

# Writing as ‘Compearance’ in *Diário da Queda* by Michel Laub

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*Diário da Queda* (2011) by Michel Laub has been described as *aut-oficção* (autofiction), the Brazilian translation of the concept coined by Serge Doubrovsky to describe the narrative working-through of trauma through fictional autobiography. This article re-examines the definition of ‘autofiction’ and argues that Laub’s narrative process more closely resembles Jean-Luc Nancy’s notion of a singular voice ‘comparing’ experiences in a process of ‘sharing’ that, when combined with touch and affection can – according to the novel – more successfully help to overcome trauma. At stake are questions regarding the inheritance of Holocaust memory, as well as its politicised deployment in contemporary conflicts.

Keywords: autofiction, Brazilian literature, Holocaust, Jean-Luc Nancy, memory studies, Michel Laub.

Michel Laub has declared his novel *Diário da Queda* (2011) to be a ‘fictional autobiography’. Regarding the extent to which the novel is faithful to his own biography he said, ‘in some ways it is not biographical but in other ways [...] I can see experiences that inform the book’ (Interview, Laub, 2014). The novel explores trauma in male members of three generations of the same family: the narrator, his father, and grandfather. The grandfather, an Auschwitz survivor, decides to make a new life in Brazil, but never speaks of his experiences prior to disembarking in Porto Alegre. He withdraws physically from those around him and eventually commits suicide when his son, the narrator’s father, is only fourteen. The father suffers the trauma of being the first to discover his father’s body after the suicide. In a typical trait of the so-called ‘second generation’ after the Holocaust, the father tries to compensate for the distance he felt from his own father by over-identifying with the suffering of Auschwitz and narratives of Jewish oppression throughout history. The narrator, therefore, self-consciously positions himself in relation to this weighty cultural and personal memory that surrounds him whilst examining a traumatic moment in his own life: his involvement in the bullying of a young economically disadvantaged Gentile boy João at his Jewish private school. This memory is at odds with the narrative of Jewish oppression told to him by his father and his teachers. In what follows I situate the generational accounts in relation to different psychoanalytical and sociological findings about post-Holocaust and post-traumatic experiences to highlight the emphasis that Laub places, not only on communication and sharing, but also on physical contact as a key part of the recovery process.

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As critic Barbosa do Amaral (2014) says of *Diário da Queda*, ‘the micro and the macro are in constant dialogue, in a continuous chain of connections between the personal (micro) and the historic (macro)’ (2015: 81, all translations from Portuguese are my own). In *Diário da Queda* it is the weighty legacy of the Holocaust both in global terms and within the private sphere of Laub’s own family, which creates a bridge between ‘personal’ questions regarding relationships, trauma, and identity and the ways in which these interact with more global concerns involving ongoing instances of genocide and conflict. In keeping with the singular yet globally attentive perspective that Laub invites, I posit that Laub’s novel demands to be read alongside an ever-growing corpus of post-Holocaust fiction and theory that can be characterised as much by generational remove from direct experience of the Holocaust as by the national origins of the authors. My positioning of this work in relation to *global* theoretical and fictional post-Holocaust production is a different approach, when compared to a number of existing studies that tend to situate the novel within contemporary trends in Brazilian literature: citing literary features such as narrative fragmentation and a questionable narrator as common gestures within *national* fictional tendencies (see Batista and Kuhn, 2013). Whilst these observations are valid, I have also found that Laub’s work shares a number of characteristics identified by scholars in German language third-generation narratives. This includes the impulse to ‘creatively re-invest’ in family histories; but also, more specifically, the presence of ‘multi-generational perspectives’, and an examination of the ‘complex and at times difficult processes by which family history is remembered and reconstructed’ (Heffernan and Pye, 2013: 7). Furthermore, there is a self-reflexive awareness of the possible ethical traps of creative remembering and an ultimate dedication to ‘preserving the boundaries between examples of self and the historical other’ (Seemann, 2013: 38). At stake in preserving these boundaries between ‘self’ and ‘historical other’ are debates about the ‘inheritance’ of Holocaust memory, on the one hand, and its ‘deterritorialisation’ on the other.

Attentive to both national and global positionings of the novel, Barbosa do Amaral associates *Diário da Queda* with *autoficção*, the Brazilian translation of the term ‘autofiction’ coined by French writer and critic Serge Doubrovsky in the 1970s, to describe his own work *Fils* (Doubrovsky, 1977). However, Hidalgo (2013: 219), in a more general article about the trend in *autoficção* (autofiction) in Brazilian literature, warns of the term’s use having become *banalizada* (banalised) in the Brazilian context. As such she calls for a return to Doubrovsky’s original description and a stricter definition with reference to other theories of fictional autobiography (Hidalgo, 2013: 219). In line with this call for the need to be more precise, I highlight ways in which Laub makes a deliberate strategic departure from Doubrovsky’s definition of autofiction and suggest that this philosophical and literary position in *Diário da Queda* more closely approximates to Jean-Luc Nancy’s idea of writing as the articulation of a ‘singular voice’ (Nancy, 1990).

