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ESSAYS

CONSTRUCTIVE DISTANCE: NICOLE KRAUSS'S *GREAT HOUSE* AS A MODEL FOR THIRD-GENERATION HOLOCAUST FICTION

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...The event of the Holocaust is already a horizon which orients our time, certainly in the west, even now, three or four generations afterwards.

(Eaglestone 2004: 12)

As the final Holocaust survivors pass, the urgent task of representing the atrocity in order to keep its memory alive passes to later generations. However, the ethical imperative for postwar generations to keep memory of the Holocaust alive must compete with vigorous debate about the nature of vicariously claiming connection to this horrific trauma. Accessing the event from a position of generational distance demands new levels of mediation and imagination. Fiction, in particular, has come to be considered a “serious vehicle for thinking about the Holocaust” (Hungerford 2004: 181). Many critics agree that fiction possesses a unique ability to represent the unrepresentable event that is the Holocaust, while also having the power to promote empathy towards traumatic events more broadly: “It is literature that has at least since the Romantics enabled the ethical moment which compels reader response

to pain and suffering, which summons the imaginative empathy of affinity with the Other” (Sicher 2000: 65–66).

Yet despite the liberties that govern standard creative practice, authors of Holocaust fiction are held to, and limited by, a particular set of ethical standards. Berel Lang contends that the Nazi genocide was more morally complex than other large-scale horrific events of history, and so Holocaust fiction must be judged on its ethical rigour as well as on the traditional literary markers of form and style: the Holocaust’s “moral enormity could not fail to affect the act of writing and the process of its literary representation” (1988: 1). In this fraught realm, the question of who can speak most legitimately about the Holocaust – an ethical question – must be considered along with the ways in which they speak.

Questions surrounding the legitimacy and authenticity of Holocaust representation have occupied scholars since Theodor Adorno famously and controversially stated that “to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric” (1967: 34). Perhaps the most contentious contemporary scholar to engage in discourses of postwar Holocaust ethics is the French critic and second-generation author, Alain Finkielkraut, in his 1994 text *The Imaginary Jew*. Finkielkraut criticises his generation for appropriating the suffering of their Holocaust survivor parents in order to gain a sense of moral advantage: in identifying as victims of the Holocaust without direct exposure to its danger or suffering, Finkielkraut argues, the second generation, intentionally or not, resides in fiction as “imaginary Jews” (1994: 15). Another second-generation French author, Henri Raczymow, has also contributed significantly to discourse surrounding the ethics of transgenerational trauma, while more recently, American literary scholar Gary Weissman has explored why those people with no direct familial link to the atrocity attempt to connect to it vicariously.

The nature of this critical debate revolves around a single key ethical question: whose past is it to tell? If second-generation authors lack the authority to represent a trauma that they experienced only vicariously, as some critics claim, it follows that the fiction of the third generation – I use the term to refer specifically to the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors – is doubly suspect for being twice removed. This question of an author’s pedigree lies at the heart of contemporary debates over the ethics of representing the Holocaust. As generational distance from the event increases, the legitimacy of these artistic responses becomes more ethically fraught.

Third-Generation Fiction

In the past ten to fifteen years, we have witnessed the birth of an interesting new field of literary endeavour – writings by the third generation. A growing stable of third-generation authors, including Nicole Krauss (whose novel, *Great House*, this paper will examine), Jonathan Safran Foer, and Natasha Solomons have begun producing inventive and celebrated works of literature that explore the Holocaust from a unique position of generational distance. However, while psychoanalytic theory began in the 1980s to examine the impact of inherited trauma on the third generation (Flanzbaum 2012: 14), there is currently little scholarship on the distinct characteristics of third-generation fiction and the position from which it is written. From its position of generational distance, can the third generation reasonably claim to have inherited the trauma of the Holocaust? Or is their connection to the atrocity differently nuanced and imprecise?

As an author whose Jewish grandfather survived the Holocaust, I would suggest that the ethics of representing the atrocity poses particular challenges and opportunities for the third-generation writer. Authors of this generation face a unique ethical conundrum, in that we are simultaneously connected to and twice-distanced from the event we seek to explore. Hilene Flanzbaum questions whether “by the third generation... it make[s] any sense, psychological or otherwise, to attribute behavior to the Holocaust when so many other narratives have intervened?” Her answer resonates with my own experience:

...[F]or me, it has been useful (if painful) to consider the history from which I descend. I take such categorization not as a verdict of destiny or doom but as a tool by which I better understand my previously incomprehensible behaviors and forgive my limitations. To think of myself as part of a third generation holds me accountable to my past. (2012: 15)

These issues of legitimacy and authenticity inevitably become more pronounced as generational distance from the Holocaust increases.

