



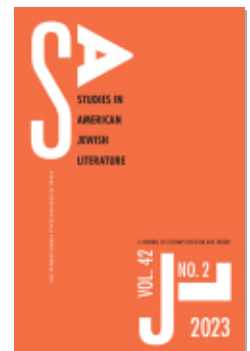
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Pre/Occupied Longing: Toward a Definition of Postnostalgia
in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*

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PRE/OCCUPIED LONGING: TOWARD A DEFINITION OF POSTNOSTALGIA IN JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER'S *EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED*

ABSTRACT

This article presents a theoretical formulation that names an experience that is common to many third-generation protagonists in the literature written by the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors: postnostalgia. Postnostalgia is an adopted “nostalgia”—though it not actually nostalgia—for a place and a time that descendants have never lived but long for as if they have. This almost-form of “nostalgia” is powerful because it is an affective and persistent response to the particular places to which they are connected, given how their families once occupied those milieus. This article treats Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything Is Illuminated*, which serves as a representation of how third-generation protagonists commonly attempt to discover pre-Shoah life by visiting the sites of family life in their family’s native lands. This formulation of postnostalgia offers insight into how survivors’ descendants in third-generation literature have responded to their inherited traumas, elucidating the common phenomenon of what is referred to as “pilgrimages” to sites of pre-Shoah family life.

KEYWORDS: third-generation, Holocaust literature, Jonathan Safran Foer, intergenerational trauma, Holocaust memory, postmemory

A number of literary critics and cultural theorists have discussed the children of Holocaust survivors and what has been described as their “nostalgia” for life before the Shoah. Most notable among this group of scholars are Sara Horowitz, Eva Hoffman, and Marianne Hirsch. Horowitz (2010), in “Nostalgia and the Holocaust,” offers cursory observations on children of survivors’ “nostalgia” for prewar life, but she largely examines those who seemingly (and enigmatically) adopt “nostalgic” attachments for life *during* the Holocaust. As daughters of survivors themselves, Hoffman (1990, 4; 2004, 204–5) and Hirsch (1997, 226, 243) each provide accounts of their own “nostalgic” affections for their families’ homeland from before the Holocaust (Ukraine). Though not born in the country of their parents’ births, both Hoffman and Hirsch describe pining for Ukraine with a measure of “nostalgia,” as if they themselves had once lived there. I place “nostalgic” and “nostalgia” in scare quotes to draw attention to this puzzling phenomenon of seemingly inherited “nostalgia”; although these individuals experience a profound longing for and an attachment to the time and place of their families’ pre-Shoah lives, neither Hirsch nor Hoffman were alive before the Holocaust, and neither ever lived in their parents’ birthplace. Hirsch highlights this perplexity when she explains that her fantasy to “return” to where her family lived before the Shoah “was not exactly a nostalgic longing for a lost or abandoned Heimat. . . . [H]ow could a place I had never touched, and which my parents left under extreme duress, really be ‘home’? Nor was it a yearning to recall some better past time in that city, for I had experienced no actual time there at all” (Hirsch and Spitzer 2010, 11). The questions, then, remain: What precisely is this almost-form of nostalgia, and what can be said about it?

Here in this study, through an analysis of Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything Is Illuminated*, I propose a new term to name this phenomenon: *postnostalgia*. Postnostalgia, with respect to the descendants of Holocaust survivors as represented in their fictional and nonfictional writings,¹ names the imaginative responses of the children and grandchildren of survivors—those known as the second and third generations, respectively—to their inherited traumas and embodied experiences from the Holocaust. Hirsch identifies inherited traumas and embodied experiences as *postmemory*, a term she further describes as “the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated” (1997, 22). Postnostalgia, however, does not respond to failures, in conception or application, of the *theory* of postmemory, nor is it an analogue or an improvement of its predecessor term. Rather, postnostalgia in second- and third-generation literature is a response to the *experience* of postmemory, an adaptive re-direction of descendants’ relationships to the past, that which does not focus on death and destruction but on life and livelihood. Though this present study stems from and centers on, for the purpose

of specificity, Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* as an illustrative literary exploration of postnostalgia, it bears noting that postnostalgia finds expression in a number of other texts written by the descendants of survivors. Melvin Jules Bukiet's *Stories of an Imaginary Childhood*, Erin Einhorn's *The Pages in Between*, Judith Kalman's *The County of Birches*, and Anne Karpf's *The War After* all give voice to postnostalgic attachments of the second generation to their families' pre-Shoah homelands. As for third-generation texts, Daniel Mendelsohn's *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million*, Rutu Modan's *The Property*, Eduardo Halfon's *The Polish Boxer, Monastery, and Mourning*, and Jérémie Dres's *We Won't See Auschwitz* offer literary representations of grandchildren of survivors' postnostalgia.

As is illustrated in *Everything Is Illuminated* (and in the other texts I mention above), postnostalgia responds to and interacts with the effects of inherited traumatic knowledge of the Holocaust. As Hirsch and Leo Spitzer note in *Ghosts of Home*, for the descendants of survivors, "negative and traumatic memories" are "nostalgia's complicating flip side" (2010, 8). As a result, in second- and third-generation writing, this postnostalgic yearning I am naming and its accompanying trips to sites of pre-Shoah life—those commonly known as *pilgrimages*—are always already inflected with malaise that stems from their inherited loss (for how could any perception of pre-Shoah life *not* be colored by loss that stems from the Holocaust?). Indeed, such pilgrimages, along with the postnostalgia that motivates them, can be understood as forms of belated address to descendants of survivors' inherited traumas—a point that bears elucidating.

