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► **To cite this version:**

Corinne Florence Bigot, Joan Chiung-Huei Chang. Haunting Books and Stories in Janice Kulyk Keefer's Honey and Ashes, Story of Family. *Women's Life Writing and the Practice of Reading. She reads to write herself*, 2018. hal-02994831

HAL Id: hal-02994831

<https://hal.science/hal-02994831>

Submitted on 21 Dec 2020

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Chapter 13

Haunting Books and Stories in Janice Kulyk Keefer's Postethnic Family

Memoir *Honey and Ashes* (1998)

Corinne Bigot

Introduction

In the beginning were stories. In the prologue to *Honey and Ashes, A family Story*, the Canadian writer Janice Kulyk Keefer explains that she wrote the memoir because she wanted to collect and write down the stories about “the Old Place” that had filled her childhood but had vanished from her consciousness as an adult (Kulyk Keefer 1998, 4). The stories which fed her feeling of, and desire for, difference, were told by her grandmother, mother and aunt and evoked their lives in Staromischna (in today's Ukraine) before they left for Canada in 1936. Writing down the stories turned into composing a family memoir—Kulyk Keefer evokes her own childhood in Toronto, and writes the lives of her grandparents, mother and aunt in pre-multicultural Canada in the forties and fifties, and their lives in Eastern Europe. Like other forms of life writing, a narrative of family is “a set of shifting self-referential practices that, in engaging the past, reflect on identity in the present” as the author is at the same time the observing subject and the object of investigation (Smith and Watson 2010, 1). Janice Kulyk Keefer, whose name on the cover is a conscious choice that signals her “split self” (Kulyk Keefer 2016, 25),ⁱ has written an immigrant family narrative that is centrally concerned with ethnicity. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson point out, “immigrant narratives ... have long been sites through which formerly marginal or displaced ethnic ... subjects explore the terms of their cultural identities and their diasporic

and transnational allegiances” (Smith and Watson 2010, 156). The memoir, that entwines the meaning of the “I” with the “we” of collective memory, is a poignant exploration of personal, familial and historical memories. Kulyk Keefer reads and writes about her family’s homeland’s tragic history,ⁱⁱ which she claims to have inherited. Thus the memoir is centrally concerned with the kind of memory Marianne Hirsch calls postmemory—the memory of the child of survivors (Hirsch 1997, 22) who is haunted by his or her family’s past, which she tries to reconstruct. The stories, that are both seductive and full of holes, trigger a desire to know more, which results in an investigation, with Kulyk Keefer commenting on her readings, and a reconstruction, in which the reader is included, notably through Kulyk Keefer’s comments on the family photographs that are included in the memoir.

This chapter intends to show that *Honey and Ashes*, a postmodern narrative that draws attention to its author’s gathering, perusal and interpretation of family documents as well as history books and novels, is centrally concerned with reading—both reading lives and reading herself home—and the exploration of the relationship between literature and haunting.

My analysis will focus on the author’s careful reading and/or examination of her sources and her attempt to create a “postmodern space of cultural memory composed of leftovers, debris ... ” that are interwoven “to tell a variety of stories, from a variety of often competing perspectives” (Hirsch 1997, 13). I will also examine Kulyk Keefer’s attempt to produce an alternative form of memory work by weaving her family’s story into (Canadian and Eastern European) History, and her attempt to write a postethnic story that speaks “across borders.” Finally, I will show that Kulyk Keefer’s belief in a “continuum of experience and imagination” (7) is linked to her belief in the power of literature to move and touch human beings, and to haunt them.

The first strands of the weave

I read *Honey and Ashes* as a postmodern family narrative, constructing a family story through careful analysis of its myths. It is constructed as a weave, the women in her family having inspired the running metaphor—Natalia, Janice’s mother, who entered the Toronto School of Design and became a talented clothes designer; Olena, her grandmother, who was a gifted seamstress; and their foremothers, who were weavers in Staromischyna. Janice Kulyk Keefer evokes women who washed and dried the stalks of flax and hemp that they later wove into thread: “all winter long the women’s looms hum and clatter” (19). The metaphor of the weave also transpires when she evokes the objects Olena brought to Canada—quilts, cushions, kilims, a wall hanging, and a *poyas*ⁱⁱⁱ she had woven herself (113), the list evoking the threads that compose the family story/ies.

