

Volume 1, No. 3 – December 2000

## The Problems of Storytelling: Forgotten Voices of the Holocaust

*Christopher J. Colvin*

### Review Essay:

**Mary D. Lagerwey (1998).**

#### **Reading Auschwitz**

Walnut Creek: Altamira Press. 184 pages,  
Paper (ISBN 0-7619-9187-5) \$ 22.95  
Cloth (ISBN 0-7619-9186-7) \$ 62.00

- [1. Storytelling Under Pressure](#)
- [2. An Outsider Reading Outsiders](#)
- [3. A First Step: Gender and Storytelling](#)
- [4. Complicating Variables: Nation, Class, Ideology](#)
- [5. Reading Through/With Chaos, Loss and Annihilation](#)
- [6. Conclusion](#)

[References](#)

[Author](#)

[Citation](#)

### 1. Storytelling Under Pressure

At the best of times, the problems of storytelling—of how stories are told, of who gets to tell their story and to whom, of how storytellers are heard and interpreted, of why people tell and listen to stories—are difficult enough. The performative, social and cultural dimensions of storytelling and the political and moral powers of storytelling are fraught with complications of voice, authority, interpretation, meaning, action, etc. When the stories we are listening to or telling are stories of violence, disruption and destruction, these problems are only amplified and made more urgent. The case of stories that surround the Holocaust have been a key site of discussion where these broader questions of storytelling intersect with the unique narrative challenges of situations of violence and chaos. Though there was a long period of silence surrounding the events of the Holocaust when it was first made widely known, in the last 30 to 40 years, there has been a long engagement with the problems of "reading" the Holocaust. The debate has not been only academic. Beginning with the publication of diaries like the one Anne FRANK kept or of stories like those from Elie WIESEL, and continuing on into the present, wider attention has been and is being paid to the Holocaust. This hasn't made the problem of how to respond to these stories any easier, however. This is especially true for those who approach the traces of the Holocaust from ethnic and generational distances that make it even more difficult to know how to respond to these stories. [1]

## 2. An Outsider Reading Outsiders

It is into this field of contention and questioning that Mary LAGERWEY offers her volume "Reading Auschwitz." In the first and second chapters, we find several clues as to her overall purpose in this volume. She tells us that, despite her perspective as a non-Jewish writer born after the Holocaust, "removed by time, place and ethnicity from these events" (LAGERWEY, pp.12-13), witnessing the stories of the survivors who were her subjects for research was her guiding principle (p.14). More specifically, we discover that she wants to catalogue her journey in reading Holocaust texts, a journey that began by asking "how personal Auschwitz stories reflect and shape knowledge of the Holocaust in the US today" (p.20). Soon, however, the convenient and familiar "grand narratives" that formed around texts from more well-known writers like Anne FRANK and Elie WIESEL proved dissatisfying. She refined her task by choosing six, lesser-known writers and considering the influence of gender in their stories. After an analysis of gender, the power of nationality, ethnicity, ideology and status presented themselves as additional, useful analytic tools. LAGERWEY finally had to confront, however, the resistance many of these stories revealed to any kind of conventional "sociological comparison between styles and themes" (p.22) and dealt with the question of chaos, loss and annihilation in relation to the problem of storytelling. In the end she offers her reflections on "how do and should people today come to know about the Holocaust, how has my life story become interwoven, [and] how can we keep survivor stories alive in our cultural memory"? (p.17) Her overall conclusion is that none of her interpretive strategies are adequate, but that each reflects a part of the greater truth. [2]

In the first chapter, she introduces the six writers that form the focus of the volume—Jean AMERY, Charlotte DELBO, Fania FENELON, Szymon LAKS, Primo LEVI and Sara NOMBERG-PRZYTYK—through short biographical sketches. She chose writers whose works were written after liberation, are publicly available, have been translated into English and used in anthologies or course syllabi and "all-three by women and three by men—illustrate ways in which gender shapes stories" (p.21). In the second chapter, LAGERWEY examines the two most well-known writers on the Holocaust, Elie WIESEL and Anne FRANK and considers how their stories have come to dominate the work of telling the story of the Holocaust. She argues that though these two writers and their stories are certainly important, they can't be asked to stand in for the experiences of all of the others who lived through or died in the Holocaust. Relying on these two writers as our principle witnesses would lead to the silencing of those with different experiences and a foreshortening of our perspectives on the Holocaust. This is the reason she has chosen in the next three chapters to examine the works of lesser-known writers. This argument is made carefully and includes some fascinating excerpts from Anne FRANK's diary (intended to contest the conventional interpretations of her character). However, this section seems to mostly be laying the groundwork for later chapters and there is nothing essentially new in the analysis presented. [3]

