The Politics and Poetics of Remembering: Memory, Trauma, and Identity in Postgenerational Holocaust Narratives

by

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My Family Remembers
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Introduction

I grew up remembering the Holocaust at dinner table conversations with my family, at visits with my paternal grandparents, who were both survivors, and at my Jewish Day School where this history shaped not only the curriculum, but our collective identity as contemporary Jewish Americans. This remembering was not confined to annual commemoration ceremonies or visits to Holocaust museums, but it permeated my family’s way of life in a way that almost nothing else has. From a young age my brother and I heard the same stories repeated over and over again—how my grandma and her sister shared their meager rations of bread with each other while they were at Auschwitz, claiming that they weren’t hungry; how my grandpa hid in the barn of a fascist Hungarian in order to escape the Nazi camps. I was told to remember these stories and to remember what my family had endured and lost in the war. This family history was sacred.

In The Shape of the Signifier, Walter Benn Michaels completely undermines this imperative to remember traumatic historic events such as the Holocaust, unsettling the very foundation on which I was raised. He grounds his argument in a critique of “the way in which the deployment of the Holocaust in contemporary America functions to make the victimization of the Jews a fact of American history” (131). Michaels argues that Jewish Americans
who did not experience the Holocaust nevertheless remember these past events as their own, retelling and reenacting narratives of suffering to “make it possible for people who did not live through the Holocaust to survive it” (145). While this attitude towards the past was encouraged—even presented as an ethical obligation—Michaels argues that this possessive investment in traumatic memory enables those who are not actually victims to see themselves as such. This often comes at the expense of recognizing contemporary victims of social injustice, and more importantly at the expense of reckoning with today’s issues of economic inequity. In Michaels’ words, “the question of past injustice has no bearing on the question of present justice” (166). Therefore remembering produces a self-focused politics of identity in which we act based on our investment in our own traumatic histories, not on our desire for a more equal and just future. As we reach towards the past, we do not take sight of the pressing issue of economic disparity between different classes in the present. Michaels advocates instead that we act on ideas, based in our contemporary realities and political ideologies, not identity, based in our ties to the past.

Reading and processing Michaels’ argument inspired in me a range of emotions: first shock at the audacity of his argument, then anger and frustration that I could not formulate my own equally convincing counterargument, and finally reconciliation as I came to understand the limits of his worldview and further explore a more complex politics of remembering through the very process of writing this thesis. Michaels’ argument initially
appeared so threatening to me because, in large part, he seemed to be right; his attempt to destabilize economic inequity as the norm in our capitalist country effectively convinces the reader of the need for a paradigm shift in the way we think about achieving a more just and equal society. He makes a solid, though highly inflammatory argument based in well-crafted critiques of contemporary literature and culture.

Nonetheless, I found the implications of his argument highly unsettling. They forced me to question the value of memory and identity, wondering if I had been raised on complete falsehoods. Not only did I have an intellectual stake in Michaels’ argument, but I felt it personally threatening because he specifically challenges the postgenerational remembering of the Holocaust as it consolidates a victimized identity for American Jews today. This affront on my own identity—as the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors and the daughter of someone who possibly falls into some of the identity traps that Michaels so effectively sets up in his argument against remembering—had serious implications. I would have to reexamine the theories of memory and identity with which I had grown up; I had been told they were sacred and now Michaels was tearing them apart. His argument led me to seriously question the purpose and value of remembering and to examine why we were so obsessed with our past. Was this obsession merely a distraction from present inequities or did it perform other functions?
After recovering from the shock of his argument, I was able to see how it manifested itself in my own family life; I realized that my parents and others in the Jewish community in which I grew up do subscribe to a version of Jewish exceptionalism and “chosenness.” My dad bases much of his identity and thereby his politics on being the child of two Holocaust survivors. His attitude towards European countries is generally based on their involvement in World War II. Denmark is good, France is okay, Germany is bad. We don’t buy German cars (we do, apparently, buy German dishwashers). But does subscribing to a version of Jewish exceptionalism blind one to other injustices around them, as Michaels implies?

I still had an intuition that there was more to be unpacked; memory and identity had to be more complex than Michaels’ argument suggested. In my attempt to examine these complexities I embarked on the project of writing a thesis—a response of sorts to Michaels’ argument against remembering. In my process of looking at examples of theoretical, literary, and real life rememberers, I came to understand a key difference between Michaels’ theories of memory and identity and those I had grown up with. In simple terms, Michaels sees the world as a competitive place: we are always competing with others for recognition in the public sphere. However, through this thesis I have come across ways of looking at memory in a comparative framework as it emerges through intersubjective encounters between others. Rather than one history of trauma silencing another, there is the possibility of their articulation in
conversation with each other. In other words, Michaels sees remembering as only consolidating identity—closing at the site of hereditary transmission of memories, while I see remembering as also presenting the possibility of understanding through and across differences.

This thesis, however, is not an attempt to completely reject Michaels’ argument. Much to the contrary, it is intended to engage it in conversation about the limits and possibilities of remembering. His argument inspired me to be more critical about my positionality and methodology as a postgenerational rememberer, and about how I view present day notions of inequity and injustice. Michaels’ reading suggested that I, as the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, was predisposed to locate my identity in a sense of perpetual victimhood, remembering my grandparents’ experience in the Holocaust as my own. Rather than seeing myself as wounded, however, I am able to examine my current position in society—writing a thesis at Wesleyan University—as particularly privileged, and though I am able to remember the tragedy that my grandparents endured, I remember from a distance, which allows me to see the distance my family has come.

To keep from succumbing to Michaels’ self-focused politics of memory and identity, we must remember through a critical understanding of our positionality, and the limits it poses, in relation to the past. We should engage with memory not as a discrete unit to be owned, but as a continuously developing and emerging form of narrative that acknowledges its own self-
production in past and present contexts. Thus, in order to “disown” memory, we must inhabit a space of self-reflexivity in which we examine our participation in its very production.

In this thesis I attempt to unpack layered memories and ways of remembering, both those of literary and theoretical rememberers and those of mine. I have worried at times that in turning the focus on my own remembering I am only perpetuating or solidifying the victimized “Holocaust identity” for myself that Michaels critiques, but instead this process has allowed me to realize that I am seeking to do the very opposite; I am trying not to present myself as a victim or an outsider, but to understand the texture of my family’s remembering by listening to and examining the stories we tell. In understanding my own place within this scheme of remembering I am able to see how I fit into this whole, how my positionality frames the ways in which I relate to both my grandparents’ history and other histories. I understand the limits of my remembering—what I am able to conjure through my own means of imagining and where I must stop and let other voices or “the record” speak. I do not experience my grandparents’ memories as my own, but I learn about them to understand my family and this history.

In the following chapters I examine the technology and texture of postgenerational remembering and its relationship to identity construction. In the first chapter I consider theoretical debates about the politics of remembering and its intersection with the politics of identity. Marianne Hirsch’s concept of
“postmemory” explains how the postgeneration relates to memories of the past through its own specialized understanding of it, but her theorization of memory as biological inheritance threatens to turn memory in a racialized property.

Walter Benn Michaels makes a strong and provocative argument against this type of private remembering, as remembering the past becomes “owning” the past through a possessive investment in a victimized identity. Gary Weissman further substantiates Michaels’ argument against over-identification with past experiences that are not our own as he puts forth the idea of “the fantasy of witnessing” in which the postgeneration feels as though they have directly experienced the trauma, even though they have not.

I complicate Michaels’ argument against remembering by incorporating theories for remembering: Caroline Rody and Shoshana Felman advocate for the need to embody and reenact memory in order to better represent the past in the present and fill history’s holes. Cathy Caruth and Michael Rothberg introduce theories of remembering in a comparative framework where, rather than closing off connections, this intersubjective emergence of memory facilitates encounters between others. In this way memory emerges only across and through differences, rather than in spite of them.

In conversation with Michaels’ examination of the politics of identity, I turn to Wendy Brown, who provides a helpful vocabulary for thinking about identity; rather than Michaels’ theory of ideology over identity, she suggests using a future-oriented language of “wanting” versus “being” which works
towards an improved future without remaining beholden to a wounded identity
stuck in the past. However, Cheryl Harris complicates Michaels’ theorization of
minority identity as property, in her argument for whiteness—an identity
Michaels does not deal with in his own argument—as property that carries
certain material benefits denied to people of color.

In the second chapter I examine Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel,
*Everything is Illuminated* (2003), as a text that deals with the issues of
postmemory, ownership of the past and competitive versus comparative
understandings of trauma. Foer’s novel seems at first to be about the recovery
of a buried family memory for Jonathan, the Jewish American grandson of
Holocaust survivors, yet Foer gives this story an unusual twist—he displaces
the “real” protagonist, Jonathan, with Alex, the Ukrainian translator and tour
guide. Alex ends up uncovering his own grandfather’s past in which he is
revealed as a perpetrator. In this way Jonathan does not “own” his
grandfather’s memory of the Holocaust, as Michaels’ would suggest.

Foer employs a dual narrative structure in which the present day story
unfolds through Alex’s letters and narrative and Jonathan’s story of his
family’s ancestral village, Trachimbrod, is told through his fantastical and self-
conscious narrative. Memory in Alex’s narrative emerges indirectly and
unexpectedly through the intersubjective encounter, in dialogue with Caruth
and Rothberg’s theories of remembering through differences. Whereas
Jonathan’s Trachimbrod narrative of the villagers’ embodied remembering
aligns more closely with Michaels’ understanding of memory as confining its subjects in the past. In the novel’s cross-cultural meeting of others, contextualized and complicated by the postgenerational search for the past, subject-positions of victim, perpetrator and collaborator are blurred; Jonathan’s privileged political position as an American buying his way to the past complicates his victimhood. This blurring, however, is all too neatly rectified in the translation of Foer’s novel into a major motion picture. The film reduces Jonathan and Grandfather into victims, reproducing some of the pitfalls of postgenerational remembering of the Holocaust put forth by Michaels.

In the third chapter I turn inward to examine my family’s and my own practices and theories of remembering. These different ways of remembering speak back to the theory that I have examined in previous chapters by offering real life examples of how remembering functions. I look at the stories that I have “inherited” from my grandparents and father in order to understand how we all remember differently and tell the stories that we need to tell in order to grapple with our present realities. I examine my grandmother’s diary, written during her internment at Nazi camps during the Holocaust, and read the unexpected story of love, longing and loss that she never explicitly told us in her lifetime. Reading this translated diary raises issues of mediation, the material and the immaterial, the burden to know the past (that my dad feels so
profoundly), and the conflict between my grandmother’s desire to withhold the pain of the past with my family’s desire to know these narratives.

I incorporate my own experience of the U.S. National Holocaust museum, where my grandmother’s diary currently sits on permanent display, as the crossroads of public and private remembering, seeking to elucidate what it means to remember the Holocaust in a U.S. national context where the less mediated experiences of remembering turn out to be the most powerful. I address my family members’ individual theories of remembering by looking at a series of interviews between my brother, father and grandmother in which they examine questions of intergenerational transmission, imagining the unimaginable, and using the past to build an ethical and moral foundation in the present. Finally, I examine my brother’s film about my grandmother’s memories of the Holocaust, in which he attempts to engage with these stories by reenacting them in a contemporary context. This remembering through critical reenactment reanimates past events in a displaced contemporary reality, helping us to both understand the past and our distance from it.

This project aims to look at issues of memory, trauma and identity critically, and engage in a dialogue with Michaels about the ways in which remembering does not always produce a self-focused politics based in woundedness. It is about examining different ways of remembering the Holocaust through theoretical, literary, and personal frameworks and looking at these unique textures of remembering. It is about looking at the ways in
which these remembering subjects attempt to learn about, own and imagine the
past. It is about looking at ways of remembering across differences in order to
facilitate intersubjective encounters, rather than close off conversation at the site
of the wounded self. Though, as Michaels so effectively argues, memory and
identity present the possibility of distracting us from larger inequities. But,
ultimately the texts of remembering which I have examined in this thesis suggest
that no one owns memory in that it emerges indirectly and intersubjectively,
slipping through the hands of those who seek to hold on to it too tightly.
Chapter One
Theories of Memory, Trauma, and Identity

‘Postmemory’ and the Technology of Postgenerational Remembering

Can trauma be inherited? If not, what relation to the Holocaust does a child or grandchild of survivors have? In “The Generation of Postmemory,” Holocaust scholar Marianne Hirsch forwards the concept of “postmemory” as a way of understanding the transmission of traumatic memories across generations. Through storytelling and photographs direct survivors pass down their memories of the Holocaust to their children who then inherit a special relation to this past. For Hirsch postmemory is a privileged, though mediated, act of remembrance in which those “who were not actually there to live an event” inherit memories of the past “by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (106). She argues that through postmemory the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors are able to engage with the past so “deeply and affectively,” that their own imaginings “constitute memories in their own right” (106). More than simply having access to the past, the postgeneration inherits this past and reanimates it as their own. Consequently, the danger of this privileged access to and understanding of the past is that memory becomes a biological inheritance in which those who
have directly descended from survivors of the Holocaust are able to remember more deeply and authentically than those who did not.

Hirsch foregrounds the mediated nature of postmemory, by suggesting that those who are unable to directly remember or recall the past instead access it by means of “imaginative investment, projection and creation” (107). This mediation compensates for the distance from which the postgeneration remembers so that they are able to create a closer connection to this past. It operates in a realm between directness—the postgeneration has a privileged and specialized access to remembering these events—and indirectness—they were not actually there to immediately remember the events. Hirsch recognizes this contradiction as “inherent to [the] phenomenon” (106) of postmemory.

In this mediated engagement with the past, the postgeneration relies on stories and photographs shared by family members to inspire a connection to this history. Through this mediated remembering the postgeneration is afforded a greater understanding of and connection to that past, but becomes dependent on material and immaterial means of accessing the past. Postmemory hence transforms this generational displacement from what can otherwise seem like an obstacle to remembering into the very means through which the postgeneration develops a special (though mediated) relationship to the past.

The contradiction within Hirsch’s construction of postmemory, which she acknowledges, is that it operates through mediation, focusing on the postgeneration’s “imaginative investment, projection and creation” (107) of
memories, but it also privileges this remembering as a more direct means of understanding and bearing witness to the Holocaust; these past events are transmitted to the postgeneration “so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (107). Hirsch therefore frames postmemory as a more direct remembering because of, or rather in spite of, its indirectness, but does not clarify why this mediation allows for a deeper or more authentic remembering, beyond the biological imperative and transmission through what she calls “the language of family” (112).

Therefore the danger of Hirsch’s model is that it approaches an understanding of memory transmitted biologically through the language and site of the family. This insidiously affords these postgenerational rememberers a more justified claim to the past as they have a more direct understanding of its events and trauma. This model of transmission through inheritance also racializes memory because only those with a direct lineage to the past are able to truly remember it. Thus in becoming a biological inheritance, memory is dangerously situated as racialized property—if I have more direct access to remember “authentically,” then I am able to claim this memory as my own and thereby own it.

However, Hirsch does attempt to challenge the notion of racialized remembering by asking if postmemory is “limited to the intimate embodied space of the family” or if it can “extend to more distant, adoptive witnesses?” (107) She posits that it is not only children of survivors who can remember
through postmemory: “[f]amilial structures of mediation and representation” allow not only those who have directly descended from the trauma to “remember” it, but also “facilitate the affiliative acts of the postgeneration” in that “the idiom of the family can become an accessible lingua franca easing identification and projection across distance and difference” (115). Affiliative rememberers who did not directly inherit the trauma through parents or grandparents would still be able to remember through their “contemporaneity and generational connection with the literal second generation combined with structures of mediation that would be broadly appropriable [and] available” to them (115). In other words, postmemory can open up memories of the past, not only to the second generation, but also to a larger public as well.

However, those without direct access to personal artifacts and family photographs are left to remember in public spaces, such as the museum, that allow for a less authentic version of postmemory since these spaces tend to be interpolated by other political aims. Therefore those who inherit the memories due to their biological closeness to the events experience a privileged position of remembering in which memory is made private. Hirsch turns this privileged postgenerational remembering into a kind of property through biological inheritance, so that remembering means “owning” the past.
Remembering the Past as Owning the Past

Literary critic Walter Benn Michaels is one of the most vociferous and polemical critics of such claims of owning the past. For Michaels, a concept like Hirsch’s postmemory, that privileges memory as inherited and therefore owned, works to codify an exclusive racial or cultural identity constituted through a unique remembering of and relation to a traumatized past. This closes off the possibility for a more egalitarian society as each identity group, living by and through their memories of past trauma, are unable to recognize the inequity that surrounds them or are so distracted by their own narratives of past suffering that they obscure the immediate material problems of other groups in the present. The result, Michaels argues, is that instead of engaging with others through a discourse of ideologies, as he suggests we should, we engage through a discourse of identity and thus remain focused on who we are rather than what we think, perpetuating this cycle of stuckness in the past.

Michaels takes a strong and controversial stance against inherited memory, arguing that ownership of these traumatic memories consolidates a victimized understanding of one’s identity position. He lays the groundwork for his argument against remembering and identity through a reading of Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel about the Holocaust, *Maus*. Spiegelman’s typology in *Maus* is famously controversial for the way it reductively translates the war into cartoon terms—Jews are mice, Nazis are cats—but Michaels takes issue
with it for another reason. He points out that all the Jewish characters are mice, even after they come to the U.S. while all the other American characters are dogs. This suggests that Jews never become American, as the Holocaust serves to shape and distinguish contemporary Jewish American culture and identity. This typology in which African Americans are indistinguishable from white Americans also suggests that the Holocaust is seen to shape identity in a way that other events such as slavery do not. Accordingly, *Maus* “shows the United States through the lens of the Holocaust. And through that lens, the United States is divided not into blacks and whites but into dogs and mice, Americans and Jews” (130) suggesting that Jewish Americans never assimilate to the status of white Americans while African Americans do (as they “melt into dogs”). This privileges the Jewish American identity as exceptional and immutable as it is inherited biologically and thus racialized. Spiegelman’s typology assumes that if Jews remain mice, Jewish identity becomes an inherent and an inheritable trait, not just a culture, history or religion. Contemporary Jewish American identity (as defined by the memory of the Holocaust) proves exceptional as it obscures all other histories. This further binds Jewish Americans to their victimhood, as they are blind to the racial and economic injustices and inequities around them that stratify American society.

Michaels compares Spiegelman’s typology to historian Arthur Schlesinger’s argument that America, as a national body, derives its collective identity from a kind of “national memory,” much like individual identity does
from a catalogue of personal memories. Therefore individuals “have access not only to their own memories but to the national memory” (Michaels 133). This translates to individuals remembering national events as their own, even and especially as they did not directly experience them, further consolidating the individual identity based in the national. Remembering history becomes the way to “know” history as “our own,” as if it happened directly to us. This framework for understanding collective histories proves especially dangerous to Michaels as it racializes national history and encourages individuals to remember history as their own, claiming a possessive investment in those narratives, even though they did not directly experience them.

