



Miller, Nancy K. "Introduction." *Extremities*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002.

Reproduced with permission of University of Illinois Press.

www.nancykmiller.com

EXTREMITIES

Trauma, Testimony, and Community

Edited by Nancy K. Miller
and Jason Tougaw

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS PRESS
URBANA AND CHICAGO

Introduction: Extremities

Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw

extremity 1: something that is extreme: as **a** (1): an outlying or terminal part, section or point: the farthest or most remote part, section, or point: the most advanced part: the farthest extent: the farthest projection: the very end (2): a limb (as of the body) or other appendage: an arm or leg; *usu*: a hand or foot **b** (1): a condition of extreme urgency or necessity: a highly crucial state of affairs: a time of extreme danger or critical need: extreme adversity (2): a moment marked by imminent destruction or dissolution **c** (1): an extremely intense degree (2): a culminating point (3): *archaic* extreme severity or rigor **d** *obs* an instance or act of extravagant behavior **e** the fullest possible extent: utmost limit: utmost degree **f** (1): a very severe, violent, drastic, or desperate act or measure (2): a single remaining source of help or plan of action: sole recourse: final resort **2:** the quality or state of being extreme—**in extremities:** at the end of one's resources: in a most crucial or dangerous condition or position: at the point of death—**to the last extremity:** to the point of death: to the death.

—excerpted from *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (unabridged), 1968.

"The old century," historian Eric Hobsbawm remarks in *The Age of Extremes*, "has not ended well" (17). Looking back from the fragile perspective of the new millennium, it would be hard not to feel staggered by the inventory of catastrophic human suffering Hobsbawm has drawn. Consciously or unconsciously, we live in the wake of the atrocities brought by war and genocide, in the long shadow cast by their prolonged aftermath.

If every age has its symptoms, ours appears to be the age of trauma. Naming a wide spectrum of responses to psychic and physical events often with little in common beyond the label, trauma has become a port-

manteau that covers a multitude of disparate injuries. Stories that would seem to belong to different orders of experience enjoy troubling intimacies. But whatever their origin, the effects of historical trauma have a tenacious hold on the popular imagination.

The term "trauma" describes the experience of both victims—those who have suffered directly—and those who suffer with them, or through them, or for them, if only by reading about trauma. Literary works, in particular the memoir, recently and in great number have turned to narratives that record for public consumption the personal strain on the body and the mind produced by certain kinds of extreme suffering, from the annihilatory technologies of the Holocaust to the devastation of AIDS. We've become accustomed in American culture to stories of pain, even addicted to them; and as readers (or viewers), we follow, fascinated (though as many profess disgust), the vogue of violent emotion and shocking events.

In a culture of trauma, accounts of extreme situations sell books. Narratives of illness, sexual abuse, torture, or the death of loved ones have come to rival the classic, heroic adventure as a test of limits that offers the reader the suspicious thrill of borrowed emotion. The private zones of the body have migrated into public domains and the limits of tellable experience have expanded, almost dissolving the border of the conventional markers that separated the private self from the public citizen. What does it mean, Ross Chambers asks in this volume, "to be haunted by a collective memory . . . of painful events that few, if any, living members of the culture may have directly perpetrated or suffered from in their own persons?" As the boundaries break down, our ideas about the workings of historical memory and events necessarily change, even if we don't fully understand the implications of these new biographical models and modes of identification.

The urge to break the silence and ignore taboos about the life (and increasingly, death) of the body that drives many of these stories shows no sign of remission. The successful, sometimes ingenious, and often crude, marketing of vicarious suffering owes something but not everything to the triumph of the memoir (and biography)—the emotional appeal of the true story. But the remarkable renewal of autobiographical writing in the late twentieth century is not solely a feature of wide-scale narcissism or the idioms of identity politics. The culture of first-person writing needs to be understood in relation to a desire for common grounds—if not an identity-bound shared experience, then one that is shareable through identification, though this too will vary in degrees of

proximity. The memoir and all forms of personal testimony not only expand the boundaries of identity construction and the contours of the self but also lay claim to potential territories of community. In complex and often unexpected ways, the singular “me” evolves into a plural “us” and writing that bears witness to the extreme experiences of solitary individuals can sometimes begin to repair the tears in the collective social fabric.

Most retrospective views of twentieth-century history assign the Holocaust a privileged place as the paradigmatic event of unspeakable human suffering, of lives lost in extremity over the course of what Hobsbawm calls the “Short Twentieth Century,” 1914–91 (3). The Holocaust has also become, especially in recent years, the focus of a great deal of contemporary thinking and writing about the nature of extreme experience. Despite the troubled debates over the ethics of representing the Holocaust at all, the rich library of Holocaust texts, the archive of historical documents, and the monuments memorializing the crisis of inhumanity that fractured the century have generated both aesthetic appreciation (alternately dismay) and critical analysis.

The commercial success of movies like *Schindler's List* and *Life Is Beautiful* made it possible for large audiences to take pleasure in—or at least be comfortably moved by—the Holocaust as spectacle. This phenomenon has continued with the box-office triumph of Mel Brooks's musical comedy *The Producers*, featuring “Springtime for Hitler,” the song and dance number already notorious from Brooks's 1968 movie version. In the same entertainment season (springtime 2001), Anne Frank's story, produced by the Walt Disney company, was shown on network television. The post-modern disconnect of a Disney version of the Holocaust conjures the scene in Art Spiegelman's *Maus* where Vladek Spiegelman imagines that his Holocaust survivor story, drawn by his son the cartoonist, could make Art as famous as Walt Disney (I, 133). Such is the unpredictable legacy of history reworked by contemporary culture. As we write this introduction in 2001, the “famous joke” referred to by one of the characters in Philip Roth's 1993 *Operation Shylock*—“There's no business like *Shoah* business” (133)—is still a propos. Indeed, the unprecedented success of Holocaust suffering marketed for mass consumption and popular entertainment seems to know no limits.