## Autobiography and ‘Autofiction’

The ambiguity with which Laub describes the ‘fictional-autobiographical’ status of his novel shows an honest acknowledgement of the fact that writing is always grounded in one’s own experience, but that any attempt to translate a life into writing (whether fictional or not) is, by definition, a displacement into language – a representation – and thus an entirely new artefact. In contemporary Brazilian fiction, Hidalgo notes the growing popularity of the fictional autobiographical genre of *autoficção* (autofiction) due, in

part, to dialogue between the Brazilian and French literary academies stating that, 'In Brazil the theoretical discussion around "autofiction" in some ways influences the very production, and reception, of texts in sequence with the similar process occurring in France' (Hidalgo, 2013: 220). It was in the French context of the 1970s that Doubrovsky contributed to growing theoretical debates about the characteristics of autobiography and its fictional variants, associating his term 'autofiction' with a particular set of conventions, exemplified in his novel *Fils*. These conventions included dealing with family relationships (for example between fathers and sons as evinced in his novel's original title), an engagement with psychoanalytical notions of narrative as therapy and Freudian ideas relating to the unconscious (the form often appearing as a stream of consciousness), and being shaped by an experience related to the Holocaust (Jones, 2007: 99–105). One can see that there are elements in common with Laub's text (in particular father/son and Holocaust-related themes), and yet there are also key differences, which bring to the fore Laub's critical deployment of the genre's conventions. One thing that stands out in such a deployment is that, while for Doubrovsky the author of autofiction should include their proper name in the narrative – and face any consequences – Laub does not include his name. Neither does he use the term 'autofiction' in describing his work, which would be natural given the term's circulation in the Brazilian context.

Laub's distancing from some of the most notable conventions of 'autofiction' might be attributed to his hesitation over a thoroughly enthusiastic embrace of psychoanalysis-as-cure, when compared with Doubrovsky who has been described as using his fiction to attempt to 'prolong his analysis' (Lejeune, quoted in Jones, 2007: 103). Laub acknowledges his ambivalent relationship with psychoanalytical discourse, particularly as applied to literature, in an interview:

To this day I have a certain fear of psychoanalysis, predominantly of psychoanalysis applied to artistic narrative, only that I continue using that procedure [...] It is a contradiction struggling with a narrative model that makes recourse to psychologism, whilst at the same time, having contempt for that psychologism. As such I take the middle road, and try to do things by straying from this relationship. (Dias and Oliveira, 2013)

Laub highlights the contradiction in 'struggling with' this narrative model whilst at the same time 'having contempt' for it. The rest of this article identifies at what point, and how, the 'straying from' this model occurs. I now turn to the family members of *Diário da Queda* to outline how their experiences approximate the particular societal and psychoanalytical characteristics associated with their generations in post-Holocaust theory.

### **The Grandfather: 'The Impracticability of the Human Experience in all Times and all Places'**

The immediate post-war era was characterised by a generalised silence regarding the Holocaust, which – at that time – had not yet been named the 'Holocaust' nor indeed referred to by the Hebrew word 'Shoah', as the Jewish Holocaust is also now known. Levy and Sznajder (2006: 58–59) partially account for this due to the fact that there was very little information yet known; however they also highlight the paradox that some of the most shocking images of corpses and mass graves had already begun to circulate in the public domain at that time. Public silence was mirrored by private

silence since there was not yet a vocabulary for interpreting or describing what had happened; it was at this time that intellectuals such as those of the Frankfurt School, and individuals such as Primo Levi (discussed in the novel, and below), began the task of creating such vocabularies (Levy and Sznajder, 2006: 58).

The wave of 'new memory studies' that emerged in the 1980s as a response to these and other political catalysts, drew on – but also revised – ideas developed as part of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century interest in the relationship between memory and culture, discussed in the work of figures such as Sigmund Freud, Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Janet, Abram Kardiner, Emile Durkheim and Walter Benjamin (Erll et al., 2008: 8). Memory studies in this period, as Huyssen (2003: 12) notes, were already bound up with the post-war processes of decolonisation 'and the new social movements and their search for alternative and revisionist histories'. In the context of the United States, Hirsch (2012) describes the effect that the showing of the 1978 television series *Holocaust* had. Being already influenced by feminism and decolonial social movements, the Dartmouth University faculty, of which she was a member, were inspired to find out how memory work related to the Holocaust, 'might constitute a platform of activist and interventionist cultural and political engagement, a form of repair and redress' (Hirsch, 2012: 6).

