

Central Lancashire Online Knowledge (CLoK)

Title	"To Tell the Story": Cultural Trauma and Holocaust Metanarrative
Type	Article
URL	https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/14351/
DOI	##doi##
Date	2019
Citation	Hunter, Anna Clare orcid iconORCID: 0000-0003-4202-920X (2019) "To Tell the Story": Cultural Trauma and Holocaust Metanarrative. <i>Holocaust Studies</i> , 25 (1-2). pp. 12-27. ISSN 1750-4902
Creators	Hunter, Anna Clare

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. ##doi##

For information about Research at UCLan please go to <http://www.uclan.ac.uk/research/>

All outputs in CLoK are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including Copyright law. Copyright, IPR and Moral Rights for the works on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the <http://clock.uclan.ac.uk/policies/>

I.ii.: “To Tell the Story”: Cultural Trauma and Holocaust Metanarrative

Anna Clare Hunter, University of Central Lancashire

In the brutal nights we used to dream
Dense violent dreams,
Dreamed with soul and body:
To return; to eat; to tell the story.¹

In the literature surrounding Holocaust representation we encounter repeated references to culture being ruptured as a result of the Holocaust. Shoshana Felman, in response to Paul Celan’s poetry, claims that ‘the breakage of the verse enacts the breakage of the world’.² Further reference is made in work of Maurice Blanchot: ‘the disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact [...] The infiniteness of the threat has in some way broken every limit’.³ The notion of rupture also forms the basis for Josh Cohen’s 2005 book *Interrupting Auschwitz*. Cohen proposes that:

in confronting the Nazi genocide, contemporary thought has attested repeatedly to an experience of its own limit. By their own accounts, historical, sociological, psychological, philosophical and theological reason encounter here less a contained object of enquiry than an uncontainable rupture and exhaustion of their explanatory resources.⁴

This article proposes that post-Holocaust Western Culture⁵ has turned to the narration of the Holocaust, primarily through written survivor testimony but also through fictional narrative and film, as a means by which closure of this rift can be sought. In doing so, testimony has been constructed within the cultural imagination as a literary genre in its own right, through the adoption and appropriation of tropes, images and narrative structures, and this genrefication has led to a metanarrative of the Holocaust that, whilst appearing to facilitate engagement with the event, actually acts as a screen between the cultural imagination and the damaging effects of the Holocaust.

As a starting point, it is first necessary to unpick the meaning of ‘damaging effects’. Culture can be viewed as a system of shared meanings and ideologies, put into practice as exemplars for lived experience.⁶ The outward face of a culture informed by such a collectivising is identified by Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka as ‘a collective self-image’.⁷ An image, that

is, based upon a society's understanding of its own ideologies and values, its own systems of shared meanings, its beliefs, and the actions taken in support of these. This last point leads us to the third and final key identifier of culture, none other than history itself. This position is enforced by Stuart Hall: 'culture [is] interwoven with all social practices [...] the activity through which men and women make history'.⁸ In addition to a shared system of meaning, the 'self-image' of culture is informed by 'fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation'.⁹ The identity ('self-image') of a specific culture is thus characterised by the way in which it views its own history, filtered through a 'collective image of the past'.¹⁰ Access to this history (and by extension the image) is regulated via the practice of cultural memory: 'a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behaviour and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation'.¹¹ Cultural memory can thus be understood as the subjective rendering of historical events, symbiotically linked to the notion of cultural self-image. This rendering is in itself the product of repetition and re-enactment through multi-generational narrative practices. Significantly, cultural memory is not an automatic reflex of the collective body of knowledge that constitutes a culture; rather, it is in itself a construct, designed to incorporate the events of history into a frame of reference appropriate to the culture itself. In this sense it is not strictly a form of memory at all, but another series of cultural practices akin to narrative. As Susan Sontag notes, 'what is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that *this* is important, and this is the story about how it happened'.¹² It is my contention that the rupturing effect of the Holocaust is located in its effect on the three pillars of cultural identity: Meaning – Image – History. As we shall see, the first two of these are completely destabilised by the extremity of the event, and it is to the third, realised in its narrative form as cultural memory, that we turn in order to repair the rift.

So how does the Holocaust attack these pillars? Death, and the practices of mourning that accompany it constitute one of the most heavily ritualised aspects of any culture. Death itself can be read as a cultural ritual, which draws its meaning from the culture-specific mourning practices that it provokes.

Within the anonymous slaughter of the camps, death as a cultural signifier ceases to have any meaning: there is no signified death, only the abjection of the corpse. Commenting on the representation of the Holocaust within survivor testimony, Terence Des Pres identifies this distinction as one of the key elements in the effect of the Holocaust on the survivor:

the dead in the camps were stacked naked in piles, rammed into ovens, tossed every which way into ditches and pits. But the man or woman who dies in normal circumstances becomes the object of complicated ritual practices which confer meaning and dignity upon his or her death and therefore humanise it. The primacy of death is denied symbolically.¹³

The cultural practice of denying the immediacy of death through symbolic ritualisation is itself denied in the inverted world of the camps. The characterising feature of death within the camps is precisely that it is an event void of all meaning. We see repeated evidence within survivor testimony of the brutally meaningless nature of death within the camp experience:

there were no prayers at his grave. No candles were lit to his memory.¹⁴

the yard is full of them. Naked. Stacked side by side. White, a bluish whiteness against the snow. Heads shaved, pubic hair straight and stiff. The corpses are frozen. White with brown toenails. There is something ridiculous about these cocked up toes. Horrifyingly laughable [...] Now the dummies are lying in the snow [...] The women lying there in the snow are yesterday's companions.¹⁵

