Popular Trauma Culture

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Selling the Pain of Others in the Mass Media

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PREFACE

As it matters more who is speaking when scholarship extends beyond the theoretical and empirical to the ethical realm, let me briefly make my subject position explicit here. Having spent my first eighteen years in East Germany has made me critical of capitalism's many injustices but also appreciative of democracy, despite its flaws. The democratic ideal of freedom of thought, though never absolute, allowed me to think, speak, and write uninhibited by political pressures. Furthermore, the virtual absence of the Holocaust from East German collective memory, which I have critiqued elsewhere, has shaped my thinking on Holocaust commemoration, because it made me critically aware of the political appropriation of the past.

Another significant influence official East German memory had on me may be best conveyed via a story-within-a-story anecdote. My friend Eran mentioned one day that a fellow graduate student had asked to borrow his car while Eran went home to Israel for the summer. He had agreed but asked that the student from the former West Germany clean it inside and out before returning the car. When he did not appear keen to do so, Eran joked: "But don't you know, *Arbeit macht frei*." My bewilderment at his clever but atypically unkind and ethically dubious comment was reinforced by knowing that Eran's father had survived Auschwitz. To my astonished question why he had never tried anything like this on me, Eran spontaneously replied: "It wouldn't have worked on you." Beyond having spent about a third of my life and the vast majority of my adulthood in the United States, I believe it is my East German upbringing that makes my thinking about Holocaust commemoration free from the oxymoronic sense of vicarious guilt that many (former) West Germans, even of the second and third postwar generation, still experience.

My critical stance toward official Holocaust memory was also influenced by the fact that I only learned about the small concentration camp, a satellite work camp of Neuengamme, that had existed outside my home town of Neustadt-Glewe, when I read John Roth and Carol Rittner's volume of Holocaust testimony *Different Voices* in Stephanie Hammer's Holocaust seminar. After some local history research, I found Lilli Kopecky, who had come to the camp on a death march from Auschwitz and was liberated there. Like myself at the time, Lilli was

living in Los Angeles, and I regularly visited her for three years until I left for a postdoctoral research project in Israel. The conversations with Lilli have immeasurably contributed to my understanding of the Holocaust as lived experience and my sense of German collective identity. So has the chance encounter at a delicatessen in Haifa with another Auschwitz survivor who was liberated in Neustadt-Glewe and her generous invitation to visit her at home, where she shared her life story with me. These experiences have also made me aware that much official Holocaust commemoration, whether in the United States, Germany, or Israel, as well as some Holocaust scholarship in literary and cultural studies, anachronistically and unethically appropriate the actual survivors by transforming them into rhetorical figures.

There is a risk to publicly pondering one's subject position, as the brief reflections in this preface may be misused for an indiscriminate critique or even a blanket rejection of the argument developed in the book, instead of engaging in rational and empirically grounded scholarly debate over differences. I have nevertheless traced some of the experiences that shaped and reflect my subject position because it makes explicit some of the context within which my notion of ethics with regard to collective Holocaust memory and the representation of victimhood generally emerged. It also indicates that, while my critique is harsh at times, it is not callous but rooted in convictions that emerged in a decade-long process of self-reflection that was informed by the interactions between personal life and scholarship.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I gladly take this opportunity to gratefully acknowledge the many friends and colleagues who have helped this book along from inception to publication. Peter Blickle generously offered to read an earlier draft of the manuscript, and I remain immensely grateful for his generosity of spirit and enthusiastic encouragement over the past years. Guy Stern likewise thoroughly read the manuscript. Beyond that, I thank him as well as my other colleagues at Wayne State University for believing that I might some day grow into his shoes when they hired me upon his retirement. One day, Guy noted my shiny red sneakers, and remembering my earlier comment that his were big shoes to fill and would thus be the size of clown shoes on my feet, he joked that those were not his shoes. I greatly appreciate that I was encouraged by him and my colleagues at WSU—including Don Haase, Alfred Cobbs, Lisa Hock, Roz Schindler, Mark Ferguson, and Felicia Lucht—to "wear my own shoes." They helped me to develop my own research agenda rather than follow narrowly in Guy's footsteps or be restricted by my appointment in German-Jewish studies. While my research agenda differs from Guy's, he has been a role model both as a scholar and a person.

Wulf Kansteiner's theoretically and empirically erudite scholarship and his critical stance toward postmodern ethical relativity informed much of my thinking. His book *In Pursuit of German Memory: History, Television, and Politics after Auschwitz* sparked my interest in scholarly analyses of television programs and popular culture generally. Moreover, his critique of postmodern trauma theory and enthusiastic encouragement of my own reinforced my idea of writing a book that explores the ubiquity of the trauma concept in popular culture without recycling tropes from this still dominant discourse. I am also genuinely grateful for his exceptionally generous support in many a pragmatic matter.

My gratitude also goes to the anonymous reviewers of the manuscript for their time, effort, and constructive criticism. I would particularly like to thank one of them for a beautifully written and incisively argued review that was enthusiastically supportive to the extent of preemptively defending my arguments against just about any potential criticism. It also made explicit for me that I intuitively argue and indeed wrote the book "from an unapologetically Enlightenment perspective."

I would furthermore like to thank Atina Grossmann, Irene Kascandes, Leslie Morris, and Dorothee Wierling for the interest they expressed in my ideas at various conferences, and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum for her extensive support in both academic and personal matters. Many thanks also to Stephanie Hammer for teaching me the core ideas in Holocaust studies. For instance, she made me aware of the notion of collective identity by occasionally asking me, as the only German student in class, what I thought about a particular idea as a German. I have built my own research on the foundation I acquired in the graduate seminar Stephanie guest-taught at UCLA about a decade ago. When she gave me a copy of her book *Schiller's Wound: The Theater of Trauma from Crisis to Commodity*, she added a personal note that ended with the words "Now—here's to *your* book on trauma!" I hope she likes this one.