For postwar generations Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* has represented the so-called triumph of the human spirit in extremity, the universalizing symbol of Jewish Holocaust experience. This girl who feared she would never grow up to become a woman left behind a text that became

an international best-seller, subjected to successive editions as well as theatrical and film adaptations. (In the wake of a recent television mini-series, Amazon.com offered an interactive CD-ROM visit to the Anne Frank House.) Victor Klemperer's recently published diaries, *I Will Bear Witness*, offer a less comfortable (and infinitely longer) record of a European life despoiled by Nazi domination. This two-volume account of Klemperer's years (1933–45) spent in progressive degradation in Dresden documents the devastating effects of life under critical conditions from the point of view of a mature man, a Jew who had been baptized a Protestant (I, viii). In the passage below, Klemperer describes the stakes of writing and hiding the diary, whose pages his Aryan wife periodically secreted for safekeeping:

This afternoon Eva is going to Pirna to fetch some money. I shall give her the diary pages of the last few weeks to take with her. After the house search I found several books, which had been taken off the shelf, lying on the desk. If one of them had been the Greek dictionary, if the manuscript pages had fallen out and had thus aroused suspicion, it would undoubtedly have meant my death. One is murdered for lesser misdemeanors. [. . .] So these parts will go today. But I shall go on writing. That is *my* heroism. I will bear witness, precise witness! (II, 61)

Unlike Anne Frank, Victor Klemperer survived and so did his diaries, though they were discovered and published only after his death. But in each case, the author's literary ambitions were posthumously fulfilled, the gift for writing recognized. Both diaries serve as reminders not just of past history but of the cost more generally of living in history; the entries chart for us the small acts of daily bravery that constitute a single human being's resistance to political violence. Anne Frank's diary, Melissa Müller claims, is "the most widely read document about the Nazi crimes" (ix). *I Will Bear Witness* has only begun its journey.

If the Holocaust supplies the paradigm of modern, incommensurable suffering, many of the ethical and aesthetic, moral and formal dilemmas involved in bearing witness to the horrors of the Holocaust reappear and are reconfigured in different national and political contexts. This is not to suggest that other kinds of disaster should be compared in literal ways to the Holocaust as a limit event. Rather, as the essays collected here show, the Holocaust has produced a discourse—a set of terms and debates about the nature of trauma, testimony, witness, and community—that has affected other domains of meditation on the forms the representation of extreme human suffering seems to engender and require.

In a study of W. E. B. Du Bois's trip to the Warsaw Ghetto in 1949, Michael Rothberg argues for a more dialogic approach to the question of the relationship between studies of the Holocaust and those of other traumatic events that have shaped and continue to shape Western history, without "collapsing the Nazi genocide into the banal litany of modern catastrophes." As he shows, a kind of double vision, analogous to Du Bois's famous "double consciousness," makes it possible to see the Holocaust in its atrocious specificity. The paradox is only apparent. "Pursuing the question of race and violence in a comparative framework," Rothberg suggests, "would allow Holocaust studies to benefit from a relaxation of the border patrol that too often surrounds and isolates discussion of the *Shoah*" (186). By the same token, to bring analyses of Holocaust-related material into other studies of extreme experience across a broad range of historically located contexts, as we have done in this book, also helps clarify the unique texture of each situation.

If, moreover, the Holocaust in our time stands not only *for* memory but for what is owed *to* memory, then that lesson should lead us to a more intense awareness of what implicates us in the lives of others. It is far easier, even seductive, to memorialize past injustice, to weep over human crimes of another era, than to take responsibility for what's before our eyes. "When I began thinking about this text," Annie Ernaux observes in her personal narrative *Shame*, "the market square in Sarajevo suffered a mortar attack that killed several dozen people and wounded hundreds of others. In the written press some journalists wrote, 'we are overcome by shame.' For them, shame was something they could feel one day and not the next, something that applied to one situation (Bosnia) and not another (Rwanda). No one remembers the blood shed on the market place in Sarajevo" (110). The shame of our modernity is due in part to the ease with which world horror seems to vanish before our very eyes.

It's often difficult to stay focused on what should demand attention or action, to resist turning the page. *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*, Carolyn Forché's stunning anthology that begins with "The Armenian Genocide (1909-1918)" and ends with "Revolutions and the Struggle for Democracy in China (1991)," offers a map of the world meant to counter a collective amnesia about the history we live through, often without paying the daily reports of its horrors too much mind. The poems Forché has assembled, she writes, all "bear the trace of extremity within them" (30). The poets did not all survive, but their works "remain with us as poetic witness to the dark times in which they lived" (29). We often prefer to read about "dark times," rather than doing anything about

them. And yet reading is not without its own burdens. In "Consuming Trauma," Patricia Yaeger scans the morning newspaper and wonders: "I'm horror-struck reading an article about Mexico, or Dakar, or Des Moines, or Dubuque and then I glance at a body clothed by Lord and Taylor and feel reprieve (or anger, or desire, or bare nausea)."

