

# Constructing the Imaginative Bridge: Third-Generation Holocaust Narratives

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## ABSTRACT

Reynolds's research examines the ways in which third-generation Holocaust writers, the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, approach the subject of their own traumatic history and the intergenerational transmission of trauma and memory. Despite the two generational divide that separates the third generation from the preceding two generations of Holocaust writers, the trans-generational transmission of trauma continues to preoccupy contemporary narratives. This research examines the ways the grandchildren of survivors, represented in this paper by Margot Singer and Jonathan Safran Foer, confront and include lost worlds in their narratives as well as their attempts to resurrect these fractured pasts through innovative uses of imaginative leaps. The third generation continues to suffer from the intergenerational transmission of trauma and memory yet discovers innovative ways to share that trauma, evidence of evolving modes of bearing witness.

## KEYWORDS

Holocaust Narratives; Third-Generation; Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma; Literature; Trauma; Memory Studies; Jewish Identity; Grandchildren of Survivors

## INTRODUCTION

Holocaust memoirists like Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel (two of the most famous) struggle with trauma throughout their writing. Their writing includes certain distinctive characteristics like the hesitancy to speak at all, the "deep sense of moral urgency" to share the truth, and the utter sorrow of acknowledging Holocaust suffering.<sup>1</sup> While some survivors wrote to preserve the truth about the Shoah, others believe that the "most appropriate response...is silence."<sup>1</sup> Words fall short, inadequately describing the horrors survivors faced, and distorting the truth about the Holocaust itself. Survivor silence then translates to survivor's children. Many second-generation authors learned not to ask questions, to keep silent, but still experience a kind of reenacted past that is "not just remembered, it is re-lived."<sup>2</sup>

In the struggle to understand the horrors of the Holocaust, silence gave way to literary voice. The urge to share one's experiences and to document the horrors of the Shoah pushed many survivors and members of the second generation to create written testimonies. In these written accounts – from both survivors and the second-generation – fictional techniques, paradoxically, helped "make outrageous history more credible."<sup>1</sup> These fictional techniques often eliminate "all references to past or future" to effectively "place the reader within the inferno."<sup>1</sup> The survivor and the second-generation writer struggle with problems of representation and how to articulate a past that feels beyond the scope of language, albeit for different reasons. For survivors, the atrocities they witnessed scarred them, leaving them to grapple with how to explain the seemingly unexplainable. Their writing depicts a "history [that] has permanently separated them from the human community" and a kind of arrested personal history.<sup>1</sup> Their children suffer from a different difficulty in articulating the past, namely that they did not witness it themselves but live in such close contact with those who testify to its horror. The second generation still expresses a profound connection to their parents' trauma, a concept Marianne Hirsch discusses in her theory of postmemory and one I will explore later in this paper. Both survivors and their children remain firmly trapped in past trauma.

The third generation of Holocaust writers – the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors – also demonstrates clear and persistent signs of the intergenerational transmission of trauma and memory throughout their writing. While the inheritance of trauma passed from the second to the third generation, the third generation distinguishes itself from its predecessors in its search to uncover and rebuild the past through innovative uses of imaginative leaps in their fictional stories. Without first-hand memories to rely on, the third generation transforms their inherited memories into imaginative leaps in ways that both embrace the holes they encounter and question how to fill them. Their approach to their inherited trauma expresses an inability to adequately name their own feelings of loss. While Margot Singer refers to nostalgia throughout her short stories, I refer to the phenomenon as an evolution of postmemory called post-postmemory. Despite the two-generation gap in historical distance from the Shoah,

generationally transmitted Holocaust trauma still strongly affects these writers in visible ways as they approach their own traumatic familial histories in their writing.

The trans-generational transmission of trauma that continues to plague the third generation can be inherited via two main pathways: verbal and nonverbal. Verbal transmission, clearly the more direct channel from which to inherit trauma, includes storytelling and sharing memories. Some third-generation writers, like Julie Orringer, find themselves lucky enough to have grandparents that are not only alive, but also willing to share their experiences. “The novel,” Orringer says in an interview with Sarah C. Lange, “was based in part on my grandfather’s experiences during the war.”<sup>3</sup> Magdalen Ng discusses how Orringer’s *The Invisible Bridge* “had some collaborative input from her family...Her grandmother read three drafts of the story.”<sup>4</sup> In this manner, stories about the Shoah can be mediated and passed down through the generations verbally. Through verbal transmission, the third generation can hear about their grandparents’ experiences firsthand. Survivors pass on their memories directly to their grandchildren, a process that creates a strong empathetic bond to their now shared trauma. Although not explicitly verbal, the third generation also finds alternative means for learning about the Holocaust through museums or other cultural initiatives like books, memorials, and classes. In either directly verbal or still openly accessible pathways, the third generation can encounter Shoah history fairly easily.

