

# 10 Holocaust Literature: Comparative Perspectives

*Stef Craps*

## Abstract

This chapter discusses attempts to theorize the interrelatedness of the Holocaust and other histories of victimization against the background of, first, the recent broadening of the focus of the field of memory studies from the national to the transnational level, and, secondly, efforts to bridge a disciplinary divide between Jewish and postcolonial studies preventing the Holocaust and histories of slavery and colonial domination from being considered in a common frame. In so doing, it highlights the pitfalls as well as the possibilities of bringing different atrocities into contact, a challenging and often controversial endeavour that holds both perils and promises. Next, it explores the ways in which the Native American writer Sherman Alexie negotiates various comparative perspectives on the Holocaust in 'The Game between the Jews and the Indians Is Tied Going into the Bottom of the Ninth Inning' (1993), a sonnet-length poem that considers Jews and Native Americans as similarly oppressed ethnic minorities, and 'Inside Dachau' (1996), a long, meditative poem that describes a Native American's reflections on visiting a Nazi concentration camp.

The past few years have seen an increasing awareness in academia of the need to think the Holocaust and other historical traumas – such as slavery, colonialism and other genocides – together in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the dark underside of modernity and to enable alliances and solidarities that transcend race, ethnicity, nationality, religion and culture. In this chapter, I will discuss attempts to theorize the interrelatedness of the

Holocaust and other histories of victimization against the background of, first, the recent broadening of the focus of the field of memory studies from the national to the transnational level, and, secondly, efforts to bridge a disciplinary divide between Jewish and postcolonial studies preventing the Holocaust and histories of slavery and colonial domination from being considered in a common frame.<sup>1</sup> In so doing, I will highlight the pitfalls as well as the possibilities of bringing different atrocities into contact, a challenging and often controversial endeavour that holds both perils and promises. Next, I will analyse two examples from an important but somewhat overlooked archive of literary texts that employ the strategy of comparison to establish links between the Nazi genocide of the European Jews and other traumatic histories.

As is well known, memory emerged as an urgent topic of debate in the humanities in the 1980s. The past few decades have seen a profusion of important work on memory, leading some to speak of a 'memory boom' (Winter, 2000). A great deal of research has been devoted to 'collective memory', a term developed by Maurice Halbwachs (1992) in the 1920s to denote collectively shared representations of the past, and 'cultural memory', a related concept coined by Jan Assmann (1992) in the 1980s which stresses the role of institutionalized canons of culture in the formation and transmission of collective memories. Early work in memory studies focused on the ways in which memories are shared within particular communities and constitute or reinforce group identity. Very often, most notably in Pierre Nora's monumental *Lieux de Mémoire* project [1984–92] (1996–8), the nation-state has been taken as paradigmatic of such mnemonic communities. In the past few years, however, the transnational and even global dissemination of memory has moved to the centre of attention. The emphasis in memory studies is gradually shifting from static sites of memory to the dynamic movement of memory. With the aid of mass cultural technologies, it has become increasingly possible for people to take on memories of events not 'their own', events that they did not live through themselves and to which they have no familial, ethnic or national tie – a phenomenon which Alison Landsberg (2004) has usefully labelled 'prosthetic memory'.

Arguments about the transnationalization or globalization of memory typically refer to the Holocaust, still the primary, archetypal topic in memory studies. In the second half of the 1990s, for example, Alvin Rosenfeld (1995), Hilene Flanzbaum (1999) and Peter Novick (1999) called attention to the so-called Americanization of the Holocaust. The transnational resonance of the Holocaust did not stop there, however. In *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*, Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider argue that the global spread of Holocaust discourse has generated a new form of memory, 'cosmopolitan memory', which they define as 'a memory that harbors the possibility of transcending ethnic and national boundaries' (Levy and Sznaider, [2001] 2006, p. 4). In their view, as in Jeffrey Alexander's (2002), the Holocaust has escaped its spatial and temporal

particularism to emerge as a common moral touchstone in the wake of the Cold War. The negative memory of the extermination of the Jews can serve as a universal moral norm, they argue, and thus help foster a human-rights culture and advance the cause of global justice.

In the past decade, however, Levy and Sznajder's book and Alexander's essay 'On the Social Construction of Moral Universals' have been accused of being naively optimistic about the consequences of the global dissemination of Holocaust memory.<sup>2</sup> As many commentators have noted, Levy and Sznajder as well as Alexander largely ignore the fact that the Holocaust is often used in ways that do not lead to greater transcultural understanding and the establishment of a universal human-rights culture. A. Dirk Moses, for example, argues that the Holocaust is typically invoked not with the cosmopolitan effect that Levy and Sznajder suppose but 'to express the fear of collective destruction: the apocalypse of genocide', a usage which 'contributes towards terroristic political action in the form of pre-emptive strikes and anticipatory self-defence to forestall feared destruction' (Moses, 2011, p. 91). The employment of 'second Holocaust' rhetoric by Zionists in Israel and George W. Bush's repeated use of Nazi comparisons to rally support for the war in Iraq are cases in point. As Andreas Huyssen (2003) and Miriam Hansen (1996) have noted, Holocaust comparisons can also work as Freudian 'screen memories' – meaning that the Holocaust is remembered in order to repress other instances of historical oppression which are more immediate and closer to home<sup>3</sup> – or simply hinder understanding of specific local histories.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, the comparative argument can be exploited for revisionist ends and serve to relativize, dilute or erase the memory of the Holocaust, as in the *Historikerstreit* of the mid-1980s.<sup>5</sup> Another important criticism that can be levelled both at Levy and Sznajder and at Alexander is that their analysis is marred by Eurocentrism: their work tends to conflate the West with the world and to treat the Holocaust – a genocide that took place in Europe and was committed by Europeans against Europeans – as a unique source of universal moral lessons that cannot be learnt from any other event (A. Assmann and Conrad, 2010).

