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**WITNESSING DIFFERENCE: AN EXPLORATION
OF LIVING IN THE AFTERMATH OF TRAUMA
IN POST-HOLOCAUST AMERICA IN CYNTHIA
OZICK'S "ROSA"**

By

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**PROFESSOR KEVIN VENNEMANN
PROFESSOR MYRIAM J.A. CHANCY**

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If the reception history of the Holocaust were described by a musical score, it would start with a pause in order to denote the silence that characterized the Western World's response to it in the first twenty to thirty years following its occurrence. According to Dori Laub, a psychoanalyst and one of the founders of the Yale Fortunoff archives, the Holocaust was "an event that produced no witnesses" at the time of its historical occurrence (Laub 80). This absence of witnesses, however, did not occur due to the unavailability of people present at the site of trauma or the lack of awareness of those who were on the outside. In *An Event Without a Witness* Laub identifies two groups of people who could have served as witnesses of the Holocaust event: the inside witnesses—the victims and the perpetrators — , and the outside witnesses: the rest of the world that knew but stood watching silently. Despite the availability of these witnesses "as the event of the Jewish genocide unfolded, most actual or potential witnesses failed one-by-one to occupy their position as witnesses, and at a certain point it seemed as if there was no one left to witness what was taking place" (81). This failure to witness the destruction of over six million people, prompts for an exploration of the reasons behind it.

Laub's assessment of the Holocaust as "an event without a witness" does not imply an absence of outside witnesses but rather the failure of these potential outside witnesses to occupy their position as a witness. This failure points towards the burdensome double-legacy that the event left for the survivors of the Holocaust. In *Shadows of Trauma: Memory and the Politics of Postwar Identity* Aleida Assmann discusses the sense of the responsibility that survivors felt to serve as eyewitnesses to their own experiences of suffering and thus to ensure the Holocaust as the event did not remain absent from the records of history. (Assmann 70). This duty is expressed in survivors' testimonies as the duty "to live to tell their stories." At the same time, as

a violent event that happened to people against their will, the Holocaust endowed its victims with a traumatic memory recorded in their bodies that would haunt them for years against their will.

The history of silence that followed immediately after the Holocaust both confirms and complicates Laub's notion of the Holocaust as "an event without witnesses." Today, many scholars of the Holocaust agree that the difficulty of processing the Holocaust has to do with its traumatic nature. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History*, Cathy Caruth, for instance, writes: "For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence" (Caruth 187). Trauma complicates the notion of referential, linear history in which the events in the past serve as a precursor to the events in the present. While multiple definitions of trauma currently exist, the one that I will use throughout this thesis comes from Susan Brison: "[a] traumatic event is one in which a person feels utterly helpless in the face of a force that is perceived to be life-threatening" (Brison 39). As an event that occurs to the person against their own will, a traumatic event can cause one to lose a sense of agency over their life. One immediate cause of such loss of agency is the inability of survivors to witness the traumatic incident at the moment of its occurrence. This inability can be explained by the way in which life-threatening events are processed. Unlike other kinds of events, which become encoded in our memories only after we have consciously processed them, traumatic events are recorded without being fully processed by the conscious mind. As a result, those who have survived a traumatic event carry in their bodies a memory of the past that they do not possess the power of consciously recalling. This unique set of consequences created a new kind of witness—the moral witness. Assmann describes a moral witness as a person, who is simultaneously an eye-witness of an event and its

victim. (71). While feeling “the duty to tell” their stories might have filled the survivors’ lives with meaning, it also placed the responsibility of recording history and restoring justice on the victims, who at the same time had to deal with restoring their lives in the aftermath of trauma.

In *Witnessing Beyond Recognition* philosopher Kelly Oliver distinguishes between two meanings of witnessing: “the juridical connotation of being an eyewitness” to an event and “the religious sense of bearing witness to something beyond knowledge” (Oliver 16). The “juridical sense” has to do with our ability to testify on the knowledge we gain through first-hand experience. In this sense, it is connected with our position as subjects grounded in history. The second meaning of witnessing—witnessing in a sense of “bearing witness” has to do with our ability to exist in meaningful relation with the others around us. Witnessing one’s own trauma is a crucial step on the path of restoring the survivor’s ability to return to life, regain their sense of agency, and re-emerge from years of suffering in silence. However, it cannot be done alone. Witnessing, Oliver proposes, goes beyond our ability to form social relationships with others. Instead, grounded in our abilities to form relationships with others through address and response, witnessing describes the structure of subjectivity. From that perspective, witnessing in the sense of bearing witness can be defined as a process, in which survivors of traumatic events can begin to uncover the layers of trauma buried in their bodies in the presence of empathetic listeners.

By its nature, witnessing is dialogical, which means that it requires the intentional decision to speak out on the part of survivors of trauma and a commitment to listen on the part of the listeners. If the work of the Holocaust was to destroy the dialogical structure of subjectivity, witnessing can be regarded as a process of recovering it. In this thesis I examine the process of witnessing in Cynthia Ozick’s novella *Rosa* as a crucial part of living in the aftermath of trauma. As my analysis of Ozick’s *Rosa* will show, what prevents both Rosa and those around her to bear

witness to trauma is the failure to imagine oneself as implicated in the traumas of the other. This tendency to ignore the essential connection and dependence that exists between the Self and the other is enabled by the construction of difference.

Unmaking of the self

According to Michael Levine, Cynthia Ozick's novella *Rosa* should be read as a tale of searching for "an addressable you." In *Belated Witness* Levine writes: "What is clear is that the very question of addressability imposes itself so massively and with such urgency in 'Rosa' that it seems to pervade every level of the narrative" (Levine 146). The main character of the novella, Rosa Lublin is a fifty-eight-year-old woman, living in Miami, Florida. As a survivor of the Holocaust, who has become an eyewitness to the death of her child in the Nazi concentration camp, Rosa carries within her body multiple traumas: the trauma of being assaulted by a Nazi officer, the trauma of endless marching and starvation, the trauma of witnessing the death of her child, the trauma of loss of her previous life, the trauma of exile - the list is endless. The majority of Rosa's days are spent in a small cramped up hotel room writing letters to her niece Stella or her [now] imaginary daughter Magda. Rosa's interactions with people described in the novella—whether her talks with the customers in her antique shop in New York or with those who surround her in Florida are motivated by her need to find a listener who could help her bear witness to her own trauma. However, these attempts fail, leading Rosa to experience a second loss of subjectivity or something akin to re-traumatization, as she realizes that she is condemned to bearing the challenges of her own trauma alone.

