

Trauma and Transmission: Echoes of the Missing Past in  
*Dora Bruder*

Judith Greenberg

*The Gallatin School of Individualized Study at NYU*

“Je ne peux pas m’empêcher de penser à elle et de sentir un écho de sa présence dans certains quartiers.” (144)

How can the story of a Holocaust victim echo out of silence? And “how should we . . . from a distance apprehend it?” as Eva Hoffman asks of the Holocaust in general.<sup>1</sup> The narrator of Patrick Modiano’s *Dora Bruder* faces a plea to find one of its missing stories. He encounters a call for help—initially a call in 1941 to a contemporary newspaper reader to which he responds in 1995 as an archivist of sorts—to locate the missing fifteen and a half year old Dora Bruder. Like the book’s other letters addressed to the French authorities in search of missing relatives, the unanswered newspaper call transfers a sense of responsibility from those who did not originally respond to the contemporary reader. There can be no mistaking our role:

But there remain, in the archives, hundreds and hundreds of letters addressed to the Prefect of Police of the day and to which he never replied . . . Now we can read them. Those to whom they were addressed having ignored them, it is we, who were not even born at the time, who are their recipients and guardians. (69–70)<sup>2</sup>

The narrator extends the familial bonds or connections from those searching relatives to include all readers now obligated to receive and guard these calls for help. From the outset, the book thus

asks how present generations remember or attend to the calls for help and lives lost during the Holocaust. It explores the generational transfer of trauma and memory: how we in subsequent generations remain engaged with and committed to the survival of the stories of those traumatized in the past, how we are affected by those stories, and how our own contemporary traumas blend with or reawaken them. How can we “know” the traumas of others and how are we indirectly shaped by them? What are the limitations of knowledge faced by those who come after? Given those limitations, what is our responsibility and relation to them? To recall Modiano’s own words, how do we act as guardians and recipients of the letters?

Modiano creates a narrator who embodies the condition of coming after the Holocaust and needing to know or unearth a past that resists understanding. Born in 1945, this narrator is neither victim/survivor nor removed observer. Rather, as the child of a Jewish father who lived through the Occupation, he tries to understand pieces of his heritage toward which he can neither claim the authority of experience nor complete detachment. He assumes the job of—and is possessed by—searching for lost experiences. In these respects, the narrator can stand for the “next” generation’s link to its parents’ traumatized past. And while Dora is not the narrator’s “natural” parent, she comes to stand for the traumatized past for which the narrator searches. As a missing person, a runaway, Dora embodies the enormity of experience that “runs away” from the next generation; the trauma of the past it attempts to but cannot locate. His search for her story can represent our belated search for the traumatic element of the history of the Holocaust.

Modiano understands the need to flesh out an individual story by which to give shape to the process of trying to recover the silenced pieces of the traumas of others. To hear the calls that did not receive the answers they needed in the past, *Dora Bruder* creates a “narrative mapping” in which the narrator’s own route to these stories imaginatively and physically retraces Dora’s possible steps. As he tries to piece together her journey, the intersections across time from one individual to another and from one generation to another reanimate fragments of those lost lives. Its narrative transpires between journeys made under the Occupation and contemporary travels along the same streets, where repetition of shared steps pulls

the past out of silence. Hoffman observes how the paths traveled by the “post-generation” of children born to survivors moves in a direction:

opposite of the more general trajectory of response to events. For while the adult world asks first “what happened” and from there follows its uncertain and sometimes resistant route towards the inner meaning of the facts, those born after the calamity sense its most inner meanings and have to work their way outward toward the facts and the worldly shape of events. (16)

The narrator and narrative of *Dora Bruder* follow this route Hoffman describes: Resisting cultural forces such as the “silence police”—les “sentinelles de l’oubli”—and refusing to allow the past to yield to full erasure, *Dora Bruder* calls attention to how the next generation senses the “inner meanings” of the past:

I told myself that nobody remembers anything anymore. Behind the wall there lay a no-man’s-land, a zone of emptiness and oblivion. . . . And yet, from time to time, beneath this thick layer of amnesia, you can certainly sense something, an echo, distant, muted, but of what, precisely, it is impossible to say. (109)<sup>3</sup>

The “distant echo” of the past maps itself onto its narrator’s individual steps.

Hoffman’s account of her experience as a child of survivors shares with *Dora Bruder* an attention to the impact upon the next generation of living beneath the shadow of the Holocaust. Hoffman realizes that “if I wanted to understand the significance of the Holocaust inheritance for those who come after, then I needed to reflect on my and my peers’ link to that legacy, to excavate our generational story from under its weight and shadow” (xi). For Modiano, such an excavation involves both recognizing the often hidden, belated or unconscious impact of the past and addressing collective memory through personal and idiosyncratic “memory sites” or “lieux de mémoire” (what Natalie Rachlin calls the “Modiano syndrome”). From the first pages, the paths of two families overlap along the Boulevard Ornano: as a child the narrator wandered along the same area in

which Dora lived and ran away. The book creates a “memory site” out of this boulevard, connecting the narrator and Dora. That “memory site” holds particular weight because the boulevard contained a barrack that housed SS volunteers. The narrator’s own experiences and memories thus lay under the general shadow of the Occupation, even if he understands the details of that shadow only belatedly. The book examines how such “memory sites” can help someone born after the Holocaust to access pieces of its silenced stories.<sup>4</sup>

In this logic weaving the past and the present, the book seems almost to invite other associations from its readers. To this American, New York-based, reader, the call in its initial incarnation as a search notice in *Paris Soir* (for the entire book may be read as an extended series of unanswered calls for help), awakens an additional register of loss after September 11. The physical outline of Dora painted in the search notice uncomfortably evokes the messages written around photos of smiling faces on flyers posted throughout the city after the destruction of the Twin Towers. One trauma awakens another.<sup>5</sup>

Undeniably, however, Dora’s story belongs to the Holocaust and specifically to the period of Occupation in France. A reader who lives in New York does not pass signs for Drancy or Romainville en route to the airport, which in Paris mark how commonly traveled journeys chart the very routes to the camps. As the narrator says, places retain a trace or imprint of the past: “It is said that premises retain some stamp, however faint, of their previous inhabitants” (21).<sup>6</sup> But if place carries memory, then so too does the act of reading. Modiano’s text confronts the ways in which trauma is transmitted not only across time but also across minds. Cathy Caruth encourages a listening across traumas, an attention to how one trauma can speak to and inform another. She explains: “one’s own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another . . . trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another’s wound” (*Unclaimed Experience* 8). This reader’s encounter with a “lieu de mémoire” may enable some connection to other experiences of searching for the missing. Thus Dora Bruder carries its calls for help to the streets of New York and to associations to the faces on flyers after 9/11. Those flyers, like the search notice, implored the stranger: Can you fill this sketch back with life?