Though Michaels critiques history that is remembered in a way that reifies identitarian power structures by underscoring identity claims, he argues that history itself is relevant to the contemporary context, but clarifies that it should be “learned” rather than “remembered.” History can be “learned by anyone,” while “a history that is remembered can be remembered only by those who first experienced it and it must belong to them” (139). Instead of owning the past by “remembering” it, Michaels suggests examining continuities of the past in the present such as “the ways in which events in the past have caused conditions in the present” or in the idea “that the past is enough like the present that we might learn from the past things that are useful in the present” (138).
Embodied Remembering

In order to further examine the issue of remembering versus learning, Michaels turns to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, which, he argues, instead positions “remembering and forgetting” (135) as the only options for relating to a traumatic past. Michaels therefore challenges the theories of remembering in Morrison’s text in order to exemplify the issues of the post-generation remembering the past by reliving it. In *Beloved*, Denver has access to her mother, Sethe’s, suffering through the apparatus of “rememory” that Toni Morrison forwards. Michaels claims that through rememory “Sethe’s memory can become Denver’s” (136), reinscribing the suffering and trauma of slavery on the subsequent generation. However, Michaels’ reading of rememory as directly linked with identity does not recognize that Morrison’s novel in fact specifically distinguishes the two. Morrison’s rememory is crafted as a “thought-picture” (47) that exists extra-subjectively outside the mind of the person who directly experienced the traumatic event. Therefore anyone can access that event in its full depiction, but not themselves experience the suffering contained within it. Denver “bump[s] into” Sethe’s rememories, but this action of “bumping” clearly signifies a distinction between Denver’s lived experience and her mother’s, as the two remain separate entities. Morrison’s rememory presents a theoretical alternative to Michaels’ concept of remembering as
reenacting; memory is learned and understood, but not owned or embodied by the next generation.

In fact, Morrison works to underscore the distance between an actual experiential memory and the narrated version passed on to the descendants of the person who experienced it. Denver recognizes that she does not “own” memories of Sweet Home—the plantation where her mother was enslaved—in the way that Sethe and Paul D do as “they belonged to them and not to her” since they were there and she was not; we learn, “only those who lived in Sweet Home could remember it” (Morrison 13). Not only can Denver not remember events that did not happen to her, but she even “hated the stories her mother told that did not concern herself” (63). Thus the past largely remains unknown to her since she only seeks out stories of that past that involve herself. Sethe too refuses to tell Denver a complete narrative of the past, as she “had secrets—things she wouldn’t tell; things she halfway told” (38) and always “gave short replies or rambling incomplete reveries” (71) to Denver’s inquiries about the past. Sethe attempts to not pass down her trauma by withholding stories and telling Denver an incomplete narrative of the past. In the absence of a complete narrative, Denver remains unable to fully inhabit these scenes of the past. However, she continuously returns to one of these narratives which includes her as its primary subject—the story of her birth. Beloved, both as a figure of the past and a mechanism for resurrecting that past, unlike Denver, feeds off of
Sethe’s stories, getting “profound satisfaction” from hearing this personal history.

Michaels’ analysis of the transmission of memory and trauma in *Beloved*, which “establishes remembering and forgetting as the relevant alternatives” (134), assumes that the historical record is complete and accurate since we cannot “forget” what we have not learned. He does not account for the possibility that literary critic Caroline Rody puts forth. In her reading of Morrison’s *Beloved*, Rody postulates rememory as a tool for filling the “holes” of history’s past, punctured by slavery’s program of racialized obliteration and destruction. It is not, as Michaels suggests, that we remember in order to relive, but rather that we remember in order to fix a porous historical narrative.

Rody argues that *Beloved* “foregrounds its own arduous project of historical recovery” (27) through the retrieval of narratives that “work towards the health of fuller awareness” of a traumatic past. Implicit in this understanding is that memory functions as a supplement to “official” history, since the real trauma for Rody is the denying of this “missing” history. In the resurrection of an untold past, rememory “is the imaginative act that makes it possible to realize one’s latent abiding connection to the past,” thus filling in the “holes” or absences of the past and reaching towards “communal epic” (28). Morrison’s rememory functions similarly to Hirsch’s postmemory in its implicit “imaginative investment” (Hirsch 107), but differs critically in that the rememory exists also as an entity outside of the mind of the rememberer. For
Morrison the danger of not remembering, for which Michaels arguably advocates, is that this absent history remains untold. Rody discusses Morrison’s “poetics of memory”:

The characters who do not want to or cannot remember their stories reverse the desire of the writer who wants to know and tell a communal history. She must work to ‘rememory’ these ancestors who wish they could forget. In the absence of their particular faces, she must create the characters she wants to mourn. The elevation of memory to a supernatural power that connects all minds—making it possible to ‘bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else’—is generated by authorial desire to write like a “we” about unknown ancestors (28).

Therefore Michaels’ seemingly reductive politics of remembering are complicated by Rody’s suggestion that Morrison must “create the characters she wants to mourn” in an effort to move beyond a stuckness in a looming absent history. Thus the trauma in Rody’s telling becomes a twice-silenced history, while for Michaels the issue is that *Beloved* re-tells a familiar narrative without effecting a more equal society. In other words, for Rody the telling of an untold past has intrinsic value, whereas for Michaels it’s a distraction from contemporary material inequality.

For Rody, as for Hirsch, the language and space of the family serve as the location and means of the intergenerational transmission of trauma and memory. *Beloved* functions within Rody’s schema of the “mother daughter
relationship as the site of transhistorical contact” (3), which works to make the record of history more complete by incorporating “formerly unarticulated histories” (5) of slavery into a more dominant historical narrative. Through the trope of the woman’s body, generating, embodying and transmitting history, these African American and Caribbean women writers/daughters seek to mend the ruptures of slavery. They attend to the silencing of slavery’s history by rejecting the idea of history contained in the past so as to “liberate time in order to reach and release enslaved foremothers” (8). These “fantastical” and “magical” modes of narrativizing this past “rupture history with timelessness” thereby “restor[ing] maternal spaces” and allowing for “repressed herstory” to “spiral from the depths of female time” (11).

The danger (beyond the racialization of memory), that Michaels would note, in both Rody’s mother-daughter resurrection of a buried past and Hirsch’s postmemory is that the postgeneration risks crowding out their own (contemporary) lived experience as they take possession of past experiences that are not their own. In an effort to keep this history “alive” through its embodiment or a more authentic understanding of the past, these members of the postgeneration risk becoming vessels for this history, “evacuating” their own “stories and experiences” (Hirsch 107). Both Rody’s model of embodiment and Hirsch’s postmemory verge on a privileged ownership of the past that resonate throughout the larger genre of postgenerational Holocaust literature.
Working on the same question of the intergenerational transmission of trauma narratives as Rody and Hirsch, Shoshana Felman furthers Rody’s argument for embodied remembering as she advocates for reenactment as the only way to truly engage with the past. Felman introduces the idea of performative testimony as a model of remembering that valorizes embodiment because the past, she suggests, cannot be fully represented or remembered through conventional narratives. In their stead are abstract and nonsensical reenactments that refer to the horrific events. They are “the only possible ethical” means of transmission because these events, Felman argues, are “in excess of our frames of reference,” since they have “not settled into understanding or remembrance” and therefore “cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition” (5).

Felman explains how through the performative testimony “the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself” (58). This rhetoric of the listener’s co-ownership of a traumatic past, as a means of enabling the transmission of that history, proves particularly troublesome for Michaels as these reenactments that “transmit[] not the normalizing knowledge of the horror but the horror itself” (Michaels 141), create an environment in which it is possible for those “who did not live through the Holocaust to survive it” (Michaels 145). In this sense, performative testimony provides another mechanism for reliving trauma as one’s own and thereby
possessing it. The listener or the “blank screen” to whom the trauma did not happen is consequently entangled in its telling and therefore subsumed by notions of victimization, suffering, and woundedness. For Michaels, this need to assert that a listener (or descendant) experiences the trauma of the victim stems from a desire for ownership of a collective victimized identity.

In *Fantasies of Witnessing*, Gary Weissman challenges the specialized remembering forwarded by Hirsch, Rody and Felman either through mediation, embodiment or reenactment and further substantiates Michaels’ argument against over-identification with the past. He critiques “the nonwitness’s desire to ‘become a prisoner, to actually feel the horror’—in short to witness the Holocaust as if one were there” (4). Not only do the “nonwitnesses” embody these past traumatic experiences that do not “belong” to them, but they take them on as their own—as if they happened directly to them, erasing a recognition of the transmission and mediation involved in postgenerational remembering. This is particularly threatening towards a self-reflexive model of remembering in which the rememberer has a more critical understanding of their relationship to the past. These “fantasies of witnessing” also destabilize assumptions about the primacy of firsthand experience. Both Hirsch and Weissman put forth an understanding of the effects of ownership of memory on the rememberer, while Michaels focuses on the effects of memory as property on the other. Therefore Michaels implicitly assumes that a victimized
identity enables a privileged subject position, while Hirsch and Weissman suggest that it is a burden.

**Identity**

This self-claimed victimized identity that Michaels critiques resonates with Wendy Brown’s argument against what she describes as “wounded attachments” or identity’s “investment...in its own history of suffering” (55). Stemming from “identity’s desire for recognition,” these wounded (or politicized) subjects “reproach power rather than aspire to it” (55) and thereby produce themselves in opposition to, or outside of, “the white masculine middle class ideal” (61). Brown argues that through these “wounded attachments,” they make “their claims to injury and exclusion,” thereby both reinstating this ideal as the imagined center, maintaining a positionality on the margins and “sustain[ing] the invisibility and articulateness of class” (61). In other words, holding on to a history of suffering and subjugation as the basis for identity inhibits the politicized subjects from a more complete freedom in their continued enactment of self-marginality, both reinforcing their status as damaged and the center as more legitimately central. In this “attempt to displace its suffering” through the means of a Nietzschian *ressentiment*, identity “becomes invested in its own subjugation” and therefore, though the pain of the wound is displaced, the wound remains open nonetheless (Brown 70).
Nietzsche’s antidote of “forgetting” is repeated in Michaels’ proposal for a more equal society as he advocates for redistribution of wealth over racial reparations, focusing on inequities of the present rather than dwelling on past narratives of injustice. Yet something neither Brown nor Michaels address is the fact that to “let go” of victimization entails a different politics for those who largely remain victimized and those who do not—for example the relative economic situations of African Americans and Jewish Americans today present hugely different platforms from which to shed narratives of past victimization. Therefore “remembering” slavery may have important rhetorical functions that differ from “remembering” the Holocaust.

Brown however argues for a healthier alternative to this structure of woundedness as identity by putting forth the language of “wanting” rather than “being” as a more dynamic and future focused discursive movement towards an alternate political landscape (76). Brown’s call for a future-oriented language presents Michaels’ argument for “ideology” over “identity” in less unsettling terms. Building off of Brown’s case for future-oriented language, I would argue that, in fact, identity too can be employed by those in positions of power as a point of departure, similar to Brown’s language of “wanting.” For example, Jewish Americans can acknowledge their place of incredible vulnerability in mid-twentieth century Europe, while recognizing a relative position of privilege in contemporary American society today, and thus in this self-reflexive framework can employ a language of empathy and understanding
towards groups who continue to be oppressed. In other words, identity, when examined through a self-reflexive lens can also serve as a starting point for engaging with other groups—indicating our prejudices and positionality that we can either work through or against. Identity thereby becomes a point of departure, rather than a point of fixation.

Michaels furthers his argument against identity by examining how remembering the Holocaust collapses notions of personhood and identity, obliterating the possibility of subjectivity for contemporary Jewish Americans outside of a Holocaust identity. He suggests that as the events of the Holocaust are “retrospectively configured as an assault on Jewish cultural identity,” culture (identity) emerges not only “as the defining characteristic of persons,” but “itself as a kind of person” (148); herein the person “transformed into an identity” requires no beliefs or ideology since identity is itself “treated as a person,” and thus “to be a Jew—or an African-American—is…to inhabit a subject position rather than to be a subject” (149).

However, in this conflation of subjectivity and identity Michaels confines identity to that based only in traumatic events; for him twenty-first century Jewishness equals post-Holocaust victimization. In doing so he locates all forms of ethnic, cultural or national identification in primal traumatic events. However, in denouncing structures of identity as, at the very least, distracting and at most destructive, Michaels does not fully account for the disparity between different subject positions—where do these identity groups fall in the
scheme of global and local power structures? He would perhaps argue that a redistribution of wealth—a theoretical elimination of class distinctions—would counter these disparities more so than talking about them would. However, the structures that maintained power hierarchies before, including institutions of race, gender and sexuality, would remain powerful stratifying forces.

Michaels only examines identity formation of minority groups in relation to historical trauma those groups have undergone, but what about majority identity, such as whiteness? Rather than laying its foundation in a traumatic past, whiteness took its shape and has continued to maintain itself and its normativity through its racialized subjugation of others, specifically African-Americans. This has been done largely through the institution of slavery, which initially codified black bodies as property and whiteness as a property that enabled privilege. Legal scholar Cheryl Harris “trace[s] the evolution of whiteness from color to race to status to property as a progression historically rooted in white supremacy and economic hegemony over Black and Native American peoples” (1714). Michaels argues that identity groups, namely Jewish Americans and African Americans, tend towards ownership of these past memories in order to consolidate their present day group identity enshrined in a traumatic past. He thereby critiques “remembering” as it facilitates a competitive understanding of ourselves positioned in opposition to others’ as we can only remember our own trauma/history. Thus history becomes property as it is remembered. Harris’ argument that whiteness
functions as property, in legal and practical terms, suggests that “equalizing” programs such as affirmative action, which work to repair the damage of white supremacy on minority identity, perform a crucial function in “destabilizing” whiteness as property (Harris 1779). Thus, while Michaels implies that the only people who own their identities are African Americans and Jewish Americans, Harris argues that white Americans also own their identity and receive greater material rewards because of it. In failing to acknowledge whiteness as a power structure interpolating this system of minority identification and stratification, Michaels obscures the terms within which self-determination and identification are performed by minority groups and thus insidiously repeats the trauma of whiteness as defining others.

Michaels’ bottom line is that identity, be it race or culture, blinds people to the huge disparities in wealth in our capitalist society. He champions ideology over identity, ultimately advocating for a redistribution of wealth, rather than a race based reparations—he suggests that after all, it doesn’t really matter why a nine-year-old child is poor, only that they are poor. Whatever the cause of their poverty is, “the child cannot be understood to deserve his or her impoverishment” (166) and should not be held accountable for it. Therefore an “interest in the past” or understanding the historical context of this child’s poverty “shouldn’t be mistaken for an analysis of or an attempt to deal with the problems of the present” (168):
It’s one thing to celebrate Black History Month, it’s another thing to redistribute wealth. And, in fact, the two things are not only different, they are, in crucial ways, opposed: reparations and the celebration of a history involve the respect for identity and for inheritance, which is to say, the respect above all for property, whether it takes the form of cultural heritage or of money…Redistribution of wealth, however, involves a certain skepticism about ownership matched by indifference to inherited identity and hostility to inherited property (168).

Here identity manufactured through narratives of the past takes the form of property, thereby making it exclusive. Michaels attempts to unsettle this exclusivity or elitism generated through the mechanism of sustained victimhood, by breaking down the institution of identity and inserting instability into its notions of ownership. What, however, is not accounted for in Michaels’ model of redistribution? Are there issues that economic redistribution cannot address? Michaels’ argument is fraught in the sense that he says it is money that is the solution to all systems of inequality, including both capitalism and racism. However, money does not touch on issues of racialized trauma beyond the material.

In *The Melancholy of Race*, Anne Cheng engages with this critical question of the “intangible wounds” (24) of racism that Michaels does not address. She presents the Clark doll studies as a key example of a collectively acknowledged need to grapple with such immaterial forms of racial trauma that
cannot be simply addressed through monetary compensation. Cheng writes about "the expansion in the notion of justice to accommodate the 'intangible' effects of racism" (4) in the Brown v. Board of Education ruling, in which the “dolls tests”—African American children when asked to choose between brown and white dolls more often than not chose the white dolls whom they identified as “good,” and rejected the brown dolls because they were “bad”—played a crucial role in evidencing the real effects of this racial injury. Cheng describes the Brown ruling as an “unprecedented judgment about the necessity of examining the invisible but tenacious aspect of racism—of allowing racial grief to have its say even if it cannot definitively speak in the language of material grievance” (4).

Because Michaels concludes that material compensation is the only answer to inequity, economic and racial, he equates cultural heritage and money as exchangeable forms of property, and virtually ignores the weight of the intangible racial wounds that Cheng underscores. Therefore, despite Michaels’ assertion to the contrary, the recognition of cultural heritage, for example in the celebration of Black History Month, can function beyond the superficial, as a mechanism of recognizing immaterial inequality past and present.

Michaels’ model of identitarian remembering, in which Jewish exceptionalism “functions to make the victimization of the Jews a fact of American history” and ignores the place of African Americans as “objects of racism” (131), allows only for competitive rather than comparative remembering. However, can remembering be understood in less destructive or
reductive terms? In other words, if Michaels puts forth an argument against remembering what might be an argument for remembering? Both Cathy Caruth and Michael Rothberg suggest models of remembering in which those who do not share an identity position can converge at sites of woundedness, furthering empathy across differences and helping the other articulate their trauma. This intersubjective “remembering” is not a way to “forget” someone else’s trauma or victimization—to obscure it, but rather to make it legible.

**Intersubjective Constructions of Memory and Identity**

Cathy Caruth explores trauma as the site of specifically cross-racial encounters in Alain Renais and Marguerite Duras’ film, *Hiroshima mon amour.* The very premise of the film seems to raise the scandal of competitive memory in that it juxtaposes the French woman’s private tragedy with the Japanese man’s cultural, national and even world-historical trauma of Hiroshima. Though, importantly, for Caruth a key aspect of trauma is its inherent belatedness; that is, the person who undergoes the trauma, does not actually experience it as it unfolds. This lack of direct access, even and especially for the victim, is what contributes to the unknowingness and slipperiness of memory in that not even the victim knows, let alone owns, their memory of the trauma. This notion that memories of trauma cannot be owned, even by the victim, complicates Michaels’ assertion that remembering equals ownership over the past, and lays the
foundation for Caruth and Rothberg’s arguments for the intersubjective construction of memory since the narratives (unknown to the victims on their own) can only emerge through contact with an other. Therefore the indirectness woven into the fabric of trauma is not a problem, but a potentiality that leads to the intersubjective encounter.

