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Author(s): Zolkos, Magdalena

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Transposition, generationality, and trauma: From psychoanalytic Holocaust studies to post-mnemonic cultures

Magdalena Zolkos¹ 

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Abstract The concept of transposition, initially linked to the study of affective transmission of trauma across generations, has not progressed far beyond psychoanalytic Holocaust studies, and its broader cultural implications remain underexplored. Through its presentation and appraisal, I make an argument for the critical and epistemic potential of transposition, both recognizing and moving beyond the specific framework of its original articulation, namely the clinical psychoanalytic work with children of Holocaust survivors in the 1970s and 1980s. First, I outline the trajectories of the emergence of the concept, focussing on the work of Judith Kestenberg. I contextualize transposition in relation to the psychoanalytic nexus of trauma and mourning, particularly regarding the effects of what Alexander Mitscherlich and Marguerite Mitscherlich called “the inability to mourn”. I then discuss how, while contemporary trauma discourses have paid little attention to transposition, this concept has been revived in studies of postmemory. Through a close reading of the novel *The White Book* by contemporary South Korean writer Han Kang, I conclude that the shift of transposition from a clinical notion to a cultural and literary idiom of cross-generational mnemonic legacies marks a significant discursive change, and it paves the way for a broader interrogation of the psychosocial costs of traumatic remembrance.

Keywords Transposition · Second-generation trauma · Psychoanalytic holocaust studies · Mourning · Judith Kestenberg · Psychoanalysis and culture

✉ Magdalena Zolkos
mazolkos@jyu.fi

¹ University of Jyväskylä, Kalliokatu 11, 40630 Jyväskylä, Finland



Introduction

One of the key theoretical innovations that emerged from the debates in psychoanalytic Holocaust studies in the 1960s to 1980s was the concept of transposition. Addressing the cross-generational transmission of traumatic historical experiences, transposition refers to a *shift in the arrangement of subjective positions* that disrupts their temporalities, environments, or forms (Kestenberg, 1989, 1993).¹ It borrows the broader meaning of the verb “to transpose” as an action of exchanging the order of, for instance, numbers, letters, or musical keys (*ponere* means to place, to put, to assume a position; *trans* means across).

While the conceptualization of transposition had until recently been predominantly confined to psychoanalytic Holocaust studies, this seemingly niche concept has found resonance in the realm of cultural and literary productions as a means to articulate the complexity of mnemonic and affective transmissions across generations. Alison Bechdel’s acclaimed 2006 graphic novel *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* exemplifies the cultural use of transposition in her graphic depiction of the daughter–father dynamics from the perspective of non-heteronormative sexuality. The narrator mentions that Marcel Proust fictionalized historical figures in his works by altering or *transposing* their gender. For instance, the character of Albertine Simonet is said to have had a real-life “equivalent” in Proust’s secretary, Albert Nahmias (Bechdel, 2006, p. 96). While this remark is intended to echo Bechdel’s own trajectories of “gender transposition” enacted through cultural performances of masculinity during her childhood (2006, p. 113), it also illuminates an essential dynamic in her complex relationship with the father, which unfolds not through trajectories of identification,² but through a *positional shift*, or imaginary exchange of positions.

Transposition involves, at least in part, a temporal matrix that centres around a fantasy of undoing or reversing time (see Laplanche & Pontalis, 1967/1988, pp. 477–478; Jackson, 2000, p. 88). Its use in *Fun Home* also casts into relief an affective dimension. This is because transposition functions in *Fun Home* as a kind of *mnemonic pivot* in relation to, primarily, the father’s repressed sexuality, desire, and (suspected) suicide. While transposition enables the protagonist to articulate fantasies of undoing the past (in an attempt to “rescue” the father), the highlighting of the transpositional dynamic in processes of remembrance reveals that her memory is imbued with, and co-constituted by, conflicting affects and emotions such as love, rage, and shame.

¹ Bernard Chervet (2022) uses the concept of “transposition” in the sense of conveyance or conversion between different systems of signs (for instance, of a psychic conflict onto the bodily medium) in his work on the *après-coup*. See also Mahony (1987) and Laplanche and Pontalis (1967/1988, pp. 90–92). The concept of transposition in psychoanalytic Holocaust studies, which is the focus of the present article, also needs to be distinguished from its use by Kristeva (1974/1984, pp. 59–60; 1987/1992).

² Focussing on children subjected to sexual violence, Ferenczi stresses the pervasiveness of the mechanisms of introjection (of, for example, parental guilt) and identification with the aggressors (1933/1988, pp. 202–203). While Ferenczi does not use the concept of transposition, his description of the effects of the “terrorism of suffering” bears some similarity to transposition (see Frankel, 2018).



In the scene following Alison's coming out, the father discloses his own "truth" regarding his sexuality. The protagonist's response further highlights the importance of transposition for how memory is produced and narrativized in the novel, as she wonders "which of us was the father? I had felt distinctly parental listening to his shamefaced recitation" (Bechdel, 2006, p. 221). By framing parentage as a question and a moment of genuine uncertainty, unknowingness, and disorientation – "which one of us is the father?", "which one of us is the mother?" – Bechdel effectively articulates transposition as a sudden and unexpected collapse of temporal and spatial distance, of generational sequentiality, and of seemingly separate stories and histories.

