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Abstract

For many Holocaust survivors, one of the most difficult obstacles to overcome is the simultaneous need to tell one's story and the awareness that language cannot convey the horrors of the experience. This awareness that words fall to communicate across generations, cultures, religions, etc. is the legacy of children of Jewish Holocaust survivors who both can't understand and are formed by their parents' stories/experiences. By engaging Deb Filler's film rendition of her one-woman stage show, *Punch Me in the Stomach*, and Abraham Ravett's documentary *Everything's for You*, I explore the ways in which film allows the second generation to confront, articulate, and ultimately resolve some of those absences and fragments that are their Holocaust narrative.

Four. Three. Two. One. The film begins, but with no color, no sound, and no pictures. "His name was Chaim" flashes on the screen, white letters on black backdrop. It disappears, and is repeated in English, in Hebrew; the name, not the person signified, changes with location and relationship to equally as silent, equally as written speaker: "My mother called him Henyek," "In New York they called him Herbert, I called him...". The film begins. This time with music, with color, and with the close-up of a woman in pale, white make-up, putting on deep red lipstick in the reflection of the camera-lens. She opens with a joke about an old Jewish woman on her death bed, and the make-up once vaguely reminiscent of a clown or a mime, may suddenly resurrect a Jewish-American vaudevillian history of Shylocks and sheenies, of comedy and implicit tragedy. ¹The differences between Abraham Ravett's *Everything's for You* (1989)² and Deb Filler's *Punch Me in the Stomach* (1995)³ are apparent from the very beginning: Ravett immediately destabilizes the audience by assaulting them with lack--silence, absence of color, images of text on otherwise blank screen; Filler centers the audience by giving them what they expect--a soundtrack, a character, a script. And yet, I would suggest that the more subtle similarities are the most telling: aesthetically speaking, both authors rely on stark colors to unsettle the audience, to attest to the contradictions that they and their narratives embody; both narratives open with death--Chaim is past tense and the Jewish woman lays dying; and both speak to the self-reflexivity of the performances--Ravett and Filler are simultaneously writer, director, and character,

situated both on and off stage at all times. And, each artist almost immediately attributes this fragmented existence, the inspiration for the work, to his or her most formative identity, that of child of Jewish Holocaust survivors.

In this paper, I would first like to posit this layered performance as the inheritance of children of Jewish Holocaust survivors, so that I may then explore the ways in which Ravett and Filler use physical performance to confront and, in part, resolve the fragments, gaps and silences of this legacy. I specify Jewish Holocaust survivors because, in many ways, I see Jewishness itself as inextricably linked to both physical performance and linguistic performativity during the Holocaust and, therefore, integral to the identity formation of the second generation. Admittedly, these vastly different notions of "perform" are rarely, if ever, discussed in tandem, and I, too, must contextualize them separately before showing how they converge in Holocaust Jewishness and the lives of second generation Jewish survivors.

The more traditional understanding of performance, that of the theater in which people play roles often written for them by others, manifests itself in disparate ways during the Holocaust. European Jews such as Ida Fink and Sarah Kofman assumed Aryan identities in order to escape the camps.⁴ By consciously performing "sameness," Fink and others necessarily redefined Jewishness as a series of actions and dialects that were to be avoided at all cost and, as such,

rendered it equally as performable. Once in the camps, Jews were subjected to what survivor Terrence DesPres refers as a systematic "excremental assault"⁵ until they were forced to embody the filthy, bestial Jew of Nazi propaganda. In short, they were forced to perform Jewishness as the Nazi's desire to see it. I would suggest that the connection between this type of performance, and the more theoretical discussions of linguistic performativity put forth by J.L. Austin, Judith Butler and others is the central role of audience. In her analysis of hate speech, Butler argues that much racially charged speech performs unique discursive histories of very real, deadly actions and, therefore, incites equally as real physical and emotional responses in its victims. The effectiveness of hate speech, then, depends on the written and unwritten social contracts that exist in specific locations. Everyone involved must recognize the power of the speaker to carry out the actions historically tied to the words used, and the historical lack of power of the victim to escape this hierarchy.⁶ In a similar manner, stating "I am Jewish" or being called "Jew" in Europe during the Holocaust instigated a predictable series of actions--incarceration, torture, loss of family, death. After the war, "I am Jewish" performs a history of atrocity that simultaneously distinguishes post-Holocaust from pre-Holocaust Jewishness and promises a different but equally as notable array of physical and emotional responses. In both theatrical performance and linguistic performativity, then, there is an acute awareness of different audience's needs,

desires, fears, and ways of knowing. The success of each depends upon the subject's ability to alter self according to context.

