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Author(s): Pascale Bos

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Pascale Bos

For scholars who work within German literature and culture of the twentieth century, the topic of the Holocaust is hard to ignore. The confrontation with this topic is a complex one, however, as the magnitude of its severity and the scale of its brutality make the Holocaust difficult to approach neutrally. Through a discussion of the feminist concept of positionality, the notion of "autobiographical reading," and the concept of "postmemory," this essay examines critically the issue of personal investment in the study of the Holocaust, and the particular role that positionality, personal and cultural memory, and identification and empathy play in this work. (PB)

For students, teachers, and scholars who work within German literature and culture of the twentieth century, the topic of the Holocaust is hard to ignore. Whether one's research or teaching focuses specifically on the period 1933–1945 or not, the historical events and their grave cultural, historical, and moral legacy for Germans, Jews, and European culture (and Western civilization) need somehow to be considered, analyzed, and made sense of. For any of us who are part of this field of twentieth-century German studies, then, we tend to be confronted with the Holocaust on a regular basis, a confrontation that is on a number of levels a very complex one, especially as the Holocaust is impossible to approach neutrally. The magnitude of its severity and the scale of its brutality make it difficult to remain unmoved. And, in fact, no one explicitly suggests that we should, as absolute scholarly neutrality seems oddly incongruent with the severity of the subject. As a result, scholarly encounters with the Holocaust are often implicitly shaped by a host of ethical and personal imperatives. Those of us who do this work read, research, or teach on the Holocaust because of the "need to remember,"

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in order to "bear witness," to "carry on the legacy," or so that "it will never happen again."

Confronting the Holocaust, especially within the field of German studies, is thus no easy task: it demands engagement, and often a deep personal involvement. But what kind of involvement is this? What is our role, as scholars, teachers, or students? Are we serving as witnesses to the events, as some argue?[1] If we are indeed (scholarly) witnesses, it would seem that our role is an important one, which requires a sense of moral obligation and selfless effort. But isn't our position in fact much more complex, aren't our investments also self-interested?

As a scholar working within the field of modern German studies, and as someone who also teaches regularly on the Holocaust and the literature and history of European Jewry, I have over the years come to question the kind of personal and scholarly investments with which we approach the subject of the Holocaust. What is it that engages us in the subject? What are we trying to find, or to learn through our research? How do we teach it, what lessons do we attempt to pass on to our students? And how as researchers, teachers, and students do our different positionalities as Americans, Germans, non-Jews, and Jews (with or without a familial connection to the Holocaust) come into play in our engagement with the subject? I believe that these questions are important to investigate, for whereas our emotional investment in this work seems undeniable, the nature of this investment, and the kinds of work to which it leads us, have often been left unexamined.

This essay seeks to examine critically the issue of personal investment in the study of the Holocaust, and the particular role that positionality, personal and cultural memory, and identification and empathy play in this work. I investigate some of these issues through a discussion of the feminist concept of positionality;[2] Susan Rubin Suleiman's notion of "autobiographical reading"; and the concept of what Andrea Liss and Marianne Hirsch have called "postmemory."[3] While positionality addresses the issue of scholars' subject positions in their work, the concept of "autobiographical reading" allows for an analysis of personal investment and the self-seeking nature of the reading of Holocaust narratives. Postmemory provides a framework through which to examine more specifically the individual and cultural memory through which the Holocaust has come to function in the personal and cultural imagination of those who were born after 1945.

My discussion aims to acknowledge personal investment in Holocaust research and teaching, investigate its nature, and analyze the role that positionality and postmemory play in it. Such a discussion could lead, I hope, to a more open scholarly dialogue within this field of

research (whereby different personal and political agendas can be acknowledged and assessed), and to pedagogical approaches that would take into consideration (and account for) the role of personal investment and positionality for ourselves as teachers and for our students.

Positionality, Autobiographical Reading, and Postmemory

The assessment of one's positionality and of one's personal investment and position in relation to one's research has been central to women's studies research for decades, due in part to the work of Linda Alcoff and Teresa de Lauretis.[4] Their work suggests how the questions of who one is as a (gendered) subject, where one is positioned, and how one is constructed, or constructs oneself culturally vis-à-vis the discourses that frame one's field of research, are important. After all, we are not simply rational, disinterested, apolitical agents. "The configurations of each person's subjectivity," as de Lauretis defines subject position, the patterns by which "experiential and emotional contents, feelings, images, and memories are organized to form one's self-image" (de Lauretis, "Feminist Studies" 5) also affect the work we do, as identity and subjectivity create the background, the position, from which we construct meaning in our work. This awareness, or consciousness, of self, the "particular configuration of subjectivity... produced at the intersection of meaning with experience" (8), that is, of subjectivity as positionality, has been essential to feminist research since the 1980s. This feminist work refused the methodological imperative to distinguish between self as actual biographical referent and self as narrator. For if positionality is a location from which we construct meaning, this positional self could not, and therefore should not, be removed from the text. After all, suggesting it was not there or did not play a role simply constituted a cover-up.

In German studies and in Holocaust studies, such an investigation of positionality has seemed less urgent, for unlike women's studies, these disciplines do not explicitly presume any particular political or emancipatory goal. Within these fields, most scholars tend to assume that a scholar's personal agenda is more or less neutral and to a great extent irrelevant. Indeed, within Holocaust studies more specifically, if questions about the role of positional subjectivity are brought up at all, it happens in a fashion that tends to foreclose a meaningful discussion. This happens at times when a scholar is a Holocaust survivor, for instance, or if there is another kind of direct familial link to the Holocaust (for example, in the case of children of survivors). In such cases, positionality comes to function merely as a simplistic identity position

(whereby the notion of identity is no longer taken as problematic, as always in flux, always under construction) that designates a personal link to the Holocaust that functions to foster a certain measure of authority and authenticity.[5] By foreclosing a discussion on the more complex aspects of this particular positionality, however (how are identity and subjectivity constructed for different survivors or children of survivors, and how do the internal characteristics of the person thus identified, as well as the external context in which that person is situated—that together define the "person's relative position" [Alcoff 349]—play a role in how he or she constructs meaning?), this background, as well as the positionality of those without a personal or familial connection, remains unexamined, even though scholars' personal investments seem so obvious and relevant.