If the traditional national focus of memory studies is one explanation for why research on the interrelatedness of memories of the Holocaust and other atrocities is a relatively recent phenomenon, another is the gaping disciplinary divide that has long separated Jewish and postcolonial studies. There has been a conspicuous lack of interaction between the two fields, despite a host of shared concerns – after all, both Jewish and postcolonial studies grapple with the legacies of histories of violence perpetrated in the name of racist ideologies and imperialist political projects. In his book *Between Camps: Nations, Cultures and the Allure of Race*, which extends the argument first made in the last chapter of *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) about the need to make connections across black and Jewish diasporic histories, Paul Gilroy

asks: 'Why does it remain so difficult for so many people to accept the knotted intersection of histories produced by this fusion of horizons?' (Gilroy, [2000] 2004, p. 78). Bryan Cheyette (2000) addresses just this question in an article in which he explores theoretical impediments that prevent postcolonial studies from incorporating Jewish history into a broader understanding of a colonizing Western modernity. Continuities and overlaps between Jewish and colonial experience have remained underexplored, Cheyette points out, because of the reluctance or inability of many postcolonial theorists to perceive Jews as anything other than part of a supposedly homogeneous, white, 'Judeo-Christian' majoritarian tradition. He gives three reasons to explain postcolonial theory's resistance to breaking down the separate spheres between Jews and other ethnicities: the past complicity of many individual Jews with the colonial enterprise; the history of Zionism, which points to Jewish collusion with colonial practices that continues to this day; and tensions in contemporary black-Jewish relations in the United States over the perceived appropriation of black experience by the Jewish community (i.e. the use of the Holocaust as a screen memory for slavery and segregation).

While Cheyette's focus is on the diffidence shown by postcolonial studies towards Jewish studies, it is fair to say that the feeling is mutual. Indeed, further complicating the dialogue between Jewish and postcolonial studies is a strongly held belief in the uniqueness of the Holocaust among many Jewish studies scholars, most prominently Deborah Lipstadt (1993), Steven Katz (1994), Daniel Goldhagen (1996) and Yehuda Bauer (1978). As Michael Rothberg points out, the proponents of uniqueness typically refuse to consider the Holocaust and other catastrophic histories in a common frame: they 'assiduously search out and refute all attempts to compare or analogize the Holocaust in order to preserve memory of the Shoah from its dilution or relativization' (Rothberg, 2009, p. 9). Critics of uniqueness or of the politics of Holocaust memory, on the other hand, 'often argue . . . that the ever-increasing interest in the Nazi genocide distracts from the consideration of other historical tragedies' (ibid.) – this is, of course, the third reason adduced by Cheyette to explain postcolonial theory's cold-shouldering of Jewish history.<sup>6</sup> In fact, a common critical response to the privileging of the Holocaust is to claim uniqueness or primacy for other histories of suffering, such as African American slavery or the genocide of the Native Americans. While such efforts have helped raise the profile of these relatively neglected histories, they are historically problematic as well as politically and ethically unproductive. Insisting on the distinctiveness and difference of one's own history can indicate a kind of blindness, a refusal to recognize the larger historical processes of which that history is a part. Moreover, claims for the uniqueness of the suffering of the particular victim group to which one belongs tend to deny the capacity for, or the effectiveness of, transcultural empathy.

Though, generally speaking, there has been little interaction between Jewish and postcolonial studies, a number of theorists and historians have long recognized continuities between the history of the European Jews and the history of European colonialism. In the early 1950s, Hannah Arendt ([1951] 2004) put forward the so-called boomerang thesis, according to which European totalitarianism, and Nazism in particular, has its roots in overseas colonialism. At around the same time, Aimé Césaire ([1950] 2000) argued that Nazism should be viewed as the continuation of Europe's treatment of various non-European peoples in the previous centuries. This understanding of Nazism as colonialism revisited on Europe also informs more recent research in the fledgling field of comparative genocide studies by scholars such as Mark Mazower (2008), A. Dirk Moses (2002), David Moshman (2001), Jacques Semelin (2007), Timothy Snyder (2010), Dan Stone (2004), and Jürgen Zimmerer (2005), who have all sought to remove the 'conceptual blockages' (Moses, 2002) in comparing modern atrocities, to move beyond notions of the Holocaust's uniqueness that might inscribe a hierarchy of suffering across modernity, and to elicit the structural continuities and discontinuities between atrocious events.

