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Nonfiction, Documentary, and Family Narrative:  
An Intersection of Representational Discourses and Creative Practices

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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For my Son.

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Abstract

NONFICTION, DOCUMENTARY, AND FAMILY NARRATIVE:  
AN INTERSECTION OF REPRESENTATIONAL  
DISCOURSES AND CREATIVE PRACTICES

By Kristine T. Weatherston, Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2014.

Dissertation Director: Dr. Elizabeth Hodges,  
Associate Professor, Department of English

*Nonfiction, Documentary, and Family Narrative: An Intersection of Representational Discourses and Creative Practices* explores the role of personal memory, family history, and inter-generational storytelling as the basis for making a nonfiction film. The film, *American Boy*, tells the story of my mother's immigration to the United States after the failed Hungarian Revolution of 1956, opening a discussion of four generations of my family life in the context of historical events, exile, self re-invention, and identity formation. As a media producer and nonfiction author, I narrate my understanding of these events to my infant son, as a way of communicating my grandfather's role in the revolution, my mother's childhood, and my own mediation of my family's trauma. Through the use of archival footage including newsreels and commercials, as well as my own archive of family photos and documents, I re-construct the existing materials to build my own associations concerning time, memory, and place. The film, as my creative practice, leads to a theoretical analysis of representational discourses

which inform the work. This deconstruction of nonfiction and meta-analysis includes my study of several practitioners in the craft of nonfiction: Kati Marton, Robert Root, Primo Levi, Eva Hoffman, Patricia Hampl, Dinty W. Moore, Peter Balakian and others.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

*There may be some rewards or pleasures in accomplishing the predictable, but a writer's real achievement comes when she or he writes an unpredictable essay, an essay only she or he could have written, an article unique to that writer. (37)*

Robert Root, *The Nonfictionist's Guide*

### **'Things'**

Jeffery Olick writes, "I repeatedly tell my students . . . family history and personal preoccupations do not suffice for a worthy dissertation topic" (23). I kindly disagree. It is our personal preoccupations that make our writings, any writings, unique. I do agree with Olick in this regard: that the concept of "intellectual motivation" is a critically necessary starting point where the "personal and intellectual" (24) come together. Here, I begin my scholarly journey.

My personal and intellectual journey began in the summer of 2008 when I travelled to Budapest, Hungary. I studied there for three months as an artist-in-residence through an award from the Hungarian Multicultural Center (HMC). My work during the residency focused on digital video and photography. The images and material I collected became the basis for a preliminary documentary film about my Hungarian roots. The subject of the film was to be my family's experience during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, in particular, my grandfather's role as a revolutionary, my grandmother's death, and my mother's escape to the United States at a young age. These events shaped my family history and framed my experience as an artist, putting my work within an intersection of representational discourses and creative practice.



During the hot summer months of 2008, I walked so much along the Danube that I wore out four pairs of shoes. I spent my time gathering images, meeting people, and becoming familiar with the language. More importantly, I came to recognize the layered complexity of my project. With support from the HMC, my faculty in the U.S., and my new Hungarian friends and colleagues, I carried my photo and video equipment around Budapest as a one-woman film crew. Along the way, I found a quality shoe store, and more importantly, I came into the presence of my long-lost Hungarian family. I returned home to Richmond Virginia with dreams of big 'things': a blend of personal, intellectual, and creative motivation.

Susan Rasmussen writes, "The personal need not, indeed should not, be solely individual" (123). My personal experiences in Budapest raise so many questions. I am pulled out of my own individual space with a new interest in the shared histories of others. This new interest positions my scholarly pursuits: the continual process of how-to, as in how to put all the personal information together into a vital project: a 'thing' that is honest, alive with detail, and imbued with truth. Take the Heideggerian "thing," where "obviously, a thing is not merely an aggregate of traits, nor an accumulation of properties by which that aggregate arises. A thing, as everyone thinks he knows, is that around which the properties have assembled" (Heidegger, 22). I struggle to assemble the properties of my thing, to build a coherent aggregate, not merely to accumulate properties, which I have done in plenty. And "if we consider moreover what we are searching for, the thingly character of the thing, then this concept again leaves us at a loss" (25).

I did not intend on being left at a loss; this idea of “loss” is, in fact, part of my “intellectual motivation.” Therefore, this dissertation discusses my work and my efforts to construct a nonfiction representation of my family narrative, specifically, a ‘thing’ within both cinematic and literary modes, a thing that is not merely a map or a blueprint of what I seek to express, but in actuality, that which I do express.

Towards this end, I have immersed myself in the work of others, a textual landscape of historically supportive and topically related materials in the interdisciplinary space of nonfiction. Engagement with this work through intellectual query supports my own development of the techniques involved in constructing nonfiction family narratives. These queries and revelations strengthen my understanding of the following questions: How does one make sense of a turbulent past? How does an artist or a writer do all of the heavy lifting: the searching, the remembering, the organizing, and the presenting? How does the manipulation of words and images come to constitute the ‘thing,’ the work, itself? What are the roles of genre, form, craft and method in the production of this ‘thing’? Does the reconstruction of memory, events, and conversations represent a truthful art form or, rather, a problematic aggregate of traits?

These ideas and questions motivate my research. Reflecting upon the difficulties in finding one's voice, of recalling historical and personal events from imperfect memories, the complexity involved in the concept of memory itself, the changes in our cultural and historical perceptions of truth across decades of conflict and survival, I present my work as an intersection of representational

discourses and creative practice. Gathering critical and theoretical topics into a useful basis for understanding my creative process, I have come to a realization: my experiences in the summer of 2008 continue to re-shape how I view myself as an artist, filmmaker, and researcher. In these roles, the work itself, the 'thing' I am creating, challenges my understanding of the events, people, and cultural connections surrounding my family's roots in Hungary. The story grows deeper in consideration of my family's narrative and our contribution to the larger global collection of immigrant stories.

I work here to bring it all together, to construct an honest narrative, to give voice to the losses and struggles of my family, to reconstruct not just *a history*, but *my history*, one that I will both speak and reveal through the audio-visual medium of nonfiction documentary and self-reflective memoir. Out of the complexity of text, image, information, and data, I will create this 'thing', this work of art, this hybrid: the impetus for my dissertation.

### ***The Story – Part One***

Ander Monson writes, "It is only through narrating our lives to ourselves that we are able to make any sense of events we experience, after all. We can't *not* narrate our lives – that's how memories are encoded and re-encoded and reconsidered and chemically recombined" (83). My mother narrated her life to me in small snippets throughout my childhood. Like Monson says, my mom couldn't *not*; but she didn't particularly enjoy telling the facts of her story either. Her memories are encoded and re-encoded through me and reconsidered here in a

brief recombining of the things I know.

On a brisk fall night in 1956, my mother, nicknamed *Vali*, perched sidesaddle on top of my grandfather's (*nagypapa*) shoulders and as tall as the light posts, he walked for her. She held tight to his bushy head of dark hair, usually so groomed, as she bopped in rhythm with his steps down the dusty streets of Budapest. They had just left the hospital, where Valeria, my grandmother (*nagymama*), lay dying from cancer in a clinical-white bed, running out of morphine. Istvan Martonhegyi, my *nagypapa*, turned the corner and disappeared into a pub, plopped chubby Vali down, ordered a beer for himself and a glass of milk for her. Both were served warm. Hand in hand, they moved to the back room and descended narrow steps into a dingy basement with blackened windows. Vali sipped her milk in a room thick with smoke, whisky and mustaches of all shapes and sizes. What did she know about Revolution? Nothing. That is, until the very next day.

This is how my mom remembers that night, or *a night*, and I embellish with a little detail (not the mustaches – nearly all the men in Hungary have a mustache). I'm struck by the line from Lee Martin's 2009 memoir, *From Our House*, that states, "I'm free to imagine the day any way I like" (Martin excerpt<sup>1</sup>). I am free to imagine this night any way that I like because my imagination is imbued with truth. The information I've accumulated from my own research, including interviews with my parents, historical facts, and other documents,

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<sup>1</sup> From Martin's website: <http://www.leemartinauthor.com/leemartin-fromourhouse-excerpt.htm>

allows my imagination to work out a realistic, *not fictional* scene informed by this data. *Nagymama* did have cancer -- cervical, or maybe ovarian cancer, or maybe it was her fallopian tubes. I posit that the kind of cancer doesn't matter; what matters is that my grandmother had cancer and she died. Lawrence Sutin positions mirror Martin's ideas of freely imagining events with the tension of fact in creative nonfiction:

First, that there are liars in every profession, and second, that writers, like visual artists, have discovered or are discovering myriad means to create telling and beautiful human portraits. Our inner lives, with their fantasies and self-deceits, are as much a part of memoir subject-matter as the confirmable facts of date and place. (24)

In other words, Lee Martin's self-portrait, memories and inner life are just as important as historical fact. Similarly, the specific medical details of my grandmother's cancer are less important than the fact that she died and the her death lead to irrevocable loss in the lives of my mother, my uncle and my grandfather.

Early detection of cancer in a woman's reproductive systems was not a routine process until the 1960's<sup>2</sup> and my grandmother's cancer advanced rapidly after the birth of her second child, my uncle Peter. The few medical records I have concerning her illness are grim in prognosis and oddly unsure exactly which area of her reproductive system was affected. My grandmother's life was not a medical priority for the State; it was only a priority for her family. She died in January of 1957, not yet 30.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cancer.org/cancer/cancerbasics/thehistoryofcancer/the-history-of-cancer-cancer-screening-and-early-detection>

I cannot tell you if any of these other details are true or what exactly those Hungarian men were doing in the basement of that pub. Gambling? Writing poetry? Planning and inciting the 1956 Revolution? I wasn't there and my mom was 8 years old. She thinks, so by proxy I think, they were part of the events that unfolded in the streets of Budapest the next afternoon. What I can promise you is that I am not lying.

My *nagypapa* came from a working-class family from a rusty town in the south, semi-rural village, one of the ones on the Danube, robbed of its name and its scenic beauty, and for no better phrase, sovietized. After WWII, the little town of Dunaujavaros was known as Stalinvaros. It was the color of grey and made of squares. From there to Baja and on to Budapest, my *nagypapa* married *nagymama*. When she became too ill to take care of herself and their two small children, my mother and her little brother Peter, the family moved in with her "bourgeois" parents in their large flat in beautiful Buda.

Buda and Pest were once two cities, divided by the Danube. They merged centuries ago into one metropolitan site with vastly different topography but shared tastes for food, wine and national pride. (I grew up in Detroit, a city also tensely divided in its own ways through economic and racial differences.) When I was a kid in the 1980's, I knew little to nothing about my Hungarian roots aside from food and wine and the occasional off-handed story from my mom. We didn't celebrate her ancestry. We celebrated the Fourth of July. I remember being embarrassed to tell people I am Polish and Hungarian. They were *Communists*.

As a little girl, my favorite president was Ronald Reagan and he did not like Communists. I watched Hungarian born Bela Karolyi lead the women's gymnastics team to gold at the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles. I sat glued to the television as Mary Lou Retton, my idol, scored a perfect 10 for America. She was immediately hugged and swept up by Coach Karolyi, who looked just like my grandfather. I watched that clip on repeat at my gymnastics lessons. I'm not ashamed to admit I wept during *Rocky IV*, a film that confirmed my staunch childhood beliefs that Russia and the Eastern European nations under their control were my own personal enemies. I was seven years old, a white, middle-class American child who loved church, gymnastics and my Polaroid camera. My only sense of history, as a child, was informed by the dominant media representations of cultural and ideological differences of the world. I didn't know any better and there was no one around from Hungary to challenge or enrich, to confirm or deny, my deeply held childhood beliefs.

Why couldn't I be Dutch? Or French? Or cool? My mom did not teach my sisters and me to speak Hungarian or to think of our Hungarian ancestry with pride and honor. *Nagypapa* died when I was just a baby and the Hungarian language died from our family when he did. My mom did teach me, however, to cook using Hungarian spices and peppers; we weren't *those* kinds of Americans who ate processed foods. My mother claimed a distinction between herself and others through things she could control via money: food, cars, clothing. Outward, surface differences served to hide, and cover-up, the underlying and lingering facts of her past life and her personal losses. Consumerism, capitalism and

credit cards were the adult rewards of her childhood struggles.

The facts of my mom's immigration to the States and the death of *nagymama* were spoken of, but never too frequently or deeply or beyond the surface facts that these events happened and that my mom hates soup. Soup, or "foul smelling filth water," was a diet staple that she and Uncle Pete ate as children in the orphanage they were sent to upon arriving to the US. Due to this experience, soup was banned from my childhood. I believe that soup reminds my mother of the orphanage where she lived for a year after arriving safely in America. My *nagypapa* had tested positive for tuberculosis and he was quarantined in a sanatorium for a year. During this time he was unable to care for his children and my mom and uncle Peter, just little kids who did not speak any English, were forced to eat soup, without him, and apart from one another.

Years before my trip to Hungary, I was talking about my mom and her strange soup thing with my father. My parent's split when I was eight -- the same age my mom was during the 1956 Revolution. It was my dad's insights about my mom and my grandfather that newly piqued my curiosity and passion for this part of our family story. My father, who quit drinking in 1996 on Super Bowl Sunday, was reminiscing fondly about the long nights he and *nagypapa* would spend over a bottle of Hungarian Tokay or maybe even something truly American like Jack Daniels. *Nagypapa* would say, with his heavy accent, "Von mooore, Ken" and then, as Dad says "The sun is up, the bottle is empty and our wives are angry." It was over "Von mooore" that my Hungarian *nagypapa* revealed his story to my Polish father. Details of how he sat freezing in the hills of Buda with a rifle and



shot AVO officers (the Hungarian Secret Police) and Soviets alike off their motorcycles. He was 26 years old during the Revolution. And he took to the streets when he ran out of bullets and engaged in hand-to-hand combat. Even when the Soviet tanks rolled in he did not stop fighting. “Pop, Pop, Pop” my dad said, with a cinematic sound effect, cocking his arms and pulling the trigger of the imaginary rifle I can only imagine.

As the fighting in Budapest went on for a month, and the 1956 Revolution failed, *nagypapa* rounded up his kids, his brother Sandor and Sandor’s wife Olga, and in the dark of night, with nothing but hope, they fled south. The northern and western borders were closed and many of the bridges were blown up. The southern borders had fewer guard patrols because they were still covered with mine fields from previous wars. Even facing this deterrent on the borderland, my family crossed into Yugoslavia. Targeted by the AVO and the Soviets, *nagypapa* knew it was worth the risk. The alternatives were: 1. A lifelong stay in the Gulag or other internment camp; 2. Torture; 3. Imprisonment; 4. Death by firing squad; 5: All of the above. These options made the chance of stepping on an old land mine worth the risk.

I have always felt compelled to present this story of my family, beyond this brief synopsis, through both visual and literary nonfiction modes. Margot Singer and Nicole Walker state, “While recent work in autobiography/life writing studies and narratology has made important interdisciplinary contributions to our understanding of the function and meaning of storytelling, from a literary/critical perspective, creative nonfiction remains virtually unexplored” (2). My desire to

explore some unexplored areas of nonfiction have opened up my usual research interests (media, i.e. television, film and video) into additional disciplines, cross-disciplines, interdisciplines and hybrids. I am also drawn to how parallel or even unrelated stories can share similar themes and universal truths. The more I read, watch and learn, the more research questions arise. Therefore, the point of this dissertation is to understand not only how to tell a story, but to figure out how that story is constructed and how that construction is used to reconcile the past with the present – my past, my mother’s past, the past of Hungary. The nonfiction work of others presents a complex interplay of interdisciplinary practices. Whether a mix of visual, written, theoretical, analytical or historical, the themes and methods bring about questions, answers and more questions. I’m concerned with issues of language, memory, point of view, authorship, methods, truth, voice, archive, memoir, and story. Furthermore, I am fascinated by the history of Hungary – murder, coups, mergers, wars, monarchies, democracy, treaties, religion -- all these things and more combine to demonstrate the drama of my mother’s narrative and my place in this world.

### ***Research Overview and Rationale***

This dissertation is based on a comparative analysis of the relationships between personal loss, memory, memoir and documentary through a qualitative reading of Kati Marton’s *Enemies of the People*, other examples of supporting memoir, documentaries and theories of nonfiction, and how these texts intersect with my own creative nonfiction practice. I am drawn to nonfiction because I believe the relationship between truth, point of view and voice are crucial to how

we understand our experiences within the world. These factors also help determine how we relate to, learn about and understand ourselves in relation to other people, places and things. To build a trust-based relationship, the nonfictionist must locate and assemble evidence and data to be convinced and be convincing. This data is processed by a reader, viewer, or audience and judged on its truthfulness. The nonfictionist is bound by a certain responsibility to the material, bound to the process of constructing and building a version of an honest story. Thus, one of the research goals of my dissertation is to reveal similar discourses across nonfiction modes in regards to presenting and creating a nonfiction narrative, where the strategies used to construct truth, voice and point of view are alike despite differences in final textual forms.

Drawing from my own experiences, I seek to address the commonalities found among texts of different nonfiction modes to reveal that the forms, while similarly structured, offer room for experimentation, artfulness, and careful construction. Though often neatly packaged in the end, the birth of a text, particularly one with the pursuit of truth or truthfulness involved, can be a messy one. My fascination with these topics extends further because *nonfiction* itself is not a neatly packaged concept; it bends and blends disciplines, it can be a hybrid. By hybrid, Mary Capello presents two working definitions: 1. “the new form made possible when areas of thought and of experience sequestered in life are allowed to share a space in art,” and 2. “a broaching of impurity that results in something exquisite” (67). I posit that whatever new form the raw materials take – memory, data, imagination, facts, images, documents, interviews takes –

nonfiction is always an exquisite hybrid, an intertext.

The way in which nonfiction is presented -- memoir, essays, video, and film -- seeks to build bridges and connections, not only between author and reader, or in the context of the subject of the text, but on the global scale of universal truths. The act of practicing nonfiction can be a healing process that explores the “interrelationships between narratives of individual and collective experiences” (Rasmussen 113). A nonfiction practice creates significant effects on the writer as well as relationships between the writer and the reader that include “readerly intimacy,” (Smith 901) “extra-textual reflections,” (Neale 952) and the “healing benefits of narrative” (Baker 16).

Structurally, Chapters 2 through 4 focus primarily on close readings of Kati Marton’s 2009 memoir, *Enemies of the People: My Family’s Journey to America*. Through analysis of her text, with the aid of supporting theoretical, analytical, and subject-related materials, the topics I approach vary in scope and size. As a starting point or backdrop, I position Marton’s memoir in topical relation to my own family’s immigration story from Hungary, exploring how Marton works with genre and form to tell her own family narrative. Her decision to write about her life and the life of her parents using memoir is of critical importance, as it breaks from her disciplinary background in journalism. Instead, she utilizes a post-modern approach of intertextual construction to create a work with multiple positions which move beyond “the tired arguments over truth-telling toward a more sophisticated conversation about this protean genre’s possibilities and forms” (Singer and Walker 2). Next, I explore themes and connections between

my own family and Marton's, including how we both process and relate to family secrets, struggles, displacement, loss, and new beginnings.

Naturally, a discussion of themes and connections includes a look at our shared "autogeography" (Borich 98). This term refers to any

Creative nonfiction project concerned with the ways we might map our bodies and places as interdependent historical data . . . particular spatial resonance, the placiness of place. An authogeography is self-portrait in the form of a panoramic of memory, history, lyric intuition, awareness of sensory space, research, and any other object or relic we pick up along the way that offers further evidence of what does or did or will happen here. (Borich 99)

No *autogeography* concerning Hungarian-American immigrants and the "placiness of place" would be complete without a discussion of our religious, ethnic, and historical complexities. George Konrád writes, "Living in Eastern Europe [Hungary] meant being constantly prepared for defeat and backwardness but also to question what it is to be human" (280). As Hungarians living in America, Marton, I, and others, understand the issues of defeat, the backwardness of many of the traumatic political and cultural events that have affected our lives, and we question what it is "to be human," as we share our similarities as well as our differences. Our close family histories connect to the larger scale histories of displacement and "assimilation"- as Hungarian Jews, as converted Hungarian Catholics, and as recent immigrants to America. In *Ethnicity and Family Therapy* (1996), Debra Smith writes of Hungarians, "Emotionality, romanticism, pessimism, isolation, and duality of identification between Eastern and Western values are common characteristics. According to

an old proverb, “Hungarians are happiest when they are in tears” (538). Smith explains further:

Hungary’s fertile land and her location at the crossroads of Europe have historically cast her in the role of protector of the Christian world from Asian invaders. As such Hungary has constantly struggled with the outside forces that were either invading, occupying or oppressing her. This constant struggle for survival has contributed to the traits of individualism, resiliency, resourcefulness, adaptability, and a love of freedom, while at the same time contributing to an ever-present fear of extermination [Sisa, 1990]. (531)

In terms of shared Hungarian autoethnographies, these traits render as truthful and universal not only in my own family narrative, but within all the Hungarian stories and memoirs I’ve read throughout my research.

In Chapter 4, I analyze Marton’s text through the lens of Robert Root’s approaches to the construction of nonfiction; a series of approaches that provide an overarching framework for how a truthful, and artful, narrative is built:

“Perceived Experience,” “Observed Experience” and “Recollected Experience.”

Chapter 5 presents a metanarrative and critical analysis of my video work. Here, I embrace a shift in tone, both creative and analytical, as I present my experiences as a practicing nonfictionist.

It feels rebellious and critical to share these words but I do so because I believe them: “There is no reason why dissertations and scholarly articles need to be only barren factual statements” (Irmscher 86 - 87). To this effect, my dissertation is not a presentation of barren factual statements. It is a hybrid of memoir, memory studies, research as a lived process, textual analysis and meta-analysis. Hybridization, according to Margot Singer and Nicole Walker, “infuses

wild energy into familiar forms. The hybrid is transgressive, polyvalent, queer. The hybrid challenges categories and assumptions, exposing underlying conventions of representation that often seem so 'natural' we hardly notice them at all" (4). In this wild and energized, hybridized spirit, I aim to present a study of how nonfiction functions to provide an interdisciplinary, intertextual practice for constructing truthful family narratives as well as to recognize that nonfiction is a "field of humanistic disciplines" (Anderson xxiv); a space for reconciling history and our understandings of who we are in the world.

## **Chapter 2: *Enemies of the People* and Facets of Memoir**

### ***Kati Marton and Sacred Facts***

On April 10, 2012 I drove from Pittsburgh to Oberlin College to attend the annual Oscar Jaszi Lectureship, a visiting lecture series with a focus on Eastern European studies. The lecture's mission, according to Oberlin's President Marvin Krislov, is to connect "today's world with the recent past."<sup>3</sup> The guest speaker that year was Kati Marton. I had spent months trying to contact Marton through her website, agent, and publicist, with no luck.

A researcher's life opens doors in interesting and unpredictable ways. Gesa Kirsch and Liz Rohan, in *Research as a Lived Process*, find value in these unpredictable moments as a means of expanding the narrow concepts of archives and research. They argue, "The importance of attending to facets of the research process [that] might easily be marginalized and rarely mentioned because they seem merely intuitive, coincidental or serendipitous" (4). Intuition, coincidence and serendipity become defining contributions to their reconceptualization of research as a "lived process" (ix). During my interview with Hungarian filmmaker Klaudia Kovacs concerning her life and the making of her film *Torn From the Flag*, I mentioned my efforts to reach out to Marton. Kovacs replied that she might have a connection to Marton for me.

