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Burning In: a sensory inheritance of family history

Abstract:

In the 21st century, as the Second World War passes from living memory, various art forms carry the injunction to remember. Novelists, often retrieving their materials from the vault of family history, fuse memory and imagination in their attempts to perceive antecedent experiences.

This is an act fuelled by imaginative empathy. Empathy, though, is a charged term, particularly in the field of Holocaust studies. To imagine what others have experienced in this context is to risk appropriation, a mawkish equivalence between the circumstances of one's own life and that of others. And yet there are models for empathy that might describe an ethical relationship between contemporary writers and their forebears. Dominique LaCapra's notion of 'empathic unsettlement' allows and calls for an affective response to the suffering of others, an ethical position between the 'objectification' of historiography and 'surrogate victimage' (LaCapra 2001: 39-40). This response is enacted via sensory tropes in Mireille Juchau's *Burning In* (Juchau 2007).

Burning In is a novel of postmemory, the complex, belated form of memory belonging to descendants of survivors of traumatic historical events (Hirsch 1997). Postmemory works deal with aftermath, with a reverberation of trauma through the generations. In *Burning In*, the past is felt as a physical haunting, a ghostly presence within the body, performed by the senses.

The title refers to a photographic technique that allows previously hidden details to come to light through selective over-exposure. It is the means by which protagonist Martine Hartmann discovers the family secret behind the silences in her mother's story of loss and exile from Nazi Berlin. Martine is aware though of the limits of what can be seen, and known. She recalls the words of Lisette Model: 'We photograph not only what we know, but also what we don't know.' Martine's art enacts LaCapra's 'empathic unsettlement'. It reaches out affectively towards her mother's experience but never loses its traces of otherness.

Martine receives her inherited past through visual means—her father was also a photographer—and through smell and touch. Though these senses bring the past into the present in powerful ways in *Burning In*, this paper will pay particular attention to the idea of listening. The child in a family listens to the silences in a household, the fragments of meaning. Listening might be self-interested, but can also be the most empathic and humane of the senses.

Dori Laub describes the role of the listener to the witness of Holocaust experience. In listening to another's experience, the listener provides the potential for the speaker to know that

experience for themselves. 'Listening' offers a way to think of postmemory that is not characterised by belatedness, but by its own form of originality, inherent in an act, a process. In *Burning In*, a novel in which both protagonist and author listen to a family's history in a way that has not happened before, 'the "knowing" of the event is given birth to' (Felman and Laub 1992: 57): a new, ethically performed, experience comes into being.

Biographical Note

Belinda Castles is a doctoral candidate in creative writing in the Writing and Society Research Group at the University of Western Sydney. Her third novel, *The House of the People*, is based on the lives of her grandparents. Her second, *The River Baptists*, won the *Australian/Vogel* Literary Award for 2006. In 2008 she was named one of the *Sydney Morning Herald's* Best Young Novelists.

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In the 21st century, as the Second World War passes from living memory, various art forms carry the injunction to remember. Novelists, often retrieving their materials from the vault of family history, fuse memory and imagination in their attempts to perceive antecedent experiences. Marianne Hirsch has called these, and other artistic attempts of later generations to know a traumatic family history, ‘postmemory’ (Hirsch 1997).

Such attempts are acts fuelled by imaginative empathy. Empathy is a charged term, particularly in the field of Holocaust studies. To imagine what others have experienced is to risk appropriation, a mawkish equivalence between the circumstances of one’s own life and others’. And yet there are models for empathy that might describe an ethical relationship between contemporary writers and their forebears. Dominique LaCapra’s notion of ‘empathic unsettlement’ calls for an affective response to the suffering of others, an ethical position between the ‘objectification’ of historiography and ‘surrogate victimage’ (LaCapra 2001: 39-40).

Such a response is enacted via sensory tropes in Mireille Juchau’s *Burning In* (Juchau 2007). This novel suggests a form of listening to family history that allows space for the ineffable—it is an act of witnessing ever-sensitive of its limitations—at the same time as it resists, in a gesture of memorial, the erasure of experience.

What we don’t know

I will never know what my grandmother was like as a child, as a young woman struggling to raise a family in a foreign and sometimes hostile country, powerless to save her parents from death. Her story comes framed, like a photograph, focused and developed by the discriminating eye of whoever chooses to tell it (Juchau 2002: 209).

Mireille Juchau, in her essay ‘Berlin Story’, reaches towards the enigma of family experience in times of suffering unknown to later generations. She uses the metaphor of photography to encapsulate the act of making sense of this experience whose actuality she cannot know. The craft that goes into the making of a photograph will in any contemporary account be as much a part of the knowledge of the experience as the events themselves. In this Juchau foreshadows her creation of photographer Martine Hartmann in *Burning In*. Martine will never know what her survivor mother ‘was like as a child’, what her experience truly was, but the attempt to know the precedents to her own life will be made in art, with a consciousness of its discrimination and blind spots.