There has so far been little parallel work by literary and cultural critics; notable exceptions include Michael Rothberg (2009; 2011), Bryan Cheyette (2000), Sam Durrant (2004), Max Silverman (2013), Paul Gilroy ([2000] 2004; 1993), Robert Eaglestone (2008) and Aamir Mufti (2007). A particularly noteworthy intervention is Rothberg's monograph *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (2009), which illuminates what he calls the 'multidirectional' orientation of collective memory. Rothberg offers an alternative to the 'competitive memory' model – shared, as he points out, by many proponents and critics of uniqueness – according to which the capacity to remember historical tragedies is limited and any attention to one tragedy inevitably diminishes our capacity to remember another. Against this framework, which understands collective memory as 'a zero-sum struggle over scarce resources', he suggests that we consider memory as multidirectional, that is, 'as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative' (Rothberg, 2009, p. 3). The concept of multidirectional memory 'draw[s] attention to the dynamic transfers that take place between diverse places and times during the act of remembrance' (ibid., p. 11). Rothberg considers memory to be inherently comparative, but he disputes the idea that comparisons between atrocities inevitably erase the differences between them and imply a false equivalence. In focusing on the Holocaust, he seeks to avoid the twin pitfalls of sacralization and trivialization: the tendency, on the one hand, to emphasize the distinctness of the Holocaust to such an extent that it cannot be compared to anything else; and, on the other, to relativize or dilute its memory by homogenizing very different histories.

Rothberg's specific concern is with the mutually enabling relationship between Holocaust memory and memories of the struggle for decolonization. While Levy and Sznajder and Alexander assume that the Holocaust is central in that it allows other histories of victimization to be articulated, Rothberg maintains that the process is not that simple. Multidirectional memory is not 'a one-way street' (ibid., p. 6): just as the Holocaust has enabled the articulation of other histories, so these other histories have helped shape the way we think about the Holocaust and affected the way Holocaust memory has circulated. In other words, the process is dialogical and multidirectional, not monological and unidirectional. The example that clinches this argument in Rothberg's book is that of Holocaust memory in France. He shows that the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62) helped bring about the conditions in which the Holocaust could be publicly remembered. At the time, many intellectuals pointed out that the colonial violence of the French state in Algeria, and particularly the use of torture and detention camps, echoed the methods of the Nazis. Rothberg contends that, along with the Eichmann trial, the protest against contemporary events in Algeria and in Paris helped enable the emergence of public Holocaust memory in France in the early 1960s.

Besides making a theoretical argument against a logic of competitive memory based on the zero-sum game and a historical argument about the inseparability of memories of the Holocaust and colonial violence, Rothberg also puts forward a political argument in *Multidirectional Memory*. He questions the taken-for-granted link between collective memory and group identity – the assumption that a straight line connects, for example, Jewish memory and Jewish identity or African American memory and African American identity in mutual confirmation. Rothberg rejects the idea that the only kinds of memories and identities that are possible are 'ones that exclude elements of alterity and forms of commonality with others' (ibid., pp. 4–5). Memories do not have exclusive owners; they do not naturally belong to any particular group. Rather, the borders of memory and identity are 'jagged' (ibid., p. 5). Going beyond the 'common sense' of identity politics, Rothberg suggests that the productive, intercultural dynamic of multidirectional memory has the potential to create 'new forms of solidarity and new visions of justice' (ibid.). However, he also recognizes that multidirectional memory can function 'in the interest of violence or exclusion instead of solidarity' (ibid., p. 12). This is often the case, for example, with the invocation of the Holocaust in the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict – briefly discussed in the epilogue of his book – which tends to take the form of 'a ritual trading of threats and insults' (ibid., p. 311).

Rothberg returns to the Israeli–Palestinian situation in his article 'From Gaza to Warsaw: Mapping Multidirectional Memory', where he engages with 'some of the more difficult and even troubling cases of multidirectionality' (Rothberg, 2011, p. 524). Even though public memory is structurally multidirectional,



he argues, in the sense of always being marked by ‘transcultural borrowing, exchange, and adaptation’, the politics of multidirectional memory does not therefore come ‘with any guarantees’ (ibid.). Rothberg sets out to develop ‘an ethics of comparison that can distinguish politically productive forms of memory from those that lead to competition, appropriation, or trivialization’ (ibid., p. 525). He maps the different forms that public memory can take in politically charged situations, tracing ‘a four-part distinction in which multidirectional memories are located at the intersection of an *axis of comparison* (defined by a continuum stretching from equation to differentiation) and an *axis of political affect* (defined by a continuum stretching from solidarity to competition – two complex, composite affects)’ (ibid.). Memory discourses that combine differentiation and solidarity offer ‘a greater political potential’, he maintains, than those that rely on equation and competition (ibid., p. 526). He concludes that ‘a radically democratic politics of memory needs to include a differentiated empirical history, moral solidarity with victims of diverse injustices, and an ethics of comparison that coordinates the asymmetrical claims of those victims’ (ibid.). The important point this article makes, more explicitly and elaborately than *Multidirectional Memory* (2009), is that not all forms of multidirectionality are to be celebrated as inherently beneficial and politically progressive; indeed, differentiation/solidarity represents only one quadrant on Rothberg’s map, a useful tool for navigating the murky waters of comparative memory.