Dominick LaCapra has coined the expression "empathic unsettlement" to describe the desired response of the "secondary witness"—historians like himself or literary critics like Yaeger, ordinary readers and viewers (thinking of movies like *Shoah* and *Schindler's List*)—who may and perhaps should empathize with the victims of atrocity, but without taking on, even in imagination, in "a kind of virtual experience," their identity ("Trauma" 722). The "secondary witness," he argued earlier, in an essay about Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah*, "should reactivate and transmit not trauma but an unsettlement . . . that manifests empathy (but not full identification) with the victim" (267). The challenge to those who read and write about trauma is to acknowledge its power and domains and also to let it rest: one should "neither confuse one's own voice or position with the victim's nor seek facile uplift, harmonization, or closure" ("Trauma" 723). Trauma has its historical specificity that must be respected. This cautionary formulation entails another: "not everyone traumatized by events is a victim" (723), LaCapra remarks, referring to the perpetrators of crimes against humanity. In an analogous argument about the importance of keeping distinctions when discerning the nature of traumatic experience, Juliet Mitchell in *Mad Men and Medusas* makes the following, sure to be controversial, claim: "although the Holocaust is one of the most grotesque events known to mankind, this does not automatically qualify it as traumatic in itself. . . . Too often cruelty and trauma are made to be synonymous" (299).

Whatever theory of trauma one embraces, there's no escaping the promiscuous application of the diagnostic, which tends to universalize suffering with little attention paid to the singularity of the experience: "In an everyday context," Mitchell writes, "we tend to look at a range of difficult or tragic occurrences from an observer's point of view and label them 'traumatic.' Instead, I want to define trauma from the perspective of the person who experiences it" (298).

By definition, memoir, autobiographical fiction, poetry, and personal criticism devoted to life lived in extremities all tell a story about trauma from the perspective of the person who experiences it. They share what Mitchell calls "some lowest common denominator" (298). But

should some experiences count for more on the scale of suffering, when evaluated according to a measurement that places surviving the Holocaust in a universe of its own? In this book we've decided to run the risk of juxtaposition, without, however, seeking to make literal comparisons. A memoir about the camps like Ruth Klüger's, or Sandra Gilbert's prose elegy about her husband's sudden death; Kathryn Harrison's literary confession of father/daughter incest or Annie Ernaux's unveiling of a family's disgraceful bodies; Eve Sedgwick's autobiographical advice columns in *MAMM* or the testimony in memoir form of men dying of AIDS; photographs of female-to-male transsexuals or the testimony of massacre survivors; all share the burden of narrating the extreme, of giving shape to what once seemed overwhelming, incomprehensible, and formless. These traumatic records all bear witness to whatever experience has broken "through the subject's protective shield" (Mitchell 291). We've chosen to retain the word "trauma" despite its potential overuse because it enfolds the diverse accounts of broken boundaries that are the subject of this book.

The task of reading the reports of extreme events that constellate the history of the twentieth century requires an adjustment of our skills as readers. These essays are concerned primarily with literary and visual representations of traumatic experience in a variety of forms, an experience that "in its sheer extremity," as Ruth Leys characterizes it, constitutes an "affront to common norms and expectations" (298). Thus, faced with the literary effects of what Rothberg has called "traumatic realism," the disorientation that attends the reader's arrival in a universe that violates all expectations, we are forced to reexamine the troubling conjuncture of the extreme and the everyday. An "epistemological and a social category," as Rothberg defines it in his present essay, this concept offers a new way of looking at the stakes of Holocaust representation, at how testimonial writing—about the Holocaust but also other occasions of atrocity—holds together on the page what the mind tends to keep apart. But if Rothberg elucidates the textual operations of what might appear to be a linguistic or mimetic predicament, he also insists on the work representation performs on—or perhaps in—the reader as a kind of pedagogy. The "traumatic realist project" produces something like a document whose origin belongs to the past (and those who died in it) but whose effects belong both to the present and the future—to the living readers whose post-traumatic responsibilities are both retrospective and prospective.

In the case of Ruth Klüger's memoir or Victor Klemperer's diaries the

reader might imagine she has gained direct access to those extreme death-bearing sites and everyday scenes of violence. But that would be to miss the gap that always separates language from reference as does the space between a train and the platform, to invoke a haunting Holocaust image. Like the traveler, the reader on the heels of the writer's experience must always be wary of the space that makes the journeying possible in the first place—lest we stumble, which of course we must.

At the same time, moreover, despite the record of witness there are those who believe that the Shoah defies representation. "Whoever assumes the charge of bearing witness in their name," declares Giorgio Agamben in *Remnants of Auschwitz* of the survivors who escaped the ranks of the dead, "knows that he or she must bear witness in the name of the impossibility of bearing witness" (34). As Art Spiegelman's therapist in *Maus* sorrowfully maintains: "Anyway, the victims who died can never tell *their* side of the story, so maybe it's better not to have any more stories" (II, 45). And yet the stories keep coming and keep getting read. Why should this be so? As Arendt concludes in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, about the will of totalitarian domination to have its victims disappear without a trace: "The holes of oblivion do not exist. . . . One man will always be left alive to tell the story" (232–33).

The problem of transmission does not diminish for those who survive the survivors—and their stories. The challenge entailed in finding a form in which to represent extreme experience involves a related yet distinct set of issues for the children of survivors and those of their generation within whom the story, however it is told, lives on. Marianne Hirsch has named this phenomenon "postmemory": "identification with the victim or witness of trauma, modulated by an admission of an unbridgeable distance separating the participant from the one born after." Through mediated acts of identification, the subjects of postmemory can revisit the past in relation to a previous generation (Art Spiegelman and his father and mother, to choose a well-known example); postmemory also entails reaching across genetic and familial ties to the experience of others to whom one is not related by blood, but whose story in life or art has the power to pierce the membrane of self-definition.