In psychoanalytic Holocaust theory, the concept of transposition has been used in relation to difficult history and vicarious trauma, concerning the ways in which the descendants of victims of violence relate to the historical experiences of their parents or grandparents (Akhtar, 2009, p. 890; Brenner, 2019). Theorists and analysts working within the framework of psychoanalytic Holocaust studies have drawn on transposition to highlight and analyse situations where the subjects find themselves unable to live in the here and now because of a lingering historical trauma (Mahony, 1980; Moscovici, 1961/2008, pp. 230–232). Instead, they are drawn into an imaginary life in *a different time and space* that corresponds to the period and location of the traumatic. The sadistic or emancipatory fantasies that arise form a kind of *phantasmic inheritance* that passes on to them from the generations of the parents or grandparents. Transposition implies an *imposition* of distant time and place onto the subject's life, which overwhelms and overpowers their present experience, and amounts to what Sándor Ferenczi called (1933/1988, p. 200) "re-experienc[ing] the past ... as hallucinatory reproduction".

While the concept of transposition has seen limited usage in the current psychoanalytic studies of culture and literature, there has been immense interest in the topic of traumatic memory, and its cultural residues and reverberations *across* generations. Among others, Harris (2020) approaches the problem of traumatic temporality within the philosophical idiom of the "inheritance of terror", while Schwab (2010) emphasizes the cultural transmission of trauma as a "haunting legacy"; Atkinson (2017) theorizes familial transmission within the realm of poetics and Frosh (2019) traces the "shadowy 'memories' [passed on by those who have come before us]" in psychoanalysis and culture. These diverse and rich contributions affirm what Hilary Mantel (2017) aptly calls "the enormous condensation of posterity" and its impact on the cultural "framework of [our] time".

Psychoanalytic theory seems uniquely equipped to address cultural manifestations of transposition, given the close attention it has historically paid to the dynamics of intersubjective "crossing over" of psychic contents (see Frosh, 2013), in particular in relation to the crossing over to others of what remains unprocessed and unassimilated by the subject, or what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1992, p. 792) describes as what was "passed on, with a mark of untranslatability on it". Therefore, it is puzzling that the concept of transposition has received little attention outside psychoanalytic Holocaust studies, and that its broader psychosocial constellations have remained underexplored.



A notable exception is the work of Marianne Hirsch on postmemory (1997, 2008, 2012). Theorizing the impact of ancestral trauma on the “generation after”, Hirsch has turned to the concept of transposition in *The Generation of Postmemory*, where, drawing on Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), she juxtaposes two concepts: postmemory and rememory. Importantly, these are not positioned as binary opposites; rather, Hirsch’s argument is that post-mnemonic cultural production is always at risk of sliding or slipping into “self-wounding and retraumatization” (Hirsch, 2012, p. 86). While postmemory “works through indirection and multiple mediation”, rememory is “communicated through bodily symptoms [and is] a form of repetition and re-enactment” (Hirsch, 2012, p. 82). Postmemory is a kind of “heteropathic memory” that enables narrativization of traumatic experience, and hence allows a more agential and potentially emancipative engagement with violent history (Hirsch, 2012, p. 86). Rememory is a very different form of cultural mnemonic practice, and transposition is its key mechanism: the subject (here Sethe in *Beloved*) *transposing themselves* into the parental, or more broadly ancestral, “world of the dead” through “mimetic repetition” of trauma (Hirsch, 2012, p. 83; see also Hirsch, 2002, pp. 74–75). According to Hirsch, there is no possibility—cultural *or* subjective—of historical distance *or* mnemonic remediation in rememory (see also Dolto, 1985; Schutzenberger, 1999; Frosh, 2013; Barbre, 2015, pp. 107–126; Harris, 2020, 2023, pp. 111–126).

Drawing on the nexus of transposition, trauma, and historical memory in Hirsch’s work, this article provides a critical appraisal of the psychoanalytic concept of transposition with the aim of exploring its critical and epistemic potential for cultural analysis. First, I outline the historical, intellectual, and clinical contexts in which the concept of transposition was coined. The key focus here is on the psychoanalytic debates in Europe in the 1970s and 1980s on the analysis of children of concentration camp survivors—the generation “in the shadow” of the Holocaust (see Hass, 1996). My outline of transposition highlights Judith Kestenberg’s work by drawing attention to a set of her theoretical and analytic contributions to knowledge about second-generation traumatization. I then situate the concept of transposition in relation to the broader cultural and psychoanalytic discourses on mourning, emphasizing the psychosocial dynamics that Alexander Mitscherlich and Marguerite Mitscherlich (1967/1975) called “the inability to mourn”. (While the Mitscherlichs’ book concerned the psychosocial dynamics of “unmournability” in post-war Germany, others have extended these insights to the victims of the Holocaust and their children.) I show that in the course of these debates, the lack of capacity for mourning was articulated as a key trajectory of transposition.

In the final section of the article, I consider transposition as a cultural and literary trope by analysing its function in *The White Book* (2016), a poetic meditation on the untimely death of a sister by contemporary South Korean writer Han Kang. I argue that, similar to the opening discussion of Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, here transposition is not simply a pathology of memory but rather an affirmation of personal (family) history. In *The White Book*, transposition becomes a mark of intimate connection that the living form with the dead, which in turn reframes the relationship between voice, language, and trauma.