As trauma theory persuasively argues that trauma issues forth from a moment of rupture—and thus a ruptured sense of time—it therefore presupposes a prior period of stasis—and thus a prior sense of linear time. For descendants of survivors represented in second- and third-generation writing, though they have imaginative access to life before the Shoah, they do not always have a concrete sense of this past that preceded the moment of rupture known as the Holocaust. Though they can locate a vast visual, documentary, and material archive that gives voice to the Holocaust itself as an historical event, they do not often have access to such an extensive archive of pre-Shoah *family* life. This is especially the case given how possessions and property belonging to their progenitors were lost, stolen, and/or destroyed at the hands of Nazis and/or thieving opportunists. As such, in the writings of descendants of survivors, pilgrimages to sites of pre-Shoah life become ways to fill in this archive, to flesh out, in figurative and literal senses, traces of life before the Holocaust; pilgrims seek to occupy, in the flesh, the places of their families' pre-Shoah lives, so as to find out more about their no-longer families.

Thus, by animating those places, *their bodies become figurative archives of possibility*—of what could and should have been had the Shoah never occurred—in both imaginative and bodily terms. Though it would of course be impossible

in an actual sense to archive their families' pre-Shoah lives by way of their bodies (for how could one's body take corporeal stock of life that is no longer?), their bodies qua figurative archives of possibility furnish them with embodied narratives that become ways of connecting with their late families. Their bodies, in situ, figuratively represent their late families, inasmuch as they re-present or re-introduce their families' presence in the place that they lived before the Shoah. By becoming figurative archives of possibility, they figure themselves into imagined histories that catalyze a greater corporeal sense of familial connection. In lieu of external archives, their bodies, however imperfectly and fictionally, archive imagined histories of how their families may have lived before the Holocaust and how they themselves may have lived, if the Holocaust had not happened. Their bodies, in place (and in the place) of their late families' bodies, come to embody an imagined family history, that is, a narrative of pre-Shoah life, even if that history or narrative of what possibly may have been never actually came to pass. It is standing on-site that makes manifest a narrative that functions as a stand-in, a substitute history for what is missing in their imaginations, as is illustrated throughout second- and third-generation writing.

Therefore, for third-generation protagonists specifically, these trips are not about directly addressing the original wounding event—the Holocaust—not only because directly addressing the original wound would be impossible regardless (for any form of traumatic address is always indirect) but also because these third-generation witnesses are twice removed from the original trauma. Even if they were to know their grandparents' narrated stories of what happened, that "history" is always already constructed. This is in part because, by definition, the original traumatizing event was often never fully known by survivors themselves, insofar as it was, as Cathy Caruth explains in *Unclaimed Experience*, "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness," and what happened cannot therefore be narrated as such (1996, 4). Any narrative is a construction and is never able to articulate completely the original moment of violence. This is even more so the case for the third generation, for whom "the intergenerational passing on of trauma . . . is a historical process that produces history through the erasure of its own witness" (Caruth 2014, 403). Because of the erasure of history's own witness—the covering over of what happened, leaving only an inscription or a trace of the wounding event—in tandem with how they were not traumatized firsthand (or secondhand for that matter), third-generation protagonists are in an even more precarious position to address their inherited traumas. Thus, whatever narrative they choose to give voice to their family's history, whether it is close to what "actually" happened (if that were ever possible to know in full) or if it is based on imagination (a projected, postnostalgic fantasy), does not ultimately seem to matter. Rather, what matters is finding *a* narrative, *a* way of contextualizing and making sense of a past that

belatedly ruptured their lives, along with a past that preceded that period of rupture (Cooper 1995, 145).

Referring to third-generation Holocaust representation broadly, Gerd Bayer explains in “After Postmemory” that “there is a noticeable decrease [in comparison to the first and second generations] in the urgency to keep particular details in perpetual memory” (2010, 117). This decreased emphasis on factual details for the third generation is a consequence of emphasizing details that are more emotionally proximal to them. In the context of postnostalgic constructions of the past in third-generation literature, this decreased emphasis on factual details is accompanied by an increased emphasis on imagined details. What becomes important for protagonists are not necessarily “objective,” “historical” facts but, instead, *usable narratives* that allow them to live “after such knowledge,” as Hoffman articulates it in the title of one of her works. Pilgrimages thus better enable third-generation characters to figure out, in bodily and imaginative ways, what preceded the Shoah in order to better understand, albeit incompletely, what was lost in the first place. As they accept that they cannot and *will not* understand the Holocaust in toto, they seek to at least *contextualize* this trauma in imagined constructions that narrate, in their own terms, what preceded it. Indeed, for the third generation, “coming to terms” with the past is precisely that: finding terms, or language, to articulate themselves in relation to their late families and thereby address their inherited traumas—all in service of constructing an emotionally true, usable narrative, even if it is not factually accurate and even if it is, in large part, fictional(ized).