Writers and artists of the post-Holocaust generation have come to embody, as they refigure, an experience not theirs and yet a part of a historical legacy that touches them deeply. Like the mark under the breast of the mother of Toni Morrison's character Sethe in *Beloved*, the tattoo on the arm of a camp survivor functions as the sign of traumatic experience

retained on the skin and in the body. Morrison's novel tells a story of intergenerational transmission, demonstrating the daughter's responsibility in the recognition of another's suffering. How should a daughter acknowledge the effect of her mother's trauma? Hirsch's "empathic aesthetics" give a feminist inflection to LaCapra's notion of "empathic unsettlement"—a protocol of looking and feeling that keeps remembrance open and porous but also bounded and closed to further penetration.

Trauma, one could say, never happens only once. "The story of trauma," Cathy Caruth has argued in her reading of traumatic temporality, should be understood as "the narrative of a belated experience," and in that sense also can be followed through "its endless impact on a life" (7). A phenomenon of delayed response, trauma often unfolds intergenerationally; its aftermath lives on in the family—but no less pervasively in the culture at large. The story can deeply affect those who have not stood directly in the path of historical trauma, who do not share bloodlines with its victims. The question of how a poet transmits the memory of the Holocaust takes a famously troubling turn when like Plath she imagines herself to be the daughter of a Nazi father. Sylvia Plath's poems "Daddy," "Lady Lazarus," and "Getting There," and, as we'll see, Benjamin Wilkomirski's narrative, *Fragments*, provide striking examples of how in particular the collective trauma of the Shoah crosses national and genetic borders and continues to permeate post-Holocaust culture.

Do you have to be Jewish, Plath's poetry might be seen to ask, do you need a biographical connection to the Holocaust, to feel close to the victims, to imagine their journeys to suffering and oblivion, to figure in language and through poetic devices the suicide of prisoners and survivors? These literary works, each symptomatic of its particular historical moment, raise in acute form the question of what the proper relation between any individual and the legacy of the Shoah might be. Plath's critics were outraged by the poet's use of Holocaust material to express personal suffering: "how dare she presume to imagine herself as one of the victims?" To make heard the stories of the imagined dead, Plath deploys the rhetorical trope of prosopopoeia. The figure reveals the uses and abuses of empathy. On the one hand, simulating the voices of those who are absent may be interpreted as a productive act of empathy. Prosopopoeia, Susan Gubar argues in this volume, provides a "haunting surrogate" to the fate to which a post-Holocaust writer might have been destined. On the other, Plath's poetry also offers "a critique of the lure of empathy," seen as a "ruse . . . of identification."

Even more acutely than Plath's poetry, Benjamin Wilkomirski's "memoir" forces sticky ethical questions. Wilkomirski's bestseller *Fragments* was praised to the skies for being uncannily authentic before being denounced as a fraud. Anyone who read the book before the imposture of its author was exposed in 1998 will remember the shock that came from the harrowing description of a child's nightmare in a concentration camp. Now the shock comes from the fact of Holocaust appropriation. "Being an extreme case," Susan Suleiman observes, "*Fragments* poses certain questions starkly: . . . To whom does the memory of the Holocaust belong?" (554). The scandal of this affair points to the extreme difficulty of adjudicating the ownership of collective memory faced with the extraordinary malleability of empathy in contemporary culture. Rather than bar non-Jews or non-survivors from access to this memory as though it were copyright, as readers (not to say citizens) we have the task of sorting out the feelings of uneasiness some experience when ownership appears threatened. When shock leads to total dismissal, the legacy of the Holocaust as a more broadly human, mind- and body-shattering catastrophe, one could argue, is also threatened.

Meditating on the Wilkomirski/Dössekker border crossing, Ross Chambers examines the process by which an individual may come to "confuse the collective historical consciousness concerning outrageous events with painful personal memories; and to confuse them to the point of being *inhabited* (i.e., haunted) by the events *as though* he or she had actually lived through them." As Gubar demonstrates in the case of Plath's poetry, empathy in representations of extreme experience operates from two interrelated positions: the writer's relation to the material she wishes to convey and the reader's response. In *Fragments*, whose narrative obeys the formal properties of asyndeton (a rhetorical figure that operates through the omission of certain logical connections), readers supply the missing pieces. Asyndeton, Chambers argues, is "a privileged figure of Holocaust witnessing" because readers must make a connection to what's described by finding a place of pain in themselves to which they may relate a suffering they probably have not experienced; remembering *with* the other in this bodily (and yet rhetorical) way is an intense form of "reader involvement." Like postmemory, this involvement entails a double movement of recognition: what joins one to the victim and what separates. Faced with the gaps and incompleteness of testimony, readers fill in the blanks from their own storehouses of memory and "phantom pain." Through this traffic of affective connection between writer and reader, individual attachment may serve to balance an overwhelming sense of

collective loss that is not restricted to the Holocaust; it also characterizes, Chambers suggests, AIDS testimonial writing. At the same time, however, whatever the attachment between writer and reader, there remains in every act of witness a place of opacity, what Agamben calls a "lacuna," that cannot be illuminated or put into language (39). In the same way, prosopopoeia may conjure the dead but no figure of speech can ever bring back the missing bodies or their words.

"*Why has testimony*," Shoshana Felman asks, "*become at once so central and so omnipresent in our recent cultural accounts of ourselves?*" (Felman and Laub 6). If every century has been marked by extreme experience, it has become almost compulsory in ours to document the disaster. It's as though we "feel a need to record everything," Geoffrey Hartman observes, "even as the event is occurring" (*Longest Shadow* 106). Whatever the temporal relation to the event (on the spot or after the fact); whatever the medium (video, film, memoir, fictional or critical confession, public testimony or legal deposition); and whatever the degrees of emotional involvement; we bear witness individually for ourselves, our own sake, but always in relation to others (again, both individually and in the name of a community). In that process, the act of testimony also becomes a speech act and draws meaning from its effects on the listener. Acts of witness bind teller and listener through what Wendy Chun in "Unbearable Witness" calls a "contract of listening" (this contract is not unlike the one binding writer and reader in autobiographical acts although these are not formally, as we'll see, the same activity). "For the testimonial process to take place," explains Dori Laub, "there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an *other*—in the position of one who hears. Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude. The witnesses are talking to *somebody*: to somebody they have been waiting for for a long time" (Felman and Laub 70–71). Testimony attempts to bridge the gap between suffering individuals and ultimately communities of listeners, whose empathic response can be palliative, if not curative.

