Remembering the Present:
Affect, Phenomenology, and the Survival of One

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Abstract

Despite our best efforts to give authority and voice to survivors through the nationalized establishment of public testimonials, it is my contention that the burden placed on survivors to articulate something that inherently can’t be articulated has come at a price, a price paid by individual survivors themselves. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania with holocaust survivor Sam Weinreb, this essay works to illuminate how national and individual anxieties surrounding the Holocaust define our engagement with individual survivors and limit the types of narratives survivors can tell about their traumatic pasts. More specifically, my analysis focuses on the affective resonance of survivor’s bodies within and outside testimonial spaces. I explore how these affectively conditioned bodies satisfy and reify national narratives of the Holocaust that work to remedy the incongruences this event reveals within a particular utilitarian hope logic at work in contemporary U.S. society. Finally, after deconstructing how this utilitarian hope logic obscures the reality of survivors’ present existences, I offer an alternative form of hopeful remembrance capable of bringing survivors’ presents and pasts into view, ultimately creating possibility within the futures they might inhabit.

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The Scream, Edvard Munch (1893)
Not for nothing did Santayana once contend that life is a movement from the forgotten to the unexpected. —Lauren Eiseley

The bustling crowd, filled with celebrities, politicians from city hall, and curious pedestrians drawn to the scene by its immanent pulse, waited with great eagerness and anticipation for the arrival of the S.S. Perch: the first U.S. military ship to return from World War II carrying survivors of the Nazi extermination camps. All orphaned and having been liberated only months prior, the impossible journey these individuals endured had, at last, come to an end as the distant lady liberty welcomed them with her beacon of hope on the closing horizon. Among such passengers was seventeen-year-old Sam Weinreb, who, having been ill for the majority of their ten-day trip across the Atlantic, lay in his bed, unable to see the harbor outside. Upon exiting the ship, Sam and his fellow orphans were swarmed by the crowd of people who had been anticipating the ship’s arrival for some time. From this crowd emerged, with a wide and welcoming smile, none other than the mayor of New York City: Fiorello H. LaGuardia. As Sam recalls, after personally shaking each orphan’s hand Mayor LaGuardia announced, much to Sam’s dismay, “Son, you’re going on a helicopter ride.”

Overwhelmed by the crowd’s excitement, unsure exactly what the Mayor had said as his English wasn’t nearly as good then as it is today, and still recovering from his illness, Sam recounts the experience as follows:

This man was so nice! He wanted us to see all of New York, but I couldn’t even look out the window…I never even saw too many of the buildings because I had to worry about myself…and if I would survive that flight, that’s what I was concerned about. I was so afraid that I would throw up.
After returning safely to the ground and meeting numerous other public officials who had a variety of questions to ask him, Sam, in a newly acquired voice, began to tell the story of his life. Today, at the age of eighty-seven, Sam continues to tell this story in testimonial spaces near his home in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I was fortunate enough to experience several of these talks during the summer of 2013. I additionally had the opportunity to spend time with Sam outside these testimonial spaces, where he spoke freely about experiences like the one mentioned above that he does not include in his talks.

Signifying a material link to one of the most incomprehensible tragedies known in U.S. public culture, I witnessed Sam’s presence in such spaces give pause to audience members (myself included) time and time again as forgotten details of his traumatic past seemed to seep from the wrinkles and scars across his body. Most notably, the atmosphere within such spaces, regardless of the audience inhabiting them, seemed to reflect a distinct and uniform affective orientation toward Sam and his story. Given how consistently such sentiments could be traced across a wide variety of social contexts, both inside and outside the walls of testimonial spaces, I began to sense that such feelings were at least partially mediated by a collective mythic narrative that exceeds immediate physical interactions.

Thus, this thesis takes as a starting point the notion that people feel a particular way about the Holocaust and that this mode of feeling is highly structured in an effort to reconcile the incommensurability such an event signifies in American society. My analysis in no way seeks to question the authenticity of such feelings. On the contrary, I treat seriously these feelings by understanding them as fundamental to the terrain in
which Holocaust survivors living in the United States negotiate their identities in everyday life. Despite our best efforts to give authority and voice to survivors through the nationalized establishment of public testimonials, it is my contention that the burden placed on them to articulate something that inherently can’t be articulated has come at a price, a price paid by individual survivors themselves. Thus, this essay works to illuminate how national and individual anxieties surrounding the Holocaust define our engagement with individual survivors and limit the types of narratives survivors can tell about their traumatic pasts. More specifically, my analysis focuses on the affective resonance of survivor’s bodies within and outside testimonial spaces. I explore how these affectively conditioned bodies satisfy and reify national narratives of the Holocaust that work to remedy the incongruences this event reveals within our own systems of logic. Most notably, I focus my analysis on a utilitarian understanding of hope, evident within national promises such as “the American Dream,” which maintain the notion that a life should ultimately “add up to something” or, at the very least, that the “good” we experience in life must always outweigh the “bad.”

In Sam’s case, the narrative structure of his talk is simultaneously limited by and representative of the above-mentioned utilitarian logic through its decisively “hopeful” ending: Sam’s arrival into the Untied States. Additionally, and at the core of my argument, people’s engagement with Sam is limited in so far as this appropriated understanding of Sam’s past trauma exceeds his present (and future), ultimately preventing a current trauma he faces—his wife’s struggle with Alzheimer’s—from being properly recognized and addressed. After deconstructing how this utilitarian hope logic obscures Sam’s present trauma, I offer an alternative form of hopeful remembrance
capable of bringing Sam’s present trauma (and happiness) into view. Locating this alternative form of hope at play in both Sam’s past and present traumatic experiences, I seek to underscore how vital the concept of hope is to life itself; but, most importantly, how not all forms of hope are maintained equally. While the content of Sam’s talk is crucial to my project, this essay centers on the body that carries such content and the affective terrain it must navigate in the process. Akin to Ana Cvetkovich’s (2003) project, *An Archive of Feeling*, in which she describes her investigation of trauma as “an inquiry into how affective experience that falls outside the institutionalized or stable forms of identity or politics can form the basis for public culture” (17), my approach seeks to create possibility, flux, and *life* within an archive of feeling that denies such vital human needs to its subjects.

Similar to the persona Kathleen Stewart (2007) embodies in *Ordinary Affects*, I “write not as a trusted guide carefully laying out the links between theoretical categories and the real world, but as a point of impact, curiosity, and encounter…[I] gaze, imagine, sense, take on, perform, and assert not a flat and finished truth but some possibilities (and threats) that have come into view in the effort to become attuned to what a particular scene might offer” (5). In this sense, my own experiences with Sam in and outside testimonial spaces function as the raw material for (re)imagining the affective landscape I critique. Acknowledging the ways in which my initial engagement with Sam was largely conditioned by the very mythic narrative I work to complicate in this essay, I attempt to simulate my experience of passage beyond this form of engagement by recounting particular scenes in which the reality of Sam’s present emerged, unremittingly, as a *problem* that my prior intuition inherently could not address. In an effort to explain such
phenomena, I draw from phenomenology, the film *Children of Men* directed by Alfonso Cuarón, and Edvard Munch’s painting *The Scream* (1893) to elucidate the burdensome temporality of Sam’s everyday existence while acknowledging possibilities within it.

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I met Sam for the first time in the fall of 2012. As a student filmmaker, I was contacted by Sam’s son, Stuart Weinreb, to make a documentary about Sam’s life that would focus on his time as a prisoner in the Auschwitz concentration camp. Additionally, the film would showcase Sam’s personal testimony, which he has offered to hundreds of audiences throughout the country. Stuart received my contact information from a family friend, Bill Stewart, who is a philosophy professor at Carlow University, just down the street from Sam’s apartment in Squirrel Hill, PA. Bill teaches a philosophy of the Holocaust course that Sam has spoken in for a number of years. As a result, Bill and Sam have developed a close friendship. When describing Sam to me, Bill would frequently say that if he had to choose between having his students listen to Sam speak for ten minutes or attending one of his classes for a whole semester, he would undoubtedly choose the former. When asked how just ten minutes with Sam could replace an entire semester of Holocaust theory and history, Bill would cite Sam’s mere presence in the room as reason enough, as if Sam’s body alone could speak volumes beyond anything uttered in words. Like an artifact that reveals its history obliquely in the form of cracks, scratches or defacements, the wrinkles across Sam’s face and the scar covering his serial number tattoo attest to the experiences he describes in his talk in ways that can’t be easily mediated or explained, but are, nevertheless, difficult to ignore. As I outline in this essay, collective affects surrounding Holocaust survivors are productive in that they carefully
condition citizen’s engagement with such unmediated phenomena in ways that maintain the flow and logics at stake in everyday life.