Karen Flint, Lori Lantz, and Eran Neuman have remained friends since grad school despite the distance between Detroit and Charlotte, Berlin, and Tel Aviv respectively. I specifically dedicate every "however" in this book to Eran since he once mentioned that this is his favorite word in English. And while the word "pink" probably does not figure in most scholarly manuscripts, it does make an appearance in mine and is dedicated to Lori because, as Olaf says, to her pink is not a color but an attitude. And after a recent stay with Karen, David, and Kerala in London, any mention of the city in the book and elsewhere now also serves as a reminder of this great time.

Let me also mention old and new friends and colleagues and thank them for formal and especially informal exchanges of ideas and stories at many conferences that I hope will continue for many years to come: Ulli Bach, Valentina Glajar, Yvonne Ivory, Susanne Kelley, Yulia Komska, Erin McGlothlin, Kerstin Müller, Caroline Schaumann, Joachim Schlör, Vera Stegmann, Susi Vees-Gulani, and Sebastian Wogenstein.

I am grateful to my PhD students Pauline Ebert and Juliana Mamou for both thinking independently and appreciating my advice, as well as being intrinsically motivated to write their dissertations. I am especially indebted to Pauline for her patience in waiting for my comments on her chapters. Her genuinely friendly, kind, and cooperative personality made the transition from *Doktormutter* to friend and colleague natural and easy. I am certain that Juliana will likewise soon complete an excellent dissertation.

My manuscript would not have become a book without Leslie Mitchner, the humanities editor at Rutgers University Press, and Marlie Wasserman, who serves double duty as the press director and editor in Holocaust and Jewish Studies. I am sincerely grateful to both of them. The book also greatly benefited from Rachel Friedman's editorial skills, which helped me to ruthlessly cut the manuscript in length by about a quarter, and in the process clarify the argument. Thanks also to Rachel for encouraging my tentative idea to reflect

explicitly on my subject position. I would also like to thank Charles Annis for his thorough final editing of the manuscript.

I'm also grateful that Mark Ferguson and Louise Speed (and Sox) kept an eye on my house when I was away and helped in countless other pragmatic matters. And I owe apologies to my neighbors on Audubon Road who had to tolerate my front and back yard becoming ever more jungle-like over the past two years as the necessity of finishing the book before tenure review left time for little else. Last but certainly not least, I would like to thank my parents for supporting me in their own ways.

I am genuinely grateful for all of the encouragement even if I didn't always heed the advice but, *pace* Kant, plucked up the courage to use my own mind. The somewhat precarious decision, given the time constraints of tenure track, not to revise my dissertation but instead write a book from scratch was rewarded by the extensive interest in my manuscript among major American scholarly presses, six of which requested that I submit it for review. (That I remained committed to Rutgers University Press speaks to the exceptional support my project received there.) By writing a new book I could expand beyond the discursive constraints of the dissertation framework, generated after all during early graduate work, and thus develop a new research agenda that extends beyond both my home discipline of German studies and the canon that still dominates much literary studies scholarship to contemporary American popular culture. It also reflects my growing interest in ethical questions and will, I hope, contribute to the current ethical turn in cultural studies after some three decades of postmodern relativism.

Popular Trauma Culture

Introduction

Oprah at Auschwitz

"We've become accustomed in American culture to stories of pain, even addicted to them. . . . In a culture of trauma, accounts of extreme situations sell books. Narratives of illness, sexual abuse, torture, or death of loved ones have come to rival the classic, heroic adventure as a test of limits that offers the reader the suspicious thrill of borrowed emotion."

–Nancy Miller and Jason Tougaw, *Extremities*[1]

The notion of popular trauma culture developed throughout the pages of this book can be captured in a nutshell by a brief discussion of three media events that exemplarily mark its emergence, culmination, and critique. The first is the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, which began on April 11, 1961.[2] Information about the trial was not only widely disseminated via radio, newspapers, and magazines, such as Hannah Arendt's famous reports for *The New Yorker* subsequently published as *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, but also and especially through the new medium of television. While this was the first trial filmed in its entirety, the television broadcasts focused on the testimony of Holocaust survivors and thus both reflected and reinforced the significance attributed to the witness accounts by the prosecution. However, as most survivors had no knowledge of crimes for which Eichmann could be legally held accountable, they did not function as eyewitnesses in the judicial sense, but were ascribed the new social function and identity of historical witnesses. Chief prosecutor Gideon Hausner and Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion wanted to use the trial to teach the world a history lesson.[3] Indicating his intuitive understanding of the new media discourse generated by television, Hausner cast survivors rather than legal experts as the core figures in the trial. As they were accompanied by dramatic displays of raw emotions, survivors' personal accounts of persecution were far more suitable for television than complex historical and juridical accounts of Eichmann's role in the "Final Solution."

The Eichmann trial not only introduced the significant notion that the genocide of European Jewry was a distinct and defining event in twentieth-century history, but it also constitutes the first key instance of popular trauma culture. It infused Western culture with the pain of others, to use Susan Sontag's famous phrase,[4] represented in historically and politically decontextualized narratives. They were constructed around a melodramatic conflict between absolute innocence and rank evil, which was embodied in the dichotomized flat characters of victim and perpetrator. According to the core story paradigm, the main character eventually overcomes victimization and undergoes a metamorphosis from the pariah figure of weak and helpless victim into a heroic survivor. As part of this transformation process, the victim-cum-survivor generates a witness testimony of the past traumatic experiences. The paradigmatic story line moreover recycles the Christian suffering-and-redemption trope of spiritual purification through physical mortification in trauma-and-recovery narratives and encodes a latently voyeuristic kitsch sentiment as the dominant mode of reception. Although the first day of the Eichmann trial proceedings thus symbolically marks the birthday of popular trauma culture, as cultural trends are generated through the mass media, its birthplace is the ephemeral space of the radio and TV airwaves rather than the Jerusalem courthouse.