Practicing analyst and active participant in the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale, Laub is in many ways the ideal listener—trained in the art of attentiveness, and self-conscious about his role. In the world at large, however, ideal listeners and settings seldom appear. And even Laub's model is vulnerable to the power of defenses entailed in receiving the story. "A sense of outrage," "a flood of awe and fear," "foreclosure through facts," and "hyperemotionality" (72–73) all can interfere with the testimonial act. The transmission of a witness's story is therefore

doubly complicated, first by the witness's own degree of temporal, spatial, and emotional distance from what is being documented, and second, by the listener's reactions.

Inevitably, the nature of testimonial dynamics varies as it engages with the emotional logic of different historical situations, even while displaying many of the characteristics of those delineated by Laub: the fraught interaction of witness and listener; the quest for words commensurate with experience; the creation of metaphors to compensate for the failure of language faced with the exorbitance of the literal; the exposure of private suffering to establish modes of negotiation between the intimate and public; all of which—ideally—result in the formation of “an affective community” (Hartman, Interview 220) that can encompass both witnesses and listeners.

Sometimes listeners can be too powerful. Even testimony that garners a vast and sympathetic audience, like that of Zivia Lubetkin, a young Polish Zionist who witnessed the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto uprising, can be received in such a way that the experience of the testifier gets lost in the process. Orly Lubin retells Lubetkin's story, arguing that she sacrificed herself to the Zionist cause by reshaping her words and her delivery to make them palatable for interlocutors struggling to unite a ravaged diaspora and build a nation. Zionist leaders literally rehearsed the degradation out of her speech and the tears out of her delivery, until her account became satisfactorily coherent and uplifting. What remains of Lubetkin's performance are thirty-five seconds of film that itself bears witness to the transformation of flesh into symbol. A woman's body became heroic, raised to the national scale. By definition testimony, in particular the genre of *testimonio*, always unites individual and collective in the testifying body. Zivia Lubetkin, Lubin argues, “had no interest in the ‘I’—neither in its uniqueness, nor in its relations with the others.” As a result, however willingly, Lubetkin was biographically effaced between the past she endured and the future envisioned by the Zionist movement.

If testimony about traumatic experience always has a double function, both producing social discourse and initiating individual recovery, these two effects do not necessarily coincide. In Lubetkin's case, the building of an ideological discourse took precedence over personal healing. In these foundational moments of nationhood, Zionists were not ready to highlight the trauma of individual shock, of one person's lived experience. Rather they sought to integrate personal experience within its fragile borders, reshaping narrative within its demands for a heroic history, and seek-

ing to overcome the recent catastrophes to the Jewish peoples. Subsequently, in keeping with “the upbeat and universalist postwar mood,” the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, Peter Novick argues in *The Holocaust in American Life*, was made into “the central symbol of the Holocaust” (114–15).

Testimony records a movement from individual experience to the collective archive, from personal trauma to public memory. But when testimony located on a national stage is riven by conflicting aims among those bearing witness, such a transformation is impeded. This is evident in the debates between feminists and postfeminists that ensued after the 1989 massacre at Montreal’s École Polytechnique. Even though the killer, Marc Lépine, explicitly targeted female students—killing six of them—citing hatred for feminists as his motivation, the political resonance of the violence was obscured by the divided response to the horror. The drive to testify, Chun shows, was frustrated by a persistent dissension between survivors who identified themselves as feminist and those who did not; while some sought healing in the effects of public speech, others demanded privacy. The debate initiated a battle over how to interpret the events and how to recover from the trauma they produced, a battle never resolved. In Chun’s view, the goal of testimony is not “to cure either the speaker or the listener but rather to respond and listen so that survival is possible.” For some individual healing may indeed have resulted from speaking out, but that healing was not recorded in any collective response. In effect, the social discord that emerged in response to the massacre in the first place resolved itself on the side of a collective agreement to restore the status quo.

In memoir form or public debate, questions of testimony can fracture communities of fellow-sufferers along ideological lines, divide as well as bridge. When a memoir records a trauma occurring in the present, as AIDS memoirs do, readers are fragmented into those who feel at risk and those who disavow it, separating themselves from the writer of the testimony. In AIDS memoirs, Jason Tougaw shows, what connects reader and writer is the risk for infection—so that listening involves tolerating an elaborate exegesis of AIDS symptoms, both bodily and social. AIDS memoirs written from within the epicenter of the pandemic during the period (roughly 1985–95) when AIDS was, however wrongly, still primarily associated with gay men, asked readers to confront their own anxieties. Reading about HIV re-enacts the disconcerting chain of transmission charted by the virus itself. The trauma that compels the testimony creates a community of readers through their shared vulnerability. When trauma continues in the

present, readers find themselves implicated beyond the page. Listening may be necessary for survival, but reading AIDS memoirs means avowing what healthy readers would prefer to disavow: the threat of the virus.

