Silence, Childhood Displacement, and Spatial Belonging

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Existential spatial ties, as the early humanist geographers argued, are crucial part of human self-positioning (e.g. Relp, 1976; Tuan, 1977). Yet even the contemporary analysis of fluid identity politics often disregards the silent and embodied positionalities through which emotional place-relations are constructed in daily encounters. As memory studies scholar Jay Winter (2006) argues, silence is always a social process, involving different actions and agencies. This means that silence does not refer to something totally absent in the social sphere, but rather to the absence of narration (cf. Rose, 2004, 559; Curti, 2008). In conceptualizing silence, I argue the focus should not be on somewhat old-fashioned emancipatory rhetoric of giving voice to some defined marginalized communities, but rather on defining and understanding varying tactics and banal political subjectivities involved in these multiple practices of silence. More importantly, there is a crucial conceptual difference between *silenced memories* (i.e. collective amnesia of societies) and *silence in memory politics* (i.e. materialized silence in practices). The latter is often missing in critical political geography research.

Tracing silent spatial tactics requires innovative theoretical and empirical interventions, in order to conceptualize beyond the hegemonic oral narrations paradigm in the multidisciplinary field of memory studies and to reconstruct the role of subjectivity in critical political geography (see Kallio in this collection). This means, for example, utilization of visual culture and bodily performances in research design, and shifting the analytical scope to the socio-cultural silence and

its situated nature. According to David Campbell (2007, 361), when concerned with the visual performance of the social field, we should view geopolitics, and, I propose, silence, as discursive practices with material effects. In an epistemological sense this leads to asking how the dynamics between sites and sights of belonging occur, and how these dynamics reveal materialized bodily memories and reconstruct the spatial belonging of humans (cf. Campbell, ibid.).

Too often the existing memory research in political geography still reflects the national framework. This means that a territorial trap (Agnew 1994) continues to define the analytical scope of many research settings. In other words, local memory practices and processes are viewed in relation to nation-state bound mnemonic dynamics. Even in analysis of *trans*national memory practices the focal point is a comparison of different national memory cultures rather than, for example, floating signifiers of travelling memory that are creatively adapted in multiple contexts, and used to signify remembering but also forgetting in several societies (e.g. Huyssen, 2003; Erll, 2011). Thus, in this intervention I propose an emphasis on the *transcultural* manifestations and tactics of memory (see also Crownshaw, 2011). Transculturality is a research perspective which directs attention towards mnemonic processes common across and beyond cultures (Erll, 2011). Research on transcultural practices of remembering is based on two intertwined premises. First, memories are mobile, and socio-culturally 'older' memories are often used to make sense of new and different experiences (ibid.,14). This means that memory practices are not socially, territorially or temporarily exclusive. Second, the transcultural is always situated and takes place in specific local contexts, and is related to particular people, communities and their agendas.

As bell hooks (1990) and Joanne Sharp (2011) have suggested with the concept of subaltern geopolitics, the position of some groups of people is not completely 'other', resistant or alternative, but ambiguously marginal. I argue that, for example, displaced children and young people—during the displacement by war or conflict situation, and also after returning home—are practicing subaltern geopolitics, i.e. trying to reconstruct the ties of belonging (Kuusisto-Arponen, 2011). They are not outside the state or associated institutions, but their practices are characterized by the asymmetry of power relations and subordinated modes of representation (e.g. hooks, 1990; Sharp, 2011), which often are embodied and silent. Thus, it is exactly 'the who' that we need to rediscover first, in order to recognize and analyze the situated knowledge of 'how' and in 'what' practices the lived worlds of displaced children and young people are formed.

Existential and emotional place-relations are constructed through personal experiences, oral history and non-representational practices (Thrift, 2008). The feeling of spatial belonging is created through several placings, spatial relationships and daily routines. Moreover, identity and memory politics are never based only on topological places, but also on several non-topological emotions, memories and affects (Derrida, 1995; Nora, 1996; Kuusisto-Arponen, 2009). Silent mindscapes

and unreflective spatial memories are crucial components in the understanding of the present, but they also direct the ways people orientate to the future.

Because the construction of a sense of belonging occurs in relation to several places, people, and communities, it always requires mobility in geographical thought, representational landscapes, and embodied personal and collective memory practices. Spatial identity is not only achieved through identification with groups of individuals, but through performative repertoires and memories that are expressive and embodied (cf. Hetherington, 1998). These embodied repertoires and memories are extremely important in conflict situations where forced displacement changes the daily social and geographical environment (Curti, 2008; Venken, 2009). Through these bodily repertoires and memories fluid spatial ties are reconstructed. Often these performances are non-textual and some even non-cognitive (Connerton, 1989). More importantly, as Cresswell (2006, 58) argues, it is through the body that these spatial mobilities, such as displacement, are experienced.

