

THINKING THROUGH THE HOLOCAUST

A Discussion inspired by Hilene Flanzbaum ed. *The Americanization of the Holocaust* Baltimore, Johns Hopkins 1999

As Hilene Flanzbaum indicates in her important collection of papers, the term ‘the Americanization of the Holocaust’, which she uses as her title, is not original. She identifies two earlier usages. Lawrence Langer, the trenchant discussor of Holocaust literature and testimony, was perhaps the first to use the term as long ago as 1983, in a piece entitled ‘The Americanization of the Holocaust on Stage and Screen’ in Sarah Blacher Cohen’s book, *From Hester Street to Hollywood*.ⁱ The other use identified by Flanzbaum is by Alvin Rosenfeld in 1995 who, as Flanzbaum notes, employs it to indicate how the Holocaust is being degraded by American popular culture. In the same year that Flanzbaum’s collection was published, 1999, Peter Novick published *The Holocaust in American Life*. Novick argues that the American preoccupation with the Holocaust in the 1980s and 1990s has to do with the establishment of a secular American Jewish group identity and, as Novick puts it, ‘not just a competition for recognition but a competition for primacy’ within what he describes as a ‘victim culture’.ⁱⁱ I do not want to comment on Novick’s argument here, but rather make the point that, taken together, his book, Flanzbaum’s collection, and the articles to which she refers, mark a significant, if not crucial, moment in the American, and the more general ‘Western’, understanding of the Holocaust. What these various works signify is the beginning of an interrogation of the meaning of the Holocaust in American culture.

This development is momentous in its own right. However, it opens the way for the next step, the beginning of a discussion of the meaning of the ‘Holocaust’ itself as a key myth in the formation of the ‘Western’ postmodern experience. In my use of myth here I must emphasise, as does Tim Cole in his book *Images of the Holocaust: The Myths of the ‘Shoah Business’*, that I am not a Holocaust denier. Rather, identifying the Holocaust as a myth, in the semiotic sense of the term, enables us to ask how, and why, the destruction of around six million Jews has been identified as the—not ‘a’—Holocaust, with a capitalised ‘H,’ and what this has come to mean.

The relationship of the Holocaust, as a naturalised and, indeed reified, event, to the claim that we now live in a postmodern world is complicated. Dominick LaCapra

criticises Jean-Francois Lyotard's argument in *Heidegger and "the jews"*ⁱⁱⁱ for troping 'away from specificity and evacuat[ing] history by construing the caesura of the Holocaust as a total trauma that is un(re)presentable and reduces everyone (victims, witnesses, perpetrators, revisionists, those born later) to an ultimately homogenizing yet sublime silence.'^{iv} LaCapra argues that, for Lyotard, 'Christians (even Jews) are at best merely modern whereas "jews" are postmodern.'^v The "'jews,'" an abstracted cultural construction, become the carrier of the qualities of the postmodern as a consequence of the term's relationship to the Holocaust. At the core of this argument is the debate over the representability of the Holocaust, something to which I shall return later. For LaCapra, the problem with Lyotard's argument is that it elides the actual, historical Jews who, of course, still exist. LaCapra's point is a good one, nevertheless, once we appreciate the discursivity of the 'Holocaust' itself we can also recognise how the claim to the un(re)presentability of the Holocaust as itself a construction, a way of thinking about the murder of six million Jews, marks an originary site of the postmodern experience.

The 'Holocaust' has not always been as prominent in popular consciousness as it is now. During the 1950s not only was there little acknowledgement in American culture of the destruction of Eastern European, and much of Western European, Jewry, as is discussed in the chapters by Flanzbaum, Shandler, and Greenspan, in *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, but there was also no generally accepted collective term to describe what had taken place. To take just one example, when the American author, Norman Mailer, published 'The White Negro' in 1957, he began by writing: 'Probably, we will never be able to determine the psychic havoc of the concentration camps and the atom bomb upon the unconscious mind of almost everyone alive in those years.'^{vi} Mailer's 'White Negro' was the (white) hipster but at least some of his description is applicable to the Jew who, in 1950s America, was rapidly being identified as 'white'.^{vii} Mailer most likely did not know that the term had been applied to Jews in Germany in the 1860s.^{viii} In Mailer's work, the Jew, and his own Jewishness, is written out. Yet, the very term 'white Negro' echoes the ambivalent position of Jews in American culture – in today's American multicultural terms either a group within the 'white' race, and therefore an ethnic group, or racially different from the dominant 'white' race. This positioning has led to Jews often mediating African American culture to a 'white' audience with widely varying consequences – from blackface to The Beastie

Boys' appropriation, or reworking depending on how you look at it, of rap.^{ix} At the same time Jews developed close alliances with African Americans and were, for example, prominent in the Civil Rights movement.^x

Much of 'The White Negro' can be read as a meditation on how Jews might experience life with their knowledge of what has come to be called the Holocaust; how Jews might live in modern nation-states knowing that, with the institutional apparatus of the nation-state, the dominant group can instigate the extermination of a people excluded from that state. However, Mailer displaces his discussion from the Jews, and, in a characteristically modern Jewish move – a move which has been typical of the Jewish attempt to be seen as members of a common humanity – universalises his argument.^{xi} He writes about the hipster that he is, 'the man who knows that if our collective condition is to live with instant death ... then the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to live with death as immediate danger.'^{xii} Here, a version of existentialism is being advocated as the answer to dealing with the knowledge of the possibility of extermination.