To the extent that literary critics have studied texts that connect the Holocaust to other historical tragedies, they have tended to focus on prose works – mostly novels – that put the Nazi genocide in contact with the horrors of slavery or the violence of the decolonization process. One thinks, for example, of the work of the French Jewish writer André Schwarz-Bart and the British Caribbean author Caryl Phillips analysed by Rothberg in *Multidirectional Memory* (2009), the writings of the African American novelist William Gardner Smith discussed by Gilroy in *Between Camps* ([2000] 2004), and the various novels about the Algerian War of Independence studied by Silverman in *Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Fiction and Film* (2013).<sup>7</sup> In the remainder of this chapter, however, I will look at how other kinds of mnemonic connections are made in a different literary genre, exploring the ways in which the Native American writer Sherman Alexie negotiates various comparative perspectives on the Holocaust in his poems ‘The Game between the Jews and the Indians Is Tied Going into the Bottom of the Ninth Inning’ (1993) and ‘Inside Dachau’ (1996). The former is a sonnet-length poem that, as the title suggests, considers Jews and Native Americans as similarly oppressed ethnic minorities; the latter is a long, meditative poem that describes a Native American’s reflections on visiting a Nazi concentration camp. This shift of focus to poetry and to the genocide of the Native Americans is meant to complement the prose- and slavery- or decolonization-centred approaches typically used in

the study of transcultural Holocaust literature. However, the reason why I turn to Alexie's work in particular is primarily didactic: it exemplifies a wide range of possible ways to think the Holocaust and other histories of victimization together and thus allows me to conveniently illustrate several of the theoretical perspectives outlined above.

Before I go on to analyse Alexie's poems in some detail, I would like to briefly contextualize them by pointing out that the use of Holocaust rhetoric in relation to Native American history – which comprises genocidal warfare, land theft, ethnic cleansing, disease and cultural destruction – is hardly uncommon among Native American scholars and artists. Indeed, the devastation and suffering inflicted on the indigenous peoples in North America since the arrival of Columbus in the Caribbean in 1492 is widely thought of as a holocaust in its own right and frequently also called that. Many Native American intellectuals refer to this traumatic history as the 'American Holocaust' or the 'American Indian Holocaust'. Like other minorities in the United States, Native Americans use the Holocaust to articulate and demand recognition for their own people's suffering. It suffices to look at the titles of a number of popular studies of Native American history to see how established this practice is: for example, Russell Thornton's *American Indian Holocaust and Survival: A Population History since 1492* (1987), David Stannard's *American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World* (1992) and Ward Churchill's *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas, 1492 to the Present* (1997). One could also point to a frequently cited article by Lilian Friedberg titled 'Dare to Compare: Americanizing the Holocaust' (2000): unlike Novick, Rosenfeld and Flanzbaum, who invoke the phrase 'Americanization of the Holocaust' to designate the process by which the Nazi genocide of the European Jews has moved to the centre of American culture, Friedberg uses it to express her desire for the United States to finally acknowledge its own traumatic genocidal past – the atrocities experienced by the Native Americans – as another holocaustal history. As Friedberg observes, while the Nazi genocide has achieved mainstream recognition in Germany and around the world, the genocide against the indigenous inhabitants of North America continues to be 'denied or dismissed as the inevitable prelude to the rise of the greatest nation on Earth' (Friedberg, 2000, p. 356).

Artists have been no less hesitant than scholars to draw parallels between the genocide of the Native Americans and the Holocaust. Consider, for example, the documentary *American Holocaust: When It's All Over, I'll Still Be Indian* ([2000] 2005) by Joanelle Romero, which compares the Nazi genocide to the US government's treatment of Native Americans and its lasting effect on their culture today. Romero began putting together the film in 1995 and produced a shortened, 29-minute version of it in 2000, in the evidently vain hope of encouraging new funders so that she could complete what she had originally conceived of as a 90-minute documentary. Romero's film shares its main title with a 1996 album by Georgie



Jessup, a singer-songwriter and activist, which contains ten songs describing the plight of the Native Americans. In the field of literature, the anthology *Eating Fire, Tasting Blood: Breaking the Great Silence of the American Indian Holocaust* (2006) is also noteworthy. Edited by Marijo Moore, it brings together Native writers from many different tribal backgrounds from across the Americas who call attention to their traumatic history and protest 'whitewashed' versions of American history which deny, trivialize or normalize the suffering of the Native Americans.