Writing about illness in a public forum creates the possibility of community. The intimate tone of "Off My Chest" (beginning with its title), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's witty advice column in *MAMM* magazine, implies a shared, if not collective, struggle, through her own experience of living with the disease of breast cancer. Sedgwick offers concrete, subjective, empathic, and opinionated advice for women overwhelmed by the practical politics of breast cancer treatment. The column's publication in *MAMM* (importantly, the sister-publication of *POZ*, a magazine for the HIV community), whose explicit aim is to establish a breast cancer community, means that ideally the readership will include healthcare professionals, therapists and social workers, and family members of women with breast cancer. Sedgwick speaks with the authority of the patient and the commitment of a longtime feminist critic willing to risk exposure and the language of commonality: "But listen, here's the bottom line. . . . The only certainties are that you will have feelings, and that over time even the strongest of them will change and change again. . . . That's what being alive means."

We've been making an argument about the role testimony plays in the construction of community and collective identity; we've also been emphasizing the public spaces in which private anguish is brought into the public record and into public memory. Weighing the merits of "writing wrong," seeking the widest context for her story, Sandra Gilbert concludes that "anyone who has suffered the shock of what is experienced as a wrongful death has had to engage with what it is impossible to tell yet somehow essential to speak, if only stammeringly." To tell the story is to attempt, as Gilbert describes the process here, "to relieve the pain of reliving the pain," to write the "untellable grief." Traumatic experience, in this sense, is silenced pain that demands a voicing—and a hearing. But is everything good to tell?

Writing wrong is an attempt to right wrongs, to refuse to keep private, solitary suffering locked away, to put one's story into the public domain, to take it out of the bosom of the family it has wounded and place it in a discourse that makes the story shareable with others. "'You must not tell anyone,' my mother said, 'what I am about to tell you'" is the first line of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (3). "'You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy'" is the injunction for a daughter not to tell that hangs as an epigraph in italics over Alice Walker's epistolary

novel, *The Color Purple* (11). These two immensely successful texts (non-fiction and fiction) by twentieth-century women writers who refuse to remain silent record the stakes of revelation, make public narratives of what was meant to remain shrouded in privacy. Both literary works, King-Kok Cheung shows, bear witness to a dare: “to listen to their own pains, to report the ravages, and, finally, to persist in finding strengths from sources that have caused inestimable anguish” (172). The family, feminist theorists have shown, as an apparently safe scene of private life, can be dangerous to girls and women. The desire to report the crime, to tell all, and in particular to violate the conspiracies of silence and shame that constrain girls’ voices, also resides at the heart of Kathryn Harrison’s notorious memoir *The Kiss* and Annie Ernaux’s *Shame*.

Contemporary chronicles of the self refuse the limits of decorum rather than restrict the project of uncovering. The confessional memoir makes the private public—secrets, fantasies, taboos. Freud believed that the secret lives of the mind offend if revealed unmediated: “The day-dreamer carefully conceals his phantasies from other people because he feels he has reasons for being ashamed of them. I should add now that even if he were to communicate them to us he could give us no pleasure by his disclosures” (443). “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming” has an anachronistic feel in a therapized culture obsessed with circulating its shameful secrets (pace Foucault). But of course in this essay Freud was making a distinction between everyday fantasies and creative works—it’s above all the aesthetic that makes the fantasies of others palatable or seductive.

In the testimonies of extreme experience that attend to the crises of the body and the mind, the relation between ethics and aesthetics comes under pressure, strained and subject to debate. With confessional writing, especially the memoir form that deals with sexuality and bodily distress within the family, that relation is sometimes stressed to a breaking point for both writer and reader. The question of where to draw the line in taste and genre poses shifting dilemmas for critics, who intervene in the debate and shape reception. What’s tricky for readers are the moments when within what Leigh Gilmore calls the “less inflected dimensions of everyday life” feelings of “harm and pleasure” get combined: when the home turns dangerous and the familial erotic (31).

Though the comparison may seem odd, the reception history of *Fragments* has much in common with that of *The Kiss*. Laura Frost observes that *The Kiss* disturbed reviewers because it raised “questions of referentiality and authorial presence.” On the epistemological front, readers

doubted Harrison's story and excoriated its teller. Harrison's perceived equivocation and generic manipulation produced "revulsion and horror." Critics objected to Harrison's airing of family secrets, to the ease with which she sanctioned the ultimate violation of kinship in a narrative that collapsed distinctions between the realm of the extreme and the everyday—above all, banalizing the taboo. But this was to confound form and content. Critics appear to have been trumped by the paradox of confessional memoir, a genre that exposes secrets only to re-conceal them through aestheticization. Apparently intent on frustrating the transmission of this story of father-daughter incest, reviewers resorted to questions about genre and form. Still, if critics went to great lengths to dismiss Harrison, readers kept buying books.

If any recent memoir tested the limits of familial dysphoria, *The Kiss* capped those of Harrison's American precursors of the genre (despite the fact that the genre of the book was subject to debate). In the French novelist and memoirist Annie Ernaux's bestselling narrative *Shame*, scenes of domestic trauma haunt the daughter and produce a form of writing that takes the reader to the edge of abjection. Ernaux stages her affront to expectations within the body of the text, throwing down a gauntlet to readers: "I have always wanted to write the sort of book that I find it impossible to talk about afterward, the sort of book that makes it impossible for me to withstand the gaze of others" (109). In a way, the challenge of a writing that seeks to penetrate the nature of shame and to override its inhibitions on the page participates in the project of "traumatic realism" that we invoked earlier, a writing project that like *The Kiss* (despite the vastly different subject matter) forces the reader to confront the uncomfortable contiguity of the extreme and the everyday—precisely *in* the everyday. And again, for women, the family in its dailiness is often the site of trauma, of domestic violence and bodily shame. The first sentence of *Shame* boldly bypasses the injunction to remain silent: "My father tried to kill my mother one Sunday in June, in the early afternoon" (13). Perhaps in a kind of fin de siècle exhaustion with *politesse*, first-person memorialization in the 1990s produces an unsettlement that aggresses and alienates the reader, sometimes causing an anxious withdrawal, sometimes nervous excitement.