This paper explores these complex questions through an in-depth analysis of a key third-generation text, Nicole Krauss's *Great House*. By analysing the distancing techniques Krauss uses in her novel, I aim to demonstrate how by drawing attention to their generational distance from the Holocaust, third-generation authors are responding ethically to the challenge of representing mediated trauma. In this way, *Great House* can be considered ethically valid not despite but because of its author's generational distance from the Holocaust.

Postmemory

Second-generation scholar Marianne Hirsch has contributed significantly to the field of Holocaust memory studies as it relates to the transgenerational transmission of trauma with her research on how inherited traumatic memory (what she terms postmemory) of the Holocaust manifests in the aesthetics of the second generation. Her scholarship on transgenerational trauma has impacted the “era of memory” (Hoffman 2004: 104) so crucially that her term *postmemory* has been adopted almost universally by scholars working in the field of second-generation memory.

While Hirsch initially conceived of postmemory as a familial process of transmitted trauma, passed directly from survivors to their children, her later work encompasses “more explicitly comparative memory work” that includes “extreme dispossession in the context of the familial ruptures caused by war, genocide, and expulsion” (2012: 24). Hirsch comes to distinguish, as Eva Hoffman does (2004: 187), between “the postgeneration as a whole and the literal second generation in particular”, thus demarcating “affiliative” and strictly familial postmemory (2008: 114). This paper focuses specifically on Hirsch’s concept of familial postmemory.

Her work poses but does not resolve the crucial question: can the third generation legitimately claim to have inherited the trauma of the Holocaust? During an interview at the Wheeler Centre in Melbourne, Australia, an audience member asked Jonathan Safran Foer about his views on this subject: whether trauma could be passed down from generation to generation, and the form that this inheritance might take. Rather than label his traumatic connection to the Holocaust explicitly, however, Foer provided the analogy of an old vine growing around a fence that has been removed because it is rotting, until “all that was left was this weird vine that’s attached to nothing” (2011). The idea of inherited trauma as something deformed that flourishes and grows around absence or silence resonates with the experience of post-Holocaust generations.

Many second-generation authors describe a sense of absence or void – a lack of knowledge about the past that seeks some resolution or understanding in the present – as a key reason why they are compelled to explore the Holocaust (Hirsch 1996: 661–662; Raczymow 1994: 100). Third-generation authors – twice-distanced from the trauma of the historical event – arguably suffer this absence even more. Whether postmemory can indeed be passed from generation to generation or not, the third generation’s familial link to the Holocaust is an important factor informing, and for understanding, their writing.

Third-generation fiction remains a distinct and under-explored phenomenon, with its own specific narrative techniques, theoretical framework, and potential to contribute to contemporary

society's understanding of the Holocaust. However, with a few notable exceptions, scholarship on this subject has tended to focus on specific narrative elements (such as the use of fantasy or dual narrators) without considering how these authors' familial connection to the subject has informed these narrative techniques. This is a significant gap in the field, given that third-generation authors have not only reached adulthood but are contributing critically well-regarded works of fiction to the literary community. This paper traces a crucial link between the third-generation's traumatic inheritance and the specific narrative techniques of their fiction.

Nicole Krauss's *Great House*

Nicole Krauss was born in Manhattan in 1974 to Jewish parents; her maternal and paternal Jewish grandparents had emigrated to London and New York respectively to escape the Holocaust. She studied English at Stanford University, and later pursued graduate study in art history in Britain. Krauss's first novel, *Man Walks into a Room*, published in 2001, explores themes of memory, and was a finalist for the *Los Angeles Times* First Book Award. *The History of Love*, the author's second novel and an international bestseller, was published in 2005 to wide critical acclaim. Published in 2010, her third novel, *Great House*, was a finalist for the National Book Award for Fiction and was shortlisted for the Orange Prize. In 2004, Krauss married fellow third-generation author Jonathan Safran Foer, from whom she separated in 2014.

