

Viola Parente-Čapková and Riitta Jytilä

## Sofi Oksanen – Contested Memories in Bloodlands Fiction

In our chapter, we study contested memories in the work of the Finnish-Estonian writer Sofi Oksanen. Contested memories is one of the central themes in Oksanen's work: it includes how memories and history are contended, challenged, disputed, questioned or even manipulated; whether and how they can be "given back" to both individual people and peoples in the sense of communities. At the same time, by contested memories, we also mean some aspects of the reception of Oksanen's work: reviews and debates surrounding her writing have repeatedly raised the issue of the "right to memory" and right to (historical) truth.

Oksanen is one of the contemporary Finnish authors that literary scholars have analysed and interpreted most; her work has been commented on by writers on fiction but also other cultural and public figures including politicians,<sup>1</sup> both in Finland and abroad.<sup>2</sup> Her work has been widely translated (into more than 40 languages) and she has won a large number of literary awards both in Finland and internationally. In this chapter, we discuss Oksanen as a versatile literary author who is also a visible and, for some, controversial public figure, which is obvious from the reception of her writings and her persona. Oksanen has been engaging in public debates about domestic violence, racism and women's rights, and, most consistently, about the history and current political situation of Eastern and North-Eastern Europe.

---

<sup>1</sup> Before the last (2024) presidential election in Finland, the major Finnish newspaper, the daily *Helsingin Sanomat*, asked presidential candidates to write an essay to about their favorite work of literature. Alexander Stubb, the elected Finnish president, chose Sofi Oksanen's *Purge*. He wrote: "*Purge* is a story about state oppression. It is a story that concerned all former Soviet republics and those who were always oppressed by Russia throughout history. It could have been also Finland's own story" ("Puhdistus on valtiollisen sorron tarina. Se on tarina, joka koski kaikkia entisiä neuvostotasavaltoja ja niitä, joita Venäjä on historiansa aikana sortanut. Se olisi voinut olla myös Suomen tarina"). Stubb continued: "Sofi Oksanen has helped me to see. I mean to understand the deepest essence of the Soviet Union and Russia by means of a story" ("Sofi Oksanen on auttanut minua näkemään. Siis ymmärtämään Neuvostoliiton ja Venäjän syvintä olemusta tarinan kautta") (Stubb 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Oksanen has won the two major awards for prose works in Finland (the Finlandia Prize and the Runeberg Prize), the Nordic Council Literature Prize, The Prix Femina Ètranger and The Prix du Roman FNAC in France, the European Book Prize as well as other awards in France, Estonia, Hungary, Sweden and Italy. She has been also nominated for many prizes, including the Irish Dublin International Literary Award and the Swedish New Academy Prize in Literature.

In her fictional and non-fictional production, Oksanen has been focusing on Finland, Russia and Ukraine, but most of all on Estonia, being herself half Estonian. She was born and grew up in Jyväskylä, central Finland in 1977, where she also studied literature at the university, before she moved to Helsinki in order to study more literature and drama. Oksanen's Estonian mother was an engineer who grew up under the Soviet occupation in Estonia and moved to Finland after marrying a Finnish electrician. Oksanen speaks Estonian but she has always written exclusively in Finnish. Although she grew up as a Finnish speaker in Finland, she has always strongly identified with her Estonian family and heritage and has been interested in Estonian society. In her novels, Oksanen highlights experiences from the Estonian past which have remained outside the official historiography and national (Estonian) memory culture. Strong interest in the Soviet and post-Soviet past, with a particular emphasis on memory, both oral and written, has been a recurrent theme in her work. Writing in Finnish, her primary audience is in Finland, but by means of translations her work has addressed readers in Estonia, elsewhere in Europe, and outside Europe.

The field of memory studies has undergone many transformations, and nowadays memory is seen as dynamic, transcultural and multidirectional. Astrid Erl (2011b) created the concept of travelling memory: memories travel across borders and bring about new social constellations and political contexts. The transmission of memories from one cultural context to another has become a central ethical concern: who has the right to tell untold memories? How do changing contexts change the meanings of memories? The fact that memories can be contested shows that memories always work in the present and can be used as a powerful tool for interpreting, shaping and framing the past. Although remembering is directed to the past, it always takes place in the present. In the process of communication, circulation and exchange of memories cultural artefacts can play an important role; some of them are given more attention than others and can help get themes into the sphere of public memory (e.g. Rigney 2005, 20; Rothberg 2009).

Oksanen's novels highlight trauma histories of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The milieus of her novels vary; some are set in part or entirely in Finland, most in Estonia and the last one in Ukraine. Hence Oksanen's production can be, at least partly, read within the genre that the critic Marek Oziewicz (2016) has called "bloodlands fiction". The term has been derived from Timothy Snyder's book *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (2010) referring to the Baltic countries, Poland, Belorussia and Ukraine, which most brutally experienced both the Soviet and the Nazi terror. The concept of bloodlands helps us to grasp the extent and duration of the traumatic history of Eastern Europe and to realise how the histories of violence did not occur only in conditions of war. According to Snyder (2010), not all violence was related to the Second World War and not all

victims were active combatants, but most were children, women and older people. Although the Holocaust is often taken to represent all the evil of the twentieth century, the Soviet Union is also responsible for at least a third of killings of the bloodlands (Snyder 2010, 10–12). This is precisely what Oksanen tries to make her reading audience aware of in various countries and contexts. Women's memory has a special place in Oksanen's oeuvre and she does not hesitate to proclaim herself a feminist. As the Swedish feminist scholar Ebba Witt-Brattström (2014) puts it, Oksanen's "literary technique interweaves two systems of oppression: sexism and Soviet imperialism", including its colonial aspects.

The postcolonial or, indeed, decolonial perspective is something we would like to highlight in our research on the contested memories in the bloodlands fiction by Sofi Oksanen.<sup>3</sup> Cultural memory and trauma studies are currently beginning to acknowledge the need to think together post-Holocaust and postcolonial legacies and to study post-Soviet memorial forms (Rothberg 2009), but as David C. Moore (2001, 112) has observed, there is still much work to do in bringing together "too narrow postcolonial" and "too parochial post-Soviet studies". Efforts to break the silence of postcolonial studies on the subject of the former Soviet sphere (Moore 2001, 116) have already yielded various studies (e.g. Pucherová and Gáfrík 2015), and could be developed with careful contextualisation, avoiding the traps of imposing ready-made postcolonial concepts on the "second world" experience, and with a consistent emphasis on gender and intersectionality.

In this chapter, we look at Sofi Oksanen's way of dealing with memory and history on the thematic plane, i.e. with issues like passing on memories or manipulating memory on both the micro- and macro-historical levels. We also tackle the questions of how memories of the Soviet terror travel and have been contested in different cultural contexts and how the genre of fiction complicates the reactions to, reception and evaluation of written memories. Our methodology is to bring literary studies into dialogue with cultural memory studies and trauma studies, resulting in a close analysis of two novels by Oksanen, *Purge* and *When the Doves Disappeared*. As Astrid Erll (2008, 4) has stressed, in literature, it is possible to consider the specific medium or material through which memories are produced. Literary memories should not be considered as mere thoughts shuffling back and forth in an individual mind; rather, they are constituted in the processes of writing and reading (Erll 2008, 4; Jyttilä 2018, 164).

---

<sup>3</sup> Oksanen has discussed decolonisation in her essays, see e.g. Oksanen (2009c).

## 1 Fictionalised Postmemories

Oksanen can be seen as a versatile cultural agent who has mediated the memory of the twentieth-century Soviet terror to the Finnish and international public in many roles – as a writer, editor, publisher and public intellectual who is very active on social media. She debuted with the novel *Stalinin lehmät* (*Stalin's Cows*, 2003) with an autofictional twist, exploring the main character's search for identity between Finland and Estonia, the mother–daughter relationship and, on a different time plane, the tragic events of twentieth-century Estonian history. Her second novel *Baby Jane* (2005) is set in Helsinki and deals with power dynamics in a lesbian relationship. Her first play *Puhdistus* (*Purge*), was staged first in 2007; in 2008, Oksanen published a novel with the same name (Lola Roger's English translation *Purge*, 2010). *Purge* follows stories of several Estonian women along time lines in the 1940s and the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> In *Purge*, Oksanen wrote a “hybrid novel – a mixture of historical and postcolonial novel, a historiographic metafiction with elements of documented witness literature” (Witt-Brattström 2014). Her third novel, *Kun kyyhkyset katosivat* (2012, Lola Rogers' English translation *When the Doves Disappeared*, 2015), concluded her “Estonian trilogy”. *When the Doves Disappeared* is a telling example of bloodlands fiction, describing Estonian occupation by the Soviet Union and the Nazi Germany respectively. It also belongs (together with *Purge*) to those of Oksanen's novels in which the author makes use of elements known from thrillers and other genres based on suspense (Witt-Brattström 2014). In 2009, Oksanen co-edited a collection of essays on Estonian history, *Kaiken takana oli pelko* (Fear Was Behind It All), and she re-published the Finnish translation of Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* in her Silberfeldt publishing house (2012). She has also been a prolific essayist. The most recent result of her essayist writing is her last book, *Samaan virtaan – Putinin sota naisia vastaan* (2023, Owen F. Witesman's English translation *Same River, Twice: Putin's War on Women*, 2025).

