is the name for the genetic mutation found commonly on many Eastern European Jewish X chromosomes, predicting a higher than average risk of developing breast and/or ovarian cancer" (83).

Thus, by reflecting on the breast cancer that both she and her mother suffered in a poetic anthology which is specifically concerned with the legacy of Holocaust trauma, Rosner may be mirroring Brett's purpose of turning a form of suffering that is strictly bound to the female body into that shared notion of womanhood and sorority binding all female victims. In *Gravity*, Rosner never mentions the disease directly, and only in other works, such as *Survivor Café* (2017), does she share these episodes of her life with the reader. Therefore, this whole narrative develops in *Gravity* as a subtle underlying thread forcing the reader to interpret each void and silence. In "Song of My Mother," the poet seems to subtly allude to the topic for the first time:

And in your vowels I hear  
 an earlier song of terror, the one taught  
 by your own mother who walked away from you  
 the same way you tell me you walked away from me  
 when I wailed my own sorrow and need and fear.  
 You said I followed you down the street crying  
 and I think What were you doing walking down the street  
 away from me?

Now I'm the one desperate to escape  
 the hunger of a woman who rocks in my arms  
 and cannot be filled (2014, 65).

A feeling of nostalgia and intergenerational disconnection permeates the verses. Just as Rosner's mother felt abandoned by her own mother, when she was sent into hiding, the poet evokes the feelings of loneliness during her own childhood. And in this poetic dialogue established between mother and daughter, Rosner's mother also seems to acknowledge this disconnection. Finally, only through the last stanza is it possible to infer the scene that seems summoned by the poet: Rosner's lyrical persona appears to be taking care of her sick mother, whose body becomes emptied by the illness and dependent on her daughter's. The tables have turned, and it is now the poet who rocks her mother in her arms. Yet the same sense of disconnection and discontinuity remains. Indeed, this composition, in recreating an extremely personal scene of the poet's life, also epitomizes the endless effects of Holocaust trauma.

The next poem related to breast cancer, "Instructions," conjures up the poet's flight to the hospital as her mother lies on her deathbed. This composition is written as instructions directed to herself: "Fly. Think about nothing. Think about air pressure, wind, / the speed of clouds. Pray for timing. Pray for time" (2014, 83). However, by the time she gets there, her mother has already passed away: "She is gone and this / is her body only, except it's the body you've always known. / The first" (83). These verses hint at a universal and physical mother and child connection established at birth. The first time the poet alludes to her own illness, in "In the Apology Waiting Room," she visualizes herself waiting for her appointment, describing the room as she examines the patients around her, and feels "blinded / by the eloquently mute / whose sorrows always / dwarf my own," revealing a deeper feeling of empathy with the pain of others than with her own (2014, 99). The final poem tackling the author's breast cancer, "Sixty-Five Years Past Liberation," is completely devoted to the poet's diagnosis and subsequent successful treatment: "Your mother in hiding / declined the name Survivor // [...] So you / deny it too, now that you / understand something about / the body's surrender" (2014, 100).

Indeed, these verses uncover the psychological effects of trauma on the second generation, as detailed by Ferracuti (2009): second-generation survivors may experience self-punishing types of behavior and culpability, resulting from the feeling of not doing enough, of not being replacement enough for those who were murdered during the Holocaust, and of having avoided their relatives' suffering. Because the poet's mother refused to call herself a Holocaust survivor, and because she perished from breast cancer, the poet also rejects the word. This is representative of the tense relationship between mother and daughter, of the intergenerationally inherited trauma and of the genetically-transmitted disease—a disease that the poet knows haunts European Jewish women and, thus, establishes a connection among all of them.