[C]onsider If This Is a Man
Who works in the mud
Who does not know peace
Who fights for a scrap of bread
Who dies because of a yes or a no.¹⁶

Such examples reveal to us the extent to which death in the camps is removed from its 'normal' cultural context. As Blanchot puts it, 'it renders death vain [...] The disaster, depriving us from that refuge which is the thought of death'.¹⁷ The meaningless nature of death in this context calls to mind Primo Levi's conception of 'useless violence': a key element in the Nazi programme of dehumanisation.¹⁸ In fact, the negation of death as a signifier in this manner equates to a negation of the human, reinforcing the dehumanisation of the inmate and simultaneously posing a direct challenge to cultural meanings at large. Why should this be the case? To imagine the camp death as 'useless' implies that death in 'normal circumstances' (as Des Pres puts it) could in some way be 'useful'; this is also suggested in Blanchot's reference to death as a 'refuge'. The 'usefulness' of death within its 'normal' cultural context is encoded within the ritualised mourning practices that are attached to it: 'to know what mourning is, to know how to come to terms with death, and how to transfigure the work of death into a work that gives and gives something to be seen'.¹⁹ It is

these practices that are challenged and destabilised by the lack of meaning of death in the Holocaust. Echoing Blanchot's characterisation of death as a 'refuge', Derrida poses the existence of

what Lyotard calls the 'beautiful death' or the 'magical' death [which] is the one that gets meaning, and gets it as an order given to an addressee. It is a beautiful death because the order thus given to a dying or mortal addressee, the verdict addressed to him, signifies to him that this death has meaning.²⁰

The 'beautiful death' attains its 'beautiful' or 'magical' state precisely through the attribution of meaning. This is in turn 'related to a rhetoric of mourning that tries to complete or even foreclose mourning by lifting death up, sublimating it in the fulfilment and glory of the 'beautiful death'.²¹ As Des Pres notes in the quotation cited above, death is removed from itself by a ritualised process of mourning that locates it only within its symbolic value and conveniently avoids the abjection of the corpse, cited by Derrida (in turn quoting Marin) as a constant requirement 'throughout the ages that the body be covered over, buried, and in a way monumentalised by and in its representations'.²² Comforting as this may be, the corpse of the Holocaust victim cannot be covered over, nor is it buried or monumentalised. Rather it exists both within the reality of the camp and within the public imagination (informed by stark images of piles of naked corpses) as a bare representation of the meaningless death within the camps. Derrida observes this in his commentary on Lyotard's *The Differend*: "Auschwitz" would be the exception to the law of the "beautiful death" [...] "Mourning" never appears, and the word "mourning" has no grounds for appearing'.²³ Mourning itself is thus rendered void in the absence of the 'beautiful death'.

Meaning is also fractured within the Holocaust universe by the rejection of the name. For Derrida, it is the name itself that summons up the symbolism of signified death: 'the proper name alone and by itself forcefully declares the unique disappearance of the unique [...] Death inscribes itself right in the name'.²⁴ However as Derrida acknowledges, 'in the case of 'Auschwitz' [...] it is the extinction of the very name that forbids mourning'.²⁵ Within Derrida's framework of mourning, the first step in the practice of mourning is to speak the name of the dead, the name which is now detached from the body. Post-Holocaust, we find a complete inversion of this as we are confronted with multitudinous bodies of the dead who have no names. In the case of the Holocaust, neither the name nor the body lives on; thus the shattering impact of death cannot be so readily arbitrated by the incantation of the name in

mourning. Derrida himself notes the 'infinite violence' perpetrated against the victims of the Holocaust, 'depriving them of both a grave and a name'.²⁶ Death without the name, then, is comparable as 'infinite violence' with the 'violence beyond representation'²⁷ identified by Gillian Rose when death loses its cultural meaning. Loss of name becomes equivalent to loss of meaning.

In addition to challenging shared systems of meaning, the Holocaust also has a shattering impact upon the 'collective self-image' which is essential to the formation of cultural identity. The self-image of a culture is not only derived from how the group sees itself in the present moment, it also depends very heavily (perhaps more so) on the ability of the group to perceive their unity through a common image of their past. It is this attempt to find unity through a collective vision of past events that leads to the breakdown of Western cultural self-image through the dissolution of the self/other dichotomy that, under normal circumstances, works to reaffirm both who we are, and who we are not. As Judith Butler observes 'the very 'I' is called into question by its relation to the Other'.²⁸ This begs the question, in the image of culture reflected by the Holocaust, what constitutes 'I' and what is 'Other'? It is a question that is often raised within survivor testimony, as the survivor seeks to provoke just such a confrontation between culture and its own image. Thus Charlotte Delbo's appeal to 'you who know'²⁹ demands that we examine our own knowledge of ourselves and our cultural meanings, for inevitably we do not know, unless we have shared the experience of the camps. Levi's poem 'Shemá' addresses its question directly to 'you who live safe | In your warm houses' (1-2),³⁰ asking us if we recognise our own image of the human in the destitute camp prisoner that the poem portrays. Similarly, the whole project of Simon Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower* is to demand explicitly of the reader an answer to the question that so many other Holocaust survivor testimonies implicitly raise: 'you, who have just read this sad and tragic episode in my life, can mentally change places with me and ask the crucial question, "What would I have done?"'³¹ In a culture whose self-image and sense of unity is based upon an act of identification, how can we position ourselves in relation to a historical event in which, as Levi identifies in his conception of 'The Grey Zone', there are infinitesimal layers of guilt and innocence? When we gaze at our own culture in the mirror provided by the Holocaust, with whom or what are we able to identify? We reject an identification with the perpetrators of atrocity outright, as to acknowledge this would be to admit that our own culture, indeed ourselves, are capable of the same. However, although human instinct may drive us to identify with the victim, this is also impossible as a) there is