The memories of occupation within the Soviet Union have been used for different purposes and in Oksanen's case questions of historical accuracy and the authenticity of memories have been discussed. We work with Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory: according to Hirsch, postmemory is “shaped by the attempt to represent the long-term effects of living in close proximity to the pain,

---

<sup>4</sup> So far, *Purge* has been Oksanen's biggest success: both the play and the novel have been widely translated, the play has been produced in 15 countries, and the Finnish director Antti Jokinen made a film based on the novel in 2012.

depression, and dissociation of persons who have witnessed and survived massive historical trauma" (Hirsch 2008, 112). In our view, Oksanen's writings represent fictionalised postmemory which has travelled across various borders and is narrated in a different linguistic context from the one in which the memories originate. This fictionalised postmemory draws on both political and aesthetic aspects of memorial structures.

The literary genre, here, prose fiction (and in *Purge*, also drama) guides readers' expectations as well as how they interpret and experience the topic discussed. That is why we will briefly look at the reception of Oksanen's novel *Purge* to illustrate the issue of contested memories within the debates surrounding Oksanen's work. Disputes over the ownership and interpretations of memory were fierce, especially in the Estonian reception of *Purge*: Oksanen was accused of cultural appropriation of others' (Estonians') memories. Who has the right to look back and define the past? In spite of her multiple (Finnish and Estonian) identities, Oksanen was not considered Estonian enough, neither was the novel understood as a realistic representation of the history of Estonia. Before discussing the novels and their reception, we outline some background for this discussion, looking at Oksanen's production as a part of the construction of the memory culture of post-Soviet Europe and in Finland.

Since the beginning of her career, Oksanen has been very critical of how Nazi atrocities have dominated both historical, non-fictional and fictional reflection on the twentieth-century traumas while Soviet and Communist terror, Soviet colonialism and imperialism have been underplayed and the memories of these atrocities silenced in the Western perception, including that of Finland after the Second World War. Oksanen (2009b) quotes Jehanne M. Gheith who has studied oral histories of Gulag survivors. According to Gheith, the Holocaust has become the main discourse against which all other traumas are interpreted, although in general Western interpretations of trauma do not fit the experiences of Gulag veterans. This incompatibility of some experiences is partly why the Gulag has been left out of discussion about the great disasters of the twentieth century. Oksanen has proposed reasons for silencing these memories, from Finlandisation (i.e. not opposing USSR politics to maintain Finland's sovereignty) and (self)censorship to ignorance, highlighting the way the misled public becomes "useful idiots" in propaganda wars (Oksanen 2016). Indeed, for the Estonian protagonist of the novel *When the Doves Disappeared*, it is hard to believe that "the peace movement in the West seemed to be a constant source of new and productive informants, without any of the problems they had here.

The enthusiasm of those informants was dumbfounding. You didn't even have to pay them" (Oksanen 2012b, 246).<sup>5</sup>

*When the Doves Disappeared* falls, even more strongly than *Purge*, into the genre of bloodlands fiction. The genre is, according to Oziewicz (2016), a part of the process of reclaiming the history of countries and people who suffered wars, starvation and annexations, and whose stories and memories have remained untold. That is why bloodlands fiction is to be considered an important genre of trauma fiction. Genre definitions aim to frame reader expectations and to establish the phenomenon and its significance in culture (Oziewicz 2016). The works on remembering the Soviet terror have been called Gulag literature. Oksanen has claimed this concept for her literary production applying not in the strict sense of *lagernaja literatura*, i.e. literature that deals directly with the Gulag prison camps (see e.g. Gullotta 2011), but more broadly. Most Gulag literature comes from Russia and the former Soviet Union and has been written mostly by former Gulag prisoners or by writers who have been affected (directly or indirectly) by Soviet repressions.<sup>6</sup>

Western memory of the Holocaust and Central and Eastern European memory of Communist dictatorship are still often considered as separate, but this binary collapsed along with the Soviet Union as the transnational forms of memory developed (Erll 2011a, 4–5). Only recently, more studies have juxtaposed the literatures of the Gulag and of Nazi concentration camps (Toker 2019). After the fall of the Communist regime, it became possible to speak openly about Soviet colonisation and bring up the memories which had been silenced by official history within the "second world" (Köresaar, Kuutma and Lauk 2009, 329; Annus 2018). Memory cultures, theories and conceptualisations of them are always historically shaped, and as Blacker and Etkind (2013) remind us, when these cultures and the-

---

5 "Toisaalta lännen rauhanliikkeestä tuntui löytyvän koko ajan uusia hyödyllisiä informantteja eikä heillä ollut samanlaisia ongelmia kuin täällä. Heidän innokkuutensa oli mykistäävä, heille ei edes maksettu" (Oksanen 2012a, 299).

6 Memory of national and ethnic groups from the territories dominated or occupied by Russia and the Soviet Union have been used in fiction and nonfiction, history or essayistic writing recently. Finland has focused on Karelians and Ingrians, peoples from the border areas between Finland and Russia. Another Finnish writer, Riikka Pelo (b. 1972), has also defined her Finlandia-prizewinning novel *Jokapäiväinen elämämme* (Our Daily Life, 2013) as "Gulag literature". Pelo tells the story of Marina Tsvetajeva and her daughter Ariadna Efron during the 1920s and 1930s in her novel, which is close to Oksanen's in the sense that it thematises gender aspects of the Stalinist repressions and focuses on the relationships between generations of women. These similarities and genre definitions highlight a traumatic memory culture that has been difficult and, for many, impossible to voice before the collapse of the Soviet Union. See also Marja Sorvari in this volume.

ories travel in Eastern Europe the concepts of memory studies change. In Eastern Europe, memory remains distorted since a clear account with the past was never made, unlike as Germany did with the Holocaust and Second World War. The trauma paradigm and the idea that some things are too terrible to remember is central to Holocaust research, whereas in Eastern Europe the past has been remembered privately but experiences could not be shared publicly (Blacker and Etkind 2013, 5). The Soviet Union was cut off from this memory culture in the West, but with the help of many of its supporters abroad it managed to control its image to some extent. In the absence of evidence many failed to condemn Stalin (Snyder 2010, 89) and the crimes committed by the Communist totalitarian regimes.

Oksanen (2009a) has stressed, in the same spirit as Oziewicz, the importance of telling untold stories that cannot be compared to the “canonised” Holocaust stories and Western memory of the Second World War. According to Oksanen (2009a, 16), the Estonian experience is so different from Western Holocaust memories that for Estonians it has been impossible to recognise their own experience in public discourses and narratives. Oksanen’s comment should be interpreted not as a promotion of competitive suffering but in the light of the postcolonial current within trauma theory. The postcolonial approach has been introduced into memory theory by Michael Rothberg (2009). Rothberg specialised in Holocaust memory, and he has criticized the very notion of competitive memory, in which remembering certain parts of the past would exclude or rule out other memories. Instead of competition, Rothberg argues, memories work multidirectionally, bringing various histories into relation without erasing their historical uniqueness and differences. With the concept of multidirectional memory, Rothberg has highlighted the need to rethink the intersecting histories of violence and memory cultures and enable a new kind of social, political and cultural imagination. (Rothberg 2009, 3–4).<sup>7</sup> Oksanen herself says that she has been motivated to raise the Gulag out of the shadow of the Holocaust without diminishing the horrors of the latter. In her production, particularly in her “Estonian trilogy” (2003–2012), Oksanen deals with the impact of gendered and other violence on the memory of individuals and communities.

In this respect, it is viable to frame Oksanen as one woman prose writer from Central and Eastern Europe (see Parente-Čapková 2013, 2023),<sup>8</sup> including the bloodlands that experienced Soviet occupation. Many works on history from a

---

<sup>7</sup> For more on trauma within the postcolonial framework, see for example Craps (2013).

