

Book Review

Third-Generation Holocaust Representation: Trauma, History, and Memory. By Victoria Aarons and Alan L. Berger. Northwestern UP, 2017. 263 pp. \$100 (hardback).

Third-Generation Holocaust Representation: Trauma, History, and Memory is a collaborative effort by Victoria Aarons and Alan L. Berger, two distinguished scholars who have published extensively on literary representations of the Holocaust generally. Their jointly authored volume both builds upon such earlier works as Berger's 1997 *Children of Job: American Second-Generation Witnesses to the Holocaust* and Aarons' 2016 *Third-Generation Holocaust Narratives: Memory in Memoir and Fiction* and sits comfortably alongside such related texts as Helen Epstein's *Children of the Holocaust: Conversations with Sons and Daughters of the Survivors* (1979), Eva Hoffman's *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust* (2004), Erin McGlothlin's *Second-Generation Holocaust Literature: Legacies of Survival and Perpetration* (2006), and Marianne Hirsch's *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (2012).

Third-Generation Holocaust Representation is not precisely a capstone for this tradition of scholarship (more work necessarily remains to be done

on the still-emerging third-generation of Holocaust representation), but it provides a helpful overview of our present understanding of successive generations of Holocaust writing and includes a number of insightful readings of specific third-generation texts.

The book's first two chapters—"On the Periphery: The 'Tangled Roots' of Holocaust Remembrance for the Third Generation" and "The Intergenerational Transmission of Memory and Trauma: From Survivor Writing to Post-Holocaust Representation"—are arguably the strongest part of the book. The chapters discuss both the challenges unique to and modes of representation common to three successive generations of Holocaust and post-Holocaust writers: Holocaust survivors, their children (the second generation), and their grandchildren (the third generation). Part of the material on the first two generations is a review designed to provide context for the book's extended discussion of the third generation.

Unlike their Holocaust survivor grandparents, members of the third generation have no personal memory of the Holocaust and frequently feel ambivalent about even attempting to describe it, for fear of fraudulently appropriating an experience and suffering not their own. And unlike their second-generation parents, who grew up witnessing firsthand the trauma that so often held their survivor parents hostage, the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors tend to face a quite different challenge: a felt need to search out, record, and memorialize the experiences of a generation of survivors whose histories typically filter down to their grandchildren piecemeal, if at all.

Eva Fogelman's intriguing argument notwithstanding, all three generations are susceptible to trauma, but the kinds of trauma they experience differ materially from one generation to the next. The defining trauma for the first generation is the Holocaust itself, which creates a cluster of post-Holocaust symptoms ranging from aporia to repetition compulsion to the despair that can come from perpetually reliving the past as the present. "Can one die in Auschwitz, after Auschwitz?" Elie Wiesel's narrator in "An Old Acquaintance" asks rhetorically (52). The answer is of course, Yes.

The trauma experienced by the second generation, on the other hand, is experienced indirectly, as the children of Holocaust survivors grow up immersed in their parents' distress—a distress that is transmitted from parent to child either by way of stories of what the survivors experienced or

(as is more often the case) by way of what Aarons and Berger rightly call “a weighted silence that becomes solidified as felt anguish on the part of the survivor parent and dread on the part of his or her offspring” (57).

For the third generation, the residual trauma arising from the Holocaust manifests itself as a kind of second-degree absence, a sometimes poorly defined but nevertheless pressing awareness of familial disconnection and rupture that can generate an almost overwhelming sense of loss and longing. This subterranean awareness of loss and longing typically surfaces by way of what Ellen Fine calls “absent memory,” a memory vacuum “filled with blanks, silence, a sense of void” (126). Naomi Diamant further characterizes the experience as “a perception of memory as *loss*” (7), which third-generation novelist Nicole Krauss describes as follows:

[I]t has something to do with—everything to do with—the fact that my grandparents came from these places that we could never go back to because they’d been lost. . . . And people were lost. My great-grandparents and lots of great-uncles and aunts died in the Holocaust. I don’t know; maybe it’s something that’s inherited in the blood, a sense of a loss of that thing and a longing for it. (Qtd. in Wood)

The most illuminating part of the first chapters of *Third-Generation Holocaust Representation* is Aarons’ and Berger’s analysis of the ways in which this sense of loss and longing plays out in the memoirs, short stories, and novels written by grandchildren of Holocaust survivors. Aarons and Berger make a persuasive case that what third-generation writers most want is to discover the stories of their own families, the stories of their own, singular loss. And they want to do so precisely in order to “forge a connection among generations, . . . to reanimate the fractured family by means of the orderliness of historical reconstruction” (12–13). In the process, they hope to memorialize the dead, commemorate those who survived, and embody an appropriate response to the atrocities of the Holocaust by binding into one the families and generations so brutally fractured by the Nazis.