My concern about these issues stems in part from my own peculiar experience with the role identity politics plays in my work on the Holocaust. As a female, relatively young scholar with a foreign first and last name that are not recognizable as Jewish, and as a person who does not "look Jewish" (certainly not in a North American context where this means something a bit different from Western Europe), I have often been looked upon as an outsider in public academic forums such as Holocaust conferences. Apparently not personally connected to this history as a survivor or a child of a survivor, nor as a Jew, nor as a contemporary, I find that I often feel as if I have to legitimize my work or my involvement in this field. (Why do I do this work? Why does so much of my research and teaching deal with the Holocaust? What are the lessons I draw from this history?) Sometimes I refuse to do so, while at other times I make use of the powerful status of the "authentic" in this field by revealing publicly who I "really" am, namely, not only a (Dutch) Jew, but also the daughter of a Holocaust survivor.

This revelation, this "autobiographical posturing," comes about in one of two ways, either before my conference presentations in the form of a brief line in my biography, which the moderator of my panel will read out loud ("born and raised in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, she is the daughter of a Dutch-Jewish Holocaust survivor"), or I may disclose this information myself during the discussion afterwards. In either case, the revelation is both powerful and embarrassing. Powerful, for by doing so, I, personally, and therefore the work I do, seem to gain in legitimacy. No longer a complete outsider as I seemed to be before, my opinion now counts, as my perceived proximity to the Holocaust experience, my "authenticity," my personal, familial, connection are seen as an advantage, as a genuine source of knowledge, and as a position from which to assert authority. While I do indeed believe that my knowledge

or investment may differ from that of scholars without a familial connection, how this background might actually play a role in my case, and in general (and inform our work and teaching, for good or for bad), is never questioned. Playing along with this authenticity game, then, is embarrassing, for, on some level, by entertaining it, I seem to suggest that there is some validity to it, and in turn, I forgo an opportunity to question publicly how precisely positionality, mine or anyone else's, might indeed affect this work.

This is an important issue, precisely as the topic of the Holocaust does evoke a strong response for most of us, as well as for our students. In particular, if we do research or teach on the Holocaust from within the field of German studies, shouldn't we assess how we ourselves fit into this history, how we relate to it as historical subjects? Don't we need to decide how we approach this material, as a part of German history, or as a part of Jewish history, and whether we see the Holocaust as inevitable in the context of either history, or as an aberration? In the context of working on the Holocaust we are expected to take sides, to pass judgment. How can we do so without having our personal and professional background play a role? I believe that we cannot make these decisions without drawing our own subjectivity, which is in one way or another implicated in this history, into it. Where, in relation to the events of World War II and the Holocaust, do we place ourselves? It is reasonable to assume that both our different academic affiliations (as literature or history scholars, in German studies, Jewish studies, women's studies, and so forth) and our own family histories in this regard matter, as does the cultural context in which we were raised and were exposed to this history.

An example of the role positionality plays can be seen in a discussion by Atina Grossmann of late 1980s, feminist debates about women and National Socialism. Grossmann shows how a number of the (rather polarized) positions taken on by German and American women historians in relation to this question seem to be clearly affected by personal positionality: "who is doing the writing matters enormously," Grossmann argues (354).[6] A prominent American historian who condemns German women's complacency and collaboration is described as affected in her work by "the anxious burden of memory shared by Jewish colleagues and the elderly German-Jewish refugees and Holocaust survivors she befriended" (354). In contrast, Grossmann suggests that a number of German historians are carrying "another audience in their heads and hearts," as they "stress their mothers' and grandmothers' fortitude....and the[ir] energy" (354).

Aside from certain professional and personal positionalities playing a role in our research and teaching, another, perhaps even more contested, way to understand our personal investment is by acknowledging that we may indeed be "getting something" out of doing this work. In her analysis of what it means to do work on contemporary literature, for instance, Susan Rubin Suleiman suggests that we work on this kind of literature (that is: literature that is of one's time, that deals with events and ideas that one considers in some way "intersected" with one's own) for three reasons: "self recognition, historical awareness, and collective action" (3). While the latter two reasons, historical awareness and collective action, are indeed invoked as rationale for working on Holocaust-related material, self-recognition, the first, equally important reason, generally is not.

If Suleiman's definition of contemporary literature can be applied to Holocaust literature (as I believe it can, as the legacy of the Holocaust affects much of late twentieth-century history and culture, and as such, is "of one's time" even if one is born after 1945 because it has continued to intersect so strongly with many aspects of postwar politics, culture, and literature), this may play an important role in our work on the Holocaust. Holocaust narratives as "contemporary literature" can thus be "exhilarating" to write about, precisely because, as Suleiman comments, "contemporary works can be interesting in the sense of appealing to one's 'self interest'" (6). She calls this mode of reading an "autobiographical reading" that "consists of reading another's story '*as if it were one's own*'" (emphasis added; 8). In reading Holocaust literature as a contemporary's life story, we thus read for those aspects that resonate with our own experiences and sensibilities. In so doing, we are self-seeking readers.