Postnostalgia is affectively and psychically powerful given how its object of desire is ultimately unattainable but is, nonetheless, profoundly desired by descendants of survivors, as represented in descendants’ writings. Hirsch gestures toward this idea when she says,

None of us ever knows the world of our parents. We can say that the motor of the fictional imagination is fueled in great part by the desire to know the world as it looked and felt before our birth. How much more ambivalent is this curiosity for children of Holocaust survivors, exiled from a world that has ceased to exist, that has been violently erased. Theirs is a different desire, at once more powerful and more conflicted: the need not just to feel and to know, but also to re-member, to re-build, to re-incarnate, to replace, and to repair. (1997, 243)

For many descendants of survivors represented in second- and third-generation writing, this intimate desire to “re-incarnate” particular geographies, which are imbued with stories of family life, catalyzes imaginative entry into their families’ pasts that preceded the Shoah. For these descendants of survivors—as exemplified by protagonist Jonathan in *Everything Is Illuminated*—postnostalgia

articulates a longing for life before Nazi occupation, a longing that preoccupies them with their imaginative perceptions of the lands of their forbearers; it is a yearning for family existence in an uncannily familiar geography before the Shoah (Bardizbanian 2019, 46), for Jewish livelihood before mass trauma—that is, for life before Holocaust decimation and deracination.

THEORETICAL FRAME

Before exploring postnostalgia in the context of *Everything Is Illuminated*, I should discuss the etymology and genealogy of the word *nostalgia*. As Horowitz explains, “The word *nostalgia* derives from the Greek *nostos*, meaning to return home, and *algos*, meaning pain or longing. Nostalgia implies a temporal or spatial exile (or both simultaneously), and thus a longing for the past and for home, and a desire to return home in the future” (2010, 47). This conception of nostalgia is indeed applicable when discussing *survivors*’ longing for life before the Holocaust; however, simply put, it cannot be applied to the descendants of survivors, insofar as subsequent generations were, as noted above, not alive before the Shoah. Post-nostalgia thus serves as an intervention into the limited lexicon of naming survivors’ descendants’ “nostalgic” longing for times and places that preceded their births. Of course, it ought to be noted that some descendants have no interest in the lands of their families’ origins and that some share an emphatically anti-postnostalgic impulse (for example, in regard to Germany), but this study brackets off such individuals to focus on one postnostalgic subject represented in *Everything Is Illuminated*.

The fantasy of pre-Shoah life—an enabling fiction mixed with fact that is largely a function of imagination—creates, as Svetlana Boym suggests in *The Future of Nostalgia*, a double consciousness (2001, xiii–xiv). However, Boym’s notion of a double consciousness is further complicated for the descendants of survivors represented in second- and third-generation writings. Boym refers to a double consciousness as the main feature of the exilic experience: “a double exposure of different times and spaces, a constant bifurcation” (256). But for second- and third-generation protagonists, they are subject to a double consciousness in regard to where/when they live and where/when their families once lived. Indeed, the sites of where their families once lived are further refracted through their progenitors’ pre-Shoah lives, as well as through their Holocaust experiences. As a result, protagonists in second- and third-generation writing possess multiply divided consciousnesses that hold in tension their families’ exilic experiences with their families’ lives before, during, and after the Holocaust.

Boym’s helpful division of nostalgia into two overarching categories, restorative and reflective nostalgia, sheds light on the subject of postnostalgia. She states:

“Two kinds of nostalgia are not absolute types, but rather tendencies, ways of giving shape and meaning to longing. Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance” (41). This dual grouping of nostalgic tendencies elucidates the multiple ways that nostalgia operates. However, when applying Boym’s formulation to the study of postnostalgia, it bears noting that the nostalgic tendencies she identifies are not always mutually exclusive for second- and third-generation protagonists. Many of their postnostalgic attachments parallel a combination of both nostalgic tendencies, though of course at a generational remove. Boym suggests that “restorative nostalgia has no use for the signs of historical time—patina, ruins, cracks, imperfections” (45), but for these descendants of survivors, “the signs of historical time” are not to be avoided nor are they understood as void of utility. Rather, such signs of historical time are perceived as authenticating markers of historicity and authenticity, those that indexically operate as confirmation of the reality of a world that once was but is no longer. Many protagonists thus search for the “original image”—or more accurately what they *imagine* to be the original image—of home(land)s that have ceased to exist and for signs that serve to confirm the facticity of those places (49). In locating this pastness—by visiting sites of pre-Shoah life on pilgrimages—there is a perceived authentication of the reality of their families’ pre-Shoah lives that enables them, imaginatively and of course imperfectly, to “re-enter,” to “return,” to “re-establish” that which was lost. Postnostalgia, therefore, not only names the desire to “re-create” imaginatively the lost world of pre-Shoah family life by spatializing time and temporalizing space on their visits to the native lands of their families (in line with restorative nostalgia). But postnostalgia also seeks out, employs, and even cherishes the “shattered fragments of [post]memory” (in step with reflective nostalgia) (49). As such, in the writings of descendants of survivors, many hold fast to (largely romanticized) fantasies of their families’ pre-Shoah worlds. They long to touch and inhabit, even just temporarily, the home(land)s to which they were denied access, as a way of “re-claiming” a greater sense of rootedness and belonging.

I prefer the term *postnostalgia* to what has been named “ambivalent nostalgia” by Hirsch and Spitzer (2010, 19), “inherited attachment” by Janet Jacobs (2016, 102), and simply “nostalgia” by Horowitz (2010). It stands to reason that postnostalgia cannot be synonymized with “nostalgia” and/or “ambivalent nostalgia” because what is being named is, indeed, not nostalgia; that which I am naming functions comparably to nostalgia but is qualitatively different given the generational, geographical, and cognitive distance between the time and place of pre-Shoah life and the descendants’ post-1945 lives. Contra Jacobs’s term “inherited attachment,” postnostalgia, though seemingly inherited from survivors, is not actually something that can be inherited—just like, say, memory, in experiential

or biological terms, cannot be inherited *in sich*. Postnostalgia is, rather, that which is learned and smells, feels, looks, sounds, and functions like nostalgia for a place and time that descendants have never lived but long for as if they have—similar to how postmemory is that which smells, feels, looks, sounds, and functions like memory but is not memory as such. I, therefore, find the term *postnostalgia* to be a more accurate nomenclature to articulate the experience I am naming.