Stewart (2007) understands such flows and logics as threads of potentiality that promise what our experience of the ordinary can be. As she states,

The potential stored in ordinary things is a network of transfers and relays. Fleeting and amorphous, it lives as a residue or resonance in an emergent assemblage of disparate forms and realms of life. Yet it can be as palpable as a physical trace…a layer, or a layering to the ordinary, it engenders attachments or systems of investment in the unfolding of a life. [21]

While I too came to sense Sam’s profound presence during my two-month stay with him, I found it difficult to see clearly the material body beneath the affective aura surrounding it. Hidden beneath the layers of “potentiality” tucked within Sam’s affective aura, the potential for me to engage Sam in ways that don’t necessarily satisfy the grand narrative explaining his presence became, paradoxically, confined. In this sense, the potential stored within Sam’s affective aura was not only as palpable as a “physical trace,” but nearly replaced the “physical trace”—Sam’s body—from which it supposedly came. Like a shadow, the collective narrative of Sam's past trauma haunted our everyday interactions and prevented me from properly addressing the living, breathing, bleeding body standing before my eyes. In many ways, the scar covering Sam’s serial number tattoo functioned as a glass prison: seeing it, or seeing through it rather, ignited a series of illusory connotations that somehow felt more visceral than anything he could possibly say or do. Touching it, however, as one presses their hand closely against a windowpane, fogged my distant view of the inked needle that once broke Sam’s skin and illuminated the profound materiality before me. As Bill frequently mentioned, he is struck by how many of his students walk up and simply want to touch Sam after his talk. As if the desire
to connect with him and “know” his story (or at least the inherent unknowability of it) couldn’t be fully satisfied by the talk itself, this simple gesture speaks to the power of a unique material engagement I experienced with Sam in varying degrees throughout our summer together.

In Cvetkovich’s (2003) discussion of Lisa Kron’s performance piece 2.5 Minute Ride, which conveys the experience of visiting Auschwitz with her survivor father in conjunction with the experience of riding his favorite roller coaster ride, she underscores how the structure of the piece “careens, often wildly [like a roller coaster], not only between disparate stories but between widely disparate affects, taking the audience from humor to traumatic rupture without even pausing for a theatrical beat” (20). By shifting between these disparate registers, Kron effectively disrupts the continuity of both the narrative and affective trajectories at play in collectively mediated encounters with the Holocaust, ultimately forcing viewers to ask the question: “can a trip to Auschwitz be something other than another version of a trip to an amusement park, where history’s terrors are domesticated into safely consumable artifacts and emotions?” (21).

Admittedly unable to answer this question before leaving, in the performance Kron expresses how her biggest fear is that she won’t feel anything at all, that it will be “too structured and too much like a Disneyland-style amusement park for her to be able to get close to what happened to her grandparents” (22). Furthermore, Kron expresses her anxiety with having to be a witness to her father’s reactions, uncertain how to comfort him if he were to break down. The act of witnessing in this sense, “is fraught with ambivalence rather than fulfilling the melodramatic fantasy that the trauma survivor will finally tell all and receive the solace of being heard by a willing and supportive listener”
(22). Precisely in the absence of such melodramatic encounters, Kron ultimately finds herself overcome by the emotions she was worried she wouldn’t feel. Kron’s father accidentally leaves his eyeglasses inside the camp so they go inside after closing time to retrieve them. Inside the crematorium, Kron is suddenly undone by grief, but for reasons she never quite anticipated. As she states,

But when I enter the crematorium for the first time in my life I feel horror. Physical repulsion. I can feel my face contort, my lips pull back. In the gas chamber, my father stops to take his 2:00 pill. This breaks my heart. I stand to the side and cry. Hard. I can feel…I can feel the bottom. It’s clear to me now that everything in my life before has been a shadow. This is the only reality—what happened to my father and his parents fifty years ago.

[22]

As Cvetkovich notes, it’s not the crematorium itself that ignites this response, but rather “the poignancy of her ailing father getting on with the business of survival in the midst of it” (22). Most notably, her father’s “getting on with the business of survival” is decisively a present tense and continual action that acknowledges his past suffering, but crucially through the lens of a present reality rife with material needs and banal concerns. It is her father taking his 2:00 pill within the mythologized crematorium walls that ultimately brings the banality of her grandparents’ deaths to life, simultaneously rupturing the continuity of everything she thought she knew before this moment. When the walls enclosing the crematorium become simply stone, and nothing else, they become incommensurable to not just the reasoning of a society founded on sovereignty (both at the national and individual level) and meritocracy, but to any human being trying to endure the unpredictability of life. To directly face survivor’s pasts in this way is to understand their survival not in terms of a heroic escape or triumphant arrival into freedom, but as arbitrary and as senseless as the deaths of those who perished.
In an experience Sam shared with me that he does not include in his talks, Sam explains how he himself nearly fell victim to such senseless, random killing. One day at lunchtime, which for Sam and his fellow prisoners often consisted of potato peels and dirty cabbage mixed in warm water, a man noticed a pear, which belonged to an officer, resting unattended. Determined to taste it, he asked that those around him create a distraction so that he could try to steal the pear when the officer wasn’t looking. Reluctantly, the crowd agreed, despite it assuredly being a suicide mission, and the man successfully retrieved the pear without being seen. When the officer realized what had happened, he demanded that the “thief” step forward. After having his comment fall onto deaf ears, the officer, in a fit of rage, yanked twenty-five innocent people, including Sam, from the crowd and forced them into a line. The officer then proceeded to walk down the line, shooting every fifth person directly in the head. By simply being the ninth person pulled into the line, instead of the tenth, Sam’s survival and everything that has happened to him since was made possible.

Sam told me this story over breakfast at an Eat’n Park restaurant (Goldie’s favorite) before a long day of filming for the documentary. While the story itself was difficult to hear, the scene of its address disrupted the normal routine of how such exchanges usually unfolded. “Have you decided on an entrée?” the waitress asked us as Sam described to me how often times the cabbage they served at the camp was covered in dirt or mold. “We never minded anyhow, we were happy to eat anything at all.” “Should I give you both a little more time?” “Oh no, we’re ready,” Sam says. “I’ll have scrambled eggs with a side of your putatuz.” “And you sir?” “Oh, um… I’ll have the same thing.” Once the waitress had taken our menus and walked away from the table, I set my notepad
aside and did everything I could to change the subject. “Who do the pirates play today?” I asked, praying it was someone interesting. “You know, I’m not sure. I’ll have to look in the paper when we get home…” After a long silence, it appeared that he too wished to drop the story so instead we discussed our shooting schedule for the day, making sure to leave a couple hours open in the afternoon for Sam to pick Goldie up from her daycare center.

Once we started eating, I noticed something different about Sam that I hadn’t quite seen before. The bluish-purple hue of his lips, which initially signified a darkness synonymous with pictures I had once seen (or perhaps imagined) of the iron gates enclosing Auschwitz, gradually emerged before my eyes as purely flesh by the presence of a fleck of egg clinging to the edge of his mouth. For what might have been the first time, Sam’s physical body and the impossibility of it sitting across the table from me resonated in ways I hadn’t expected it to. Before analyzing further examples of such revelatory encounters, the nature of their origin, and the potential they hold for survivors like Sam, I will outline how nationalized affective and narrative dynamics surrounding Holocaust survivors obscure such seemingly obvious realizations in the first place.

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In 2008, Sam’s wife Goldie was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease. Having played together as children in Czechoslovakia years before the war, and both having survived Auschwitz independently of one another, Sam and Goldie’s relationship signifies a singular portal to a past life that can never be recreated. As Sam tragically watches his wife of over sixty years fade into oblivion, he must also witness the sole remaining link to his childhood fade as well. Thus, my tendency to approach Sam with an
attunement set towards his present concerns and feelings largely grew out of my sensing that Sam had become deeply depressed. Early into the film project I realized that he was far less interested in lecturing about his time at Auschwitz; rather, it seemed he simply wanted someone to talk with.