Suleiman's notion of autobiographical reading helps us understand the nature of the personal investment we may have in doing work on the Holocaust, by seeing it as less selfless and "noble" and possibly decidedly more self-interested than is usually the case. This seems at first wholly unthinkable, for who would want to find themselves in this traumatic Holocaust history? Aren't most of us profoundly grateful not to have lived through these experiences, not to have suffered such losses? And on the other hand, isn't it by definition impossible to understand the Holocaust fully, let alone identify with someone who lived through the "concentrationary universe"?[7]

While there may be something inherently incomprehensible about the Holocaust, we cannot deny that we read these histories of the Holocaust, and memoirs in particular, or listen to survivor testimony, precisely because we do believe that we can understand more of this

experience through reading or listening. And perhaps this activity is precisely bearable in part because while we are confronted with the horror, we feel a sense of relief in knowing that we were not there. Furthermore, if we read memoirs written after the war, we know that at least the author whose story we are reading survived (an image often imbued with a strong sense of heroism and victory, within US culture in particular). That is, while the events are deeply tragic, the survivor whose story we encounter lived to tell about it, and we are grateful to come to know it. Even when we work with stories by victims who did not survive, a confrontation with their story can still allow for an odd sense of comfort: their lost life is tragic, the Holocaust was horrible, but in the form of this work their voice survives, and is continued.[8]

Furthermore, many of us read survivor literature for the valuable "lessons" it provides. The Holocaust as a "contemporary" historical event, and the stories of its victims and survivors, have relevance for us now because they engage us morally and on a deep personal, emotional level. Because of this, we assume that they may help us understand more of our own lives and times. Insofar as these stories facilitate the thinking through (and perhaps even a mourning of) our own personal ordeals and losses, engaging in this work may in fact provide moments of personal catharsis. Just as with any other kind of novel, memoir, or film, it is possible to read or view material on the Holocaust, feel a connection, feel moved, and feel in some sense better afterwards.

The desire to find something redeeming or pleasurable in a confrontation with the Holocaust and the people who lived through it is quite strong and not at all uncommon. While this kind of "reading" may seem naïve or even objectionable, students commonly respond to Holocaust work this way, I have found, and it certainly also plays a role in the kind of scholarship that is produced on this subject. For instance, as feminist Holocaust scholar Joan Ringelheim has pointed out in a critical review of her own work, the need to look at the subject of women and the Holocaust while looking for something that would make "the horror less horrible or even negligible" (388), and to see something positive, such as agency, in the lives of these women, came to affect the outcome of her research. Looking back at her earlier work, Ringelheim suggests that her "desire for solace or peace in a disturbed world" (388) changed her respect for the women survivors whom she interviewed into "glorification" (387). This glorification in turn led to what she now argues is the incorrect conclusion that "these women transformed 'a world of death and inhumanity into one more act of human life'" (387).

In this regard, "self-seeking" and the desire to find meaning in the horrors of the Holocaust may affect the work we do. The tendency to

read autobiographically means that in reading about the Holocaust, and especially survivors' accounts (or in observing or engaging in oral testimony), we may insert ourselves: we identify, we imagine, we empathize, and we tend to project our own (usually unconscious) agendas. In fact, what I argue here is that, in general, research and teaching on the Holocaust are so thoroughly fuelled by an autobiographical imperative—that is, they rely so heavily on identification as a tool to come to understand the experience—that an examination of how, from what position, and to what end we identify is of great relevance. We need to consider what the effects of this self-seeking are on our research and our teaching.

In his work on the role of gender in an autobiographical reading of Holocaust memoirs (in which he uses Suleiman's work), Gary Weissman has pointed out that the desire for "self-recognition" influences what we choose to read and write about, "...as we search for those stories and themes which have 'autobiographical resonance' with our lives" ("Gender" 3).[9] Weissman suggests that because male scholars, who have dominated Holocaust studies, identify with male survivors, one important way in which this kind of reading thus plays a role is that their "autobiographical reading" has affected the canon of Holocaust literature, which as a result is predominantly male. The tendency to read in a self-seeking manner comes to influence the field as a whole since it determines which Holocaust texts are read, which survivors are heard or represented ("Gender" 5).[10] As I have argued elsewhere, the significance of this exclusion of female voices is in turn considerable, as gender matters greatly in determining how the Holocaust was experienced, remembered, and narrated (Bos 34–45). Through the decades-long exclusion of stories of female survivors, we have long been unable to consider the full human spectrum of this history.[11] We, in turn, as scholars who represent a variety of backgrounds and disciplines, need to consider carefully which stories we choose to include and exclude in our own research and teaching, and to be aware that our own (and our students') tendency to read autobiographically will probably affect our selection.

Apart from positionality (through the tendency to read autobiographically) affecting the choice of texts we work and teach on, Ringelheim's self-critique suggests that we should also carefully consider how the process of self-seeking, of identification, influences the content of our teaching and the work we produce. For whereas we may see the issue of identification as problematic and as uncomfortable to discuss, it is also unavoidable. How can we make sense of the Holocaust without getting personally involved, without feeling empathy or compassion for those affected? If we teach about the Holocaust, don't we, for instance, choose

to use personal narratives in order to facilitate some form of identification, of a personal connection between this Holocaust survivor or victim's story and ourselves and our students in order to make the experience more understandable? Don't we count on the involvement of our own and our students' emotions to make this confrontation work, and isn't this kind of affect influenced by who we are as individuals and how we are positioned in this history and discourse? How else but through a process of identification do scholars and students in this field, especially those who may not have a familial connection to the Holocaust, relate to it?