The stories that museums and cultural initiatives tell do not answer many of the questions that haunt the third generation. Instead, grandchildren of survivors like Margot Singer and Jonathan Safran Foer search for their family’s personal stories and experiences, the very stories that prove incredibly difficult to tell. While many members of the second generation had access to their parents and experienced their silences, the third generation runs into the silences of not only their grandparents (which could be due to their reluctance to discuss the Holocaust or their death) but their parents as well. Both generations, by “avoiding the trauma and by refraining from working it through...paradoxically recreated” a similar trauma in the third generation.<sup>5</sup> The third generation, therefore, encounters an increased level of silence from the second generation due to the silence they face from both their grandparents and parents. While the second generation experienced silences surrounding the traumatic events of the Holocaust, they learned from their parents to keep aspects of Holocaust memory quiet. Simply put, for many second-generation writers, they learned that some elements of the Shoah remain unspoken. The second generation then passed the same kind of silence they experienced from their parents onto the third generation, which in turn created a Holocaust experience that “involved a lack of meaning, lack of words, feelings without content, horror without a story.”<sup>6</sup> In order to tell their own story, the third generation must now overcome this doubling of silence due to not only their grandparents’ reluctance to discuss Holocaust horrors, but their own parents’ reticence.

### LOST WORLDS

The majority of intergenerational trauma transference experienced by the third generation, therefore, falls under the non-verbal category. Marianne Hirsch created an integral theory connected to the inheritance of trauma that she refers to as postmemory. In suggesting that memory can occur after an event – even generations after – Hirsch argues that “experiences were transmitted to [the children and grandchildren of survivors] so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right.”<sup>6</sup> Postmemory affects both the second and the third generations because they feel so personally and emotionally affected by an event they never actually experienced that survivors’ recollections permeate their own memories. Margot Singer, a third-generation writer, accurately describes the complex phenomena of postmemory in her short story “Deir Yassin,” in which one character Avraham, a member of the second generation, “knows these images may not really be memories at all, but just sediment of stories he’s been told, or photographs he’s seen.”<sup>7</sup> Avraham admits that his memories may not actually be *his* memories at all, but he still cannot shake the hold they have over him or the feeling that these recollections somehow belong to him. Importantly, though, Avraham clearly pictures the memories he tentatively claims as his own; he can recall and name them.

Like the second generation, the third generation of Holocaust writers also expresses a strong historical and empathetic connection to the Holocaust even though they were not alive to witness it. Unlike the second generation, the third generation struggles to place these haunted “memories,” passed on to them from parents and grandparents. Postmemory becomes post-postmemory for the third generation. Singer’s “Deir Yassin,” while demonstrating the postmemory of the second generation, also depicts the complicated idea of post-postmemory as something nagging but indefinable, a feeling that cannot quite be placed. Like postmemory, post-postmemory, similar to Singer’s descriptions of nostalgia, indicates a longing for something but an inability to accurately locate or retrieve it. Nostalgia haunts Singer’s characters. The key is the vagueness that troubles those searching for what might satisfy their longing. For Avraham and his niece Susan, nostalgia continues to plague them throughout the story, though in different ways. Susan comes back to Israel, a place she frequented as a child but has not visited in many years, to return her uncle Zalman’s ashes to his childhood home. Even so, she cannot help questioning why she decided to take on such a task. At night, she thinks “Cremations are forbidden/...So what remains? Nothing./ She believes nothing, and yet here she is,/ carrying out a dead man’s will. Maybe the word/ for it is just *nostalgia*.”<sup>7</sup> Something pulls Susan back to Israel, her family’s homeland after the onset of World War II, but she cannot name what exactly draws her back. At the surface level, her uncle’s dying wishes seem

an appropriate reason to return, but even she remains unconvinced that the box labeled “CREMATED REMAINS” contains the sole reason for her homecoming.<sup>7</sup>

Her uncle Avraham who has lived in Israel almost all of his life experiences a similar tug of postmemory. In a section called “Nostalgia,” he suddenly recalls “the Polish word for nostalgia... a word he didn’t even know he knew, with overtones of sadness and longing the Hebrew did not have.”<sup>7</sup> Crucially, Avraham can articulate his postmemory whereas Susan cannot. Just as Susan returns to what she considers her ancestral home and experiences a nostalgia for a world she can never fully know, so too does Avraham suddenly yearn for his own ancestral home of Poland. Both characters long for a place they can never truly experience as a home because these worlds and memories remain obscured. Immediately after recalling the Polish word for nostalgia, Singer writes, “But whatever Avraham might be nostalgic for remains as deeply buried as the rest of his mother tongue he has forgotten or repressed.”<sup>7</sup> Although unable to fully reconnect with their ancestral homes, Susan and Avraham still look towards the worlds they have each lost – and cannot adequately reclaim – with the hint of some forgotten remembrance. They experience small moments of recollection, such as Susan’s memories of her childhood summers in Israel and Avraham’s recall of his Polish roots, but instead of returning to that childhood world they see “nothing but [the] destruction” of their previous worlds.<sup>7</sup> Their nostalgia, due to their respective postmemory and post-postmemory of past trauma, serves as a hope to reconnect with a world that is no longer there.

That nagging feeling postmemory and post-postmemory create drives both Avraham and Susan to try to uncover the past. Both characters’ professions entail a form of digging, either physically or emotionally, to try to uncover the lost worlds they encounter. Avraham works as an archaeologist, an individual trained to uncover lost worlds and try to recreate them, to retell their story. In “Deir Yassin” he tells his colleague, “Listen: don’t you think we owe it to our children to go back and get the story straight? Don’t you think they deserve to know the truth?”<sup>7</sup> His sentiments reflect the drive for the truth and desire to uncover the past that the third generation continually pushes for. However, his colleague responds, “History schmistory... Just because they call it revisionist you think it has to be the truth?”<sup>7</sup> Even if these third generation authors (represented here by Avraham) could somehow exhume these lost worlds they may never know the story behind them. Avraham realizes that some worlds can never be uncovered, that some memories cannot be excavated, and that some recollections must invariably remain lost in the past.