This 'repair and redress' was often understood to be facilitated by representation and witnessing, influenced by psychoanalytical theory such as Freud's 'Remembering, Repeating and Working-through' (Freud et al., 1953). This essay remained influential for texts that discussed the narrativisation of memory as a form of therapy (particularly in the context of work on the Holocaust) despite Freud's privileging of intrapsychic theory as the main source of trauma/neuroses, rather than external events (Ringel and Brandell, 2011: 2). Many subsequent studies of the experiences of post-Holocaust generations started from the premise that the act of organising experiences into narrative was a necessary part of 'working through' trauma in line with Freud's proposed method for discovering repressed memories and treating them (see Epstein, 1979; Bergmann and Jucovy, 1990).

Nevertheless, by the time research and public interest caught up, it was almost too late to have an impact upon an aged generation whose lives had been characterised by trauma and repression. *Diário da Queda* begins with the statement that the narrator's grandfather did not like to talk about the past. For him there is only one type of memory, the type that returns again and again and 'could be a prison, even worse than that which you were in' (Laub, 2011: 8). The doubt contained in 'could be' indicates the uncertainty with which any statement can be made about the grandfather's memories or feelings since he did not speak about them and he committed suicide when his son was fourteen years old.

In many ways the grandfather's life followed a similar pattern to that which characterises the survivor generation. As Levy and Sznajder (2006: 57) describe it, 'After World War II, people affected by the war wanted more than anything else a stable life, a steady job, and a nice family with clearly defined roles for men, women, and children'. Contrary to the silence on matters relating to the war, each element of this characterisation by Levy and Sznajder is documented in the grandfather's diaries: his determination to set up a life for himself, find a wife, and have a child. He outlines the role such a wife would have: 'Wife – person that is in charge of domestic tasks, making sure to employ the most rigorous hygienic procedures in the house, and ensure that the husband's day does not contain any disturbances when he wishes to be alone' (Laub, 2011: 31). This illuminates the defined role the grandfather has in mind for his wife, as well as a preoccupation with

hygiene that surfaces in his writings. Regarding the general characteristics of the recovery of survivors, Brisán (1999) explains: 'a trauma survivor needs to be able to regain control over traumatic memories and other intrusive PTSD symptoms, recover a sense of control over her environment (within reasonable limits), and be reconnected with humanity' (Bal et al., 1999: 45). The grandfather attempts to control the environment to the extent that the 'reality' fails to match up with his expectations. The end of the above quotation in which he expresses his desire to 'be alone' emblematises the fact that the reconnection with humanity prescribed by Brisán is not achieved, and may be one of the barriers to his overcoming of trauma. Despite the fact that he finds a loving Brazilian wife, and has a child, he is not able to engage in true intimacy with either of them. The narrator reflects at length about the fact that his grandfather filled sixteen notebooks and never once spoke about how he *felt* (Laub, 2011: 47). There is the articulation of events and desires, but no 'remembering' or 'working-through' as required in Freud's description of the psychoanalytical cure. He focuses solely on narrating a perfect world, alone in his office, instead of establishing a true 'reconnection with humanity' (Brisán, Bal et al., 1999: 45).

There are other hints that even had the grandfather been able to narratively integrate his experiences, they would not necessarily have managed to save him from suicide. Laub's hesitation to fully adopt the principle of narrative-based recovery is presented via frequent direct comparisons made between the narrator's grandfather and Primo Levi who, unlike the grandfather, wrote about every detail of the camp routine. Contrary to the broadly acknowledged silence following the war regarding the experience of the camps, in the particular context of Italy there was a flurry of publications of narratives of deportation; 47 in 1945 and 1946, eight in 1947 with a significant tailing off of only one or two on average each year until 1949 (Gordon, 2012: 32). Gordon (2012) relates this boom to the fall of the fascist regime after twenty years in Italy, and the subsequent mythologising of anti-Nazi/fascist resistance. Levi himself was captured as part of the Italian resistance in 1943 and spent eleven months in Auschwitz before the camp was liberated in 1945. After the liberation he returned to his native Turin and began writing about his experiences soon afterwards. Having returned to his native country, in the heart of Europe, where a process of investigation and narrativisation of war experiences was beginning to unfold, Levi found better conditions for working through his experiences than the narrator's grandfather in Brazil, which was in the throes of its own fascist-influenced and anti-Semitic regime under Getúlio Vargas (in power 1930–1945 and 1951–1954).