Though several scholars have briefly outlined this phenomenon in the context of second-generation writing—without terming it postnostalgia, to be sure—little work has specifically examined the grandchildren of survivors' comparable attachments in third-generation writing. As a generative text that gives voice to third-generation postnostalgic longing, Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* is in line with many other third-generation memoirs, which, as Jessica Lang avows in *Textual Silence*, "often extend their narratives back to generations earlier than those affected by World War II and often investigate the features and concerns of their relatives' daily lives" (2017, 94). Foer's novel further exemplifies Victoria Aarons and Alan L. Berger's characterization of third-generation literature, which they discuss in *Third Generation Holocaust Representation*: "Third-generation writing might be thought of as quest narratives" (2017, 12). Aarons and Berger continue: "These are quests that both originate and conclude with the present and attempt to forge a connection among generations, a compulsion to reanimate the fractured family by means of the orderliness of historical reconstruction" (12–13)—or, perhaps more accurately *construction*, for, in fact, many within the third generation have never before been to the countries of their families' pre-Shoah lives. Explicating survivors' grandchildren's impulse to "return" to sites of pre-Shoah family life, Berger notes in "Life After Death": "Return instantiates a prominent feature of the third generation: a pilgrimage to the sites of a survivor's pre-Shoah existence, and extensive research into the past" (2016, 74), providing for them, as Lang suggests, "a sense of familial, cultural, and ethnic belonging" (2017, 83). Of course, there are a number of other defining aspects of third-generation Holocaust literature and, to be sure, third-generation identity more generally, but the phenomenon of "returning" to sites of pre-Shoah family life is of central importance to many third-generation protagonists, as is represented by Jonathan in *Everything Is Illuminated*.

Protagonist Jonathan's story exemplifies a significant difference between second- and third-generation Holocaust writing: despite how the Holocaust is a defining feature of his life and identity, it is not necessarily *the* defining feature as is often the case for second-generation protagonists. Although the subject of the Holocaust is certainly present, *Everything Is Illuminated* and other third-generation narratives such as Dres's *We Won't See Auschwitz* do not inevitably centralize the Holocaust as their primary focus. As the title of *We Won't See Auschwitz* gestures, rather than "returning" to the physical site that is metonymic of Holocaust

trauma (Auschwitz), the protagonists in Dres's work—akin to Jonathan in *Everything Is Illuminated*—circuitously seek to address their difficult family legacy by “returning” to sites of family life *before* the Holocaust. Indeed, in much third-generation writing, as Foer's and Dres's works exemplify, the Holocaust fits into a larger history, wherein it is one of several narrative elements, and the protagonists in third-generation literature often imaginatively extend their stories to include protracted, imaginative treatments of life before the Shoah. Despite how a number of third-generation texts include “narrative journeys, both imagined and real—both physical and psychic—back to the point of traumatic origin” (Aarons and Berger 2017, 7–8), such “return” journeys to sites of Holocaust trauma (e.g., sites of former concentration camps or ghettos) are uncommonly the primary focus of the larger narrative. But unlike the third-generation protagonists who *do* “visit ‘sites of memory,’ including, and especially, death camps and sites of massacres” (Berger 2016, 74), protagonist Jonathan attempts—though, of course, is not always entirely able—to concentrate on family and Jewish life, not on Holocaust death.

The postnostalgic pilgrimage in *Everything Is Illuminated* can thus be understood as a mode of addressing the trauma that Jonathan has inherited. Indeed, Jonathan's postnostalgia prompts him to come to terms with his inherited trauma and malaise, especially as he tries to recover a sense of “home” at the site of his family's pre-Shoah lives. By visiting the site of his family's pre-Shoah lives, he situates his inherited trauma and knowledge of the past in a longer family narrative. The “return” journey in *Everything Is Illuminated* is thus an adaptive, bodily, and imaginative response to the Holocaust's traumatic breach in a survivor-family narrative, that is, a retroactive attempt to repair the breach between life before the Shoah and life after.

EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED

Everything Is Illuminated explores “two third-generation characters and their attempt to come to grips with their traumatic post-Holocaust identity” (Aarons and Berger 2017, 139). As Jonathan seeks to uncover his family's past in Ukraine, his Ukrainian tour guide Alex helps him discover his pre-Shoah family life all while discovering more about his own family's involvement in the Holocaust. Bracketing off Alex's journey in learning about his family's past, I focus this study on protagonist Jonathan's quest to find Trachimbrod—the town where his grandfather Safran lived before the Holocaust—as that which is motivated by his postnostalgia and that which in turn feeds his postnostalgia. Others have examined his quest, particularly in the context of heritage tourism. In *Magic Realism in Holocaust Literature*, Jenni Adams explains that Jonathan's trip “evokes the exoticization

of the Jewish past by the industry of Holocaust tourism” and parodies “popular American conceptions of the European Jewish past in its exaggerated embodiment of cultural stereotype. These playful evocations of the commercial and ideological forces implicated in constructions of the pre-Holocaust past imply that the pursuit of historical ‘fact’ is both economically interested and inescapably inflected by cultural agenda” (2011, 163). Though the parodying of such “commercial and ideological forces” certainly informs the novel’s representation of Jonathan’s quest, his trip to Trachimbrod can also be understood as a portrait of a third-generation traveler who takes seriously (and should be taken seriously in) his search for his family’s past. As such, I focus on his search for the past (and his fabulation of the past) in this study.

