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"Beyond the Threshold of War, There Seemed to Be No Reality and No Past"[30]: Third Generation Jewish American Writers and the Inherited Memory of the Holocaust

Abstract: "Beyond the threshold of war, there seemed to be no reality and no past" (Hoffman 13). In her celebrated book *After Such Knowledge: A Meditation on the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (2004), Hoffman discusses the pervading presence of the Shoah in Jewish culture and memory, its psychological, emotional, and the historical reverberations of such catastrophe but, above all, she analyzes the effects this has had on the survivors' descendants. Also described by Hirsch, members of the second generation—like Hoffman and herself—established a strong relationship to "the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before" so much so that their parents' memories "constitute memories in their own right" (Hirsch 5). This has had such a powerful influence on later generations who have grown up with such inherited memories of catastrophe and trauma, that many of them have started questioning some of these accounts. One such writer is the Jewish American author Nathan Englander who, in his critically acclaimed short story collection *What We Talk About When We Talk Anne Frank* (2012), engages in a discussion regarding postmemory and its influence on the creation of both a Jewish cultural narrative and collective memory, and how this affects the characters' lives on many different levels, as well as the voices of third generation authors indirectly. In his work, Englander addresses the discussion of the memory of the Shoah and its later rewritings in quite a provocative way: by means of humor which, as scholars such as Rosenberg and Krijnen maintain, seems to constitute one of the main characteristics of contemporary Jewish writing (Rosenberg 2015; Krijnen 2016). Therefore, it is the aim of this article to analyze Englander's use of such technique to provide new

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[30] The quotation belongs to Eva Hoffman's *After Such Knowledge: A Meditation on the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (2004).

insights on what it means to be Jewish American today and the effects of the Shoah and its inherited memory on third-generation Jewish American intellectuals.
***Keywords**: Shoah; catastrophe; postmemory; inherited memory; humor; transgression.*

Introduction

In 2012, Nathan Englander published a new volume of short stories entitled *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank*, which was received with very positive reviews. Publications such as *The New York Times* characterized his style as "a combination of psychological insight, allegorical gravity and sometimes uproarious comedy" (Kakutani, "Nude Rabbis"). The collection contains eight stories, including the title story, which is a rewriting of Raymond Carver's contemporary classic "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" (1981). However, Englander recreates it from an entirely different perspective and provides it with a Jewish context. In this new account of Carver's masterpiece, he introduces a similar environment and dynamics to those of the original text, but this time Englander confronts two Jewish couples – one living in the States, the other in Israel – who are second generation-Holocaust survivors and engages in a discussion where he "raises questions regarding the Holocaust, Jewish authenticity and the authority for reckoning it" (Plank 144). In the same way as it happens in Carver's original work, the two couples get together and share some drinks and a few confessions. Throughout the course of that evening, though, the four characters are faced with some serious issues regarding their identities as Jews that will be triggered by a sinister game that one of them suggests playing: "Who Will Hide Me?"—also known as "The Anne Frank game" and "The Righteous Gentile game"[31]—. This 'entertainment' will raise some uncomfortable questions such as how they remember and deal with the memory of the Holocaust, as well as to what extent this event has determined—and continues to condition—their present lives.

The aim of the present article is to analyze how Englander engages in the discussion surrounding postmemory and its influence on the creation of a cultural narrative and collective memory that commemorates the catastrophe of

[31] It is based on a real game Englander played with his family, as explained by the author in an interview for NPR in 2012. https://www.npr.org/2012/02/15/146920283/nathan-englander-assimilating-thoughts-into-stories

the Holocaust, and to what degree these four characters' recollections are just a product of their own imagination or, to put it in Eric Sicher's words, this article investigates "what kind of memory is being handed down and what kind of post-Holocaust Jewish identity [post-memory] is helping to create" (Sicher 57). Therefore, the focus is placed on how these characters (re)consider, (re)create, and (re)define their ancestors' experiences, and how some of these recollections, as Marianne Hirsch claims, are "mediated by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (Hirsch 5). At the same time, though, this article aims at showing how third-generation authors such as Englander start questioning the memories they have inherited from their parents and identify the consequences of an 'unhealthy' obsession with the Holocaust, and its effects on later generations.

