Acceptance, Healing and Reflective Nostalgia in the Works of Elin Toona and Agate Nesaule

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Abstract. The Estonian and Latvian diaspora communities that formed in the United States after World War Two anchored their identity and cultural practices in hopes of survival and eventual freedom for their occupied homelands. Younger generations, increasingly distanced from direct ties to these homelands, often faced tensions and pressures within their communities to maintain ethnic and cultural continuity. The arts have served both as a means to affirm diaspora identity and as a vital space to articulate internal conflicts, including generational tension and cultural dissonance.

This article examines the novels *Kaleviküla viimne tütar* (*The Last Daughter of Kaleviküla*, 1988) and *Lost Midsummers: A Novel of Women's Friendship in Exile* (2018), alongside the memoirs *Into Exile: A Life Story of War and Peace* (2013) and *A Woman in Amber: Healing the Trauma of War and Exile* (1995), by Estonian and Latvian exile authors Elin Toona-Gottschalk and Agate Nesaule. These works provide rich portrayals of the ambivalent – or even negative – and often silenced experiences of exile across two distinct yet parallel communities. Narrating displacement, loss of identity, in-betweenness and violence, they reveal how individual journeys in exile negotiate trauma, identity, and belonging.

Through the lens of reflective nostalgia, these narratives illustrate that healing from displacement does not require the reversal or restoration of loss but rather its acceptance in all its complexity and contradiction. The arts thus create pathways for reconciliation and nuanced understanding within diaspora life.

Keywords: trauma; reflective nostalgia; Baltic exile literature; Elin Toona-Gottschalk; Agate Nesaule

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Introduction

The dispersion of the Baltic states' populations caused by World War Two and its aftermath brought with it a wealth of stories, testimonies, and accounts, conveyed not only through memoirs and autobiographies but also through diverse artistic representations. This study focuses on works with both direct and indirect autobiographical influences as journeys toward reconciling with the traumatic events and fractured identities resulting from exile. The novels examined are Elin Toona's *Kaleviküla viimne tütar* (1988) and Agate Nesaule's *Lost Midsummers: A Novel of Exile and Friendship* (2018). Both depict conflict between the protagonists and their families, communities, and inner selves. In conjunction, the authors' memoirs – Toona's *Into Exile: A Life Story of War and Peace* (2014) and Nesaule's *A Woman in Amber: Healing the Trauma of War and Exile* (1995) – inform the novels' narrative structures and themes, often recounting ambivalent or traumatic dimensions of exile.

This paper reads these texts as representations of psychological and emotional journeys: efforts to confront, narrate, and potentially integrate trauma and identity disruption. Drawing on Svetlana Boym's theorisation of nostalgia in the émigré condition and artistic production, I argue that embracing the ambivalence inherent in exile allows for a reframing of experience beyond the dominant narratives of collective memory and nationalism. These journeys do not necessarily culminate in healing, but they enable narrative resolution and personal acknowledgment.

Nostalgia and the Experience of Exile

The diasporic condition – particularly when rooted in forced displacement or traumatic rupture – has often been mediated through the lens of nostalgia. Svetlana Boym, writing from the perspective of a Russian émigré and developing her broader concept of the *off-modern*, defines nostalgia as "a longing for a home that no longer exists or most likely has never existed" (Boym 2008: 73). Although it may seem directed toward a place, it is in fact "a yearning for a different time – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams" (Boym 2011: 152). For many Baltic exiles, especially during the decades of Soviet occupation, the possibility of return was not only politically remote but also emotionally and existentially uncertain. The event of exile marked a profound rupture, often conceptualised as a point of no return. Even after the restoration of independence, the act of returning seldom translated into an unambiguous homecoming.

Boym distinguishes between two types of nostalgia: restorative and reflective. Restorative nostalgia "stresses *nostos* and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home," presenting itself not as nostalgia per se but as a return to truth and tradition (Boym 2001: xviii). This modality resonates with the concerns raised by Ivar Ivask, a prominent Estonian exile critic, who in 1972 warned against what he saw as the dangers of "excessive conservatism, traditionalism, dreams of past glory, cultivation of nostalgic nationalism far from the actual pressures of the surrounding cultural and political world" (Ivask 1972: 1). Much of Baltic exile literature of the 1950s and 1960s reflected this orientation, striving to sustain pre-exile literary traditions and engaging in introspective reflection on exile itself. In contrast, reflective nostalgia, in Boym's formulation, "thrives in *algia*, the longing itself," embracing ambivalence, irony, and self-awareness (Boym 2001: xviii). It "dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity" (ibid.). Reflective nostalgia allows for the recognition of exile as a condition fraught with both loss and creative potential, often resisting the temptation to idealise the past or erase the complexities of dislocation.

The authors discussed in this study, Elin Toona and Agate Nesaule, offer powerful examples of such reflective engagements with exile and memory. Toona's novel *Puuingel* (Wooden Angel, 1964), remarkable within the context of Estonian exile literature of the time, portrays the life of a cosmopolitan young woman whose defiant subjectivity resists traditional expectations. Notably, the protagonist's ethnic identity is left ambiguous, with the character reportedly based on a friend rather than the author herself, complicating assumptions of autobiographical alignment. In contrast, Nesaule's autobiographical memoir *A Woman in Amber*, published after Latvian independence in 1991, sparked ambivalence in the exile community for its unflinching portrayal of personal trauma during the flight from Latvia and its perceived deviation from collective, historically 'verified' memory. Her later novel *In Love with Jerzy Kosinski* departs from her direct personal history, shifting toward fictionalisation and situating the narrative more fully within American life, thus reflecting the shift from past to present, from collective identity to individual agency.