Two days later, I received an email from Kovacs with a flyer containing a picture of Kati Marton promoting her upcoming lecture at Oberlin. I contacted the sponsoring departments listed on the flyer, explained my dissertation and

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted from my notes at the Jaszi Lecture.



personal interests – my intellectual motivation -- and said that I would like to use an audio recorder at the lecture. They granted me permission to attend, and to record the lecture. At the event, the Oberlin faculty introduced me to Kati Marton for a personal interview. This was an incredible research moment. Like my trip to Hungary in 2008, I was once again living the research process.

Upon hearing Marton speak, I felt an immediate familiarity. I realized that it was her way of speaking English with hint of a Hungarian accent, the same autogeographical signifier of my mother's life history. Marton radiates intellect and admirable worldliness. My personal interview with her occurred much later in the evening, well after her lecture, book signing and lunch. We were both exhausted by the time it was finally my turn. I rattled through my list of "very serious" questions, ignoring my trembling, nervous hands and reminded myself to hit the record button on my borrowed Zoon recorder. I realized relatively quickly that she was as interested in me as I was in her, and soon it was she who was asking the questions to me: who are you, what are you writing about, what is *your story*? Hearing my story, we established a connection that eclipsed the distracting noises around us. Our mutual exhaustion from a day of events disappeared for a while and we were able to share our dramatic family narratives.

As displaced Hungarians, we share the same origins and are products of similar political turbulence, loss and struggle as found in our family stories. We share a mutual interest in making sense of our pasts through modes of nonfiction. We both feel that sharing our stories, and through them the personal

face of the Hungarian Revolution, with a larger audience is a way to preserve and understand the past, a way to honor our families and a way to reconcile many dark moments of discovery. Though I began to feel at ease with her, I never lost my uncanny sense that her presence and her journey is *enormous*; an enlarged, in-focus version of a tiny, blurry picture of me. And of course, this makes sense. She is my mother's age and her journey to displacement began on Hungarian soil. Her memories are her own, while mine are carefully sought out and wrought, remediated through my mother's vague re-telling of her childhood experiences to me, and my understanding of how memoir provides an entry point to some theories concerning traumatic memories.

For example, Ronit Lenten's thoughts on memory provide a critical framework for my position on trauma, memory and writing memoir:

Memory of catastrophe, often both sacralized and banalized, has become not merely a currency of our liquid modernity's 'confessional culture,' it is also becoming an increasingly valid social sciences theme – no longer the exclusive realm of historians and psychologists. That traumatic memories take up to one generation to surface – due to survivors (and perpetrators) being silenced and silencing themselves, and because histories are mostly being written by the victors – is not only a psychoanalytic insight but is also taken on board by a new generation . . . who . . . have increasingly been studying the complex implications of the construction of memory as collective political artifact. (174)

In other words, the construction of our memories through the process of memoir renders trauma as artifacts for understanding history. Marton experienced the effects of the Soviet-controlled state and the Revolution first-hand, and I experienced it once-removed. We both experienced the fallout and reverberations of history; and thus we share a similar interest found in Lenten's idea of the "the complex implications of the construction of memory as a political

artifact.” These concepts are evident in our research and writing, which reveal our unwillingness to be silenced.

Marton’s lecture, titled “A Chronicle of a Turbulent Century,” was presented to an audience of students, academics and guests from the nearby Oberlin community. It was designed as a “collective political” artifact, traversing one hundred years of loss, displacement and violence in Eastern Europe. Her lecture connected her traumatic memories of surviving her parent’s imprisonment, the Hungarian Revolution and immigration to the United States. She framed her family history within a larger historical context, relating personal experience to contemporary issues of human rights, liberty and freedom. Many Americans who had settled in the region attended the event. Their interests in the lecture and Marton’s book stem from her career as an NPR reporter, ABC News Foreign Correspondent and as a prolific author. Most importantly, readers are drawn to *Enemies of the People* because Marton encapsulates themes of a collective Hungarian immigration history – of displaced people who have suffered great personal loss and persevered in spite of the trauma. At Oberlin, she captured the audience in a sphere of empathy, compassion and connection us with the memories that ground her family story within the themes of loss and recovery. Her story resonates on a cognitive level, addressing the psychological impact of this “century of turbulence” with her personal story, demonstrating what Harvey and Miller describe as a “psychology of loss”:

From early on in life until death, people are affected by a sense of personal loss, whether losses they personally experience or losses incurred by those whom they love. The impact of this experience may be implicit, lurking in the background of a person’s thinking and daily

behavior. Or it may be staring him or her in the face and be terrifying.  
(429)

Marton's memoir presents many examples where the psychology of loss is apparent. One example is her family's exodus from Hungary in 1956. They left everything behind save for a few suitcases worth of possessions. Another example that is more implicit is the discovery that her maternal grandparent's died in Auschwitz. In this case, she feels not only her own loss, but she is also affected by the lurking sense of loss experienced through her mother's grief and sadness. Some experiences stared her directly in the face and were terrifying, particularly the day she witnessed her mother's arrest. She was only seven years old. The psychology of loss appears throughout her life; it affects her relationships with her parents, their relationship with one another, and her own desires to reconcile her past with her present.

Marton's audience may be aware of her life experiences and her professional work through her previous career as a journalist and her body of nonfiction texts. Therefore, to meet Marton in person is to engage in what Coen calls the "power struggle between author and reader," suggesting that "autobiography tempts the reader to want to actually know, capture and possess the author, which, of course, authors resist (and invite) (146). S. J. Coen discusses further, in reaction to Natalie Sarraute's 1984 memoir as a Holocaust survivor in *Childhood*:

Why was I so captured by the pain of her childhood? I think the answer is both because of her skill in drawing the reader into her experiences and because of my own wishes to reverberate with her a pain

and *again* with my own. A talented writer and a responsive reader make for an intense encounter.

We certainly should expect that authors will draw on their own feelings and experiences in their writing. Better that we not insist that we can determine the defensive and adaptive functions of their writing so that we can focus instead on the texts they have given us . . .

That a creative writer can draw on his dark side expands his creative range. Holocaust literature begins with the attempt to present the incomprehensible trauma in art and to memorialize it. (147)

Similar to Coen's experience reading Sarraute's memoir, Marton's audience is captured by the pain of her childhood. Through Marton's memoir, survivors of similar loss see themselves in the author's narrative. The Holocaust plays a painful and traumatic role in her family narrative and her understanding of Europe's history. During the decades preceding the Hungarian Revolution, before she was even born, her family life was forever impacted by bias and persecution of Jews. She faces this "incomprehensible trauma" in her memoir and through her talks and lectures, continues to "memorialize it." Marton takes the reader in to areas that reveal the darker side of her creative range by exposing her own emotions, sense of loss, and psychological pain in ways that are not apparent in her previous work as a journalist and nonfiction texts.

Elise Miller writes, "Trauma has been understood as a 'blow' to the 'tissues of the mind,' an assault on the self that ends up 'smashing through whatever barriers your mind has set up as a line of defense'" (987). Writing memoir emerges as a proactive approach for the author/writer to deal with the blows of personal trauma, to make meaning and sense of violence, struggle and difficult events. The act of writing and building a narrative extends itself to an audience of readers who have suffered a similar kind of trauma or loss. It is an

act of constructing and reconstructing meanings. “People are constantly constructing and reconstructing meanings – and themselves, in the process” (Harvey and Miller 431). “Art,” or whatever one chooses to call their chosen form of expression, provides a method for people to analyze and reconstruct meaning and themselves.

In her lecture and later in her speech at the luncheon, Marton repeatedly stated, “Facts are Sacred.” By this she means that facts are to be upheld and revered; that the details of history must not be skewed, forgotten or mis-configured. Her repetition of this personal and professional mantra speaks to her lifelong profession as a truth-seeker; a journalist and nonfictionist with the strong shoulders of her parents’ legacy to stand upon. For Marton, truth is non-negotiable. But which facts does Marton find sacred when constructing her rendition of truth? The facts she finds in AVO documents, the facts of her childhood memories and emotions, the facts found in the annals of history? How can we understand the differences between different kinds of facts and truths? Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer (160-161) present psychologist Donald Spence’s clarifications of the difference between ‘narrative’ truth and ‘historical’ or factual truth:

Narrative truth derives from an act of memory and is shaped by circumstances in the present moment in which it is remembered.

*[it] can be defined as the criterion we use to decide when a certain experience has been captured to our satisfaction; it depends on continuity and closure and the extent to which the fit of the pieces takes on an aesthetic finality. Narrative truth is what we have in mind when we say that...a given explanation carries conviction. (Spence, 1982: 31)*

In contrast 'historical truth' is time-bound and is dedicated to strict observance of correspondence rules; our aim is to come as close to what 'really' happened:

*[W]e must have some assurance that the pieces being fitted into the puzzle also belong to a certain time and place that this belonging can be corroborated in some systematic manner.*  
(Spence, 1982: 32)

I posit that Marton engages in both "narrative truth" and "historical" or "factual truth" in the construction of her memoir and treatment of loss and trauma.

Narrative truth is related to memory and interpretation, disclosed through her recollections of events as best as she can recall them; historical and factual truths can be found in the hard data and documents accumulated over the years to situate the text within the landscape of linear time and historical events.

Together, these two kinds of truth create *meaning*. On meaning, John H. Harvey and Eric D. Miller write:

Why is meaning so important to people's lives? As theorists such as Heider (1958) have suggested, when people feel that they have some understanding of events, they feel more control in dealing with those events. Some stressors may be so daunting that they defy direct actions designed to establish control (Thompson 1998). Still, a person may feel a sense of secondary control via acceptance of the situation and making the best of it, whether cognitively, behaviorally, or emotionally. Finding meaning usually is instrumental in finding hope and feeling agency in coping with loss. (431)

The concepts of trauma and loss "cannot be separated from the concepts of memory and redress. Trauma and loss are painful events that occur in the lives of individuals. Memory and repair are living concepts about what we can do today . . ." (Zapata-Sepúlveda 560). If writing a memoir is an act of processing with trauma and loss, if it is about what a survivor "can do today," it is also then an act of agency and redress. It is something one not only can do; it is a *thing*

that is made. It projects the voice(s) of the writer and amplifies the voices found through its readers. It is a nonfiction representation of meaning, where truths are constructed not only through voice and point of view, but also in the presentation of “facts.” Marton engages in the act of memoir to process and cope with her own family narrative, with all its turbulent trauma and loss, and in doing so, creates a bond with her readers that empowers them with new knowledge.

Marton confronts the truth in her memoir as a coping mechanism to deal with the unspoken past. Derek Neale posits, through a Freudian lens, that

The writer uses both elements of past and present almost as a method of reconciliation between contrary facts. This model tallies with many writers testimonies and with the version of consciousness put forward in *Nausea*. It implies a similar method is used universally, not just by writers, in the way we construe the world and narrativize ourselves. A similar prominence is give to storied experience...in which one particular version of memory is posited as a form of constant redrafting, and storytelling is presented as our species-defining survival tactic. (953)

Again, for Marton, facts are sacred, even in the way she “narrativizes” herself. She does not write of herself as a victim and her memoir is not merely a redraft of her memories; her memories are narrativized in the surrounding historical landscape of her life in Hungary. It would seem that her deeply held belief about sacred facts proves to one of her more useful “survival tactics.” She elaborates on the sacred life of facts, narrativizing and storytelling, as well as the importance of truth:<sup>4</sup>

You just didn’t talk about [the past] and therefore you harbored all these resentments. And of course if you don’t discuss things you always assume the worst. And so I have crafted, supposedly deliberately the opposite persona. I really like the truth and I like to confront the truth and I like to

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<sup>4</sup> From my interview with Kati Marton at the Jaszi Lecture



discuss it and I like to get under the surface of the story. And every one of my books is really about truth telling, because I think that you do yourself great damage if you live a lie.

For Marton, to construct a memoir and to narrativize herself is an act towards reconciling the negative and contrary discoveries of a difficult past. Her ability to share these details is what connects her to her readers. “People tell stories, relate the events of their lives, in part because these stories *are* true. They want other people to know what happened. And they want to hear about what happened as close to the truth as possible” (Williams 292). Marton wants us to know what happened. She wants the reader to learn from interpretations of both narrative and historical truths. She offers her life story enframed in her singular understanding of the truth. In essence, she relates her understand of facts and truths to the best of her knowledge. The reader may or may not accept Kati Marton’s version of the truth. To accept her version of the facts as true the reader must trust Marton’s honesty.

Ultimately, what is valuable to the reader is a deeper understanding of context and perspective. The facts with which Marton constructs her truth mean nothing until they are interpreted by the reader. It is clear to me that Marton writes with sincere intent. This is more valuable to me as a reader of non-fiction than whether or not all of her facts lead to the same construction of truth by multiple readers. The possibility of making mistakes with the facts is a universal condition of being human.

[Image 1 – Kristine with Kati Marton]

[Image 2 – Oberlin/Jaszi Lecture Poster]

**Genre and Form:**

*It is impossible to write without labeling oneself*

Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*

While *Enemies of the People: My Family's Journey to America* is Marton's 2009 memoir of her life in Hungary as a child and her immigration to the United States, it is much more than this. The narrative she presents is a thoroughly researched, method-driven investigation into her parents' lives, written from Marton's perspective as an adult. She uses the approaches of the memoirist and the methods of the historian to revisit her childhood memories, creating an intimate bond between herself and the reader. Along the way, she discovers difficult events and re-assembles them to present a compelling story that puts the reader in an intimate space of discovery. Dinty W. Moore refers to this as the idea of "intimate point of view" which allows "readers to see the world through the eyes and ears of a thoughtful author" (48).

Thomas R. Smith theorizes intimacy further by discussing "readerly intimacy" (901) and asks, "Against what do we judge the autobiographical narrator/protagonist to be certain that we are in touch with the writers and not some writerly version of them?" (900). This is an excellent question when discussing the construction of truth, voice and point of view. Marton develops multiple, but not duplicitous, voices that take us along with her into the facets of her family's story. We are privy to the point of view of herself as a child and that of her adult self. From these two voices and points to view:

We feel an intimate connection with a writer, we are feeling that ‘I am or could be that person’ . . . or are we doing something more complicated? Are we instead recognizing the validity of another’s feelings, acknowledging their authenticity, sensing that if we were in that person’s situation, we *might* feel and act the same way, all the while knowing that we are not in fact the autobiographer and not succumbing to any illusion of identity exchange. (901)

Smith proposes that rather than “succumbing to the illusion of identity exchange,” that there is instead a “temporary feeling of closeness, familiarity, and acceptance of a protagonist’s outlook . . . that the writer is understood by both writer and reader to be identical to the narrator and that the events the narrator relates are true and theoretically verifiable” (902). Marton’s adult point of view is clearly developed within her trained understanding of how to write a truthful, verifiable nonfiction narrative. She blends memory and factual truth, historical research and methodically combed data into her memoir. These efforts draw the reader more closely into her experiences as a child and as an adult. Her intimate point of view “allows you to be there, residing in the author’s world, seeing through the author’s eyes, smelling what the author smelled on a Sunday morning, feeling the unique moment through the one-of-a-kind perspective of another person” (Moore 48).

One example of this readerly intimacy occurs when Marton shares one of her more difficult discoveries, buried in the trove of secret AVO files she petitions from the government in 2000 in post-Communist Hungary. Here she uncovers that her father, Endre Marton, had willingly shared secret party information with his American friends and as a journalist, he was fully aware of the consequences of his actions. Marton is unable to withhold her candid feelings. She writes:

But here I must interject my own reaction to my father's behavior, the details of which I am learning for the first time. Papa may not have known Glaspell<sup>5</sup> but he knew he was under surveillance. Sharing a restricted document with the Americans was an act that exceeds a reporter's responsibility and, especially from the perspective of the Cold War, could be interpreted as espionage. Papa paid a huge price for his reckless arrogance. (72)

That "huge price" was his own imprisonment, whereby his family was subjected to intense fear and unrest. By letting us in on this moment of her father's "reckless arrogance," Marton shares an honest criticism of his actions. Her honesty invites intimacy. The mistakes her father made cost her family dearly and Marton does not sweep this difficult truth out of sight or ignore it for sake of painting a perfect picture of her father as a courageous, sophisticated individual.

Another common factor proposed by Smith in the build-up of intimacy is found in the qualities of the writer/narrator's voice. He writes, "Like gesture and eye and facial expressions, voice conveys what is inside and invisible to the outside, where it is visible to others" (904). As Marton's voice and perspectives grow and change, her understanding and analysis of the amassed surveillance documents unfolds, and our connection to her increases. She allows us to be there with her as she travels to Hungary and opens a massive box of materials collected about her family. We are there when she escapes to Vienna as a child and we are with her during the dramatic moments in between. We are intimately connected to her and to her journey because we recognize and hear the blend of her multiple voices: child, adult, daughter, mother, sister, wife, immigrant,

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<sup>5</sup> Douglass Glaspell was an American who worked as a secret AVO informant. Endre Marton shared a classified party document with him, which was used as by the AVO as proof that Marton was a spy for the Americans.

Hungarian, American, journalist, memoirist. This array of voices provides an inlet for different readers to connect to her narrative, and the connection fosters trust. As she shares her discoveries, memories and historical events, the multiple voices blend together to create one authentic persona.

She contrasts her more mature voice and point of view with her more naïve childhood point of view, and weaves between these two positions, or strands. Moore refers to this style as “braiding,” whereby two narrative lines combine “in order to show where they intersect, how one speaks to the other, and how both take on greater significance through comparison” (95). She shows us that her experiences and impressions of her parents within her remembered world as a little girl are often at odds with what she knows and learns as an adult. The results of this braiding include empathy and compassion from the reader. Who of us has perfect parents or lived a perfect childhood? On this level, everyone can relate. Within the text, Marton navigates between these two intimate realities or strands of a braid: her flawed childhood memories of her parents as perfect and her own (less than-perfect) adult reflections of her parents as reckless risk-takers.

Our readerly intimacy is reiterated in the places where these braided voices intersect. Smith concludes, “No matter how shocking, poignant, or grim the story the autobiographer tells, it is the autobiographer’s voice that enters the heart, that pierces the mist of intellect surrounding the text to create the reader’s sense of intimacy with the writer” (908). The reader is intimately drawn to her world for all of these reasons: her methods for coping and talking about trauma

and loss, her imperfect childhood and upbringing and her braiding of voices. These creative abilities convey a compelling and intimately detailed story that both problematizes and encourages the relationship between the reader and the writer. In the former sense, it is problematic to think that her story is the same for all Hungarian immigrants who fled in 1956. It is not, because many never left the continent, but rather started over in other European countries. In the latter sense, and in contrast to the problem created by this intimacy, her story represents a kind universal immigrant experience born out of conflict and loss that many immigrants, not of Hungarian descent, have experienced.

Marton grew up in Post-WWII Hungary, which was shackled by Soviet control at the end of the war after devastation under the brutal German war-time occupation. Her parents, Endre and Ilona Marton, were journalists for the AP and UP (respectively), occupations that singled them out as prime targets for surveillance and investigation by the Hungarian state. In February of 1955, when Kati Marton was six years old, her father Endre was abducted in the middle of the night by half a dozen military agents under suspicion of spying for the Americans. Three months later, her mother Ilona was also detained on similar accusations of spying. After witnessing her mother's arrest, Marton was separated from her parents for 18 months until their release from prison, only weeks before the 1956 Revolution. After their release, Marton's parents continued to risk their freedom and their family, reporting historic events to the Western world.

Decades later, after both Endre and Ilona had passed away, Marton took another look, a closer look, at their lives. She researched deeper in to their roles

as Hungarian journalists during the era of post-war Soviet control. Her investigative path led her to discover intimate secrets and emotional surprises about her parents. After the Soviet occupation of Hungary ended, the country opened the massive vault of secret files kept on citizens believed to be working for the Americans. With newly obtained access to these detailed AVO (The Hungarian Secret Police) surveillance files, Marton assembled a collection of documents that changed her understanding of the truth. Essentially, Marton opened a “Pandora’s box” (6) of material – data that even her father refused to acknowledge while he was alive, even after the end of Communist control in Hungary when he had the chance. She writes, “My father never opened that file; he was done with all that. To him, history – at least his history—was a burden. For me it was the beginning of my search” (4). Some of her discoveries included detailed AVO reports concerning her father’s emotional affair with a diplomat’s wife, her mother’s sexual affair with a family friend and the betrayals by those close to them who informed on her family to the AVO.

Marton’s creative and personal decisions to write her family’s story through memoir are driven by what Root calls the *nonfiction motive* -- “the desire to preserve the memory of one’s experiences” (Root 10). She acts on the motive by way of writing a first-person narrative with a limited, yet very intimate, point of view. Her structured approach is predominately linear, though she weaves in and out of the present and the past seamlessly. Her narrative is fused with memories and reflections of her family and childhood. Her life and the time periods that she writes about provide a complex interrelation between personal,

theoretical and political implications. These three components function together to help build the bridge connecting Marton's "life and "time," but this bridge wasn't formed at the onset of her writing. It came later, as material was discovered, as doors opened, as emotions and memories escalated. Indeed, there was no way to predict, or to know, how Marton's memoir would turn out until she lived through and wrote about the process of her research itself:

The relation between the 'life' and the 'times' in women's autobiography is still to be worked out; that is, there can be no easy assertion that we simply know how the paradigmatic inscription of a life joins the historical and cultural specificity of its lived time or moment. (Broughton and Anderson xi)

Regarding the interrelation between life and time, and the relations between memoir and history, Regenia Gagnier's outline of "the mode of selfhood" helps to further explain these unknowns, or rather, the subjectivities of autobiography:

A meditative and self-reflective sensibility; faith in writing as a tool of self-exploration; an attempt to make sense of life as a narrative progressing in time, with a narrative typically structured up parent/child relationships and familial development; and a belief in personal creativity, autonomy and freedom for the future. (qtd in Broughton and Anderson 4)

Gagnier's outline points to what we have come to expect from autobiography – that is a both meditative and self-reflective, that it leads to "extra-textual" reflections that transcend the text itself (Neale 952). These reflections lead to a deeper discussion of the "textual self" (5). The textual self is born in a "negotiated space" between life, art, and history. And in this space, tension occurs when the memoirist moves between historical and literary critical



perspectives. The “fascination of this tension between ‘deconstructing the self’ and ‘reconstructing the past’ and ultimately, that [they] can be part of the same interdisciplinary project” (Jolly 11) additionally complicate the relationships of life and time. One big question is raised concerning who controls the negotiations when the self is born in a textual space. Does life rule over art, and art over history? Or is it some other combination of these factors? Indeed, this negotiated space is ambiguous, and perhaps dictated only by the author herself.

Life and time accumulate with memories to oscillate in the textual space where history and memoir collide. It is a “third space,” where the collision happens, that I am interested in dissecting and reflecting upon. This concept of a third space is reminiscent of cinema and Sergei Eisenstein’s concept of the “tertium quid,” or the “third thing”: the space where meaning is created when two disparate shots, or images, collide together in film editing.<sup>6</sup> For Eisenstein, this collision makes the whole greater than the sum of its individual parts. The third thing is of course another ‘thing’ in the Heideggarian sense.