The hinge generation, the guardianship of the Holocaust, and its obsessive memories

"The guardianship of the Holocaust is passed on to us. The second generation is the hinge generation in which received, transferred knowledge of events is being transmuted into history, into myth". (Hoffman XV), such is the way in which the Polish critic and academic Eva Hoffman defines the burden and the responsibility of inheriting the legacy of one's own parents' trauma. The second generation was shaped by a series of experiences that took place before they were even born but which nevertheless determined their existence and the way they looked and understood the world surrounding them. In an attempt to come to terms with this issue and define what this meant for people from her generation, Marianne Hirsch famously coined the term "postmemory", and others such as Hoffman, following in her footsteps, tried to find a way to describe the complex implications involved in being the descendant of survivors. The lives of these second-generation children were dramatically affected by the traumatic stories told by their parents and felt the need, as well as the duty, to reconstruct them, first to honor their parents' traumatic experience and secondly, to pass them on to their own descendants However, the paradox is that this second generation that saw itself as "the guardianship of the Holocaust" had, as Hoffman claims, no real "memories of the Holocaust" (Hoffman 6) *per se*, but nevertheless felt as if these were their own. This phenomenon shaped the way in which second-generation children imagined the Shoah and retold the stories to the third generation.

Nathan Englander (1970-), a third-generation writer, has often engaged in this discussion regarding the effects of being raised in a household where one's second-generation parents are obsessed with the memory of the Holocaust. In an interview with the National Public Radio in 2013, he explained what kind of education he received as a young man, and how it was based on "fear, and betrayal, and Jewish history [...] you grow up in a world and your parents are one way and you're told this is your whole world, and this is how you're supposed to be, and you're terribly unhappy in that world, it's a very scary thing" (Englander quoted in Gross, "Assimilating Thoughts"). With these words, the author wanted to show how he was torn between his expected behavior as a Jew and the version of the world given by his parents and his own personal vision of things—Holocaust included—, and how he had to find his own narrative to liberate himself "from the past and its anxiety-producing memories" (Englander quoted in Rosenberg 135). In fact, this is what he does in his short story: to discuss the power and nature of recreated memory; how it distorts, manipulates, controls and conditions people's lives or, in other words, his is an attempt to work out how to deal with this "past that refuses to go away" (Friedlander 44). At the same time, though, by using second-generation figures, he interrogates the ways in which his preceding generation engages in what one of his characters describes as "an unhealthy" interest in the Shoah (Englander 8).

Englander has not been alone in his attempt to reformulate what constitutes the essence of Jewishness and to question the inherited memories of the Holocaust. Many other Jewish American contemporary writers who belong to the third generation, have tried to find new ways of approaching such traumatic past in different ways, often using approaches that have been perceived as controversial. As Gerd Bayer suggests, third-generation writings "reveal strategies that differ from the kind of memory work described by Hirsch, begging the question of how postmemory changes as additional generations come to be exposed to its remembered content" (Bayer 117). In fact, it was Eva Hoffman who, in her discussion of the 'postmemory generation', stressed the dynamic and changing nature of memory and its uses by claiming that "the uses of 'memory' cannot last forever; the lines of meaning drawn out of the past cannot retain their strength as a scaffolding for present significance" (Hoffman 243). As a result, writers such as Jonathan Safran Foer, Sarah Wildman, Shalom Auslander, Nathan Englander, Judy Budnitz, Daniel Mendelssohn, among others, go back to the discussion of the Shoah and relate to its memory from

more "unexpected, often highly playful, sometimes even from seemingly 'sacrilegious' angles" (Krijnen 2) and decide to put it to other uses, not because of a lack of historical sensitivity or knowledge but to explore alternative ways to approach the topic and, in so doing, giving it new meaningful reinterpretations and emphasizing its significance today.