One way better to understand both the necessity and the potential pitfalls of identification, and how identification is affected by whether or not one has a familial connection to this history, is through the notion of postmemory. The term postmemory was initially coined by Marianne Hirsch to describe a familial memory of children of Holocaust survivors (the so-called "second generation"). Through their parents' stories and silences, they were the recipients of a second-hand, delayed, and indirect form of memory that "is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection" (Hirsch, *Family Frames* 8), and thus postmemory is seen as a "response of the second generation to the trauma of the first" (Hirsch, "Surviving Images" 8). While for Hirsch the term was inspired by the experience of children of survivors (since the Holocaust figures for them as a personal history, as a "family narrative"), she also suggests, as does Andrea Liss, that postmemory need not be defined by this "familial inheritance and transmission of cultural trauma." For even though "familial inheritance offers the clearest model for it, postmemory need not be strictly an identity position" (Hirsch, "Surviving Images" 10).[12] After all, as Leslie Morris argues, "...as the memory of the Holocaust circulates beyond the actual bounds of lived, remembered experience..it seeps into the imaginary of other cultures (and other geographical spaces) as postmemory..." (291). Thus, "outsiders," too, have access to a form of "secondhand" postmemory (Hirsch, *Family Frames* 249).[13]

The notion of postmemory, then, can be used to understand a familial as well as a non-familial relationship to the Holocaust. That does not mean that the two forms of postmemory are the same, however. Hirsch, for instance, suggests that the postmemory of "outsiders" may be understood as an act, as a "*retrospective witnessing by adoption*" (Hirsch, "Surviving Images" 10; emphasis in the original). This process is made "more readily available" through "particular forms of identification, adoption, and projection."[14] This form of identification provides a means of access for those who were not there: "It is a question of adopting the

traumatic experiences—and thus also the memories—of others as one's own, or, more precisely, as experiences one might oneself have had, and of inscribing them into one's own life story" (Hirsch, "Projected Memory" 9).

The difference, then, between familial and non-familial (extra-familial or cultural) postmemory is one of degree: both involve processes of identification and imagination with a history not experienced first-hand, and in both cases one may find instances of over-appropriation and over-identification. Nevertheless, there are more distinctions. Children of survivors grow up with fragmented family narratives characterized by a trauma that, as Cathy Caruth has suggested, is by definition not linear and directly referential (11). The narrative of trauma, as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (11), was most often vague, confusing, distorted, indirect. To be the first (and often only) recipient of these stories, stories that were characterized by absence and indirectness, meant that these children were in fact twice the recipients of the story of an absence—first, because their parents had no real mastery over their traumatic memories, and second, because they as children born "after the fact" were physically absent from the Holocaust experience. To a child of a survivor, the Holocaust may thus be one's familial story, and in this regard it is one's personal story, but at the same time, one is still left to struggle to decipher the trauma at the core of the silence, to connect, to make what was absent present.

The effects of this trauma, these absences, these silences, are complex and varied, but they tend to lead to roughly two different kinds of responses. Children of survivors may deny the existence or the significance of this particular history (this is possible in particular in families where no one speaks of the experience). Or they may instead feel strongly compelled to "fill in the blanks" of the stories, to come to understand better the source of the silence and loss in their families that so thoroughly affected its dynamics (while most families at the same time denied that it did). They have to come to know, have to find out the details of what had happened to those who made it through, as well as those who did not. When they try to do so, however, it often turns out that the confrontation with these stories does not "solve" anything, nor does it provide some kind of emotional or intellectual solace. In fact, the more one knows, the more it becomes clear that nothing of this particular history can ever be truly assimilated into a story or an emotion that makes sense. The severity of the persecution, the scale of the loss, are

so unfathomable and so incomprehensible that they can hardly be articulated. For many children of survivors, the cumulative aspect of this particular trauma is unbearable, it numbs, and ultimately, it traumatizes all those who allow themselves to be truly confronted by it. The confrontation with (and either avoidance or exploration of) the trauma of the parents thus tends to be experienced as fundamentally involuntary and to a certain extent unavoidable, and as something that cannot be assimilated. One may seek identification just as those without a familial connection do, but the results may turn out to be far less manageable. Furthermore, the sense that this quest is never optional (as it to a certain extent is for those growing up without such a clear family connection) gives it a very different dimension and represents a very different investment.

Thus, while the notion of postmemory can be used, I believe, to describe the affective dimension of the constellation of personal and cultural discourses and experiences that make up our positionality, and thus can be seen as part of one's positionality, extra-familial postmemory (in contrast to familial postmemory) is at once also more than and different from this kind of positionality, as it so clearly denotes an aspect of choice. "Witnessing by adoption" suggests a deliberate affective engagement with the Holocaust, in contrast to a familial postmemory, where the confrontation is defined by historical and personal factors over which one seems to have little control.

Extra-familial postmemory is no less real or important than familial postmemory, however, if we understand it as a form of identification that facilitates the crucial bridging of the gap between survivors and those who were not there, since it seems to allow for a connection, a dialogue. This is important, as the Shoah seemed to extinguish the very possibility of address, of appealing to another person outside of the reality of the camps, as Dori Laub points out (81), and this in turn convinced some of the survivors "that their experiences were no longer communicable, even to themselves, and therefore perhaps never took place" (82). Indeed, Laub calls this loss of the capacity to be a witness to oneself "perhaps the true meaning of annihilation" (82). If we do not believe that through postmemory those generations born after the Holocaust can or should still be able to relate to it, what will be left of those stories?

Notwithstanding extra-familial postmemory's significance for enlarging the circle of witnesses, some of this identification, "the imaginative capability of perceiving... what is happening to others in one's own body," can also potentially become problematic if it remains unexamined. Hirsch warns that these "lines of relation and identification" need to be theorized further in order to resist appropriation and incorporation.

It is the kind of identification that leads to "adoption," appropriation, and the erasure of the difference between self and other in our confrontation with the Holocaust (in research and/or teaching) that concerns me, as it allows the viewer or reader to become "a surrogate victim" and allows "context, specificity, responsibility, history" to become blurred (Hirsch, "Projected Memory" 17).

While I have found the notion of (familial) postmemory very useful for me personally, because it allowed me to conceptualize my own profoundly complex relationship as a child of a survivor to this past,[15] my concern is that when postmemory is used in a broader cultural sense as "retrospective witnessing by adoption," the potentially problematic processes of "identification, adoption and projection" that are involved may not be sufficiently analyzed. I wonder whether postmemory risks becoming a vague catch-all term used by academics through which to articulate a broader cultural-historical awareness of and emotional connection to the events of the Holocaust, but which conveniently leaves out one's particular personal investment in this knowledge or connection. I wonder what need it fills, and how it functions in our work. Not only should we investigate more thoroughly how this broad cultural memory of the Holocaust functions in the US and in different European nations,[16] and how it has influenced each of us individually, we should also ask what we gain personally from our choice to engage with this subject, this trauma, this loss. Why does one choose or feel compelled to become a "secondhand" witness?