Subsequently, whether or not second generation survivors desire to tell one of the many Holocaust stories that has shaped them psychologically and physically, they are taught from birth--through silence and misunderstanding--to play their stories differently for different audiences. As Lori Lefkowitz, second generation survivor, points out in "Inherited Holocaust Memory and the Ethics of Ventriloquism," knowing oneself as "Child of Holocaust Survivor...freezes us into our position as our extraordinary parent's children," and "second generation" infers a precarious position that is simultaneously privileged, "closer to the source," and "emphatically not first."⁷ Deb Filler shows us that to survivor parents "emphatically not first" is fundamental in raising children. Survivor babies are "placed on solids immediately. [They have] to be strong. [They have] to be happy" because "happy" not only denotes the condition most removed from the event and those forced to endure it, it also promises that the survivors have truly survived by creating a generation that is unshaped by the Holocaust. Once outside the Jewish community, however, the second generation is recognized as "closer to the event." As Filler playing her best friend's mother explains, the Star of David Debby wears symbolizes the ability of the Jewish people to overcome the various "obstacles" that they have had to "put up with." For the non-Jewish community, "Jew" automatically

resurrects a tragic, recent history that positions Debby as a unique amalgamation of victim and survivor.

By transferring the physical performance inherent in second generation identity from the daily routine to the stage and screen, Filler creates a medium in which she can become those audiences that see her differently. She may explore others' relationships to the Holocaust and, subsequently, to herself. But perhaps more importantly, the narrative structure dictated by film, the promise of a beginning, middle, and end, allows Filler and Ravett to unite, if not reconcile their fragmented selves if only for the duration of the film and in the confines of the frame. The first spoken word of Ravett's *Everything's for You* is "Pop" in his own voice. Although Ravett then positions himself off-screen as both interviewer and director, and asks questions such as "What about your family?" that seem to remove him personally from the material being discussed, neither Ravett, his viewing audience, nor the subject being interviewed can forget the natural power dynamic that exists between Chaim the father and Abraham the son. The task of the second generation to perform different identities becomes more problematic when disparate worlds collide because audience expectations differ. The viewing audience expects Ravett as director to control visual and aural representation and, as he chooses to be heard but not seen during the interview, he partially succeeds in fulfilling that role. But as son to the father subject who can see Abraham behind

the camera, Ravett cannot help but become a part of the narrative the interview is telling. Ravett leads, "A boy and a girl?" "A boy and a girl" Chaim affirms. "When was the last time you..." the interviewer begins before he is interrupted with the desired response. The conflation and predictability of question and answer attests to Abraham's inability/unwillingness to detach himself from his father's narrative. As interviewer he is asking the same questions he has obviously asked many times before as son. Because of this, the traditional view of director/interviewer as the power figure is compromised; Abraham does not have complete control of the film he is making.

But as we see in both Filler and Ravett's works, physical performance does more than supply an audience and a form for collecting fragmented selves. By combining audio and visual in a controlled environment, film allows the children of Holocaust survivors to articulate the unsaid and tell the untold that plagued their childhoods. In the previously discussed article, Lefkovitz positions performance as a means of highlighting the ruptures of language and meaning that necessarily exist between children of survivors and their parents by evoking "ventriloquism" as the artistic medium used by the second generation to tell their parents' stories. The life of the ventriloquist is marked by public silences and displaced voices, the life of the puppet by public speeches of scripted memories and routines. Holocaust ventriloquism, Lefkovitz notes, is particularly problematic because as children

become the story tellers there is the risk of usurpation, of the child appropriating or altering their parent's stories. Equally as possible is the silencing of the child's story, the story that cannot hold up to that of the parents which must be told at the expense of all else. Thus, for each voice heard, each story told, there is the equally as notable presence of the voice unheard, the story untold.

Through film, Ravett and Filler may at least articulate the silences and expose the ruptures so central to their identity. Ravett's inquiries are often answered with the hopeless and enigmatic, "If you knew what one potato meant for me, then you would understand," followed by silence. Accompanying this declaration of unresolvable difference is an animated sketch of a father and son, the latter of which lacks a mouth. The silence, rendered visible by the incomplete face, manages to articulate that which the father leaves unspoken, 'but you cannot know (the value of a potato), so you will never understand me or yourself.' Furthermore, while film may not provide Ravett with the knowledge he is seeking, it provides him with the tools to at least control the duration and placement of the silences that have constructed his Holocaust narrative as much as stories of Auschwitz. Similarly, Filler illustrates that even a father who is willing to give answers cannot repair the fissure in language that results from the saturation of meaning in atrocity. On their "whirlwind tour of Easter European death camps," Sol Filler brings Deborah's attention to the field they are passing. She remarks on the beautiful color of the

corn, to which her father responds, "I saw a French girl shot in those fields." Since words, landscapes, etc., cease to signify a common meaning, the second generation must create a new space, a new mode of communication, if they are to make the first generation and others hear their unique stories, enable multiple audiences to understand that "it was my Holocaust too."⁸

