Those Who Come After
Postmemory, Acknowledgement and Forgiveness

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Studies in the Psychosocial

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Stephen Frosh

Those Who Come After

Postmemory, Acknowledgement and Forgiveness
Reviewing the manuscript of this book, I realised that I have been working on many of the issues in it for a long time – probably at least two decades. This means that I have too many people to thank than I can really remember: so many substantial contributions to my thinking, so many incidental ones that have become significant in retrospect, so many hints and nudges and challenges. At this point, I think all I can do is recognise that there are lots of hauntings in my writing and thank all the people concerned.

That said, in the last stages of the book I have been particularly grateful to several of my colleagues in the Department of Psychosocial Studies at Birkbeck, University of London. The creative, fertile and sometimes fractious environment of that Department, now (2018–19) ten years old, has been exceptionally important to me. I am also very aware of how much my PhD students and recent postdoctoral researchers have affected me and how much I enjoy working with them. I hope I have influenced them as much as they have me.

Many chapters of this book draw on previous publications of mine, in most cases reworked. I am grateful to the relevant publishers to be able to use this material here. The details are as follows.


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Introduction

What Lives On

Recent years have seen the emergence of ‘postmemory’ as a field of study concerned mainly with the ‘transgenerational’ impact of personal and social trauma. This raises important questions about the mechanisms and ethics of transmission of suffering across generations as well as about the responsibility for acts carried out ‘in our name’ but not with our agreement or involvement. It has practical implications for how much ‘acknowledgement’ and ‘reparation’ should be required of people for things done by their ancestors. It is especially timely in the context of cultural and political movements demanding recognition of historical wrongs and their continuing effects into the present. It also registers the kind of experience that Jonathan Boyarin (1996, p. 143) is reflecting on when he writes, ‘the future has collapsed upon itself, and we are burdened more by what we come after than by what awaits us.’ The feeling he has – and he is referencing here a specifically Jewish, but nevertheless widespread, sensitivity – is that we move forward in time carrying (‘burdened by’) what has happened in the past and that this is more concrete than any consideration we might have of future possibilities, hopes and dreads. Or perhaps we should say that the past enthralls us; it captivates us – with all the ambiguities of being enticed but also enslaved that these words contain.
The technicalities of the notion of ‘postmemory’ will be examined in Chapter 1, in particular the question of what the ‘post’ refers to and of the distinction between the repetitive and intrusive way in which some past experiences – even those that are not one’s own – can insert themselves into the ongoing life of those who have in some way witnessed them, as against the capacity to take hold of these experiences and do something with them. This latter capacity is termed by Marianne Hirsch (2012) ‘postmemorial work’ and seen as involving rethinking or ‘working through’ the past rather than being caught in its embrace. The link I would make here is with a way of processing the past that honours it and acknowledges its power, yet also – to use the vocabulary of haunting and ghosts – lays it, as far as possible, to rest. It will immediately be obvious that this small caveat, ‘as far as possible,’ is an important one both as a question about what can be done to resolve the legacies of trauma and suffering, and what should be done. Maybe there is a limit to what is possible but also what is ethically and historically necessary; maybe it really is the case that there are experiences of the recent (or some might claim even quite distant) past that can never be resolved and always have to live on in order for their significance for contemporary social and personal formations to be recognised. The legacy of slavery could well be the prime example here, though not the only one – genocides and displacements, colonialism and its depredations continue to haunt, and perhaps they always will, whatever acknowledgments are made and compensations are paid. We continue to live with these historical realities and their effects. The title of Christina Sharpe’s (2016) meditation on blackness, In the Wake, speaks directly to this point. Black people in particular, but all of us in different ways, live ‘in the wake’ of the slave ships that uprooted, transported and degraded and destroyed the lives of twelve million or more Africans, and built a western ‘developed’ world on the back of this criminality, and wrecked the continent from which the slaves came. This wake continues to spread without dissolving, catching everything in its path, troubling the waters. ‘Working through’ this in pursuit of calm may not be possible, nor might it be ethically defensible: that is, we should continue to be troubled, even if we are called upon to think and act in response to its call.
If there are legitimate limits to what can and should be forgotten or forgiven, however, there is no legitimacy to the decision to avoid encountering the legacies of this ‘past’ suffering, especially when – as it always seems to do – it stretches out into the present or ‘post’ situation. Such a decision is really a refusal or denial, to give it the name with which it now reveals itself in the political sphere. Denial is a process of repudiation, sometimes unconsciously motivated because acknowledgement of what has happened or is happening is hard to bear (this is its psychoanalytic meaning) but often consciously motivated and then rationalised (‘it wasn’t so bad’; ‘there are others who have suffered as much’; ‘we were violated too’; ‘it was a long time ago’). Denial converts ‘known knowns’ into ‘unknown knowns’ – which again is a psychoanalytic formulation referring to the things we really do know but hide from ourselves and from the world. The active nature of this process is very marked: denial is work, yet the opposite of ‘working through’, which is a way of becoming more aware and facing up to the truth of one’s experience. Denial, on the other hand, is a mode of resistance to knowledge; as Jacqueline Rose (2007, p. 21) puts it, ‘it is the mind at war with itself, blocking the path to its own freedom and, with it, its ability to make the world a better, less tyrannical, place.’ This last phrase is crucial: the ability of the mind to improve the world depends on its capacity for thought and reflection, and in particular for openness to pain and the consequences of suffering, including one’s implication in the suffering of others. This is what is being referred to through the language of acknowledgment and witnessing in which this book partakes; this too is what is being named when individuals and groups who have experienced significant harm demand recognition of what has been done to them. The capacity to open out to others’ experience is also part of a broader requirement for the setting of ghosts to rest, one which recurs explicitly and implicitly in every chapter of this book: the demand for justice. In a refrain to which I shall return, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (1989) proposes that the antonym to forgetting is ‘justice’. Avery Gordon (1997) also sees the requirement for justice as the reason why we should attend to the needs of ghosts: something has been left undone that needs to be put right, and it is this that we are called on to do by all the hauntings and postmemories we might encounter in ourselves and others. Something lives on; this can be a consolation,
as in our recollections of loved figures, but in the context of the kind of material with which this book deals it is also a demand and a statement about what it is to live an ethical life. The exploration of postmemory and the occupation of the ‘second generation’ by the deeds and experiences of the previous one (a major strand in this is Holocaust memory) is the focus of Chapter 1 of this book, where some of the issues of ‘post’ness are revolved in an attempt to begin the process of understanding what it might mean to live with the burden of ‘what we come after.’