The second exemplary media event in the genealogy of popular trauma culture, the *Oprah Winfrey Show Special* broadcast on May 24, 2006, signifies its most spectacular culmination to date. It depicts the host and Elie Wiesel at Auschwitz. After the fiasco of featuring James Frey's largely fabricated memoir *A Million Little Pieces*, in which he narrates his recovery from alcohol and drug addiction, in September 2005, Winfrey selected Wiesel's *Night* as the next text for her book club. As Adam Shatz, the literary editor of the *Nation*, put it sarcastically in the *LA Times*, what better way for Winfrey "to insulate herself from criticism over the Frey contretemps than to warm herself by the hearth of Holocaust remembrance?"[5] Shatz also noted that "Oprah is planning a trip to Auschwitz with Wiesel. . . . And yes, the pilgrimage to the camps will be filmed."[6] During their televised engagement in Holocaust tourism, Winfrey and Wiesel walk past the camp's iconic markers that have become so emblematic for the cultural memory of the Holocaust that the name of the camp provides its metonymy. The memorial site's surreal, otherworldly aura has been skillfully enhanced by the almost complete absence of other visitors at this usually heavily populated site, visited annually by about a million tourists, and by filming on a snowy day.[7] The thick snow generates an eerie light that blends the grounds into an equally milky-white sky. Although the show was filmed in color, it echoes the post-color black-and-white aesthetic of *Schindler's List* since, apart from Winfrey's colorful scarf and a pair of red shoes skillfully displayed atop the pile of shoes in the museum's exhibition, virtually all color is effaced by the peculiar quasi-black-and-white aesthetics generated by the white light outdoors.[8]

Simultaneously enveloped in and juxtaposed as two dark figures to the eerie, deadly still, and deserted white space, Winfrey and Wiesel are engaged in a conversation that generates a dissonant fusion between his quasi-religious understanding of the Holocaust as an incomprehensible mystery of suffering and redemption and her self-help platitudes of trauma and recovery. Film critic J. Hoberman's apt critique of *Schindler's List* as the ultimate "feel-good story about the ultimate feel-bad experience" thus likewise pertains to the *Oprah Winfrey Show Special*.[9] While Winfrey's immensely popular talk show reflected and reinforced trauma culture discourse, Roger Luckhurst's characterization of her as "the inaugurating figure of contemporary trauma celebrity"[10] pertains equally well to Wiesel, the other iconic representative of American trauma culture. He personifies the complementary discursive tendency of Holocaust sanctification to Winfrey's trauma-and-recovery kitsch. Functioning as "both priest and prophet of this new religion"[11] as which he practices Holocaust commemoration, Wiesel embodies victimhood and survivorship for a small, but culturally influential elite. They consume highbrow media like his more than forty books and the Arts and Leisure section of the Sunday *New York Times*, where they encounter Wiesel's Christ-like public persona of the eternally suffering victim and his regular sermons on the supremely significant and universally applicable, yet inherently incomprehensible, lessons of the unique Holocaust mystery.[12]

Winfrey and Wiesel not only engage in what John Lennon and Malcolm Foley have termed "dark tourism,"[13] but also up the trauma culture ante by filming their rendezvous at Auschwitz for mass consumption by American viewers whose socialization imparted little or no knowledge onto them about the Holocaust as historical event.[14] Reflecting and reinforcing dominant American Holocaust discourse, their televised sentimental journey through Auschwitz does not inform viewers about the complex socio-political history of the "Final Solution," but rather constitutes a search for mystical revelations and uplifting self-help messages. According to Adam Shatz, it transforms "the Holocaust into another recovery narrative."[15] The *Oprah Winfrey Show Special* thus both enacts and signifies that popular trauma culture has incorporated and transformed the American Holocaust discourse out of which it initially emerged.

Despite the continued prominence of both Holocaust kitschification and sanctification, they no longer constitute the only modes of representation. Mel Brooks's 1968 film *The Producers*, its successful 2001 transformation into a Broadway musical, and its 2005 re-adaptation into a new movie; Tova Reich's 2007 satirical novel *My Holocaust*; and the 2004 episode "The Survivor" of Larry David's *Curb Your Enthusiasm* series critique American Holocaust pieties via satire and parody. A scene from the latter metonymically marks another core moment in the genealogy of popular trauma culture, namely its most concentrated critique to date. The episode, which I will later discuss in greater detail, parodies both the representation of the Holocaust as a quasi-sacred event,

a veritable Holycaust, and the made-in-Hollywood trivialization of the genocide as Hollycaust in tear-jerking blockbusters, as well as the interaction of both modes of Holocaust emplotment with American culture. The most spectacular scene from the episode ensues when a dinner-table conversation turns into a shouting match between Solly, a fictional Holocaust survivor who in appearance and behavior constitutes the ultimate antithesis to Wiesel's public persona, and Colby, a former participant in the popular reality series *Survivor*. They fight over who had to defeat greater obstacles, suffered more, and thus constitutes the preeminent "survivor." The scene ridicules via satiric exaggeration and parody emblematic components of popular trauma culture: the clichéd nature of dominant American Holocaust representations, the ubiquitous but ethically and epistemologically untenable notion of Holocaust uniqueness and preeminence,[16] the excessive, and unethical because inherently competitive claims to victim status, and the vast metaphoric extension of the survivor position.

These three exemplary media events indicate that narratives of victimization and survival, trauma and recovery are anything but restricted to scholarship in postmodern trauma theory and the select examples from the literary and filmic canon that constitute its limited empirical corpus.[17] According to the alternative paradigm proposed here, it is precisely the question that trauma studies scholarship has left out that ought to be explored, namely how the ubiquitous notion of trauma functions in contemporary culture. And since cultural trends are generated via the interaction of vast audiences and the mass media products they consume, it is the representation of traumatizing experiences in popular culture that must be analyzed.[18] The notion of trauma widely disseminated via the self-help industry, which is reflected and reinforced by other popular culture products, describes a psychological reaction to an experience in which a seemingly omnipotent perpetrator inflicts extreme violence on a helpless victim. Because the latter's psychological suffering continues long after the physical pain subsided, self-help literature teaches its many consumers that in order to overcome traumatizing experiences and transform weak victims into heroic survivors, the traumatic memories must be narrated.