This search for knowledge is typically expressed by way of a quest narrative that begins and ends in the present but that returns—partway through

the narrative—to the scene of the Holocaust crime by making pilgrimages to what Pierre Nora calls “sites of memory”—a process of historical reconstruction that may include interviews, archival research, and the use of a variety of sources of information that can be gained piecemeal, including “vague references, indirect stories, conversations overheard, oblique observation, and from documents, abstract ‘histories’” (6).

Much of what the third generation discovers is likely to be incomplete and even contradictory, in part because a reasonable amount of the available evidence filters down to them by way of what Marianne Hirsch calls the second generation’s “postmemory” of the trauma suffered by their survivor parents. “Postmemory,” Hirsch writes,

describes the relationship that the “generation after” bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they “remember” only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. (postmemory.net)

The second generation sometimes resents postmemory because the brute fact of their parents’ suffering tends to trivialize their own suffering by comparison. But the third generation often searches out postmemory as a treasure-trove of knowledge that will help them reclaim a lost inheritance. Postmemory is for the third generation technically an indistinct rather than an indirect memory, and in fact the second and third generations react to postmemory so differently that it makes sense to distinguish second-generation postmemory from a third-generation phenomenon that is increasingly associated with the phrase popularized by Eva Hoffman, “after such memory.” In Gerd Bayer’s subsequent expansion of Hoffman’s initial phrase, “after such memory” is best applied to the experiences and expectations of the third generation: “the ‘after’ in this phrase,” Bayer concludes, “has a significantly different relationship to the past from the ‘post’ in postmemory. The latter defines itself through a sense of belatedness that

puts the zero degree of memory at the moment of trauma. The former phrase firmly holds on to the present and looks for a place of memory within everyday life" (132).

As Aarons and Berger are careful to note, the third generation's quest for insight and connection is anything but easy. The third generation worries that they will necessarily misrepresent the past. Their parents are often reluctant to help, in part because they want to shield their children from the knowledge of the worst horrors of the Holocaust. And although their grandparents may be less reticent to recount the stories of their lives, they may be "resistant to the efforts to uncover that which was secreted in their own attempts to repress and compensate for both individual and collective grief" (64). And lurking behind all that is the sure knowledge that time is running out and that sooner than later, the last of the first-generation witnesses will die.

Given how difficult it is to uncover and sift through the available evidence, it is perhaps not surprising that the literature of the third generation tends to focus, sometimes to the point of obsession, on specific pieces of information, especially information about family members. Indeed, one of the signal contributions of *Third-Generation Holocaust Representation* is Aarons' and Berger's consideration of the extent to which the work of the third generation is shot through with "careful attention to detail, numbers, places, dates, and identities, as if the recreation and visualizing of the particulars will fill the empty spaces created by time and distance" (15). Not surprisingly, at the heart of this accumulation of details resides a deeply felt psychological need: "Such quests for the particulars . . . are compulsory and, in some ways, compensatory attempts to offset the haunting and chronic condition of loss" (19).

After discussing the third generation's felt sense of loss, its employment of the quest narrative, and the way it excavates sites of memory, postmemory, and the information gleaned "after such memory" for relevant information about family members who suffered in the Holocaust, Aarons and Berger conclude their analysis of third-generation representation by linking that generation's goals to the goals of the generation that precedes them. As *Third-Generation Holocaust Representation* makes clear, the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors return again and again to the technical residue of the past in order to work through the same five stages of development

Daniel Bar-On initially identified with respect to the work of the second generation: knowledge, understanding, emotional response, attitude, and behavior, including a cluster of insights designed, as much as anything, to help establish “ethical constraints and guidelines for future generations” (39).

In the pursuit of those difficult, worthy goals, the third generation necessarily “finds itself engaging in a tenuous balance between identification and distance. On the one hand, there is the compelling impulse to understand the particulars of the events On the other hand, there is a very clear, if regrettable, sense of the distance that must be transversed” (34). At its best, the third generation’s quest for enlightenment and connection does more than simply mine the past and follow the second generation’s lead. At its best, the third generation’s quest for a kind of narrative truth that supplements—though it does not replace—historical truth holds the looming threat of forgetfulness at bay by simultaneously discovering and enacting the kind of collective memory that “does not erode with time, but rather, gathering momentum, as Lisa Appignanesi suggests, ‘cascades through the generations’” (33). And in analyzing that important and laudable process, *Third-Generation Holocaust Representation* does much the same.