Memoir and history, two disparate parts or disciplines, two unique things, often exist at odds with one another. They are, however, inextricably linked. The development of a family story or personal narrative both navigates in and creates this third space. “Memoir and history regard each other a wide divide, in effect, they’re goalposts marking extremes of nonfiction. The turf that separates them – and of course connects them – is the vast playing field of memory” (Hampl & May 3). While Marton’s historical reports contain details collected largely by

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<sup>6</sup> <http://faculty.cua.edu/johnsong/hitchcock/pages/montage/montage-1.html>

informants about her parents, the facts contained in these documents develop a space filled with conflict from her own childhood memories. This “turf” and the playing field of memory constitute a “space [that] is the uncomfortable location where the historian and the memoirist do the work of interpretation and imagination” (3). Again, this speaks to Margaretta Jolly’s assertion that the memoirist negotiates a “space between the disciplines that is ‘almost art’” (11).

Another term for this conceptual space is that of the *intertext*. Jolly writes,

When we read autobiography, therefore, we must look again to those ubiquitous textual ‘cracks’ – though neither for precisely historical nor psychological information but rather as evidence of an intersection of different discourses, or ‘intertextuality.’ This evidence tells us not about the writer directly, but about the terms upon which s/he wrote. (18-19)

Marton’s earlier understanding of her parents as famous, heroic, and courageous players on a global stage are not imagined, not artfully dreamt up, but present textual cracks, fissures, in how her memory interacts with fact. Instead, “courage” and “heroism” are ideas projected forth from Marton’s negotiated place, relevant to her life and time, and are based on the *idea* of her parents. These ideas are re-interpreted and developed into a more complex and realistic portrait of her parents when the next element is added – the facts found in the AVO files. Whereby an “accurate account of events is not enough: we must make meaning of events if we’re to make art (or even simply artful nonfiction” (Anonymous 31), Marton makes meaning of her parents flaws in an effort to provide an artful re-telling of their lives. With the additional knowledge of their flaws, as both ordinary and extraordinary people, she links their unusual role in history to the more commonplace facets of everyday life: her mother’s daily

application of red lipstick, her father's imported tobacco, walks to school with her sister in expensive matching dresses. While these details may seem commonplace, they provide significant details that contrast her family from those around her in Hungary. These details also serve to connect the reader to the Marton's unique upbringing by revealing how our understanding of everyday items like lipstick, tobacco and clothing are indications of the very different world where she grew up. Marton establishes a critical connection between herself and the reader through these idealizations of her memories. With artful displays of everyday items and events against a backdrop of time and place, she demonstrates the severity of oppression in Hungary.

But why did Marton choose memoir as her form? Why autobiography? Why not a more "objective" approach through the more traditional journalistic discipline? An historical nonfiction text in third-person? Marton's training as a journalist is, in a way, innate to her because her parent's were so passionate about their work as journalists, but the fact is that their journalistic passions led them to prison, to desert their family, to dangerous situations. Since Marton is working with facts, and in her own words "facts are sacred," how can she reconcile the world of journalism with artful storytelling? How do facts become art? Anonymous writes:

A student of mine put it beautifully, I think; she said that when you're working with fact – whether as a reporter or a literary nonfiction writer—the facts are like clay. You mold the factual material and shape it. If you're a reporter, you then work to wipe away the fingerprints, to remove your personal mark. But if you're a creative nonfictionist, you leave those fingerprints, because they're part of the art you're making. Your imprint on the factual material – your sensibility and mind—are part of what makes it

artful nonfiction. It's how one particular mind makes meaning of the actual. (34)

Marton makes no effort to wipe away her fingerprints from the facts. Moreover, it's as if she has two sets of fingerprints all over her art – those of her childhood hands and those of her adult hands. It could be, as well, that the manipulation associated with memory, fact and writing is like the manipulation of raw material. How one molds these raw elements will determine how the audience connects with and interprets the text.

Helen Epstein, who began as a journalist and later focused her writing on memoir, states in *Coming to Memoir as a Journalist*:

We journalists did not traffic in useless, self-indulgent fantasy. We did research, made acute observations, investigated records, asked probing questions, got the facts. After this proactive work, we were to erase all trace of ourselves. I liked that idea. Since childhood, I had been fascinated by the properties of invisible ink, and here was a chance to be there and then not be there, to become invisible. (48–49)

Marton, typically the invisible journalist, artfully reports “the facts,” and reveals herself as “I.” She renders herself visible through the form of memoir, and not just as the adult author, but also as a child who remembers. But why? Perhaps “the reading and writing of life-history as both a mode of critique and a means of empowerment” (Broughton xiii) transforms the author as much as it transforms and manipulates the text. Memoir molded her telling of her life, her time, and her memory into an artful display of the facts. It provided the appropriate approach for sharing her story with the larger world, indeed, the global community. Furthermore, as Toril Moi puts it, the “speaking subject that

says 'I am' is in fact saying 'I am he (she) who has lost something' (99). For those who have lost something, creative nonfiction and life writing can serve as coping practices and mechanisms for exorcising trauma. Sara Baker discusses this as a work of the imagination: "There is the psychic reality of memory, the objective reality of history, and the third space, which is neither but partakes of both, literature, and the work of the imagination" (20). Marton's position within the subjective negotiated space of memoir allows her to approach her losses and gain a larger sense of agency over her own family narrative from the "privileged place of self reflection." This place, as an intertext, is unstable, that is:

To begin to think about place- to shift the grounds of the question from "who is speaking?" to "where am I speaking from?" – is also to recognize that the subject is both temporary and precarious. To make the place of subjectivity into a question is thus also to destabilize it, to open up the possibility of other places, other subjects. (Broughton and Anderson 175)

This opening up to the possibility of other places and other subjects, is an example of intertextuality, of moving through disciplines, of a Barthesian shift from work to text. He writes, "the Text does not stop at (good) Literature; it cannot be contained in a hierarchy, even in a simple division of genres. What constitutes the Text is, on the contrary (or precisely), its subversive force in respect of the old classifications" (157). This "subversive force" moves to undo the tenets of hard and fast disciplines: art, journalism, documentary, nonfiction. The ground shifts, the subject weaves through various disciplines, looks in on itself, and speaks of itself and its movement to the audience.

In addition, Judith Butler's theory on how the self comes in to being addresses the rules of disciplinarity and objectivity through the idea of

separation. In this sense, memoir separates from discipline and becomes a method toward subjective selfhood and self-possibility:

The self only becomes the self on the condition that it has suffered separation . . . a loss which suspended and provisionally resolved through a melancholic incorporation of some "Other." That "Other" installed in the self thus establishes the permanent incapacity of that "self" to achieve self-identity; it is as it were always already disrupted by that Other; the disruption of the Other at the heart of the self is the very condition of that self possibility. (383)

Marton's shift in genre and form from the "self" of her journalistic background to the "Other" is shown in her identification towards literary nonfiction tendencies. She becomes a different kind of communicator. Her new way of developing meaning occurs in the negotiated space where art, life and history collide. This also signals a shift in her methods and her understanding of her own story.

Towards this notion, Sabine Vanacker writes:

The importance of the genre lies not solely in the description of the life of an individual. In its traditional form, the autobiography presents an individual who has established, via his [her] writing, a scripted coherence to his [her] life and self which is not there in day-to-day experience, but belongs strictly to textuality . . . it serves as a monument to its writing subject, containing the aura of a finished, accomplished life. (182)

Marton's text presents "the aura" of a finished, accomplished life through the embodiment of an accomplished text. She breaks from her traditional styles of third-person omniscient writing found in her previous texts. She embraces the "modernist critique of 'objectivity'" (Broughton xiii) that defines our understanding of the discipline of journalism and the genre of creative nonfiction. Indeed, the genre bends along with her, for while genres are rooted in convention "they are also shape-shifters, in a continual state of flux" (Singer and Walker 4). Within the

sub-strata of memoir, Marton becomes flexible, embracing the possibility of creativity in her form. She does not merely report the sacred facts, she also interprets them with emotion. She combines her skills as an historical writer with an eye, and a voice, for storytelling and creative possibility. Moore notes that “contemporary authors often combine elements of each of these [memoir, literary journalism, personal essay] into their writing, using what is needed, when it is needed, to bring life to whatever complex story they have in mind” (4). Thus, it is clear that Marton finds a way to pick and choose which elements work in her own telling of her complex, subjective story. Patricia Hampl explains further: “Like many memoirists, I’ve discovered that my particular location at the intersection of personal and collective experience, with roots back in early childhood, has provided me with an inexhaustible subject” (48). The subject is herself.

Marton’s path as a writer and memoirist, in fact, is similar to Patricia Hampl’s. Both Marton and Hampl grew as writers out of a journalistic background, both hail from Eastern European descent, and both have transitioned their family histories into memoir. Hampl’s career trajectory as a memoirist began with her 1981 publication of *A Romantic Education* where she discusses her thoughts, methods and personal dilemmas while she simultaneously transitions the biography of her Czechoslovakian grandmother into a historically-based memoir. Her transition from “self” to “Other” is similar to Marton’s. She explains:

There were two strikes against autobiographical writing, in my view. One was literary...and my other mistrust of autobiography was more personal: I had been brought up not to talk about myself, a worthy sanction, surely. And given my sense of being from Nowheresville, I had no impulse to

pretest this injunction. Besides, surely it was unfair to use other people – one’s family, friends, people met on a train – people who were unsuspecting players in what we affectionately call real life and who, were not, after all, the game subjects of journalism. And – another stumbling block – how could the first person voice claim documentary reliability? Beyond that, who could possibly care about my life? (Hampl 136-7)

Is it, however, the author’s task to make the audience *care* about their lives? Or is “caring” more of a luxury for those who come from someplace other than “Nowheresville”? Why did Hampl suppose, in her early understandings of autobiography, that the details of her life didn’t seem very important? Perhaps in the intertextual, negotiated space of memoir, “Nowheresville” is actually a more relevant, more accessible, more open space than the specificity and remoteness found in the lives and stories that come from “*Somewheresville*.” Moreover, the ability to trigger imagination, create a bond, or build a community yields more substantial outcomes than to simply motivate an audience to “care” about one’s all too specific life and time. Caring is easily passive; to connect via the imagination is to engage with the text on entirely uncharted cognitive and emotional levels.

Derek Neale asserts, “Memory is crucial to the writing process and that memory works in tandem with imagination. Their mechanisms are so similar as to be identical; the way in which we construe and construct the world around us is the same as the way in which we make up stories” (957). An example of Neale’s concept can be found in Balazs Szabo’s 2008 memoir, *Knock in the Night*, he writes, “I want you to imagine yourself accompanying me through this real journey, not in the privileged life where you were fortunate to have your



beginnings, but in mine to see how you would fare” (1). Szabo does not ask the reader to care. When he shares his memories, he specifically asks the reader to *imagine*. We are asked to join Szabo on his quest to make sense of his past. As a child witness to the 1956 Revolution, survivor of the Soviet occupation and a refugee, he challenges the reader to imagine and enter into his life and his time, to use imagination and travel with him as he navigates his deeply personal story. Szabo constructs the story from a third-person point of view, referring to himself as “Balazs” rather than “I.” This approach to memoir develops a distance between the writer of memoir and his position as storyteller. His use of third-person reflects how he sees his own history and that memoir provides a vehicle for him to present his story without leaving the space he has created to reconcile his own past and his losses. To navigate between one’s unique story and the details of one’s own life and time, and to render these details with universal points of reference, is to build a connection to a larger audience on a deeper level.

In order to successfully establish a set of basic concrete connections, Moore believes that an author must adopt a flexible, artistic and energetic approach (4) to the subject and the form. Even before an audience “cares,” the author must do more searching and be more openly receptive to change than they’ll ever admit. The author must understand that “creative nonfiction is a *style* of literary writing, an art form that starts with language and an individual point of view and then discovers its unique shape through trial and error. To succeed in creative nonfiction, you must be open to new ideas” (Moore 4). Sometimes, it

seems, the newest ideas are found in writing about oneself and one's sense of place, even if that place is "Nowheresville."

The openness to different voices and subject positions found in Marton's literary style suggests that her abilities to craft a memoir are influenced by her experiences within the discipline of journalism and her rejection journalism's rigidity for her memoir. She knows that her story cannot be confined by the codes of the journalistic tradition. She is also an established historical writer, but she transitions out of the more traditional modes of these disciplines and instead applies her knowledge and skills of them into the creative realm of memoir. She embodies interdisciplinarity in her nonfiction techniques as defined by Joe Moran. He states, "I want to suggest that the value of the term, 'interdisciplinarity,' lies in its flexibility and indeterminacy, and that there are potentially as many forms of interdisciplinarity as there are disciplines" (15).

Furthermore, her story exists as an intertext, in that it weaves the elements of the disciplines of journalism, history and creative nonfiction with the braids of her memoir's unique voices. Her oscillating position is not neutral. Her position is an anti-objective authorial position one. It is not determined by or within pre-fixed disciplinary strata. It is unlike her previous work in its personal treatment of the subject, its ability to embrace the self as subject, its ability to artfully approach trauma and loss. In terms of arguing for its worth as a work of art, this argument is in fact a non-issue for many writers of memoir who embrace the subjective position of self as an other, or a way to enter into larger conversations about facts and as a way to frame knowledge.

Eula Biss writes:

A lot of euphemism and categorization and shuffling of feet goes into the project of making a clear distinction between the kind of nonfiction that deserves to be regarded as art and the kind that does not. Never mind that such a distinction cannot be made, such a project is destructive to our environment. (198)

In other words, Marton and Hampl are surveyors of their own environments.

These environments are, in fact, the ground from which these authors are able to cultivate a shift in subject position, to weave multiple versions of their own voices, and to provide different points of view. Hampl renders her interests in herself as the subject by finding the deeper connections between writing about herself as a way of also writing about others who share similar experiences and untold stories. She becomes more interested in “writing about people like myself: women, immigrants, people who had a history of trauma.” Hampl explains further:

I was becoming aware that we all perceive events – public and private – through the double prism of our culture and personal experience, and it resonates in multiple echo chambers like memory. Unlike journalism, which demands that reporters ignore or subsume that subjective reality, memoir encourages writers to plumb it. (51)

Both Marton and Hampl exhibit the ability to shift from journalist to a unique kind of personal storyteller and do so through the complex interplay of approaching their texts from observed, recollected, and perceived experiences. These approaches help make sense of the negotiated space of intertextuality and to render a more thoughtful and deeper ‘truth’. To create a connection between the author and the larger community, memoirists write to make sense of

what has occurred in their lives and to reconcile their understanding of the world at large, history, and themselves. In doing so, these flexible, malleable and unpredictable environments and spaces the memoirist inhabits traverse the everyday and the strange, building connections between communities of readers.

Towards this notion, Matt Becker states:

As memoirists record and make sense of their personal history, they demonstrate the complexities of their life, no matter how extraordinary or seemingly commonplace, how exemplary or abhorrent. By allowing us access into their private thoughts and emotions as they undergo this process, they encourage us to identify and empathize with them – two important building blocks in the creation of community. (127)

To identify and empathize – these kinds of connections, methodically produced within a negotiated space, are profoundly more significant than to simply work to make the reader “care.” Indeed, to “care” is only worthwhile if it is a reflection of that nonfiction motive: “the importance of tapping into our passions, pursuing research subjects that attract our attention, and allowing creativity and intuition to enter the scholarly research process...” (Kirsch and Rohan 9). It is the author’s desire to make something more of the process, “to both accept that all meanings are provisional – that we are always “subjects in process”—and, at the same time, to see the possibility opened up for new forms of writing and creativity”

(Broughton and Anderson 228). Roland Barthes asserts:

A language and a style are blind forces; a mode of writing is an act of historical solidarity. A language and a style are objects; a mode of writing is a function: it is the relationship between creating and society, the literary language transformed by its social finality, form considered as a human intention and thus linked to the great crises of History. (14)

As a subject in process, the story – the great crisis of personal history - unfolds, over a life and time and across the wide-open playing field of intertextuality and artfulness. Language and style, the objects of the function of writing, provide the basis for creating, or for making art of words, thoughts, ideas and memories. When these concepts collide, one may find a good story is the final result of all these blind forces. In Patricia Hampl's experiences:

I knew how to tell a good story, and I kept my audience engaged until invariably a listener piped up, 'Would you *please* get to the point!' 'The point?' I asked, genuinely puzzled. Even then I understood that the telling of the story *was* the point, that the facts of the story mattered less than the communion of the word, the telling and the listening as entry point to a world outside of linear time. (13)

The entry point that Hampl speaks of is in contrast to Marton's belief that facts are sacred. For Hampl, the telling of the story, a story with the intention of a being truthful, provides a softer and more accessible entry point than the hard, sacred entryway of facts. This is not to say that Hampl is any less honest; it is, in fact, the differences between these facts and truth that speak to the versatility and flexibility of form and method when one constructs memoir and family narrative.

### Chapter 3: Themes and Connections

*For the ancients, truth was something eternal: what was true was true in all times and in all places.*

Daniel W. Smith, "Temporality and Truth"

#### **Universal Truths**

Kristen Iversen writes:

Memoir is a blend of fact and memory, dream and desire, reflection and regret. It's an intimate journey of self-examination and self-reflection undertaken with a reader on your shoulder. But it's more than that. It seeks to reveal the self in relation to the world; to broader social, cultural, or political themes or issues; to an event or series of events; to a person, a government, a culture. (201)

Patricia Hampl and Kati Marton tell a *good* stories because they traverse this terrain laid out by Iversen. They weave self-examination and self-reflection into an intimate sphere that exists to reflect larger themes and ideas. They tell intimate stories that reflexively examine each of their selves as they examine history. Marton and Hampl write because they understand that the telling of the story and the mode of writing is the function; it *is the point*. Sharing their inner most intimate feelings through story, through memoir – sadness, regret, even joy -- allows her to reveal herself, as Iversen states, "in relation to the world."

Hampl and Marton also makes efforts to tell stories that are *true*. *Enemies of the People* is Marton's attempt at a Hampl's kind of truthfulness, the truth approached through memoir. Their efforts to tell a true story through discovery and history are parallel to the details and efforts found in the telling of my own family story. Their memoirs exist as part of the widening discussion of immigration stories that define America and Americans within the context of

cultural pluralism and history. Their views provide a “close interrogation of the positions from which one defines oneself as a participant in the larger conversation taking place across international borders” (Zabarowska 10). Such a “globalized view of American history” calls for “‘building bridges’ across the national and cultural borders constructed through such narratives all over the world” (Zabarowska 10). Similarly, Ellen Peel’s discussion of Doris Lessing’s memoirs reveal parallel notions of this idea of a writer’s relationship as an individual and as a representative of a group:

The individual can represent the group and the group can represent the individual. Her [Lessing’s] concept is not based on a simplistic belief that everyone is identical and anyone can represent anyone else. Instead of believing that all the traits of every person are possessed by everyone else, she believes that each trait to every person is possessed by at least one other person. In other words, no trait is unique to a particular person, including her. A trait of an individual or group can be represented by another particular individual or group that possesses that trait, but not by just any other individual or group. (8)

Peel argues through Lessing’s work that it is naive to believe everyone is interchangeable and that one person can singularly represent an entire group. In this sense, Marton’s text connects her experience in the world to its historical context but it does not claim to speak for everyone. It works as both an individual and group narrative by focusing on the specific traits and characteristics of its time but not of every person who experienced a similar event. What matters are not the superficial details which may be common to many people in many places and times. What matters is the construction of narrative voice in the face of trauma and suffering, and how that voice may inspire others to tell their stories in their own way.

Further, Marton's text shares traits between the individual and the group and it connects the world through the significance of these traits. The large-scale, group traits she represents include Hungarian ethnic identity, Hungarian-Jewish identity and history, the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust and WWII, the Soviet Occupation and the Cold War. The more specific and individual traits are how she experienced these events as a young child in a particular family, living in Budapest. From these perspectives, her text serves as a topical, structural and aesthetic bridge that connects to my own position as a writer and creator of nonfiction and the teller of my mother's family narrative. It further connects the wider global community of displaced peoples who have felt or experienced similar trauma, loss and struggle.

By braiding the voices of her childhood and adulthood and developing new evidence-based points of view, Marton builds a narrative that provides the reader with a deeper understanding of her experiences. Her memoir reminds us that the telling of the story is the point; in the telling we find the space where the connection between the author and the reader both begins and ends. The text is "very much a score of this new kind: it asks of the reader a practical collaboration" (Barthes 163). Susan Rasmusson writes "the value of dilemmas and ambiguities in the selecting of histories of practice and presenting the past" are at the core of this collaboration. She further states, "The consequences of the past are not some passive accumulation of experiences, but in effect are emergent, generated in the communicative interplay of experience as incidental and intentional and individually and collectively relevant" (115).



When I read *Enemies of the People*, I find myself very much a “practical collaborator” in that the text itself builds connections that are both “individually and collectively relevant.” Marton provides a framework for understanding the many similar facets of my mother’s refugee narrative. A number of connective lines exist in the stories of my mother Valerie Martonhegyi and Kati Marton. These lines are demonstrative of what life was like as a child in Hungary during the Stalin era and the 1956 Revolution. My mother and Marton are close in age – my mom was born in October 1948 and Marton in April 1949. Both were children who lived under the oppressive communist control of Hungary and, more specifically, in the city of Budapest. Both my mother and Marton were separated from their parents when they were little girls. Both witnessed the Revolution – tanks, gunfire, fighting in the streets, curfew, blackouts. Both experienced exile and renewal through an immigration story. Marton writes “I had no notion that I was living history,” (187) and neither did my mother. Both began new lives in the United States. Even their last names are similar though there is no known family connection. My mother’s last name with the addition of *hegyi*, which means “mountain”<sup>7</sup> – and translates to *Marton’s Mountain*. And both women are mothers with daughters.

The differences in their stories are as important and culturally relevant as their similarities. Marton’s parents were far more cosmopolitan and connected to the world outside of Hungary than my mother’s more typical Hungarian family. By comparison, the Martons were affluent, “upper-class” citizens with high level

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<sup>7</sup> <https://translate.google.co.uk/#auto/en/hegyi>

diplomatic, political and social ties. Their wealth, their brightly-colored, fashionable, imported clothing and the American-made Studebaker her father purchased from a departing American diplomat (40), made most Hungarians fear and avoid Kati Marton's parents (39). They were "Others." Of course, the Martons' lifelines with the West singled them out as prime targets of the AVO who tracked their movements. As journalists they entered the American legation every Tuesday morning in an open defiance of the state. The Marton family was targeted even by their neighbors -- neighbors who voluntarily sent their own small children to play with Kati and her sister for the sole purpose of spying on the Marton household in order to gain kickbacks from the government. Their Western connections provided an affluent childhood for the Marton children -- a nanny, toys, clothing, private tutors -- which resulted in an exclusive kind of childhood for the Marton children, atypical for most Hungarian's at that time.

Marton reflects that she and her sister were "politicized children" (38) who grew up in and were often part of an "adult world"; that their family behaved in a manner of "internal exile" (40). Day trips with ambassadors, diplomats and other politically influential adults to places such as the Turkish baths or the opera, and accompanying their parents for coffee meetings with intellectuals at the marble tables of Gerbeaud<sup>8</sup> were normal, everyday activities for the young Marton girls. Surrounded by the intellectual elite, outsiders not invited, the Marton family conducted their work around their children, blending the unspoken rules of their journalistic risks with family activities (38).

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<sup>8</sup> An upscale café in Budapest

My grandfather Istvan, on the other hand, was not a well-connected reporter for the AP. He was from the middle stratum: an accountant for the state who, with his brother Sandor, took up arms against the Red Army in the Revolution. My grandmother Valeria was not a stylish international reporter for the UP like Ilona Marton. She was a homemaker who was diagnosed with an unidentified terminal cancer in her reproductive system and battled the disease throughout the latter half of her 20's. Her two small children, my mother and Uncle Pete, watched her wither away. She died in January of 1957, just as her family secretly crossed the southern Hungarian border into Yugoslavia. There were no diplomats or Turkish baths or American cars in my mother's story.

