Mapping Generations of Traumatic Memory in American Narratives

Mapping Generations of Traumatic Memory in American Narratives

Edited by

Dana Mihăilescu, Roxana Oltean
and Mihaela Precup

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS
PUBLISHING

Mapping Generations of Traumatic Memory in American Narratives,
Edited by Dana Mihăilescu, Roxana Oltean and Mihaela Precup

This book first published 2014

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-5672-X, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-5672-0

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This volume was edited as part of the UEFISCDI-funded project "Cross-Cultural Encounters in American Trauma Narratives: A Comparative Approach to Personal and Collective Memories," PN-II-RU-TE-2011-3-0149 (October 2011-September 2014), contract no. 64/2011, project coordinator Dr. Roxana Oltean.

INTRODUCTION

Identifying mechanisms of traumatic memory for various generations of trauma survivors has been an increasing focus of scholarship and public attention in recent decades, in the works of scholars such as Mieke Bal, Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman, Marianne Hirsch, Nancy K. Miller, Dominick La Capra, Michael Rothberg, Leo Spitzer, and others. Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" (1997, 2012), Peggy Phelan's "performative memory" (1997), Dora Apel's "secondary witnessing" (2002), Alison Landsberg's "prosthetic memory" (2004), Michael Rothberg's "multidirectional memory" (2009), the role of mediation and remediation in the dynamics of cultural memory (Astrid Erll, 2012; Aleida Assman, 2011), and Stef Craps' focus on "postcolonial witnessing" and its cross-cultural dimension (2013) are all essential to current scholarly examinations of generations of post-traumatic memory.

Mapping Generations of Traumatic Memory in American Narratives is a collection of essays that participates in this particular conversation as it explores the performance and transmission of post-traumatic memory in contemporary United States. The essays in our collection expand current directions of trauma studies beyond the narrow focus of early 1990s practitioners and towards the creation of a self-reflective critical paradigm. They examine the dynamics of the transmission of trauma from the personal to the public and from one generation to another; they attempt to reexamine the classic definition of trauma as a singular exceptional event that shatters all systems of representation; they also propose a definition of testimony that goes beyond presence, and draws attention to the potential for cross-cultural ethical engagements. These complex forms of traumatic transmission are examined in this volume in four parts, each with a different focus: trauma and multidirectional memory; the representation of trauma in autobiographical texts; the dynamic of public forms of national commemoration; the problematic instantiation of 9/11 as a traumatic landmark.

Our volume attempts to expand the narrow definition of the term "generation" beyond the genealogical and into the cross-cultural. Thus, the chapters from **Part One. Legacies of Multidirectional Memories: From Pre-Holocaust to Postcolonial Traumas**, build on the work of Michael Rothberg, Stef Craps, and Gert Buelens by exposing the blind spots of a

Western theoretical and diagnostic model in trauma studies, and exploring forms of non-Western/alternative engagements with oppression and suffering. Two chapters explore the Holocaust and the input of Neo-Hoodoo mythology on the traumatic history of African Americans, thus juxtaposing the experiences of (post)colonialism, Auschwitz, and Harlem. More precisely, Adam Brown and Danielle Christmas's chapter focuses on Sydney Lumet's influential and controversial film *The Pawnbroker* (1965) in comparison to Richard LaGavranese's post-neoliberal film *Freedom Writers* (2007). The authors explore the stakes of this kind of Holocaust films for collective understandings of race and class in urban America, highlighting the importance of whether the directors choose a redemptive resolution when exposing the genocidal nature of urban racial and economic suffering. Next, Elisabeth Oyler's chapter examines Ishmael Reed's theory of Neo-Hoodoo, a tradition based on the organization of Haitian VooDoo and building upon an Americanized version of it; the author explains it as "a multicultural and inclusive practice that welcomes all cultures to (re)join, reclaiming a lost cultural history" which is part traumatic, part celebratory, and works towards creating an inclusive cultural future. Anna Sajecki's chapter also focuses on the inscription of trauma into space, examining Annie Proulx's novel *The Shipping News* (1993) in order to decode the manner in which the imprint of a spatial, traumatic narration can be passed down across generations, and how it changes as one starts the process of working through.

Two other chapters from Part One propose a novel path in the field of trauma studies by suggesting that Rothberg's model of multidirectional memory can be extended to also instrumentalize the analysis of trauma in the case of postcommunism. The chapters reflect on the US as a site of East European traumas when they examine the 1903 antisemitic Kishinev pogrom and the early 1990s war from Yugoslavia in Aleksandar Hemon's *The Lazarus Project* (2008), as well as the role of Voice of America radio broadcasts for the investigation of American representations of East European traumas during the Cold War. Dana Mihăilescu's chapter thus reads Hemon's narrative as a work underscoring the difficulty of dealing with urban norms of historical/structural traumas and practices of mourning. She also suggests that the examination of the perspective of displaced individuals in the city leads to the possibility of shifting reductive frames of reference, and opens spaces of negotiation that will hopefully allow for a better future via cross-cultural, multidirectional configurations. The author does this by examining the struggles of immigrants to the US in a multidirectional approach connecting refugees from two widely different historic traumas—the 1992 siege of Sarajevo

and the 1903 Kishinev pogrom. On the other hand, Roxana Oltean's chapter focuses on two VOA scripts from 1951 and 1953, which "address the issues encoded by the syntagm 'Stalintowns aplenty'—violence, imposition and obliteration—and engage the wider topic of the communist purges from two perspectives: the politicization of city names and its role in the creation of a totalitarian geography, and the projection of an American/universal counter-space built on ethical principles from surprisingly diverse perspectives." The author's main aim is to read VOA broadcasts and their ideological function in the spirit of Michael Rothberg's suggestion that non-competitive traumas may yield a multidimensionality that opens up the space of ideology to multivocal readings.