In another of Singer’s stories, “Hazor,” revisionist claims call the biblical timeline into question; evidence once thought to support Joshua’s defeat of the Canaanites, now undermines that very supposition by arguing that the Israelites never razed Hazor at all. Avraham’s research, however, clings to the previously established explanation of the ancient archaeological site. He tries to remain unbiased though, and states that the “evidence was all that mattered.”<sup>8</sup> Avraham relies on the physical evidence, “fragments of orange-brown, or grayish-yellow clay, incised or burnished, decorated or plain,” he uncovers at the site.<sup>8</sup> But, just as his colleague in “Deir Yassin” explains, even the physical evidence may not expound the truth. Avraham arrives at no concrete answer by the end of the story; Singer never tells us which timeline archaeologists accept, leaving us exactly where we started: stuck in between two possible stories with no way to know the truth.

While Avraham struggles with the changing historical timeline, he also finds another “artifact” that might help him piece together a part of his own past: his sister Leah’s diary. In reading it, he tries to recreate his own childhood through her eyes, to recover the lost world of his past. But his sister’s diary disconcertingly sheds little light on his role in her past. His absence in her diary causes him to question whether “a diary contained any greater truth than any other artifact.”<sup>8</sup> Despite his attempts to learn from Leah’s diary, Avraham acknowledges that his wife Eva “would have laughed at his attempts to piece together Leah’s story, his fanciful theories based on the most tenuous of facts.”<sup>8</sup> Once again, Avraham fails to answer any of the questions he has at the beginning of the short story. His inability to recreate his own sister’s past proves all the more troubling for an individual trained to cogently reassemble the past from forgotten fragments.

His niece, Susan, attempts to surmount a similar challenge. As a reporter, she also relies on physical evidence to tell the story. But, unlike Avraham, who must overcome his temporal distance from the civilization he studies, Susan must also push through a physical distance. In “Body Count” Susan attempts to write about the fighting in the Balata and Jenin refugee camps in the West Bank of Israel. Unfortunately, from her office in New York, she must rely on Debbie, an American-born reporter living in Israel. Without direct access to the scene of the supposed massacre, Susan finds herself in a situation representative of the third-generation writer who lacks access to survivors’ memories and personal stories. Susan asks Debbie, “But did *you* see any bodies?”<sup>9</sup> Debbie’s response, “I didn’t, no,” once again leaves Susan without any concrete answers; she can only rely on the fragmentary knowledge she has managed to glean from Debbie and her own research.<sup>9</sup> Like her uncle, Susan can only use what little she knows to create a record of the past, a record that, at the end of the Singer’s short story, proves wildly inaccurate. Unlike her uncle, Susan never actually has the artifacts herself. She relies on second-hand accounts and second-hand information transmitted to her from others. Avraham’s postmemory includes artifacts and memories of places he’s actually been (the archaeological sites and memories from when he lived in Poland as a child). Susan’s post-postmemory does not. By ending her short story with

Susan's inaccuracies, Singer reflects third-generation anxieties about trying to tell a story with no artifacts of their own. If Susan cannot even tell recent history correctly, how can she possibly hope to tell her own familial story correctly?

Even the settings of Singer's stories reflect physically lost locations, particularly those lost to violence. Deir Yassin, once a small village that fell to violence, now houses the Kfar Shaul Mental Health Center, a hospital designed to "care for Holocaust survivors gone mad."<sup>7</sup> Singer states, "Even now, Palestinians still call it Deir Yassin, although it isn't marked on any map," indicating that although this physical location has been destroyed, its legacy still captivates those who remember it themselves.<sup>7</sup> Avraham can name the original location; Susan cannot. While the archaeological site Hazor has been lost to time, its legacy remains one of violence; the biblical description of it claims that Joshua razed the city when he arrived. Just like Deir Yassin, Hazor lives on only in shaky memory. The refugee camps mentioned in "Body Count" contain those lost to their homelands because of fighting. This is reminiscent of both Susan and Avraham who themselves feel dislocated. Even these refugees' makeshift homes have collapsed because of violence. Lastly, the title of her story "The Pale of Settlement," which I will examine further later in this paper, recalls the Russian partition of Poland and the regions for settlement allowed to the Jews, all of which belong to a period of history. With the dissolution of the Russian Empire, these traditionally Jewish sections also plummeted into the realm of history and memory.