The first chapter focuses on the stories Olena, Vira (her aunt) and Natalia (her mother) told Janice throughout her childhood, and the powerful impact they had: they were “like the books in which [Janice] lost herself” (299). They conjured up a world that was more real to her than the world of TV cartoons whose characters’ adventures “paled beside the stories [her] mother told of her childhood in a village named Staromischyna, or “the Old Place” (12-13). The Old Place, in the immigrant’s memory is always a paradise, as Eve Hoffman, who left Poland at thirteen, points out in her own memoir, *Lost in Translation* (1998, 5). As immigrants whose “past is home, albeit a lost home” (Rushdie 1992, 9), Olena, Natalia and Vira have created fictions, an “imaginary homeland” (Rushdie 1992, 10) which Janice inherits. They conjure up a fairy tale village, complete with thatched houses, horses and carts, geese, storks, fields and orchards; in the stories, their house is “not a house but a world” (23). The untranslatable words that evoke it make it even more fantastic and real: “you enter the house by the *siny* ... you pass the *komora* with its sacks grains and floor ... two stoves, one for cooking and a tall clay *pich* ... The *bambatel*, with its grand wooden floor ...” (24). The world of stories was, like the world of fairy tales, a world the child could return to in her mind

and imagination, since it never left her. In the first section of the memoir, Kulyk Keefer uses the stories she remembers to conjure up and imagine the lives Natalia, Vira, Olena and Tomasz (her grandfather) had before they emigrated to Canada.

Stories, however, are only one strand of the weave since Kulyk Keefer examines family photographs, documents and even objects, trying out different ways to read them and relate them to the stories, in order to tell the story of the family. So doing she creates a “postmodern space of cultural memory composed of leftovers, debris, single items in order to tell a variety of stories, from a variety of often competing perspectives” (Hirsch 1997, 13). Another layer of reading is added when Kulyk Keefer reads the documents she inherited from Tomasz and connects them to the stories. These documents—passports, cards, boat tickets, birth and death certificates—are said to be her “most precious possessions” (16) and their reading, with the help of a friend who speaks Polish, is also foregrounded. Some documents “validate the existence” (53) of characters in the stories, enabling her to see them: “Petro suddenly comes alive for me: Petro, who was struck dead ... when he was only seventeen” (53). They help her understand the plight of her family better: Tomasz’s 1931 boat ticket and his stamped passport provide her with the dates of his single visit to Staromischyna during the family’s seven-year separation (73-74).

Yet some documents force her to see that “stories speak one language: documents another” (52). Thus one document reveals a six-year legal battle after Olena’s father’s death that contradicts the moving story of his deathbed bequest to Olena (53). Kulyk Keefer’s examination of official documents in Latin, Ukrainian, Polish and English enables her to retrace Tomasz’s journey from Poland to Canada and to find the truth about the births and deaths of his children. Comparing the dates on the birth and death certificates to the date on the boat ticket leads to the discovery that the moving story of his having left home on the very day the twins were born and his son died is untrue (61). Yet she sees that stories do not really

lie—Olena’s story repairs the wrong before the judge did since Olena’s father intended to give her his property, and the second one creates meaning as Tomasz’s departure for Canada is “mirrored” by his son’s birth and death (62) while making the father’s plight easier to picture. Thus Kulyk Keefer does not oppose documents to stories or truth to fiction, rather she weaves them together.

Reading photographs and writing the family myth

Family photographs regularly feature in family memoirs^{iv} and *Honey and Ashes* includes a fourteen-picture family album which Kulyk Keefer comments on. As Roland Barthes has shown, one “reads” pictures (Barthes 1977, 32-51; 52-68), and as Marianne Hirsch demonstrates, family photographs can be “read” (Hirsch 2012, 10) as part of family narratives. On a first, simple, level, Kulyk Keefer reads the pictures by relating them to the stories: some photographs enable her to suddenly see fabled characters such as Melania, Olena’s cruel mother, who looms large in Olena’s stories. More interestingly, she reads them critically, since, as Marianne Hirsch argues, photography “perpetuates family myths while seeming merely to record actual moments in family history” (2012, 7). While Kulyk Keefer reads and deconstructs the family narrative through family photographs, she also foregrounds her participation in its construction, through appropriation: “we appropriate [people in the pictures] for our purposes, making mysteries or moral fables out of the way they stand” (Kulyk Keefer 1998, 59). She is aware that family photographs “locate themselves precisely in the space of contradiction between the myth of the ideal family and the lived reality of family life” (Hirsch 2012, 8): for instance she reads the snapshot of a family gathering in which Vira and Natalia wear smart dresses as evidence of their mother’s belief in the obligation to be well dressed for a photograph, although the family had very little to eat (Kulyk Keefer 1998, 136). She sees what the photograph hides (their poverty) and relates it to

a larger context by quoting Margaret Forster's working class memoir in which Forster writes of the significance of dressing well (136).