Both authors foreground trauma, contradiction, and the psychological toll of displacement, aspects that restorative nostalgia often subdues under the guise of euphemism or mythic return. In contrast, their works articulate a reflective nostalgia that embraces ambiguity, complicates cultural memory, and foregrounds critical engagement with exile society. Through them, we see the contours of a literary mode that neither sentimentalises nor simplifies

the condition of exile. The theme of return also figures prominently in exile literature, though it is not always an explicit goal. The hope or anxiety of return shapes much of the diasporic imagination. In reflecting on her own return through photography, Boym notes that second-generation immigrants – those born or raised abroad – often possess a more legible cultural grammar for narrating return, having "shared frames of references, styles of writing, and syntax of longing" with their host cultures. These narratives are often "more understandable, explicit, and acceptable" than the "tongue-tied and accented tales of first-generation immigrants" (Boym 2011: 152–153).

'Trauma' itself tends to elude a definition all-inclusive of psychological, medical, creative and narratological meanings, except for the most simplistic and circular one, that of a reaction to a traumatic event. As for what a traumatic event could be is very personal. Nigel C. Hunt points out earlier aims in psychiatry to "objectify the [traumatic] stressor" to differentiate between the responses to, for example, war or sexual violence and grief over a loved one (Hunt 2010: 8). However, since events affect people differently, focusing on whether the event caused changes in the individual's psychological and physiological response is crucial (ibid.) Hunt discusses as an example coping mechanisms in response to distressing situations:

> If a person has to sit an exam, then they may spend hours worrying about it unduly. They may also spend hours in avoidance – perhaps visiting the pub or going for a long walk in the country. These symptoms are normal. It is only when someone is devastated by a terrible, overwhelming event that these normal responses – or coping strategies – become abnormal, the memories become unbearable, emotions run riot, and it is impossible to live one's life in a normal manner.
>
> A traumatic event, by definition, breaks down the accepted social and personal structures and belief systems of the individual. (Hunt 2010: 10)

For an event to be traumatic, it has to disrupt the way in which the individual perceives and responds to their environment. How a traumatised individual would respond is very rigid and black-and-white:

> If you believe in the essential goodness of other people, then your experience of trauma will demonstrate that belief to be false. If you believe that terrible events will not happen to you – perhaps because it is statistically unlikely – and you are on a ferry that sinks, then in the future you may not want to go near a ferry because you now believe that it is likely to sink. (ibid.)

Restorative nostalgia deals in similar absolutes, as a longing for a rigid image of how things were prior to the traumatic event, whether imagined or real. Holding on to a perceived glorious and comforting past opposes the tumultuous event that took it all away in an effort to unmake it.

A community as a whole would be affected by trauma in a similar manner. Neil J. Smelser proposes that disasters, displacement and violence experienced by communities can be regarded as cultural trauma: "an invasive and overwhelming event that is believed to undermine or overwhelm one or several essential ingredients of a culture or the culture as a whole." (Smelser 2004: 38), or (which could apply to the example of Baltic exile communities) a national trauma claiming cultural damage (Smelser 2004: 38), always evoking a certain type of emotion and contested by alternative interpretations of said event (Smelser 2004: 38). While restorative nostalgia would uphold the cultural trauma, (often upheld by figures in the community such as writers (Smelser 2004: 39)), reflective nostalgia would contest it.

Escape from the homeland in 1944 and its aftermath would undoubtedly be an event that would leave its mark on both the individual and the community. However, in the case of the latter, the effects would be a gradual response in the collective discourse. In her examination of examples from Estonian exile literature through the lens of trauma theory, Tiina Ann Kirss calls the event "a psychologically rupturing experience, but initially numbing, with lasting, often surprising consequent effects." (Kirss 2002: 1871)[2] Andrejs Plakans also points out that in the case of Latvian exiles, in the short time following, "there were strong indications that the psychic wounds accumulated during flight had not translated into a collective widespread trauma making them incapable of action" (Plakans 2021: 93), and while there were the makings of a collective trauma, it "was mediated by an immensely varied direct experiences" (Plakans 2021: 61). While informed by personal experiences, the greater narrative of a collective trauma would be a response that comes later, also leaving the possibility that individual experiences may in fact differ.

In this study, both Toona and Nesaule represent what may be called generation 1.5, i.e. those born in their homelands, yet educated and culturally shaped abroad. Their familiarity with English and the literary norms of their host societies allows them to navigate between exile traditions and the expectations of a broader transnational readership. Their work resists both the idealisation of homeland and the uncritical embrace of assimilation, instead carving out complex in-between positions. For Ivask's concern about the stagnation of exile literature, Boym offers an antidote: "nostalgic dissidence".

[2] My translation.

Reflective nostalgia, she writes, "fears returning with the same reflective nostalgia [that] can foster a creative self. Home, after all, is not a gated community. Paradise on earth might turn out to be another Potemkin village with no exit" (Boym 2001: 354). The notion of *nostalgic dissidence* creates space for literary and artistic engagement that critiques both the homeland and the exile community, while resisting easy binaries of belonging and alienation.