Jonathan Safran Foer also includes examples of physically lost worlds in his novel, *Everything Is Illuminated*. Like the plethora of examples present in Singer's fiction, Foer's novel describes Trachimbrod, the fictional Jonathan's ancestral shtetl, as completely gone. These physical lost worlds signify that the third generation encounters what they perceive as unrecoverable memories and histories. The inclusion of these lost worlds capture the third generation's fear that they have lost access to history and that the only possibilities they may have to uncover the truth all lead disconcertingly to dead ends. Just as Singer's characters display a preoccupation with piecing together the past, *Everything Is Illuminated* also emerged from a deep-seated desire to uncover the truth behind Foer's family's experiences. His novel began as an investigation into his past, of which he had almost no knowledge. He states in an interview with Jane Zwart, "a lot of my writing has been born out of the inability to communicate things."<sup>10</sup> He goes on to say, "I encounter these holes in my life. The hole of my family's history in Eastern Europe. The hole of the silence about that history."<sup>10</sup> Foer reflects these holes and the difficulty of articulating the past in his novel, not only in the fictional Jonathan's quest to find the woman who saved his grandfather during the Holocaust, but also in the uncertainty he includes in the history of his family's supposed shtetl of origin, Trachimbrod. A plaque in Trachimbrod "marks the spot (or a spot close to the spot) where the wagon of one Trachim B (we think) went in."<sup>11</sup>

Both Foer's and Singer's distance from their own familial past represent emotional lost worlds. Emotional lost worlds draw from fears of how to write about the Holocaust without a direct connection to the actual historical event; the third generation must determine how to discuss the Shoah even as survivors die. At a loss, they continually include imagery of lost worlds representing their longing to remember but their inability to access the past, their disconnect with the memories they feel commanded to remember. This tension proves characteristic of post-postmemory; it conveys a sense of loss as well as an inability to adequately name what exactly has been lost. It feels both personal and distant. Post-postmemory also reflects the difficulty of working with only transmitted memory instead of actual memory. Despite her family's Jewishness, "Susan herself is the kind of person to whom people sometimes say, But you don't look Jewish...The truth is...she doesn't exactly feel Jewish either. She feels hollow."<sup>7</sup> Susan must figure out how to reconnect with a heritage she feels no real relation to, an emotional past tortured by trauma that she knows only indirectly. To try to piece together her history, Susan, like her uncle who collects ancient artifacts, has her own closets "filled with artifacts from the past."<sup>7</sup> Yet these physical items cannot adequately retell the past or reshape the world she has lost. When, in "Body Count," Susan tries to tell the story of the supposed refugee-camp massacre she cannot help feeling "more than ever that she should be there instead of Debbie."<sup>9</sup> Her family's history of trauma and their connection with the Middle East call to Susan, command her to witness the trauma firsthand. The physical distance, used here as a metaphor not only for Susan's emotional distance from her homeland, but also for the distance between survivors and the third generation, proves insurmountable. Susan remains in New York and, with "no evidence to support claims of massacre or deliberate slaughter of Palestinians by Israeli soldiers," gets the story wrong.<sup>9</sup>

Incorrect retelling of a story occurs in several of Singer's narratives, especially when her characters face issues of memory, and, more specifically, memory loss. Avraham clings to the previously established historical timeline in "Hazor" amidst abundant revisionist claims. Facing a complete rewrite of the historical and biblical timeline, Avraham must admit his own doubts about the accuracy of archaeological digs. "The problem was that the evidence could be read in so many ways. Any argument was just supposition piled on superposition, a house of sand."<sup>8</sup> History as he believes it could crumble at any time. This idea ultimately calls into question how we create a story using only the fragmented history which physical artifacts and inherited memory create. These incorrect stories speak to the insecurities of the third generation; they cannot possibly know the full extent of the truth, meaning that any story they may try to create themselves must inevitably fall to inconsistency.

Singer's organization of "Hazor" casts doubt upon the reliability of a story sewn together from pieces. Singer intersperses the sections on Avraham attempting to uphold the traditional historical timescale and his musings on Leah's diary with sections dedicated to specific artifacts themselves. The juxtaposition between his studies in ancient archaeology, his interest in his sister's private life, and his descriptions and theories about certain artifacts reveal a similar inability to come to a firm conclusion about the past, even his own past. If Avraham cannot even truly understand his own sister from her diary then how can he hope to understand a culture that perished long ago and left behind similar everyday objects? Specifically, Singer includes a section on a Cuneiform tablet, a marker of human writing and, more importantly, the human desire to record life. The tablet, like his sister's diary, mentions few specifics about date and time, ultimately reminding Avraham that "Everything depended on a few lines etched in red-brown clay."<sup>8</sup> Both the tablet and the diary rely on a "scratch made by a human hand," but neither tell Avraham what he so desperately wants to know: the truth about the past.<sup>8</sup>

Susan, as a member of the third generation, faces a much more difficult path because unlike Avraham she does not have access to artifacts from her past that have any kind of coherent story. When she asks Avraham for her mother's diary, he lies and says that he could not find the diary before throwing it away. He denies her attempt to recover her past. While Avraham can look to mementos from his past, Susan can only rely on the scant artifacts she can find, and then only on the emotional connection she has to them without ever really knowing the story behind them. Singer demonstrates this with uncle Zalman's death (Avraham's brother) in "Deir Yassin." After his death, Zalman, like the generations before him, leaves only "a fistful of facts both random and worn that hardly add up to an entire man/ the way eyes, a nose, ears, and teeth do not add up to a face" for Susan to fit together into a coherent narrative.<sup>7</sup> Since much of the transference of memory occurs piecemeal, the third generation continually encounters half conversations about their past which can actually "drive the [third generation's] impulse to piece together" the full story about their own traumatic, familial past.<sup>12</sup> While some narratives reflect a strong desire to tell their grandparents' stories in order to preserve their memories, more often than not Margot Singer's characters desperately want to fill the gaps in their own knowledge. Susan therefore collects trinkets of history from the older generations, items infused with other's memories that somehow become her own. This inheritance occurs without Avraham sharing one story during her visit in "Deir Yassin."