Family pictures (and the order in which they appear) enable her to both read and write the family myths, for instance a series of pictures featuring Vira and Natalia, from 1937 to 1949, from the classroom at Charles Fraser School to Vira's graduation, tells the story of the girls' successful integration in Canada. She also uses a photograph she calls "the best" family portrait (156) to write Tomasz and Olena's narrative. In the snapshot, taken two years after Olena and the girls joined Tomasz in Toronto, Olena, Vira and Natalia stand behind Tomasz who is seated. Kulyk Keefer reads the picture—her family's smiles, their impeccable clothes, the crease of Tomasz's trousers, and their shining shoes—as evidence of the family's success. She also connects it to the wedding photographs that should have been taken, but were not, due to the bride's parents' opposition to the marriage, and writes the family portrait into the family myth. She does not only see it as evidence of a happy life, she reads it as the conclusion of a fairy-tale like narrative: "here, then, is the happy ending of the courtship in that moonlit orchard seventeen years ago" (156).

Kulyk Keefer also draws attention to the construction of the family myth by exposing the seam of a photograph. A studio portrait featuring Tomasz, Olena, Vira and Natalia is described, commented on and included in the book, dated "1928?" (np). It used to hang in the grandparents' bedroom, and for years Janice believed it was taken in Toronto, after the women arrived. But her investigation (comparing dates) proves that the photograph "tells a lie" (84), which her careful examination of the picture confirms. She finds the seam that joins the two photographs—Tomasz's, taken in Toronto, the women's, taken in Pidvolochys'k. So it speaks of the family's seven-year separation, through its "scar": "though the tinting has been done by a skilful pair of hands, it can't disguise the scar between presence and absence"

(85). While the photograph creates the family myth, the seam exposes its construction. It is also evidence of a silent repair, revealing a desire to change the story.

Drawing the reader in

I believe Kulyk Keefer's comments on the photographs she has included to be a device meant to draw the reader in, encouraging her to try her hand at reading them too. This reader is brought in, encouraged to participate in the weaving of the story, through the compelling force of the pictures. For instance, commenting on the studio portrait of her aunt and mother taken in the early forties, four years after their arrival in Toronto, Kulyk Keefer draws attention to the girls' unusual pose (they stand back to back, their shoulders touching), proudly asserting that they are sisters (102). Read in connection with the chapters devoted to Natalia's and Vira's "journeys," from their first days in Toronto when they arrived at the ages of fourteen and twelve with no knowledge of English, to their graduations from Design school (Natalia) and university and medical school (Vira), the picture and the next two snapshots are part of the narrative of the immigrant family's successful journey, or, in Hirsch's terms, family myth. Yet I find that the girls' portrait yields another interpretation: reading it with the chapter in which Kulyk Keefer calls the girls "survivors" (105) and describes the many diseases—scarlatina, typhoid fever and diphtheria—that killed many children in Staromischna including the girls' sister, I see two survivors who stand together and *alone*: "after the death of the twins, they have to be everything to one another, for better or worse" (105). I also follow Kulyk Keefer's reading of the family myth through the wedding photographs (Olena's, Natalia's and Vira's) she comments on and includes, and add my own reading. Kulyk Keefer evokes the *poyas* that Olena brought from home for her daughters to wear on their wedding days, concluding that the *poyas*, embroidered blouses and skirts were nowhere to be seen on these days, as evidenced by the pictures. I see that the wedding

photographs reveal the girls' successful integration in Canadian society *and* the cultural gap with their previous lives, yet my eyes are drawn to a *punctum*, a piece of embroidered cloth on Olena's arms suggesting her connection to the past.