The term 'concentration camps' does not carry the power of 'the Holocaust.' It suggests a diffuseness, and does not indicate destruction, let alone murder on a scale beyond anything that modern, or for that matter pre-modern, Europe had ever known. Moreover, 'concentration camps' carries no moral overtones such as those that have become implicit in the use of 'Holocaust'. 'Concentration camps' suggests something practical. In my own experience, being a teenager during the 1960s in England and having been told that I had had relatives murdered in 'the camps,' I thought more of the terrible things that went on in those places rather than of the whole process as an organised assault on an entire people – something much more abstract.^{xiii}

The official, public beginnings of the understanding of what happened to European Jewry as genocide can be recognised first in Israel. In 1950 Israel passed its Law against Genocide, but the public recognition of the massive destruction of European Jewry had to wait until 1959 when Israel officially decreed public observance of 'Holocaust and Ghetto Rebellion Memorial Day.' Cole, who describes this history, connects it with the abduction, and the 1961 trial, of Adolf Eichmann as part of a growing recognition in Israel of the political need to acknowledge the decimation of European Jewry.^{xiv} Cole notes that, in the founding legislation for Yad Vashem, the Israeli

memorial to the dead established in 1953, the greatest emphasis was on Jewish heroism.^{xv} Briefly tracing the history of the usage of 'Holocaust', Paul Brienes asserts that: 'Not until the late 1950s ... was the word introduced by the Israeli Yad Vashem memorial institution, only slowly entering the American vocabulary during the next several years'.^{xvi}

In the United States, the history of the acknowledgement of the extermination of the Jews has a different ideological evolution. In 1947, the mayor of New York, William O'Dwyer, set aside an area of Riverside Park for a memorial. At the site a plaque was placed which reads: 'This is the site for the American memorial to the Heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto Battle, April-June 1943, and to the six million Jews of Europe martyred in the cause of human liberty.' This memorial was not thought of directly in terms of genocide but, rather, in connection with absolutely massive – but, possibly, not thought to be unimaginable – loss of life. After all, the loss of life in the USSR during the Second World War, is also calculated at over six million people, while Germany lost over three million.^{xvii} In the plaque's rhetoric what makes the loss of six million Jewish lives special enough to justify this memorial is what Robert Young describes as a 'characteristically American emphasis,'^{xviii} that these Jews died as martyrs (Christian notion of sacrifice) to human liberty (a great Enlightenment cause, that is individual freedom). Put like this, it seems a big stretch to think that the people who were massacred by the Nazis for their racial attribution could be claimed by this American ideology.

Langer, in his 1983 discussion of American plays about the Holocaust, argues that:

'There is no final solace, no redeeming truth, no hope that so many millions may not have died in vain. They have. But the American vision of the Holocaust, in the works under consideration here, continues to insist that they have not, trying to parley hope, sacrifice, justice, and the future into a victory that will mitigate despair.'^{xix}

The hope, sacrifice and justice that Langer identified in the plays that he was examining are an expansion of the moral aspects that Young imputes to the Riverside Drive plaque. What Young has identified in the inscription on the plaque laid in 1947, an early version of the Americanization of what was not yet identified as the Holocaust, Langer views as a

much more pervasive, and typical, Americanization. The reidentification of the 'concentration camps' as the 'Holocaust', a more unifying and abstracting term, made its association with an American Enlightenment moralization easier. Novick argues that this moralization has a social importance today: 'As, over the past generation, ethical and ideological divergence and disarray in the United States advanced to the point where Americans could agree on nothing else, all could join together in deploring the Holocaust – a low moral consensus, but perhaps better than none at all.'^{xx} The Holocaust, then, is not only the cultural marker for a 'Western' postmodernity, signalling the failure of the Enlightenment belief in Reason, it also serves as the last modern moral absolute, the last guarantor of Right and Wrong, Good and Evil, otherwise lost to the relativizing that characterises the postmodern experience. In Christian America, this Jewish event now serves as the lowest common moral denominator.

In the United States, the general acceptance of the idea of the Holocaust appears to have taken place in the latter part of the 1960s. Brienes argues that it happened after the Six Day War of 1967. He writes:

'It was only after the June 1967 war that we see the proliferation of scholarly studies, films, courses, lectures, conferences, tough Jewish pulp fiction, and intense popular discussion. Among American Jews, Israel's victory in June 1967 expanded and escalated what had previously been a limited relationship to the Holocaust.'^{xxi}

Brienes argues that, after that war, American Jews began to see the Holocaust as part of a binary with Israel in which the claimed weakness and passivity of the Jews massacred in the Holocaust was opposed by the claimed strength and assertiveness of Israeli Jews, something thought to be demonstrated by the Israeli success in the Six Day War. This process was facilitated by the taking up of 'Holocaust' as a way of identifying what had happened. Novick's argument is rather more complex. He suggests that, in the 1950s, it was politically disadvantageous for Americans to acknowledge the Holocaust as, with the beginnings of the Cold War, the United States had to establish an image of Germany as a friendly nation and demonize the USSR. However, in the 1970s, 'American Jews' anxiety about Israel's security, and their viewing Israel's situation within a Holocaust framework, was the single greatest catalyst of the centering of the Holocaust in American Jewish consciousness.'^{xxii} Novick goes on to argue that it was the Jews themselves who

worked to get the Holocaust accepted as a part of what he calls ‘general American consciousness.’^{xxiii} What was it, though, that made American culture so receptive to the Holocaust? A part of the answer, as we have already noted Novick discussing, was the experienced need for some common moral agreement. To this, we can add that what made this need imperative is that the loss of a common morality was taking place in a society that did not think of itself as being founded on a common culture but, rather a common moral order.^{xxiv} In the context of this need, the moralization of the experience of African Americans, of the Middle Passage and slavery, would have been too politically fraught. Further, Israel was already reestablishing the Holocaust/Shoah as a moral touchstone.

