

CULTURAL TRAUMA AND NAVA SEMEL'S REPRESENTATIONS OF HOLOCAUST MEMORY

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ABSTRACT AND INTRODUCTION

Literature as memorial demonstrates how history and culture shape one another. Fiction based on history is created through testimonies and the stories of individuals. Collective memory is defined by Richard Crownshaw as the collection of individual memories, made social through the shared experience of individuals or a personal transmission of memory. Collective memory creates the cultural memorials in which an event is remembered by the larger population, including the traumatization passed on by the witnesses. Trauma is inherently passed down from those who have experienced it to those who listen to their testimony, thus allowing for collective trauma to be created. Nava Semel's novel, *And the Rat Laughed*, follows the story of one survivor's testimony skewed by her granddaughter and eventually taken by the world as their own legend of a tortured young girl. This globalized memory, according to Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder, transcends the boundaries of its place, time, and source. Once a story has been universalized, this shared memory can pose danger to the authenticity of experience. Semel shows her audience these concepts of transmission and the creation of cultural memorial through her fictional characters. Through the grandmother's testimony in *And the Rat Laughed*, Semel demonstrates traumatic transmission of memory and the creation of collective Holocaust history through an individual's testimony.

REPRESSION AND CULTURAL MEMORY

The grandmother's repression of her individual Holocaust story never allowed for its transmission into the cultural memory of the Holocaust until she shared her testimony. In his article "Theory After Memory," Crownshaw argues that, "cultural memory is inherently collective", meaning cultural memory is created through the collective memory of individual experiences (Crownshaw 1). Crownshaw argues that the transmission of an individual's memory creates a larger, collective memory about an event such as the Holocaust. In addition, Crownshaw suggests this can occur through the "social significance" of an individual's memory, since, "past happenings... are reconstructed within a social frame" (Crownshaw 1). Group thoughts are socially formed simply because they involve other people who experienced the same event. Regardless of an individual's experience, "the individual's memorative thoughts on past happenings exclusive to him or her will be, by their very nature, social" (Crownshaw 1). In this way, collective memory is possible because "the framework of collective memory confines and binds our most intimate remembrances to one another" (Crownshaw summarizing Halbwachs, 2). Individual memories, however, are only truly able to transcend their original witness's consciousness through a witness's willing transmission. *And the Rat Laughed* follows the Holocaust experience of an old woman who struggled to recollect her past, and the way transmission of her personal memory distorted itself into a new collective remembrance. Part one of the novel began with the grandmother's struggle to remember her own Holocaust experience at the request of her granddaughter. She wondered, "How to tell this story?... For so many years she's kept the story within her" (Semel 3). After years of repressing her memory, the grandmother wondered how she could relay her life to her granddaughter in the proper way. The grandmother was haunted her whole life by the memory of her Holocaust experience. Subconsciously, details of her repressed memories would occasionally come back to her in fleeting glimpses, as an "unsummoned spike" that would jab its way into her conscious without warning (Semel 4). Since the grandmother had never testified aloud, the story was contained within her. There were no

E. MILLER: CULTURAL TRAUMA AND REPRESENTATIONS OF HOLOCAUST MEMORY

willing listeners until her granddaughter asked her to tell the story. However, as Crownshaw suggests, the existence of other people who played a role in the grandmother's memory makes her memory inherently social. Later, the reader finds out that the family of three who had kept her in the ground and the priest who raised her afterward all played a part in the grandmother's memory. Because of their involvement, their memory of the same event existed from their personal perspective. Grandmother's memory became inherently social, and therefore collective.

