

ALICE BALESTRINO

“RADIANT DARKNESS LEAKED OUT THROUGH HER CRACK”

Cracked Families and Leaking Trauma in Michael Chabon’s Moonglow

ABSTRACT: This paper looks at the entity of the family as a space of memory repository and, more specifically, as a time-space of trans-generational transmission of traumatic memories. It focuses on Michael Chabon’s novel *Moonglow* (2016) and it resorts to Art Spiegelman’s *MAUS* (1991) as a narrative model. This analysis dwells on families of Holocaust survivors, defined as “cracked families,” in which the dynamics of trauma transmission may be interpreted through the image of the “leaking trauma.” The “leaking trauma” describes the relationships between traumatized individuals and their offspring, and the mechanisms through which the present (as well as the future) of a household is shaped by and negotiated in the light of its past. Finally, this paper investigates the literary techniques that postmemorial generations (a term coined by Marianne Hirsch) employ in order to represent and narrate their own memorial condition, their own experience of the Holocaust.

KEYWORDS: Jewish-American Literature, Holocaust Literature, Postmemory

After I’m gone. Write it down.
Explain everything. Make it mean something.
Use a lot of those fancy metaphors of yours.
Put the whole thing in proper chronological order,
not like this mishmash I’m making you.

Michael Chabon, *Moonglow*

This epigraph is borrowed from Michael Chabon’s novel *Moonglow* (2016). The protagonist – the grandfather of the Michael Chabon character, narrator and author, the three figures coinciding – exhorts his grandson not only to listen to the story of his own (and to some extent his wife’s) life, but also to record it – “Write it down” – and, most importantly, to elaborate a narrative out of it: “Explain everything. Make it mean something. Use a lot of those fancy metaphors of yours. Put the whole thing in proper

chronological order” (Chabon 2016, 241). This excerpt condenses the outlook of an old man on his deathbed (and under the influence of pain medication) confessing the past he kept to himself up to that moment to a younger man; it signals the trans-generational juncture of a grandfather passing the baton of memory to his descendant; it expresses the conversion of a personal story into shared, familial memory and, at the same time, it means merging individual, scattered memories into a coherent story.

In this paper, I will focus on the way in which Holocaust narratives explore the entity of the family as a space of memory repository and, more specifically, as time-space of trans-generational transmission of traumatic memories. I will discuss Michael Chabon’s *Moonglow* as the main case study and, to some extent, Art Spiegelman’s *MAUS* as an illustrative and visual model of these mechanisms. My analysis will dwell on families of Holocaust survivors as the epitome of families having to deal and come to grips with a traumatic past; a bulky heritage that permeates the everyday life of all the members, not only of those who directly experienced the tragic event. How do traumatized individuals – often suffering from PTSD, “post-traumatic stress disorder,” provoked by their involvement (in several and differing forms) in the Holocaust – relate to their kin and, especially, to their offspring? In this context, to what extent are family dynamics affected, twisted, and eventually turned dysfunctional? In what terms is the present (as well as the future) of a household shaped by, negotiated in the light of its past? In order to explore these subjects, I will resort to the category of “postmemory” elaborated in the 1990s by Marianne Hirsch and systematized in her seminal *The Generation of Postmemory, Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (2012), in which Hirsch investigates the memorial condition of the children of Holocaust survivors as well as the complex system of inter-generational, memorial connections that link the parents’ traumatic experiences to their children’s traumatic memories. Memories crossing the borders of the individual experience and slipping into the very fabric of the family constitute the foundation and the specificity of the memorial phenomenon Hirsch calls postmemory: as the term itself suggests (conveying the idea of a shift, either temporal, or cultural, or generational, from memory to what may come after, “post,” it), postmemory implies a sharing of personal experiences that, due to emotional bonds, is peculiarly compelling and affective. Against the background of this theory, my aim is to analyze some key literary techniques typifying postmemorial narratives and engaging some traits of second-hand memory and inherited traumas: entangled perspectives, historical complexity, overlapping of temporal dimensions and multi-layered understanding of the past among others.

