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Into the unknown: Daniel Mendelsohn's *The Lost* and the writing of third-generation Holocaust literature

Abstract:

As distance from the Holocaust increases, the crucial task of representing the genocide in order to perpetuate its memory passes to later generations. In the past ten to fifteen years, third-generation authors (defined here as the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors) have emerged, according to Alan L. Berger, as 'the new bearers of *Shoah* representation' (2010a: 81). However, while the fields of psychology and, more recently, epigenetics, have started examining the impact of inherited trauma on the third generation, there is currently little scholarship on the distinct characteristics of third-generation literature and the position from which it is written. Members of this generation grapple with and seek to understand the unique dichotomy granted them at birth. How can they reconcile their vague yet potent emotional connection to this distant atrocity, and how might this impact their writing? To what extent can the third generation reasonably claim to have inherited trauma from or postmemory of the Holocaust? Which images and tropes might they use to convey the unsettling yet generative tension at the heart of their experience: both the burden of their familial inheritance, and the fact they are generationally removed and sheltered from the atrocities of the Holocaust by their parents and grandparents? Through examining the techniques third-generation author Daniel Mendelsohn uses in his memoir *The Lost* (2006), this paper will trace a crucial link between the third generation's complicated traumatic inheritance and the narrative choices of their writing.

Biographical Note:

Antonia Strakosch's research explores the intersection between trauma, memory, and writing, in particular, the characteristics of third-generation Holocaust literature. She is completing a PhD in creative writing at RMIT, where she is writing her second novel about the Holocaust, *The Gap*. She is the granddaughter of a Jewish-Austrian Holocaust survivor.

The Third Generation

Fifteen years ago, literature on the third generation (I use the term to refer to the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors) was virtually non-existent. In the nearly four decades since Helen Epstein published her seminal text, *Children of the Holocaust*, in 1979, scholarship around issues of representation in the second generation has developed to the extent that it is now 'a recognized and accepted part of Holocaust studies discourse' (Jilovsky et al. 2016: 4). Yet it is only in the past decade or so, as the grandchildren of survivors have come of age and have begun to reflect on their traumatic inheritance, that third-generation writing has emerged. As the last generation to have known survivors personally, third-generation authors are the last living link to the Holocaust and 'a bridge to future Holocaust memory' (Jilovsky & Silverstein 2016). They are thus vitally responsible for carrying the Holocaust's lessons for humanity into the future. Third-generation writers have emerged, accordingly, as 'the new bearers of *Shoah* representation' (Berger 2010a: 81).

In the past fifteen years, authors including Nicole Krauss, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Daniel Mendelsohn (this article will explore his memoir *The Lost*) have published feted and highly original works that interrogate their traumatic inheritance as the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors. Yet the characteristics of third-generation writing as they relate to the intergenerational transmission of trauma (what Marianne Hirsch terms *postmemory*) have remained underexplored. In mid-2016, Esther Jilovsky, Jordana Silverstein and David Slucki released *In the Shadows of Memory: The Holocaust and the Third Generation*—the first edited volume devoted solely to critical and creative work by survivors' grandchildren. Yet it was only in early 2017, when Victoria Aarons and Alan L. Berger published their important work, *Third-Generation Holocaust Representation: Trauma, History, and Memory*, that scholarship surrounding the impact of inherited traumatic memories on third-generation writing entered the mainstream.