According to Bruno Latour, a concept succeeds based on its degree of associative power to bind otherwise heterogeneous ideas, that is, the extent to which it functions as a discursive knot.[19] Expanding Latour's argument from the natural sciences to representation at large and popular culture in particular, I suggest that the trauma concept functions as a discursive knot in contemporary culture due to its vast associative powers of generating interactions between disparate ideas. In other words, the discursive knot generated by the trauma concept provides the dominant mode of emplotment—the basic narrative structure and core set of characters—for representing such diverse experiences as child abuse, Holocaust survival, war combat, terminal illness, and addiction in contemporary Western culture. However, the media spectacles of popular

trauma culture remove these experiences of victimization and suffering from their socio-political contexts by reducing them to their smallest common denominator of a body in pain. They proclaim that, no matter what happens, whether genocide or child abuse or lesser evils, there will always be a happy ending when good wins over evil, victims become survivors, and perpetrators are punished, thus teaching consumers that the socio-economic status quo need not be changed through political action. Mass media emplotments of the pain of others are thus not only unethical because they transform traumatic experiences into entertainment commodities but also because they are politically acquiescing and covertly reinforce the oppressive hegemonies of late-modern capitalism that have generated, or at least enabled, the victimization experiences. My understanding of popular culture thus bears some family resemblances to the Frankfurt School critique of mass culture and the rejection of gothic and sentimental novels for their politically anesthetizing capacity in the so-called German and British reading debates of the late eighteenth century.[20]

The analysis of popular trauma culture developed throughout the book is structured as follows: In part one, I analyze how the currently dominant plot formula, set of characters, and core tropes for representing victimhood and suffering emerged in American Holocaust discourse. The genealogy of popular trauma culture includes an analysis of the transition in rhetoric from testimony to so-called victim talk and of the survivor figure's rise to hero status. It furthermore encompasses critiques of the political appropriation of Holocaust memory in American culture and of the Holocaust envy signified by claims of vicarious victimhood. Part one concludes with a critique of teary-eyed kitsch sentiment encoded as the dominant reception mode into the narratives that embody popular trauma culture.

As daytime TV talk shows and the popular literature genre of misery memoirs currently constitute the preeminent genres for depicting the pain of others as mass media spectacles, they are explored in parts two and three respectively. Like the witness testimony given at the Eichmann trial that signaled the advent of trauma culture, the accounts of victimization and violence, pain and suffering generated on talk shows are widely disseminated via television.[21] First-generation shows like *Phil Donahue* and *Oprah Winfrey* represented personal experiences of extremity as individual melodramas in the inherently de-politicized manner paradigmatic for self-help discourse. Subsequently, the platitudes and clichés of pop psychology were supplemented by the modern-day freak show spectacles of second-generation shows like *Ricki Lake* and *Jerry Springer*. The so-called trash talk shows parodied the trauma kitsch of their predecessors as trauma camp and replaced the sentimental and inherently condescending pity encoded into the first-generation shows as their dominant reception mode with the non-empathic ridicule of *Schadenfreude*. Despite the significant differences between pop-therapeutic and trash talk shows, the latter

are likewise politically acquiescing because they cast the status quo as the sane and safe Other to their freak show dystopia.

Part three turns to the depiction of victimization experiences as spectacles of suffering in misery memoirs. Although they currently constitute the largest growth sector in book publishing worldwide and have been widely discussed in the international press, this is the first scholarly analysis of this popular literature genre. I further extend the analysis to fictional, and therefore fake, misery memoirs and the scandals they generated when exposed, because forgeries signify which objects are considered most valuable and hence significant in a given culture. As the dominant subjects of fake misery memoirs are child abuse and the Holocaust survival of children, part three concludes with exemplary analyses of Anthony Godby Johnson's and JT LeRoy's fake autobiographical narratives of horrific child abuse as well as Misha Defonseca's and Binjamin Wilkomirski's likewise forged memoirs of Holocaust survival by young children. Although all four texts and the scandals surrounding them have been widely reported in the press, none but the last has been previously discussed in literary scholarship.

The epilogue extends the analysis of popular trauma culture by critiquing the dominant, but ethically flawed, reception mode encoded into mass media representations of victimhood and suffering. These popular culture products incite audiences to engage in fantasies of witnessing the pain of others. The book concludes with an exemplary analysis of Katharina Hacker's 2005 novel *Eine Art Liebe* (A Love of Sorts). The German author reimagines Saul Friedlander's famous memoir *Quand vient le souvenir* (*When Memory Comes*) in fictional form so her strongly autobiographical narrator can engage in a fantasy of witnessing the Holocaust by listening to the testimony of Friedlander's fictional alter ego. The epilogue thus not only returns to Holocaust discourse, bringing the exploration of popular trauma culture full circle, but it also expands the realm of analysis beyond American popular culture to indicate that trauma culture is neither a purely American phenomenon nor solely generated via the mass media.

PART ONE

Popular Trauma Culture

Generating the Paradigm in Holocaust Discourse

"The Holocaust–once it became its own archetype and entered the public imagination as an independent icon–also became a figure for subsequent pain, suffering, and destruction."

–James Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*[1]

Popular trauma culture emerged when the genocide of European Jewry was incorporated into the collective memory of the United States because American Holocaust discourse generated the dominant paradigm that would subsequently be employed to represent the pain of others in the mass media. The Holocaust was transformed from an event in European history into a core constituent of American memory, not only because it became the core marker of American-Jewish identity via the dubious notion of hereditary or vicarious victimhood, but also and especially because it was appropriated politically on a national level. After the popular stage and film adaptations of Anne Frank's diary in the 1950s, American Holocaust discourse shifted in focus from victims to survivors with the television broadcasts from the Eichmann trial and the rise of Elie Wiesel to preeminent Holocaust representative. And despite the wide spectrum of Holocaust representations between commercialization and sanctification, stories of survival have dominated over depictions of death ever since. The new narrative mode of witness testimony generated at the Eichmann trial and disseminated widely via radio and television broadcasts was quickly adopted beyond the legal realm. It was not only employed

to represent the genocide itself, but also became an archetype for emplotting diverse experiences of victimization. Silvia Plath's figurative use of Holocaust imagery in particular foreshadowed the rise of Holocaust discourse to paradigmatic status for representing historically unrelated suffering.