I suggest that both authors, by exploring the female breasts through postmemorial writing, engage in feminist writing, as "poetic responses to breast cancer both inform and are informed by feminist activism and theory" (Hartman 2004, 155). Hartman has claimed that women poets' writing about this illness gives way to new layers of

meaning and reimagines the female body, and this is only possible because feminism has provided a useful and flexible frame for this purpose. In addition, poetry is a suitable form of expression because it has the potential to make abstract ideas more concrete and vivid: “it can work through what it really means [...] for the personal to be political, for identity to be embodied, and for subjectivity to be fractured and discontinuous” (155). In this regard, I argue that, through her poetic rendition of breast cancer, Elizabeth Rosner achieves new avenues of meaning: she negotiates the fractured relationship with her mother and her own role as a second-generation female Holocaust survivor, she acknowledges the intergenerational legacy of trauma and she tacitly claims this gender-specific experience as one that genetically binds European Jewish women.

Moreover, according to contemporary feminist scholars, women’s literary representations of cancer embrace both aesthetics and activism. Their writing about cancer promotes cultural change because “it foregrounds ill women’s agency rather than their victimization; it celebrates feminist themes of affiliation, resistance, and new knowledge; it offers opportunities for healing to both writers and readers; and it provides strategies for mourning and commemorating the women whose lives have been lost to this disease” (DeShazer 2008, 261). Rosner’s rendition is highly representative of these ideas, crucial to contemporary feminism.

As for *The Auschwitz Poems*, I suggest that Brett also engages in feminist writing as she centers on the unique struggle of women in the concentrationary universe, delving into the violations inflicted upon their bodies and, particularly, through the exploration of breasts as a leitmotiv symbolizing this genuinely gender-specific trauma. Brett’s poetic rendition of the abuses perpetrated on the female body hints at the idea of gender as a system of oppression operating to subordinate women in the concentrationary universe. In fact, Brett’s poetry mirrors the cornerstones underlying a feminist writing of the Holocaust, as defined by Zoë Waxman (2017, 18): first, Brett emphasizes the distinctive experience of women; second, she reflects female voices in an attempt to resist the conventional male-biased perspective by exploring traditionally overlooked experiences such as sexual abuse and maternity; third, she uses the testimony of women to give voice to their disempowerment during the Holocaust. More significantly, Brett seems to accomplish this threefold mission through the lens of postmemory—relating to the events not through recollection but through representation, fabulation and projection (Hirsch 2001)—in a constant attempt to reconnect with her mother and, at the same time, negotiate the meaning of her own identity as a second-generation female survivor.

Rosner’s and Brett’s migrant poetry, which focuses on their childhood experiences in a somehow foreign land, also allows a gendered approach to the postmemorial experience in that both poets explore and censor gender inequality, thus triggering a form of feminist writing. Lily Brett’s *The Auschwitz Poems* was published in 1984, during the Second Wave of feminism, where reflection on poetry led to, as Adrienne Rich (1973) wrote, the disintegration of the barrier between private and public. In

this regard, Brett's major focus, as she reconstructs her childhood, lies in her mother's absolute commitment and relegation to the domestic realm. In "Everything Looked Normal," she explores this domestic reality in depth:

Your  
numbered  
arm

your  
numb  
head

and  
hundreds  
of  
dead

the  
floor  
screeched

the  
cupboards  
groaned

the  
fridge  
shrieked

and  
the  
curtains  
hung

weighted  
with  
banished  
sadness

and  
you

cleaned  
and  
cleaned

and  
ironed  
and sewed

and  
cooked  
and  
served

and  
everything  
looked  
normal (2004, 173).

In general, Brett seems to hint at the idea that her mother's compulsive behavior concealed a strategy to cope with trauma. Considering how sharply the poet's childhood lyrical *alter ego* summons these images, she seems well aware that, even if "everything looked normal," in fact, this was not natural conduct whatsoever. Yet, only after several poems reflecting on her mother's behavior at home is the reader able to interpret a subtle but steady feminist reading of the anthology. This layer of meaning is unexpectedly triggered by "Rooshka's Dream," a composition evoking Brett's mother's pre-war life:

In Pomorska Street  
you  
studied hard

and  
tutored  
after school

and  
mastered  
chemistry and maths

your  
green  
eyes



glowed

probing  
physics  
and biology

[...]  
in Pomorska Street  
you  
were

one  
of  
the  
few

Jewish  
girls

who  
dreamt  
further

than  
marriage  
and children

you  
wanted  
to be  
a pediatrician (2004, 175).