When I arrived in Pittsburgh for the first time in the fall of 2012 for Goldie’s eighty-third birthday, her symptoms seemed relatively pronounced, yet still mild. After seeing her later that same year in June, however, she felt almost like an entirely different person. Though I would catch glimpses of the Goldie I once knew, a brief chuckle, a hello or simply an affirming head nod signaling to me “I know you, I’ve seen you before,” such moments were tragically few and far between. After living with them in their apartment for several days, I quickly grew accustomed to the new routines of their everyday life and came to understand how vital such seemingly mindless repetition was for Goldie’s well being. While Sam handled such pressures with incredible grace, patience, and kindness, I could tell that the constant worrying had started to take its toll. Though Sam rarely expressed to me outright how difficult his life had become, his body frequently betrayed his pleasant demeanor. His face looked thinner, the twinkle in his eye had faded, and his back looked hunched, the toll of having to lift Goldie several times a day. Furthermore, the emotional toll of having to watch his wife of over 60 years fail to recognize herself in the mirror had clearly set in. In the face of such unimaginable responsibility and heartache, Sam not only continued to give his talks, but agreed to be in the film as well.

Having been exposed to this painful dimension of Sam’s life, I became protective of him in ways I didn’t anticipate nor fully understand. Accompanying him at his various
talks, I felt uneasy and out of place within the audience. The whole production felt too easy, too clean. Sam’s story, filled with unimaginable pain and loss, somehow fell fluidly on sorrowful ears. The room listened as one, cried as one, and laughed, when it was appropriate to do so, as one. Furthermore, the fact that Sam’s more immediate trauma couldn’t be acknowledged in such spaces confused and unsettled me in ways that made his talks difficult to watch.

In her discussion of what it might mean to be an “affect alien,” Ahmed (2010) joins notions of revolutionary consciousness and affect in an effort to describe a similar sensation to the experience I had in Sam’s talks. As she notes,

> If we think of revolution and affect we might notice that flow and stress are distributed and redistributable: you can be stressed by a world in which you flowed, which you experience as compliant and easy, by the very act of noticing that world as a world. Indeed, revolutionary consciousness might be possible only as a willingness to be stressed, to let the present get under your skin. [169]

By understanding consciousness as the product of an attunement to the particular affective forces a scene offers, Ahmed effectively brings into question the ontological claims affects make on our experience of reality. Framing affect not as a threshold to “the” real, but rather to some version of it, Ahmed simultaneously opens affective experience to structuralist critique without making any problematic claims about a “true” (versus false) consciousness. In this sense, we can better clarify not only the power national affects hold over Holocaust survivors, but the challenges one might face in gaining a revolutionary consciousness amidst such permeating forces.

As previously mentioned, my ability to recognize the particular affective world of Sam’s talks as in fact a distinct “world” arose primarily from having witnessed two distinct spheres of Sam’s existence: his personal life and public life. While the affective
aura surrounding Sam’s body lingered long after we left his talk, this aura could not withstand the unpredictable flow of our everyday interactions. By witnessing the rupture of such affective forces across a wide variety of social contexts, I ultimately gained the “revolutionary” perspective and ability to comprehend his public identity as limited, ultimately allowing alternative dimensions of his being to emerge at the periphery of Survivorship. The very notion that one need such a revolutionary perspective to engage Holocaust survivors in ways that acknowledged their present concerns was very troubling to me—particularly given the poignancy of Sam’s struggle with Goldie’s Alzheimer’s. As a result, my project quickly shifted course in an effort to comprehend the mechanisms through which such affective forces were maintained.

Referencing José Munoz, Lauren Berlant (2011) notes that Munoz “explicitly frames the present as a prison” and, crucially, “sees hope as pointing from the past’s unfinished business to a future beyond the present to sustain the subject within [this prison]” (14). By focusing my ethnographic gaze on the present and understanding hope as both a fundamental human need and potentially harmful mechanism of imprisonment, this essay works to illuminate the ways in which current forms of Holocaust remembrance limit survivors’ capacity to turn towards other possible worlds of being that might exist outside the rigid, “hopeful” trajectory of experience defined by grand Holocaust narratives more broadly. My specific analysis is laced with the irony that Sam has spent a majority of his life not in Auschwitz or universities offering his testimony, but in small backrooms of Jewelry shops as a nationally renowned watch repairman. As Sam fixes time for his countless customers, his story and affectively mediated existence also allow others to experience time freely, but at the expense of freezing his own temporality.
Incorporating Durkheim’s classic text on the division of labor, namely his critique of pessimism and optimism within utilitarian discourse, into her analysis of hope, Ahmed (2010) underscores the ways in which our capacity to be hopeful often relies on an orientation toward the past. In her reading of Durkheim she writes,

He [Durkheim] suggests that we have hope because of what is in the past, making a calculation about what he calls the average life: in such a life “happiness must prevail over unhappiness. If the relations were reversed, neither the attachment of men to life, nor its continuance jostled by the facts at each moment, could be understood. [182]

In other words, if relative fortune must ultimately outweigh relative misfortune in the unfolding of a life for our attachment to life itself to remain possible and if such “‘relative bounty’” (182) is what comes to define the character of our hope, then we can conclude that the future we hope for is defined by the past we came from.

Returning to Sam and the profound misfortune of his past, I’d like to use Durkheim’s notion of “relative bounty” as a framing device for considering the “cost” of Sam’s story signifying the ultimate account of human suffering in U.S. popular culture. While poststructuralist theorists have rightly posited the inherent unknowability of survivor’s experiences, such an approach ceases to be productive (and in some cases harmful) when we account for the anxious political/social/existential reality in which such traumatic experiences are affectively disseminated. Thus, it is my contention that from the void of such unknowability a collectively mediated grand narrative of survivor’s experiences has emerged, simplifying the infinite idiosyncrasy of each survivor’s experience into a ubiquitous grand narrative. Furthermore, this mythic narrative is naturalized as the only “true” reality when individual survivors, burdened with the impossible task of telling their complete life story, reify such grand narratives in an effort
to garner the sole form of public validation at their disposal. While my analysis focuses primarily on how survivors are affectively conditioned by such grand narratives, I also argue that the narrative structure of survivor’s testimonies play a fundamental role in facilitating the continuity of the such affective forces.

In the story Sam gives at his talks, it is the arrival of a boat, the S.S. Perch, that ultimately comes to ignite and signify the promise of his hopeful future. After corresponding back and forth between liberation camps for several months, Goldie informs Sam one day that she will be moving to New York City to live with her uncle and suggests that Sam follow. Without relatives of his own in the U.S. or a single dollar to his name, Sam reluctantly attempts to find a way to satisfy her wish. Eventually, Sam manages to sneak past the security gates of the U.S. Naval Base he is stationed at and confronts a U.S. officer (in broken English) with an urgent request: “you see, there is this girl and she won’t stop bothering me about going to the U.S” (this part always receives a nice laugh from the audience). The next day, Sam receives a message from the U.S. officer. Initially reluctant to answer the phone call as similar phone calls in Auschwitz often promised certain death, Sam is persuaded by a friend to answer the call: “Answer the phone, you’re safe now! We’re with the Americans.” To Sam’s astonishment, over the phone the officer tells him, with great excitement, “Son, you’re going to the United States TODAY! Gather your belongings, your ship leaves in an hour.” Without a single item to his name, Sam walks aboard the U.S. Navy ship towards a certain and hopeful future in a land of freedom. This “hopeful” turn in Sam’s story, which happens to be directly aligned with his promised arrival into the United States, is also marked by a distinct affective shift among audience members in the room by the very certainty of the
story’s happy conclusion. The audience knows where the story is going because it ends right where they’re sitting: in the land of the free and the home of the brave. A place, which, despite any shortcomings it might have in the present, is reified by the structure of Sam’s narrative as a safe haven for the lost and tortured souls of the world. What such deterministic logic overlooks, however, is that Sam’s journey across the Atlantic wasn’t so easy.

Within his first hour aboard the ship, Sam is invited into a kitchen that contains an open buffet that he is encouraged to go to any hour of his choosing. Having been nearly starved to death for several years on end, he couldn’t help himself from eating nearly anything and everything in sight. This lasted for nearly six days until Sam, ironically, grew ill from over eating. Refusing to eat anything for nearly an entire week afterwards, Sam describes the pain he experienced during this time on the ship as being on par with anything he felt while in Auschwitz. Furthermore, it should be noted that Sam wasn’t alone in having this experience. Some passengers, tragically unable to contain their voracious appetites, consumed so much that the results were even fatal. To term such accounts as simply ironic is to overlook the gritty affective structuring at stake in their formation. In Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* (2011), she notes that optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving; and, doubly, it is cruel insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming. [2]

Thus, the lesson we might draw from such tragic cases is that the approximate objects we assign our hopeful feelings to can’t bring about our ultimate happiness unless we
acknowledge their equal capacity to induce harm. Furthermore, we must acknowledge how the objects we attach ourselves to cannot bring about our happiness in themselves alone. When Sam described his first experience at the buffet to me, it wasn’t the taste of each individual pastry he emphasized, but rather the sheer magnitude of food before him, a limitless quantity that promised, “you will never be hungry ever again.” Thus, by blindly following the lines of potential existent within this promise, Sam’s immediate bodily needs were overlooked, ultimately bringing him harm. In this sense, Berlant’s notion of cruel optimism and Sam’s journey to the U.S. after liberation both speak to the promissory mechanisms at play in the affective resonance of survivor’s bodies in the U.S.