Reading and weaving the family history into Canadian History

As she describes herself reading the family documents and photographs, Kulyk Keefer writes them into the larger context of Canada's immigration history. In the early to mid twentieth century, Halifax and Quebec were Canada's two major ports of entry for immigration from Europe, which the Solowskis' journeys illustrate. Interestingly, at the time when Kulyk Keefer was composing the memoir, the Canadian government was constructing a site of memory [*lieu de mémoire*]^v (Nora 1996, 194) of its own—Canada's Museum of Immigration in Halifax.^{vi} The museum opened on the very site where immigrants used to be processed upon arrival, and has become a symbol of the memorial heritage of Canada's immigrant communities.

Collecting, reading, describing and quoting from the family documents and photographs, reading them in connection with the stories, Kulyk Keefer creates her own place of memory to write the family's experience of exile into Canada's history of immigration. She uses Tomasz's boat ticket as well as official documents stating that Tomasz was "legally admitted" at the Port of Quebec in 1927 and certifying he had been "passed by the surgeon" to retrace his journey from Danzig to Saskatoon via Cherbourg, Quebec and Halifax (62) and to evoke immigration from poverty-stricken Europe. She narrates Olena, Natalia and Vira's departure from Poland and arrival in Halifax in 1936 and the medical inspection they endured from Vira's point of view it. She links Vira's trachoma to an article from the *Halifax Herald*, April 4, 1903, claiming that sixty of the 160 Canada-bound passengers from Eastern Europe on one liner were held up for trachoma (115). The article makes her understand why Olena

needed to have Vira's trachoma treated before they left Poland, although the treatment was barbaric. The success story does not cancel out the hardships the family experienced, both during the journey and once in Toronto, nor the reasons why they left "the Old Place." Kulyk Keefer recalls the objects her grandmother took with her from home, those remainders and reminders of the past that always spoke of exile and loss. She evokes Olena's first sewing machine in Toronto, which was encased in a box "like a relic" (30), and fascinated her. It was understood to be inferior to the black and golden machine Olena had in the village, and so reminded her of their exile. The Canadian machine was also evidence of their first years in Toronto, when Olena started earning paltry sums sewing shirts for another more successful immigrant. As an adult, Kulyk Keefer reinterprets the fabled black and golden machine as the result of dire poverty and forced immigration: it was bought with the money Tomasz earned in Canada, and enabled Olena to sew clothes for their children, "whose very existence ha[d] forced her husband to live so far away" (30).

Postmemory

As a postmodern life narrative focusing on ethnicity and legacy, *Honey and Ashes* is an attempt to "resituate the autobiographical 'I' within an ethnic 'we' as the meaning of her 'I' is entwined with and must be read with the 'we' of collective memory" (Smith and Watson 2010, 176-177). In a telling scene, Kulyk Keefer describes the experience of seeing her face in her grandmother's pictures, a resemblance she accentuates by putting on a headscarf. So doing she turns into "any woman from the Old Place, sixty or six hundred years ago" (47-48). This strengthens her belief that there is no clear cut between past and present. The scarf, she sees, is both shelter and halter, both a shell and a noose (48). It reveals her attachment to her family and to her family's past, however tragic the past was.

The memoir reveals “a compulsion to tell” that marks second generation Canadian Ukrainians (Ledohowski 2013, 198-216). Collecting the stories Kulyk Keefer comes across silences, denial, and memory losses, which become blatant when she starts reading history books: “[t]his curiosity meant that following what had been private images, family myths, into the vortex of context—a public world full of other people and events that the storytellers of my childhood had never known, or had forgotten, or suppressed” (Kulyk Keefer 5). *Honey and Ashes* is concerned with postmemory, which, as Marianne Hirsch explains, is inherited, “delayed, indirect, secondary” (Hirsch 1997, 13). Hirsch’s concept is linked to Henri Raczymows’s concept of *mémoire trouée*, a memory full of holes which also defines the indirect and fragmentary nature of second-generation memory (Hirsch 1997, 23).