Transposition In Psychoanalytic Holocaust Studies

The context in which the concept of transposition was first coined and theorized was psychoanalytic engagements with children of Holocaust survivors, primarily in Europe, Canada, and the US, starting in the late 1960s. Analysts observed that although the survivors' offspring were born after the war, they exhibited symptoms and enactments specific to a trauma—one that strongly resembled “survivor syndrome” (Niederland, 1968, pp. 313–315). Major debates on second-generation traumatization dominated the 1967 Congress of the International Psychoanalytic Association in Copenhagen and the 1970 Congress of Child Psychiatry in Jerusalem, parallel to interventions and contributions by Bernard Trossman (1968), Vivian Rakoff (1969), John Sigal (1971), Henry Krystal (1978), and others.³ The common thread emerging from this scholarship is its “post-Freudian” approach; the early contributors to the field of psychoanalytic Holocaust studies explicitly distinguished their own analyses of the transgenerational psychosocial impact of genocidal violence from Freud's model of trauma, which they deemed “inadequate” (see, for example, Bergmann & Jucovy, 1982, pp. 7–8). This critique of Freudian psychoanalysis centred on questioning whether trauma was a temporary condition resulting from the breakdown of the psyche's protective barrier owing to an external shock, as explained in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920/1955a), and whether trauma could be successfully overcome.

While an observant reader might find this repudiation of Freudian notions of trauma reductive, the move “beyond Freud” in the emerging field of psychoanalytic Holocaust studies coincides with an important discursive shift in theoretical and cultural attention to trauma, which arguably shapes current understandings. What stands out in the early debates about the second-generation affective transmissions of catastrophic experiences is the fusion of the psychoanalytic concept of trauma with the discourse on the Holocaust as an *irreparable event*. Among others, Max Pensky (2003) has used the term *Nichtwiedergutzumachende*, that “which can never be made good again”, to capture the motif of “irreparability” recurrent in many survivor testimonies (see also Hatley, 2000; Reale, 2019). In effect, the key discursive development that laid the ground for the conceptualization of transposition in psychoanalytic Holocaust studies was a question of living with irremediable and unrectifiable loss (see Rashkin, 2008).

One of the pioneers in the field of psychoanalytic Holocaust studies was Judith Kestenberg (1910–1999). Born under the name of Silberpfenning into a Jewish family in Tarnów, Poland, Kestenberg was educated in Vienna (obtaining a doctorate in psychiatry in 1934), trained as an analyst at the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society, and, after emigrating to the US in 1937, specialized in child psychiatry at the Bellevue Hospital in New York, eventually taking up a professorship at the New York University School of Medicine. Incorporating elements of recreating bodily kinaesthetic sensations that facilitated the recovery of forgotten memories, Kestenberg's work focussed on two “types” of patients: concentration camp

³ For psychoanalytic studies on transgenerational transmission of trauma, see Eckstaedt (1982), Laub (1998), Kogan (2002, 2007), Brenner (2004), and Parens (2004).



survivors who had experienced the camps as children and children of Holocaust survivors. She established a psychoanalytic practice of children and adolescents, and cofounded (with Milton Kestenberg, her husband) the International Study of Organized Persecution of Children and the Hidden Child Foundation, which offered a therapeutic platform for Holocaust survivors who had been placed as children in non-Jewish homes and religious institutions under changed names and identities (Haber, 1999; Romer, 1999; Mühlleitner, 2002; Brenner, 2014, pp. 11–13).

In her work with the offspring of camp survivors, Kestenberg developed the term “transposition” as a key descriptor for the psychosocial experience shared by many of her analysands. She described it as an interchange of psychic positions between the children and the parents: the offspring of the survivors recurrently reported obsessive self-imagining as their parents by “borrowing” the time and place of their parents’ traumatic experiences. The children recounted this self-imagining manifesting as the past and a distant location *inserting itself* into and overpowering their immediate experience of the “here and now” (Kestenberg, 1980). Kestenberg’s striking vocabulary of a “time-tunnel” characterized transposition as a pivot mechanism of a fantasy life that enabled their transfer into “the world of the dead” (1982, p. 149; 1991, p. 161). The descendants’ reported sense of “living in two separate epochs” (and places) was a marker of an inner life that *splintered* under the force of transgenerational traumatic affects, which manifested in their experience of simultaneity of the “here and now” and “there and then” (Kestenberg, 1993, p. 1117; Kestenberg & Brenner, 1996).

One striking element in Kestenberg’s conceptualization of transposition is that alongside the capacity of trauma for a *temporal disordering* of the present—the analysands recurrently narrated a sense of lives dominated or overtaken by familial history that they had not directly experienced—there is a need to theorize the manifestation of trauma through a *spatial disfiguration*.

The case of Kestenberg’s analysand, Rachel M., whose father was a Holocaust survivor and who emigrated to the US after the war, is instructive here. In the course of the analysis, Rachel M. frequently narrates feelings of “belonging” in the Warsaw Ghetto; despite having never visited the city, she reports having memories of the place and a strong desire to return as if she herself had experienced life in the ghetto. The intensity of her connection to this place is undeniable. Taking Rachel M.’s narrative as an example of transpositional dynamics of multigenerational trauma, Kestenberg also references Joyce McDougall’s distinction between neurotic hysteria and “archaic hysteria” (McDougall, 1989; Kestenberg, 1993, p. 1123). McDougall argues that while in neurotic hysteria the subject defends their “right to satisfaction”, in the case of archaic hysteria, their very right to existence is at stake (1989, p. 54). In her description of Rachel M.’s case, Kestenberg argues that the analysand’s hysterical symptoms were of “archaic” character and, as such, were closely aligned with the transpositional experience.