### 3. A First Step: Gender and Storytelling

The third chapter presents the first of what will be three "readings" of the works of these six writers. Interestingly, she warns us beforehand that this first reading is undertaken through a "gendered lens" (p.72) and represents her initial (and, she admits, unsatisfactory) attempt to find some way to frame and interpret these stories. Unsatisfactory because, as she confesses throughout the book, it tries to paint everything with the brush of gender. All the women's stories become archetypal, or rather stereotypical, tales of common struggle, nurturing mutual support networks, focus on "family, courage and fulfillment" (p.98) and "the wisdom of sisterhood" (p.99). The men's stories become narratives of self-sufficiency, brutality, fear, competition, mistrust and collusion. Though she again mobilizes fascinating excerpts from these six writers in making her claims about the "gendered dichotomies" (p.154) in these stories, her argument is ultimately deterministic and reductionist. The chapter takes a very narrow and essentializing definition of gender difference (or dichotomies) and basically runs these six writers through the mill. [4]

Of course, she repeatedly warns the reader that she knows all of this already. The gender chapter is included to mark out a first and less than successful attempt to wrestle with these texts. We are assured that later on, in the next two chapters, we will see a refinement and complexification of her position. Before I continue discussing the following chapters, let me first deal with this question of placing succeeding interpretations one after the other to chart one's intellectual progress. This is one of the major innovations this volume intends to offer. On one hand, I find this kind of "experiment" useful and interesting in that it reveals three different and potentially useful ways of reading the same texts. Rather than trying to cover all of one's interpretive bases in one pass (an impossible task) or sticking to one narrow and dogmatic perspective on the material, here we are allowed three fairly independent readings of the same set of texts. Margery WOLF'S book "A Thrice-Told Tale" is a similar attempt to map out the ways our perceptions of our research material change over time, space and genre. This idea is grounded in what the series editors and others have identified as an important part of new ethnographic writing styles: the replacement of the all-knowing observer with the humble and stumbling participant who learns as he or she goes along (ELLIS & BOCHNER 1998, p.7, MARCUS & FISCHER 1986). Michelle KISLIUK (1998) has also provided a thoughtful example of how ethnographic fieldwork can be successfully described in a way that resists the "fieldworker/researcher-as-hero" archetype. Instead, the research process is described as one of slow, insecure and sometimes painful enlightenment. On the other hand, though, I wonder how useful it is to simply reproduce a one-dimensional and deterministic chapter on gender, one that is fatally flawed, by the author's own admission. I am sure LAGERWEY learned some valuable lessons (as we all do as we work through our material) in writing and then rethinking the gender chapter. I am just not sure what I learned from it. It have been more helpful if LAGERWEY could have gone back and rewritten the chapter on gender to integrate it more successfully with the rest of the book. It isn't necessary to write an entire chapter on gender (or anything) that is less than illuminating to make the point that relying too much on one interpretive stance can be dangerous and misleading. Similarly, I wonder if the previous chapter on WIESEL and FRANK also demanded that much space to make the point about the dangers of relying on canonical writers. [5]

#### **4. Complicating Variables: Nation, Class, Ideology**

The fourth chapter is an attempt to deepen the analysis of the gender chapter by factoring in nationality, ethnicity, ideology and status as complicating variables. This chapter is much better than the chapter on gender, its reading of the texts more fine-grained, subtle and open to contradiction. It also highlights what is in the end the real strength and pleasure of this book: the chance to learn some of the details of the lives of prisoners who led lives in the camps very different from what one finds in the canonical writers on the Holocaust or on our movie screens. Again, there is nothing here that is significantly new theoretically, either about stories of the Holocaust or about the problems of storytelling in general. However, her refinement of her previous chapter's argument (even, sometimes, to the extent of reading the same passage in directly opposite ways) and her attempt to bring this valuable, but under-recognized material to light is appreciated. [6]

#### **5. Reading Through/With Chaos, Loss and Annihilation**

Her third and final "reading" is her most provocative theoretically and attempts to examine at what point(s) narratives (and our attempts to read and understand them) begin to break down under the weight of what the stories are trying to convey. More specifically, she asks how our attempts to understand and give meaning to these narratives often fall apart in the face of the chaos, the grotesque, and the evil that suffuse and direct the stories we are reading. This chapter moves a bit away from the stories themselves and engages more with the long-standing debate in studies of the Holocaust about the problem of rendering the Holocaust in language. LAGERWEY, in this chapter, responds to these debates with a finely balanced position on the problems of language and narrative in the face of chaos. Her reworking of BAKHTIN'S notion of the carnivalesque and the grotesque to better suit the realities of life in the camps is especially useful as is her section on how "time, space and rationality" come under specific kinds of strain in places like Auschwitz. [7]

