

**"SWADDLED IN WHITE STRING":
BREAKING LOOSE FROM THE TIES OF FAMILY MEMORY
IN EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED**

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School,
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"SWADDLED IN WHITE STRING":
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IN EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED

presented by Elizabeth Ansfield,

a candidate for the degree of Master of Arts,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of
acceptance.

Professor Sam Cohen

Professor Maureen Stanton

Professor Roger Cook

For my mentor and friend, Michael Bernard-Donals, who taught me,

There's no such thing as truth, just good writing.

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ABSTRACT

Author Jonathan Safran Foer traveled to the Ukraine in search of the woman who saved his grandfather from the Nazis, and found nothing. Having intended to write a nonfictional account of his journey and findings, he realized as he sat down to write that he had to replace the missing information with an imagined personal history. From these inventions was born his novel, Everything is Illuminated.

This (re)creation process is characteristic of postmemory, a concept developed by Marianne Hirsch. Postmemory defines the relationship that children of exiled Holocaust survivors have with the memories of their parents. Because these children were not there to experience their families' trauma, they cannot adopt the memories of their parents but must instead invent their own memories. This essay explores how the novel's narrative structure, mythical elements, and resolution (or lack thereof) serve as solutions to allay the problems of postmemory.

**"SWADDLED IN WHITE STRING":
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INTRODUCTION

At the age of twenty, Jonathan Safran Foer traveled to the Ukraine in search of Trochenbrod, the shtetl¹ of his family's origin ("An Interview"). There, he hoped to find the woman who supposedly saved his grandfather from the Nazis. Foer arrived armed with a photo of the woman and his grandfather, Safran. On the back of the photo was inscribed "Augustine." When he arrived at the location where Trochenbrod once stood, he found nothing

¹ A small Jewish village in pre-Holocaust Eastern Europe

-- no Augustine, no trace of a shtetl -- because there was nothing left to be found.

Foer claims that he had gone there intending to "chronicle, in strictly nonfictional terms," an account of his journey and findings ("An Interview"). But when he began to write, he realized that he had to replace the missing information with an imagined personal history. The foundation of Jewish tradition is heritage, respect for one's ancestors, and oral histories.² Therefore, Foer and other Jewish writers without connections to their pasts must reinvent themselves, their family histories, and their memories as Jews.³ Foer's novel Everything is Illuminated is the product of this (re)creation. Foer has balanced the realistic and the folkloric with the use of multiple narrators to show and ultimately heal "the rift that

² In the Torah text, the Jews are enjoined to continually remember various aspects of their history that are seen as significant to the collective Jewish identity: they must remember that they were slaves in Egypt; they must remember the Shabbat to keep it holy; they must remember their enemies as exemplified by Amalek. Their history is studded with fast days and feast days that are meant to recall long distant events both positive and negative. The emphasis on historical memory is understandable, for without it a people is doomed to live only in the present. The Jews believe that without memory, a people can hardly be a people because, if there is little understanding of a collective's common roots in the past, there can hardly be a meaningful communal consciousness.

³ That is, these second- and third-generation offspring of survivors must reconstruct their histories a consequence of the abrupt disturbance of transmission of the Jewish heritage attributable to assimilation, migration, and near-extermination of their ancestors.

[he] experienced when trying to imagine the book" ("An Interview").

This "rift" that Foer is encountering is a consequence of postmemory, a concept coined and studied by Marianne Hirsch. Hirsch claims that postmemory characterizes the experience of survivors' children and grandchildren. These children of survivors grow up surrounded by stories and memories of the Holocaust. At some point, they begin to acknowledge the distance between the life they share with their parents and the pre- and intra-Holocaust lives of their parents. While they cannot truly comprehend, recreate, or empathize with the experience of their parents, they internalize or adopt the unfathomable memories of traumas that define their family histories. Hirsch claims that "the power of mourning and memory, and the depth of the rift dividing their parents' lives, impart to them something that is akin to memory" ("Past Lives" 662). Thus, they carry memories of what James Young calls a "vicarious past" that are not really their own (qtd. in Sicher 57).⁴ The act of imagining (and not truly adopting)

⁴ For more information about the "vicarious past," see James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven, 2000)1-2

these "secondary, or second-generation" memories is the foundation for Hirsch's concept of postmemory.

Hirsch also posits that "postmemory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation" (662). In Everything is Illuminated, Jonathan Safran Foer invents family memory in order to fashion bridges between himself, the stories passed down to him, and the unknowable history that defines him. Having attempted to piece together his identity with incomplete and irretrievable memories, he forges a possible history in the imaginary shtetl of Trachimbrod, filling in the gaps with fiction.

Several times in the novel, Foer uses the image of a white string to represent this unknowable or forgotten past. The white string is particularly cumbersome for Sofiowka, the madman of Foer's imaginary shtetl of Trachimbrod, whose memory is the only key that will unlock the mystery of the shtetl's conception. Yet Sofiowka is an unreliable storyteller because in his attempts to recall his memories, he remembers only the act of remembering:

He tied one [string] around his index finger to remember something terribly important, and

fearing he would forget the index finger, he tied a string around his pinky, and then one from waist to neck, and fearing he would forget this one, he tied a string from ear to tooth to scrotum to heel, and used his body to remember his body, but in the end could remember only the string. Is this someone to trust for a story? (15)

Foer's white string that binds him to his unknowable past "is not even [his] own, but tied around [him] by parents and grandparents - strings not fastened to anything, but hanging loosely from the darkness" (Foer 260). Foer attempts to loose himself from his white string, so that remembering is only the first step in a long mourning process that will reconnect him with his family's past.

Foer reaches his goal using fiction, cutting all the strings and reinventing another version of himself, the so-called "hero" of the story. This fictional protagonist, also named Jonathan Safran Foer, goes on a journey to discover the events of his own family's past.⁵ This device of self-insertion into one's own text is a popular method in postmodern experimental fiction, yet it has not yet been given a title.⁶ In comic book commentary, there exists the term "Author Character,"

⁵ Like the protagonist Foer, the protagonist's family is an alternate version of the author's real family.

⁶ Other examples include Philip Roth's Plot Against America, Miguel de Unamuno's Niebla, Paul Auster's City of Glass, and Milan Kundera's Immortality.

which refers to the author's illustrated self-inclusion in his text, though this is usually in reference not to a fictional character but an autobiographical representation. Because Foer's character is a version of himself that exists in an alternate reality, I will use the term "autonym" or "autonomous character" to describe the author's alter ego.⁷

Like Foer himself, his autonomous character, despite his access to an abundance of details about his family's past, must carry out the relentless task of creating memories to fill the void of the unknowable experience. Through his character's actions, the author illustrates the insatiability of the desire to understand and recreate the traumatic experiences of survivors that shape his life.