Despite physical and temporal distance, Rosa's confrontation with the world of the Nazi concentration camps, is starkly present in sunny Florida in the form of trauma. This

haunting presence is most evident in a scene at the beach, when Rosa ventures out in search of a pair of lost underpants. Although the very reason motivating this journey carries within itself the element of absurdism, it testifies to the impact that the trauma of sexual violence has on Rosa's life. This memory of the trauma of sexual violence is implicated in the text's reference of Rosa's underpants: "Her pants were under the sand; or else packed hard with sand, like a piece of torso, a broken statue, the human groin detached, the whole soul gone, only the loins left for kicking by strangers" (Ozick 48). The naturalistic, almost violent description of separate body parts presents the physical decomposition of the body as the result of sexual trauma. This physical decomposition not only invokes the memory of the physical torturing of the body but also represents at the bodily level what Susan Brison views as the result of the working of trauma - "the unmaking of Self" (39).

One of the main ways the experience of violence contributes to the "unmaking of Self" is through hindering the survivor's ability to form meaningful relationships with others around them. The presence of the traumatic past in Rosa's present is expressed not only through the vivid flashbacks that are triggered in her body by the images of barbed wire or striped dresses, but also in the way she engages with those around her. Rosa's past experiences affect her present through the expectations she holds of others. This can be inferred from the lack of trust and eventually the sense of menace she experiences from Simon Persky, an older Jewish American, whom she meets while waiting for the laundromat to finish her load. When a pair of Rosa's underwear goes missing, she comes to a seemingly absurd conclusion that Persky must have stolen it, "Degrading... A fact, one pair of pants was lost. An old woman who could not even hang on to her own underwear. Then it came to her that Persky had her underpants in his pocket." The text continues,

Oh, degrading. The shame. Pain in the loins. Burning. Bending in the cafeteria to pick up her pants, all while tinkering with his teeth. Why didn't he give them back? He was embarrassed. He had thought of a handkerchief (Ozick 33—34).

The text expresses the terror and the shame that fill Rosa's mind, showing that the past is indeed starkly present in her life. Miriam Sivian writes that "Shoah is like a wash that colors much of Ozick's fiction" (Sivian 139). Similarly, trauma is like the broken mirror through which all of the events and relationships of Rosa's present are reflected. Thus, while a person unaffected by the trauma of sexual violence could have assumed that they dropped the underwear, Rosa's mind unintentionally returns to the events of the past, which transform her perception of the present and undermine her ability to trust Persky. A few lines later, a reference to a handkerchief clears out the confusion, making one realize that Rosa must have mistaken the underwear for the handkerchief that Persky "picked...up and stuffed...in his pants pocket" when they sat in a cafe. (Ozick 26) However, this does not keep Rosa from venturing out into the beach in search of her lost underpants. In *At the mind's limits* Jean Améry argues the experience of the denial of help in a situation of violence leads one to lose "trust in the world" (Améry 28). The consequences of this loss are expressed through Rosa's inability to trust the benevolent nature of Persky's intentions and, instead, cause her to assume that his interest in her must be necessarily sexually charged.

Considering the vicissitudes of witnessing to trauma, the question remains whether others can be held responsible for bearing witness to one's traumas. In his work, Améry argues that the Holocaust and the experience of torture undermined the idea that lies at the core of Western philosophy—the idea of the autonomous self. Améry insists that many of our life experiences that we take for granted imply that human beings are dependent on the help of others. When a

child experiences hunger, they rely on the help from their mother. Similarly, when anyone experiences pain, they rely on the help of the doctor. However, as Améry explains, “the expectation of help is as much a constitutional psychic element as is the struggle for existence” (28). The existence of the Self, on the metaphysical level, is only possible through the existence of the Other. Similarly, Oliver argues that one’s experience as a subject is contained in the space between response-ability and addressability (Oliver 6). That means that one experiences themselves as an active Subject only in response to the other’s address. That’s why, Oliver argues, “witnessing” can serve as an accurate model of subjectivity.

For this reason, the stakes in losing trust in the social world extend beyond one’s ability to be a member of public life, posing a metaphysical threat to the existence of one’s subjectivity. The loss of subjectivity implies not merely a loss of being able to trust another to respond to her address, but also a loss of her own ability to respond to others’ address. One scene that demonstrates Rosa’s lack of empathy towards others’ struggles and traumas is the scene at the hotel kitchen, in which Rosa comes across the black cooks:

It led her to light; voices of black men. A window. Vast deep odors: kitchen exhaust, fans stirring soup smells out into the weeds... She fled past the black cooks in their meat-blooded aprons, through a short corridor: a dead end facing an elevator. She pushed the button and waited. The kitchen people had seen her; would they pursue? She heard their yells, but it was nothing to do with her... A kind of emergency maybe. The elevator took her to the main floor, to the lobby; she emerged, free. (Ozick 50)

Rosa’s initial fear of being followed and persecuted by the cooks confirms that her traumatic memories of the past shape her relationships with others around her. However, her fears of the

cooks are quickly proved wrong: “The kitchen people had seen her; would they pursue? She heard their yells, but it was nothing to do with her...” (50) In this scene, which describes black men who toil away in the basement, Ozick points to the underprivileged position that black people occupy in the American society. Located in the basement of the hotel, the kitchen becomes a trap for black people, who unlike the guests of the hotel, the members of the upper class, can afford while they cannot. As will show later such position as the lower caste of the society brings them close to the position non-assimilated Jews occupied in post-WWI Poland . Nevertheless, Rosa flees past them towards the elevator and emerges free, leaving them behind . Rosa manages to break free due to being non-black. Overwhelmed with her own experience of liberation, Rosa leaves the black people behind and as such fails to respond to their address. Thus, Rosa’s experience of trauma does not only limit her from finding a listener to bear witness to her traumas, but it also prevents her from being open to witnessing other people’s traumas herself. As my analysis in the following sections will show, Rosa’s inability to find an “addressable you” could be the result of others’ similar failure to see themselves as implicated in her traumas.