Based on his trip, Jonathan writes an intricate story of Trachimbrod as a way of filling in the epistemic and affective gaps about his family’s history in Ukraine. The story that he constructs, the lore he creates, is replete with townspeople, town festivals, traditions/holidays, etc.—all of which he compiles as fodder for the manuscript he is writing. At the center of Jonathan’s imaginatively constructed narrative is a baby, his “great-great-great-great-great-grandmother” by the name of Brod, who is adopted by a man named Yankel (Foer 2003, 16, 22). The majority of Jonathan’s manuscript is set before the Holocaust, both in the time of Brod/Yankel and then in the years of Safran’s life leading up to the Holocaust. Despite the moments throughout Foer’s narrative that foreshadow the Holocaust (Safer 2006, 117), the central focus of *Everything Is Illuminated* is on life in Trachimbrod before the Shoah.

Much has been written about Foer’s debut novel *Everything Is Illuminated*, particularly as it relates to the text’s use of magical realism, metafiction, narrative unreliability, and representation of inherited trauma, along with (the limits of) historical knowledge. For example, Adams explains that the novel’s “magical elements . . . serve to undercut the assumptions of the potential knowability and objective representation of the past that underlie the historical realism affirmed elsewhere in the novel” (2011, 40–41). Adams also understands the text’s magical elements as reflective of the Holocaust’s traumatic dimension, where the irruption of magical unreality in the novel functions “as a symbolic substitution for an unknowable and unnarratable historical extremity” (37). The novel’s magical realist elements speak to Jonathan’s postnostalgic impulse to fill in the gaps in the historical record. This is not to say that Jonathan is unaware that the magical aspects of his narrative are in actuality magical (and thus impossible to have occurred)—an unawareness that would, in its own right, call into question his reliability as narrator. This is, however, to say that the magical elements of his narrative hyperbolically point, in line with Adams’s argument, to how Jonathan’s postnostalgia is both an expression and a function of his deep-seated desire to locate a knowable or narratable history that will never actually be knowable or

narratable as such. But there are other aspects of the novel that cause some critics to question Jonathan's reliability as the novel's narrator. Audrey Bardizbanian in "From Silence to Testimony" explains that Jonathan and Alex's letters offer "at first a series of metafictional reflections, but they also highlight the many 'non-truths'—to take Alex's term—that the narrator-translator tells, thus suggesting the text's own unreliability and instability" (2019, 44). The "non-truths" that Bardizbanian references may well be understood as those that undermine Jonathan's trustworthiness as narrator, but such non-truths may also be interpreted as self-aware, intentional fabrications of an unknowable past. Indeed, *because* he does not know or have access to his family or Trachimbrod's history, he must self-consciously deploy non-truths in service of fleshing out a usable narrative of the shtetl for there to be a narrative at all. As Eric Doise in "Active Postmemory" suggests, since "works considered creative allow artistic license, they in turn may grant witnesses the freedom to be . . . flexible with the truth in the manner necessary to work through the silences they have inherited" (2015, 94–95). Jonathan's flexibility with the truth, that is, his non-truths—synonymous with imaginative constructions—can thus be read as constitutive elements of his postnostalgia.

In addition to how Aarons and Berger correctly identify Foer's novel as representative of "the universal dimension of intergenerational transmission of trauma" (2017, 145), I argue that *Everything Is Illuminated* is a *postnostalgic* representation of pre-Shoah life, not to mention a depiction of a return narrative that is motivated by postnostalgia. In "Illuminating the Ineffable," Elaine Safer describes the novel's depiction of Trachimbrod as "Edenic," suggesting that "[t]his depiction is another illustration of the way re-memory [or postmemory] can create scenes and images that we wish were true even though we know they are not. Foer's first novel creates the [post]nostalgia for shtetl life like that in Trachimbrod, with its fantasy, folklore, and sense of wonder" (2006, 128). Jonathan's paradisaic fabulation of Trachimbrod speaks to his (idealized) desire for a sense of familial completeness or wholeness. But what motivates his imaginative re-telling of Trachimbrod's history is his pilgrimage to the site of the former shtetl (113). He states: "I want to see Trachimbrod. . . . To see what it's like, how my grandfather grew up, where I would be now if it weren't for the war" (Foer 2003, 59). However, as Alex explains when they arrive in the place where the shtetl once stood, it seems as if they "were in the wrong country, or the wrong century, or as if Trachimbrod had disappeared, and so had the memory of it" (115). Jonathan's search, to which Alex's words unwittingly point, is an impossible task. The Trachimbrod he seeks to find is forever gone; as the town and all but two of its inhabitants were decimated, Jonathan's search for the place of his family's birth, no matter how many clues or archival documents he secures, could never materialize that which he seeks. Yet, this is the very task that nonetheless underlies the postnostalgic impulse, and it is this postnostalgic impulse that motivates *Everything Is Illuminated*.