<sup>8</sup> Mostly male writers who had emigrated from the countries occupied or semi-occupied by the Soviet Union brought up these issues for many decades, including Milan Kundera (for the comparison between his and Oksanen’s works see Lehtimäki 2022). However, though *Kniha smíchu a*

women's perspective originate from these countries. Women have been publishing often semiautobiographical memories or (fictional) postmemories of Soviet terror including the deportations from the Baltic countries and other parts of the Soviet Union, like in *Ar balles kurpēm Sibīrijas sniegos* (2001, Margita Gailitis' English translation *With Dance Shoes in Siberian Snows*) by the Latvian activist and politician Sandra Kalniete. Similarly to Oksanen, Kalniete has argued that "behind the Iron Curtain the Soviet regime continued to commit genocide against the peoples of Eastern Europe and, indeed, against its own people [...] the two totalitarian regimes – Nazism and Communism – were equally criminal" (Kalniete 2004).<sup>9</sup> The Czech writer Kateřina Tučková, who has openly appreciated Sofi Oksanen's oeuvre, has also written about women's – mostly traumatic – experiences under both Nazi and Communist dictatorship in the former Czechoslovakia, which did not belong to Snyder's bloodlands but also experienced the double occupation. In her – also widely translated – novels, Tučková would take up various controversial subjects like expulsion of the Sudeten Germans from Czechoslovakia after the Second World War, *Vyhnání Gerty Schnirch* (2009, The Expulsion of Gerta Schnirch, Véronique Firkusny's English translation *Gerta*, 2021), always from women's point of view. Tučková has also used the technique of attaching more or less factual or fictitious archival documents to her novels, including those of the secret police in *Žítkovské bohyně* (2012, Andrew Oakland's English translation *The Last Goddess*, 2022). Similar trends in women's writing can be found in Poland, Ukraine, Baltic states and other countries.

These historical novels by women, some of which fall into the category of bloodlands fiction and use techniques known from microhistory, reflect on relationships between women, be it matrilineage or sisterhood, literal or metaphorical. That is also the case of Nora Ikstena's novel on twentieth-century Latvian history, *Mātes piens* (2016), meaning literally "mother's milk" but translated into English in 2018 by Margita Gailitis as *Soviet Milk*. Such a need for exoticisation shows that even during the last decade, a historical novel conveying women's experience from Latvia can hardly have a "universal" title. The "general" map of cultural memory (cf. Meusburger et al. 2011) has not included the countries placed for decades under the Communist rule, still subjected to the practices of Euro-Orientalism (e.g. Kuldkepp 2023). The situation has changed after the war in Ukraine began in 2022, but only slightly.

---

zapomnění (1979, *Le Livre du rire et de l'oubli*, the *Book of Laughter and Forgetting*) shows the perversities of totalitarianism, it can hardly be called Gulag literature or bloodlands fiction.

<sup>9</sup> Sandra Kalniete's (2004) speech "Old Europe, New Europe" is now available only in the Internet Archive. It has been quoted in research on cultural memory, see e.g. Leggewie (2011, 127), and Troebst (2011, 149).

## 2 Transgenerational Memory and Women's Trauma in *Purge*

Next, we will consider how travelling memories become contested in Oksanen's most famous novel *Purge* (Oksanen 2008a; Oksanen 2008b), which focuses on the recent history of Estonia and the burden of intentional and unintentional forgetting handed down to generations. In *Purge*, the persecution of women seem to form a continuum: while in the 1940s, the anti-heroine named Aliide had to suffer sexual torture by the Russian occupants of Estonia and their local helpers, in the 1990s she is being reminded of her traumatic past by her great niece Zara, who became a victim of sex trafficking and, all of a sudden, turns up at Aliide's country home. Regardless of geographical location or historical period, both women have to survive in violent circumstances and both end up committing crimes themselves. In the novel, Oksanen thematises gender-based and sexual violence with their aftermath – distressing memories, gnawing uncertainty and guilt. In the world created by Oksanen in *Purge*, one can never know what to say aloud, as stated in the motto by the Estonian poet and politician Paul-Erik Rummo with which the novel begins: "The walls have ears, and the ears have beautiful earrings".<sup>10</sup>

The novel is set on several different time levels, including the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union when the archives opened. Its narration moves back and forth through time, and its literary structure is fragmented. It includes fictional documents and official Soviet intelligence archives. The depiction of the milieu and main characters, Aliide and Zara, is still very realistic and the narration emphasises the sense of authenticity, inviting the reader to imagine "what it feels like". At times, the narration is almost naturalistic in the sense of highlighting the raw and "ugly" aspects of perceiving reality, such as a disgusting blowfly buzzing in the ceiling (Oksanen 2008b, 5) and raspberry jam spread over a pancake that looks like it is clotted with blood (183).<sup>11</sup> During the war, everyday chores set the rhythm of the day and time passes in the uncertainty of the future; the characters ponder the German occupation and whether it will remain a permanent state or whether Aliide's parents will return home. At the end of the war, Soviet deportations of Estonians to Siberia accelerated and when "the last of the farms was roped into the kolkhozy, plain talk vanished between the lines" (Oksa-

<sup>10</sup> "Seinillä on korvat ja korvissa kauniit korvarenkaat" (the translations into English from *Purge* are by Lola Rogers, see Oksanen 2008b).

<sup>11</sup> "inhottava, likaojassa kasvanut raatokärpänen lentelee katon rajassa" (11) "tummat vadelmat hilopurkissa näyttävät hyytyneeltä vereltä" (Oksanen 2008a, 179).

nen 2008b, 208).<sup>12</sup> The remembrance of “free Estonia” lives among the people but is being erased from their memory and continues to live only in certain details as women’s food or healing recipes passed on to the following generations. The male characters in the novel either comply with the occupants’ regime or choose the resistance, as does Aliide’s brother-in-law Hans Pekk, the husband of Aliide’s sister Ingel. He joins the “Forest Brethren”, i.e. the Estonian resistance who were hiding in Estonian woods for decades after the Soviet occupation of the 1940s. Hans deserted from the German army to fight for free Estonia and is chased by the Soviet occupants. The sisters hide him in their family house, in a “secret chamber” not visible from outside. The reader of *Purge* can follow Hans’ thoughts and hopes for free Estonia by means of his diary entries throughout the book. Oksanen has included Hans’ diary entries as well as excerpts from (fictional) secret intelligence documents. By using seemingly documentary material, Oksanen takes a stance on how history is written and whose perspectives and discourse remain in the history books.

The novel focuses on two female characters, Aliide and Zara, and their mutual relationship. When Aliide and Zara meet, Aliide is an elderly woman who has lived through the Soviet occupation of Estonia. She lives in the Estonian countryside, finds Zara in her yard and offers her shelter. Zara’s arrival in Aliide’s home is not a coincidence since Zara is Aliide’s great niece (being the daughter of Linda, who is herself the daughter of Aliide’s sister Ingel). Zara, who is now a victim of sex trafficking, was told about her great aunt living in the Estonian countryside, and she uses Aliide’s home as a refuge while running away from her captors. Both women have been sexually violated and this brings their lives together. When Zara arrives at Aliide’s house she has a photo of Aliide and Aliide’s sister Ingel and she wants to find “a story that she hadn’t been told” (Oksanen 2008b, 81)<sup>13</sup> as a child. Zara’s mother Linda was exposed to sexual violence and torture by the Soviet interrogators and their Estonian helpers, along with Aliide and Ingel, while being interrogated about Hans’ whereabouts, which they never revealed. They never talked about the sexual assaults they had endured. In the novel, the (silenced) motif of sexual violence and the memory of it unites three generations of women.

Seeing Zara triggers bodily memories in Aliide. From Zara’s gestures, Aliide recognises that she has also experienced violence: “But the girl was so clearly terrified that Aliide was, too. Good God, how her body remembered that feeling, re-

---

<sup>12</sup> “kun viimeisetkin talot hirtettiin kolhoseihin, suorat sanat katosivat rivien väleihin” (Oksanen 2008a, 203).

<sup>13</sup> “tarinan, jota hänen eli ollut kerrottu” (Oksanen 2008a, 83).

membered it so well that she caught the feeling as soon as she saw it in a stranger's eyes" (Oksanen 2008b, 79).<sup>14</sup> However, Aliide's memory of her own traumas is still too painful and Aliide has been used to erasing it from her mind for decades. By turning in her sister Ingel, who was, as a consequence, deported to Siberia, Aliide tries to forget and "cancel" the violence experienced and shared by women in her family (and, indeed, to have her sister's husband Hans, with whom she is madly, secretly in love, for herself). In blanking out the memories of sexual torture, Aliide could become a respectable woman and "that was important, no one would ever know" (Oksanen 2008b, 168).<sup>15</sup> When victims and perpetrators cannot be simply separated, it becomes difficult to talk about the suffering and remember it.