I want to argue that the notions of familial and cultural or extrafamilial postmemory by themselves do not resolve or explain much about our positionality, and that our use of the terms to explain, in shorthand, as it were, what our relationship to the Holocaust consists of, should not keep us from exploring in more depth how this relationship to these events has been (and will continue to be) shaped. Indeed, there is a great need to investigate and theorize further the "lines of relation and identification" involved in the process of postmemory, both for those with and those without familial postmemory, since I believe that not doing so might lead to an appropriation that can become purely personal and sentimental, whereby "context, specificity, responsibility, history" become unclear.

Let me illustrate here how easily this can happen if one does not explore personal investment and positionality, by means of a reading of *Eyes from the Ashes,* a "memory project" by Ann Weiss, that consists of a video, a photo exhibit, and a photo book. At the center of all three, video, book, and exhibit, is a collection of reprints of personal photographs brought along by Jews who were deported to Auschwitz after the

liquidation of the Bendin ghetto in Poland in 1943. Weiss came across the photos by chance during a tour of Auschwitz in 1986, when the photos, which were not exhibited, were shown to her privately by a guide. She then negotiated permission with the Polish authorities to copy the photos.

Weiss has traveled over the past decade with this exhibit of reproduced photos around the United States, showing her video that contains a selection of the photos and telling the story of their discovery. I find her lecture presentation problematic because the story of the photos' (re-)"discovery" and "rescue" by Weiss, the child of survivors, who grew up without any photos of her own murdered relatives, becomes so central. Because of this, I choose here to focus on her recent book. In *The Last Album: Eyes from the Ashes of Auschwitz-Birkenau* (2001), which opens with a foreword by Leon Wieseltier, author and literary editor of the *New Republic* (and himself the son of a Holocaust survivor), and an introduction by Holocaust scholar James Young, several hundred of the photos that Weiss found at Auschwitz have been beautifully reproduced. This book in particular presents an odd disjunction, for not only does one not expect such photographs in the format of a coffee-table book, it is also highly unusual to see such a book introduced by prominent intellectuals, suggesting that the book belongs to a different (scholarly) genre. Most problematic, however, is how it asks to be read.

Educational and artistic projects that use domestic, pre-Holocaust photography often provide an invitation to identify that is difficult to resist, and this project is no different. As both Liss and Hirsch have pointed out, photography plays a central role in postmemory, as it both facilitates and complicates this process of identification. Liss argues, in fact, that postmemories tend in general to be centrally informed by photographs: "Postmemories... constitute the imprints that photographic imagery of the Shoah have [sic] created within the post-Auschwitz generation" (Liss, *Trespassing* 86). Hirsch suggests that, on the one hand, photos seem to evoke the physical reality of the event, the "trace," or "evidence" we so desperately seek, the further removed we are from the events in time. That is, photos have the ability to connect us to the "real." On the other hand, photos hold a central place because certain Holocaust photo images (in particular those from the concentration camps and ghettos) have circulated with such repetitiveness that they have gained a certain sense of familiarity to those of us who were never there (Hirsch, "Surviving Images" 13). In some respects, then, these photos have become iconic in our cultural postmemory.

Hirsch and Liss criticize the repetitive use of certain kinds of photos (in particular Nazi propaganda shots) in contemporary educational material and in academic and artistic work, because they risk the desensitizing of the audience to these images (Hirsch, "Surviving Images" 24; Liss, *Trespassing* xii-xiii).[17] They suggest, however, that the judicious use of certain kinds of photos, namely family snapshots, does work. Liss, for example, argues that domestic images of pre-Holocaust families potentially can "transform the sentiment of singular personal attachment into potent collective signs of irreducible existence and retrospective resistance," as these kinds of photos so explicitly counter the "other" photos, namely, "the legions of horrific photographs picturing people stripped of their humanness, images that have been archived, reproduced, and codified into unaccountably familiar yet blinding postmemories" (Liss, *Trespassing* 93).[18]

Notwithstanding their power, it is the use of these family photos in art and documentary projects that potentially also lends itself most easily to "narcissistic, idiopathic looking," as Hirsch rightly warns, because we as viewers easily identify with the images and project ourselves into them. Thus, she suggests that the challenge for those who use photography (in art, or, as I would argue, in research or teaching) is to "find the balance that allows the spectator to enter the image, to imagine the disaster, but that disallows an overappropriative identification that makes distances disappear" (Hirsch, "Projected Memory" 10).

This is no easy task, however, as becomes clear in Weiss's project. How the photographic images of the Holocaust are read and what kind of identification they invite or elicit depends strongly on what kinds of photos are selected and on the context in which these photos are placed. Weiss's work is an illustration of a photography project in which careful reading becomes essential, but tricky, as the issues of positionality, ownership, and (inappropriate) identification converge.

The first (and by far largest) part of the book contains photos organized by theme, from different schools and orphanages, the Chasidic community, Zionist organizations, and different families. The photos depict ordinary pre-war Jewish community life and activities. We see pictures of families, children, friends, weddings, outings, and club and school life. In fact, little is remarkable about any of these photos, apart from the fact that the spectator knows that the people portrayed were probably killed by the Nazis, and that those who made the effort to bring these photos with them to Auschwitz were murdered as well. This knowledge of their tragic deaths, then, creates a moving disjunction: the contrast between these vibrant, healthy, happy Jewish faces, which give us a glimpse of Jewish life in Eastern Europe before the Nazi invasion,

and their inevitable, senseless deaths in the Nazi camps. In this respect, this book functions a little like the traditional *yisker bicher,* the memorial books created after the war by survivors to commemorate the destroyed Jewish communities of Eastern Europe.[19]

For many readers, the pictures in this book may indeed provide a first glimpse of a thriving, very normal, pre-war Polish Jewish community. They form a stark contrast with the now widely circulated images of camp inmates, emaciated faces staring through barbed wire fences, and piles of corpses. In fact, this contrast forms the strongest rationale for the reproduction of these photographs, as Weiss suggests: "...these photos do not depict the familiar nightmare images of violence and death commonly associated with Hitler's Europe. Instead they resonate with life. In these intimate photos, we witness life as it was supposed to be, life before the horror began" (20). What matters to Weiss is that these are "the very photos they chose for their own remembering," allowing us "the most intimate view of who these people were, who they loved, what mattered most to them" (21). The reproduction of these photos is supposed to return humanity to the victims.