Moonglow revolves around Chabon’s grandparents’ past, perceived through the associative and atomistic narrative of the grandfather; a vision that juxtaposes different images thus shaping a composite, and always renewed, comprehension of the events. The grandfather’s account is fragmentary and, lacking a solid narrative structure, it allows the recipients the agency to construct their own logic out of it by arranging the memory-

atoms into narratives-molecules. The grandfather is never referred to by his proper name, only by the title defining his role in the family; the protagonist of this story is simply called “my grandfather,” without any further individualization except for the possessive adjective that shows the familial relationship existing between protagonist and narrator. This narrative choice delineates the boundaries or the scope of his storytelling, making them coincide with those of the family circle; in other words, Chabon the author seems to suggest that the events recounted in the novel by Chabon the narrator are intended to be remembered and narrated because his grandfather lived through them and passed them on to Chabon the character. The familial bond, hence, not only defines the protagonist’s identity – more than his own individuality – but also structures the narrator’s grasp of the narrative and roots his perspective. Chabon seems to understand the relationship to his grandfather as a way into history: he turns his grandfather’s memories into a text in order to shape a story that is cut out of the macro scenario of History and focuses on the micro implications of some major recent events, among them the liberation of Europe during World War II, and the Cold War Space Race. From *grand récit* to individual accounts, this historical and so-called “memoirist” narrative functions as a microscope, often losing sight of the context and magnifying small elements.

The strong familial bond between grandfather and grandson permeates the narrative with emotional implications on the part of the narrator; this means that Chabon’s literary transposition of his grandfather’s memories cannot be objective, it cannot be grounded in narrative detachment and cannot but mirror the author’s position: at once distant from and close to the events narrated. It is also hard to draw a line between facts and fiction. “Memorial” is a label that applies to this kind of literature only to some extent, because it is memorial in the sense that, in order to comprehend the past, it resorts to memories – with their ephemeral ontological status and their biased epistemological reach, their plurality and their potential unreliability; at the same time, though, the memories recounted are second-hand, familial rather than personal. In *Moonglow* the act of remembering is a double-object verb: despite the sequential order (memories proceed from elderlies to their descendants), both the source (the grandparents) and the receiver (Chabon and to some extent his mother) of the memorial transmission are involved in the remembrance process, each with their own memorial agency. However, being at least one generation removed from the events, and being filtered through the voice of non-witnesses, these recollections come necessarily “after” memory; these memories are actually “post-memories” and this is the main reason why their narrativization – that is produced by the generations that come after – is defined as “post-memorial.”

Postmemory is by definition different from memory still, it approximates memory in its affective force and psychic effects. It is the result of “acts of transfer”¹ that transform first collective history into individual memory and then arrange memory into stories shared across the family circle. These stories are subsequently inherited by second and third generations that finally internalize and elaborate them, turning them into postmemories. This transmission process is embedded in multiple forms of mediation; being a structure for the comprehension of a trauma experienced vicariously, postmemory represents a connection to the past that is mediated on the one hand by the family heritage – made up of stories heard from parents or relatives, personal photographs, items and documents – and on the other hand, by official history – that relies on records, canonized images, public archives and collective imaginary of remembrance.

According to Hirsch, the ultimate point of postmemorial work is “to reactivate and re-embody distant political and cultural memorial structures by investing them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression” (Hirsch 2012, 31-35). Postmemory, Hirsch’s theorization goes on, “shares the layering of the other ‘posts’ that [...] continue to dominate our intellectual landscape [and] reflects an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture” and – more to the point of my argument – it accommodates “a *structure* of inter- and trans-generational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience. It is a *consequence* of traumatic recall but (unlike post-traumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove” (6; italics in original). Intrinsically ingrained in the “intimate embodied space of the family” with a traumatic past, the mechanisms examined by postmemory seem to produce peculiar family dynamics worthy of investigation. This notion of memory as a form of relationship to the past is not only radically different from recorded history but also necessarily linked to the formation of families living a present jeopardized by the intrusiveness of the past, a condition that I aim to analyze in *Moonglow*.