The lack of storytelling present in "Deir Yassin" leads ultimately to one horrifying question for third-generation writers: how do you recover lost worlds when survivor memory fades or grandparents die? Now that her grandparents are dead Susan ventures back to Israel to connect with her mother's side of the family. Unfortunately, she only uncovers silence. When Susan asks Avraham what the building that now stands atop the old site of Deir Yassin is, he responds that it is only a mental hospital. He does not attempt to tell her the history of Deir Yassin, effectively silencing the very past Susan expresses a desire to learn about and leaving that past unnamable. Yet Avraham, more than anyone else in the story, should understand "what happens...when memory fails" because his wife Eva suffers from severe Alzheimer's disease.<sup>7</sup> He witnesses the aftermath of memory loss every time he visits his wife at the same mental hospital that rests atop the ashes of Deir Yassin. By positioning the mental hospital that serves both those suffering from "Jerusalem Syndrome" and those, like Eva, whose memories are "as blank as air" directly atop the site of a massacre, Singer indicates that trauma falls to silence, getting buried and forgotten as time progresses, unless someone continues to tell the story.<sup>7</sup> Even Avraham cannot remember specific details of his life in Poland before his family moved to Israel: "Among the things Avraham cannot remember/ is what the leaving was like."<sup>7</sup> The archaeologist cannot unearth his own past: only expose the holes.

For many third generation writers, issues of survivor memory, and specifically memory loss, correlate with the overwhelming fear of losing their connection with their past. Without access to these memories, the third generation once again encounters dead ends and silences. However, the imperative to remember and carry on Shoah legacy that follows Holocaust survivors and their families puts the third generation at odds with their realities. In stories that address issues of memory loss such as Singer's, how can the third generation remember when the only witnesses of the actual event who are present in the narratives do not remember? These lost worlds represent the fear of how to portray the Holocaust without direct access to memories or witnesses and the third generation's lack of knowledge. They also prove particularly troubling for the third generation trying to fill these gaps in their writing. The grandchildren of survivors, faced with trying to piece together fragments of transmitted memory, must figure out a way to recover these lost worlds not only in the knowledge they discover personally but in the articulation of that knowledge as well.

### RECONSTRUCTING LOST WORLDS

Unfortunately, even if the third generation may be able to fill in some of the gaps they have, as seen in Singer's stories that include fragments and artifacts like "Hazor," they often encounter dead end after dead end. Without the full story about familial Holocaust trauma, the third generation often balances Holocaust trauma with other everyday aspects. Additionally, the subtlety with which third generation writers acknowledge the Holocaust in their characters' lives creates stories that rely on family relationships and everyday occurrences instead of Holocaust horrors. While direct references to Holocaust trauma convey "a sense of immediacy and impact" for the first and second generations, "the third generation writer views these events as an indirect

part of the narrative, one balanced by other, also important, histories.”<sup>13</sup> Singer’s “Deir Yassin,” which tells three stories simultaneously (that of Susan, Avraham, and Zalman), exemplifies this balance. Even though Singer constantly shifts between these three distinct narratives, “one story doesn’t overpower another; one character doesn’t reside in the shadow of another.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Foer includes stories from the fictional Jonathan, Alexander, and Jonathan’s ancestors. Most third generation writers do not create stories that begin and end with the Holocaust. Instead they balance this trauma with the mundane and allude to the Holocaust throughout.

For both Singer and Foer, balancing their familial Holocaust trauma with other aspects of daily life reflects a hesitancy to claim Shoah suffering as their own. Attempts to imagine the horrors their grandparents faced without appropriating them reflect a kind of empathetic understanding, something the third generation must struggle to uncover and to understand as well. Their hesitancy reflects the difference between actual memory and inherited memory: survivors claim their identity. They cannot help but claim it because it has literally been inscribed on their bodies. The third generation both respects and struggles to understand their role in that identity that shapes their family but can never truly be theirs. Third-generation writers, therefore, include subtle hints that conjure specific Holocaust memories in readers’ minds; they constantly struggle with “how much of the past [they] can carry forward and how much [they] leave behind.”<sup>14</sup> Contemporary novelists are “preoccupied with the ways in which identity is affected by the ongoing presence of the past in the lives of those who did not experience it but are nonetheless profoundly affected” by inherited Holocaust trauma.<sup>15</sup> They must determine how to create their own lives and memories without losing themselves in the past.