This introduces what is perhaps this book’s primary concern: what it means to be a witness to suffering and to the testimony of suffering. I have tried to keep systematically to a distinction here between the testifier, who has actually experienced an event and is in some way speaking about it, and the witness who is responding to this testimony; but these positions are also intertwined, as the witness can be traumatised or the testifier may feel that she or he is bearing witness to an experience that rightfully belongs to others. Indeed, this might be part of the confusion of temporality that constitutes postmemory: one who should be in a position of witnessing (for instance, the child who hears or absorbs the parent’s testimony) is instead dragged into a state of experiencing the trauma as if it were her or his own. Naming this state of mind as ‘postmemory’ might be helpful in distinguishing it from a genuine first-person memory; but in addition, recognising it as a form of witnessing can be a way of sympathetically responding to the way trauma can get inside people and make them feel as if there is no distinction between themselves and the suffering other. There are various more precise psychoanalytic terms for different aspects of this experience (for example, identification, projection, projective identification), relating to differing possible mechanisms whereby one might feel infected by someone else’s state of mind, and this variegated vocabulary is a very useful one. However, the central idea is for now all we might need: there are times and conditions of emotional intensity, rooted in certain sorts of relationship (especially that between children and their parents), in which it can be hard to make out whether an experience we might have is our own or someone else’s. In those circumstances, understanding when we are witnessing something powerful and how it might affect us – including how it might invite us to turn away from it – is a crucial step towards locating where it belongs.
But how can we sustain a witnessing stance that does justice to an experience of suffering? Much of this book is concerned with the question of what it means to be an ‘implicated witness’, understood as someone who is called upon to respond to a testimony because they are somehow connected to it. I try to explore how witnessing can be done without silencing a testifier, which means finding a way to respond without either turning away too fast, or colonising the experience by making it one’s own. Chapter 2 takes this up with some ‘mythical’ examples from Jewish texts, namely the Biblical story of Lot’s wife and two stories by the great nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Yiddish writer, Isaac Leib Peretz. Through these examples I examine the process of ‘turning back’, suggesting that this motion (which in the context of Lot’s wife might be interpreted as a maternal urge) can be a loving way to bear witness, though it can also – as symbolized by Lot’s wife’s calcification – become a process of traumatic over-identification, in which the witness relives the original trauma, bringing it down on herself. Yet turning back and/or staying with another’s suffering is clearly a deeply humane act in which one responds to another’s call irrespective of the price one might have to pay oneself. Despite the risk of multiplying trauma, is this not an ethical response? Interestingly, the protagonists of this part of the story are all mute: the two daughters of Lot who remain in the doomed city of Sodom have nothing to say for themselves, and Lot’s wife does not speak even when she looks back to see what is happening and even when she is turned into the famous pillar of salt. Does trauma breed silence? One reading of the two Peretz stories presented here is that they are meditations on a different possible response to trauma: speaking out. In one story, Bontsha the Silent (Peretz 1894), the wronged hero is defined by his silent acceptance of suffering; in the other, Neilah in Gehenna (1909), the lead character takes revenge – belated and temporary but revenge nevertheless – on his persecutors. My suggestion here is that writing out of the Jewish experience in his particular time and place, Peretz offers us a way of considering the conditions under which speaking about suffering can and should happen, opening up the question of the reception such speech might deserve.