no basis in shared experience and b) to do so would be to acknowledge our own vulnerability to extreme violence, which is equally untenable as to consider ourselves as the potential perpetrators of such violence. As Gillian Rose comments on the project of reading Holocaust survivor testimony: 'you emerge shaking in horror at yourself, with yourself in question'.³² Yet it is repeatedly to this third pillar of cultural identity – history in the form of narrative, often realised as survivor testimony - that we turn as a culture in order to seek some sort of means by which this rupture can be healed.

Lawrence Langer has commented on the tendency within Western culture to assign to Holocaust testimony something akin to a redemptive function; or to try to frame the experience of the Holocaust survivor within the established Christian narrative of death followed by salvation in an attempt to neutralise the threat that the Holocaust poses to the stability and continuity of that culture. Langer notes that 'scarcely a volume appears that is not celebrated as a homage to "the indomitable human spirit";³³ yet the project of survivor testimony is often precisely the opposite of this. Langer's comments reveal the extent to which Western culture has attempted to impose meaning upon the Holocaust by viewing it through the mediatory lens of pre-existing narrative frames of reference and aligning these with new, culturally constructed frames of reference in the form of a metanarrative aimed towards the assimilation of the event into cultural memory.

As an act of negotiation between past and present, cultural memory is called upon to construct narratives of the past that adhere to 'current social and political agendas'.³⁴ When Oren Baruch Stier comments that 'memory construction is memory negotiation',³⁵ we can read into this an attempt on the part of contemporary constructions of cultural memory of the Holocaust to heal the rupture provoked in post-Holocaust culture. This is facilitated in part by the production of a narrative of cultural memory that reflects the values that a culture wants to see in itself. It is also possible to read this act of cultural narration in terms of trauma theory, which is how Mieke Bal situates the construction of cultural memory. Bal echoes Stier and Pierre Nora by identifying cultural memory 'as an activity occurring in the present, in which the past is continuously modified and redescribed even as it continues to shape the future'.³⁶ For Bal, cultural memory is a product of a 'collective agency'. The concept of a cultural group forming a collective subject in this way opens the door for Bal's discussion of cultural memory in the light of trauma theory, in which 'trauma can paradoxically stand for the importance of cultural memory'.³⁷ Central to this formulation is

the possibility of what Bal terms ‘narrative reintegration’, the inscribing of traumatic memories into narrative as a healing process. This theory of trauma and recovery is usually applied to the individual subject. However, viewing a culture in terms of a collective subject enables us to further understand cultural rupture in terms of a trauma enacted upon the collective psyche. The significance assigned within trauma theory to the failure of the traumatic memory to enter into narrative can be equated with a failure of the process of interiorisation that categorises traditional mourning practices. Following Derrida’s suggestion that within an individual performative act of mourning, the interiorisation of the dead Other is critical to the ability to accept the loss and move forward, the appropriation of Holocaust survivor testimony into cultural memory can be viewed as a collective act of interiorisation that attempts to narrate the Holocaust into cultural memory. This act is reminiscent of the idea that an act of narration can heal trauma by integrating the traumatic memory into the narrative memory of the subject. As such the integration of the Holocaust into the narrative of cultural memory can thus be viewed as an attempt to counteract the trauma enacted upon culture by the extremity of the event. All of this centres upon the possibility of transmitting the Holocaust as narrative, for as Bal comments, ‘to enter memory, the traumatic event of the past needs to be made “narratable”’.³⁸ It is at this point that we turn to the significance of Holocaust survivor testimony within cultural memory.

There are two potential frameworks by which we can understand the relation of testimony and cultural memory. The first of these, proposed by Nora, sees testimony as forming a *lieu de mémoire*, defined within Nora’s framework as ‘any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community’.³⁹ As Nora notes, memory is tied to sites, thus the main function of *lieux de mémoire* is to provide a site within which memorialisation can take place. Nora proposes that certain historical traces become *lieux de mémoire* through a deliberate act of memorialisation on the part of the culture to whose history they belong:

lieux de mémoire arise out of a sense that there is no such thing as spontaneous memory, hence that we must create archives, mark anniversaries, organise celebrations, announce eulogies, and authenticate documents because such things no longer happen as a matter of course. When certain minorities create protected enclaves as preserves of memory to be jealously safeguarded, they reveal what is true of all *lieux de mémoire*, that without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep them away.⁴⁰