In the aftermath of the crushed Revolution, my family fled illegally on foot and found their way south to a Red Cross sponsored refugee camp, running through abandoned WWII minefields and sheltering with sympathizers in the frigid winter. Marton's family did not flee illegally. They were granted passports out of Hungary by the government in a strategic move to distance Endre and Ilona from the ability to report news from the inside of the Iron Curtain to the rest of the Western world (205-6). This is not to say that their defection was effortless, not traumatic, and full of loss. It was, undoubtedly, all of these things.

Our families arrived in America under contrasting circumstances as well. The Martons, having faced a difficult separation in Hungary, were able to rebuild their lives in the States and remain together. She writes of their exodus to Vienna in an automobile:

A Hungarian soldier wearing a Soviet-style greatcoat, with a red star pinned to his fur cap, leaned in and asked for our passports. Minutes

later, the barrier we had spent my entire life trying to cross was lifted and the soldier waved us through. (206)

Comparatively, my mother's family remained together throughout the Revolution and exodus from Hungary, but they were separated upon arrival in America. They did not have government issued passports; they came to the USA as sponsored refugees with help from the Red Cross. President Eisenhower issued green cards and granted political asylum for the displaced Hungarians like my 8-year-old, non-English-speaking mother. Upon arrival, however, my mother and her little brother were taken from their father because he was stricken with tuberculosis and he was quarantined. My mom and uncle lived for a year, in a strict Catholic orphanage in Ohio, separated from each other except at mass. There they lived, in relative isolation, until my grandfather was deemed healthy enough to take care of his children. The worlds of the Martons and the Martonhegyis, though parallel in many regards, do not share the same fortunes or fates.

The differences between their immigrations contrast one another in stark terms. The facts remain, however, that both left their home countries behind, both faced an unknown future, and at a very young age, both had to process these losses and uncertainties. Their unique details do not circumvent the reality of their shared experiences and related life stories. These details provide proof of a universality of truths that transcend their stories' inimitable specificities. The details of each woman's narrative do not eclipse the big-picture resemblances. Although I cannot speculate whether the two women would have been friends,

they most certainly would recognize essential traits in one another shaped by the common thread of history.

Marton and I recognized these similarities and differences as we spoke after the Jaszi Lecture. Though the details of their specific experiences share as many similarities as differences, the universal themes that can be drawn from Kati Marton's life are parallel to the themes that can be drawn from my mother's life and even my own experiences as a researcher and storyteller of my family narrative in that I have needed to tell the story my mother would not, or could not, tell. In telling such a story "nothing less is at stake than the search for our individual and shared truth" (HAMPL & MAY 6); both Marton and I have our individual stories that share the same kinds of truth(s). These similarities and differences present universal truths; a series of underlying themes that resonate with wider audiences than Hungarians, Revolutionaries and immigrants. These truths resonate with the world at large and reflect the importance of memoir as a process for finding individual healing strategies and building sites of collective memory for people whose stories emerge in the aftermath of violence, conflict and displacement.

The migration stories and the origins of many families stem from similar circumstances of political, cultural, social and economic oppression. This is not solely an "American" phenomenon. Rather, immigrant stories the world over share common themes including foremost the motivation to keep one's family safe against a tide of violence. In her discussion of Chilean victims of the Pinochet regime, Pamela Zapata-Sepúlveda writes:

Experiences with political repression and deprivation of liberty and torture are among the saddest reflections on humanity...Fear, pain, grief, loneliness, abandonment, guilt, anger and hatred are some of the feelings that a victim may experience, remember or relive. (560)

While geographically and historically different from Zapata-Sepúlveda's topic, the effects of political repression on its victims bear the same traits. Loss is loss; separation is separation. Both my mother and Kati Marton were separated from their parents and experienced their own politically instigated deprivation of liberty. To pick apart the details that make their stories different is to ignore the heart of the matter, to avoid what connects all people on fundamentally deeper levels of human experience. Regardless of when and where these little girls were split from their parents, the fact remains that each child faced the same kind of traumatic experiences; the same fears, the same sadness, the same uncertainties. Their personal tragedies provide links to universal themes, because often it's not just the details that matter, it's the telling of the story, the shared sense of experience, of understanding, and of healing. Johnson notes, "I understood that the telling of the story was the point, that the facts of the story mattered less than sharing the communion of the word, the telling and the listening as entry point to a world outside of linear time" (13).

Marton's narrative journey is anchored by her access to the large inventory of Hungarian Secret Police files amassed on her family. By 1950, the AVO had collected 1,600 pages about her family (23) of which her discovery in 2008 demonstrates a dramatic escalation in the story. They also provide multiple temporal and spatial entry points for the braiding of her authorial voice. From a file dated September 18, 1950, that she discovered in 2008, Marton writes:

The AVO formally decided that my parents were, in classic Communist jargon: “the sworn enemies of our People’s Democracy and faithful adherents of the American way of life, and though they pursue their professional work openly, their reporting is mocking and hostile to our national interest.” (26)

The breadth of information within these files triggered a paradigmatic shift in her understanding of her parents’ lives and her own. The data she uncovered altered how and what she writes in her own memoir and created new moments from her past that had not been preserved in her memory. These AVO files became sites for both “knowledge production” and “knowledge retrieval” (Shultz VII). Marton is not merely adding to what she already knows, but building entirely new memories from the narrative created by strangers for the purpose of surveillance. As the author of her own narrative, she articulates her methodologies for retrieving knowledge and the emotions that accompany this work with inflection, nuance, and self-awareness (Schultz IX). Before Marton began her research her memories had not been preserved. This means multiple things: her memories were not stored and they were not consciously remembered. What she uncovered gave her new information to work with – new knowledge. The new knowledge and facts she garnered gave her new ways to make meaning of moments that had she forgotten, but things she never knew before. Suddenly, many things in her life made sense. The data enable her to dig deeper into her past and to excavate.

Concerning the massive data in the AVO files, Marton writes:

It is not just historical fact for me: these are my *parents*. My outrage is fresh as I read the AVO files, since my parents talked neither about their persecution or their courage. It used to frustrate and annoy me that they

kept us away from our own history. Now truth emerges in the bureaucratic prose of the Communist secret police who are compiling a family history for their own purpose, so different from mine. They are looking for exploitable weaknesses in my parents, I am looking for truth. (14)

Marton discovers details about her parents that would have been difficult for a child to understand, and as an adult, prove no less difficult to process. Through her outrage, she continued to look for the truth, sifting through the thousands of pages in the AVO files, never losing sight of her nonfiction motive. In one section headed “Family Relations,” the AVO provides details of both her parents’ extramarital relationships and affairs. With intercepted letters that bring her to tears and shame (77), to photos and written detailed accounts of her parent’s domestic drama, Marton is granted an unsettling, yet deeper insight into her how her parent’s both hurt and loved one another. These files literally put names, dates, and images in her hands. This concrete data is paradoxical. At once critical to the researcher, the data is also emotionally damaging to the memoirist, who in this case are the same person.

In 2007, Marton reached out to Csery Lajos, whom she remembered from her childhood as a “sometimes babysitter” (110). She learns, however, from the surveillance files collected during the summer of 1954, while her father Endre Marton was imprisoned, that Lajos was actually her mother’s lover. In their meeting as adults, Lajos “in his eighties and still handsome” (111) openly discusses his relationship with her mother as well as his failed recruitment by the AVO to spy on Ilona. Upon seeing him 50 years later, with the truth of the affair out in the open, Marton writes: “A mysterious bond binds us – a sudden proximity



to my mother . . . emotional intimacy transferred from one generation to the next” (237). Lajos tells her in a matter-of-fact tone, “Your mother was one of the great loves of my life . . . She broke my heart.” Marton admits that her mother’s coldness in breaking up with Lajos makes her feel slightly ashamed of her mother. What a contrast for Marton to feel as an adult; to at once both admire and feel shame for her mother, years after her mother has passed away. To be in the presence of Ilona’s lover, the man who provided her mother much happiness while Ilona did everything possible to help her imprisoned husband Endre and look after their two small children (238) is no small challenge to the author. Fortunately, according to Lajos’ recollection and affirmed through the accounts written by the AVO officers assigned to this part of the Marton case, he was not a cooperative spy for the Hungarian Secret Police. How did he, among all the others, escape their clutches? Lajos claims he kept the AVO at bay by telling them “I’m really clumsy at these things. I’m a very poor liar and I don’t think I would make a good agent for you” and inexplicably, he never heard from the AVO again (111). Clearly, they had far better and more cooperative informants including the Marton’s nanny *Madame*, who filed daily progress reports on Ilona’s relationship with Lajos (110) and all the activity within their household. Additionally, the AVO had recruited local merchants, neighbors, friends and colleagues to spy on the Marton family. All were far more willing and complicit than Ilona’s young lover because collaboration with the AVO came with monetary rewards and privileges.

Not all of her discoveries in the AVO files were as painful or emotionally damaging as finding out that nearly all of their friends were informants. In fact, many of the documents provided special private pathways towards a reframing of some of her darker memories in a more positive and enlightened way. Some of the discoveries even created stockpiles of new information about her parents that she could not remember or would otherwise have never known. Marton writes: “Why didn’t Papa tell us more about his remarkable courage in those days? The AVO files tell me that he not only evaded the Gestapo and the Arrow Cross, he played an active role in the small anti-Nazi resistance movement” (14). Her father never spoke of these events, never inflated his image even with the truth of his actions, even after he and his family were safe in the U.S. Furthermore, these AVO files speak to the flaws of memory, the difficulty of remembering one’s childhood, and the imprint left by long-gone forgotten things that can be found in the retrieval of archival data. For example, in a surveillance record from August 27, 1954, Marton is granted the keys to a forgotten portal that leads to a disremembered day of her childhood, a tender non-memory of an afternoon outing of ice cream and shopping with her little sister Julia and her father. The AVO record lists a play-by-play of their movements and the details are lovely and insightful:

*11:43 [Endre] Marton drove to Gerbeaud and, after finding a table, ordered ice cream. The three consumed the above while chatting.*

*12:20 PM Holding his children’s hands, Marton walked back to his car. They drove to Vaci Ut 7 and entered a toy shop.*

*12:30 Holding his daughters’ hands, Marton left the shop. One of the little girls carried a package wrapped in pink paper. (41)*

Marton, who remembers her father as reserved and somewhat distant when she was a child, is granted a deeper appreciation of him because of the details in these AVO files. Of this uncharacteristically chatty man who took her shopping and bought her ice cream, she writes, “Thanks to the AVO’s surveillance record, I now know he was both devoted and affectionate” (41). She elaborates further, “To the AVO I owe a long-ago late-summer day, washed away by the dramatic events to come. It is now restored to me” (42).

My mother also remembers her father as a reserved, somewhat distant man. Debra Smith notes in a section titled “Characteristics of Hungarian National Heritage” in *Ethnicity and Family Therapy*:

Although Hungarians are generally an emotional people, certain negative emotions are not always expressed openly. For example, it is considered ‘shameful’ to express conflicts, anger or pain out in the open, possibly out of a sense of needing to preserve family loyalty. In contrast to negative emotions, Hungarians tend to be more free in their expression of affection, even in public places [Kosa, 1957]. (538-9)

While my grandfather was outwardly expressive and social, it was difficult for him to express deep emotional intimacy. When my mother and I talk about her father, she speaks of him with great affection, but reveals with an obvious sadness that he never told her he loved her. Both my mother and my grandfather suffered greatly from psychological loss. My grandfather did not share his feelings and no doubt he quietly dealt with the loss of his wife, his country and his language in silence like Hungarians, according to Smith, tend to do. There are many events of his past that he did not discuss with his children, lost now to time

and faded memory. As far as I know, we do not have AVO files to reconcile my mother's memories<sup>9</sup> or my grandfather's life, nor do I have a stockpile of diaries and documents to connect me to the past. Ilona Marton also kept a journal and wrote an unpublished memoir, further connections for her daughter to read and use to delve into their family history. In truth, those hated AVO files provided a series of posthumous gifts that allowed Kati Marton to revise, rethink and regard her memories in such a way that "the past is thus built into the discursive and non-discursive ordering of the lives we live" (Rasmussen 114).

My grandfather did not share his story as a 1956 Revolutionary with his children. I cannot claim to have heard this story directly, as I was only a baby when he passed away in 1978. I have noted, though, he did share it with my father Ken, late into the night after many drinks. In this way, like Rasmussen notes, he was in control of the discursive and non-discursive ordering of his life. Istvan and Ken were very close. My grandfather found a strong ally in my dad and confided the dark parts of his Hungarian life and exodus with him. Many years later, my father shared these parts of our family story with me; the details of my grandfather hiding in the hills of Buda, shooting Soviet troops off their motorcycles with a shotgun; engaging in hand-to-hand combat with the one's who didn't immediately die and came running after him. My dad served as the record keeper of my grandfather's grim accounts; a far more benevolent and less potentially evil parallel than Kati's AVO files, but a history collected by someone

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<sup>9</sup> Future fieldwork and research in Hungary is tentatively planned for 2016, with the express goal of researching my Jewish ancestry and to look through the AVO files for any data on the Martonhegyis.

else, and remediated, nonetheless. To my dad I owe thanks for sharing this part of my mother's family narrative with me.

***“We were not Jewish”: Autogeography, Ethnicity and History***

The pathway of a life dedicated to history, truth and research can be permanently altered when the discoveries are deeply personal. Understanding one's own past after the influx of newly submerged data can create a dramatic shift in the originally proposed narrative construction of old events. Marton writes, “I would not have written this book if my parents were still alive” (251) because of the deeply personal nature of the material and because Marton did not want to disrupt her relationships with her parents. Their deaths opened up the possibility for Marton to bring historical research together with her memories. In this space of possibility and research, the details she discovered challenged her interpretation of her life and open up the form of memoir to her. Towards this notion, Elaine Tyler May writes:

History and memoir are both interpretive arts. Both genres use carefully selected fragments of the past – memories, documents, events – to tell a story. In that sense, memoirists and historians mine similar sites and go through similar processes to construct their understandings of the past. (85)

An inciting incident which caused Marton to re-interpret her own past occurred while she engaged in her primary investigations for her biography on Raoul Wallenberg. Her 1980 book, *Wallenberg*, focused on a Swedish man who saved thousands of Hungarian Jews during WWII. In her research, Marton discovered a large fragment of the past – an unknown Jewish root. This particular family

secret, suppressed for decades and re-discovered while “mining” information sites for a concurrent research topic, presented itself as perhaps by accident, perhaps by fate. Marton writes, “During the course of an interview in Budapest with a woman saved by Wallenberg, she said, quite casually, ‘Of course, Wallenberg arrived too late to save your grandparents from the gas chambers.’ That was the first time I heard what had happened to my maternal grandparents” (12).

From her parents view, this discovery was unwelcome, as they had buried the details of Ilona’s parents’ terrible fate for nearly sixty years. Marton was thirty and had never known that her mother, and her maternal grandparents, Anna and Adolf Neumann, were Jewish. Though she was aware that her paternal lineage included Jewish ancestors, she did not understand the full extent of her Jewish ancestry. She writes, “The story my parents told us about Mama’s parents was wholly fake” (12). Marton’s maternal grandparents, Ilona’s mother and father, had not died during the air attacks on Budapest as she was led to believe her whole life. Rather, her maternal grandparents were betrayed by Hungarian collaborators, their own ‘people’, and they were arrested and delivered to the Nazi occupiers. They died in Auschwitz.

Marton writes: “Memory is famously deceptive. Many of my early childhood recollections probably come from my parents’ recounting of them, conflated with my own memories” (31). She grew up without any knowledge or memory of Jewish ancestry from her maternal side and she remembers only limited discussion of her father’s Jewish roots. Her parents’ crafted a false

history of Ilona's mother and father; perhaps a slightly less painful history, but their absence was felt nonetheless. Marton notes that there was always a void when discussing her maternal grandparents and their story. She explains:

I had sensed a missing piece: the absence of photographs or mementos from my mother's side of the family. Somehow, the discovery – even the tragedy of grandparents' murder by the Nazis—made me feel more grounded in history, more substantial than the refugee whose history began upon arrival to the New World. (13)

To be grounded in the present by the past speaks to the discussions of Broughton and Anderson in Chapter 2 and relates the details of how a life and time are explored in memoir. Marton's understanding of history provides an historical backdrop, rooted in fact, to explain the loss of her family. To this effect Elaine Taylor May states:

Memories, like historical documents, need to be situated and interpreted in the proper moment. We cannot escape the hindsight that comes with writing about the past – in fact, hindsight is essential. But we need to do our best to move our imaginations into the time frame of our subjects. (90)

Marton is able to process the important discoveries of her family's history with what May refers to as the tool of "essential hindsight." Unaware of this part of her full Jewish ancestry until adulthood, her understanding and imagination seem to be linked within the process of constructing memoir. Her discovery creates the proper moment to situate the facts. When she imagines the time frame contextualizing her parents she must situate their memories against the backdrop of history, the Nazi occupation of Hungary and Hungary's cooperation with the deportation of the Jews. Since these facts were suppressed, she must engage her imagination to build a bridge of understanding towards these unspoken

experiences, a critical tool to unlock her parents' secrets. She writes that her discovery about her grandparents' deaths and her Jewish ancestry was "a relief . . . Painful as it was, I was finally in possession of the truth" (14). Ultimately, hindsight helps her shape her reaction to the painful truth in a conflicting way. Marton notes that her discovery of her Jewish heritage "opened a sad rift between my parents and me" (13), even when she felt relief in the knowledge of the truth.

The recognition of how "anti-Semitism shaped Papa's life choices" (10) includes where he went to school and whom he was eligible to marry. In 1939, shortly before the radical right was legally elected as the majority in Hungary's Parliament, new legislation was passed for the further "limitation of the encroachment of the Jews in public life and in the economy" which affected the 800,000 Jews living in Hungary (Konstler 374). By 1941, mixed marriages were made illegal (374). Marton's ability to situate these facts from the point of view of an adult against the difficult background of history allows her to build a critical pathway towards understanding her subjects, her own parents. This conflict acts as a narrative focal point in her memoir, as she addresses her father's contradictions between his nationality and his religion:

Scorned by elements of his own country as a result of his Jewish origins, but a fervent Hungarian patriot, Papa insisted that even Shakespeare was better in the Hungarian translation. Called up for military service at eighteen, this athletic young man, a prize winning fencer, was found 'unfit' because of his Jewish roots. (9)



Later in his life, after Ilona passed away, as his daughter embarks on her quest to develop the family memoir, he says to her, “You will never understand what it was like for us . . . it is simply beyond your comprehension. We were not Jewish. We were Hungarian. Absolutely and totally assimilated” (13). While during the inter-war period Jews in Hungary still benefitted from the emancipation of 1849, their rights continued to dwindle after WWI. Kati Marton refrained from stating the obvious to her father: that Hitler and his Hungarian allies did not share the same feelings of her parent’s “assimilation.”

During Hitler’s occupation of Hungary, Endre and Ilona Marton, as secret, non-practicing Jews, never wore the yellow star, a crime punishable by death. They used fake ID’s with Christian-ized and “nationalized” Hungarian names, they moved constantly and never settled until the war was over (12). The issue is further complicated, as Marton writes:

This brings me to an essential mystery of my childhood: having barely survived the Nazis, my parents should have kept their heads down. Yet, when the Communists took over Hungary, my parents brazenly and openly aligned themselves with the new Enemy: the Americans. (15)

This “essential mystery” speaks to her father’s complex inner-turmoil and politically imposed contradictions – to identify as Hungarian or to identify as a Jew? This inner turmoil that forces one to choose a specific identity is divisive; it is an example of split identity, a forced border crossing even before the Martons leave Hungary. During these war years, the Martons, as husband and wife, forged an new identity together in defiance of the Gestapo and the Arrow Cross. After the war, after surviving the Holocaust, they turned their defiance against the

new oppressors -- the Communists and the AVO (15). The lies that Kati Marton's parents lived, however, were emotionally damaging to them, perhaps because they survived when so many others died. Their lies became unearthed by their daughter from whom they spent a lifetime keeping secrets from. It provides a possible explanation for some of the more reckless life choices they made as journalists. To abandon part of the self is to abandon loyalty. The burden of surviving by concealing the truth motivated Kati Marton's journey to reveal these moral contrasts to her parents, who contained their trauma by building a protective wall of silence. In our interview, she elaborates:

I think it is very traumatic and I think they never got over that early trauma. Life really, as I said, is like post traumatic shock when you have your own countrymen turn on you like that. And I was the one who brought it back.

So there was a real cooling between us for a number of years. But then we slowly worked our way back and...Because of course, we loved each other. You know? And they are my parents.

It was painful for my parents to lose control of their narrative when I came back with this information. And I'm sure it made them feel very insecure.

Trauma is one of the universal themes that links Marton to her reader through memoir. The act of reading her memoir is an act that is not seen as "static or as a matter of dissection but as an experience, a drama to be acted out" (Anderson xviii). In other words, the reader is not a passive viewer, the reader experiences Marton's dramatic journey alongside her.

My family story harbors a potentially similar Jewish Hungarian secret. Upon close inspection of old documents pertaining to my grandfather, Istvan, I was surprised to see that his father's surname was *not* Martonhegyi. It was *Musitz*. This unexpected last name is listed as my great grandfather's last name

on my great-grandparent's marriage license, dated November 8, 1908. During my summer in Budapest, my translator and mentor Beata Szechy informed me that *Musitz* is an ethnic Hungarian Jewish last name. *Really?* This indicates that after their marriage in 1908 and by the time my grandfather was born in 1920, his parents had already changed the family name from *Musitz* to *Martonhegyi*.

[Image 3: Great-Grandparents marriage certificate with surname *Musitz*]

[Image 4: Insert – *Musitz Mihaly Gyorgy*]

[Image 5: Note from my mother]

What does one make of what my mother writes here, the vagueness of “at some point the last name was changed to Martonhegyi?” Historically, this type of name-change was a common practice among Hungarian Jews even after the brief emancipation of 1849 all the way through WWI (Lendvai 238). Lendvai writes of the Emancipation Law in Hungary that governed until 1918:

The singular relationship between Hungarians and Jews came about partly because already during the Revolution [1848] the Jews had identified themselves with the Magyar national cause, the Hungarian language and, to a great extent, Hungarian culture. (330)

Though not forced to choose, many did choose the side of self-identifying first as Hungarian, secondly, if at all, as Jewish. Thus, self-identification emerges as a

central theme in the memoirs of assimilated Jewish Hungarians. George Konrád writes in his 2007 memoir *A Guest in My Own Country*:

The members of my family thought of themselves as good Hungarians and good Jews. The two did not come to be viewed as separate until WWII.