However, unlike Plath who borrowed Holocaust language to express her own interminable suffering, representations of the pain of others in the mass media culminate in happy endings of survival and redemption. The protagonist's testimony, which may be overtly or covertly expressed in the inherently competitive rhetoric of victim talk, is cast in sync with self-help doctrine as indicative that the increasingly clichéd metamorphosis from victim into survivor has been accomplished. The survivor figure, who imbues the unethical Social Darwinist notion of the survival of the fittest with the quasi-sacred aura of the Holocaust, rose to cultural dominance at the same time that the American ideal of pursuing individual success and happiness gave way to a sense that life was a constant struggle for survival. Overcoming victimization–increasingly termed survival, even if the victim's life was not threatened–thus replaced traditional notions of accomplishment and heroism. While the heroes of old altruistically risked their own lives to save another's, the objective of the modern-day antihero is simply to survive.

Popular trauma culture thus recycled the quintessentially American rags-to-riches tale and the Christian suffering-and-redemption plot in Holocaust-and-survival narratives, which in turn provided the paradigm for trauma-and-recovery stories. As Jacob Heilbrunn recently wrote in the *New York Times*, "the further the Holocaust recedes into the past, the more it's being exploited to create a narrative of redemption."[2] After all, when the Holocaust is emplotted for mass consumption, Nancy Miller and Jason Tougaw argued, the representations must enable audiences "to take pleasure in–or at least be comfortably moved by–the Holocaust as spectacle."[3] And this teary-eyed sentimentality would be encoded into popular culture products at large as their dominant mode of reception because it enabled the transformation of the pain of others into bestselling mass media commodities. Or as Lauren Berlant put it, the "production of tears where anger or nothing might have been more urgent" happened with the "coming to cultural dominance of the Holocaust and trauma as models for having and remembering collective social experience."[4]

1

Holocaust Tropes

"As the Holocaust moved from history to myth, it became the bearer of 'eternal truths' not bound by historical circumstances."

–Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*[1]

The Holocaust has been so thoroughly integrated into American national memory that, according to Gary Weissman, "as a term, 'the Holocaust' suggests not only the Jewish genocide but its Americanization, not only the event but the attempt to name or represent it."[2] Located among the core monuments to American history, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum was opened in 1993 in the nation's capital, and its operating expenses—originally to be raised by private donations—have been largely taken over by the federal government. U.S. presidents have urged their constituents to preserve Holocaust memory and official remembrance ceremonies are held annually in the Capitol Rotunda and by the American military. The Holocaust is also a mandatory subject on the high school curricula of many American states.[3]

The genocide was furthermore kept in the public sphere by news reports on related contemporary subjects: Between 1977 and 1978, there was a controversy over the right of a handful of American Neo-Nazis to conduct a march in Skokie, Illinois.[4] On an official visit to West Germany in 1985, President Ronald Reagan attended a commemoration ceremony with Chancellor Helmut Kohl at the Bitburg cemetery, where not only Wehrmacht soldiers, but also SS men are buried. Beyond the participation in the memorial service itself, Reagan generated a widely reported public relations fiasco by remarking that "German soldiers buried in the Bitburg cemetery were victims of the Nazis just as surely as the victims of the concentration camps."[5] A year later, the Nazi past of Kurt Waldheim, the former UN secretary-general and new president of Austria, was widely publicized, and the question was raised whether he should be placed on the American watch list of Nazi criminals and thus barred from entering the United States.[6] Subsequently, another controversy emerged over Pope John Paul II's reception of Waldheim at a time when the latter was a pariah throughout Europe.[7] Another point of controversy involving the Catholic Church was

the presence of a Carmelite convent at the Auschwitz site. It remained in the news because the promised relocation of the convent was continually postponed for several years. In 1987, another trial of a Nazi criminal in Jerusalem was widely broadcast on American television. However, while John Demjanjuk, who had been extradited from the United States to Israel, was found guilty of being a particularly brutal camp guard in Treblinka, the verdict and death sentence were overturned in 1993 by the Israeli Supreme Court.[8] The Holocaust was furthermore kept in the news by ongoing debates over Swiss banks' reluctance to pay out the funds in "dormant accounts" of Holocaust victims and the revelation that the Nazi gold that the Swiss banks laundered included dental fillings of concentration camp prisoners.[9] Most recently, there was headline news about the restitution of five Gustav Klimt paintings that had been confiscated by the Nazis to an American descendant of the Austrian-Jewish owner, who sold them in 2006 for more than $327 million.

American Holocaust discourse is intrinsically intertwined with the extensive oeuvre and omnipresent public persona of Elie Wiesel, "who acts as a self-appointed spokesman-of-sorts for the survivor generation," as Tim Cole put it.[10] Wiesel widely disseminated the notion that the genocide of European Jewry constitutes a unique event and an unknowable mystery that can nevertheless teach America universal lessons. However, it was particularly the representation of the Holocaust in the mass media that disseminated the subject widely. The most important products generated by what Norman Finkelstein dubbed the "Holocaust industry"[11] include the stage and screen adaptations of Anne Frank's diary in the 1950s, the 1978 *Holocaust* TV mini-series, Roberto Benigni's 1998 commercially and critically successful film *Life Is Beautiful*, and Roman Polanski's likewise acclaimed 2003 movie *The Pianist*. However, most important was Steven Spielberg's 1993 blockbuster *Schindler's List*. Its premier was perfectly timed in the same year that the Holocaust museum in Washington, DC, opened. Not only Jerry Seinfeld's sitcom parents urged their son to watch *Schindler's List*, but President Bill Clinton, public officials nationwide, and Oprah Winfrey asked their fellow Americans to watch it as their civic duty.[12] Most recently, Mark Herman directed the film adaptation of John Boyne's bestselling children's novel *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*. Also released in 2009, director Stephen Daldry adapted German law professor and crime author Bernhard Schlink's novel *Der Vorleser* (*The Reader*) for the screen after the novel had become an international bestseller when it was featured on Oprah Winfrey's talk show in 1999.