On these grounds this intervention proposes that the study of critical political geography should widen its scope on analyzing the bodily performances and non-textual memory practices of children and young people. Otherwise a great deal of valuable knowledge on childhood spatiality will be misunderstood or continue to remain completely hidden (see also Philo and Smith, 2003; Kuusisto-Arponen, 2009; Venken, 2009). Children and young people's home-making practices, playing, drawing, joking and other such memories of daily negotiations of belonging are important sources for academic research when analyzing the place-based subjectivities, and in general the spatial politics of childhood drastically altered by displacement. These bodily practices express the co-implicated nature of memory and emotions in spatial identity politics and materialize in the silent geopolitics of belonging (see also Curti, 2008).

The experiences of displaced children and young people are ethically challenging to study in the midst of social crisis when displacement occurs, for example in refugee camps or reception centers (e.g. Marshall 2013). Moreover, I claim that the extended effects of displacement on people in their life span and spatial identification can only be studied after the displacement. This situated knowledge (cf. Rose 1997) of forced displacement can be approached through the narratives of childhood memories. The focus then is on how these people give an account of their altered childhood agencies and their own reflections on their daily, social interactions. On the other hand, displacement memories can be traced in visual culture products such as films or children's picture books. Visual materials enable study of the idea of the displaced body as a carrier of memory and reveal long-term emotive-spatial tactics involved in reconstructing the sites and ties of belonging. Both of these approaches appreciate the displaced people's own presence as political selves in their childhood or adolescence (e.g. Philo and Smith, 2003). This idea is not, however, a commonly applied standpoint in political

geography research focusing on the socio-historical construction of the sense of belonging (cf. Kallio and Häkli, 2011).

I will now clarify my point with an example that illustrates how the bodily agencies and emotions involved in childhood displacement are depicted in two children's picture books: Shirley Hughes's (1998/2007) *The Lion and the Unicorn* and Veronica Leo's (1990) *Oravansilmät* (The Eyes of the Squirrel). Both books tell a story about a child evacuee during World War Two. In Finland and the United Kingdom unaccompanied children were sent away from their family and familial environment in order to protect them from the war. In the UK 1.5 million children were sent as evacuees within the country and a few thousand were sent abroad to Commonwealth countries such as South Africa, Canada and Australia. In the case of UK, children stayed within the same language area and most of them were evacuated from a few months to a year (Parsons 1998). The 70,000 to 80,000 war children who were sent from Finland to other Nordic countries had to come to terms with a foreign language, and often their evacuation lasted for several years. It is also estimated that 7,000 to 15,000 Finnish children stayed permanently in Sweden after the war (Kavén 2003; Kuusisto-Arponen 2008).

By focusing on bodily tactics, nuances of national contexts and transcultural practices of childhood displacement, I trace children's own subjectivity and their multiple agencies in regaining spatial belonging. In Hughes's book, a boy called Lenny is sent out of London to the countryside, and, in Leo's book, a girl (unnamed) is sent from Finland to Sweden. While Hughes's book is fictional, Leo's book is partly autobiographical. Both children travel alone and have no siblings in their biological families. They also speak the same language as their foster families, which was not common among the Finnish war children in particular. Contextualization of the stories differs as Lenny stays on the home front while the Finnish girl is sent to a country not at war.

The visual atmosphere in the books is dominated by dark colors; only a few spreads are colorful. Colorful illustrations in Lenny's story are linked to the social relations between him and caring adults who are the maid and the injured soldier living in the foster house, but not the nanny. In the Finnish girl's story, red and yellow colors appear when she remembers home and familiar things back in Finland. The red color is symbolic because her childhood home had a beautiful stained glass window depicting a red-eyed squirrel. In the book, the red color connects the events of longing for the familiar with the actual daily experiences of being a stranger. The last pages of both books are intriguing in terms of social agency and usage of colors.

Common to both stories is the appearance of brighter and happier colors when the children find out about their return back home. Whereas Lenny's story ends with him and his mother walking hand in hand, surrounded by green fields and blue sky, the Finnish girl's story has more serious tones. The last picture depicts her going home in her grandfather's horse carriage, covered by the blue,

starry night sky. The narrative framing of the Finnish story in fact ends with a conflictual description of the child's own agency and the adult's expectations. The girl expects to see a happy and playful mother, as she was before the war. Now her mother seems to have become a serious adult woman who talks to her daughter as if she were also an adult. The mother also blames the girl for having been inconsiderate because she had wished for a teddy bear in her letters. The mother says: 'You should have known how the things were at home. We had much more serious troubles here.' The girl does not know what to answer, but thinks to herself that finally she has learned a lesson: one has to think of others first, not only what one wants.

