

OUT OF THE SUGAR FACTORY

Dorothee Elmiger, translated from Swiss German by Megan Ewing

1. As its title suggests, *Out of the Sugar Factory* is an exploration of sugar as a global commodity across a multitude of historical times and geographical locations. What compels the narrator/author to trace sugar's trail in these different directions, and what does she find when she does so?
2. *Out of the Sugar Factory* treats many historical figures—including Teresa de Ávila, Adam Smith, Karl Marx, Vaslav Nijinsky, Ellen West, Marie Luise Kaschnitz, and Werner Bruni— as characters in its contemporary setting. What happens when historical figures become contemporaneous to each other and to the narrator in her imagination?
3. The narrator identifies what she believes is the originating scene of her project: the sale of two Black female figurines, perhaps from Haiti, at the auction of the Swiss lotto winner Werner Bruni. *Out of the Sugar Factory* repeatedly turns to the figurines as a node or “convergence of the most diverse strands of history” (pg. 12). In what ways do the figurines become enmeshed both in the global histories that the text seeks to make visible and in the narrator's telling of those histories?
4. Consider the Swiss nation's historical commitment to socio-political “neutrality.” Does *Out of the Sugar Factory* complicate notions of personal and national neutrality?
5. What is the relationship between the author and the text's narrator?
6. Tao Leigh Goffe has coined the term “sugarwork” to refer to the patterns of labor, energy, and reproduction symbolized by the womb and the stomach that fueled sugar production in the colonial era and the present. *Out of the Sugar Factory* is also interested in relationships between sugar and female embodiment, and the narrator references Freud's comment that women's sex lives resemble a “dark continent” (pg. 50). What kinds of hunger, desire, and consumption does sugar become a symbol of in the text?
7. Consider the coexistence of the narrator's deep awareness of her place within capitalist networks of consumption, and her desire to, like Ellen West, bite “greedily and lustfully into all life” (pg. 154). How does the exploration of desire connect with the narrator's experience of her own body, and with the containment and/or commodification of women's bodies in general?
8. What is *Out of the Sugar Factory*'s relationship to history and historical objects? What does the text's adoption of other genres—archive, detective story, biography, and fiction, for example—do to our understanding of history?
9. Consider some of the images the narrator uses to describe her project: as “walking through brambles” (pg. 7), “a luminous path...through the things” (pg. 10), “a neurotic pilgrimage” (pg. 12), a pear offered to a lover (pg. 69), and a childhood encounter with goats “now disembodied” (pg. 172). Which of these images, or others, resonates with your own experience of reading of the book, and why?



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