Furthermore, while the grandmother's memory was collective, her personal trauma could not be conveyed to others without her own expression of this. Traumatic memory can be passed from primary witness to secondary witness, creating a broader collective trauma as more listeners become witnesses themselves. Trauma is defined as an unconscious memory that is, "culturally endogenous and unlocatable in or uncontainable by witness and event" (Crownshaw 8). According to Crownshaw, trauma "is not the event itself that returns in the dream, flashback, hallucination, or other form of intrusive and repetitive behavior, but rather the failure to process the event" (Crownshaw 5). For the grandmother, the failure to fully process the traumatizing events of her childhood led to the repression of her memory and its eventual, intrusive jabbing in her conscious years later. Through repression of this trauma, the grandmother realized, "the wilder it grew and the stronger its roots, the old woman had deluded herself into thinking that she had managed to sever its limbs and eradicate it" (Semel 17). Repression never truly eliminated her trauma. Not only was she traumatized by the confusing separation from her parents, but once she was sent into the pit in the ground the farmer's son Stefan repeatedly raped her. The grandmother was unable to relay aloud the most traumatizing part of her story to her granddaughter. Her granddaughter's request for a story surfaced her grandmother's trauma, however, in an incomplete memory that upset her to recall as much as the experience itself. She asks herself, "Who said every story had to be told? Who said every story has to see the light of day?... The old woman is tempted to rebury it" (Semel 29). The grandmother had lost control of the story in the attempted recollection of her memory. The trauma made her too emotional to continue speaking. This loss of control is considered the loss of agency, occurring when, "the victim of trauma is reduced to passivity" (Crownshaw 7). Since the grandmother could not share these memories, the trauma they left her with was kept within her as well. Crownshaw argues that for the grandmother, "the burden of witnessing [was] passed on to those who listen to witness' testimony", even without testimony of the most traumatic part of her memory, because with loss of agency trauma means can be passed on "from the individual to the collective" (Crownshaw 7). According to what the grandmother conveyed in words to Granddaughter, the young girl was under the impression that, "they [her parents] hid her with a couple of farmers in some small village" (Semel 55). Since the grandmother did not convey every detail of her repeated rape and torture, the granddaughter believed a story that was warped by her grandmother's inability to fully recollect her trauma.

TRAUMA AND MEMORY LOSS

Additionally, the effect of trauma in the unconscious of children can lead to profound memory loss, therefore a child's traumatized consciousness is not reliable for accurate remembrance. In her article titled "Trauma Inherited, Trauma Reclaimed: Chamberet, Recollections from an Ordinary Childhood", Bella Brodzki claims that for the children who survived the Holocaust, "Their lives, of course, could not be reconstituted" (Brodzki 155). The grandmother's parents never returned to her, although she recalls, "they swore they would... again they promised they would" (Semel 16). As Semel demonstrates in her description of the grandmother's recollections, the trauma of being ripped from her parents among unkept promises was common for children who were hidden without their parents during the war. Brodzki argues that, "for every rupture there was a conscious or unconscious covering of the void—whether by repression, collusion, consensus, or imposition" (Brodzki 156). The grandmother repressed her own trauma until the granddaughter urged her to share her story. It reopened the rupture of her beloved parental relationship, which upset her as much as it did the first time. This rupture is obvious in the simple syntax and basic grammar the grandmother used when she tried to recollect her experience, or as she described, "Her childish voice reaches out through the cracks in the story" (Semel 16). When she thought of her parents leaving her, her mind could only recall the words, "Such a bad girl. Unwanted

girl. Too bad she was born. She had it coming" (Semel 13). They are short and childlike in their word choice and structure. A child would think of being sent away from their parents as some sort of punishment, although an adult can comprehend that it was intended with the child's best interest. The grandmother could not look back at this traumatic memory with the rationale of an adult, and recollected details as if she were still a child. Overall, Semel demonstrates how the repressed memory of child survivors was overshadowed following the Holocaust, and "their experiences were eclipsed by the parent's generation's overarching suffering" (Brodzki 156). Therefore, the lack of emphasis on childhood trauma caused victims to further suppress their traumatic memories. Brodzki claims that in more recent years, child survivors have come forward to tell their experiences because of old age, since "a particular sense of urgency haunts them as the last survivors, compelling them to bear witness to the world at large" (Brodzki 156). The grandmother Semel created in her novel challenged this idea, since she still refused to tell her granddaughter the details of her Holocaust experience, even though time to share her story was running out. She waited until she was confronted by her granddaughter and obliged, thinking, "it's as if she has no choice but to assume the role of storyteller" (Semel 1). According to Brodzki, child survivors often have, "jarring, disjointed memories; inaccessibility or repression was compounded by the refugees' and survivors' post-war dispersion, absorption, and assimilation into new cultures" (Brodzki 156). By not being able to access their own personal memories, many child survivors have assumed the same story as adult survivors who have agency and better memory of adulthood. The grandmother did not want to recollect details of her own story, and therefore this trauma manifested itself within her memory well into her adulthood.