Levi lived until his 70s, whereas the grandfather in the story committed suicide at a much younger age. However, Laub chooses to emphasise the similarities in their situations as opposed to the differences: 'The only difference is that, instead of having an apparently normal family life and decades afterwards throwing himself down a staircase, he had an apparently normal family life and decades later started writing in those notebooks' (Laub, 2011: 78). The phrase 'the only difference' and repetition of the 'apparently normal family life' reinforces the comparison. It is in fact not known conclusively whether Primo Levi's death was a suicide but the narrator suggests that it was in the phrase 'throwing himself down a staircase', as is the case with Primo Levi's principal biographers at the time. At this point the narrator chooses not to emphasise the point that his grandfather also committed suicide, ending with 'started writing in those notebooks'. The implication of similarity is emphasised in its absence.

Dealing with a survivor suicide, *Diário da Queda*, bears crucial witness to the sort of 'deathlife' or 'necrotic consciousness' that Langer (2006: xii) insists should be added to the list of commonplace responses to atrocity that includes 'amnesia, evasion, denial,

indifference, healing “working through”, resistance and transcendence’. He reminds us that: ‘As someone who has outlived the camps, the survivor moves further from death; but as someone who has returned to the realm of the living, he or she moves closer to it’ (Langer, 2006: xiii). It appears that this ‘moving closer to death’ is the case for the grandfather of the story.

## The Father: ‘The Power of Public History to Crowd out Personal Story’

If the generation of survivors was characterised by a desire to return to a stable life, what of the children who were brought up with an awareness that their parents had suffered deeply traumatic experiences? One of the most influential concepts in relation to the experience of the second generation is that of ‘postmemory’: Hirsch’s contribution to this tradition that describes the common psychoanalytical responses of a generation whose lives are overshadowed by the horror suffered by their parents. She defines the term as a ‘*structure* of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience. It is a consequence of traumatic recall but (unlike posttraumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove’ (Hirsch, 2012: 6). In clear parallels with Laub’s depiction of his own father’s experiences, Hirsch interprets the work of second generation photographer Lorie Novak as ‘a drama about the power of public history to crowd out personal story’ (Hirsch, 2012: 6). These tensions whereby the second generation feel that their own emotions and experiences are subordinated to those of their parents, is visible in the following early quotation: ‘My father talked a lot about Germany of the 1930s, how the Jews were easily tricked, and how it was easy to think that one house being invaded was an isolated event’ (Laub, 2011: 26). Despite not having been alive or in Germany during these events the quotation says that the father ‘talked a lot about Germany’ as if he had witnessed them himself. The narrator’s father’s awareness of what his father may have experienced had to be acquired through historical and testimonial accounts, since the grandfather did not speak of it himself. As such the father deliberately ‘crowds’ himself with the ‘public history’ of the Holocaust, reading Primo Levi and others, in order to feel closer to his father, but also to distract himself from his own history of pain and loss.

At stake for the narrator’s father in learning everything he can about Auschwitz is the need to suspend his resentment of his own father for being withdrawn and ultimately choosing to withdraw himself from life. The narrator posits: ‘It is easier to blame Auschwitz than to accept what happened with my grandfather. It is easier to blame Auschwitz than to submit oneself to a painful exercise, that any child in the situation of my father would do [...] to judge my grandfather not as a victim, but as a man and husband and father, who ought to be judged like any other man and husband and father’ (Laub, 2011: 81). This need to ‘blame Auschwitz’ becomes a fixation for the father since, as the quotation suggests, normal judgements of fathers and husbands were suspended in these special cases. He is unable to admit the negative impact that his father’s withdrawn personality and suicide had on his own life: ‘Is it possible to hate a survivor of Auschwitz as my father did?’ (Laub, 2011: 136). This hatred that the father feels is a source of pain that he himself then had to repress, causing him acute bouts of depression, which he also hid from those closest to him.

The narrator’s father is diagnosed with Alzheimer’s at which point he begins his own writing project which is structurally similar to that of his father: ‘the hours in the study

like my grandfather, a project more or less like that of my grandfather, a book of memories with the places where my father went, the things he saw, the people with whom he spoke' (Laub, 2011: 93). Here an explicit comparison is made between the two patterns of behaviour, even though the content of the writing turns out to be quite different. When his father begins to write his own memoir the narrator believes he is trying to open up to him about his depression. The father writes: 'My mother never knew that sometimes I locked myself in my room to cry. No one in the shop knew that I closed the door of the bathroom, in the middle of the morning, and stayed there for ten minutes, half an hour crying' (Laub, 2011: 141). This phrase 'my mother never knew' is an exemplary one within the novel, in which so many statements are made about what people do not know about each other. In the novel positive consequences come from the progressive bridging of these gaps through 'presentation', 'offering', and 'compearance', the words used by Nancy (1990: 58) to describe modes of 'being-in-common'. The opening up to his son about his depression, through his writing, comes almost too late; however, the reciprocal act of sharing that they both undertake at this stage, facilitates a turning point, not just in their relationship, but also in terms of the narrator's relationship with his wife, and decision to have a child of his own.