To deconstruct these mechanisms, I’d like to begin by considering on what grounds audience members (myself included) base their certainty that Sam’s arrival in the U.S. marks the end of his potential misfortune. By directly associating Sam’s liberation from Nazi oppression with his incapacity to experience misfortune in the future, we are employing a logic reminiscent of Durkheim. We are orienting our hope for Sam’s future towards his unimaginably traumatic past, which, in order to have happiness prevail over unhappiness in the sum total of his life, requires he have a future life filled with fortune. While such a perspective is crucial for a society that seeks to maintain a certain utilitarian logic, which we might locate under the umbrella of the American Dream, it should be no surprise that such “hopeful” expectations often crumble in the animate flux of everyday life. Social theory is well versed in the variety ways in which such promises can’t be maintained for racial minority groups or those of low socio-economic status. Why then do we blindly demand equally flawed logics to apply to the lives of survivors?
In her chapter entitled *Unhappy Migrants*, Ahmed (2010) describes a phenomenon she calls “the happiness duty” and elucidates its failure to accommodate alternative unhappy experiences migrants might have that occur simultaneously within the larger, “happy”/“hopeful” grand narrative of their arrival:

The happiness duty for migrants means telling a certain story about your arrival as good, or the good of your arrival. The happiness duty is a positive duty to speak of what is good but also can be thought of as a negative duty not to speak of what is not good, not to speak from or out of unhappiness. It is if you should let go of the pain of racism by *letting go of racism as a way of understanding that pain*. It is as if you have a duty not to be hurt by the violence directed toward you, not even to notice it, to let is pass by, as if it passes you by. [158]

To more clearly discuss the ways in which Ahmed’s “happiness duty” relates to Sam and his story, let us replace “the pain of racism” with simply any kind of suffering at all. As mentioned previously, it is my contention that through our prudent efforts to “never forget” and retain our unhappiness with the Holocaust, we have elevated the subject to a mythic realm of extremist understanding, where all other possible forms of suffering fall second to the impossible suffering signified by the Holocaust. While it has never been my intention to *question* the horror of Sam’s experience in Auschwitz, I would like to *ask the question* “what is the cost of maintaining such absolutist understanding?” Who pays this price and for whom? Furthermore, why is simply asking this question so difficult?

Ahmed outlines the ways in which happiness, like hope, is a promissory mechanism, through which certain objects become “happy” by the future trajectories they promise individuals who attach themselves to them. Citing heterosexual marriage and children as two examples (among others) of happy objects within popular American culture’s conception of the good life, Ahmed reveals the ways in which happiness can be denied to certain groups and reserved for others. Conversely, Ahmed maintains that
certain objects can come to signify *unhappiness* as well and that such objects in particular preserve a rather complex relation to the past:

> Some happy objects—one might think of the turban or burqa—become the cause of national unhappiness not simply because they cannot exist alongside the happy objects of the nation but because they are saturated by unhappy histories, as histories of empire that are erased under the sign of happiness. Objects become unhappy when they embody the persistence of histories that cannot be wished away by happiness. [159]

I’d like to consider what it might mean for us to understand Sam, and all living Holocaust survivors for that matter, as unhappy objects. By framing Sam himself as an unhappy object and not simply his serial number tattoo or the Nazi Swastika, we can understand the ways in which even living bodies, moving through space and time, can become trapped within promissory structures that extend both into the past and future. As indicated by the affective disposition of Sam’s talks, Sam and his story are undoubtedly expected to make us feel, for lack of a better word, unhappy. The societal recognition of Sam as an unhappy object persists by the simple fact that as he stands before us, the scars across his body betray our ability to forget. Such material presence, a presence I myself found haunting at times, exposes our inherent inability to put certain histories behind us.

As Ahmed writes, “these histories persist [and we must] persist in declaring our unhappiness with their persistence” (159).

Paradoxically, however, through our effort to persist in declaring our unhappiness with the Holocaust and the enduring traumatic memory persistent in its survivors, I argue that alternative forms of suffering survivors might experience escape our grasp. As a collectivity, we are unable and unwilling to face Sam’s traumatic past directly, the way Kron does in *2.5 Minute Ride* for instance, because doing so risks rupturing the continuity of numerous logics fundamental to American society. As a result, we engage individual
survivors through the affective medium of a particular form of unhappiness. While we are able to comprehend the tragic reality of survivor’s experiences, the mythic grand narrative of their arrival contains our engagement with these stories and the bodies that tell them. Thus, while Sam’s persistence as an unhappy object in social memory substantiates his past and the injustices committed against him, the redemptive narrative containing such past suffering prevents us from discerning hardships he may currently be facing. Furthermore, any present signifiers of suffering we might recognize outside the trajectory set into motion by his unhappy past, pale into insignificance when juxtaposed against the sublime horror of the Holocaust. As a result, my experience with Sam suggests that any form of suffering Sam might experience in the present can’t be adequately voiced or understood in ways that honor the reality of his experience.

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For Stewart (2007), author of *Ordinary Affects*, “what matters is not meaning gathered into codes but the gathering of experience beyond subjectivity, a transduction of forces, a social aesthetics attuned to the way a tendency takes on consistency, or a new regime of sensation becomes a threshold to the real” (340). Stewart defines “the real” not as a single, static realm, but as a world of infinite variation. Certain “regimes of sensation” make possible certain forms of engagement with “the real,” ultimately extending our definition of what the “the real” might be as far as our regimes of sensation allow. In this sense, by incorporating an affective sensibility into my analysis of Holocaust survivorship in the United States I work to broaden the regime of sensation through which we can engage the topic. While my analysis emphasizes how national affects surrounding the Holocaust effectively limit people’s engagement with Sam and
Sam’s own ability to navigate his identity in everyday life, I do not deem such structures of feeling completely determinate. As my experience of affective alienation in Sam’s talks suggests, alternative thresholds to “the real” exist beyond such mediated structures of feeling. As Michael Jackson (1996) exclaims, “no matter what significance we attach to discourse or culture, the phenomenal world of human consciousness and activity is never reducible to that which allegedly determines the condition of possibility” (22). A reeling present and the interrelation of bodies in space cannot be fully conditioned or anticipated. As evidenced by my time with Sam, even the affective flow of everyday life can short-circuit. I understand these short-circuits as opportunities for engaging alternative thresholds to “the real” that might be better suited for bringing Sam’s present needs into focus.

Regarding the utilitarian hope logic mentioned above, my aim is to illuminate the mechanisms through which this type of hope is maintained by focusing my analysis on how such “hopeful” promises can’t be kept for those who perform the labor of maintaining such promissory structures in the first place. In this sense, by understanding the narrative structure of Sam’s testimony and his affective disposition in and outside such spaces as both products of a utilitarian hope logic and, at the same time, productive of this very logic, we can begin to understand how Sam is denied hope from a system he himself helped create. In an effort to resist reifying such flawed logics within the national archive, we will now look towards an alternative hope logic at play in Sam’s story capable of creating possibility within the rigid life trajectory established for him.

As Sam notes in his talk, there were countless opportunities for him to take his future into his own hands by destroying it before the Nazi guards had the chance to. The
camp was surrounded entirely by electric fences and, as Sam notes, “not a day went by
where someone didn’t walk up and grab hold of that fence.” Explaining how he often felt
envious of such individuals, “at least they no longer had to suffer, they could be at
peace,” Sam recounts that for him suicide was a luxury he couldn’t afford. Without
knowing whether or not his parents, two brothers and one sister were still alive after
having been taken from him without warning, Sam felt he had a responsibility to go on
living so that one day they may be reunited. When audience members ask Sam what gave
him the strength to go on living, he always replies: “The hope of seeing my family again,
that’s what kept me alive.” In the face of chaos and oblivion, Sam found his footing by
imagining an alternative future for himself. In this sense, the thought of seeing his family
again is retroactively framed as a possibility that ultimately makes living itself possible.
Though such a future would tragically never be realized, a realization Sam says was by
far the most painful moment of his life, Sam’s ability to accommodate the possibility of it
happening at all is ultimately what made his future possible.