Part Two. Trauma, Lineage, and Transmission in Autobiography ponders the complex relationship between the autobiographical mode and traumatic testimony, while reflecting on the interplay between words and images, as well as the role of gender in the construction of the autobiographical subject. Our contributors also expand the sometimes rigid fixation of trauma studies on the strictly theoretical debates about trauma and representation or trauma and temporality as established by several leading figures in the field (such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Dominick LaCapra). They do so by investigating the constantly shifting dynamics of Nora's already mediated sites of memory (Erl and Rigney). This shift of focus opens wider debates in the humanities that have driven scholars towards the exploration of specific transnational and transgenerational experiences and encounters. Thus, Kate Parker Horigan discusses the conversion the autobiographical discourse of trauma from the first-person story—present in Abdulrahman Zeitoun's Katrina survival story first published online in his own blog—into the story of the heroic immigrant whose individual voice is erased as he is emplotted in a best-selling success story in Dave Eggers' *Zeitoun* (2009). Parker Horigan uses critical discourse analysis to reflect on the public transformation of the character Zeitoun into a useful prop in the construction of competing political discourses, where Islamic masculinity is one of the main variables. The fictionalization of a real-life traumatic event is complicated by its embeddedness in a specific ideology, as Sostene M. Zangari's chapter from this collection also demonstrates. By focusing on crime novelist James Ellroy's interpretation of his mother's unsolved murder, Zangari reads Ellroy's successful series of four crime novels, the *Los Angeles Quartet* (made up of *The Black Dahlia*, *The Big Nowhere*, *L.A. Confidential*, and *White Jazz*) through his 1996 autobiography, *My Dark Places*. In the latter, Ellroy remembers his own reading of his mother's

death as a crime in which she was complicit, a perspective that was proposed to him as a child by his father but that was also informed by the particular gender politics of the 1950s. Zangari demonstrates that Ellroy's ambivalent emotions are also reflected in a fictional world dominated by a violent patriarchy whose destruction of the city mirrors the shattering of the psyche of the child whose mother was killed, and whose understanding of the event is manipulated by the same forces that may have allowed for her death. The negotiation between contemporary norms of mourning and the referential expectations of autobiography is next examined in Mihaela Precup's chapter on three memoirs of mourning: Joan Didon's *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) and *Blue Nights* (2011), and Joyce Carol Oates' *A Widow's Story* (2011). Precup focuses on the reception—in reviews and online comments sections from amazon.com and other relevant websites—of these three autobiographical texts whose main purpose is recording the death of a loved one and the subsequent period of grief and mourning. The role of the archive in the exploration of trauma is further analyzed by Golnar Nabizadeh in a chapter that interprets the particular reading experience imposed by autobiographical comics (or "autographic comics") whose main representational challenge lies at the intersection of punctual and ongoing trauma—Art Spiegelman's *Maus I and II* (1987, 1991), *MetaMaus* (2011) and *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004), and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006).

The chapters from **Part Three. Commemorating Trauma, Shifting National Icons: Marginal and Mainstream Paths of Remembrance** depart from the examination of the site of punctual trauma and into the exploration of the dynamic mediation of public places of memory. Emma Login's chapter, "Contemporary War Memorials and the Urban Landscape: The Memorialization of Marginalized Groups in Washington, D.C.," reads the visual rhetoric of three memorials from Washington, D.C.—the African American Civil War Memorial, the Japanese American Memorial to Patriotism during World War II, and the American Indian Memorial Initiative—to unveil the negotiations and power dynamics behind their construction and to propose a shift in the policies that dictate official structures of remembrance. In a similar vein, Liz Medoff's chapter, "The Gendered Approach. Talking Trauma in National Monument Discourses," places itself in conversation with theoreticians such as Ann Cvetkovich, Erika Doss, and Jill Bennett in order to walk readers through the ways affect is negotiated in the memorial site of Ground Zero. Sara Polak's chapter, "Prosthetic Memories of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Infantile Paralysis as Narrative Embodiments for Traumatic American War Memory" examines Roosevelt's disability—as it is

represented in several films such as *Pearl Harbor* (Michael Bay, 2001), *Hyde Park on Hudson* (Roger Michell, 2012), *FDR American Badass!* (Garrett Brawith, 2012)—that functions as an embodiment of the trauma of war.

The chapters in **Part Four. 9/11 and the Canonization of Trauma** question the place of 9/11 in an international hierarchy of suffering constructed through the formation of a canon of representation established by post-traumatic visibility. Rodica Mihăilă's opening chapter investigates several forms of memorializing the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the recent American novel, as either healing therapy for the nation or oblique critique of American exceptionalism, by focusing on two debut novels published in 2011, Amy Waldman's *The Submission* and Teju Cole's *Open City*. Allison Whitney expands the exploration of various processes of healing by examining Paul Greengrass's 2006 film, *United 93*; she presents both film production and spectatorship as memorial acts, and argues that Greengrass's formal and narrative strategies suggest that to memorialize 9/11 is to remember the cognitive dissonance experienced by the spectator-survivor, thus foregrounding the initial stage of confusion over working through a traumatic experience. Audrey Bardizbanian's chapter considers how the narration of urban space and traumatic memories reflect each other as a way of transmitting both personal experiences and collective traumas in Jonathan Safran Foer's popular but problematic novel *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005). By looking at Foer's 2005 novel from a different angle, Brittany Hirth exposes how direct articulation of 9/11 is not always readily accessible in the present, and critiques Foer's method of utilizing the Dresden and Hiroshima bombings within his narrative about 9/11 as stand-ins for the latter's representation. Finally, Jenn Brandt's chapter focuses on the narrative use and function of "othered" bodies in response to 9/11 and the War on Terror—specifically those considered transgressive, terrorist, and/or tortured—in Claire Tristram's *After* (2004) and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007). Brandt shows how such transgressive bodies subvert recognizable stereotypical notions of gender, sex, class, and nation in an effort to problematize notions of identity and nation that have been ignored or oversimplified in many discourses of 9/11, thereby destabilizing the processes of nostalgia.