The expressions and manifestations of archaic hysteria—concerned as it was with *survival*—involved somatization where the body had the status of a “mediator between fantasy and reality” (Kestenberg, 1993, p. 1123). Rachel M. had been referred to therapy on the grounds of a severe psychosomatic disturbance, and Kestenberg’s description of their first meeting includes a striking phrase that Rachel



“[looked] like a concentration-camp victim” (1982, p. 150). Kestenberg describes that Rachel was mute and had a sunken abdomen; she was fixated on the workings of her digestive system, her intestines in particular, obsessively engaging in elaborate techniques for controlling bowel movements. These “inhibition[s] of function, rigidity and deanimation” operated as non-verbal defence mechanisms (1982, p. 150). Returning to Hirsch’s *The Generation of Postmemory*, her discussion of transposition and rememory closely examines mnemonic somatization. Focussing on cutaneous manifestations (marks, scars, and tattoos), Hirsch discusses these as “visual figurations” of trauma and thus as a form of bodily remembrance carried through and across generations (see also Ferenczi, 1933/1988). One example of such a “visual figuration” of trauma is the branding mark of Sethe’s mother’s arm in Morrison’s *Beloved*; another is an eczema mark on the arm of a survivor’s daughter in Anne Karpf’s *The War After: Living with the Holocaust* (1996) – the mark appearing in the exact place on her arm where her mother’s concentration camp number tattoo used to be (Hirsch, 2012, pp. 82–84).

Kestenberg’s key contribution to theorizing transposition lies in its distinction from studies focussed on children’s identification with their parents. Instead, she outlines transposition by contrasting it with the filial desire to emulate the parent (1982, p. 148). The subject who slips into the “time when the parents were persecuted” does not necessarily aspire to achieve a parental likeness but, rather, to live (*as if*) “in the past of the parent” (Kestenberg, 1991, p. 161). Rather than assimilating parental characteristics, the subject of transposition engages in a more complex enactment of contradictory desires—rescue and redemption, as well as persecution and even murderous aggression—whereby their ego “adapt[ed] [both] to the Holocaust and to present-day reality” (1982, p. 149; see also Kestenberg, 1988). This provides the subject with both “a contradictory and a unifying base” in the process of identity formation (1982, p. 148).

Kestenberg’s distinction between transposition and identification is, I would argue, insufficiently addressed in Hirsch’s discussion. For Hirsch, the parents’ traumatic past becomes an object of “desire and ... hesitation” for the second generation and a marker of “the necessity and the impossibility” of remembrance (2012, p. 82). In contrast, Kestenberg places a greater emphasis on the destructive and aggressive aspects of the descendants’ fantasies by outlining the wounding mnemonic re-enactments (directed against themselves) as related, at least partly, to *the goal of finding acceptable outlets for aggressive impulses*, and for destructive desires towards their relatives. Thus, while Hirsch stresses the subject’s ambivalent stance towards their traumatic “inheritance”, Kestenberg alerts us to the mechanisms of disavowal as another key element in her theory of transposition.

Discussing Rachel M.’s conflicted and “splintered” phantasy world, Kestenberg notes that Rachel also imagined herself as her father’s protective mother. In this particularly powerful and absorbing fantasy, she sought, first, to re-experience the grandmother’s powerlessness and inability to protect and feed her child (Rachel’s father) in the ghetto, and, next, to “overcome” the (grand-)maternal weakness by imagining herself as the grandmother but with the power to secure food and to feed and nourish. Her fantasies were based on a curious multiplication of positions and “protagonists”: by “letting people come in and out of confinement and watching



over them, yet killing them as the Nazis had and then resurrecting them”, Rachel M. was “her own father, his mother, herself, people in the ghetto and camps, their persecutors and their rescuers ... a briber and a bribe taker, a traitor, a hero and a victim of the persecution” (Kestenberg 1982, p. 149).

The plurality and incongruity of these desires were connected to the pivotal role of the phantasy of “resurrection” in relation to those who did not survive the Holocaust (not only was Rachel M. keen to rescue and save the survivors but also to bring back the dead to life). The resurrection phantasy was premised on a prior phantasy *to be the Nazi who killed them* (see Kestenberg, 1982, p. 149). The resurrection of the dead relatives was also a moment of overcoming aggression towards her victimized relatives and towards her survivor father.

Drawing on Freud’s theory of the fragmentation of the superego, including the split between the punitive and ideal aspects, Kestenberg argues that the occurrence of this split in the case of survivors’ children was a result of their frequent engagement in disavowal—the children occupied a position of both *knowing* and *not knowing* about their relatives’ traumatic past (see Laub & Auerhahn, 1985, p. 5).⁴ Importantly, this disavowal of knowledge is directly linked to modes of remembrance and the cultural and familial mnemonic space that is available to—and enforced upon—the subject. As in Rachel M.’s case, through the mosaic of “open and hidden messages” the child was simultaneously called into a commemorative position by the parents *and* excluded from (explicit and narrative) memory by them; at once both carefully protected from the knowledge of the past *and* constantly exposed to it (Kestenberg, 1980, pp. 776–777).