Similarly, Sam’s immediate moment of liberation is realized when he acts and
flees from a Death March from Auschwitz to Wodzisław Śląski assembled at the end of
the war. With thousands of individuals dying around him each day and sensing his
vitality fleeting from exhaustion and the freezing ground beneath his feet, Sam begs his
friend David, the only friend he had in the camp, to flee with him. Refusing to choose a
path of “certain death” over one of “almost certain death,” David begs Sam not to go
through with it. Unable to continue following the march towards its resultant future, Sam
is forced to deny his friend’s plea and, at the first opportune moment, decides to run as
fast as he possibly can away from the line and towards a nearby grove. While the only
thing Sam remembers after this experience is waking up in a Soviet hospital, he does remember telling himself never to let the Nazi guards look him in the eye if they were to shoot him. He insisted his death be of his own making and refused to give the guards his one lasting possession. Later in a liberation camp Sam would find another survivor of the march who knew David and how he died. The woman remembers speaking to David, how he told her about his “crazy friend Sam” and how sure he was that this friend would surely be killed. The woman went on to tell Sam that only two hours after speaking to him, two hours after Sam fled towards “certain death,” David collapsed in a snow bank and died. Failing to find hope within an alternative future, a future which Sam only made possible by denying the trajectory established for him, David’s death offers us a poignant example of the ways in which hope and life itself are inextricably entwined. Furthermore, it is the chance inherent within Sam’s decision to flee that ultimately makes it hopeful.

To clarify the alternative hope logic at play in these accounts, I’d like to draw from Ahmed’s (2010) work on hope. She understands hope first and foremost as a promissory mechanism. Certain objects come to signify future trajectories of happy futures, which we hope for, and our proximity to these objects resultantly translates as a proximity to happiness itself. Crucially, it is “the promise of happiness [that] makes things promising” and this promise is “always ‘ahead’ of itself,” never something which can be cleanly grasped in the present (181). Furthermore, such anticipatory logic is reified by its ability to function retroactively. As Ahmed states, “the object of feeling lags behind the feeling. The lag is not simply temporal but involves active forms of mediation. We search for the object: or as Nietzsche describes: ‘a reason is sought in persons, experiences, etc. for why one feels this way or that’” (27). Thus, we feel something, and
then look for a cause (the object) of this feeling. This practice extends both into the past and future as the “happy objects” we link to our present feelings become potential paths towards happiness, which we seek out and follow into the future. The word “potential” here is vital to Ahmed’s analysis. While certain paths (and, thus, objects) hold more “promise” than others, she crucially maintains the notion that no path can guarantee our happiness. In this sense, when we invest ourselves in certain objects we are engaging in a hopeful attachment to them. In describing the nature of such an attachment Ahmed states that “if happiness is what we hope for when we hope for this or that thing it does not mean we think we will be happy but that we imagine we could be happy if things go the right way” (182). Contrary to the utilitarian hope logic discussed by Durkheim, Ahmed’s understanding of hope is thus defined by its capacity to break promises as well as keep them. In this sense, hopeful attachments cease to be hopeful the moment they guarantee that a particular trajectory will unfold.

Returning to Sam and the binding “hopeful” promise that his future can only be filled with good fortune given the profound misfortune of his past, Ahmed’s understanding of hope reveals how such deterministic logic in fact denies Sam the prospect of making hopeful attachments in his identity as a Holocaust survivor. For Ahmed, the future must be maintained as a space filled with possibility, flux, or, in some cases, no future at all. To underscore Ahmed’s understanding of hope, its relationship to the future, and the potential this form of hope holds for survivors like Sam, let us look to Ahmed’s reading of Cuarón’s dystopian film *Children of Men*.¹

¹ I began developing this analysis of Ahmed’s reading of *Children of Men* in a paper for Donavon Schaefer during the spring of 2013.
In Ahmed’s explanation for why dystopian films in particular are productive analytic tools for understanding promissory structures such hope she states,

I offer readings of dystopian forms insofar as they take as a starting point the possibility that the future might be something we have already lost—this is not a vision only of an unhappy future but the possibility of no future at all, where no future is not conceived as unhappiness (which would be predicated on the survival of a subject) but no hap, no chance, no possibility. I want to think about what it means for happiness [and hope] to depend on there being a future, as a dependence that enables a certain anxiety about the possibility of its loss. [163]

Thus, as the primary dystopian film of Ahmed’s analysis, *Children of Men* takes as a starting point the notion that we are not anxious enough about losing the future. Speaking against the numerous deterministic logics permeating American society, of which utilitarian hope is only one example, *Children of Men* works to rupture such promissory structures by introducing the possibility that the future itself can be lost. From the first minute to its final seconds, the future unfolds as a question in the present (164). It is the year 2027: women have become infertile, the streets of London appear overrun and destitute, and an explosion in a nearby coffee shop ignites our engagement with the main character, Theo. At the start of the film, Theo is portrayed as having “unattributed grief…a general sense of despair about the possibility of living a life other than the life that just goes on” (171). Similar to the present prison that Sam inhabits, Theo’s experience of the present is made meaningless by the very predictability of his future: once the last human being has perished, it will be the mankind. Theo being drawn into caring about something ultimately prompts the action of the film and his conversion from despair to having hope establishes the film’s narrative trajectory. Paradoxically, this trajectory is made possible by the seeming impossibility of the narrative going anywhere at all. As the subject of a plea from his ex-wife Julian, a member of the revolutionary
group the Fishes, Theo is given the task of taking a refugee girl named Kee to a boat called *Tomorrow* so that she and her unborn child can join a utopian project called the Human Project. Their journey becomes the story of the film.

As the story unfolds, we quickly learn that the cause of Theo’s unattributed grief does not stem directly from the fact that women have become infertile, but can be traced to the death of his son years prior. When his friend, Jasper, jokingly asks him what he thinks about the Human Project at the beginning of the film, Theo erupts and responds: “The Human Project. Why do people believe this crap…even if they discovered the cure for infertility. It doesn’t matter. Too late. The world went to shit. You know what. It was too late before the infertility thing happened, for fuck’s sake.” As Ahmed’s reading of this scene suggests, “the ‘too late’ provides both a critique of hopefulness and a retroactive disbelief that anything could have been done, a suggestion that there was never any hope to hope for” in the first place (172). As the film progresses, however, Theo’s despair is redirected into purpose by his being “turned” towards other possible worlds that present themselves within the unpredictable flow of time and chance encounters. As Ahmed crucially states, “to be turned is not always about being turned into action, but can be about how one is turned by the actions of others” (172).

Similar to how the interruption in Theo’s life, brought about by Kee, is ultimately what allowed Theo to turn towards alternative worlds of being outside the bleak trajectory established by his past grief, I’d like to take Sam at his word when he told me that the two months I spent with him were the happiest months he’s had in a long, long time. While I would prefer to simply attribute this happiness solely to our friendship and the content of our interactions, I’d rather treat seriously the possibility that it was simply
the interruption of his everyday habits, brought about by my presence and the project itself, which ultimately made such happiness possible. Sam’s “happiness” in these terms can be predicated on the word’s root: “hap,” meaning “chance” (Ahmed 2010:22). More specifically, I believe that the action-oriented (i.e. present oriented) nature of our engagements prompted Sam to conceive of and, in some cases, experience alternative worlds of being, worlds otherwise inaccessible to him in spaces affectively conditioned by his past. As Ahmed explains, “a happening is an encounter, the chance of an encounter, or even a chance encounter. Such encounters recreate the ground on which things do happen. To recreate a ground is to deviate from a past that has not been given up. When things go astray, other things can happen. We have a future, perhaps” (198). Acknowledging the profound capacity of the alternative hope logic existent within both Sam’s story and Children of Men to make life possible under the most insurmountable conditions imaginable, I seek to clarify the inner-workings of this hope logic so that we can perhaps replicate it in our collective construction of national narratives more broadly. In this sense, in our effort to “recreate a ground” we might align our efforts within a phenomenological vein that satisfies Husserl’s desire for a “return to things themselves” versus abstract theories about what is “actually” going on. To further elaborate this notion and its productive powers for survivors like Sam, we will now look to the painterly works of Edvard Munch and phenomenology.