Although in retrospect we know that the 9/11 flyers led to the

same outcome—there were few, if any, survivors among those faces—at the time they not only spoke to the refusal to say goodbye in such an improper way, but also to a hope for retrieval and the sense of the impossibility of the event. The unanswered calls for help in *Dora Bruder* articulate a similar impossible hope and disbelief. How could anyone believe the truth of the fate of the missing? In his wish for readers to respond differently to the calls for help, the narrator displays his own participation in this logic of simultaneous anxiety, disbelief and hope. He describes his own expectations for the calls put forth in this book: “In writing this book I send out signals, like a lighthouse beacon in whose power to illuminate the darkness, alas, I have no faith. But I live in hope” (35).<sup>7</sup> The original question of how present generations respond to the calls for help develops into a realization of the difficulty of even acknowledging or understanding calls that speak to a disappearance too great to fathom.

For the person facing the loss, this sense of *uncertainty* about the boundaries between the living and the dead speaks to the traumatic nature of the event. In trauma, what remains central and haunting also resists assimilation, as Maurice Blanchot puts it: “The disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact” (*The Writing of the Disaster* 1). Trauma creates the paradoxical condition of inaccessibility and persistent return. On the one hand, certain situations of loss or pain present too great a shock for the mind; “the human system of self-defense becomes overwhelmed and disorganized,” Judith Herman explains (34). A kind of confusion or even amnesia may occur. The event impedes psychological integration and remains missing, inaccessible (Van der Kolk, *Psychological Trauma* 6).

If traumatic events produce a gap in knowledge for the victims that set them apart from other situations of grief, mourning or memory, then these gaps are only increased when another (such as the narrator) attempts to understand the experience of someone (like Dora) during the Occupation. Trauma can be transmitted from one generation to another both actively and passively—actively in the sense of the acquisition of historical knowledge and passively in the sense of the scars one generation unwittingly inflicts upon, repeats and passes on to the next. *Dora Bruder* confronts the impact, integration and inaccessibility of trauma not neces-

sarily for the traumatized victims themselves—the Bruders died in Auschwitz—but upon those of the next generation who actively try to understand what these victims might have experienced and passively may receive the indirect after-effects of those experiences. The active process of historical investigation faces its own uncertainties. Any act of telling the story of another involves translation, loss and interpretation. But stories of trauma expand the layers of inaccessibility. Amassing archives full of facts does not necessarily yield deeper understanding. The traumatic events of the past instead create a crisis of “how we in this era can have access to our own historical experience, to a history that is in its immediacy a crisis to whose truth there is no simple access” (*Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 6). *Dora Bruder* also identifies some of the ways by which trauma is accessed or transmitted passively, such as the repetition of patterns over generations or the force of *lieux de mémoire* upon people living in their shadows.

Among the many things missing from the silence following the Holocaust, the ultimately futile experience of waiting, looking and searching for missing loved ones—an experience probably common to thousands if not millions—also belongs to its story of destruction and belies a lost part of French History. By beginning the book with a search notice Modiano foregrounds the uncertainty of its claims to knowledge. It positions itself in a role similar to that notice, calling out for help and uncertain of any response. Instead of providing an answer to the question, “Where is Dora?” it gives voice to the feelings of anxiety, confusion and loss created by her absence. The search notice in *Paris Soir* captures the state of trauma with which Dora’s parents must have lived while searching for their daughter. Ernest Bruder can thus represent the thousands of French Jews living with such anxiety who continued suffering until they finally met their missing loved ones in death. When the question “Where is Dora?” extends into the present morphs into how can we understand the experience of Ernest Bruder’s question?

Yet despite these gaps in information or this “crisis of truth,” traumatic stories cannot remain silent. Much as missed moments of trauma return over and again to possess their victims, *Dora Bruder*’s narrator returns to certain “missed moments” or sites. The narrator’s commitment to return and retrieval displays an almost ob-

sessive quality, evocative of patterns of actual survivors. Surviving trauma, according to Cathy Caruth, entails a “repeated confrontation with the necessity and impossibility of grasping the threat to one’s own life” (*Unclaimed Experience* 62). While victims of trauma may experience numbing and dissociation, the event can possess them in the form of flashbacks, hallucinations or the return of the repressed. Something persists. In Modiano’s book, the narrator displays an urgency to recapture the missed moments and gaps created by the trauma of another: “beneath this thick layer of amnesia, you can certainly sense something, an echo, distant, muted, but of what, precisely, it is impossible to say” (109).<sup>8</sup> The original traumatic event may remain inaccessible but its after-effects, the returning echoes, resound with force. While the narrator never confronts a threat to his own life or the traumas of the Occupation, he hears their echoes and takes up their continued *demand*.

And he passes that demand onto the reader. Modiano transfers the “overwhelming immediacy” (Caruth) of the father’s call for help onto us. Roland Barthes speaks of the “retrospective irony” of a photograph, the “deadly knowledge” that the viewer possesses and the subject ignores.<sup>9</sup> Such “retrospective irony” applies to the search in *Dora Bruder*. For even before reading of Dora’s deportations to Tourelles, Drancy and Auschwitz—and of the “irony” that the father finds his daughter in these camps—we know that a young Jewish runaway stood little chance wandering about the streets of Paris in 1941–42. Beginning the book with such a plea for information to the outside world illustrates the contradictory situation of looking for the story of a Jew at this time: the narrator and his reader both can easily find her in Auschwitz/death—the final location for the majority of such “missing people”—and *cannot* locate her. The narrator wishes to capture or understand more about Dora’s traumatic experiences. But, like a trauma that simultaneously returns in its literality and remains inaccessible, he and we both know and cannot know the trauma of another, the truth of Dora’s story. As the narrator concludes:

I shall never know how she spent her days, where she hid, in whose company she passed the winter months of her first escape, or the few weeks of spring when she escaped for the second time. That is her

secret. A poor and precious secret that not even the executioners, the decrees, the occupying authorities, the *Dépot*, the barracks, the camps, History, time—everything that defiles and destroys you—have been able to take away from her. (119)<sup>10</sup>

We know the outline and the end, and yet Dora's secret, like trauma itself, escapes.