Alexie's work offers a particularly thoughtful and sophisticated engagement with the question of the comparability of the Nazi genocide which goes beyond a straightforward appropriation of Holocaust rhetoric to validate an occluded history of victimization. A poet, novelist and filmmaker, Alexie, who self-identifies as a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian, has self-reflexively invoked the Nazi Holocaust from the start of his career in relation to Native American history. As Nancy Peterson points out in an insightful article that traces these references throughout his work, Alexie's various explorations of the interconnections between Jewish and Native American historical experiences 'reflect a significant ethical engagement with issues attached to genocidal histories and our use of them' (Peterson, 2010, p. 65).<sup>8</sup>

Included in his poetry collection *First Indian on the Moon* (1993), 'The Game between the Jews and the Indians Is Tied Going into the Bottom of the Ninth Inning' is one of Alexie's earliest poems to contemplate the interrelations between the Holocaust and the genocide of the Native Americans, and can be seen as a programmatic prelude to the more extensive, comprehensive, and elaborate treatment of this theme found in the later poem 'Inside Dachau', from his collection *The Summer of Black Widows* (1996). 'The Game' is a multidirectional postmemorial poem that seeks to move beyond a competitive understanding of the relationship between different historical traumas towards a more dialogical, collaborative and inclusive perspective.<sup>9</sup> The speaker is a Native American who is in a love relationship with the addressee, who is Jewish. He wonders whether their intimate touches will evoke traumatic memories of Native American massacres ('Sand Creek, Wounded Knee') in him and of the Holocaust ('Auschwitz, Buchenwald') in his partner. He answers his own question in the negative, adding that

... we will only think of the past  
as one second before  
where we are now, the future  
just one second ahead. (Alexie, 1993, p. 80)

His reluctance to admit such memories of genocide can be accounted for by a desire to fully inhabit and enjoy the present moment of love without distractions or interruptions. However, as Peterson points out, 'there is also the suggestion that history must be bracketed because the lovers might begin to compare

their histories and to compete for “most victimized” status’ (2010, p. 67). This suggestion is reinforced by the title of the poem, which casts the Jews and the Indians as competing teams in a baseball game that is about to be decided. The game is described as tied, but the eventual outcome can only be a win for one team and a loss for the other. The incongruous and irreverent sports metaphor satirizes the competitive memory model which, it is suggested – baseball being an all-American pastime – the United States imposes on ethnic minorities. Jews and Indians are forced to compete for public visibility and recognition of their respective genocidal histories. Jewish and Native American suffering cannot be remembered together; the collective memory of one group has to win over that of the other, which it inevitably screens out or hides from view. That this pernicious competition is generally seen as having been won convincingly by the Jews is evident in ‘Inside Dachau’; in this poem, however, the memory battle is presented as still undecided. Importantly, though, the speaker of the poem goes on to qualify his blanket refusal to accept the burden of his and his partner’s traumatic historical memories. In the closing lines he raises the suggestion of a possible alternative to memory competition and comparative victimology:

but every once in a while  
we can remind each other  
that we are both survivors and children  
and grandchildren of survivors. (Alexie, 1993, p. 80)

The poem ultimately refuses to play the game of competitive memory and resists its presumed inevitability, gesturing instead towards a multidirectional model in which different historical memories enter into dialogue and mutually inform one another rather than cancelling each other out.

This move from competition to multidirectionality can also be found in the longer and more complex poem ‘Inside Dachau’, Alexie’s most sustained and profound comparative engagement with the Holocaust to date. This seven-part poem shares the thematic focus of the earlier poem, bringing memories of the Nazi genocide and the genocide of the Native Americans into contact. It explores what it means to become a responsible witness to the Holocaust, raising difficult questions about how separate histories of mass suffering and their legacies can be brought together in a productive, mutually illuminating manner. The poem interrogates the appropriateness both of using the Holocaust as a metaphor, as a lens through which to look at other histories, and of treating the Holocaust as a radically unique event, incomparable to other atrocities. While it does not shy away from evoking Native American history through Holocaust allusions, thus analogizing these different historical traumas, it ends by embracing a metonymical logic that sets Jewish and Native American experiences alongside one another, preserving the distance between them.

What prompts these reflections and meditations is a visit to the site of the former Nazi concentration camp in Dachau by the speaker and his partner while on a trip to Germany, which is recounted in the first section of the poem.<sup>10</sup> Opening as early as 1933, Dachau was the first concentration camp established by the Nazis. During the next 12 years, an estimated 200,000 people were imprisoned there – two-thirds of them political prisoners, one-third Jews – of whom some 30,000 died there. Dachau holds an important place in American public memory because it was only the second camp to be liberated on the Western front (the first was Ohrdruf, a subcamp of Buchenwald): it was liberated by the US army on 29 April 1945. As a result, it was also one of the first sites where the full scope of the Nazi horrors was exposed to the Western world, through journalistic reports and newsreels. The speaker of the poem and his partner lie to their German hosts about their plans for the day, telling them that they intend to spend their time ‘searching for rare albums in [nearby] Munich’ (Alexie, 1996, p. 117). It is not entirely clear why the lie is necessary; after all, the German hosts are very open about the Nazi past – they ‘always spoke of the camp / as truthfully as they spoke about the seasons’ – and admit to feeling guilty about it: ‘We are truly ashamed of Dachau’ (ibid., p. 118). As Peterson (2010, p. 73) suggests, a possible explanation is that the speaker’s initial reasons for wanting to visit the camp – to find inspiration for self-centred poetry about the horrors that took place there – are not entirely honourable:

Once there, I had expected to feel simple  
emotions: hate, anger, sorrow. That was my plan.  
I would write poetry about how the season  
of winter found a perfect home in cold Dachau.  
I would be a Jewish man who died in the camp.  
I would be the ideal metaphor. (Alexie, 1996, p. 117)

He abandons this plan to take on the identity and assume the voice of a Jewish inmate who died in the camp after realizing that things are not so ‘simple’ and that his desire for identification is ‘selfish’. Indeed, there is a fundamental gap between his experience and that of the Jewish victims that cannot be bridged by metaphor:

. . . I thought it would all be simple  
but there were no easy answers inside the camp.  
The poems still took their forms, but my earlier plans  
seemed so selfish. What could I say about Dachau  
when I had never suffered through any season  
inside its walls? . . . (Ibid.)

The speaker questions his ability and his right, as an outsider to this history, to imagine himself in the place of a Holocaust victim. The fact that he is a Native American does not make any difference – in fact, his ethnic background is not even known to the reader at this point in the poem. While we, of course, tend to identify the speaker of a poem with the poet, and are even encouraged to do so in this case by the fact that the speaker's companion is, like Alexie's wife, called Diane, it is not actually made explicit that he is a Native American until the fourth part of the poem, which uses the phrase 'we indigenous people' (ibid., p. 119). Until then, the first-person pronouns that are used could refer to any present-day visitor to Dachau, or, at least, any American visitor (as we will see, one of the couple's German hosts refers to the United States as 'your country' (ibid., p. 118)). In any case, the speaker's ethnicity does not give him the right to conflate his own experience with that of a Jewish Holocaust victim. In so doing, he would be appropriating, exploiting and colonizing the Jewish inmate's experience, erasing its difference, ignoring its historical specificity – an arrogant, insensitive, indeed 'selfish' act.

While the first part of the poem thus warns against conflating distinct historical experiences, it also warns against treating them as unique and incomparable. Mikael, one of the German hosts, asks:

... but what about all the Dachaus  
in the United States? What about the death camps  
in your country? (Ibid.)

This question may well be intended to deflect attention from German to US atrocities – presumably the US government's reservation policy and military massacres – in a manner reminiscent of the conservative position in the *Historikerstreit*; however, as Peterson (2010, p. 73) points out, the ethical issues about the comparability of the Holocaust and Native American history that it leads the speaker to confront will preoccupy him for the rest of the poem. Still in part 1, he acknowledges that Mikael's 'simple questions' are 'ignored, season after season' – meaning that the genocide of the Native Americans continues to be denied – and gloomily reflects:

Inside Dachau, you might believe winter will never end. You might  
lose faith in the change of seasons  
because some of the men who built the camps still live in Argentina,  
in Washington, in Munich.  
They live simple lives. They share bread with sons and daughters  
who have come to understand the master plan. (Alexie, 1996, p. 118)

Here, and indeed throughout the rest of the poem, the speaker expresses his fear that winter will never end and that regeneration and renewal will remain

forever elusive. This fear is based on the observation that the ideology of those who constructed the Nazi camps is being passed along to the next generations, both in Germany and elsewhere in the world. The poem's extensive use of highly repetitive poetic forms – such as the sestina in part 1, the villanelle in parts 3 and 7, and the rondel in part 4 – underlines this sense of hopelessness. The repetition compulsion in which the poem appears to be caught on the formal level, with the same rhymes, words, or lines constantly recurring, reflects the speaker's impression that history keeps repeating itself.

He does not acquiesce in this state of affairs, though. The next three sections of the poem go to the root of the problem and examine the role that the memory of the Holocaust can play in perpetuating or confronting the denial – and the resulting continuing perpetration – of other atrocities. In part 2, the speaker notes that by repressing knowledge of atrocities ('we insist / on ignoring the shared fires in our past' (ibid.)), and particularly of our own implication in them ('We attempt to erase our names from the list / that begins and ends with ash' (ibid.)) – like the Germans who claim not to have known about the Holocaust or the Americans who continue to deny what was done to the Native Americans – we ensure that genocides will keep occurring; genocides of which we ourselves may well one day become the victims:

We ignore the war until we are the last  
standing, until we are the last to persist  
in denial, as we are shipped off to camps  
where we all are stripped, and our dark bodies lit  
by the cruel light of those antique Jew-skinned lamps. (Ibid.)

