

# Between Art and Testimony: Transforming Oral Histories of Holocaust Survivors into Young Adult Fiction and Creative Non-Fiction

*Karen A. Krasny, York University*<sup>1</sup>

*Works of historical fiction and creative non-fiction written about the Holocaust continue to occupy an important place in both the literary and history curricula in K to 12 schools. In discussion with author Kathy Kacer, I describe the particular challenges of transforming oral testimonies of Holocaust survivors into young adult (YA) narratives including the ways in which these narratives are mitigated by the adult desire to educate and protect and by the undeniable influence of the publication of the diary of Anne Frank. By taking up the problem of bearing literary witness as a mode of pedagogical address through Spargo's notion of vigilant memory and his reformulation of Levinasian ethics into terms of mourning, I demonstrate how oral histories directly or indirectly embedded in YA Holocaust narratives, might address the epistemological consequences of the Holocaust, specifically for invoking an ethical and social responsibility for the other through a resistance to consolation as a conventional form of commemoration.*

Works of historical fiction and creative non-fiction written about the Holocaust have come to occupy an important place in both the literary and history curricula in K to 12 schools. These narratives contribute to an educational imaginary focused on global social justice and contingent upon a belief in literature's potential to animate moral action. Not surprisingly, much critical attention has focused on the questionable coherency ascribed to the Holocaust experience as it is represented in young adult literature.<sup>2</sup> In this article, I detail the particular challenges of transforming oral testimony of Holocaust survivors and their families into historical

---

<sup>1</sup> Karen A. Krasny, Ph.D. is Associate Professor at York University where she teaches graduate seminars in language, culture and teaching and in adolescent and children's literature. Her recent research includes a co-edited volume of middle school students' writing and visual art titled "*We Are Their Voice*": *Young People Respond to the Holocaust* to be released by Second Story Press in fall 2012 and a SSHRC-sponsored investigation into the construction of post-Soviet national identities in Ukrainian diaspora literature.

<sup>2</sup> On the coherency ascribed to the Holocaust experience in YA literature, see Deborah Britzman, "If the Story Cannot End: Deferred Action, Ambivalence and Difficult Knowledge," in *Between Hope and Despair*, ed. R. Simon, S. Rosenberg, and C. Eppert (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 2000), 27-57; and Adrienne Kertzer, "Do You Know What 'Auschwitz' Means?: Children's Literature and the Holocaust," *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 23, no. 2 (1999): 238-256; and Theresa Rogers, "Understanding in the Absence of Meaning: Coming of Age Narratives of the Holocaust," *The New Advocate*, 15, no. 3 (2002): 259-266.

fiction and creative non-fiction written for an audience of young adult readers. In discussion with author Kathy Kacer, I explore the ways in which educational desire, the publishing industry, and the art of storytelling work to curate oral histories of the Holocaust as consoling narratives. I respond to the critique that such works delimit ethical engagement through the presentation of oversimplified “feel good” stories of an event that defies representation and take up the problem of witnessing as pedagogical address mediated through Santayana’s admonition: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”<sup>3</sup> Drawing on Spargo’s notion of “vigilant memory,”<sup>4</sup> in which he attempts to reformulate Levinasian ethics into terms of mourning,<sup>5</sup> I examine how oral histories directly or indirectly embedded within these narratives might address the epistemological consequences of the Holocaust specifically, for invoking an ethical and social responsibility for the other. I argue that young adult literature about the Holocaust can constitute a critical context for examining how writers negotiate the imaginative distance between art and testimony and is but one of many shifting cultural contexts that Spargo contends reflect the changing meaning of the specter of historical atrocity for different generations and audiences.

### **From Testimony to Telling Stories**

Author Kathy Kacer is seated once again in the audience at a Toronto production of her play based on her book *The Secret of Gabi’s Dresser*, which was inspired by the true story of Kacer’s mother who, in 1942, hid in a dining room dresser while Nazi soldiers searched the house looking for her.<sup>6</sup> The producer of the play has made a practice of bringing in Holocaust survivors to each show so that students in attendance could ask them questions at the end of the play. At this particular performance, Kacer listened attentively as Edith Schwalb briefly recounted for audience members, how she and her brother once managed to escape the attention of Nazi soldiers and how residents of the small French town of Moissac, Jews and non-Jews alike, conspired to keep them safe. As the dwindling number of Holocaust survivors advance in age, Kacer is worried that the opportunity for students to hear

---

<sup>3</sup> George Santayana, “Chapter XII Flux and Constancy in Human Nature,” in *The Life of Reason*, vol. 1 (New York: Scribner, 1905), 284.