In this deliberate act of memory, a cultural group chooses the most relevant ‘vestiges’ of history to commemorate and thus infuse with memorial meaning.⁴¹ In doing so ‘these bastions buttress our identities’.⁴² We choose as our *lieux de mémoire* those aspects of our history that best suit our own self image of the present: therefore *lieux de mémoire* perform the function of the building blocks of cultural memory, enabling us to construct an acceptable vision of the past. It is in this manner that Nora is able to label the *lieu de mémoire* as ‘a distorting mirror, twisting its own themes in ways that define its significance’.⁴³ Can we thus view survivor testimony as this ‘distorting mirror’? Consider the following, in light of the work that we have already done on understanding survivor testimony:

the *lieux* of which I speak are hybrid places, mutants in a sense, compounded of life and death, of the temporal and the eternal [...] The fundamental purpose of a *lieu de mémoire* is to stop time, to inhibit forgetting, to fix a state of things, to immortalise death, and to materialise the immaterial.⁴⁴

This citation speaks to both the atemporality of survivor testimony and to the construction of testimony as a site of negotiation between past and present that we have posed above. The commemorative aspect of testimony is enacted in the inhibition of forgetting: ‘never again’ developing out of ‘never forget’. Significantly, Nora identifies one of the key purposes of the *lieu de mémoire* as ‘to capture the maximum possible meaning with the fewest possible signs’.⁴⁵ The ‘fewest possible signs’ here relates to the generic tropes of testimony; thus it is the very commonality of genre that enables us to construct survivor testimony as a *lieu de mémoire*. Reading the genre of testimony as a *lieu de mémoire* facilitates the memorialisation of something that the vast majority of us have no actual memory of. We are able, through this construction of cultural memory, to find access to the very ‘inaccessible’ past that Nora speaks of, and that in terms of the Holocaust is even more inaccessible than usual. There is, however, a point at which this formulation becomes problematic. Faced with the question of whether a memoir may be a *lieu de mémoire*, Nora notes that this would be subject to certain conditions: ‘the memoir writer must be aware of other memoirs [...] He must find a way to identify his individual story with a more general story. And he must somehow make his personal rationale consonant with public rationality’.⁴⁶ This is certainly the case for some writers of Holocaust testimony: Levi in *The Drowned and the Saved* attempts to situate his own narrative against a backdrop of collective testimony, as does Charlotte Delbo. It would be impossible, however, to claim that this is true for all survivor testimonies, especially given that the act of testifying is at heart an introspective one. In the moment of testimony, the

initial witnessing of the event that had previously eluded narrative memory, the individual survivor may have little concern for whether his or her text will situate itself well in relation to other texts of the genre. Ultimately, cultural response to the genre of testimony is not predicated upon whether or not an individual text can be considered a *lieu de mémoire*. Rather, I propose that the entire genre is in itself constructed as a *lieu de mémoire* within the cultural imagination: in the act of reading collectively, we assume the necessary identification with Nora's 'general story'. Reading the genre of testimony as a *lieu de mémoire* offers the opportunity for an easy assimilation of the Holocaust into cultural memory; however to embrace this opportunity without question would be reductive. In accepting and reproducing the meta-narrative of the Holocaust that is suggested by the genrefication of testimony, western culture constructs the entire genre of testimony as a *lieu de mémoire*, not because the evidence exists to support this, but because we wish it to be so. By embracing the genre of testimony as a *lieu de mémoire* it is possible to convince ourselves that we have created a memorial space for the Holocaust within cultural memory; however this signals a further misdirection of the commemorative gaze: testimony as *lieu de mémoire* becomes little more than a repository for our own pseudo-identification with the Holocaust. The mirror is a distorting one because it allows us to see the version of ourselves that heals the rupture with the past through a present-day act of incorporation. In an echo of the very atemporality that characterises the *lieu de mémoire*, by constructing the genre of testimony in this manner as a *lieu de mémoire* we in fact lose our connection to history; our engagement with testimony becomes all about how we see ourselves in our connection to the events of the past.

This argument is supported and distilled by Stier, using slightly different terminology but nevertheless arriving at similar conclusions. Stier appropriates the religious formulations of 'icon' and 'idol' to illustrate his theory of how the historical trace or artefact can mediate between the past and the present to produce cultural memory. Stier proposes that 'Holocaust icons [are] those representations which, though complex and inspiring a certain level of discomfort, nonetheless communicate something of the meaning of the past without overly distorting it'.⁴⁷ Again, this is a theorisation that can be readily applied to Holocaust survivor testimony: the 'discomfort' described by Stier equating to the paradox of identification encoded within the testimonial narrative. Stier uses the religious terminology deliberately to convey 'the issue of the presumed sanctity of Holocaust symbols and, especially, artefacts'.⁴⁸ This echoes Nora's claim that 'memory situates remembrance in a sacred context'.⁴⁹ In fact,