For individuals who identify as members of the third generation, note Jilovsky and Silverstein, memory is not a passive inheritance but rather an active faculty doing both conscious and unconscious work (2016). This memory work arises from a sense of connection to the suffering of one's grandparent/s in the Holocaust, and a desire to memorialise their experience of trauma so that it is not forgotten. Melvin Jules Bukiet, however, argues that 'memory is an inaccurate term. For anyone who wasn't *there…* thinking about the Holocaust is really an act of the imagination. All we know is how little we know' (2002: 16). The grandchildren of survivors cannot remember a trauma they did not experience, after all, but rather inherit strains of their grandparents' suffering through the displacement and anxieties of their own second-generation parents. As a result, the third generation's emotional and creative investment in the Holocaust is fanned not by the flames of direct memory but rather by the sparks of imagination. According to Bukiet, Hirsch's concept of second-generation postmemory is apt to describe the inherited trauma of later generations and their investment in representing the Holocaust creatively. Indeed, a growing body of scholarship has emerged in recent years that considers the potential for second-generation postmemory to extend to the third generation (Berger 2010a; Jilovsky et al. 2016; Lang 2009). Certainly, as Bukiet suggests, the landscape of Holocaust memory is shifting increasingly to the realm of the imagination as the direct testimony of survivors passes.

In their recently published work, Aarons and Berger highlight the ways in which the idea of memory itself may need to be reconfigured or reconceived given the third-generation's inevitable distance from the Holocaust. This notion provides a useful jumping off point for reassessing the role of memory in third-generation writing. Aarons and Berger depict memory as 'woefully inadequate to the task of transmission' (2017: 43) and suggest, rather, that from the distance of the third generation, it may be more productive to reconceive Hirsch's concept of postmemory as a metaphor or trope for 'what remains after memory' (2017: 206). This refiguring of memory builds upon the work of scholars including Richard Glejzer and James Young, who have examined the complexity of memory from a range of perspectives, highlighting the ways in which forgetfulness and social interaction are bound up in and act upon it (Glejzer 2003: 128; Young 1993: 2-6). Memory is a complex, subjective, and unstable faculty, yet as the final survivors die out, 'what remains after memory' (Aarons and Berger 2017: 206) becomes critically important as it is the only way post-war generations can access and represent the otherwise distant events of the Holocaust. With no personal memory of the genocide, and often little knowledge of the survivors themselves, third-generation authors must rely on photos and family stories to imagine and conjure for the reader the suffering their grandparents lived through (Berger 2010b: 149). Daniel Mendelsohn describes his generation as having 'keepsakes' but 'no memories to go with them' ([2006] 2013: 182). In this way, these writers seek to comprehend what French author Henry Raczymow—referring to his own second generation—has called a 'memory shot through with holes' (1994: 98). However, the reaching of third-generation writers towards a remote past—and in particular, their attempts to connect with that past through accessing family heirlooms—raises a number of ethical concerns.

As many critics have discussed, the writing of trauma is fundamentally bound up with ethics (Finkielkraut 1994; Lang 1988; Raczymow 1994). How, then, can third-generation authors articulate the nuances of their traumatic inheritance while taking up 'the ethical lessons of postmemory' in the creative realm (Silverstein 2014)? Third-generation writing arises from a body of literature examining the legitimacy of postwar responses to the Holocaust, yet it is filtered through a further generational and creative remove. Members of this generation grapple with and seek to understand the unique dichotomy granted them at birth. How can they reconcile their vague yet potent emotional connection to this distant atrocity, and how might this impact their writing? The third-generation struggle hinges on finding ways to represent this uneasy position of being simultaneously connected to and twice-distanced from the Holocaust. Many authors experience this borderland of distance and connection as hauntingly powerful. Yet their challenge lies in finding means to convey this longing for their unknown pasts without overstating the impact of the Holocaust on their life and writing. Taking into account these ethical complexities, which images and tropes might third-generation authors use to convey the unsettling yet generative tension at the heart of their experience: both the burden of their inherited trauma, and the fact they are 'chronologically separated and shielded from the horrors of the… Holocaust' by their parents and grandparents (Berger & Milbauer 2013: 64)?

Third-generation literature is informed not only by the discipline of Holocaust memory studies, but also by work undertaken in the field of trauma studies. Cathy Caruth's influential notion of trauma as a process of 'recall or reenactment' that *comes after* a traumatic event and through its very belatedness 'pushes memory away' resonates with the mediated and belated nature of the third-generation experience

(1995: viii). Caruth argues that 'the pathology [of trauma] consists… solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it' (1995: 4). She draws on Freud's late research into the 'paradoxical relation between history and trauma' (what he termed *latency*) to examine how 'events, insofar as they are traumatic, assume their force precisely in their temporal delay' (1995: 9).