Transposition and Mourning

The discussion on disavowal of traumatic knowledge in Kestenberg’s framing of transposition is closely linked to the question of its relationship to mourning. While Kestenberg describes Rachel M. as “mournful” (1982, p. 152), she insists that transposition is qualitatively different to mourning. Conversely, transposition is a *substitute* for mourning and a sign that proper mourning has not taken place.

⁴ Hanya Yanagihara’s novel *To Paradise* (2022) exemplifies the working of disavowal in response to the protagonist’s inheritance of injurious history. The third part of the novel, “Zone Eight”, depicts a dystopian twenty-first-century world ravaged by a series of global pandemics, which have resulted in death and disability among world populations and coincided with highly restrictive and oppressive political conditions whose main social incentive centres on prolonging humanity’s existence beyond the next pandemic. Charlie is a woman whose both physical and cognitive abilities are impaired by one of the pandemics; she was raised by her loving and caring grandfathers, one of whom, Charles, was a scientist who had played a key role in developing pathogens that led to global outbreaks of these devastating illnesses. He was subsequently imprisoned and executed by the new authoritarian government. Charles is marked by this dual trajectory in how he is remembered by his granddaughter; he is a loving person, committed to her well-being, and vulnerable yet, at the same time, he bears responsibility for his destructive impact on human life, including his complicity with the emerging regimes of biosecurity. This mnemonic duality functions in the text through disavowal—both as a psychoanalytic concept and a literary figure—in that Charlie both *knows* and *does not know* her grandfather’s history. Her own life is also shaped by this dual impact in that she is both a beneficiary of her grandfather’s social privilege and a victim of one of the illnesses that his scientific work has contributed to.



Kestenberg argues (1982, p. 152) that as Rachel “borrowed her father’s world and the objects of this world”, she sought to rescue and retrieve what has been lost—by bringing the dead back to life and making the traumatic events “unhappen”—and not to relinquish or surrender it. The juxtaposition with mourning casts into relief transposition’s function as an obstruction of and resistance to the recognition of loss, to the decathexis of the love-object and to the subsequent psychic reorganization (see Freud, 1917/1957; Kogan, 2002).

Kestenberg also draws attention to the violent dimensions of the survivors’ relationships with their children. That is because the reparative and mnemonic obligations passed on to the next generation are tied to how the “survivor-parents involve ... their children in the overcoming of [the] obstacles” to mourning, and they can blame them for the “failure to reproduce the dead” (1980, p. 777). These intense demands are also linked to the over-idealization of children born after the war, seen as a symbolic return to life after death, a “repudiation of Hitler’s genocide” and a “symbol of all good” (1980, p. 778). In Kestenberg’s report of Marvin, another child of Holocaust survivors, the inability to fulfil these expectations leads to a persecutory identification; Marvin described childhood and adolescent misbehaviour as moments when he felt that through his birth “Hitler himself had been resurrected, rather than the good children [Hitler] had killed” (1980, p. 778).

In order to elaborate on the dynamics of transposition “blocking” mourning in the case of the victims’ offspring, Kestenberg turns to the work of Alexander Mitscherlich and Marguerite Mitscherlich and their famous thesis on the German “inability” to mourn. Significantly, the Mitscherlichs (1967/1975) situate the perpetrators’ (and the offsprings’) inability to mourn the dead Führer at the level of the psychic *and* political resistance to mournful affects by disavowing both the leader and the history of affective investment in him. Situating the collective lack of grief against the backdrop of the post-war public attention to questions of economy rather than interrogation of their own implication in the Nazi atrocities, the Mitscherlichs identify at the core of the German “incapacity to mourn” the psychic avoidance of shame and guilt, partly linked to the ambivalent relationship to Hitler. Kestenberg considers the Mitscherlichs’ insights when discussing the cross-generational effects of what she considers to be the first generation’s resistance to recognizing the loss endured in the Holocaust as irreparable.

What Kestenberg’s and the Mitscherlichs’ works have in common is the attention to how *that which does not occur* becomes a psychosocial inheritance that “binds” generations through a traumatic residue. Kestenberg (1980, 1989) notes that the incomplete mourning experienced in the case of the descendants of Holocaust survivors is linked to the “altered conditions” that the survivors experienced after the war. Kestenberg’s attention to the social “discomfort” caused by the survivors and their stories—the public’s unwillingness to listen to, receive, and comprehend their narratives was frequently reported by camp survivors—indicates a noteworthy (if somewhat underdeveloped) attempt to link the theory of psychic transposition and social critique. While subsequent psychoanalytic accounts of historical trauma and grief have veered away from the language of mourning “incapacity” (for instance, Laub (1995) describes mourning as “interminable” and as a “struggle”),



Kestenberg's insights into the ancestral transmissions of affect and its link to the generational "incompletion" of grief still hold critical and epistemic possibilities. It is connected to the suggestion that mourning is a kind of "obligation" that can be passed on to others, and that interlaces the psyche, the political, and perhaps also the ethical.