Wayne Koestenbaum's "Aryan Boy," a fragmented remembrance, begins with a small piece of family history. The son's story of a disturbing memory unfolds outside the tent of traumatic conventions. On the contrary, the boy imagines the possibility that his father was laughing as

he reminisced. "At some overnight nature retreat, long ago, outside of Berlin, my father woke to discover someone pissing on his head. It was the Aryan boy in the upper bunk. While my father told me this story, I was bathing, under his supervision; a plastic cup floated beside me in the soapy water." The anecdote, one of the few his father had told about his childhood in Nazi Germany, moves through a series of episodes in which a boy's body, the legacy of the Holocaust, masculinity, the entanglements of penises and pissing continue to reverberate until they come together in a final melding of aesthetics and ethics—relief at not liking *Triumph of the Will*, of not finding "the Aryan boy attractive as he leaned over and let pour onto my head his golden arc." Like Harrison's and Ernaux's memoirs, Koestenbaum's radically brief narrative—a boy's memory of a father's story of humiliation—is a story in large part about bodies; and its structure stages the embarrassments of a hesitant sexuality at home (and not at home). The segments and their headings—"The Reproduction Story," "One Problem with This Discourse," and so on—function as captions to the verbal snapshots of the family album. At the same time, they embody the episodic structure of memory (traumatic and commonplace) and remind the reader how artful life writing necessarily must be.

In "A Palinode on Photography and the Transsexual Real," Jay Prosser elaborates a form to fit a body that both is and isn't what it appears to be. Prosser makes a critical confession—one that is not set to reveal something new but to correct, to modify the shape of an earlier revelation about the meaning of gender—and genitals. Writing "as a" transsexual about transsexuality means charting space in public discourse for a subject position that confuses, repels, and fascinates readers. The confusion and the fascination originate from the same source. As a critic coming to grips with an argument he had made about what photographs can tell us about the referent they seem to capture, Prosser (like Chambers and Rothberg in different contexts) works through the Lacanian notion of the real as that which cannot fail to elude us: "transsexuality," he writes, "resonates for our moment because the process of surgical reassignment seems to offer a literalization of the traumatic loss of the real and our attempt to regain the real *through* trauma." Transsexuality operates both as literal cutting of the body, a contemporary trauma indebted to the technology of modernity, and as the metaphor for trauma as a crisis in and of knowledge. The relation between the crossing body and the real is like the unbridgeable one between interlocutors that testimony seeks to erase.

There is an uncanny (which is also to say willfully canny) match be-

tween the form of the palinode—a recanting—and the fate of the transsexual body. You can't ever fully erase the previous message—of argument or gender. The trauma in this instance has to do both with getting it right (the right body) and having been wrong (the imperfect argument). You can never take it all back, just as Prosser finds himself unable to say of Loren Cameron's nude self-portrait, "But he has no penis!" At the extreme limits of representation (and this is perhaps the conundrum at the heart of gender) there is a point where what can't be put into words is what we just can't stop talking about, without quite ever getting there.

Contemporary writers push the envelope, the experiment, of identity—in the most literal sense of the word—to see what message it bears; in some cases, the medium *is* the message, as John Updike suggests in an essay about his psoriasis, "At War with My Skin": "It pains me to write these pages. They are humiliating—'scab-picking,' to use a term sometimes levelled at modern autobiographical writers" (44). Updike points not only to the inevitable slippage between literal and metaphorical domains of selfhood, between, say, scab and soul, but also the desire to overcome the vulgarity of picking in public. Scabs are the benign version of scars, the traces of wounds trying to heal on the surface of the skin. Skin holds memory and, as we've seen in the cases of tattoos and marks, mute signs of old humiliations. Picking scabs keeps the wounds open. Life writers are willing to tolerate the mess of embarrassment because they also expect their scabs and scars to remind readers of theirs. In hoping for parity, they can wish for clemency.

Perhaps as readers of contemporary life-writing, shoppers for shocks to our systems and values, literary critics and teachers of literature, look to meet if not match the wounds of others. We demonstrate a willingness to be bruised, to have our indifference challenged. Reading for the extreme is a way to consider the politics of empathy and acknowledge the limits of our civic engagement. So perhaps we should ask ourselves what's going on when we read a literature that takes us, however indirect the route, to the limit of norms and expectations, to the edge, sometimes, of what appears to be the tolerable. We need to worry more about why we like to buy and read these narratives of life in extreme conditions that serve as a scary mirror in which we contemplate not ours but another's face.

We inhabit an academic world, on Patricia Yaeger's reading, that cherishes what we've called the literature of affront, a world of critics "busy consuming trauma—eating, swallowing, perusing, consuming, exchanging, circulating, creating professional connections—through its stories about the dead." As teachers and students it's uncomfortable to dwell upon our

contractual obligations both toward the dead and toward the living, whose pain is represented in material that often causes powerful reactions of discomfort or shame, or even, an ambiguous pleasure in picture of suffering.