Refusing to witness and constructing difference

Witnessing one’s own trauma is a necessary step on the path towards the re-making of the self in the aftermath of violence. However, the dialogical structure of witnessing makes one dependent on the others to be willing to assist in the process of bearing witness to their own trauma. This dependence becomes particularly pertinent in a situation like Rosa’s, since as a survivor she is physically dislocated from the site of their trauma and has no access to a community of survivors with who could have potentially helped her witness her own trauma.

Hence, Rosa has to rely on those in her physical proximity to bear witness to her trauma. When Rosa ventures out to the beach, reliving the traumatic memory of violence that occurred in her past, she attempts to reach out for help from others. However, her call for help doesn't find an addressee. Instead, it is met with indifference and the refusal of help from others around her, resulting in the further loss of trust in the social world and Rosa's alienation from it. One such instance occurs between Rosa, who gets lost on a private beach, and the hotel manager, who holds a Jewish last name—Finkelstein. Rosa says to him: "Mister, you got barbed wire by your beach," to which he responds, "Are you a guest here?" and their conversation continues, as follows:

"I am someplace else."

"Then it's none of your business, is it?"

"You got barbed wire" (Ozick, 51)

What becomes evident in this passage is the lack of true dialogue between the two people who engage in the conversation. Instead of answering Rosa's inquiry about the barbed wire, Finkelstein launches at her with a question: "Are you a guest here?" which hints at Rosa's presumed non-belonging to the place. Although, in this question Finkelstein refers to Rosa's belonging to the hotel, he also emphasizes her identity as a refugee, a person "from someplace else". (Ozick, 51) Although Finkelstein does not know for sure whether Rosa belongs to the place, he might be inferring this from Rosa's accent or her tendency to read the sign of barbed wire as a sign of violence rather than a simple matter of protecting property. Constructing Rosa as someone who does not belong to the place, Finkelstein establishes that her opinion and traumas are not of relevance to this place and, by extension, to him.

If one were to infer Rosa's and Finkelstein's reactions to the barbed wire from this dialogue alone it would point towards two strikingly different interpretations of the same image. For Rosa, the image of barbed wire that surrounds the hotel's beach is not a way of marking territory—it is the symbol of the concentration camp, the place and time in which the murder of her daughter happened. Furthermore, the barbed wire exists as a physical boundary that separates Rosa as a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust from those who were not present at the camps. In Finkelstein's words, and world view, barbed wire is part of the ordinary, an element of the simple procedure of protecting private property of the hotel from intruders. The silence with which he responds to Rosa's concern over barbed wire seems to have a voice of its own—a voice of a white American, saying “After all, what could possibly be nothing violent about putting fences around one's own property?” What compels Finkelstein to speak in this white America's voice is the result of years of assimilation that turned the Jews who immigrated to the US prior to WWII into white American people. (Brodkin 158)

It is true that unlike Rosa who went through the experience of suffering at the concentration camp, Finkelstein was not present there and therefore does not possess first-hand memories of the event. Nevertheless, his failure to respond to Rosa's call for a witness does not revolve around his inability to remember. Considering Finkelstein's Jewish identity, which is signaled both implicitly through his last name and explicitly, when he later admits, “I am Jewish,” such different interpretations of the same visual symbol of barbed wire cannot be attributed to the lack of public memory of Holocaust in the United States. (Ozick 51)

Sociologist Ronald Berger suggests that the turning point in the history of remembering the Holocaust in the United States was the trial of Adolf Eichmann that came in 1961 (Berger 42). Covered in the New Yorker by Hannah Arendt (whose reports later turned into a powerful, yet

controversial study of “the banality of evil”), the trial put the experiences of Jewish suffering in concentration camps in the forefront of the public consciousness of the Western World. It created, in Raymond Schmitt’s words, “an emotional reminder,” an event that brought forward “memories and feelings that have been retained in the psychic body” (Berger 42). As a Jewish American living in the seventies, long after Berger’s “turning point,” which were marked by a growing familiarization of the public with the visual symbols of the Holocaust, Finkelstein must have been exposed to the images associated with the memories of the camps. The smoke of the gas chambers, the barbed wire, the stripped pajamas—all of these images that contributed to the creation of the public memory of the Holocaust in the United States must have been available to him. Therefore, Finkelstein’s lack of response towards Rosa is not a form of blindness that results from his inability to remember, but rather a refusal to do so. The lack of first-hand experience of the suffering at the concentration camps does not prevent Finkelstein being a potential witness to Rosa’s suffering. Rather, the lack of immediate connection to the event of her suffering makes it possible for him to avoid the responsibility of witnessing Rosa’s trauma.

Finkelstein’s refusal to recognize barbed wire as a sign of violence and an artifact of the concentration camps comes from a desire to distance himself from the community of trauma. Indeed, when Rosa speaks directly to the cause of her aversion to barbed wire, “Only Nazis catch innocent people behind barbed wire,” the hotel manager acknowledges his ability to recognize that symbol and the history of violence and suffering that comes with it by responding: “The red wig dipped. ‘My name is Finkelstein’ (Ozick 51). Referencing his Jewish last name, Finkelstein establishes that he is familiar with the history of Holocaust. Moreover, he signals that his Jewish identity makes him empathetic to the suffering of the European Jews in the concentration camps and therefore that he should be exempt from Rosa’s accusations and suspicion over the malicious

purpose of barbed wire. However, Finkelstein's refusal to recognize barbed wire as a sign of violence also indicates his refusal to acknowledge his responsibility for witnessing the Holocaust. Susan Brison argues that "cultural repression of traumatic memories comes not only from an absence of empathy for victims, but also out of an active fear of empathizing with those whose terrifying fate forces us to acknowledge that we are not in control of our own" (Brison 57). As an example, Brison describes her own desire to distance and misidentify from Ruth Elias, a woman who had to euthanize her own child in a Nazi concentration camp in order to end their suffering in Joseph Mengele's experiments. As a woman and a mother, Brison recognizes that it is due to her subject position in history that she has been able to avoid the fate of Elias. However, she admits that the only way for her to be able "to bear the knowledge of such an atrocity" and to continue living is to create a distance between her own life path and that of Ruth Elias'. Similarly, as a Jewish American, Finkelstein must know that he could have suffered the same violence that Rosa has, had he been in Europe during WWII. Finkelstein's refusal to identify with Rosa can be explained by Brison's comments on Elias as a survival mechanism: it allows him to continue living with this knowledge. However, it also prevents him from becoming an effective witness to Rosa's trauma, thus exacerbating the sense of alienation that Rosa feels having to bear the burden of her trauma alone.