The speaker is warning us here of what will happen if we persist in white-washing our own history; if we stop denying, perhaps we have a chance to escape this fate. Both the problem and the solution are captured by the title of part 2, 'history as the home movie'. If we treat history like a home movie, and edit out or fail to record unhappy memories, that means we refuse to confront the dark chapters of our past. These chapters should be made part of our family history, it is suggested, in the sense that we should become as intimately familiar with them as we are with the kinds of events home movies typically record. The title can also be seen to problematize our tendency to narrow history down to our personal history and to ignore the suffering of others.

In part 3, the speaker wonders whether visiting a memorial site such as Dachau can stimulate remembrance and critical reflection. He scrutinizes people's motivations for visiting Dachau, repeatedly asking (using a generic 'we'),

Why are we here? What have we come to see?  
What do we need to find behind the doors? (Ibid., p. 119)

A possible answer that is offered is that we may be looking for an apology from the perpetrators, bystanders or negationists of the Holocaust. However, it is suggested that that expectation does not suffice and is unsatisfactory. After all, it could be a way of letting ourselves off the hook, of shirking our responsibility to confront our own dark past, which part 2 emphasized. The speaker suddenly adds the question, 'What have we come to see / that cannot be seen in other countries?' and recognizes that 'Every country hides behind a white door' (ibid.). The implication is that visiting sites of trauma in other countries may be a way for people to avoid dealing with disturbing aspects of their own past. The speaker thus criticizes the use of the Holocaust as a screen memory for more discomfoting memories of events closer to home. As Friedberg points out:

In the pathological dynamic of genocidal histories, the perpetrator culture invariably turns its gaze to the horrors registered in the archives and accounts of the 'other guys.' This is why Holocaust studies in the United States focus almost exclusively on the atrocity of Auschwitz, not of Wounded Knee or Sand Creek. (2000, p. 354)

From an American perspective, Dachau is an even more appropriate choice for a screen memory than Auschwitz, as the former was liberated by the Americans, the latter by the Soviets. Hence, visiting Dachau offers Americans an opportunity to see themselves in a heroic, wholly positive light.

However, as part 4 makes clear, it can also have the effect of making the visitor more rather than less aware of the shameful history of their own country and bringing him or her face to face with its continued denial. Provocatively titled 'the american indian holocaust museum', this section of the poem, in which the speaker for the first time explicitly identifies himself as a Native American, circles around three repeated lines:

What do we indigenous people want from our country?  
We stand over mass graves. Our collective grief makes us numb.  
We are waiting for the construction of our museum. (Alexie, 1996, p. 119)

Part 4 stresses the parallels between Jewish and Native American history. The images of mass graves and, in the next stanza, shoes of the dead that could 'fill a city / to its thirteenth floor' (ibid.) apply to both the Holocaust and the genocide of the Native Americans, and Jews and Native Americans today also share a profound sense of 'collective grief'. However, while Jewish losses are widely acknowledged and publicly commemorated nowadays – for example, through the transformation of Nazi camps into memorial sites and through the foundation, in 1993, of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC – those suffered by the Native Americans are still officially unrecognized and not taken



seriously, as is apparent from the absence of a high-profile museum dedicated to the memory of the victims of colonialism in the United States. The speaker exposes this asymmetry and calls for the establishment of a museum devoted to what the title of this section refers to as the 'american indian holocaust', which could serve the same purpose as the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in making the devastations of Native American history publicly visible.<sup>11</sup>

As Peterson points out, if 'Inside Dachau' had ended here, 'it could be read as primarily interested in developing a comparative suffering framework' to advance the Native American cause, with the Holocaust being used to highlight and demand recognition for the tragic history of indigenous people in the United States (2010, p. 74). However, the poem continues and, in the last few sections, moves towards a more multidirectional understanding of collective memory. This becomes particularly clear in part 6, which juxtaposes Jewish and Native histories both formally and thematically. In fact, this section of the poem can be seen to resume the critique of metaphor that began in part 1 by developing a way of connecting Jewish and Native American experiences without equating them. It is made up of a series of couplets in which the speaker imagines himself to be Jewish in the first line and speaks of being Spokane in the next. The opening stanza, for example, runs as follows:

If I were Jewish, how would I mourn the dead?  
I am Spokane. I wake. (Alexie, 1996, p. 121)

Each couplet asks a question in the first line, about how a Jewish person would do certain things, and makes a statement in the next, about the speaker being Spokane and therefore acting somewhat differently. As Peterson notes, 'the overall effect' of this structure 'is to locate provocative points of difference and connection' (2010, p. 75). In the first couplet, for example, the speaker establishes a link between different mourning practices – sitting shiva in the Jewish tradition and holding a wake in the Native American one – but refrains from collapsing them into one another. The assumption of easy comparability that underlay the speaker's initial plan for the poem – in which he would be an 'ideal metaphor' for the experience of a Jewish inmate of Dachau – and the whiff of memory competition that hung over part 4 of the poem have given way to an open-ended exploration of points of cross-cultural contact and areas of overlap between Jewish and Native American identities which respectfully acknowledges the gulf that separates the two.