The belatedness that Caruth describes is particularly apt in characterising the third generation's experience of inherited trauma. It is precisely their twice-mediated distance from the atrocity—their *coming after* both their parents and grandparents—that delineates how many third-generation authors relate to and represent the Holocaust. As the site of original trauma occurred before they were born, they cannot access memory of the genocide directly, yet, as Bukiet contends, many experience it as one of the most important events of their lives (2002: 18). I would argue, then, that third-generation 'postmemory' functions the way dreams do—as a mechanism of the unconscious whose potency can haunt one's waking hours, yet whose precise shape is difficult to grasp. Through its very belatedness, it threatens to vanish the more one probes at it, only to rear up unbidden in haunting and unexpected ways.

As a third-generation writer myself, I have long been haunted by a vague yet powerful connection to the trauma my Viennese-Jewish grandfather experienced in the Holocaust. My grandfather died when I was ten, yet his suffering grips me more with each passing year, as if his memory were rising up in some inexplicable yet tangible way. There is something about the unknowability of all he endured that knocks the wind out of me, the tantalising sense of connection to him vanishing before I can ever truly grab hold of it. In third-generation literature, this complex traumatic inheritance—a belated yet persistent throbbing that never entirely goes away—manifests in particular narrative choices.

Daniel Mendelsohn's *The Lost*

Third-generation author Daniel Mendelsohn's memoir *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million*, published in 2006 to wide critical acclaim, traces the author's worldwide quest to uncover the fate of his Jewish relatives who perished in the Holocaust. Haunted since childhood by his purported resemblance to his murdered Great-Uncle Shmiel, Mendelsohn pursues the truth of his six relatives' tragic fates—his grandfather's aforementioned brother, his wife, and their four daughters. He traverses the globe, tracking down ailing Holocaust survivors from the small Polish town of Bolechow (now part of the Ukraine) who had known his family before the war. The resulting 650-page epic is strikingly original, weaving together memoir, detective story, and scholarly musings on the gospels and their lessons for humanity in a post-Holocaust world.

The Lost explores themes of family history, memory, and Jewish identity, and what it means for third-generation authors to attempt to reanimate or stake their future in a fragmented past. Mendelsohn interrogates the third generation's often-thwarted attempts to uncover their unknown family stories. What might it mean, he asks, to stake one's future in a past growing more opaque with each passing year? How can we, as the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, continue to seek a connection to our grandparents' trauma when the very history we strive to illuminate crumbles and

vanishes the more we probe at it? These difficult questions are without easy answers, yet as the final survivors pass away, they pulse with particular urgency. The third-generation writer's quest to reanimate their remote past is inherently desperate, for time is quite literally running out. These narratives, as a result, 'expose an anxious fear of belatedness, of late arrival to an inheritance' (Aarons & Berger 2017: 7). This sense of urgency imbues *The Lost* with a live-wire tension and persistent narrative drive.

Mendelsohn's relentless search for his family's story is driven by a need to rescue his relatives from the vagaries of history, to restore to them the specificity of individuals. In seeking concrete facts about his relatives to record in his book, he strives to ensure that their lives aren't vanished from memory. *The Lost* is a search, he notes, 'for what remains of these people. Human beings never disappear. Vanishing is done by somebody else' (Throsby 2015). The idea of the Nazis intentionally vanishing a race of people—of vanishing itself not as a passive or accidental slipping away but as something performed with calculated bureaucratic intent by human beings—is one of the key factors that motivated Mendelsohn to write his memoir. Forced to confront the unbearable truth that his relatives had effectively been 'erased from memory' (Throsby 2015), he embarked on a five-year quest for answers. His search for 'the explosion out of generalities into something specific' (Mendelsohn [2006] 2013: 144) resonates with many third-generation authors' need to probe their veiled histories for the facts that lie beneath.