Another possible reason why Finkelstein refuses to bear witness to Rosa's trauma has to do with the guilt that the Jewish American community must have felt over their history of inaction during the Holocaust. The ability to distance oneself from a traumatic memory comes from a privileged historical position in the world. Such privilege of escaping from violence and trauma often stems from spatial or temporal factors. In *Rosa*, Cynthia Ozick establishes that Finkelstein's ability to escape from the suffering in the Holocaust came from his different

position in the world at the time when the Holocaust occurred. “Where were you when we was there?” (Ozick, 51) Rosa asks Finkelstein, knowing well herself that he, just like many Jewish Americans, would have been in the United States, “dancing in the pool in the lobby...” (Ozick, 51). The silence that comes instead of a response from Finkelstein confirms that he is also aware of this alter-reality. Instead, Finkelstein begs Rosa to leave and “go home” so that he would not have to feel shame over the failure of Jewish Americans to act upon the sufferings of their European counterparts.

If we consider Oliver’s definition of witnessing as a process of “bearing witness to what cannot be seen,” then we can begin to recognize that Finkelstein’s failure to witness goes beyond his potential inability of recognizing barbed wire as a symbol of violence. Although the images that trigger Rosa’s memories were not physically seen by Finkelstein with his own eyes, they are not necessary to respond to her call for help. Witnessing in the sense of “bearing witness to what cannot be seen” does not require first-hand knowledge of the eyewitness. Instead, this model of witnessing requires one to recognize the essential relationship that exists between the Self and the Other and the responsibility that comes from within that relationship. Finkelstein’s failure to witness Rosa’s trauma comes as a result of refusing to see himself as implicated in the traumas of others who are “different.” However, as I will show later in this paper, Finkelstein is not the only character who has a compulsion to distance oneself from violence through constructing the other as different. As already stated above, Rosa, but also her niece, Stella, as survivors themselves, are partial in trying to avoid identification with the community of trauma as well.

Establishing Difference: “My Warsaw is not your Warsaw”—Rosa and Persky

Unlike Finkelstein, Persky, another Jewish American in this story, is enthusiastic about acting as a witness to Rosa. “Unload on me,” says Persky to Rosa, encouraging her to share with him the unbearable burdens of her past. (Ozick 22) However, Persky grounds his attempts to establish a rapport with Rosa in their commonality. When he learns that Rosa is not only a refugee, but was also born in Warsaw, he exclaims: “I am also from Warsaw!” (Ozick 18) This causes Rosa to vehemently disagree with him. “My Warsaw is not your Warsaw”—this phrase runs like a refrain of the song throughout the novella and underscores Rosa’s refusal to establish a relationship of identity with Persky. When Rosa first insists on separating her own memories of Warsaw from Persky’s she is referring to the fact that Persky immigrated before the Holocaust. Rosa’s Jewishness in the present is the result of the Holocaust. It’s not a matter of choice of identity, but rather a fact that describes her existence in the aftermath of the event, When Rosa recalls the event in her letter to her daughter Magda, she complains of her “high cultured family” being grouped with “those [non-assimilated] Jews”: “Imagine confining us with teeming Moskowitzes and Rabinowitzes and Perskys and Finkelsteins, with all their bad-smelling grandfathers and their hordes of feeble children” (Ozick 66). Besides the apparent classism and disdain towards the poorer unassimilated Jews that Rosa’s words convey, this memory also bears witness to a turning point in the fate of Polish Jewry: the destruction of differences by the Nazis between the two groups that viewed themselves as different.

Along these lines, Cathy Caruth links the project of Sigmund Freud’s essay *Moses and Monotheism* with his personal attempt to find an explanation for Nazi persecution of the Jews. (Caruth 182) While working on this essay, Freud wrote a letter to his friend Arnold Zweig in

1934, in which he says: “Faced with the new persecutions, one asks oneself again how the Jews have come to be what they are and why they have attracted this undying hatred. I soon discovered that Moses created Jews.” (Caruth 182) It is the “creation of the Jew” in the act of suffering and persecution, Sigmund Freud argues, that describes the particularity of Jewish identity. The Nazi’s project entailed the erasure of differences that existed between different classes of Jews. Rosa’s contempt for having to share the same spaces with the poor traditional Jews shows that in her youth, which predates the Shoah, Rosa did not identify as Jewish. Moreover, in *Rosa*, the text that describes her life in sunny Florida thirty years later, Rosa never refers to herself as Jewish. Instead, she constructs herself as different from “those Jews”—the red wigs, speakers of the Yiddish language. Yet, to the contrary, due to the references to Rosa’s experience of the Holocaust - the text marks Rosa as Jewish. In *On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew*, Jean Améry, a survivor of the camps himself, writes: “I was nineteen years old when I heard of the existence of a Yiddish language, although on the other hand, I knew full well that my religiously and ethnically very mixed family was regarded by the neighbors as Jewish.” (Améry 83) Although Améry describes his experience of growing up not in Poland but in Germany, the sense of ambiguity that surrounds his Jewish identity shares something in common with that of Rosa: both Améry in his youth and Rosa in hers do not self-identify as Jewish. Rather, their Jewishness is constructed from the outside, through the violence of others.

When Rosa refuses to identify with Persky, exclaiming once again “My Warsaw is not your Warsaw,” she is denying the common origins that both she and Persky share. It is through her devotion to the Polish language as well as her memories of her parents that we see that Rosa comes from a family of assimilated Jews, who chose to abandon their Yiddish-speaking roots

and construct their identity around Polishness. In one of the passages Rosa remembers her mother's hatred of her grandmother's cradle songs sung in Yiddish: "*Unter Reyzls vigele shteyt a klorvays tsiegle*. How Rosa's mother despised those sounds!" (Ozick 19) A couple of sentences later this phrase is translated into English: "*Under Rosa's cradle there is a clear-white little goat...*" This layering over of speech of multiple generations in the passage serves as a textual montage, a monument consisting of words, commemorating the complicated history of Jewish assimilation in Poland. This denial is rooted in the legacy of Jewish assimilation in Poland. In *On the Edge of Destruction: Jews of Poland Between the Two World Wars* sociologist Celia Heller describes the social position of Jews in the interwar period using Max Weber's definition of a caste as "a closed status group." (Heller 59) To convey to a broader audience, which might be less familiar with Polish history, the social position of Jews in Poland, Heller compares it with the position of black people in the US of the Jim Crow Era. Unlike in the US where racial difference between white and Black Americans was invested legally, Jewish inferiority was not established in the laws, it was, instead, deeply rooted "in Polish custom and the Polish Psyche." This attitude is well reflected in the common phrase cited by Heller that was common at the time: "Even though he is a Jew, he is a decent human being." (Heller 59) Constructing Jews as lesser than Poles and not Poles, this phrase bears witness to the processes of othering and dehumanization of Jews that later created the basis for Nazi's inflicted destruction of Jews, known under the name of Holocaust, with which the Polish government was complicit.