Weiss presents her work as a personal mission, and the act of painstakingly reproducing and archiving these photos may well have served an important personal function for her, a daughter of survivors who grew up with few family pictures. Thus, it perhaps constitutes important "postmemory work," since, for Weiss, the photos can represent the loss of her family and of Eastern European Jewish culture, and allow for a process of mourning and "working through." I believe, however, that for a general audience that may or may not be Jewish, or even American,[20] and that (on the whole) does not have a familial connection to the Holocaust, the photos come to facilitate a different kind of identification. This identification may be far more sentimental, and even nostalgic, and risks retroactively erasing the reality of the horrors of the Holocaust.

My problem with the book is that it seems packaged to do precisely that. The book's layout is beautiful, many of the men, women, and children in the photos are attractive, and the images are presented without much context. All of this invites fetishization. It is a pleasure to look at these pictures, just as it would be if they had been in a regular family album, and this pleasure is possible precisely through a process of identification. "This girl looks just like my aunt," we think, "this baby could be my nephew!" We look, we recognize ourselves, our lives, our families, and then are called back to the reality of these people's deaths.

While Weiss seeks this identification, seeks to undo the abstraction of the Holocaust, and elicit a different form of mourning from her audience, I wonder what kind of mourning this project truly brings forth.

These are compelling photos, but we know nearly nothing about these people as individuals, the lives they lived, we know nothing of the circumstances of their death, either. We are left to project our own image onto them and to wonder who they are. Instead of using such family snapshots and returning humanity to the victims, or, as Liss suggests, transforming "the sentiment of *singular personal attachment* into potent *collective signs* of irreducible existence and retrospective resistance" (93, my emphasis), the sheer size of the project and the anonymity of most photos make me feel as if I am intruding into lives that were never meant to be this public, lives that are made into a spectacle without permission.

Perhaps because of my own personal connection with this history, growing up with identical snapshots of (my own) murdered relatives in which we as a family had a tremendous emotional investment, I tend to resist this transformation from the personal attachment to the collective sign. Despite the kind of profound postmemory these photographs may elicit through our ability to identify with them, we should not lose sight of the fact that the people in these photos are indeed not our family, are not us, and furthermore, that they were indeed someone else's relatives. These photos, taken along to Auschwitz by relatives or friends precisely because they felt an emotional attachment to the people depicted in them, are now displayed as iconic "traces," representing no longer the people in the photographs or their owners, those who loved them, but more symbolically, the losses of the Holocaust, the loss of innocence, of normal lives, of entire communities. I take issue with this kind of symbolic presentation and the "idiopathic, narcissistic" looking it invites (Hirsch, "Projected Memory" 10), and I am asking others to resist it, too.

For the (much shorter) second part of the book, Weiss tracked down and interviewed a number of survivors depicted in these photographs, as well as surviving family members. Through the in-depth interviews the photographs come to life and do justice to the victims, and a more appropriate distance between them, the Holocaust experience, and the viewer/reader is reinforced. We can no longer project ourselves onto the images in these photos as before, as they are no longer anonymous but presented within the context of the story of the survivors themselves. Certainly, these stories, too, can be read autobiographically, but this requires more conscious effort than with the photos in the first part of the book, where identification occurs so effortlessly. A reading of the interviews is less likely to lead to the kind of identification in which the distance between reader and survivor disappears completely.

Weiss's project, then, suggests precisely how difficult it is to read Holocaust-related work (history, memoirs, film, photos) without projecting ourselves into the stories and images. Both the desire to connect, and the imperative to understand (or to have students understand) more fully these unimaginable experiences make us put ourselves into these stories and images. Furthermore, in some cases, doing so may in fact make us feel better. Looking at the photographs in Weiss's book is in an odd way pleasurable. As we are asked only to imagine what happened to the people in these photos but are not confronted with their deaths, we do not have to confront fully the horror of the events. The history of what follows is assumed to be so well known that it is left out of the work. Graphic photos from Auschwitz, for instance, are not included in the book. Some Holocaust works, then, more than others, tend to invite identification explicitly (even though it may become potentially sentimental, nostalgic, and inappropriate), as our own positionality and investment are so explicitly not called into question.

There are a number of different ways in which we can prevent this kind of looking or reading, and prevent our (and our students') engaging in it. One way, as I have suggested throughout this essay, would be to investigate one's positionality toward this history, and to analyze what one's particular postmemory of the Holocaust is fuelled by, and thus consciously question our personal investments in this work. Why do we do it? What do we have personally invested? What do we get out of it? What are we looking for, how are we reading? I am not calling for such personal revelations to become part of every essay or book published in this field, or even of every student paper. I do think that at some point in every research endeavor, however, we should encourage each other and our students to consider these questions of investment.