Moonglow is a *memoir* in the form of a novel and at the same time a novel in the form of a *memoir*.² Michael Chabon (author and narrator) collects episodes from the heritage of his family creating a narrative proceeding without a chronological order: from his maternal grandparents’ first encounter after the war, to his grandfather’s involvement in

¹ For a comprehensive study of how memory is conveyed and preserved within groups through acts of connection and sharing, see Paul Connerton’s *How Societies Remember*.

² For an extensive study on some genres which may further frame *Moonglow*, see Julie Rak’s *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market* (on *memoir*); Alison Gibbons’ “Contemporary Autofiction and Metamodern Affect” (on autofiction); Armine Mortimer’s “Autofiction as Allofiction: Doubrovsky’s *L’Après-vivre*” (on autobiographical writing as a literary trend of 21st- century US literature).

the hunt for Nazi scientists during WWII, from his own, i.e. Chabon’s, memories of the time spent with his grandparents as a child, to his mother’s troubled childhood – all scattered with further digressions and speculations on science, humanism, pop culture and several other issues. Even though it is hard to keep track of and summarize the plot, the narrative is anyway sustained by some cornerstone events: the American grandfather (who served in the army during WWII) meets the grandmother upon her arrival together with her six-year-old daughter from Europe, where the two had survived what would later be called the Holocaust.³ After their marriage, the grandmother’s eccentric behavior turns into mental illness and she is admitted to an asylum while, in the meantime, the grandfather loses his job, gets arrested, and lives a thousand other adventures. The character of the grandmother, despite looming in the background and being the protagonist of fewer stories than her husband, is the unstable center of the narrative: it is her gravity that makes the members of her family move around, her traumatic background that directs the future of her household.

I have conceived an image that, in the context of this novel, aptly describes the scope of the traumatic transmission from the grandmother to the rest of her family and the consequent postmemorial atmosphere due to its crossing of generational boundaries, and it is that of a “leaking trauma:” a historical trauma that brims over one generation into another; it overflows the generation of those directly involved and then, drop by drop, leaks into the rest of the family, affecting the generation of those who did not experience the tragedy in person, and thus producing in them a vicarious involvement. Moreover, the drops of this leaking process seem to inexorably dig a hole into the historical consciousness of the following generations that are, hence, paradoxically subjected both to the feeling of emptiness due to the lack of first-hand experience and to a sense of saturation caused by the adding of family postmemories to personal memories.

Moonglow is both explicitly and implicitly rooted in this act of leaking: on the one hand the whole narrative enterprise of the grandson recording and narrativizing his grandparents’ (hi)story originates from the inter-personal, inter-generational passage; from “the living connection” (Hirsch 2012, 33) between the past of the stories and the present of the narration. On the other hand, this kind of transmission of information gets literalized in the novel exactly through the metaphor of the “leaking trauma;” when the narrator dwells on the first encounter between his grandparents, this is how he visualizes his grandmother in the eyes of his grandfather: “She was a vessel built to hold the pain of her history, but it had cracked her, and radiant darkness leaked out through the crack” (Chabon 2016, 95). The weight of the grandmother’s traumatic past has cracked its own integrity; it has denied its own condition of “pastness” leaking flows of oxymoronic

³ “Then he saw that in gun-coloured ink on the inside of her left arm, she bore the recent history, in five digits, of her life, her family, and the world. He read its brief account and felt ashamed” (67).

“radiant darkness” into the present. The definition, almost an epithet, of the grandmother as “cracked vessel,” as cracked human being leaking history over her present, returns in the novel; she is “a woman with a crack in her brain that was letting in shadows and leaking dreams” (208); “the voice or the thoughts or the memory that tormented her had returned: her hidden history of loss, loss upon loss upon loss unending, flooding back into her body as that tablespoonful of life leaked out” (209).

Furthermore, the rupture of the cracks, along with their opening, seems to represent not only the source from which trauma leaks out, but also the recipient that lets the trauma in, once more signalling that postmemory is a bijective act of remembrance: it takes a source and a receiver, it gets activated when there is a sharing of memories inside the family circle. In other words, cracks are part of the familial language in *Moonglow*, they ensure “the living connection” and the transmission of experiences between members of the family; the narrator ponders on his own relation to the past: “I still hear that raucous voice; I hear a hatbox full of voices. They bubble up from a crack in my brain, dark mutterings, shouts, and low reproaches that fall just short of sense, intruding on my thoughts almost any time I’m alone in a quiet room” (372).⁴ In the end, cracks seem to define the whole existence, the identity of the protagonists’ family:

“Do you think they were ever happy?”