Caruth argues that far from closing off connections, as Michaels suggests, trauma narratives are only able to take shape through this contact between different rememberers. Caruth exemplifies this intersubjective possibility in *Hiroshima mon amour* as the trauma narrative of the French woman emerges through her encounter with the Japanese man on the “site of [his] catastrophe” (Caruth 34), Hiroshima. The missing of the Japanese man’s trauma—he did not directly experience the destruction at Hiroshima, but his whole family did—helps to shed light on the missing of hers—she saw her lover get killed, but “the moment of his death actually escaped [her]” (38) because of the indirectness and belatedness embedded in the original event.

Though this cross-racial encounter opens up the possibility for articulations of trauma that were otherwise blocked, Caruth explains how this “being together” is not an act of reconciliation between the Japanese man and French woman:

Because the lovers are thus linked in the missing of their trauma, what takes place in their dialogue is the establishment of their respective
histories. This establishment of history, however, is not simply an act of empathy or understanding (41).

This presents a much more complicated politics of remembering than Michaels’ purely competitive framework. It denies both antagonism and reconciliation, as it exists in a space between the two with a refusal of complete understanding and comprehension.

Caruth examines this space of entanglement where “one’s own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another,” leading to an encounter “through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another’s wound” (8). This entanglement—a “being together” without “coming together”—allows for the articulation of individual traumas. The French woman’s narrative cannot emerge on its own, but requires the cooperation of the Japanese man to insert himself into her narrative for it to take shape. This entanglement of the two individuals and their stories initiates narrative, rather than refuses it (as does the initial event of trauma) or blocks it (as does Michaels’ competitive memory). For Caruth trauma is about openness—opening at the site of the wound—while for Michaels it is about closure—consolidating identity and closing off possibilities for cross-racial empathy and understanding. Only through their intersubjectivity, indirectness, and belatedness are these trauma narratives able to emerge in contrast to Michaels’ competitive memory which functions through direct and absolute claims of ownership over the past.
While Caruth sees cooperative witnessing between the Japanese man and the French woman, some critics have argued that the Eastern man is in service to the Western woman, on the very site of his own trauma because his story never fully emerges, only hers does with his help. Cultural critic Rey Chow critiques Marguerite Duras’s racialized politics of representation in which the “the ascendance of the cosmopolitan [French] woman as text—in the form of her open sexuality, her memory, her subjectivity—goes hand in hand with a minimization, if not disappearance, of the other man” so that his main purpose is to serve “as a screen on which the woman can recall and project her past” (155). Though the text’s “avowed aesthetic aim” is to resist the straightforward documentary approach, this type of documentary realism is “used in an unproblematized manner on the racial other” (156). Chow notes that Duras’ use of “sophisticated textualist politics does not necessarily preclude cultural imperialism” as the white woman’s victimized subjectivity is explored and elaborated “at the expense of other historical victims” (160).

It is possible though, as Caruth asserts, that the film recognizes we are not hearing the Japanese man’s story in that we don’t have access to the whole story of Hiroshima regardless. Caruth writes, “the question of history in this film…is a matter not only of what we see and know but also of what it is ethical to tell” (26). She points out that the film does not come to a close around the French woman’s completed narrative, but introduces “a new story and a new language” (43)—the Japanese man’s conversation with another woman in
Japanese remains untranslated, foreign to the French woman and a majority of the Western audience who would have seen this film. Caruth suggests that in “understanding what it means to depart” through the French woman’s departure, the film opens up the question of the Japanese man, or “the language of the Japanese man’s own trauma” (45). Here Duras and Resnais comment on the limitations of Western visions since they are unable to fully represent the Japanese man’s story through their Western lens, while making clear that there is an urgent need to ask after the other story.

For Caruth, the possibility of intersubjective constructions of trauma narratives allows for memory and identity to emerge through contact with an other. This entanglement of different narratives opens up the potentiality of comparative, rather than competitive remembering. Michael Rothberg employs this rhetoric of comparative remembering to challenge Michaels’ construction of memory as purely competitive in *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in an Age of Decolonization*. Rothberg takes Michaels’ diatribe against remembering the Holocaust nationally on the Washington Mall, where we have yet to recognize the trauma of American racism against African Americans, as the starting point for his argument against competitive remembering (Michaels, “Plots Against America” 289-90). Rothberg takes issue with Michaels’ reductive argument that treats memory as competitive within a public sphere that only recognizes certain traumas. Instead, Rothberg posits that the public sphere is “a malleable discursive space in which groups do
not simply articulate established positions but actually come into being through their dialogical interactions with others” (5). Thus identity formation, as it takes place in the public sphere, undergoes a dynamic and interactive process of development in which separate memories emerge not as discrete entities, but intersubjective constructions.

Rothberg destabilizes Michaels’ assumption that memory acts competitively as it works to consolidate identity through a self-focused politics. Instead he puts forth multidirectional memory, “subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing” (3), and produced intersubjectively in spaces of interaction and entanglement between different histories. Rather than closing off connections and consolidating identity at the site of the self or individual group, Rothberg’s multidirectional memory works through the very “interaction of different historical memories” to produce an “intercultural dynamic” of remembering through both commonality and difference (3). He argues that our identities, partially based in past events, in fact require this “element of alterity and forms of commonality with others” (5) in the formation and articulation of our memories and selves.

In this way memories are not owned and do not directly determine our identity, but rather have “jagged” (5) borders. They emerge in conjunction with other histories “that initially might seem foreign or distant” (5), but enable this articulation of trauma and other narratives of the past. The Holocaust therefore, instead of “blocking other historical memories from view,” can
contribute to the “articulation of other histories” and itself emerge through other narratives of historical trauma in uneven and unexpected ways (6). For example, in France during the Algerian War of Independence “many understood the French state’s widespread use of extrajudicial violence as just such a reawakening of the past” (17); this reawakening set the stage for survivors of the Nazi camps to publicly articulate their experiences of torture during the Holocaust—narratives that had been relatively silenced in the years immediately following the end of World War II. Through this multidirectional lens, Rothberg argues against the discourse of the uniqueness of the Holocaust, as a “sui generis event” (8), suggesting instead that Holocaust remembrance “emerged in dialogue with the dynamic transformations and multifaceted struggles that define the era of decolonization” (7).

Multidirectional memory “acknowledges how remembrance both cuts across and binds together diverse spatial, temporal and cultural sites” and is “partially disengaged [from] exclusive versions of cultural identity” (Rothberg 11). Therefore seemingly distinct memories, such as those of the Holocaust and those of twentieth century Jim Crow U.S., may be put in dialogue with each other; their “specificities, overlaps, and echoes of different historical experiences” (17) come together to form a model of solidarity critiquing and denouncing racialized violence. This comparative model both allows for historical and contextual specificity while also acknowledging commonalities, and perhaps even shared causes among different experiences of oppression.
This is not an attempt to equate African American and Jewish histories, “but rather to highlight both similar structural problems within those histories and missed encounters between them” (159). For example Du Bois’ commentary, “The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto,” touches upon the manner in which “Jews, race, and genocide hold together commonality and difference in a revised version of double consciousness” (Rothberg 112) in the way that the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto “reveals the more subtle and insidious operation of the color line in the very different political geography of Jim Crow America” (Rothberg 125).

Particularly useful to Rothberg’s construction of multidirectional memory is film scholar Miriam Hansen’s rhetorical and theoretical employment of Freud’s “screen memory.” Rather than competing with other memories of past traumas, the Holocaust serves as a “screen memory” through which Americans remember another “traumatic event that cannot be approached directly” such as “the genocide of the Native Americans…[or] the Vietnam War” (Rothberg 12). In this indirect remembering, “displacement…functions as much to open up lines of communication with the past as it close them off” (12). As opposed to Michaels’ understanding of memories “blocking” other memories, the “screen memory” presents the possibility of “opening up” access to other memories.

In a self-conscious attempt to realize the politics of multidirectionality and intersubjectivity that he presents in *Multidirectional Memory*, Rothberg
informs the reader of the comparative methodology he employed in his own process of researching this book. He looked at a diversity of archives in order to forge “links between dispersed documents” and develop a kind of “comparative thinking” (18) across this distance and difference. Rothberg argues that this project articulates the need to “traverse sacrosanct borders of ethnicity and era” (17) in order to understand the ways in which collective memories exist beyond themselves and beyond the nation-state. He defines his project as working within “an ethical vision based on commitment to uncovering historical relatedness” as he “work[s] through the partial overlaps and conflicting claims that constitute the archives of memory and the terrain of politics” (29), allowing for a comparative network of remembering. This valorization of intersubjective constructions of memory in practice and theory is also an attempt to reach towards “new forms of solidarity and new visions of justice” (5), formulating a politics of identity beyond the self.

Ultimately, we come back to the question of the transmission of memory across generations—does the postmemory model function in the way that Hirsch suggests it does? Who can participate in this kind of specialized or arguably racialized remembering? Only those who have directly descended from the victims of the trauma or anyone who has access to their stories and artifacts? The positionality of the rememberer in practical terms affects issues of access to the stories and artifacts of the victims. In less tangible terms, the language and site of family allows for an immaterial transmission of feelings.
and attitudes towards the past (Hirsch 112). Despite postmemory’s location in this private realm, others outside the family are also able to remember. Though, these “affiliative rememberers” are generally confined to remember in public sites of memory. Here is where Michaels would advocate for “learning” over “remembering” to avoid unequal access to these narratives of the past through which rememberers consolidate their identity positions. I would argue, though, that those who “remember” also have the faculty to empathize with other peoples and learn other histories. They thereby gain a deeper understanding of what it means to undergo trauma and be oppressed or to have moved beyond racial woundedness. So it is with a critical positionality, in which we critique the place from which we remember, evaluating both past and present circumstances, that we can facilitate conversation and understanding across differences.

Rothberg’s multidirectional memory and Caruth’s discourse of entanglement allow us to see models of memory emerging through and across differences, beyond the rigidity of owning the past through racialized inheritance. These arguments destabilize Michaels’ notion of memory as property as they argue that it is the original lack of ownership that is built into the very nature of trauma as an opportunity for articulation rather than something to be fixed or overcome. While Hirsch and Michaels situate ownership as inheritable, memory in Caruth and Rothberg’s terms only develops intersubjectively and therefore eludes any complete possession as it
cannot be fully possessed by one individual or identity group. Remembering is not about reinhabiting the past to consolidate identity, but about revisiting those stories and that history to connect to others.

Rothberg and Caruth’s formulation of the intersubjective construction of memory and identity acknowledges the slipperiness and indirectness of remembering a traumatic past, in that it cannot be directly narrated, much less owned. The articulation of the past in the present then becomes a \textit{possibility} for Rothberg and Caruth instead of a burden as it is in Michaels’ argument against remembering. The opening at the site of woundedness and interaction between different remembering subjects presents the potentiality for conversation across and through difference, allowing for individual narratives of trauma to emerge as they both bump into and build on each other. It is here in this space of entanglement, indirectness and intersubjectivity that Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel \textit{Everything is Illuminated}, which I discuss in the following chapter, launches.
Chapter Two
Postgenerational Remembering in *Everything is Illuminated*

**Postmemory and the Postgenerational Narrative**

Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated* works within the genre of postmemory as his postgenerational protagonists, Jonathan the American Jew and Alex the Ukrainian tour guide, approach their grandfather’s histories through their own present day search for the past. Their grandfathers’ “real” memories become their own as they resurrect them through their “imaginative investment, projection and creation” (Hirsch 107) of this buried past. However, the supposed object of their search—an uncovered and reconciled history with victim and perpetrators clearly in their places—is held at a distance. Foer imbues the postgenerational search for the past with a sense of empathic understanding between others, but subverts its standards of sentimental appreciation and reconciliation of past traumas, as the one who is reconciled at the end of the novel is Alex, the Ukrainian tour guide, rather than Jonathan, the grandson of Holocaust survivors.

Jonathan, a young American Jew in search of his grandfather’s unknown history, travels to Ukraine in hopes of finding the woman who he thinks may have saved his grandfather during the Holocaust. He pays a Heritage Tourism company to help him find the village where his grandfather
grew up and escaped from during the Holocaust. Alex, Jonathan’s Ukrainian tour guide and translator, narrates their story of searching for the past. In this intersubjective encounter between Jonathan and Alex we initially learn more about notions of memory and identity than we do about either of their grandfather’s pasts, as the past seems to remain elusive in the present. Jonathan’s parallel narrative takes the reader back to his family’s ancestral shtetl of Trachimbrod, where he imagines his grandfather lived. This fantastical and magical history in which village members are constantly performing, shaping and embodying memory, progresses chronologically to arrive at the scene of the village’s destruction at the hands of the Nazis where it intersects with the present day narrative told by Alex. Ultimately Alex uncovers his grandfather’s past, while Jonathan lacks a complete narrative of his own grandfather’s story. The indirectness and slipperiness of memory in both Alex’s and Jonathan’s narratives leaves us to question notions of owning or accessing the past.

Hirsch’s postmemory sets up the intergenerational transmission of memory as direct, though heavily mediated, while Foer’s novel suggests that in fact memory that is sought out directly proves elusive; memory only takes shape in the present indirectly and intersubjectively. Jonathan’s effort to remember his grandfather’s past is not only mediated by the function of postmemory, but also by Alex, his Ukrainian tour guide, whom he must depend on for his often-incoherent guidance. In this way, Foer privileges intersubjective mediation
versus a more “direct” model of postmemory, but treads a line between a model of reconciliation, “blurring the borders” between different rememberers and a model of entanglement which allows for narratives of the past to emerge—a Caruthian “being together” without “coming together.” Foer questions postmemory’s biological inheritance of memory as he displaces Jonathan, the supposed protagonist and grandchild of Holocaust survivors, with Alex, the inarticulate and rather incompetent Ukrainian narrator who ends up finding his own grandfather’s history. This affords the reader the occasion to navigate a politicized territory of remembering with elements of the traditional postgenerational narrative at work as a point of reference from which Foer departs. This novel also takes issue with the construction of history as isolated events of the past, and in place presents a “multidirectional” mapping of the past in which histories are viewed as multivalent and intersectional; in this way history cannot be fully owned.

**Heritage Tourism as Owning the Past**

If Hirsch’s model of postmemory runs the risk of claiming ownership over the past, Foer’s novel takes such notions of owning the past as its humorous starting point. Hirsch’s postmemory affords postgenerational rememberers a more authentic and direct claim to the past, running the risk of claiming an exclusive ownership of these memories. *Everything is Illuminated*
deals with these issues of ownership of the past through the framework of the Heritage Tourism Industry, which allows Jonathan to access his grandfather’s buried history by purchasing it through a travel agency. Jonathan pays Alex and his grandfather, employees of their family’s Heritage Tourism company, to guide him to Trachimbrod, the village his grandfather grew up in and fled from during the war. History, in this sense, is commodified as it becomes accessible by paying for it, translating Hirsch’s postmemory into purely material terms.

Alex describes his father’s travel agency, “Heritage Touring”:

It is for Jewish people, like the hero, who have cravings to leave that ennobled country America and visit humble towns in Poland and Ukraine. Father’s agency scores a translator, guide, and driver for the Jews, who try to unearth places where their families once existed. OK, I had never met a Jewish person until the voyage….all I knew of Jewish people was that they paid Father very much currency in order to make vacations from America to Ukraine (3).

Alex’s malapropisms and comic tone reflect the frivolity of the project of the Heritage Tourism industry that feeds into the “cravings” of the Jewish people to “unearth places where their families once existed.” The tension held within the word “unearth” brings attention to its duality as a mining of what is beneath the surface, but also an “un-earth[ing]” or destruction of the foundation beneath this surface. Thus, digging up one’s past also destabilizes the land itself, just as Jonathan’s project threatens to do. Alex’s confused
vocabulary and awkward phrasing also speak to the dangers of “buying” or “touring” the past, as the voyager clearly orientalizes the foreign subject, imagining him as an artifact on display and stuck in time. Foer challenges the ethics of this self-focused and unreflexive appropriation of the other by displacing Jonathan as the narrator and supposed protagonist and turning him into a subject of Alex’s story.

Alex describes the American Jew as willing to pay “very much currency” for access to their family’s past or to “make vacation from America to Ukraine” (3), reminding the reader that Jonathan pays him. Alex says to Jonathan, “…if you command me to post back the currency you have given me in the previous months. It will be justifying every dollar” (179). Foer’s novel suggests that Jonathan’s “sham” quest to find his grandfather’s story, in that he has sought out access to these memories by paying for them, leads to the unveiling of a “real” story. The surprise, however, is that the “real” story is not his own, but Alex’s. Therefore the Heritage Tourism industry functions as a “sham” as it claims it will give Jonathan access to his family history, while it ends up revealing Alex’s truth. This unexpected positive outcome for Alex does not exactly validate the project of Heritage Tourism, but instead suggests that memory can neither be approached directly nor owned, but only comes into production through messy mechanisms such as the intersubjective encounter facilitated by the Heritage Tourism industry.
Foer’s novel forces the reader to navigate the indirect search for a past that is both porous and elusive. Through the dual narrative structure he calls on the reader to participate in the text’s intersubjective construction of memory and subjects, as the reader is the only one privy to all of the narratives and is therefore responsible to piece it together. The reader thus is convinced of their active engagement with the text as they navigate multiple narratives that feature displaced narrators, misused words, magical realism, and a spiraling web of self-referentiality in which names, themes and stories are repeated and refer back to each other. The reader is therefore, like Jonathan, transformed from tourist to participant in the intersubjective construction of memory.

This type of active and engaged reading, navigating a fragmentary text told from shifting perspectives, seems to share Hayden White’s view that the appropriate medium to narrate Holocaust history is literary modernism. White argues that “modernist modes of representation may offer possibilities of representing the reality of both the Holocaust and the experience of it that no other version of realism could do” (41). Therefore because Foer “refuses to endorse the notion of representational standards or norms,” which the debate over representing the Holocaust “has continually produced,” the text is imbued with a “discursive in/stability” (Amian 13) as it switches between literary forms—Alex’s realist narrative of present day action and Jonathan’s modernist prose of a magical past—and dual constructions of memory as developed intersubjectively through letter-writing and as embodied in the Trachimbrod
narrative. Foer thus seems to follow White’s interest in modernism as he employs a type of self-conscious representation.