The belated and incomplete search for Dora can serve to illustrate the interminable condition of trying to know any one of the missing stories of trauma from the Holocaust. Hoffman instructs that, "it is important to be precise: we who came after do not have memories of the Holocaust" (6). Much as Dora's secret slips through the fingers of all forces, whether positive or destructive, that try to locate her, the traumas of the Holocaust, pose a crisis to those who follow. Susan Brison, citing Lawrence Langer, articulates this ongoing process of learning and yet not knowing, writing:

trauma, however, unravels whatever meaning we've found and woven ourselves into, and so listening to survivors' stories is, as Lawrence Langer describes reading and writing about the Holocaust, "an experience in unlearning; both parties are forced into the Dantean gesture of abandoning all safe props as they enter and, without benefit of Virgil, make their way through its vague domain." (58)

But if the focus of the search remains elusive, the very process of searching and "unlearning" brings other lost stories to the surface. In *unlearning*, we "apprehend from a distance" (Hoffman). As readers progress through the book, they hear the other calls for help from relatives of the missing, ultimately creating an echo chamber of grief and unanswered pleas. "To the Prefect of Police/ Sir, I humbly draw your attention to my request. It concerns my nephew, Albert Garudens, . . . To the Director of Police for Jewish Affairs/ Sir, I implore you to have the great kindness to release my daughter, Nally Trautmann, from Drancy camp . . ." (70).<sup>11</sup> One excruciating call comes in the form of the incomplete letter the narrator finds in a bookstall along the Seine written by Robert Tartakovsky, whose hopeful and optimistic letters to his family only belie his suffering. Again a retrospective knowledge surrounds the reading of this let-

ter as the writer heads off to his final “journey” without knowing the awaiting horror. His requests for clothing and basic hygienic supplies such as a bar of soap or a nail brush speak to the lack of normalcy of life in the camps and the impossibility expressed in his hope that he might return to a life of basic decency. He even puts aside his treasured rations, imagining a time at which they might be better appreciated, “I’ve put aside all chocolate and jams, and the large sausage” (104).<sup>12</sup> The futility of his specific requests and suggestions only highlights the painful fate that awaits him of which he remains unaware. “Perhaps I’ll get a chance to meet the person whom Jacqueline wanted to get released” (103) he proposes, unaware of the fact that the journey he embarks upon will most likely meet that person only in death.<sup>13</sup> Tartakovsky expresses the same attachment to uncertainty and hope in the face of an understanding of the gravity of his situation as those searching lost relatives described earlier. He writes both “Never think that no news means bad news” (102), “If you don’t hear from me, be patient, if necessary, go to the Red Cross” (104) and also “Advise our friends to get away somewhere if they can, for here one must abandon all hope” (103).<sup>14</sup> Don’t give up hope but abandon hope.

By reproducing this letter in the book, Modiano transmits Tartakovsky’s echo to the reader. This letter speaks to the reader like a voice calling out from the grave and conveys aspects of one particular victim’s trauma. Modiano also names and provides some sketch of an identity for a few women deported on the same day as Tartakovsky: Anna Melka/Annette Zelman the fiancée of Jean Jausion, Josette Delimal, Tamara Isserlis, Hena, the “thief” with whom the narrator identifies, and Claude Bloch the sole survivor of this group, bringing pieces of otherwise lost lives out of silence.<sup>15</sup> Dora’s incomplete story thus connects the narrator to a “community” of others dealing with loss, separation and uncertainty before death and becomes another document that brings their names to the public. Tartakovsky’s letter, the search notice, and details of these lives offer the narrator a means to draw pieces of stories of trauma out of silence and transmit them to future readers.

Among the “communities” the narrator uncovers is the group of adolescents with whom Dora traveled to Drancy. Her belonging to an age frequently associated with rebellion against author-

ity sheds light on her defiance and refusal. Running away embodies a saying “no” to the myriad of authorities imprisoning, restricting and harming her. Brison discusses the necessity of refusal and negation in the face of the Holocaust:

As Emil Fackenheim writes, “the truth is that to grasp the Holocaust whole-of-horror is not to comprehend or transcend it but *rather to say no to it or resist it.*” The “no” of resistance is not the “no” of denial. It is the “no” of acknowledgment of what happened and refusal to let it happen again. (64)

Dora’s escape says “no” to her various captors and performs such refusal. Remaining missing may have literally kept Dora alive, out of the hands of the collaborating police, the authorities charged with both finding a runaway and ensuring her ultimate disappearance.

Dora’s defiant embrace of “being missing”—a runaway—of course reminds the narrator of his own adolescent need to run away, defy authority and use the power of “being missing.” One must inevitably ask: What draws the narrator so deeply into the search for *this* missing girl? How does his own experience lead him to this particular story? One might speculate that Dora’s very condition as a missing runaway offers narrative possibilities for explanation, or rather exploration. If Dora were “found,” then the writer’s narrative would end. In this sense, he depends upon her escape. The creation of narrative is linked to the endless slipping away of the story. Modiano ensures that his narrator’s attempts to account for Dora stumble on many levels. Each attempt opens further layers of narrative searches and then each layer crumbles successively into more fragments. The continual acknowledged frustrations in locating Dora can thus stand for the enormity of what will always remain *missing* from the narration of the Holocaust—the millions of missing lives and untold futures; the missing experiences, stories that were never written and will never be known, lost alongside the lives that experienced them; and the missing part of events so horrific that even the survivors themselves cannot have access to them. Any imposition of clarity or finality upon Dora’s and the other stories in the book would ignore the enormity that remains unknown. By refusing narrative closure and picking up a search process after over

fifty years, the narrator conveys the sense of emptiness, absence and yet unanswered questions that surround his search for the stories of the dead; he continues a process of *unlearning*.