Overall, our volume explores cross-cultural and trans-generational encounters in post-World War II American trauma narratives by mapping out traumatic memory in successive cycles of American narratives generated by major moments of trauma in US history or European history impacting the US through geopolitical consequences or extensive public

debate in the US: slavery, ethnic cleansing in Eastern Europe, the Holocaust, post-Cold War configurations, and the 9/11 attacks. We read these narratives as not separate but interconnected, in the sense that they shape the US as a performative site of post-traumatic cross-cultural and transnational dialogue between generations. The corpus of narratives under discussion includes fiction, diaries, memoirs, films, visual narratives, and oral testimonies given in the US. The selection discloses a wide diversity of memories and voices, belonging to East European immigrants, to individuals marginalized because of class, race, ethnicity, gender differences and to a seemingly prosperous multicultural America, the target of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Given the broad range of topics addressed, the essays in our volume propose a new paradigm of post-traumatic memory which connects not only separate generations, but also separate geographical, cultural and political spaces affected to different degrees by shared historical events which produced considerable loss of life and liberty and which show how the US paradoxically became a space of inherited trauma and possible but always complicated relief for various generations of survivors.

PART ONE:

LEGACIES OF MULTIDIRECTIONAL MEMORIES: FROM PRE-HOLOCAUST TO POSTCOLONIAL TRAUMAS

WHEN THE HOLOCAUST COMES TO HARLEM: TRAUMATIC MEMORY, RACE, AND ECONOMIC (IN)JUSTICE IN AMERICAN HOLOCAUST FILM

ADAM BROWN AND DANIELLE CHRISTMAS

Sidney Lumet's controversial 1965 film *The Pawnbroker* was one of the first films to situate Nazi Germany's persecution of Jews alongside the experiences of an impoverished community of ethnic minorities in urban America. Almost half a century after its release, debate over the film continues unabated. Wendy Zierler captures one version of this debate when she stresses the "both problematic and salutary" consequences of those narratives (and she counts Lumet's film as a particularly guilty offender here) that juxtapose what she calls "the individual histories of Jewish and black suffering alongside each other."[1] Her concession, however, that "salutary" benefits exist holds promise that, even in her analysis, the limitations revealed in texts like Caryl Phillips's *Higher Ground* (1989) and *The Nature of Blood* (1997) can be overcome.

Counseling caution for a different reason, Laurence Mordekhai Thomas critiques the "invidious" and widespread "rivalry of suffering between the two groups," which has, at least partly, been brought about by what he views as the indifference of white America to both, and a reinforcement of racialized ideas on all sides.[2] Thus, even when put forward with the best intentions, any suggestion that the Holocaust and African American slavery can be compared with one another must be thought through with considerable care. In this chapter, we return to Lumet's pivotal film to re-examine the complexities of situating deeply traumatic historical experiences "next to" one another in film. Our analysis here of the textualities and reception of *The Pawnbroker* maps a trajectory from Lumet's film to contemporary notions of urban race and class politics, and the place of Holocaust representations in those conversations. Similar themes converge in *The Pawnbroker* and contemporary Hollywood intersections of the urban and the Holocaust—for our purposes, we will look at Richard LaGravenese's 2007 drama *Freedom Writers* as one such example—exemplifying what could be called different generations of Holocaust memory, though the narrative and technical

strategies employed by Lumet, and transformed by his successors, yield profoundly different results.

In both Lumet and LaGravenese's productions, the specter of the Holocaust, which is used alongside urban American narratives, directly engages with the transformation of American notions of racial and economic oppression. Lumet's film was developed in the context of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, more specifically the 1964 Harlem race riot, while later urban-Holocaust dramas respond to contemporary American notions of urban race and class; *Freedom Writers* follows Lumet's map, in its structure as an answer to the climactic Los Angeles race riots of the early 1990s. An analysis of these films reflects a social schizophrenia over the role of race versus the role of class in early incarnations of urban conflict—and later films that revive and revise these early tropes—highlighting a collapsing of narratives about one group popularly imagined as white and wealthy (Jews) with another group imagined as brown and violent (urban young adults). The resulting analogies and hierarchies set up between Holocaust persecution and urban American racial tensions have long proven contentious, as is revealed through an analysis of the popular and scholarly reception of Lumet's work in particular. The fraught tension between the convergence and conflation of the distinct traumas of these different groups must also be considered within the broader critique of what has been called the "Americanization" of the Holocaust, or the "Holocaust Industry."[3]

Annette Insdorf has observed that while the first two decades of Holocaust feature films focused on "Jewish victims and Nazi villains," the "second wave," beginning in the mid-1980s, has concentrated on resistance and rescue.[4] Lumet's film and followers, like LaGravenese's *Freedom Writers*, can be seen to fit into each of these waves respectively. Taking on a somewhat apocalyptic tone, Alvin H. Rosenfeld's recent volume *The End of the Holocaust* (which includes chapters on the Americanization of the Holocaust and the influence of Anne Frank's story), warns of the destructive impact of continued and increasing denial, indifference, and misrepresentations—particularly in terms of the "American triumphalism" (by which he means the optimistic resort to heroic deeds and happy endings) of film and other media.[5] While we do not subscribe to an inherently negative perspective on Holocaust film—indeed, we see it as a potentially very effective medium for negotiating Holocaust memory and experience in a complex and nuanced manner—the problems involved in screen narratives remain integral to any consideration of their potentialities. It is for this reason that the web of critiques surrounding a key text like *The Pawnbroker* be subjected to the

same level of scrutiny as the prolific body of critics has brought to the film itself.