One important aspect of the use of the term ‘Holocaust’ has been to provide Jews and Gentiles alike not only with a sense of the massiveness of the destruction but with a way of thinking the practice of a genocide. ‘Holocaust’ began to come into general use more broadly in the ‘West’ during the 1970s. Personally, not having grown up with it in England, I am still a little uneasy using it, in the same way that one is with a new word one has learnt in a language not one’s own. I don’t feel confident that I know its full meaning.^{xxv}

Hannah Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, first published in 1963, and in which ‘Holocaust’ is not used, notes that, even during Eichmann’s trial, ‘None of the participants ever arrived at a clear understanding of the actual horror of Auschwitz, which is of a different nature from all the atrocities of the past, because it appeared to prosecution and judges alike as not much more than the most horrible pogrom in Jewish history.’^{xxvi} The naturalisation of the term ‘Holocaust’ played a major part in transforming this understanding in the ‘West,’ for one thing, it offered a new collective term to describe the murderous events which covered many countries, thousands of large and small communities, and almost ten years. Arendt’s book and the articles on which it is based, which had appeared in *The New Yorker*, were an important factor in the growing public awareness in the United States of the deliberate extermination of European Jewry. Jeffrey Shandler, in his chapter entitled ‘Aliens in the Wasteland: American Encounters with the Holocaust on 1960s Science Fiction Television’ in the Flanzbaum collection, and in his book *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust*^{xxvii}, details the emphasis on concentration camps in the early images of what we now call the Holocaust on American television. For example, the television play, *Walk Down the Hill*, which aired on 18th

March 1957, describes the process through which an American POW in a prisoner-of-war camp ends by acknowledging his Jewish background and walking down the hill to a concentration camp.^{xxviii}

In the United States, the landmark year for the public acceptance of the Holocaust, and the connotations of this term, as part of American culture was 1978. Novick notes that; ‘Since the 1970s, the Holocaust has come to be presented—come to be thought of—as not just a Jewish memory but an American memory.’^{xxix} Henry Greenspan in his chapter in the Flanzbaum collection, ‘Imagining the Survivors’, identifies 1978 not only because it was the year that NBC showed the mini-series *The Holocaust* but because it was also the year that Jimmy Carter established the presidential commission that would oversee the creation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum which was finally opened in 1993. Taken together, these events also mark the final transition in American representation from concentration camps and pogrom thinking to the Holocaust and genocide thinking.

Greenspan’s chapter is subtitled ‘Testimony and the Rise of Holocaust Consciousness’ and he describes the shift from the 1950s silencing of survivors to the present-day ‘collection and distribution [of survivor testimony]—in the greatest possible quantity, through the most contemporary possible means—[which has] become a modern crusade’.^{xxx} ‘Survivor testimony’ has become the bulwark of claims for the ‘Truthful’ presentation of the Holocaust against the arguments that the Holocaust is, in essence, unrepresentable. Thus, in the naïve formulation, survivor testimony presents ‘what actually happened’ whereas all other forms of representation are insufficient at best. In some formulations survivor testimony is not representation precisely because it is the witnessing of survivors. Langer, who is concerned with memory rather than representation – not that one can discuss memory in modernity without even implicitly discussing representation – argues that:

‘The raw material of oral Holocaust narratives, in content and manner of presentation, resists the organizing impulse of moral theory and art. ... A kind of unshielded truth emerges from them, through which we salvage an anatomy of melancholy for the modern spirit – part of our anguish and our fate.’^{xxxi}

We should note here that survivor testimony is, by its nature, not about the Holocaust as this has come to be constructed but about the experience of an individual. It is the

Holocaust as a genocidal event that is understood to be unrepresentable. Greenspan's description of the collection of survivor testimony 'in the greatest possible quantity' suggests not only the recognition among archivists that those who lived through the genocide are reaching the ends of their lifespans but also that there is something obsessive about this collecting, as if it might be possible finally to collect so much testimony that it somehow comes actually to (re)present what has been constructed as unrepresentable, the Holocaust.

Greenspan also notes the terminological shift in the United States from 'refugees' to 'survivors'. He argues that it was this shift that enabled those newly designated as survivors to speak. In Australia, where many people from the camps were given entry as part of the post-war build-up of the population, the term used was 'Displaced Person' often abbreviated in day-to-day conversation to 'D.P.'. The effect was the same as in the United States, the euphemistic identification helped to silence the new arrivals. At the same time, many survivors didn't want to speak about their experiences and a kind of mutual silencing took place. As an Australian historian friend of mine put it in the form of a personal reminiscence in an email to me: 'I have quite strong memories from childhood of people who had "secrets," parts of their lives that were not talked about because of great hurt and pain – and the parents of friends who had numbers on their arms and who actively constructed barriers against talking about them and what lay behind and around them.' The general change in term to survivor has both licensed these people to speak about their ordeal and allocated them another role, as witnesses to the experience of genocide.

When the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum was opened in Washington in 1993 it 'brought in 20,000 visitors in the first week, 70,000 in the first month and around two million in the first year'.^{xxxii} Cole notes that only the United States Air and Space Museum, the largest museum in the world, gets more visitors. The conflation of memorial and museum suggests the confusion, or perhaps postmodern convergence, of purpose of this and similar institutions. They commemorate the Holocaust by both informing and acting as a site of remembrance. But, as James Young, the foremost writer on Holocaust memorials, explains in his chapter: 'American memorials seem to be anchored not so much in history as in the ideals that generated them in the first place'.^{xxxiii} This tells us something important about the Americanization of the

Holocaust, that in the United States, the Holocaust is thought of firstly ideologically, as the pretext, in fact, for a moral statement.

The number of visitors exemplifies the place that the Holocaust, as a given, occupies now in American culture. What this place is, is much more difficult to discern. Following a similar train of thought to Novick's, Young describes how African Americans, Jewish Americans and Native Americans began to express their respective senses of group ethnic identity in the 1960s by way of an emphasis on each group's mass suffering and trauma: enslavement and the Middle Passage, the Holocaust, displacement and destruction. Young notes that: 'America was becoming a culture of competing catastrophes'.^{xxxiv}

Much of the remainder of the Flanzbaum collection, as with the chapter entitled 'Shoah' in Whitfield's *In Search of American Jewish Culture*, published in 1998, discusses the variety of representations of the Holocaust in American culture. Amy Hungerford, for example, considers the problem of the very representability of the Holocaust. Those unfamiliar with the debates over the (re)presentation of the Holocaust may find this idea surprising. After all, conventional semiotic-inspired wisdom is that everything is, of necessity, representable as a function of its circulation in a system of meaning. Saul Friedlander who is the most prominent promoter of the position that the Holocaust is unrepresentable has edited a book entitled *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution*^{xxxv}. He argues that: 'What turns the "Final Solution" into an event at the limits [of representation] is the very fact that it is the most radical form of genocide encountered in history: the wilful, systematic, industrially organized, largely successful attempt totally to exterminate an entire human group within twentieth-century Western society'.^{xxxvi} Here, history starts with the twentieth century and is limited to 'Western' society.