Writing an invented history based on real lives and real traumas can create obstacles for the writer who is attempting to find a place in his family history. The inventions that fill the gaps of postmemory, while useful for satiating the creator's desire for answers, must endure the challenges of ethical and moral

⁷ The term "autonym" has alternate meanings that do not quite suit the concept I am defining here. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "autonym" as the following: "A book published under the author's real name...Also, one's own name as distinguished from a pseudonym, esp. the real name of an author." See: "autonym, n." The Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed. 1989, OED Online, Oxford University Press, 11 Apr. 2007 <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50015227>>

dilemmas: as one invents traumatic events based on historical occurrences, how does one preserve that history without falsifying it? How does one write about the unknowable traumas of family members with both respectful censoring and candor? How does one write an entertaining fictional story framed around an event as gruesome as the Holocaust?

To understand how Foer juggled such dilemmas, it is worth exploring how the novel's narrative structure, mythical elements, and resolution (or lack thereof) serve as solutions to allay the problems of postmemory.

I. A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO HIRSCH'S POSTMEMORY

In 1998, Marianne Hirsch traveled with her family to Czernowitz, renamed Chernivtsi after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Habsburg Empire, to visit the town that her parents had once called home. They were approached by a woman in the street who asked Hirsch's mother, Lotte, "Where are you from?" ("Generations of Nostalgia" 253) The question was loaded with several possible

truths. "From America," Lotte could have answered, though that would have trivialized the significance of their visit. Perhaps she could have responded, "We're from here, Chernivitsi," but they were not from this strange place that their Chernowitz had become. And so she answered, "From here, Czernowitzer."

Meanwhile, Marianne Hirsch observed her surroundings, trying to place her family in this foreign place that, she was told, no longer resembled the town that they left in 1945. Hirsch grew up hearing her parents' reminiscient yarns of their homeland as they continued to "nourish and perpetuate the notion of 'Czernowitz' as it had been transmitted to them physically and in cultural memory" (256). Marianne and her parents, then, lived in a world that was shaped by "postmemory." In other words, the Hirsches defined their heritage with a "mediated relation to...a lost 'world of yesterday' that they themselves had inherited from parents and grandparents who had enjoyed the benefits of Jewish life under the Habsburgs" (256). Their hungry and nostalgic longing for their lost home is a form of mourning "for a home that no longer exists or *has never existed*" (Boym xiii).

Hirsch's mourning, however, is different from her parents' mourning. Her parents continue to mourn the loss of a former life and home. Hirsch, desiring to mourn with her parents in order to internalize her history (which is wrought with mourning), weeps not for a loss of home, but for the absence of it. For her and other children of survivors, "'home' is always elsewhere" (Hirsch, "Past Lives" 662). Returning to their parents' former European homelands will be more exasperating than satisfying, because these homes are no longer where their parents lived but where they experienced genocide and banishment. While these places still carry dear pre-Holocaust memories for the survivors, they also become defined by trauma that expelled their families and memories. That is, the memories that the survivors carry from these homes are encumbered and tainted by death. Their children, "born after the war, sometimes in place of a child killed in the war...experience their lives as a sort of exile, not from a present or future place, but from a completed time which would have been that of identity itself" (Fresco 211).⁸ This state of exile that separates the

⁸ Translated from French by Marianne Hirsch in "Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile" (662). Original source listed in Works Cited.

child from an essential part of his identity is an essential characteristic of postmemory.

In "Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile," Hirsch explains that there are several forms of postmemory and that each of these forms includes this characteristic state of exile(663). She refers to writer Henri Raczymow's concept of the *mémoire trouée*, or "memory shot through with holes," that distinguishes those children of survivors whose parents never spoke of their former homes or wartime traumas from those who have some access to the stories of their families' pasts. This former group of children consequently has very little or no access to the repressed stories that shape their families. They feel the need to "re-member, to re-build, to re-incarnate, to replace and repair" and often do so by imagining a world in which their parents once thrived that rarely bears any resemblance to the real place. Raczymow makes clear, however, that by inventing, they are not attempting to fill the holes in their memory, but instead they are disputing the impossibility of knowing or remembering an absent past. Hirsch agrees:

Postmemory seeks connection. It creates where it cannot recover. It imagines where it cannot recall. It mourns a loss that cannot be repaired. And, because even the act of mourning is secondary, the lost object can

never be incorporated and mourning can never be overcome.

It is this absence of memory that functions as the mechanism to drive Raczymow's writing.

In his fictive novel, Contes d'exil et d'oubli [translated by Hirsch as "Tales of Exile and Forgetting"], Raczymow reconstructs the past he never knew using an invented protagonist who, like Jonathan Safran Foer, travels to his parent's pre-Holocaust home attempting to recapture an unknown thing that shaped his family's identity. Raczymow's story, however, while based on his experience, is a blatantly fictional story about blatantly fictional characters. Foer's story, with its use of an autonomous character, has an air of nonfiction that unites the writer and his imagined past, blurring the line between fiction and reality.

Raczymow, unlike the hopeful Foer, makes clear his position that it is impossible to unearth this spirit of home. In spite of that, Contes d'exil et d'oubli functions for Raczymow as a cathartic evocation of his real experience. Raczymow explains: "Writing was and still is the only way I could deal with the past, the whole past, the only way I could tell myself about the past - even if it is, by definition, a recreated past" ("Memory" 104). At the same time, Raczymow insists that

a successful investigation of the inevitably inaccessible comprehension of or familiarity with one's past is one that must not and cannot achieve fruition.

He writes:

In a well-known passage, Kafka suggests that if Moses did not reach Canaan, it was not because he had sinned, but because his life was merely a human life. We never reach Canaan. Canaan is only in sight. But for the writer, Canaan is the book that he is writing and that he dreams of finishing. Once it is finished, another Canaan is in sight, as dreams of finishing another book. To reach Canaan would be to die...Out of the impossibility of recapturing the past, some forge the very meaning of their writing, well aware of how ridiculous the pursuit of the impossible is.⁹
(104-5)

By including himself in his novel, Foer's attempts to satisfy his thirst for a knowable past are unquenchable. He is chasing the horizon, only to find more land to cross. Even as he fills gaps and "discovers" a potential history that might serve to connect him to his family's past, he finds that he still is missing the gift of comprehension. Because he did not experience the trauma that defines the stories that fed him during his upbringing, he cannot and will not be able to mourn with his family. He will, however, continue to mourn for

⁹ For Kafka passage, see Kafka, Franz. *Diaries 1914-1923*. Ed. Max Brod. Trans. Martin Greenberg and Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken, 1949. 195-196

them by writing about his experience of seeking their trauma.