<sup>4</sup> R. Clifton Spargo, *Vigilant Memory: Emmanuel Levinas, the Holocaust, and the Unjust Death*, (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> For the allusive relation between Levinasian ethics and the Holocaust, see Robert Eaglestone, “From Behind the Bars of Quotation Marks: Emmanuel Levinas’s (Non)-Representation of the Holocaust,” in *The Holocaust and the Text: Speaking the Unspeakable*, ed. Andrew Leak and George Paizis (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 2000), 97-108. On ethical critique as being implicit in the memory of injustice, see Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, [1974] 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Kathy Kacer, *The Secret of Gabi’s Dresser* (Toronto: Second Storey Press, 1999).

oral testimony directly from Holocaust survivors may soon be a thing of the past. She knew immediately that Schwalb's story was something that she wanted to write about. For Kacer and the survivors she encounters, it is all about legacy, the chance to ensure that victims add their voice to mounting numbers of reports and analyses by historians, psychologists, psychoanalysts, philosophers, political scientists, economists, and sociologists who, for more than half a century, have sought to convey the fullest meanings of the Holocaust. Survivors' testimonies constitute the mainstay of Kacer's storytelling and work to resist the totalizing effect of attempts to understand the Holocaust solely in terms of historical and psychological antecedents. Kacer approached Schwalb after the performance, introduced herself, and asked for an interview. Schwalb agreed and as a result, the survivor's oral testimony became the basis for the novel *Hiding Edith*.<sup>7</sup> Kacer writes conscious of the difficult questions related to rendering the Holocaust for children and adolescents. She prefers to characterize her work as creative non-fiction as opposed to historical fiction and is clear that there is no unifying narrative that can possibly capture the specter of the Holocaust for child or adult.<sup>8</sup>

For the past eight years, Kacer has been a regular guest in my undergraduate English education courses and graduate seminar in adolescent and children's literature at York University in Toronto. In working with Kacer, it is hard not to observe a particular vigilance that characterizes her work of transforming survivors' testimonies into stories to capture the attention of young adult readers. The child of Holocaust survivors, Kacer draws determination from what Elie Wiesel defines as the obligation owed to the dead to bear witness.<sup>9</sup> She tours with a repository of artifacts. Her collection includes photographs of children performing the opera *Brundibar* in Theresienstadt, maps of ghettos, copies of an underground newspaper generated by Jewish youth in a Czech village prior to their eventual deportation to concentration camps, reproductions of survivors' passports, trans-Atlantic tickets, and a worn yellow Star of David given to her by a survivor. The dresser in which her mother hid from Nazi soldiers remains at home in her family's dining room, a testament to her inheritance as witness. Prior to interviewing survivors and their families, Kacer turns to historical accounts and actual archives to conduct extensive research. She needs to gain a sense of what happened in a particular country, region, city or town, before, during and after the events of the Holocaust. Preliminary research helps Kacer develop an interview protocol, questions that will shape discussions with survivors and their families as she digs deeper, paying attention to that which either remains off the historical record or is seldom explored in relation to

---

<sup>7</sup> Kathy Kacer, *Hiding Edith* (Toronto: Second Storey Press, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Interviews with Kathy Kacer were conducted through a series of electronic communications from August 17 to September 19, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Elie Wiesel, "Why I Write," in *Confronting the Holocaust*, ed. Alvin Rosenfeld and Irving Greenberg (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1978) 202-203.

the Holocaust. For example, in penning her first novel written for an adult audience *Restitution: A Family's Fight for Their Heritage Lost in the Holocaust*, Kacer, reports having to meticulously research the events leading to the takeover of the Sudetenland in former Czechoslovakia in 1938.<sup>10</sup> For Kacer, the policy of appeasement and the decision rendered by Germany, Britain, France, and Italy to give Germany control of the Sudetenland prior to the beginning of the Second World War, marked a mother's suspicions and an important starting point for documenting the harrowing saga of one family's Holocaust survival and the eventual restitution in 1990 of four paintings belonging to the family's estate.

Beyond offering readers a historical account, Kacer is committed to crafting a compelling story, a transformation that Lawrence Langer argues, entails "historical fact and imaginative truth."<sup>11</sup> Convinced that we need young people to make meaningful connections to history if it is to be memorable for them, the author discusses with survivors how she negotiates the distance between memoir and fiction—sometimes changing names and events and adding detail or constructing dialogue to create a verisimilitude that projects some quality of empirical reality. Kacer concedes: "Is it the "whole" truth? No, but it is a piece of the truth." Her aim, she reports, is not to whitewash history but to affectively engage children and adolescents in an otherwise unimaginable event. That any artistic or literary projection of the Holocaust is invariably incomplete is the focus of much scholarly analysis and critique. Survivors orally impart their story to Kacer, fully knowing that Kacer will creatively adapt it for a particular audience of readers. They are kept informed as the manuscript develops and given final approval. Many had spoken publicly about their lives before the books were published and they feel that seeing their experiences in print advances their intended mission of bearing witness. What remains of paramount importance to the survivors about whom Kacer has written is that there be some acknowledgement that "they once lived in a family, in a city or a village, in a particular country during horrific times." They feel that transforming their oral testimonies into stories written for a younger audience is one way to achieve that recognition and to offer some assurance of extending that acknowledgement into the future.

---

<sup>10</sup> Kathy Kacer, *Restitution: A Family's Fight for Their Heritage Lost in the Holocaust* (Toronto: Second Storey Press, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Lawrence Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975), 8.