TESTIMONY AND COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

Testimony of a witness' trauma allows for memory's transmission into a collective consciousness, as shown in the "Girl & Rat" legend, but whether this is considered helpful or a hinderance to a witness's memory depends on the listener's reaction. Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer write in their article "Witness in the Archive" that for the collective memory of the Holocaust, witness testimony can contradict itself. It can be used either as "necessity, on the one hand, but also (can allow for) the impossibility of fully bearing witness to this particular traumatic past" (390-391). If a witness's memory is traumatic, according to Crownshaw's theories of agency, the witness may not possess full agency over their own story. Semel's novel takes place in Israel with Israeli characters; the Israeli conscious about the Holocaust was largely shaped by the trial of Adolf Eichmann that took place from 1960 to 1962 (Hirsch and Spitzer 391). Hirsch and Spitzer contest Hanna Arendt's idea that the witness testimony used in the trial was unnecessary, and "extraneous to the judgement of the accused" (Hirsch and Spitzer, 391). Hirsch and Spitzer rebut with the idea that if the Eichmann trial was revolutionary for Israeli consciousness about the Holocaust, "it is because it allowed for a collective story to emerge through individual victim testimonies and to gain... authority" (392). Testimony was necessary for collective confrontation. Jennifer Rinaldi agrees in her article "Survivor Song: The Voice of Trauma and its Echoes" that Semel's use of a witness's testimony allows her novel to examine "how testimony, as the story itself, functions for both the individual and society" (81). The multiple contexts through which Semel uses testimony, such as the grandmother's story, the granddaughter's interpretation of the story, and poetry, demonstrate the impact of the Holocaust on collective consciousness the more stories are passed on. Once the grandmother tried to tell her Holocaust story to her granddaughter, she realized she was rendered practically mute by her trauma. Attempting to tell the story put the grandmother back in the event itself, which caused the type of powerful reaction Hirsch and Spitzer argue has been exploited by the greater collection of Holocaust testimony in movies like *Shoah*. Whatever her granddaughter could get her to say, which was a fictional story about a girl and a rat living in a hole, was passed on to the larger consciousness of Holocaust testimony. The problem of inaccuracy is possible in personal testimony, since testimony "may also abstract the moments of muteness and collapse as those that most closely reveal the 'truth' of the event" (Hirsch and Spitzer 397). The inaccuracy of the story the granddaughter collected could have been prevented with different collective measures that would have made the grandmother feel more comfortable; the grandmother said herself, "If she'd been asked to give an account instead of telling a story, it would have been simpler... anything that she did not want to let out could have been blocked"

E. MILLER: CULTURAL TRAUMA AND REPRESENTATIONS OF HOLOCAUST MEMORY

(Semel 10). Rinaldi argues this, saying that the grandmother's story did contain agency despite its inaccuracy, and this is "a consistent attribute of trauma testimony that does not render it invalid, but rather, explains how it functions" (Rinaldi 83). Discussing how the granddaughter reacted to her grandmother's testimony, the granddaughter explained, "just when I thought she was finally getting on with it, she would stop and clam up, and then she'd try again, and everything got stuck... and I started losing patience" (Semel 54). The struggle and muteness the grandmother faced when attempting to testify, whether they created a loss of agency or not, made her story personally authentic. According to each theorist, whether her testimony is accurate or inaccurate, the grandmother's story and trauma were transmitted into the greater Holocaust collective once shared.

Thus, the transmission of the grandmother's trauma allowed for its transformation into a larger social and cultural memory, globalizing a memory that once was personal. In Semel's novel, she shows how a grandmother's legend about a rat and a young girl in a pit in the ground was spread through poems posted on the Internet. After more people read the poems, the legend took on a life of its own. After they were published online, "the poems emerged out of the shadows of the offbeat sites and electronic mails into the cultural mainstream", where eventually "each generation offered its own interpretation, whether based on ones from earlier times or introducing a meaning all its own" (Semel 121-122). It spawned television shows, operas, multimedia games, and illustrated images that were found on "diaries, calendars, and PDAs... *Girl & Rat* defied all its critics and assumed its place as a cultural tradition" (Semel 125). Soon, everyone wanted to interpret the "Girl & Rat" story. The grandmother's memory became its own story within the postmemory of the Holocaust, deviating far from its' source. The narrator in part four of the novel assumed, "It probably began with a rumor- an incredibly effective way of transmitting information- and soon cropped up on the ancient internet" (Semel 124). The reader knows the legend did not deviate from a rumor, but a woman's lived experience. According to Crownshaw, this universalization of memory can be dangerous for the accurate remembrance of historical events, since "the inclusiveness of the concept of postmemory... creates a cultural scene in which we no longer identify with the Holocaust's victims, but... with those who have over-identified with them" (Crownshaw summarizing Weissman, 28). Therefore, "the original witness (the Holocaust's victims) have been wholly subsumed by our act of witness" (Crownshaw summarizing Weissman, 28). The globalization of the "Girl & Rat" legend took on its own agency separate from its origin through its use in popular media.