The problem of witnessing is increased by the position witnesses often have of being implicated, directly or indirectly, in the history of oppression
or in sustaining it, raising the issue of how we can work from such a position to ameliorate violence and suffering. In Chapter 3, I consider ways in which such implication can be addressed and might fuel initiatives towards acknowledgement. Drawing on the work of Jessica Benjamin (2018), I outline how a theory of recognition becomes one of acknowledgement through the inclusion of a notion of a witnessing ‘third’. This third is actively implicated in the injury caused by oppression and is called upon to do something about it. I go on to use Judith Butler’s (2009) account of the challenge of nonviolence to address issues of vulnerability, cohabitation and justice. Finally, I return to the question of the kind of witnessing third that might make a difference, offering an appreciation and critique along the way of some of the ‘lessons’ commonly read out from another fictional character, Herman Melville’s (1853) *Bartleby*. The points that arise here include the kinds of actions that an implicated witness might be called on to engage in to produce the sorts of changes (justice) that might constitute acknowledgement, and the question of speaking out, this time not by a victim but by the witness addressing her or his own community to insist it takes a position of responsibility for others.

Chapter 4 can be seen as an extended historical and psychoanalytic example of this issue of implication, concentrating on the descendants of perpetrators – in this case (as in many) of the Holocaust. It begins with a question that will hover over the material for a couple of chapters, that of the conditions for forgiveness. The general line taken is that there can be no forgiveness without the taking of responsibility, and the conditions for addressing this are largely historical (hence sociopolitical) even if they are also inscribed psychically. The chapter presents evidence of the failure of postwar German society to create the conditions for acknowledgement of its culpability with the Nazis, and the shadow this has thrown over subsequent generations of Germans. This is a different kind of ‘postmemory’ or haunting from that experienced by the descendants of survivors or victims, but it has some parallels and also a specific dynamic fuelled by (and fuelling) competing claims of victimhood and social practices promoting denial. The entire scenario is a very painful one, but I try to rescue something from it at the end of the chapter by turning to an incipient literature on solidarity: on what might happen if the descendants of victims and the descendants of perpetrators can share a space for encounter.
with one another and with the differing shadows thrown on them by the same destructive events. My more hopeful thought at the end of this chapter is that this too is a mode of witnessing, one which includes attentiveness to shared dreams and nightmares.