Burning In is then a work about postmemory, which is itself an act of postmemory,ⁱ the author’s attempt to know the experience of her grandmother through the sensory experience of a protagonist who acts as her stand in. It is a fiction interested in how the past is felt now: in it, family history engenders a physical haunting, a presence within the body, performed by the senses.

Martine Hartmann is the photographer daughter of Holocaust survivors and Australian exiles, Lotte and Nathan Hartmann. She has inherited photography from her father and is leaving behind her mother’s world in Sydney—of breadcrumbs in pockets, old letters spilling from handbags and silences that suggest the ineffable—to make her career as a photographer in New York. But the prologue telegraphs her own immense loss in the disappearance in Central

Park of her daughter Ruby. Martine, running ‘white-faced, trembling’ down the street against the Manhattan traffic, ‘is her own witness’ (Juchau 2007: 3). The fiction that ensues is a narrative of such witnessing: of how she got here, of what it has taken. She is witness to the residue of an event dispersed through the generations, of the echoes and aftermath that live inside her in the present.

Photography is Martine’s tool for seeing the world, for making something of her past and present. It documents existence and at the same time marks the distance between her own experience and others’, expressing the limits of seeing, of what the visible can tell the viewer. She makes an exhibition of photographs of homeless men in Central Park that includes images of their own photographs and books, finding that:

Each item radiated its special aura, potent from touch, each contained something of their small histories, powerful—not because they were broken—but because they’d remain otherwise undocumented (Juchau 2007: 52).

The photographs the men own and display have a special, documentary function and resonance that echoes that of the family pictures in Lotte’s albums and Sydney home. At their very least they prove that their subjects lived and were cherished. But in the darkroom, developing her shots of the men and their belongings, Martine is doing something more than documentation. She practises ‘a kind of divining, she chipped away with light till she discovered the picture’s true form’ (2007: 53). She makes an image’s true form, not a person’s. The subject remains distinct. She records and defines only her own impressions:

It wasn’t always true, she saw, that you photographed to hold something closer; it wasn’t always a kind of theft. These shots for example: no matter how much she learned about the men, the act of photographing them seemed to harden the difference between their situation and hers (2007: 53).

Martine thinks of the words of Lisette Model, teacher of Diane Arbus: ‘We photograph not only what we know, but also what we don’t know’ (Juchau 2007: 53). Photography is a means of apprehension for a person fathoming the world and her own history. It records an object but then throws into relief what she does not know. And it is technique—her purposeful art—that performs this tension.

Burning in

In this novel, photographic technique conceals and reveals. ‘Burning in’ is the process used in printing to increase exposure of part of a photograph, by covering the rest, in order to darken the selected area. After Martine loses her daughter, Lotte sends her negatives of Heinrich, Lotte’s lover before she married Martine’s father, Nathan. When Martine exposes the prints, Heinrich comes into focus first, and then a smaller figure. She lengthens the exposure ‘and a face blooms out of the whiteness: a girl she’s seen a thousand times... The basement grows suddenly chill as she squints at this child...’ (Juchau 2007: 223). This secret girl, hidden in the photograph, with the ghostly power to turn a room cold, is her mother’s first daughter, whom she left in Germany; a blonde child with a gentile father, who looked just like Martine’s lost daughter Ruby. To print a photograph in which she can hold Heinrich

and this child, Blanca, at the same time, Martine burns in, covering Heinrich's face with her hand, giving Blanca the light and time to reveal herself. This scene of burning in, and the phrase itself, with its evocation of heat-fuelled inscription of something only briefly visible, symbolises the elusive promise of the quest of probing family secrets, of reaching towards arcane, hidden knowledge.

These negatives have been made by Martine's father Nathan in order to keep a secret from those without the special knowledge to reveal it. She has inherited from her parents a secret and the means—photography—to discover it. Martine's inheritance of the code and the cipher to unlock it suggests a number of related questions. Do photographers (or writers) become such because of their family histories? Are they seeking a form that will help them to know what they don't know? Did they inherit the tools to probe their past *along with* their past? In Martine's case the mystery is transmitted in the repeated petering out of Lotte's stories, by the bread in her pocket that leads Martine into her past like a figure from a dark fairytale might lead a child into the woods. Martine's tool for knowing, or for reaching towards the edges of the knowable, comes with the photography of her father. Family is the source of the mystery and of the means to follow its trail, to shape and define the experience of knowing and not knowing.