Another way to counteract a too facile and potentially sentimental identification which erases specificity and history, and which shelters us from the reality of the profound violence and terror of the Holocaust, is to place the kind of work that potentially elicits this kind of response back into a larger context that does provide a confrontation with this traumatic background. An example of such a contextualizing is the "Tower of Faces" in the United State Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. The photos that cover the entire length and width of the inside walls of this tower (which conjures up the image of a chimney) are family and community snapshots of Jewish families from the small town of Ejszyszki in Poland, painstakingly collected over a decade by Yaffa Eliach, one of the few survivors of this town, and they are quite similar in genre to the ones used in Weiss's project. While they thus risk producing a potentially similar problematic response in the

viewer, I believe the effects of these photos to be very different, because of the way they are exhibited. The tower is in the middle of the exhibit, and while standing in the tower, on a bridge, one can look up and down at the photos that cover the walls, but one can never see all of them, or even most of them, as many are too high up or too far down to be seen clearly. In fact, this set-up seems to have been deliberate, as a visitor gets to see different parts of this photo collection only when, at different moments throughout the exhibit, s/he crosses again through the tower while descending through the museum, floor by floor (one starts the exhibit on the top floor), and crossing from one room of the exhibit to the next. As the spectator is confined to different bridges each time, suspended in the air between the walls of the photos, the photo collection prevents the satisfying sense of completeness from taking hold that Weiss's collection elicits. In fact, as spectators we seem to "miss" the encounter with many of the people in the portraits because they are too far away for us clearly to see them, and we are thereby confronted both with the fact that we literally "missed" knowing these people while they were alive, and the realization that a complete presentation of the millions of people murdered by the Nazis, or even of the people of just one village, is not possible. We are thus reminded of the massive scale of the murders, as well as of the losses it represents. At the same time, our tendency to view these family photos in an "idiopathic" way is frustrated, complicated, made impossible. We are not offered the chance to see something as comforting and beautifully arranged as a photo album: the architecture of the exhibit itself prevents this from happening. Furthermore, it is important that these photos are only a small part of a much larger exhibit that focuses precisely on the details of the crimes of the Holocaust, its unprecedented brutality and scale, thus not sheltering us from the larger context of this history.

Awareness of context, framing, and presentation, then, in addition to self-awareness, are vitally important in how we encounter (and teach) the Holocaust, as emotions can so easily be manipulated. Certain presentations may (more than others) elicit a tendency to identify uncritically. Knowing that we do tend to read and look in this self-seeking way can thus guide us in choosing representations or texts that instead frustrate or complicate this desire, making a more critical discussion of both text and our own investment possible.[21]

I have suggested in this essay that within scholarship that deals with the Holocaust, taking stock of how positionality plays a role in the work we do (what different shapes our subject positions take and from which position we come to interpret the material we encounter) is important, for not only is the Holocaust difficult to approach neutrally, it is indeed

our affective capacity to identify (and our tendency to be self-seeking readers) that plays a great role in our gaining access to this experience. I introduced postmemory both as a crucial (and quite widely used) term to indicate the particular affective dimension of the connection we feel to this subject (a response to the trauma of the survivors that takes the form of a delayed and indirect form of memory), and as a notion that brings the problematic issue of identification to the center. For whereas postmemory can be defined as familial (whereby it stands for the affective dimension of the experiences and discourses that make up the encounter of a child of survivors with the Holocaust), it can also be understood as extra-familial, as an act, a "retrospective witnessing by adoption" (Hirsch, "Surviving Images" 10). As such, postmemory may bridge the gap between survivors and those who were not there, but it can do so, I have suggested, only if the acts of identification and adoption are sufficiently analyzed and self-monitored. If not, this affective response to the Holocaust can take the form of inappropriate over-identification that erases the difference between one's own subjectivity and experiences and that of those personally affected by the events.

In both cases, familial and non-familial postmemory, I have argued, the lines of relation and identification need to be theorized further. How do we approach the subject, with what kind of background, with what kind of investment? What is it that engages us, what are we looking for, what are we trying to learn or to teach? To illustrate the importance of such questions, I discussed Weiss's *Eyes from the Ashes,* in which the invitation to identify in overappropriative ways is particularly difficult to resist. A critical investigation of one's positionality is essential in countering such a response, I argued, as well as an awareness that certain discourse on the Holocaust invites "narcissistic, idiopathic" looking more easily than others.

My hope is that a call to a return of a more open discussion of these issues of personal investment and positionality, as established within feminist theory, will lead to scholarship in which positionality can indeed be acknowledged and investigated in more complex ways, not just in working on the subject of the Holocaust, but in the field of German Studies more generally. Furthermore, such an investigation could lead to the formulation of innovative pedagogic approaches that take into consideration (and bring into play) the positionality of our students as well, an approach that is not only relevant, but that in the process also educates the next generation of scholars on these issues.

Notes

[1] Des Pres (xiii). See also Felman, who contends that as the reading of survivor literature opens up "the imaginative capability of perceiving history—what is happening to others—in one's own body," it allows readers to become belated witnesses (108).

[2] Linda Alcoff articulated the notion of positionality in the late 1980s as an "alternative theory of the subject," a "third course" to transcend the dilemmas inherent in both cultural feminist and post-structuralist conceptions of female subjectivity (341). This essay was first published in *Signs* 13.3 (1988): 405–36.

[3] Liss and Hirsch seem to have developed this concept simultaneously, independently of each other. For Liss's first and later use of the term, see Liss (*Trespassing*) and Liss ("Trespassing"). For Hirsch, see Hirsch (*Family Frames,* "Projected Memory," and "Surviving Images").

[4] Alcoff bases her work on positionality on that of de Lauretis, who suggests that subjectivity, "for all social beings," is constructed through the process of experience (de Lauretis 157), that is, "by one's personal, subjective, engagement in the practices, discourses, and institutions that lend significance (value, meaning, and affect) to the events of the world" (159). Combined with the notion of "identity politics," the notion that "one's identity is taken (and defined) as a political point of departure, as a motivation of action, and as a delineation of one's politics" (Alcoff 347–48), Alcoff now argues that a woman can "actively utilize" her identity, "the product of her own interpretation and reconstruction of her history, as mediated through the cultural discursive context to which she has access," as a location for the construction of meaning (349). Positionality is the awareness as (female) subjects that we can "take up a position within a moving historical context and...choose what we make of this position and how we alter this context" (350).