II. AN APERÇU: THE MULTIPLE VOICES OF EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED

At the heart of Everything is Illuminated is protagonist Jonathan Safran Foer's journey to the Ukraine to find the woman who saved his grandfather. He hires a translator and a driver from "Heritage Touring," only to find that his translator speaks a very broken English and that his driver is "blind" and requires the assistance of a "Seeing Eye bitch," a libidinous and mentally deranged dog named Sammy Davis, Junior, Junior. Together, these characters travel in search of Trachimbrod, and uncover unexpected histories, both painful and rewarding.

The stories within Everything is Illuminated are assembled as a collection of writings that Foer's anonymous character has collected during his correspondence with Alex, the tour guide and translator. Both Alex and the protagonist are writing novels and sending individual chapters to each other by mail,

though we only have access to the documents that the protagonist holds, which do not include the letters he writes to Alex. Foer arranges this collection of writings in chronological order as they are being "written" by the characters and staggers them, creating a collage of narratives that intersect and diverge throughout the novel.

The first narrative is in the form of a series of chapters for a developing novel written by the protagonist, named Jonathan Safran Foer. The protagonist's chapters together shape a comprehensive, though blatantly fictive, history of Trachimbrod, in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. In writing Trachimbrod's imagined history, this narrator also begins to construct a chronicle of the Foer family up to the years preceding the Holocaust, including detailed anecdotes that he invents about his great-great-great-great grandmother, whose mysterious conception became a legend in Trachimbrod. The protagonist's narrative then skips several generations and ends, in the years just preceding the Holocaust, with the marriage of Foer's grandfather, Safran, to his first wife.

Where the protagonist concludes, the next narrative begins. As a companion to the hero's chapters is another series of chapters, though these are written by Alex. Alex's chapters reveal the events of his journey through the Ukraine with the hero and Alex's grandfather in search of what remains of the "real" Trachimbrod.¹⁰ What unfolds in Alex's narration is not only a discovery of Foer's ties to Trachimbrod, but also an unearthing of Alex's grandfather's traumatic past in Trachimbrod.

Accompanying Alex's chapters are letters from Alex to Foer, in which Alex comments on the construction and accuracy of Foer's chapters and reveals that Alex's own chapters contain invented anecdotes. Alex's confessions and accusations of telling half-truths bring into question the dependability of either narrator and the liberties of poetic license. Through the use of these unreliable narrators, Jonathan Safran Foer (the real author of the book) foregrounds one of the many struggles of postmemory: the impossibility of any wholly accurate access to the past.

His narrators do, however, make evident the devastating and very real effects of the Holocaust on

¹⁰ i.e. The Trachimbrod that exists in this novel, not in real life. Alex's Trachimbrod should also remain independent of the Trachimbrod of the nineteenth century depicted in Foer's narration.

survivors and their children. Within Alex's letters and chapters is the story of Alex's grandfather, who serves as a bridge between the known and the unknowable as he struggles with regretting the selfish deeds he committed during the Holocaust.

At the end of Everything is Illuminated, the characters recognize the bleak and undesirable effects of re-discovering, re-constructing and re-remembering the traumas of the past. The characters in Foer's reconstruction of his family's origin begin to recognize the burden of trying to remember too much. Alex stops writing to Foer, displeased with the hero's cynical reconstruction of Trachimbrod's past. Alex's grandfather commits suicide, having come face to face with his past and, despite the passage of time, finding that closure has again eluded him.

III. MAKING FICTION OUT OF MEMORY: THE ISSUE OF NARRATIVE RESPONSIBILITY

Foer's autonomous character appears in the book as an amalgam of individual narrators that serve different functions:

Foer the Narrator - the fictional Foer who is writing chapters about the fictive history of pre-Holocaust Trachimbrod as if it were authentic to fill the holes of the Author's empty memory with an understanding of his family's life pre-Holocaust.

Foer the Character - the fictive protagonist who discovers the stories of his family's Holocaust trauma during his trip to the Ukraine. His character is presented through the narration of Alex the tour guide and translator of the Character's journey.

Foer the Author, the real Foer, is the writer and re-imaginer of an invented history, an imaginary journey, and fictional characters. This Foer is the one dealing with postmemory and using this novel to fulfill an essential part of his Jewish identity: family memory. His autonomous characters, on the other hand, are

dealing with postmemory by journeying through Trachimbrod and its history. The differences between the autonomous characters serve to help Foer the Author, the real Foer who has created his autonomous characters, maintain authorial distance from the past that he has created. After all, the autonomous character and "Hero" may confuse some readers into believing that this story is a chronicle of the Author's real experience. The Author insists, however, that he is not the same person as Foer the Narrator:

They are profoundly different people who happen to share a profound amount. It's useless to try to find points of convergence and divergence... since both the writer and the character are always changing - neither under my control. ("An Interview")

It is not until late in the text of Everything is Illuminated that the reader is made aware of this thin line separating fact from fiction. Alex writes about a scene he has read in Foer's diary, in which Foer has written about a time in the future when Alex disowns his father. Alex makes note of the Foer's attempts to be prophetic, which ultimately makes clear the author's mishandling of the truth:

I read several pages...some [scenes] happened early in history and some had not even happened yet. I understood what he was doing when he wrote like this. At first it made me angry, but then it made me sad, and then it made me so

grateful, and then it made me angry again...
(160).

It is clear that Foer's chapters have been fabricated, that he has been, as Alex would claim, "nomadic with the truth" (179). So where, then, does nonfiction end and fiction begin? And why did the Author give his name to his Narrator?

In part, the Author claims, his intention was to maintain a certain level of truth. He intended the space between fiction and nonfiction to be indiscernible. He continues, "It upped the ante of risk. I suddenly felt like I had something more to lose than whether or not the novel was good" ("An Interview"). Foer the Author recognizes that his connection to his text goes beyond a common name. In his initial desires "to see what [Trochenbrod is] like, how [his] grandfather grew up, where [he] would be now if it weren't for the war" (Foer, Everything 59). Foer is also seeking to understand the culture and events that serve as the foundation for his third-generation American-Ukrainian identity. He believes that "everything is the way it is because everything was the way it was" (Foer, Everything 59, 145).

At stake here then, is his desire to appease his hunger to understand the trauma that defines his

upbringing. With so little information available with which to investigate, accompanied by the impossible task of understanding the atrocities, Foer can never know and empathize with his grandfather's experiences before and during the Holocaust. By writing this book, however, he is able to evaluate the difference between what was and what *could* have been while "the images of his infinite pasts and infinite futures [wash] over him as he [waits], paralyzed, in the present" (Foer, Everything 264).