Calling himself a "Pole by right" Rosa's father describes the injustice that defined the situation of Polish Jews in the aftermath of World War I. "The Jews, he said, did not put a thousand of years of brains and blood into Polish soil in order to prove themselves to anyone." (Ozick 40) Following the declaration of Polish independence in 1918, in which many Jews

fought, inspired by “the long-nurtured dream of beloved *ojczyzna*,” came the pogroms. (Heller 50) Although the history of antisemitism and of the othering of Polish Jews pre-dates this period by a couple of centuries, many of them fought alongside non-Jewish Poles in World War One and then again volunteered during the Russian intervention into Poland in the 1920s. The rise of nationalism in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century deepened these pre-existing tensions, leading to pogroms—the acts of violence and destruction towards Polish Jewry by non-Jewish Poles. In the wake of this new wave of antisemitism, the Polish Jews had two distinct ways of responding. While traditional Jews became even more drawn into their own community, many of the secular, assimilated Jews chose to cling to their Polishness. Historian Celia Heller argues that the existence of assimilated Jews as a separate group in interwar Poland is not a well-known fact around the global Jewish community, “let alone among non-Jewish people.” (Heller 183) Jewish-conscious assimilation dates to the nineteenth century. This assimilation, also known as acculturation of Jews, led some assimilated Jews to gradually conceive of themselves as distinct from traditional Jews.

Within this context, the text contains evidence for two possible interpretations of Rosa’s line “My Warsaw is not your Warsaw.” In other words, Rosa’s refusal to establish her sameness with Symon Persky can be interpreted in two ways. The first difference between Rosa and Persky is a difference of origins: while Persky came from traditional Jews, Rosa came from a family of assimilated Jews, who did not self-identify as Jewish. The second difference between Rosa and Persky is a more fundamental difference: it’s a difference between two kinds of Jewishness that exist in the aftermath of the Holocaust. While Persky’s Jewish identity is one that is cultural, Rosa’s Jewishness results from trauma. Susan Brison speaks of the “unmaking of self” or loss of one’s identity as the result of trauma. Paradoxically, the Holocaust did not only

destroy one kind of identity that Rosa has had, but it has also created and imposed a new identity—a Jewishness that is rooted in trauma. Persky’s enthusiasm to partake in Rosa’s trauma establishes him as a possible witness to Rosa’s trauma.

While Rosa refuses a relationship of identity with Persky, she insists that there exists a similarity between her and Persky’s wife. “I’m a mother, Mr. Persky,” says Rosa, “the same as your wife, no different.” (Ozick 59) In *Rosa*, Persky’s wife does not speak a word. Neither does the text offer her name. Instead, her portrait is presented through the words of her husband, Persky, who says that she is locked up in a mental facility because “she’s mixed up that she’s somebody else.” (Ozick 27) From Persky’s words, it appears that Persky’s wife imagines herself to be Lauren Bacall. Bacall, whose birth name was Betty Joan Perske, was an American actress of Jewish ancestry, who hid her Jewish identity for the sake of maintaining a successful career in Hollywood and on Broadway. Similarly, in one of her letters Stella tells Rosa that if she were to return to New York, the authorities threatened to put her away into a mental facility as well. (Ozick 32) Alluding to the “madwoman in the attic,” Ozick inscribes Rosa into a line of texts that start with Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* that describe women who have been ushered into spaces of non-existence. The interest in making a non-white woman the subject and the main character of the narrative brings Cynthia Ozick’s *Rosa* together with Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven* and other texts of postcolonial modernist literature. In these texts, the authors criticize the society’s tendency to portray women, in particular a non-white woman as “crazy” beings who need to be isolated and hidden away from the eyes of society. The characters of these novels share a number of challenges that are akin to those that Rosa faces: the loss of their mother tongues, the absence of a community, and as a consequence the absence of others who could effectively bear witness to their traumas. What

makes Rosa one of the characters in this tradition is her positionality which is located at the intersection of two identities: she is both a woman and a Jew. The text attributes the lack of help that Rosa experiences while trapped on a private beach behind barbed wire to her identity: “Behind her their laughter. They hated women. Or else they saw she was a Jew; they hated Jews.” (Ozick 49) The particularities of Rosa’s positionality make her experiences different both from the white American women and the Jewish (or Jewish American) men. Since Rosa’s positionality is inherently different from both Persky and Finkelstein, it creates additional challenges for communicating her own experience to them. The image of a madwoman, who is locked up in the attic, points towards the inability or refusal of the society to listen to their stories because they are different. Since Rosa’s words (I’m a mother, Mr. Persky,’ says Rosa, ‘the same as your wife, no different”) are addressed to Persky, they are an attempt on Rosa’s part to communicate to Persky an entry point towards how to listen to her (Ozick 59). In the context of the plot, Rosa’s emphasis on her sameness with Persky’s wife comes at a time in the novella, when Rosa is about to show to Persky that her life extends beyond the realm of the physical and temporal limits of sunny Florida. Since both Persky’s wife and Rosa belong to the community of the madwomen in the attic, it means that their experiences and stories exceed the limits of common understanding. Therefore, in order to be able to bear witness to Rosa’s trauma Persky has to be able to suspend searching for their commonality and attempt to bear witness to her experience on her own terms.

In *Witnessing Beyond Recognition*, Kelly Oliver cites a case-example from Dori Laub’s interviews, in which the accuracy and credibility of the testimony of a female survivor of Holocaust was questioned. Oliver describes that the controversy surrounded the number of chimney’s burning at the concentration camps. While the woman in her testimony spoke about

four chimneys that exploded, historians insisted that there was only one chimney at the camp.