Great House explores themes of memory and loss, confession, and Jewish identity, and how these themes relate to and characterise the third-generation experience. The trope of distance emerges in embedded, nuanced ways. Krauss's technique is narratological rather than linguistic; rather than utilise distance in the language of the book, as say Jonathan Safran Foer does in *Everything Is Illuminated*, Krauss structures her narrative as a journey from "distant, foreign points" towards a traumatic heart: an Israeli antiques dealer named Weisz whose father's desk was plundered from his study in Budapest by the Nazis (Spence 2010: 35). The lives of the four Jewish narrators intersect at this colossal writing desk. The desk functions as an extended metaphor whose menacing power comes to represent the burden of emotional inheritance; as the links between characters become clear, so too does their varying access to the trauma of the Holocaust.

The novel is divided into two related sections, each containing four chapters narrated in the first person. In the first chapter, "All Rise", a middle-aged New York writer named Nadia professes her remorse to an unknown listener she addresses as "Your Honour": in writing seven novels at the desk she inherited from the murdered Chilean poet Daniel Varsky, Nadia confesses

she has neglected opportunities to seize both love and life. Varsky's death haunts Nadia to the extent that the trauma permeates each area of her life. Her descent into paranoia and paralysis is told in flashback. The hulking desk that Nadia has "physically grown around" in some ways triggers this emotional descent (Krauss 2010a: 17). When a mysterious young woman comes to claim the desk, the loss severs Nadia's writing life; it is as if she cannot function without the familiar burden of this inherited object:

I looked across the room at the wooden desk at which I had written seven novels. ... One drawer was slightly ajar, one of the nineteen drawers, some small and some large, whose odd number and strange array, I realized now, on the cusp of their being suddenly taken from me, had come to signify a kind of guiding if mysterious order in my life, an order that, when my work was going well, took on an almost mystical quality (2010a: 16).

While her character has no direct connection to the Holocaust (Nadia remains ignorant of the desk's origins in the study in Budapest), her response to first gaining and then losing the desk mirrors symptoms of transgenerational trauma. Nadia clings to this trauma even when its direct object (the desk) has been removed. Here, Krauss's traumatic inheritance as the grandchild of Holocaust survivors manifests in the use of symbolism as a narrative technique. The desk functions as a metaphor to represent the third generation's vague yet powerful emotional connection to the trauma of the Holocaust.

The next chapter, "True Kindness", while it bears perhaps the least relation to the Holocaust (the desk is not present here at all), further explores themes of death and loss through the trope of distance. Set in Israel, the chapter focuses on the elderly Jew Aaron's attempts to reconcile with his estranged son – a judge who is in a coma after being hit by a car (we later learn that Nadia was driving and Aaron's son is the judge to whom she addresses her first-person confession). Aaron laments that his son "tirelessly searched for and collected suffering" from a young age, eventually writing a clandestine novel about a captured shark that bears the accumulated misery of the people dreaming around it (Krauss 2010a: 68).

According to Berger and Milbauer, Aaron's frequent use of the phrase "pass over it" indicates "the silence which characterizes many in the survivor community, as well as their descendants, when reflecting on the myriad moral, psychological, and theological questions engendered by the Shoah" (2013: 80). His final statement, "I can't pass over it", shows that his own traumatic memory will be passed down to the second generation. While the chapter does not deal directly with the Holocaust, suffering and death are present not just as themes but as

menacing forces the characters are attempting to escape. In this way, Krauss highlights the haunting nature of postmemory and its capacity to reverberate across generations.

"Swimming Holes" explores British scholar Arthur's guilty investigation into his mysterious wife Lotte's traumatic past (Moore 2011). As she succumbs to dementia, he considers whether her deep-seated grief at leaving her parents behind when she escaped from Nazi Germany on a Kindertransport in 1939 invalidates what he thought was their happy life together. In the fourth chapter, "Lies Told by Children", a young writer/academic named Izzy explores the truth of her relationship with the damaged siblings, Yoav and Leah. Their father Weisz's unspoken yet pervasive Holocaust trauma profoundly impacts his children: "They were prisoners of their father's, locked within the walls of their own family, and in the end it wasn't possible for them to belong to anyone else" (Krauss 2010a: 113). Here, Foer's idea of inherited trauma as a "weird vine" that grows around absence or silence resonates with particular poignancy (2011).

In the second section of the novel, this chapter is replaced by one titled "Weisz", in which Yoav and Leah's father reveals the origin of the desk's extraordinary influence: he has spent his life as an antiques dealer tracking down the furniture plundered by the Nazis from his father's study in Budapest, "as if by putting all the pieces back together he might collapse time and erase regret" (Krauss 2010a: 116). The desk is the final piece in the puzzle, and after retrieving it he commits suicide. The desk's passage from one character to another "allows Krauss to probe closely the survivors' and their offspring's 'response to catastrophic loss'" (Berger and Milbauer 2013: 69).