For an individual who experiences trauma, survival necessitates a form of forgetting. The Auschwitz survivor and poet Charlotte Delbo writes that in order to survive in the aftermath of Auschwitz, the part of the self that remembers must be set aside and remain missing to ordinary consciousness. "No doubt, I am very fortunate in not recognizing myself that was in Auschwitz" (3). "How does one rid oneself of something buried far within: memory and the skin of memory?" (3) she asks. Delbo separates the concentratory world from the "normal" world and develops the term "deep memory" to represent those sense memories that physically transplant the survivor back to the camps, to the trauma. "Deep memory" must be set aside in order for one to participate in the normal world; as she put it: "—So are you living with Auschwitz?—No, I live next to it. Auschwitz is there, unalterable, precise but enveloped in the skin of memory, an impermeable skin that isolates it from my present self" (2). Delbo writes about Auschwitz not from "deep memory," full of sensations and physical imprints, but from "external memory" or "intellectual memory," connected with the thinking process (3). In articulating the need for such massive trauma to remain missing Delbo gives voice to the continual obstacles and lacunae that even Dora would face if she were to tell her own story.

But Dora does not survive. And thus the question of the role of "deep memory" befalls the narrator in his task of imagining what she might have experienced. In trying to pull Dora's story out of a historical erasure does he also face a kind of "deep memory" that simultaneously informs his journey and remains apart? Could a "deep memory" also exist for those who did not actually travel to Auschwitz, a memory that remains buried and yet sits off to the side and cannot disappear? Of course, the actual emotional and bodily experience Delbo describes could never be transferred; this piece dies with the body it inhabits. Modiano and his narrator do not possess the actual memories of their parents. Instead their question becomes one of how they inherit the stories of their parents, relatives, friends and countrymen. Do they experience some shared traumatic past? How are stories passed from body to body in a deep manner so

as to transmit the “inner meanings” Hoffman describes? Modiano’s narrator explains that Dora reverberates within him; he feels an echo of her presence in certain places. How are such echoes transmitted? Do successive generations engage not only in intellectual searches but also such “deep” emotional searches? How does *Dora Bruder* illustrate a kind of “transgenerational transfer”? (Hirsch)

For one who comes *after* the traumatic events themselves, such as the narrator (or the readers of *Dora Bruder*, who, as time goes on, belong increasingly exclusively to the generation born after the war), the trauma of the Holocaust both remains elusive and pervades his very being. He was born both into and out of this period of history: “So many friends whom I never knew disappeared in 1945, the year I was born” (81).<sup>16</sup> The narrator begins his life in the shadow of the Holocaust. He was born both too late and at the right time—too late to know the “friends” he seeks and yet at the right time so that he did not become one of the missing himself. The year of his birth initiates what Hirsch calls the “generation of post-memory” and Hoffman, expanding upon Helen Epstein’s work, calls the “second generation”—the generation that must look for clues of their past only to find lacunae. Hoffman, born in Poland in 1945, writes: “in the beginning was the war. That was my childhood theory of origins, akin perhaps to certain childhood theories of sexuality. For me, the world as I knew it and the people in it emerged not from the womb but from the war” (3). The group born into trauma—the group that emerges from the war—can never fully know the events which shape them. The ethical responsibility of learning about its horrors is paired with the impossibility of ever truly “knowing” the experience. Marianne Hirsch proposes that this generation experiences “postmemory,” a term that offers a means of thinking about the structure of transmission of trauma across generations, always necessarily at a remove.<sup>17</sup> Hirsch explains postmemory as:

an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture . . . not a movement, method or idea; I see it, rather, as a structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. It is a consequence of traumatic recall but (unlike post-traumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove.<sup>18</sup>

For those in this generation born to traumatized parents, the very figures supposed to nourish, root and help shape the life narratives of the children actually create further gaps, absences and uncertainties. These children, in turn, face the extra challenge of trying to script a life story from a place of origin full of missing pieces. And yet, that does not mean the experiences of the parents or those “origins” are necessarily absent. The shadow of the Occupation colors the narrator’s life in ways of which he is both conscious and unconscious. In particular, his interactions with and memories of his father replay pieces of experiences from the Occupation. The memories of the father shape the “belated” memories of the son.

How then does the narrator experience and does the narrative explore the realm of “postmemory?” *Dora Bruder* emerges not only out of the Bruder’s loss of their daughter but also out of the narrator’s need to answer anti-Semitic publications. His first book acts as a form of retribution against the anti-Semites who attacked his father and in so doing, harmed him. “As for me, I wanted my first book to be a riposte to all those who, in insulting my father, had wounded me” (58).<sup>19</sup> His very writing takes root as response to a certain kind of narrative; writing emerges from the wound. This explication of intent also spells out the fact that injuries to one generation pass along and scar the next. Because of the texts’ impact upon the father, the son suffers.

For much of the story, memories of his father’s abuses interweave with the narrator’s exploration of his role in the “second-generation.” Although readers never learn the father’s perspective regarding the Occupation, his aggression towards his son informs us of the residue of the war’s impact upon him. His acts of cruelty—having his son arrested as a “hooligan” and hiding the son’s army “call up” papers to make him an outlaw—reenact the very threats he himself faced during the war, although in a different register, playing them out in times of “normality” and peace. In a kind of repetition compulsion, the father recreates the traumatic scenario of being “rounded up” but acts as the perpetrator. In this sense, the father seems to identify with the aggressor of the trauma he experienced, positioning his son in his own former role caught by the authorities. The son experiences his own traumatic memories, linked to the Holocaust, as a repetition of the trauma of the war. The father’s

role as an accomplice in or instigator of, his victimization shocks his son: "Yet I was surprised that, after all he had been through during the Occupation, my father should have offered not the slightest objection to my being taken away in a Black Maria" (57).<sup>20</sup> "Family memory" passes on from one generation to the next not through stories and connections but through the repetition of abuse.