When the narrator finds out about his father's Alzheimer's it is as if the fact of his impending memory loss allows the narrator to properly open up to him for the first time. The decision to have a child – structurally linked within the novel to this process of sharing – makes way, in the following chapter, for a 'passing-of-the-baton'; the father's condition holds out long enough for him to meet and hold his new grandson. It is at this point, for the first time, the narrator addresses the reader as 'você' (you) directing the whole narrative to *his* child and opening up the pathways of intergenerational sharing at a much earlier life-stage. However, before examining the implications of the narrator's conciliation with his father and the addressing of the narrative to his own son, it is necessary to examine the narrator's awakening to his own experience of trauma and his path to the discovery of his father's Alzheimer's which triggers his own writing exercise.

## The Narrator: 'Leaving Behind the Impracticability of the Human Experience in all Times and all Places'

Through his father's lectures and the history lessons in his Jewish private school the narrator learns at a young age that the Holocaust is an unquestionably traumatic subject. Yet he only comes closer to understanding his grandfather's experience once he has suffered a trauma of his own: the experience of an underprivileged Gentile boy, João, being dropped and injured in front of his family at his thirteenth birthday, as part of a prank by the narrator and his schoolmates. He says, 'If in that era you asked me what affected me more, seeing that happen to my classmate or the fact of my grandfather having been in Auschwitz, and by affect I mean feel intensely, like something palpable and present, a memory that does not need to be evoked in order to appear, I would not hesitate in giving the reply' (Laub, 2011: 13). This implies that the lived experience of the fall of João had a stronger impact upon the narrator than knowing of his grandfather's time spent in Auschwitz, a grandfather whom he never met, and in a time and location far removed from his own. This section examines the narrator's narrative integration of his own moment of trauma, and the progressive therapeutic unworking of the self into effective 'non-self-sufficiency' (sic) and 'interdependence' (Nancy, 1997: 111).

The first mark of difference that introduces the narrator's bullied schoolmate João is class rather than religion; with 'it' referring to the fall that traumatised the narrator, he says: 'The party in which it happened, did not take place in a luxury hotel, but rather in a party hall, a building that did not have a lift or a doorman because the celebrated one was on a scholarship and the son of a bus attendant' (Laub, 2011: 11). This quotation describes the humble location of João's birthday party in comparison to the lavish *bar mitzvah* celebrations of the narrator's Jewish peers, and highlights the low-skill, low-paid occupation of his father. The narrator, on the other hand, is characterised by his wealth and cosmopolitan mobility: 'At thirteen years old I lived in a house with a swimming pool, and in the summer holidays I went to Disneyland' (Laub, 2011: 12). The following phrase lists all of the commodities that the narrator owns, 'a videogame, a videocassette, a bookcase full of books and disks, a guitar, a pair of ice skates, a NASA uniform [...] an unused tennis racket' (Laub, 2011: 12). Nevertheless, the following chapter juxtaposes the richness in goods with the lack of intimacy in his life which goes on to characterise his adult relationships: 'At thirteen years old I had never had a girlfriend' (Laub, 2011: 12). He goes on, 'I had never felt real pain. I had never seen anyone die or suffer a serious accident' (Laub, 2011: 12). This high-point of innocence and material abundance sets the narrator up for his own fall, foreseen in the title, and mirrored in the actual fall of João on his birthday; the moment of rupture in the narrator's account of his life.

The fall of João takes the form of a traumatic memory for the narrator who at first represses the fact of his own involvement in the prank. The night of its occurrence he dreams of João's father, uncles, grandparents at the party, and the moment of silence after the fall itself. There is a repeated return to the account of the event in the text with a slight difference in the story each time. The narrator's evolving narrative about his involvement in the prank mimics the logic of Freud's 'Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through' (Freud et al., 1953) in a process of identification of the repressed memories, repetition of them, and thereby a working-through. After presenting himself as merely an observer the first time, the second time the narrator discusses the incident he says: 'I do not know if I participated because of those other classmates, and it would be easy at this point to blame them for everything, or if at some moment I was active in the story: if in the previous days I had some idea, if I made some suggestion, if somehow I was indispensable to everything playing out exactly as planned' (Laub, 2011: 21). Here he toys with the idea that he might have even been the person to suggest the prank, or been instrumental in carrying it out. In the following chapter section he says:

I do not know if I did that because I was reflected in my colleagues. João being thrown up once, twice, me catching, until the thirteenth time and with him still rising I withdraw my arms and take a step backwards and see João stopped in the air starting the descent; or if, on the contrary, ultimately this idea two days earlier, something I might have said or an attitude I might have taken, one time that it might have been [...] independently of the circumstances and the apologies, if at the bottom of it all they were also reflected in me. (Laub, 2011: 21–2).