As David Clarke (2015, 227) points out, the way Oksanen deals with victimhood is most complex; she "actually focuses chiefly on Estonian nationals and explores their complex experience of suffering and complicity in the perpetration of suffering, which cannot be reduced to any schematization". Moreover, it is suggested that Aliide herself was forced to participate in sexual torture of her seven-year-old niece Linda. Even if she tries to forget, Aliide has to face the memory of extreme violence numerous times, for example when visiting a dentist in 1952: "It was the same man. In that room. The same hairy hands. There in the basement of the town hall, where Aliide had vanished, where she just wanted to get out alive. But the only thing left alive was the shame" (Oksanen 2008b, 254).<sup>16</sup> The deictic expression "in that room" emphasises the experiential nature of the scene. In the Gulag context, the effects of colonisation were primarily psychological: internalisation of Soviet ideology sneakily crept into all thinking (Kellertas 2006, 6). Postcolonial theory makes visible the suffering associated with power and injustice (Kellertas 2006, 8), and *Purge* brings out these ambiguous processes, such as internalisation of self-hatred visible in both Aliide's and Zara's characters. Oksanen herself emphasises the closeness of her production to postcolonial perspectives and post-Gulag literature. The novel is about the experiences that official history would not recognise and acknowledge, thus affecting the individual's ability to remember and build a future.

---

14 "Mutta tytön kauhu oli niin kirkasta, että Aliide tunsi sen yhtäkkää itsessään. Hyvä Jumala, miten hänen ruumiinsa muistikin sen tunteen, muisti niin hyvin, että oli altis sille heti, kun näki sen vieraan ihmisen silmissä" (Oksanen 2008a, 82).

15 "Ja se oli tärkeää. Että kukaan ei koskaan saisi tietää" (Oksanen 2008a, 165).

16 "Sama mies. Siinä huoneessa. Samat karvaiset kädet. Siinä kunnantalon kellarissa, jossa Aliide oli kadonnut ja josta hän halusi selvittää hengissä, vaikka ainoa mitä oli jäänyt henkiin, oli häpeä" (Oksanen 2008a, 250).

Constant suspicion of and by other people creates an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear. In the novel, the fly that dominates the opening scene becomes a multifaceted symbol of all the paranoia, uncertainty and violence caused by Soviet terror. Aliide's story begins: "Aliide Truu stared at the fly, and the fly stared back" (Oksanen 2008b, 4).<sup>17</sup> The fly is associated with Aliide's disgust towards her own body and with the shared shame of sexual violence (see Lappalainen 2011). It can be seen more broadly as part of the literary memory culture of the Gulag, where animal characters were used to imagine human suffering (cf. Etkind 2009, 658). On the one hand, Aliide is a/the fly, the shameful object of violence. As we learn at the strongly ironic end of the novel, she was herself a part of the Soviet intelligence under the code name "Fly", or "Kärbes" in Estonian.

One chapter in *Purge* is named "Kärsimykset pesivät muistissa" or literally "Suffering Nests in One's Memory" (Oksanen 2008b, 249).<sup>18</sup> In the novel, after all, the possibility of remembering depends on the connection between women, although they are unable to tell each other about their experiences and their communication works largely by interpreting non-verbal signs. Aliide's encounter with Zara forces her to confront the burden of the past. Aliide recognises Zara's experiences; memories are embodied and silent, but shared. The title of the novel can be easily read as referring to Stalinist purges, but it is equivocal and can be interpreted in many ways. The associations with dirt and filth are repeated in the novel referring to gendered experience of the Communist purges, giving the word "purge", associated with purification, a bitterly ironic meaning. At the very end of the novel, it is suggested that Aliide might kill Zara's victimizers, the ex-KGB agents, who became sex traffickers under the new political order of the early 1990s. Hence Aliide – and with her, the reader – might experience a kind of purifying katharsis when burning the villains' bodies together with her house and the memories attached to it. These last passages of Aliide's and Zara's story are, however, written in the conditional: "If the girl made it home, she would tell Ingel that the land she lost long ago was wait[ing] for her" (Oksanen 2008b, 355).<sup>19</sup> The major theme of *Purge* remains the depiction of the difficult and impossible choices, as well as complexities of intimate family history and transgenerational traumatic memory in the face of atrocities in the bloodlands.

---

17 "Aliide Truu tuijotti kärpästä ja kärpänen tuijotti takaisin" (Oksanen 2008a, 10).

18 The title's literal translation would be "Suffering Nests in One's Memory" but it was translated as "Suffering Washes Memory Clean". In Finnish, the verbs *pesiä* (nest) and *pestä* (wash) are very close to each other and may have gotten mixed up in the process of translation. The English translation sounds very ironic, but the original phrase lacks irony altogether.

19 "Jos tytö selviäisi, hän kertoisi Ingelille, että täällä ne kauan sitten menetetyt maat odottavat" (Oksanen 2008a, 344).

### 3 Contested Authority of Experience: Transnational Memories and the Multifaceted Transnational Reception of *Purge*

Sofi Oksanen's own experiences in Estonia have created the impression of autobiographical memory and intimate, authentic experiences that seemed to offer credibility and competence to tell the stories of the Soviet terror. Sanna Lehtonen (2017) argues that autobiographical memory plays a central role in Oksanen's production, which has caused disputes over the ownership of memories. As a public figure, Oksanen's ethnic credibility in the media is built on authenticity. Her own childhood memories of Estonia and stories she heard about the Soviet occupation have been creating a public image according to which Oksanen has the right and competence to talk about Estonian history (Lehtonen 2017, 265–266). Oksanen's own life and image is thus closely intertwined with the controversies around her works. In the following paragraphs, we look at the ways Oksanen's competence has been discussed mainly in Finland and in Estonia after the publication of *Purge*, tackling also the Russian reception (see Lappalainen 2013; Jyttilä 2022a; Pariente-Čapková 2022 and forthcoming). The reception of the novel in other countries is no less interesting, from Germany and France to Italy and the English-speaking world (see esp. Lappalainen 2013).

Reception of *Purge* in Finland has been very complimentary. After the literary prizes awarded to *Puhdistus*, critics would analyse Oksanen's background and characterise her e.g. as a “bilingual” and “bicultural” writer, calling for “recognising” and “acknowledging” her multilingual and multicultural background (Grönstrand 2010). In Finland, *Purge* has been studied in the light of narrative theory, moral philosophy, ethical issues, affects such as shame and trauma. The ethical value of the novel has been seen in its narrative ambivalence and its versatile expression which utilises myth, from the Bible to Greek tragedy (Nystrand 2012; Lehtimäki 2022). Jyttilä (2022a, 2022b) has placed the novel within the framework of trauma studies and in relation to historical fiction in Finland. *Purge* has been compared to literary classics in English by authors such as Toni Morrison (Lehtimäki 2010, 41–42). Päivi Lappalainen (2011) offered one of the first feminist readings of the novel, concentrating on shame. All in all, literary critics in Finland would not question Oksanen's competence, authenticity of the memories and experiences she draws on, or accuracy and “correctness” of the historical events she refers to in her work.

The reception of *Purge* in Estonia has been contradictory. The immediate reactions were most positive: Oksanen was named the “Estonian Person of the Year” in 2009 and received prizes and other awards. However, the tone changed

during the following years, as noted by Eneken Laanes (2012) and Päivi Lappalainen (2013), who have studied the reception of *Purge* in Estonia. The criticism concentrated on the lack of authenticity and the act of appropriation, if not theft, of Estonian memories and experiences. For the Estonian poet and politician Jan Kaplinski (2010), the novel “pretends to be a realistic story about life in Soviet Estonia in the second half of the twentieth century, and seems to have been accepted as such by the public in Europe and America”. Kaplinski (2010) himself took a very critical stance towards *Purge*, openly contesting Oksanen’s fictionalized post-memory:

She is selling something that pretends to be our life, but isn’t. Our life in the Soviet Union was not a horror story! Of course, there were many horrific episodes, years of terror and counter-terror, but as a whole, we lived a life that was often quite interesting and funny. I cannot approve the idea that my life, the life of my parents, my friends, my colleagues was not a life worth living, that we felt we were prisoners in a large prison camp. The USSR after the death of Stalin was not a prison camp. It was a lousy country, but there were and there are many much more lousy countries in the world.

Kaplinski’s criticism is telling: he constructs *Purge* as a novel aiming at constructing a testimony of collective memory, and exempts himself from that very “collective”. In Estonia, debates on the value of Oksanen’s novel also touched on the commercial potential of travelling trauma and the problem when remembering becomes consumption. Oksanen was accused of deploying and capitalising on other people’s suffering and other people’s memories. At the same time, as Laanes (2012) has pointed out, *Purge* confirms that literature as a medium of collective remembrance is a phenomenon of reception and that popular success is a prerequisite for attracting transnational attention to issues of historical injustice, especially in marginal historical contexts.

The (Estonian) national perspective on *Purge* reinforces the understanding that in the process of creating fictional postmemories, historical specificity may be compromised. How we deal with specificity in remembering historical injustice and suffering in the public arena and in literature is a question still open for discussion. Kaljundi, Laanes, and Pikkannen (2015) have stated that one of the most important tasks of the independent Estonian memory policy has been to maintain continuity with the interwar republic and promote the Estonian perspective on the Second World War and the Soviet era. This rewriting of history has not been easy and the success of Oksanen’s work indicates the potential of fiction in dealing with the difficult past (Kaljundi, Laanes, and Pikkannen 2015, 53–54.) Nevertheless, Oksanen’s right to discuss history and memory as well as the “correctness” with which she constructed them have been questioned.