These different endings in the books reflect not only changes in the familial relationships that occurred during the displacement but also the hegemonic national narratives developed after World War Two in these two countries. The UK was one of the winners of the war. So, happy endings even in war torn and bombed cities were possible. Instead, Finland had its peculiar situation of having to cede areas to the Soviet Union and simultaneously force German allies out of the country (the so called Lapland War 1944–45). In a way war continued even after the peace treaty when war reparations were paid to the Soviet Union.

The visual close-looking of the two picture books leads me to ask how the agencies of young children are narrated and visually described, and what kinds of conflictual elements are involved in them. Both books describe how forced displacement changed the children's daily life. The main story lines visualize the most important emotional turning points of children's evacuation period: Leaving home, adjusting to the new social environment, homesickness and returning back home. This kind of storytelling is based on *episodes of surviving*. I argue that episodes of surviving are actually common transcultural markers in memory transmission: they are socially acceptable and appealing enough in articulating displacement experiences without making territorial claims, accusing anyone or employing the load of nostalgia. Further, I propose that these episodes of surviving are actually floating signifiers operating across national memory cultures i.e. transculturally. This widens the idea of floating signifier to practices and tactics of memory. However, the contextual nuances, the banal daily negotiations of belonging and resistance, are often dismissed in these transcultural translation acts of displacement narratives. I argue that the reason for this lies partly in our understanding of who is, and by which means, an active agent in the reproduction of the ties and sites of belonging in childhood. Thus, and this is important in terms of socio-spatial belonging, these two books clearly illustrate how the displaced children's own political agencies alter.

Both Hughes and Leo's books have illustrations where children are wrapped up in a blanket or sit on an adult's lap during the bombings. Children needed safety which the war-torn familial social networks could not provide. These images contextualize the main plot and justify the drastic measure of sending unaccompanied children to unknown places. Agency in defining the safe childhood

environment was almost entirely in the realm of adults. Sending children away was presented as a nearly non-negotiable issue, even though no social consent was ever reached around this issue in Finland or England. The decisions were made for the children, but not often with them.

Children were treated as if mail packages with the name tag hanging around their neck. This name tagging was partly a practical matter: the tag stated the name, age and home address of the child. However, tagging was also a symbolic act which changed these children officially into the category of evacuee. This categorizing altered children's subjective agencies and their chance to have a say in decisions over their daily life. For example, after the long train journey, Lenny and three girls are taken into a big house which is to become their foster home. Lenny's presence upsets the nanny of the house because they had only asked for girls. The illustration depicts the nanny with a belittling look on her face, staring at this new boy in their hall. Lenny's bodily gestures are very revealing: He has sad eyes, his head is pointing downwards and his hands are in his jacket pockets. The name tag is still hanging around his neck and his small piece of luggage is on the floor near him. Lenny does not say anything but just waits for what is to follow from his being a boy.

In the books the submissive agency of the displaced children changes when life in the new place is felt to be too different from that at home. For example, in Leo's book the Finnish girl goes to a school where the school children have to walk in line everywhere. The girl dislikes this because she would prefer being alone with her sorrows. She hides behind the coats hanging in the coat rack in the school's entrance hall. In her hiding place she then remembers her friends and the school building back home. She imagines the familiar school yard and the stairs of her old school. In her memories she can be alone and do what she wishes even though her lived experience is very different.

Both books present episodes such as those above, where mindscapes and memories are used as reviving the child's own subjective agency. Also, confrontations with adult carers boost the daily agencies of the displaced children. For example, Lenny stubbornly refuses to eat bacon because he was not used to it in his own family. He keeps thinking of his mother and father while declining all the nanny's attempts to make him eat. An oppressive silence falls into the kitchen, and in the end the nanny tells all the evacuees to take their dirty plates into the scullery and get out from under her feet. These silent acts of resistance were crucial in regaining personal life politics in the new context. Thus, the narrations and visualizations of displacement are not just stories about reactive adaptation and adjusting in the new context, but about *proactive* childhood agency aiming to define the banal practices in which the site and ties of belonging will re-emerge.

To conclude, mnemonic processes and practices of belonging are multiscalar. Understanding how socio-spatial memories are constructed and how they travel across memory cultures requires the development of methodologies (i.e. non-

representationality and deconstruction), methods (analysis of the visual and performativity) and materials (films, picture books, cartoons etc.), some of which have recently gained a permanent foot hold in critical political geography and geopolitics. Consequently, the transculturally oriented reading of narrative and visual material as illustrated in my intervention piece provides an interesting standpoint in the analysis of childhood socio-spatial belonging. Thus, by way of concluding I propose that we should recall and analyze the narratives of displacement not exclusively as stories of surviving, but rather as stories of fluid agencies with transcultural features.

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