“Definitely,” I said.

“Definitely?”

“For sure.”

“She went crazy. His business failed. They couldn’t have children of their own. He went to prison. HRT gave her cancer. I shot his brother in the eye and then married a man who cost him his business. When were they happy?”

“In the cracks?” I said.

“In the cracks.” (426)

The cracks, the interstices, the breakage that tries to fill and to be filled; these are the ciphers of families grounded in postmemorial systems.

The metaphor of the leaking trauma is all but new to the imagery of postmemory. As a matter of fact, it may be recognized in the expressive language of the text that can be arguably considered the manifesto of postmemorial fiction and that displays narrative categories and aesthetic structures that have since become foundational of this genre: Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel *MAUS* (serialized from 1980 to 1991 in *Raw*, the magazine founded by Spiegelman and his wife, Françoise Mouly). As it is well known, this work explores the artist’s parents’ experience as prisoners at Auschwitz (recounted from the viewpoint of the father and filtered by the son’s panels), as well as the difficulties

⁴ This latter comment is presented to the reader in a footnote, ideally creating a crack in the text that allows the space for metanarrative reflection.

encountered by the Spiegelmans in the aftermath of the war – a matter investigated through the perspective of the son (Art Spiegelman himself) and his relationship with his dysfunctional mother. The concept of leaking trauma pertains the whole work and it is visualized from the very start: already in the book cover, the letters spelling the word MAUS are bleeding on the picture below, possibly signaling that the traumatic experience of the parents who survived the Holocaust is impossible to restrain. As much as the artist tries to force his parents’ trauma into the quite comfortable borders of the rectangular panels of comics, this trauma leaks out and stains what is beyond the boundaries. This idea of the trauma of the Holocaust leaking from one generation into the next is reinforced by the sequence of the titles that Spiegelman chooses for MAUS I and MAUS II: the first part is called “A Survivor’s Tale – My Father Bleeds History” whereas the second begins, tellingly, with a conjunction that indicates a familial passage: “And Here My Troubles Began.”

If the inheritance of postmemory through a trauma that leaks is rendered clear in these two examples, in some other passages Spiegelman dwells on how this trans-generational aspect interplays with the construction of the narrative; that is hence suspended between two generational and chronological standpoints and two narrative voices. This bi-phonic narrative is constantly punctured by a necessary negotiation between two distant positions – a negotiation that often takes the shape of a friction between official history and family (i.e. personal) memories especially when the two do not coincide. This mechanism is brilliantly exemplified in a multi-panel sequence that visually represents the double time frame grounding the postmemorial condition. Having to draw the inmates’ marches in and out of the Auschwitz gate, Spiegelman depicts an orchestra made up of prisoner musicians in the background because, as he clarifies, its presence is “well-documented” (Spiegelman 2003, 210). At this point, the narrative set during the war years gets interrupted by the father’s voice that shifts the time frame approximately thirty years onwards and introduces a metanarrative level. He argues that there was no orchestra at Auschwitz because he did not see any while marching through the gate and this means that, in his own personal experience, the orchestra did not exist. Caught between the necessity to make a historically accurate account and the will to be faithful to his father’s memories, the cartoonist decides to negotiate between these two diverging versions by employing a peculiar graphic and narrative device. The following panel shows indeed an orchestra at the entrance of Auschwitz, but it is almost hidden by a big crowd of inmates marching (a crowd bigger than the one in the first scene). This visual effect prevents Spiegelman’s father from seeing the orchestra that nevertheless pops out at the rear of the frame. The sequence ends with another time shift to the conversation between father and son; a dialogue that highlights one more time the distance that may sometimes separate official records and personal accounts.