The memoir shows that, as Hirsch argues, photography and postmemory are related (12-13; 19). Describing the family portrait that used to hang in her grandparents’ bedroom Kulyk Keefer confesses, “all my life I’ve been haunted by this photograph” (85). She sees more than the seam in it, she sees Vira and Natalia as haunted by the deaths of their siblings: “sometimes it seemed as if the pallor of the children who’d survived was an act of revenge ... by the ones who’d died” (85).^{vii} Although Janice has never known the twins, nor seen any photographs of them, they are haunting presences in her imagination, and with them, countless, nameless infants who died of typhoid fever, scarlatina or dysphtheria in the Old Place. *Honey and Ashes* is a testimony about being haunted by absent presences, through stories that are half-remembered and half forgotten. Kulyk Keefer narrates the story of Olena’s sister’s tragic death as told by her grandmother. The fifteen-year old died in a Russian punitive raid during the First World War (151-152). Like everyone in the village the girl was forced to dig trenches in the cold all day; she was later discovered to have a fever and alarmingly swollen legs. As the girl refused the only solution she was offered—amputations—she died of gangrene. Janice is haunted by the fact that no one remembers her

name: “all we can call her is ‘the girl’” (152). Memories and stories are full of holes which, coupled with the striking images survivors evoke, increase their haunting effect. Natalia remembers only one night of terror when they had to hide from the Polish militia (181). However partial the story is, it haunts Janice’s postmemory, as evidenced by an isolated one-sentence paragraph that repeats Natalia’s description of her cousin who had been savagely beaten to death: “A mess of red jelly, crusted with flies” (181).

Reading History

Kulyk Keefer claims she has inherited “the burden and gift” and a past which she sees as “an equal spill of beauty and blood” (14) and explains that to claim Ukrainian descent is to belong to “the most tragic nation in Europe” (199). Remembering the stories resulted in questions about her family’s homeland’s history and the family narrative turns into an investigation. Her intention, as she explained elsewhere, was to “go into the intersection of history and [her] family’s personal history” (Kulyk Keefer and Zakydalsky 1996, 10). She describes herself reading history books and the *Encyclopedia Britannica* to learn about the history of Galicia (Kulyk Keefer 1998, 167). She later reads books about the history of Poland’s and Ukraine’s Jews. History books yield intellectual comfort, proving that the Poles and Ukrainians were encouraged to fight against each other by their rulers (169) or showing that the prejudices against the Jews were not the products of genetics but were motivated by economics and empire (202).

Yet history books prove to be too “abstract” (202) and do not help her to “see” people. So she draws connections between the history books she reads and the personal and familial stories she was told, since what matters to her is the intersection between History and family history, which is accessed through stories. She relates Tomasz’s life to the history of Eastern Europe: when he turned eighteen, in 1918, Galicia, which was part of Austria, became

part of Poland (167), when he married Olena, Poland's rights to Western Galicia were confirmed by the League of Nations (178). She finds Tomasz and Olena's exile in a paragraph stating that starvation in Galicia resulted in forced immigration (171). She compares sources, multiplying perspectives. She reads about "the pacification of Ukraine" when it became part of Poland after the 1818-1819 war—in books, in an article from *The Guardian* dated October 1930 that explains that "the pacification" of Ukraine meant "punitive expeditions" (179), and in a booklet dated 1931 published by the Ukrainian Review which describes Polish brutalities in Eastern Galicia (179-180). This she relates to Natalia's story about finding her cousin's body after a raid.

History books also provide her with knowledge that confirms her own feeling of having inherited a tragic history. A complex history of colonization, invasions, changing borders, and violence, including pogroms, emerges. History books, however, do not devote many pages to the Ukrainian-Polish war (1918-1919) which for her is "one of these crucial places where private and public history, family memory and public record intersect" (174). Tomasz, whose father was Polish, joined the Ukrainian Galician army, and thus fought against his father's people during this war. While History books tell her that Galicia became a killing field, and that thousands of civilians were killed (170), family (hi)story cruelly reminds her that brothers fought with and killed one another.

The references to the encyclopaedia's entry on "Galicia" serve other purposes. They prick the reader's interest since she is unlikely to have come across the name Galicia, encouraging her to read on. Referring to the region as "Galicia" also reveals how impossible it is to call it either Poland or Ukraine. It highlights an impossibly complex weave of ethnicities and nationalities—Goths, Slavs, Hungarians, Ruthenians, Ukrainians, including ethnic Jews—and a complex coexistence of languages—Yiddish, Polish, Ukrainian, Russian, German.