Elucidating how the Holocaust came to fill "a need for a consensual symbol" for American Jewish identity, Peter Novick's 1999 study *The Holocaust in American Life* makes an important contribution to the ongoing debate over the "uniqueness" versus the "universality" of the genocide.[6] Relating this debate to the "comparability" issue, he writes, "Every historical event, including the Holocaust, in some ways resembles events to which it might be compared and differs from them in some ways (...) to declare the Holocaust unique, is intellectual sleight of hand."[7] In his study of Holocaust popular culture in America, Alan Mintz outlines what he sees as the predominant "exceptionalist" model of Holocaust representation, which is "rooted in a conviction of the Holocaust as a radical rupture in human history that goes well beyond notions of uniqueness," as opposed to the "constructivist" model, which "stresses the cultural lens through which the Holocaust is perceived."[8] The former perspective will clearly be more suspicious of comparative explorations of the kind Novick describes, while the latter constructivist approach is more likely to be at least open to the possibility that such comparisons can lead to illumination and are not automatically labelled a betrayal of Holocaust victims. Although our subsequent analysis of *Freedom Writers*, as one of many examples, will expose significant problems in the embedding of the Holocaust as a framework through which to understand (and resolve) the problems of urban America, our investigation of Holocaust-related cinema in a sense straddles the exceptionalist and constructivist approaches, as we seek not only to critique the problematic implications of the process of "Americanization" that have eventuated, but also to highlight the cultural (and generational) lenses through which the intersection of Holocaust and urban American narratives have been mediated.

In his introduction to *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Michael Rothberg writes that his study pivots on several central questions, namely,

> What happens when different histories confront each other in the public sphere? Does the remembrance of one history erase others from view? When memories of slavery and colonialism bump up against memories of the Holocaust in contemporary multicultural societies, must a competition of victims ensue?[9]

Located within a more specific context, this chapter seeks to examine these questions through an analysis of the simultaneous depiction of urban America and the Holocaust in film. Critiquing what he views as the

"flawed" and commonplace conceptualization of traumatic pasts as existing within a "competitive" framework, Rothberg writes of the need to "consider memory as multidirectional: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative."[10] Given that the vast majority of scholarship on Holocaust film has frequently focused on the (mis)appropriation of Holocaust memories and experiences to serve various (non-Holocaust-related) political agendas, it might be argued that the literature in this area in part reinforces a "competitive" discourse influenced by, and linked to, the contentious issue of "uniqueness." To be sure, there are certainly more than enough cases where Holocaust films (and texts in various other genres) justifiably give one pause, if not discomfort, in their attachment of Holocaust imagery to generate meanings about other historical phenomena. Yet as our previous discussion of Zierler highlights, a productive conversation incorporating both black and Jewish suffering can—and must—ensue in order to come to terms with the past from all angles. Furthermore, while a great deal has been written about how certain "trivializing" comparisons have negative implications for Holocaust collective memory, we aim to shed light on the problematic consequences of Hollywood's embrace of Holocaust narratives for understandings of urban America. In doing so, we underline the need to both resist "competitive" frameworks that position Holocaust (mis)representations as only impacting one set of historical experiences, and to acknowledge that memory, its mediation, and the consequences of this process, are multidirectional, subject to continual re-negotiation and comprising both problematic and productive possibilities. Both the limitations and potentialities of Holocaust film can be seen nowhere more clearly than in the textualities and reception of a single and singular film: *The Pawnbroker*. While each subsequent section can be read on its own terms, this chapter as a whole is meant to complicate, while also rescuing a valuable film from the often polemical, sometimes reductionist, regularly competing, and always impassioned critics that have raised the volume of discussion beyond understanding.

Cashing in on Jewish Suffering? Contentious Analogies and Christological Imagery in *The Pawnbroker*

Based on Edward Lewis Wallant's 1961 novel of the same name, *The Pawnbroker* focuses on the story of Holocaust survivor Sol Nazerman, who ekes out a miserable existence amidst low-income, urban American ethnic minorities—people he callously exploits through his business. From the outset, the film makes clear that Nazerman has unsuccessfully

attempted to repress his memories of the past, exemplified in his refusal to change the page of his store's calendar past the anniversary date of his family's murder, lest he lose temporal proximity to their death in the Nazi camps. Using fragmented "flash cuts" or "shock cuts" to construct an innovative mode of flashback, Lumet stylistically juxtaposes re-enacted footage of concentration camp existence with dismal images of New York slum life. Depicting a society divided by the race- and class-based tensions of 1960s New York City, the plot pivots on Nazerman's relationship with his young, charismatic Puerto Rican shop assistant, Jesus Ortiz, who is desperate to break free of socio-economic restraints and leave his criminal youth behind. Turning to Nazerman for inspiration that does not come, Ortiz reluctantly resorts to helping others rob the pawnshop, but is killed when he defends Nazerman from one of his armed accomplices.

Made in 1962 and released three years later, *The Pawnbroker* was produced at a time when a new set of American social values were being normalized, propelled by initiatives like the Civil Rights Movement. Situated within this complex context, the film merges the repressed trauma of the survivor with the socio-cultural tensions of American society, reflecting Lumet's intense preoccupation with the latter subject, as seen in his earlier powerful film *12 Angry Men* (1957). Notably, during the mid-1960s, pawnshops and their predominantly Jewish owners were often "viewed as the symbol of white colonization of the black inner city" and targeted during the race riots in Harlem (and as we discuss later, in 1990s Los Angeles).[11] Indeed, Alan Rosen points out that the setting of the pawnshop has repeatedly been appropriated throughout cinematic history to "emphasize allegations of Jewish greed or contest them."[12] And while, to the film's potential credit, it complicates these representations in important and unusual ways—humanizing the Jewish pawnbroker-archetype without turning him into the warm-hearted predecessor of Charlie Chaplin's *The Pawnshop* (1914)—*The Pawnbroker* has attracted a great deal of criticism on a number of issues, with scholars and other commentators debating the apparent analogy drawn between the Holocaust and Harlem, the problematic use of Christological imagery, and the reinforcement or subversion of antisemitic stereotypes. This section evaluates and contributes further to these debates.