The Hungarian government took up arms on the German side with the aim of recovering part of the lost territories, and it was willing to send half a million Jews to German camps in exchange. It was a bad bargain, because in the end they lost not only the Jews but the territory as well, and were left with the shame of it all. (16)

How to define oneself then: alongside your beloved country or alongside your beloved faith? Even if memoir cannot fully enable one to reach a definitive answer, posing the historically situated question allows the audience to gauge, against the backdrop of time and place, the significance of ethnic and religious identities in Hungary. According to Laszlo Kontler, by 1944 Hungary had deported 440,000 Jews to Eichmann's *Judenkommando* to augment Germany's labor force. But there was little doubt that the trains were heading to an extermination camp. 320,000 people never returned (Kontler 384). How does a survivor deal with these issues? Konrad's memoir presents one example through his recollections as a child survivor who avoided deportation and internment. He recalls the German occupation of Hungary with an air of strategic detachment and distance. "In place of a childhood, there is an absence, a story that has not been and cannot be fully told" (116). As Marton notes, based on her own grandparents' experiences:

My grandparent's had prospered during Budapest's Golden Age, a brief time of liberal values and relative tolerance, during the last three decades of the nineteenth century, when Jews were given full rights – at least on paper. My grandparents did not hide their Jewish roots (though like many, they Magyarized their Germanic-sounding name early in the twentieth

century, feeling that Hungarians should have Hungarian-sounding names).  
(8)

Hungary's emancipation of the Jews lasted from 1848 to 1918, with the official Emancipation Act passing in 1867 (Lendvai 329). As part of Budapest's Golden Age, the new laws reflected accommodations that allowed Jews to freely (almost) engage in commerce, industry, banking and ownership of real estate (Kontler 238). Many Hungarian Jews, however, despite this tolerance "on paper," continued to face social, cultural and economic prejudice. This pressure to change their names to a more national, less ethnic, less *obviously* Jewish sounding name demonstrates the fraught relationship in Hungarian identity. In many cases, the livelihood of a family business, the availability of work, opportunities for advancement, education and health care, and love, especially love, depended on name changes to express national allegiance. Many Jews from across Europe moved to Budapest during the liberated time of the Emancipation. Lendvai states, "The linguistically and culturally Magyarized Jewish immigrants made a decisive contribution to the creation of a new bourgeoisies" because they were responsible for "Budapest becoming the greatest financial and media center of Europe east of Vienna" (331). They created a kind of "surrogate middle class," and "no other 'foreign' group had assimilated as rapidly as the Hungarian Jews, yet social discrimination lasted against them the longest" (Lendvai 332).

My great-grandparents left Baja, in Southern Hungary, after they were married in 1908. Their destination was Budapest, where Jews enjoyed economic

and social breakthroughs greater than anywhere else in Europe at that time (Lendvai 333). “The upsurge of Budapest attracted Jewish merchants and traders, and later also skilled workers and intellectuals, to the metropolis, and they in turn contributed to it” (331). The cosmopolitan and urban streets of Budapest made a better place for a young family to hide their Jewish past and start over as Hungarians only. If things were better for Jews, however, why did so many feel the need to choose a new name, a new home, to assimilate, to hide? These questions reverberate in the turmoil of history, where self-identification and the burying of facts and truths meant the difference between life or death.

If, in fact, the name *Musitz* implies a Jewish history on my paternal grandfather’s side (and my mother and I both believe that it does), then Istvan Martonhegyi’s parents took their efforts toward “Magyarizing” even further. By the time my grandfather was born in 1920, the Martonhegyi’s converted to Catholicism and raised their children in the Catholic faith. According to historian Paul Lendvai:

It was easier for a gifted man of Jewish origin, after converting to Christianity, to become a university professor, a nobleman or even [like the historian Vilmos Franknoi] a Catholic bishop than to attain a hierarchically significant but, in the eyes of the gentry, desirable position as a small-town magistrate or member of one of the gentry’s clubs. (332)

My mother, Valerie Martonhegyi, was raised Catholic. She had no knowledge of a “secret” Jewish past until I brought her my evidence. She only remembers her father and paternal grandparents as Hungarian Catholics. She does not recall what her grandparents did for a living, but they were able to send their son to

university. I have no idea why my grandfather did not serve in the Hungarian army on the side of Germany during WWII. I would like to find out. Moreover, the name *Musitz* tells a different kind of historical story, a story that communicates to my family now in one surviving document, about our possible Jewish ancestry. This possibility was likely unknown even to my grandfather, though of this I am also uncertain. If he knew, he simply never spoke of it or he so deeply suppressed his assimilation that he became exclusively Hungarian and not Jewish. Thus, the Martonhegyi family lost its Jewish roots, until I, like Kati Marton, disturbed the silence with my investigation of my family's story.

These suppressed histories, brought forth today through the memoirs of those who lived through it, as well as the documents and primary source discoveries of displaced children, immigrants and later generations, fill the spaces where communication breaks down. On so many levels, documentarians and nonfictionists rely on research and historical documents to tell our stories for us by filling in the blanks, building the narratives, debunking lies and half-truths. "Research is a meaningful collection process that has helped [writers] better understand their own historically situated experience. It can even become an identity-forming, life-changing activity" (Kirsch and Rohan 2). For both Marton and me, the discoveries we've made have been transformative. In Marton's case, the research process changed her self-identification. Admittedly, I am not as conclusive in my autogeographic research mostly because it will take at least another trip to Hungary. I will likely need to travel far outside of Budapest, to Baja, Dunajuvaros, perhaps to Oteshevo in Macedonia (the refugee camp

where my family fled after the 1956 Revolutiuon) to search the archives of history to confirm my own Jewish ancestry and to fill in the spaces where questions remain. My data nonetheless point to the complexity of Hungarian identity and its roots in many centuries of ethnic and religious plurality.

The collection of memoirs dedicated to these themes and similar family narratives have grown over the years, with writers exploring their own autogeographies, as well as ethnic and religious ties to Hungary. In the poetic historical family narrative *One Must Also Be Hungarian*, Adam Biro reflects on his life growing up in Communist Hungary, a childhood survivor of the 1956 Revolution and a defector to France. With intricate, delicate strands that take the reader as far back in his family history as he can find documentation for, we travel through his family history and find ourselves in Hungary in 1806. The effects are breathtaking as Biro traverses between each of family member's voice and geographic place. He reflects on the family members he has memories of with clarity. He imagines the family members he did not know, but has heard a lifetime of stories about. Like Marton, Biro meshes childhood and adult points of view. The prose is delicate and deliberate; soft and hard. Biro writes, from his adult perspective as he reflects on his life:

Time stretches out, yesterday is so terribly already gone. I can barely make out my childhood face of fifty years ago through the whitish fog of another century, and the boundaries become blurry. We are all reliving a vital experience, one that is unique, like no other. It is experienced anew over and over again, and our loves, our lives, our death can only be ours. (6-7)



Like Marton, Biro uses intimate storytelling to weave us in and out of time and place, history and memory. Moments known only to the deceased, understood to the living through unearthed archives. In his specific story there lies a universality; “we are all reliving a vital experience, one that is unique.” And the name Biro? Of course, an “assimilated” name. He writes of his paternal grandfather:

He was born Braun Márkus, but when still very young he modernized his given name by deleting its Latin ending, then “Hungarianized” his family name into Bíró, a word that can be translated into English as “judge” or “arbiter” or “mayor of a small county...Braun Márkus Hungarianized his name at the moment when the patriotism of Hungarian Jews was at its peak (some good it did them – just as it did Captain Dreyfus<sup>10</sup>, the most French of the French, the most stupid of patriots). (Biro 55 – 56)

Moments later in Biro’s text, when the authorial voice changes from grandson of Braun Markus to that of his present self, Adam Biro, historian and personal essayist, (denoted by a shift to *italics* within the placement of the text itself), he explains the Hungarian Jewish situation in even more depth:

*Franz-Joseph had been emperor of Austria since 1848 and king (crowned even! Along with Sissi herself!) of Hungary since 1867. During his reign, Hungarian Jews were emancipated and able to fully participate in the life of the nation. At least that’s what they hoped. They got rid of their German or Jewish names or both. Finkelstein became Fenyves or Fenyvesi or Fenyö . . . And the Braun became Bokor or Bodor . . .or Bíró . . . They also gave up their language: no one spoke Yiddish in my family. (I write this for form’s sake: Hungarian Jews, those from the heart of the country, never did speak Yiddish. Russian, Polish and Lithuanian Jews spoke it. In the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Yiddish was only spoken on border areas, in Galicia, Ruthenia, Bucovina . . .) And then, the urban population also got rid of its faith. It produced politicians, journalists, writers, photographers, filmmakers and world famous musicians. Most of the lawyers, doctor or bankers in Budapest were Jewish. But they all, down to the last individual, thought of themselves as Hungarian and*

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/anti-semitism/Dreyfus.html>

*openly claimed that identity. And yet, they were Jewish and Hungarian, they couldn't be one without other (one day my father told me, "Jews are very intelligent, Hungarians very creative, so, a Hungarian Jew is the apex of the human species." I believed him for a long time. And, all shame aside, I must confess that I might still believe it, perhaps secretly or at least unconsciously). (56 – 57)*

This long passage from Biro, with its exclamations and asides and confessions, speaks to the ideas behind the suppression of being Jewish in Hungary as a form of hiding. The loss of language, even if only in the most remote areas is no less difficult to process than the larger idea of the loss of faith. And the fact that these losses were generally unspoken, and highly accepted, makes these collectively sweeping changes speak to a deeper cultural scar than can be seen on the surface. The pain of this scar can be felt in the generations who survived the Holocaust and their children and grandchildren, who seek a connection to their ancestors and their trauma. Furthermore, the Martons, the Biros, my great-parents and all their parents too, are from generations that experienced decades of turmoil stemming from a series of debilitating wars and oppressive occupations, beyond their own persecution internally by Hungarians. Endre Marton is quoted as saying: "I left my emotions at the barrier" (252), and it is safe to say, that my grandfather probably did as well. These painful family truths and experiences were left further behind, perhaps buried, when everyone arrived to the United States, when assimilation in their new country presented another daunting challenge, another layer of removed of one's former self and identity. The rupture from a known life and time, to a giant leap into a new life and time further complicates the condition and idea of the immigrant experience. Many

erased the past to attain freedom, only to find that this freedom resulted in feelings of loss by later generations for their erased, buried or forgotten identities.

Kati Marton was never able to fully examine the subject of her maternal grandparent's Jewish past with her mother and father when they were alive. When I approached the subject with my Polish father, who knew my *nagypapa* so well and calls him a "hero," my dad snapped at me and spat "Istvan hated Jews." Be that as it may, the evidence points to his daughter's, my own, Jewish roots. They point to me. When Marton looks back on her parents and how they felt about her knowledge of their Jewish past, she writes:

When I called Papa from Budapest with the news of my 'discovery,' he was cold. His secret had been revealed to his daughter, and he had lost control of his own narrative for the first time. It put a strain on our relationship for the next twenty-five years. For my mother, too, these topics were off limits. If I raised them, her eyes would fill with tears, which would silence me. (12 - 13)

This reaction of silence from the generations before us presents roadblock. It bars further communication, not only on this line of questioning and this buried subject, but it prohibits other discussions between Marton and her parents. Endre Marton's loss of control of his own narrative signals the moment when Kati Marton begins to take control of her narrative. In my interview with Kati Marton, she states:

I think communication and lack thereof is such a big part of the problem and it is a generational problem too. Because, for my parents there were whole areas that you just didn't talk about, even between husbands and wives.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> From my personal interview with Kati Marton at the Jaszi Lecture, 04 April 2012

Additionally, children and grandchildren are also cut off from many of the communication lines that link them to a traumatic past. When communication is cut off, how can we reconcile the turbulence of our own histories? “The task and results of demythologizing and re-visioning of the past belong to all citizens of the world” (Zabarowska 12). For citizens of the world, memoir tells not only the story of ‘one’, but it demythologizes and re-visions the stories of ‘many’. What we can rely on are the stories to repair or replace broken communication lines, as well as the archives and documents that speak to us from the grave. These materials can also take the place of missing memories, to shape our understandings of ourselves within the context of our family histories. We can then take these materials and assemble them in artful, creative and truthful ways for future generations to understand and share with their families and the larger community. Memoir has the “the potential to produce in us a strong connection to the author’s humanity, and it is from this connection that the genre also has the potential to build community” (Becker 127). While Marton, Biro, and I are three people out of millions of the displaced, our stories matter. Our families bear witness to historical injustice and possess the power to transform the detached reader into an empathetic participant. In this way, memoir performs a curative act in engaging the reader with the construction of narrative and historical truth.

In this sense, *to matter* falls within the scope cultural pluralism<sup>12</sup>, multiculturalism<sup>13</sup> and “dismantling essentialist representations of history and national identity” (Zabarowska 11). Apart from indigenous peoples of the Americas, it is safe to say that everyone in the United States originated from somewhere else in the world at some point in their family history. Some escaped, fled, or were forcibly taken from their homes. Many did not ask to come here and many did not survive the journey. But many individuals and families survived and arrived, one way or another. Some stories are triumphant, while others are tragic, and then there’s every conceivable experience in-between. Our nation’s immigration stories fall on a spectrum that presents a continuum of these experiences, a spectrum that represents how many came to be in America. It speaks to one of the universal truths that for those that are not descendants of Pre-Columbian era people, we are all, in fact, connected in some way by an immigrant or immigration story. Knowing this, the notion of “what is American’ was and is paradoxically based on the “exclusionary politics of identity that admitted only straight, white, male, Angle-Saxon Protestants to the national consensus” and therefore “re-reading and re-visioning American identity requires

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<sup>12</sup> *Cultural Diversity* as defined in Kiser. Clyde V. “*Cultural Pluralism.*” *Annals of the American Academy of Political Science*. Vol 262: Reappraising our Immigration Policy. (1949): 117 – 130. “any type of cultural diversity within a give area, and might be applied to classification by race, ethnic group, religion, rural-urban status, occupation, income, or general level of living.”

<sup>13</sup> *Multiculturalism* as defined in Gumucio, Christian Parker. “*Interculturality, Conflicts and Religion: Theoretical Perspectives.*” *Social Compass*. 55(3): (2008) 316 – 329. “to share and learn through cultural differences, promoting understanding, harmony and justice in a society in which diversity prevails.”

a careful examination of the power structures that made its original vision possible” (Zabarowska 11).

Furthermore, it is a false assumption to think that cultural, ethnic and religious memoirs of Eastern European immigrants will all reveal a uniform and fervent love of the West (in opposition to the oppression of the Sovietized East). One example can be found in Eva Hoffman’s memoir *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* (1989). A Polish immigrant who relocated to Vancouver as a teen, then to New York as an adult, Hoffman speaks to the issues that many immigrants, including my mother, faced upon their arrivals in the West. Hoffman writes:

Immigrant energy, admirable name though it has gained for itself, does not seem a wholly joyful phenomena to me. I understand the desperado drive that fuels it. But I also understand how it happens that so many immigrant Horatio Algiers overshoot themselves so unexpectedly as they move on their sped-up trajectories through several strata of society to the top. From the perspective outside, everything inside looks equally impenetrable, from below everything above equally forbidding. It takes the same bullish will to gain a foothold in some modest spot as to insist on entering some sacred inner sanctum, and that insistence, and ignorance, obliviousness of the rules and social distinctions – not too speak of ‘your own place’ – can land you anywhere at all. As a radically marginalized person, you have two choices: to be intimidated by every situation, every social stratum, or to confront all of them with the same leveling vision, the brash and stubborn spunk. (157)

Hoffman saw the immigrant experience as imposed and void of in-between distinctions. Throughout her narrative this brings her great conflict. Life as an immigrant was defined by two social systems that defined one’s potential for upward mobility. For her, and for many others, it became the site of great anxiety. She writes, “I know I’d better do very well – or else. The ‘or else’ takes many forms in my mind – vague images of helplessness and restriction and

always being poor” (157). Perhaps these images of being poor, helpless and restricted are more realistic and universal than the fairy-tale optimism of the “American Dream.” For Hoffman, she finds traces of this anxiety in the writings of others, including one Mary Antin, whose autobiography dates back to the 1880’s. Hoffman’s close analysis of Antin’s writing leads her to unearth deeper meanings in Antin’s cloaked optimism. Hoffman writes:

Being a close reader of such remarks, I can find volumes of implied meaning in them. But it is exactly the kind of meaning that Mary Antin was not encouraged to expand upon. And so there it is, a trace she never follows up on: a trace of the other story behind the story of triumphant progress. (163)

The “story behind the other story” is, by all accounts, the true nature of memoir and family narrative. The “behind story” lives in that third space, the place where memory and history collide, where identities break apart, and where narratives are reclaimed and retold.

## Chapter 4: Robert Root and Strategies for Nonfiction Construction

Robert Root's *The Nonfictionist's Guide: On Reading and Writing Creative Nonfiction* (2008) presents useful practices with reflections on theories, methods, analysis. As a practicing nonfictionist, scholar and teacher,<sup>14</sup> Root's greatest challenge is to find a working definition of what nonfiction is. He writes, "that's the problem with this "non" business – it reduces everything to dichotomies" (3). For Root, it is less difficult to present what nonfiction is *not*(4): it is not a conforming art (8). He asserts that our definitions of nonfiction "need to be determined by our practices rather than insisting on the reverse – that our definitions determine our practices" (8).

For this, he renders a useful framework for understanding nonfiction: the nonfiction motive. Discussed earlier, the nonfiction motive derives from "the individuals' need to know or to understand a specific, limited topic," (6) and "the nonfictionist's motive is always, at bottom, a desire to understand the information with which she's confronted, to uncover its shape, to follow where it leads her" (7). For Root, the motive behind writing nonfiction must be real and significant – before "you can write nonfiction that truly matters to readers, it has to matter to you. You have to have the nonfiction motive" (7). The material exists on a plane of significance -- the importance of which, the extent to which it matters, the author determines by careful selection. The ordering of the story, by omission and inclusion, reveals the nonfiction motive. From here, the writer can simply "let

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<sup>14</sup> Retrieved 10 Oct. 2014 from <http://www.rootwriting.com>



the essay (or memoir or cultural criticism or what have you) become what it needs to become” (8).

To bring shape, or structure, to one’s motivated ideas, Root presents three distinct approaches to nonfiction: observed, perceived, and recollected experience. I consider these three thoughts to be a strategic system of approaches for ordering experience. The strategies serve as guides towards constructing one’s own practice as well as templates to analyze existing nonfiction texts. The three strategies can be used as the nonfictionist sees fit. They are flexible, malleable, and work within and for the hybrid, intertextual, interdisciplinary nature of nonfiction. One may adopt any variation of observed, perceived or recollected experience as useful approaches within or towards the same text at any time that they feel necessary. This is part of what makes creative nonfiction *creative* – flexibility of form is essential to the stories expressed by these strategies. Root’s approach provides a way for the writer to present her nonfiction motive toward her subjects and data. These strategies help the writer discover their form when “the writer works with the material and tries to discern an appropriate shape as understanding unfolds” (31).

Root’s strategies are:

1. Observed Experience: “what you’ve done or witnessed or what you would like to observe or witness” (15) and “something that is happening as the writer<sup>15</sup> records it” (178)

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<sup>15</sup> For clarification, when Root uses the term “writer,” I propose the term “creator” instead, as not all nonfiction is “written.”

2. Recollected Experience: “the stuff of memoir and personal narrative and cultural reportage” (16) and “something that happened that the writer later recalls and reports” (178).
3. Perceived Experience: “refers to what you’ve read or been a spectator for; it’s the cultural criticisms and expressive academic discourse or investigative reportage” (15) and “something that happened or exists that the writer has verification for thorough research, testimony, and deduction confirmed by reliable primary and secondary sources and conscientious consideration of evidence” (178).

Root clarifies these strategies with this assertion:

This assumes on the part of the observer, perceiver, or recollector the honest intention of recording or reporting the truth and, additionally, the capability or capacity to uncover, recognize, and “verify” the truth. (To ‘verify’ means to prove, substantiate, or confirm the ‘verity’ -- accuracy or reality – of something. (178)

In this part of my analysis of Kati Marton’s *Enemies of the People*, I present that she has utilized each of Root’s approaches in her development of her memoir. As ways to structure her own memories, her reflections, and her traditional boundaries between journalism and investigative reportage, these strategies provide a system for looking at her work as a truthful intertext. To look at the text through the lenses of these approaches provides a critical understanding of Marton’s unique positions as a researcher, journalist, writer and personal witness. And if these approaches are like lenses, then one can overlap on another, move in front of or behind another, or layer these lenses in any fashion the nonfictionist deems appropriate. The construction of Marton’s memoir relies

on these strategies to develop the interplay of history and subjectivity, the delicate construction and balance of archival materials and third-party data, and the tools for expressing her own authorial voice, memories and point of view.

### ***Observed Experience***

Root's first strategy, *Observed Experience*, is partially defined as something that is happening as the writer/creator records it. Marton utilizes this approach on several occasions throughout the memoir. Her adult experiences in the field while researching her parents lives, including all of her return trips to Hungary, are presented within her text through her own notes, records and observations. She writes:

At times during my research I felt as if I had joined the army of watchers. But my motives were different from the AVO's...I began the bureaucratic process of retrieving the rest of their files, never imagining there would be so much. As papers began to arrive, I realized the risk I had taken. What if the files revealed some terrible deceit? The loss would have been mine. In the end, the opposite was the case. Reading and rereading these pages has made me feel closer to both my parents. (254-255)

Marton lets us in on her worries and fears as she embarks on her journey. She is able to reflect on these moments because of her efforts to record her observations. Her observations show what happens to her as she records the moments, and as she shares them with the reader she evokes greater readerly intimacy. She returns to Budapest in 2008 with her daughter Elizabeth and shares her observations:

I am back in Budapest for my final research trip. As always, I inhale the familiar smells, which haven't changed: the aroma of coal and oil wafting from Danube barges, the nutlike smell of the great chestnut trees, and the

whiff of coffee that hangs in the air. My relationship to this city is akin to an old and hopeless love; a sense that between Budapest and me there is no future, only past. Old fears are mixed with an inexplicable long for that brief and interrupted childhood. (231-232)

This strategy is effectively applied in her construction of her adult point of view, as she chronicles her experiences researching and digging through not only the AVO archives, but of observing the familiar places of her traumatic past. This holds true in all of her one-on-one meetings and her present day sojourns to significant locations: her trip to the dilapidated synagogue in Miskolc where her maternal grandparent's worshipped, the Fo Utca prison where her parents were held, and to Csaba Utca, the neighborhood where she grew up in Buda. On visiting her old home in Buda, she writes:

Across the street from the church, in front of the new John Bull Pub, we pass a girl with dreadlocks in camouflage pants who look more at home in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. But as we climb the steep hill toward my old house, we pass men with gnarled hands who lean hard on canes and short, stout women, who are not part of the New Hungary. (242)

In essence, Marton's observations of Hungary share a modern resemblance to her observations of Brooklyn. Her contemporary observations, however, are imbued with her observations from her past life as a child on these same streets of Budapest. She remarks on this situation allowing the perspective of her two distinct observations to lead the narrative into a world of divergences, where the aging history of old Hungary contrasts with modern people, places and images.

### ***Recollected Experience***

Root's second strategy, *Recollected Experience* – refers to something that happened which the writer/creator later recalls and reports. A significant portion of

Marton's recollections of her childhood in Hungary are presented using this strategy. Her re-telling of what she saw during the moments leading up to and during her mother's arrest are by far the most dramatic events. Furthermore, her use of this strategic approach is particularly important when she contrasts her childhood in Budapest with her new life in America. Her emotional reunion with Csery Lajos (Chapter 2) is one example, as is a continued part of the above passage from the trip to her old home in Csaba Utca. She continues, "We stand for a while at the intersection of Csaba Utca and Roskovics Utca, where I learned to ride a bicycle and from where my parents were snatched by the secret police" (242). Here, two of Root's strategies are used simultaneously in the same passage. Marton is simultaneously observing and recollecting the significance of that street corner.