Such an approach is echoed by scholars like Abebe, who emphasises that the arts provide critical space for negotiating diasporic identities:

> The arts play a critical role in providing people with a platform from which to make sense of, construct and express their diasporic identifications. In the arts, there is ample space for (re)interpretation and ambiguity, and people are given a licence to *explore* without the expectation that they will necessarily *discover*. (Abebe 2018: 56)

When the dominant narrative within a diaspora emphasises survival and cultural preservation, the arts can support but also challenge that framework, revealing untold stories, marginalised perspectives, and private traumas. Works by Toona and Nesaule therefore exemplify a more nuanced and self-reflexive form of exile writing, one that leans into the creative productivity of the diaspora and its capacity for dissent.

As Abebe further notes, diaspora arts should be approached as "a social process of positioning and repositioning oneself in relation to proximate and generalised (imagined) others" (ibid.). This conceptual lens invites richer, more varied analyses of exile literature as a dynamic, evolving conversation with memory, identity, and cultural politics.

Herein also comes the issues surrounding the position of women within a diaspora and in diaspora literature, something which both Toona and Nesaule have scrutinised. In her own words, describing her works and that of her literary and generational peer Helga Nõu, she notes: "In our exile culture, the men were important, the women were secondary. Helga and I were two women writers, who pioneered a new – a thematically shocking to some – novel." (Lindsalu 2015)[3]. Commenting on the famous passage in *A Woman in Amber* in which the men and women of the Latvian community argue over which gender had it worse in the war and its aftermath, to which the narrator's mother responds: "Other things happened to women, terrible things, more destructive in their own way" (Nesaule 1995: 182). Vērdiņš suggests the work is: "… a story of the exile community as a bulwark of patriarchal conservatism, under which

[3] My translation.

women are constantly forced to submit to a nationalistic narrative of Latvian war survivors in exile, and their own experiences are silenced and erased." (Vērdiņš 2021: 188).

Boym's restorative nostalgia in its 'truth and tradition' would suggest an adherence to patriarchal norms and an avoidance of narratives and experiences of women. But in reflective nostalgia's acknowledgement of the complexities of the past and through the platform of the arts, these 'other things' can be represented, discussed and be accepted. The works of Toona and Nesaule at hand represent not only less told perspectives but also a journey of acceptance for the authors themselves.

Toona and Nesaule: Writing from Displacement

Both Elin Toona and Agate Nesaule construct works shaped by personal memory, war, exile, and intergenerational trauma. Their writing negotiates the blurred lines between memoir and fiction, a boundary they themselves acknowledge. Toona's *Into Exile: A Life Story of War and Peace* (2013) and Nesaule's *A Woman in Amber: Healing the Trauma of War and Exile* (1995) both explicitly challenge expectations of historical accuracy and instead foreground subjectivity and emotional truth:

> There are incidents that I cannot frame with words and frames that I cannot fill adequately with facts, but the scenes are as vivid now as they were at times they happened. For that reason alone, I must dub this book a work of "faction" – a blending of fact and fiction; … (Toona 2013: 355–356)

> I know that memory itself is unreliable: it works by selecting, disguising, distorting. Others would recall these events differently. I cannot guarantee historical accuracy; I can only tell what I remember. I have had to speculate and guess, even to invent in order to give the story coherence and shape. (Nesaule 1995: xvii)

These opening declarations – Toona's epilogue and Nesaule's preface – signal that the texts should not be read as collective testimonies of Estonian or Latvian exile, but as personal narratives imbued with natural distortions and ambivalences. The question, then, is not of referential truth, but what Maarja Hollo calls "truthfulness", the writer's "sincere intention to speak the truth about the life that he or she has lived" (Hollo 2013: 103). This allows their works to function not as cultural prototypes but as pathways toward narrative and personal healing. As Hollo notes in her reading of Richard Wollheim's

Germs, "in order to implement the therapeutic function of writing in all of its intensity, the writer must chisel the matter of memory into a narrative with merciless precision" (Hollo 2013: 15). The same tension is present in Toona's and Nesaule's approach to narrating exile.

Elin Toona Gottschalk (b. 1937) fled Estonia in 1944 with her mother and grandmother, settling first in a DP (Displaced Persons) camp in Germany before moving to the UK in 1947. Her early life – marked by separation from her parents, placement in an orphanage and feeling caught between Estonian heritage and British society – shaped her early literary work. Her memoir *Into Exile* recounts her escape from Haapsalu, Estonia, wartime life in Germany, displacement in DP camps, and subsequent integration into British life. It also reflects on her family's cultural heritage: her grandfather Ernst Enno was a prominent Estonian poet, and both her parents were theatre actors. However, the memoir focuses on emotional distance, particularly between Elin and her mother, and her feelings of otherness not only within her host society but also her exile community. The book concludes with her return to Estonia, now irreversibly changed, where she nonetheless chooses to resettle, reclaiming a sense of belonging despite all loss.

Toona's *Kaleviküla viimne tütar* (1988), described as fiction inspired by her life (Hinrikus 2016: 191), follows Tiiu, a second-generation Estonian-American who inherits an exile community named Kaleviküla in New Jersey. The name invokes *Kalevipoeg*, the Estonian national epic, signalling the burden of national myth and the pressure of cultural preservation that haunts exile life. The inclusion of the mythic Kalev – promised to return and restore Estonia – sets the tone for generational conflict and the weight of historical memory. This connects to what Hinrikus notes is a characteristic of the exile writers of Toona's generation:

> … the desire to revise the national narrative of the Estonian exile and standing up against the rules set by the older generation. At times it takes the form of rebellion, at times that of a game, at times these taboos touch upon the ideology of Estonianness in exile, than the morals or linguistics. (Hinrikus 2008: 208)[4]

Toona's work captures this tension, with Tiiu's journey echoing the theme of generational identity crisis. While direct parallels between the experiences of Toona and the protagonist cannot be drawn outright, the author does not invent but still mediates tensions within the exile community in America over motherhood, intermarriage and insularity.