## Between Narrative and History

Shoshana Felman and Barbara Hernstein Smith distinguish between history, which is generally viewed as a discipline of inquiry and a mode of knowledge, and narrative, which is conceived of as a mode of discourse and a literary genre. Accordingly, narrative can be defined “as verbal acts consisting of *someone telling someone else that something happened*” where that something that happened is history and where that “someone telling someone else that something happened is narrative.” But, posits Felman, the delineation is not so easily drawn when one considers that history’s “establishment of facts of the past “ is achieved through their “narrativization.”<sup>12</sup> In “Camus’ *The Plague*, or A Monument to Witnessing,” Felman problematizes Hegel’s classical philosophy of history that supposes “historical narration to have appeared contemporaneously with historical deeds and events.”<sup>13</sup> Through an examination of Albert Camus’ post-war writings, Felman demonstrates how traditional forms of historical narration have necessarily changed after the atrocities of the Holocaust.<sup>14</sup> In light of Elie Wiesel’s proclamation that “[t]here is no such thing as literature of the Holocaust, nor can there be,”<sup>15</sup> Felman proposes to test instead the impact of the Holocaust on the narrative and makes a compelling argument to engage literature as a form of action in order to create “a new form of *narrative as testimony* not merely to record, but to rethink and, in the act of its rethinking, in effect transform history by bearing literary witness to the Holocaust.”<sup>16</sup> I am not going to suggest that the vast majority of young adult literature written about the Holocaust approaches the allegorical depth or existential intensity in Camus’ *The Plague* (1947) and *The Fall* (1956), but I argue that narrative as testimony and the charge to rethink and transform history by bearing literary witness has particular relevance for post-Holocaust generations and hence, YA readers and writers. This move toward narrative as testimony in YA literature, however, is not without its considerable challenges, not the least of which is the contentious place of hope.

---

<sup>12</sup> On the defining history and narrative, Shoshana Felman and Barbara Hernstein Smith are cited in Shoshana Felman, “Camus’ *The Plague*, or a Monument to Witnessing,” in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, ed. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, (New York: Routledge, 1992), 93.

<sup>13</sup> George W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (The Colonial Press, 1899), 60.

<sup>14</sup> Shoshana Felman illustrates literature a metaphorical transformation of history using in Felman “Camus’ *The Plague*,” 93-119.

<sup>15</sup> Elie Wiesel, “For Some Measure of Humility,” *Sh’ma* 5, no. 100 (October 31, 1975): 314.

<sup>16</sup> Felman, “Camus’ *The Plague*,” 95.

## The Problem of Aesthetic Justification

The late critic and musicologist Theodor Adorno once declared that to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.<sup>17</sup> Langer argues that Adorno never intended his denunciation to be taken literally but rather to represent the apprehension that the transformation of atrocity into some form of artistic expression may in the end, misrepresent the experience of the Holocaust and in turn, appeal to our sensibilities in such a way as to create artificial meaning and purpose.<sup>18</sup> According to James Young, the Holocaust marks an antiredemptory age in the arts of memory. In contrast to Felman, Young contends that the Holocaust did not produce any new forms of artistic expression, having for the most part, been assimilated by the modernist innovations generated in the wake of the First World War. Yet as Young explains, “where antirealist and fragmentation motifs were seen as redemptory of art’s purpose after the Great War precisely because they refused to affirm the conditions and values that made such terror possible, art and literature after the Holocaust are pointedly antiredemptory of both themselves and the catastrophe they represent.”<sup>19</sup> As Young sees it, all post-Holocaust writers and artists are faced with the dilemma of imposing meaning and significance on the Holocaust. Citing Saul Friedländer, Young draws our attention to the potential for redemption reflectively generated by the very act of narrating history. Friedländer, too, is doubtful that experimental responses to Holocaust testimony are the answer as they may verge on the nihilistic and undercut any and all meaning.<sup>20</sup>

Alvin Rosenfeld writes of the improbability of conceiving of a Holocaust literature except as “an attempt to retrieve some ongoing life—posit a future tense—for whatever it is of human definition that remains to us.” In “The Problematics of Holocaust Literature,” Rosenfeld puts before us the impossibility of reconciling the idea of writing to preserve “an articulate life” where “what remains is less than what perished but more than that which wanted to conquer and prevail,” with the idea expressed by Adorno and others that to do so attributes aesthetic justification and artificial meaning on mass suffering.<sup>21</sup> Elie Wiesel’s denunciation of Holocaust literature as “a contradiction in terms” further emphasizes the ethical quandary

---

<sup>17</sup> Theodor Adorno, “Engagement,” in *Noten zur Literatur* III (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1965), 125-126.

<sup>18</sup> Lawrence Langer, “In the Beginning was the Silence,” in *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975), 1-30.

<sup>19</sup> James Young, *At Memory’s Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 5.

<sup>20</sup> Saul Friedländer, *Memory, History and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993).

<sup>21</sup> Alvin Rosenfeld, “The Problematics of Holocaust Literature,” in *Literature of the Holocaust*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004), 22.

facing post Holocaust artists and writers wanting to represent survivors' oral history.<sup>22</sup> Rosenfeld draws our attention to the fact that Wiesel's writings, perhaps more than that of any other writer, testify to the Holocaust's demand for speech. This alone should prompt *our consideration* of Wiesel's stated view that any attempt to write Holocaust literature is "blasphemy" but as Rosenfeld argues, not necessarily, *our acceptance*. As Rosenfeld points out, the only alternative is to succumb to silence and that by far, would be the greater injustice.