The phantom

The phantom child of the past, hidden in the photograph, can be read as a manifestation of Abraham and Torok's 'cryptonymy' (Rashkin 1988: 32). Blanca, emerging in photographic development, can also be seen as the 'phantom' of cryptonymy, or family secret, 'transmitted without being stated' (37). Abraham writes: 'Should the child have parents "with secrets,"... he will receive from them a gap in the unconscious, an unknown, unrecognized knowledge' (Abraham in Rashkin 1988: 39). This secret has dwelt in the crypt Lotte has built and protected. It is transmitted through Martine's 'blood somehow, from birth or before that, a molecular inheritance' (Juchau 2007: 46). Such an inheritance creates a new crypt in the next generation. At the loss of her daughter, 'Martine unthinkingly adopts her mother's approach to grief. Her whole life, taught by Lotte. Grief is retreat, utterly private, it goes on and on and on' (Juchau 2007: 172).

When Martine and Ruby visit Lotte in Sydney, Lotte takes them to Old Sydney Town and has a sepia portrait of Ruby taken, in which she carefully arranges the child's position, draping a shawl of her own around her shoulders. Martine does not understand what has happened until later, when she has burned in the phantom child, Blanca. She returns to the photo of Ruby to see that 'Lotte had conducted her own kind of sorcery' (224). She has carried the image of the hidden child within the crypt and used Ruby to recreate it. In spite of this poignant, secretive act, in sending the photographs of Blanca to Martine, she is dismantling the crypt, releasing the phantom so it might dissipate. Or, put another way, she is reconstituting a symbol, giving Martine the tools with which to read her family history.

Esther Rashkin explains the significance of the symbol to Abraham's cryptonymy and its use as a theory for reading:

For the Greeks, the symbolon was a piece of pottery or earthenware that was broken in two prior to [a] voyage. One of the two pieces remained at the site of departure while the

other was carried by the traveller and ‘voyaged’ with him. Upon his return... the traveler’s piece of pottery served as a sign of recognition and as proof of his identity when it was rejoined with its matching complement. The word ‘symbol’ referred to each of the two pieces individually as well as to the act of putting the two pieces together (from the Greek *symballo* = to put together). (Rashkin 1988: 47).

Reading then is the ‘deciphering of inscriptions left by the voyage’ of the symbol, and the retracing of that voyage (48). It is a reunion of the symbol with its co-symbol. However, that co-symbol is itself another symbol ‘separated from its own complement’ (48). This explains ‘...the infinitude of the interpretive process’ (48). Lotte, in allowing her secret to be revealed, carries the symbol back to its co-symbol; she places the child that preceded Martine alongside her lost daughter, opening up interpretive possibilities, allowing Martine to open the crypt, to escape imprisonment. The phantom, if kept hidden, has the potential to hold ‘the individual within a group dynamic constituted by a specific familial... topology that prevents the individual from living life as his or her own’ (40).

Cryptonomy resemble’s Hirsch’s postmemory in this regard:

... to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness, is to risk having one’s own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present (Hirsch 2008: 107).

Martine brings the two pieces of the symbol, Ruby and Blanca, together, and opens up the possibility of countless other broken pieces, looking for their complement. The phantom in the photograph, in its appearance, which threatens to be momentary, draws the secret into the light, making it disappear: it is no longer a secret. This leads to ‘a wild frenzy of printing’, (Juchau 2007: 224) a fossicking, the outcome of which is uncertain, but which does at least give Martine a tool with which to begin to read her past.

There might be at last a ‘working through’ personal history as opposed to an acting out. Grief might no longer go ‘on and on and on’ (Juchau 2007: 172). Martine has been haunted, but the moment of revelation will lead her not to a ghost but to a living person who can be found, to some extent known. Lotte gives Martine the agency to reverse the process whereby ‘something is unknown (*unheimlich*) to the subject in one generation and secretly “known” or “within the family or house” (literally *heimlich*) in the preceding one’ (Rashkin 1988: 40). Martine is in a position to make the secret child, the phantom, familiar flesh: family.

Writer as listener

Memory, though so often connected to photography, resides too in senses other than the visual. In ‘Berlin Story’, Juchau helps her grandmother Gerda seek the place in which she sheltered from the violence of Kristallnacht. She is looking for a building with a ridged wall to which she clung, ‘frozen’, as books were burned outside the synagogue and a man was beaten. Juchau writes: ‘my grandmother looks for the building *her hands remember*’ (Juchau

2002: 200 original emphasis). The place in which Gerda witnessed brutality can be found only by touch.

Burning In catalogues Martine's sensory witnessing of her own and her family's lives. Martine, resurfacing after a week in her new lover Joe's apartment, pulls the hair on her legs. She thinks: 'Wake up, you have forgotten yourself' (Juchau 2007: 38). As she wanders the streets in Joe's clothes, her senses return. She notices that she smells like a man. On Bleecker Street the smell of food reminds her of her father. Later, when Ruby has gone, she goes through Ruby's things, looking for clues. And when Joe returns, she puts her hand on a boiling kettle. When he leaves the apartment, she 'pushed her nose into the pillow and thought she could detect, in one tiny note of his scent, a part of Ruby's smell. It undid her completely. She lay down and wept' (Juchau 2007: 151). Memory is in the touch of objects and the smells of food, clothes, a man, a child. Breadcrumbs stick to the glue of an envelope from her mother like braille. Bread, letters, the tokens of her mother's past, make something Martine can read with touch. *Her hands remember*.