At the same time that Foer is trying to understand how his grandfather's experiences might have influenced his identity, the Author also wishes to comprehend the trauma itself. In a conversation that Foer, the author's autonomous character, has with Alex in the novel, Foer relates a memory of screaming words with his grandmother off her back porch at night when he would stay over. He would scream long, multisyllabic English words while his grandmother would scream Yiddish words that her grandson did not understand. When Alex asks why Foer never asked his grandmother what these words meant, Foer replies, "I was afraid...I knew I wasn't supposed to ask, so I didn't." Alex responds with a comment that certainly signals a trigger for Foer's

drive to comprehend his family's past: "Perhaps she desired for you to ask...perhaps she needed you to ask, because if you didn't ask, she could not tell you...Perhaps she was shouting, Ask me! Ask me what I'm shouting!" Foer's autonomous character, then, shares some of the same desires as his creator: he too aspires to do more than simply hear the stories - he dreams of comprehending them.

At the same time that Foer is demonstrating his personal connection to the text by giving his name to his autonomous character, he is able to maintain a certain level of distance from the action within the text by replacing his real experiences with the experiences of his "invented selves": Foer the Narrator and Foer the Character.

These invented selves, too, maintain a distance from the trauma of the invented Foer family's past. The invented selves passively participate in the narration, referring to themselves only when they must use minor temporal or familial details to organize the chronology of the text. For example, as he invents the Foer family tree, Foer the Narrator does not offer any personal or sentimental reactions that might implicate him directly in the story. Instead, he merely provides time markers to indicate where in this history he is situated: "He

had been given a baby, and I a great-great-great-great-great-great grandfather" (42).

Because Foer the Author gives Alex the responsibility of reporting about the journey to Trachimbrod and the unearthing of the story beneath Safran's suffering during the Holocaust, any sentimentality that Foer the Character expresses is mediated through Alex's narration. When Alex begins to report the scene of the characters' poignant discovery of Trachimbrod's horrors during the Nazi occupation, we are spared the devastating emotional experience of an affected narrator. Instead, the author presents this scene within the confines of Alex's distanced narration.

At this point in the novel, Alex explains that he, Foer the Character, and Alex's grandfather have finally found Trachimbrod and its sole inhabitant, who we eventually learn is named Lista. After much provocation, Lista brings them to the site of Trachimbrod, now reduced to nothing. Yet the scene that follows reveals that within this "nothing" there is too much that remains for Foer the Character to stomach.

Alex narrates what he remembers of the conversation in which Lista recounts to her visitors her memories of the night when the Nazis annihilated the Jewish community of Trachimbrod. Alex's narration of Lista's

testimony leaves little room for reflection or judgment. Instead of summarizing, he uses dialogue, which is concentrated in the form of a long paragraph spanning nearly five pages without line breaks, stressing the urgency and pain of recounting this nightmare.

Alex narrates this scene with awe, honesty and trepidation. He recalls, just as Lista begins to tell her tragic tale:

We could have stopped it there. We could have viewed Trachimbrod, returned to the car, and followed Augustine back to her house. The hero would have been able to say that he was in Trachimbrod, he could have even said that he met Augustine, and Grandfather and I would have been able to say that we had completed our mission. But Grandfather was not content with this...I was not ashamed and I was not scared. I was not anything. I just desired to know what would occur next. (184-5)

Only infrequently and with purpose does Alex, whose narrative is typically infused with his opinionated or self-interested interjections, break into the dialogue to speak directly to Jonathan, who is reading Alex's text.¹¹ His need to repent before continuing with his

¹¹ For an example, see Everything is Illuminated, p. 66: "When the food arrived, the hero asked for me to remove the meat off his plate. 'I'd prefer not to touch it,' he said. This was on my nerves to the maximum. If you want to know why, it is because I perceived that the hero perceived that he was too good for our food. I took the meat off his plate, because I knew that is what Father would have desired me to do, and I did not utter a thing."; p. 68: "There is something I did not mention before, which it would now be befitting to mention. (Please, Jonathan, I implore you never to exhibit

narration foreshadows the gravity and impending grimness of the subsequent story.

In this scene, Lista explains that the Nazis rolled out the Torah on the ground, desecrating the holy text, and demanded that the Jews spit and step on it, and tear it with their hands (185). When Lista's father refused to spit on the Torah, the Nazis shot Lista's mother. When he continued to refuse, they shot Lista's sister. Alex then informs us that Foer the Character, who is listening to Lista's testimony as Alex translates, says that he does not want to hear any more. At this point in the text, Alex prepares to reveal Lista's account that will uncover the events of Safran's life that Foer had come to hear. Alex interrupts his own narration and speaks directly to Foer the Narrator, who is reading Alex's chapters as Alex writes them: "Jonathan, if you still do not want to know the rest, do not read this. But if you do persevere, do not do so for curiosity. That is not a good enough reason" (186).

At this point in the novel, the three Foers seem to have harmonized in terms of their emotional burden. Each is unable to assume responsibility for the unbearable emotional weight of his grandfather's trauma.

this to one soul. I do not know why I am writing this here)."

Alex's version of Foer cannot contend with a devastating past that becomes overwhelming and he insists that he must stop listening. Foer the Narrator insists on reporting only the history of Trachimbrod that leads up to the atrocities and reserves only enough strength for one paragraph on the Jews' demise (272). Foer the Author indicates that, even though he is inventing these stories, he is mourning for the traumas his grandfather suffered; but he does not claim to comprehend them.

Alex does not attempt to rationalize or sentimentalize the story either. After his warning to his pen pal, Alex does not break into Lista's story even once. He reports the story as if it was a script, and expresses no emotional reaction, but instead pulls himself away from sentimentality by noting the scene around him:

[Lista explained,] "But my sister did not die. So they held the gun in her mouth while she was on the ground crying and screaming, and with her hands on her place, which was making so much blood. Spit, the General said, or we will not shoot her. Please, my father said, not like this. Spit, he said, or we will let her lie here in pain and die across time." "Did he?" "No. He did not spit." "And?" "And they did not shoot her...he put the gun against my father's head. Spit, the General said, and we will kill you." "And?" Grandfather asked. "And he spit." The hero was several meters distant, placing dirt in a plastic bag, which he called a Ziploc. After, he told me that this was for

his grandmother, should he ever inform her of this voyage." (187)

In his use of fiction as a way to consign to his characters the mourning that is characteristic of postmemory, the Author is admitting a remorseful obligation to dissociate himself from the text as he composes it. It is clear why Foer the Author placed the responsibility of managing the emotional response to such horrors in Alex's hands: Alex's narration functions as a device to distance the Author from the tragedy that he is inventing. The Author seems to be acknowledging the shame he feels for having conjured up this nightmarish anecdote. Part of this shame certainly stems from the fear of making "art" out of the Holocaust. Foer is imagining and putting into poetic terms that which we cannot and would rather not imagine. What is worse is that he is doing so in attempts to "make sense" of his grandfather's experience - an experience that defies all logic. Foer's shame is one shared by many authors of Holocaust fiction, including Cynthia Ozick, who explains her fear of "mythopoeticizing" or "making little stories out of a torrent of truth" (Ozick qtd. in Heron). She continues, "I worry very much that this subject is corrupted by fiction and that fiction in general corrupts history."