Transposition and Haunting

While Kestenberg's theory of cross-generational traumatic transmission took her clinical work with children of camp survivors as a primary point of reference, her writing frequently invokes literary and cultural references. Perhaps the most curious and striking effect of this is that she articulates transposition as a condition akin to a ghostly possession—the second-generation analysands did not simply want to "live in the past", Kestenberg writes (1982, p. 148), but desired to "harbour the dead within themselves". This casts transposition in a complex relational matrix, which includes numerous protagonists—we could call them "silent addressees" of the children's desires—not only the parent survivor but many others, too, those who had died in the ghetto or in the camps. In cross-generational mnemonic transmission, the parent survivors are significant not only for what they themselves had endured, but also, and perhaps more importantly, as witnesses to those who did not survive. In other words, the striking feature of the transposition narratives is that, for the second generation, the dead relatives became a source of address akin to passing on an ethical obligation. This coincided with a sense of "unpaid debt" as if, by continuing to live, the children remained indebted to the departed. This sense of responsibility coincided with a plethora of responses: depressive affects, a mnemonic obligation, a desire to not simply repair but to "undo" the past, and (bore similarity to) mourning—although, as I discuss below, transposition also lacked some of the constitutive elements of mourning.

The language of containment and interiority used by the analysands is noteworthy because it invoked a protective and salvational phantasy—what Kestenberg calls the children's "rescue task" (1982, p. 157)—that coalesced into an image of *hiding the victims within their own body*. In this imaginary scene, the living body opens to offer shelter to the victims, thus forming, as I argue, a counter-figure to the gas chamber that encloses the victims in order to destroy and annihilate. The body of the transposing subject is experienced as a shielding containment of the dead. Their body is also a site for accommodating and communicating with their ghosts. Kestenberg (1982, p. 148) notes the metaphoric-metonymic relationship between "the unknown past" and "the unknown [bodily] insides". Rachel M. preserved an image of her embodiment that enabled a kind of Hadean descent; a retreat into the "father's former life" by "communing with people of the past within the confinement of her own body" (Kestenberg, 1982, p. 148). This act of incorporating the dead within her body, be it as part of her "death-rescue preoccupation" or as a kind of corporeal seance, had a strong corrective aspect to it; it occurred because Rachel unconsciously believed that her father *had not mourned* the dead (Kestenberg, 1982, p. 149).



Transposition manifests in a “Messianic movement”, by which Kestenberg means that the subject’s phantasmatic investments can acquire pathological forms of a breakdown of reality and delusional acts of retrieval of the victims from their perpetrators, while in a “normalized state” it takes the form of various compensatory and reparative endeavours (1993, p. 1122). That “movement” is spurred by the desire to “live in the parents’ past by converting the present into the past and *changing the course of history* [emphasis added]” (Kestenberg 1980, p. 783). While Kestenberg does not reference Freud’s theory of undoing, her notion of Messianism as “bringing back the dead” parallels Freud’s ideas about the psychic mechanism of “undoing what has been done”, or “making-unhappen” (*Ungeschehenmachen*), (see Freud, 1909/1955b, 1911/1958). Significantly, the goal of “undoing what has been done” is *not* a reparative action focussed on the present or what Laplanche and Pontalis call the “very common form of normal behaviour [of withdrawing statements, making up for injuries, rehabilitating]” (1967/1988, p. 478). Rather, “undoing what has been done” has changing the past as its goal. Kestenberg’s use of the term “Messianism” connoted a phantasy of rescue and “undoing” (in the Freudian sense)—the subject desired to sacrifice their life and body so as to die *in the stead of* the victims.

The key protagonists in Rachel M.’s “rememory” were two relatives who died in the Holocaust: an aunt (after whom Rachel was named) and an older brother, a child from her father’s first marriage. Her father kept his first marriage and his son a secret from Rachel, as well as the son’s death in the ghetto. It was only when she visited distant relatives in Israel as an adult that Rachel learnt about these paternal secrets (Kestenberg, 1993, p. 1120). While in Hirsch’s discussion the dynamics of transposition are primarily filtered through the conceptual lens of mother–daughter relationships (2012, pp. 77–100), it is important to recognize the place of sibling relationships in Kestenberg’s conceptualization, particularly regarding the formative event of a premature death of a sister or a brother.

Thus, Kestenberg’s insights provide an important supplement to the scholarly writings on affective and traumatic transmission, by correcting its dominant imaginary of successive generations (grandparent/parent/child) and expanding its scope to horizontal or “intra-generational” transmission in cases of survivor siblings. In the case of Rachel M.’s transposition, the mother was significant—while not a Holocaust survivor, she “facilitated” the traumatic transmission and “unconscious[ly] enhanced” the daughter’s transposition (see Kestenberg, 1993, p. 1120)—but it was the brother whose haunting presence dominated Rachel M.’s fantasies and obsessions. The brother, who was killed in infancy during the war, became a key “transpositional figure” for Rachel, and her narratives placed him as an object of “Messianic desires” of resurrection, which, Rachel fantasized, would be accomplished by sacrificing of her own life. Against the backdrop of her visits to Israel as an adult, Rachel created a fantasy of meeting the brother by chance, marrying him, and having a child with him. The desire to resurrect the “dead Holocaust child” with her brother was a source of Rachel’s reluctance to have children “in the present”.

Kestenberg’s close attention to Rachel M.’s language of *accommodating the dead within the body* leads her to observe that the second generation often framed their



lives as a *continuation* of the victims' lives. (In Rachel's case, this was reinforced by being named after a relative who had died in the Holocaust.) In her own narrative of traumatic transposition, Epstein (1979, p. 147) describes the feeling of "hundreds of people liv[ing] through [her]"; people whose "lives ... had been cut short in the war". Rachel also expresses a sense of carrying her dead relatives *within herself* by invoking an image of being possessed by a malicious spirit from Jewish folklore, a dybbuk (Kestenberg, 1993, p. 1119). Here, the dybbuk is a sign of traumatic contents "that can only be worked out through bodies and souls of the children" (Frosh, 2013, p. 152). Consequently, transposition *symptomatizes history* that refuses not only to be confined to the past but also to be limited to a lifespan of a singular generation. Instead, just like a dybbuk clings to its victim, the past *adheres* and *sticks* to the next generation; troubling, painful, and unappeased, it continues to upset the present.