The subtlety of third-generational Holocaust imagery urges the reader to dig into the text, to uncover meaning, and to foster a dialogue between themselves and the text itself. Uncovering meaning with only miniscule hints to work with reflects the very situation the third generation faces. The subtlety they employ does not imply that the third generation feels less affected by the Holocaust, but rather that they simply approach the subject more cautiously because of their increased historical distance and their fundamental lack of knowledge of their familial histories (that is their personal histories), as well as their empathetic connection to the Shoah. In the face of so many lost worlds, the task of the third generation is to piece together these fragments of history, to “reconstruct and reassemble fragmented lives,” and to create a cogent articulation of the past.<sup>16</sup>

To do this, they turn to innovative imaginative leaps. The third generation uses imaginative leaps in their fiction to reflect their fragmented identity and knowledge. Post-postmemory, in its inability to be pinned down, creates a space in which the third generation imaginatively constructs their own connection to their traumatic history. Due to grandchildren’s increased emotional and historical distance the Holocaust is “increasingly a subject for the imagination.”<sup>13</sup> As Holocaust survivors die, leaving an almost impenetrable silence, the third generation still finds ways to break through the quiet and connect to their familial past despite losing their direct link to Shoah trauma. The third generation, using transmitted trauma and memory, must make bigger leaps to compensate for the larger distances they must cover. While this does make discovering one’s family history harder it also means “The third generation is much less restrained than its predecessors. They search for memory even while giving free rein to artistic imagination that informs a variety of innovative narrative techniques.”<sup>17</sup> These “innovative narrative techniques” can be broken down into two categories: imaginative uses of form and imaginative uses of language and content.

Creative approaches of form include structural innovations in the story itself (chapter breaks and shifts between narrators) and the linear narrative (jumps throughout time taking the reader from past to present and back again). More often than not, imaginative leaps in form shape the ways in which third-generation authors break up their narratives. Breaking the narrative, shifting back and forth from one narrator to the next or from one protagonist to another, reflects not only the third generation’s fragmentation, but also the ways in which they balance Holocaust trauma with other elements of the story and with a sense of life before and beyond the Holocaust. The third generation’s use of innovative structural forms represents their “resistance to the use of a linear or neatly cohesive narrative.”<sup>18</sup> Writers like Jonathan Safran Foer and Margot Singer both experiment with form by pursuing multiple story lines throughout their narratives. Instead of transitioning smoothly from one storyline to the next, each author jumps, section to section, among different characters’ perspectives. Foer’s novel weaves the fictional Jonathan’s distant past together with his contemporary search for that same past. Each chapter tells a different history, introduces new characters, and forces us to try and organize everything linearly ourselves.

This constant shifting gives the reader a kind of whiplash effect, especially in Foer’s novel that jumps from past to present consistently throughout. The push and pull between the past and the present mimics the third generations’ constant debate about how much of the past they can plausibly carry forward and still remain aware of their present lives and circumstances; third-generation writers want to include the past, but must find ways to incorporate that past within the present they choose to write about. Experimenting with form in this manner also forces the reader in multiple directions, causing them to constantly remind themselves of what just happened in one story line and how that connects to the next storyline, which mirrors the fragmentation in the lives of grandchildren of survivors.

While Foer shifts between storylines throughout a longer narrative, Singer does so in her short stories. Instead of fully explained stories, Singer includes vignettes, small instances of particularly strong imagery. The structure of Singer's stories reflects the way pieces do not always add up to a whole. Just as Susan knows only a few details about her uncle, "That he was seventy when he died of a heart attack/...That he never went to synagogue and had only disdain for God/...That he had a crooked eyetooth, hairy nostrils and ears," so too does Singer only give us moments, instead of a coherent and complete story, from Susan's and Avraham's lives throughout "Deir Yassin".<sup>7</sup> In "The Pale of Settlement," Singer jumps between Susan's mother's stories and Susan's complicated relationship with her boyfriend, James. Organized in a similar fashion, "Body Count" bounces between Susan's job as a reporter and her relationship with her coworker and his girlfriend. As previously mentioned, Singer also fragments "Hazor" amongst Avraham trying to reaffirm the traditional historical timeline, his attempts to decipher his sister's past, and his catalogue of artifacts found during his dig at Hazor. How can Susan possibly learn about her past familial trauma when the direct witnesses to it are dead, senile, reticent, or stumbling through a broken past themselves? Her knowledge of her past is relegated to fragmentation in the form of artifacts like the Cuneiform tablet or her mother's diary that cannot adequately tell a complete story and to which she has no access. Her stories, due to being composed of these unique vignettes, function like memory itself: reliant on a quick succession of images of poignant moments in our lives, but ones that do not tell the whole history. These vignettes include both prose and poetry, which are both deliberate ways to force us into new ways of thinking. Each section relies on strong imagery, but by introducing the poetic form Singer pushes us to consider the language she uses anew. Perhaps introducing new forms of language can unmask the past and tap into the lost worlds through a new perspective.

Singer's deliberate fracturing of language through her poetic forms and vignettes mirrors not only the fragmentation the third generation experiences, but also the profound silence that pervades their attempts at recovery. Her characters represent hope that this reticence can be broken. Avraham and Susan's occupations strive to give a voice to the silence surrounding the past (both the distant past that Avraham studies at archaeological sites and the recent past that Susan tries to report) and especially give a voice to those who did not get to speak for themselves. Avraham even admits that memory resembles a "story you invent in the shape of your desire" instead of "something you could excavate, analyze, piece together, solve."<sup>7</sup> Singer implies that the third generation cannot simply rely on physical artifacts to create their narratives. The fact that Avraham and Susan attempt to go behind the records, and beyond the fragmented artifacts they discover, demonstrates the necessity of these imaginative leaps in third-generation narratives; they have no other way to tell the story.