Additionally, while doing her field research and returning to Hungary, she reunites with old playmates and friends from her childhood – many whose parents were, in fact, informants. Her exhaustive research exposes new information about her family that she would never have known or understood as a child. She follows up on this research with meetings with Lajos Csery, with "Flower," and with her parent's American friends and allies, calling upon her recollected experience and challenging it with new data.

### ***Perceived Experience***

Root's third strategy, *Perceived Experience* refers to something that happened or exists that the writer/creator has found verification for through

research, testimony and deduction confirmed by reliable primary and secondary sources and conscientious consideration of evidence. This approach can be found in all of the data Marton discovers about her family in the AVO documents and even more surprisingly, the FBI dossier she receives concerning her parents. These FBI documents, obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, provide “215 pages of heavily redacted material . . . the first document, an internal FBI memorandum, is dated May 10, 1955 and shows that Cold War paranoia ran as deep in Washing as in Budapest” (246). Indeed, even before her family immigrated to the United States, the FBI also surveilled the Martons. Upon arriving to the US, the Bureau continued to suspect the Martons of being double-agents or spies for the Hungarian government. The Marton’s were under suspicion, even interrogated numerous times, until 1968 (246 – 249). Another new discovery for Marton about her parents!

But it is her meeting with “Flower,” her father’s very well known journalism colleague-turned-informant that is the most telling of how this method helps her continue with her memoir. She writes, “I had originally intended to end the memoir at this point for which it becomes an ordinary American story. Or so I thought . . .” (221).

A brief synopsis to situate “Flower,” (or code-name “Virag” in Hungarian [222]) is necessary. The man posed as a family friend, but was an agent for the Hungarian Foreign Intelligence Section, working under-cover in the USA in the State Department’s Correspondent’s Association. His task -- to recruit the Marton family to spy for the Soviet-controlled Hungarian state. She writes:

On May 21, 1962, the Hungarian Ministry of the Interior requested the Washington embassy's Intelligence Section to bring 'recruiting or at least opening channels of communication with [Marton's] wife, with recruitment in mind.' 'Flower' was instructed to maintain his relationship with my father, to avoid anything that might arouse suspicion, but to draft detailed memorandum regarding my parents' 'character, their vulnerabilities, their passions, their positive qualities. What is their relationship to each other, as well as toward their children? What is their financial situation? . . . Which of the Martons is better suited for recruitment?'

. . . 'Flower' was told to collect intelligence and pass it to the half-dozen intelligence agents posing as diplomats at the embassy, who then transmitted it to the home office...

. . . In Washington, where the watchers were themselves watched by Hoover's FBI, my parents were safer than they had ever been in their own country. What they could not have guessed was that agents in both Washington and Budapest were scheming to lure my parents back to Hungary. (222-223)

Due to these new revelations, of dark plots hatched to lure her parents to become informants against the United States for the AVO (224), Marton's nonfiction motive is renewed and the family saga continues.

It is her meeting with "Flower" on her final trip to Hungary in the late 2000's that utilizes the blend of all of Root's strategic approaches. It is at once an observed, recollected and perceived set of experiences and a layering of lenses upon which she will see and record her data. She confronts "Flower" with documents she has unearthed that reveal his true nature. She observes his denial and responds to him from the perspective of a reporter, but she is unable to hide her emotions with him. She re-tells the moments as she witnesses it. She writes, "'Flower's' coldness hardens me as well. I begin my interview as if it were just another among the thousands I have done in my writing career" (232-3). But Marton is unable to be only a reporter and researcher, she is and always will be the adult version of a child who lived through this turmoil and loss of which

she reports. And “Flower” is no less a villainous figure, even so much later in their lives.

### ***Further Considerations***

I propose that for further consideration Root’s strategies can be applied to nonfiction works that do not fall within the disciplinary mode or form of written creative nonfiction forms. I believe that these strategies are applicable to visual forms of nonfiction such as documentary film, video and television, as well as forms of oral history, photo essays, games, theater, screenplays, interactive sites and other kinds of experimental or multimedia modes of nonfiction because they provide useful approaches to experiences and data. Where nonfiction manifests itself, these forms will be useful to structure, analyze and order the data. Again, these strategies are non-exclusive and can occur simultaneously within any text. An author/creator can use any strategy at any time, and use one, or all three approaches, in any sequence or overlapping fashion within any given text at any time. This non-exclusivity goes beyond written text; it extends to all text. Indeed, I believe these are intertextual approaches that can be applied to any form that engages in the construction of a truthful, nonfiction presentation. My thoughts concerning the proposal for these strategies will be concertized further in Chapter 5 where they provide a useful tool in the discussion of my own creative practice and the development of this dissertation.

Root states:

Even if we exclude from this conversation the willfully deceptive – those who completely fabricate experiences they haven’t observed or do not recollect or deliberately mislead readers about what they actually perceive – and even if we accept on good faith the integrity of the observer/perceiver/recollector’s



efforts, we still can't guarantee the absolute truthfulness of what we read – or for that matter, what we write. (178-9)

In other words, it seems clear from my analysis of Kati Marton's memoir, that Root's strategies provide a structural network and a series of approaches, or lenses, that help define, develop and build what we see and what we consider to be nonfiction texts. Like a camera lens, they provide tools for the construction of an image, and in the case of nonfiction, a construction of truth. Fundamentally these strategies rely on the nonfiction motive, for nonfiction is nothing if not a truthful pursuit.

## **Chapter 5: A Messy Memoir: Constructing *American Boy***

*Not all nonfiction is about presentation of researched evidence. Much of it is about the experience or the recollection of the author.*

Robert Root, *The Nonfictionist's Guide*

*Creative nonfiction is inevitably, unavoidably, uncomfortably meta-narrative.*

Kristen Iversen, "How to Be Tough in Creative Nonfiction"

### ***An Addendum to My Family Narrative***

Most everyone has a family and a family story. This chapter focuses not only on my family and our story, but also on my experiences and reflections of authorship and constructing my own nonfiction rendition of one part of my family story. It's the beautiful and ugly truth, remembered. It is no doubt an "uncomfortable meta-narrative" (Iversen 199). By "meta-narrative," I mean, "Whereas narrative represents the story as it is manipulated by the discourse, metanarrative speaks about the narrative and exists as a function of the discourse" (Munson 20). It is my way of understanding "the writer's consideration of the social use which [s]he has chosen for [her] his form, and [her] his commitment to this choice" (Barthes 15).

Family stories define many experiences in the world as discourse surrounding the historical, the cultural, the social and the personal. The way that I structured these categories into the final documentary video is through the application of Robert Root's conceptual strategy. That is, I remembered my

family stories, collected formal research and assembled the data. Root's strategy of *perceived experience* is where "something that happened or exists that the writer/creator has found verification for through research, testimony and deduction is confirmed by reliable primary and secondary sources and conscientious consideration of evidence." This strategy functions in my creative work as a guiding principle.

In this chapter, as I recall the false starts, mis-steps, and varied approaches to building the video, I found a clear direction forward by putting *perceived experience* in practice. Because I am writing about myself and that "writing about yourself is a high-wire balancing act between revelation and a need to set bounds, to respect your own need for privacy and the right to privacy of others" (Kaplan 99), I found Root's approaches gave stability to my process. Anne Lamott writes, "Remember that you own what happened to you" (6); and in that sense, my mother owns what happened to her, and I own what happened to me while living with her, while writing about her and while constructing a documentary film about her life. Essentially, my aim here is to present my experiences in this creative documentary process with an honest and respectful manner. The re-sets, re-shapes and reframing of the story are, in fact, an essential component of working through Root's approaches. Not incidentally, the construction of this chapter adopts Root's strategy of *recollected experience* – something that happened which the writer/creator later recalls and reports. In this case, the meta-narrative is my recollection of making this documentary. As the creative work itself, and as a reflective piece, both sections exemplify Root's

approaches in order to work.

By *work*, in the first sense of “creative work,” I mean the video itself as a work of art, a creative construction, a collage. By *work*, as in the verb, I mean the process by which I have chosen to tell, to construct, and/or to omit the parts of the story that I believe are essential. To tell this story to my friends, family, colleagues and community is to work to serve a purpose, to assemble the elements for my audience. The purpose, or the point, is for the work to not *just tell*, but to *show*, and to build an illustrative collection of data that offers shared themes and universal truths for the audience to consider. These themes and truths help the larger audience connect to one another in a global sense through *my act of telling*. “Our histories and, in particular, our subjective telling of our histories collectively inspire a people’s history. What happened – the facts – are not even as important to empowerment and transformation as the telling of what we remember and how we remember it” (Macdonald 78). Because of the power of this process, to transform the audience, Root’s strategies are crucial to ensure that the facts do not get abused and the truth twisted.

What are these facts? What is it to remember? “It is to have an image of the past. How is this possible? Because this image is an impression left by events, an impression that remains in the mind” (Ricoeur, 10). What I remember, the impressions that remain in my mind, and how I remember them are shaped like this: from as far back as my memory reaches, I have listened to and always felt drawn in by the snippets of my mother’s refugee story. Many childhood memories, even my dreams, are formed by these impressions that remain in my

mind -- linked to my mother directly telling me, about their narrow escape, the death of her mother, the separation from her father when they arrived to the United States, how she moved to Los Angeles as soon as she graduated from high school.

These impressions are more vivid in my mind than any archival footage can paint them. Archival footage, however, is a wonderful tool to visualize that for which one does not have visual documentation. Thankfully the Internet Archive at [archive.org](https://archive.org) exists for researchers looking for new ways to both show and tell. The Internet Archive is a 501(c)(3) non-profit that was founded to build an Internet library. Its purposes include offering permanent access for researchers, historians, scholars, people with disabilities, and the general public to historical collections that exist in digital format.<sup>16</sup> This database provides a convenient way for researchers to access digitized film, video, and images for a wide variety of subject matter.

Using archival footage presents a creative challenge because it reveals an inevitable problem, the tension between personal and historical narrative. Here, I establish a mediated space in which I may re-write the object(s) of my story by re-ordering otherwise misplaced materials towards the presentation of my subjective truth, that is, the facts as I have assembled them. My relationship to these 'facts', these 'things', invites the audience to consider the possibility for both conjunction and/or tension between my autobiographic narrative and academic discourse.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://archive.org/about/>

## ***The Story – Part Two***

The story of my relationship with my mother is not nearly as exciting as the way I share my crafting of her childhood in the *The Story – Part One*, found in the *Introduction* of this dissertation. In the interest of preserving my faith in artful and truthful storytelling, the admission of some of my own painful experiences cannot go untold. Indeed, I hope these admissions become a source for “readerly intimacy.” I share them not only to bring the reader in more closely to my family narrative, but to also create a parallel understanding of my intellectual motivation. My aim is to show why my research interests in nonfiction have proven so powerful in my own identity and creativity. Nonfiction has provided a means of reconciling my own painful family history.

My parent’s separated permanently in 1985. That same year my mother stopped parenting my sisters and me. No more birthday parties, no more help with homework, no more showing up at my volleyball games or my eighth grade school play. I was eight years old when the war between my parents ended in a begrudged cease-fire, the same age my mom was when her mother died and her family fled post-Revolution Hungary. I don’t believe in coincidences.

Officially, my mom physically left me a few years later. I was a sophomore in high school, and I came home and she was gone. She had not died, but it was like a death in the family. She had packed up a few of her belongings one afternoon, leaving behind the entire house full of stuff – the pots and pans, the towels, the cats and the kids, and got into her boyfriend’s car and they drove

away. While my younger sister and I were sitting in our windowless high school, my mom decided, once again, to embark on a new beginning for herself. This new beginning came without warning and she abandoned my sister Katherine, age 14, and me, age 15, and left us with nothing but a lot of her old clothes, family mementos and no one to parent us. It was 1994 and I had not lived with my dad since 1985. It was a strange phone call, about a month later, when he realized he was going to have to suddenly start parenting two of his teenage daughters. It was another three years before I spoke to my mom again.

As an adult, I have made many excuses and found forgiveness for my mother's complicated behaviors, bad decisions, and hurtful actions *because* of these family stories. They provide a framework for the production of empathy. I repeat to myself, "well, she didn't grow up with a mother either" as if it's the perfect excuse for the things she did, for abandoning her family. And it's not like she knew this would happen, or that when I was little, that she was providing me with the ingredients of empathy. That by passing her family story down on to me, she would deposit not only the indelible, unbendable impressions they left in my childhood self, but that she would literally hand me the toolkit for compassion and forgiveness. I reconcile these facts because she must have felt the impact of her family's immigration story and the early death of her own mother on such a deep, impenetrable level.

At a vulnerable, impressionable age, she also became the mother-figure to her younger brother Pete and she still is today. She was already a grown-up by the time she was ten. I think this is a key to understanding how she was able

to abandon me emotionally and physically – that no matter what, she would always have her brother-son, the man-child life-trauma partner, my Uncle Pete. He is a lost boy, in his sixties now and unable to hold a job. My mom turned her back on things that most people, including Child Protective Services, would deem important with such ease, but she never abandoned Pete. The bond between them, as child survivors of a deeper trauma, was bigger than her connections to her own children.

I also find forgiveness when I remember that she was forced to leave everything, including her own dying mother, behind in Hungary. If “we recount things which we hold as true and we predict events which occur as we foresaw them” (Riceour 9), then my mother’s difficult young life served as the blueprint for my youth, adolescence and adulthood, indeed, the blueprint of her own difficult adult life as well.

Paradoxically, I have spent so much of my life drawn to my mother’s refugee story. It defines and fascinates me. I have shared her epic Hungarian story orally at cocktail parties for decades; I use it as a crutch in my therapy sessions. I shrug my shoulders and say, “It’s a Hungarian thing” which is reminiscent of Smith’s assessment of the Hungarian people and their unwillingness to discuss difficult events. Eva Hoffman speaks to this in her memoir:

Does it still matter, in these triangulations, that my version of reality was formed in Eastern Europe? It is well known that the System over there, by specializing in deceit, has bred in its citizens an avid hunger for what they still quaintly call the truth. Of course, the truth is easier to identify when



it's simply the opposite of a lie. So much Eastern European thinking moves along the axis of bipolar ideas, still untouched by the peculiar edginess and fluidity created by a more decentered world. (211)

Like Hoffman, my mother's first versions of reality were also formed in Eastern Europe and resemble this axis of bipolarity that Hoffman speaks of.

When I have been asked about my dissertation, I have reverted to my memorized script of my mother's experiences, hitting the high notes and punctuating the drama because it's *so easy to tell*. The peculiar edginess of her story stands out in the more decentered, post-immigrant, assimilated American world. According to Moore, "a subject becomes noteworthy, in other words, because the author takes close notice and then finds a way to transmit his or her own fascination with the subject to the curious reader" (Moore 11). I have taken close notice of the peculiarities of my mother's life story and my family narrative. I hold my mother's story as true in the sense that it happened and it happened to her, and I fashion this story as a conduit for understanding facets of my childhood.

I believe these subjects to be noteworthy: my relationship with my mother, my consideration of who my mother and I are through our past and in to our present, and the story of where my family came from. I've chosen different modes of nonfiction to "transmit" my fascinations – spoken, written, visual. In order to fully grasp the tenets of my fascination and interpret the strange events in my life that have unfolded vis-à-vis her experiences and choices, I actively engage in the *nonfiction motive* – "the desire to preserve the memory of one's experiences" (Root 10). In this case, by way of visual re-interpretation, I tell a story

about my family, not for the cocktail part, but for the audience that matters most to me, my son. I invite the larger audience to listen to a private conversation between a mother and her child. As he grows up, his understanding of the story will change; the telling of it may or may not.

Kristen Iversen writes, “You have to be tough to write creative nonfiction” (201). I always thought I was tough but my family story has a way of breaking me down. My experiences as a writer, video artist and media maker have underserved me in the daunting task of constructing a nonfiction visual story of my family’s Hungarian life. It’s so personal; it opens wounds. My proposed documentary has been my not-so-sweet pet albatross, pecking at my face, heart and hands, for the best part of my 30’s. It turns out that until now I have traditionally been a better orator of my mother’s fascinating journey than a focused practitioner of crafting a creative documentary of the same story. In other words, what I’ve lacked in the execution of the documentary practice I most certainly made up for with a lot of talk backed up by my overflowing wells of *curiosity* and *passion*.

So, somewhere inside me, I have always possessed the raw material, the language and motive to tell the story. According to documentary scholars, without these precious materials you have *nothing*. Sheila Curran Bernard writes “Passion is going to be your best weapon against discouragement, boredom, frustration and confusion” (39) and Dinty W. Moore states,

curiosity and passion are invaluable if you want to grow as a writer and push your writing to where it doesn’t just sit on the page waiting to be

read, but seems somehow to literally jump off the page, *demanding* that the reader sit up and pay attention. (7)

Over the years, my frustration with my own writing has been discouraging. In a section of his essay “Written Through the Body” called *How to Read This Essay*, William P. Banks writes:

Sitting at my desk, wrestling with the fragments that will become this essay, I think to my self, ‘How will my audience interact with this text?’ I resist creating a traditional theoretical essay...but will my resistance frustrate my readers early on so they quit reading? (22-23)

Banks captures my conflict perfectly. My commitment to developing the documentary story wavered. The story repeated at ever more cocktail parties, but it remained stagnant. It ceased to inspire me or my audience anymore. My frustration resulted from a lack of structure, effort and detail, and an inability to life the narrative to my level of emotional attachment. I was absolutely unable to move my work forward.

Sitting at my variations of a desk for the last seven years, working out different ways around the traditional theoretical essay, I have worried far too much about making sure the reader doesn’t quit. This was not just writer’s block, it was *everything* block. I needed to unlock my “nonfiction motive.” After all this time of self-imposed pressure to craft a perfect documentary, I had collected a large quantity of data. Elements of my story remained separated in dozens of tapes, transcripts, document scans, translations, interviews and journals from the time at the artist’s residency in Hungary. My writing simply sat there. It didn’t demand, it didn’t tell, it didn’t *work*. Houston would call this a “shattered narrative.” She writes:

One thing I am sure of, having spent the last five years inside a shattered narrative, is that time is a worthy opponent. It does not give up quietly. It does not give up kicking and screaming. It does not, in fact, give up at all. (Houston xx)

And neither do I -- because “a shattered narrative is still a narrative. We can’t escape it, it is what we are” (Houston xx). This is what I am. I am a Hungarian, I am maybe a Jew. I am a mom. And I will be a doctor of philosophy. I am the writer and maker of creative nonfiction. All the raw data was already there, but my nonfiction motive was still unclear. To discover this motive required the task of deep reflection, of coming clean, of letting the story tell itself. For “the writer of creative nonfiction has no (such) mask. She represents herself as herself on the page. Or rather, herself as a version of herself. It’s real. Yet all is artifice” (Iversen 198).

As I lay out the layers of successes and failures here, of constructing and transmitting what I have been so curious and passionate about for so long, I must stop to make a few confessions about myself (as myself). At the start of summer 2014, at a crippling stand-still, hot with anxiety, I packed up nearly 7 years worth of painstakingly collected personal and family data and just sat down and wrote my family story using the same 3-Act narrative structure I teach all my scriptwriting students to use. It was so simple that I feel dumb admitting how amazingly it worked as a method for extracting the narrative. Suddenly, the work started to make sense and to take shape.

The final form would come a little later, once the work started to become a plausible, watchable, archival piece (and I’ll explain this a little further in the

chapter). But there I sat, doing what I teach, or “attempting to do the impossible: to represent reality and to create literary art” (Iversen 198) and this impossible thing became, for the first time ever, a possibility. I realized then that not only do you have to be tough to write creative nonfiction, you have to be flexible *but not too* flexible; structured, *but not too* structured; imaginative *but not so* imaginative that you blur the sacred lines of truth. And you have to be a little kind to yourself too.

[Image 6 – Narrative Structure Diagram of *American Boy* script draft]

I began crafting the story in a script format. After several drafts, I settled on my final script. A voiceover, read by me, recorded and transferred into my software. Next, I began to search thoroughly through *archive.org* and the Prelinger archives for video and old film footage to support my script. This is another method of strategy that I advise my documentary students to use if they are short on B-roll or needed to cover a shot with video of something demonstrative, ironic, or illustrative. Searching topics as varied as “Hungarian revolution,” “teenagers” “1960’s” “post war suburbia” and “tuberculosis,” I created a sizeable database of archival films (preserved by Rick Prelinger in the public domain for anyone to use and free to download, remix and redistribute). With no copyright violations to worry about, each video downloaded quickly though, I had to convert many into compatible and editable video files. As shown on the database in Figure 7, the running times of the films range from 30 seconds to over an hour, and I watched each film, logging shots and takes in to bins and sub-bins, according to content, in my preferred editing system, Final Cut Pro.

[Image 7 – Archival Footage Database from July 6, 2014]

Many of the videos I downloaded were digitized versions of old newsreels, public service announcements, corporate films by the Jam Handy Organization, and retro commercials. For example, in my script, I talk about my mother graduating from Catholic high school in 1966. In *American Boy*, this line of dialogue is covered with footage of teenagers, at a picnic table. Then the reel cuts to a young male and a female getting in to a 1965 Mustang. There's no reason to think this couldn't be my mom and her friends at a lake or campsite in Ohio. These shots originate from the footage clip on the database entitled "The Bottle and the Throttle." It is a 1965 PSA described on *archive.org* as such:

Studies problems of drinking and driving, emphasizing the error of the statement that you must be drunk before your driving ability is materially impaired. Uses the story of a teenage couple who are involved in a serious accident on the way home from the beach.<sup>17</sup>

It is a terrible film, out-of-date, ominous, poorly acted. This PSA, however, contained exactly what I required for my visual work to *work* – a couple shots of teenagers in or around 1966, to illustrate the point in the narration when I speak directly about my mother graduating from Catholic high school in that same year. As an editor, the images in this film were meaningful as they illustrated moments in my script with visual materials. *Show, don't tell.*

In this manner, my editorial choices re-orient and re-write the images on the screen, using the archival footage to illustrate 'my' story rather than the story

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<sup>17</sup> Retrieved 07/31/2014 from  
<[https://archive.org/details/0992\\_Bottle\\_and\\_the\\_Throttle\\_The\\_E00776\\_01\\_50\\_27\\_08?start=494.5](https://archive.org/details/0992_Bottle_and_the_Throttle_The_E00776_01_50_27_08?start=494.5)>

that the original camera crew had intended to capture. This technique emphasizes the hybridity of my film text, crossing fluid boundaries to tell a new story in the mediated space between my narrative imagination and historical artifacts.

The use of archival footage to illustrate scenes for which I had no personal footage is a great example of the power of visual storytelling and editing. While the literary nonfictionist works creatively on paper/screen, uses words, syntax, white space and other creative text-based manipulations of ideas, the documentary nonfictionist uses image, video, visual effects, sound effects and score, dialogue and score to build meaning. To create meaning and to paint scenes, scenarios or moments with a mix of sound and imagery, the traditional documentary film/video nonfictionist can create visual associations with materials that are not and never were connected at all to the main theme. The editorial impact serves to provide a backdrop of visual context in relation to the voiceover, interviews, or story structure.