The theme of forgiveness is extended into Chapter 5, which again draws on a Jewish text, Emmanuel Levinas’ (1994) ‘Talmudic Reading’ Toward the Other. The question ostensibly discussed in this text is the conditions for forgiveness on the Jewish Day of Atonement, but Levinas uses it to offer a comment on whether Martin Heidegger – the foremost philosopher of his day and a profound influence on Levinas – could ever be forgiven for his alliance with the Nazis in the 1930s. Levinas’ conclusion seems to be that because of his standing and importance, Heidegger should not be forgiven for this corruption. This verdict, however, was rejected by another major figure of the second half of the twentieth century who had fallen under Heidegger’s spell yet also found a path away from him, Hannah Arendt. I am intrigued by how and why these two Jewish philosophers, both engaged (albeit in different ways) with questions of ethics and both deeply aware of their Jewishness and of the devastation wrought by Nazism, could come to such different conclusions. Of course, Arendt had an affair with Heidegger, which puts her in a different personal position to Levinas; and it is partly in the name of the primacy of love that she was willing to reconcile with him. This itself raises many questions: can we forgive out of the personal preference of love? Is Arendt justified in believing that one has to find ways of starting again, of moving on? Or is Levinas right to draw a line, not simply due to the gravity of a person’s actions (Heidegger was not one of the killers, for example) but because of the responsibility certain people have? And on top of that, if we allow for the possibility of remorse as a precursor to forgiveness, how do we know that this remorse is genuine, and what does that mean? The example of Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela’s (2003) acceptance of the sincerity of atonement by the apartheid assassin Eugene de Kock is added to this to query the conditions of forgiveness for unutterable wrongdoing.

The last three chapters of this book engage with the issue of witnessing by drawing on creative work as a way of examining the distinction drawn by Hirsch (2012) between postmemorial work and postmemory, and the
broader question of what it might mean to consider witnessing as an act of working through Chapter 6 explores the nature of artistic and psychoanalytic encounters that promote a kind of endurance. What is meant here is that such encounters slow time down, reminding us that there is something important about stillness, about remaining with a situation until it organises itself under the pressure of its own desire. The pleasure and pain of endurance is examined with reference to the artistic practice of Marina Abramović and the chaotic situation of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s waiting room in the last years of his life. The purpose of this analysis is to explore ways of listening and being-with that may help resolve the problem of how to witness without either turning away or over-identifying and so colonising the testimony, making it more about oneself than the testifier. Chapter 6 suggests that something in the presence of a witness can be drawn on by a speaker, but that this is also potentially rife with fantasy and what psychoanalysts would call transference. I argue that these dangers are real and common, and that we can see the fantasies in operation in the desperate search for meaning that is dramatised in some psychoanalytic and artistic situations. Nevertheless, there remains a possibility that a certain variety of relatively austere, cautious and mainly understated responsiveness is possible in the name of a kind of solidarity. This can be individual or collective; it possibly stems from the capacity to endure with others, to acknowledge their suffering without trying to wish it away; it probably needs a kind of non-invasive yet active presence on the part of the witness, a making-present of one to the other.