Yet even in his victimized position, the son remains acutely aware of his *difference* from the father as well—the police let him walk away and he does not face a "concentrationary" world as he departs from the station. He writes:

I had already worked this out at the age of eighteen while on that journey with my father in the police van, a journey that was a harmless repetition, a parody, of other such journeys—in the same police vans and to the same police stations—but from which nobody had ever returned home, on foot, as I had on that occasion. (82)<sup>21</sup>

During the war Jews could not have taken the route he did and the narrator displays his acute awareness of his complex relation to the experiences of the previous generation. The steps that entitle him as a writer to speak in the place of the dead render him in a complicated or double-edged speaking position. On the one hand, his retracing the steps of the dead and putting those steps into writing gives voice to the previous generation brings them out of erasure. Yet at the same time, the writer also (perhaps unconsciously) "steals" from the dead, assuming a speaking position not rightfully his own. For instance, speaking of Robert Desnos he writes: "I had no idea that Desnos had written a book called *La Place de l'Étoile*. Quite unwittingly, I had stolen his title from him" (83).<sup>22</sup> As spokesman for his father's injustice, the narrator simultaneously imitates the thieving father. This condition may also highlight a conflict for any speaker in the second, or subsequent, generation. How does one find a speaking position that doesn't "steal" since one can never actually walk in their shoes? As Hirsch points out, members of the second generation may find themselves particularly concerned with the responsibility to the "pain of others" (evoking Sontag) and yet sensitive to not appropriating their stories.

Other parallels between father and son cement them both to

the Occupation as the year 1945 divides them across a chasm. Much as the narrator is “rounded up” by the police, he also identifies with his father’s complicated role as victim and outlaw. Rather than accept the injustice imposed upon him, the narrator casts himself as a runaway and a thief, exhibiting a defiance of authority similar to Dora’s. In this respect, both father and son embrace their role as “thieves,” a significant designation since more than any actual goods they pilfered, both symbolically “stole” their lives from a fate that prescribed for them the same death as Dora Bruder. The narrator describes his father’s activities in the black market and considers: “According to German decrees, Vichy laws and articles in the press, they were no better than common criminals, so they felt justified in behaving like outlaws in order to survive. For them, it was a point of honor. And I applaud them for it” (97).<sup>23</sup> The son honors and respects the father’s defiance. He recognizes how living outside the law helped survival.

While both generations steal, the son seems to experience what is often termed “survivor’s guilt,” common to many who have witnessed the death of another. The father might be said to illustrate a kind of “guilty survival”—he survives *because of* “guilty,” illegal or possibly collaborative acts. Indeed, he almost seems to steal the son’s memories, forcing the son’s relation to the authorities to mirror his own. But what about the son? He seems doubly laden with guilt, feeling not only “survivor’s guilt” for having been born right after the war but also for having been born to a guilty father. The father’s transmission of trauma to the son may thus symbolize a general cultural or generational burden and responsibility felt by the children born in the aftermath of the Holocaust. It may be that the narrator assumes “guilt” not so much as a child of a Nazi might, but rather as someone who simply comes *after*.<sup>24</sup> In these respects, Modiano creates a narrator who raises questions for a variety of readers with different parentages or origins—those who collaborated, those who were victims, and those who, like his own father, occupied a position somewhere in the middle as Jew and collaborator. He stands at the nexus of contesting roles, full of varieties of “survivor’s guilt” and yet opening up silenced stories.

Much as the narrator depicts the child’s need to come to terms with his or her parentage or origins, he also displays symptoms that

might be described as the residue of some kind of trauma, some tie to the father's "deep trauma," despite his remove. Juliette Dickstein proposes that "Modiano's obsession with recollecting the Occupation is similar to the way in which trauma victims compulsively recall their violently disturbing experiences" and suggests interpreting this obsession according to Freudian psychoanalytic paradigms (145–46). Indeed, when the narrator searches for Dora's birth certificate in a municipal building, he is seized by an anxiety attack and seems to display a kind of PTSD symptomatology, "I was seized with panic, with that sense of vertigo you have in bad dreams when you can't get to the station, time is running out and you are going to miss your train" (12).<sup>25</sup> The experience sets off a flashback of visiting his father, twenty years earlier in the hospital, a symptom that suggests his own, albeit belated, "war wounds."

The architecture of the institution brings back a memory of trying to locate his father but never actually finding him. The search for the father leads to an uncertainty about the father's very existence.<sup>26</sup> After searching the halls, he writes that he "came to doubt my father's existence" (12) and never saw him again.<sup>27</sup> The fact that the narrator becomes confused about his father's ever having lived attests to a profound confusion. Without the son's memory, would the father also disappear? On the one hand, his confusion may betray an aggressive wish that the father had never existed, aligning the son with the collaborating side of the father. On the other hand, the anxiety can also express the burden of memory to draw his father out of oblivion. Through the symptom of an anxiety attack, the body expresses the narrator's conflicts regarding his father. But it is important to draw a distinction from Dickstein's theory of what we might call the narrator's "PTSD." His symptom does not equate his suffering and memory with the suffering of the victims of the Holocaust. It displays his own scars and unconscious reactions as forms of "postmemory." Much as the book asks how the search for Dora calls to readers across a gap in time, it also looks at how wounds are inflicted across such a gap. One might extend Caruth's insights about the impact of trauma upon its immediate victims to the next generation. She proposes that PTSD is "not so much a symptom of the unconscious as it is a symptom of history" and that "the traumatized become themselves a symptom of a history that they can-

not entirely possess" (*Trauma* 5). Can we extend the relation between traumatic symptomatology and history or truth to interpret how the next generation's symptoms, struggles, and "postmemory" also reveal an aspect of history that remains unknown?

In the scene in which the panic attack recalls a search for the lost father, the anxiety seems to rest not so much with a vain hope of finding the actual lost father, as felt in the uncertainty surrounding the searches after 9/11 or for Dora Bruder. Rather the anxiety stems from the fact that the father was always lost for the son.<sup>28</sup> The father's acts reinforce this sense of absence—he slams the door in the son's face when sent by the mother to collect money and refuses to even return his gaze when joined together in the police cell.<sup>29</sup> His continued denial of recognition of the son not only disengages him from intimacy or connection but gives the illusion that they do not exist in the same world—either the son or the father is invisible:

Il était là, devant moi, impassible, l'air vaguement dégoûté, il m'ignorait comme si j'étais un pestiféré et j'appréhendais l'arrivée au commissariat de police, ne m'attendant à aucune compassion de sa part. (*Dora* 70)

Sitting there, opposite me, impassive, with an air of faint disgust, he ignored me as if I had the plague, and, knowing that I could expect no sympathy from him, I dreaded our arrival at the police station. (Modiano-Kilmartin 57)

Perhaps Ernest Bruder's notice in *Paris Soir* attracts the narrator because it expresses one father's search for his child, a desire and relationship denied to the narrator. Dora's father calls out in desperation from beyond the grave for his child, while his own father shuts the door in his face.