[4] My translation.

Agate Nesaule (1938–2022) fled Latvia during the Soviet advance, surviving traumatic events en route to Germany and years in DP camps before resettling in Indianapolis in 1950. Her father, Pēteris Nesaule, became a prominent figure in the exile Latvian Lutheran community, while her mother, Valda, came from the Russian imperial aristocracy and later earned a doctorate in literature. Nesaule's *A Woman in Amber* presents a fragmented memoir, shifting between memories of childhood trauma – threats of execution, witnessing sexual violence – and her adult life in the US, including a failed marriage and professional accomplishments. The narrative form mirrors the psychological process of working through trauma, with disjointed time and memory underscoring the ongoing effects of exile and violence. Her guilt, alienation from her mother, and attempts to reconcile her identity form the emotional backbone of the memoir. Ultimately, the act of writing becomes a means of resolution and self-definition.

Lost Midsummers (2018) continues Nesaule's exploration of identity and exile through fictionalised lenses. It follows Alma, born in Latvia, and Kaija, born in a DP camp, as they navigate post-war life in Indianapolis. Despite similar beginnings, their values and paths diverge: Alma clings to tradition and community respectability, becoming a wealthy but bitter landlord; Kaija, a "wild child", pursues an academic career and a more fluid identity, but struggles with rootlessness. Their friendship reflects larger tensions in the Latvian exile community between tradition and adaptation, memory and forgetting. The slight age difference becomes symbolic: one remembers Latvia; the other knows it only through inherited stories. As with Toona's *Kaleviküla viimne tütar,* generational difference shapes the experience of exile.

Nesaule's depiction of the exile community drew criticism for defying idealised narratives. As Zake notes, her memoir was controversial for portraying American Latvians not as prosperous and content, but as suffering in silence:

> [It] did not offer the optimistic ending of émigrés having found the safe haven in the U.S. Instead, Nesaule's description of the exiles' soul showed how individual American Latvians battled with pain and misery, while the community as a whole tended to avoid discussing such issues openly. (Zake 2010: 8)

Nesaule was accused of undermining the community's narrative of success, her depictions being "hardly an example of success, prosperity and stability" (ibid.). Kārlis Vērdiņš similarly observed that Nesaule's international success placed on her the burden of representing the Latvian exile experience, a role which she resisted. Critics faulted her work's emotional focus as lacking historicity

and failing to serve as a "tool for representing Latvian exiles rather than simply a journey of personal healing" (Vērdiņš 2021: 187).

Both authors resist simplistic categorisation. Their works exist in the space between fact and fiction, individual and collective, nostalgia and critique. Rather than offering authoritative accounts of exile, they offer deeply personal narratives shaped by memory, trauma, and attempts at reconciliation. Seen through Svetlana Boym's framework of nostalgia, their texts perform *reflective* rather than *restorative* nostalgia acknowledging loss without trying to mend it, embracing the contradictions of exile to narrate rather than resolve identity. In this way, Toona and Nesaule offer not just stories of trauma, but acts of narrative survival.

Refugee Trauma and the Gendered Memory of Displacement

The traumatic experiences of displacement – flight, exile, and life in DP camps – form the emotional core of both Toona's and Nesaule's memoirs. These experiences are not just revisited but narratively reworked from the perspective of adult women reflecting on their childhoods. In this way, their texts perform a dual function: they bear witness to trauma while also participating in what might be called a process of narrative healing, an effort to find coherence, reconciliation, and meaning in suffering through storytelling.

This healing is gendered and deeply personal. Both Toona and Nesaule fled their homes as young girls (aged 7 and 6, respectively) and carried the resulting psychological burdens throughout their lives. Their memoirs are acts of return, not just to specific memories but to feelings of abandonment, violence, and dislocation. Yet they are not merely testimonial; they restructure the trauma through narration, opening space for emotional and ethical recovery.

Both memoirs begin with a depiction of hurried flight and the sense of loss it entails. After fleeing Estonia, during her stay in Germany in 1945–1946 Toona endures abuse in a Nazi-controlled school in Germany and is later sexually assaulted by a US soldier in a DP camp. As with many traumatic memories, Toona's narration is filtered through the incomprehension of childhood, focusing more on aftermath than on the violent act itself. It is her mother's reaction, not the assault itself, that becomes the traumatic rupture:

> I didn't even know sex existed. … The beating confirmed she would never love me. Much later, when I was fourteen and in the British orphanage, I found out how babies were made. That information did not help either. I thought then that Mother had beaten me because she didn't want me to have a baby, which would have given her another mouth to feed. (Toona 2013: 95)

Here, trauma is inseparable from misunderstanding, miscommunication, and emotional abandonment. Toona's pain lies not only in the violation but in her mother's response, one that severs rather than supports. Yet the very act of recounting this episode decades later, and doing so with clarity and restraint, enacts a form of healing. Later in the memoir, Toona narrates her eventual reconciliation with her mother, not as a resolution but as a hard-won understanding. This movement – from rupture to recognition – mirrors the logic of healing as articulated by trauma theorists such as Dori Laub and Judith Herman: healing does not erase the trauma but allows the survivor to integrate it into a narrative of self (Laub 1992: 85–86; Herman 1992: 175–181).