Transposition in Han Kang's *The White Book*

The White Book (2016) by Han Kang is an autobiographical poetic meditation about the premature death of the author's infant sister and its profound impact on remembrance. The book is framed as a series of short, evocative poetic passages about different items connected by a single thread, their white colour. Through text and photographic images, the mnemonic assemblage of these (seemingly unrelated) white objects (infant swaddles, fog, mooncakes, snow, and milk) are interwoven into literary representations of the event of *an untimely death*—a child's death—and evoke strong emotions. The personal and familial remembrance enters into a kind of dialectic with history by casting the memory of this singular death event against the backdrop of Warsaw's wartime destruction (a city that Han Kang visits and whose unfamiliarity and strangeness work as an unexpected mnemonic trigger). As Han Kang encounters ruins from the 1944 bombing, now integrated into reconstructed and new buildings, the "boundaries which separate old from new, the seams bearing witness to destruction, [lying] conspicuously exposed", the memory of the sister surfaces like a ghost, and she likens the sister to the ruins: "A person who had met the same fate as that city. Who had at one time died or been destroyed", and yet, who through memory and affect had also "painstakingly rebuilt themselves, [and who] was therefore something new" (2016, p. 32). Transposition is a key figure in Han Kang's meditation on the cross- and intra-generational workings of grief, and it helps position the subject in ways that are never binary and "locked" (in relation to the dead infant sister, or in relation to the grieving mother, etc.) but, rather, creates a multipolar relational constellation that connects the "vertical" (mother-daughter) and the "horizontal" (sister-sister) vectors of transmission. In *The White Book*, the distinction between postmemory, where the subject "rethinks or 'works through' the past", and rememory, where the subject is "*caught in [the past's] embrace*" (Frosh 2019, p. x), remains fluid and unstable, and at times collapses entirely.

Transposition in *The White Book* is both a psychoanalytical concept and a literary device operating through a series of shifts in the narrative position alongside the spatial and temporal axes. The simultaneity of the "here and now" and "there and



then” (which Kestenberg foregrounds as the experiential marker of transposition) instantiates “shifts” in the text by alternating perspectives between the mother’s experience, the dead infant sister, and the narrator. However, rather than “immobilizing” the subject by locking her into predetermined ways of remembering, the transpositional dynamic in the text is also what helps her bear and endure the past. Transposition in the novel is thus *not* a marker of an incapacitated subject but, instead, serves as a source of poetic imagination and ethical responsibility. It does not incapacitate the narrator in her relationship with the injurious past or predetermine her patterns of remembrance; rather, it discloses a sense of intimate connection to the past that is a source of pain and love, and which—for that reason—she cannot (and perhaps does not want to) transform into what Ferenczi refers to as a decathected “objective memory” (1933/1988, p. 200).

As in Kestenberg’s figuration of the psychic “imposition” of distant time and place onto the subject as haunting, in *The White Book* the shifts in perspective coincide with a distinct *spectral sensitivity*. Recounting the story of a Jewish man from Warsaw who claimed to have “incorporated” his dead brother’s soul, Han Kang alludes to her own experience of transposition: “some vague sensation I had known as a child, some stirring of seemingly unprompted emotion, might, unbeknown to me, have been coming from her” (2016, p. 38). What is unique about Han Kang’s poetic take on transposition, though, is that, more than Kestenberg and Hirsch, she frames it in affirmative terms as a *capacity* to “detect”, engage with, and respond to ghosts. Through this perspective, she complicates (and perhaps also de-pathologizes) the earlier formulation of transposition, providing her readers a glimpse into what it is like to both feel “dispossessed” by the past and to assert agency vis-à-vis one’s traumatic inheritance.

The pivotal event in *The White Book* is the death of Han Kang’s prematurely born sister—an event taking place *before* Han Kang was born—and with the mother as the only other protagonist in the story and, having unexpectedly gone into labour and giving birth alone, the solitary witness to the dual event of her daughter’s birth and death. Despite the mother putting all her efforts into keeping the baby alive, the premature baby dies after a few hours (Kang, 2016, pp. 23–24). During her ordeal, the mother repeats a plea “for God’s sake don’t die”, and these words echo and ricochet through the text, akin to a protective mantra and a supplication, but also the narrator’s conjuration of a ghost (Kang, 2016, p. 24). The plea is a key formula of the text’s transpositional dynamic, not because it “works” but precisely because it fails—the utterance is a poignant illustration of what J. L. Austin calls “failed performative”, as it does not bring about the desired consequences. The words thus leave a ghostly trail in her family’s history and form a lens through which Han Kang examines and frames her own historical experience, and in which she anchors a memory of the scene that she had inherited from her mother. The sister’s birth/death story is narrated through its figurative alignment with a range of white objects, for example, a raw mooncake, “a thing so lovely they do not seem of this world”, but which, when steamed, “bec[a]me disappointingly matter-of-fact” (Kang, 2016, p. 25).