Foer fears the same. In fact, if Foer the Author were to have given to his Narrator the responsibility of relating this anecdote, he would be replacing historical accuracy with imaginative accuracy, the eye with the mind's eye ("An Interview"). By handing the responsibility to Alex, who is himself the author's invention, Foer is emphasizing the rift between the real and the imagined. Though his invented selves are merely characters named Jonathan Safran Foer, they are extensions of who he *could* have been because their experience is based on the potential experience that the Author might have encountered had he truly experienced the journey he imagines in this book. Therefore, if the real Foer were to write the invented trauma of his grandfather into the narrative of his invented selves, he would be overwriting the *real* trauma of his grandfather and the Trochenbrod Jews.

Instead, Foer grafts an array of novelistic techniques onto a sliver of knowledge that he has received from his grandfather and onto the assumptions he has made based on the yellowing photo of his grandfather with the enigmatic "Augustine." Foer the Author must base his identity and his novel on the very sparse information he has gathered about his grandfather's real experience, and ultimately creates a

history to reverse the act of destruction. Using a fiction centered around an existing event in history and the people who experienced it, Foer draws on the very real after-effects of Holocaust trauma to recontextualize and give shape to a lost history. While the protagonist in his book is not Foer himself, Foer uses his own name to create a potential identity. Though the Author found nothing on his real trip to the Ukraine, he can imagine a self in another world and impose a possible context for the memories he has inherited in real life. In this way, he is beginning again, cutting all of the strings from everything he has known and fabricating new strings of his own. He begins his story from the beginning – the birth of Trachimbrod – and not from the moments that fed his postmemory, so that he can make sense of the new memories that he has created to build his potential or invented identity.

In this way, Foer's goal in Everything is Illuminated closely resembles the intentions of Henri Raczymow's fiction. In Contes d'exile et d'oubli, Raczymow does not intend to attempt to fill in the holes of his own memory but would rather provide this relief for another character whose identity is defined by an unearthed history. In fact, Raczymow understands that this missing memory can never be recovered. Rather than

coming to this disappointing conclusion by embarking on a painful exploration of their own roots, both Raczymow and Foer give this burden to their protagonists, thereby separating themselves from their texts.

On the other hand, Raczymow's preference to fictionalize his past stands in opposition to Foer's semi-autobiographical style. Raczymow makes clear the importance of fictionalizing a past separate from the past that he yearns for. In Contes d'exile et d'oubli, Raczymow leaves himself and his family out of the text, inventing a new set of characters similar to his family; but they are not, he makes clear, his family. He invents a history for his invented characters because he believes that "he has no right to speak of what he did not experience" (Sicher 64). He could very well choose not to write about the experience at all, but the holes in his memory create such a psychological affliction that he feels he must write (64).

On the other hand, because Foer is composing with a language that imitates eyewitness testimony and simulates a researched experience, he risks creating for his reader a false sense of authenticity (Bernard-Donals 202). Foer avoids misleading his reader, however, by including an angry letter from Alex, who takes Foer the

Narrator to task for telling untruths and for having invented in the chapters of his book such a vulgar past for Safran:

How can you do this to your grandfather, writing about his life in such a manner? Could you write in this manner if he was alive? And if not, what does that signify?...We are being very nomadic with the truth, yes?...Do you think that this is acceptable when we are writing about things that occurred?...If we are to be such nomads with the truth, why do we not make the story more premium than life? It seems to me that we are making the story even inferior. We often make ourselves appear as though we are foolish people, and we make our voyage, which was an ennobled voyage, appear very normal and second rate...it could be perfect and beautiful, and funny and usefully sad, as you say...I do not think that there are any limits to how excellent we could make life seem. (179-180)

By including this argument, the Author indicates that he could have very well sentimentalized the history of his grandfather, but he chose not to. Foer instead produced a *representation* of his grandfather's experience that very clearly is not the real experience, keeping in mind that the problem of representing trauma is that one can never truly know or properly articulate the essence of the trauma. His intention is not to "speak for the survivors, and thus risk substituting [his] voice for theirs" (Bernard-Donals 202), but is instead to try to represent the fictional experience of a fictional character. While there are not "any limits to how

excellent [he] could make life seem," the trauma that influenced the Author to write this book could never, no matter what poetic liberties he takes, produce a story that concludes that life is beautiful (Foer, Everything 180).

IV. WHIMSY, TIME, AND THE CYCLE OF ERRORS: PLAYING WITH HISTORY TO CREATE MEMORY

While the Author is careful not to sentimentalize Safran's Holocaust trauma, he takes more liberties with his chapters about the history of Trachimbrod. In these chapters, Foer uses particular magical realist devices and elevated language - which counterbalances the contemporary language and atmosphere in Alex's narrative and letters - ascribing to the narrative a seamless dreamlike quality. This whimsical style embodies Foer's attempts to romanticize a past that he will never truly own. In essence, he is endeavoring to capture not only the Jews of Trachimbrod and their relationship to their home, but also the spirit of what he imagines was once Trachimbrod.

The Narrator evokes the essence of Trachimbrod within the first fifteen pages of his created history. The Trachimbrod narrative begins with the mysterious river birth of a baby girl, the Narrator's great-great-great-great-great grandmother, after Trachim B's wagon tumbled into the Brod river:

In the middle of the string and feathers, surrounded by candles and soaked matches, prawns, pawns, and silk tassels that curtsied like jelly-fish, was a baby girl, still mucus-glazed, still pink as the inside of a plum...Bitzl Bitzl R was able to recover the wagon a few days later with the help of a group of strong men from Kolki...But sifting through the remains, they didn't find a body. (Foer, Everything 13-14)

The shtetl itself is perhaps stranger than the bizarre appearance of the child. The town is divided by a line separating the Jewish Quarter - where "all religious studies, kosher butchering, bargaining, etc." take place - and the Human Three-Quarters - in which people engage in "activities concerned with the humdrum of daily existence [such as] secular studies, communal justice, [and] buying and selling" (10). The town has two synagogues, one for the Slouchers and the other for the Upright congregation.¹² The Upright synagogue stands on

¹² See p. 18: The synagogue once housed all the Jewish congregants of Trachimbrod, who "hung--with one hand on prayer book and one on rope - from the pulleys clipped to their belts," their heads brushing the ceiling of the synagogue to be closer to G-d. The division between the

wheels, to accommodate the "shtetl's ever-changing negotiation of Jewishness and Humanness."