We know, for a dozen books by Elie Wiesel alone have now told us, that the Holocaust demands speech even as it threatens to impose silence. The speech may be flawed, stuttering, and inadequate, as it must be given the sources out of which it originates, but it is still speech. Silence has not prevailed—to let it do so would be tantamount to granting Hitler one more posthumous victory—just as night has been refused its dominion.

Rosenfeld explains that the Holocaust writer who confronts her subject does so knowing that it is likely to overwhelm the capacity of language. He likens the writer's position to the spiritually faithful who in their frustration and anguish, yearn "for the fullness of Presence" but are "forced to acknowledge the emptiness and silence of an imposed Absence."<sup>23</sup>

### Consoling Narratives

Any oral or written testimony of the Holocaust transformed and transcribed as YA literature is likely mitigated by two interrelated influences that conspire to create hopeful and consoling narratives. The first relates to the conventions of the genre itself and the second concerns the enduring legacy of the publication of *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*. If we accept Jonathan Frow's description of genre as a dynamic process that reflects changing cultural discursive practices rather than a set of stable rules, then it follows that texts and genres are mutually influential.<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, the transcendent and widespread appeal of *Anne Frank* has likely contributed to the demarcation of YA literature as a distinct and increasingly popular cultural form of representation within the broader category of children's literature.

---

<sup>22</sup> Elie Wiesel, "The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration," in *Dimensions of the Holocaust: Lectures at Northwestern University*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Elie Wiesel, Lucy Dawidowicz, Dorothy Rabinowitz, and Robert McAfee Brown (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press), 7.

<sup>23</sup> Rosenfeld, "The Problematics of Holocaust Literature," 23-24.

<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Frow, *Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

The American Library Association (ALA) describes YA literature as works written for children and adolescents aged twelve to eighteen.<sup>25</sup> In my experience as a language arts coordinator and teacher in K to 12 Canadian schools, however, many of the works marketed by publishers as YA literature are read as early as fourth and fifth grade by nine- and ten-year olds. While there are no fixed lines, generally, YA literature appears to be the dominant literary genre in middle school (grades five to eight) classrooms and libraries while the high school curriculum focuses more squarely on the classical canon and contemporary works written for adult readers. Jack Zipes has written extensively on the questionable existence of children's literature. Like most forms of child culture, Zipes adopts a Marxist point of view to argue that the genre is monopolized by market forces to reflect adult sensibilities and desires. Children's literature performs a socializing function insofar as works written for adolescents and children more often than not, serve as instruments of cultural homogenization and moral instruction.<sup>26</sup> Holocaust testimony, however, disrupts the boundaries of idealized childhood, making writing survivors' accounts for children and adolescents complicated. When it comes to selecting Holocaust narratives, librarians and teachers (who, more than children, are the market audience) tend to negotiate between what they believe to be their responsibility to inform and their responsibility to protect, sometimes, but not always, taking their cue from theories of child development.<sup>27</sup> There is a persistent assumption that younger readers expect and deserve stories that end in some resolution. As Adrienne Kertzer points out, "If we persist in thinking that children need hope and happy endings (and I must confess that I believe that they do), then the stories we give them about the Holocaust will be shaped by those expectations." Most YA Holocaust narratives, therefore, attempt to recuperate hope and courage to posit the moral imperative: Never again! Any attempt to narrate Auschwitz defies the explanatory function of traditional children's stories so it is not surprising, that most YA Holocaust literature attempts to do so by featuring heroic and triumphant stories of escape through immigration or rescue, or of hiding and resistance. There are predictably far fewer YA narratives that take the reader inside life and death in the concentration camps.<sup>28</sup>

Genre theory offers some insight into how YA literature offers a socially structured context for hopeful endings and one that positions both reader and writer in dialogue with George Santayana's well-known admonition: "Those who cannot

---

<sup>25</sup> American Library Association, "YALSA Mission Statement," accessed January 31, 2012, <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/aboutyalsa>.

<sup>26</sup> On the social and economic forces shaping the industry of children's and YA literature, see Jack Zipes, "Why Children's Literature Does Not Exist," in *The Troublesome Success of Children's Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 39-60.

<sup>27</sup> David Russell, "Reading the Shards and Fragments: Holocaust Literature for Young Readers," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 21, no. 2 (April 1997): 267-280.

<sup>28</sup> Kertzer, "Do You Know What 'Auschwitz' Means?," 253.



remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”<sup>29</sup> Frow defines genre as a key means by which we categorize the many forms of literature and culture and as such, genre works to actively generate and shape our knowledge of the world. Like all genres, works written for young adults employ a set of formal features (e.g., the visual structure of type size and font, form, organization, specific vocabulary) and a thematic structure that draws heavily upon a set of conventional topics to project a coherent and plausible world from these materials. All of these features combine to form a general structure of implication that invokes and presupposes a range of relevant background knowledge and experience to make the reader complicit. The author typically establishes a situation of address or level of authority reflected in the tone adopted.<sup>30</sup> Accordingly, the majority of works marketed to a contemporary YA audience among which Holocaust narratives are well-represented features an adolescent protagonist and narrator, who may or may not be one in the same. In some cases, the author of the work is also an adolescent as is the case with S. E. Hinton, who was seventeen when she began writing *The Outsiders*.<sup>31</sup> The narrator in YA literature speaks from the point of view that she shares common ground with her reader. The reader becomes engaged in a kind of a peer relationship through which she and the narrator/protagonist can explore some adolescent crisis or conflict. While contemporary YA literature is characterized by the fundamental elements of character, plot, setting, theme and style and spans the gamut of fiction subgenres, these elements can be extended to include autobiographical and biographical narratives. Prevalent among works of YA literature are coming-of-age stories that focus on resolving or coming to terms with the challenges of youth of which *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* takes center stage.