As Nancy Miller and Jason Tougaw aptly observed, "the unprecedented success of Holocaust suffering marketed for mass consumption and popular entertainment seems to know no limits."[13] And A. O. Scott recently commented in the *New York Times* that "for American audiences a Holocaust movie is now more or less equivalent to a western or a combat picture or a sword-and-sandals epic."[14]

Except that, given what Jacob Heilbrunn described as their "saccharine promises of redemption,"[15] Holocaust movies made in Hollywood are more likely than other films to win an Academy Award. As the actress Kate Winslet, "playing herself" on the British sit com *Extras*, remarked, "I've noticed that if you do a film about the Holocaust, you're guaranteed an Oscar."[16] While her remark evokes the Best Actor awards given to Roberto Benigni for *Life Is Beautiful* and Adrien Brody for *The Pianist*, winning Best Actress herself in 2009 for her role in *The Reader* turned her quip into a quasi-prophecy. And the famous line that "there's no business like Shoah business" cited by a character in Philip Roth's *Operation Shylock* indicates not only the continued significance of the Holocaust as a subject for the American film industry, but also its thorough integration into American culture.[17]

Holocaust Lessons in American Values

Although the Holocaust is ubiquitous in U.S. politics and culture, and polls regularly show that vast numbers of Americans consider it an important subject, Americans are by far the least informed with regard to factual knowledge about the historical event, compared to their French, British, and German contemporaries.[18] While some 95 percent of Americans claim to have heard the term "Holocaust" and 85 percent maintain that they know what it means,[19] "38% of American adults and 53% of high school students either do not know or offer incorrect answers to the question: 'What does the term "the Holocaust" refer to?'"[20] Moreover, only 21 percent of Americans possess even such basic information as knowing "that the Warsaw ghetto has a connection to the Holocaust."[21] It is thus as an ahistorical myth, rather than as a historically specific event, that the Holocaust has been adopted into the national memory of the United States, or as Tim Cole put it, "myth has replaced reality, and indeed myth had become more important than reality."[22]

In fact, the ignorance about Holocaust history was a necessary prerequisite for, and in turn reinforced by, the adoption of the genocide of European Jewry into American national memory. It was precisely this lack of historical knowledge that enabled emplotting the Holocaust based on melodrama's good-versus-evil dichotomy and casting the United States as Nazi evil's innocent Other to minimize America's own past and present crimes. Given its status as critically self-reflective and empirically substantiated scholarly discourse, historiography thus constitutes an inherently antithetical counter-discourse to the transformation of the Holocaust into an American myth. According to Roland Barthes, myth "abolishes the complexity of human acts" and "gives them the simplicity of essences" because "it does away with all dialectics" and "organizes a world which is without contradictions."[23] It also deceptively claims to be "not . . . an explanation but . . . a statement of fact"[24] to hide its own status as

only one possible mode of representation and thus suppress counter-narratives. Myth is therefore inherently hegemonic. In fact, Barthes characterized it as "the language of the oppressor."[25] The notion that the Holocaust as myth constitutes an ideological construct "whose central dogmas sustain significant political and class interests"[26] is central to Norman Finkelstein's polemical indictment of the American Holocaust industry.

In the process of mythification, as the Holocaust was transformed from an event in European history into an American cultural memory, it was ascribed eternal truths and universal lessons. According to a core doctrine of American Holocaust discourse, the genocide of European Jewry is both a unique event in human history and inherently incomprehensible.[27] Nevertheless, unlike any other atrocity, or even any other historical event, we are to believe that the Holocaust can teach us universal lessons, paradoxically, not despite, but precisely because of its uniqueness and incomprehensibility.[28] It is because of these supposed universal lessons that Americans should learn more about Hitler's Jewish victims than, say, about Stalin's Soviet victims or Pol Pot's Cambodian victims.

While American Holocaust discourse was prefigured in the 1950s stage and screen adaptations of Anne Frank's diary and entered the public sphere with the televising of survivor testimony from the Eichmann trial in 1961, the term "Holocaust" itself only became a household name with the 1978 broadcast of the *Holocaust* TV series. It aired after the Watergate scandal, the Vietnam War, and racial violence, all of which signaled to many Americans an increasing fragmentation of their society and the erosion of traditional American values. It was the longing for simple moral certainties in an increasingly complex and divided late-capitalist society that led many Americans to embrace the dichotomous moral universe of *Holocaust*.[29] "Whether someone was politically liberal, moderate, or conservative," Robert Wuthnow wrote, "that person was more likely to be interested in the Holocaust if he or she perceived serious problems with the moral order."[30] However, "it was the Holocaust as symbol of ever-present evil rather than the Holocaust as historical event that was of interest to persons troubled about the moral fabric."[31] As Michael Berenbaum, the former director of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, put it, "'people don't know what good or evil are, but they are certain about one thing: the Holocaust is absolute evil.'"[32] Raul Hilberg similarly wrote that the Holocaust allowed Americans "to know the difference between good and evil."[33] While Americans may not be able to agree on much else today, they can join together in deploring the Holocaust. The genocide of European Jewry was, then, adopted as a cornerstone of U.S. national memory because, cast as ultimate evil, it was dubiously appropriated in providing a lowest common denominator for American values. In other words, the Holocaust serves the core social function in "the fundamental tale of pluralism, tolerance, democracy, and human rights that America tells about

itself,"[34] of enabling the United States to celebrate and reinforce its own traditional values by showing their negation.[35] Or as John Mowitt put it, "in relation to it 'we' know with a certain certainty where we stand."[36]