[5] Take, for instance, the authority attributed to someone like Elie Wiesel. Having "been there," and having written on his Holocaust experiences, he has become an "expert" with a year-round lecture schedule, serving as an advisor of some kind for innumerable boards, foundations, and organizations related to the Holocaust. In the case of children of survivors, the assumptions made based on this positionality are possibly even more problematic, as I will explain later.

[6] It is important to note that the only forum where these issues have been brought up at all within this field is from within feminist studies.

[7] This is a commonly used English translation of the term first coined by David Rousset, a survivor of Buchenwald, in *L'Univers concentrationnaire.* It denotes the crimes committed by the Nazis and the concentration

camps themselves; while stemming from within (or located in) modern-day Europe, it also represents a wholly "different universe," bearing little resemblance to a "normal" world.

[8] Something of the kind certainly has occurred in the reception of the diary of Anne Frank, for example. Her work is taken to be a most powerful antidote to the Nazi hatred, whereby the fact that her "voice" survived while she did not is taken as a measure of comfort. It is now possible to find a theater poster announcing a youth theater's performance of the Goodrich and Hackett play *The Diary of Anne Frank,* which reads: "All the world's armies couldn't do more damage to the Nazis than the diary of a 14-year-old girl." The fact that Frank did not survive, and that her diary was not published until well after the Nazis were defeated, becomes completely irrelevant. Her story thus functions to make us "come to terms" with the Holocaust, defeating the Nazis, as it were, posthumously.

[9] I am grateful for his astute analysis of the issue of "autobiographical reading" and his reference to Suleiman's work. See also Weissman's critical discussion of positionality in the work of Lawrence Langer (Weissman, "Lawrence Langer").

[10] In this regard, it is interesting to note that so many of the authors in the canon of Holocaust literature are middle-class, assimilated Jewish humanists (for example, Primo Levi, Anne Frank, Jean Amery, Etty Hillesum, while Charlotte Delbo is not Jewish at all), which suggests that in that regard, too, our personal bias as overwhelmingly middle-class and secular scholars leads to the selection of certain texts over others. Of course, this selection is influenced in part by what publishers put out, and their choice is affected by the demand of the marketplace. It is reasonable to assume that market demand in turn is affected by the public's perceived ability to identify, that is, to read such texts autobiographically. Hence, there has never been much of a market in Western Europe and the US for memoirs written in Yiddish by observant Orthodox Jewish survivors (some of these texts have been published in small editions in Israel, and by small local presses in Brooklyn).

[11] I would like to see us remedy this exclusion, however, not by now focusing exclusively on women's stories, but by using our awareness that we read autobiographically (as gendered beings) to analyze how gender matters in narratives by both women and men.

[12] Liss does not define postmemories as familial at all, but uses the term to define all postwar Holocaust memory projects, regardless of whether the creator is a child of survivors (Liss, *Trespassing* 86). It is interesting to note that Suleiman also points out that a personal connection to a certain story is not necessary to identify: "it would be far too restrictive, and wrongheaded,

to suggest that only one who has undergone a certain experience can respond to another's story...autobiographically" (204).

[13] Hirsch suggests, for instance, that it should be the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's mission to generate postmemory in a general audience: "The museum was created not primarily for survivors and deeply engaged children of survivors...but for an American public with little knowledge of the event. At its best, the museum needs to elicit in its visitors *an imaginary identification*—the desire to know and to feel, the curiosity and passion that shape the postmemory of survivor children. At its best, it would include all of its visitors in the generation of postmemory" (*Family Frames* 249, my emphasis).

[14] Not only is postmemory not necessarily tied to family, Hirsch argues that it should also not be tied "to a group that shares an ethnic or national identity marking" (Hirsch, "Surviving Images" 9–10).

[15] It "characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated" (Hirsch, *Family Frames* 22).

[16] In regard to the US context, Dora Apel shows that since the late 1960s, the Holocaust for many American Jews has served as a "unifying theme" that is meant "to promote Jewish identity and stem the tide of intermarriage and a too-successful assimilation" (15). She argues that "the evocation of the Holocaust serves as a kind of unifying historical reminder of the inescapability of Jewishness" (17). As an example of its power, she cites the 1998 *Annual Survey of American Jewish Opinion,* in which "remembrance of the Holocaust" was mentioned as the activity with the greatest importance to respondents' Jewish identity (17).

[17] For a similar critique, see also Zelizer.

[18] See also 27–28, where she discusses the "Tower of Faces" exhibit in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and argues that these photos do allow for identification.

[19] These are regional histories that talk of the Jewish community before and after the Nazi onslaught, and they usually contain photos, illustrations, graphs, and names of those who were killed. In this respect, the book mirrors in a strange way the work of the photographer Roman Vishniac and his "memory project" of the "vanished world" of Polish Jews. For a critical analysis of this work, see Zemel. As Zemel points out, the Jews in Visniac's photos (taken in the 1930s in Poland) are always seen from the perspective of what lay just ahead, their destruction. Thus the viewer comes to share Vishniac's position as *knowing witness.* As a result, "the images launch a voyeuristic fascination with a marked people in the moments before

death....This uneasy voyeurism is sanctioned, however, by turning the act of looking to commemorative ritual" (81–82).

[20] There is now a German edition of the book in print as well (Weiss, *Das letzte Album*).

[21] Texts that lend themselves well to such a reading because they interpellate the reader in a way that frustrates this desire are, for instance, Ruth Klüger's memoir *Weiter leben: Eine Jugend* (1992), or Charlotte Delbo's collected works *Auschwitz and After* (1995). While both are profoundly moving pieces of literature, they do not allow for easy self-seeking or projection. Klüger's work complicates this process because it explicitly tries to appeal to the reader outside of the text, putting us back into our place as audience, and Delbo's work prevents this by its poetic power that makes us aware of the barriers of language and the inability fully to understand the experiences of the author.

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