The physical presence of Ravett and Filler is central to this generation of meaning because it establishes a new vehicle for communication in the body itself. In *Punch Me in the Stomach* Filler dons two different costumes to signify father--the simple hat indicates a performance of father on-stage for a theater audience, the more complicated gray hair, mustache, hat and suit is father offstage, both more consciously performed and more real. It is in this intricate guise as father that Filler bridges the gaps in knowing presented by the different realities of the cornfield. Although Filler is playing father, she is, after all, in dialogue with herself, and as such successfully articulates the two very different voices of first and second generation--she witnesses the death of the French girl and sees a beautiful corn field. Filler gains access to the otherwise inaccessible memories of her father's experience and, as her real father is sitting in the audience, tells him of her own.

Ravett attempts a similar possession of his father's body and memories as he moves from his safe position behind the camera to the visual field, entering a tiled, public shower with his son, also named Chaim, forcing the audience to recall

photographs of gas chambers and haunting memories of a son killed during the war. And yet, this performance of the Holocaust serves to emphasize not bridge the disparities between father's memory and son's knowing because, although the gas chambers were a very real part of his father's Holocaust experience, he and his son never occupied those physical spaces. The memory that Ravett performs is not his father's. In another scene, Ravett appears on screen as an animated child being beaten by his father for breaking a key in the lock. The adult voice asks, "why'd you hit me so hard?" and it becomes apparent that the voice of the interviewer is also that of a victim and a survivor of the Holocaust. Thus, while the metaphorical shifting of bodies does not suture gaps in understanding between parent and child for Ravett in the same way it does for Filler, by becoming father, victim, and survivor, Abraham begins to tell his own story which is equally as grounded in atrocity.

Perhaps the reason that Filler's performance seems to negotiate a space in which first and second generation may speak, listen and understand while Ravett's does not is that Ravett's narrative is more directly plagued by the most unbreachable of silences--death. As we learn by the end of *Punch Me in the Stomach*, Filler's father watches her performances, listens to them, and suggests minor changes in presentation be it posture or statistics. Presumably, he grants her permission to tell a misled and indifferent tour guide the truth about the camps because "I was there,

I know" in his voice because, in a way, she does know. Ravett, on the other hand, makes it clear from the very beginning that the father survivor is past tense. He has died during the course of the project, so he can neither hear the way Abraham's questions sound without the camera present as mediator, nor see himself defer the answers to those questions. He will never understand that it is his son's Holocaust too.

But, in some respect, the physicality of the film does allow for new bonds to be formed between father and son. As Chaim dies, and Ravett finds pictures of his father's family that died during the war, he begins to understand the meaning of loss, the value of a potato. Ravett can look at the photograph and then look to his own children playing in the snow and understand the potential for unbearable loss in fatherhood. He may look to the photograph and look to his father's empty chair and "understand a little." By locating, living and, finally, articulating this loss for a larger audience Ravett begins to know his father, and tells another piece of his own story. And, as Filler puts her arm around her real father who waits for her in the otherwise empty theater at the end of *Punch Me in the Stomach*, the audience at home is left with the hope that for once, the show might not always go on.

¹ For a comprehensive study of Jewish-American vaudeville see Harley Erdman, *Staging the Jew: The performance of American Ethnicity. 1860-1920*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1997).

² *Everything's for You*, dir. Abraham Ravett, videocassette, 1989. Filmed 1974-77 and 1984-89. Chaim Ravett died in 1979.

³ *Punch Me in the Stomach*, dir. Deborah Fuller and Francine Zuckerman, perf. Deb Filler, videocassette, Zee Films, 1995.

⁴ Ida Fink's autobiographical novel *The Journey*, trans. Joanna Weschler and Francine Prose (New York: Farrar, 1992) and Sarah Kofman's memoir *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1994) are two of many Holocaust narratives that explore the sustained psychological trauma that results from "passing" as non-Jew.

⁵ Terrence DesPres, *The Survivor: 'An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1976).

⁶ In *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Buffer acknowledges the problems and contradictions that arise when the court system legislates on the power/legality of hate speech by examining several conflicting rulings by the Supreme Court and others (New York: Routledge, 1997). Buffer bases her analysis of the performativity of language on J.L Austin's pivotal work *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard UP).

⁷ Loft Lefkovitz, "Inherited Holocaust Memory and the Ethics of Ventriloquism," *The Kenyon Review*, 19.1 (1997): 3543.

⁸ *Punch Me in the Stomach*