Throughout his gruelling journey, Mendelsohn discovers that 'family history could be more than just tables and charts, could in fact help explain how people—my grandfather, say—became who they were' (49). This sentence is worth unpacking as it speaks to the crucial link between family history and identity. Efraim Sicher argues that postmemory is so powerful in shaping second-generation identity that history has 'maimed [them] before their birth' (2004: 263). Yet this yearning search for identity within one's own history also haunts many third-generation authors, whose 'project becomes both self-construction and discovery of the lost past' (Aarons & Berger 2017: 81). In Mendelsohn's case, it was this hunger for identity that helped him sustain his search over the five long years it took to research and write *The Lost*. When, partway along, he considered abandoning the project, he was spurred on by the sense that 'the dead were not so much lost as waiting' (Bladek 2008: 303). This idea of his murdered relatives 'waiting' for him to uncover the facts of how they died leads Mendelsohn, over the course of writing the book, to an ardent desire to discover how they had lived: 'all during the trip, I'd wanted a gripping narrative. It was only when I listened to [Bolechow Holocaust survivor] Jack Greene that I realized I'd been after the wrong story—the story of how they'd died, rather than how they had lived' (184).

This fundamental shift in perspective testifies to the author's own journey towards identity as a member of the third generation. As Ron Rosenbaum observes,

> the fact that his search begins with a physical resemblance to one of the Lost suggests that an important aspect of the obsession is a search for his own identity, his face in the face of the Loss. (2006: 10)

It is only by attempting to discover who these people were—that his Great-Uncle Shmiel was partly deaf, for example—that Mendelsohn can begin to carve out his own self in relation to the family that he has lost. Thus, the pursuit of his family history takes him beyond the 'tables and charts' (49)—beyond the facts about the mass shootings outside Bolechow or the atrocities that occurred in the town hall—and

into a realm in which the identity of his dead relatives might crucially inform who he chooses to become. This idea of seeking one's future in a crumbling past resonates with how photographer Bill Henson describes the archaeology of ancient artefacts:

> The object of archaeology is a whole new kind of future. It is retrograde; every new step it takes into the past, every older grave it finds, becomes a piece of our future. The ever-older becomes what lies ahead of us. An unexpected discovery could change our own, still uncertain destiny. (2014: 4)

By excavating the past in order to learn how best to live in the modern world, Mendelsohn attempts to erect a bridge between the remoteness of history and the immediacy of a present indelibly shaped by all that was lost. In doing so, he teaches us 'that not knowing certain stories, being ignorant of intricate histories that, unbeknownst to us, frame the present, can be a grave mistake' (Rosenbaum 2006: 10).

The Unknown

The fractured memory that characterises Mendelsohn's search is poignantly represented on the cover of the book itself. On the front of the edition reissued by William Collins in 2013, there is a faded, blown-up photograph of a man's face superimposed with faint, feathery lines. The photograph (we can only assume it is of Mendelsohn's Great-Uncle Shmiel) vanishes in shadow the more one stares at it, as if refusing the viewer entry into its haunted world. It is a sensuous and tantalising image—the penetrating gaze of the single visible eye, the prominent nose, the full and pillowy lips. At the top of the photo, an angled line across the forehead suggests the outline of a man's hat. The word *Bolechow* is written in faint script beside the left nostril. The peaks and troughs of the man's face, I realise suddenly, resemble the altitude markers on a map. His long nose, which flares ever so slightly at its tip, is a prominent mountain range, the dark space between his lips a fertile valley. Shmiel's face is branded with the physical markings of his Polish hometown—the place where, in 1943, he would be gunned down with one of his four daughters in the back garden of a still-standing house. In this subtle yet distinctive way, Mendelsohn's evocative cover highlights the position of place in third-generation literature as a site of imagination rather than memory. These authors' 'imaginative returns … both literal and metaphorical to re-enact and reclaim the past' (Aarons & Berger 2017: 64) speak to the ways in which places such as Bolechow, towns whose Jewish communities no longer exist, must be *created* rather than remembered in the literature of the third generation. In the shadows of a murky and distant past, as Aarons and Berger note, 'absence emerges as a marker of place' (2017: 64). The faint lines of this map on the cover of *The Lost*, then, are not so innocent after all. They brand Shmiel with a premonition of his violent end, burn death right into his skin. The distant horror of the Holocaust becomes a gauze mask draped across his face, one from which he cannot escape.