My principle criticism of this section of the book, however, is that she seems to ask the argument about chaos and the failure of language to do the work of explaining the inadequacies of her earlier, more deterministic readings. When she found that gender was not a simple lens through which she could easily categorize and interpret stories, she went on to explore a range of other complicating factors (nationality, ideology, etc.) When even these factors failed to provide a consistent and elegant interpretive framework for these stories, she seems to look to these ideas of chaos and the grotesque to explain away these difficulties. She does argue forcefully and effectively that spaces of chaos and loss present unique (perhaps insurmountable) challenges to both the storyteller and the listener. What seems to be missing, however, is an idea of how storytelling *a/ways* faces these problems of meaning, though perhaps in different ways or to lesser degrees in different contexts. The series editors in their introduction to this volume explain they are searching for work that presents "people ... as complicated and vulnerable human beings who act and feel in complex and often unpredictable ways. As social agents, constrained but not controlled by culture ... [who] tell stories that often show a dazzling human capacity to remake and reform cultural

narratives." (ELLIS & BOCHNER 1998, p.7) I can't help but be left with the feeling that in this book, the very real chaos of Auschwitz is made to do more analytic work (or interpretive destruction) than it needs to. That is, the writers she deals with tend to be represented as either (1) defined narrowly by the variables of gender, nationality, ethnicity, ideology, status, etc., or, (2) when they behave oddly or unexpectedly, victims of the failure of language and the loss of meaning in the face of chaos. [8]

## 6. Conclusion

In the end, there is a reluctance to develop or articulate an interpretive approach that is somewhere in between blunt determinism and incoherence in the face of chaos. I think this is because, despite its intentions as ethnography and sociology, this book is really more about charting the author's own philosophical and moral dilemmas about the usefulness and difficulties of telling and listening to the stories of the Holocaust. It is less successful in providing a plausible or innovative interpretive, sociological framework for engaging with these stories. To the extent it records her encounters with and re-readings of these texts, it is a successful and powerful volume. As mentioned above, the excerpts from these six writers very effectively challenge and complement the archetypal stories of struggle that tend to form around the figures of victims and survivors like Anne FRANK and Elie WIESEL. The chance to follow her progress as she refines her position, the self-reflexive considerations of her position and responsibility as a non-Jew born after the Holocaust, the spaces of not knowing, of silence, of witnessing she respectfully maintains in her analysis—all of these are reasons I found this book useful and instructive. It is not ethnographically or sociologically grounded enough to offer significant insights on other levels, however. We never really know much about the authors outside of their texts. Her own presence in the text is inconsistent and there is little engagement with broader debates in many fields about the problems about memory, stories, authority, voice, meaning, interpretation, etc. This may not be her point, however, in writing the book. Whatever its difficulties, it is still a moving and provocative attempt to lead her readers through some texts on the Holocaust that are rarely read or written about. [9]

## References

- Bakhtin, Mikhail (1984). *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Ellis, Carolyn & Bochner, Arthur (1998). Series Editors' Introduction. In Mary D. Lagerwey (1998). *Reading Auschwitz* (pp.7-9). Walnut Creek: Altamira Press.
- Kisliuk, Michelle (1998). *Seize the Dancel: Baaka Musical Life and Ethnography of Performance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Marcus, George & Fisher, Michael M.J. (1986). *Anthropology As Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wolf, Margery (1992). *A Thrice-Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism and Ethnographic Responsibility*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

## Author

Christopher J. Colvin is a PhD candidate in cultural anthropology at the University of Virginia. He is currently conducting fieldwork on victim support groups and the problems of storytelling in post-apartheid South Africa.

Christopher J. Colvin

21 Duke St.

Observatory 7925

Cape Town, South Africa

e-mail: [cjc5r@virginia.edu](mailto:cjc5r@virginia.edu)

## Citation

Please cite this article as follows (and include paragraph numbers if necessary):

Christopher J. Colvin (2000, November). The Problems of Storytelling: Forgotten Voices of the Holocaust. Review Essay: Mary D. Lagerwey (1998). Reading Auschwitz [9 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* [On-line Journal], 1(3). Available at: <http://qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-eng.htm> [Date of access: Month Day, Year].

Copyright © 2000 FQS <http://qualitative-research.net/fqs>