Speaking to the potential problem of the Holocaust-as-American allegory, the intertwined narrative imagery of the Nazis' persecution of Europe's Jews and "everyday" suffering in New York have drawn the ire of a number of critics. Despite Lumet's claim that "there certainly was no attempt to show Harlem as a modern day concentration camp," many have censured *The Pawnbroker* for doing exactly this.[13] Ilan Avisar, one of the

first scholars to write on Holocaust film, classifies the film as an "extreme example of Jewish self-hatred," condemning "the bogus analogy between the horrors of the Holocaust and living conditions in Spanish Harlem."[14] More recently, Lawrence Baron has reiterated this point, writing that the "conflation of American racial discrimination and Nazi extermination distorts the historical reality of each."[15] On viewing the film, there would seem to be considerable evidence to support such sentiments. Lumet's sophisticated use of montage, a metaphor for the protagonist's ongoing psychological trauma, suggests that certain events witnessed by Nazerman in his New York-urban present instantly trigger memories from his European-labor camp past: the sound of barking sparks a memory of his friend, another Jewish prisoner in the camp, being chased by German guard dogs as he attempts to escape over the fence; a fleeting shot of a gang of adolescents assaulting an African American child in the "ghetto" evokes more images of the past. And when Nazerman catches a subway train, his mind returns to his family's deportation in cattle trucks and his son's death on the journey. The metaphorical significance of the film's aligning of the present with the past—and vice versa— is seldom rendered in a subtle manner, neither for Nazerman nor his viewers.

And yet, the film's approach to hand-held camerawork positions the viewer to situate Harlem as slight evidence for the privileged gaze at Jewish trauma, staging Jewish victimhood as the prime (if practically-speaking, out of view) injustice for which American injustice is a vehicle for understanding, rather than presenting urban trauma as co-equal to the Holocaust. In this way, the brief shot of a pile of shoes in a store window, the frequently passing trains outside Nazerman's store, and the striped shadows cast on his body by the pawnshop's bars, might be interpreted as a manifestation of his (distinctively Holocaust-induced) internal conflict more so than what Zierler suggests is a one-to-one parallel between historical contexts.[16] Joshua Hirsch finds traction in this reading of the film; pointing to the distinction between the fragmented shot/reverse shots used in the flashback sequences and the classical short/reverse shot structure of the film's opening title as Nazerman observes the ghetto streets as he drives through Harlem, Hirsch contends that "the formal directness with which the film constructs an epistemology of Harlem could not be more directly opposed to the formal fragmentation with which it constructs an epistemology of the Holocaust."[17] Similarly, Leonard J. Leff stresses additional devices used to discourage—or at least destabilize—connections between the Holocaust and Harlem, among them the impact of the peaceful family scene set in Germany that opens the film; the contrast between the "hallucinatory" cinematography of the camp

sequences revealed in fractions of seconds and the dense, sustained composition of New York's *mise-en-scène*; and the scoring of the past and present with classical music and Quincy Jones' jazz respectively.[18]

Similar to the purported analogy between the camps and Harlem, visual allusions in the film to Christian mythology are inarguable, if variously interpreted. Several scholars point to the youthful and aptly named Jesus Ortiz spiraling through a process of temptation and doubt (expressed through his visit to a Catholic Church just prior to robbing the pawnshop), through to his ultimate sacrifice, which redeems not only his own misguided behavior, but—according to many interpretations—Nazerman as well. In the film's final sequence, Nazerman moves from cradling Ortiz's body in a style somewhat resembling Michaelangelo's "Pietà" to slowly impaling his hand on the spike punch he uses to collect receipts, which has often been seen as evoking the stigmata. While commentators at the time of the film's release did not generally find the Christian appropriation of Jewish suffering to be problematic,[19] and even in the 1980s, Nazerman's infliction of pain on himself was uncritically described as "a complex and eloquent physical action that functions as penance,"[20] this was soon to change. For instance, a dismayed Avisar writes of Nazerman's gesture as "obviously an act of crucifixion," which literally Christianizes him through "love, grace, and suffering."[21]

On the other hand, Annette Insdorf makes a compelling counter-argument, writing that Nazerman's act of self-impalement on the spindle must be situated within a broader narrative thread developed in the film. In her reading, "Nazerman's attempt to express his pain ultimately shows his inheritance of a Nazi concept"—again predicating the film's narrative on Nazerman's relationship to the Holocaust, more than an allegory of urban malaise. Setting the "religious overtones aside," Insdorf argues that the "excruciating shot" in which Nazerman impales his hand on the pawnticket spike "conveys how Nazerman's self-inflicted wound makes concrete one of the film's central themes: [Holocaust] survivor guilt."[22]

Despite subtle gestures to opportunities for Nazerman to move past this guilt over the course of the film—in his (extremely) restrained affection for Ortiz or his potential (if unlikely) friendship with social worker Marilyn Birchfield—the alleged redemptive thrust of the narrative is blunted significantly in the film's final minutes, when Nazerman walks with his bleeding hand before him out of the pawnshop and through the crowd of bystanders gathered outside. With no offers of help from those around him, he wanders down the street and around the corner, his continuing trauma seemingly unnoticed by both the people around him and the jarring, enthusiastic trumpeting that plays on the soundtrack. Here,

Lumet distances his film from the final developments in Wallant's novel, which depicts a more sympathetic Nazerman who actually accepts Birchfield's friendship and continues his work at the pawnshop with a new assistant. Lumet's abandonment of this more uplifting conclusion supports the often-overlooked fact that the film's denouement—despite the earlier abundant and troubling use of Christological imagery—can be argued to resist a clear-cut notion of redemption. Amidst the ambiguous tone of the final frame, as Nazerman wanders traumatized through the indifferent crowd, *The Pawnbroker* may come closer than many other (particularly American) Holocaust films to fitting the "anti-redemptory aesthetic" that a number of Holocaust scholars, like Oren Baruch Stier, would call for in the decades that followed.[23]