These magical elements tout the "fictiveness" of this fiction (Behlman, 60). In contrast to the realist quality of Alex's narratives, the Trachimbrod narratives play with language - and physics, human physiology, temporality, etc. - to form "ironic contrasts between folkloric Jews and the real Jews whose culture produced their stories...through a set of voices that always distance and mediate experience" (Behlman 60). The contrasts between the folkloric and historical ascribe an unnerving, ominous humor to the Trachimbrod narrative. The folkloric Jews of the invented past thrive in a world of innocence that will eventually be tarnished by the reality of the world outside of it. In these chapters, the Author is amplifying the distance

Upright congregants and the Slouchers occurred on the eve of one legendary Yom Kippur, when a fly flew into the synagogue, and landed on the most ticklish of places on the congregants' faces, demanding that each of the congregants let go of either the Holy text or their ropes to scratch their noses. Half of the congregation let go of the ropes and fell to the ground before they would dare release their holy books. These congregants then became the Uprighters, "who continued for two hundred years to walk with an affected limp to remind themselves - or, more remind others-of their response to The Test: that the Holy Word prevailed." Those who let go of the prayer books before they would the ropes became the Slouchers, who wore fringes sewn to their sleeves, reminding themselves "of their response to The Test: that the strings are carried around with you, that the spirit of the Holy Word should always prevail." [Underlined emphasis mine]

that separates the broken post-Holocaust world he knows and the pre-Holocaust utopia he imagines.

At the same time that the Trachimbrod narrative contrasts the magical past with the disenchanting present, it also pits past against present, exposing the inevitability of repeated mistakes committed within a single family. Just as the Author is struggling to illuminate a past that would anchor him to a home, the children whose ancestors lived in a different Trachimbrod desire to understand the experience of their parents. As the Nazi forces approach, the citizens of Trachimbrod dream of the home that existed before the world turned sour:

Villagers became embodiments of that legend they had been told so many times, of mad Sofiowka, swaddled in white string, using memory to remember memory, bound in an order of remembrance, struggling in vain to remember a beginning or an end...memory was supposed to fill time, but it made time a hole to be filled. (Foer, Everything 258 and 260)

At this point in the novel, time becomes distorted: characters of generations long past speak to characters of the present.¹³ The reader is pulled back and forth between past and present as the characters become

¹³ On page 263, Safran speaks with his great-great-great grandfather:

The Kolker: *I haven't ever wanted to burden you.*
Safran: *But you have, great-great-great grandfather. You have.*

plagued by their overabundance of memory.¹⁴ As the accumulation of memory literally begins to take over the present in the text, Safran becomes a representative of Foer himself. That is, Safran tries to make connections between the events of his past to create a cohesive and logical narrative "with an order of imagery, an intelligibility of symbolism. Where were the symmetries? The rifts? What was the meaning of what had happened?...why was he who he was?" (260). Foer seems to have come to an understanding that to try to understand how the past shapes one's identity is a fruitless journey that can only result in more questions.

The past and present intersect in the final pages of this book, though very few conclusions are reached. Instead, readers must attempt to make connections between several open-ended conclusions. In one version of Trachimbrod's destruction, the Nazis enter Trachimbrod and demand that the Jewish villagers spit on the Torah. Then they put all the Jews in the synagogue before setting it ablaze. But this, Foer realizes, does

¹⁴ p. 261: "And so it was when anyone tried to speak: their minds would become tangled in remembrance. Words became floods of thought with no beginning or end, and would drown the speaker before he could reach the life raft of the point he was trying to make. It was impossible to remember what one meant, what, after all of the words, was intended."

not explain Safran's mysterious survival, so Foer offers an alternative explanation: as the Nazis raze their shtetl, the Trachimbroders, including Safran and his very pregnant wife, jump into the river. As they flail and pull each other underwater, Safran comes up for air and sees that his wife has given birth just before drowning. In a repetition of the town's founding event, a baby, Jonathan's father, rises to the surface of the water.

In a jarring return to the present, the last few pages of the novel feature a letter from Alex's grandfather to Foer. In the letter, we discover that Alex's grandfather is about to commit suicide after having confronted the traumas of his past, which were revealed earlier in the text: When the Nazis invaded the shtetl and demanded to know who was Jewish, Alex's grandfather pointed at his best friend in order to save his own life. He believes that identifying his friend in order to save himself is tantamount to having murdered him with his own hands (251). In the letter, Alex's grandfather also reveals that Foer and Alex have stopped writing to each other. He insists that Alex and Foer "must cut all the strings...with everything they have known" (275). Knowing that Alex cannot cut the strings

on his own, Alex's grandfather ends his life in fear that his own trauma will forever be a burden on his grandson, just as Safran's trauma, and the mystery of it, has become a burden for Jonathan Safran Foer.

V. FACT, ARTIFACT, AND ARTIFICE: MATERIAL MEMORY

AND MEMORY MADE OF MATERIALS

Music is beautiful. Since the beginning of time, we (the Jews) have been looking for a new way of speaking. We often blame our treatment throughout history on terrible misunderstandings. (Words never mean what we want them to mean.) If we communicated with something like music, we would never be misunderstood, because there is nothing in music to understand. This was the origin of the Torah chanting and, in all likelihood, Yiddish - the most onomatopoeic of all languages. It is also the reason that the elderly among us, particularly those who survived a pogrom, hum so often, indeed seem unable to stop humming, seem dead set on preventing any silence or linguistic meaning in [sic]. But until we find this new way of speaking, until we can find a nonapproximate vocabulary, nonsense words are the best thing we've got. - Jonathan Safran Foer, Everything is Illuminated, p. 203

The sources of Foer's postmemory and the inspirations for his novel include the trinkets he has collected, the stories his grandparents told him as he grew up, and the photographs of their lost home, Trochenbrod. One photograph in particular, featuring

Safran standing next to the woman who allegedly saved him from the Nazis, was a key figure in his process of imagining his story.