Extremities is an attempt to acknowledge the moral murkiness of the enterprise, to bear witness to the power of a culture whose cogito, according to Geoffrey Hartman, appears to be "I bleed, therefore I am" (in Ezrahi, 295). In *Extremities* we have wanted to evoke a circular meditation that moves from Patricia Yaeger's opening salvo about the dangers we incur by being overly confident that our theories can accommodate all the contingencies our reading practices may encounter; from collective atrocity, through public testimony, through the family, to the lonely gesture of telling "the story of storylessness" that shattered one woman's life. We've looked at art and national testimony, poetry and barbed wire, photographs of surgically reconfigured bodies and broken limbs, the soil of urine and a father's kisses. Stories that challenge the limits of representation and transmission resonate because they chronicle experience that has yet to be incorporated within the popular imagination. The Holocaust, we've suggested, dominates our critical horizon because its chroniclers have been so vigilant in forging indelible marks, in creating monuments to it in public memory. More recently, a flood of writers has followed suit, carving out new discursive territory to document a range of extreme experiences earlier generations of writers had consigned to silence—the anatomy of illness, the horror at the heart of the family. The common thread connecting these stories about fatal illness, premature death, incest, family trauma, and sexual fantasy that have been addressed in this book is that they call attention to the working of extreme experience in our own lives, in some cases close to home, in others most remote. If through listening or reading, readers find only approximations of the damaged consciousness that makes itself felt in art and writing, the words and images may nonetheless compel us to listen and respond. Recounting the extreme, we believe, sometimes has the power to form a community entangled together through the act of listening.

Solidarity, Richard Rorty has suggested, requires the "imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers"; requires, we might add, a recognition of our own linguistic and psychological limits. We can begin to take political responsibility, he argues, by "increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people" (xvi). But as we've seen, a reader's involvement with the painful details of another's story entails both the pleasures of the imagination and the defenses of personal boundaries—and these reactions shape the ex-

ercise of identification across the borders of the unfamiliar. Accounts of extreme experience set in motion an ambivalent desire to look, to grapple with real suffering, and at the same time to look away—to put the book down, including this one. The essays in *Extremities* try to come to terms with the pulls of those mixed emotions. Their authors articulate the necessity of an ethical response to the experiences of those fellow sufferers who might not (and often do not) resemble us. The forging of community is both an arduous and utopian project, beyond the realm of a single essay or book; but any reader can take a first step toward collective self-consciousness by negotiating pathways of responsiveness and responsibility between what is both strange and familiar, distant and all too close.

• • •

We complete the editing of this manuscript in the aftermath of the World Trade Center's destruction: September 11, 2001. This tragic overture to the twenty-first century has changed the context of this book, jarred our perspective. We are only beginning to take the measure of the new testimonies to loss, the new contexts of traumatic experience that this event has produced. Glued to television screens, as if mesmerized by the recirculation of the images, the repetition of eye-witness accounts, we attempt to fathom the unfathomable: We talk about our disbelief as a way of learning to believe. As rescue efforts, criminal investigations, and political strategies develop, the horror becomes narrative. For better or worse, a story is taking shape—visual, fragmentary, for now open-ended.

NOTE

We thank Rebecca Hogan and Joseph Hogan for editing the special issue of *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, "Extremities: Memoirs at the Fin de Siècle," and for their generosity in allowing us to republish some of those essays here. We are also grateful to Gloria Fisk, Susan Gubar, Marianne Hirsch, and Michael Rothberg for their judicious editorial responses to this collection.

WORKS CITED

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. New York: Zone Books, 1999.
- Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York: Viking, 1963.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

- Cheung, King-Kok. "'Don't Tell': Imposed Silences in *The Color Purple* and *The Woman Warrior*." *PMLA* 103.2 (1988): 162-74.
- Ernaux, Annie. *Shame*. Trans. Tanya Leslie. New York: Seven Stories Press, 1998.
- Ezrahi, Sidra. "After Such Knowledge, What Laughter?" *Yale Journal of Criticism* 14.1 (2001): 287-313.
- Felman, Shoshana, and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Forché, Carolyn, ed. *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*. New York: Norton, 1993.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming." *The Freud Reader*. Ed. Peter Gay. New York: Norton, 1989.
- Gilmore, Leigh. *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001.
- Hartman, Geoffrey H. *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.
- . Interview by Jennifer Ballengee. "Witnessing Video Testimony." *Yale Journal of Criticism* 14.1 (2001): 217-32.
- Hobsbawm, Eric. *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991*. New York: Vintage, 1996.
- Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- Klemperer, Victor. *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years, 1933-1941*. Trans. Martin Chalmers. New York: Random House, 1999.
- . *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years, 1942-1945*. Trans. Martin Chalmers. New York: Random House, 1999.
- LaCapra, Dominick. "Lanzmann's *Shoah*: 'Here There Is No Why.'" *Critical Inquiry* 23 (Winter 1997): 231-69.
- . "Trauma, Absence, Loss." *Critical Inquiry* 25 (Summer 1999): 696-727.
- Leys, Ruth. *Trauma: A Genealogy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.
- Mitchell, Juliet. *Mad Men and Medusas: Reclaiming Hysteria*. New York: Basic Books, 2000.
- Müller, Melissa. *Anne Frank*. Trans. Rita and Robert Kimber. New York: Holt, 1999.
- Novick, Peter. *The Holocaust in American Life*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.
- Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Roth, Philip. *Operation Shylock*. New York: Vintage, 1993.
- Rothberg, Michael. "W. E. B. Du Bois in Warsaw: Holocaust Memory and the Color Line, 1949-1952." *Yale Journal of Criticism* 14.1 (Spring 2001): 169-90.
- Spiegelman, Art. *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History*. New York: Pantheon, 1986.
- . *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began*. New York: Pantheon, 1991.
- Suleiman, Susan. "Problems of Memory and Factuality in Recent Holocaust Memoirs: Wilkomirski/Wiesel." *Poetics Today* 21.3 (Fall 2000): 543-59.
- Updike, John. *Self-Consciousness: Memoirs*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1990.
- Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. New York: Pocket Books, 1983.