The same tension between solid facts, memories and fluid exchange between these two innervates the author’s note that introduces *Moonglow*, where it is claimed: “In preparing this memoir, I have stuck to facts except when facts refused to conform with memory, narrative purpose, or the truth as I prefer to understand it.” What Spiegelman presents as a dilemma for the postmemorial artist, Chabon dismisses as a rapidly resolved impediment to the creation of his specifically postmemorial narrative by choosing to be faithful to his family “version.” With the use of the first person singular pronoun, he firmly posits his own endeavor in the value of memories over facts; a bold stance that makes the category “memoir” clash with the statement that follows and leaves the reader in bewilderment.⁵ Chabon’s take is in line with the words of his grandfather on the novel, when he states that minor details – and by extension, I add, historical accuracy at all costs – are not relevant for the actual comprehension of events:

“It explains nothing.”

“It explains a little.”

“It’s just names and dates and places.”

“Okay.”

“It doesn’t add up to anything, take my word for it. It doesn’t mean anything.”

[...]

“Anyway, it’s a pretty good story,” I said. “You have to admit.”

“Yeah?” He crumpled up the Kleenex, having dispatched the solitary tear. “You can have it. I’m giving it to you.” (Chabon 2016, 240-41)

What the old and the young Chabons seem to imply in this conversation is that the scope of memorial (and consequently of postmemorial) acts distances itself from contingencies and from the countable details, lying instead in the uncountable, personal significance that every member of the family attributes to events – both directly and vicariously experienced. It is what gets compressed, distilled and ultimately leaked out from an event (in the case of memory) or from a direct or indirect testimony (in the case of postmemory) that constitutes the spark and the heart of remembrance. Remembering is made out of images – as in a “grainy kinescope of memory” (182) – of oral accounts – “there is likewise no photographic record [...]. But there was a testimony, and my grandfather made it to me” (271) – of impressions and beliefs – “Did I know? Did I know. I mean, I... *sensed...*’ She paused, reluctant to carry on in this vein, trucking with things

⁵ This tension between facts and fictions might be profitably investigated also in the light of Hayden White’s speculations on the practice of discourse as a constitutional mode of comprehension of historical facts. “[H]istories gain part of their explanatory effect by their success in making stories out of *mere* chronicles, and stories, in turn, are made out of chronicles by an operation which I have elsewhere called ‘emplotment.’ And by emplotment I mean simply the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific *kinds* of plot structures” (White 1978, 83; italics in the original).

that could merely be sensed. ‘I knew she was afraid of something I couldn’t see’” (180). Eventually, the comprehension of the past takes the shape of a physical reaction: “Understanding leaked into his eyes, along with a hint of contempt” (263).⁶

This latter quotation introduces one more generational perspective in the narrative, that of Chabon’s mother;⁷ a woman that embodies the paradoxical condition of being both direct and indirect witness of the Holocaust because she was involved in it, but as a very little girl. She literally represents what we may define as the “bridge generation” that relates within the family the generation of survivors to that of their offspring coming after the war. Living at a time in the presence and in the absence of the traumatic events, her remembrance is a hybrid of memories and gaps, of the will to explain and the impossibility to articulate. Moreover, her testimony of the aftermath of the war and of her parents’ struggle to deal with their past is more immediate than Chabon’s since she has lived through those years herself. Her role in the family narrative is probably the most complex, because of her perspective as both “insider” and “outsider;” located in the middle of the memorial *spectrum* whose poles are the survivors (her parents) and the indirect witnesses (her son), as a daughter of Holocaust survivors she experiences a trauma of her own, that of feeling the pain of a past that is not hers – the postmemorial condition *par excellence*.

This conflicted stance makes her memories slippery and incomplete, overshadowed by episodes of amnesia and because inherited through non-rational structures (“‘Did I know? Did I know. I mean, I... *sensed...*’”) ultimately beyond verbalization.