There are extremely important questions elided in such a definition, such as the connection between the concept of genocide, first identified, or at least named, towards the end of the Second World War, and modernity. Raphael Lemkin is credited with introducing the term genocide in a book he published in 1944 entitled *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*^{xxxvii}. The purpose of the book was to think through the legal implications of the German occupation of Europe. Lemkin describes the word 'genocide' as denoting 'an old practice in its modern development.'^{xxxviii} The modern aspect, for

Lemkin, was that what was singled out for destruction was the ‘nation’ in all its forms, from political and social institutions, language, culture, to the group of people who make up the nation. Lemkin writes that: ‘Genocide is directed against the national group as an entity, and the actions involved are directed against individuals, not in their individual capacity, but as members of the national group.’^{xxxix} The point here is an extremely important one. Crucially, what was new about the action which Lemkin is describing as genocide is that it depends on a conceptualisation of a group of people, and all the social and cultural things associated with that group, as a totality. The conceptual connector between genocide and modernity is not, as it might first appear to be, the discourse of race. Race aids the practice of genocide by helping to delineate a particular group. Rather, the link is the more fundamental understanding of groupness, that individual human beings, for example, can be thought of as identifiable as members of a limited and distinguishable group, and that this group is, in some fundamental way, different from ‘us’, whoever ‘us’ may be – this ‘us’ is, to some extent at least, defined by the group we construct as excluded. It was the modern, discursive production of Otherness that made genocide a meaningful possibility.^{xl}

Friedlander’s argument contains a strong moral component. Implicit is the fear that representation, or at least some representations, will banalise the Holocaust. The connection between the horror of such mass murder and banality had been made earlier by Arendt who, along with others, including his captors, had been shocked by the very averageness of Eichmann. She subtitled her book, *A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Here we touch on another aspect of the problem, the aesthetics of the understanding of the Holocaust. If the Holocaust is special, somehow beyond imagining, and beyond representability, then it can be thought of as sublime. To understand evil as banal, as everyday, suggests that the possibility of the Holocaust – of the fantasy that is given form by the discourse of the Holocaust – is implicit in the formation of modernity, more specifically, in the very form of the modern nation-state.

Friedlander also makes a connection with the characteristically postmodern problematisation of representation: ‘postmodern thought’s rejection of the possibility of identifying some stable reality or truth beyond the constant polysemy and self-referentiality of linguistic constructs challenges the need to establish the realities and truths of the Holocaust; conversely, the very openness of postmodernism to what cannot yet be formulated in decisive statements, but merely sensed, directly relates to whoever

considers that even the most precise historical renditions of the Shoah contain an opaqueness at the core which confronts traditional historical narrative'.^{xli} In this formulation Friedlander concentrates on the particular form of theoretical thinking that has come to be identified as postmodern. The claim that the Holocaust is unrepresentable is based on a long-standing position that what happened lies beyond the power of language to provide an adequate description. George Steiner has argued that, in Christian thought, 'the God-concept ... seems to transcend the capacities of language either to define or to analogize truthfully the object of conceptualization and expression'^{xlii} and goes on to suggest that: 'The problem as to whether there is a human form of language adequate to the conceptualization and understanding of Auschwitz, as to whether the limits of language do not fall short of the limits of the Shoah-experience, is now ineradicably installed in Jewish existence.'^{xliii} While this is so, perhaps what is more important is that the idea that there are limits to the representational capacity of language has been secularised and is now generalised beyond Christian and Judaic thought to being a foundational understanding of post-Holocaust life in the 'West,' in, indeed, the postmodern world.

Friedlander goes on, with a greater cultural emphasis, to suggest that the Final Solution itself has called into question 'the validity of any totalising view of history'. We can take this line of thinking further. The discursive identification of the deliberate murder of around six million Jews as genocide, as more specifically the Holocaust, evolved a crisis within modernity. It fundamentally unsettled ameliorist thinking that privileged such terms as progress and development and evinced a moral crisis in the celebration of increasing rationalisation—a point made well by Zygmunt Bauman in *Modernity and the Holocaust*.^{xliv} When, as is often said in everyday conversation, it is claimed that the Holocaust is unthinkable, a statement is being made not about the limits of representation so much as about the limits of thought in the (post)modern world, about, we might say, the limits of discourse at the present time.

In this sense it is the invention of the Holocaust that allows us to think of the crisis of modernity as a crisis of representation *within* modernity, and within the 'West' described by that modernity, a crisis that is characteristic of what has come to be called the postmodern. Here, what is crucial is that 'the Jews', a complicated constructed category, as we have already noticed with Lyotard's notion of the "jews", and one in which I want to emphasise the presence of actual people, were both a part of the 'West',

and implicated in the elaboration and practice of modernity, and Othered by the 'West'. Thus, there is a special quality to the destruction of European Jewry that does not pertain to the earlier Turkish decimation of the Armenians or to, for example, the more recent genocidal attacks by the Hutus on the Tutsis in Rwanda.^{xlv} This quality is a consequence of the very Europeaness of the Holocaust, that it took place *within* the geographical limits of modernity, rather than in areas colonised for modernity. It is within this context that the work of Art Spiegelman, the *Maus* comic books, needs to be discussed. Hungerford asks why Spiegelman populates his books with 'fantastical animal-persons' and yet he categorises the books as non-fiction. Her answer bears precisely on the relationship between the Holocaust, representation and the superseding of modernity's certainties. She writes that, 'in *Maus* Spiegelman aims at a literal truth that photographs or realistic drawings would fail to convey: the truth that not only Jewish identity but all identities arise from the Holocaust and, more specifically, from telling Holocaust stories, for it is Holocaust-centred identity that the animal heads made visible, make literal, and it is telling Holocaust stories that makes the heads themselves "REAL".^{xlvi} This does need some relativising. All identities in the 'West', in 'Western' (post)modernity are now imbricated with the Holocaust. The Holocaust, as itself a discursively constituted event, founds the unrepresentable site for the always provisional representations of the postmodern 'real', itself a provisional claim. Of course, this does not mean that people don't represent the event(s) that go(es) to make up what is called the Holocaust. Rather, it means that, on a discursive level, the meanings that are caught up in the term are ultimately unrepresentable precisely because the Holocaust has come to mark the limit, conceptually and historically, of modern representability.