The remaining chapters of *Third-Generation Holocaust Representation* provide individual readings of representative third-generation writers, cycling through memoirs, novels, and short stories in sequence, before returning—in the last chapter—to a consideration of a final novel, Julie Orringer’s *The Invisible Bridge* (2010). The readings in this part of the book are interesting in their own right, but their primary function is to provide detailed examples of the generational tendencies described in the book’s first two chapters.

“Third-Generation Memoirs: Metonymy and Representation in Daniel Mendelsohn’s *The Lost*” highlights both the anxiety Mendelsohn feels while attempting to narrate his family’s past and the pressure he feels to do so regardless, a pressure that—in the words of Emily Miller Budick—“has intensified as increasingly temporal distance has made speaking or writing about the Holocaust that much more precarious and forgetting it all that much easier” (330). *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million* (2006) also illustrates the tendency among third-generation writers to rescue particularity from generality: “My book,” Mendelsohn reminds Andrew O’Hehir, “is about six people, not six million people.” In discussing *The Lost*,

Aarons and Berger emphasize the extent to which found objects—old photographs, letters, postcards, Holocaust memorial objects, and the like—represent an individual path to memory and, in the process, “become the frame, the scaffolding upon which [Mendelsohn] erects the lost narrative of his great-uncle’s life” (85). They close the chapter by acknowledging the challenges inherent in the task of using the technical residue of the past to return to a place one has never been: “The third-generation memoirists, regardless of the number of return visits to the actual and approximate sites, still find themselves lost in the fragments of memories and the accumulation of artifacts and names and dates, and of the places they traveled” (100). The resulting return is necessarily as much novel as memoir, the unstable embodiment of what Anna Richardson rightly calls “a dialectic between knowing and not-knowing” (159).

The three chapters on third-generation novels use novels by Joseph Skibell, Michael Chabon, Jonathan Safran Foer, Nicole Krauss, and Julie Orringer to illustrate a related cluster of third-generation tendencies, including a return to the site of memory, a preoccupation with found objects, an exploration of the relationship between displacement and nostalgia, and various attempts to repair the world by way of magical realism, Jewish myth, mysticism, folktales, and such figures as the golem and the *lamed vov zaddik*. Krauss’ novels in particular bear witness to her Holocaust inheritance in ways designed to deny the Nazis ultimate victory by responding to her family’s catastrophic loss with hard-fought—and ultimately hard-won—hope. In *Man Walks into a Room* (2002), *The History of Love* (2005), and *Great House* (2010), Krauss simultaneously acknowledges the material reality of intergenerational transmission of trauma and attempts a partial repair of the world—*tikkun ha-olam*—through loving memory, witness, writing, and family. As Aarons and Berger put it, “In Krauss’s worldview, the burdens of inheritance and intergenerational transmission of traumas can be turned into joys of a rich and a reciprocally nourishing relationship between parents and children, one deeply anchored within a family unit and based on a tradition developed out of stories of loss, survival, and redemption” (155).

“Nicole Krauss: Inheriting the Burden of Holocaust Trauma” is a reasoned analysis of Krauss’ work as a representative third-generation novelist, and after what is essentially an extended aside into the use of found objects—especially photographs—in various third-generation short stories

and works characterized as “imagination based on fact” (Johanna Adorján, qtd. in Bottom), *Third-Generation Holocaust Representation* closes with surprisingly helpful chapter on *The Invisible Bridge*. Aarons’ and Berger’s discussion of the novel is solid, but more importantly, “‘There Were Times When It Was Possible to Weigh Suffering’: Julie Orringer’s *The Invisible Bridge* and the Extended Trauma of the Holocaust” also includes an extended meditation on various of the issues raised earlier in *Third-Generation Holocaust Representation*, including an important discussion of the connections among memory, history, and fiction.