A postethnic memoir

Like all chronicles of diaspora, *Honey and Ashes* “interrogate[s] and undermine[s] any simple or uncomplicated sense of origins” (Chambers 1994, 16). Kulyk Keefer makes a clever use of the paratext to shift the ground of reference for identity: two maps, meant to be read together, shift boundaries as Staromischna moves from the Polish-USSR Ukrainian border to Ukraine (x, xi). Her explanation that “Staromischna” is a rendering from Cyrillic into English of the Ukrainian name, while the name that appears on prewar Polish documents is spelt differently (xiii) and her mention of reading family documents written in Polish *and* Ukrainian further shift the ground. *Honey and Ashes* belongs to a recent trend in family narratives that explores “a postethnic identity” (Smith and Watson 2010, 157) and challenges the single story of fixed identity. Her own grandfather is a case in point when she asks, “was he Polish or Ukrainian, Tomasz, Solowski?” (Kulyk Keefer 1998, 173), and she uses family documents to prove her point: “My grandfather’s name as it appears on official documents is perfectly Polish” (173).

Kulyk Keefer makes it clear that for her ethnicity is linked to history, rather than culture, and is not a cultural choice, nor an intellectual one: “for me ethnicity has been no voluntary affair of food and dress but a mesh of old place and new, of personal and public history—a mesh that cuts deep into the skin” (7). As Lisa Grekul points out, the figurative bridge of blood that exists between Kulyk Keefer and her family’s history is a recurring image (Grekul 2005, 150) but I find the image of the mesh cutting into her skin equally crucial. Since she often refers to borders, defines herself as “a Ukrainian-Canadian with a thread of Polishness in her” who wishes to tell a story that speaks “across any number of borders” (7), I read her metaphor with Gloria Anzaldúa’s metaphor of the border as an open wound: “the U.S.-Mexican border es una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and

bleeds” (Anzaldúa 2012, 25). In *Honey and Ashes*, the wound breaks where the past grates against the present and bleeds into it.

The memoir is meant to draw connections between people, across borders and ethnic divides, in an attempt to create “a common space” (7). The memoir challenges “the single story”^{viii} by refusing to take sides, by showing equal concern about the victims of the Polish-Ukrainian war, pogroms,^{ix} and the Holocaust, by showing how prejudice spreads, and by adopting multiple sources and perspectives. Thus she tries “to see things from the Polish side” (179), that is to say her readings enable her to analyse the difficulties the new Republic of Poland that the Allies “pulled out” of their hats after 150 years of colonial rule faced: to understand how the attempt to build the nation led to defining its people by their language and their faith, and that denials of human rights and perversions of justice were doomed to occur. Above all, reading about the 1918-1919 Polish-Ukrainian war enables her to understand that the Ukrainian school she attended taught them “the single story”: “it was understood that the Poles were our enemies” (173). She also explains that she was traumatized by an American novel she read in her twenties at a time when she lived in England and had decided to become Janice Keefer. Louis Begley’s novel, *Wartime Lies*, which details “the long Polish struggle against the Ukrainian invaders” (200-201), is both the other side of the story she was used to hearing about at Ukrainian school and a single story that feeds into *and* fuels prejudices. The novel, which made her feel close to despair (200), had the power to conjure up a world whose burden overwhelmed her, and confirmed her desire to flee from her own past.

A continuum of imagination: literature and painting

Kulyk Keefer explains that her choice to study English literature in England was a way for her to escape from her ethnic identity (221), hence her choice to write a PhD dissertation on Henry James, “that arch-Anglophile” (221); however, she discovered that he expressed the

very thing/exactly what she was desperately running from—“the imagination of disaster” (221) that haunted her family. It was Toni Morrison who later taught her that imagination is bound up with memory (7). The memoir makes it clear that literature puts words to her feelings, and helps her define what she believes in. As a writer who had previously written a novel about a woman haunted by Woolf’s novels, and would later use T.S. Eliot’s *Waste Land* as a haunting sounding board to a poem conveying her worries about the new millennium,^x Janice Kulyk Keefer expresses her belief in literature when she says she believes in “a continuum of experience and ... imagination” that can bring people together (1998, 7).

She believes that books can make us “read ourselves home” (233) and so she reads herself home, even when quoting the Caribbean-Canadian poetess Dionne Brand’s impossible longing for home (326). She recognizes the Zbruch (Staromischna’s river) in Isaac Babel’s story “Crossing the Zubrich” (18; 202). She relates to Chekhov’s stories whose setting and characters evoke the peasant culture she comes from in a much more truthful, albeit frightening, way than sentimentalized images on greeting cards (91). As she is writing the memoir and reading about the hostilities against Jews in Ukraine, she re-reads Isaac Babel, with whom she fell in love in her twenties. “Crossing the Zubrich” enables her to imagine Olena’s Jewish friends of whose fate nothing is known (202-203).