The concluding section of 'Inside Dachau' holds on to the insights gained in the previous section, with the speaker recognizing the limits of his understanding:

I am not a Jew. I was just a guest  
in that theater which will never close. (Alexie, 1996, p. 22)

As the latter line suggests, the poem does not end happily. The speaker predicts that atrocious events will keep on happening:

I wonder which people will light fires next  
and which people will soon be turned to smoke. (Ibid., p. 122)

While his reflections lead to a disillusioned perspective, the poem as a whole is not entirely fatalistic. A measure of hope can be found in the agency of the text itself, which performs the very process of cross-cultural mourning whose absence it laments, and which in so doing seeks to transform the reader into an agent of such mourning. As Laura Leibman argues, 'Alexie uses the sequence about visiting Dachau to forge a new identity for the mourner and a new mourning process – one that is active. Through this transformation of readers into agents in mourning, the poet seeks to bring about change' (Leibman, 2005, p. 557). As a textual memorial, Alexie's poem hopes to trigger a form of reflection in its readers in the same way Dachau triggered reflection in the speaker. The invitation it extends to the reader to engage in constructive memory work – by bearing witness to the horrors of the Holocaust, acknowledging the historical traumas of the Native Americans, and recognizing the continuing recurrence of genocide – is the poem's modest but valuable attempt to act upon the world in such a way as to help prevent or reduce further violence. Like 'The Game', 'Inside Dachau' thus exemplifies not only the dangers involved in, but also the benefits potentially brought by, adopting a comparative perspective on the Holocaust. As such, it is in line with recent research in the field of comparative memory studies, which is suspicious and critical of overly celebratory accounts of the increasingly transnational circulation of Holocaust memory, but not to the point of altogether abandoning the notion that something positive can come out of it.

## Notes

1. For a more detailed study of these two developments, from which this account is drawn, see Craps (2013, chapter 6).
2. For incisive critiques of Levy and Sznajder's and Alexander's arguments, see A. Assmann (2010), A. Assmann and Conrad (2010), Moses (2011), Poole (2010), and the various responses to Alexander's essay included in Alexander et al.'s *Remembering the Holocaust: A Debate* (2009).
3. It can be argued that the enormous amount of attention paid to the Holocaust and the extraordinary importance attached to this event serve to blind Americans and Europeans to certain unpalatable aspects of their own history: the genocide of the Native Americans, slavery and segregation, nuclear warfare and the Vietnam War in the case of the United States; colonial history and collaboration with the Nazis in the case of various European countries. Remembering the Holocaust, so the argument goes, allows these nations to evade these awkward episodes from their own past.

4. See, for example, Neil Levi's (2007) analysis of how, in the Australian context, explicit comparisons of the fate of the Aborigines after settlement with that of the Jews during the Holocaust lead to disavowal or partial remembrance of a traumatic local history.
5. The *Historikerstreit* or Historians' Debate was a controversy over the interpretation of the Holocaust between left-wing and right-wing intellectuals in West Germany. Some conservative historians, led by Ernst Nolte, compared the Holocaust to the crimes of Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union and to Germany's own losses (the mass expulsions of ethnic Germans from Czechoslovakia and Poland at the end of the Second World War) in order to diminish the importance of the Holocaust and to overcome the singularity of German responsibility for it. Progressive intellectuals, most prominently the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, insisted on the uniqueness of the Holocaust as a defence against this relativistic position, which sought to minimize Nazi crimes.
6. See, for example, Churchill (1997), Stannard (1992), Novick (1999) and Finkelstein and Birn (1998).
7. For additional discussions of prose fiction that connects the Holocaust to other histories of victimization, see Cheyette (2000); Craps (2013, chapters 7 and 8); Craps and Buelens (2011); Mufti (2007); Rothberg et al., eds (2010).
8. For a fine analysis of issues of mourning in Alexie's work, which also devotes considerable attention to 'Inside Dachau', see Leibman (2005).
9. The term 'postmemorial' derives from Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, which she coined, in her book *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (1997), to describe the relationship that children of Holocaust survivors have with their parents' traumatic experiences. More recently, though, Hirsch has expressed her hope that the notion of postmemory can provide 'a useful framework' for 'connective approaches' such as that developed by Rothberg: 'I am interested in exploring affiliative structures of memory beyond the family, and I see this connective memory work as another form of affiliation across lines of difference' (Hirsch, 2012, p. 21). Alexie's poem can be seen to anticipate this intertwining of the multidirectional and the postmemorial.
10. An amateur YouTube video made by an American tourist which combines his personal home video footage of his visit to Dachau with archival images of the same sites gives one a sense of what it is like to visit Dachau today and of what the place looked like in the 1940s (Peppels, 2007).
11. It should be pointed out that the National Museum of the American Indian opened on the Mall in Washington, DC, in 2004, eight years after Alexie published 'Inside Dachau'. However, this museum does not function as the 'american indian holocaust museum' which the poem calls for: rather than documenting genocide, it celebrates the rich history and culture of indigenous peoples throughout the Americas.

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