Although the vast majority of the novel is an imaginative construction of life before the Holocaust, there are nonetheless several moments that foreshadow the catastrophe that awaits Trachimbrod at the hands of the Nazis. The peculiar image of “the feet of the dangling men [in the synagogue] . . . caked in shit” early in the novel portends the not uncommon occurrence of Jewish men having lost their bowels after being hung at the hands of Nazis (20). So, too, does the description of baby Brod qua dis/assemblage of infant limbs anticipate the imminent destruction of innocent life:

It was through this hole that the women of the shtetl took turns viewing [baby Brod]. . . . The hole wasn't even large enough to show all of the baby at once, and they had to piece together mental collages of her from each of the fragmented views—the fingers connected to the palm, which was attached to the wrist, which was at the end of the arm, which fit into the shoulder socket. (20)

Jonathan describes Brod in terms of fragmented body parts, as dis/jointed anatomy; the baby's human form is divided into limbs, viewed not as a whole body by the shtetl women because of the hole's limited purview. However, the women's inability to view the baby's full body operates on a metaphorical level as well. The lack of baby Brod's corporeal wholeness retrospectively prefigures not only how Nazis saw Jews, in the German, as *figuren* or *stücken*—that is, as pieces or worthless things. But the divided-up baby body further adumbrates, in hindsight, the tangled masses of bodies of innocent Jewish Holocaust victims. These foreboding images—in tandem with both how Yankel puts baby Brod in the oven (reminiscent of crematoria) so she can sleep and how her “body was tattooed with the newsprint” after lying on newspapers (presaging concentration camp tattoos)—point to the destruction of Trachimbrod and its Jewish inhabitants (43). The inclusion of these images supports the idea that, in retrospect, the “idealized prewar past is seen as already containing the seeds of the catastrophe. Additionally, such idealized remembrances are projected onto the same physical spaces as genocidal violence, so that one sort of memory is invariably enfolded in the other” (Horowitz 2010, 49). Indeed, as protagonist Jonathan writes these scenes, his backward “view” of Trachimbrod—that is, his imaginative construction of the town—is, in part, grown from “the seeds of the catastrophe” and is inflected with the Holocaust malaise described above. This is an inevitable consequence of growing up with family stories from the Shoah that in turn haunt those who hear them. However, though these foreshadows of the Holocaust are peppered throughout the text, they are few and far between. More so at the heart of the novel is Jonathan's search for pre-Shoah life, which is motivated by his postnostalgia and is therefore the focus of this study from this point forward.

The image of Jonathan digging up dirt when he arrives in Trachimbrod is both symbolic and symptomatic of his postnostalgia, serving as a guiding metaphor for his attempt to excavate and archive his family's pre-Shoah past that he seeks to find. Of course, keeping soil from sites of particular importance is not necessarily an uncommon practice on such pilgrimages, but this image of Jonathan filling Ziploc bags with soil assumes additional valences of metaphorical significance in the context of the novel. Jonathan digging up soil in the place from which his family originates parallels his desire to unearth, so to speak, his family's past. Alex refers to how Jonathan "*made bags of dirt*," explaining that the dirt is for his grandmother, should he eventually decide to inform her of his trip to Ukraine (Foer 2003, 102, 187). But in addition to how his trip is an effort to dig up his family's past, to disinter potential clues on-site in Trachimbrod, Jonathan's digging can further be understood as an effort, figuratively speaking, to carve out his place in the place that would have been his home, if the Holocaust had never happened. And that he then keeps the soil represents his desire to physically and psychically bring Trachimbrod back to the US with him. Jonathan's somewhat sentimental—or, à la Boym, *romantic*—acts of digging and collecting dirt can thus be understood as symbolic for how he tries to exhume the past but also as metaphors for marking his would-be place in his family's home(land) and for keeping Trachimbrod with him after he leaves. What he carries forward with him on his person (the dirt)—and, in turn, Jonathan's very person (his body itself)—renders him a figurative archive of possibility, a receptacle of his imagined family history. As his pilgrimage to Trachimbrod is fed by his postnostalgic romance with the shtetl, his postnostalgic romance (and, to be sure, his postnostalgic fabrication of the town) is fed by his pilgrimage.

Jonathan's manuscript contains the imagined accounts of several of his family members that function as narrative projections of himself and speak to his postnostalgic impulse. Offering insight into Jonathan's projection of himself into the past, Alex describes how both he and Jonathan embody the characters of his manuscript. Penning his letter from Ukraine to Jonathan in the US, Alex writes: "*Do you know that I am the Gypsy girl and you are Safran, and that I am Kolker and you are Brod, and that I am your grandmother and you are Grandfather, and that I am Alex and you are you, and that I am you and you are me?*" (214). Alex's statement, in part, suggests that Jonathan, as it were, *is* Brod and Safran. Otherwise put, Brod and Safran are Jonathan's imaginative constructs and egoistic projections, those in whom he longs to see himself. As he cannot see himself through his family members from his limited backward-looking perspective, he comes, rather, to see *them* through *himself*. Jonathan, by writing himself into the characters of Brod and Safran, retroactively places himself in his family's imagined history, which thereby furnishes him with a more personal "family" framework for self-understanding.