As Bayer suggests, one of the main distinctive features of the third generation is their point of departure. These authors feel more connected to the future than to the past: "the past is geared towards a future in which memory can have a permanent presence, potentially even without being traumatizing" (Bayer 119, 124). Unlike the second generation that focused on the past experiences of their parents, third-generation writers use this past to rethink the future. This is clearly helped by the temporal distance between their generation and that of their grandparents, because as Aarons states, "the third generation finds itself in the position of being *simultaneously remote from* and also consciously *connected to* the memory of the Holocaust, [they are] inheritors of the memory of the Shoah" (Aarons xvii, my emphasis). They are in a different context, and they need new and suitable ways of dealing with it that challenge more traditional, conventional, or popular representations. This means that while first generation works were narratives of the protagonists' direct experiences (either as survivors or as contemporaries of the Shoah), and second-generation authors wrote about their parents' trauma and tried to come to terms with it, third generation writers have inherited these stories and their knowledge of the past in a more indirect and mediated manner (Krijnen 11) which, in turn, has had a powerful impact on how they see and understand the Holocaust. Even if such authors are reflecting on the Shoah as a traumatic event for their ancestors, what they are often really discussing in their texts is themselves: how all this inherited past has shaped them, and how they have had to deal with it.

Inevitably, new challenges need new strategies, and one such commonly used device by these writers is humor. According to Slucki, Patt and Finder, "In the last two decades, humor that invokes symbols of the Holocaust has become more prevalent in American, Israeli, Canadian, Latin American, Australian, and European popular culture" (Slucki et al.: 4). As Krijnen highlights, these writers use subversive humor to continue making sense of the Shoah because, two generations after the events, it is necessary to redefine and rearticulate it (Krijnen 8). Such humor does not trivialize or minimize the meaning and impact of the Shoah but it shows how it can be used as an empowering tool over one's past; an

instrument that allows Jewish Americans to present themselves not solely as victims, but also to come across as people in control of their narrative and their history, otherwise, as Hoffman claims, focusing exclusively on the feelings of hatred and fear "can only hurt ourselves" (Hoffman 246). Besides, it helps them bring the issue of Jewish past and identity back to the center and engage in fruitful as well as other urgent debates.

Humor and 'authentic Jewishness'

In a recent article published in *The New York Times*, Jason Zinoman claimed that "in 2014, a Pew study revealed that 42% of American Jews described having a good sense of humor as 'essential' to being Jewish" (Zinoman, "Is it Funny for the Jews?"). Nathan Englander seems to be no exception to this, and he uses this strategy to bring to light instances that demonstrate the tension experienced by his characters and their sometimes problematic relationship with the memory of the Holocaust. For some critics, the use of humor helps create a narrative of empowerment that makes it possible to leave—what Rosenberg calls—the 'victim mentality' behind, and "begin to trust and engage the Other for the good of the entire community" (Rosenberg 134). In fact, 'trust' is one of the key issues in "What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank" as it constitutes one of the central elements of both the plot and the actual game that its characters play. At the same time, though, humor is also used to push sensitive issues to an extreme for the readers to question the dangers implied in the idealization of someone else's past experiences; a phenomenon that clearly reflects an existing tension and represents the "uneasy oscillation between [the] continuity and rupture" of such memories (Hirsch 5-6).

Englander raises questions about the way in which such descendants remember their parents' ordeal and how they idealize, and to a certain extent also fantasize with, this whole experience and, to do so, he makes use of black humor. One example of such controversial technique is the exchange between the unnamed narrator and Mark (Yuri in his new Hebrew identity) where the latter emphasizes the degree to which Orthodox Jews living in Israel have come to terms with their people's traumatic experience by going back to using German cars. Mark says: "Do you know why in Israel all the buses and trucks, why all the taxis, even, are Mercedes?" (Englander 22), to which the narrator replies: "Because they give you a big guilt-based discount? Or maybe because Mercedes is the best at building vehicles for the transport of Jews–they have a certain

knack" (Englander 23), followed by Mark's comment: "Because in Israel we are sound, solid Jews, and so it is nothing, even after the war for us to drive German cars" (Englander 23). Mark's claim is counterbalanced by the sinister joke about the transports of Jews to demystify what to the unnamed narrator seems an inappropriate remark on the superior moral stand of Jews and what it is based on, but in essence, the objective behind such dark humor is to question the efforts on the part of this ultra-Orthodox character to defend his people's moral superiority.