Whether as an independent self-selected reading or more likely, as a curriculum object for study, that this autobiographical work by fifteen-year old Anne Frank continues to be of keen interest to new generations of young readers is not surprising. Since the diary’s first publication in 1947 under the editorship of Anne’s father Otto Frank, the work has been translated into sixty languages and has sold in excess of twenty million copies. Anne Frank’s narrative is the most widely circulated of any World War II figure making her quite possibly, the most well known child of the twentieth century.<sup>32</sup> In many respects, *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* is read in schools as the quintessential *Künstlerroman*, a *Bildungsroman* or coming-of-age tale characterized by the protagonist’s journey to becoming a participant in a

---

<sup>29</sup> Santayana, “Chapter XII,” 284.

<sup>30</sup> Frow, *Genre*.

<sup>31</sup> Susan Eloise Hinton, *The Outsiders* (New York: Viking Press, 1967).

<sup>32</sup> Alvin Rosenfeld, “The Anne Frank We Remember,” (paper presented at the Herman P. and Sophia Taubman Endowed Symposia in Jewish Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara, August 31, 2004), accessed September 1, 2011, <http://www.uctv.tv/search-details.aspx?showID=8872>.

modern historical world in which her art plays a facilitative role. Anne is read as the protagonist of her own story and like the fictional characters Jo, in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and Harriet, in Louise Fitzhugh's more lighthearted *Harriet, the Spy*, Anne's journey is propelled by her writing.<sup>33</sup> But unlike her fictional counterparts, Anne's journey is never completed. In reality, she is not reintegrated into the modern progressive state despite our sentimentalizing efforts to the contrary. If we are to accept, even in part, Zygmunt Bauman's argument that the Holocaust is closely connected to the categorization and order-making directed energies of modernity, it is Anne, who, rather than coming to terms with the modern world, is killed by calculation's extreme cruelty.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, that such routinization of evil is perpetrated by her fellow human beings is something that is never sufficiently brought to the fore in what Rosenfeld dubs the Anne Frank we *choose* to remember.

As Rosenfeld explains, the diary's initial publication in 1947 was met with limited success. Many people wanted to move beyond their own wartime hardships and deprivations and were not moved to read the book as a triumph over suffering, early criticism by Dutch historian, Jan Romaine, focused on the importance of the diary as a historical document for what it could tell us about the "hideousness of fascism" and "important truths about the Nazi catastrophe" and Romaine saw it as a dark book. Nevertheless, others reading Anne Frank's diary for the first time were moved by the young girl's courage and honesty and read the diary as a personal testament to hope as the ultimate means of overcoming miseries endured. Anne Frank did not so much perish but transcend the Holocaust to give the world a sign that evil cannot prevail and good will always shines through. What became immediately clear is that the diary provoked contested readings. When the diary of Anne Frank became available to an American audience in the 1950s, details of Nazi atrocities committed against the Jews were not yet widely known and the oft quoted line in the diary, "In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart" resonated more with American post-war optimism than with Holocaust realities. As time wore on, the range of competing readings began to narrow. The Albert Hackett and Frances Goodrich Pulitzer Prize-winning play *The Diary of Anne Frank* that hit the Broadway stage in 1955 marked a rhetorical gesture toward the posthumous life of Anne Frank and her diary as cultural icon. The flurry of popular media adaptations that followed solidified the image of a buoyantly cheerful Anne Frank, considerably less spiritually and intellectually complex than the view finally afforded us by the 1989 critical edition of the diary. The transformation and transfiguration of Anne Frank—dehistoricized, de-Judaized, and deracinated—lives

---

<sup>33</sup> For a discussion on the YA *Künstlerroman*, see Roberta Seelinger Trites, "Re/constructing the Female Writer: Subjectivity in the Feminist *Künstlerroman*," in *Waking Sleeping Beauty* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1997), 63-79.

<sup>34</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

in our cultural psyche as a universal symbol of redemption and hope.<sup>35</sup> In the words of Eleanor Roosevelt, “Anne’s diary makes poignantly clear the ultimate shining nobility of [the human] spirit.”<sup>36</sup>

Author Cynthia Ozick has been even more critical of how the diary of Anne Frank has been curated to the point of being “bowdlerized, distorted, transmuted, traduced, reduced; it has been infantilized, Americanized, homogenized, sentimentalized, falsified, kitschified, and, in fact, blatantly and arrogantly denied” concluding: “Almost every hand that has approached the diary with the well-meaning intention of publicizing it has contributed to the subversion of history.”<sup>37</sup> What, therefore, does the afterlife of Anne Frank portend for those like Kacer who want to employ their storytelling skills to tell survivors’ stories? How, in turn, should these works be taken up in the literature and history classroom? And can YA readers and writers derive hope from Holocaust testimony without imposing artificial meaning on atrocity?