On a more communal level, the failure to acknowledge the son may be read as a repetition from the Occupation of the failure to acknowledge the humanity of the Jew. The father's "repetition compulsion" here creates its own scars and further repetitions. For it in turn leads the narrator to question the father's existence which would cause an erasure that again would replay the Nazi project—the erasure of Jews so as to create no record of their ever having

lived at all. First the father and then as a result the son reenact the efforts of the “silence police” during the winter of 1941 which was “cutting people off from one another, muddying and wiping out their tracks to the point where their existence is in doubt” (68).<sup>30</sup> In this sense, the father passes on to the son the residue of trauma he experienced, even if he himself was unaware of its effects in unconscious repetitions.

For Modiano the doubt about existence ripples out from each layer of the story to the next. Ernest Bruder’s doubt and search notice extend to the narrator’s doubts about his own search for Dora and the authenticity of his speculations, to the doubts about the authenticity of his own father. This doubt extends to the process of reading the book itself. Modiano employs his familiar form, that Dickstein characterizes as “neither entirely autobiographical nor entirely fictional, but *faussement transparent*,” quoting Pierre Assouline, to whom Modiano gave an interview in 1990.<sup>31</sup> The techniques that confuse narrator and author, and fiction and autobiography, enable a questioning of the boundaries of the text shared by postmodern practices. But with *Dora Bruder* one might replace the term “postmodern” with Hirsch’s term “postmemory” to explore how, for Modiano, the central issue lies not so much in doubting the “truth” of the account but in the unpacking of the ways in which trauma casts doubt about existence, the ways in which such erasures and anxieties are passed from the generation of witnesses to the generation that follows and that holds only fragments of search notices and numbers that cannot speak. Its questions revolve around how one writes about the doubt or uncertainty of the trauma of others. The original question remains: if one possesses only a fragmentary echo that easily dissipates, how does the story resist erasure? It seems then, that the echo resounds; some “postmemory” transmits itself across generations through repetitions, further scarring, and the embrace of a model of defiance or escape.

The three photographs included in the English edition to the book may also speak to this question.<sup>32</sup> The family shots—of Dora and her parents, probably taken around the time of her disappearance, of Dora as a child with her mother and of Dora as an adolescent with her mother and grandmother—create one other form of lasting memory. Probably intended to record an intimate family

memory, the images' constructed nature only emphasize a lack of naturalness and spontaneity, conveying instead depression or distance. Like our relation to the faces on the missing person flyers after 9/11, they mark that eerie state between life and death, alive while photographed but now acting as testament to their deaths. The "retrospective irony" that haunts the search notice and the scores of letters pleading the authorities for information about their loved ones reappears in the photographs, all testimonials, marking lives that will soon be slaughtered. As Hirsch writes in the context of the role of photography surrounding 9/11, "images printed onto paper by way of light are ghosts that haunt" (*Trauma at Home* 83). To a contemporary reader, the picture's oval shape and image quality mark its role an artifact from a bygone era, a piece of the past. It might even be said to resemble a kind of tombstone, perhaps fitting as the people killed have no tombstones, only photos that can testify to their having existed. Modiano's inclusion of these photographs in the book sets them "in stone" for an eternity.<sup>33</sup>

According to Bessel A. van der Kolk, "the essence of psychological trauma is the loss of faith that there is order and continuity in life. Trauma occurs when one loses the sense of having a safe place to retreat within or outside oneself to deal with frightening emotions or experiences" (31). Our world order was restored after 9/11. Dori Laub, psychoanalyst and Holocaust survivor, considers the parallels and differences and stresses the inadequacy of the comparison. As *Dora Bruder's* narrator learns, Ernest and Cécile Bruder, like many eastern European Jews, lived in exile and under erasure long before the Occupation, although none could presage the Holocaust. The world into which Dora was born and certainly the world of her adolescence was one that turned away from the sufferings and disappearances of Jewish girls (and boys). The narrator reminds himself that:

for her, running away was not as easy as it was for me, twenty years later, in a world that had been once more made safe. To her, everything in that city of December 1941, its curfews, its soldiers, its police, was hostile, intent on her destruction. At sixteen years old, without knowing why, she had the entire world against her. (64)<sup>34</sup>

Yet despite our divide from to the world of the Holocaust, we are

born in its aftermath and it shapes our perceptions and the narratives we construct. If the comparisons to 9/11 come up short, Dori Laub finds a parallel in that both horrible events created an absence of narrative—the stories of the missing remain *missing* stories:

Perhaps, after all, there is a resemblance between the attacks of September 11 and something equally unimaginable that happened in the Holocaust. I want to emphatically stress that there can be no equating them. The scale is too disproportionate. The landscape around the destruction of the Twin Towers continues to be humane, filled with people attempting to comfort and restore. This is completely different from the landscape of the Holocaust, in which the surrounding world was dumbfounded by the extraordinary impact of death or stood back and let it happen. During the Holocaust, and for many years after it was over, nobody was willing to hear and to know what truly was happening, in spite of overwhelming evidence. It took decades for a dialogue of testimony to emerge. Yet there is this similarity: the absence of narrative. No one can really tell the story of the Twin Towers disaster, and no one is really ready to hear it. (208)

Laub's insight that no one can tell the story and no one is really ready to hear it can be directly applied to *Dora Bruder*. As the narrative makes evident, no one can tell the story of Dora Bruder. And, as the novel asks, how are we, the successive generations, to hear and respond to its echoes so we don't merely ignore or "act out" as symptoms its shadowy impact?

### Notes

1 *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History and the Legacy of the Holocaust*.