Memory that transcends the boundaries of its primary witness and its origins is called cosmopolitan memory, according to Levy and Sznajder, which Semel demonstrates in the universalization of the "Girl & Rat" legend. Cosmopolitan memory is defined by Levy and Sznajder in their article "Memory Unbound: The Holocaust and Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory" as "collective memory that transcends national and ethnic boundaries" (88). The separation from the source of memory alone leads to "changing representations of this event" (Levy and Sznajder 88). Semel takes this to a heightened level, creating a world in which history had been erased and altered among ever-growing technology, and where memory could be transmitted from mind to mind like an e-mail. She demonstrates the danger in a loss of memory and history, since there is a possibility for inaccuracy in the universalization of memory. When people looked back on the legend of "Girl & Rat", different potential origin stories were created, one of them being "the tradition that identified the little girl as the daughter of a father from India and a Native American mother" (Semel 124). The reader knows this to be inaccurate because they heard the grandmother's testimony within her own head, but through centuries of translation the story lost most of its accuracy. In part four of the novel, the narrator attempted to find the true origin of the story, taking them to future Israel now called TheIsrael, where "they obliterated their past, including their Zionist ideology and Jewish religion" (Semel 143). Countries in Semel's future completely abandoned their history, memory, and culture to become universalized. In this way, she shows how the cosmopolitan memory of "Girl & Rat" shifted away from its origins as the story of a Holocaust survivor, and took on its own agency.

Semel uses an interpretation of gender representation not often seen in Israeli literature, since her protagonist, the grandmother, is a survivor of sexual assault. In her assessment of female Israeli writers titled "The Poetics of Horror: Representations of Violence against Women in Israeli Women's Literature,"

Shai Rudin states that Israeli women focus on gender-based violence in their works rather than the political violence of Israel. While male Israeli writers tend to focus on violence like the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, female writers often write about violence against women. This does not make their writing any less political, however, as Rudin states that “addressing violence against women defines female Israeli writers as political writers” (7). The acknowledgement itself of this issue is a demonstration of its importance and prevalence in the lives of women. These contemporary female authors “describe rape as a major trauma that haunts the woman long after the actual assault is over” (Rudin 7). The abuse the grandmother endured by the farmer’s son, Stefan, was one of the only elements she did not share with her granddaughter, because almost a century later, it was still her greatest shame. The reader infers through the grandmother’s disjointed language that Stefan repeatedly raped her, and it is expressed in short, simple syntax:

Jewish skin, so soft, so smooth.
 Jewish undies.
 Don’t you dare open your Jewish mouth, or I’ll kill you.
 How could she tell now?
 Either way, it will end in death (Semel 28).

Semel deliberately made her protagonist a young girl, and therefore rape was used as a demonstration of Stefan’s, and the Holocaust’s, power over the girl’s gender, religion, and age. This part of her legend, apart from the presence of the rat, was one of the few accurate details remembered one hundred years later, demonstrating the prevalence of gender-based violence in society no matter its ethnic or religious involvement.