Throughout *Into Exile*, Toona recounts repeated episodes of abandonment – by her father, by her emotionally distant mother, and by the institutions that took her in. Her eventual separation from her beloved grandmother, the one adult who provided consistent emotional care, leaves a profound mark. These accumulated losses produce a chronic state of insecurity that defines her refugee childhood. Yet again, the memoir serves as a literary space in which these absences are acknowledged, named, and given narrative shape transforming them, if not into closure, then at least into meaning.

Nesaule's *A Woman in Amber* similarly weaves a path from trauma to emotional healing. The narrator Agate describes memories from her childhood of living under the constant threat of sexual violence and execution in a sanitarium in Germany that has been taken over by the Soviet military. Her memories are filled with terror, confusion, and the overwhelming desire to remain unseen.

While being kept within the sanitarium, a woman is caught moments after having strangled her daughter and before her own suicide; she is shot by soldiers. The soldiers subsequently threaten the whole group, including Agate and her mother, with execution. Her mother braces her to accept it, until the moment they are told they would not be executed after all. While seeing both the dead mother and daughter, Agate describes the aftermath:

> My mother leans down and whispers, "Are you all right, precious?"
>
> I nod. I would like to tell her I'm not, I would like to ask her where I have seen the dead mother and daughter before. Why do I know that all this has happened before, why am I certain that it will happen again and again?
>
> But I do not say anything. I nod and pretend that I am all right. I ask my mother to smile, and she does. I pretend that makes me happy, I hold onto her hand, I close my eyes, but the gray cold stays inside me. (Nesaule 1993: 81)

These experiences would go on and shape the narrator's life, leading to years of survivor's guilt, self-blame and loss of self. Similarly to Toona's journey, these

experiences cause Agate to withdraw from her mother, leading to a reconciliation after the latter's passing through a vivid dream of meeting her and apologising to each other. This point also comes within the memoir after Agate has fully narrated her traumatic journey and found the support she needs. Unlike earlier exile narratives, which foreground masculine heroism or collective perseverance, Nesaule offers a gender-conscious portrait of fear and survival, foregrounding the emotional interiority of a girl trying to endure powerlessness.

These unflinching depictions of vulnerability, particularly gendered vulnerability, challenge the dominant aesthetic of earlier exile literature, particularly in the resettlement period of the 1950s. Tiina Kirss notes that such earlier representations often dramatised escape as a redemptive act, but also came to form an "official" escape narrative part of the general mythos of exile (Kirss 2002: 1872). Similarly, Plakans identifies the 1950s as a time when Latvian exile culture consolidated around ideological coherence, aligning stories of escape and the lost homeland and continuation of older literary traditions with moral righteousness and national loyalty (Plakans 2021: 307–308). Kirss has also suggested a testimonial function and a balm for the escape trauma for this era within Estonian exile literature (Kirss 2002: 1872). These early narratives functioned as a kind of restorative cultural therapy, although they often excluded or suppressed personal pain, especially where it contradicted heroic self-representations.

In contrast, both Toona and Nesaule resist this collective myth-making. Their stories refuse closure, resist easy heroism, and foreground ambivalence, fracture, and contradiction. They speak not only of what happened, but of what could not be spoken at the time, what was silenced, misinterpreted, or punished.

Through the example of the response to August Gailit's novel *Üle rahutu vee* (Across the Restless Sea, first published in 1951), a harrowing and ambivalent picture of a boat full of refugees attempting to cross the Baltic Sea, Epp Annus described how post-war Estonian exile communities discouraged emotionally raw or morally ambiguous narratives, favouring instead stories that aligned with national resilience (Annus 2001: 308). From the Latvian perspective and even after the restoration of independence, Nesaule herself recounts how her memoir was criticised for being too personal, for recounting events – especially gendered suffering – that many believed should have remained untold (Aistars 2009). Vērdiņš's connects it to the readership's expectation that *A Woman in Amber* would "represent the entire painful history of Latvia and its people" (Vērdiņš 2020: 185–186). This also connects to Boym's notion of restorative nostalgia, i.e. there is one idealised image of the past, which might inevitably be subverted through the narration of traumatic personal experiences previously left untold.

By narrating what was once un-narratable, Toona and Nesaule engage in reflective nostalgia (Boym), challenging the simplified visions of the past promoted by restorative nostalgia. Their memoirs do not seek to rebuild an idealised homeland or recover a lost unity. Instead, they explore the psychic and emotional terrain of exile from within. Healing, in their work, is not about returning to wholeness but about acknowledging fragmentation: recognising loss, naming pain, and allowing ambiguity to exist within the self.

The healing offered by these memoirs is neither triumphant nor complete. It is slow, partial, and deeply embedded in the act of writing itself. By reclaiming their stories – stories of vulnerability, violence, and survival – Toona and Nesaule make visible the intimate and gendered dimensions of displacement. In doing so, they offer not only testimony, but a literary model of healing that is rooted in honesty, emotional risk, and the possibility of understanding across time.

This complex negotiation of memory and pain continues in the narratives' treatment of family life. If the refugee years marked the initial rupture – emotional, physical, and moral – then family life in exile becomes the arena where the long-term consequences of that rupture are played out. In both memoirs, the family is not a source of uncomplicated comfort or refuge; rather, it becomes a site of inherited trauma, gendered silences, and intergenerational strain. Yet even here, the authors pursue not only a reckoning with the past but a search for healing through confrontation, through refusal, and occasionally, through reconciliation. As the memoirs move from wartime displacement to the domestic space of exile, they continue to challenge mythologised exile narratives, exposing how unresolved trauma and fractured belonging are lived – and sometimes slowly healed – within intimate relationships.