The aforementioned Estonian literary critic Eneken Laanes has been coming back to Oksanen and *Purge* during the last decade and a half, concentrating, lately, on the issue of memory. In her article “Born translated memories: Transcultural memorial forms, domestication and foreignisation”, Laanes (2021, 41) “draws on translation studies, world literature studies and receptions studies to describe the domesticating and foreignising effects of memories that are ‘born translated’ and the ways they are received”. She focuses on the immensely important issue of translation, both linguistic and cultural, discussing *Purge* as “a translation of memories of Soviet state terror through the transcultural memorial form of war rape and its foreignising effects in the local context of remembering of these events” (2021, 41). This article is more nuanced than the earlier Estonian reception (including Laanes’ own) but remains very critical: though Laanes (2021, 51) admits that Oksanen’s *Purge* “opened up an important debate about the experiences of women under Soviet state terror in the largely male-dominated memory cultures of WWII and the Stalinist period in Eastern Europe”, she blames Oksanen for representing “sexual violence against women in post-WWII Estonia by subsuming it under the transcultural memorial form of war rape and thereby de-historising it” (Laanes 2021, 52). Moreover, Laanes indicates that Oksanen’s “born translated memories” can lead to “simplification of local history and the implantation of certain homogenising memorial forms” (Laanes 2021, 52).

Ways of questioning the author’s authority, the authenticity of the memories she works with and the accuracy of the historical events depicted in her novel(s) have also appeared in Oksanen’s Russian reception, though rather differently and, obviously, for different purposes. Oksanen has been presented as a writer drawing on “second” or “third hand” experience she heard from her Estonian grandmother. Reviewers point out the “historical errors” in Oksanen’s novels; some even question the fact that Estonia was occupied by Russia/the Soviet Union (montrealex 2011; Žemoitelite 2015; lustdevildoll 2017; see Parente-Čapklová forthcoming). In Russia, Oksanen’s works have received a most varied reception, from competent analyses of her works carried out in a positive tone to fierce attacks, ultimately labelling her as “mad” and “pathologically” Russophobic, attacking her personality (“lesbian”, “raging feminist”) and ridiculing her looks (e.g. Anonymous 2024; see Parente-Čapklová forthcoming).

## 4 *When the Doves Disappeared: Twisted Memories in the Bloodlands*

In the essays on Estonian history that Oksanen edited, the Estonian journalist I. A. Masso (2009, 215) reminds readers (including those of Oksanen's novels) that Estonia gained its independence at a time when it was fashionable to celebrate the deconstruction of all stories, proclaim the death of grand narratives and see all truths as relative. This trend has been rather problematic for those Estonians (and, of course, others) who, after half a century of Sovietisation, were able to search for truth about their twentieth-century history, to formulate new narratives and revisit counter-narratives. Moreover, history is still a highly contested field in Estonia and, as there are groups claiming the nonexistence of the Holocaust, certain groups in the former Soviet Union have kept claiming that the Baltic states were never occupied, as is obvious in Oksanen's Russian reception. In Putin's Russia, this version of history has gradually become the official truth.

Falsification of memory and history is the central theme of the novel *When the Doves Disappeared* (2012b; see also Oksanen 2009b), which refers to both Holocaust and Gulag. The depiction of the Nazi occupation of the Baltic states includes the horrors at Klooga, a subcamp of the Vaivara concentration camp complex in the Harju county, Estonia. Subsequently, the novel deals with the Soviet occupation after the war which makes it an example of bloodlands fiction par excellence. According to Snyder (2010), the double occupation was a difficult and complicated situation in which many people were operating on opposite sides at different stages and compromises had to be made. Again, *When the Doves Disappeared* is a historical novel which has been read against the "real" historical events. After the colourful reception of *Purge*, the Estonian translator of the novel Jan Kaus expressed his wish that the readers of the *Doves* would not concentrate on whether the historical events, times and places in the novel were "correct" but rather on the basic motifs behind people's behaviour, namely man's relationship to power, described by Oksanen in her work (Suomi ulkomaila-sivusto 2012). This caution sounds interesting especially vis à vis the main character of the novel, Edgar Parts, whose job becomes precisely the falsification of history. He is an aspiring writer, though he appears more as a mockery of a creative writer. As Markku Lehtimäki (2022, 224) has pointed out, from the narratological point of view, the novel is partly composed as a collage, which is suggested also by the cover picture of the Finnish original where a man's (presumably Parts') face is being composed by cutting and pasting, showing various instruments to help the process: scissors, tweezers and glue. Moreover, the collage of the man's face

seems to be placed on his head as a mask.<sup>20</sup> The symbolic meaning of the picture points to Parts' technique of composing his works and of constructing his identity; hence history, memory and the author's self are created by "cutting and pasting" various sources.

The novel is rather exacting for the reader, since this Oksanen's work is based on hints, allusions and gaps that have to be filled, but it centres on two men and two women. This is a different setup than in Oksanen's previous novels, which we have seen were dominated by literal or metaphorical matrilineage and sisterhood. Nevertheless, as in the two preceding novels in the Estonian trilogy, this one juxtaposes timelines (here mainly 1941–1944 and 1963–1966). Similarly to *Purge*, we have a melodramatic contrast between the patriotic resistance hero with a symbolic name, Roland Simson (again, one of the "Forest Brethren"), and his cousin and evil opposite, Edgar Parts. Edgar loyally serves the Estonian patriots, the Germans and the Soviets in succession, pursuing his career at any cost. Like the devoted Estonian patriot Hans Pekk in *Purge*, Roland also keeps a kind of a diary, which Edgar finds in the 1960s, after having been assigned to write a propagandistic work about Nazi crimes. He becomes an established apparatchik and embraces the task to create history about the evils of the "Hitlerian occupation".

Ironically enough, in his notes, Roland wanted to keep records of Soviet/Russian crimes for possible trials in the utopian free future. For Edgar, Roland's belief is a mere illusion, indeed, a delusion. Another contrast between Roland and Edgar is that while Roland is "straight" in various senses of the word, Edgar is a gay man who never comes out of the closet. Eventually, he marries Roland's beloved Juudit, only to hide his homosexuality. At the end of the novel, we learn that Edgar behaved brutally and mercilessly not only in the war and during the post-war totalitarian regime but that he also murdered Roland's fiancé Rosalie to prevent her from revealing his homosexuality. The reader does not get much information about Rosalie. Juudit, pursuant to her biblical name, is a controversial character. The true heroine of the novel becomes Roland's daughter Evelin, who resumes her father's resilience when taking part in a student demonstration forbidden by the Soviet regime in the 1960s. When she learns that she is in danger and the secret police are after her, she avoids going home so as not to jeopardise her parents.

Parts, who, again rather ironically, functions as the unreliable narrator in the novel, gets the job of "correcting history" and inventing memory because there is

---

<sup>20</sup> The cover of the Estonian translation (*Kui tuvid kadusid*, translated by Jan Kaus; Tallinn: Varrak, 2012) is identical with the original (Finnish), while the covers of the British and American editions of the English translation are different (*When the Doves Disappeared*, translated by Lola Rogers; London: Atlantic Books; New York: Knopf; Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2015).

“no greater magician with words” than him (Oksanen 2012b, 75).<sup>21</sup> The discriminate nature of the Soviet terror, missing lists of victims or executioners and lack of adequate memorials enable manipulations of memory. These manipulations have brought about perverted forms of remembrance, such as “magical historicism” (Etkind 2009, 632; Oziewicz 2016) that works in a situation when large-scale ignorance disabled the truth and instigated paranoia. The ways of falsification and manipulation become so monstrous and absurd that the most viable trope to deal with them is irony. In the novel, irony functions on various levels:

Parts remembered well how when the hammer and sickle was hoisted up the flagpole at Pikk Hermann on September 22, 1944, the flag that was taken down wasn’t Hitler’s – it was Estonia’s own flag. Five days of independence. Five days of freedom. Parts had seen the flag himself, although in his manuscript he naturally didn’t mention it, because the Soviet Union had liberated Estonia from the Hitlerists. (Oksanen 2012b, 258)<sup>22</sup>

The theme of falsification of memory and history is intertwined with the background outlined on the former web pages of Like, the Finnish publisher of Oksanen’s novel. After the book came out, Like provided information about historical characters and events that had inspired Oksanen. The material included an interview with Maarja Talgre, daughter of a member of the Estonian resistance, Leo Talgre (1919–1944), who died during his fight for freedom. The father sent his wife to safety in Sweden, where the daughter was born and where she became a journalist. She wrote a reportage novel, *Leo – Ett estniskt öde* (Leo – An Estonian Destiny, 1990), about her late father’s life. In the Like interview, she remembers the Cold War, when she read an article in the newspaper *Kodumaa* (patria, native country), sent to émigrés by the KGB.<sup>23</sup> The same newspaper is mentioned in Oksanen’s novel. The official Soviet Estonian propaganda very convincingly depicted Leo Talgre as a sadistic war criminal and a fascist, in the spirit of the old Soviet habit to label all opponents of Soviet totalitarianism as “fascists” without the slightest idea of the historical meaning of the word. Though she did not believe a word of what she read, Maarja Talgre felt pain and agony. Many years later,

---

<sup>21</sup> “häntä parempaa ‘sanamaagikkoa’ ei ole” (the translations from *When the Doves Disappeared* into English are by Lola Rogers; see Oksanen 2012a, 93).