(Oliver 1) The incongruence between the factual account of the event given by historians and the memory of the event as presented by the survivor led the historians to reject the survivor's testimony as lacking credibility: "The Auschwitz survivor saw something unfamiliar, Jewish resistance, which gave her the courage to resist... Seeing the impossible- what did not happen - gave her the strength to make what seemed impossible possible: surviving the Holocaust."

(Oliver 1) This story, as Oliver aptly argues, points towards the limited capacity of listeners to listen for the experiences that defy the common frameworks of understanding. Similarly to Laub's controversial testimony, Rosa attempts to communicate to Persky something that might go beyond the familiar. Rosa establishes the fact of her motherhood indirectly, admitting that there are three of them left from her family after the camps: "I'm left, Stella's left.' She wondered if she dared to tell him more. The box on the bed. "Out of so many, three." (Ozick 59) While Rosa does not mention her daughter Magda directly to Persky, she attempts to provide evidence of the fact, using Magda's shawl as a replacement item that usually triggers a vivid memory of Magda in Rosa's imagination. In the scene, Rosa's attempt to provide evidence fails, highlighting Oliver's observation about the irrelevance of factual information to the process of bearing witness to trauma. Despite the loss of her daughter at the concentration camp, Rosa reimagines her daughter as alive and spends her days writing letters to her. That is why when Rosa imagines her sameness with Persky's wife, she emphasizes their sameness through their common experience of motherhood. "I'm a mother, Mr. Persky,' says Rosa, "the same as your wife, no different." (Ozick 59) Rosa's emphasis on her maternal identity can be interpreted as her attempt to reclaim her life in the aftermath of the Holocaust. In order to begin to bear witness to Rosa's trauma, Persky has to allow for Rosa's identity as a dispossessed mother.

Alternative strategies for witnessing: Rosa & Stella Writing and reclaiming agency through narration

“She wrote sometimes in Polish and sometimes in English. Rosa wrote to Stella in English. Her English was crude. To her daughter Magda she wrote in the most excellent Polish.” (Ozick 14)

If there is one character in the story, whose subject position makes their relationship to the event of Holocaust similar to Rosa’s, it would be her niece, Stella. As someone who has lived through the traumatic experience of the concentration camps and watched the suffering of others, Stella is both a victim and an eyewitness of the Holocaust. Although Stella was younger, just a teenager, these factors make her a moral witness of the event. Nevertheless, Stella and Rosa are not able to serve as witnesses to each other due to the conflicting approaches they have towards their shared past. While Rosa’s past as trauma is directly present in the story, the novella does not contain specific examples of the traumatic past reappearing from in Stella’s life. Unlike Rosa, Stella is convinced that the best way of dealing with a traumatic past is to distance oneself from it. Both Persky and Stella encourage Rosa to abandon the past and embrace her life in the present. In order to do so, Stella reframes her identity and the narrative of her life to match that of a white American woman, “an ordinary American, indistinguishable!” (Ozick 33) Ozick highlights the similarity between Finkelstein and Stella through their relationship with Rosa. Finkelstein refuses to recognize barbed wire as a symbol of the concentration camps. Stella does the same by giving Rosa a blue striped dress as a birthday gift. (33) However, while Finkelstein distances himself from a traumatic memory of the past that concerns him by extension through his Jewish community, Stella tries to distance herself from her own in the camps. In doing so,

Stella rejects the duty of the moral witness to “live in order to tell” that grows out of her role as an eyewitness to Holocaust, while embracing the need of reclaiming her life as her own.

The contradictions that prevent Rosa and Stella from bearing witness to each other’s traumas extend beyond their relationship towards a strict dichotomy of forgetting or remembering the past. Rather, it’s the way in which they remember and forget, the way in which they reconstruct the past as part of their own narrative that differs significantly. One such retelling revolves around the identity of Magda’s missing father and his nationality. Was Magda’s father a Pole or a Nazi? In a letter to Magda, Rosa briefly mentions the “rumors” that exist around her being forced by a German officer. However, she quickly refutes them, portraying them to be entirely the results of Stella’s fantasies. (Ozick 43) In the *Shawl*, Ozick never mentions the event of sexual assault itself. Instead, she creates an indirect reference to the event through describing Magda’s blue eyes and facial features. “The face, very round, a pocket mirror of a face: but it was not Rosa’s bleak complexion, dark like cholera, it was another kind of face altogether, eyes blue as air, smooth feathers of hair nearly as yellow as the Star sewn into Rosa’s coat. You could think she was one of *their babies*.” (Ozick 4) Although the blueness of Magda’s eyes is first observed through the eyes of Rosa, who is looking at her baby’s face, Rosa does not speak herself about the origin of their blueness. Instead, it’s Stella who calls the eyes “Aryan,” establishing an alternative memory of the past in which the blueness of Magda’s is attributed to the event of the sexual assault. By contrast, in *Rosa*, in her letter to Magda, Rosa denies the occurrence of the event. Rosa tells Magda that her father had a Polish name—Andrzej. According to the definition of narration that both Brison and Felman use in their works, narration is an act “consisting of someone telling someone else that something happened” (Brison 102). Narratives do not simply emerge by themselves but rather are reconstructions of the past shaped

by the identity of their narrator. Thus, the conflict between two kinds of narratives is constructed as the conflict of two narratives that are brought forward through the speech of two different people: Rosa and her niece Stella, whose motivations for reconstructing memory are different: while Rosa appears to want to “tell to live” while Stella “lives to tell” while also attempting to absolve herself of guilt, a point I will return to below.