Belonging Through Marriage

Marriage emerges as a central site of pressure and conflict within the selected works, reflecting the complex interplay of exile, identity, and the struggle for healing. The family becomes a fraught terrain where personal and collective wounds intersect, and where the possibility of healing is both challenged and sought.

This is most evident in *Kaleviküla viimne tütar*, which opens on the day of the funeral of the protagonist Tiiu's father, where she is treated almost like an unwanted guest. Her marriage to an American alienates her from her community and deepens her isolation, a source of ongoing emotional pain that complicates her quest for healing and belonging:

> Formerly familiar and sweet Tiiu Malk was now an American stranger, Mrs Charles "Chuck" Johnson … Tiiu, the daughter of old Malk, had made her decision and it couldn't at first be questioned either – she had stayed with her husband and that, too, was a certain kind of duty. (Toona 1988: 10)[5]

Toona's portrayal underscores how Tiiu's identity and agency are constrained by patriarchal expectations – as daughter and wife – yet paradoxically, the survival of the exile community hinges on women's ability to marry within the ethnicity and raise children who embody cultural continuity. Women bear the double burden of subjugation and cultural custodianship, which intensifies the emotional and psychological weight they carry. Tiiu's husband's view of her "as property, like a lot of men did with their wives" (Toona 1988: 50)[6] reflects patriarchal control that denies her healing autonomy. Her very Estonian-ness and connection to Kaleviküla threaten this imposed ownership, illustrating how identity and belonging become battlegrounds of control and resistance.

Throughout the novel, Tiiu is confronted by alienation from both the unit of her family and the Estonian community. The conflict of community is evident in the strained relationship between Tiiu's husband and father:

> Tiiu did not want to think of the arguments between Father and Chuck, which were mainly political and ideological. American liberalism against Estonian conservatism and self-lived experiences. … Tiiu's personal wishes and disappointments had to be suppressed … leaving no room for deeper introspection. Tiiu saw these years of her life as a movie in which she had starred in the leading role. But in certain knowledge that real life would wait for her in Kaleviküla. That she would find her previous sense of resilience and wholeness as soon as the men reconcile and she is free to return to familiar surroundings. (Toona 1988: 17)[7].

However, the death of her father makes the reconciliation she wished for impossible and the homecoming far less than ideal. Similarly, Toona's 1964 short story "Laps magab" (*The Child Sleeps*) portrays a mother caught between parental duties and personal desire, her relationship with an English boyfriend complicated by conflicting expectations. The tension between fulfilling the demands of motherhood and asserting individuality mirrors the broader challenge of healing fractured family ties and cultural dislocation.

Tiiu's rejection by her community for marrying outside her ethnicity and having a child with an American extends into the fraught inheritance of

[5] My translation.
[6] My translation.
[7] My translation.

Kaleviküla's land. The village itself symbolises not only a physical space but also the possibility of cultural survival and healing through continuity. Yet the threat of its sale and dispersal of the community exacerbates Tiiu's alienation. Although she gains formal ownership, the land is regarded as belonging to her husband, reinforcing her disempowerment and complicating her healing journey.

Throughout the novel, the exile community serves as a barrier rather than a refuge, impeding Tiiu's search for closure and belonging. Her marriage to an American marks her as an outsider, a condition reflected in the community's rejection of mixed marriages. Sociologist Tõnu Parming's 1960s survey captures this anxiety about cultural survival, framing the preservation of ethnic identity as a matter of existential urgency:

> If the leaders of our refugee people believe that the Estonian identity will strengthen in exile, their perspective, therefore, may be upon a strong oak, but without seeing that from the acorns there sprout no new seedlings and the roots diminish steadily, until in a few decades, neither the leaves nor the trunk will receive the essences it needs to survive. (Parming 1970: 33–34).[8]

This metaphor of a weakening tree captures the fragile state of cultural identity and its interdependence with family and marriage practices. The fear of cultural extinction intensifies pressures on women to conform, often at the expense of their own healing and happiness. Tiina Kirss further notes the older generation's fear and rejection of mixed marriages, complicating younger women's identities and their paths toward healing (Kirss 2006: 673). This vigilance towards the marriage choices of younger generations connects to a need for survival in a foreign environment when home is under an oppressive regime. While it may not be a direct result of traumatic experiences of escape, it does speak of an adherence to a community's cultural trauma narrative. Thus, narrating stories of women experiencing discontent and alienation within the context of marriage can be regarded as an act of dissent towards the dominant narrative.

Toona's own marriage to an American and life in the US during the 1960s inform these narratives, even as Tiiu's second-generation status distances the story from Toona's personal biography. The novel channels the tensions women faced in exile, including Toona's expressed refusal "to marry an Estonian just for the independence day celebration" (Lindsalu 2015)[9], highlighting the conflict between communal duty and personal autonomy, a central axis of healing in exile.

[8] My translation.

[9] My translation.