TWICE A SURVIVOR

Moreover, Semel’s protagonist is not only a female survivor of assault, but a survivor of the Holocaust, and this intersectional representation is rarely utilized in Holocaust literature. Gender representation in Holocaust studies is, according to Janet Jacobs’s article “Women, Genocide, and Memory: The Ethics of Female Ethnography in Holocaust Research”, “not only valid but necessary to redress the absence of women’s lives and experiences in the documentation of Holocaust history and the preservation of Holocaust memory” (230). In her study of Holocaust memorials, Jacobs observed a lack of women represented as victims of violence and as religious Jews. In memorials throughout Europe, Jacobs observed male bodies as “a background against which to compare the women” (231). The cultural memory of the Holocaust is either male-centered or genderless, while the presence of women is voyeuristic. In museums, Jacobs observed that “it is primarily women’s bodies that form the focal point for the commemoration of atrocities, such as human experimentation, that highlight the violation and desecration of the Jewish body” (233). The obsession with the observation of the injured female body is related to the cultural memory of the dead as those of “passivity, weakness, and victimization” (Jacobs 233). In Semel’s science-fiction future, nothing is remembered of the Holocaust except for a story of the rape and abuse of a young girl. As an Israeli woman writing about the subsequent “victory” of an abuser and the “loss” of the ninety-year-old woman who is still traumatized by the abuse, Semel gives a gendered and political viewpoint of the cultural memory about the Holocaust in Israel and the history of violence against women. The intersectionality of the grandmother as an Israeli Jewish woman who is a Holocaust survivor makes *And the Rat Laughed* connected to more than just the Holocaust, but also Israeli politics, women’s rights, and gendered violence.

Cosmopolitan memory allows for both forgetting and remembrance, but collective forgetting in self-interest or collective remembrance as homogenization are potential issues seen in Semel’s novel. Some theorists, like Barbara Mistzal, see both the positive and negative effects of Levy and Sznajder’s cosmopolitan memory. Mistzal writes in her article, “Collective Memory in a Globalized Age”, that “despite growth of the passion for memory, today culture’s power to dissolve memories grants a high status to forgetting” (25). The paradox between societies who want to hold onto national and ethnic ideals but similarly want to collectively forget parts of history is common among the study of collective

E. MILLER: CULTURAL TRAUMA AND REPRESENTATIONS OF HOLOCAUST MEMORY

memory. Semel effectively shows the necessity of collective memory in part three of her novel by writing a future in which most of the world's collective memory is erased and replaced with constructed ideas. The narrator in part three was determined to find the origin of the "Girl & Rat" legend, although they had no knowledge of the Holocaust because the memory of the genocide was purposely not passed down. They thought they had a lead in their idea that the little girl was Jewish. They said, "When I recounted the 'Girl & Rat' legend, the idea of some link between a Polish-born Jewish girl and the Christian faith was categorically rejected, and the Ju-Ideah elders' initial politeness suddenly disappeared" (Semel 145). Although the grandmother was saved by a Christian priest, and therefore this connection was historically accurate, the future elders in charge of passing down memory refused to acknowledge it. Later, while doing more research, the narrator said, "I beamed a 'Who Remembers?' message all over the mindnet. The answers pointed to children who had been stashed away in closed places, and identified so many perpetrators by name... But the fact that there was no rat mentioned ruled out a connection" (Semel 146). With knowledge of the Holocaust, the narrator would have connected the hidden children to the "Girl & Rat" legend. Social forgetting, according to Mistzal, is "essential for the construction and maintenance of national solidarity and identity" (30). Semel creates a future in which social forgetting exists among a society based on the electronic passing of memory between minds. In his article titled "Transnational Holocaust Memory, Digital Culture and the End of Reception Studies", Wulf Kansteiner writes that "in matters of Holocaust remembrance cultural homogeneity hides a considerable degree of political diversity" (306). Without this allowance for critical thinking, "societies seem to strive to devise and re-tool strategies of collective remembrance for the purpose of collective self-praise", however, remembrance "tend(s) to alleviate rather than exacerbate feelings of unsettlement and trauma" (Kansteiner 307). National remembrance can eliminate negative feelings while national forgetting can refuse the process of acknowledgement and healing after war or genocide. Both allow for positive and negative effects, but Semel's novel shows how forgetting eliminates accuracy where remembrance would not have.