2 This essay refers to Joanna Kilmartin's translation. Berkeley: U of California P, 1999. The original reads: "Mais il reste, dans les archives, des centaines et des centaines de lettres adressées au préfet de police de l'époque et auxquelles il n'a jamais répondu. . . . Aujourd'hui nous pouvons les lire. Ceux à qui elles étaient adressées n'ont pas voulu en tenir compte et maintenant, c'est nous, qui n'étions pas encore nés à cette époque, qui en sommes les destinataires et les gardiens" (84).

3 Je me suis dit que plus personne ne se souvient de rien. Derrière le mur s'étendait un no man's land, une zone de vide et d'oubli. . . . Et pourtant, sous cette couche épaisse d'amnésie, on sentait bien quelque chose, de temps en temps, un écho lointain, étouffé, mais on aurait été incapable de dire quoi, précisément (131).

4 Roger Gilbert-Lecomte, the poet who died in 1945, walked the same streets as the narrator. Robert Desnos, the writer and resistance fighter who died in Terezin, even "lent" him—although unconsciously—the title of his book, *La Place de l'Étoile*. The narrator speaks about the disparity and incongruity between our current epoch and the Occupation and yet how one encounters the very stones of the buildings that period. Perhaps those stones will speak of the past:

Maintenant que se sont écoulés près de soixante ans, ces archives vont peu à peu livrer leur secrets. La Préfecture de police de l'Occupation n'est plus qu'une grande caserne spectrale au bord de la Seine. Elle nous apparaît, au moment où nous évoquons le passé, un peu comme la maison Usher. Et aujourd'hui, nous avons peine à croire que ce bâtiment dont nous longeons les façades n'a pas changé depuis les années quarantes. Nous nous persuadons que ce ne sont pas les mêmes pierres, les mêmes couloirs. (83)

Now that almost sixty years have passed, these archives will gradually reveal their secrets. All that remains of the building occupied by the Prefecture of Police during the Occupation is a huge spectral barrack beside the Seine. Whenever we evoke the past, it reminds us of the House of Usher. And we can hardly believe that this building we pass every day can be unchanged since the forties. We persuade ourselves that these cannot be the same stones, the same corridors. (69)

5 In the context of one trauma evoking another, I wrote much of this paper in the midst of Hurricane Katrina in September, 2005. While a natural disaster and not an act of human cruelty, in its aftermath missing person flyers were posted awakening those memories yet again.

6 "On se dit qu'au moins les lieux gardent une légère empreinte des personnes qui les ont habités (28).

7 “En écrivant ce livre, je lance des appels, comme des signaux de phare dont je doute malheureusement qu’ils puissent éclairer la nuit. Mais j’espère toujours” (42).

8 “sous cette couche épaisse d’amnésie, on sentait bien quelque chose, de temps en temps, un écho lointain, étouffé, mais on aurait été incapable de dire quoi, précisément” (131).

9 Marianne Hirsch uses this term of Barthes from *Camera Lucida* to discuss the role of photography in relation to trauma and 9/11 in particular in her essay “I Took Pictures” (*Trauma at Home* 73).

10 “J’ignorais toujours à quoi elle passait ses journées, où elle se cachait, en compagnie de qui elle se trouvait pendant les mois d’hiver de sa première fugue et au cours de quelques semaines de printemps où elle s’est échappée à nouveau. C’est là son secret. Un pauvre et précieux secret que les bourreaux, les ordonnances, les autorités dites d’occupation, le Dépôt, les casernes, les camps, l’Histoire, le temps—tout ce qui vous souille et vous détruit—n’auront pas pu lui voler” (145).

11 “Monsieur le Préfet, J’ai l’honneur d’attirer votre attention sur ma demande. Il s’agit de mon neveu... Monsieur le directeur du service des juifs/ Je sollicite de votre haute bienveillance la libération du camps de Drancy de ma fille, Nelly Trautmann . . .” (84–85).

12 “j’avais mis de côté tout le chocolat, les conserves et le gros saucisson,” which he probably never had a chance to enjoy (125).

13 “Peut-être aurai-je l’occasion de rencontrer celui que Jacqueline voulait faire libérer” (124).

14 “Si vous n’avez pas de nouvelles, ne vous inquiétez pas, et au besoin adressez-vous à la Croix-Rouge,” “Mon silence ne signifiera jamais que cela va mal,” (123) and “Recommandez à tous les amis d’aller, s’ils le peuvent, prendre l’air ailleurs car ici il faut laisser tout espérance” (122).

15 Interestingly, Modiano also names the superintendents and inspectors who hunted down Jews and whose names “résonnent d’un écho lugubre et sentent une odeur de cuir pourri et de tabac froid” (“resound with a lugubrious echo and give off an odor of rotting leather and cold tobacco”) (84). While these names certainly ring out a different kind of echo, through the narrator’s act of naming, the past refuses to fully yield to silence.

16 “Beaucoup d’amis que je n’ai pas connus ont disparu en 1945, l’année de ma naissance” (98).

17 Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory.”

18 This is to draw a distinction from a view that considers Modiano or his narrator to be traumatized by memories of the Holocaust. For instance, Juliette Dickstein writes “Modiano’s protagonists are preoccupied with their uncertain, cloudy, indeed limited memories. Their discrete cases of amnesia result from a simple and incontestable fact: what they are trying to remember happened before they were born. At times, however, they do seem to suffer from the opposite problem, too much memory” (149). Although Dickstein emphasizes that the characters were born after the war, she still accords them memory of it. I will soon discuss the ways in which the narrator experiences his own second-generation traumas and “postmemory” but I want to make certain that born in 1945 he does not suffer his own memories of the Holocaust.

19 “Moi, je voulais dans mon premier livre répondre à tous ces gens dont les insultes m’avaient blessé a cause de mon père” (70–71).

20 “Pourtant, j’étais étonné que mon père, qui avait vécu pendant l’Occupation ce qu’il avait vécu, n’eût pas manifesté la moindre réticence a me laisser emmener dans un panier à salade” (70).

21 Je m’en étais déjà aperçu vers dix-huit ans, lors de ce trajet en panier à salade avec mon père—trajet qui n’était que la répétition inoffensive et la parodie d’autres trajets, dans les mêmes véhicules et vers les mêmes comisariats de police—mais d’où l’on ne revenait jamais à pied, chez soi, comme je l’avais fait ce jour-là” (99).