The contradictions that arise between two narratives point towards the problems that are inherent to the position of a moral witness. Brison proposes that the narratives told by people who have lived through traumatic events fall into two kinds of categories: “living to tell” and “telling to live.”(Brison 103) Brison, for whom the motivation to write this book came from her own experience of living through sexual violence, speaks out on this matter both as person who has been the victim of violence and as someone who has, in the aftermath, witnessed the disintegrating effects of trauma. Brison’s positionality serves as a perfect example of the “moral witness.” The ambiguity of this position consists in the conflict between the goals of recording history—“living to tell” and the need of speaking as a way of reclaiming agency over the narrative of their life, or “telling to live.” “Living to tell” consists in presenting a factual account of “something that happened” in front of the moral witness’s eyes. It revolves around the responsibility that survivors feel to fill the gap that was left in history with their own testimony as eyewitnesses. Many survivors admit to the sense of urgency that they felt “to live in order to tell” their stories' helped them in the moments of despair in concentration camps. In her letter to Magda, Rosa points towards the necessity and urgency that she felt to “tell” everybody what happened. She writes: “I wanted to tell everybody—not only our story, but other stories as well. Nobody knew anything. This amazed me that nobody remembered what happened only a little while ago. They didn’t remember because they didn’t know.” (Ozick 66) The lack of knowledge

of the others here is presented as the result of them not being eyewitnesses of the event. Unlike Finkelstein or Persky, who “was not there” when the suffering in the concentration camps occurred (and therefore cannot know of what had happened), Rosa was physically present at the site of the event’s occurrence. Therefore, she feels that it’s her duty as an eyewitness of the event to record the story and her version is different from Stella’s.

On the contrary, “telling to live” describes a practice, in which writing and speaking can serve as a tool of reclaiming ownership over the narrative of one’s own story. This approach revolves around the role of the moral witness as a victim of a traumatic event. Since trauma constitutes an event that occurs against one’s own will, survivors often experience it as a loss of agency over their life. Under these circumstances, writing can serve as an effective strategy of reclaiming one’s own agency because, as Brison notes, “while traumatic memories (especially perceptual and emotional flashbacks) feel as though they are passively endured, narratives are the result of certain obvious choices (how much to tell to whom and in what order.)” (Brison 54) This quality of writing makes it an effective tool of reconstructing the survivors’ sense of agency over their own life. However, the choices towards which Brison points - “how much to tell to whom and in what order,” as well as what to tell, clearly point towards the ways in which the goals for writing such narratives might conflict with the goals of reconstructing factual accounts of what happened.

The divergence between two versions of the narrative of Magda’s origins that contradict each other are the result of two different reconstructions of the narrative. As someone who has lived through the traumatic experience of the Holocaust, Stella occupies a position as a moral witness. Although Stella was younger, just a teenager, she still has been an eyewitness to the suffering in the camps and was also a victim, hence her position as a moral witness. One could

argue that each of the characters—both Stella’s and Rosa’s retellings of the past are consistent with the goals of “telling to live.” In *Shawl* Rosa Stella steals Magda’s shawl, which causes Magda to walk out of her hiding place and eventually leads to her death. Constructing a narrative according to which Magda was a daughter of Rosa and a Nazi soldier might make Stella feel less guilty of her actions. On the other hand, the erasure of the event of sexual violence from Rosa’s narrative is consistent with theory that I have referred to earlier: the impossibility of the self to witness their own trauma at the time that it occurs. Even if the event of the Nazi soldier assaulting Rosa did occur, in Rosa’s narrative of the past its occurrence might be marked with a gap rather than a record of it. “Telling to live” involves reconstructing the past and bringing it together into a cohesive narrative with the present so that it helps them overcome the gaps in their personal history and build their life. For this reason, two moral witnesses having diverging narratives of the past can be appropriate as long as they are consistent with their strategies of living through trauma. However, this divergence is what explains Rosa’s and Stella’s inability to serve as witnesses to each other's trauma. Furthermore, it speaks towards the limited ability of bearing witness to the trauma of Holocaust within the community of survivors and highlights the need of outside witnesses to take part in the process.

In absence of available outside witnesses, Rosa does what many of the survivors of Holocaust do, she turns to writing as a means of reaching out towards “an addressable you.” In the novella, Rosa receives letters from Stella and Dr. Tree, a psychology scholar, who speaks in a quasi-scientific language. However, it is through Rosa’s writing to her “imagined/deceased” daughter Magda that she renegotiates the memories of her past and attempts to imagine an alternative future. The very act of Rosa writing to Magda, her inexistent daughter serves as revisionary practice, an opportunity to re-imagine one’s past in order to build towards an

alternative present and future. In these letters, rather than creating a historical or factual record of what happened in the past, Rosa reimagines her past, engaging in what I have referred to as “telling to live”. By writing to her daughter, Rosa attempts to break away from the traumatic past and imagine an alternative future. When Rosa tells Magda that her father was a Polish Gentile rather than a Nazi soldier, she presents identity as a choice that one might have: “You can be a Pole or a Jew—you have a legacy of choice” (Ozick 43) By creating an alternative memory of the past, Rosa grants her daughter with an identity that is rooted in personal choice rather than a fact that emerges from the traumatic experience one has been through.

Conclusion: Witnessing difference & Literature as Testimonial Breakthrough

“But I am not from here.

Unfortunately, from now on you will be from here, like everybody else.”

-- Albert Camus, *The Plague*

“The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration’ is a contradiction in terms,” writes Elie Wiesel, a survivor of the Holocaust and one of its most eloquent and prolific spokesmen. (Wiesel, 7) This statement testifies to the ambivalence that surrounds the ethical dilemma of creating a fictionalized account out of an event defined by perennial human suffering. The dangers of literary representation of the Holocaust run in the form of creating fiction out of it, taking away from the “realness of the event.” Such fictionalization of the Holocaust can potentially strengthen the positions of the Holocaust deniers, whose logic can be summarized in such statements as “This couldn’t have possibly happened. So, it must not be true.” However, far from insisting on silence as the best treatment of the matter, Wiesel in this essay urges the writers to re-examine their ways of writing so that it could respond to the ethical needs of their time. His essay is not a

call to stop any kind of literary production, but rather to face up to the question: how can literature through the means of language become a vehicle of restorative justice?

In *Camus's Plague, or a Monument to Witnessing* Shoshana Felman argues that the events of World War II and in particular the Holocaust created a new kind of literary genre—"the literature of testimony" (Felman 114) Arising out of the ethical obligation to bear witness to the horrors of Holocaust, literature of testimony's task "is to confront the horror of [the era] own destructiveness, to attest to the unthinking disaster of culture's breakdown, and to attempt to assimilate the massive trauma" (Felman 114) This literature's task is not limited to the task of collecting the data or recording on paper "what happened" in the form of chronology. Rather, the goal of the literature of testimony is to restore the dialogical structure of subjectivity through creating a community of readers who can serve as witnesses to those in search of "an addressable you." Unlike factual historical writing, literature possesses the capacity to demand from its reader a commitment that goes beyond a purely cognitive level. Rather, by creating characters whose struggles, dilemmas and life stories, literature creates an address invoking in the reader a responsibility for response.