In the novel's 1970s setting, the pressures of marriage are omnipresent. An American partner could be grudgingly accepted only if assimilated into the Estonian community. Tiiu's husband rejects this demand as he expects her instead to assimilate into American culture, taken even further as he virtually claims her:

> From the first moment of him laying eyes on her on the Columbia University square, he had known that this woman belonged to him, and would be married to him. Claiming her was assured, because Tiiu was a naive girl lacking in life experience, despite being smart and talented in her field, beautiful on top of that. … Chuck had loved showing Tiiu what a real American should be like. He had felt important, strong, like a man. (Toona 1988: 71)[10]

This cultural clash inhibits Tiiu's ability to find healing in either identity. Her daughter Rosa, described as having a "typical American upbringing" and doing "whatever she wanted whenever she wanted" (Toona 1988: 12)[11], embodies this liminal outsider status. By the novel's close, Tiiu and Rosa's disappearance into "parts unknown" symbolises the failure of the community to offer healing or belonging.

Tiiu's repeated, unsuccessful attempts to find comfort – in Estonian fairy tales, sympathetic peers, or her husband – underscore the lasting scars exile and cultural estrangement inflict on family life. Healing remains elusive, deferred by the multiple fractures between identity, community, and personal agency. In Tiiu, Toona encapsulates the experience of second-generation Estonians in exile, particularly that of women and the expectations placed on them.

A Woman in Amber parallels these themes in the experiences of Agate, whose marriage to an American named Joe – against parental wishes – is marked by dismissal of her Latvian identity and cruelty toward her trauma. Agate's resigned acceptance, "Deep down I know that I do not deserve any better," (Nesaule 1995: 192) reflects the psychological wounding that inhibits healing. Yet unlike Tiiu, Agate ultimately leaves Joe and finds a supportive partner, facilitating a transformative, healing journey toward reclaiming identity and selfhood.

In *Last Midsummers*, community expectations similarly shape the protagonists' lives and prospects for healing. Kaija's multiple relationships provoke Alma's resentment, rooted in Alma's own desire to marry a Latvian and raise Latvian children. The rigid community standards and the trauma of social exclusion – illustrated by the wake held for a Latvian girl who married an

[10] My translation.
[11] My translation.

American – reflect the heavy cost of conforming or resisting exile demands. Maija Hinkle's oral histories confirm the trauma tied to community expectations around marriage:

> Several participants in my "Exile History" workshop recounted very unhappy and traumatizing experiences occasioned by the rigid demands for correct behavior within émigré Latvian society. This was particularly with respect to marriage with Americans and acceptance by a new community. (Hinkle 2006: 52)

For these women, the choice is between submission to a stifling community identity – often at the cost of personal ambitions and healing – or social death and alienation. Kaija rejects a Latvian marriage because it would require her to sacrifice her dreams, while Alma resigns herself to a loveless marriage. Their separate journeys reflect the ongoing tension between communal belonging and personal healing, a theme that culminates with the promise of return to the homeland, a potential site of restoration and reconciliation.

Resolution Through Homecoming

For exiles, the idea of returning home carries a potent emotional charge as both a source of longing and ambivalence. Returning to a liberated homeland, long awaited by Estonian and Latvian diaspora communities, became a reality with the restoration of independence in 1991. Yet, as the works discussed reveal, the return often failed to be the idyllic homecoming imagined in nostalgia. Rather, it presented complex challenges to identity and healing, complicating rather than resolving the fractures of exile.

According to Boym, reflective nostalgia "delays the homecoming – wistfully, ironically, desperately." (Boym 2001: xviii) What restorative nostalgia would envision as an ideal homecoming is impossible as, in the case of exile, it would require undoing the event of exile. Whereas reflective nostalgia involves a conscious awareness of the past's passing and the impossibility of truly recapturing it.

The hope of return is both a symbol of healing and a test of its limits. Toona's *Into Exile* narrates a poignant return to Estonia in 1990, in the tumultuous time prior to independence. The arrival in Tallinn is marked by alienation and disillusionment, from delays at the border to the dominance of Russian on the streets.

On returning to Haapsalu, her childhood hometown, Toona discovers that her old home no longer exists. Her unsuccessful attempts to reclaim the land underscore a painful rupture between past and present, loss and belonging.

Toona narrates her mixed feelings prior to arrival: "When the permit arrived, giving me permission to go to Haapsalu, I was both excited and nervous. This was going to be the true homecoming for which I had braced myself, but could never have prepared for adequately." (Toona 2013: 343) She recounts a tinge of associated trauma as well, wishing to have been alone for the moment of return in case it was too painful and personal, but also vivid fears from her childhood and even a bodily reaction: "The recurring nightmares of returning to exploding attics and strangers at the front door had not been dispelled despite my determination to tear out that page for good. My stomach churned and my heart pounded." (Toona 2013: 343) And upon the moment of coming to where her house had stood, she narrates:

> Our house had disappeared. There was no woodshed, no garden. There was nothing familiar. Even our tall trees had gone. I had prepared myself for strangers and rejection, but not for the absence of anything familiar in the one and only homecoming of my life. (Toona 2013: 344).

Having never expected an ideal homecoming, the reality was even more disconcerting. In place of the house stood a facility of the nearby sanatorium. It comes to symbolise her disconnect from her home:

> That monstrosity on my property had made it clear that I did not belong here. Instead quite the opposite had happened. Estonia had come to me, luring me with stories that should have been mine, with people I should have known, places where I should have been. It was showing me a life that could have been mine, but was not. Was God being deliberately cruel in showing me the full jigsaw puzzle picture in which I was the missing piece? Was He being kind, letting me see what might have been, but with a warning to leave well enough alone. (Toona 2013: 349).

The realisation evokes something that restorative nostalgia would have promised, and after this admission Toona goes on to narrate her varyingly successful attempts to create or find any connection to home.