Her recollection of these years was riddled, an empty quadrant of space lit by infrequent stars. [...] I could tell she thought this explained why she had lost so much history from that period of her life, but I wanted to point out that amnesia, whether induced by drugs or by trauma, did not explain everything. It did not explain, for example, the constant gaps and erasures that she introduced into her accounts of the things that she did remember. (166)

An emotional and memorial condition that makes her feel “an emptiness between her knees,” a sense of being “*unhorsed*:”⁸ of lacking the quality defining her familial heritage, of being unable to intimately empathize with her mother who, as I will discuss further below, relates to her past according to non-rational, obscure, mystic forms (345; italics in original). Despite the difficulties in coping with the familial past, mother and daughter

⁶ Helen Epstein, who studied the Holocaust legacy inherited by children of Holocaust survivors, has defined the process by which the second generation absorbs their parents’ attitude towards their traumatic past as “wordless osmosis.”

⁷As for all the members of his family, Chabon never mentions her proper name in the novel.

⁸ This term that refers to the “Skinless Horse,” the nightmarish figure that metaphorizes the grandmother’s mental disease and the visions from the past that stalk her.

(i.e. Chabon’s grandmother and mother) share the same history, they are united by the same haunting memories, even though in different ways.

This cumulative comprehension of the past and the development of a familial, postmemorial language imply the involvement, in the construction of postmemorial narratives, of at least two voices; postmemory is never an autonomous remembrance, never a solitary enterprise, it is always a family matter, a proposition in a longer, more composite text where the agency of different individuals and of different generations is at stake. Once the core, the inner significance of a past event leaks out of its cracks, the narrative made out of it is in a sense discretionary, subject to the agency of the kin-narrator who, as much as they try to be faithful to memories, will arrange the events (considered as the structures, the graspable shapes assumed by the essence of the past) according to his or her own logic. This is the case of the two divergent rationales that the grandfather and the grandmother apply to the construction of the past both as a series of occurrences and as a narrative; in these passages, the narrative is highly self-aware, reaching meta-literary peaks in which the narrator interrogates the nature of “making (up) stories” itself.

On the one hand, the grandmother is convinced that the narratives composing both past and present realities are completely arbitrary, even irrational in the capriciousness with which they subjugate human beings to their tyrannical power. Not by chance, she is persuaded that she can play with temporal dimensions with a deck of fortune-telling cards which “she had been given in the DP [Displaced Persons] camp at Wittenau by the requisite old gypsy witch woman never seen again” (193) and that, following the same conviction, she can rearrange the past and the present at her will. Interestingly, the fortune-telling cards are also the means through which she tries to establish a first testimonial encounter with her grandson, a child at the time, by telling him stories that, inspired by the figures on the cards, always end up unsettling and frightening him because “the fates that befell them [the characters] were dark” (53). The grandson notices a certain “urge” on the part of the grandmother to tell him these stories – “There was no way to predict when the urge would come over her” (52) – a desire that resembles what Primo Levi, in the author’s preface to *Survival in Auschwitz* (first published in Italian in 1948, and translated into English in 1959), defines as “the need to tell our story to ‘the rest,’ to make ‘the rest’ participate in it, [that] had taken on for us, before our liberation and after, the character of an immediate and violent impulse” (14)⁹. Building on this similarity, one may argue that the grandmother’s stories are implicit, probably yet not conscious testimonial accounts through which a Holocaust survivor tries to make her

⁹ According to Levi’s account, one of the possibilities that concentration camps inmates feared most about their future was – interestingly – to go back home, open up with their families about the atrocities and the sufferings endured and not be believed by their dear ones.

grandson participate in her trauma, by leaking her memories of the past over the present of her family, over the ordinariness of a game with her grandson.

However, the testimonial endeavor seems to clash with the arbitrariness of the grandmother’s stories which are not only inspired by imagery characters and hence fictional (as in the case of the game with the fortune-telling cards), but also, by her own admission, often made up, even when they were supposed to be real, based on facts. A likely explanation may be that the illogicality and the catastrophic character of what she has lived through have ignited in her a suspicion towards enlightened, realistic categories proven wrong and unreliable by the madness of the Holocaust. Therefore, even the act of bearing witness cannot be consistent, rational in its absolute truthfulness, but it is subject to the instability that shook the foundation of Western societies and redefined the concepts of possibility and impossibility, of reality and imagination.