Moving on from the somewhat ambiguous situations of Abramović and Lacan described in the previous chapter, Chapter 7 extends the account of how to navigate between colonising and rejecting the traumatised other by looking at the question of how witnessing and responding to testimony can be done in a way that links personal and social experience through creative imagination. The detailed example given is of a piece of post-Holocaust music: Steve Reich’s Different Trains. This is a work for string quartet and tape written in 1988 and is widely recognised as one of the most significant musical compositions of the last thirty years. The musical strength of Different Trains is immense, but my interest is in what the piece conveys about the complex issue of how to respond to trauma in a manner that balances empathic identification and ‘austere’
separateness and resolves into creative forms of memorialisation. I argue
that Reich manages this balance in an unusually powerful and somewhat
surprising way, linking his own experiences with the very different one of
the Holocaust survivors whose speech he samples, and making some pro-
vocative ‘errors’ of transcription that themselves reveal his engagement
with the material. The success or otherwise of such a piece of work will
always be open to scrutiny and debate; but to me *Different Trains* seems
an exemplary instance of the capacity of a creative mind to show openness
to others’ experiences and to make links with these, re-imagining them
through his own consciousness yet still allowing them to breathe.

The final chapter, *What We are Left With* explores the question of what
might be the legacy of a psychoanalysis in the context of a broader exami-
nation of issues of ‘trace’, loss and mourning and hence of subjective
temporality. It begins with a brief look at psychoanalytic ideas about the
end of analysis, evoking these in the familiar context of loss and melan-
choly. A critical reconsideration of the fashionable use of melancholia to
suggest a way of recovering past loss leads to an account of an alternative
understanding of the endpoints of analysis to be found in two related
Lacanian ideas: that of ‘expectation’ and ‘subjective destitution’. The sec-
ond part of the chapter examines two short episodes from Gérard Miller’s
describe their encounters with him in terms that might be idealised, but
also evoke a sense of personal reworking and lived affective resonances,
and of continuing gratitude. This is starting to suggest that powerful
encounters leave traces that are not melancholic, but rather provoke the
subject to some kind of new engagement with history, especially in the
context of personal and social trauma. The final section of the chapter
examines Cathy Caruth’s (1996) controversial theory of trauma, in par-
ticular her Lacanian-inflected reading of a traumatic dream discussed by
Freud. Whilst Caruth’s conceptualisation of trauma is highly problematic
in its generalising and ahistorical framing, this analysis suggests that one
legacy of an intense encounter of the kind represented by psychoanaly-
sis – as of anything that has been gone through and then ‘left behind’ – is
a kind of difficult awakening. This raises issues of ‘afterwardsness’, of the
haunting of the present by the past, and of what might open our eyes to
the future.
By What Right?

All this poses a question that troubles me when I think about my own writing and read others’ thoughts on similar topics. By what right do I discuss issues to which I have had very limited exposure, and of which I have no direct experience? Are the grand tragedies that are dignified with the term ‘trauma’ shareable with, or comprehensible to, those who have not been through them? This is a topic that I will discuss in various places, but it needs acknowledging that it is hard to speak in the register of trauma, and I certainly do not want to claim any resemblance between any of my own personal troubles, however much they might mean to me, and those larger agonies with which this book is mainly concerned. Still, it is worth thinking about the issue of what it can mean to be one who not only ‘comes after’, but in some ways has never been connected at all, who cannot claim ancestors who were direct victims or perpetrators, who watches from afar. Of course, it would be easy to say that we are all witnesses in a globalised society, and this is patently true: there are few excuses for remaining ignorant of what is going on or of what has happened in the recent past. This is why denial is such a prevalent mechanism: it is almost impossible not to know, somehow, about suffering and therefore not to feel some kind of demand to respond, a ‘call’. Staving off this knowledge and demand is a kind of art form, requiring psychological and relational work if we are to remain as uncaring as we so often manage to be.