The representations of the Holocaust that do occur in American culture, and there are many, take place within a negotiation between predominantly the dominant, Anglo-American culture and Jewish, especially *Yiddishkeit*-inflected Jewish, culture as it has been transformed within the United States. Indeed, one strand in the naturalisation of Holocaust representation in America has been the post-Second World War Yiddishisation of American culture.^{xlvii}

In her chapter in the Flanzbaum collection, Joyce Antler sketches the developing expression of the Holocaust in American theatre over the post-war period. She concludes that, 'the new "Americanized" Holocaust plays limit Holocaust representation by portraying its effects within the framework of family drama'^{xlviii}, a point which, as Antler

acknowledges, needs to be understood in relation to the experience of the trauma of the Holocaust by the children of survivors, for these are the people who, in the main, are now writing these plays. This does, though, bring us to another problem, how to define 'survivor'. There is a tremendous investment in this term now, a determination for reasons that cannot be gone into here to limit the meaning to those who were actually in the camps. However, I want to argue for a much broader definition of the term. In one sense, all Jews born in the 'West' after the Second World War are survivors and, indeed, in a rather different sense—and without wanting to diminish the trauma within the families of those who actually survived the camps—if we follow the logic of Hungerford's argument, and I for one agree with her, then we are all, Jew and Gentile, the survivors of the Holocaust. One small, everyday, demonstration of this comes in the email quotation that I used earlier from a historian who describes, as a child, meeting people with mysterious, traumatic, and yet 'silent' pasts in the period after the Second World War. We must, therefore, recognise different kinds of survivors – or, better, different ways that we, in the 'West' are all implicated in the Holocaust and shaped by what the 'Holocaust' has come to mean.

Antler starts her chapter with a brief account of the American theatrical production of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. She describes how the play 'link[ed] the Holocaust directly to the American psyche'.^{xlix} The play that was finally put on in October 1955 was actually the second script to be written from the book of Anne Frank's diary, published in English in 1952. For it to reach the stage, the Jewishness of the text had had to be, to point up an irony, eliminated. Indeed, Cole writes: 'By effectively separating the diary from its Holocaust context, it was possible to create a play and a film with a happy ending'.¹ The separation universalised the message of the play and the film, and allowed for them to work within a very American understanding of suffering, power, and intolerance of what today is problematically referred to as 'Human Rights'. Cole notes that 'Anne [Frank] became the patron saint of liberalism'.^{li}

The play of Anne Frank's diary was written and staged well before the extermination of six million Jews became known and understood through its designation as the Holocaust, and well before the post-1970s American emphasis on ethnic specificity. Antler ends her chapter by concurring with the message of Cynthia Ozick's *Blue Light* that 'historical memory may be a prophylaxis against the failure of imagination, courage, and human connection; remembering becomes both a moral

obligation and a political necessity'.^{lii} Antler's position is very worthy, very Jewish with its emphasis on memory^{liii}, and very American with its idealistic linkage of morality and politics.

Walter Benn Michaels, in his chapter in the Flanzbaum collection, which thinks through the social role of Holocaust memory, argues that: 'The primacy of the Holocaust as a guarantor of Jewish identity marks...the emergence of an explicitly antiessentialist Jewishness'.^{liv} What he has recognised is the more general cultural shift—we might, following Foucault, talk about an epistemic shift and think of it as one characteristic of postmodernity—from thinking in terms of essence, in this case thinking in terms of race and racial inheritance, to thinking in constructivist terms, here, an emphasis on culture. Applied to Jews, Michaels writes that:

'Jews can give up the belief in Jewish blood and give up the belief in a Jewish God; what they can't give up is Jewish culture. Hence the significance of the Holocaust and of the widespread insistence that Jews remember it, and hence the importance of the idea that "understanding" the Holocaust is a kind of "obscenity"'.^{lv}

The notion of the Holocaust as beyond understanding, and Michaels is right in his assessment that the claim to understand the Holocaust is censured on moral grounds, ties in again with Friedlander's argument that the Holocaust is beyond the limits of representation. Michaels' point is that this position is a socio-cultural one. If scientific claims about race, and ontological, religious claims about the 'chosenness', the singularity of the Jewish people, are set aside, as essentialist and ontological claims increasingly are, then, Michaels argues, it is the Holocaust which has come to fulfil the degree zero of Jewish cultural identification.

Michaels goes on: 'The prohibition against understanding the Holocaust is at the same time formulated as the requirement that it be *experienced* instead of understood, and this requirement...makes it possible to define the Jew not as someone who has Jewish blood or believes in Judaism but as someone who, having experienced the Holocaust, can, even if he or she was never there, acknowledge it as part of his or her history'.^{lvi} For American Jews, as for Jews all over the 'West', and perhaps all over the world, for Ashkenazi Jews, Sephardi Jews and also Mizrahi Jews, without a nation-state to which to refer for an ethnic 'origin', the Holocaust, and the possibility of its return, becomes the

crucial common cultural event. It is, given the modern preoccupation with defining a people, the event that provides a sense of community to all Jews, whether religious, secular, or assimilated. Acknowledging this is not the same as saying that who is a Jew is here being defined by those who are not Jews, a common criticism of this position. Rather, it is to recognise that, the Holocaust functions in the same way that great common trauma is often used to found national identity^{lvii}. In this sense, one can assert or deny connection with this event and with the community that it helps to found. For Jews who live within nation-states, even pluralist ones, dominated by other groups, the cultural memory of the Holocaust reminds them of the terror and violence which in practice or potential is a part of the articulation of the modern state, and reminds Jews that, in the modern state, the most absolute form of exclusion from the state has been genocide.