With this technique I traverse both ends of the nonfiction spectrum, bridging both the literary and visual forms to break media-specific boundaries. It relies upon the audience's psychological associations to create a perceived reality through an effective engagement with their inferences. The audience accepts that the teenagers from the archival footage are a representation of teenagers of the time period rather than the "actual" subjects. This technique utilizes the visual literacy of the mediated audience who can quickly grasp ideas of nationality, class, era, gender; a "situatedness" that occurs by viewing mere

seconds, even a few frames, of film footage. The footage creates a supporting counter-dialog to the voiceover script. I have discovered, as a scholar and artist, that while it is fun to research the footage, it is also incredibly difficult to work within and between these nonfiction modes. Indeed, I can admit that these archival resources are the glue that patched my entire work together. My original script was longer, and filled with heady commentary. It delved into multiple topics, both anecdotal and analytical. But when it came down to getting the *work to work*, I simply omitted parts of that script for which I did not have the footage to cover. Considering my audience and their need for the story to keep moving, I eliminated parts of the script that felt unmotivated without the right footage. This self-imposed editorial rule kept me from spinning my wheels and freed me to be more playful and less bound. Also, this allowed me to strip the layers down to essential form. *Let the content dictate the form.*

Next on my to-do list: spend countless hours scanning, resizing and organizing all the family documents I might ever need, including all the photos and letters my mom saved from her childhood, as well as my own collection of family photos. I located my old VHS copy of the Trever family 8mm home movies from the 70's and 80's (my mom and dad, plus my three sisters and I), and then transferred this nearly dead VHS tape to MiniDV. After that, I logged and captured all these stills and family footage into the same system of media management that I created for the archival footage in Final Cut Pro. Artistically, I chose to contrast the historical footage of the Revolution with the personal footage from five decades of family life.



Suddenly, after months of preparation, I was able to put some *work* into the work. This is typically thought of as the process of immersion, where:

Researchers must loose – and lose—themselves in the era they are studying. Not merely direct archival material but newspapers, textbooks, magazines, journals, encyclopedias, and other contemporary sources are essential because they provide the historical context for the material we work with. (Gold 15)

Like David Gold in *The Accidental Archivist*, I immersed myself in my area of study, having traveled to Hungary and back, excited by the journey, invigorated with possibility. I immersed myself in order to find my story, my nonfiction motivation.

The final documentary, *American Boy*, is a construction of this immersion. It is comprised from a variety of archival materials, combined with a revised and reworked voiceover read by me, a series of digitally effected scanned photos and home movies, plus music composed by my husband, Colton Weatherston.

In documentary, the assemblage of the formal elements turns *perceived experience* into more than just a strategy or approach to data; it became a hands-on practice. The video is more than method into practice; indeed, it is the “thingly” thing – not an aggregate of traits, but the thing that I wished to express.

Here, I offer the work as both a probing theoretization and as an autobiographical intervention. The tension between past and present, between visual and spoken narrative establishes a structural pillar for the work, a sense of irresolution; irresolution, not in the sense of being incomplete or unfinished, but in the sense of being situated in a history with the singularity of one human voice

communicating an unfinished story to an audience also engaged in a continuous struggle to understand a present unfolding in causation from the scattered details of an often unknowable past. Here again, the film represents a hybrid work with open boundaries that span non-fiction, history, and personal memoir.

As a hybrid work, *American Boy* contains a certain capacity to remain fluid, adaptable, and self-questioning by remaining suspended between conflicting objectives and results. Rather than being a weakness, this approach supports the many parts of the film that come together to work as an honest and respectful homage to my mother, her story, and my family's narrative. While clearly articulating our experiences of trauma, loss, displacement, and new beginnings, my film reaches for engagement with the audience on these themes as universal experiences, to be shared and understood in a broad sense with "readerly intimacy".

*American Boy* works traditionally as a short documentary because there is a defined narrative structure with the essential beginning, middle and end. This structure establishes the dramatic cues with conflict, rising and falling action, and resolution. As such, it fits within the audiences' expectations for experiencing a story. This also functions to create "readerly intimacy," by inviting the audience to experience the particulars of the story within a recognizable, universal format.

Personally, it works on a deeper level to provide a strong sense of accomplishment. This is a gift; the gift of completion. As a finished work of art, it offers a method for dealing with the psychology of loss. There is nothing more

satisfying than a finished work; it is a gift that moves me to tears of joy.

Further, I take pleasure in rhetoric and reflection, in writing about the making and writing itself, both creatively and theoretically. This concise personal essay archival film, driven by narration and music, shares a visual linear story of my mother's life directly with my son, and indirectly, with anyone who may have experienced war, exile and revolution in their family history. I finally completed the film I felt I was born to make. It is not perfect – because my goals were not perfection. My goals had to be grounded in the nonfiction motive, which took me time to find within myself. My authorial voice had been thwarted by “the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people...the main obstacle between” myself and a “shitty first draft” (Lamott 28). But now I can write about the piece because it is done; and in with this experience I am free. How do I know it's done? Lamott describes it:

This will probably happen while you are sitting at your desk, kneading your face, feeling burned out and rubberized...and even though you know the manuscript is not perfect and you'd hoped for so much more, but if you also know that there is no more steam in the pressure cooker and that it's the very best you can do for now – well? I think this means you are done. (94)

And so, this chapter of *American Boy* is done. No more burned out me. No more face kneading. This is not only the very best I can do for now, I think it is the best work I could have done for this portion of the project. And here, in this chapter that focuses on my creative practice, I can play more with structure than in the video; here I am allowed to weave more of a “meandering intellectual journey” (Moore 3). From pressure cooker to finished film, my purpose here is to

provide the reader a glimpse into the messy, unique-to-me, final details and meta-analysis of this long, drawn out, fully immersive process.

### **The First Forms – and Failures**

A discussion of the false starts that preceded my work provides insight to the methods I chose to use in order to complete my documentary video. The tenets of good drama and dramatic structure demand that a heroine face crisis after crisis. The let-downs, betrayals and struggles I faced helped me find my voice, to engage my audience and tell my story. Finding my voice has been my dramatic need, the core of my creative dilemma, the object of my desire. Before I found my voice, I made the mistake of thinking that I could write out of “someone else’s dark place” (Lamott 199). I was trying to speak for my mother. How could I tell her the story from her point of view? Some authors can do this, but I could not. How could I tell her story when clearly she does not want to tell it herself? I tried to create narrative distance from a “subject” who is already very close to my personal story. I failed, time after time, to find my narrative motive. Or did I? These apparent failures set the stage for the discoveries that finally set the project into motion.

One could easily say that my project really began during the 1956 Revolution, before I was even born, when young men and women took up arms against the Soviets, and other young men and women took up cameras and recorded the events on film as they occurred. These people captured the footage which I would use decades later. In this process, they engaged in Root’s

method of *observed experience*, recording the actual events as they happened. Much of their footage from their *observed experience* was destroyed, however, many materials survived. As newsreels from 1956-57 became public domain, Prelinger Archives collected, digitized and stored them in the online database at archive.org. These materials are available for research and public interest, providing documentaries with source material. I had zero intention of using the archive when I started out on this adventure because I envisioned a documentary with interviews of my mother and *cinema verite* footage. I wanted to reunite our extended Hungary family. I wanted epiphanies and release, to feel deeply moving moments and capture them on video. But these goals were unrealistic and, in the end, the archival materials became the key to my nonfiction motivation.

In the beginning, I envisioned this documentary to be long, grand and epic; a feature film with Oscar potential. My ambition was to craft a deeply personal investigation, with detailed questions for my mother and my uncle Peter. I wanted all of the grit, no painful memory unexplained. I wanted an exorcism of my family's demons. And yet, I fancied myself the Studs Terkel of family narrative – delivering profound and universal stories of my ordinary family with an ease that might soften their emotional impact. It seems so naïve now. This approach was destined to fail because of my overblown expectations. My mother, like Kati Marton's father, had found safe refuge in concealment of her 'truth' and I was on a mission to 'out' her. She bristled and evaded my attempts to open up a discussion. Had I learned nothing from a lifetime of knowing my

mother? I don't care what Barthes says: *expectations* are the death of the artist.

I recorded a dozen interview tapes of my mom and my uncle. We were all so very chatty. My carefully honed, organized and deliberate questions felt like a soft-power AVO interrogation. She ignored, avoided and skirted my inquiries. Instead, we talked about her cats. When I got back to task, a series of brisk answers ensued: "I don't remember," "it was so long ago," "I was too young". Then, we all smoked a *lot* of cigarettes and stared into the uncomfortable silence. It felt fake and forced.

The material is unusable. I dare say the footage is *unwatchable*. I cringe looking at it, I cringe writing about it. I want to permanently hide it like a bad memory. It doesn't *work*. I did learn from those interview experiences, however, critical facts about my mom and my uncle: *They don't want to talk about it*. This kind of approach wasn't going to work and I moved on with the knowledge that I would have to find a different narrative and a revised nonfiction motive.

The next angle arose when I spent three months in Hungary through the artist's residency from the HMC. This experience was and is one the most exciting things to happen to me in my life. I look back fondly and know that I really was on quest to reconcile my mother's past with our relationship in the present. And this quest fit perfectly with my plans to be *epic*. While in Hungary, I explored many facets of life in Budapest, but one of my main purposes was to

find my grandmother's grave.<sup>18</sup> All I had to go on to find my grandmother's grave were some unreliable "facts." I had two photocopies of old pictures: a picture of my grandmother Valeria's headstone with her married name on it "Martonhegyi Istvanné" (Mrs. Istvan Martonhegyi), and a picture of her parents and siblings at this grave with hand-written notes of our best guesses of who each person is in the photo.

[Image 8 – Grandmother's Grave – Martonhegyi Istvanné]

[Image 9 – Family at Grave with notes]

These photos were sent to my grandfather from her family in Hungary after she died and Istvan immigrated. My mother supplied me with black and white photocopies with which I tried to locate the grave.

There I was in Budapest in 2008, an American woman in her early 30's with a tripod, a MiniDV camera and these vague pictures. With the help of some local people who struggled with my attempts to speak my mother's native language, I found my grandmother's grave. It was in the Farkasréti Cemetery -- not the Kerepesi Cemetery, as my mom had thought. Only the grave did not have my grandmother's name on it -- it bore the name "Garaí Agostonné" (Mrs. Agoston Garai). Who was Garaí Agostonné and how did she steal my grandmother's grave?

[Image 10 – Garaí Agostonné grave – 2008]

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<sup>18</sup> This is in reference to my maternal grandmother, who was Catholic. She married Istvan Martonhegyi, whose parents "assimilated."

As far as epic questions in my world go – this was definitely up there. After a few phone calls through a translator and a long meeting with the director of Farkasréti cemetery, it was determined that Garaí Agostonné was my grandmother's sister, Margit! She is in the family photo with her husband Agoston and her two small children, Agoston Jr. and Zsuzsa. When I received that photo from my mom, all she wrote was “My mother's sister” – which of course, concealed the ‘truth.’ The little son in the photo is Agoston Garaí II, named after his father, Margit's husband, then a sixty-year old man, who buried his mother with her sister (my grandmother Valeria) and replaced Valeria/Istvanne's cracked and ruined headstone.

Decades before I began my quest, young Agoston took over this family plot and when Margit died in 1980, he reunited the two sisters. In Hungary, graves are not owned, they are rented, and re-rented every 15 - 25 years. Agoston took over the rent of his long-dead Aunt Valeria's grave, 15 years after she had died in 1957. Of course, I had no knowledge of this culturally specific, autogeographic information, until I arrived in Hungary and hauled my film equipment all over the wrong cemetery, and a few days later, all over the correct cemetery.

Once I discovered the grave, and the existence of my mother's little cousin Agoston, he and I made a plan to meet each other. Later that week, in a small streetside café across from the famous Opera house on Andrásy *utca*, I met my long-lost Hungarian second-cousin Agoston and his wife Erzebet. It was amazing. There are few words to describe the moment, but I believe this would



certainly follow Kirsch and Rohan's philosophies of research as a lived process. I was much too emotionally present to think of distancing myself from this "lived" experience to pause to operate my MiniDV camera. Epic failure? Maybe.

Though I left the café without the footage I had hoped for, I have come to accept this as an integral part of my research.

In this one good photo of all of us, it's clear that this man is related to me. You can see it in our cheeks.

[Image 11 – Photo with Agoston].

In the final documentary video for this dissertation project, I ended up not using any of the thousand or so photographs I shot in Budapest either. Nor did I use any of the handheld video footage, or any of the awkward news-style stand-ups I shot of myself on my quest in the cemetery or at other historically significant locations. In the end, like the unusable interview footage with my mom and everything else I deemed awful, there was still a substantial amount of material that I might find useful, items that could even illustrate my curiosity and passion. These useful items are found in the details themselves – in the stories we shared, the things I learned. The tiniest bits of remembrances or emotion, or nuance that I gleaned from all of these experiences as a traditional documentary researcher became the seeds that made the final text grow and work as a piece of nonfiction. None of the hard data – the photos, the videos, etc. – *worked*. The real experience, the real heart of the project, is in the stories, the details, in finding the *affect* – it's not in forcing materials into a film and trying to make them

work when they cannot.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, as I reflect on my false starts, I see that I was not wasting time. Rather, I was collecting data from my travels, from my mother and her family. Even more importantly, I was engaging in all three of Robert Root's strategies for developing and crafting truth, voice and point of view in nonfiction:

1. Observed Experience: What I observed in Hungary firsthand; what I've observed/experienced with my mother.
2. Recollected Experience: Details from my mom and her brother's interviews and their memories. My own memories of their story and of them.
3. Perceived Experience: Everything else. All the research, data collection, archival materials. My own faculty of discernment to sift through the validity of the data.

Root's strategies are relevant to my work and I learned to use them to craft my mode of nonfiction. The telling of this long creative process informs the shape of my final approach, the approach that stuck.

### **The Final Form:**

The final form came to me as if in a dream. Hazy and asleep, late one

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<sup>19</sup> My photos and my blog from Hungary can be found here:

- Blog: <http://phdkt.blogspot.com>

- Photobucket: <http://s4.photobucket.com/user/spytech/library/budapest>

night in June 2014, I was nursing my five month old baby boy. It was like any other night in the early summer. Everything was perfectly quiet. All was still as the blue light of pre-dawn filtered into my bedroom.

Sticking with my plan to be respectful of the most private and personal details of my childhood, to choose the kindest descriptions possible, my current relationship with my mother can only be described as *complicated*. I attribute my frustrated false-starts over the years to the ebbs and flows of her performance to conceal her story and total discomfort to recording devices.

But the truth of the matter is, I have always possessed the raw material, the curiosity and the passion, to make this work *work* without her creative input. I have always had my own memory of her story as my foundation. I have always had access to research and sources, documents, archival video footage and images, and my own narrative strengths to piece the story around her, without her. I just *couldn't* do it.

Until that night. As my little baby nursed, my mind decided to stop churning away at the rancid butter of despair that I've spread all over this project. The word "purpose" popped in to my head. I asked myself, "What is the purpose?" And the final form found its ground in the shape of a new audience under the big umbrella of the "personal essay film," and here I found my purpose, my nonfiction motive. According to The Center for Media and Social Impact, personal essay films "work to illuminate big issues in history because they are small statements about big things. They are about resisting the voice of the

powerful, and about claiming the power of representation. Sometimes they work to connect the disconnected.” In my case, the personal essay film helped me reconnect to the story, to make my small statement about many big themes including war, family, displacement, and new beginnings. The personal essay and its purposes, serve as testimony “to the importance of history, the importance of a public memory, of a record that represents the subjectivity of the participants.”<sup>20</sup> Understanding these shifts in my practice and approach allowed me to free myself from the disappointments of my past attempts. Through the use of archival media and in my shift in voice and tone, I was able to embrace a different approach with a far more satisfying purpose and to focus on a new, really adorable audience, my son, the next generation to receive this family story.

My new audience came to be found in the little, round, peaceful face of my then five-month old son, Colton. For who else is more important in my life? Who do I owe and wish to share this story with more than him? All this time, my imaginary audience of this ever-unfinished documentary was too large, too looming, too judgmental. I didn’t think they would want my personal essay film with all its imperfections. My imagined audience wanted everyone else’s *perfect* film. As noted earlier, this gross effort towards perfectionism effectively achieved exactly what Anne Lamott predicts: “perfectionism will ruin your writing, blocking inventiveness and playfulness and life force...perfectionism means that try desperately not to leave so much mess to clean up. But clutter and mess show us that life is being lived” (28). And the purpose, again, is to offer my voice as an

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<sup>20</sup> Retrieved 7/24/2014 from <<http://www.cmsimpact.org/media-impact/related-materials/case-studies/teachers-guide-use-personal-essay-films> >

expression of the life of my family, to find a universal understanding in the particulars of our lived experience. My fictitious audience of the unknown work did not care for my clutter, my imperfect world. They would criticize and dissect me, tell me I was a disgrace to my Hungarian people, to my grandfather's legacy, to my mother's suffering. I was suspended and paralyzed, and I had no idea how to reach my audience, or even who my real audience would be. According to Sheila Curran Bernard, reaching your audience is your key to success: "Keep in mind" she writes, "that in the end, you still want to reach people with a subject and story that grab them, hold them, and – ideally – stay with them long after the lights are back on." (40). In terms of audience, I felt doomed; in terms of epic story, I was tortured in the bottomless pressure by my creative block.

But in the blue light of that early morning, I suddenly embraced Moore's uncomplicated notion, "The creativity of the form is in how the story is told" (4). Shifting the focus of my audience shifted the focus of my purpose in one of the most productive epiphanies of my creative career. It allowed me to reshape the telling of the story, indeed the form itself, for no one but my son. The personal essay film became my key to success, my key to my audience, my conduit to tell this story for my son as a proxy to share it with a larger audience. No one had earned the power to halt my work dead in its tracks and yet there it was. Stalled, spinning my wheels in a bitter rut.

How I tell the story to my son vastly differs than how I tried to tell it for my mother. Changing the narrator position provided the key to re-start my project. It opened up a clearing through which I was able to craft my family narrative.

Looking down at my son and realizing this new purpose, that this story is for him, was a paradigmatic shift in the balance of power, “for what makes a paradigm is not just the form of the discordant concordance or the model that subsequent tradition identified as a stable literary genre” (Ricouer 69) and “if we encompass form, genre and type under the heading “paradigm,” we shall say that the paradigms are born from the labor of the productive imagination on these various levels (Ricouer 69). This shift in narrative voice was a labor of my productive imagination. Signaled by a shift in the audience through the change in pronouns – not “my mother” but “your grandmother,” the narrative process became suddenly enjoyable.

Finally, my curiosity and passion combined with my need to reconcile my family narrative with the relationships in the present. I found my purpose. My tone of anxiety, impatience, and frustration was suddenly gone. The space where I was unable to continue due to the blocking of my emotions and the paralyzing relationship with my mother had diminished. By changing the pronoun from “my mother” to “your grandmother,” and speaking to a different person, I was able to communicate that I already knew to shape a narrative that I’d already written, and to inform my son about his family’s history without the affect of anger. The shift in narrative motive was a rewarding experience.

Perhaps it is confusing to call the film *American Boy* since the main character, my mother, is a woman, and I narrate the piece and I too am a woman. But that is also the point -- to demonstrate the transformations we all experience as generations hand down family stories, whether matrilineal or

patrilineal. The story is about how my son came to be an American, instead of a Hungarian. I might have had a daughter, but instead I had a son. He is a little boy. He is an American. And the circumstances by which he came to be an American historically are universal to any American who has an immigration story. And he is the main focus of the story because it is told for him and to him. Though this discussion does not render the title without complications, I do hope that in the future, if I am able to make further installments to his story, such as the exploration of his paternal grandparents lives, and the story of his maternal grandfather (my dad, Ken), then the piece will become part of a series. This is where the “what now” and “what next” questions come in to play. *American Boy* is only one part of my son’s family narrative and I am still full of the same curiosity and passion to explore the rest of his ancestral story.

While this particular, and perhaps final form of *American Boy* falls in the genre of the personal essay documentary, it is also a letter to my son. On writing letters as a way to navigate a difficult topic, Anne Lamott writes:

When you don’t know what else to do, when you’re really stuck and filled with despair and self-loathing and boredom, but you can’t just leave your work alone for a while and wait, you might try telling part of your history – part of a character’s history – in the form of a letter. The letter’s informality just might free you from the tyranny of perfectionism. (172)

Looking back, I *needed* this project to be perfect – not just as a dissertation but also as family document. This “letter” allowed me to reframe my purpose and, ultimately, share my imperfect family story with my son, and by proxy, open a door to a larger audience, who may find a common cause in looking at history with a hope for the future.

In shifting from “my” to “your,” I believe I effectively added to the final form, by adopting the practice of turning the documentary video into a letter to my son. Suddenly, this daunting work, was fun; it was new. Additionally, in a personal interpretation of Paul Ricoeur’s sense of the “productive imagination”, I do not think it is by accident that my magic moment of realization occurred while nurturing my child from my own body. It is the telling of history through a variation of an embodied experience.

What I learned in this process too, is that in this paradigmatic shift, narrative voice and intended audience are linked in important ways. My original script began, “My mother was a refugee.” When I read it I sounded angry, hardly able to swallow the years of emotion I have lived with my mother. It made me so uncomfortable to listen to while editing that I formed a block, a protective barrier against my own progress. Once I began speaking the story to my son, however, everything softened. By stating “Your grandmother was a refugee” instead, I shifted the balance of power back to me, and my voice demonstrated an appropriate tone for a child audience. This shift allowed me to speak without judgment and to share the same empathy and compassion around my mother that I have searched for during much of my adult life.

I cannot gauge to what extent *American Boy* will be a success or if it is the kind of text that can make an audience care about my family of my life. What I do hope is that, like Balazs Szabo’s memoir, it encourages the audience instead to *imagine*. I hope that the film inspires the audience to let go of their comfort, of their peace, of their own life experiences, and to imagine themselves as a child



witness to war and displacement, as a child who suffered the loss of parents, and to imagine the perseverance needed to survive these kinds of losses. I hope that they not only feel and experience the difficulties, but that their empathy for others grows as a result of their viewing experience. As my son grows, I hope the themes and information in this film resonate with him continue to resonate with him as his own intellectual development grows and changes. As his mother, I want this film to inspire him to ask questions, to engage, and to find his own curiosity and passion for the stories of his family, the stories of those around him and stories of the world at large. If this is the long-term outcome of my film, then it will have fulfilled the greatest achievement.

Today, while my son is still a baby, I see the film as embodying a kind of success to the extent that it opened a pathway for discourse in my dissertation. The documentary is representative of Root's strategy of *perceived experience* in action because of the narrative structure and the ways in which I found and developed the story. It is successful, in my mind, because it is *done*, because it is a finished text. In it, I created a hybrid of disciplines, an intertext, a nonfiction visual representation of my mother's refugee story. I believe it is most successful because of the honest purpose of sharing my family's story to my young son and preserving the universal truths that my mother's life encompasses. I do not claim that the final video of *American Boy* is a perfect text. Rather, it is an example of Hampel's notion that the "the facts of the story mattered less than the communion of the word, the telling and the listening as entry point to a world outside of linear time" (13). In other words, I aim to provide an entry point into my mother's

narrative, flaws and all, for my son and for the larger reading, viewing and listening audience.

We have all felt degrees of loss, loss of things of course, but more importantly, loss of what we desire; piece of mind, comfort, family, love, home. Our psychological maps are pinged with checkpoints that register different losses over time. We have all dealt with pain, we have all tried once or twice to reinvent ourselves and I strongly feel that most of us believe in new beginnings. Most of us have hope. *American Boy*, to me, is a reflection my determination to teach my son kindness, compassion and hope. This story becomes an entry point for him to engage with his grandmother's life as a tool for processing some of the sadder and more complicated sides of humanity – loss and pain. In this way, the video is another kind of success because I was finally able to tell my mother's story and to create a space of understanding and compassion for a young girl who faced terrible challenges in her life, who lived through great struggles and who still struggles. Whether it will achieve some further critical, artistic or commercial success does not matter. As a work of creative nonfiction, a work of art, *American Boy* has achieved my purpose, achieved a completion to my nonfiction motive.