Another example of how humor is used to "undercut further the 'sacred' nature of the Holocaust" (Rosenberg 124) is the story that Mark shares and which involves his father and another survivor who accidentally meet at a country club. Mark explains how he realizes that both men have the same camp number tattooed—with a different final digit. Mark clearly sees a chance to bring two survivors together and show them they have shared the same experience: "'He's right ahead of you', I say. 'Look, a five', I say. 'And yours is an eight.' And the other looks and my father looks, and my father says, 'All that means is, he cut ahead of me in line [...] He's a cutter'" (Englander 11). Mark absolutely fails to awaken any emotion in any of them. Possibly for this character, the idea of bringing together two survivors who lived in the same camp has a powerful emotional impact on him as a result of the narrative that he himself has built and that, as Hirsch claims, is based on "imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (Hirsch 5), but not on real recall. In the activation of his postmemory, Mark seems to have projected an idea of what it would be like for his father to meet a former inmate from the concentration camp, a projection based partly on his father's experiences and his son's own 'romanticization' of such reunion. But ironically enough, the meeting fails to trigger any such reaction in the father, on the contrary, he simply dismisses the other inmate and moves on to whatever he was doing before. For Deb, the narrator's wife who is also obsessed with the Holocaust, the anecdote disappoints her as well, since "she was expecting something empowering" (Englander 11). Both reactions (Mark and Deb's) also seem to point in the direction of Hirsch's claims that there is a whole "process of identification, imagination, and projection of those who grew up in survivor families" (Hirsch 35). Therefore, both characters have created and anticipated an imaginary response to a very specific situation which, when confronted with the real survivor's reaction, fails to fulfill their expectations. Evidently, some critical voices have been also raised against Englander and other authors who use

humor in their stories connected to the Holocaust, either because they consider that, under the appearance of a renewal some of these writers still victimize their characters (Alter 2012) or that this light-hearted approach is perverse (Reisz 2000, Katchanovski 2004), whereas others such as Pinkser (2014), Bollen (2012), Rosenberg (2015), and Krijnen (2016) see it as a necessary and positive development.

But the problematic use of black humor does not end there. Throughout the story, Mark usually attempts to show that those who live in Israel are the 'real' Jews, engaging in a sort of competition with the narrator to show who is a better Jew. Mark goes to the extent of defining intermarriage with gentiles as the following: "Our concern [...] is not the past Holocaust. It is the current one. The one that takes more than fifty percent of the Jews this generation. Our concern is intermarriage. It is the Holocaust that's happening now" (24). This insistence on the purity of their community is in itself a very dark joke if we consider the historical context and pseudo-scientific justifications used to oppress European Jews during World War II. In fact, Mark's statement clearly undermines his earlier claim involving Jews and German cars, etc. Englander is dealing with a very difficult and disturbing issue here and he seems to be writing a sort of cautionary tale. There is a fine line that Englander uses to connect his black humor to a much more profound discussion of how the characters defend and articulate their sense of 'Jewishness'.

This second element that the author brings into play is crucial to the argument that he tries to develop in his story. The discussion of what constitutes the essence of 'Jewishness' and who is (or not) a 'proper Jew' permeates the whole text. Englander provides numerous examples, from short anecdotal ones such as when Mark wants to demonstrate how he and his wife are proper Jews who have as many kids as possible: "'You should see how we live with ten'" to which the narrator replies: "'The kids, I say. 'We could get you a reality show with that here in the States. Help you get a bigger place'" (Englander 4), to others such as when the narrator explains how Mark and Lauren "went from Orthodox to ultra-Orthodox, which to me sounds like a repackaged detergent– ORTHODOX ULTRA, now *with more deep-healing power*" (Englander 5, my emphasis).