Defining the Holocaust as absolute evil in quasi-religious, rather than historical, terms teaches America untenable lessons, such as good and evil are both absolute and hence clearly distinguishable. Ascribing to the Holocaust the status of principal reason that the United States fought in the Second World War allowed an understanding of it in melodrama's simplistic moral certainties as the last just war. Furthermore, casting American soldiers as having heroically defeated the ultimate evil of Nazism—while minimizing the significant contributions of the Allies, particularly the Soviet Red Army—enabled the United States to define itself as the ultimate virtuous Other to Nazi evil. The Holocaust was thus turned into the benchmark against which all other events would be assessed. When compared to the Holocaust, the forceful seizure of the New World and the destruction of Native American life, slavery and segregation, the nuclear bombing of Japan, and the Vietnam War pale in comparison precisely because the Holocaust has been defined *a priori* as ultimate evil. The Holocaust was, then, adopted into American national memory because it could be unethically appropriated as an exculpatory screen memory to evade responsibility for the crimes perpetrated throughout American history.[37] As Peter Novick put it, "the repeated assertion that whatever the United States has done to blacks, Native Americans, Vietnamese, or others pales in comparison to the Holocaust is true—and evasive." And while a serious and sustained encounter with America's own crimes "might imply costly demands on Americans to redress the wrongs of the past, contemplating the Holocaust is virtually cost-free: a few cheap tears."[38]

Moreover, as Christopher Lasch argued, when the notion that American lives were dominated by the pursuit of happiness gave way to the sense that they were governed by an insidiously traumatizing fight for the survival of the fittest, narratives of the Holocaust experience were ascribed the capacity to teach Americans survival lessons.[39] However, applying supposed Holocaust survival lessons to mundane, if highly stressful, American life is untenable. Despite the unethical exploitation and oppression of the vast majority to generate profits for a minute minority inherent in the economic system of capitalism, equating this with the slave labor and extermination of Holocaust victims is ahistorical and unethical.[40] This notion not only belittles their suffering but, in sync with psychotherapeutic discourse, it also anesthetizes the justified frustration with the American way of life, instead of leading to concerted efforts to effect political changes. As the ethical dilemmas and political choices faced by Americans today are categorically different from those of Holocaust victims, Peter Novick writes, "lessons for dealing with the sorts of issues that confront us in ordinary life, public or private, are not likely to be found in this most extraordinary of events."[41] Paradoxically, it is based on the Holocaust's supposed uniqueness and

incomprehensibility that it was ascribed universal lessons, or, as Tim Cole put it, that it became "a bottomless 'lucky dip' which can mean all things to all people."[42] Phillip Lopate likewise scathingly critiqued American Holocaust discourse because it "has a curious double property of being both amazingly plastic—able to be applied to almost any issue—and fantastically rigid, since we are constantly being told that the Holocaust is incomparable, a class by itself, *sui generis*, not to be mixed up with other human problems or diluted by foreign substances."[43]

Representations of the Holocaust are moreover consumed because of the dominant, if dubious, notions that suffering generates spiritual purification and that moral enlightenment can be gained not only from one's own immediate experience, but also through the vicarious experience of others' suffering via media consumption. According to Peter Novick, "it is accepted as a matter of faith, beyond discussion, that the mere act of walking through a Holocaust museum, or viewing a Holocaust movie, is going to be morally therapeutic" and hence that "multiplying such encounters will make one a better person."[44] Philip Gourevitch also sarcastically noted this paradigmatic notion of popular trauma culture in his review of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. As he put it, the museum is apparently "meant to serve as an ideological vaccine for the American body politic" because "a proper dose of Holocaust," we are to believe, "will build up the needed antibodies against totalitarianism, racism, [and] state-sponsored mass murder."[45]

While the legacy of the Holocaust could be taken as the global responsibility to end and prevent all persecution and atrocities, the ubiquity of the Holocaust in the American public sphere has not generated such a political awakening. While some Holocaust museums may host special exhibitions informing visitors of current human rights violations, they rarely suggest concrete action beyond charitable donations. Likewise, audiences of Holocaust movies and memoirs are not asked to engage politically in the present. After all, the Nazis were defeated long ago, and the surviving victims are no longer persecuted. For instance, although the frequently cited number of one to one-and-a-half million Jewish children killed in the Holocaust has prompted many a sentimental tear, it has had no effect on the fact that as many children die worldwide annually of the effects of malnutrition and preventable diseases. In fact, American Holocaust discourse is inherently apolitical. This is also indicated by the fact that the neo-conservative critics, who attacked the addition to the Western literary canon of minority narratives constructed around collective experiences of victimization during the so-called Culture Wars of the 1990s, saw no need to criticize Holocaust studies.[46] And while establishing the Holocaust as the ultimate embodiment of evil is unethical in itself because it minimizes all other instances and forms of oppression, victimization, and atrocity, it also lessens the probability of individual and collective political action to end current and prevent future human rights violations.

The Jew-as-Victim Trope

Holocaust discourse also generated the problematic conflation of Jewish identity with victimhood. Although the victim Anne Frank has long been replaced by the survivor Elie Wiesel as the paradigmatic Holocaust figure in American culture, the Jew-as-victim trope introduced into the public sphere by the screen and stage adaptations of her diary and reinforced by the television broadcasts from the Eichmann trial, has had a long discursive afterlife. Transformed from signifying empirical Holocaust victims into a rhetorical figure, it has been employed to designate a wide range of individuals and groups who experienced victimhood and oppression.

The Jew-as-victim figure populates feminist writings from Simone de Beauvoir's reference to "Jewish character" to Betty Friedan's provocative accusation that suburban 1950s American housewives were living in comfortable concentration camps and Naomi Wolf's recent evocation of the Holocaust to emphasize how severe and prevalent eating disorders are among American women. It has furthermore been employed to highlight the politically liberatory potential of Otherness from Hanna Arendt's notion of Jews as "conscious pariahs" and Jean-Paul Sartre's "authentic Jew" to Jean-François Lyotard's "the Jews."[47] Moreover, Paul Celan cites Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva's line that "all poets are Jews" and Nelly Sachs wrote that "all human beings who suffered became Jews."[48]