Israel has the most modern of secular foundation myths, seeing itself, at least in part, as formed in opposition to the Holocaust.^{lviii} As Sara Holowitz remarks in her chapter in Flanzbaum's collection, on filmic representations of the Holocaust in the United States and Israel, 'The Cinematic Triangulation of Jewish American Identity', in Israel: 'The victims [of the Holocaust] become representative of diaspora Jews, and thus diaspora as a condition (*galutiyut*) becomes responsible for the Shoah'.^{lix} Israel sees itself, in contrast, as the site of Jewish salvation, as the home of active, forceful Jews who created the Israeli state. The thinking here is that the passive, fatalistic Jews of the European diaspora allowed themselves to be destroyed. The violence of the modern state is displaced onto an event which happened before the founding of Israel and onto the states in which European Jews lived. This narrative of state violence provides a legitimation for the existence of Israel, and for its own violence in the protection of the (Jewish-)Israeli people.

Yet, if the Holocaust is indeed a culturally identifying feature for Jews in the diaspora, and for Israeli Jews in a rather different way, there is, as I have begun to suggest, a certain Americanization of the discourse of the Holocaust, of what the Holocaust means. At the same time, the Holocaust is increasingly a part of American culture, that is, it has come to belong to all Americans, at the least as, constructed in an American image, it has become a moral prism through which the rest of the world is viewed and judged, and by which Americans assess the behaviour of their own country in the global order. Thus, for example, the Holocaust became a touchstone for American journalists writing about the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo.

However the thematics of the Americanised Holocaust, filtered through American culture's Christian fundamentalist tendency to moral binaries, most obviously callous and sadistic Nazis, and murderous annihilation of those designated as Other, appear across American culture. In the film *Blade Runner* (1982), for example, the replicants, who look just like humans – actually, in the film they all look just like 'white' people – are manufactured to be slave labour on other planets. When some escape and come back to Earth they have to be eliminated. The connotation of replicants comes from a troping of African Americans. This is made explicit in the voice-over when the senior policeman, who calls the replicants 'skin-jobs', is described as the sort of man who, in an earlier time, would have called Blacks 'niggers'. However, the most human of the replicants is named Rachael. Played by Sean Young, her looks as well as her name suggest that she is Jewish. With this plot development, the film's thematic anxiety about passing takes on another set of connotations. More importantly here, though, the elimination of the replicants takes on connotations of both African American enslavement and murder, and the Jewish Holocaust – and suggests a similar racialisation of the groups.

In 'Play Will Make You Free', the final chapter of the Flanzbaum collection, Andrew Levy discusses an example of Holocaust connotation where the signifier is loosened from its established signification. In Nike Town, the complete experience store of the athletic-clothing manufacturer Nike, Inc., Levy identifies an aesthetic drawn from Nazi Germany. He writes that: 'Nike discovered that an American audience in the 1990s could conceivably find a seamless mosaic, not a dissonant clash of world views, in the commingling of Nazi iconography and American culture'.^{lx} Levy argues that Nike's 'marketing strategies offer no explicit symbols of victimization, no evident scapegoat, no *loser*—a kind of radical pop retelling of World War II in which Holocaust denial manifests itself as the expression of relentless power with the complete absence of a victim'.^{lxi} Levy goes on to explain that critics of Nike have found victims, its exploited Asian workforce and, as he remarks elsewhere, those excluded from Nike's 'overwhelmingly white-executive structure'.^{lxii} Here, the Holocaust and its victims are an absence which, when identified, leads to a questioning not only of the aesthetic good-sense of the designers of Nike Town but of the morality of American multinational capitalism.

Flanzbaum's collection, together with Novick's *The Holocaust in American Life*, has begun a questioning of the positioning of the Holocaust in American culture. I have

suggested that this questioning should now be taken further, examining how the very discursive construction of the murder of around six million Jews has taken place in American, Israeli and other societies, that is, we must examine the construction of the discourse of the Holocaust itself – certainly not to debunk what took place, but to understand how the claims about the Holocaust operate in Euro-American modernity, how it operates as an ideology. How, for example, the Holocaust works to mark a conceptual limit to modernity, and marks, in at least some people's understanding, the beginning of the disenchanted, uncertain, self-referential postmodern world. And how the 'Holocaust' helps to legitimate particular national and moral claims.

Writing this in Australia I am very much aware that there is very little discussion here about the Australianisation of the Holocaust. Certainly, it is reasonable to say that the Holocaust has not become an overt part of Australian culture to the extent that it has in the United States. Nevertheless, there are an increasing number of novels and plays that deal with the Holocaust and we should not forget the most prominent literary scandal of recent years, Helen Darville's revisionist account of the Holocaust purportedly written by a woman of Ukrainian descent, *The Hand That Signed The Paper* (1994), written under the pseudonym Helen Demidenko.^{lxiii} In her discussion of Australian Holocaust memorial museums, Judith Berman has argued, in implicit distinction to the United States, that: 'The overwhelmingly Jewish design teams, expressing the non-universalistic outlook of Australian Jewry, agreed that their museums would not include detailed depictions of other Nazi victims, or information about victims of other human tragedies before or after the Holocaust.'^{lxiv} This highlights how, unlike in the United States where the Holocaust has, to a considerable extent become viewed as both a Jewish event and also one that speaks to all Americans on a moral level, in Australia, the Holocaust is much more a part of the identification of the Jews as a distinctive ethnic group within Australian multiculturalism.^{lxv} Perhaps the most intriguing thing about the Australianisation of the Holocaust is the implicit claim that Australia's tolerant (sic) multicultural society relegates the Holocaust, and anything that might be construed from it, to history.^{lxvi}