These creative manipulations of form indicate that the third generation feels much less restricted than the second and first generations to tell an absolutely factual story about the Holocaust. Instead, these narratives focus more on how they tell the story and on their search for identity. To do this, the third generation must be willing to take imaginative leaps to glue together their fragmented knowledge. Without a clear sense of their own familial history, the grandchildren's imaginative leaps in content often include the use of myth or fable.

Foer, in *Everything Is Illuminated*, essentially creates his own originary myth. For many third generation writers who face "the absence of historical 'facts,' myth becomes a valid alternative to illuminating one's origin."<sup>19</sup> An origin myth strives to explain where a person came from, to root them in a history that helps them understand their present. Foer begins his origin myth, a "version of the past [that] has no qualms about being openly fictional," with his distant grandmother who is quite literally born into trauma.<sup>20</sup> After her parents' bizarre deaths in a wagon crash into a river, a newborn girl, "still mucus-glazed," floats to the river's surface amidst the physical wagon fragments, but also the fragments of her lost life.<sup>11</sup> Foer creates the image of a newborn literally born into wreckage and into a life with no parents and subsequently no explanations of her own familial past. The newborn's fragmentation clearly represents the intergenerational transmission of trauma and the peculiar situation of the third generation. The only direct witnesses to the event are the fictional Jonathan's distant grandmother's parents (who died) and a few townsfolk (who did not actually see anything).

This passage depicts not only the struggle the third generation faces when trying to piece together the fragments of their past, but also the unique way in which they choose to do so. Foer does not try to recreate a factually-based, historical representation of his family's origins; instead he paints a picture of a child destined for trauma, a child floating amidst the remnants of a lost world, destined to search for meaning amongst the fragments. As Monica Osborne explains, grandchildren of survivors, unlike their predecessors, experience much more caution when declaring their identity, if they declare one at all. Their writing is "not an assertion of identity" but a "quest for or question regarding identity."<sup>18</sup> Instead of laying claim to an identity, the third generation, in part due to the gaps in knowledge, questions their identity; they search for it in these narratives but never seem to find a definite answer. It is, therefore, precisely the third generation's distance that affords them more freedom to take more imaginative leaps than survivors, who felt absolutely compelled to explain what the camps were actually like, and the second generation, who tried to recreate their parents' experiences.

Singer's short story "Deir Yassin" clearly indicates the continued intergenerational transmission of trauma throughout her narrative with fairy-tale-like elements. At one point, Susan and Avraham's clocks freeze at exactly the same time signifying that the inheritance of Holocaust trauma that troubled the second generation continues to plague the third generation. When their clocks simultaneously stop, Singer indicates that they both feel drawn to and paradoxically trapped in the past. Singer poignantly describes the nature of indirectly experiencing trauma, as those that suffer from postmemory and post-postmemory do due to their distance but strong emotional connection to the actual event, when she writes that "Even those who escape dismemberment will suffer from an endless ringing in their ears."<sup>7</sup> Like Avraham "constructing an impossible story from the barest of facts" when trying to reassemble his sister's life, the third generation often takes leaps of imagination to create a complete story from just a "ringing in their ears." As Singer suggests, transmitted Holocaust trauma continues to haunt the third generation but they choose to describe it in fantastical ways.

Although Singer's "Deir Yassin" reflects the absence of storytelling, another of her stories demonstrates a clear preoccupation with what exactly storytelling is, and how myth and fable shape the tales we hear. Singer includes a storyteller, Susan's boyfriend, in "The Pale of Settlement." At night, James seduces Susan with his tales of the ancient Aborigines by describing their creation myth set in a time "before the world was fully awake."<sup>21</sup> What James refers to as "*Dreamtime*" recalls Susan's earlier nostalgia because it exists "just below the surface of consciousness."<sup>21</sup> What attracts Susan to this myth, however, is how she imagines the ancient Aboriginal ancestors "cracking through the earth."<sup>21</sup> Unlike Susan's, these Aboriginal ancestors can break through their metaphorical and physical darkness and shed light on their history. Susan's memories and stories of her ancestors remain lost in their own half dreamlike state in which Susan can hear "the faintest tinkling of bells" or feel "a pressure on [her] chest" but where she cannot name the feeling or memory itself.<sup>7</sup>

The most important storyteller present in "The Pale of Settlement," however, is Susan's mother because she may actually be able to enlighten Susan about her familial trauma. Each night, Susan's "mother told her bedtime stories. The stories were always about her mother's childhood and they were always sad."<sup>21</sup> Despite the solemnity of her stories, Susan continues to ask to hear them. In Singer's narrative, Susan first asks to hear about her great-grandfather and his banishment to Siberia. Susan wants to hear about the persecution and encampment of her Jewish ancestors. The question remains: why does Susan continue to ask for these kinds of stories? The answer lies in the fact that lost worlds pervade her mother's stories, along with lost places and people that drive Susan to try to uncover as much as possible about them. "The places her mother talked about had vanished," Singer writes, "into a pink blotch that spread across the top of the map that pulled down over the blackboard in Susan's classroom like a window shade."<sup>21</sup> Putting the story's locations on a map in a classroom indicates that Susan should learn something from these bedtime stories.