In the novel, traditional notions of ownership over the past, such as Hirsch’s postmemory which lends the direct descendents of Holocaust survivors specialized access to this Holocaust history, prove futile, since the uninvolved translator/mediator is the one who benefits from this digging up of the past. Jonathan’s search for the past ultimately leads to Alex’s cathartic reconciliation of his own family life. Jonathan, contrastingly, encounters difficulty in fully accessing his own grandfather’s narrative as it looms absent and remains obscure. Though he encounters limited accessibility to the past, his own search becomes Alex and Grandfather’s search. This expanded search has unexpected positive outcomes for Alex, as he discovers his own grandfather’s story, and challenges Hirsch’s formulations of biological inheritance of memories of the Holocaust for the children and grandchildren of Jewish survivors. Foer’s reformulation of postgenerational remembering opens up the possibility of transfer of ownership from Jonathan to Alex and Grandfather, despite their unequal economic and political circumstances. Therefore the past “belongs” to Alex and Grandfather too, as they, like Jonathan, make claims to its narratives, places and artifacts. Nonetheless, while Alex and Grandfather are able to access this repressed history, they are only able to do so through their intersubjective encounter with Jonathan who materially enables their search by paying for his own.
Literary critic Walter Benn Michaels critiques the way in which descendents of Holocaust survivors remember a past that they did not directly experience as it consolidates their identity based in this traumatic past, and perpetuates a self-claimed, but false, victimized identity. *Everything is Illuminated* takes this model of the victimized Jewish American identity based in the Holocaust as its foundational event and subverts it by complicating Jonathan’s position as not only an inheritor of this history, but as an actor in a contemporary political context in which he is less the victim than the exploiter. Additionally, because Jonathan does not actually recover his grandfather’s history by purchasing it, the novel seems to questions Michaels’ assertion that postgenerational Holocaust novels help to claim identity via continuity of the past.

This displaced positive outcome, not for “the hero,” but for the translator is referenced early in the novel when Alex asks Jonathan, within the body of the narrative text, “how does this make you feel, Jonathan, in the luminescence of everything that occurred” that “Father dubbed [Grandfather] an expert” tour guide (6). In this direct communication with Jonathan, parenthetically circumscribed within the text, Alex alludes both to the questionable ethics of “Heritage Touring” in its practice of selling access to the past and the novel’s equalizing impulse as the lines between victim and perpetrator, protagonist and foil are blurred. In asking Jonathan directly, “how does this make you feel,” he also asks the reader how they feel about being
guided narratively by a somewhat unreliable tour guide; the reader thus is engaged in the performance of the text as both a participant within it and an observer from without who is supposed to question its ethics of remembering.

Though Jonathan, in search of a lost property (his own identity) manifested in photographs, artifacts and stories of what once was, assigns himself ownership over this history through his purchase of it, Alex and Grandfather too claim a right to this history as their own. While the novel accesses the past through Jonathan’s quest, it slowly reveals ownership as more open and ultimately transfers it onto Alex and Grandfather. With Grandfather’s prodding, Alex curiously “investigate[s]” this repressed history as he inserts his hand into the box of artifacts entitled “In Case” (222). This somewhat ambivalent reach into history’s unknown speaks to Alex and Jonathan’s common desire to rummage through the ambiguous contours of the past and Alex’s need to know how Jonathan feels about this mutuality, as he “desired to discover” how Jonathan would react to “the notion that [he and] Grandfather…had the same privilege as [Jonathan] did to investigate the box” (222). This articulated desire for equal access to the buried history theoretically positions Jonathan and Alex as legitimate co-owners of that past. However, it is with a marked ambivalence that Alex edges towards claims of ownership and even falls short at that. Only with prodding and insistence from Grandfather is Alex able to approach the idea of mutuality of ownership between himself and Jonathan. He seeks Jonathan’s approval before reaching his hand into the box.
of the past because he “had not thought of it in this way” (220), as his own too. At the same time, Foer undercuts the notion of a complete ownership of that history for anyone, as the main object of their search, Augustine, whom Grandfather argues “is not any more [Jonathan’s] than [his and Alex’s]” (220), proves rather elusive and ultimately appears as a cautionary figure against excessive owning of the past. Stuck in the past, Augustine’s house and lifestyle are overwhelmed by relics of remembrance, so much so that she is only partially available in the present to these three miners of history.

The postgenerational rememberer’s relationship to the past is complicated as access to these memories is sought out through on the ground searches for the “real past,” which exists more immediately in a specific contemporary political and cultural reality that “belongs” to another victim. In Jonathan’s search for Trachimbrod, the village that served as a longstanding home to past generations of his family, he must navigate the complicated political implications of his return to Ukraine as a twenty-first century American Jew. Alex’s uncertainty of his relationship to the past marks a tension laden in the mechanism of private memory, as it is so commonly associated with ideas of ownership and identity. Private memory—an individual’s remembering of their past or family’s past as it constitutes their understanding of their self—is commonly positioned in opposition to public memory—an intersubjective or communal remembering. However, Foer breaks down this oppositional positioning since all memory in *Everything is Illuminated* is constructed
intersubjectively and imbued with political ramifications; both public and private remembering become political when questions of access and mediation arise as these remembering subjects must position themselves in relation to places, people and artifacts of the past and present. This sets up another opposition between “real” or unmediated remembering, done by those who directly experienced the events they remember, and mediated or postgenerational remembering done by those who seek to uncover and thus remember events they did not directly experience, but nonetheless see as crucial to their own identity construction. “Real” remembering, though mediated by the passing of time and the political position of the rememberer to their past, assumes authenticity through its directness. In this placement of the “real” or mediated rememberer in relation to the past, structures of ownership ensue—who has the most direct access to the past, who mediates whose access, and how are remembering subjects constructed? Foer speaks to these questions in his depiction of the Heritage Tourism industry that commodifies memory, and thus facilitates ownership, not for the American Jew who buys his way in, but for Grandfather who is able to come to an understanding about himself in relation to his past, and thereby Alex who gains access to his family’s untold history.

Jonathan returns to his family’s village that really only exists mythically in the past and claims a proprietary right to access the remains of that village to discover the “truth” of his grandfather’s story. The question of privilege in
regards to access to or ownership of memory gets at the foundation of the perpetrator, collaborator, victim relationship; how does one’s positionality as a descendent of traumatic historical events shape one’s relationship to these memories and remnants of that history? Does this then become a question of supposed morality in which those who are complicit in the past destruction no longer have a right to access its narratives in the present, and that private and public memory are reserved only for those who suffered within them? Foer makes a point to the contrary, as Jonathan’s rather incomplete and unfulfilled trip, in the practical terms of the ultimate infeasibility of the completion of his search, complicates notions of the conventional “victim’s” right to access the past. His search for the past remains stunted, failing to provide any concrete closure to issues of his heritage. It is only in his fantastical rendering of a Trachimbrod once upon a time that he is able to mythically narrativize a confusing understanding of where he comes from, which ultimately has little to do with the Holocaust itself.

In the end, it is Alex, not Jonathan, who is able to reconcile this past with his present and move forward, displacing the supposed protagonist’s narrative of recovery and progress as he claims it as his own. By rearranging the terms within which Holocaust narratives are generally told, Foer suggests that the reader evaluate Jonathan’s current position as an American who has the privilege to embark on a search for an elusive past. He thereby further complicates this question of who deserves access to history and memory. In a
sense, Foer tries to transfer the privilege of the displaced protagonist, Jonathan, by reducing his actual voice to mostly parenthetical contexts. In doing so, Foer acknowledges the positional advantage that Jonathan has in being the more obvious descendent of this story in the common postgenerational Holocaust narrative of digging up one’s history through an often sentimentalized search for relics of that past. Foer attempts to rectify this unequal positioning by assigning Alex the role of the main narrator who guides both Jonathan and the reader.

Foer too addresses the political implications of Jonathan and Alex’s relationship in a global context. As an emerging imperial power in a post-war world, the U.S tells its own story as that of a progressive country propelling itself forward in a globalized political economy and dwarfing any notions of Ukrainian global or local ambitions. In this context, Jonathan’s usage of “the Ukraine” (70, emphasis mine) potentially connotes a geopolitical positioning of both individuals in the larger context of U.S. relations to post-war Ukraine in a kind of condescending or patronizing manner. This marks their relationship as unequal before they even meet. As the novel shifts between past and present, notions of victims and perpetrators also shift. Nonetheless, Foer transfers power to Alex by placing him at the center of the novel as the dominant narrative voice of the present day action.
Blurring Memory’s Borders and Intersubjective Constructions

Ownership of memories connotes a competitive remembering in which politicized issues of access and mediation complicate a narrative of coming together or “blurring the borders” between remembering subjects. The rhetoric of “blurring the borders” (Callado-Rodriguez 61) appears throughout the scholarship on Everything is Illuminated, as these critics try to locate Jonathan and Alex, as narrators and subjects, in a context of identification and reconciliation. In many of these readings, these “disruptions of boundaries” between Jonathan and Alex ultimately bring the men together, as the “borders between men dissolve” and they come to an “acknowledgement of a shared legacy of violence” (Propst 38). The rhetoric of “blurring” is further employed in describing the efforts of the men to move beyond “oversimplified categorizations in which everyone is a perpetrator, collaborator, or victim, and to build more complex representations of the past” or “sites of community” (Propst 37). These networks of remembering converging at “sites of community” can be seen as a postgenerational equivalent to what Cathy Caruth calls the “discourse spoken…on the site of catastrophe” (34). These sites, much like Beloved’s conceptual apparatus of rememory, delineate certain terms of interaction between various rememberers and the space that facilitates that remembering.
While Caruth’s vision of a discourse spoken from “the site of catastrophe” also involves the blurring of boundaries between different subjects of trauma, it refuses the romanticized idea of individuals coming together in the full comprehension of each other’s traumas. Instead, she argues that a complete understanding of trauma is unavailable even to the person who experiences it. Yet it is precisely this fundamental incomprehensibility at the heart of trauma that presents the possibility of intersubjective communication. Caruth argues that in Alain Resnais and Marguerite Duras’ *Hiroshima mon amour*, this “site of catastrophe” leaves space for both “the man’s ‘nothing’ and the woman’s ‘everything’” allowing for “the coming together of two absolute claims to faithfulness” (34) without the complete reconciliation that the rhetoric of “blurring the borders” suggests. Their dialogue is “not simply an act of empathy or understanding,” but rather a place to “establish their respective histories” (41), allowing the man and the woman to be together without fully grasping the other’s or even their own trauma.

In contrast to Caruth’s “site of catastrophe,” Propst’s “sites of community” is rather utopian in its romanticized ideal of a complete union of two individuals’ narratives of past traumas. However, “sites of community” can also indicate a space in which all rememberers converge and then depart in different directions, akin to Michael Rothberg’s “multidirectional memory” which allows for “visions that construct solidarity out of the specificities, overlaps, and echoes of different historical experiences” (17). Therefore there
are both realist spaces of reconciliation and authenticity, and modernist or post-modernist spaces of fragmentation and mediation. The realist spaces emerge in readings such as Francisco Callado-Rodriguez’s argument that these “confrontations” between Grandfather, Alex, Augustine and Jonathan “reveal the truth [Grandfather] had concealed for a long time” (62), allowing for the “authentic” past to emerge. However, while the novel offers the revelation that Grandfather betrayed his best friend by announcing him to the Nazis as Jewish, it frames this “truth” within a non-realist or post-modernist structure in which certain words are pushed together without spaces in between to separate them. Therefore, though “disorderly” and “fragmentary,” we are mostly able to understand the content of the narrative, but are alerted to its mediated status and thus question the “truth” it “reveal[s]” (Callado-Rodriguez 64).

This model of narrativization through confrontation is enacted in the very structure of the book, as both literary modes—realist and modernist—comment on, crash into, and build on one another. Jonathan’s fantastical narration of his family’s long lineage in the village of Trachimbrod unfolds seamlessly. Contrastingly, Alex’s realist narration, which is splattered with misused words and awkward phrasing, raises issues of translation and inaccuracy as it highlights issues of real life communication. While Jonathan produces a series of cyclical stories that refer back to the same themes and characters, creating a village and family history, Alex uncovers a repressed history for both himself and his grandfather. Jonathan is positioned in a place
of privilege, since he is able to create freely, building upon a mostly erased history, while Alex must emerge and speak from a repressed history. Jonathan resists complete self-identification with the narrator of the Trachimbrod story, as he hides behind fantastical imagery and language, surfacing only parenthetically, whereas Alex openly parades his position as his text’s producer, as he displaces both Jonathan, the “real” protagonist, and the “correct” words with his misspoken English. The reader finds herself initially wanting Jonathan to tell the story, if only to get an “accurate” account of the events, but ultimately capitulates to Alex as the only available guide.

Though Jonathan and Alex exchange few words dialogically within the narratives themselves, both descendants of this traumatic history become entangled in each other’s stories. The two subjects and narrators emerge and develop in relation to each other as the dual narrative structure facilitates and requires their co-dependent subject formation and growth. We find out that their grandfathers’ stories are more literally entangled as they circle around and ultimately intersect with each other. Caruth argues that this entanglement is a key feature of trauma narratives:

We can read the address of voice here, not as the story of the individual in relation to the events of his own past, but as the story of the way in which one’s own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore to the encounter with another,
through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another’s wound (8).

In “listening to another’s wound,” one is able to “bear witness” (8) by creating a platform from which to narrate the incomprehensible. Therefore, rather than placing the emphasis on Alex and Jonathan’s relatively superficial relationship as depicted within the narrative itself, Caruth’s reading might lend emphasis to the displaced dialogue between them through letter-writing and parenthetical communications and silences. Rather than what is said, it is what is not said that fills the spaces of listening. Jonathan, within the context of Alex’s letters, performs largely as a listener who himself only speaks through Alex’s voice. Thus, as their narratives are “tied up” together, they are able to listen through this entanglement.

Within this model of self-understanding via the other for Jonathan and Alex, there is not a complete coming together of the two individuals or the larger entities which they represent, but there is a modified, and arguably more complex, understanding of the self through the other. Alex writes in his letter to Jonathan, “There may be two right things. There may be no right things. I will consider what you deem. This is a promise. But I cannot promise that I will harmonize. There are things that you could not know” (218). The promise to not “harmonize” repeats the notion of the impossibility of a complete comprehension of the other’s traumatic experience, but puts forth a model of
empathic listening and facilitative connection that fosters the intersubjective formation of memory in a perhaps more responsible way.

The epistolary exchange in *Everything is Illuminated* marks the narrativization and listening between two individuals who both need to unpack a history to lend understanding to the present. The unbalanced relationship, in which Alex reaches out to Jonathan with expressions of connection, anguish and longing, positions Jonathan, the recipient of these letters, as the “listener” or reader. The transfer of narrative from Jonathan to Alex—this is supposed to be Jonathan’s story of exploration, discovery, and reconciliation—disrupts the construction of subjects as victim and perpetrator, creating more ambiguous and ambivalent forms of relating to and understanding each other. Alex slips between terms of inextricable closeness, “We are making one story, yes?” (144) and enduring distance, “I want to inform you about what it is like to be me, which is a thing that you still do not possess a single whisper of” (178).

Through Alex’s inconsistencies and the apparent lack of mutuality in their relationship, this oscillation reveals a tension in Jonathan and Alex’s relationship that Foer highlights in that there are no direct expressions of empathy or even direct responses from Jonathan to Alex’s outpourings. The absence of compassion or even communication from Jonathan can be read as either a silent listening or mere silence, but the novel makes it impossible to tell.

Jonathan is mainly constructed intersubjectively through Alex’s letters and narrative, with the only representation of his voice coming in obliquely
through the Trachimbrod stories, in which he never appears. In between moments of dialogical exchange between Alex and Jonathan, Alex writes, “[w]ith my silence, I gave him a space to fill” (158). Yet in the novel, it is Alex’s narrative that comes to “fill” the space of Jonathan’s silence. The displacement of Jonathan as narrator gives Alex space to emerge as the dominant voice and thereby reverses the terms of subjective definition within the novel. Yet because the novel initially presents Jonathan as the protagonist, the reader constantly searches for Jonathan’s voice within Alex’s confused and porous prose. The narrative thus forces us to continually read for Alex within Jonathan’s silences and Jonathan within Alex’s.

The displacement of Jonathan as a narrator by Alex enables a deeper examination of the ways in which their relationship is contingent on East-West power dynamics. Alex and Jonathan switch places as Alex begins the novel as the orientalized subject without a story of his own, as he is a conduit for Jonathan’s story, but it is Jonathan who ends up as a subject of Alex’s narrative. This switch initially engages the reader at the level of the known—the West silencing the East—but shows the ways in which a West looking for its roots in the East must question its narrative of immutable power.

In the end, however, Alex remains a function of Jonathan to the extent that he serves primarily as a guide for Jonathan and the readers. He importantly displaces Jonathan as narrator, but in these terms Jonathan is the acknowledged “real” narrator, thus undermining the centrality of Alex on his
own terms. Alex can be read as Jonathan’s ventriloquist puppet, or contrastingly as asserting his own agency in constructing both Jonathan and his story. In this production of the subject through a markedly (inter)subjective medium Foer attempts to acknowledge the constructedness of “coherent subjectivities” and the instability of their “potential meanings” (Amian 2). Alex peels away at his performative self by revealing to Jonathan his true self: “You cannot believe it, but all of the stories that I told you about my girls who dub me All Night, Baby, and Currency were all not-truths” (144). Though he attempts to convince both Jonathan and the reader that he is here revealing his authentic self by exposing his “not-truths,” his prose continues to be textured with incorrect and misused words, to alert the reader that he is still performing in broken English as his self.

Foer again speaks to the constructedness of the text through a more literal romanticisation of Jonathan and Alex, when he presents them as collaborators and lovers:

We are talking now, Jonathan, together, and not apart. We are with each other, working on the same story, and I am certain that you can also feel it. Do you know that I am the Gypsy girl and you are Safran, and that I am Kolker and you are Brod, and that I am your grandmother, and you are Grandfather; and that I am Alex and you are you, and that I am you and you are me? Do you not comprehend that we can bring each other
safety and peace? When we were under the stars in Trachimbrod, did you not feel it then? (214)

Alex asks Jonathan to “feel it” and compares himself and Jonathan to romantically involved couples in the novel’s narrative, nearly collapsing these two characters on themselves as they become more equally interchangeable—“I am you and you are me.” The romantic here comments on the bizarreness and ultimate falseness of a complete identification between Jonathan and Alex as both men are “working on the same story” of the village’s genocide, but their relationship is based in past perverse and unromantic relationships that function through a lack of complete comprehension of the other. This touches on the tension between Caruth’s “site of catastrophe,” which exists in its lack of understanding and Callado-Rodriguez’s “sites of community,” which suggests a romanticized notion of reconciliation. In the novel, the tension between these possibilities built into the traumatic encounter manifests in bizarre sexual encounters marked by profound lack of understanding and alienation; Kolker and Brod do not sleep in the same room, but must have sex through a small hole in the wall. In this sense, one unified progressive narrative (towards and about reconciliation) cannot convey the specificity of both Jonathan and Alex’s experiences, and therefore emerges as two split and faulty texts.

Discourses of (in)authenticity of subject and text materialize as Alex claims that he and Jonathan are “being very nomadic with the truth” (179). In
parading the performativity of the text Alex announces, “there are [no] limits to how excellent we could make life seem” (179). The potential for self-creation becomes possible in the intersubjective space of the dual narrative as it takes on a refracted authenticity in which the performed is “the real” or the ideal. With Jonathan as a sounding board for Alex, together, they question the ethics of “being nomadic with the truth.” The productivity of the text itself, Alex claims, can “make us good” (145), as the process of writing and speaking through this network of mis/understanding entangles the self with the other and thus forms an intersubjective network of memory and its ethics.