22 “J’ignorais que Desnos avait écrit *La Place de l’Étoile*. Je lui avais volé, bien involontairement, son titre” (100).

23 “Les ordonnances allemandes, les lois de Vichy, les articles de journaux ne leur accordaient qu’un statut de pestiférés et de droit commun, alors il était légitime qu’ils se conduisent comme des hors-la-loi afin de survivre. C’est leur honneur. Et je les aime pour ça” (117).

24 Rachlin compares Modiano’s relation to his father’s collaborative role to how children of Nazi perpetrators “inherit” or feel a kind of next generation guilt: “The first two stages of this identification, guilt for the father’s past and pity for him, have been found by Austrian journalist peter Sichrovsky to be typical reactions amongst many of the sons and daughters of Nazis he interviewed for his book, *Nâître coupable, nâître victime*” (130).

25 “j’étais pris de cette panique et de ce vertige que l’on ressent dans les mauvais rêves, lorsque l’on ne parvient pas à rejoindre une gare et que l’heure avance et qu’on va manquer le train” (17).

26 It is during a search notice for a *birth certificate*—the proof of Dora’s existence—the father’s existence comes into question.

27 “je finissais par douter de l’existence de mon père” (17).

28 In an interview in *La Croix* in 1969 Modiano discusses the father’s collaboration and absence:

L’affaire se situe entre mon père et moi. Mon père a pu préserver sa vie grâce à une attitude trouble, grâce à des multiples concessions. Ce qui alimente mon obsession ce n’est pas Auschwitz, mais le fait que, dans ce climat, pour sauver leur peau, certaines personnes ont pactisé avec leurs bourreaux. Je ne réproouve pas pour autant la conduite paternelle. Je la constate. Mon père a disparu. Je veux dire que je n’ai plus aucun contact avec lui. (qtd. in Rachlin 128)

This is between my father and me. My father was able to save his life thanks to taking on a complex role and making numerous concessions. What keeps my obsession alive is not Auschwitz but the fact

that, in this climate, to save their own skins, some people made deals with the devil. I cannot so much condemn my father's behavior. I state it. My father disappeared. I want to say that I no longer have contact with him. (My translation)

29 "il m'a claqué la porte au nez" (69).

30 "brouillait et effaçait leurs itinéraires, au point de jeter une doute sur leur existence"(82).

31 See Dickstein 148.

32 Interestingly, the French versions of the book do not include these photographs, which adds another layer of absence to the question of origins. As Klarsfeld's *French Children of the Holocaust: A Memorial* explains:

After the publication in France of the first edition of this children's memorial in the fall of 1994, the well-known French writer Patrick Modiano wrote an essay about the book in the daily *Libération* (November 2, 1994). The name of **Dora BRUDER**, who was deported on **convoy 34** of September 18, 1942, and for one whom no photograph had been found, haunted Modiano. He wondered about other Bruders, whose names he found in the 1978 *Mémorial de la Déportation des Juifs de France*. Modiano's questions spurred further research on our side, and eventually we found a tombstone photograph in the Bagneux cemetery near Paris. (1599)

33 It is notable that Dora's mother emerges in the photos as the figure she resembles and towards whom she leans, indicating a closeness. Yet we learn little about that relationship. This may reflect Modiano's own omission of his mother's role in his story. Do the omissions of mothers create a "safe place" for them that escapes or does it reenact a form of erasure?

34 "Sa fugue n'était pas aussi simple que la mienne une vingtaine d'années plus tard, dans un monde redevenu inoffensif. Cette ville de décembre 1941, son couvre-feu, ses soldats, sa police, tout lui était hostile et voulait sa perte. À seize ans, elle avait le monde entier contre elle, sans qu'elle sache pourquoi" (78).

## Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.
- Blanchot, Maurice. *The Writing of the Disaster*. Trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1995.
- Brison, Susan J. *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2002.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.
- , ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995.
- Delbo, Charlotte. *Days and Memory*. Trans. Rosette Lamont. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2001.
- Dickstein, Juliette. "Inventing French Memory: The Legacy of the Occupation in the Works of Patrick Modiano: 1968–1988." *Paradigms of Memory: The Occupation and Other Hi/Stories in the Novels of Patrick Modiano*. Eds. Martine Guyot-Bender and William Vander Wolk. *Currents in Comparative Romance Languages and Literatures*, Vol 64. New York: Peter Lang, 1998. (145–63)
- Greenberg, Judith. *Trauma at Home: After 9/11*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2003.
- Guyot-Bender, Martine and William Vander Wolk, eds. *Paradigms of Memory: The Occupation and Other Hi/Stories in the Novels of Patrick Modiano*. *Currents in Comparative Romance Languages and Literatures*, Vol 64. New York: Peter Lang, 1998.
- Herman, Judith. M.D. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic, 1992.

- Hoffman, Eva. *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History and the Legacy of the Holocaust*. New York: Public Affairs, 2004.
- Hirsch, Marianne. "The Generation of Postmemory." *Poetics Today*, forthcoming.
- . *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997.
- Klarsfeld, Serge. *French Children of the Holocaust: A Memorial*. Eds. Susan Cohen, Howard M. Epstein and Serge Klarsfeld. Trans. Glorianne Depondt and Howard M. Epstein. New York: New York UP, 1996.
- Laub, Dori, M.D. "September 11-2001: An Event Without a Voice." *Trauma at Home: After 9/11*. Ed. Judith Greenberg. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2003: 204–15.
- Modiano, Patrick. *Dora Bruder*. Trans. Joanna Kilmartin. Berkeley: U of California P, 1999.
- Rachlin, Natalie. "The Modiano Syndrome: 1968–1997." *Paradigms of Memory: The Occupation and Other Hi/Stories in the Novels of Patrick Modiano*. Eds. Martine Guyot-Bender and William Vander Wolk. *Currents in Comparative Romance Languages and Literatures*, Vol 64. New York: Peter Lang, 1998. (121–36)
- Van der Kolk, Bessel. *Psychological Trauma*. Arlington: American Psychiatric, 1997.