The map unfortunately also serves as a window shade, something that blocks out light. In other words, the map paradoxically represents something Susan needs to learn from and a dead end with no way to see past the vanished places. Susan cannot even hope to visit these places because "You couldn't go to those parts of the world any longer. They were gone."<sup>21</sup> Even Susan's homecoming to Israel in "Deir Yassin," a visit punctuated by a haunting nostalgia and a sense of hollowness of self, reflects the impossibility of retuning to the lost worlds Singer includes throughout her collection. Similarly in "The Pale of Settlement," Susan's "mother's stories gave her a hollow feeling behind her ribs, as if there was a trapdoor inside her that dropped open to her mother's pain."<sup>21</sup> While this image clearly implies the intergenerational transmission of trauma and the empathetic bond created by such transmission, the trapdoor also implies a hidden secret, something Susan cannot name. Susan seeks to fill that hollowness behind her chest, but she can never fully uncover her past's mysterious pull because so much of it has been lost both physically and emotionally.

The only way Susan can really recover these stories is through her own imagination. Without any "photographs of her mother's childhood home...she had to make it up."<sup>21</sup> Susan builds the setting of her mother's childhood through creative manipulations of her mother's memories as they have been passed onto her. Even though these stories obviously refer to her mother, Susan notes that her mother would begin her stories with "Once upon a time...as if the stories might be made-up tales."<sup>21</sup> By destabilizing the classic children's bedtime story and morphing it into an ongoing story that shares familial trauma, Singer not only distances the trauma but also reminds us how ingrained this trauma becomes in the lives of the grandchildren of survivors. Susan asks questions of her mother like "But what was it like? When she died?" only to receive silence.<sup>21</sup> Despite her mother refusing to answer such inquiries, Susan still voices how much third-generation authors desperately want to hear the whole story: "But Susan did need to know, the way she covered her eyes during the scary parts of movies but peeked through her fingers anyway."<sup>21</sup> Susan only hears one happy story from her mother, that of her and Susan's father "falling in love at first sight."<sup>21</sup> Immediately the idea of love at first sight feels reminiscent of childhood fairytales of princesses and princes. Shortly after mentioning this cliché, Susan admits, "she wasn't sure her parents ever really got along."<sup>21</sup> What she searches for in her mother's stories is not necessarily the truth (a historically accurate retelling of the past) but her mother's memories of what happened. The only way Susan can possibly fill the gapping holes in her familial knowledge is through these leaps into fantasy.

Singer ends this story, and the entire short story collection, with a short meditation on storytelling itself. Susan remembers that Hebrew, the tongue of her ancestors, has “no word for *fiction*.”<sup>21</sup> Instead, the “closest term for *fiction* was *bidayon*... a falsehood or a lie.”<sup>21</sup> This statement reflects the third generation’s fears of losing their own history and the truth behind their family’s trauma. How do third-generation authors like Singer and Foer ever get the story straight? As we observe throughout the short stories examined in this paper, Singer’s characters often fail; they repeatedly tell an incorrect story or, if not entirely incorrect, disconcertingly incomplete. But Singer’s last line of her entire collection reflects a different aspect of third-generation narratives. It reads, “People told you what they needed to believe.”<sup>21</sup> For the third-generation author, therefore, stories reflect a way to share information, but the inclusion of myth or fable allows the author to tell as complete a story as possible. The truth behind the story ultimately does not matter as much as what the teller decides to communicate.

## CONCLUSION

Driven by a strong desire to uncover the truth about their familial history, grandchildren of survivors write to fill in the holes they have about their traumatic past. Emerging from these gaps, the third generation struggles with identity, never claiming a fixed identity but constantly questioning and searching for what it means not only to be Jewish in a post-Holocaust world, but a grandchild of survivors. Unfortunately, they also continually encounter “lost worlds,” pieces of memory and history that can never fully be uncovered. To try and piece together their fragmented knowledge and exhume these lost worlds, they create innovative imaginative leaps both in form and content.

The third generation uses innovative, imaginative leaps to fill gaps in knowledge while acknowledging that they may never actually know the full story. For this reason, their stories often openly embrace the fantastic and the mythic. They do not try to recreate their grandparents’ trauma but to communicate their own fragmentation. Despite the fragmentation the third generation continually encounters, Foer and Singer’s narratives unfailingly demonstrate the persistent presence of inherited trauma and the evolution of postmemory to post-postmemory. As Foer describes in his fictional history of Trachimbrod, the “children had it worst of all, for although it would seem that they had fewer memories to haunt them, they still had the itch of memory as strong as the elders of the shtetl. Their strings were not even their own, but tied around them by parents and grandparents – strings not fastened to anything, but hanging loosely from the darkness.”<sup>9</sup> The Holocaust clearly still affects the third generation, illuminated in the ways they choose to write about their traumatic family histories. The intergenerational transmission of trauma and memory continues to transform with each generation, an evolution in modes of bearing witness and Holocaust representation.

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#### PRESS SUMMARY

The work examines how Holocaust trauma changes generationally, specifically how the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors write about their own familial traumas. While the second generation demonstrates signs of Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, the third generation shows the evolution of postmemory to post-postmemory. The third-generation author uses imaginative leaps to demonstrate not only their fragmentation but also their desire to complete the story in any way they can. Overall, inherited trauma continues to affect the grandchildren of survivors, evident in the ways they choose to write about their traumatic pasts.