there is within this formulation a precedent for reading a text as an icon: the Bible, for example, acts not only teleologically within the Christian faith but also as an iconic form. The same might be said for the Qu'ran or the Torah Scrolls, all of which are afforded the 'superstitious respect and veneration' within their respective religious groups that Nora ascribes to the trace,⁵⁰ and that I propose is directed towards Holocaust survivor testimony. In fact, Levi pre-empts my argument in *If This Is a Man*, by suggesting that the stories of the survivors 'are simple and incomprehensible like the stories in the Bible. But are they not themselves the stories of a new Bible?'⁵¹ For Stier, symbols and artefacts become icons for remembrance when viewed in their proper memorial context;⁵² therefore once again we arrive at the possibility that when testimony is read collectively, as a genre, it is afforded this iconic status: reading the 'hundreds of thousands of stories'⁵³ in light of each other is what enables Levi to group them *collectively* as 'a new Bible'. Through the formation of genre, we can thus read the texts of testimony as one meta-text, one Holocaust icon within Stier's framework. Like the *lieux de mémoire*, the icons of Holocaust memory act as 'symbolic mediators of memory [...] in order to carry out the project of remembrance'.⁵⁴ This is achieved through an engagement with the past facilitated by the icon in the present moment: 'the performative quality of how an aspect of the Holocaust is contextualised that gives it its vibrancy and lends the illusion of immediacy'.⁵⁵ The performative essence of the icon returns us to the question of trauma and cultural memory, for as the past is enacted through the performative quality of the icon, this mirrors the performative re-enactment of trauma: 're-enactments of traumatic experience take the form of drama, not narrative'.⁵⁶ Insofar as both trauma and the icon are performative, we can identify a further link between the icon and the narrative of trauma contained within survivor testimony. It is here, however, that another problem arises. The performative re-enactment of trauma is not conducive to memory and commemoration (as Stier argues the icon is), rather it is a result of a failure of incorporation into narrative memory. Similarly, we can argue that the repeated engagement with the genre of testimony within the cultural imagination amounts not to a continuous process of commemoration through the mediatory performance of the icon, but a traumatic repetition born of a failure of incorporation into cultural memory. What can account for this disjunction? Stier offers us the answer in the form of the 'idol', a 'false god' of memorialisation that is developed from an inappropriate response to the Holocaust icon.⁵⁷ The distinction between the two is identified as follows: 'a religious icon is a medium for worship; an idol is itself the object of worship'.⁵⁸ In terms of cultural memory, 'icons [...] call attention to the gap between then and now, now and here, to the necessary vicariousness

of their (re)presentational strategies. Idols often erase that distinction, offering too much closure'.⁵⁹ As an icon (or as a *lieu de mémoire*) the genre of testimony offers the chance to engage with the events of the Holocaust, to face our own image in the mirror of the past. What in fact happens is that we treat the testimony itself as the event, so that 'the icon replaces the discourse that produced it'.⁶⁰ This is to a certain extent unavoidable, owing to the predominance of metonymy within Holocaust representation. Elsewhere in my research I have argued that the genre of Holocaust survivor testimony is constructed around a series of metonyms;⁶¹ this is reflective of the fact that, according to Stier, in choosing one part to become representative of the whole, the metonym becomes one of the most effective means of representing the enormity of the Holocaust:

metonymic representation, relies on elements drawn in some way from the Holocaust and the Holocaust's remnants or residues in the present (the situating of *identity*) [...] Because memory is constituted of and by the past, it is more suited to the metonymic than to the metaphoric style.⁶²

Within cultural memory the meta-narrative produced out of the genre of testimony metonymically stands in for the Holocaust in general. Perhaps this is not surprising, given the predominance of metonymic imagery that informs the meta-narrative itself. By focussing on the genre of testimony itself rather than its ability to mediate between our present selves and our ruptured past, we engage in what Stier describes as 'a mistake of interpretation [...] Idol making shows a misplaced (or displaced) impatience for redemption, and easy redemption, especially in the case of the Holocaust, is an impossible desire, an ever deferred wish'.⁶³ One of the most common forms of 'idol making' that we encounter in relation to survivor testimony is apparent in the cultural response to the survivor himself. In the words of Dori Laub, 'survivors frighten us', because they remind us of 'a horrible traumatic past [...] bear witness to our own historical disfiguration'.⁶⁴ Survivors are rendered profoundly 'Other' by their experiences; this is replicated in the number of survivor testimonies that speak of the impossibility of rejoining the world post-liberation. It is difficult to know how to respond to the survivor in his 'Otherness': this is evidenced in the impossibility of identification that dominates the genre of survivor testimony. The two most predominant responses to this impossibility are to idolise or infantilise the survivor, to compound this sense of 'Otherness' so that we do not have to address what it is that the survivor represents. An examination of contemporary fictional representations of the Holocaust reveals a clear trend towards the infantilisation of survivors; [this is exemplified in the narrator Ben's frustration with his](#)

survivor parents in Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces*. Growing up, Ben has almost unmitigated access to the facts of the Holocaust:

the images my father planted in me were an exchange of vows. He passed a book or magazine to me silently. He pointed a finger. Looking, like listening, was a discipline. What was I to make of the horror of those photos, safe in my room with the cowboy curtains and my rock collection? He thrust books at me with a ferocity that frightened me, I would say now, more than the images themselves. What I was to make of them, in my safe room, was clear. You are not too young. There were hundreds of thousands younger than you.⁶⁵

These facts, this knowledge, frustrates Ben, to the extent that as he grows older he rejects his parents. He represents them as overprotective and irrational, afraid of their own shadows:

I learned not to bring school friends home. I worried that our furniture was old and strange. I was ashamed by my mother's caution and need as she hovered, 'What is your last name...what do your parents do...where were you born...?' My mother begged my father and me for news from our world [...] She carried our passports and citizenship papers in her purse 'in case of a robbery.' She never left a dirty dish in the sink, even if she were just walking to the corner store.⁶⁶

Ben's parents and their experiences are alien to him, so he infantilises them as a coping strategy, rendering their fears as nothing more than childish superstition. We find further evidence of this in a number of sources. In an inversion of the parent-child relationship the nine-year old protagonist of David Grossman's *See Under Love* believes it is his duty to rescue his parents from their post-Holocaust anxiety:

who else can save Mama and Papa from their fears and silences and krechtes, and the curse, which was even worse after Grandfather Anshel turned up and made them remember all the things they were trying so hard to forget and not tell anyone. Momik intends to rescue Grandfather Anshel as well, of course.⁶⁷

In Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, the central protagonist's father, Vladek, is represented in a very similar manner to Ben's parents in *Fugitive Pieces*, as a miserly, irritable old man plagued by child-like superstitions and insecurities 'he ran out of the hospital, against the doctor's advice. He says that he doesn't trust the doctors here [...] it's crazy. He looks like a ghost!'⁶⁸ To a certain extent, this trend towards infantilisation is not only derived from our inability to understand the experience of survivors; it is also a product of the very nature of that experience. In his reflective analysis of the concentration camp experience, Bruno Bettelheim claims that within the camp, prisoners became like 'innocent children', completely dependent

upon the SS for their basic elementary needs.⁶⁹ The troubling link to the Nazi project of dehumanisation clearly serves to further problematise the representation of the survivor as child; this level of discomfort replicates once again the problematic question of identification for post-Holocaust European culture, however much one might wish not to identify with the perpetrators. Additionally, by identifying with the protagonists of texts such *Maus* we also identify with the frustration and impatience generated by survivors in these narratives: a frustration that proceeds from our own lack of understanding.

To infantilise the Holocaust survivor neutralises some of their troublesome power; an alternative, but equally problematic, paradigm for responding to Holocaust survivors is to over-emphasise that power through the process of idolisation. Herehere, in light of Stier's framework of icons and idols, I wish to examine the construction of the survivor as Holocaust idol.

In the penultimate chapter of his final text, *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi invites the reader to participate in the discourse that has proceeded from his correspondence with certain members of his audience, specifically, 'Letters from Germans'. The content of these letters is varied, and contains for the most part a mixture of apology and denial. There is one writer, however, who demonstrates a trend that is common in contemporary cultural responses to the Holocaust:

about you too I have constructed for myself a well-defined image: it is you, who, having escaped a terrifying destiny (forgive my presumption), wanders about our country, still estranged, as in a bad dream. I thought I ought to sew a new suit for you like those donned by the heroes of legend, a suit that will protect you from all the world's dangers.⁷⁰

H.L., a young woman born after the end of the war, is described by Levi as an 'intimately gentle person'.⁷¹ She seems in her letters to be genuinely seeking to understand the past, and how the country of her birth could have produced the monstrosity of the Holocaust. However, her approach to this quest for knowledge, centred on her relationship with Levi, is characterised by a profound misdirection of gaze. In posing Levi as a 'hero' she is seeking redemption for the sins of the past by idolising what was previously rejected by her culture as undesirable, however she is also placing him in an untenable position: 'I could not recognise myself in this image [...] I answered that such suits cannot be given away as gifts: one must

weave and sew them for oneself'.⁷² In appropriating Levi as an idol through which she can enact her own redemption, H.L. (unintentionally, it would seem) shifts focus away from Levi's experience of the past and rests it firmly on her own experience in the present. This is the effect of all Holocaust idols, and one that is replicated in the appropriation of the genre of Holocaust testimony within cultural memory.

For Imre Kertész, it is the Holocaust survivor himself who is responsible for the process of idolisation. In a commentary on his fellow survivors, Kertész observes that:

There is something shockingly ambiguous about the jealous way in which survivors insist on their exclusive rights to the Holocaust as intellectual property, as though they'd come into possession of some great and unique secret; as though they were protecting some unheard-of treasure from decay and (especially) from willful damage. Only they are able to guard it from decay, through the strength of their memory.⁷³

Within this positioning of the survivor as guardian of memory, it is the survivor himself, rather than the reality of his experience (whatever that reality may be) that becomes the focus of the public gaze, deflecting attention away from the painful memory of that experience. There is a temptation, Kertész argues, to encourage that gaze, to invite it to linger:

the drive to remember seduces us into sneaking a certain complacent satisfaction into our reminiscences: the balsam of self-pity, the martyr's self-glorification. And as long as we let ourselves float on the lukewarm waves of belated solidarity (or the appearance of solidarity), we fail to hear the real question, always posed with trepidation but still audible, behind the phrases of the official eulogies: how should the world free itself from Auschwitz, from the burden of the Holocaust?⁷⁴

This is not to say that the survivor resists any act of healing through commemoration, 'the survivors, indeed, long for nothing else'.⁷⁵ Rather, the objectifying gaze of publically held memory renders the figure of the survivor opaque, so that no beams of illuminating memorial experience may pass through. The survivor becomes his own idol, the locus of officiated remembrance rather than a vehicle for memory and healing. In posing the question "who owns Auschwitz?" Kertész reminds us all that the era of the witness⁷⁶ is drawing to a close: 'as they grow weaker with age, Auschwitz is slipping out of their hands. But to whom will it belong?'⁷⁷ How will it be possible to nurture and maintain cultural memory of the Holocaust when the idols on which such memory is predicated are no longer available? The genuine concern that living memory of the Holocaust is about to pass us by reveals the extent to

which cultural memory is dependent upon the survivor-idol; we have yet to form a meaningful relationship with our own past.