Everyone has a family story. And this is part of mine.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

### *Synthesis*

The nonfictionist must find and possess a kind of truth. The truth may take on many forms. She must be able to explain who, what, where, when, why and how, using a different array of the forms found in traditional disciplines of journalism, history and literature. Margot Singer posits the untethered facets of creative nonfiction as forms based on love and honesty:

We love creative nonfiction, of course, because of its blurry borders, the way it toggles back and forth between fact and the imagination, between expository and lyric modes. We love its ability to blend scene, description, meditation, raw fact, speculation, and reportage. Creative nonfiction casts aside journalism's formulaic 'five W's' and inverted pyramid structure and neutral third person invisibility for a vast array of forms. This plasticity, of course, makes some people nervous. If a piece of nonfiction reads like fiction or poetry, how can you tell it's true? You have to take the truth on faith – not form. (141)

A desire to discover and possess the truth drives Kati Marton to unlock her family's secrets, her family's "Pandora's Box." For Marton, writing is an act of assembling the truth, through which the bare phenomena become sacred facts. These facts build toward a truth which honors her grandparents' memory and her parents' legacy. The sacred nature of this truth is the underlying motif found in *Enemies of the People*. Indeed, the sacred space underlies the philosophies behind all of Marton's journalistic work and nonfiction texts. In the process of searching for the truth about her family, Marton transformed herself from news

reporter and journalist to nonfictionist and memoir writer,<sup>21</sup> building upon each discipline to express a new vocation with expanded boundaries.

I had hoped that making my documentary video would have helped bring me closer to my mother. I can't say that it has. I can say that overall the immersive experience, the process of questioning, researching and analyzing my own motives and the methods of others have helped me reconcile the past with the present. I have a much stronger knowledge of how to communicate my family narrative and how to analyze other nonfiction texts. This is how I have come to understand the "nonfiction motive" or what Jeffrey Olick calls "intellectual motivation." I hope I have proven Olick wrong -- that a personal preoccupation is no basis for a dissertation. Such preoccupation can indeed make a completely reasonable basis for a dissertation, as I hope to have demonstrated here. Academics are always exploring personal passions and intrigues even if they are not focused on family narrative or nonfiction.

What does this dissertation share in terms of creative nonfiction and its many forms? How does memoir, as a literary art, benefit from such personal discussion dressed in academic verbiage? Perhaps the answers to these questions can be found in the metanarratives of the many examples from the selected memoirists, or perhaps the answers are more appropriately found in a reader's response to a nonfiction text. In either case, the strategies for constructing a nonfiction narrative often share the same overarching traits, the outcomes tend to showcase the creators motivation to reconcile some part of

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<sup>21</sup> From my notes from Jaszi Lecture

their world. Perhaps Robert Root massages the discussion towards a more appropriate approach that puts to rest the tiresome, distracting issue of dichotomies in the hybrid, intertextual, interdisciplinary space of creative nonfiction:

For me, terms like 'personal' and 'academic' aren't very useful descriptors. Isn't the opposite of personal 'impersonal'? Shouldn't the opposite of academic be 'non-academic'? But then we're back to defining things by what they're not. Moreover, such terms generate a false dichotomy. The personal and the academic are not in opposition to begin with . . . Expressional, transactional, poetic – these terms cover very nicely the range of writing not only students but also working writers do. (5)

In other words, the false dichotomy generated by useless descriptors has proved useless here as well. In my experience, there is no competition between the personal and the academic. It seems only natural for people to intellectualize what they are most passionate and curious about.

I should disclose now that this dissertation you have read is simply a thinly veiled work of creative nonfiction. It is an attempt to stick it to the opposition, to erase the false dichotomies, to bridge the personal and the academic in an intellectual, creative and researched practice. Do you feel tricked? Do you feel like you've been let in on a secret, or another layer of "readerly intimacy?" Both? Neither? Does it even matter? The acts of truth-telling and knowledge-production challenge me to confront my history, my expectations, my limitations, and my own situated being. Through my creative practice I have found my strengths and I engaged in a closer discourse with the sacred facts of my own family narrative.

***“He told me the story of silver.” Or, No Two Snowflakes***

There were thousands of people affected by the Hungarian Revolution, so why is my family story significant? I believe it is significant because historical events are so specific to each individual person and no one else could tell my family narrative like me, not even my mother. In fact, her story would be a very different story, if she were willing to tell it. Instead, I told my story, which includes her. The universalities of our common stories, however, lie within the specificities. For example, regardless of the specifics of a given family narrative, those who left Hungary for the U.S. traveled not dissimilar paths. Everyone comes from some kind of family and simply by being in the world, everyone possesses some kind of family history. My specific details of loss are mine to uncover and deal with. Is it like this for others? Since no one has the same story, or even the same version of the same specific story, how can the act of constructing a family narrative help us reconcile our cultural differences? I believe reconciliation can be found in the idea of what a historical family trauma means to current and future generations and how history reverberates in the space of now. For instance, what does the Civil War mean to a white Southerner of Scottish descent, or a black Southerner who can trace his or her ancestry to Senegal; what does the war in Angola in the 1970's mean to an Angolan living in the U.S. now? What does the Vietnam War mean to the Cambodians who settled in the United States? What does the Holocaust mean to today's generation of American Jews, Germans, Hungarians and any ethnic, political or social group who still struggle to process the effects of this event generations later? What

does genocide and atrocity mean to any group at any given time? We cannot know the extent of the psychological impact of these events without the stories of the survivors or without the interest of later generations of readers and audiences.

Furthermore, we cannot predict when one's memoir will surface within popular media and change the discussion of historical events. One example can be found in the memoir and slave narrative of Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave*. Northup's memoir, published in 1853, exists in the public domain and is available for free at the Internet Archive<sup>22</sup> and The Public Domain Review.<sup>23</sup> (The Internet Archive, not incidentally, is the same site that offers the Prelinger archives, which provided all the public domain film sources used for *American Boy*). With the commercial success of director Steven McQueen's 2013 film adaptation of Northup's text, and subsequent Oscar™ nominations and wins for *12 Years A Slave*, mass audiences who never heard of or knew about this free EBook are now familiar, in a non-academic, everyday discourse, with Northup's traumatic experiences. While the film version presents a dramatic remediation into a cinematic narrative form, one cannot discount the renewed discussion this film has brought forth on important subjects such as slavery, American history, and black cultural identity, outside of academia and into the public sphere.

Memoir can reshape or redefine how an audience might access time,

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<sup>22</sup> Retrieved 10 Oct. 2014 from <https://archive.org/details/twelveyearsasla01nortgoog>

<sup>23</sup> Retrieved 10 Oct. 2014 from <http://publicdomainreview.org/collections/twelve-years-a-slave-1859/>

place, people, history and traumatic events. Our entry point to history is created by those who have survived such events. A survivor's story is often framed within the context of one's experiences or understanding of the world. A particular passage from Primo Levi's third memoir *The Periodic Table* (1975) exemplifies the larger significance of the individual as an element in the greater process of building a collective memory through storytelling and creative nonfiction. Levi, an Italian chemist, a Jew, and a Holocaust survivor, frames his understanding and coping with the atrocities he witnessed through the recognizable structures and metaphorical underpinnings of science.

Later in his life, Levi meets with Cerrato, an old friend and fellow chemist:

I asked him if he would like to contribute to this book. If he would, he should tell me a story and, if he would allow me to make a suggestion, it should be our kind of story, in which you thrash about in the dark for a week or a month, it seems that it will be dark forever, and you feel like throwing it all up and changing your trade; then in the dark you espy a glimmer, proceed groping in that direction, and the light grows, and finally order follows chaos. Cerrato said seriously that indeed sometimes things went like that, and that he would try to come up with something; but in general it was really dark all the time. You couldn't see the glimmer, you beat your head again and again against an ever lower ceiling, and ended by coming out of the cave on your hands and knees and backward, a little older than when you went in. While he was interrogating his memory, his gaze fixed on the restaurant's presumptuously frescoed ceiling, I took a quick glance at him and saw that he had aged well, without deformations, on the contrary growing and maturing; he had remained heavy, as in the past, incapable of refreshment and laughter, but this was no longer offensive, and more acceptable of a fifty year old than in the youth of twenty. He told me the story of silver. (203-4)

The story of silver is Cerrato's story – it is its own singular element. More specifically, it is Cerrato's element of choice. Silver represents his self, his



identity. But, silver is only one element that exists within the larger context of the elements of the periodic table. The periodic table, which provides a structure to our scientific understanding of all the elements in the known universe, serves as a metaphor for the landscape of self, identity, collective memory and personal narrative.

What this passage presents to the reader is Cerrato's individual narrative nestled within the framework of the periodic table, which itself represents the bigger picture of the world – or, Levi's world of the book, and therein, a collection of survivors' memories. Within this memoir, other elements present different aspects of Levi's story and metaphorically represent different experiences from other survivors, other times, places, and events.

The difficulty that survivors face in communicating their stories often presents itself through transference of story into symbolism and metaphor. Where negotiating the painful memories of the past with inescapable personal loss leads to a cognitive suppression of historical truths, Levi's "kind of story" addresses the past with metaphor and a framework for understanding. His kind of story is one where the writer would "thrash about in the dark" and then "in the dark you espy a glimmer, proceed groping in that direction, and the light grows, and finally order follows chaos." His is a description of how one makes sense of, speaks of, tells of, and writes of a traumatic life – by making order out of chaos. "Thrashing about in the dark" is simply one place where a survivor may choose to confront their own psychological loss.

There are thousands of suppressed atrocities that humans live with in silence. We inflict them upon one another in every era. To process and cope with these unspeakable acts of horror, we may choose to use art, metaphor and language to set free our nonfiction motive, to speak truth to injustice, to purge the burden of suffering. To find purpose difficult memories resulting from large-scale historic events is perhaps the greatest function for the authors of nonfiction, documentary and memoir. While large-scale history frames the general events of many family narratives, the close-up details establish an emotional presence which functions, in memoir, as the mediation of these histories, their contradictions and cognitive distortions. This achieves the author's purpose, her motivation: to confront, explore and reveal a truer 'truth.' Here the emotional presence of the story sustains the discourse between the author and the audience, giving this form of intimate storytelling its power to express a shared understanding. Empathy is not optional.

But even the power to create memoir and nonfiction from loss and trauma does not always provide a full release. What can we make survivors who find the courage to write their memoirs, but are still so haunted by their own memories that life becomes too difficult to live? The death of Primo Levi in 1987 was ruled suicide.<sup>24</sup> Levi, a chemist and Auschwitz survivor, lived to tell the tales of his own trauma and survival via his writings. His psychological makeup, however, was greatly affected by loss. Of Levi's life, Elie Wiesel commented, "Primo Levi died

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<sup>24</sup> Retrieved 08/09/2014 from  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/bday/0731.html>>

in Auschwitz, forty years later,"<sup>25</sup> a comment that speaks to the ongoing struggle in Levi's soul to find peace beyond his past. Even the therapeutic act of writing, of building a readerly intimacy with his audience, of negotiating memory and history with metaphor and art, could not fully exorcize his pain.

While many people share similar traumatic experiences, similar exposures and similar outcomes to events, no two stories are ever the same, not even from the same moment of the same day. We live inside the *Rashomon* effect: "the subjectivity of perception on recollection, by which observers of an event often produce substantially different but equally plausible accounts. The point for investigators is that the truth is in the amalgam of the individual accounts."<sup>26</sup> I'm certain that if my mom and my Uncle Pete could ever truly open up about their childhood in Hungary, and their new lives in the United States, the reader would experience two very different accounts of very similar worlds.

What will we make of future immigrant stories, the ones that haven't been told yet (but, in essence, are already being written?) Can we predict the universal themes to be written in the future in family narratives, life writings, documentaries and memoirs originating from the Central American children currently detained in Texas? While each child will likely carry the weight of a similar tale of struggle and escape from the violence in their home country, they will also share the humiliating experiences of feeling hated, loathed and unwelcome in the United

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<sup>25</sup> Retrieved 08/09/2014 from <<http://www.bostonreview.net/diego-gambetta-primo-levi-last-moments>>

<sup>26</sup> Retrieved 08/09/2014 from <http://www.mbird.com/2010/05/bart-ehrman-and-rashomon-effect/>

States. Stories of abuse by border patrol,<sup>27</sup> lack of food, shelter and supplies, as well as insufficient legal council only scratch the surface of their traumatic experiences. Of the nearly 60,000 immigrants, many whom are teenagers,<sup>28</sup> each possesses his or her own unique voice and story. Each of these 60,000 people hold a tale within them that is their own and yet part of a greater story. The potential of these stories-to-come will illuminate the struggles of the larger global community, struggles of displaced peoples that will be a testament to our nation and its role in history. What will our periodic table look like? Which element will a survivor choose to define their place in history?

It is overly simplistic to assume that all human suffering is inflicted during large-scale global events, between warring nations or through conflicting ideologies. Many forms of suffering occur within our own families, friends, and communities, during everyday events and in miniscule detail. These distinctions does not propose to undermine the importance of personal experience, in fact, I dare assert that the smaller and more personal the event, the deeper the cut. It is, however, not for me to decide what constitutes the supposed right material or to judge the value of the criteria for memoir, rather, my goal is to approach the subject of memoir, whether large-scale even or intimate life detail, with the same levels of curiosity and passion that I apply to my own work. It is safe to say that I

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<sup>27</sup> Retrieved 08/09/2014 from <<http://www.npr.org/2014/07/24/334041633/amid-wave-of-child-immigrants-reports-of-abuse-by-border-patrol>

<sup>28</sup> Retrieved 08/09/2014 from <<http://www.breitbart.com/Big-Government/2014/07/22/Pew-Research-Report-Nearly-90-of-Illegal-Immigrant-Children-Are-Teenagers>

value comedienne Tina Fey's memoir *Bossy Pants* as much as I value Gloria Steinem's *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*, or both of Hillary Clinton's memoirs as much as I value any other truthful account of life. Each of these women presents a unique, but universally feminist perspective of the world in which I live.

Furthermore, my continuing career and role as an author and educator is to establish similar criteria for students to engage with these questions and implications of nonfiction. The act of uncovering difficult truths that are diligently, efficiently and purposefully buried is a function of the researcher and the nonfiction author in their search for understanding human existence. The purpose is not to disturb the wound and re-hurt it, but to illuminate the specific injuries people have experienced and to gain a more thorough knowledge of the world itself. This knowledge becomes both a tool for survival and a witness to the beauty which persists in spite of history.

It is an injustice to future generations to hide from and cover up the difficult histories that continue to shape us culturally, socially, and politically. Turkey may deny the Armenian Genocide of 1915,<sup>29</sup> but denial does not erase it from the known world. Denial does not eliminate the 'sacred facts' that this genocide happened. Denial does not change the effects of genocide, invasion, revolution and catastrophe. The effects of this genocide on individuals and families persist in the aftermath. Family narratives, in the case of the Armenian Genocide, are handed down as lived experience with the potential to transform the balance of

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<sup>29</sup> Retrieved 08/09/2014 from <<http://www.armenian-genocide.org/genocide.html>

power, to speak truth as a witness to history.

No greater example of this can be found in Peter Balakian's memoir *Black Dog of Fate* (1997), which speaks to the tension between how history is written and memoir is lived. In the early 1960's, Balakian is in eighth grade and tasked to write a social studies project on Near Eastern culture. His father says, "Here's a chance for you to learn something about Armenia" (99). Balakian continues:

Two weeks went by and I found I had read several books on Turkey without ever once coming across a reference to Armenia. I thought it strange, because Armenians had lived in the land now called Turkey long before the Turks had come. For a minute, the American Indians flashed through my mind . . . But there was no time to think about this. My paper was due in four days and I hadn't written anything . . .

Young Peter Balakian finishes his project.

I brought the paper home that night and announced at the dinner table that I had received an A for my social studies project. My father, his voice rising with a modicum of excitement, asked, "So what have you learned about Armenia?"

"I wrote about Turkey," I said.

My father stared at me, and silence hung over the table.

"What?" His voice cracked as he lingered on the *t*. "You were supposed to write about ---?"

"I know," I cut in, "but I couldn't find anything." (99-100)

He couldn't find *anything*? Balakian, of course, is then drawn in from a young age to learn all that he can about Armenia. This leads him to uncover an array of suppressed facts about his family and the genocide. Balakian's research functions as "knowledge production" in the act of "knowledge retrieval." Olick's concept of "intellectual motivation" and Root's "nonfiction motive" become part of

Balakian's life work. The result is a successful memoir that challenges Balakian's American present with the darkness of his ancestral past. It also emphasizes Marton's philosophy that 'Facts are Sacred.' For what happens when the facts are simply non-existent in the history books? It sets an author on a different journey to uncover and present the truth. The phenomenon of people writing themselves into the canon of history has dominated the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries today. To a large extent, this is the essence of memoir: to provide a form for the voices of marginalized people to enter into the dominant discourse, to be visible inside the larger historical picture.

What Balakian discovers in his adult quest parallels Marton. He, too, opens a "Pandora's Box." While access to information in today's digital age has vastly increased since Balakian's youth, this does not mean the information that is easily at hand provides truer or deeper insight. If facts are sacred, then the nonfictionist must produce even more rigorous research, for working within these boundaries one prevents the spread of mis-information. Through a rigorous lived process, the memoir author establishes good faith through credibility, like a journalist, but with the expanded scope to include readerly intimacy for a more detailed engagement with personal history.

A memoir has the potential to upset and challenge accepted readings of history by filling the spaces where personal accounts had been silenced or ignored. When the elements of this process collide, they create a new *thing*; a new knowledge. To accomplish this, the writer/author/creator is tasked to forge these pieces together, to trigger the imagination, to treat facts as "sacred" and to

make the work *work*. Each family narrative, when explored, can expose trauma and the psychology of loss. Understanding one's own history can give the author and the audience a more secure place from which to mediate and participate with a text. A text *works* when a writer engages in lived research and approaches historical data with a clear purpose. The passion will sustain you when the work becomes arduous; the curiosity will compel you when the facts become threatening. This is how one can give voice to truth.

Nonfiction, and more specifically memoir, performs best when the concepts of curiosity and passion collide. There must be more than these two concepts, however, to make the work come alive. William Bradley writes, "Creating literature out of a life lived is no easy task; as human beings, we are in bondage to our flawed perceptions and spotty memories" (205). Sometimes, to break free of one's own bondage, to get to the writing, you need to block out the rest of the world and focus on your own small universe.

For me, it was quiet pre-dawn with my baby that pushed me through my own paralyzing block. Once I understood my purpose, my nonfiction motive, I saw my mother in a different way. She was so deeply damaged as a child by what happened to her in Hungary and her early years in the United States, that she does not want to return to her memories, and I must respect this. She did not ever benefit from any therapeutic release or healthy, mindful processing of her trauma. It affects her even today in her reluctance to share the story with me, to parent me, to engage with the world with some form of agency and redress. Instead, her form of engagement has been to bury the pain and start over,



accent-free, with a new American identity – thousands of miles away from the sadness of her childhood, hair blowing in the wind in her convertible in southern California.

One way to reconcile her past with my present is the construction of this writing form. It is a hybrid: a memoir, a research paper and a personal essay. I have framed my mother's experiences in ways that engage, question and re-position the critical distance between my emotions and the sacred life of facts. I am proud of this intersection of representational discourses and creative practice – it is an honest thing.

There were thousands of Hungarian refugees in the United States and Europe and yet none will be able to tell the same story as my mother, not even her brother, who experienced it all by her side. Her story is as unique as my recollection of it; it is its own "story of silver." It proves even more unique with my remediation of the story via visual re-interpretation through the art of video editing and post-production, found in the form of my archival film, *American Boy*. And this is why it was so meaningful to me, after all these years, to find my own voice -- because it is mine and it comes from my own dark place. My voice is an element – maybe it's gold, or carbon, or maybe it's more volatile like francium<sup>30</sup> – just waiting to combine with another element before it explodes. Or more likely it is a gust from the same storm as Marton, Biro, Levi, and Hoffman – or Adolf and Anna Neumann and all the others who didn't survive the storm -- or don't have

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<sup>30</sup> Retrieved 08/09/2014 from <http://science-facts.top5.com/the-top-5-most-explosive-elements-on-earth/>

the chance or the courage to open up and find their own voice. In any case, after all this work, I am still unsure what element I am. The unknown is what continues to motivate me, to continue my research, to continue my family narrative for myself and for my son.

Indeed, perhaps it is in this unknown space where art, creativity and motivation grow. In this negotiated space, one can shape their experiences and find their way to the audience by seeking and owning their honest voice. Anne Lamott writes:

The truth of your experience can only come through in your voice. If it is wrapped in someone else's voice, we readers will feel suspicious, as if you are dressed up in someone else's clothes. You cannot write out of someone else's dark place; you can only write out of your own. (199)

The truth of my experiences could not be written out of my mother's place. I struggled to find my own place and from that place I discovered the uniqueness of my own part of the story and that this story was no longer for or about me, or my mother, or my grandfather. As I was no longer trying to dress up in my mother's clothes, so to speak, I shared the story in different ways, written and visual, that made sense to me and allowed me to discover my nonfiction motive and to explore my intellectual motivation. This may conclude my exploration of writing and life, of truth and experience, of the intersection of research and creativity, on this dissertation -- my hybridization of media, art and text. I do not believe, however, it provides a complete conclusion to my fascination with my family story, or the end to my discussion of my unpredictable relationship with my mother, or provide a finale to my intellectual motivation. I think it is only the

beginning of a new kind of motivation, fueled by an even greater curiosity and even more profound passion. I see now the possibilities, and the importance, of writing out of my own dark place in order to see the world, and my life, in a different and more thoughtful light.

There are others who see this light as well, those who write out of their dark places to share the intimate details of their own experiences in the world. What memoir offers the writer is a platform from which to approach and construct the details of their own narrative. The possibility of memoir to share an honest version of a truthful story with an audience and to engage with our own rendition of facts provides a transformative experience. In the end, it is an act of empowerment and a way to write one's own history and to document a life and a time in one's own voice. The many ways in which nonfiction manifests itself is not arbitrary nor is it fixed. For if the act of practicing nonfiction provides a healing process that explores the "interrelationships between narratives of individual and collective experiences" (Rasmussen 113) then the forthcoming writings of future nonfictionists and memoirist may provide profound texts written or performed from a singular voice whereby that one voice connects individuals and group alike. That one voice, expressed in memoir, may also draw in audiences who would otherwise have never heard this voice at all. Ultimately, the essence of nonfiction is to share an idea, or an approach to an idea, among communities and people, sometimes globally, sometimes locally, in a shared and collective understanding that illuminates the world from the hybridized space where truth, voice and point of view continue to negotiate.

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## **Appendix of Images:**

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## **Vita**

Kristine Trever Weatherston was born on July 31, 1977, in Mt. Clemens, Michigan and is an American citizen. She graduated from Walled Lake Consolidated Schools, Walled Lake, Michigan in 1995. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Film Studies with a Minor in Women's Studies from Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan in 2000. She received a Master of Arts in Media Arts from Wayne State University in 2005. She has served as a faculty member at Wayne State University, Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia and Point Park University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, teaching courses in film, television and media blending pedagogical positions of both theory and creative production. In fall 2012, she began her appointment as an assistant professor in the Department of Media Studies and Production at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where she teaches creative scriptwriting, documentary production, TV producing and directing, and television studies courses.