However, the core of the story is the actual and direct discussion of the Holocaust and its remembrance. The unnamed narrator's wife, Deb, is described as someone with an "unhealthy obsession with the idea of that generation being

gone. Don't get me wrong. I care, too. All I'm saying is, there's healthy and unhealthy, and my wife, she gives this subject a lot, *a lot*, of time" (Englander 8). Throughout the story, the narrator emphasizes how interested she is in Mark's parents who survived the Shoah, and how concerned with the need for her people to honor their legacy properly. Deb's admiration is partly based on her ideas of what a Holocaust survivor must be like. Although she is not a direct descendant of any survivor, she has received a very specific type of education. Her own husband claims that: "It's like she's a survivor's kid, my wife. It's crazy, that education they give them. [...] It's like we're twenty minutes from downtown Miami, but it's really 1937 and we live on the edge of Berlin. It's astounding." (Englander 12) The presence and persistence of the Shoah as well as the remembrance of an extremely vivid past that she has not actually lived, seem to have had a powerful impact on her. The fact that she behaves like this (we are told in the story that even when she and Lauren were kids, Deb already wanted to play the Anne Frank game that will be discussed below) eventually leads to the core of the text. Deb's husband – the narrator – states the following:

> "What I'm trying to say, whether you want to take it seriously or not, is that you can't build Judaism only on the foundation of one terrible crime. It is about this obsession with the Holocaust as a necessary sign of identity. As your only educational tool. Because for the children, there is no connection otherwise. Nothing Jewish that binds".
> "Wow, that's offensive", Deb says. "And close-minded. There is such a thing as Jewish culture. One can live a culturally rich life."
> "Not if it's supposed to be a Jewish life. Judaism is a religion. And with religion comes ritual. Culture is nothing. Culture is some construction of the modern world. And because of that, it is not fixed; it is ever-changing, and a weak way to bind generations." (Englander 22)

In this passage one can clearly see the two opposing ways of looking at the essence of Jewishness. On the one hand, the narrator highlights how asphyxiating the constant reminder of the Shoah is and how it shouldn't define their whole cultural identity and become the central part of the younger generations' education, what is more, he points at the constructed nature of the idea of culture, thus hinting at the fact that it is something malleable. Deb, meanwhile, has quite a different approach to the matter. For many – Deb included – as Karl A. Plank claims, "the obligation to remember the Holocaust,

which is parallel only to the Exodus in its commanding presence, becomes a sacred obligation. Failing to observe remembrance […] would be tantamount to giving Hitler 'posthumous victory'" (Plank 135). However, what the narrator seems to point out is that the more one sanctifies and focuses on the Holocaust as *the* defining event for the Jewish community, the less one is paying appropriate attention to the long, rich, and complex history of the Jewish people.

A few pages after this exchange between the married couple, the narrator and Lauren engage in a conversation about his wife's serious obsession with this specific historical event. Apparently, ever since she was a young girl, Deb has been playing a scary game that involves the idea of a second Holocaust and who would hide her and other Jews if this took place:

> "And I'm happy to hear say that, as that's just what I've been trying to get her to admit for years. That it's not a game. That it's dead serious, and a kind of preparation, and an active pathology that I prefer not to indulge.
> 'It's the Anne Frank game, right,' Shoshana says, 'Right?'
> [...] 'No, it's not a game. It's just what we talk about when we talk about Anne Frank.'
> 'It's the Righteous Gentile game', Shoshana says.
> 'It's Who Will Hide Me', I say.
> [...] 'That, in the event of an American Holocaust, we sometimes talk about which of our Christian friends would hide us'. (Englander 29)

The game is the result of a combination between Deb's fear and her pathological obsession with the Shoah, something that has been part of her life since she was young. It is also a way for her to honor the memory of those who suffered, by means of a faithful reproduction of what it must have felt like back then to find somebody who would hide you and who would be willing to risk his/her own life to protect you. This exchange contains one of the crucial sentences in the story, which in fact is also the title. The narrator's statement: "No, it's not a game. It's just what we talk about when we talk about Anne Frank" (Englander 29) which has been open to two main non-mutually exclusive interpretations.