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- i Sarah Blacher Cohen ed. *From Hester Street to Hollywood: The Jewish-American Stage and Screen* Bloomington, Indiana University Press 1983. Flanzbaum references the article as reprinted in Lawrence Langer *Admitting the Holocaust* New York, Oxford University Press 1995.
- ii Peter Novick *The Holocaust in American Life* New York, Houghton Mifflin 1999, p. 8 and 9.
- iii See, for example, Jean-Francois Lyotard *Heidegger and 'the "jews"'* Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 1990.
- iv Dominick LaCapra *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* Ithaca, Cornell University Press 1994, p 97.
- v LaCapra *Representing the Holocaust*, p 98.
- vi Norman Mailer 'The White Negro' reprinted in *Advertisements for Myself*, New York, G P Putnam's 1959, p. 311.
- vii For a brief discussion of the Jewishness of Mailer's White Negro see Stephen J. Whitfield *In Search of American Jewish Culture* Hanover, Brandeis University Press 1998, p. 144. Karen Brodtkin in *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press 1998, discusses the post-war whitening of the Jews in the United States.
- viii Sander Gilman writes that: 'The Jews became the "white Negroes," as Otto von Bismarck's friend Hermann Wegener observed in 1862, because the demands of the Jews for political and social equality created in the privileged group, the Germans, the need to see the Jews as politically subservient and immutably different.' (Sander Gilman *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins 1986, p 7).
- ix On the Jewish use of blackface in film see Michael Rogin *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* Berkeley, University of California Press 1998. There is a short article on Jews in rap in the online magazine *Tattoo Jew*, Douglas Century 'Jewz in Hip Hop' at <http://www.tattoojew.com/hop.html>
- x See Cheryl Greenberg 'Pluralism and Its Discontents: The Case of Blacks and Jews' in David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, Susannah Herschel eds. *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism* Berkeley, University of California Press 1998. See also the works cited by Greenberg at note 8 in that chapter.
- xi Ivan Kalmar, in *The Trotskys, Freuds and Woody Allens: Portrait of a Culture* Viking, Toronto 1993, makes a similar argument. He writes that: 'The abstract, the universal, the general is by definition where similarities are emphasised' (p 70). Kalmar's point is that assimilating Jewish intellectuals in modernity tended to look for abstractions rather than specificities. By this means they could emphasise similarities and ignore the specificity of their Jewish circumstance.
- xii Mailer 'The White Negro', p 313.
- xiii The British appreciation of what happened to the Jews began with liberation of Bergen-Belsen by British troops. As Tim Cole puts it in *Images of the Holocaust: The Myth of the 'Shoah Business'* Duckworth, London 1999: 'The harrowing film footage of piles of corpses was shown in British cinemas shortly after liberation on 15 April 1945, and ensured that 'Belsen' became a synonym for Hitlerian atrocities.' (p 98). For decades after, an extremely thin person was often described in

- Britain as 'looking like something out of Belsen'. As late as 1976 Sid Vicious, later of the English punk band the Sex Pistols but at that time in a band called The Flowers of Romance, wrote a song entitled 'Belsen Was a Gas.' The song was subsequently performed by the Sex Pistols. (See Jon Savage *England's Dreaming: Anarchy, Sex Pistols, Punk Rock and Beyond* St. Martin's Press, New York 1992, pp248-249, 458-459). Even in the late 1970s in Britain the extermination of the Jews was still thought through the idea of concentration camps, and in particular Belsen.
- xiv Cole *Images of the Holocaust*, p. 56. See also Cole's chapter 'Yad Vashem'.
- xv Cole *Images of the Holocaust*, p 122. Cole writes: 'Of its nine memorial objectives, three were concerned with remembering Jewish destruction, five with remembering Jewish 'heroism', 'fortitude' and 'struggle', and one with remembering the actions of 'high-minded Gentiles'. 'Heroism' outnumbered 'destruction' two to one.'
- xvi Paul Brienes *Tough Jews: Political Fantasies and the Moral Dilemma of American Jewry* New York, Basic Books 1990, p 71. There are less well-known usages of the term 'holocaust' to describe what was happened to European Jewry as early as 1942. In that year the term was used in an address delivered by Rabbi Eliezer Silver to a conference of Agudat Israel in Belmar, New Jersey. A year later the word was used by Abba Hillel Silver to describe the ongoing destruction of European Jewry at the National Conference on Palestine. (This information comes from a posting by Gershon Greenblatt to the H-Judaic List in the H-Judaic Digest for January 3-8, 1998. Greenberg references an article of his own, 'Myth and Catastrophe in Simha Elberg's Religious Thought', *Tradition*, Fall, 1991). The particular importance of the Yad Vashem usage is that it was official and public.
- xvii Of course, these figures make no reference to the proportion of USSR people, or Germans, killed.
- xviii Robert Young 'America's Holocaust: memory and the Politics of Identity' in Flanzbaum ed. *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, p 70.
- xix Lawrence Langer 'The Americanization of the Holocaust on Stage and Screen' in Cohen *From Hester Street to Hollywood*, p 214.
- xx Novick *The Holocaust in American Life*, p 13.
- xxi Brienes *Tough Jews*, p 72.
- xxii Novick *The Holocaust in American Life*, p 168.
- xxiii Novick *The Holocaust in American Life*, p 209.
- xxiv In 'Multicultural Imagined Communities: Cultural Difference and National Identity in the USA and Australia,' (in David Bennett ed. *Multicultural States: Rethinking Difference and Identity* London, Routledge 1998, pp 135-162) Jen Ang and myself argue that, unlike many states, the United States is founded on a common moral order rather than a common culture. In 'Seinfeld is a Jewish Sitcom, Isn't It?' (in *Coming Out Jewish: Constructing Ambivalent Identities* London, Routledge 2000) I argue that this moral order is expressed in everyday life through a preoccupation with civility.
- xxv Of course, from a semiotic point of view, words do not have 'full meanings'. What I am getting at here is the feeling that I know the parameters of meaning of 'Holocaust' so that, when I use it, I would have confidence that I have a sense of the normal range of meaning that I am offering the person to whom I am talking.
- xxvi Hannah Arendt *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 247. Arendt's use of 'Auschwitz' here is noteworthy. In *Images of the Holocaust* Cole writes that: 'with the emergence of the myth of the 'Holocaust', 'Auschwitz' came into its own as not simply the Warsaw Bloc symbol of fascist aggression, but as the symbol of the 'Holocaust'. ... As early as 1955, it was the name 'Auschwitz' – not 'Belsen' –