Even with a more generous analysis of the film's Christological implications in mind, it is still frequently understood as a vehicle for antisemitic stereotypes. Nazerman's cold exploitation of his customers and generally unsympathetic nature leads Avisar to argue that the film uses "the anguish of Jewish history (...) insidiously to strengthen one of the most negative stereotypes of Jews as heartless money-makers."[24] Ortiz's temptation and "fall" has been read as a (if not unreasonable, at least partially excusable) consequence of Nazerman's refusal to take him on as a "disciple" (in another Jewish "betrayal" of the Christian martyr), and links have been made by several scholars between Nazerman's name, indifferent attitude, or exploitative behavior, and his apparent status as a perpetrator of injustice, or "Nazi man." With this and other critiques taken together, there are still unexplored avenues for critique. For instance, Avisar's denouncement of the "insult and offence in [the film's] portrayal of the Jews vis-à-vis the blacks and the Puerto Ricans" raises questions about the representation of other ethnic minorities through the subjectivity of the Jewish protagonist.[25] This includes the sexualization of Ortiz's African American lover Mabel Wheatley, a prostitute who is depicted in one of the film's most pivotal scenes through an arguably porno troped aesthetic, and the demonization of Rodriguez, the thoroughly unsympathetic boss of a crime syndicate. Terri Ginsberg points to the controversial argument put forward by some historians concerned with Jewish American filmmakers that the prevalence of violently racist imagery regarding African Americans in Hollywood cinema is the result of "a displaced allegory-effect of suppressed, often repressed, Jewish anger and indignation over historical, including North American, antisemitism."[26] It is necessary, then, to understand how representations of non-Jews in the film can speak to the social role of non-Jews in its own time, up to the present.

From "Oppressor" to "Whore": Depictions of Non-Jews in *The Pawnbroker*

In spite of what the title of Lumet's film suggests, Nazerman in an important sense only adopts the guise of a pawnbroker, and is actually the (somewhat reluctant) front man for a criminal organization led by Rodriguez—by far the film's most unsympathetic character. While the youthful, enthusiastic, and compassionate Ortiz assists in establishing Nazerman's shortcomings in personality and morality, Rodriguez is situated at the opposite extreme. Indeed, Rodriguez can be read as the "present day Nazi" within Lumet's film—in Insdorf's words, "a new incarnation of an old demon."[27] Curiously, the process of adaptation from book to film centers much of the racial anxiety of the film on African Americans. On the one hand, Ortiz was a light-skinned African American in the 1961 novel, but is Puerto Rican in the film; whereas on the other hand, the crime syndicate boss has transformed from an Italian immigrant in Wallant's text to an African American with a Spanish name in Lumet's.

The demonization of Rodriguez begins from his very first appearance early in the film when he calls Nazerman to ask how business is—although it is clear he has no interest in the answer, and only seeks to torment Nazerman with his power over him. Seated in the dining room of his extravagant home, the intimidating Rodriguez is portrayed through a low camera angle, dressed in a conspicuous white shirt and cravat, and at one point demanding that Nazerman acknowledge a joke he made was funny until the dismal survivor hangs up the phone. The power Rodriguez holds over him is nonetheless reinforced when he has one of his henchmen call Nazerman again and he is forced to answer. Later in the film, Mabel Wheatley, the lover of Ortiz who works as a prostitute, testifies to Rodriguez's reputation for brutal violence. At the instant Nazerman realizes that Wheatley and he share the same boss, a shock cut juxtaposes Nazerman in the present uttering Rodriguez's name and a brief glimpse of the younger Nazerman being spoken to by a Nazi officer in the camp, clearly implying a connection between the two perpetrators. The parallel is reinforced a number of times, as Wheatley claims Rodriguez is "the big man, the boss, about the biggest in Harlem." Further, when Nazerman subsequently confronts Rodriguez with his dismay that the pawnshop is connected with prostitution, the latter is again portrayed through low camera angles as he stands domineeringly over the trembling Nazerman with an aggressive glare. This scene is also the first time flash cuts are used with images only set in the present, suggesting that Rodriguez's threats to Nazerman have brought the trauma of his past back to him more

closely than ever. Rodriguez then leaves Nazerman sitting slumped on a sofa with the comment, "Happy dreams, Uncle."

In his last appearance in the film, Rodriguez's threats become reality, as he initiates and then oversees the physical beating of Nazerman. When Nazerman still refuses to sign the papers Rodriguez requires him to, and tells his oppressor that he will have to kill him, Rodriguez refuses. Again standing over him defiantly, he calmly tells his victim in a manner that echoes much survivor testimony regarding Nazi refusals to allow Jews the "freedom" to die of their own volition: "That's what you really want Professor, isn't it? Tell you what, you'll die, but not when you want to." He then exits the store and disappears from the narrative, although his menacing threat still hangs in the air for the remainder of the film. Rosen writes that while Wallant's novel implies that oppression in American society replicates that of European colonialism, Lumet's film suggests that "the agent of oppression comes from within, not from a white European but from a black American who himself comes out of Harlem."[28] He goes on to comment on how, in a shift from "the victim's relation to his own victimization…blacks [in *The Pawnbroker*] are complicit in their own exploitation and persecution."[29]

Following from this, Rosen connects the depiction of Rodriguez with the issue of "collaboration" with one's persecutors, widely criticized at the time of the film's release by Hannah Arendt and Raul Hilberg: "The film suggests that whatever the Jews did, they did as any victim would have done—and does."[30] However, the film gives no indication that Rodriguez suffers, or has ever suffered, persecution of any kind. The evil he perpetrates seems to stem from his own vicious nature, because, as Rodriguez himself declares, "I've got a feel for things." Further, the crucial facet of this issue that Rosen does not consider is the problem of judgment that arises in such assessments of the so-called "collaboration" of the persecuted. Indeed, the passing of moral judgments on Jewish victims forced to cooperate with their Nazi captors remains an emotionally and morally fraught topic, with strong condemnation of such "complicity" being particularly common to Holocaust films.[31] The overwhelmingly negative, two-dimensional depiction of Rodriguez is no exception to this.