<sup>22</sup> “Parts muisti itse hyvin, että kun 22. syyskuuta 1944 sirppi ja vasara olivat nousseet Pitkän Hermannin salkoon, alas laskettava lippu ei ollut Hitlerin, vaan Viron oma. Viiden päivän itsenäisyys. Viiden päivän vapaus. Parts oli nähty lipun itse, vaikka käsikirjoituksessa hän ei sitä luonollisesti kaan voisi mainita, koska Neuvostoliitto oli vapauttanut Viron hitleristeistä.” (Oksanen 2012a, 314).

<sup>23</sup> The material, including the interview with Maarja Talgre, is no longer available on the Like website. We would like to thank the publishing manager at Like, Jaakko Launimaa, for providing us with the valuable information.

when she met the author of the article and asked him why he could ever write those aggressive and hateful lies about her father, she experienced the Arendtian “banality of evil”. The author said: “That’s how people had to write back then. It was part and parcel of writing” (Talgren 2014, 109; see also Parente-Čapková 2013).<sup>24</sup> This banality and complete lack of self-reflection evokes Rothberg’s (2000, 12) concept of traumatic, which is prosaic, quotidian and extreme. In the novel, this is indicated by various details such as Edgar’s memories of prisoners being tortured by burning iron: “Parts didn’t like irons [...] For years afterward the glow of the iron still carried the reek of burning flesh [...] He was a sensible man – there was no need to threaten him. Let them use the iron on unimportant people” (Oksanen 2012b, 241).<sup>25</sup>

*When the Doves Disappeared* analyses the psychological mechanisms that produce writing like the texts by Parts. There is both the “obligatory” element (“it was part and parcel of writing”) and a deeply subjective one. In passages describing Edgar’s “creative process” while he is writing the book depicting the “horrifying crimes”, “fascist conspiracies and chilling acts of murder” and “bestial forms of torture” committed by the “Estonian evildoers” (Oksanen 2012b, 74)<sup>26</sup> we witness authorial ecstasy that comrade Parts, as the narrator calls him in the second half of the novel, experiences when he gets carried away by the rhetoric of the hateful propaganda. This ecstatic gratification is boosted by the pleasure of fabrication felt by Parts when he is creating the myth about himself and re-creates his memories and his whole life story which, as he hopes, will end up in school textbooks. Parts reaches the climax when he chooses his cousin Roland (whose diary entries he appropriates for his own purposes) as the main target of lies and half-

---

<sup>24</sup> Maarja Talgre has also written an essay about the issue (Talgren 2014). In it, she discloses the name of her father’s slanderer, Andrus Rooltaht, and emphasizes that in his defamatory piece from 1965 (called “Leo Talgre’s ‘Meteoric Flight’”, “Leo Talgre ‘tähelend’” in the original Estonian), he mentions “Leo Talgre’s diary” (Talgren 2014, 108). Maarja Talgre had no knowledge of her father’s diaries, until they were found in Canada, by “a good person” who read her book (Talgren 2014, 110). Maarja Talgre was not certain that Rooltaht had really read Leo’s diaries, but suspected that he might have: “The whole story ‘Leo Talgre’s ‘Meteoric Flight’’ is, of course, a falsification and loathsome propaganda to me. What makes it even more dreadful is that Rooltaht is a skilled KGB propagandist. It looks like he has some genuine documents at his disposal, but he uses them like raisins in his propaganda cake. He distorts facts and fantasizes in between” (Talgren 2014, 110).

<sup>25</sup> “Parts ei pitänyt siltysraudoista [...] Siltysraudan hehku toi vuosienkin jälkeen nenään käryän lihan hajun [...] Hän oli järkevä mies, ei häntä olisi tarvinnut uhkailla, siltysraudoilla piinattiin vain mitättömyyksiä” (Oksanen 2012a, 293).

<sup>26</sup> [kykenivätkaän] “kammottavin rikoksiin”, [paljastetaan] “fasistisia salajuonia ja karmivia murhatekoja”, [lukea todistuksia] “eläimellisistä kidutusmuodoista” (Oksanen 2012a, 92).

truths. He gets excited by affective engagement in the hateful propaganda as well as by his controversial emotions, fears, megalomania and personal interests. His fanatical hatred for Roland is motivated, apart from jealousy, by Roland's extreme passion for truth, perceived as a major threat by Edgar who had internalised the mode of living a lie. In order to persuade his reader, and perhaps also himself, he uses – mostly very clumsy – rhetorical devices as e. g. certain expressions as degeneration (Oksanen 2012b, 102, 113)<sup>27</sup> and rhetorical questions, combined with shocking images: "Who would have believed that a man pretending to be an exemplary father had just a short time before mercilessly shot infants before their mothers' eyes?" (Oksanen 2012b, 287).<sup>28</sup>

Again, most ironically, while Parts portrays Roland as a monster, he appropriates some of Roland's deeds, making use of the diary Roland was writing with the hope that the truth could be known one day. Parts is the embodiment of Václav Havel's (1978, 9) tenet that in a "post-totalitarian state" the "individuals confirm the system, fulfill the system, make the system, are the system". They are "objects in a system of control, but at the same time they are its subjects as well. They are both victims of the system and its instruments", whose "position in the power hierarchy determines the degree of responsibility and guilt" (Havel 1978, 16). In *When the Doves Disappeared*, evil and lies are rewarded and, unlike in *Purge*, waiting for catharsis feels rather pointless. With bitter irony, the reader is left to contemplate the quote from Parts' opus: "Soon there will be no eyewitnesses left, only books witnessing that sadism."<sup>29</sup>

## 5 Conclusions

The Gulag themes in Oksanen's works – in some of them juxtaposed with the Nazi crimes – are explored within transnational processes of remembering, which cannot be restricted to only one framework of a specific national identity. *Purge* and *When the Doves Disappeared* deal with Soviet Estonia but have contributed to Finnish, and, at least to some extent, more broadly transnational memory

---

<sup>27</sup> Oksanen (2012), 127, 140. As also Markku Lehtimäki (2022, 238) notes, expressions typical for the totalitarian vocabulary bring together both bloodlands oppressors, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.

<sup>28</sup> "Kukapa uskoisi, että erinomaista isää näyttelevä mies oli vain vähän aikaa sitten ampunut armotta imeväisiä äitiensä silmien edessä?" (Oksanen 2012a, 349).

<sup>29</sup> Oksanen's original sentence ("Kohta silminnäkijöitä ei enää ole ja tuosta sadismista todistavat enää kirjat", Oksanen 2012a, 278) was translated as "Soon there will be no eyewitnesses left, *no more* books witnessing that sadism" (2012a, 227, our italics), which lacks the irony of the original.

culture. These fictionalised travelling (post)memories contribute to debates on de-colonisation and to enabling “a new kind of social, political and cultural imagination” (Rothberg 2009, 3–4). “Gulag is a tragic story that unites many peoples: apart from the Balts also the Finns, the Germans, those of Eastern Europe and so on” (Oksanen 2009b),<sup>30</sup> i.e. both the bloodlands and other countries, including, of course, the Russians, whom Oksanen does not mention. As has happened in Finland (and in many other countries), literature takes part in the process of creating a memory culture, sometimes after comparative historical research is popularised, at other times by highlighting themes even earlier than the history writing.

Recognition of bloodlands fiction as a genre might raise awareness of memories and concepts of history that have still not been recognised in mainstream memory studies or popular perception. Many literary pieces have had a new life as TV or film adaptations, and as Jerome de Groot (2009) has noted, not only historians but also writers and artists more widely study how history is experienced and circulates in culture. Once again, the concept of unified history is being challenged by non-academic, or public history, the popularity of which is based on the storytelling and freedom of expression inherent in fiction (Groot 2009, 4–6).