In putting down these very early memories of my grandmother, I have so far avoided quoting her directly. To claim or represent that I retain an exact or even approximate recollection of what anyone said so long ago would be to commit the memoirist’s great sin. [...] She would, however, be happy to show me how her magical deck of [fortune-telling] cards could be used to tell a *story*. (22; italics in the original)

She was always making things up when I was little,” my mother said after I was done. “I used to catch her out all the time. She called them ‘stories.’ ‘Oh!’” She put on her mother’s accent, the rasp and pitch of her voice. “*You’re right, I told a story.*” (426; italics in the original)

On the other hand, the grandfather has an analytical mind frame but his trust in reason was severely undermined during WWII when he helped to track down Nazi scientists involved in the rocket industry. Moreover, his wife’s mental weaknesses, or “crack in the brain,” in the aftermath of the war called into question his previously solid belief that everything always happens for a reason, and a scientific one. It is “the illusion of control,” he has his best friend say, “You know that right? There is no actual control. It’s all just probabilities and contingencies, wriggling around like cats in a bag” (125). According to the grandfather, when History, or natural conditions, or a superior force, play with human beings as with cats in a bag, there is no explanation, of any kind, you can look for.

All he [Richard Feynman] wanted was to find the answer to the question ‘Why did *Challenger* explode?’ Right? And that answer was never going to be ‘Because it was all part of God’s plan’ or, I don’t know, ‘*Challenger* exploded so that some little kid somewhere would get inspired to grow up and become an engineer and invent a safer, more durable propulsion system for spacecraft.’ Or even, like, ‘Because humans and the things they make are prone to failure’ or ‘Shit happens.’ [...] The answer was always going to be dates, and names, and numbers. And that was good enough for Feynman, because the point was to find out. The meaning was in the inquiry. (240)

Remembering does not mean explaining, the grandfather seems to suggest. In the context of the family, memory seems to prevail on history because it is personal, transmissible, it can be turned into family heritage; memory does not follow the same structures, the same order, the same logic as recorded history. And postmemory in particular, with its bi-phonic narratives, its double object constructions, diverts not only from the exact chronicles of historical events but from conventional memorial practices as well, by imposing the familial gaze that, being subjective, necessarily particularizes and distorts simple facts.

The novel presents two peculiar circumstances in which the characters’ attempt to conjugate postmemory according to traditional paradigms of remembrance proves to be a failure. In the first incident, Chabon realizes that the notes he took on a copy of J.D. Salinger’s *Nine Stories* while talking with his grandfather about his past are gone, probably due to the exchange of his copy of the book with that of his ex-wife when they divided their belongings following the divorce.

I jotted down some of the names of the devices and tools my grandfather remembered having contrived during his time at Twenty-third and E. It was a fairly long list, with many annotations, scrawled inside the front cover of the book I was reading that day, Salinger’s *Nine Stories*. Decades later, [...] at the sight of the cover with its grid of coloured blocks, the memory of that afternoon returned to me: a slant of submarine light through the eucalyptus outside the guest bedroom, my grandfather’s brown face against a white pillow, the sound of his Philadelphia vowels at the back of his nose like a head cold. But when I opened the book, the inside cover was blank. In making our terminal inventories, my ex-wife and I must have exchanged copies. I had lost to estrangement and carelessness the only document I possessed of the week I am now trying to reconstruct. (118)

In line with the grandfather’s thought, destiny seems to confirm that the essence of memory is not in the details and Chabon’s postmemorial narrative is possible (and cannot be possible but) through a recollection of the senses and not thanks to “a fairly long list.”

In another scene, Chabon’s mother shows him the album that her mother (i.e. his grandmother) brought over with her from Europe, but when she opens it in order to look at the four photographs dating back to the pre-war years, they discover that they are missing. However, she is eventually able to recollect memories beyond pictures and records.

“Well, shit,” said my mother.

“Did they fall out?”

“I don’t know.”

[...] Anyone would have been upset by such a loss, naturally. [...] But] my mother’s lack of attachment to the past and its material embodiments went deeper than principle, training, or metaphor. It was an unbreakable habit of loss. [...] The photo album lay between us. I opened it to its first page, the four empty frames with their French inscriptions. “Show me anyway,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“Describe them.”