Another problematic representation of an African American character is that of Wheatley herself. Given that Wheatley and Ortiz's healthy sexual relations are symbolically used to contrast with the "mechanical," even "necrophilic," sexual intercourse that Nazerman has with the wife of his dead friend, combined with the fact that Wheatley is listed not by her name, but as "Ortiz's girl," in the film's credits, she can hardly be considered a rounded character.[32] In the pivotal sixth flashback sequence

of the film mentioned above, Wheatley visits the pawnshop and attempts to use her body to entice Nazerman to give her a better price for her locket. When the woman takes off all her clothes in front of Nazerman, she repeatedly directs him to "look" at her nude body. But obstructing our own ability to "look," the camera cuts to more images of Nazerman's experience in Auschwitz, including a panning shot of several women forced to be camp "prostitutes" (or, more accurately, rape slaves). Juxtaposing the black woman's exposed breasts in the present day with the naked body of Nazerman's wife just prior to his witnessing a Nazi officer raping her, Lumet positions Wheatley as a conduit to Nazerman's repressed memories, ignited by her physical provocation. Nazerman orders the woman out of his store, and his enraged groan and clenched fist serve as a dramatic prelude to his climactic "silent scream."

Joshua Hirsch provides an acutely detailed discussion of this sequence, which he characterizes as "a paradigm of the posttraumatic flashback," yet relegates his brief reflection of the gendered implications of this sequence to an endnote.[33] While Aaron Kerner's analysis of this scene notes that "the female subjects [are] treated as fetish objects as well as subjugated by forcing them into sexual slavery" within the film, this must be taken a step further to acknowledge how both women are objectified through the camera's gaze.[34] The construction of Wheatley's sexuality in the scene, pivoting on the colonialist binary of simultaneous revulsion from the "savage," and desire for and fascination with the "exotic," reveals that the depiction of her behavior arguably reinforces the racialized and sexualized stereotype of the "Othered" Black woman. More problematically still, and reflecting the parallel arguably made between Rodriguez and Nazerman's Nazi tormentor, Wheatley's commands that Nazerman "Look" at her naked body are connected through his memory to the Nazi officer's demands that he watch his wife being raped ("Willst du was sehen?" ["Do you want to look at something?"]). As discussed elsewhere, the common trend of deploying female sexuality that is both intrinsically connected to fascist ideology and used to further male narratives has proven a particularly problematic cultural context for attempts to represent women in Holocaust cinema.[35]

The sultry facial expression and pleading tone with which Wheatley delivers her request for Nazerman to "look," alongside the positioning of the viewer to see her body through the eyes of Nazerman, can further be argued to engage in what has been termed "pornotroping"—a process of representation derived from slavery that transforms a human being into objectified flesh and renders them subject to the (un)pleasure of the viewer.[36] Spillers writes that pornotroping occurs where the African

American body becomes "a territory of cultural and political maneuver," an object of "captured sexualities" embodying both "otherness" and "sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general 'powerlessness.'"[37] When pornotroping reduces a body to a sexualized object that embodies nothing but the absence of all power, the process of eroticization overwhelms that which is purportedly being critiqued. In the case of Wheatley's desperate struggle to make ends meet in the present, the fetishistic display of her body while she appeals to Nazerman's "sexual instincts" undermines the film's apparent critique of the social forces that drive a woman to such lengths in search of extra money. Also of significance is that Nazerman is very uncomfortable with Wheatley's presence and tries hard not to look, thus arguably rendering the camera's (and viewer's) gaze more implicitly titillating.

Another often overlooked facet of *The Pawnbroker* is the pedagogical discourse constructed through the relationship between Nazerman and Ortiz—the most central non-Jewish figure in the film, and certainly a more complex figure than the demonized Rodriguez and sexualized Wheatley. Ortiz explicitly positions himself as the "student" of the reluctant Nazerman throughout the narrative; however, the educational process and outcome revealed in this relationship is considerably different from that depicted in *Freedom Writers*, which we will return to. In fact, *The Pawnbroker* can be seen to suggest that finding salutary meaning from the Holocaust is a flawed enterprise. The distance between Nazerman's experiences and the lives of all those around him is particularly evident when Ortiz asks him whether his identification tattoo from Auschwitz signifies a "secret society or something?" Further, none of the film's flashback sequences—roundly criticized by many for purportedly constructing an analogy between the Holocaust and Harlem—are ever recounted by Nazerman to any other character. Presumably, his Jewish sister (also a survivor) knows, but all others, it seems, including Ortiz, cannot know nor understand.

The issue of pedagogy in *The Pawnbroker* was recently taken up by Rosen, who focuses on three scenes in Lumet's film that depict the protagonist "teaching" his would-be protégé different "lessons" that might provide "the assistant with skills that will help him 'get legit'—to give up a life of crime in order to acquire economic, social, and cultural legitimacy—and also school him in a broader circle of cultural awareness."[38] Consisting of monologues and conversational exchanges of various lengths, these "lessons" constitute a form of transaction markedly different from the exploitative pawnbroker-customer relationships (and the extreme power discrepancy between Nazerman and Rodriguez) that

pervade the rest of the film. Crucially, however, these "lessons," if they can rightly be characterized as such, are unsuccessful. Driven to despair and following the "wrong lesson" (Nazerman's declaration that "money is the whole thing"), Ortiz resorts to participating in the robbery of the pawnshop and becomes the plan's ultimate victim. To add yet one more to a long list of interpretations of Nazerman's well known "silent scream" as he clutches Ortiz's body, this outcry might well be read as amplifying Ortiz's spoiled attempt to liberate himself from his surroundings; thus mourning the unfulfilled promise Ortiz makes to his mother at the start of the film, "I am going a long way." The suffering of the Holocaust survivor who cannot be liberated from his past thus becomes a metaphor for the poor Latino New Yorker who cannot be liberated from his slum. Further, the scene depicting Ortiz's drawn-out death in the street and the long wait for the ambulance to collect his body—filmed mostly using long shots—reveal him to be still very much encased in the community he so desperately wished to leave. In a sense, Nazerman's inability to escape the memories of his past reflects Ortiz's inability to escape the barriers of race and class he encounters in the present. Even if one accepts the view that Ortiz functions as a plot device to introduce the film's Christological themes, or that at least some tentative hope for Nazerman's future is gestured to, it is clear that no easy salvation exists for Ortiz or any of the other victims of race and class oppression in Harlem. A radically different conceptualization of pedagogy, memory, redemption and the role of the survivor can be found in Richard LaGravenese's 2007 film *Freedom Writers*.