Nevertheless, a witness, especially one at a temporal or geographical distance, is not the same as one who is caught up in an event, even if witnessing can have its traumatising aspects. So there is a problem to consider. By what right do I – or any other non-participant – arrogate to myself the task of writing about trauma, postmemory and the like if this is not my experience, if I have not only not lived directly through the relevant events but also cannot claim to be a direct witness of others’ testimony or even to be therapeutically involved with them? It should be noted how this is marked as a contemporary kind of question, shadowed by a postcolonial acknowledgement that it is possible to speak ‘in the name of’ someone else and thereby deny them their singularity whilst ostensibly offering solidarity. In claiming the right to engage with any
experiences, even those that are not my own, I risk setting myself up as a translator of things that perhaps should not be translated, potentially taking them away from those who actually ‘own’ them and have the sole entitlement to articulate them. Speaking about these things without having participated in them could be a way of appropriating them for my own use, probably acting out some personal lack by leaning on others’ more dramatic lives; perhaps also consciously or unconsciously hoping to gain some credibility and moral standing by association with their encounter with human limits. If I cannot speak from the grave myself, I can at least ventriloquise the speech of those who do.

This is all true and makes me wary and worried about my approach in this book. Yet I also think that a prohibition on speaking for others is dangerous in its own way and has its own ethical complexities. For one thing, it rules out most creative work, and would restrict art’s precious capacity to make us see and feel anew – to see things that we have not seen and feel things we have not felt. Instead, if only first-person observation were to be allowed, if everything else were to be under a cloud of suspicion, there could be little possibility of solidarity drawn from active imagination, the kind of imagination that makes us care about events we have not gone through ourselves. As it happens, of course, even first-person observation is under suspicion: not just whether people who are being abused have the capacity to see everything ‘as it is’, but also because of the impact that emotion has on memory as well as the needs of any situation (such as truth commissions or archives of genocide testimonies) and how they influence what is selected to be told to them. The climate of suspicion infects everything, and whilst at the extremes this is deadly and pernicious (for instance, Holocaust denial), it is also a salutary reminder that the truth is complex and multifaceted and needs to be approached cautiously whether one was directly involved in the events being narrated or not.

But the similar problems faced by those who speak from experience and those who do not is not my main point, and anyway it does not hold convincingly. Obviously the one who was there has advantages in speaking of what happened; on the other hand, those who are at more of a distance can consider testimony in a different kind of context, moving in and out of identification with it in ways that can be creative and productive –
doing what Hirsch (2012) calls ‘postmemorial work’. My larger point, however, is an ethical one in itself. With all the caveats and concerns mentioned above – the danger of colonisation and appropriation, of distortion and acting out, of reduction of extreme, incomprehensible experiences to more everyday ones that anybody might have – it is still the case that reaching out to those whose situation is different from one’s own is a fundamental way in which to encounter others and as such is a measure of the possibility of becoming an ‘ethical subject’. This sounds idealistic, as to an extent it is, yet there is a considerable amount of contemporary critical thought that feeds into it, most notably Emmanuel Levinas’ (1991) insistence that the responsibility for the other is primary, and that the foundations of human subjecthood lie in this ethical relationship. In this way of thinking, a person becomes a ‘human subject’ when she or he makes such an ethical connection with others. This principle also appears in the somewhat different ideas of recognition promoted by Jessica Benjamin (2018) and resistance to ethical violence described by Judith Butler (2005), ideas that form a backbone of this book. But the central claim is a broad one that hangs capacious around these distinctive psychoanalytic and philosophical props. If we are to pursue a world that has any kind of justice in it, we have to be able to listen and respond to the voices of those with whom we do not directly share experiences, of those who might be different and whose narratives might need translation, even amplification to be heard in some places. Of course, we should also promote the prospects for those others – especially those who fit Butler’s (2004) characterisation as ‘precarious lives’ – to speak in their own voices, to be heard directly for themselves. Nevertheless, the mediation and amplification that can be given – and Butler is one major example of this – is part of a process that is both political and ethical. We need, that is, to find ways to identify imaginatively with those with whom we may have ‘nothing in common’ (Lingis 1994), but become connected through recognising their precarity and the relevance of their experience to general human concerns. Speaking for others in the guise of speaking about them can reduce the power of their direct testimony; but it can also be a way of amplifying their voices and ensuring that, as witnesses, those who do not share directly in their experiences nevertheless are made to take them seriously.
This does not mean claiming a universalising perspective. Indeed, understanding and acknowledging the specificity or singularity of the position from which we encounter others is a central element in the approach adopted within the general psychosocial studies framework which this book inhabits. For myself, I read these accounts of suffering and haunting from the position of one who comes after in a very particular way, as a member of a generation of Jews born within a decade of the Holocaust and caught up in its commemoration and in the anger and distress that mounted as its significance seeped in, as well as with the hope and anxiety invested in my generation. This does not give me any greater or lesser right to explore them than anyone else has; but it says something about what my exploration might be founded in, its particular characteristics and biases and idiosyncrasies; and some of the motivation for finding out about what happened and what its legacy could be.