In Oksanen’s fiction, gender plays a key role. The antiheroes of the novels analysed in this chapter, Aliide and Edgar, are of different genders, which determines their approach to memory. In Aliide’s case in *Purge*, the past is mostly remembered in the private and intimate sphere. It is the painful past wrought into women’s bodies that creates transgenerational trauma, staged against the background of bloodlands history. The trauma is transferred matrilineally.<sup>31</sup> There is, of course, the matrilineage formed by Ingel, Linda, and Zara, all victims of sexual torture and exploitation under different political regimes. However, matrilineage is not the only transgenerational link between the female characters in the novel. Indeed, the two protagonists, Alide and Zara, are not mother and daughter, but more distant relatives, so the female genealogy is extended to a more general level. In *When the Doves Disappeared*, the intimate sphere plays an equally important role: the protagonist Edgar is forced to hide his sexual identity. It is obvious that Edgar’s evil deeds are not connected directly to his homosexuality, but the necessity to live a lie, hide, and fear exposure play a most important part in his actions (see Lehtimäki 2022, 246). Edgar embraces the grandiose undertaking of inventing, falsifying and manipulating

---

<sup>30</sup> “Gulag on kuitenkin yhteinen surutarina monille kansoille: Baltian lisäksi suomalaisille, saksalaisille, koko Itä-Euroopan kansoille ja niin edelleen” (Oksanen 2009b).

<sup>31</sup> For analysis of matrilineage in Sofi Oksanen’s *Stalin’s Cows*, see Parente-Čapková 2015 and Kačkuté 2024.

the history of the whole nation, though many of his constructions relate to his own, most intimate memories. Through her characters, Oksanen fictionalises postmemory, reactivating and re-embodiment “more distant political and cultural memorial structures” (Hirsch 2008, 33). The reception of her works has raised fundamental questions about the concepts of collective or group versus individual memory, as well as about “translated memories”. Many memory scholars have conceptualised and debated these issues but the fictional discourse enables us to ask again and again, “Whose memories, really, are we talking about? How are they known, how do they come to us? In other words, to what extent are collective memories memories at all, rather than received ideas or historical fables?” (Hoffman 2000, 2).

As we have shown, texts travelling across borders raise many ethical issues on various levels. Analysis of the scholarly and broader reception of her novels enables us to look at Oksanen’s ways of engaging in the debates concerning memory in a more complex and versatile way. This raises “questions of engaged scholarship and research positionality”: not only historians, writers and artists but also literary historians and scholars, though indirectly, participate in debates about “which memory is historically sound, and which is not” (Subotić 2020, 7). These debates require continuous scholarly engagement, especially vis à vis the recent trends of deconstructing the foundations of research into memory studies (e.g. Gensburger and Lefranc 2020).

## Bibliography

Annus, Epp. *Soviet Postcolonial Studies: A View from the Western Borderlands*. London & New York: Routledge, 2018.

Anonymous. “Urodstvo literaturnoi grimasy. Vojna Sofi Oksanen s Rossijej”, 1 March 2024. <https://www.suvorov.press/urodstvo-literaturnoj-grimasy-vojna-sofi-oksanen-s-rossiej/?ysclid=lwc157yx74646352979> (accessed 20 February 2025).

Blacker, Uilteam, and Alexander Etkind. “Introduction.” In *Memory and Theory in Eastern Europe*, edited by Uilteam Blacker, Alexander Etkind, and Julie Fedor, 1–22. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Clarke, David. “The Representation of Victimhood in Sofi Oksanen’s *Purge*.” *Journal of European Studies* 45, no. 3 (2015): 220–235. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047244115586922>.

Craps, Stef. *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Erl, Astrid. “Cultural Memory Studies. An Introduction.” In *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, edited by Astrid Erl, Ansgar Nünning, and Sara Young, 1–15. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008.

Erl, Astrid. *Memory in Culture* (Kollektives Gedächtnis und Erinnerungskulturen, 2003). Translated by Sara B. Young. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011a.

Erll, Astrid. "Travelling Memory." *Parallax* 17, no. 4 (2011b): 4–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2011.605570>.

Etkind, Alexander. "Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied: Magical Historicism in Contemporary Russian Fiction." *Slavic Review* 68, no. 3 (2009): 631–658. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S003767790001977X>.

Gensburger, Sarah, and Sandrine Lefranc. *Beyond Memory: Can We Really Learn from the Past?* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

Groot, Jerome de. *Consuming History. Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2009.

Grönstrand, Heidi. "Kaksi maata, kaksi kulttuuria: Sofi Oksanen suomalaisen kirjallisuuden kartalla." *AVAIN – Kirjallisuudentutkimuksen aikakauslehti* 7, no. 1 (2010): 42–50. <https://doi.org/10.30665/av.74787>.

Gullotta, Andrea. "A New Perspective for Gulag Literature Studies: The Gulag Press." *Studi Slavistici* VIII (2011): 95–111.

Havel, Václav. *The Power of the Powerless*. Translated by Paul Wilson. 1978. <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/wp-content/uploads/1979/01/the-power-of-the-powerless.pdf> (accessed 20 February 2025).

Hirsch, Marianne. "The Generation of Postmemory." *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 103–128. <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2007-019>.

Hoffman, Eva. "Complex Histories, Contested Memories: Some Reflections on Remembering Difficult Pasts." *Occasional Papers of the Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities* 23 (2000): 1–20. Edited by Christina M. Gillis. [https://townsendcenter.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/publications/OP23\\_Hoffman.pdf](https://townsendcenter.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/publications/OP23_Hoffman.pdf) (accessed 20 February 2025).

Jytilä, Riitta. "Memory as Imagination in Elina Hirvonen's When I Forgot." In *Storytelling and Ethics. Literature, Visual Arts and the Power of Narrative*, edited by Hanna Meretoja and Colin Davis, 159–173. Abingdon: Routledge, 2018.

Jytilä, Riitta. "Ylirajaiset traumakulttuurit ja Sofi Oksasen *Puhdistus*." *Idäntutkimus* 29, no. 2 (2022a): 37–52. <https://journal.fi/idadntutkimus/article/view/113904/71229> (accessed 20 February 2025).

Jytilä, Riitta. *Traumaattinen muisti nykyproosassa*. Helsinki: SKS, 2022b. <https://doi.org/10.21435/skst.1485>.

Kačkuté, Eglé. "The Migrant Mother's Silence in Her Mother Tongue as a Mothering Strategy." *Contemporary Women's Writing* (2024); vpae027. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cww/vpae027>.

Kaljundi, Linda, Eneken Laanes, and Ilona Pikkane. "Introduction. Historical Fiction, Cultural Memory and Nation Building in Finland and Estonia." In *Novels, Histories, Novel Nations. Historical Fiction and Cultural Memory in Finland and Estonia*, edited by Linda Kaljundi, Eneken Laanes, and Ilona Pikkane, 26–76. Helsinki: SKS, 2015.

Kalniete, Sandra. "Old Europe, New Europe." Speech at the opening of the Leipzig Book Fair, 2004. <https://web.archive.org/web/20041023172107/https://www.mdr.de/DL/1290734.pdf> (accessed 20 February 2025).

Kaplinski, Jaan. *Sofi Oksanen and the Stalin Award*. 2010. <http://jaankaplinski.blogspot.com/2010/08/sofi-oksanen-and-stalin-award.html> (accessed 20 February 2025).

Kelertas, Violeta. "Introduction. Baltic Postcolonialisms and Its Critics." In *Baltic Postcolonialism*, edited by Violeta Kelertas, 1–10. Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2006.

Köresaar, Ene, Kristin Kuutma, and Epp Lauk. "The Twentieth Century as a Realm of Memory." In *The Burden of Remembering. Recollections and Representations of the 20th Century*, edited by Ene Köresaar, Epp Lauk, and Kristin Kuutma, 9–34. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2009.

Kuldkepp, Mart. "Western Orientalism Targeting Eastern Europe: An Emerging Research Programme." *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* vol. 17 (4): 64–80. <https://doi.org/10.51870/AEMQ7827>.

Laanes, Eneken. "Sofi Oksanen's *Purge* in Estonia." In *Baltic Worlds. Dislocating Literature*. June 2012. <https://balticworlds.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/oksanen.pdf> (accessed 20 February 2025).

Laanes, Eneken. "Born Translated Memories: Transcultural Memorial Forms, Domestication, and Foreignisation." *Memory Studies* 14, no. 1 (2021): 41–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698020976459>.

Lappalainen, Päivi. "Häpeä, ruumis ja väkivalta Sofi Oksasen *Puhdistuksessa*." In *Häpeä vähän! Kriittisiä tutkimuksia häpeästä*, edited by Siru Kainulainen and Viola Parente-Čapková, 259–281. Turku: Utukirjat, 2011. <https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-29-8414-5>.

Lappalainen, Päivi. "Finnish Literature Abroad – The Case of *Purge* by Sofi Oksanen." In *Finnische Sprache, Literatur und Kultur im deutschsprachigen Raum*, edited by Marja Järventausta and Marko Pantermöller, 333–351. Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 2013.