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Maintaining a Norwegian vein of naturalism developed by Hans Jaeger and Christian Krogh, Edvard Munch’s paintings possess an emotionally intelligible
communicability rooted in a pragmatic social relevancy. There is always purpose, a lesson to be learned in his work, and it is, thus, the responsibility of the viewer to engage Munch’s message. In this sense, as David Loshak (1989) argues, “Munch’s development should, therefore, be seen in the light of an underlying commitment to nineteenth-century attitudes and regarded less as a renunciation of realism than as a subjective extension of it” (273). While Munch could hardly be classified as a realist painter, his work’s inherent communicability limits its potential as a purely abstract, impressionistic form. As Loshak notes, Munch’s perspective compositions emerged most distinctively around the time he began incorporating elements from neo-impressionism, symbolism and art nouveau into his work. Such developments resulted in “the flattening of forms and spaces into two-dimensional patterns, in order to portray subjective concepts instead of objective percepts” (273). Munch’s neo-impressionistic style directs our reading of each individualized, impressionistic brushstroke into textured forms, which we recognize as affectively charged figures, objects, or landscapes despite their aesthetic detachment from objective reality. Thus, by partially severing a realist aesthetic from the physical world, we find that the “real” need not be tied solely to literal reality, but, as Munch’s paintings reveal, that perhaps “the real” exists elsewhere; in the social and emotionally charged imaginary of the viewer. A definition of the “real” in this sense is less concerned with physical reality than it is with the social and affective construction of it within subjectivities.

Painted on the frame of the 1895 version of Edvard Munch’s most famous work, *The Scream*, is a poem that alludes to a lived experience that inspired the painting. While

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2 I began thinking about the relation between Edvard Munch, phenomenology, and anthropology in a paper for Zaineb Saleh in the fall of 2013.
Munch’s language paints us a vivid image of the scene, his words inherently lack the sensibility achieved by the painting itself. As one imagines this scene through words, the sky congeals and Munch himself becomes frozen in time. Upon viewing Munch’s painting, contrastingly, time persists as the fiery sky absorbs the figure (Munch) without swallowing him whole. As Loshak notes, “the foreground figure is almost absorbed by the curvilinear flow of landscape and sky, and is thus threatened with becoming part of a subjective two-dimensional pattern” (276). This two-dimensional pattern, however, is challenged by a deep three-dimensional perspective offered by the harsh diagonal causeway located behind the figure and within the depths of the image. There is thus a conflict between two distinct space conceptions: two-dimensional curvilinearity and three-dimensional rectilinearity. The effect is that such contrast ultimately balances the composition, yet also creates tension within it (Loshak 1989:274). It is this very tension that I assert must be accounted for and problematized within ethnographic explorations of a self that exists “in-the-world” (to reference Husserl), yet nevertheless within a collectively mediated, curvilinear field of affective forces.

As the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964) notes, the painter “sees what inadequacies keep the world from being a painting… and sees painting as an answer to all these inadequacies” (31). In claiming that painters, “possessed of no other ‘technique’ than the skill [their] eyes and hands discover in seeing and painting” (Merleau-Ponty 1993:123), resist a still-life reading of the world through their recognition of its inherent inadequacies, the tendency to stabilize reality and make it readable is affirmed as intellectualism’s predominant mode of engaging the world. Such essentialist practice can be located within the mythic, affectively mediated grand
narrative of Sam’s arrival. While such collective logic ultimately allows us to recognize the bright orange tongues of fire as sky in Munch’s painting, Munch’s particular abstract rendering of reality and the figure within it reveals how collective logics can consume the subject, obscuring alternative realities from the viewer’s eye. Phenomenology advocates for a shift away from such modes of abstraction, towards an immediate, both temporally and spatially speaking, articulation of experience. Thus, it is with little surprise that phenomenologically oriented thinkers like Merleau-Ponty would find great value in the realities portrayed in Munch’s work. In other words, Munch successfully situates realist conceptions of reality within subjective, lived experience by literally and metaphorically incorporating a spatial dimension (the third dimension) into the composition’s flattened, two-dimensional background, ultimately allowing a temporal understanding of the scene to emerge.

For my own research, such a sensibility is particularly fitting in that it accounts for spatial engagements amongst bodies (via the presence of the third dimension), yet stages such interactions against a social backdrop of affective and political continuities. Most importantly, all of this is achieved within the framework of a reeling present, which is problematized and understood in these very terms. Similar to how I came to visualize Sam at the Eat’n Park restaurant, when one looks at The Scream, one cannot easily engage the viewer directly at first glance. Upon further looking, however, the subject staged at the heart of the image begins to hold sway. What provokes this new form of perception is the tension created by the figure’s blurring in and out of focus from the painting’s background. Similar to Stewart’s (2007) analysis of the still life that gives pause, the viewers inability to cleanly delineate the figure’s form from the swirling
landscape manifests as an “intensity born of a momentary suspension of narrative, or a glitch in the projects we call things like the self, agency, home, a life. Or a simple stopping” (19).

Contrary to Munch’s narrative description of his experience on the causeway, which inspired the painting, *The Scream* depicts solely the terminal point of that sequence in which Munch is left behind his two friends who now walk far off in the distance away from him. The passage of time in this case is conveyed by the distant figures who now belong to the past as their distance in space measures the time that has elapsed since they left the narrator (Loshak 1989:274). “The unbroken flow of perspective thus indicates both continuity of extension and continuity of duration” (Loshak 1989:274), which results in a relational understanding of time as it is imagined between bodies. This fourth dimension, which is made possible by Munch’s inclusion of the third dimension, is what ultimately allows the figure to remain at the foreground of the image. Similar to how the waitress’s interruption of Sam’s story, which also signified an affective interruption, helped me comprehend his physical presence in ways I hadn’t previously been able to, the figure’s distinct presence within *The Scream*, which interrupts the curvilinear flow of the background, suggests that the landscape in which individuals negotiate their identities cannot fully determine the nature of their existence.

Citing Henri Bergson, Loshak (1989) notes “time, in so far as it is a homogenous medium and not concrete duration, is reducible to space…[thus,] we are compelled to borrow from space the images by which we describe what the reflective consciousness feels about time and even about succession (275). In these terms, time can be understood as not only subjective, but as a perspective constantly generated and influenced by bodily
encounters. Thus, while Sam’s present may be imprisoned by the trajectory set into motion by his identity as a Holocaust survivor, the deterministic logics that maintain this prison, (such as the utilitarian form of hope I discuss) prove futile when applied to the animate flow of everyday life. Both Sam’s current traumatic experience with Goldie and his ability to experience alternative worlds of being (incited by the film project and the interruption this project caused in the flow of Sam’s everyday life) support this notion. Keeping in mind Ahmed’s crucial understanding that hopeful attachment’s rely on possibility and a certain anxiety about the future, I will now elucidate these phenomenological modes of thinking in an effort to clarify how such “impossible” encounters (according to the trajectories established by the flawed collective logics I discuss) contribute to a more realistic portrayal of survivor’s experiences (both past and present) and how focusing our ethnographic gaze on such encounters in addition to survivor’s past traumatic experiences might allow us to better address/recognize survivor’s present—and most pressing—needs.

As Jackson (1996) describes, in The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology (written in the final years of his life, between 1934 and 1937) Edmund Husserl grants ontological priority to what he calls the Lebenswelt (lifeworld) over the world of theoretical thought and expository ideas (Weltanschauung) (13). In this lifeworld, Husserl essentially distinguishes living bodies from physical bodies, noting how the former must “hold sway in consciousness” (107). Husserl understands this European crisis, brought about by the failures of Nazi ideology and propaganda, as “a disenchantment with scientific rationality and a longing to make philosophy more open and responsive to the demands [and experiences] of human life”
Human consciousness in this instance comes into direct conflict with the foundational Cartesianism of western scientific and philosophical traditions. Whereas Descartes divided the world into “an unworldly, transcendent domain of mind and a worldly domain of body” (30), Husserl and later phenomenological thinkers like Merleau-Ponty who would follow and push beyond Husserl’s final thesis advocate for an understanding of consciousness that can accommodate a living, feeling body capable of producing knowledge through experience. As Jackson explains, citing Merleau-Ponty, “motility ‘is not, as it were, a handmaid of consciousness, transporting the body to that point in space of which we have formed a representation beforehand’” (31). Rather, “consciousness is in the first place not a matter of ‘I think that’ but of ‘I can’…[It] is ‘a being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body’” (31).