This passage invokes debates about complicity; what was the narrator's role as part of this act of collective violence? Did he play a decisive role in either the decision or the implementation, and what provoked him to go along with it? By the time the memory resurfaces once more the narrator has taken ownership of what happened: 'For me everything starts at thirteen years of age, when *I allowed João to fall* during his birthday



celebration' (emphasis added; Laub, 2011: 33). By discursively processing his experience in retrospect, the narrator appears to come to terms with his involvement.

The Jewish school that he attends is like any other apart from the fact that 'you spend your childhood hearing talk of anti-Semitism: there are teachers that are exclusively dedicated to that' (Laub, 2011: 11). These narratives are reinforced by his father's own strong preoccupation with Holocaust memory and anti-Semitic oppression throughout history. The narrator explains that he did not see his father very often in those days because he would come home exhausted from work, but when he did, he would embark upon interminable lectures about 'the Jews who died in the Olympics of 1973, the Jews who died in the attacks on the OLD, the Jews who carried on dying at the hands of the neo-Nazis in Europe and of the Soviet alliance with the Arabs and the ineffectiveness of the UN and the bad treatment of Israel in the press' (Laub, 2011: 36). We see, therefore, that the father's strong engagement with the Holocaust memory leads to a political sympathy with Israel and contemporary Jewish causes.

When he was young the narratives of his father's lectures haunted the narrator, surfacing in his dreams, and making the memories of Jewish oppression seem much closer to him than they actually were: 'the swastikas or the Cossack's torches outside the window, as if any person in the road was about to dress me in pyjamas with a star and cram me into a train on its way to the chambers' (Laub, 2011: 36). As he gets older, with the repetition of the stories, their effects diminish and they become more alien from his lived reality in 'Porto Alegre, living in a house with a swimming pool and being capable of allowing a classmate to fall on his back at his birthday' (Laub, 2011: 36). This tendency in post-Holocaust representation: 'that constructs the child as an unexamined emblem of vulnerability and innocence' (Hirsch, 2012: 16) is contested by the presentation of a cruel group who are now well fed, well holidayed, and capable of humiliating a boy who does not share the same economic advantages as them.

The discourse of anti-Semitism in relation to Jews across the ages is juxtaposed with the detailed description of the extreme present-day bullying of João. The way the passages are written creates empathy for João by lingering on elements of the torture by his classmates, which he accepts with complete passivity:

The classmate orders him to stand, and he stands. The classmate throws the sandwich far away, and he goes to retrieve it. The classmate traps João and forces him to eat the sandwich bite by bite, and all the while João's face does not give anything away – no pain, no plea, no expression. (Laub, 2011: 19)

The focus on the dehumanising treatment of João, narrated in this description with a detailed repetitive rhythm, functions as a visible fault line in the narrative of Jewish victimhood dominant in the school and in the narrator's father's discourses. In contrast to these detailed anecdotes of personal oppression in which the language leads one to identify with the pain and humiliation of João, the list of atrocities committed against the Jews in history is given in an impersonal list form, blurring events together and diminishing the individual significance of each one:

You spend your childhood hearing an explanation for the atrocities committed by the Nazis, that remit to the atrocities committed by the Polish, that were echoes of the atrocities committed by the Russians, and by this account you could include the Arabs, the Muslims, the Christians and whoever else you need, a spiral of hatred founded on the envy of intelligence,

of the force of will, of the culture and the richness that the Jews manage to create despite all of these obstacles. (Laub, 2011: 11–12)

The wider unworking of Jewish commonality is evident in the following passage in which he says he experiences ‘the growing discomfort in relation to my father, a rejection of his performance when talking about anti-Semitism, because I have nothing in common with those people apart from having been born Jewish [...] and as much as so many people died in concentration camps, it doesn’t make sense that I should have to remember that every day’ (Laub, 2011: 37). It is telling that in the phrase ‘I have nothing in common with those people’, in which he uses the most distant demonstrative Portuguese adjective *aquelas* (those), as opposed to *essas* or *estas* (these). In his opinion, the oppression suffered by the Jews in his father’s discourse is no excuse for João’s oppression.