Jonathan's depiction of Brod and Yankel's relationship—idealized, yet ultimately impossible to know—metaphorizes his relationship to his family's pre-Shoah past: both romantic and fabricated. Although Alex later critiques Jonathan for not making the story idealistic enough (179), Jonathan's vision of Brod and Yankel finds expression in paradisiac terms; Jonathan describes the father and daughter's home as a

sanctuary from Trachimbrod, a habitat completely unlike the rest of the world. No hateful words were ever spoken, and no hands raised. More than that, no angry words were ever spoken, and nothing was denied. But more than that, no unloving words were ever spoken, and everything was held up as another small piece of proof that it can be this way, it doesn't have to be that way; if there is no love in the world, we will make a new world. (89)

Jonathan styles Yankel and Brod's home as a hate-less, anger-less, and affirming "new world" that functions as a "sanctuary"—a romanticized, fantastical construction of his family. Yet, Jonathan tempers his conception of this haven of a home by also explaining that Brod "didn't love Yankel, not in the simple and impossible sense of the word. In reality she hardly knew him. And he hardly knew her. They knew intimately the aspects of themselves in the other, but never the other" (82). Paralleling Brod's relationship to Yankel, Jonathan's relationship to his family is defined by a subject-less love, that is, a love that has no actual subject or subjects. And yet, Jonathan's manuscript, nonetheless, bespeaks his love for his family he "hardly knew"—or, more accurately, never knew. Like Brod and Yankel, who perceive themselves in and through each other, Jonathan sees, places, and projects himself into the past, especially into the family members he imagines and loves. As Brod and Yankel recognize the intimate aspects of themselves in each other, so too does Jonathan find intimate aspects of himself in the fabricated person(a)s of his family. Similar to Jonathan, Brod and Yankel both "willfully creat[e] and believ[e] fictions necessary for life" (83): "Like Yankel, [Brod] repeats things until they are true, or until she can't tell whether they are true or not. She has become an expert at confusing *what is* with *what was* with *what should be* with *what could be*" (87). The implied parallel here is not necessarily that Jonathan is incapable of telling what is accurate and what is not, regarding Trachimbrod's actual history. Rather, as is symptomatic of many descendants of survivors, his imaginative recreation of pre-Shoah life blurs fact (based on his archival research) with fiction ("*what was* with *what should be* with *what could be*"); though not wholly factual, that is, not *factually accurate*, his postnostalgic representation of Trachimbrod is nonetheless *emotionally true*, in light of how it gives voice to his desire to flesh out his family's past.

Including not only his (imagined) family members, Jonathan's manuscript is moreover populated with (imagined) townspeople who, together, can be understood as additional narrative projections of his desire to find continuity between himself and Trachimbrod's pre-Shoah past. His desire to locate a document that he imaginatively invents, *The Book of Antecedents* (akin to *yizker bikher* or memorial books), makes manifest his longing to locate pre-Shoah history. In his imagined history of Trachimbrod,

The Book of Antecedents began as a record of major events: battles and treaties, famines, seismic occurrences, the beginnings and ends of political regimes. But it wasn't long before lesser events were included and described at great length—festivals, important marriages and deaths, records of construction in the shtetl (there was no destruction then)—and the rather small book had to be replaced with a three-volume set. (196)

Though he does have access to some archival documents, his primary-source documentation—and thus knowledge—of life in Trachimbrod before the Holocaust is sparse, disjointed, and incomplete. Therefore, in lieu of a fleshed-out portrait of Trachimbrod—that which would offer him a more historically situated entrance into his family's pre-Shoah past—he imaginatively constructs a detailed account of shtetl life. He explains that “[e]ven 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 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 not happen)” (196). His projection onto these students in Trachimbrod becomes clear: If only Jonathan could locate *any* edition of *The Book of Antecedents* (or something similar), he, too, might be able to learn from the generational wisdom to which he was denied access. Had the Holocaust never occurred, he would likely have been one of these students. His fabrication of them as serious students of *The Book of Antecedents* therefore speaks to *his* (romanticized) desire to study the text conscientiously and thereby “inhabit its pages,” to indwell history postnostalgically.

Jonathan and his characters' discussion of the importance of pursuing dreams speaks to his drive to explore his postnostalgia as a way to come to terms with his family's traumatic past. Given how Jonathan's postnostalgia is largely based on dreams, projections, and fantasies, the pursuit to find his family's pre-Shoah lives is to make manifest a time and place before traumatic rupture—all in hopes of working around and, indirectly, through his inherited wounds. Alex writes to Jonathan after their trip to Trachimbrod: “*Many of the things you informed me in July are still momentous to me, like what you uttered about searching for dreams,*

and how if you have a good and meaningful dream you are obligated to search for it" (52). Though he means to say *obligated*, Alex writes "*oblongated*," a dictional error (a function of English not being his first language) that sheds light on Jonathan's postnostalgia. As the derivative of "*oblongated*" is presumably *oblong*—synonymous with *long*—his word choice indirectly gestures toward how Jonathan *longs* to search for a "*good and meaningful dream*." And as Alex means to say obligated, his intended diction further makes clear his postnostalgia. Obligated—derived from the Latin verb *obligare*, meaning "to bind, bind up, bandage"—in this context signals a sense of Jonathan being *bound* to his quest because, in short, he is *bound up* with the past. His search, then, for pre-Shoah life is an attempt to free himself from his inherited traumas by way of returning to family and Jewish life before the Holocaust. Offering further insight into postnostalgia, a townspeople in Jonathan's manuscript, before adding more entries to *The Book of Recurrent Dreams*, says: "*But first . . . we must review last month's entries. We must go backward in order to go forward*" (37). This necessity to "*review*" past dreams as a way to move forward mirrors further Jonathan-as-author's obligation to his late family, though of course one cannot "*review*" something one has not viewed in the first place. "*Reviewing*" others' past dreams—or, more accurately, reviewing *dreams of others' pasts*—motivates Jonathan to "*return*" to the physical sites of a pre-traumatic past. Prompted by dreams of others' pasts, such physical "*returns*" to pre-Shoah family life are intended to create a more fleshed-out perception of the past. This in turn makes room for Jonathan to move forward and begin attempting to unbind himself from the effects of intergenerational trauma.