In addition to this, there is a further difficulty inherent in the idolisation of the survivor that once again raises the question of metonymy. Recalling Paul Ricoeur's claim that ancestors are infused with an opaque symbolism,⁷⁸ we can relate this to the idol function: whereas an icon is translucent and provides a conduit for mediation between present and past, an idol ~~is opaque, reflecting-reflects~~ only our own present self-image back at us. As a symbolic figure who 'comes to occupy the place of an Other',⁷⁹ the survivor metonymically stands in for those who perished. This is clearly problematic; however it is also to a certain extent unavoidable: as Levi notes, 'the drowned have no story'.⁸⁰ The meta-narrative of the Holocaust that is derived from the genre of testimony is informed exclusively by the narratives of those who survived the atrocity (there are very rare exceptions to this: Anne Frank, for example, who is also identified as a 'cultural icon' by Tim Cole).⁸¹ The gaze of the reader is therefore turned exclusively towards the survivor-author who becomes representative of all other survivors, as well as those who did not survive. By focussing the memorial gaze on the survivor as a Holocaust idol, we condense the multiplicity of Holocaust experiences into one narrative of survival. We seek redemption in our engagement with the meta-narrative of testimony, ~~with the hegemonic Holocaust Story~~, in the same way that we seek identification within the narratives of the individual survivor testimonies that constitute the genre, in order to convince ourselves that we are not responsible for the atrocities presented to us by the fact of the Holocaust. This is an effort at self-consolation that is doomed to inadequacy. We recognise the potential within testimony for negotiating between our past and present selves, however we ultimately fail to take advantage of this potential, using the text itself as a screen between the present and the unpleasant image of the past. As Levi comments of his own testimony, 'the two books [...] have interposed themselves, in a curious way, like an artificial memory, but also like a defensive barrier, between my very normal present and the dramatic past'.⁸² This can be read as a microcosmic version of the overall effect of the assimilation of the genre of testimony into cultural memory. Paradoxically, the act of remembrance encoded within the engagement with testimony is ultimately inverted to become an act of forgetting.

Thus we arrive at an aporia: having identified that a meta-narrative of the Holocaust exists and the processes by which it came into being, we must now acknowledge that, on the one

hand, it militates against the integration of the Holocaust into cultural memory by providing an 'easy' cultural frame of reference that screens the true horror of the event and facilitates an inappropriate sense of cultural redemption. On the other hand, however, Holocaust meta-narrative also provides a framework within which we can explore our own responses to the Holocaust, and negotiate the dialectic between remembering and forgetting. Can these two faces of the Holocaust Story be reconciled? Clearly echoing Cohen's proposition that 'it is just this inner tendency towards self-division that constitutes the truth of the lyric after Auschwitz'⁸³ Sue Vice argues that the most appropriate form of narrative representation is 'riven with a more fitting linguistic and narrative self-doubt'.⁸⁴ Following this, I would suggest that for contemporary Holocaust narrative, the best approximation of a response is not to seek closure or redemption but rather to embrace the rupturing effect of the Holocaust, inhabit the aporia that it provokes within narrative, develop and work within the tensions between seeing, knowing and understanding that the Holocaust demands that we confront. James Young argues that

so long as we are dependent on the 'vocabulary' of our culture and its sustaining archetype, it may not be possible to generate entirely new responses to catastrophe. It may now be possible, however, to respond from within our traditional critical paradigms with self-awareness of where traditionally conditioned responses lead us in the world.⁸⁵

By formulating a critical awareness of the restrictions imposed by our own cultural archetypes of interpretation, we are able to acknowledge the limitations of modern engagement with the Holocaust, and this in itself becomes a form of response.

References

- Jan Assman & John Czaplicka, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity', *New German Critique*, 65 (1995): 125-33
- Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe & Leo Spitzer (eds), *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (Hanover, NH & London: University Press of New England, 1999)
- Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996)
- Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004)
- Josh Cohen, *Interrupting Auschwitz: Art, Religion, Philosophy* (New York: Continuum, 2005)
- Tim Cole, *Images of the Holocaust: The Myth of the 'Shoah Business'* (London: Duckworth, 1999)
- Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, trans. Rosette C. Lamont (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995)

Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001)

Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976)

Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub MD, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992)

[David Grossman, *See Under Love*, trans. Betsy Rosenberg \(London: Jonathan Cape, 1989\)](#)

Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms', *Media, Culture and Society* 2.1 (1980): 57-72

[Imre Kertész, 'Who Owns Auschwitz?', trans. by John Mackay, *Yale Journal of Criticism* 14.1 \(2001\): 267-272.](#)

Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991)

Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man / The Truce*, trans. Stuart Woolf (London: Abacus, 1987)

Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 1988)

Primo Levi, 'Reveille', trans. Ruth Feldman and Brian Swann, in *Holocaust Poetry*, ed. Hilda Schiff (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1995)

Primo Levi, 'Shemá', trans. Ruth Feldman and Brian Swann, in *Holocaust Poetry*, ed. Hilda Schiff (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1995)

[Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces* \(London: Bloomsbury, 1997\).](#)

Pierre Nora, ed., *The Realms of Memory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, 3 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996)

Anna C. Richardson, *To Tell The Story: Tracing the Development of Holocaust Narrative from Personal Trauma to Popular Fiction*, (University of Manchester [PhD Thesis], 2008)

Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, 3 vols (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988)

Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996)

Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (London: Penguin, 2003)

[Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, 2 vols, \(New York: Random House, 1986\)](#)

Oren Baruch Stier, *Committed to Memory: Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003)

Sue Vice, *Holocaust Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2000)

Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Stella Rodway (London: Penguin, 1981)

Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower: On The Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness* (New York: Schocken Books, 1997)

[Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of The Witness*, trans. Jared Stark \(Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press\).](#)

James E. Young, *Writing and Re-writing the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1990)

¹ Levi, 'Reveille', 117.