In *Camus' The Plague or a Monument to Witnessing*, Shoshana Felman suggests that in Albert Camus' novel of the same name, *the Plague* serves as a metaphor for World War II. Felman describes an attempt of one of the characters of the novel, Rambert, who is a journalist and an outside witness, to distance himself from the community of people who are trapped in a city under quarantine. "He had explained that his presence in Oran was purely accidental, he had no connection with the town and no reasons for staying in it; that being so, he surely was entitled to leave... The official told him he quite appreciated his position, but no exception could be made." (Camus 80-82). If, as Felman suggests, the *Plague* serves as a metaphor for World War

II, then the town, closed under quarantine, serves as a model of a concentration camp, a space from which one cannot escape. In order to describe such a situation of no escape, Felman introduces the term “total condemnation,” which describes “a situation from which one cannot exclude oneself, except by self-deception.” (Felman 107) Even though one might attempt an escape from this situation by constructing themselves as fundamentally different from those condemned to suffer, as a witness to the event, they cannot ignore the fact that their positions could have been easily reversed.

Ozick’s Rosa bears witness to the consequences of failing to imagine oneself as implicated in the suffering of the other in numerous instances but Rosa’s memory of the tramcar that went through the Warsaw Ghetto stands out among them:

“The most astounding thing was that the most ordinary streetcar, bumping along on the most ordinary trolley tracks, and carrying the most ordinary citizens going from one section of Warsaw to another, ran straight into the place of misery. Every day, and several times a day we had these witnesses... They were all the sort of plain people of the working class. but they were considered better than us because no one regarded us as Poles anymore.” (Ozick 68)

What Rosa is witnessing in this passage is the failure of others to bear witness “in the religious sense,” as Oliver puts it (5). The people riding in the tramcar by virtue of seeing with their eyes become eyewitnesses, however they fail to bear witness to the suffering of others in the ghetto. This failure of ordinary citizens to bear witness to the suffering of those who were once their own neighbors makes them partial collaborators in the Nazi project. As Ozick demonstrates earlier in the text, the construction of the Jewish group identity in WWII as one of the people condemned to suffer happened through an erasure of pre-existing differences of class,

upbringing, and their own self-identification. The erasure of differences was also paralleled with augmenting the pre-existing social attitudes that viewed Jews as fundamentally different and inferior to Poles. In the passage with the tramcar, Ozick emphasizes the randomness of this division and shows that the indifference of the ordinary Poles riding in the tramcar enabled the suffering of those who were once just regular citizens, just like them.

However, as a character, Rosa is also partial in trying to escape from a situation of total condemnation through constructing herself as different from others. This becomes evident from the passage, where she expresses her disdain for being ushered into the same spaces with the poorer Jews: “Imagine confining us with teeming Moskowitzes and Rabinowitzes and Perskys and Finkelsteins, with all their bad-smelling grandfathers and their hordes of feeble children” (Ozick 66). As Felman explains “it is precisely this attitude of self-exclusion from the contemplation which condemns Rambert, in making him unwillingly participate in the historical death sentence inflicted upon others, while maintaining his own blindness with respect to [their] own blindness with respect to [their] own situation as condemned.” (Felman 108) Similarly, Rosa’s desire to disidentify from the poor Jews: the Moskowizes, Rabinowizes, Perskys and Finkelsteins makes her partially complicit in the Nazi’s project of eschewing the Jewish people out of Europe. The “blindness” described by Felman runs close to what Jean Améry writes about when he writes about the relationship between the torturer and the tortured. Améry argues that what allowed the torturer to torture was “the radical negation of the other, as the denial of the social principle as well as the reality principle.” (Améry 35) In other words, what allows the torturer to torture is the failure to imagine that the positions between the two might have been reversed. It is the same idea that those everyday witnesses riding in the tramcar try to avoid so that they can go on living their lives. This moral indifference rests on the assumption that if

someone is different from myself, then their life fate is not of relevance to me. However, Rosa's own fate in the Warsaw Ghetto confirms the fallacy behind this statement. While Rosa attempts to evade the fate of poor Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto, constructing herself as different and non-belonging to the group, she ends up suffering the same fate as them. The power to choose whether she belongs or does not belong to the group ends with the decision of one Nazi officer to classify her as Jewish and therefore to the ranks of the condemned. Similarly to Rambert, Rosa is unable to escape from a "situation of total condemnation," which highlights that each one's suffering is implicated in the suffering of the others.

Rosa's struggle to find "an addressable you" dictated by her conditions of exile prompts one to consider the necessity of bearing witness to the traumas and stories of those whose lived experiences do not bear similarity to our own. As my analysis of Ozick's Rosa shows, what prevents both Rosa and those around her to bear witness to trauma is the failure to imagine oneself as implicated in the traumas of the other. This tendency to ignore the essential connection and dependence that exists between the Self and the other is enabled by the construction of difference. Therefore, since the ability to witness others' trauma falls through in cases where the other bears little resemblance to ourselves, we as a society have to develop modes of seeing and listening that go beyond recognizing sameness towards witnessing difference. In *Witnessing Recognition and Response Ethics* Kelly Oliver writes that bearing witness to trauma requires from one "a pathos beyond recognition." ("Recognition and Response Ethics" 481) Recognition, a model of subjectivity first proposed by Hegel, accounts for the dialectical relationship that exists between the Self and the Other. However, according to Oliver, this relationship is grounded in recognizing sameness in the others, which inherently limits one's ability to only respond to traumas of those who are similar to oneself. (*Witnessing Beyond Recognition* 5)

Instead, Oliver proposes that the human inbuilt capacity to respond to the call of the other (response-ability) establishes an ethical responsibility to witness the traumas of those who are different from us. Quoting Derrida, Oliver asks: what if “the function of the eye is not to see but to cry?” (“Recognition and Response Ethics” 482) Answering affirmatively to this question, as Ozick suggests in her short stories concerning Rosa’s trauma, would establish a responsibility of people to witness traumas of those whose life experiences have made them fundamentally different, but nevertheless no less human and therefore worthy of having their lives witnessed.

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