Yet the fine, feathery lines also look remarkably like fingerprints. In this case, they might symbolise Mendelsohn's tentative grip on his fragmented past, his attempt to lay claim to some sense of family connection. If this is indeed the author's fingerprint, then its uniqueness testifies to the blood he and Shmiel share. What better way to evoke the craving for his lost relatives than by reaching his hand out and actually touching them? This interpretation of Mendelsohn's front cover is a poignant reminder of the third generation's troubling distance from the history they seek. The

more they reach out to touch the past, the more it shrinks into shadow. Ellen Fine describes the shadow, in fact, as a key image in post-Holocaust writing:

> On the one hand, the shadow is a hovering presence that will not go away … On the other hand, the shadow is absence, a reflection of the reality that took place but not the reality itself. (1997: 127)

The haunting image of a fingerprint on an old family photo, then, speaks to the third generation's shadowy, faltering grasp on their fragmented pasts.

Mendelsohn's shrouded history—represented so compellingly on the cover of his memoir—plagued him to the extent that he undertook years of punishing research in order to try and track down the truth. Yet the Holocaust's unknowability also enticed him. The few black and white photographs of Shmiel and his family in his mother's album, as a result, took on vital, generative significance:

> *Unknown and unknowable*: this could be frustrating, but also produced a certain allure. The photographs of Shmiel and his family were, after all, more fascinating than the other family pictures that were so fastidiously preserved in my mother's family archive precisely because we knew almost nothing about him, about them; their unsmiling, unspeaking faces seemed, as a result, more beguiling. (41)

This passage explores the lure of fragmented memory, and the experience of being 'recruited' by an unknowable past. It also speaks to Hirsch's influential scholarship on family photographs—'ghostly revenants from an irretrievably lost past world' (2008: 115)—having the potential to both bridge generational distance from the Holocaust, and to emphasise its insurmountability. According to Hirsch, 'historical photographs from a traumatic past authenticate the past's existence … and, in their flat two-dimensionality, they also signal its insurmountable distance and "derealisation"' (2008: 116). In the context of third-generation literature, family photographs could be said to symbolise the critical juncture between these authors' simultaneous distance from and connection to the Holocaust. The ethical lesson we can draw from these tantalising relics is to remain vigilant about formulating and articulating the third generation's delicate, complex relationship with their traumatic pasts.

The Lure of Intimacy

In the face of their splintered family histories, many third-generation authors pursue the specific facts of their relatives' lives and deaths as a way of gaining an intimacy or closeness with the past. Specificity, in fact, 'shows itself to be an urgent preoccupation for those of the third generation whose grandparents are no longer living' (Aarons & Berger 2017: 17). Throughout *The Lost*, Mendelsohn's craving for intimacy with his murdered relatives manifests in particular narrative choices. Each 'hard piece of knowledge' he acquires testifies to his family's existence (144). Specificity—a search for 'the particulars of experience' (Aarons and Berger 2017: 19)—is important to him as a third-generation author precisely because it is so difficult to achieve. His desire to rescue his relatives 'from generalities, symbols, abbreviations, to restore to them their particularity and distinctiveness' (135) is an attempt to create a presence in the face of vast absence. In light of this, the discovery of a concrete fact about his family—something as seemingly trivial as his Great-Aunt Ester having had 'lovely legs'—seemed like a 'victory' (Throsby 2015). According to Phillips, 'the closer he gets to the lived experience of these events, the more intimate