Suddenly, from the incessant images of her post-war mother being completely relegated to the domestic sphere and to traditional, unbalanced gender roles, the reader is transported to a pre-Holocaust scenario to discover a strongminded, intelligent, brave young woman, determined to rise above gender bias and social barriers. Even after being forced into the ghetto, Rooshka does not renounce her aspiration:

in Pomorska Street  
despite  
your

red hair

and  
green  
eyes

they  
stopped  
you

leaving  
Lodz

in Palacowa Street  
in  
the  
ghetto

months  
after  
your final  
school exams

you  
dreamt

over  
and  
over again

you  
still  
had  
to sit them (2004, 175).

Following Suzanne Juhasz, who conducted extensive research on Second-Wave feminist poetry as it unfolded, one of the main characteristics of this movement is that “domestic interiors give way to inner places: those of imagination, of dream, of thought. The space of the mind” (1979, 23). By diving into her mother’s consciousness and mental landscape, Brett appears to harmonize with this crucial notion, creating a poetic texture that is all the more layered, complex and subtle because she does

so not by directly focusing on her own self, but rather by vicariously reexperiencing her mother's life through the lens of postmemory, thus, in a way, reinterpreting and redefining the meaning of the past.

Finally, the poet brings this poetic discussion to an end by means of a sad irony. In "A Graduate," the poet mourns her mother's shattered dreams: "You / gained // a / degree // in / anxious / expression // from / this // university of / horror" (2004, 170). Rooshka's youthful ambitions of daring to dream beyond children and marriage and to achieve academic and professional success were crushed by the Holocaust. In the post-war period, she was not able to pursue them either, as she was relegated to the domestic sphere and the perpetuation of unbalanced gender roles. I suggest that this idea may allow a new reading of "Everything Looked Normal," the poem examined on previous pages: "and / you / cleaned / and / cleaned // and / ironed / and sewed // and / cooked / and / served // and / everything / looked / normal" (173).

As the young poet's lyrical persona deciphers her mother's relegation to the private realm to perform the only roles available to her, namely mother and wife, claiming that it *looked* like normal behavior—but thus implying that in essence it *was not*—and after sharing with the reader her mother's pre-war self, the poet may actually be censoring the normalization of gender inequality by interrogating the alleged boundaries between the domestic and the public sphere and the essential imbalances of power and gender. In a way, therefore, Brett is tacitly turning personal experience into a political force, thus harmonizing with Second-Wave feminist poetry (Juhász 1979). Ultimately, Brett seems to hint at the idea that Holocaust trauma, both during the events and in its aftermath, engendered a space for the patriarchal system to further subordinate women. Indeed, Zoë Waxman has emphasized that gender continued to shape the lives of survivors after the war had ended, through targeting women as child bearers and caregivers (2017, 113).

In line with Brett, Rosner revisits her childhood in order to gender her poetic rendition. She explores her strict Jewish upbringing in order to offer a deeper understanding of the complex tensions between gender and religion. In "Learning How to Pray," she recalls how she was perceived, as a young woman, in the synagogue: "Always remember you may not touch / the sacred scrolls at all because you're unclean / and bloody, and you can't help it" (2014, 60). In fact, "Ghosts" evokes this reality in detail. As the poet's childhood lyrical persona enters the synagogue, she reminisces: "I / slipped into a row of / silent women, off to the side where / we were not permitted to touch / the Torah or even its garments / with our unclean hands," and she relates to this marginalization and silencing of women: "I had learned how to recite the prayers / but never how to pray, not in my / own language and not / in my own voice" (63-64). Yet, ultimately, the lyrical speaker is able to challenge this patriarchal ethos:

it was only later,  
when I no longer walked with my father  
that I found a moment of grace

my hands hovered  
 above a pair of lit candles and I  
 whispered to the ghosts of every woman  
 who came before me, every blessed  
 touch of light (2014, 64).

