

# **The Journey to Liberty**

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

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## **המסע לחירות**

הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת

המחלקה לבלשנות וספרות אנגלית

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## Introduction

*We are all trying to find our grandmothers because we're trying to find something out about our past and how it came to be there instead of here, there or here instead of us, like an infinite conveyor belt that never comes round again...*

--Eleni Sikelianos, *You Animal Machine (The Golden Greek)*

I too am searching for my grandmother, for an elusive past, which Sikelianos describes as an infinite conveyor belt that relentlessly moves forward. I long for something that will never return but that seems to offer some sort of insight into my present; this longing forms the basis for my memoir.

From the age of six, when my father died, I grew up in an all-female household, so it always seemed natural to me to be a feminist. I was fourteen years old in 1970, when women protestors burned their bras at the entrance to the Miss America Pageant, and I instantly became a convert to the Women's Lib Movement. My choice to write about the women in my family is an extension of a lifelong exploration of gender identity and a commitment to creating a society where women's voices and stories are represented as part of the human experience

## Aims and General Description

"The Journey to Liberty" will be a collection of lyric essays, intermingled with prose poems and flash non-fiction that explores the lives of five mothers who have survived adversity. My goal in this project is to explore the women who have influenced my life and to look deeply

into some of my basic identities as a woman, a mother, a feminist, a social activist, and a creative artist. In this sense, the manuscript is a memoir.

## Conceptual Background

*As women, our relationship to the past has been problematical. We have been every culture's core obsession (and repression); we have always constituted at least one-half, and are now a majority, of the species; yet in the written records we can barely find ourselves. Confronted with this "Great Silence," we have apparently had two paths to follow: the path of anatomizing our oppression, detailing the laws and sanctions ranged against us; and the path of searching out those women who broke through the silence, who, though often penalized, misconstrued, their work neglected or banned, or though tokenized in lonely and precarious acceptance, still embodied strength, daring, self-determination; who were, in short, exemplary.*

--Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*

In 1976, when Adrienne Rich wrote *Of Woman Born*, there was very little literature about mothers, and even less written from a woman's point of view. In her book, Rich describes the need to write about extraordinary women, so that we and our daughters can find the role models we need to create positive identities for ourselves.

In the two decades following the publication of Rich's book there were very few literary works written about mothers or from the point of view of mothers. Notable among them are Marianne Hirsch's 1989 *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, which explores the characterization and

portrayal of mothers in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century literature. In the literature she surveys, mothers are rarely portrayed as full human characters. The female authors and their avatars, the daughter characters, often see the mother as the person who tries to force them to conform, confining them to the limiting expectations of society. The daughters see themselves as an infinite well of disappointment to their mothers and are resentful and angry at their mothers for not defending them, encouraging them, or supporting them.

In the last ten years the situation has changed; many new memoirs focus on the author's relationship to his or her mother. *Mothers* by Rachel Zucker, *Mother Daughter Me* by Katie Hafner, and Sherman Alexie's memoir *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me* are a few examples.

Zucker's *Mothers* was a major inspiration for my project due both to its hybrid form and also to its content. Much like Zucker, I am searching for the maternal influences in my life. In her book Zucker expands the meaning of mother to mean all the female relations that have nurtured her, challenged her, and facilitated her growth. But the main character of the book is her own mother, who is mostly absent until the end. By then the reader understands that, in contrast to all the other characters in the book, the relationship she had to the woman who gave birth to her was the least nourishing relationship of all her "mothers."

The women whom I want to write about survived adversity, danger, poverty, and loss with courage, humor, and generosity of spirit. But many of the stories about these women were told to me second, third, even fourth hand, as family legends and fragmented memories. As a non-fiction writer this presents a problem since, as Vivian Gornick writes, "A memoir is a tale taken from life—that is, from actual, not imagined, occurrences—related by a first-person

narrator who is undeniably the writer.” This guideline often creates an internal struggle, since I believe that my dreams and imagination make up a crucial part of my experience, but are, by definition, not verifiable facts. In addition, memory is often fragmented, and I am acutely aware that I sometimes modulate memory in order to create a consecutive linear narrative, even though it may not align exactly with the facts.

Elena Sikelianos’s memoir, *You Animal Machine*, offers a model for creating a narrative out of incomplete, unreliable, and contradictory information. Sikelianos does not try to fill in what she doesn’t know with speculation; rather she breaks up the linear flow of the story and builds the narrative, fragment upon fragment. Indeed, she includes poems with blank spaces in the lines or sometimes an unfinished word, which is her way of acknowledging the blank spaces in her memory and in the stories she has been told.

Though she never says it explicitly, she is also searching for the roots of the abuse and neglect that have left their scars on her and her family. She deals with some very painful incidents that she can only touch lightly or hint at and express in poetry. People who have experienced trauma will often feel overwhelmed by past events that threaten to take over the present. They may relive the past event over and over in the form of flashbacks, hallucinations or nightmares. Hybridity can be an effective way of writing about trauma, since it accommodates these multiple non-linear forms. For example, Sikelianos condenses time by using fragments and lyrical flash passages, which de-emphasize chronological progression that is often associated with biological generation, and in this way expresses not only the inability to narrate the events of her grandmother’s life, but also the experience of trying to process the unnarratable events.