- which Theodor Adorno chose to use in his well known statement that ‘to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’ (p 100).
- xxvii Jeffrey Shandler *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust* New York, Oxford University Press, 1999.
- xxviii Shandler *While America Watches*, pp 50-55.
- xxix Novick *The Holocaust in American Life*, p. 207.
- xxx Henry Greenspan ‘Imagining the Survivors’, p. 59 in Flanzbaum ed. *The Americanization of the Holocaust*.
- xxxi Lawrence Langer *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* New Haven, Yale University Press 1991, p 204.
- xxxii Cole *Images of the Holocaust*, p. 146.
- xxxiii James Young ‘America’s Holocaust: Memory and the Politics of Identity’, in Flanzbaum ed. *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, p. 71.
- xxxiv Young ‘America’s Holocaust’, p. 81.
- xxxv Saul Friedlander ed. *Probing the Limits of representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”* Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press 1992.
- xxxvi Saul Friedlander ‘Introduction’ to *Probing the Limits of Representation*, p. 3.
- xxxvii Raphael Lemkin *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress* Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Division of International Law, 1944.
- xxxviii Lemkin *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, p 79.
- xxxix Lemkin *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, p 79.
- xl On this, see Tzvetan Todorov *The Conquest of America* New York, Harper and Row 1984.
- xli Friedlander ‘Introduction,’ pp. 4-5.
- xlii George Steiner ‘The Long Life of Metaphor – A Theological-Metaphysical Approach to the Shoah’ in Asher Cohen, Joav Gelber, Charlotte Wardi eds. *Comprehending the Holocaust: Historical and Literary Research* Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang 1988, p45.
- xliii Steiner ‘The Long Life of Metaphor,’ p 46.
- xliv Zygmunt Bauman *Modernity and the Holocaust* Cambridge, Polity Press, 1989. This is not to say that the ‘Holocaust’ was alone in problematising ideas of progress and the like but, rather, that its identification was a crucial element of that problematisation.
- xlv Here, we need to remember that there is a now a large literature debating the uniqueness, or otherwise, of the Holocaust. I do not have room to discuss this phenomenon here. Novick *The Holocaust in American Life* outlines the debate, see especially pp 195-198. Perhaps the crucial point is how the claim to the Holocaust as a unique event feeds into the claim of the specialness – in Judaic terms, the ‘chosenness’ – of the Jews. There is a further point here, the American moralization of the Holocaust has also reinforced a tendency to understand the Holocaust as unique.

- xlvi Amy Hungerford 'Surviving Rego Park: Holocaust Theory from Art Spiegelman to Beryl Lang' in Flanzbaum ed., *The Americanization of the Holocaust* p. 124.
- xlvi I discuss aspects of this in 'Seinfeld is a Jewish sitcom, isn't it?' in Stratton *Coming Out Jewish*..
- xlviij Joyce Antler "'Three Thousand Miles Away": The Holocaust in Recent Works for the American Theatre' in Flanzbaum ed *The Americanization of the Holocaust*., p. 141.
- xlix Antler "'Three Thousand Miles Away",' p. 125.
- l Cole *Images of the Holocaust*, p. 34.
- li Cole *Images of the Holocaust*, p. 33.
- lii Antler "'Three Thousand Miles Away"' , p. 141.
- liii The classic discussion of the importance of memory for the Jews, placed in a consideration of Jewish historical thinking, is Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* Seattle, University of Washington Press 1962.
- liv Walter Benn Michaels "'You Who Never Was There": Slavery and the New Historicism—Deconstruction and the Holocaust' in Flanzbaum ed. *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, p. 195.
- lv Michaels "'You Who Never Was There",' p. 195.
- lvi Michaels "'You Who Never Was There",' p. 195.
- lvii Witness, for example, the use of the battle of Gallipoli in Australia.
- lviii The official Israeli foundation narrative is centred on Zionism.
- lix Sara Horowitz 'The Cinematic Triangulation of Jewish American Identity: Israel, America and the Holocaust' in Flanzbaum ed. *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, pp. 146-147.
- lx Andrew Levy 'Play Will Make You Free: Reprising *The Triumph of the Will* in Chicago's Nike Town' in Flanzbaum ed. *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, p. 223.
- lxi Levy 'Play Will Make You Free', p. 223.
- lxii Levy 'Play Will Make You Free', p. 219.
- lxiii The list of novels, plays, and autobiographies concerned with the Holocaust published in the last decade in Australia is too long to give here. There is one short article that deals with the Holocaust and film in Australia: Jan Epstein 'Jews and Films in Australia: The Impact of the Holocaust', *Westerly*, vol 41, no 4, 1996, pp 65-69. Helen Darville's book was originally published as Helen Demidenko *The Hand That Signed the Paper* Sydney, Allen and Unwin 1994. Much has now been published on the Demidenko scandal, see, for example, Robert Manne *The Culture of Forgetting: Helen Demidenko and the Holocaust* Melbourne, Text Publishing, 1996; Andrew Riemer *The Demidenko Debate* Sydney, Allen & Unwin. 1996; Catherine Driscoll 'Helen: Minority/Minoritarian Discourses' in Joe Lockard and Melinda Micco eds. *Pretending to be Me: Ethnic Transvestisism and Cross-Writing* Urbana, University of Illinois Press 2000.
- lxiv Judith Berman 'Australian Representations of the Holocaust: Jewish Holocaust Museums in Melbourne, Perth, and Sydney, 1984-1996' in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol 13, no2, 1999, p 215.

^{lxv} In 'The Impossible Ethnic: Jews and Australian Multiculturalism,' (in *Coming Out Jewish*) I make the point that, in Australia, the Holocaust has come to be utilised as an 'origin' for Australian Jewry in a similar way that, say, Italy or Greece serve as national origins for those of Italian and Greek background in Australia.

^{lxvi} On the meaning of tolerance in Australian multiculturalism see Ghassan Hage *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* Sydney, Pluto 1998; also, Jon Stratton *Race Daze: Australia in Identity Crisis* Sydney, Pluto 1998.