These last lines hint at the notion of universal sorority binding women through time and space. More significantly, those women, who were considered unavoidably dirty and bloody, become to the poetic persona the epitome of precisely the opposite, embodying light and purity. While she does not renounce her background and heritage, she is able to employ critical thinking to scrutinize both and eventually rise above the still prevalent bias against girls and women. The poet's pursuit of her own voice, in fact, seems strongly connected to this process of overcoming religiously-induced gender prejudice. Thus, I suggest that Rosner's process of achieving posttraumatic growth involves a form of reconception, reinterpretation and reimagining of the female body that can only be achieved through the prism of feminism.

This process also seems to intertwine with the exploration of sexuality through literature, which becomes a way to ascertain her agency and ownership of her story, central concerns in postmemorial writing. She needs to recover the "Pages from the Lost Notebook," as the title of this paradigmatic prose poem suggests. Evoking a journey to Europe with her father in search of their roots, this poem begins: "in the original version of the story I spent one rainy night in Paris with a man I met at a café," and goes on to detail their sexual encounter. However, she then confesses that, due to her father's objection upon reading it, she chose to omit this episode: "I decided that I was telling my father's story, and the man from the café didn't belong here, with the rest. He was an interloper, a distraction, a removable piece" (2014, 57). Paradoxically, indeed, the author has already shared with the readers her sexual experience.

This resistance to comply with her father's wishes illustrates Marianne Hirsch's warning that, for the second generation, "to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors" (2012, 5). For Rosner, inquiring into her sexuality, in spite of her father's explicit disapproval, is clearly a strategy to ascertain that her postmemorial poetic rendition is also her own story. In fact, Rosner ends this poem by stating this realization: "Now I see he [the Frenchman] was there to remind me to pay attention to the pieces of myself I was learning how to assemble, to sort through what was them and what was me. So I can tell the story as if it is my own, and whole this time, out loud" (2014, 58). For Rosner, resisting religiously-induced gender prejudice and asserting her sexual agency through poetry is a way to own her story, a crucial step in achieving postmemorial growth.

The exploration of Brett's and Rosner's postmemorial writing supports Faulkner's claim that the use of poetry in qualitative research provides a way to engage in feminist

methodology when poets draw attention to bodily experiences, show embodiment and reflexivity and collapse the false split between mind and body, private and public (2020, 18). As Faulkner has suggested, poetry may function as a response to gender inequality, confronting structures of power so as to engage the audience by triggering poetry's political potential (30). I contend that Brett's and Rosner's Holocaust postmemorial poetry is inextricably connected to the authors' bodily, lived experiences. Their writing activates feminist activism inasmuch as it construes the *Sboab* as an ongoing gendered process, underscoring its unique aftermath for women and thus displacing traditionally male-centered interpretations.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

This article has examined Lily Brett's *The Auschwitz Poems* and Elizabeth Rosner's *Gravity* through the lens of postmemory with the purpose of exploring poetry as a way to convey the gendered intergenerational transmission of trauma. Relying on Faulkner's methodology (2020), I have aimed to discern whether the anthologies permit a feminist reading of the poets' postmemorial experience. In this regard, I argue that Rosner's and Brett's renditions—though stylistically, ontologically and figuratively divergent—share at the core of their narratives an underlying gendered-focused layer of meaning, which penetrates into a postmemorial experience that is to a great extent defined by gender.