While phenomenology understands feelings and bodily experience as our most fundamental thresholds to “the real,” my deconstruction of Sam’s affective aura in and outside testimonial spaces suggests that even feelings and inter-bodily encounters can still be mediated by collective forces. Nevertheless, phenomenology still remains crucial to my analysis in its fundamental refusal to exclude the physical body from the realm of inquiry. In this sense, given how thoroughly mediated my engagement with Sam’s body often felt, my desire to both uncover and honor the physical limitations and present needs of Sam’s body can be situated within a phenomenological vein. The notion that Sam’s immediate physical needs could be overshadowed by the affective aura surrounding him became poignantly clear to me after shooting the very first scene of the documentary. Pressured to document every detail Sam could remember, the mantra “never forget” incessantly raced through my mind, obscuring the human being I initially sought out to
connect with. Most notably, my realization that I had failed to engage Sam in a way that honored his present needs became strikingly clear by perhaps the most unexpected occurrence I could think of: a sunburn.

Given how big of a fan Sam is of the Pittsburgh Steelers, I chose to interview him by the waterfront, directly across the river from Heinz Field. The day we filmed this interview was easily one of the hottest days of the summer. We brought several bottles of water in case Sam got thirsty and left him in the car with the AC blasting while we set up our equipment. The shoot ended up taking roughly an hour and Sam, being the person that he is at the ripe age of eighty-seven, didn’t make a single complaint throughout the entire shoot. I had Sam discuss several topics he rarely brings up in his talks and felt that the location complimented the content of the interview nicely. In my eyes, the shoot had been a huge success. After calling Sam the next day, however, to schedule our next shoot, he informed me that after a rather painful night’s sleep because of the throbbing on his face, he woke up with a terrible blister on the end of his nose that might be infected. Apparently, Sam had failed to mention to us that his daily medication causes his skin to be extra-susceptible to sunlight. As a result, the hour of sunlight we exposed him to had had a terrible effect on his skin.

Feeling incredibly guilty and concerned for Sam, especially after seeing the blister in person, I found myself questioning whether or not we should continue shooting at all. Here I was, trying to “help” this man by telling his story and sharing it with the world, causing him even further pain. Ultimately, I found it necessary to ask Sam if he wanted to stop filming and scrap the project all together. To my surprise, Sam hadn’t even considered the possibility of stopping. Instead, he handed me Goldie’s make-up kit and
asked me to fix him up, assuring me that “people won’t even notice the big ugly thing”. Reflecting later that night on Sam’s burn, I was struck by how immediate Sam’s pain was and how seeing the burn made such pain instantly pertinent. The burn was so shocking that it demanded my attention. You couldn’t look at Sam without first acknowledging the burn and the resultant pain it must have been causing him. While functioning similarly to the pain found in his traumatic past in that both have the capacity to condition our perception of Sam, Sam’s pain associated with his sunburn reflects a present and immediate feeling. That is not to say that Sam’s past trauma does not continue to inflict pain, but rather, it is to say that seeing Sam’s burn in the present forced me to see, perhaps for the first time, a living, breathing, bleeding man that such unfathomable past traumas had prevented me from seeing. While I hadn’t yet understood what to make of this phenomenon, an experience later that week would, again, shock me into Sam’s present to the extent that from then on, the film would take on a radically different, present-oriented approach.

On our way to shoot another interview scene at the nearby park, my director of photography, Danny Bedrossian, and I had just finished packing our equipment into Sam’s car when Sam realized he had forgotten his jacket. After refusing my offer to run up and get it for him—“it’ll take two seconds!”—Sam walked up to his apartment and came back down business as usual. After driving for a few minutes, I started to notice a red splotch on Sam’s pant leg. The splotch trickled straight down the side of his leg and looked a lot like ketchup so I asked Sam if he had maybe spilled some sauce on it at lunch. “Oh, that…it’s nothing. I just bumped my knee on the bed.” After realizing that the “ketchup stain” was in fact blood, I insisted Sam pull the car over so we could clean
him up and bandage what looked like a pretty bad cut. After pleading with him for several minutes, Sam finally agreed to pull over. “Does it hurt real bad?” I asked, fearing the worst. “Oh jeez, if I made it through all that Holocaust mess, don’t you think I can handle a little cut?”

The “cut” ended up being fairly serious yet Sam insisted we go on shooting. So, after getting him a change of pants and cleaning his wound, we went about our day as planned. Later that night, however, Sam’s response stayed with me. I kept asking myself, what if I hadn’t noticed the red splotch and the cut was really bad? Would Sam have said anything at all? While Sam’s stories from Auschwitz often frightened me in ways that lingered well beyond our meetings, it was the prospect of Sam failing to recognize his own present suffering that kept me up that night. It’s not that Sam couldn’t feel the pain in his leg, but that he felt such pain wasn’t worth articulating, that there wasn’t an audience to properly recognize and acknowledge his present concern.

As evidenced by the above accounts, phenomenology’s unwavering emphasis on the physical body is paramount to my comprehension of my experiences with Sam. For an anthropology that seeks to translate phenomenological inquiry into practice, the task is thus to “recover the sense in which experience is situated within relationships and between persons” (Jackson 1996:26). As Merleau-Ponty (1993) notes, to justly understand a single body “associated bodies must be revived along with [it]—‘others,’ not merely as my congeners, as the zoologist says, but others who haunt me and whom I haunt; ‘others’ along with whom I haunt a single, present, and actual Being as no animal ever haunted those of his own species, territory, or habitat” (123). In this sense, by gaining this understanding we can properly comprehend the extent to which Sam’s
present needs are often denied social recognition and his capacity to possess a truly hopeful orientation towards the future is undermined each time grand narratives of his traumatic past affectively precede his physical presence.

Lila Abu Lughod, among other anthropologists with a phenomenological sensibility, has engaged such ethnographic specificity by attempting to tell the stories of particular individuals, tracing the significance of larger structural/historical/political phenomena from the nexus of their being. By focusing on individuals and the peculiarities of their everyday lives, Abu Lughod adds a temporal dimension to social analysis and “trains our gaze on flux and contradiction; and the peculiarities suggest that others live as we perceive ourselves living—not as automatons programmed according to ‘cultural’ rules or acting out social roles, but as people going through life” (Jackson 2012:23). Such narratives are crucially conveyed in the present tense and are mediated through an individual perspective that remains relevant to larger collective imaginaries. Understanding how such stories are written and why they take the form that they do must undoubtedly accommodate an inter-bodily analytic with a temporal affinity towards the present, but, as we have discovered, such inter-bodily transferences cannot be understood without an affectively oriented ethnographic sensibility as well.

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Similar to Sam’s story, *Children of Men* also ends with the arrival of a boat *Tomorrow*. As the boat approaches and after Theo has died, Kee exclaims: “Theo, the boat! Theo, the boat. Its okay, we are safe now. We’re safe” (Ahmed 2010). In this final scene there is a tendency to read the boat as a solution, as the key to humanity’s future. For Slavoj Žižek, for instance, the boat provides closure to a convincing political
solution. In an interview in which he describes the boat he states: “It doesn’t have roots, its rootless, it floats around,” from which he concludes: “You cut your roots, that’s the solution” (Ahmed 2010:97). If the ending of the film is ultimately hopeful, however, as Ahmed (2010) maintains, Žižek’s reading “prematurely fills the boat with a meaning, as a kind of optimism (the boat as the cause of pleasure becomes full of potential)” (197). In order for the boat to signify the possibility of a tomorrow (the tomorrow we hope for), Ahmed reminds us that we must read its arrival as having the potential to save us from today or not save us. As she states,

    Rather than pointing our happiness toward the boat, by seeing it as full of potential, we would instead accept the happiness as pointless, as a way of responding to the possibility of its arrival. The boat might arrive or not. We have to work hard to get to the point of the boat’s arrival, whether or not the arrival happens. If it arrives, we won’t know whether the boat will give us what we hope for. The boat will no longer be held in place as a happy object; the prospect of its fullness will not be the point of our journey. [198]