There is another sense, central to the idea of witnessing, that weaves its way through this novel, that of hearing. In 'Berlin Story' Juchau observes that the German language, heard through loudspeakers on the U-bahn has the power to haunt: '*Aussteig links, Aussteig rechts*—my first encounter with these instructions was in a description of the commands given to those arriving by train at Birkenau... directions that determined whether a person lived or died' (Juchau 2002: 203). When Martine makes her own return to Berlin, she too hears something sinister in announcements on a train platform: 'German, on loudspeakers, like something from *Triumph of the Will*. Berlin, a city overlaid with the bright, psychic imprints it had left on her mother' (Juchau 2007: 262).

Martine hears, but she also listens, carefully. Children, hoping to untangle the mysteries that might explain their origins, listen to the silences in a household, grasping at shards of meaning. The child of postmemory is a born listener. Lotte tells Martine on the phone: "'So like your father! You *tell* a person *be* happy, it does not equal happiness'" (Juchau 2007: 64). And Martine is astonished by this 'tremendous piece of evidence' (64). A small statement, of the kind mothers make all the time: you are just like your father. And yet to Martine this statement brims with 'implications'.

Listening is an inquisitive activity, self-interested, perhaps, in a child who wants to know who they are, but as the child grows, listening can also be a fundamentally empathic attempt to know family experience. Hearing suggests a passive role as receiver of information. Listening is an active, potentially humane extension of this sense, implicitly generous towards the experience of the other.

Psychiatrist and child survivor Dori Laub describes the role of the listener to the witness of Holocaust experience. In listening to another's experience, the listener provides the potential for the speaker to know that experience for themselves:

The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to—and heard—is, therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the 'knowing' of the event is given birth to. The listener, therefore, is a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo* (Felman and Laub 1992: 57).

Such a relationship offers a way to think of postmemory that is not characterised by belatedness but by its own form of originality, inherent in an act, a process. The events that set this story in train may be long finished, but the act of listening to, of actively receiving their transmission in whatever form available, is a new event in itself. A special kind of listening happens at this distance. In *Burning In*, a book in which both protagonist and author listen to a family's history in a way that has not happened before, a new experience is coming into being: 'the "knowing" of the event is given birth to'.

What happens in the production of postmemory works is not the same, literally, as the event of testimony. The person who experienced the event is not necessarily in a position to speak. But Juchau, via Martine, takes on the role of listener to family experience in a relationship that shares some of the ethical characteristics of Laub's witness and listener. He writes:

The listener has to feel the victim's victories, defeats and silences, know them from within, so that they can assume the form of testimony... he nonetheless does not become the victim (Felman and Laub 1992: 58).

Martine, flattened at times by grief, can nevertheless tell the difference between her own experience and that of others. She artfully documents, aware of the limitations to understanding. The 'act of photographing... seemed to harden the difference' (Juchau 2007: 53). And yet what Lotte has given her in the offering of her secret is something with which she can work. 'How can it be that she has not memorialised Ruby?' she asks herself (Juchau 2007: 279). At the end of the novel Martine has found a way to transmit her family's story, to witness their experience. At Bebelplatz, where the books were burned, she will project their images, like Shimon Attie's projections of the former occupants of particular houses and businesses of Berlin onto their walls, reanimating these places in ghostly production.

Laub writes that the 'absence of an empathic listener, or more radically, the absence of an addressable other, an other who can hear the anguish of one's memories and thus affirm and recognise the realness, annihilates the story' (Felman and Laub, 1992, 68). Martine, in memorialising Ruby, along with other family members, finds a way to resist the annihilation of family story, to 'resurrect the exiled on the streets from which they'd been hounded' (Juchau, 2007, 302). The postmemorial writer's purpose seems to merge movingly with her subject's in these final pages. The writer in the family is listening, enabling a story to resist eradication. This novel enacts Laub's assertion that: 'Testimonies... cannot take place in solitude. The witnesses are talking to somebody: to somebody they have been waiting for for a long time' (Felman and Laub 1992: 70-1). In the case of the postmemory writer, they may have waited for generations.

Endnotes

ⁱ To borrow from Robert Eaglestone describing the works of Paul Auster, Georges Perec and Art Spiegelman as texts 'which are precisely both about Hirsch's postmemory and are themselves acts of postmemory.' (Eaglestone 2004: 810)

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