References


Beginning by Looking Back

Reflecting on ‘second generation’ experience, the ‘second generation’ here being the children of Holocaust survivors, Eva Hoffman leads us straight into the question of what it means to inherit suffering, and indeed what it means to ‘inherit’ another’s experience at all.

And yet, at the same time, this is exactly the crux of the second generation’s difficulty: that it has inherited not experience, but its shadows. The uncanny, in Freud’s formulation, is the sensation of something that is both very alien and deeply familiar, something that only the unconscious knows. If so, then the second generation has grown up with the uncanny. And sometimes, it needs to be said, wrestling with shadows can be more frightening, or more confusing, than struggling with solid realities. (Hoffman 2005, p. 66)

What are these ‘shadows’ to which Hoffman refers? Are they the experiences that the parental generation has had, passed on through their observable actions – the stories they told their children about their lives, their overprotection or silent avoidances, their investment in and ambi-
tions for their children (‘not letting Hitler win’ – Hoffman 2005, p. 66)? Or are they something communicated more subtly, as if through a kind of telepathic process, whereby the material implanted in the child is impossibly strange and disturbingly incomprehensible, and so remains like this, shadowing psychic life? To what extent, we might also ask, is this kind of shadowing a specific heritage of those ‘traumatic’ experiences that cannot be talked about easily, but are freighted with a significance that might not be interpretable to those who have not actually lived them? Is it ever possible to absorb such experiences if one has not been there oneself, or is it only people who have been through a traumatic experience who can appreciate fully what it means? A terrible, dark Jewish joke quoted by Devorah Baum captures some of the essence of this difficulty, albeit framed in pain and theological bitterness.

Elie Wiesel goes up to Heaven, meets God. He tells God a Holocaust joke: God doesn’t laugh. Wiesel shrugs: ‘I guess you had to be there.’ (Baum 2017, p. 46)

This ‘joke’ is about theodicy: God cannot have been present at Auschwitz. But it also plays on the question of identification with suffering: is it possible to ‘get the joke’ if one has not had the experience oneself, but only engaged with its consequences indirectly? Yet if this is not possible, then the meaning of such experiences will rarely be conveyable from one person to another, and the testimonies of those who were directly involved have to be received in silence, without anyone else having the authority to comment or speak about how they have been affected. No-one else would be able to claim understanding, because only those who have gone through the events have testimonies that can count. There are some who argue this way; even Primo Levi, whose literary witnessing has possibly had more impact than anyone else’s, doubted that he could speak in the name of those who had perished. Here is the famous passage on this issue, much quoted and referenced and on the whole assented to whilst also being denied:

I must repeat – we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses. This is an uncomfortable notion, of which I have become conscious little by little...
We who were favoured by fate have tried, with more or less wisdom, to recount not only our fate, but also that of the others, the submerged; but this was a discourse ‘on behalf of third parties,’ the story of things seen from close by, not experienced personally. When the destruction was terminated, the work accomplished was not told by anyone, just as no one ever returned to recount his own death. (Levi 1988, pp. 63–4)