After reviewing the ongoing controversy concerning the use of the word “memory” to describe what is for the third generation necessarily an act of imaginative creation, Aarons and Berger both concede the point—“To be sure, those who were not present for the unfolding of events of the Holocaust cannot in any literal measure of the term ‘remember’ such incidents” (205)—and reach an eminently reasonable middle-ground concerning what can properly be said to constitute memory, history, fiction, and—ultimately—truth:

Given the inevitable constraints of language and perception, “memory” is an inexact term to describe the way in which post-Holocaust generations absorb and transmit the events that they do not, in fact, remember. That being said, the term “memory” has a useful place in these discussions, especially when conceived of differently, as more fluid. . . . The generic boundaries between history and fiction must especially be fluid and are so for third-generation Holocaust writers. The ideal of remembrance becomes, not just a matter of the known facts . . . but of histories still needing to be revealed, both personal and general. These histories are built from a combination of discovered historical data, often from personal sources and the recollection of such, but also from visits to places and archives. Because we lack the precise vocabulary to identify the unique relationship that post-Holocaust generations have to the event, we require a metaphor that will approximate the way in which post-Holocaust generations identify themselves with the collective and individual traumatic imprint of the Holocaust. . . . That

metaphor is “memory,” but understood generically as the mixing of memoir and fiction.

Thus memory as a central critical metaphor operates in the same way that we “remember” the more quotidian events of our more proximate familial pasts, those moments we transferentially identify, occasions in which we may not have been literally present, but we are made affectively present through iterations of stories, photographs, artifacts that have been handed down throughout the generations. Memory as a trope becomes a means of mediating loss and arbitrating distance and temporality. (205–06)

This valorization of constructed, mediating memory both links the final chapter of *Third-Generation Holocaust Representation* to its first two chapters and affirms constructed memory as a concept and mode of analysis that stands shoulder to shoulder with such associated concepts as collective memory, postmemory, and “after such knowledge.” Indeed, in the final analysis, Aarons’ and Berger’s advocacy of the kind of memory brought into being by way of the related processes of recovery and creation may be *Third-Generation Holocaust Representation*’s most important contribution of the evolving field of Holocaust study.

WORKS CITED

- Aarons, Victoria. *Third-Generation Holocaust Narratives: Memory in Memoir and Fiction*. Lexington Books, 2016.
- Bayer, Gerd. “After Postmemory: Holocaust Cinema and the Third Generation.” *Shofar*, vol. 28, no. 4, 2010, pp. 116–32.
- Berger, Alan L. *Children of Job: American Second-Generation Witnesses to the Holocaust*. SUNY P, 1997.
- Bottom, Sari. “Interview: Johanna Adorján, Author of *An Exclusive Love*.” *SMITH Magazine*, 25 Feb. 2011. smithmag.net/memoirville/2011/02/25/interview-johanna-adorjan-author-of-an-exclusive-love/.
- Budick, Emily Miller. “Acknowledging the Holocaust in Contemporary American Fiction and Criticism.” *Breaking Crystal: Writing and*

- Memory after Auschwitz*, edited by Efraim Sicher, U of Illinois P, 1998, pp. 329–43.
- Diamant, Naomi. “Fighting the Assassins of Memory: Fifty Years on.” *The Holocaust: Lessons for the Third Generation*, edited by Dominick A. Iorio et al., UP of America, 1997, pp. 1–11.
- Epstein, Helen. *Children of the Holocaust: Conversations with Sons and Daughters of the Survivors*. G. P. Putnam, 1979.
- Fine, Ellen S. “Transmission of Memory: The Post-Holocaust Generation.” *The Holocaust: Lessons for the Third Generation*, edited by Dominick A. Iorio et al., UP of America, 1997, pp. 125–34.
- Hirsch, Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*. Columbia UP, 2012.
- . “Postmemory.” postmemory.net/.
- Hoffman, Eva. *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust*. PublicAffairs Books, 2004.
- Krauss, Nicole. *Great House*. Norton, 2010.
- . *The History of Love*. Norton, 2005.
- . *Man Walks into a Room*. Doubleday, 2002.
- McGlothlin, Erin. *Second-Generation Holocaust Literature: Legacies of Survival and Perpetration*. Camden House, 2006.
- Mendelsohn, Daniel. *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million*. Harper-Collins, 2006.
- O’Hehir, Andrew. “Finding the Lost.” *Salon*, 14 Dec. 2006. archive.li/XXLX5E.
- Orringer, Julie. *The Invisible Bridge*. Knopf, 2010.
- Richardson, Anna. “In Search of the Final Solution: Crime Narrative as a Paradigm for Exploring Responses to the Holocaust.” *European Journal of English Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2010, pp. 159–71.
- Wiesel, Elie. “An Old Acquaintance.” *Legends of Our Time*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968, pp. 39–53.
- Wood, Gaby. “Have a Heart.” *The Observer*, 4 May 2005. theguardian.com/books/2005/may/15/fiction.features3.

—Daniel K. Muhlestein
Brigham Young University