The narrator expresses a feeling that the transmitted memory (of the sister’s birth/death) is “contained” within her subjective life, and that she is “grown up inside”



this life (Kang, 2016, p. 24). She comes to view her life as, in an important respect, *continuous* with her sister's—she writes: “[within] all those white things, I will breathe in the final breath you released” (Kang, 2016, p. 157). I described above the motif of mnemonic containment—of a sense of holding the dead within (one's own life and one's body), and of being held by them in return—as a recurrent trait in the psychoanalytic concept of transposition. This motif is also present in Han Kang's narrative of feeling enclosed by and within history passed on by another generation, and a sense of personal obligation to this. At the same time, Han Kang supplements the imaginary of mnemonic containment or enclosure with a more affirmative discourse of “holding”. Just as the womb or the swaddling bands hold tight a baby's body in order to “mitigate the shock of its abrupt projection into limitlessness”, Han Kang defines her task as “holding” (the sister and the sister's memory). She describes the task of “mnemonic holding” being passed on from the mother, the “guardian” of that memory (a highly ambiguous task that she depicts as, at the same time, inseparable from violence and from love). She describes the mother as a “priestess” of “shattered memories” who “run[s] her fingers carefully over [the memories'] sharp edges” (Kang, 2016, p. 138).

As mentioned above, the context of this rememory and transposition is Han Kang's departure from the familiar settings of her home country and a period of residency in Warsaw, which she finds both alienating and uncanny. Part of Han Kang's framing of cross-generational transmission is its intimate connection to a place that is completely unrelated to it, but which co-articulates with the memory—here, through the figurative whiteness. Han Kang experiences Warsaw as a city marked by whiteness, be it fog or snow, as well as the omnipresent remnants of past destruction (the wartime ruins, debris, and human ashes, which she describes as “white”, and which surround her). She calls Warsaw a “white city”, one that has been so completely destroyed that “there is nothing [there] that has existed for more than seventy years” (Kang, 2016, p. 32). She asks “why do old memories constantly drift to the surface, here in this unfamiliar city?” (Kang, 2016, p. 27). And, reversely, her transgenerational memory of loss renders Han Kang capable of “seeing” the war destruction of Warsaw not as a past event, but as something that manifests in the present—intimately, affectively, and through pathos. While “strange”, Warsaw appears to her also “curiously familial” (Kang, 2016, p. 44). Witnessing Polish rituals of remembrance, Han Kang reflects on South Korea's “incapacity to mourn” its own authoritarian violence: a place where “the dead had been insufficiently mourned” (2016, p. 131).

Finally, by situating the concept of transposition in a broader cultural post-mnemonic context, *The White Book* raises a question about its relation to language, to voice, and to listening. The haunting memory defies linguistic representation; the mother's utterances “do not die” are “unintelligible words” and “indecipherable sounds laden with love and anguish” (Kang, 2016, p. 38). The experience of being haunted by the past remains unconfirmed (beyond proof and beyond certainty), and yet highly evocative. Han Kang writes “I can neither confirm nor deny that there are times when she has sought me out, hovering at my forehead and by the corners of my eyes” (2016, p. 38). The evanescent affective shifts and “stirrings” are testimonies to a struggle “to part from something inside ...” (Kang, 2016, p. 91).



Han Kang imagines the sister undertaking *her* trip to Warsaw, and the two exchange positions—quite literally, as the book shifts from first-person narration to a third person perspective—pre-empting a kind of recognition of her own life having been conditioned by the sister’s premature death: “[had] those lives made it safely past the point of crisis, my own birth ... would not have come about”, and “[this] life needed only one of us to live it ... [my] life means yours is impossible” (2016, p. 138). Transposition is portrayed here as a figure of living *in the stead of* another, which centres not on incorporation of another’s attributes but, rather, on a complex interplay of internalization and externalization.

Conclusions

In this essay, I have presented the concept of transposition, which emerged in psychoanalytic Holocaust studies in 1970s in Judith Kestenberg’s therapeutic work with children of Holocaust survivors. Outlining the key characteristics of transposition (the incorporation of parental trauma into the lives of the offspring, the complexity and incongruity of its underpinning desires, and fragmentation of the superego), I have zeroed in on two key implications of transposition for cultural trauma theory: the pertinence of the mechanisms of transposition for the discourse of generational transmission and “haunting” of unresolved histories of violence and injustice, as well as the insights it provides into understanding the limits, failures, and aporias of mourning. In the final section, I have moved beyond Kestenberg’s framework of psychoanalytic Holocaust studies and considered the epistemic and critical potential of transposition for literary and cultural interpretation of trauma more broadly, by locating transposition in the familial and intimate context of Han Kang’s *White Book*. I have shown that while for Hirsch, the transpositional dynamics of passing mnemonic contents to subsequent generations does not bring appeasement, but only repetition and re-enactment (see 2012, p. 84), in *The White Book*, the collapse of distance between subjects, times, and locations also marks a moment of connection and intimacy.

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Magdalena Zolkos is an Associate Professor in the Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy at the University of Jyväskylä. She works in cultural and political memory studies and psychosocial and feminist theory. She is the author of *Restitution and the Politics of Repair: Tropes, Imaginaries, Theory* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020) and co-editor (with Bohdan Shumylovych) of *Psychosocial and Cultural Perspective on the War in Ukraine: Imprints and Dreamscapes* (Routledge, forthcoming in 2024).