“I can’t describe things,” she said. “I don’t have that.”

“Please?” I said. “Just tell me what used to be there.”

She closed her eyes and then reopened them, angling her head to one side, eyeing the page with a sidelong gaze of reminiscence. (320-323)

Ultimately, I argue that postmemory complicates familial dynamics by burdening the relationships between mother and daughter, grandparents and grandson with the necessity and responsibility to tackle a traumatic past. This process exceptionalizes postmemorial families and accommodates a distinct structure for the comprehension of familial past, one that can be profitably investigated against the background of Spiegelman’s meta-literary work *MetaMaus* (2011). This is the artist’s reflection, thirty years on *MAUS*, on the generative process that led him to the creation of the narrative and of the expressive forms featuring his graphic memoir about his parents’ story. In the introduction Spiegelman depicts himself as a mouse haunted by questions regarding the genre of his major work – “why comics?” – the forms of his aesthetic language – “why mice?” – and the subject of his narrative – “why the Holocaust?” These issues frame the author’s reflection on his own personal and artistic commitment to his parents’ past and imply that his postmemorial undertake is grounded in an emotional identification. Distressed by this condition, Spiegelman wants to find an ultimate answer to these questions so that he can, eventually, get rid of his “forefathers” and take off the mask that prevents him from breathing. However, when he removes the mask that viscerally because physically made him embody his parents’ memories, what is left is only a skull. This gesture, and its result, opens up a further consideration on the character of postmemory: this picture seems to suggest that postmemory cannot be abandoned or rejected; when post-generations try to emancipate themselves from it, they find out that it is not a mask, a shape, an appendix; it is rather an intrinsic part of who they are in relation to their forefathers.

REFERENCES

- Caruth, Cathy. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP.
- Chabon, Michael. 2016. *Moonglow*. New York: Harper.
- Connerton, Paul. 1989. *How Societies Remember*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Crownshaw, Richard. 2010. *The Afterlife of Holocaust Memory in Contemporary Literature and Culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Eaglestone, Robert. 2004. *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Epstein, Helen. 1988. *Children of the Holocaust. Conversations with Sons and Daughters of Survivors*. New York: Penguin USA.
- Foer, Jonathan Safran. 2002. *Everything is Illuminated*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Gibbons, Joan. 2007. *Contemporary Art and Memory*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Gioux, Henry. 2014. *The Violence of Organized Forgetting: Thinking Beyond America's Disimagination Machine*. San Francisco: City Lights Books.
- Hirsch, Marianne. 2006. “Testimonial Objects: Memory, Gender, and Transmission.” *Poetics Today* 27 (2):353-383.
- Hirsch, Marianne and Leo Spitzer. 2008. “The Tile Stove.” *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36 (1/2):141-150.
- Hirsch, Marianne. 2012. *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hoffman, Eva. 2004. *After Such Knowledge. A Meditation on the Aftermath of the Holocaust*. London: Secker and Warburg.
- Kaplan, Brett Ashley. 2007. *Unwanted Beauty: Aesthetic Pleasure in Holocaust Representation*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Kaplan, Brett Ashley. 2011. *Landscapes of Holocaust Postmemory*. New York: Routledge Research in Cultural and Media Studies.
- Landsberg, Alison. 2004. “Prosthetic Memory. The Transformation of American Remembrance.” In *The Age of Mass Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Levi, Primo. 1996. *Survival in Auschwitz*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Levi, Neil and Michael Rothberg, eds. 2003. *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Nguyen, Viet Thanh. 2016. *Nothing Ever Dies. Vietnam and The Memory of War*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Novick, Peter. 2000. *The Holocaust in American Life*. Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 2004. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Rothberg, Michael. 2000. *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 2009. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- Spiegelman, Art. 2003. *The Complete Maus*. New York: Penguin.
- . 2011. *MetaMaus: A Look Inside a Modern Classic, Maus*. New York: Penguin.
- White, Hayden. 1978. *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- . 1987. *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Young, James. 1988. *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust. Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.