However, the Jew-as-victim trope was most prominently employed to signify suffering unrelated to Holocaust history in the later poetry of Silvia Plath, particularly in the infamous lines from "Daddy": An engine, an engine./ Chuffing me off like a Jew./ A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen./ I began to talk like a Jew./ I think I may well be a Jew."[49] The Eichmann trial had coincided with her own hardships, which included a miscarriage, the infidelity of her husband, Ted Hughes, their subsequent separation, and her electroshock therapy that eventually led to her suicide in 1963.[50] Given the prominence of the trial in the mass media and the spectacular and unimaginable nature of the events recounted in detail in the witness testimony, Plath came to know and express her own pain in this new language. For her, the Holocaust did not primarily constitute a distinct historical event, but a discourse that provided radically new but widely understood images that she could use to articulate her own agony.[51]

The dominant notion among literary critics that Plath's ahistorical use of Holocaust imagery is unethical[52] likewise pertains to the Jew-as-victim figure in feminism, existentialism, and postmodernism, despite the fact that it served to advocate collective emancipatory projects. It also and especially applies to the ubiquity of Holocaust tropes in popular culture, because the redemptive narratives serve to transform the pain of others into politically anaesthetizing mass media commodities. Transforming empirical Holocaust victims into

a rhetorical figure is moreover unethical because it effaces the actual victimization experiences of real, non-metaphoric Jews.

Holocaust Envy

Although the Holocaust is ascribed the capacity to teach Americans universal lessons, paradoxically, it is also cast as a unique event in history. "It is not enough that the Holocaust was dreadful," Phillip Lopate critiqued this untenable idea, "it must be seen as *uniquely* dreadful."[53] The earliest record of the ahistorical claim that the Holocaust was a singular, and therefore incomparable and incomprehensible, event are the proceedings of the 1967 symposium on "Jewish Values in the Post-Holocaust Future."[54] The notion of Holocaust uniqueness emerged in a discussion among Emil Fackenheim, George Steiner, Richard Popkin, and Elie Wiesel in which the word "unique" was used more than twenty times.[55] However, the uniqueness claim was not generated based on Holocaust historiography. Not only were none of the participants historians, but the genocide was only on the verge of becoming a viable historiographic subject.[56] Rather, it emerged by way of religious chosenness in a debate of Jewish philosophy and theology about post-Holocaust values.

The idea that the Holocaust was a unique event is not only nonsensical but also unethical because, as Peter Novick writes, it inevitably constitutes a demand for preeminence.[57] He provocatively argues that the notion of uniqueness signifies that "your catastrophe, unlike ours, is ordinary; unlike ours is comprehensible; unlike ours is representable"[58] and even marks a claim to "permanent possession of the gold medal in the Victimization Olympics."[59] Phillip Lopate similarly rejects the privileged status of the Holocaust in the "pantheon of genocides"[60] because it "diminishes, if not demeans, the mass slaughters of other peoples (or, for that matter, previous tragedies in Jewish history)."[61]

When merged with the idea that to compensate them for their suffering, victims are entitled to benefits in the present,[62] the uniqueness-cum-preeminence claim entitles Holocaust survivors to maximum compensation. Or, in Norman Finkelstein's uncharacteristically understated words, "*unique* suffering ... confer[s] unique entitlement."[63] Reinforced by the moral superiority ascribed to Holocaust survivors *pace* Wiesel because their suffering had purified and sanctified them, Holocaust survival was transformed into the ultimate moral capital in the present. Since in contemporary culture communal identities are based "almost entirely on the sentimental solidarity of remembered victimhood,"[64] resentment arose among other groups that the Holocaust had become the central symbol of oppression and atrocity in American culture and the benchmark against which other atrocities were judged (and found lacking).[65]

The most common defense against the assertion that the claim of Holocaust uniqueness-cum-preeminence is unethical has been the counter-charge that it

was in fact others who were behaving unethically by appropriating Holocaust language and imagery.[66] Wiesel declared at the 1967 symposium that "'Negro quarters are called ghettos; Hiroshima is explained by Auschwitz; Vietnam is described in terms which were used one generation ago'"[67] and that this should constitute a reason for transforming the Holocaust experience from a source of shame into one of pride. Subsequently, however, he would consider such analogies as illegitimate appropriations occasioned by what critics have variously termed Holocaust envy,[68] survivor envy,[69] or memory envy.[70] According to Novick, Wiesel even claimed that "'they are stealing the Holocaust from us.'"[71] The sentiment was echoed by Maurice Messer, a fictional Holocaust survivor with an "embellished" heroic past in Tova Reich's satire *My Holocaust*. He complains about a group of New Age hippie visitors at the Auschwitz memorial site that "'they're trespassing on mine Holocaust!'"[72] Most effective, however, in the defense of the moral capital of Holocaust preeminence is the accusation that denying Holocaust uniqueness constitutes a form of Holocaust denial.[73] Nevertheless and despite the oxymoronic fallacy, overtly claiming uniqueness and covertly preeminence of the suffering endured by one's own group has become paradigmatic in trauma culture. As a character in Reich's satirical novel put it: "We at United Holocausts shall always be mindful of our debt to the pioneering work of the Jewish people in the creative and conceptual uses of victimhood and survivorship and Holocausts. . . . You are the model that our equally special and equally unique and equally equal Holocausts aspire to and strive to emulate."[74]

Vicarious Holocaust Victimhood

In addition to the political appropriation of the Holocaust to minimize the crimes in American history, the unethical transformation of empirical Holocaust victims into metaphors via the Jew-as-victim trope, and the untenable claim of Holocaust uniqueness-cum-preeminence, the genocide has also been used to redefine American-Jewish identity. As the integrating ethos of American idealism was increasingly replaced by the particularism of identity politics, Jewish selfhood was likewise reconstructed around difference. However, increasing secularization and intermarriage meant that religious belief and practice could no longer function as the dominant identity marker. And after the Israeli victory in the Six-Day War and the beginning of the occupation of Palestinian territories in 1967, Zionism likewise lost much of its unifying pull.[75] Reinforced by the dominant zeitgeist of generating group loyalties around experiences of victimization, American-Jewish identity was thus not only increasingly transformed from a religious into an ethnically based sense of self, but also largely constructed around the Holocaust. As Ian Buruma put it, "when Jewishness is reduced to a taste for Woody Allen movies and bagels, or Chineseness to Amy Tan