Collective memories can still transcend boundaries despite once being suppressed and forgotten, however, and Semel demonstrates this in her settings of 1999 Israel and the dystopia of 2099. Semel's novel, although focused on the testimony of a Holocaust survivor, takes place entirely in post-Holocaust Israel. In Samuel Moyn's article "Two Regimes of Memory", he writes that after the Holocaust, especially in Israel, there was a "transition between two regimes of memory. An initial period of repression gave way, after twenty years or more, to one of obsession" (1182). Parts one and two of Semel's novel take place in 1999, during the second regime of Holocaust memory. Initially, the international community considered the "atrocities as 'crimes against humanity' rather than culturally specific acts of violence" (Moyn 1182). By later acknowledging anti-Semitism as the fuel for the violence of the Holocaust, subsequent generations have been able to consider the Holocaust as a mainly Jewish event. This allowed Israel to come to terms with an event that played a large part in the formation of their national identity as a Jewish state. Critics of the new regime, however, consider this universal obsession with the Holocaust political appropriation (Moyn 1182). The granddaughter had a school assignment in which she asked a Holocaust survivor about their experience, and she shared it with her class. She was disappointed that her grandmother does not tell her a concentration camp story; she came to expect these from her past exposure to Holocaust knowledge. Memory in part four of the novel was arbitrarily passed from one brain, or "mindset", to another, no matter who this information belonged to originally. In this future, Semel says all memory becomes collective and is easily appropriated. Those who criticize globalized memory would say this first regime of Holocaust forgetting allowed for "a reintegration of the Jews into national cultures in which their place had been challenged" (Moyn 1183). Jews were able to assume a larger national identity not based on their religion or their genocide, and this was useful for the grieving process. The grandmother not only repressed the trauma of her story, but was never forced to confront it growing up in the first regime, which did not encourage her to share her experience. When her granddaughter asked her eighty years later to recount her experience, the grandmother was shocked to be asked to face her memory in a personal story. Collective forgetting allowed the grandmother and the rest of the Jewish survivors to rebuild new lives for themselves, but later obsession by latter generations forced them to confront memories they would not have otherwise. Thus, the integration of personal

narrative into collective history occurred as survivors passed their stories on. Sequentially, this collective history is passed arbitrarily from one future mind to another, as shown in Semel's novel.

Although an inevitable element of all Holocaust literature, cultural memory is used by Semel as a literary device to further emphasize its necessity. Bart Keunen introduces the concept of cultural thematology in his article, "Cultural Thematics and Cultural Memory: Towards a Socio-Cultural Approach to Literary Themes". Keunen defines cultural thematology as, "the study of cultural memories and... the study of the interaction between literature and cultural life" (20). He claims that authors inadvertently use historical analysis in their writing, meaning they analyze the culture which they are writing about while drawing from personal culture. Keunen explains the reason why cultural thematology is the necessary connection between society and culture in literature. He states, "symbolic expressions should be seen as coextensive with society; they are not separated from social behavior but are rather the tools with which social interactions take place" (Keunen 22). Symbolic expressions in *And the Rat Laughed* include the literary devices of science fiction, non-linear plot, and the themes of Holocaust remembrance by first and second-generation witnesses. Keunen also states that his theory of cultural thematology is "the study of collective images that are part of the cultural memory of specific social groups" (Keunen 24). Semel's present-day characters are Jewish, Israeli, and first and third-generation witnesses to the Holocaust who share collective images of the Holocaust that the reader recognizes as cosmopolitan. The granddaughter knew about the Holocaust before she asked her grandmother about it. Semel's dystopian future contained characters who had been programmed to only remember certain events, paralleling the granddaughter who had only been told one type of Holocaust story her whole life. She thought her grandmother's saviors were "good farmers", and potentially eligible to be "Righteous Gentiles", showing how her collective idea of the Holocaust shaped her assumptions of her grandmother's experience (Semel 65-66). Keunen also states that literature allows for cultural themes that help create collective identities. This is true of *And the Rat Laughed*; within the novel, future identities are formed from the cultural memory of "Girl & Rat". Semel demonstrates that collective identities have been created from the homogenization of Holocaust memory in Israeli culture.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, Semel suggests that the origins of trauma can be separated from their source and become a larger cultural phenomenon. Although the grandmother went most of her life without expressing her trauma, her memories were eventually shared through her testimony. Once out in the world, her stories were transmitted through poetry and achieved legendary status. Semel's novel makes evident the abilities of personal witnessing and trauma to become globalized. Memory can become universal once it passes into the greater collective consciousness. Collective history forms around universal memory, accurate or not. Inaccurate historical consciousness and universalized suffering are the potential dangers of this skewed memory. Despite the usefulness of shared trauma for its victims, sometimes, history is fated to forget itself.

E. MILLER: CULTURAL TRAUMA AND REPRESENTATIONS OF HOLOCAUST MEMORY

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