On the contrary, both combined provide a useful way to understand what Englander is trying to do in his work. Roberta Rosenberg claims that the sentence allows us to comprehend the meaning of the story because, the game confronts us with the issue of whether 21st century America has the "ability to transcend or

be enveloped by Holocaust anxiety" (Rosenberg 125), while there a series of specific associations and echoes connected with the iconic name 'Anne Frank'. So, to Rosenberg, creating a game that bears such a name is certainly meaningful; it is a game that, as Rosenberg states, is already "loaded against faith, hope and belief" (Rosenberg 126). Parallel to Rosenberg's interpretation, Karl Plank highlights how the story is not really about the remembrance of Anne Frank or any other specific Jewish historical figure, but rather it is very much about how "we have trapped ourselves in an attic of our own making" (Plank 147). Plank's statement clearly points out at the constructed nature of second-generation remembrance and how, in the process of creating its cultural narrative, it has chosen what to remember and why, and built a whole narrative (i.e., an attic) around it. Besides the cultural and historical considerations, and taking the ending into account, this "attic of our own making" has another possible interpretation which is not directly related to memory and history and that can be connected to the ways in which the members of the couple relate to one another, too:

> 'You could play against yourselves, then' Shoshana says, 'What if one of you wasn't Jewish? Would you hide the other?'
> [...] I stand there with my chin raised so my wife can study me. So she can really get a look in, and get a think in, and decide if her husband really has what it takes. Would I really have the strength, would I care enough–and it is not a light question, not a throwaway question–to risk my life to save her and our son?'
> [...] 'Now you,' Deb says. 'You and Yuri go.'
> 'How does that even make sense?' Mark says. 'Even for imagining'.
> 'Shhh,' Shosana says. 'Just stand over there and be a good Gentile while I look'
> [...] 'Of course you can imagine it', Shoshana says. 'Look', she says, and goes over and closes the pantry door. 'Here we are, caught in South Florida for the second Holocaust. You're not Jewish, and you've got the three of us hiding in your pantry'
> [...] And that's what we do, the four of us. We stand there playing our roles, and we really get into it. We really all imagine it. I can see Deb seeing him, and him seeing us, and Shoshana just staring and staring at her husband. (Englander 31-2)

"Staring and staring" but not getting any reply or reaction. As has been said at an earlier stage of this article, the final silence ends up revealing that Mark would not hide his own wife. The ending of the story is extremely disturbing. That is why the only way for it to finish is with silence. It is very disturbing for

many different reasons. Leaving personal issues between the members of the couple, the main reason is that Mark is asked to place himself in a gentile's shoes. Would he really risk his life for somebody else? What is more prevailing, one's own instinct to survive or one's moral obligation to help others? Would everybody trust somebody they don't know? Englander finishes his story with the line: "trapped in that pantry. Afraid to open the door and let out what we've locked inside" (Englander 32). What are these characters hiding from each other and from themselves? What have they discovered about themselves while playing a game that precisely deals with trust and hiding others? Rosenberg sees it clearly: they are trapped "in the attics of their own catastrophic imaginations, clearly unable to find their way out" (Rosenberg 126).

Conclusions

Englander seems to point at the need for the Jewish community to achieve a "balance in representation" (Friedlander 51), and its problematic effects if that is not properly done. He raises a series of crucial issues in an apparently innocent rewriting of Raymond Carver's classic, where he discusses the tensions among members of the same cultural group, how young people are educated and what narratives are transmitted to them as well as those that they also create in an attempt to honor their ancestors and their suffering. The author, as a member of the third generation of Jewish American writers, wants to transform the painful experience of such a catastrophe such as the Shoah into something powerful and inspiring, a history that empowers and serves his community to focus on a much more hopeful future. He does it, as most of his contemporaries, from a different perspective which may at times seem controversial, above all for his use of dark humor when dealing with such a sensitive topic as the Holocaust.

Besides, he also questions who writes the narratives which are passed on from generation to generation, and how and why they do it in certain ways. He presents the way(s) in which the Holocaust has been sometimes sanctified as the *only* defining moment in Jewish history and the effects this has on individuals as well as on the creation of a collective memory for his people that really acknowledges their long history and complexity. It is not a matter of forgetting the history and terrible psychological, emotional, political, and cultural impact of the Shoah, on the contrary. But Englander's point in the story seems to echo Karl Plank's statement: "It is necessary to remember that attic in Amsterdam, but to live finally elsewhere" (Plank 149).

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