Narrative Structure

Great House's structure, which opposes "any kind of easy connective tissue" (Krauss 2010b) so that characters and narratives stand removed from one another for the majority of the book, reflects the difficulty of accessing the trauma of the Holocaust from the distance of the third generation. According to Krauss:

novels tend to be, in some way, a structural blueprint of the mechanisms of the author's mind, and I happen to have a very strong spatial sense. ... I've developed this habit of starting at very distant, foreign points and moving inwards. I'm trying to understand: what is the connection between these feelings, these people, these places, these ideas? (Spence 2010: 35)

Krauss's narrative progresses from these "distant, foreign points" towards the harrowing core of the novel with only a vague sense of how (or indeed if) these characters and narratives

will connect. Without any obvious sense of chronology, the narratives stand beside each other in time and space. The novel's structure, then, functions as a series of concentric circles that sweep ever closer to the Holocaust as the site of grief. Krauss approaches the trauma of the event indirectly, never tackling it head-on but rather coming at it from the side as the narrative circles finally overlap. This structural approach leaves the reader feeling both distanced from the trauma of the Holocaust, and wary of investing emotionally in the story lest these tentative narrative threads fail to connect. However, just as the reader struggles against the structural and emotional distance inherent in the novel, so too does the author of third-generation fiction struggle to access the trauma of the Holocaust from their position of generational distance. Thus, the readers' difficult journey through the narrative – their battle against the trope of distance inherent in the novel's structure – mirrors the third-generation author's struggle to connect meaningfully with their remote traumatic past.

Linking these disparate narratives is the desk which, Krauss notes, “becomes like a needle and thread that stitches some of the stories together” (Spence 2010: 35). Far from being a simple structural aid, however, the desk comes to represent the burden of inherited trauma. Krauss explains, “it wasn't so much the desk that mattered, but the burden of inheritance – emotional inheritance. This is one of the many things I was writing about: what we inherit from our parents and what we pass down to our children. ... And so, somehow, the desk became imbued with all of that” (Spence 2010: 35). Krauss's literary preoccupation with this burden of inheritance, argue Berger and Milbauer, “is central to the explicitly Jewish imperative of passing the tradition from generation to generation (*l'dor ve-dor*) and goes to the heart of Krauss's fiction. ... The issues of writing and parenthood are intertwined, as are those of bearing witness and intergenerational transmission of memory and trauma” (2013: 67-68).

As the desk was stolen by the Nazis, its menacing power over the characters stems directly from the trauma of the Holocaust. This trauma is symbolised in the physical structure of the desk itself. The desk's nineteenth drawer is locked, as if here, sealed under lock and key, resides the original site of trauma: the hidden suffering of the Holocaust. This drawer haunts the characters for the reason that they cannot access it; what resides in there is a mystery that is both inherited and inaccessible. Thus, the desk functions as a metaphor for the vague yet powerful emotional connection these characters have to the Holocaust. Moreover, the desk can be seen to represent the haunting strains of absence and silence that characterise Marianne Hirsch's notion of postmemory.

Conclusion

This paper has investigated the ways in which Nicole Krauss's novel, *Great House*, interrogates notions of third-generation postmemory; in particular, how her familial connection to the Holocaust and resultant burden of inheritance manifests in specific narrative techniques. Krauss, however, argues that *Great House* does not explore the Holocaust directly:

I know this goes against the grain of what most critics might say about my work, but I would not say that I've written about the Holocaust. I am the grandchild of people who survived the historical event. I'm not writing their story—I couldn't write their story. There are characters in my novels who have either survived the Holocaust or been affected by it. But I've written very little about the Holocaust in terms of actual events. What interests me is the response to catastrophic loss (2010b).

According to Berger and Milbauer,

Krauss is right to insist that she cannot write the story of survivors or their direct offspring for whom the Holocaust as a historical event, a lived experience, held an immediacy she cannot recreate. Nonetheless, Krauss realizes that the impact of the Holocaust continues to resound ... and that she must therefore find ways to comprehend and articulate the plights of contemporary Jews who have inherited the traumatic legacy of the Shoah, in all of its many, varied, but sharply felt manifestations (2013: 65).