The “continuum of imagination” implies the capacity to touch and be touched: Babel’s story hurts her because it has the power to touch: “it’s as though he were writing with the tip of a knife, nicking not paper, but skin” (203). Virginia Woolf’s words wring her heart (16). A Chronicle about a princess in Kiev who was forgotten in a labyrinth-like palace when her family fled the Mongol slaughters, “gnaws” at her (169) as it evokes her father’s sisters who were left behind when their parents fled to Canada in 1914. She can endow objects with the power to tell stories of people’s lives/deaths. One object in a British Museum’s display of jewellery hidden and found in Kiev moves her because it conjures up “the warmth and

softness of the skin that wore it.” (161). The mention of the woman’s skin reminds me of her relation to the miniature cupboard that used to sit on a shelf in her mother’s house: “a replica, holding the touch of the hands that had fashioned it” (26). The key word, I think, is “touch,” a word with a double meaning, tactile and emotional (Sedgwick 2003, 17). Eve Sedgwick argues that to touch is always to reach out, to fondle, and “always to understand other people,” “if only in the making of the textured object” (14), and this is shown by Kulyk Keefer’s attempts to reach out to people in the memoir. The attention she pays to people’s faces, photographs, objects or books she remembers from her childhood or encountered in her investigation reminds of Jean-François Lyotard’s idea that Walter Benjamin’s childhood stories do not describe events from childhood but “capture the childhood of the event and inscribe what is uncapturable about it” (Lyotard 1992, 106). Lyotard defines the encounter/event thus: “What turns an encounter with a word, a smell, place, book, or face into an event is not its newness ... it is its very value as initiation. You only learn this later. It cut open a wound in the sensibility. You know this because it has reopened since and will reopen again” (106). While many such encounters/events with people, artefacts, stories and book pepper *Honey and Ashes*, one in particular deserves careful attention—the encounter with *The Diary of a Young Girl* which she read at age twelve.

The experience is so intense we might call it love at first reading as Anne Frank and her Diary become one with Janice: “it became my companion, my shadow self” (194). She recalls a strong sense of identification although Anne Frank was German and Dutch, and a Jew: “we were the same somehow” (194). She identified with Anne as a girl, whose thoughts and “desires” she shared (194), and as one who like herself was “other” (194). She recalls that the introduction to the Diary shocked her into understanding what genocide was, which she related to her own family’s history, further reading her life in Anne’s: “Anne had been murdered, along with millions of other people, just for being. What happened to the Franks

could have happened to us; Anne's death could have been my own" (194). The Diary was also the first reading experience of hearing two voices, the girl's and "the voice of History with a capital H" (194), which led her to start reading history books, which was also the first intimation, if not step, of her larger, relentless investigation. The Diary is a "bridge of words" that speaks across borders. It contains all that matters to her and which *Honey and Ashes* retraces: the intersection of the personal and the historical, a voice that had to capacity to touch her readers across borders, and finally, a haunting child.

The final section of *Honey and Ashes* is devoted to her on visit from Poland to Ukraine, all the way to the Old Place. It reveals another crucial encounter with paintings by Natalka Husar, a Ukrainian-Canadian artist, who painted the series after her own journey to Western Ukraine. Janice took the catalogue with her on her journey, along with maps and guidebooks, suggesting they meant as much to her and guided her as much as books could. She inserts several titles into the narrative, and describes several paintings, but only includes one reproduction. On the surface (literally) *Pandora's Parcel to Ukraine* tells the story of the thousands of parcels Ukrainian-Canadians sent to the region (228). Beneath the surface, through the technique of underpainting, another story appears: one can see Chernobyl children,^{xi} whose bodies are already showing signs of disease (228). These children, which Kulyk Keefer has elsewhere called fireflies,^{xii} join a host of ghostly presences—Vira and Natalia's siblings, her mother's cousin, "the girl" whose name no one remembers, a cousin called Petro, Anne Frank, among others— that haunt her imagination and the memoir, and prompt her to write.