Leggewie, Claus. "Seven Circles of European Memory." In *Cultural Memories: The Geographical Point of View*, edited by Peter Meusburger, Michael Heffernan, and Edgar Wunder, 123–144. Springer, 2011.

Lehtimäki, Markku. Sofistikoitunut kertomus ja lukemisen etiikka. *AVAIN – Kirjallisuudentutkimuksen aikakauslehti* 2 (2010): 40–49. <https://doi.org/10.30665/av.74793>.

Lehtimäki, Markku. *Sofi Oksasen romaanitaide. Kertomus, etiikka, retoriikka*. Helsinki: SKS, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.21435/skst.1482>.

Lehtonen, Sanna. "The Fame and Blame of an Intellectual Goth. Sofi Oksanen (1977)." In *Idolizing Authorship. Literary Celebrity and the Construction of Identity, 1800 to the Present*, edited by Gaston Franssen and Rick Honings, 257–273. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017.

lustdevidoll (without title). Когда исчезли голуби – Софи Оксанен | Livelib. 2017. <https://www.livelib.ru/book/1000947728-kogda-ischezli-golubi-sofi-oksanen> (accessed 28 February 2025).

Masso, Iivi Anna. "Hauras ja haavoittuva totuus." In *Kaiken takana oli pelko – Kuinka Viro menetti historiansa ja miten se saadaan takaisin*, edited by Sofi Oksanen and Imbi Paju. Helsinki: WSOY, 2009.

Meusburger, Peter, Michael Heffernan, and Edgar Wunder (eds). *Cultural Memories: The Geographical Point of View*. Heidelberg: Springer, 2011.

montreallex. Izba-tšitalnja i slušateljnja. 2011. <https://montreallex.livejournal.com/237058.html> (accessed 20 February 2025).

Moore, David Chioni. "Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique." In *Baltic Postcolonialism*, edited by Violeta Kelertas, 11–43. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2001.

Nystrand, Marko. *Arvoja näkyvissä. Kaunokirjallisuuden etiikka Ludwig Wittgensteinin filosofian valossa*. Helsinki: Helsingin yliopisto, 2012.

Oksanen, Sofi. *Puhdistus*. Helsinki: WSOY, 2008a.

Oksanen, Sofi. *Purge*. Translated by Lola Rogers. New York: Grove/Atlantic, 2008b.

Oksanen, Sofi. "Johdannoksi." In *Kaiken takana oli pelko. Kuinka Viro menetti historiansa ja miten se saadaan takaisin*, edited by Sofi Oksanen and Imbi Paju. Helsinki: WSOY, 2009a.

Oksanen, Sofi. "Se toinen, tuntematon holokausti." 3 (2009b). <https://www.tuglas.fi/se-toinen-tuntematon-holokausti> (accessed 20 February 2025).

Oksanen, Sofi. "Dekolonisaation ajasta." In *Kaiken takana oli pelko. Kuinka Viro menetti historiansa ja miten se saadaan takaisin*, edited by Sofi Oksanen and Imbi Paju. Helsinki: WSOY, 2009c.

Oksanen, Sofi. *Kun kyyhkyset katosivat*. Helsinki: Like, 2012a.

Oksanen, Sofi. *When the Doves Disappeared*. Translated by Lola Rogers. London: Atlantic Books, 2012b.

Oksanen, Sofi. "Sofi Oksasen pysäyttävä kirjoitus infosodasta – Tätä on kirjoittaa Venäjästä." *Kaleva*, 26 May 2016. <https://www.kaleva.fi/sofi-oksasen-pysayttava-kirjoitus-infosodasta-tata/1744065> (accessed 20 February 2025).

Oziewicz, Marek. "Bloodlands Fiction. Cultural Trauma Politics and the Memory of Soviet Atrocities in *Breaking Stalin's Nose*, *A Winter's Day in 1939* and *Between Shades of Gray*." *International Research in Children's Literature* 9, no. 2 (2016): 146–161. <https://doi.org/10.3366/ircl.2016.0199>.

Parente-Čapková, Viola. "Umlčená paměť. Finsko-estonský fenomén Sofi Oksanen a její *Očista* (Puhdistus)." *Tvar XXI*, no. 19 (2010).

Parente-Čapková, Viola. "To byla taková doba. Sofi Oksanen: Čas ztracených holubic (Kun kyyhkyset katosivat)." Translated by Linda Dejdarová. Prague: Odeon, 2013.

Parente-Čapková, Viola. "'Mother, Mother, Let's Go Back': Perspectives on the Mother-Daughter Relationship in Contemporary Prose by Finnish Women Writers." New Perspectives on the Mother-Daughter Relationship in Contemporary Women's Writing Cross-Cultural Seminar, 20 March 2015, Centre for Contemporary Women's Writing, School of Advanced Study, University of London.

Parente-Čapková, Viola. "Sofi Oksanen ja 'tuntematon' Ukraina. *Koirapuisto*-romaani ja sen vastaanotto." *Ajan kohina* 18 (2022): 36–49. <https://blogs.helsinki.fi/venalainen-kirjallisuus/files/2022/11/Ajan-kohina-18.pdf> (accessed 20 February 2025).

Parente-Čapková, Viola. "Meille, imperialistisia ambitioita omaavan valtion lukijoille.' Raivo-feministi Sofi Oksasen vastaanotto Venäjällä." In *Liikkuvat tekstit, liikkuvat naiset Suomen, Venäjän ja Neuvostoliiton kirjallisella kentällä*, edited by Viola Parente-Čapková, Arja Rosenholm, and Kati Launis. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, forthcoming.

Pucherová, Dobrata, and Róbert Gáfrík. "Introduction: Which Postcolonial Europe?" In *Postcolonial Europe? Essays on Post-Communist Literatures and Cultures*, edited by Dobrota Pucherová and Róbert Gáfrík, 11–24. Leiden and Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2015.

Rigney, Ann. "Plenitude, Scarcity and the Circulation of Cultural Memory." *Journal of European Studies* 35, no. 1 (2005): 11–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047244105051158>.

Rothberg, Michael. *Traumatic Realism. The Demands of Holocaust Representation*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2000.

Rothberg, Michael. *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009.

Snyder, Timothy. *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*. New York: Basic Books, 2010.

Stubb, Alexander. "Krimilläkin oli varmasti omat Aliidensa, Ingelinsä ja Zaransa." *Helsingin Sanomat*, HS Viikko 2 (2024): A17. <https://www.hs.fi/mielipide/art-2000010088164.html> (accessed 20 February 2025).

Subotić, Jelena. "The Appropriation of Holocaust Memory in Post-Communist Eastern Europe." *Modern Languages Open* 22, no. 1 (2020): 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.315>.

Suomi ulkomaille -sivusto: "Sofi Oksanen esittelee Tallinnassa uuden romaaninsa vironnosta." 22 November 2012. [https://finlandabroad.fi/web/est/ajankohtaista/-/asset\\_publisher/TV8iYvdcF3tq/content/sofi-oksanen-esittelee-tallinnassa-uuden-romaaninsa-vironnosta/384951](https://finlandabroad.fi/web/est/ajankohtaista/-/asset_publisher/TV8iYvdcF3tq/content/sofi-oksanen-esittelee-tallinnassa-uuden-romaaninsa-vironnosta/384951) (accessed 20 February 2025).

Talgre, Maarja. *Leo: ett estniskt öde*. Stockholm: Bonniers, 1990.

Talgre, Maarja. "Annex: My memories of Soviet propaganda in Sweden". *Historical Memory versus Communist Identity. Proceedings of the Conference "The Shaping of Identity and Personality under Communist Rule: History in the Service of Totalitarian Regimes in Eastern Europe,"* Tallinn, 9–10 June 2011, edited by Meelis Saueauk, 105–110. Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 2014.

<https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/33306/507876.pdf?sequence=1>  
(accessed 20 February 2025).

Toker, Lena. *Gulag Literature and the Literature of Nazi Camps: An Intercontextual Reading*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019.

Troebst, Stefan. "Halecki Revisited: Europe's Conflicting Cultures of Remembrance." In *Cultural Memories: The Geographical Point of View*, edited by Peter Meusburger, Michael Heffernan, and Edgar Wunder, 145–154. Heidelberg: Springer, 2011.

Witt-Brattström, Ebba. "The Dark History in Sofi Oksanen's Writing." In *The History of Nordic Women's Literature*. 2014. <https://nordicwomensliterature.net/2014/12/01/the-dark-history-in-sofi-oksanens-writing/> (accessed 20 February 2025).

Žemoitelite, Jana. "Kogda zarezali svinej." *Licey*, 17 April 2015. Когда зарезали свиней – Интернет-журнал «Лицея» (gazeta-licey.ru). <https://gazeta-licey.ru/culture/literature/31916-kogda-zarezali-sviney?ysclid=lwc1d99t8442518350> (accessed 20 February 2025).