This productivity also presents the possibility for the blurring of perpetrator and victim as Alex suggests, “we could have [Grandfather] save your grandfather. He could be Augustine. August, perhaps. Or just Alex, if that is satisfactory to you” (179). This confusion of subjects once again makes central the constructedness of the text in its ability to self-produce its own narrative—Grandfather can be Augustine or “just Alex” and subjects can come to a more coherent sense of themselves in relation to others.

The ethics of remembering and narrating that remembering raises questions about who can or should write another’s narrative, and even more so whether one can write their own story. While the novel itself is a displacement of Jonathan’s voice, filtered though Alex’s faulty language, Jonathan enables the progression of Alex’s narrative when Alex is unable to continue to narrate himself. Alex is moved to face his father and continue his own self-fashioning in
response to Jonathan’s fictional story about Alex standing up to his father. In doing so, Jonathan unearths previously repressed tension produced by Alex’s understanding of himself in relation to his father and family. Through Jonathan’s mediation, Alex is able to continue on with his own story. However, Alex finds himself unable to continue narrating as he comes across a photograph of his own grandfather:

(Here it is almost too forbidding to continue. I have written to this point many times, and corrected the parts you would have me correct, and made more funnies, and more inventions, and written as if I were you writing this, but every time I try to persevere, my hand shakes so that I can no longer hold my pen. Do it for me. Please. It is now yours) (226).

Alex here acknowledges the retrospective construction of his text, as he has “written to this point any times” and edited this text as well. This retrospective construction allows Alex to insert parenthetical notes to Jonathan which place the text in a framework of connectedness. This performative exchange of roles—in which Jonathan narrates Alex’s story—enables a further blurring of perpetrator, victim, narrator and subject. It also raises questions about how capable one is to write their own family’s history; in asking Jonathan to write his story—after all “it is [Jonathan’s]”—Alex, in a way, rejects ownership over the photograph of his grandfather and thus the understanding of his grandfather’s role, as a “collaborator” in this Holocaust history, both because it is painful, but also because this ownership would consolidate a confining
identity. Therefore in having Jonathan continue the narration, Alex is able to become the listener, enabling him to “bear witness” to, rather than own the memory.

Similar to its intersubjective construction of Jonathan, the epistolary form “fashions the reader as a reading subject—absorbed in and constituted by a process of intersubjective exchange” (Amian 1). The reader functions both internally, as an actor in the text asked to mediate between Alex and Jonathan, confirming or denying claims of connectedness, and externally, performing the function of a listener asked to bear witness. The reader also sustains connections between the dual narratives, fulfilling their function as a part of the constructed community that holds the novel together.

The Embodiment of Memory in Trachimbrod

In contrast to Alex’s epistolary narrative, which strives to uncover repressed truths, Jonathan’s contribution to the narrative is a self-referential, spiraled history of the fictional town of Trachimbrod that often collapses on itself in part to reveal its own status as a fictional construct. Most of the history in the Trachimbrod narrative is constructed as the events occur, whereas the narrative told in Alex’s letters is heavily mediated through retrospection, translation and “misplaced time” (Foer 218). What is transmitted in the Trachimbrod narrative is a model for understanding and documenting history
where time is not progressive, but cyclical, so that events are not simply located in the past, but located at a multitude of axes where memory takes its shape.

Through this constructivist version of continuously produced and embodied memory, Foer suggests that history, when viewed as monolithic and constructed only in the past, cannot be easily accessed. Nevertheless, he too suggests that embodying memory produces its own threat of confinement and stuckness in this constant return to memory and remembering.

Between both narratives, Foer constructs memory as unstable as it is shaped by different spaces and modes of remembering: those in which memory is contemporaneously performed and thereby embodied and those in which it is memorialized and placed in the past. Foer parodies the contemporary discourse of the need to remember anything and everything that is considered part of “our history,” and thereby questions the twenty-first century American Jewish discourse of the need to remember the Holocaust so that we understand who we are. Trachimbrod’s “narcoleptic potato farmer,” repeats this clichéd motto, “it is most important that we remember,” but does not specify “the what,” which turns out to be “not so important,” only “that we should remember” (36). In removing the “what” and replacing it with a how, this ritualistic remembrance creates a mandate to remember as a modus operandi. Foer’s humorous, yet skeptical attitude towards remembering for the sake of remembering suggests sympathy with Michaels’ argument against blindly remembering the past in order to consolidate our present day identity. Within
this Trachimbrodian model, memory is continuously constructed, as a way of life, but only accessible to members of this community. Both Foer and Michaels take issue with this type of remembering as it confines the remembering subjects both within this specific site of memory and within their own community, prohibiting the possibility for cross-cultural understanding.

In the shtetl world of Trachimbrod that Foer creates, “‘nothing’ exists outside the generative realm of language and productive powers of the imagination” (Amian 10). Therefore this “performative dynamic of self-fashioning,” which structures the novel as self-referential and contingent on itself, “emerges as a key source of agency and empowerment” (Amian 10). Memory provides the template for this continuous self-production of identity in which “the novel’s communities are never simply there but must be performed” (Amian 10). Katrin Amian writes that belief becomes the mechanism through which the self is fashioned, thereby granting the community of believers more autonomy and legitimacy in their self-production. Acts of repetitive, fantastical and nonsensical storytelling generate the village’s winding narrative as it returns to themes of death, birth, sex, and text.

Sexual intercourse not only serves as a medium of transmission but also as a means of identity constitution as it maintains the continuity of the community and its practice of remembering by producing another generation of Trachimbrodians who fit within and perpetuate the same spiral of memory and remembering. As a defining and repeating moment in the village’s self-narrative,
sex becomes a point of referentiality and transmission, and it is located largely around festivals or special celebrations such as “Trachimday,” which “is the only time all year...when enough copulative voltage is generated to sex the Polish-Ukrainian skies electric” (96). Since time is often collapsed in the Trachimbrod narrative, generations are all really one and the same as they repeat and reproduce patterns of remembering that are contiguous with their dynamic sense of self-narrative and self-understanding. Sex becomes a mechanism for establishing this generational continuity. This proves problematic in that Trachimbrodians are confined within this cycle of memory production and identity constitution that repeats itself and dictates certain modes of living and remembering. This limits their worldview to their immediate lived experience and denies the possibility for cross-cultural exchange.

Continuing in this discourse of sex as a means of transmission, memory is transmitted intergenerationally in a type of reproductive model in which “[m]emory begat memory begat memory” (258). In this program of proliferative transmission, the “villagers became the embodiment of that legend they had been told so many times...using memory to remember memory, bound in an order of remembrance, struggling in vain to remember a beginning or end” (258). This embodiment of memory seems to function like Caroline Rody’s model of mother-daughter transmission of memory as it is resurrected and reconstructed through this “transhistorical contact” (Rody 3). In both models of embodiment the descendent carries their “difficult inheritance”
(Rody 4) within their very selves as a way of ensuring its narration and transmission. However, in the Trachimbroadian model, villagers giving shape to a memory also become its victims, as it confines them, “swaddled,” “bound,” and “struggling”; they are both stuck in an infantile state, tied to their responsibility to embody memory while also kept safe by this supportive structure of remembering that allows them to keep the past present, but becomes increasingly monolithic and burdensome. While Rody’s model lends more agency to the bearers of history as they subvert obfuscating systems of hegemonic narration that continually fail to acknowledge the space that these mothers and daughters inhabit, in the Trachimbroadian model, as the Holocaust approaches, memory takes on an increasingly oppressive form as it uses villagers’ bodies to form a more complete representation of itself.

This language of confinement and struggle, as it leads to drowning, refers back to the primal moment of Trachimbrod’s inception and its ultimate destruction, both taking place in the water, as a generative and destructive force of life. This narrativization of history “floods” and “drown[s] the speaker before he could reach the life raft of the point he was trying to make” (261). Foer’s text continues in this vein of entrapment and drowning in memory:

And so it was when anyone tried to speak: their minds would become tangled in remembrance. Words became floods of thought with no beginning or end, and would drown the speaker before he could reach the life raft of the point he was trying to make. It was impossible to
remember what one meant, what after all of the words, was intended (261).

Thus the narrativization, far from being rehabilitative, as we might expect, actually destroys the “speaker” through its repressive, rather than liberating force. If memory is embodied, it has already been consumed and internalized, and thus narrativizing does not help to treat the experience of traumatic neurosis. Through the narrativization of memory in the Trachimbrod narrative, words lose their intended meaning and memories lose their intelligibility. As the Trachimbrodian subject is confined in a present overwhelmed by the past, memory loses meaning in its spiraling self-reflexivity and the past becomes more obscure.

Foer further critiques embodied remembering in his depiction of the Trachimbrodian obsession with remembering through texts. In “The Book of Antecedents,” textuality becomes the privileged mechanism through which the community forms memories and thereby reproduces its understanding of itself. This model of remembering presents the issue of memory consolidating identity that Michaels puts forth as the Trachimbrodians become confined within their own cycle of remembering. “The Book of Antecedents,” the book of all books, embodies the continuous construction of Trachimbrod’s self-narrative through memory making and documenting. The reader learns that “even the most delinquent students read The Book of Antecedents without skipping a word, for they knew that they too would one day inhabit its pages” (196). This self-
reflexive text formulates a kind of stuckness that serves as a model of Foer’s text itself; both texts risk the danger of self-enclosure in that their “worldview” is limited to how they see themselves, stunting the possibility for a “multidirectional memory.” The post-modern novel both allows for this possibility, in its intersubjective construction of its subjects, but also works against as its writing confines the Trachimbrodians in a cycle of remembering.

“The Book of Antecedents” not only documents significant moral and existential questions, like “the entirety of the world as we do and don’t know it” (198), but also more localized subjects like “Yankel D’s shameful bead” (197)—a story which we never actually “know,” signaling the impossibility of retrieving Jonathan’s family narrative. Thus “The Book of Antecedents,” though monumental in form, is constantly being constructed and re-read by members of the Trachimbrod community. Memory is therefore structured as a mode of identity formation through both past and present narratives, and thus the two modes of time are constantly blurred, perpetuating a stuckness in the past.

The Trachimbrodian construction of memory as embodied by the village community is furthered in memory’s categorization as a sixth sense rather than merely a mechanism of documentation or identity formation. As inscribed in “The Book of Antecedents”: “Jews Have Six Senses: Touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing…memory. While gentiles experience and process the world through the traditional senses...for Jews memory is no less primary than the prick of a pin”
This conception of memory exceeds even Michaels’ understanding of ownership of memory, as it becomes a means of directly interfacing with the world, as a sixth sense, rather than a mediated entity which one reaches through the medium of narrative. It still dangerously approaches Jewish exceptionalism, as only Jews can access this medium so immediately and directly through which they experience the world in a heightened state. Michaels would argue that the equivalence of memory to a sensorial function obscures the effort to ownership over these identity-shaping experiences and thus mistakenly conceptualizes memory as unmediated.

Where memory is seen as continuously forming, time is constructed as cyclical. Based on historian of religion Mircea Eliade’s notion of ancient time in The Myth of the Eternal Return, Francisco Callado-Rodriguez posits that “Jonathan’s presentation of events imposes a cyclical understanding of life centered on the notion that things will eventually deteriorate as time advances until the cycle comes to its end” (58). This cyclical model of history, constructed around the continuously forming memory, clashes with the physicality of the present day search for access to memory of the past. In response to their difficulty in finding Trachimbrod, Alex writes, “It was seeming as if we were in the wrong country, or the wrong century, or as if Trachimbrod has disappeared, and so had the memory of it” (115). The unlocatability of Trachimbrod in the twenty-first century speaks to the misguided understanding of memory as accessed physically or geographically and thus puts forth a
critique of attempts to embody memories of the past in the present. Though revisiting the places where past events occurred may help to stimulate emotions and possibly memory, Foer questions this over-emphasis on the on-the-ground present day search for the past. Despite Jonathan’s diligent attempt to uncover his grandfather’s story by returning to Trachimbrod, his history proves intractable and thus difficult to fully access and comprehend.

The Trachimbrod narrative progressively approaches the present day narrative with the story of the Trachimbrod execution at the crux of this intersection. In this intersection memory becomes narrativized instead of embodied as both Augustine and Grandfather, who directly experienced the scene of the Trachimbrod execution, tell the story, but this story is mediated for Jonathan by Alex’s translation. While Augustine reluctantly tells the horrors of the Nazi execution, Jonathan, who doesn’t “want to hear any more” (186), walks away and begins “placing dirt in a plastic bag” (187). In order to shield himself from the pain of this past memory which he believes does not “belong” to him, he distances himself and attempts to access his grandfather’s story more directly through material means. “[S]everal meters distant” (87) collecting dirt in his Ziploc bag, Jonathan appears foolish and misguided as he turns to the material—actual dirt from Trachimbrod—over the immaterial—a narrative of the execution, in order to substantiate his claims to the past. Jonathan continues to seek a deeper connection with his grandfather’s past by owning it, so he collects the dirt as a material embodiment of the past that he can claim as
his own. Foer here challenges the idea of relating to the past by owning it, as Jonathan appears ridiculous in his attempt to collect an intangible history by putting it into a bag.

Augustine describes her traumatic encounter with the Nazis and subsequent struggle to find help in order to convey the impossibility of imagining the past in the present. She tells Grandfather and Alex: “It is not a thing that you can imagine. It only is. After that, there can be no imagining” (188). Therefore she suggests that memory only exists in its own lifetime and cannot be conjured up through post-remembering. The only remaining place where Jonathan and Alex can go to remember is the Trachimbrod monument, which stands “in the middle of the field” so that it was “very impossible to find at night” (189); it too is hidden and unlocatable. Here Foer suggests a way in which the Heritage Tourism industry does not succeed because it offers the possibility of revisiting the past in order to reembody it, while it is only actually able to bring individuals back to the physical places of the past, rather than facilitate an embodied remembering of this past. Much of the history of these places has been erased; upon arriving at Trachimbrod Alex comments, “There was nothing” (184). What remains is the monument which allows for a public remembering in an official site of memory. What Jonathan seeks though is a private remembering, which comes through either embodying the past or reimagining it through the mechanism of “postmemory” which Hirsch forwards, both unavailable to him by way of the Heritage Tourism industry.
Ultimately, Jonathan does not find exactly what he has come looking for, and the novel ends on the theme of transmission, in “a moment of urgent communication” (Amian 14) from Grandfather to both Alex and Jonathan. Grandfather’s last communication ends with the incomplete statement “I will…” (Foer 276); he attempts to transmit and re-ignite this method of self-fashioning as it lends Alex more agency in narratively rehabilitating himself and his family. As Grandfather’s story breaks off, Alex is left to fashion his own, removing himself from a cycle of stuckness.

**The Aestheticization of *Everything is Illuminated***

Foer’s best-selling novel was translated into film form several years after its publication, further expanding its reach in the popular public sphere. Though the novel complicates Michaels’ argument against remembering the past as owning the past, the film falls into some of the pitfalls of this argument by reducing Jonathan to a victim. In this translation to film, key changes work to produce a very different argument about trauma, memory, and identity. Most significantly, the film almost completely excises Jonathan’s Trachimbrod narrative, save for a few flashback scenes which lack the original text’s whimsical quality. This seems to suggest that this narrative’s perverse and often-nonsensical nature proved incompatible with the Hollywood production machine and its specific understanding of how to appropriately and profitably sentimentalize and Americanize the postgenerational Holocaust narrative. The
film therefore can only imagine redemption as comprehension between its characters. The traditional linear narrative structure of the film therefore emphasizes reconciliation over alienation.

In the film an emphasis is placed on Jonathan as “the collector,” rather than “the hero” as he relates to the past by constantly packaging material goods to be archived in his collection. This apparent step away from a more self-reflexive understanding of the power relations between Alex and Jonathan feeds into a more comfortable narrative of reconciliation in which Jonathan’s position of power—as an American buying these memories—is neutralized, as he becomes the one who is alienated and isolated from the contemporary culture that surrounds him and inhibits his unfiltered access to the past. The film does not contain the novel’s tension located in the intersubjective and politically complex construction of its subjects as blurred between the roles of victim, perpetrator and collaborator. In the film Jonathan is presented as an outsider clumsily navigating the contemporary Ukrainian territory in a way that casts him as victim more than victimizer. More strikingly so, Grandfather is transformed from a collaborator, sending his best friend Hershel to his death, as he does in the novel, to a more complete victim, as he himself is revealed to be a Jew who has masqueraded as an anti-Semite, in a dramatic flashback scene that portrays him rising from a pile of dead Jewish bodies. Thus the viewer is no longer made to feel ambivalent towards Grandfather or Jonathan, but
simply made to empathize with them as victims, allowing for unambiguous closure.

Though Alex functions as Jonathan’s guide within the film, the viewer’s entire experience and understanding of the narrative is developed largely outside of his misguided narrative. Therefore, Foer’s “corrective” act of displacing the narrator in the novel is no longer relevant as Jonathan remains the protagonist of the film. Issues of ownership over memory are therefore reinscribed as Jonathan remains the “rightful” owner of this history as evidenced in his expansive collection of artifacts and other material goods, supposedly mediating and legitimating his connection to the past. Instead of reaching into the box marked “In Case,” as he does in the novel, Alex receives a gift from Jonathan—a Jewish star necklace that belonged to Jonathan’s grandfather—just as Jonathan is leaving for the U.S. This revision suggests that Jonathan is unquestioningly, the real owner of this past, and in order to reconcile a relatively confusing relationship between him and Alex, he extends a relic of this history to Alex, thereby still remaining its original and “rightful” owner.

Whereas the novel ends before Jonathan’s return to the U.S., the film follows him home so that when we see him standing at his grandmother’s grave in his final scene he appears to be at peace with his family’s past. Within this time scheme Jonathan has already returned to the U.S. when Grandfather kills himself; he is settled, while Alex experiences a final de-stabilization. Alex’s
narrative also ends at a cemetery, as he and his family bury Grandfather next to the Trachimbrod monument. Although the film preserves the fact of Grandfather’s suicide, because Grandfather is a Nazi victim rather than a collaborator, the death is portrayed as a release from traumatic suffering rather than the tortured consequence of guilt. Therefore, the two funeral scenes come to parallel one another in conveying a sense of closure and reconciliation with the past.
Chapter Three
My Family Remembers

My grandma used to say to me, “I don’t want to burden you with these stories,” as if they would weigh me down. These were stories of the war—how she was uprooted from her hometown of Beregszász, in what was then Czechoslovakia, taken to Auschwitz-Birkenau and forced to work in a munitions factory as a part of the Nazi sanctioned slave labor. I wondered then and now what it means to have inherited a burden? This complicated burden seemed to involve both knowing and unknowing; my grandma thought that knowing the details of past traumatic events would inspire in us an enduring pain, a pain she was burdened with, but did not want to pass on to us or repeatedly reignite in herself. Whereas my dad was plagued by this unknown past which he sought to uncover.