### **Author as Memoirist**

In my interactions with Kacer, I observe how the author takes up Santayana’s caution not as a closed moral imperative that demands our coming to terms with atrocity but rather as Santayana originally intended it—as an attentiveness to the inherent dangers of history as “a vain... repetition of the past [that] takes the place of plasticity and fertile readaptation.” The philosopher argued that in a moving world, “readaptation is the price of longevity.” According to Santayana, we must avoid mere retentiveness as a condition of progress for it strives toward inattentiveness to conditions where memory devolves and degenerates into self-repeating and instinctive reaction as we have seen in the well intentioned, but misleading inspirational rhetoric that serves to universalize the Holocaust to all suffering past and present. History, Santayana contends, “is nothing but assisted and recorded memory” that requires “some witness, and we must trust experience before we proceed to expand it.”<sup>38</sup> At the same time, Santayana recognizes that history as recorded memory is subject to all that the imagination can supply and if not kept in check can grow into legend with its own dramatic rhythms and expressive emphases. For this reason, the philosopher argues that there can be no serious history until there are archives and preserved records. In his words, “it is not possible to say, nor to

---

<sup>35</sup> Alvin Rosenfeld, “The Anne Frank We Remember,” (paper presented at the Herman P. and Sophia Taubman Endowed Symposia in Jewish Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara, August 31, 2004), accessed September 1, 2011, <http://www.uctv.tv/search-details.aspx?showID=8872>.

<sup>36</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, introduction to *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, by Anne Frank, trans. B. M. Mooyaart (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1952), xiii.

<sup>37</sup> Cynthia Ozick, “Who Owns Anne Frank?,” *The New Yorker*, October 6, 1997, 76.

<sup>38</sup> On historical readaptation, see Santayana, “Chapter XII,” 284.

think, everything at once.” Invariably, the “historian’s politics, philosophy, or romantic imagination furnishes a vital nucleus for reflection...and the private interest which guides a man [sic] in the selection of his materials imposes itself... on the events he relates and especially on their grouping and significance.”<sup>39</sup>

Transforming survivors’ oral testimony into YA literature is an artful enterprise that casts Kacer into the role of memoirist as she constructs her narratives from oral histories, personal knowledge, archival evidence, and a range of textual sources. Because survivors are insistent that the world should know of families and homes lost, Kacer often travels to the cities, towns, and villages where survivors lived and worked so that she might, in some part, recreate for readers the human and physical geography that marked survivors’ journeys. The survivors Kacer interviews today were children during the Holocaust. Kacer, like many other YA authors writing about the Holocaust, invariably begins by painting a picture of domestic life and how it changed, at first, in response to growing suspicions and increased sanctions and later, radically under the imminent threat of Nazi terror. Survivors, for their part, provide Kacer with a retrospective account of their experience but they too, must construct from fragmentary memories, piecing together the images that continue to stand out from the rest and struggling to bring forth those that may provide coherent links between what they remember and what they may have subsequently learned. Again, many of the survivors who have shared their story with Kacer, have repeated their story often and over time, some details are likely to fade while others appear more pronounced. But where children’s and, albeit to a slightly lesser extent, YA literature expect a happy and hopeful ending, testimony anticipates no such resolution. Nor does it require explanation. As Kertzer, explains, a witness providing testimony “may see a pattern of meaning in her experience, but she need not. There is a religious and legal sanctity inherent in being a witness that frees the witness from the need to explain her testament: I saw this; it may make no sense to you or me, but this is what I saw.”<sup>40</sup>

### **Spargo’s Vigilant Memory as a Mode of Pedagogical Address**

The ongoing aim for truth in Santayana’s notion of history as readaptation warrants ethical and pedagogical consideration. In *Vigilant Memory: Emmanuel Levinas, the Holocaust, and the Unjust Death*, R. Clifton Spargo contends that the act of interpretation is embedded in almost every description of the trauma. Borrowing from Spargo’s reading of Levinasian ethics,<sup>41</sup> his articulation of mourning as the site

---

<sup>39</sup> For a discussion of the conditions of expression and memory that provoke Santayana to declare: “History is always written wrong, and so always needs to be rewritten,” see George Santayana, “Chapter II History,” in *The Life of Reason*, vol. 5 (New York: Scribner, 1906), 45.

<sup>40</sup> Kertzer, “Do You Know What ‘Auschwitz’ Means?,” 239.