It ought to be emphasized that Jonathan's destination is Trachimbrod, *not* sites of Holocaust atrocity. Similar to how in the preface of *We Won't See Auschwitz* Dres describes the brothers' "*quest*" as one that "*breaks free of death to remember life*" (2012, v), Jonathan does not travel to Europe with the intention to visit former sites of execution, concentration camps, and/or ghettos. Rather, Jonathan, focusing on life in lieu of death, travels to Trachimbrod to find the story of his grandfather and the woman whose name he believes to be Augustine—in order to archive, in both physical and psychical senses, his family's history. There, he meets Lista, the only person who remains in Trachimbrod after the Holocaust. Repeatedly prodding her for details, Alex's grandfather pushes her to tell Jonathan about what happened when the Nazis invaded Trachimbrod, even though she is clearly reticent to do so. Jonathan then steps in, saying, "I don't want to hear any more," at which point Alex stops translating her words (Foer 2003, 186). Jonathan's declarative statement speaks beyond just ending the conversation in the moment; it can be understood, in a greater sense, as a postnostalgic declaration, an intentional posture that focuses on life and not death. As members of the third generation have heard about the Holocaust throughout much of their lives—and, in many cases, have been inundated with the history of the Shoah—many "don't want to hear any more." This is not to say that Jonathan and the third generation in

general seek to forget the Shoah, do away with Holocaust memorialization, and/or stop talking about the catastrophe that indelibly shaped their family's (and their own) lives. Rather, Jonathan desires not to focus on emotionally taxing details about gratuitous atrocity; he does not fixate on Nazi destruction of Jewish life. He seeks, instead, to move outside and beyond the (re)traumatization that comes from dwelling on the Holocaust.

Jonathan's manuscript about Trachimbrod represents a new direction in Holocaust "memory." As more and more survivors are passing away, their memories are interpreted, interpolated, and altered by the third generation. Referring to the partial draft of Jonathan's manuscript, Alex says: "*I am certain I will love very much to read the remnants*" (25). What Alex presumably means to say here is *fragments*, not "*remnants*." His comment, however, is ironic because, although he does not mean to say "remnants," what Jonathan has written is indeed one of the very few documents that discusses what remains from Trachimbrod, even if what remains is largely imagined, romanticized, and idealized. As the manuscript is the product of the "remnants" of history—and the product of the memory of one of the few from Trachimbrod who remained alive after the Holocaust—it can be understood as an extension of that history. Jonathan's construction of pre-Shoah Trachimbrod thus combines historical, narrative, and postnostalgic "*remnants*," a combination of the narrated fragments of his family's past and his imagination.

Jonathan's postnostalgia, his "homesickness" for a time when and a place where he never lived, is thus a desire to imaginatively implicate himself in a narrative of which he was not actually a part but of which his life is a direct result; his trip better enables him to voice that which he never knew. Even and especially as that voice is his own, it permits him to articulate a large lacuna in his family history that had, up to that point, eluded articulation. Such a pilgrimage is therefore a form of traumatic address, particularly as it enables a postnostalgic construction of pre-Shoah life. Indeed, by "returning" to the site of his family's pre-Shoah lives, though never having been there in the first place, Jonathan seeks to satisfy his postnostalgic longing for the motherland. He is in search of an alternate, subjunctive life that could and should have been otherwise had history run a different course. That is to say that he is in pursuit of a different existence that would have been his own but emphatically was not.

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NOTE

1. I want to make clear that my argument is specific to *descendants of survivors*, not to those born to non-survivors. Despite how some have (mistakenly) expanded the definition of the second and third generations to include anyone born soon after 1945 who was negatively affected by the Shoah, the categories *second generation* and *third generation* ought not to be broadened. In her study of the second generation, Ellen S. Fine refers to the “post-Holocaust generation” as those who “have been marked by images of an experience that reverberates throughout their lives” (Fine 1998, 186, 187; see also Sicher 1998, 19, 24; Grimwood 2007, 3; Morris 2002, 291–306; Hirsch 2001, 9–10). Like Fine and others, one could collapse the boundaries between the children and grandchildren of survivors and those born around the same time, but what is lost is, quite simply, specificity. Rather than placing descendants under the same categorical umbrella as their peers born to non-survivors, I separate the two groups. It is unfounded to argue that the two groups’ life-experiences, upbringing, epigenetic inheritances, and family makeups are homogenous or even similar; the qualitative differences between the descendants of survivors and their peers—most specifically, actually sharing space and time with traumatized parents and grandparents regularly—resist collapsing the differences between these two groups. *Postmemory* specifically is not a general term that names a wide-ranging consciousness; rather, the term *postmemory*, as Gary Weissman rightly argues, “concerns family secrets, the mysteries of a parent’s [and a grandparent’s] life, identity, and family before and during the Holocaust” (2016, 169). Weissman continues:

The place of the Holocaust in survivor families varies from family to family, and among children [and grandchildren] in the same family. Even so, when discussing the sons and daughters [and grandchildren] of survivors it is important to retain a sense of this familial orientation to the Nazi genocide and distinguish it from knowledge of the Holocaust gained from films, books, testimonies, memorials, and museums. It takes nothing away from reading Holocaust memoirs, visiting museums and historical sites, or listening to survivors to acknowledge that these experiences differ substantially from that of growing up in survivor families. In its effort to distill a privileged relationship to the Holocaust from the complexities of the parent-child [and grandparent-grandchild] relationship in these families, the curious move of expanding and then renaming the second generation obscures this very distinction. (169)

Along with Weissman, I include only those who were raised in survivor-families in my analysis.

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