Firstly, the poets' creative reimagining of their mothers' Holocaust pasts functions as a cognitive tool that attempts to bridge their detached realities through the notion of a shared, gendered trauma that is intergenerationally transferred. To resist Langer's "principle of discontinuity" (1991), they construct dialectic spaces characterized by the persistent conflict between longing, silence and fragmentation, poetically exploring their matrilineal heritage. Both anthologies emphasize the double-edged nature of motherhood: shattered by the wartime past, motherhood epitomizes a constant source of sorrow; although restored by the authors through poetic expression, it also becomes crucial to achieving posttraumatic growth. The authors' constant invocation of mothers and grandmothers strengthens the matrilineal bond, imbuing their poetic renditions with an aura of female kinship.

Secondly, while the poets struggle to negotiate their role as second-generation survivors, their poems allow a feminist reading which focuses on the singular experience of women, both during the *Sboab* and in its aftermath. I have suggested that their exploration of breasts shows their commitment with feminism. Rosner's reflection on breast cancer achieves new avenues of meaning by negotiating the fractured relationship with her mother and her own identity, and by tacitly claiming this gender-specific experience as one that binds Holocaust victims and survivors, thus harmonizing with contemporary feminist scholarship on women's cancer literature (Hartman 2004; DeShazer 2008). Brett's exploration of the violations perpetrated upon the female body, epitomized in the breasts as a highly symbolic leitmotiv, highlights the unique

struggles of women and defines the Holocaust as an exceptionally gendered process. In contrast, the author also transforms the breast into an autonomous character in her narrative, anthropomorphized and turned into a life-giving entity that resists the Nazi dehumanizing ethos.

Thirdly, migrant poetry also provides an enlightening frame to further the gendered analysis of the postmemorial experience since both poets explore inequality and power relations as they poetically render their childhood and upbringing. I argue that, by contrasting her mother's post-war absolute relegation to the domestic realm with her pre-Holocaust self-sovereignty and aspirations, Brett is censoring the normalization of gender imbalance by interrogating the boundaries between the private and the public sphere, turning the personal into the political, and thus embracing Second-Wave feminist poetry tropes (Juhász 1979). At the core of the issue, Brett seems to suggest that as the Holocaust unfolded, it perpetuated the patriarchal system that subordinated women; in its aftermath, gender continued to shape survivors' lives. This idea is central to current Gender and Holocaust Studies, as Zoë Waxman (2017) has emphasized.

Regarding Rosner's *Gravity*, I suggest that the inspiration of feminism permeates her work inasmuch as she resorts to it to rethink the female body, resisting gender prejudice, in a double-edged cognitive and literary process that leads her towards posttraumatic growth. The poet examines her strict Jewish upbringing to analyze the tensions between gender and religion, finally overcoming the still-prevalent religious bias against women. Besides, exploring sexual freedom, in spite of her father's explicit disapproval, becomes a strategy to ascertain that she is the owner of the story that she is poetically rendering. Thus, I have argued that Rosner's process of achieving posttraumatic growth entails a reinterpretation and reimagining of both the female body and the gender hierarchy that is only possible through the prism of feminism.

Weighing up the facts, I claim that Lily Brett's *The Auschwitz Poems* and Elizabeth Rosner's *Gravity* allow a feminist reading and provide an insightful framework to further scholarship on the gendered intergenerational transmission of Holocaust trauma, examined through the prism of postmemorial poetry. Poetry becomes a fluid form of expression that allows the authors to transform their embodied, personal experience into a political force that challenges the patriarchal ethos and defines the Holocaust and its aftermath as a gendered process. Hence, I contend that both renditions offer new insights into postmemory as a double-edged process that encompasses both aesthetics and a form of social activism, triggered by feminism, and mirrored in the reconception of the female body and traditional unbalanced gender roles. Considering current research trends on Gender and Holocaust Literary Studies, it is crucial that the academic community continue to foster scholarship in this field by expanding the scope of their work using gender studies-approaches to postmemory in order to resist the conventional male-centered perspective and explore the ways in which gender continues to shape the lives of second-generation survivors.

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