Her memoir closes with a powerful, if somewhat ambivalent, recognition. She finds belonging through mementos she has left or lost both in and outside Estonia and how exile to her generation was but: "a legacy of dreams and disappointments, bequeathed by loved ones about a past we hardly remembered and a place we barely knew." (Toona 2013: 356) But the view from her home will never truly be lost, describing her memory of it from a visit in the year 2000: "Standing on the Promenade, gazing over the quiet lagoon, I was beset by the unreliability of existence. I was wondering whether I would ever

come back. And then it hit me – I had never left!" (Ibid.) This statement signals a profound, inward healing, an acceptance that healing does not necessarily depend on physical presence or idealised return but on the reconciliation of identity and memory across space and time.

Nesaule's *Lost Midsummers* similarly explores the complexities of return. Despite embracing American freedoms, as Latvia opens up Kaija is drawn back by an unresolved yearning. Upon finding her former home desolate and occupied by strangers, her alienation deepens. However, an almost mystical encounter with a local offers her a moment of emotional release and connection:

> Kaija was crying freely. Her alienation and all the critical comments she had made about Latvians were dissolving and flowing away, taking with them the pain of exile. She was known and accepted. She was home. She was one with every tree and cloud and blade of grass. (Nesaule 2018: 394)

This experience represents a crucial moment of healing, a release from exile's accumulated pain through an embodied, almost spiritual connection to the land. For Kaija, who has long been deemed a "lost cause" by her community and friends, return allows her to reclaim a fractured identity and to heal on her own terms. Her abstract resolution parallels Nesaule's own narrative journey, suggesting that healing does not always require literal return, but the reconciliation of self with fragmented histories.

Alma's trajectory contrasts with Kaija's. Although initially jaded upon reconnecting with surviving family in Latvia, Alma finds a fragile belonging through the gifts they bestow. Yet the true resolution for both women does not culminate in the homeland but back in the United States. Reunited during a Latvian Midsummer bonfire, they achieve a profound peace with each other and themselves. Kaija asks Alma to tell her of all the grief she had experienced over the years, and in return she asks for her to tell of the old midsummers she does not remember from Latvia. The prevailing notion that Nesaule emphasises is that healing is not contingent on reversing exile by physical return, but on embracing and finding meaning in the present.

In *A Woman in Amber,* Nesaule does not depict any return to Latvia; Agate takes solace in the homeland's mementos but resolves never to live there. Kaija's life and eventual contentment in America mirror Agate's with both finding healing not through restorative nostalgia's promise of regaining all that was lost, but through forging new paths of identity and belonging.

Leena Käosaar observes regarding *A Woman in Amber* that: "national identity is depicted not as a natural part of a person but rather a feature that emerges most clearly in conflict and borderline situations where one cultural

group is juxtaposed with others in various forms of power-struggle" (Kurvet-Käosaar 2003: 325). This dynamic is equally apparent in *Lost Midsummers*, where Alma and Kaija grapple not only with American society but also with their own communities. Tiiu's subordination to American identity through marriage reflects similar tensions. The novels extend this analysis by highlighting the protagonists' fraught relationships with their exile communities: power struggles shaped by being one or two steps removed from the homeland of their parents. Alma elects to embody the dutiful Latvian, while Kaija deliberately distances herself; Tiiu strives to fulfil communal demands but remains marked as an outsider. None find easy comfort, illustrating exile's ongoing emotional and identity wounds.

Toona's *Kaleviküla viimne tütar* ends on a note of destruction and unresolved trauma: the village, spared from sale, is instead flooded by sabotage. Finding no reconciliation between the Estonian and American parts of her life, Tiiu escapes, disappearing from both worlds. Written just before Estonia's independence, the novel closes on a desperate, ambiguous note. Toona later revealed plans for a second part in which Tiiu escapes America to Estonia, only to find America following her (Lindsalu 2015). This imagined continuation symbolises the futility of escaping an in-between identity and anticipates the overwhelming cultural influx Estonia faced post-independence.

Both *Kaleviküla viimne tütar* and *Into Exile* conclude that returning to the homeland is not a panacea for the wounds of exile. However, *Into Exile* and Nesaule's works notably frame a return within a broader narrative of healing, one grounded in reconciliation, acceptance, and the complex negotiation of memory, identity, and place.

Conclusion

The selected works vividly capture the ambivalence inherent in exile, a complex interplay of traumatic experiences, identity conflicts, and pressures exerted by both the host society and the diaspora community. At the same time, they reveal narratives of survival, resilience, and healing through acceptance. Although the two novels were written in different eras and emerge from distinct exile communities, they resonate with each other through shared themes of generational and identity struggles.

This paper's aim was not to present a singular or definitive testimony of diasporic experience but to illuminate significant recurring themes within literary portrayals of exile. As Alpha Abebe insightfully notes: "Diasporas include individuals who have social, emotional and/or material ties that span across various geographies and histories, and the arts provide the opportunity

to engage with these parts of their lives without necessarily laying full claim to them." (Abebe 2018: 56)

Both novels explore the fraught process of balancing multiple, often conflicting, identities, experiences that may or may not draw directly on autobiography, yet reflect deeply felt individual struggles. By recounting and representing the painful realities of exile, the works move beyond collective memory to give voice to personal testimony and the possibility of resolution. The journeys of these women – from enduring trauma and negotiating identity conflicts to ultimately embracing loss and ambivalence – embody the essence of healing framed by Svetlana Boym's concept of reflective nostalgia. Healing, in this context, is not about restoration or reversal but about reconciliation and acceptance of the complexities of exile.

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