<sup>41</sup> Spargo, *Vigilant Memory*.

of ethical inquiry,<sup>42</sup> and his critique of literature's therapeutic temptations,<sup>43</sup> I argue that the act of bearing literary witness as a form of pedagogical address need not so much focus its considerable efforts in casting doubt on either "the artfulness" or "the ethical purposiveness" of a literary work, "but to concede a greater divide between the art of trauma, which is preeminently rhetorical, and the traumatic experience to which it would testify." According to Spargo, Levinasian ethics is not forged in certainty but rather, emerges in the disruption of language and being—that which escapes language's inherent logic and leaves us grappling with an incompleteness between what we know or think we know and what we don't know or at times, cannot know.<sup>44</sup> I suggest that it is within this epistemological lack, that is to say, the hermeneutic divide between the rhetoric of representation and trauma as lived experience, where we should focus our pedagogical efforts. A movement in this direction requires us to examine education's appropriation of the Holocaust as a metonym for moral action.

Spargo warns that any system of ethics based on responsibility as the measure of a moral agent's fulfillment of an obligation easily "forsakes that other motivating principle of moral action," that is to say, "the benefit of another" in esteeming that obligation. In postmemory, the person to whom one would respond is conceived of as "an object of thought that falls already into the past tense." Obligation, in this sense becomes a matter of knowledge pursued at will. In Holocaust education, the obligation to bear literary witness tends to be in direct response to the universalizing moral mandate "never again." Citing Levinas in *Otherwise Than Being*, Spargo would have us think about responsibility existing beyond the bounds of knowledge and anterior to any external moral code and cultural structures of the self and its responsibilities. In contrast to the deliberative model of moral philosophy in which a moral agent is faced with the choice of whether or not to intervene, Levinas posits obligation's alterity in relation to subjective consciousness as he argues for an ethics whereby the other imposes obligation before the subject chooses it.<sup>45</sup> In other words, the time it takes to choose one's obligations already ignores the immediate plight of the other. Such estranged temporality of responsibility ensures that neither the obligation nor the expression

---

<sup>42</sup> On elegiac literature's potential for animating the ethical imagination, see R. Clifton Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins's University Press, 2004).

<sup>43</sup> For Spargo's critique of Freud's and in particular Cathy Caruth's description of trauma leading to a hermeneutics of language that cannot escape its own rhetoricity as an involuntary trope in literary texts, see R. Clifton Spargo, "The Rhetoric of Trauma," *Reading On* 1, no. 1 (2006): 1- 21, accessed August 17, 2011, <http://readingon.library.emory.edu/>.

<sup>44</sup> Spargo, "The Rhetoric of Trauma," 11.

<sup>45</sup> Emmanuel Levinas. *Otherwise Than Being*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press [1974] 1998).

can ever be adequate to the signifying force of ethics.<sup>46</sup> This irreducible dialectic grants ethics its force to resist being subsumed by “the ordinary workings of social consciousness, or by a politics aiming pragmatically, or merely conventionally, beyond rigorous ethical questions.”<sup>47</sup>

Adopting ethics’ larger calling suggests that the Holocaust is forever with us not as an instrument of universalizing morality, but rather as an object of perpetual mourning. As Spargo explains, mourning implies a quality of ethical wishfulness in the form of an opposition to death. Arguing from a post-psychoanalytical and post-structuralist perspective, Spargo extends mourning to “an opposition to political forms of death bearing directly upon our philosophical attitudes toward death” that “may function as the predicate of justice.” Rejecting Cathy Caruth’s notion that literature can be the site of trauma, Spargo focuses instead on the unfathomable gap between the rhetoric that shapes representations of trauma and the traumatic experience.<sup>48</sup> Challenging the therapeutic function of mourning as the work necessary to overthrow the wishful state of mind or that which opposes death, Spargo asks: “How are we to know when the acceptance of death, which necessarily means relinquishing the other to death, might also mean tolerating unjust deaths and those who perpetrate them?”<sup>49</sup>

Spargo’s vigilant memory centers on the Levinasian idea of mourning as a figure for the past that has everything to do with the injustices of the present. As a form of pedagogical address applied to the act of bearing literary witness, an ethics of mourning refuses to redeem or console but rather asks us to acknowledge the death of the other as a historical urgency that calls for a renewal of responsibility. To mourn, Spargo tells us, is to defend against prevalent cultural modes of commemoration that seek to console. As Spargo explains:

Embedded in mourning is a requirement to interrogate our cultural expressions of grief and to be on guard against the movement toward consolation—as a matter...of ethical disposition. ...For consolation always involves a relenting of the hypothesis of agency, a humbling recognition that there is nothing more one could have done or might still do for the other.<sup>50</sup>

## **Conclusion: Making Educational Oral Histories in YA Holocaust Narratives**

---

<sup>46</sup> R. Clifton Spargo, introduction in *Vigilant Memory: Emmanuel Levinas, the Holocaust, and the Unjust Death* by R. Clifton Spargo (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins’ University Press), 1-31.

<sup>47</sup> Spargo, *Vigilant Memory*, 10.

<sup>48</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996).