By reimagining Sam’s “hopeful” arrival into the United States in the terms Ahmed outlines above, we can begin to conceive of alternative approaches to engaging Sam’s traumatic past that are more suitable for accommodating his present experiences into view. By avoiding prematurely framing Sam’s arrival into the U.S. as inevitably optimistic in an effort to balance out the profound misfortune of his past, we ultimately open Sam’s present (and future) to a realm of possibility beyond the rigid trajectory established by the grand narrative of his arrival. While such an approach risks undoing certain logics crucial to the collective good, such as the utilitarian hope logic I discuss, my analysis suggests that the livelihood of individual survivors may directly rely on such untethering.
Fear of the unknown more often than not manifests itself as fear of that which cannot be seen or held. If we cannot see it with our own eyes or feel it in our own bodies, the next best thing is to name it, no matter how arbitrary (or even harmful) such naming may be. In the case of disease, for instance, naming and recognizing a specific set of symptoms as socially significant holds unique power and consequences. As Shenk (2001) writes in *The Forgetting, Alzheimer’s: Portrait of an Epidemic* “every disease needs a name. As a matter of social reality, no disease exists until it has one…the disease name is public recognition of a shared affliction. The name also says, THIS is what you are suffering from. You are not alone. Others are suffering from the same thing…the name also says, we’re going to fight this thing” (78). While the term Alzheimer’s undoubtedly holds emotional weight and social significance, its victims find only partial solace in identifying with it. This is largely because the IT, which defines and *causes* Alzheimer’s, is unresolved. Not only is there fervent debate within the scientific community over whether neurofibrillary tangles or plaques are to blame for the physical cause of the disease, but the symptoms which fall under the heading of Alzheimer’s is vast, varied, and, unsettlingly, all too common in nearly all elderly individuals. Not only this, but the disease itself happens so gradually that its symptoms often go unnoticed until the disease develops into its later, more lethal, stages. As Shenk explains, “a definitive determination requires evidence of both plaques and tangles—which cannot be obtained without drilling into the patient’s skull, snipping a tiny piece of brain tissue, and examining it under a microscope. Brain biopsies are today considered far too invasive for a patient who does not face imminent danger” (35). Thus, “until autopsy,” an official diagnosis can only be “probable Alzheimer’s.”
While the cause of Alzheimer’s has remained largely a mystery, once one is diagnosed as having the disease (or at least symptoms synonymous with the disease) the trajectory of mental deterioration and emotional hardships to follow is disturbingly certain. As patients lose the ability to perform basic tasks one by one, there is a time scale for the patient and their loved ones to follow so that each step can be prepared for both physically and emotionally. The expected path an individual is likely to follow once symptoms are recognized goes as follows:

1) No difficulty at all
2) Some memory trouble begins to affect job/home
3) Much difficulty maintaining job performance
4) Can no longer hold a job, prepare meals, handle personal finances, etc.
5) Can no longer select proper clothing for occasion or season
6) Can no longer put on clothes properly
7) Can no longer adjust bath water temperature
8) Can no longer use toilet without assistance
9) Urinary incontinence
10) Fecal incontinence
11) Speech now limited to six or so words per day
12) Speech now limited to one word per day
13) Can no longer walk without assistance
14) Can no longer sit up without assistance
15) Can no longer smile
16) Can no longer hold up head. [123]

While comforting in one sense, one can only imagine peeking ahead to the final stages, allowing the harsh truths they hold and the emotional weight they bear to creep backwards in time, taking hold of the present and sedimenting its trajectory into the future. When Sam speaks to Goldie’s doctor about her treatment, he constantly reminds Sam “not to hope for her to get better, but for her not to get worse” as delaying the disease is the only defense we currently have against it. Thus, as Sam embarks on this path, his only chance at survival is to assimilate a new sense of normal into his everyday life, recognizing the happy moments when they emerge and handling the challenging
ones to the best of his ability. It must be noted that this process of survival in particular is unique to each individual in the case of Alzheimer’s. As Shenk explains: “While medical science gives us many tools for staying alive, it cannot help us with the art of living—or dying. Life, in its precious transience, is something we can only define on our own terms. With Alzheimer’s disease, the caregiver’s challenge is to escape the medical confines of disease and to assemble a new humanity in the loss” (93). Each time Sam looks at Goldie, asks her questions, or repeats the same story to her several times over, he knows there is a slim chance she will respond or that she even recognizes who he is. Yet, despite such unfathomable obstacles, Sam chooses to flee, yet again, from the trajectory of deterioration he is told to accept each moment he is with her.

In refusing such a trajectory, it is true that Sam risks having his heart broken, his hopes crushed. It is also true, however, that Sam could very well prove this trajectory wrong by turning towards alternative worlds of being. Recalling Ahmed (2010), while such worlds may not take him very far, it is the mere possibility within his attachment to them that gives Sam hope and, ultimately, the ability to experience some degree of happiness. During my time with Sam and Goldie, I had the opportunity to turn with him toward such a world. Jokingly one night at dinner, I asked Goldie if she wanted to go out dancing with me. Expecting her usual reply in which she painfully repeats the phrase “I know, I know, I know,” to me and Sam’s surprise, she eagerly nodded her head and replied “Oh, yes!” Sam then went on to ask her, jokingly, if she would rather go dancing with me or with him. Without missing a beat, Goldie pointed towards me and the three of us all laughed, sharing a moment that nearly brought Sam to tears. In the face of oblivion,
sometimes the only option is to imagine the possibility of there simply being another possible option.

A disease such as Alzheimer’s offers a troublingly poignant example of how larger categories of identification, which we ultimately rely on to make ourselves legible to those around us and (in some cases) to ourselves, can stabilize a life, but at the cost of freezing life’s immanent flux, contradiction, and blurry engagement with other lives surrounding it. In certain cases, such stability can mean everything or, at the very least, establish a clean limit for what everything can mean. Similar to the way in which a “break” or tangential path taken by an Alzheimer’s patient from the expected trajectory of brain deterioration can become a reason to live, the potential that the recognition of gaps or “historical interruptions” make possible for individual survivors means everything. While the ethnographic sensibility I have employed throughout this project undoubtedly offers a counter narrative to the larger grand narratives offered by national Holocaust discourses, my aim is not to fully de-stabilize or de-legitimize them in any way. Rather, my aim is simply to complicate the absolute claims such discourses make so that the individual’s burdened with the task of upholding grand narratives might be granted the possibility of experiencing alternative and more hopeful forms of being.

In his reading of Children of Men, Žižek notes that “the film’s power inheres in how much the suffering takes place in the background… it is too intense to look at it directly, so we can see it only obliquely, behind the action of the film” (Ahmed 2010:185). While Ahmed (2010) notes that in one sense we could see this as a possible limitation of the film, she also notes how we are nonetheless still aware of such suffering despite it not being the focus of our experience. As she explains,
In gaining focus, we can lose focus on suffering. At the same time, to lose focus on suffering does not mean that suffering is not there, or that it cannot be behind our action, in the sense of giving us an aim, direction, or purpose. A good question is whether focusing on suffering is always what allows us to do something about suffering—action might require the capacity to lose and gain focus. [185]

Taking into consideration my numerous encounters with Sam that forced me to re-focus my engagement with his traumatic past in terms of his present circumstances and acknowledging how productive such encounters were in enabling Sam to inhabit alternative forms of being, we can better appreciate Ahmed’s question. Furthermore, by revealing how collective narratives of the Holocaust that focus on suffering in fact limit people’s ability to comprehend the reality of such suffering, we can clarify the ways in which such affectively mediated encounters are harmful to individual survivors themselves. While this does not mean that we should disregard all attempts at articulating Sam’s experiences, we must acknowledge the inherent limits to such projects and remind ourselves that knowing ceases to be productive the moment it prevents others from doing. Thus, by shifting the focus of our ethnographic/historical gaze between suffering and action (which might also contain suffering), we allow our subjects time and space to confront such suffering and, most importantly, move on with their lives.

My aim in this project is not to assert whether or not collective memory should be designed with an emphasis on individual needs versus those of the collective. Rather, my analysis aims to provide a toolkit for properly framing such a question, both logically and morally, if we choose to ask it. During the question and answer session of Sam’s talks, his favorite part, he is frequently asked whether or not he would forgive the individuals responsible, in whole or in part, for killing his family. Admitting that he often asks himself this question daily to little or no avail, Sam, after a heavy pause, answers the
question as follows: “It is not my right to forgive those people. Only the dead can forgive.” The answer rarely falls onto satisfied ears, including his own no doubt, but such is the nature of trauma. By freeing himself from the responsibility to forgive or not forgive and reserving this right for those who have perished, Sam preserves such matters in the only place where they can be discussed meaningfully, simultaneously gesturing toward a future life of his own making. Emerging not in the form of a simple yes or no, but as a rhetorical invitation to look deeper, Sam’s solution, like Stewart’s investigation of affect, “gestures not towards the clarity of answers, but towards the texture of knowing. What a life adds up to is still a problem and an open question; an object of curiosity” (Stewart 2007:129).
References Cited