This is a very powerful comment and it has fuelled some influential thinking on the nature of witnessing, for example Giorgio Agamben’s (2002) evocation of the figure of the ‘Muselmann’ as the one who is too close to death to testify, yet precisely because of this is the only ‘true’ witness of the appalling event. However, it is clear from the immense readership that Levi’s books have had and their status as paradigmatic testimonies that his challenge, despite being ‘repeated’, has not been fully absorbed. Or at least, his and others’ attempts to speak ‘on behalf of third parties’ have largely been treated with proper seriousness and respect. All this is to say, it does seem possible to convey something of the experience; and if this is not the whole story, if we can never know for sure what would have been said by those who cannot speak, there is sufficient in these testimonies to be getting along with. Maybe the ‘shadows’ that Hoffman refers to apply here: the shadows thrown by experiences may not be the experiences themselves, but they have the shape and possibly even the texture of those experiences, and they seem capable of passing across boundaries, of seeping from one person to another. In addition, it is possible that the shadows, examined closely, also make the original experiences visible to those who might not otherwise be able to look directly at them.

Discussing intergenerational connections and the meaning of the passing of a generation, Lisa Baraitser (2017) makes a link between the experience of being affected by something one cannot quite identify and the processes of reflection embedded in the practice of psychoanalysis. She writes (p. 102) that the ‘attempt to make sense of something that one knows has occurred, and yet in some profound way one seems to have missed, is at the core of a psychoanalytic sensibility in which events come to be significant after an originary event that has bypassed memory and language.’ According to Baraitser, this experience is at the heart of what Freud refers to as ‘historical truth’, ‘the indelible trace of experience on
the psyche prior to the capacity for the event to be encoded in a recallable way, a trace that can only be reproduced rather than remembered, as its original form is lost.’ This is a complicated idea, but it seems to introduce into ordinary life something that is more often seen as confined to the experience of trauma. Traumatic experiences are held to be too overpowering to be grasped as they occur, so instead they are somehow ‘gone through’ without being properly processed, ‘becoming significant’, as Baraitser puts it, only later on if it becomes possible to think about them in a calmer way, with more perspective or distance. The existence of such experiences seems undeniable. Freud’s (1920) post-World War One examination of traumatic dreams showed how they constitute a repeated return to the scene of suffering, maybe as a way of trying to deal with it – to master it in important ways or even (considering that we are talking about bad dreams) to wake up from it. Faced with suffering that we cannot fully understand, we either shut ourselves off from it (denial and forgetting of troubling occurrences being prevalent in everyday life), or we keep worrying away at it until it begins to make some sense. What Baraitser suggests, however, is that this is a psychoanalytic norm: everything happens later than it should. The actual experience is missed yet still remains, not as a ‘memory’ but as some kind of an ‘event.’

Baraitser here is drawing on the ideas put forward by the French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche (1999), whose dual notions of the traumatic origin of psychic life and of ‘afterwardsness’ have become increasingly influential. The key ideas are, first, that the experience of the infant as recipient of ‘enigmatic’ messages from adult carers institutes a lifelong process of a kind of failed decoding characterised by the sense that there is something that we know is important, yet always escapes us. At the start of life, the carer communicates messages to the child, many of which are interpretable as messages of love, concern, enjoyment and the like; but some messages are not ‘coded’ in a way that is translatable, because they are infiltrated by the carer’s own unconscious and consequently carry too great a charge for the infant to comprehend. These ‘enigmatic’ messages are hidden away, and function as sources of puzzlement and excitement, an unconscious itch that surreptitiously makes itself felt and never quite disappears. The second idea is that these enigmatic messages can only be understood, to the extent that they can be understood at all, retrospect-