Despite his mother’s ambivalence towards discussing the past, my dad would always plead for stories about the war. As he tells it, when he was a child growing up in Israel he started to ask where his grandparents were, and began to slowly develop a “need to know everything,” “demanding stories at every meal.” As he grew older he would ask more specific questions about the details of his parents’ experiences before, during and after the war, in their hometowns and in the concentration and slave labor camps. My grandma did not want to “burden” him with these stories in fear of passing down the trauma along with
the narratives. Therefore my dad ended up hearing most of his mother’s stories from her younger sister, Irenke, which he then passed down to my brother and me. He talks about receiving these stories from his aunt as a kind of gift; he treasured them like they were the wealth that his family lost in the war.

My grandparents, both originally from Czechoslovakia, moved to the U.S. in 1958, after living in Israel for ten years after the war. They lived on the same street in Washington Heights for over fifty years. My dad, uprooted from his idyllic childhood in Israel, had to contend with his feelings of otherness, both because of his parents’ identity as survivors and immigrants, and his own foreignness. This street in Washington Heights and my grandparents’ apartment on the tenth floor of a high-rise apartment building, initially filled by other Jewish families, immigrant and otherwise, now filled by a largely Dominican population, served as a backdrop to these stories of the Holocaust. Their apartment for me existed in a space between anxiety and comfort. The distinct smell, feel, and look of the apartment—shiny golden pillows, antique couches, a plastic cover over a crocheted white tablecloth—made me feel, every time I visited, as if I was treading on the past, preserved in the present; a past that was both precious and decaying. Though, narratives of this past emerged mostly through my grandpa’s voice. My grandpa Nusika loved to talk about his stories of the war, of the past. He usually told his stories as unfolding events in the grand historical narrative of the Second World War, and consequently did not quite touch on the emotional. But I loved to listen to them, even after
hearing the same stories over and over. When he told these stories I felt a certain comfort in this ritualistic activity of listening to my grandpa talk about the past in the present. I presumed I was receiving my “inheritance.”

My grandma Shari who hated to talk about the Holocaust would often turn the conversation back to food. Were Benjamin and Maddie hungry? Did we want some cake or cookies? No, no we would repeatedly tell her. We just ate something. Were we sure? Yes, yes we were fine. My dad or grandpa would bring the subject back to the Holocaust and she would sit there in relative silence, correcting a name or a fact here and there that my grandpa could not remember, her face plastered over by a deep and almost numbing sadness.

“Why do we have to remember this sadness?” she would ask. Every time before we left to go back home, my grandparents would offer us some item from their apartment to take with us. Often it was the precious crystal bowls from Prague, but we would refuse; they were too heavy, too valuable, too important—what would we do with them? Sometimes they would send us home with bags of food, or clothing that they no longer wore. Often we left with stories and memories, or bits and pieces of them.

Despite the sadness that plagued my grandma, or perhaps because of it, she showered my brother and me with love, compassion, and care. She and my grandpa took the 1 train downtown to our apartment on the Upper West Side every Thursday afternoon. They would take care of us while our parents were at work. Often we would go across the street to Central Park; I remember us all
crawling on the grass and collecting chestnuts from underneath a tree in the
park next to the playground. At home, on our white-carpeted floor, they would
get down on their knees and play legos with us. They always made sure to feed
us, usually macaroni and cheese and sometimes brownies. Their endless
devotion to us made them a constant presence in our lives. Yet, I always felt a
lingering distance. A lingering sadness on their faces, when they were not
smiling at us. I wonder now, if I had known their stories better—a more
coherent narrative perhaps—would we have been able to bridge this distance? I
don’t think so.

My dad, who grew up with this “unknowable” past, has been haunted
by its overwhelming presence in his own life. His project has been to uncover
these stories, to know his family’s unspoken Holocaust narratives, and to deal
with their pain through his own words—his poetry and his own retelling of
these stories. Through his words and imagery he projects feelings of anger,
frustration, confusion, loss, love, and longing. Here he not only speaks with his
parents and lost relatives, but reckons with larger ideas of justice, morality and
pain.

When I was growing up my dad encouraged my brother and me to ask
our grandparents about their past. History and “where we came from” were
valued not just in our home, but also at the Jewish Day School we attended
where we were surrounded by a culture of storytelling. At school, starting from
a young age, we learned, told and re-told the stories from the weekly chapter of
the Old Testament. I was told to search for the past, and to value it. This is one reason why I initially found Michaels’ argument against remembering so threatening; it seemed to be the exact opposite of what I was taught at home and at school.

As I turn my focus inward to understand how my family remembers my grandma and her history I too am remembering and telling my own story; this project is an act of remembering. I learn my grandma’s story by reading the diary that she kept while she was in Nazi camps and I explore the ways in which my family and I understand her story by reading other “texts” that document our attempts to engage with her and her past by each telling our own stories, asking how these narratives (hers and ours) translate. My goal in this section is to uncover the past and also to examine how we uncover and remember that past.

**The Stories She Tells: Shari’s Diary**

For members of the postgeneration seeking to understand their parent or grandparent’s experience during the Holocaust, what could be more valuable than a diary? A diary turns the seemingly untranslatable—the question of what was it like for someone to experience the Holocaust—into a question of the specific events or emotions they experienced as told in their own voice. This recounting of events, information, and emotions allows the postgeneration, who did not directly experience those events, what seems like the next best
thing—a firsthand account of the events as they occurred. The diary in particular suggests an immediacy as the most “direct” representation of the past.

In the last year of her life my grandma asked my dad if he had her diary that she wrote during the war. My dad didn’t and thought that he had lost it. His guilt prevented him from asking her about its details. After my grandma died in January of 2009, my dad and brother were sorting through her belongings and came across a small rectangular book, with the name “Sari” painted on the cover in her desk drawer. This was it. My dad, assuaged of his feelings of guilt, and excited that he now had another avenue to uncovering the past, decided to get it translated from Hungarian to English.

The diary initially seemed to offer the possibility of direct access to my grandma’s story’s, which she had withheld during her lifetime, but the immediacy that it proposed was denied. Though we were to gain a more in-depth knowledge of her experience during the war, we would have to wait for her text to be translated—for it to become accessible to us. And once it was translated would it still be my grandma’s intimate prose?

My brother at the time was working on his senior film thesis—a film about the ways in which my grandma’s memories of the Holocaust were passed down and reinterpreted by each subsequent generation. This was his own story about her past. He found a retired professor at his college to translate the diary’s Hungarian text and simultaneously my dad contacted the U.S. National
Holocaust Museum to see if they were interested in the diary as archival material. They were, and decided to put it on permanent display after finding and archiving six other diaries that were written by women with whom my grandmother socialized at the slave labor camp, Sommerda, a subcamp of the Buchenwald concentration camp.

The period during which we waited for the translation of the diary was filled with speculation and anticipation. Was this text going to recount the horrors that the Nazis committed against my grandma’s family and community? Would this fill the space of unknowing that weighed down on my family perhaps even more than the knowledge we did have? The waiting delayed the directness and immediacy of the text that we so desired—it reminded us of the obstacles and ultimate impossibility of this kind of “direct” remembering.

My dad said that his mother hadn’t wanted him to know about the diary because she said it was just the romantic musings of a young woman. The diary’s actual content remained unknown to him and anyone besides my grandma until after her death. My dad speculated that it “could range from the horrific, to missing her family—her parents, her boyfriend, her sisters and brothers who were killed” and since she “didn’t want to put [my brother and I] through pain or burden [us]” she wouldn’t reveal what was written. She tried to stay silent to keep us safe and keep herself from revisiting the trauma too.

The professor translated the diary in installments and bit by bit we were able to read about my grandma’s experience through her own (translated)
words. It satiated our need to know, particularly my dad’s, but left us longing, at least myself, for my grandma to have spoken these words to us herself in her lifetime. Even as each translated section satisfied our hunger for knowledge about my grandma’s life, the “truth” slowly revealed was a surprising one. A good part of her text focused on her unfulfilled love affair with a man named Alex, the non-Jewish Belgian electrical engineer of the munitions factory in the slave labor camp where she was forced to work. Before reading the diary no one in my family had ever hear of Alex or the love affair. As she tells it, she and Alex shared many gazes and conversations filled with longing and desire for one another. Another shorter part of the diary recounts the six weeks she spent at Auschwitz-Birkenau and the final death march, forwarding a perhaps more expected narrative of the horrors of the Nazi death camps. Her diary exists in a space between the immaterial and the material. Fantasy and terror. The burden of knowing and the burden of not knowing.

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What evidence or documentation remains from this period in history? And what is passed down? As Hirsch’s essay on postmemory notes, for many descendents of Holocaust survivors, family photographs are a crucial site of transmission of memory. My family too remembers through the photographs that we have of my grandparents and their families, mostly from before the war. We have one photograph of my grandma’s whole family. She and her younger sister Irenke are dressed in the same outfit, as tends to be the case in all the
photographs I have seen of them before the war. The one photograph we have that was taken during the war is of my grandpa in a slave labor camp. About ten or so men are posed together, mostly shirtless, still looking robust in what was only the first year of the war. My dad tells me how rare it is to have such a photo. When I went to Jewish Day School, on Holocaust Remembrance Day they would turn one of the communal rooms into a memorial site. On one of the walls they projected photographs of students’ families (grandparents and great-grandparents mostly) from before and during the war. I would always watch the slideshow on the wall, waiting in anticipation to see my family up there. I would recognize my grandma and her sister Irenke by their kind faces, matching outfits, and crossed arms, and I would also recognize my grandpa at the labor camp standing on a mountainside amongst a group of tanned and mostly strong looking men. I felt a sense of pride seeing them up there; this was where they lived. My dad’s poetry, in which he grapples with issues of remembering, justice, and loss as related to the Holocaust, was also up on the wall.
But, what is passed down besides photographs and artifacts? Stories, memories, narratives—the immaterial. These, like the material, are highly valued and precious. They are fragile, in that anyone can appropriate them and shape them to their liking, but also potentially inextinguishable, if they are continuously repeated. Thus, they constantly face the risk of extinction, yet flirt with notions of immortality. They are therefore anxiously sought out, told and retold, by those who cannot bear the prospect of their extinction. Whereas those to whom the events have directly happened often do not want them to achieve longevity as their retelling constitutes a reliving of the pain contained in the initial event. Herein lies another tension in “the burden” of telling the trauma.

The diary exists in a space between these two as it makes the immaterial material by documenting, on paper, the things of the past. It therefore lives in a
space of tension between containing the past in the past, and retelling it to ensure its continuation into the present. This is perhaps why my grandma didn’t want us to know the contents of her diary during her lifetime and why she was reluctant to tell us her stories of the war. This burden (of knowing), as she called it, haunted my dad as he anxiously mined through this largely unknown past. He did everything from studying this history in college courses with Elie Wiesel to traveling to Israel to hear his mother’s stories via her sister who was much more inclined to talk about “the sadness.” Through her he inherited his wealth of stories. Through her he built on his own imaginings of his mother’s past, envisioning her as the heroine of her own tragedy.

My grandma sees the burden of the past as something to be hidden, tucked away and silenced, whereas my dad sees the burden as an obligation, something he is ethically obligated to piece through, despite its depressing nature, and understand. While my grandma asks, “why should they be burdened with my past?” my dad argues that “it’s inevitable that we have to process our parents and our grandparents lives,” in order to “make it [our] own truth.” But in doing so we insert a tension into the “search,” as it is no longer about preserving the past, but about making that past our own. The burden, for my dad, is multi-faceted; it is both a “reality” that must be shed in order for each subsequent generation to achieve its own “independent lens” on the past and that “independent lens” itself; it is “a litmus test of how to live a
moral life”—both guide and weight to be carried; it is the imperative to remember.

I am realizing that I see the burden perhaps as a possibility—albeit a challenging one—for unpacking the ways in which we remember in order to understand more about myself and my family. In this sense the burden is neither taboo to discuss, nor an obligation, but a possible site for examining this network of remembering that illuminates the ways in which we shape our identities and worldviews through the stories we tell about the past.

The diary is a text that keeps on returning and continuously revealing itself in different spaces. Is this the burden? The privileging of this palimpsestic text both reifies the primacy and seeming immediacy of the firsthand experience and signifies the postgenerational experience as necessary and important. So then, should I see my grandma’s diary as a sacred document that allows me access to a privileged knowledge of the past? Or rather, should I simply read this document as my grandma’s means of maintaining a sense of her own humanity during the war and after? I read the diary not as an official historical narrative of a “survivor,” but as the personal memory of a twenty-four year old woman who underwent great tragedy. It is both her own means of survival and our means of understanding the past; her fantasy and ours.
These are some of the words she left us with:

Alex, chérie!

I want to collect all my memories of him
so that sometime
I can take them out like
a treasured jewelry box

This man—this memory
is very dear
to me.

Our

life

is so barren

The meetings at the beginning
were beautiful

I spent a lot of time in the corner

He observes me
without words
pines for me his looks follow me everywhere

He would look at my figure
swaying
back and forth
as I walked down the hall
depth suggestive beautiful
grey eyes

It’s cold. I’m in my striped clothes and a raincoat, and I haven’t seen Alex in three days. That night he enters. I try not to let my excitement show but unfortunately after three months I’m beyond indifference. Alex stands by the pressing machine, I’m talking to Auntie Bastos and he’s looking at me. Our gaze meets for long moments and I can see all of the love and desire in his eyes. Our souls met and I felt an aching desire in myself as well—desire to be free rather than a prisoner, to be with him in a room and finally lose myself entirely in his eyes. It was difficult to be careful and disciplined all the time.

Often he would come in and go straight to Irene’s machine. Everybody took his presence for granted and when he didn’t show up at times everyone noticed it. "Sari, the Belgian hasn’t been around for a while." He spoke with Irene about wise generalities, but mostly about me. Often he just stood there and repeated
my name. "Sari, Sari." It's terrible that all this is already in the past. It would be so good to see him. I am lonely without him.

My God,
    forgive me
I knew
that this would happen

when he would disappear (April 2nd)

the tones of detonations
    from far away
    hungry idle
i'm now full of hope
now hopeless

    it can't
last forever we say
they're 30 km from Erfurt

and

my only only

    narcotic,
is thinking
    about Alex

Will we ever meet again
in this life?

(This is more unlikely since we are marching on the German roads day after day towards uncertainty. Towards a concentration camp or work camp)
air raids

    bombings
shooting
    the fear of death

accompanies our way

hunger
cold
broken feet
spent weakened people
(God, help us) we were one

he was a part of me like no one else
he went to Berlin during the week of March 18-25th.

We lived between doubt and hope

I thought about him
every day

I relived the moments
he was with us again and again

Two weeks

Now in the midst
of our travels—I recognize him in a movement
a cap
a silhouette

I often see his slender knock kneed figure
his gray eyes
his noble graying head

Will I see him again?
He wants to find me in Hungary,
he once said

I could love him,
perhaps we could be happy

* * *

And now, as I thought of it often, I'd like to gather my memories from the last year up to today, and write them down. It's so difficult! I've lived through more tragedy, suffering and sadness than the protagonists of novels, and the
details are so terrifying that one only whispers them. I'll try. I ask God's help for it. Even now I'm writing this sitting in a bunker.

Sunday's mood was light and carefree, but by the evening the mood turned torrential as the police came around. The orders were to pack a blanket and a little food. We packed until (Monday, the 17th) afternoon, unsure what to take. By evening we formed a line, they put us in a railroad wagon, and the first monstrosity of our tragic year began.

There were 94 of us in one wagon, no window. The air came through a little slit. Often, especially during the day, we thought we would suffocate. And the toilet—a different torment. About 20 breads for a 3 day trip was all we had. My God, we were so careful, so sparing, not to bring the apples, eggs, biscuits, bacons. We left behind everything and everybody. Desperation became our master.

There were five of us together, later we found out mother and company sat in another wagon. The nights were terrible filled with ghostly whistles and human sounds. There wasn't enough room to stretch out our stiff legs, and while during the day we stripped to our shirts in the suffocating heat, at night we shivered.

Thursday night we arrived at—as we found out later—Birkenau, an awful death camp near Auschwitz. Many people thought they saw the flames of the crematorium, human bones, and heard screams. We stayed in the wagon that night. Berta fainted three times during the trip. She said, and even looking back at it from the distance of a year it's monstrous, that “at least my end will come sooner.”

Is this the memory I never knew was there?

* * *

Fantasy—this was a word my brother latched onto early on in his filmmaking process to describe the ways in which my dad, or other members of the postgeneration, might project their own realities onto their imaginings of the Holocaust due to their displaced positionality from the actual remembering. So my dad remembered his mother’s story in such a way that allowed her to be
heroic—in his narrative she was resilient, subversive and triumphant against Nazi terror. He repeatedly told us the story about how she would always put a little less ammunition than required into the guns in the munitions factory so that they would malfunction. Or how she would assign the weakest women the easiest jobs, trying to subvert the Nazi’s Darwinian scheme. How can we process such horrific acts of violence and terror and how can we understand what it meant to suffer those acts? It is in our own stories, our own imaginings that we insert our voice. This insertion is not about privileging the self, but about making the memory palatable or bearable so that the ego can withstand it. In heroicizing his mother, my dad, like his own mother, felt that this past was too much to handle directly, so he created his own narrative or understanding of her past. Out of this “remembering” comes triumph, heroism and resilience. This glorification makes the process of dealing with the past more bearable and even productive in creating the foundation for my dad’s (and my grandma’s) identity after the trauma. These narratives based in things of the past gain a new life in the present through these postgenerational projections.

My grandma too employed a kind of fantasy as she imagined herself and Alex running away together; she wrote a love story. The allure of the romantic escape perhaps allowed her to persevere despite her dismal surroundings and situation; she describes “thinking about Alex” as her “narcotic.” For her, fantasy was clearly a method of survival—a question of what stories she had to imagine in order to get through the daily terror. It was also the filter through
which she was able to tell her own story. Alex was her narcotic not only in the
day to day getting by, but also in the remembering of that trauma. He allows
her to remember.

What story do I tell? I often feel the need to keep her memories, as she
has written them, sacred and complete. Not to insert my own voice into her
story, but to listen. I listen to her poetic prose and the pauses between her
words. But through this listening I tell my own story. This is not exactly the
Shari who I grew up with (who fed me whether I was hungry or not). This new
Shari who I am exposed to through the diary—simultaneously pining for a
romance that was forbidden while maintaining a certain, albeit depressed,
resilience despite her world collapsing all around her—unsettles and complicates
the Shari who I knew in the last ten years of her life—loving and caring, yet
seeming to have lost her love for life and only living for her family. The
grandma that I knew asked us where we were the night before, if we were warm
enough, if we had eaten enough food. And the stories that I read in the diary
were not the stories I grew up hearing. In fact, no one in my family had heard of
Alex until reading this diary.