they become, the more intimacy—in its various senses—becomes Mendelsohn's subject' (2007: 22). It is a poignant reminder of the third generation's fragmented relationship with their traumatic histories that the only type of intimacy with the past available to him, at least initially, is in the act of writing itself. Through his arduous mission to interview the remaining Bolechow Holocaust survivors, however, Mendelsohn finally gains access to the 'lived experience of these events' (Phillips 2007: 22). This hard-won access to living witnesses allows the author to inch ever closer to the truth behind his relatives' story.

Born out of Mendelsohn's desire to connect emotionally with his traumatic past, the style of his narration is deliberately intimate. He uses long sentences threaded with commas, each additional phrase sharpening and deepening the one that has come before it:

> I had promised myself that as we drove out of the town and back up the little hill toward L'viv, I would turn around, as I somehow knew my grandfather had done on an October day eighty years before, turn around for the reason we always turn around to stare at what lies behind us, which is to make an impossible wish, a wish that nothing will be left behind, that we will carry the imprint of what is over and done with into the present and future. (643)

There is something generous about this mode of writing, engendering of good will, as if Mendelsohn is granting the reader access to each thought as soon as he thinks it. This has the effect of sweeping one up in the story. We are so bound up in what is happening—and, importantly, what might happen next—that pages fly by without us even noticing. Through his own desire for intimacy with the past, Mendelsohn 'draws us more deeply into the experience of the larger catastrophe than we might have thought possible' (Rosenbaum 2006: 10). As a response to his traumatic inheritance of loss and uncertainty, each concrete fact he records helps bring the distant genocide to vivid, horrible life.

Yet as we discover in the reading of *The Lost*, Mendelsohn's increasing intimacy with his harrowing past never negates or compensates for his generational distance from the Holocaust. It is in the space between their connection to and distance from the genocide that third-generation authors often strike upon the most fertile literary ground. The generative potential of the unknown, the magnetism of an unbridgeable past that dangles before us the alluring sense of connection we seek—these qualities imbue *The Lost* with much of its ethical and emotional tension. Mendelsohn formulates this issue of distance and connection, however, in a particular way. While he seeks to illuminate his history through rigorous research, a certain distance from his subject allows him to manipulate material in ways that will best serve his narrative:

> Another way of saying this is that *proximity* brings you closer to *what happened*, is responsible for the facts we glean, the artifacts [sic] we possess, the verbatim quotations of what people said; but *distance* is what makes possible the story of what happened, is precisely what gives someone the freedom to organize and shape those bits into a pleasing and coherent whole. (437)

The tensions inherent in this uneasy position raise certain moral dilemmas. While the third generation's distance from the Holocaust gives rise to questions of appropriation and legitimacy, it is this distance itself that allows these authors a degree of creativity and playfulness in their writing. Just as Mendelsohn struggles with the gravity of his subject and the responsibility of doing his relatives' story justice, he also relishes the

opportunity afforded by his generational distance to manipulate his story into 'a pleasing and coherent whole' (437). In a realm that has traditionally frowned upon inventive or playful representations of the Holocaust (Des Pres 1988; Lang 1988; 2003), third-generation literature possesses a comparatively high degree of creative license. Mendelsohn uses this relative creative freedom to thread his narrative with vividly imagined scenes set during the Holocaust—with varying success. In the following passage, he imagines the final moments of Shmiel's daughter Ruchele as she walks naked onto a plank above a grave in the Taniawa forest in 1941:

> At some point it was her turn, she walked with the others onto the plank. Likely this plank had some give, perhaps it bounced a little as they lined up: an incongruously playful motion. Then another burst of fire. Did she hear it? ... We cannot know. We know only that her soft, sixteen-year-old body—which with any luck was lifeless at this point, although we know that some were still alive when they fell with a wet thud onto the warm and bleeding, excrement-smeared bodies of their fellow townsfolk—fell into the grave, and that is the last we see of her; although we have, of course, not really seen her at all. (Mendelsohn [2006] 2013: 262)