In "Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile," Marianne Hirsch focuses on photography as "the medium connecting memory and postmemory" (669). She defines photographs as "traces," referring to the term that art historians and semioticians use to discuss the photograph.¹⁵ These "traces" serve as a physical, tangible connection between image and referent, like a footprint ("Surviving Images" 14). Hirsch believes that pre- and intra-Holocaust photographs perform a particular service better than fiction can.¹⁶ She claims:

Photographs of the world lost to the Holocaust can thus contain, perhaps more obviously than the names and narrative fragments handed down to [Henri Raczymow's fictional protagonist,] Matthieu Schriflich, the particular mixture of

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida introduced the concept of the "trace", claiming that photography begins with the moment in time selected by a photographer from an unceasing flow of life. "Trace" is a remnant of something that once was there, but is no longer: an imprint of a lost object, a marker of both absence and one-time presence.

For more information on the history and significance of the "trace" in photography, see Silvers, Ronald. "Photography, Sympatheia, and Canada's Visual Heritage." Association de Musées Canadiens. 15 April 2007. <<http://www.museums.ca/fr/>>.

¹⁶ The "pre- and intra-Holocaust photographs" are in reference to Hirsch's category of Holocaust photograph that includes "all of those pictures which are connected to total death and to public mourning - both pictures of horror and ordinary snapshots or portraits, family pictures defined by their context as much as by their content" ("Past Lives" 668).

mourning and re-creation that characterizes the work of postmemory. (669)

What is important to Foer's novel, however, is not only the "re-creation that characterizes the work of postmemory" but also the process of imagining and the act of recontextualizing fragments of history to include the self. While Hirsch's focus on the photograph as a "mixture of mourning and re-creation" is rational, it is important to consider in the investigation of postmemory the positive and negative aspects of the process of imagination, taking into account the various sources of postmemory.

First, let us consider Plato's *The Allegory of the Cave*, in which Plato sums up his views of ignorant humanity, trapped in the depths and not even aware of its own limited perspective. The prisoners are chained in a cave and unable to move their heads, limited to viewing the world in the form of shadows that move across the cave wall in front of them. What the prisoners see and hear are shadows and echoes cast by objects that they do not see. The prisoners mistake appearance for reality.

The danger of using photographs to recreate memory is that the assumptions made about the pictures replace the truth of the stories behind the pictures. That is,

what we see in the pictures are only shadows of the events that were occurring at the moment the photograph was taken - and these shadows cannot properly elucidate the meaning of their referents. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes calls a photograph "literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here" (80). While we may be moved by pictures of real events and the stories we make of them, the gap between memory and postmemory is still cannot be bridged, for that supposed bridge would be constructed from false assumptions.

Foer's fiction, on the other hand, does not claim to reconstruct truth, but instead endeavors to create a work of art - a colorful collage of representations of material sources for memory (pictures, diaries, jewelry, letters, etc.). Ironically, Foer's book and his characters' journey begin with a photograph of Safran and Augustine. The photograph becomes a central thread in the story, mesmerizing each of the characters as they fall in love with their own version of Augustine as they tell their stories.

Like these characters, viewers of pre- and intra-Holocaust photographs experience a moment when "[they]

look into the eyes of people who were alive, full of joy, confidence, and hope" (Hirsch, "Past Lives" 672). Looking into the eyes and learning the names of Holocaust victims in countless photographs may, as Michael Berenbaum, director of the Holocaust Memorial Museum, puts it, "personalize the story of the Holocaust." Hirsch insists, however, that "names...serve less to individualize than to generalize: in the photographs' multiplicity, the names become anonymous and generic...This is a collective and not an individual story..." (672).

On the contrary, in Foer's book, readers have the opportunity to witness those lives as they happen. The personalities behind the names "Safran," "Augustine," "Sofiowka," "Brod," are not anonymous and limitless as they are in a photograph. That is, Foer individualizes these names, giving each a voice and personality. The individual stories that Foer creates allows Foer, and his readers, to invest emotionally in the experiences of his characters and explore how one life's experience begets another's experience.

While Foer's book emphasizes the lives of his characters, Hirsch posits that the Holocaust photograph has a forceful association with death as those who gaze

at the photographs must mourn the impending death of the subjects they are viewing:

The pictures...tell us the immediacy of life at the moment photographed, transformed in the instant of this recognition into the death that we know soon followed. They evoke both the anger and the disbelief accompanying this temporal jolt. With death as the photographs' latent content, commemoration becomes remembrance - a collective act of resistance against forgetting. ("Past Lives" 674)

Although Everything is Illuminated contains stories of the past that lead up to the Holocaust, the focus is not on the imminent demise of the story's characters. This is not a story that causes the audience to, as Barthes says of viewing a photograph, "read at the same time *This will be and this has been* [and] observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake" (96). This is a story that explores "the images of infinite pasts and infinite futures" that are determined by the *life* experiences of Foer's ancestors (Foer, Everything 264). That is, the impending death of the Jews does not take center stage in this story. This is a story founded on the idea that "everything is the way it is because everything was the way it was" (145).

As a source for postmemory, a photograph emphasizes the viewer's helpless observation of the subjects' imminent deaths. Nadine Fresco indicates that "the

destruction was such that not an image was left from the Jewish life before the war that was not in some way encumbered, tainted, marked by death" (qtd. in Hirsch, "Past Lives" 662). As these viewers imagine the stories of the doomed subjects in the photographs, they cannot disassociate the lives they are viewing from the inevitable deaths of the subjects. Foer's novel takes a more manageable route to "remember" the lives of the Trachimbrod Jews: his characters use material sources for memory that allow them to participate actively in the construction of their histories, even if those histories were disrupted by an unstoppable trauma. Foer's characters use sources to inspire memory including trinkets, memory books, personal possessions, and maps to create a story about the past that draws the attention away from the Holocaust and toward the colorful lives of the people who *lived* before and after the genocide.

Foer's novel itself is a material source for memory that promotes the remembrance of lives. On many levels, Foer has constructed a counterfeit *yizker bikher*, or memorial book. The *yizker bikher* originated as a collection of stories arranged in exile by survivors of the pogroms who intended to preserve the memories of their destroyed cultures. Holocaust survivors built on

this memorial practice and composed for subsequent generations comparable memorial books that they dedicated to the memories of their individual destroyed communities (Hirsch, "Past Lives" 665-6). Because Foer's ancestors did not provide him with a *yizker bikher* that held the stories of Trochenbrod, he has manufactured his own for his imagined shtetl of Trachimbrod.

Hirsch herself talks about *yizker bikhers*, describing them as sites where children of exiled survivors can find a lost origin. She explains that *yizker bikhers* "evoke and try to re-create the life that existed, and not only its destruction" (665). Her study of memorial books quickly transitions into a form of memorial book whose "radically different form illustrates the difference between memory and postmemory": fictional histories of fictional lives such as Raczynow's Contes d'exil et d'oubli.