² Felman, *Testimony*, 25

³ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 1.

⁴ Cohen, *Interrupting Auschwitz: Art, Religion, Philosophy*, 1.

⁵ [The focus of this study is on what Imre Kertész describes as 'European \(or at least western European\) public consciousness' \('Who Owns Auschwitz?', 267\). This is not to exclude or marginalise specific cultural memories of the Holocaust but rather to explore the construction, situation and traumatic impact of the Holocaust within the mass cultural imagination.](#)

⁶ Assmann and Czaplicka, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity', 129.

⁷ Assmann and Czaplicka, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity', 126.

-
- ⁸ Hall, 'Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms', 63
- ⁹ Assmann and Czaplicka, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity', 129
- ¹⁰ Assmann and Czaplicka, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity', 127
- ¹¹ Assmann and Czaplicka, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity', 126
- ¹² Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 76
- ¹³ Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps*, 156.
- ¹⁴ Wiesel, *Night*, 123.
- ¹⁵ Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 17-8.
- ¹⁶ Levi, 'Shemá', 205.
- ¹⁷ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 3.
- ¹⁸ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 83.
- ¹⁹ Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, 159.
- ²⁰ Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, 235
- ²¹ Brault and Naas, 'To Reckon with the Dead: Jacques Derrida's Politics of Mourning', 19.
- ²² Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, 152
- ²³ Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, 236
- ²⁴ Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, 34
- ²⁵ Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, 237
- ²⁶ Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, 185
- ²⁷ Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, 132.
- ²⁸ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 23.
- ²⁹ Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 11.
- ³⁰ Levi, 'Shemá', 205.
- ³¹ Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower: On The Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*, 98.
- ³² Rose, *Mourning Becomes The Law*, 50.
- ³³ Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, 2.
- ³⁴ Stier, *Committed to Memory: Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust*, 11
- ³⁵ Stier, *Committed to Memory: Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust*, 11.
- ³⁶ Bal, *Acts of Memory*, vii.
- ³⁷ Bal, *Acts of Memory*, x.
- ³⁸ Bal, *Acts of Memory*, x.
- ³⁹ Nora, *The Realms of Memory*, xvii.
- ⁴⁰ Nora, *The Realms of Memory*, 7.
- ⁴¹ Nora, *The Realms of Memory*, 6.
- ⁴² Nora, *The Realms of Memory*, 7.
- ⁴³ Nora, *The Realms of Memory*, 15.
- ⁴⁴ Nora, *The Realms of Memory*, 15.
- ⁴⁵ Nora, *The Realms of Memory*, 15.
- ⁴⁶ Nora, *The Realms of Memory*, 17.
- ⁴⁷ Stier, *Committed to Memory: Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust*, 32.
- ⁴⁸ Stier, *Committed to Memory: Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust*, 41.
- ⁴⁹ Nora, *The Realms of Memory*, 3.
- ⁵⁰ Nora, *The Realms of Memory*, 9.
- ⁵¹ Levi, *If This Is A Man*, 72.
- ⁵² Stier, *Committed to Memory: Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust*, 41.
- ⁵³ Levi, *If This Is A Man*, 71.
- ⁵⁴ Stier, *Committed to Memory: Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust*, 33.
- ⁵⁵ Stier, *Committed to Memory: Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust*, 45.
- ⁵⁶ Bal, *Acts of Memory*, ix.
- ⁵⁷ Stier, *Committed to Memory: Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust*, 33.
- ⁵⁸ Stier, *Committed to Memory: Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust*, 32.
- ⁵⁹ Stier, *Committed to Memory: Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust*, 32.
- ⁶⁰ Stier, *Committed to Memory: Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust*, 32.
- ⁶¹ Richardson, *To Tell The Story*, 73-120.
- ⁶² Stier, *Committed to Memory: Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust*, 3.
- ⁶³ Stier, *Committed to Memory: Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust*, 32-3.
- ⁶⁴ Laub, *Testimony*, 73.
- ⁶⁵ Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, 218-9.
- ⁶⁶ Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, 229.
- ⁶⁷ Grossman, *See Under Love*, 18

⁶⁸ Spiegelman, *Maus* vol II, 121.

⁶⁹ Bettelheim, *The Informed Heart*, 114.

⁷⁰ Levi, *The Drowned and The Saved*, 157.

⁷¹ Levi, *The Drowned and The Saved*, 158.

⁷² Levi, *The Drowned and The Saved*, 157.

⁷³ Kertész, 'Who Owns Auschwitz?', 267.

⁷⁴ Kertész, 'Who Owns Auschwitz?', 268.

⁷⁵ Kertész, 'Who Owns Auschwitz?', 268.

⁷⁶ Wieviorka, *The Era of The Witness*

⁷⁷ Kertész, 'Who Owns Auschwitz?', 267.

⁷⁸ Paul Ricouer, *Time and Narrative*,) iii, 115.

⁷⁹ Paul Ricouer, *Time and Narrative*,) iii, 115.

⁸⁰ Levi, *If This Is A Man*, 96.

⁸¹ Cole, *Images of The Holocaust*, 23-46.

⁸² Levi, *The Truce*, 397

⁸³ Cohen, *Interrupting Auschwitz*, 21.

⁸⁴ Vice, *Holocaust Fiction*, 5-6.

⁸⁵ Young, *Writing and Re-writing the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*, 192.