In this passage, Mendelsohn allows himself a degree of creative license with Ruchele's death that is ethically troubling. His description goes beyond merely fleshing out the facts that he learns (indeed, he is not even sure if Ruchele made it to the forest, or was killed earlier in the Town Hall), and into a realm of vivid description that is clearly intended to scintillate the reader. He embellishes the scene with imagined sensory detail as a way of bringing her death 'to life'. Ruchele's body falls 'with a wet thud'; her fellow townsfolk are 'warm and bleeding'. According to Aarons and Berger, 'the result of such vacillation between discourse and the lacing or layering of fantasy and reality … creates the ongoing tension throughout' the text (2017: 103). I would argue, however, that Mendelsohn's easy liberty with the facts of Ruchele's murder borders on ethical trespass. In utilising rich imagined details in order to engross the reader and create a greater emotional impact, he risks undermining the gravity and specificity of her death. This speculation calls into question the ethics of writing from life; in particular, the trespasses Mendelsohn has committed in the name of a good story. Given the Holocaust's 'moral enormity' (1988: 1), scholar Berel Lang argues that authors who write about the topic are morally obligated to their subject matter in a way that other writers of atrocity are not: 'the writer's intervention, whatever else it does, draws attention away from the subject itself' (2003: xvii).

Indeed, as a reader it is difficult to read this passage from *The Lost* without feeling manipulated by its embellishment and overt attempt to tug on our emotions. More importantly, however, this passage calls into question Mendelsohn's stated obligation to reanimate his lost relatives' lives and deaths with rigorous singularity. How might he honour his family's memory, we are left to wonder, while still writing a book with buoyancy and suspense? What might it mean to *step outside* history, to order and at times embellish the facts that he discovers in such a way that they appear irresistible to the reader? In other words, what are the ethical consequences of third-generation authors exploiting their distance from the Holocaust in the name of creating riveting literature? By drawing attention to their remoteness from the Holocaust, third-generation authors have the opportunity to lead readers away from a passive or complacent reading of history towards a more active one, by enabling them to compare their own perhaps dormant knowledge of the atrocity against the version being presented in the texts. This, I would argue, is an ethical way to represent

atrocity from a position of generational distance. In this excerpt from *The Lost*, however, Mendelsohn buries this distance behind juicy writing and fantasy, without drawing attention to either. The result is an unfortunate ethical breach that threatens to overshadow the other 642 pages and their thoroughly imagined, meticulous and enlightening lessons for writing about the Shoah in a post-Holocaust world.

Conclusion

In *The Lost*, the drive and intensity of the narrative mirrors Mendelsohn's own all-consuming search for answers—a search characterised by absence, longing, and fractured memory. The strength of Mendelsohn's desire to uncover his family's unknown past is palpable. 'There is something about the quest for knowledge about other people that makes us frantic', notes Adam Phillips. 'History-writing, as Mendelsohn both shows and tells, can be a struggle to hold oneself together' (2007: 21). As a third-generation author, I relate deeply to the frantic quality of Mendelsohn's quest. Many of us are compelled by this same almost desperate need to 'tame' our unknowable pasts. The haunting possibility that we will never uncover the truth of what our grandparents suffered in the Holocaust both plagues us and drives us ever onward. It is our writing itself, in this case, that offers a way forward. In the face of the unknown, our memoirs and novels, plays and poems, console us that we are at least staking our own small claim on the past, while also allowing us to transmit knowledge of the Holocaust into the future. Writing about our grandparents' arduous journeys enables us to preserve their experiences for future generations. In this way, the writing of *The Lost* arose as a narrative response to Mendelsohn's traumatic inheritance as the grandchild of Holocaust survivors.

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