<sup>49</sup> Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning*, 20.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

In *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture*, James Young reminds us: "It is time to step back and take accounting—where does all this history and its telling lead, to what kinds of knowledge, to what ends?"<sup>51</sup> Reflecting on Spargo's insistence upon an ethics of critique that focuses on the divide between the art of representation and trauma as lived experience, I contend what authors like Kacer can provide YA readers through the literary transformation of survivors' oral testimonies is a type of historical narrative that creatively takes into account both the events of the Holocaust and how they get passed down to us. Young asserts that perhaps these post-Holocaust memory artists can incite the next generation of historians to a more refined and complex kind of history telling<sup>52</sup>—one that would work toward satisfying Santayana's unceasing aim for truth. Meeting the challenge to make educational oral histories in YA Holocaust literature, however, requires a recognition of the partial role of the writer in a pedagogical proposal forged on an ethics of mourning. The reader, too, has a critical contribution to make. Educators and students can begin to negotiate the impossible distance between art and testimony by valuing the fragmentary composition of what is made to appear as a coherent linear narrative. To this end, they will need to engage in the actual work done by historians and writers like Kacer in order to better understand how life histories are taught, read, and written.<sup>53</sup> While literature can console as much as it can provoke and disrupt, access to live or digital testimony, archives, photographs, artifacts, and historical records can serve to remind us to whom our critical reading practices are held responsible. Literature has established a long relationship with the photograph since the invention of the latter medium and the text-image composites in the fictional work of W. G. Sebald have been shown to be an effective means of interrogating the problem of modernity as it relates to the history of the Holocaust.<sup>54</sup> In contrast to the biographer, who not too surreptitiously inserts photos in the centre of her book to chronicle her subject's life, Kacer judiciously integrates photographic images throughout or at the end of her narratives as a way of exploring questions of memory. Elizabeth Ellsworth writes of

---

<sup>51</sup> Young, *At Memory's Edge*, 11.

<sup>52</sup> James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

<sup>53</sup> On the educational possibilities for biography and life-writing, see Karen A. Krasny, "Into a New Light: Envisioning Educational Possibilities for Biography," *Language and Literacy: A Canadian Educational E-Journal*, 8, no. 2 (2006), accessed February 28, 2012, <http://www.langandlit.ualberta.ca/spring2006/Krasny.pdf>

<sup>54</sup> For a thorough discussion on the problem of modernity explored in Sebald's novels through the author's post-Holocaust obsession with the archival institutions and processes responsible for producing and preserving knowledge, see J. J. Long, *W. G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

the “unintentional involuntary experiences of the learning self” that I propose is indispensable if one is to encounter the phenomenon and expression of inconsolable grief of mourning necessary to renewing our responsibility to the dead.<sup>55</sup> For example, I have often observed the jarring discomfort among teachers and students as they come to the end of *Clara’s War*, a story of a girl’s uncertain life in Terezin and her performance in the children’s opera *Brundibar*. Steeped as they are in the tradition of school concerts, mental images of endearing antics, flashing cameras, and proud parents unexpectedly collide with the photograph of the real life faces of children who are about to give their all to entertain their executioners.<sup>56</sup>

*Clara’s War* is based in part on the oral history provided by John Freund who survived Terezin and subsequently, Auschwitz. Unlike the majority of YA fiction, the story is unconventionally open-ended with Clara having to say goodbye to her dearest friend Hanna, who some young readers will recognize is bound for the gas chambers. We never know the fate of the streetwise and savvy Jacob who attempts escape or for that matter, the narrative does not deliver the fate of the protagonist Clara as the story ends just prior to liberation. A school librarian reviewing for *School Library Journal* found this “disconcerting and disappointing” but appreciated the “accurate and the historical photos and artwork” which she felt added realism.<sup>57</sup> The irony of this review reflects a persistent expectation on the part of educators that YA fiction should console but YA non-fiction need not. Spargo’s ethics of mourning suggests that literature’s capacity for ethical reflectiveness lies not in the reparation of continuity, whereby literature assumes the cultural language of grief and symbolic expression of loss but in the problem of alterity, that is to say, in interrogating “the premises, strategies, and conventions of language” that “troubles the ordinary capacity of language as representation.”<sup>58</sup> Situating young adult readers in the dialectic of grief may grant them the agency to resist the impulse toward more cultural conventions of commemoration that have actively worked to portend as Alvin Rosenfeld has documented, the end of the Holocaust.<sup>59</sup> While literary mourning seeks to disrupt structured expectations to leave readers without consolation, resistance to cultural and psychological resolutions may generate hope in the perpetual invocation of an ethical acknowledgement and responsibility for whom one mourns. Enacting an ethics of mourning while bearing literary witness,

---

<sup>55</sup> On the involuntary nature of experience as pedagogical address, see Elizabeth Ellsworth, *Places of Learning: Media, Architecture, Pedagogy* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 26. For further discussion on Ellsworth’s notion of pedagogy as productive conflict as it is presented in response to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, see Karen Krasny, “Prophetic Voices: Three Books to Encourage Us to Listen Beyond Historical Silence,” *Curriculum Inquiry* 36, no. 1 (2006): 93-106.

<sup>56</sup> Kathy Kacer, *Clara’s War* (Toronto: Second Storey Press, 2001).

<sup>57</sup> Paula J. LaRue, “Clara’s War (Fiction),” *School Library Journal* 48, no. 2 (2002): 134.

<sup>58</sup> Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning*, 10.

<sup>59</sup> Alvin Rosenfeld, *The End of the Holocaust* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011).



therefore, demands a pedagogical proposal that would invite both educators and students to reflect upon their own instrumentalization of memory.