Of course, Foer's memorial book is of a different variety. Because the photograph of Safran and Augustine cannot provide for Foer a link between memory and postmemory considering his trip to Trochenbrod revealed nothing about his grandfather, his invented memorial book serves as a created act of witnessing and a site of imagined or vicarious memory. What he creates is not a

photo album full of colorless, idle, and elapsed moments that one must piece together to create a choppy and incomplete whole. Instead, he builds but a collection of potential thoughts, descriptions, and experiences to construct a life of a village.

Since the photograph that inspired Foer and his anonymous character to construct the history of Trachimbrod proves to be an insufficient source, Foer must use other materials, making very clear in his text that this reconstruction must derive from multiple sources. In his quest for Trachimbrod, he is disappointed to find nothing left of the village but grass and a commemorative plaque. In Lista's house, however, they find a gold mine of artifacts that together construct a notion of Trachimbrod:

There were many boxes, which were overflowing with items. These had writing on their sides. A white cloth was overwhelming the box marked WEDDINGS AND OTHER CELEBRATIONS. The box marked PRIVATES: JOURNALS / DIARIES / SKETCHBOOKS / UNDERWEAR...There was another box, marked SILVER / PERFUME / PINWHEELS, and one marked WATCHES / WINTER, and one marked HYGIENE / SPOOLS / CANDLES, and one marked FIGURINES / SPECTACLES...the box marked DARKNESS, or the one with DEATH OF THE FIRSTBORN written with pencil on its front. I noticed that there was a box on the top of one of these skyscrapers of boxes that was marked DUST. (147)

The characters take with them a box marked "IN CASE" in which Lista has saved a collection of relics that

connects all of the characters together in a common history. When they investigate the contents of "IN CASE," they find a way to recontextualize each piece so that they can attempt to make sense of their position in this history. When they find a necklace, Alex's grandfather says, "I purchased one very much similar to this for your grandmother when we first became in love" (222). They remove a book titled *The Book of Past Occurrences*, which includes "a biennial census, with every name of every citizen and a brief chronicle of his or her life...summaries of even less notable events, and commentaries on...LIFE, AND THE LIFE OF LIFE" (196). Foer's autonomous character takes special interest in *The Book of Past Occurrences* just as former inhabitants of Trachimbrod once had in the narration of Foer the Narrator:

Every schoolboy learned the history of Trachimbrod from a book originally written by the Venerable Rabbi [who said] *AND IF WE ARE TO STRIVE FOR A BETTER FUTURE, MUSTN'T WE BE FAMILIAR AND RECONCILED WITH OUR PAST?*...Even the most delinquent students read *The Book of Antecedents* without skipping a word, for they knew that they too would one day inhabit its pages, that if they could only get a hold of a future edition, they would be able to read of their mistakes (and perhaps avoid them), and the mistakes of their children (and ensure that they would never happen), and the outcome of future wars (and prepare for the death of loved ones). (196)

After all, when a Jew learns the history of those who birthed him, tradition commands that he consider how he might learn from the experiences of his antecedents that have shaped his life. He also must view his antecedents as extensions of himself, a "reverse heredity" (Foer, Everything 140). In the text, Foer the Narrator imagines a scene in which his grandfather, who is about to marry, stands before a bronze statue of his own very-great grandfather and sees himself:

The men at the flour mill...chipped in to have the Kolker's body bronzed, and they petitioned...to stand the statue in the center of the shtetl square as a symbol of strength and vigilance...Men and women [had] journeyed from distant shtetls to rub [the statue's] nose, which was worn to the flesh in only a month's time and had to be rebronzed...His dimensions changed slightly with each bronzing...For each recasting, the craftsmen modeled the [statue's] face after the faces of his male descendents - reverse heredity. (So when my grandfather thought he saw that he was growing to look like his great-great-great-grandfather, what he really saw was that his great-great-great-grandfather was growing to look like him. His revelation was just how much like himself he looked.) (139-140)

This "reverse heredity" phenomenon is similar to one Hirsch observed at the Holocaust Memorial museum as visitors viewed pre-genocide photographs of Holocaust victims: "'Look, look, look,' I hear people saying all around me, 'we have a picture just like this one in our album.' Or 'Look, that looks just like grandma!'. . .The

conventional nature of family photography allows for this identification, this erasure of time and space" ("Past Lives" 671). These museum visitors are recontextualizing the ordinary, non-graphic pre-trauma photographs in attempts to draw sense into an event that defies logic. That is, the viewers explore how the subjects in the photograph fit into what the viewers know - the resemblance of the photographic subjects' appearance or stance to the viewers' families and picture albums, respectively. Because they cannot fathom the atrocities and imagine the past, they must imagine how the photographs' subject fit into the context of the knowable present.

In Everything is Illuminated, however, Foer's characters recontextualize ordinary objects to make meaning of the objects themselves in the context of their pasts:

JEWS HAVE SIX SENSES: Touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing... memory. While Gentiles experience and process the world through the traditional senses, and use memory as a second-order means of interpreting events, for Jews memory is no less primary than the prick of a pin, or its silver glimmer, or the taste of the blood it pulls from the finger. The Jew is pricked by a pin and remembers other pins. It is only by tracing the pinprick back to other pinpricks - when his mother tried to fix his sleeve while his arm was still in it, when his grandfather's fingers fell asleep from stroking his great-grandfather's damp forehead, when

Abraham tested the knife point to be sure Isaac would feel no pain - that the Jew is able to know why it hurts.

When a Jew encounters a pin, he asks: *What does it remember like?* (Foer, Everything 198)

Here, Foer is defining the institutional nature of Jewish memory. What has happened to the Jewish individual has happened to the entire Jewish people. Abraham's experience still affects the whole. The survivor's experience still affects the whole. Jewish memory does not belong to a single person, but is part of a collective identity, a community that shares a common bond that ties each person to their communal history.

Foer's novel is not just a story about the characters trying to find connections between themselves and the traumas that their families experienced. The story also represents the collective experience of remembering as part of the Jewish tradition. Embedded within Jewish culture is the desire to remember and embody collective Jewish history. Therefore, one might say that the Jewish experience involves a constant refiguring, recreating, and recontextualizing of postmemory.

Like the *yizker bikher*, each line of Foer's text is a new white string that Foer constructs to re-member and

recontextualize memory, bringing him closer to his lost origin. As he creates the new string he must weave into his invented history the old strings -- "strings that are not [his] own, but tied around [him] by parents and grandparents...strings not fastened to anything, but hanging loosely from the darkness" (Foer, Everything 260). These old strings -- his grandparents' stories about their Trochenbrod, the yellowing picture of Safran and "Augustine" -- provide a context of the past with which he can weave his own present and future.

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