We had heard of her wonderful life before the war—partly from my dad
and partly from her—in the town of Beregszász where she was surrounded by
bountiful vineyards. Her house too was surrounded by a beautiful veranda on
which her family would enjoy meals together. My dad would tell me how my
grandma was a violin protégé and at the top of her gymnasium class—she was
even planning to go to medical school. I had heard about how she and her sister, Irenke, kept each other alive during the war by sharing bread and supporting each other through every hardship. My dad told me about how my grandma started the practice of offering her sister part of her meager rations, claiming she wasn’t hungry. And it was perhaps this act of selfless generosity that kept her and her sister alive, more so than the bread itself. I had heard about the final days of the death march when the American planes overhead were shooting down at the road on which they were walking, and so my grandma and her sister ran to the side of the road and threw themselves down on the ground with their friend in between them. Tragically, in the moment of their “liberation” by the U.S. army, the friend on the ground in-between them was killed. I had heard the tragic story of my grandma’s fiancé, Cully, who escaped from a different slave labor camp, but was killed towards the end of the war fighting against the Nazis with the Russian army. My grandpa was his best friend.

Reflecting on this, I realize that all these stories I have heard through my dad. This diary is the first time I have truly heard my grandma talk about her personal memories of the war. But, when I finally get to hear her speak, what does she talk about? She talks about love. Within the diary she remembers her own experience, not as it unfolds chronologically, but as she is able to write it through the story of Alex. Sometimes recollecting more recent events and sometimes reaching back several months. She remembers feelings of longing,
desire, loneliness, and despair. I don’t feel these feelings as if they were my own, but I do empathize and listen; I want to hear her story so badly.

While being interviewed by my brother and dad, my 89-year-old grandmother describes the diary and her experience at Sommerda:

“Amos you took away a little red notebook, and there’s a poem in it. This girl wrote this poem over there and she made that thing over there. She was stealing the material, painting it and writing a beautiful poem to me. I had 94 people I had to arrange, who will work what? There were times when we didn’t have work, but you had to show that you are working, so I had to find out what to give them to work. And there was a Belgian—how to put it—he was taking care of the machines, electrical guy. He was always bringing us some kind of food.”

Here my grandma recalls the past, but she does not tell us that she was in love with the Belgian whom she briefly introduces in her account. Are the memories contained in the diary in a way more direct that her own recollection decades after the event? I wonder what she would think about us reading her diary, or about the hundreds of thousands of visitors who pass by and look at her diary as an artifact of what life was like during the war. These strangers share in the intimacy of her diary, establishing a kind of collective remembering through the materiality of this actual artifact from the past.
**Private Remembering in a Public Space: The United States National Holocaust Memorial Museum**

My grandma’s diary is now located in the U.S. National Holocaust Memorial Museum. I wonder what it means that one of her most personal items, which tells the intimate stories of her experience during the war, is now in the public space in the U.S. that commemorates, memorializes, and facilitates remembering of the Holocaust for an entire public seeking to learn about this past. I wonder if my own private “remembering” of her experience is shaded by her diary’s placement in such a public space. Does this placement break down the structure of proprietary remembering that Michaels criticizes, in that my family has relinquished ownership of my grandma’s diary?

The diary sits on permanent display adjacent to an actual barrack imported from Auschwitz and a room entitled “Voices of Auschwitz” where visitors can sit and hear accounts of what it was like to be in the Nazi camp. It rests in a case next to a photograph of her and her sister Irenke and other diaries which belonged to women who were in the same labor camp as my grandma. The diary—my grandma’s intimate recollections of her experience during the war—now lives in this public space that employs an “American” rhetoric for remembering. This highly personal document, the content of which my grandma concealed for her whole life, is available to the entire visiting public. Yet the text itself is not. The museum turns her voice into artifact, suggesting that what seems to count is not the diary’s actual content, but the
fact of its existence. This mute artifact exists within the competing discourses of the museum which insist that we remember the silenced past as it re-silences my grandma’s voice. Is she speaking?

I went to visit the Holocaust Museum to see my grandma’s diary on display to try to understand what it means to remember the Holocaust in an American context. The diary is located on the third floor of the museum, called “The Final Solution.” I knew I would have to walk through a cattle car to arrive at the Auschwitz section of the museum where my grandma’s diary lived, as my dad had previously informed me. Once I spotted the diary I initially felt a surge of emotion. I was simultaneously anxious and prideful wondering if she would have wanted this public display of her own private remembering, but content that she was contributing to the public record of this history. I felt both a protectiveness over this artifact and photo, and a sense of pride that others were looking at it too in order to understand the past—the same past I was sifting through. I wondered what the museum was trying to say in displaying my grandma’s diary along with other diaries of women from the same slave labor camp. They contribute to the record of official history and humanize that monolithic historical narrative. But, in withholding the actual text of the diary or attempting to reanimate its narrative through its retelling the museum almost unintentionally allows the visitor to understand what this artifact means on their own terms. In spite of the museum’s efforts to recreate this history as contemporary experience in order to incorporate the visitor as an active
rememberer, the most powerful moments seem inadvertently to arrive when it does not ask visitors to embody this history as their own, but to simply look or listen.

Here was my grandma’s diary, made public in the museum setting, yet still personal. It was much smaller than I had imagined it would be. I had to get close and peer in through the glass to see its details. It was about five by four inches and had her name—Sari—painted for my grandma by another woman in Sommerda in red, blue and yellow with flowers surrounding it on the cover. To the left of the diary was a photo of my grandma and her sister, Irenke which was accompanied by a descriptive text that said my grandma, the writer of the diary, was to the left in the photograph; this was wrong—she was on the right. Did it matter that the museum was wrong?

The U.S. National Holocaust Museum is surrounded by other “official” seeming municipal and government-affiliated buildings located on or just off of the Washington Mall. What did it mean for the museum to be one among these buildings? Was it an “American” building? In The Texture of Memory, James E. Young suggests that “in being placed on the Mall, the museum will enshrine not just the history of the Holocaust, but American ideals as they counterpoint the Holocaust” (337). Therefore as Americans learn about and remember “the crimes of another people in another land, [they] will recall their nation’s own idealized reason for being” (337). In this way the museum disseminates a
history and remembrance of the Holocaust filtered through an “American” ideology, displacing the immediacy of that history on its own terms.

The museum’s façade, carved out of limestone to reveal a grand entrance, fades into the landscape of the other similarly constructed national buildings, but its sides are composed of red brick, speaking to the duality of its narrative; we remember the Holocaust, but we remember as Americans. The museum uses popular discourses of American identity—citizenship, patriotism and duty—to talk about remembering the history of the Holocaust. It is in this way that it activates understandings of this remembering as a national obligation. But the question of how to remember the Holocaust is drowned out by the seemingly reductive imperative of the museum—that we must remember the Holocaust. Similarly, in terms of the diary the museum is not testifying to what the voice tells us, but simply that there is a voice.

Before taking the elevator up to the fourth floor, where the permanent exhibit begins, all visitors are given an identity card of someone who lived in Europe during World War II, most of them Jewish. The identity card is emblematic of the entire visit to the U.S. National Holocaust Museum in that it is designed to facilitate experiential remembering. In a way the identity card looks like a U.S. passport with the U.S. seal on its cover—the eagle with an olive branch in one hand and arrows in the other. Arched around this seal are the words “For the dead and the living we must bear witness.” This identity card seemingly assigns each visitor not only a new identity, as listed inside the card,
but also a new nationality. It borrows from an American patriotism or sense of national duty that establishes American citizens as soldiers for its cause of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” in order to lend to a new kind of Jewish American identity in which our duty as citizens becomes an eternal remembrance of the Holocaust. We “bear witness” constantly—ready for peace or battle—in order to establish a sense of national Jewish order. Notice that we “bear witness” for “the dead and the living” (underline theirs); this renewed sense of identity and duty requires us to view the Holocaust not as a past event, buried with the dead, as we perhaps memorialize them annually, but rather as a living, unfolding, current event that plays out daily. It is especially for these vestiges of the Holocaust, that remain alive and living today, that we must “bear witness.”

I open the card and the inside flap reads: “This card tells the story of a real person who lived during the Holocaust.” The “realness” of this person is supposed to lend a certain authenticity to the visit. I am no longer following an official history of the Holocaust, as narrated by the museum historians, but an actual person’s life. What does this do for my visit? By individualizing and personalizing the victims of the Holocaust, whether or not I have family members or know people who directly experienced it, I am now incorporated as a rememberer, as a part of my duty as a citizen of, if nothing else, the Holocaust Museum. The actual information contained within this identity card seems rather unimportant; however it is the name, Lajos Nagy, and the town
Zagyvapalfalva, Hungary that haunts me. Such foreign sounding and hard to pronounce names are left to be unspoken—only thought of periodically as I walk through the museum. However, even more challenging than bearing witness to the dead of my identity card is bearing witness to the living. Who are “the living?” Perhaps the living survivors, but once they have all past, to whom or for whom must we bear witness? Unlike at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where I can simply dispose of my colored “M” pin in a receptacle on the way out, here I am unsure what to do with this identity card. Should I carry it around in my bag like any other form of identification, just in case someone should ask me for it? Do I keep it stored in a safe place at home, like my real U.S. passport?

Interestingly, and seeming to confirm James Young’s argument about the “Americanization” of the Holocaust Museum, the permanent exhibit, which visitors arrive at by taking an elevator, starts at the moment of the U.S. liberation of the Nazi camps. In the elevator ride up to the fourth floor the viewer’s attention is directed towards a video of the U.S. liberation of the Nazi camps with an American G.I.’s voice-over, reiterating the familiar trope of the indescribability of what they encountered when they arrived at the camps. The museum grants the visitor access to this “exclusive history” through both the identification card, as described above, and the framework of the liberation. Just like our American predecessors before us, we too are “liberating” these images of destruction, by giving sight to their trauma and once again bearing
witness. This point of entrance also nationalizes the memory of the Holocaust as a moment of glory for the U.S. troops as the liberators—enacting our values of liberty and justice in a very literal way. From here the story starts, but abruptly rewinds back towards the narrative of the rise of Nazi power in Germany.

The aesthetics of the museum produce oppositional spaces—dark and light or past and present—that shape the experience of the museum spectator. The dark spaces have small sources of light emanating from obscured locations or in the case of the cattle car, light spills through the lone window in the car, reproducing the experience of the survivor. The dark spaces, or spaces of remembering, made up of mostly cold surfaces of exposed brick, concrete, and paneled wood exit into minimalist white spaces marked by clean lines and bare walls. In these white spaces there are places to rest, but most visitors continue walking through without stopping, perhaps so as not to prolong the final exit from the oppressive space of the museum. The only sounds in these “rest areas” are visitors’ voices, chatting, questioning or commenting, whereas in the dark spaces there are also sounds of newsreels, music from political rallies, and isolated, yet muffled audio from various installments that emanate out into the exhibit space. These spaces of remembering become oppressive as they demand the viewers to immerse themselves in this Holocaust mindset, that to go to the bathroom or water fountain, and exit the immediately dark space, is a relief. Certain spaces of remembering, like the room filled with piles of blackened,
battered shoes collected from those as they entered the concentration camps, are consumed by their silence, except for a haunting hum that emanates out from behind the quiet chatter of visitors’ voices. Above these shoes hangs a poem: “We are the shoes. We are the last witnesses.”

In my three hours at the museum I only encountered one museum guard, and she appeared to be walking from one post to another. The presence of the museum guard reminded me that my interaction with the subject matter was being heavily mediated by the institution within which I stood and of the literal barrier between myself and the objects on display. This inadvertent reminder clearly counters the intent of the Holocaust Museum which strives to convince the visitor that they are interfacing with history directly.

Certain signs around the museum caught my attention: “The Rise to Nazi Power in 13 minutes” and “Anti-Semitism in 5 minutes.” These were of course signs for movies, and their scheduled screening times, but nonetheless appeared incredibly relevant to the nature of immediacy conveyed in the museum exhibits. Though the artifacts and texts are in place as historical evidence, they, along with the depressed and dark ambiance, create a kind of contemporary reanimation and representation of these past events. The museum instills a sense of urgency in the visitor; you must “bear witness” and “remember” now so that these events do not get erased and thereby happen again.
As I passed these signs I remembered a previous visit to the Holocaust Museum that I took in the 8th grade at the Abraham Joshua Heschel School. In preparation for this visit we talked about what the Holocaust meant for the population of Jews in Europe, especially in Poland, where they comprised nearly a tenth of the population before the war. My teacher instructed each student in the class to look to the person to their right and their left and imagine that by the end of the war those two people would be dead. This rather evocative thought exercise, which clearly has sustained its intended impact as it has stayed with me almost ten years later, reactivated history in a manner that injected this same kind of urgency into our identity as American Jews, and through this total identification with the past, we were asked to inhabit the place of the victims.

At the end of the permanent exhibit museum visitors encounter a cinema constructed by what appears to be Jerusalem limestone. Playing on the screen are testimonials, in documentary style, in which survivors of the Holocaust recount their experiences and stories directly to the camera. These stories, as well as their subjects, were quite emotional and moving. By this point in my visit I had allowed myself to fully capitulate to the content of the museum. Rather than being hyper-analytical I let myself feel whatever I was moved to feel. These testimonials seemed to be the most appropriate representations of these memories and this history because they seemed to allow the survivor voice to emerge less confined by the Jewish American nationalist project of the museum. The storytellers were not asking us viewers to reenact or carry their stories for
them, but simply to listen. The testimonials also helped me realize the
importance of hearing about the Holocaust as a way to learn about it. Hearing
allows the listener access to these events without requiring them to reenarrate
them. These memories were contained in the survivors’ telling of them and
retained their impact as they came directly from the mouth of the person who
experienced the trauma. The viewers, in this moment, were not expected to own
or reenact these memories, only to listen and empathize as we were moved to do
so. Though emotional, it did not feel burdensome.

**How We Remember: The Interviews**

*G: My memory’s pretty good, which is not so good because I too remember
those terrible things which happened to me. But if you ask questions I will try to
answer it.*

Memory is both the technology for recalling the past, and also a
recreation of that past. For my grandma, the recall she says comes easily, but
the reliving comes with consequences. For her, narrativizing the events of the
past requires a kind of reliving—the kind that Michaels denigrates when
employed by postgenerational rememberers—that haunts her and those who
listen to her, she would argue. Instead of even having the option of forgetting,

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1 My brother conducted a series of interviews with family members including my grandmother and dad in January 2009. Below in italics are excerpts from these interviews. Dad, Amos = D, Brother, Benjamin = B, Grandmother, Shari = G.
or not remembering, my grandma was burdened with the inability to forget. Late at night she was kept up by these memories of her past, their presence marking the terrible loses she suffered. My dad asked her if she talked about her experiences during the war, after it was over, with her sister and husband. She told him to do so would have been a form of “self-torture.” Nonetheless, she remained unable to forget, despite the fact that it wasn’t talked about very much. If she could never forget, why would she ask my dad, her son, to remember?

B: Do you think that your experience in the war was passed down in any way to dad?

G: Benjamin, you never forgot what you went through. You never. Sometimes it was in the back of your memory or your head, but you never forgot it. You never forgot that experience. Never.

My grandma avoids directly answering my brother’s question, and thereby implicitly suggests two different possible answers: that she was so completely consumed by this history—“you never forgot that experience”—that it was inevitable for it to be passed down to my dad as he grew up with her or that because it was located within her own memory, she served as its container, protecting my dad from inheriting the trauma. She thought if he did not know it, he couldn’t inherit the pain. Yet, it was not knowing that drove
him to pursue and reanimate the stories in his own life, to tell them as his own, and thus “inherit” the trauma.

The survivor’s inability to forget juxtaposed with the subsequent generations’ inability to remember produces a complicated politics of remembering in which both subjects are produced as wounded or with an apparent lack. This inevitable search to make sense of the past in the present has led my dad, a member of the second generation to continuously and relentlessly dig through its contents, working against my grandma’s project of containing the past in the past or at least not transmitting the trauma of her own stories by withholding them. The tools he has for making sense are the stories he has sought out and “inherited,” the artifacts that remain (photographs and the diary), and his own self-narrative—all making up the immaterial and material. He describes the way in which he understands and relates to his parents’ past and its limits:

_D: The search for meaning to our lives, this need to know out of love, to draw close to loved ones to try to understand them even in their silences, to understand their hidden silent depths and this difficult endeavor to know, to understand, find meaning in our lives is inevitably limited by our own lens, by what we have known. We attempt to fill in the blanks with what we do know even if it is through a glass darkly, refracted through the prism of our own lives._
We draw near to others whom we love and to ourselves by imagining what we cannot fully know about them, sometimes trying to imagine the unimaginable.

The question of how to “imagine the unimaginable” when “limited by our own lens” speaks to the project of Hirsch’s postmemory, which provides a framework for members of the postgeneration to engage with this past not through “recall but imaginative investment, projection and creation” (107). For my dad, this “need to know” is not only about knowing the stories of the past, as that is impossible in full since he did not himself directly experience them, but it is about finding a mode, through the “prism” of his own experience, to relate to those severely affected by the past, in the present. It is also about filling holes that were left by destructive events, untold stories (silences), and missing family members. These absences are filled by the postgeneration’s “search for meaning” and “imagining.” It is not that we seek to create our own version of events, our own memories, but more that we are unable to truly “remember” what happened and therefore must access her story and this history through our own understanding of her narratives. We read her diary to understand how she remembered through which we learn about her and her history.

D: Well grandma’s life and Birkenau is probably unimaginable to anyone who wasn’t there.
B: But not even to that extent—yeah that was unimaginable, that extreme of her experience, but even just the mundane things are also unimaginable, you know? Like even her life as a kid or in Prague after the war or anything before you were born is unimaginable for you just because all you have to base it on are the accounts of others and maybe a photograph here and there—

D: It’s true. Everyone’s life—if you want to use unimaginable in that way—no one will really ever be able to understand what’s unsaid, what people don’t want to reveal, what they didn’t really experience, you know you’re getting it second hand from other sources but on top of all that, from grandma, who lived through one of the most unimaginable periods in history where people were slaughtered for—beyond understanding—for reasons that are hard to grasp even.

Herein lies the conflict for my dad between the “need to know,” as a kind of moral imperative, and the impossibility of fully knowing what he did not experience. This tension is perhaps the “real” burden with which my dad and other members of the “second generation” must contend. It positions them in a constant search, situated in contrast to the survivor’s equally impossible desire to forget. My dad needed these stories—he needed a way to understand his parents (and the “unimaginable”)—where they were coming from and what had been taken from them to explain their distance and difference. My brother and I needed these stories to understand my dad and to develop a concept of
what the Holocaust meant for our grandparents. More than simply consolidating our own identities, we all felt the need to better understand each other. And we thought that somehow through these stories we would. My grandma thought in telling her stories she was putting the burden of remembering on us. In asking those questions it often felt like we were putting the burden of remembering on her.