## Community Revealed in Death and Birth

The event that triggers the narrative is the discovery of his father’s Alzheimer’s. The narrator in *Diário da Queda* says ‘never was a theme so much written about than that of a son in the face of the father who is going to die’ (Laub, 2011: 147). A reference to Nancy’s essay ‘Myth Interrupted’ is useful for interpreting this repeated occurrence. In this case, however, it is a Blanchot citation occupied by Nancy that helps to illuminate the impulse to write in the face of death: ‘The basis of communication [...] is not necessarily speech, nor even the silence that is its foundation and punctuation, but exposure to death, and no longer my death, but someone else’s, whose living and closest presence is already an eternal absence’ (quoted in Nancy, 1990: 61). This passage poetically reflects the situation here of a lost loved one whose ‘living and closest presence is already an eternal absence’, but it also emblematises a wider significance of finitude in Nancy’s configuration of communication and community, demonstrated in the following idea: ‘Communication consists before all else in this sharing and in this compearance (*com-parution*) of finitude: that is, in the dislocation and in the interpellation that reveal themselves to be constitutive of being-in-common’ (Nancy, 1990: 29). The narrator self-consciously reflects on this apparently common pattern of writing in the face of a father who is about to die: ‘I don’t want to tell another of those stories of re-evaluation in the face of a limit situation, as if the perspective given by the end of someone close, allows us to see that everything else is unimportant’ (Laub, 2011: 147). Despite the hesitation expressed, however, *Diário da Queda* is effectively this ‘story of re-evaluation’. The biographical similarities between the narrator and Laub are revealed in this motivation, given that the novel is dedicated to his father, but his father was no longer alive when it was published.

‘Community is revealed in the death of others’, says Nancy, because ‘The genuine community of mortal beings, or death as community establishes their impossible communion’ (Nancy, 1990: 15). However, birth for Nancy is also the symbol of a new beginning, a proof of community in spacing, as described in the following passage: ‘instead of fulfilling itself in a work of death and in the immanence of a subject, community communicates itself through the repetition and the contagion of births: each birth exposes another singularity, a supplementary limit, and therefore another communication’ (Nancy, 1990: 60).

In line with this thinking, the birth of the narrator's son – and some of the key moments leading up to the decision to have a child – constitute significant turning points in the novel, and contradict some of the critics who note a circular structure to the novel, and a lack of 'progress' (see Torres, 2012: 136). The title of the final section, 'The Diary', significantly reverses the title of the novel when combined with the previous section's title 'The Fall', reversing the flow of fortunes of the narrator. It shows progression from the downwards motion of a *fall* to the forward motion of writing, and repudiates the idea of a 'circular structure' inhibiting change, instead pointing to renewal in the form of new life. It is the narrator's third wife who gives him an ultimatum to stop drinking because she wants to have a child. In doing this he breaks the cycle of what Auschwitz represented according to the repeated trope: 'the impracticability of the human experience in all times and all places'. He says: 'Having a child is to leave behind the impracticability of the human experience in all times and all places' (Laub, 2011: 150). Determined not to repeat the mistakes of the previous generation, who withdrew from physical contact and 'sharing', his focus is on haptic interaction with emphasis on the baby knowing it is loved: 'the lap and skin of your mother, her odour, the touch of her hands passing you to my lap, the clothes that I'll be wearing, my beard, the sound of my voice, the words I'll say that will still be incomprehensible; but you'll look at me and know intuitively what is behind each one of them' (Laub, 2011: 151). The words are incomprehensible for the baby but the bond is formed and it is the start of a new beginning for both the narrator and his son.

More so than 'autofiction', then, the way in which I suggest Laub understands the relationship between writing and therapy is akin to Nancy's understanding of the limits of psychoanalysis and the benefits of 'compearance', sharing, and touch. Nancy's critique of psychoanalysis hinges upon a similar gripe to that which Derrida (1975: 38) expresses in 'Freud and the Scene of Writing' criticising the logocentric and phonocentric of psychoanalysis. In *The Purveyor of Truth* Derrida further problematises the claim of Freud to be able to 'unveil' a truth, though psychoanalysis, in one text (literature or psyche as text) through another text (his own analysis); questioning, then, what the difference in status between the two texts might be. Nancy (1990: 33) further distinguishes his understanding of 'sharing' from the emphasis in psychoanalysis of 'recognition of the other', which originates from, and upholds, the self-other dichotomy, and an essential grounding in the sovereign 'subject'. Instead of 'recognition', then, we have 'resemblance': 'A like-being resembles me in that I myself "resemble" him: we resemble together, if you will. That is to say, there is no original or origin of identity'. Laub's revision of the psychoanalytical model of therapy, as we have seen, places emphasis on relationality and touch as important aspects of therapeutic process.