Krauss acknowledges that the title of her book, *Great House*, which refers to a story from the *Book of Kings* about the Jews being exiled from Jerusalem, speaks directly to the "catastrophic loss" her family endured in the Second World War, and more broadly to "how Jews attempt to cope with the destruction that characterises their history" (Moore 2011).

The troubled Jewish siblings Yoav and Leah, in fact, are the only characters in *Great House* who belong to the third generation (the desk was their Hungarian grandfather's). While their father, Weisz, disguises the burden of his emotional inheritance, his strict and dogged personality (mirrored in his unrelenting search for his father's desk) has the effect of transferring his own inherited trauma onto his children.

Thus, although there are only two third-generation characters, the themes of distance and haunting that permeate the book – the characters' vague yet potent emotional connection to the trauma of the Holocaust – reflect the third generation's dilemma. How do we access the trauma

of the Holocaust from the distance of the third generation? What does it mean to be both connected to and twice-distanced from the event we seek to represent? Is our work, by its very distance from the Holocaust, ethically suspect? Or can this distance itself, when acknowledged and utilised as a narrative trope as in *Great House*, render our work ethically legitimate? Throughout this book, “death and the death imprint stalk the lives of Holocaust survivors and their descendants” (Berger and Milbauer 2013: 77). Yet the novel also contains a measure of hope: “Krauss’s appeal to her readers is that writing itself is a form of protest against despair” (Berger and Milbauer 2013: 81).

In “The Future of the Past”, Efraim Sicher articulates the second generation’s complex need to privately mourn and publicly “speak” the Holocaust – a need that encompasses both their desire to promote lessons of the atrocity in order to oppose the silence that harbours forgetting or denial, while simultaneously “working-through” the Holocaust’s traumatic legacy on their own psyches (2000: 70). Is the third generation compelled by this same need to privately mourn and publicly “speak” the Holocaust? Do our fictions arise from the desire to process our traumatic inheritance, or from subtler, more complex yearnings?

In Nicole Krauss’s *Great House*, the author’s use of specific narrative techniques highlights the third generation’s simultaneous connection to and distance from the Holocaust. By drawing attention to her remoteness from the trauma, Krauss enables readers to compare their own perhaps dormant knowledge of the atrocity against the version being presented in the text, and thus to be led away from a passive or complacent reading of history towards a more active one. In this way, *Great House* can be considered ethically valid not despite but because of its author’s generational distance from the Holocaust. Krauss’s model suggests that an author’s very distance from the Holocaust is not only an inevitable but a productive ingredient of contemporary Holocaust fiction. *Great House* has broader implications for how contemporary society accesses past atrocities, suggesting that the mediated spaces of (post) postmemory and imagination are fertile and legitimate sources for engaging with acts of atrocity.

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ABSTRACT

Constructive Distance: Nicole Krauss's *Great House* as a Model for Third-Generation Holocaust Fiction

As the final Holocaust survivors pass, the urgent task of representing the atrocity in order to keep its memory alive passes to later generations. In the past ten to fifteen years, the third generation (defined here as the grandchildren of survivors) have begun producing inventive and celebrated works of literature that explore the Holocaust from a unique position of generational distance. While psychoanalytic theory has started examining the impact of inherited trauma on the third generation, there is currently little scholarship on the unique characteristics of third-generation fiction and the position from which it is written. As an author whose Jewish grandfather survived the Holocaust, I would suggest that the ethics of representing the atrocity poses particular challenges and opportunities for the third-generation writer. Authors of this generation face a unique ethical conundrum, I argue, in that they are simultaneously connected to and twice-distanced from the event they seek to explore.

In this paper, I adapt Marianne Hirsch's notion of second-generation postmemory to consider a particular third-generation novel, Nicole Krauss's *Great House*. I suggest that Krauss's text is ethically valid not despite but because of its author's generational distance from the Holocaust. Krauss uses distancing techniques in the structure and content of her novel to highlight her twice-mediated knowledge of the atrocity. By drawing attention to her remoteness from the Holocaust, Krauss enables readers to compare their own dormant knowledge of the atrocity against the version being presented in the text. In this way, she leads readers away from a passive or complacent reading of history towards a more active one. Krauss's model suggests

that the post-generation author's inevitable distance from the Holocaust is in fact a necessary and productive ingredient of contemporary Holocaust fiction.

KEYWORDS

Holocaust fiction, Third generation, Nicole Krauss, *Great House*

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