Nazerman's Harlem or Today's Long Beach? Conversion and Redemption in *Freedom Writers*

Freedom Writers is based on the experiences of a class of English students and their teacher at Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach, California. Once a high-achieving public school, its quality and safety have been dramatically compromised by an early 1990s state-mandated racial integration program. Into this chaotic and violent atmosphere enters the white, wide-eyed, well-intentioned main character, Erin Gruwell, whose formal dress style and trademark pearls reveal that she comes from a somewhat privileged background. The brand new English teacher is given, in the language of the film, the "unteachables" and "at-risk" students, who are not trusted by the school's administration to learn with "real books." *Freedom Writers* enters the tradition of Richard Brooks's *Blackboard Jungle* (1955) and John N. Smith's *Dangerous*

Minds (1995), by focusing on "an optimistic White novice teacher's struggle to inspire urban high school students. Her delinquent, remedial students become dependent on their teacher, who instils in them a sense of self-respect and motivation to learn."[39] Following this well-trodden formula, all of Gruwell's students, save one, are non-white and before they become "dependent," they approach their new teacher with a skepticism and contempt reserved for racially privileged outsiders. While the intertextual links to similar films are important in reinforcing a generic trend of whites redeeming non-white(s), *Freedom Writers* differs significantly in its appropriation of the Holocaust to this end.

Stylistically, LaGravenese's decision to open the film with scenes of the 1992 Los Angeles race riots recalls Lumet's invocation of urban suffering when he sets the tone of *The Pawnbroker*'s narrative with images of Harlem's poverty-stricken streets. Alongside archival footage of the L.A. riots, the opening sequence of *Freedom Writers* utilizes documentary-style, on-screen text to preface the narrative with the authoritative statement that "gang violence and racial tension reach an all time high." However, while Lumet seamlessly uses shots of his New York setting to move the narrative forward, LaGravenese relegates his urban landscape images to the beginning of his film, making it the scene onto which his narrative of redemption gets mapped. From the opening scene, then, *Freedom Writers* reflects an acute interest in building a narrative of redemption, one for which Lumet arguably does not share an interest (despite some narrow critical accounts of his film).

Further, in contrast to Ortiz's fervent attempts to alter his socio-economic situation in *The Pawnbroker*, the students of *Freedom Writers* seem possessed by a fatalistic acceptance of their deprived status. Indeed, the film offers a very negative depiction of their attitude towards society and their place within it in a number of ways, configuring their suffering as a self-fulfilling prophecy of the continued perseverance of each group in persecuting all others, while (for the most part) marginalizing the role of those with actual social, economic and political power for the desperate situation ethnic minorities face. Early in the film, the African American, Latino, and Asian students offer graphic depictions of their lives as a constant "war" of survival. The school is starkly characterized as the sum of several distinct communities, including "little Cambodia," "the ghetto," and "South of the border"—communities that seem to be inherently violent. Home lives are similarly defined by affiliation and hostility, encapsulated in sentiments like, "My people are a gang," "We fight for territory," and "It comes down to what you look like." Thus defined, the students' race- and class-infused suffering sets the terms of their relationship with Gruwell; it is

exactly the nature of this suffering, then, that is impacted by their Holocaust education.

The students' encounter with the Holocaust is precipitated by Gruwell's distress at the in-class exchange of a racist image, which she discovers when one day's lesson is interrupted by the laughter of several students. She is disturbed to find Jamal, an African American student, upset by the picture of a face with exaggerated lips. In response, Gruwell offers an especially angry monologue in response to the image, drawing a parallel between the hand-drawn image and racial stereotypes perpetuated in the propaganda of the Nazi party, which she terms "the most famous gang in history." Gruwell challenges the class's belief that they "know all about gangs." In fact, she explains that "you're amateurs. [The Nazi] gang will put you all to shame." And should the students fail to see the relationship between themselves and the discontented German populace of the 1930s, she explains how like her class, the Nazis "started out poor and angry and everybody looked down on them." This turns into a cautionary tale when Gruwell explains the historical consequences of this subversion of personal responsibility and prejudice: the Nazis "just wiped out everybody else. Yeah, they wiped out everybody they didn't like and everybody they blamed for their life being hard."

Expanding further on the influence of Nazi racial propaganda, Gruwell ends her emotive speech with the statement: "That's how a holocaust happens. And that's what you all think of each other." Not entirely unlike the parallel made between Rodriguez and a Nazi officer in *The Pawnbroker*, Gruwell links a manifestation of racial prejudice in the classroom to the Holocaust in a very problematic manner, as the connection hinges on Gruwell's suggestion that the students are behaving like Nazis, a notion reinforced by most students' initially gleeful responses to the notion of wiping out other groups. The metaphor rests on her account of the Nazis as people reacting to being "poor and angry," an oversimplification that is the film's first gesture at de-historicizing the decidedly different nature of poverty and anger that has led to conditions in Long Beach. Not only does Gruwell's "lesson," as Tara Yosso and David García point out, "falsely equat[e] the [Nazi] regime's violence and an ideology of White supremacy with her students' racial prejudices," it also occurs at the expense of the humiliation of one African American student, Jamal, who had unsuccessfully pleaded with Gruwell to "just let it go."[40]

Discovering that the vast majority of her class have no prior knowledge of the Holocaust, Gruwell becomes committed to the idea that Holocaust history has the power to wholly convert each student into