Laub overcomes the self-other dichotomy through some formal aspects of the novel that succeed in bringing a constitutive relationality into view. The novel is written in the style of autobiographical notation with sections entitled 'Some things that I know about my grandfather', 'Some things that I know about my father', 'Some things that I know about myself', ending with 'The Fall', and 'The Diary'. Each main section includes numbered 'chapters' which can be as short as a paragraph, or composed of a few paragraphs related to a point or person. The people described within the chapters of each section do not adhere strictly to the person named in the title of the section, nor are they in chronological order; for example, in 'Some things that I know about my grandfather' the first two points refer to the narrator's grandfather; however, the third is a note relating to the historiography of the Holocaust, and numbers four to 38 (the rest of the section) are about the narrator himself and in particular his training for the *Bar Mitzvah* and the

bullying at school of a poor non-Jewish classmate (João). The fact that a section ostensibly about the grandfather focuses more on the father and the narrator suggests that they are inconceivable without each other. This coincides with Nancy's ontological notion of being-singular-plural; the recognition that from our birth we already exist because of, and in relation to, others (Nancy, 2000: 3).

The notion of writing as the expression of a 'singular voice' is also observable in the single (fictional autobiographical) voice and perspective of the narrator. In an interview Laub says, 'Everything is autobiographical in a book, because the writer is based in his own memory, even if it is used to invent' (Frey, 2013). He continues: 'at the moment of writing you struggle with the dilemma to expose or not to expose. When you write you go against your shyness and overcome it, or don't write' (Frey, 2013). Echoing Nancian vocabulary he explains that one has to make a conscious choice to 'expose' in order to write. It is only by sharing our most intimate desires and fears that we can 'compear' and enact our status 'in-common'. We gain access to others such as the father and grandfather only through their own writings or things that they share or expose to the narrator. Most of the sections in fact consist of explanations of what is *not known* about his grandfather and his father (many of the initial chapters within sections start with 'I don't know if ...'); and what people do not know about him. This '(un)trustworthy' (a term used by Laub to describe him) narrator – insofar as he readily admits he does not *know* a lot of what he is speculating about – draws attention to the necessary 'singular' perspective and confined epistemological position of any authorial 'voice'; the narrator/author does not pretend to have any access to the psyches of others, even his closest family members (Nancy, 1990: 70).

## Conclusion

At stake in this acknowledgement of the irreducible difference between even the closest family members examined above, is the undermining of identitarian discourses (in this case strong Jewish loyalties) that seek to bind people together into closed fraternities. Part of the process of unworking such bonds involves surrendering the notion of the Holocaust as a privileged site of violence in the twentieth century, particularly when these claims are used to justify ongoing conflict. In the following passage Laub uses an ironic tone to question this status of the Holocaust as a uniquely horrific site of tragedy, and decentres it from a history of twentieth-century destruction. In order to illustrate the full effect of the passage I shall quote at length:

If Auschwitz was the biggest tragedy of the Twentieth Century, which presupposed that it is the biggest tragedy of all the centuries, since the Twentieth Century is considered the most tragic of all the centuries, because never before were so many people bombed, gunned down, hanged, impaled, drowned, stabbed and electrocuted before being burnt or buried alive, two million in Cambodia, twenty million in the Soviet Union, seventy million in China, hundreds of million adding up Angola, Algeria, Armenia, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Chechnya, Chile, Congo, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, Egypt, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Haiti, Honduras, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Korea, Lebanon, Libya, Mexico, Myanmar, Palestine, Pakistan, Poland, Portugal, the Philippines, Romania, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tibet, Turkey, Vietnam, corpses that accumulate in a pile

up to the sky, the general history of the world that is simply an accumulation of massacres that are behind whatever discourse, whatever gesture, whatever memory, and if Auschwitz is the tragedy that concentrates in its nature, all of these other tragedies as well, it doesn't stop being a form of proof of the impracticability of the human experience in all times and all places. (Laub, *Diário*: 133).

This passage confronts the reader with many of the major conflict zones and massacres of the twentieth century, including some that – as is explicitly stated – saw many more deaths than the Jewish Holocaust. The alphabetical list allows notable exceptions to be identified quickly: Israel is not on the list but Palestine is. Leaving out Israel and including Palestine makes it clear that the narrator does not subscribe to his father's branch of political solidarity with Israel based upon a common Jewish identity. In tackling the sensitive issue of the inheritance of Holocaust memory, Laub undertakes a radical unworking of identity and the self that seeks to allow for new non-binding, mutually supportive relationships or '(k)nots of interdependence' to be created through 'sharing', 'compearance' and tactile association. The open end of *Diário da Queda*, focused on 'the life in front of you still, starting from the day you are born', hopes to break the cycle of trauma and violence, and open up instead to the community of *being-in-common* (Nancy, 1990: xxxvii).

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