At this site of memory, though we do not have direct, complete or unmediated access to the past, there exists an intergenerational transmission between survivors and their children and grandchildren, whether this transmission is marked by narrative or silence. So then, what gets passed down? So much of this transmission is immaterial—how do we examine its effects on the postgeneration?

_D:_ Do you think anxiety and depression from the war could pass from one generation to the next?

_G:_ You don’t inherit that. No. I don’t think you inherit these things. Maybe physically you inherit certain things from your parents.

_D:_ But not psychologically?

_G:_ Not psychologically. You are growing up in a different world, under different circumstances…but I tell you something Benjamin, don’t go deeply into it. It’s a very sad thing. It happened to our people but that was many, many years ago…
B: So are you saying we don’t have to think about it now? We can forget about it?

G: I still think yeah. You know I am here alone and I can’t fall asleep, so everything is coming to my mind from poetry, to movies, to Beregszász and my past—

D: You don’t want the next generation to remember it? That it’s a way of honoring the past?

G: You have to know it, but don’t go deeply into it. So emotionally I don’t want him to feel anything. He has to know about it yes.

D: Well once you know about it, you feel it emotionally because it’s such a sad story you can’t help it. I think it’s good to feel it—not for you, you have a right to forget about it because you experienced it, but for people who weren’t there I think it’s their duty to know what happened—

G: Yes I understand.

D: To understand what humanity can do so maybe it won’t happen again so maybe they can become better people so maybe they won’t mistreat other people so maybe when there’s another genocide you save people.

G: You have to know the past of the parents, grandparents. You have to know about it but don’t—don’t dwell about it.

“Know it, but don’t go deeply into it” or “dwell about it” my grandma says. Similar to Michaels, she advocates for “learning” over “remembering.”
My grandma was trying to save us from a life plagued with remembering a
depressing past; the life that had haunted her. As she tries to escape this past
that “was many, many years ago” we try to get closer to it. My dad deeply
engages with it by “feel[ing] it,” and in fact argues that “you can’t help [but feel]
it.”

But, what does it mean for the postgeneration to have this type of direct
access to the survivor’s narrativization of their own memories? To be so close to
these stories that we “feel [them] emotionally,” as both my dad and Hirsch
suggest. Does “feeling it” make it more direct in that our emotions are our
own? Or is it further displaced since we feel through the stories that we tell, our
own projections? My dad suggests that in feeling the past the “people who
weren’t there” are complying with part of “their duty to know what
happened.” This duty (to the survivors and to oneself) of learning the past by
feeling it risks the possessive “remembering” that Michaels critiques. In other
words, though our emotional engagement with these stories does not connote
ownership over the past, it enters the dangerous territory of identity
construction as the basis for a victimized self. But this feeling of the past as it
allows for a potentially more direct engagement with the past, is not about
privileging the self, but about “understand[ing] what humanity can do so
maybe it won’t happen again” so that we “can become better people so maybe
[we] won’t mistreat other people.” It is about feeling the past to create more
ethical selves in the present.
D: Did you think it was important for me when I was small for me to know the stories and now for Ben and Maddie to know the stories of your life in the Holocaust?

G: Why do they have to know this sadness?

D: So you don’t think they should know it?

G: No, Amos. It is a burden. It is not a something—why should they be burdened with my past?

D: Because they were—

G: It happened sixty—almost seventy years ago, right?

D: So they can know their identity, where they come from. That way you can honor the dead, remember the dead—

G: I am very happy to answer any questions.

D: So is the burden heavier than the need to remember your identity, your family, your grandparents, your great grandparents?

G: It’s a very sad thing for me.

D: So—

G: I wish I didn’t have such a good memory, Amos

D: Do you want Ben and Maddie to know the stories? Is it a burden for you to tell the story?

G: No, Amos, I am thinking of it anyway. But Ben if you want to know anything, you just ask.
My dad suggests that in order to know ourselves—our identity—we must know her story. Michaels might suggest that knowing ourselves by “honoring” and “remembering” the dead would ground our identity in not just a wounded past, but a dead past. I would argue that my dad’s understanding of identity construction is more complex than this reading of Michaels offers; it is not simply about collapsing the victim’s subjectivity onto oneself as a postgenerational rememberer, but about remembering in an ethical way so that we can know “where we come from” and how we can move forward within this “moral framework” that an understanding of the past lends us. It employs remembering as healing and understanding others so that we don’t “mistreat people” and so that in the face of another genocide we “save people.” As long as the postgenerational rememberer does not take on this wounded subjectivity themselves, but understands the distance from which they remember—these are the terrible events that happened, these are the people who suffered and perished, and here I am remembering them in my contemporary context—then an ethical and constructive remembering can occur. Hearing and learning the stories, for my dad, is about “creating [his] own identity, [his] own…ethical framework for living [his] own life” through an understanding of the past. This need to remember, my dad says, stems from a desire to situate himself on a strong moral foundation:
D: We also have a need to create our own life in an honest, genuine way, so you want to base it on a foundation that you personally can believe in. Before you move on and say I'm building my house and here's the foundation, you want to make sure it's as solid as possible because you're gonna have to live in it.

And these stories for my dad are that foundation—the house that he has built to live in. How though can one construct a basis for action, for living, from narratives of the past that are easily lost in passing of time, or withheld? He diligently collects his mother's stories. He also studies these stories and this history in order to live a meaningful life based on “a more complete and refined structure of ethics and morality” according to the inner ethics of these past events. Importantly, though, the narrative that these stories build is ever evolving:

D: You’re saying, but aren’t you limited by who you are? Well that’s inevitable, maybe you have to fight against that, and maybe your children help you do that, another generation rises and gives you back information, gives it to you from another direction, or a friend does, or further study does, of studying ethics and moral—of studying these stories.

My dad’s understanding of his own identity, as much as it is based in this past, continues to be challenged and changes accordingly as it faces
pressure from other voices, including my brother’s and my own. Ultimately what emerges though is a continued dedication to the past, but through multiple prisms. What matters here is the way in which he employs these memories of his parents’ past and where the feelings of anger and of loss get projected. As these feelings work to close off connections between himself and people of different histories, consolidating his identity based in the Holocaust by “remembering” and “honor[ing] the dead,” they function in a competitive network, as Michaels would suggest. However, they can also be used in a comparative framework by remembering so as not to “mistreat other people,” by allowing our limited worldviews, as influenced by our identity positions, to be challenged with information “from another direction” as we remember across and through differences. It is this kind of critical remembering that works against the idea of Jewish exceptionality with Jews as the “ultimate victims.”

**My Brother’s Story: Remembering through a Critical Reenactment**

My brother is also sifting through this history and our complicated understanding of what we’ve inherited from it. He is making a film about this search. His senior film thesis has since turned into a full-fledged film project that he has been working on for the past three years. In his words, the process of
creating the film and the narrative that it tells is about “understand[ing] grandma’s experience and who she was during the Holocaust in a way that’s independent of the stories that dad passed down to me about her.” This is his story. The film is now a collection of footage of towns and places in Eastern Europe that were significant for my grandma, including those which she mentioned in her diary—her hometown Beregszász, which is now part of Ukraine, her apartment in Prague, where she lived for several months after the war, Sommerda and Gelsenkirschen, two of the labor camps at which she was interned, and Auschwitz-Birkenau. In addition to this footage my brother has decided to reenact certain scenes from my grandma’s diary, playing her himself, thus displacing her story two generations and confusing its gender. His girlfriend plays Alex—the non-Jewish electrical engineer at the munitions factory in Sommerda, my parents play my grandma’s parents, and I play her younger sister, Irenke.

What though is the purpose of this reenactment? In reanimating our grandma’s story my brother wondered, “if I re-enact certain events that grandma wrote that she experienced, will it help me understand what she actually experienced any better? Will it allow me to more easily relate her experiences to experiences in my own life?” I was initially ambivalent about my brother’s idea of reenactment because of the arguments I had been reading for this thesis about the danger of recreating, and thus embodying memory as our own, to call it our own, even though we did not directly experience it. I
anxiously wondered were we the self-victimizing Jews that Michaels so severely critiqued? I soon realized though what my brother’s project was actually trying to do. Through the process of creating this film he is seeking to shed my dad’s narrative—the “reality” of the previous generation—in order to tell his own story. This works against the plot of Michaels’ remembering as each generation tells their own narrative anew. The reenactment was not an attempt to exactly or directly recreate the scenes of past in order to bring the past, intact, into the present as our own reality, but rather an intentional displacement of time, gender, location, and context to mark our distance from it. Our engagement with the original events is about understanding our displacement from those events by re-narrativizing the trauma in our own contemporary vocabulary. For my brother this vocabulary is his current neighborhood, Crown Heights, it’s the silk screen printing factory where his girlfriend Eliza works, its our childhood apartment, it’s his process as a filmmaker. It’s the question of how Grandma Shari’s history would look when reanimated in 2012.

So, we do not reenact the past because we are forever stuck in a victimized identity, as direct descendents of a traumatic past; instead we perform the past in the present to see the ways in which our lives are so profoundly different from the circumstances of that past. And we can learn that past, by reading her diary, and relate to that past by acting it out in our displaced way, but we cannot directly remember it because we were not there to experience it. In this way the reenactment is about learning, not reliving.
In a way, this project was an invocation of Hirsch’s postmemory with the understanding that we would never be able to fully “remember” what my grandma experienced seventy years ago, therefore all we could do was imagine it by recreating and embodying it in our current and contemporary vocabulary. These switches allowed us to honestly (and for my brother “deeply”) engage with the original narrative by showing both our connection to and displacement from these events. Imbued in this project is a desire for “direct” feeling—a more authentic understanding of past events—similar to my dad’s longing to “feel” the past. My brother writes that through this film he “want[s] to get as direct access to it as possible…that a reenactment will be more direct than textual reading, more experiential” and he “can't get in as deep just by reading.” So it’s about the depth of engagement through embodiment and reactivation—a desire for relationships (between present and past) that are based in our unique individual realities; about understanding the specifics of our grandma’s experience so that we do not have a de facto “third generation” identity, but understand the ways in which her experience and her memories operate in our lives so that we can understand both our connection to that past and our displacement from it. However, despite the intent of the displacement to facilitate a “deeper engagement” with her past, it also creates room for excusing any “not feeling” as the displaced reenactment functions outside of the immediate or direct. In other words, even though the recreation of the past in the present is meant to facilitate a deeper connection to that past, it is okay if it
doesn’t because of that very distance from that past. In a Caruthian way though, we can articulate our stories through that very space of unknowing.

Making a film by performing the reenactment, interviewing my family, filming scenes of contemporary Eastern Europe, and ultimately editing all of this material together into one narrative is about the process of creation, reanimation and refinement through which the past is realized in actual terms of the present. For my brother “the process of making it into a movie functions in [his] understanding of grandma's story and...in making a final product, it crystallizes. It's a resolution.” It allows him to tell his story. My brother traveled through Eastern Europe and found specific sites at which my grandma lived and worked, places she mentioned in her diary. This physicalization of her memories and diary narrative makes her immaterial his material. It becomes his, not in a proprietary sense, but in the sense that he now has his own lens on the past and it is his own narrative to tell. He seeks to create his own story, rather than repeat the one that has been passed down to him through my dad and other texts.

This process is not direct or straightforward. My brother is now inundated with footage which he must piece together in some kind of coherent narrative. He must craft his own story, but is not exactly sure what story to tell or how to tell it. My brother is ambivalent to have voiceover, to guide the reader so directly, but that inevitably is what the film is—my brother’s version of events. The film must work towards coherence between the different narratives.
and communicability, while allowing for various individual voices, ultimately letting my brother’s voice emerge most loudly.

Scenes from my brother’s reenactment script in which I played my grandmother’s sister, Irenke:

I. Irenke talks with Alex

_Irenke working at a station, Alex comes over to her, leans amicably/flirtatiously, talks with her for a minute, she is a bit shy, he walks away, Irenke smiles at camera (supposedly Sari) and beckons_ IRENKE’S STATION IS THE PAPER CUTTER

K. Sari and Irenke marching

_Sari is walking with Irenke along road (Eastern Parkway) BOTH STILL WEARING WORK JUMPSUITS_

_Shot A long zoomed in from front, just Sari (0:15), Shot B long zoomed in from front, Sari and Irenke (0:15), Shot C close dolly from front just Sari (0:30), Shot D medium dolly from front Sari and Irenke (0:30), Shot E close profile dolly just Sari (0:15), Shot E medium profile dolly Sari and Irenke (0:15), Shot F long zoomed in feet (0:15), Shot G long wide from front whole scene (0:30), Shot G long wide from rear whole scene (0:30)_

_(total = 225 seconds)_

M. Family in apartment

_Sari lies on stone floor, in the background father's feet. Sari gets up, father is making tea with arm in sling, Sari walks to bedroom, mother is sick in bed, Sari walks to other bedroom, Irenke is packing. Sari leaves the apartment and father stands in the doorway. SARI IS STILL WEARING WORK JUMPSUIT_

_Shot A close of Sari on floor with father's feet in the background. Make this all a single shot, camera should follow Sari from behind and shoot over Sari's shoulder. Look back at the end to show father in doorway. (3:20)
I asked my brother why he feels the need to experience our grandma’s history by narrating it? In crafting a script, he is able to tell his own story. And part of that is about crafting a more individualized identity. My brother feels that like the stories that have been passed down, he has been given a certain identity, “without necessarily receiving it willingly.” This process of telling his own story is about “trying to dig around that identity, dismantle it and understand what is beneath” by reactivating memory in his own context, through his own lens in order to construct a more critical identity. This is effectively the opposite of Michaels’ plot, as this process of “remembering” works to challenge a passed down identity, and construct one meaningfully using the present as a way to better understand the past.

There is something about the repetition—doing multiple takes to get the shot right—that made the experience more ordinary for me, yet intensified it for my dad. The repetition allowed him to meditate on his mother’s experience. It brought him back to that time and place, while for me it made their extraordinary situation seem more ordinary. My dad kept repeating how this experience of reenacting the scenes of his mother’s diary was making him realize the pain of what she and her family went through. He played his grandfather (whom he never met) who had a broken arm in the ghetto when he was preparing to evacuate. My dad mentioned how terrible it must have been for
him to endure the train ride to Auschwitz with a broken arm. In this same scene where my dad was preparing to leave the ghetto, I am packing. This scene was shot in my actual bedroom with my actual clothes and suitcase that I hadn’t fully unpacked since returning from college and would be packing for "real" again in a few days to return to college. For my dad repetition was the opportunity for a deeper mediation on the details and feelings of the past, while for me it was an exercise already based in my own habit. For both of us though, the repetition made the “exceptional” more ordinary by making it relatable.

The medium of film serves as filter through which we can relate to and understand the past—a kind of “screen memory” through which we do not access actual memories of the past, but our own understanding of our distance from those memories which “functions to open up lines of communication with the past” (Rothberg 12). In this sense, the mediation of the film and the weirdness of acting out a “real past” in takes would seem to defamiliarize the subjects from the content, but through the process of creating the film, the scenes of the past became more ordinary for my dad and me. The bizarreness of the screen performance aspect and of embodying these figures of the past paradoxically became more “real” and less strange through the repetition of scenes, doing multiple takes, as we referenced the past through our own presents.

On the second day of shooting I met my brother and the rest of the film crew on Eastern Parkway in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. We were filming the
death march scene in which my brother (my grandmother) and me (her sister, Irenke) were walking and walking. My brother currently lives in Crown Heights, home to significant Orthodox Jewish and African-American populations, notorious for the riot between members of the two communities in the early nineties. This felt like an oddly appropriate background for my brother’s film considering Michael Rothberg’s “multidirectional memory” which “acknowledges how remembrance both cuts across and binds together diverse spatial, temporal and cultural sites” and works to engage what can otherwise seem like “exclusive versions of cultural identity” (11). This space, which inhabits a history of distinct cultural identity narratives violently coming into conflict with each other, seemed to provide a fitting foundation off which to be working on a project about remembering through difference.

As we shot long, medium and close up shots of us walking, fast and slow, with our hands in and out of our pockets, Chasidic Jews walked in and out of the shot. We were walking right next to 770 Eastern Parkway—the Chabad, a Chasidic movement of Orthodox Judaism, world headquarters. We clearly stood out in our work jumpsuits with our film equipment. Some people stopped to ask us what we were doing. The Holocaust, it seemed, was an interesting and relevant topic of conversation amongst those who stopped to talk with us. One woman who stopped said her brother was a survivor of the Nazi camps and told us we were doing good work.
The reenactment scenes, shot on Super 8 film, possess a dream like quality appropriate for these time and gender-confused narratives to emerge. They seem to effectively tell a story without actually narrating that story, but perhaps I found this sort of understatedness so powerful because I was privy to the entire narrative. I wonder what meaning this film, largely stripped of any efforts to sentimentalize, will have for an “outsider” not as steeped in these stories and this history as my family. My brother’s footage of contemporary Eastern Europe tells another narrative; these places of the past exist in unique social and political realities today. It is impossible to access the past directly, but one must travel through these mediating circumstances of the modern-day realities of these places. Thus only in our displaced, indirect way can we relate to and engage with memories of our grandma’s past. In fact, it is in examining the displacement that these interesting textures of remembering emerge. Through remembering we examine how we are still able to relate to these experiences and how we have traveled away from them, distancing ourselves from their immediate narratives.

Looking Inwards

Examining how my family remembers helps to evaluate what it means to remember in “real” terms rather than only through theoretical or literary rememberers. Though my family members might mimic some of the patterns of
remembering that Michaels and others lay out, we exist on our own terms and 
_speak back_ to the theorists through our specific conditions and ways of 
remembering. As the theorists delineate structures within which we remember, 
we remember, and often not within those lines that have been set for us. This is 
in no way meant to diminish the value of the work of the previous two 
chapters, but to put that theoretical work in dialogue with a very real example 
of remembering the Holocaust, largely through a postgenerational framework: 
my family’s and my own.

It’s hard to examine my own family’s practice of remembering 
paradoxically because it is so immediate, direct, and available. It feels unfair to 
“use” their words as textual evidence to either prove or disprove the theory I 
have outlined in previous chapters. How then have I engaged with these words? 
These practices of remembering each hold their own intrinsic value in their 
uniquely textured ways of thinking about and narrating the past. It is therefore 
not a question of “good” and “bad” remembering, but about understanding 
how we reach towards the past and how that affects our identity position 
today. Indeed there are more and less destructive ways of remembering, but the 
point is not to condemn, rather to understand these textures of remembering; 
how people live after and in relation to a traumatic past—whether that past was 
the Holocaust itself, or growing up with that past lingering in the present.
Works Cited


Propst, Lisa. “Making One Story”?: Forms of Reconciliation in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* and Nathan Englander's *The