Another model that was a useful in portraying family dynamics and narrating around family traumas is Eula Biss's *The Balloonists*. Biss is trying to make sense of her mother's silence and her parents' divorce, which she likens to a plane crash. Interspersed throughout prose poem stanzas are technical paragraphs explaining the use and regulations governing the black box recovered from a plane crash. The key point about the box is that it records the last minutes of sound before the plane goes down. The black box becomes the central metaphor of the book. Much as we try to decipher what caused the crash by listening to fragments of recorded sound, Biss is trying to figure out what caused her family to fall apart by examining the fragments of her memory, as well as listening to the voices of those who were there at the scene of the accident—her mother's sisters.

Like Sikelianos, Biss tells the story in fragments taken from different times and places and juxtaposes one against the other. In this way connections are made between the different scenes. A stanza about her boyfriend's parents is placed close to a stanza about a couple she is sitting next to on a bus, followed by a stanza that begins, "My parents have not talked to each other for five years." On this page she is examining three different models of couples. Her boyfriend's father watches TV and his mother volunteers at the church. Her boyfriend's parents in a different context may be boring or shallow, but in this context seem to portray for Biss the ideal "normal" family that she may have fantasized about as a child. The couple on the bus are holding hands but not looking in the same direction. They model a way of non-verbal communication that still retains a connection, where as her parents not speaking to each other implies a deep rift between them.

I intend to use short prose image-based, fragment-like stanzas throughout the whole book, much in the same way as Zucker, Sikelianos and Biss, in order to show the common threads among lives of the women I am writing about and their influence over my own experiences of being a daughter and a mother. I want to convey the connections rather than just the individual chronological story.

## Shape of Project

I choose to write in a hybrid fashion, combining prose fragments, imagined dialogue, essay, flash non-fiction, drama and poems. These forms will create a spiral structure in which specific themes emerge and recede multiple times acquiring resonance and new associations and forms with each appearance. With each loop, the significance of the event changes in light of the new context. This is similar to the way our memories gain significance and sometimes even change in light of new experiences. I want to use hybrid writing to reflect a universe that is strange, coincidental, accidental and wonderfully chaotic. Because of a chain of random events I was created, and furthermore I was shaped by these events. It is what makes me unique and hopefully what makes this story interesting.

The book chapters will be organized around five women: my mother, my paternal grandmother, my aunt Rose, my grandmother's grandmother, and myself. Stories of secondary characters, my mother's stepmother, my mother-in-law, and me as foster mother, will serve as connective tissue.



Loss will form the core of the spiral structure: the loss of my father when I was six (a key trauma in my life) my mother's loss of a husband, my grandmother's lost son and my aunt's lost brother. We often think of heroes as males who have fought and defeated evil. But these women are my heroes because they were repeatedly assaulted by loss, poverty, disease, trauma of wars. These women not only survived, but they lived and laughed and loved and raised children and looked life in the eye and kept going.

The structure of my book is similar to Zucker's, *Mothers*: each of the five chapters will include short prose verses about each woman, starting from her childhood ending with my mother's death. In this way I hope to compare these women's lives, seeking perhaps the root to their endurance and strength, and seeking as well to find out how I am similar to them and in what ways am I different. In each chapter I will be using multiple literary forms. I will use epistolary to address these characters directly as a way of establishing an artificial narrative progression that their physical death cut short in real life. Mini-theater or drama will allow me to examine the testimony of particular characters about an event that no one agrees about. This will highlight the impossibility of narrative objectivity and, at the same time, a desire for it. It will also be a good vehicle for humor which I will use to keep the story from becoming too sentimental. When describing trauma I will use poetry, for, as Joy Ladin writes in her essay: "Finding a Form for Trauma" in *Family Resemblances*: "Trauma is experience that cannot be subsumed or digested, cannot be narrated as past because it is always present. Trauma interrupts our self-generating story, exposing the multifarious materials that self-narration enables us to think as coherent, continuous selves." Poetry is therefore, the best genre for

traumatic stories because speaking more directly to the subconscious, poetry has the power to convey experience that is raw and unprocessed.

The first chapter will be birth: My grandmother giving birth to my uncle on the kitchen table; my mother's mother becoming sick with a degenerative disease which was triggered by giving birth to my mother; the birth of my two children. The second chapter will deal with childhood: my aunt Rose adjusting to her new life in America, my own childhood and memories of parenting my twins. The third chapter will be about my father's death and two very difficult years that followed. The fourth chapter will be adolescence and will include stories of my mother growing up with her step mother, my experiences as a foster mother and my grandparents' move to the US, as seen through the eyes of my Aunt Rose as a child. The fifth chapter consists of stories about falling in love and getting married and becoming mothers. The last chapter will center around death and dying.

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