While works of literature and art are shown to be crucial to Janice Keefer as a human being and as a writer, Greek myths and literature are granted a special role. *Honey and Ashes* starts with and returns to Greek myths, from Orpheus and Odysseus (16) to Odysseus and Persephone (283), because they illustrate what we seek, they warn us but also express a

writer's most meaningful attempt: to write of the dead. Kulyk Keefer reads her own venture in the myth of Orpheus and Persephone: "what Orpheus attempted: to bring back the dead from an underworld of silence and forgetting" (16).

Conclusion

Honey and Ashes is both a postethnic family memoir and a postmodern life narrative, whose narrator comments on her readings and the role they played in her life and sense of identity. The memoir grants equal importance to family documents, photographs and stories and to history books and novels, all of which are part of the "weave." The metaphor of the woven cloth that runs throughout the memoir reads at first as a woman's tribute to her female ancestors, most of whom worked at their looms in the village, and to her mother and grandmother, who were seamstresses. But it also enables a writer and lover of world literature to place her life narrative inside its larger tradition, as Greek mythology and literature are rife with weavers from Arachne to Philomela to Penelope.

Although Kulyk Keefer started with the intent of writing of "her" dead, the memoir, through collective memory and history, speaks of the haunting presence and lives and deaths of many others. As she writes the memoir, she understands that writing is an act of exorcism that sabotages itself since it turns into "one more form of haunting" (16). *Honey and Ashes* is a form of memory work that comprises both reading lives, from her parents to strangers, through encounters, and writing these lives, all the while "fight[ing] against the cicatrisation of the event," as Lyotard puts it (1992, 106) to preserve the haunting. *Honey and Ashes* also establishes a strong connection between literature and haunting as the passion for stories, books and reading goes with the desire to be haunted.

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Notes

ⁱ In "Language Lessons," she explains that she started to call herself Janice Keefer after her marriage to Michael Keefer, only to see that this proved no solution to her "problematic sense of identity" and so decided on "an unhyphenated" name that would be an acknowledgement of her split self. (Kulyk Keefer 1996, 25).

ⁱⁱ As the memoir will show, situating the village, and more largely, this region of Eastern Europe, is a loaded issue. Galicia is a historical and geographic region in Central-Eastern Europe, once a small kingdom that straddled the modern-day border between Poland and Ukraine. Kulyk Keefer cites the Polish thinker Adam Michnik who calls it "the most tragic nation in Europe" (Kulyk Keefer 1998, 199).

ⁱⁱⁱ A piece of cloth to be wrapped around the waist, to mark off the blouse from the skirt.

^{iv} For instance Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* (1982), which Kulyk Keefer evokes as the kind of family memoir she intends to write (Kulyk and Zakidalky 1996, 10), includes several family pictures.

^v The concept of memory sites (*lieu de mémoire*) was popularized by the French historian Pierre Nora in his three-volume collection *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (1982-1984), published in English as *Realms of Memory* (1996).

^{vi} Canada's Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 in Halifax opened in 1999. It occupies part of a former ocean liner terminal and immigration shed. Family documents such as tickets, passports or photographs, and personal objects such as suitcases are on display, to illustrate and retrace the story of Canada's European immigration, and

evoked the fates of the thousands of immigrants who arrived from Europe, and more largely, immigrants. The museum offers visitors the possibility to trace their ancestors' history. Its purpose is to make Canadian proud of their ancestry and history, which stands in sharp contrast to the experience immigrant communities had, as Kulyk Keefer's memoir reveals.

^{vii} The twins were born in 1927, Ivan died six months later, and Marusia a year and a half later. The photograph was taken around 1928.

^{viii} I borrow this metaphor from the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie who used it to refer to prejudices, in particular ethnic prejudices, in her 2009 Ted Talk. See https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story

^{ix} One section of the memoir is devoted to her confrontation with another aspect of her family's homeland's history, that proves equally tragic, equally haunting: "to claim Ukrainian descent is to belong to what Polish thinker Adam Michnik has described as the most tragic nation in Europe. ... the tragedy has to do with an equally vicious anti-Semitism that became part of my life" (199).

^x *Rest Harrow*, 1993. "The Waste Zone," 2001. See Olinder 2009.

^{xi} The nuclear plant accident occurred on 26 April 1986 at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant near Pripjat, in what was then part of the USSR but is now Ukraine.

^{xii} Janice Kulyk Keefer wrote about the Chernobyl children in her 1996 novel, *The Green Library*. In the novel, the father of one of the victims calls the children "fireflies" (Kulyk Keefer 1996, 213).