Nazis, the Holocaust, and Australia's History Wars

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The essay engages with ongoing debates about the validity of comparing Holocaust memory, situating these in the context of Australia's History Wars. Looking at Markus Zusak's The Book Thief (2005) as a recent fictional attempt to confront the effects of both Holocaust memory and German perpetrator trauma, it also considers the novel's status as a displaced (Australian-authored) German survivor's account. Arguing against a facile assimilation of the novel to the contemporary 'Holocaust industry', the essay asserts the value of a transnational approach that insists on the cultural and historical specificity of the Holocaust while showing its continuing usefulness in energising discourses of traumatic memory not necessarily related to the Shoah itself. At the same time, it sounds a cautionary note against using the Holocaust, either as a form of screen memory to avoid confronting colonial violence or as a negative analogy to assert the relative innocuousness of the Australian past.

Keywords: Holocaust; history; memory; trauma; Germany; Australia

False Comparisons?

On 10 June 2009, James von Brunn, an 88 year-old American white supremacist and Holocaust denier, entered the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. and gunned down a security guard before being restrained by other guards on duty. Various motives for the shooting have been discussed, though it seems likely that there was a connection with President Barack Obama's 5 June speech at Buchenwald, one of the most notorious of the Nazi concentration camps whose very existence von Brunn refutes. In the wake of the shooting, it emerged that von Brunn, in addition to belonging to several US-based neo-Nazi organisations, has links to the British National Party (BNP) and also supports the historical revisionist work of the Adelaide Institute in Australia, though the latter vehemently denies any connection with him, saying it is not in their control to monitor those who subscribe to its website or who appear, for whatever reason, to sympathise with its views.

If von Brunn's link to Australia remains tenuous at best, its conclusive revelation wouldn't be surprising. Neo-Nazism in Australia has a relatively short but decidedly undistinguished history. Australia is the only Western country to have admitted large numbers of Nazi war criminals between 1945 and 1950, not a single one of whom has been convicted,[1] while neo-Nazi activity since then has been sporadic but intense, peaking during the Gulf Wars and in the aftermath of 9/11, when numerous Jewish institutions in Australia were attacked.[2] (Over and against this, it should be said that Australia took in more Jewish refugees *per capita* during the Holocaust years than any other country except Palestine, and that Australian Jewry – the tenth largest in the Diaspora – is often seen as a model for Jewish communities worldwide).[3]

Meanwhile, debates about anti-Semitism in Australia have continually bubbled up to the surface of the nation's cultural life, prominent examples being the controversies surrounding Helen Demidenko-Darville's 'Holocaust novel' *The Hand the Signed that Paper* (1994) and, more recently, Christos Tsiolkas's vampire chronicle *Dead Europe* (2005), the former of which was accused of playing fast and loose with Holocaust history and the latter of perpetrating a 'performative anti-Semitism' that seemed fatally attracted to the very forms of racist extremism it sought to attack.[4] However, probably the most volatile associated issue in academic circles has been the debate over the legitimacy or not of comparing the treatment of Australia's Aboriginal people to the Holocaust, which has played a key role in the wider historical controversies sometimes bracketed under the media-driven heading of the 'History Wars'. The History Wars, which I understand here as that set of loosely connected public debates clustering around the 'balance sheet' view of Australian history, have undergone several different phases, probably peaking in the mid to late 1990s with polarised responses to Geoffrey Blainey's controversial epithet 'Black Armband' history, Keith Windschuttle's ideologically partisan attack on ideologically partisan accounts of Aboriginal history, and scattered allegations of genocide surrounding the Stolen Generations, crystallised most notably in the landmark 1997 *Bringing Them Home* report.[5]

More recently, other prominent Australian historians such as Inga Clendinnen have tried to claim that the History Wars are over, though this seems to me at least debatable, as is her claim that the term 'genocide', which was repeatedly invoked by the authors of *Bringing Them Home*, is inappropriate and ill judged.[6] Although quicker than most to acknowledge the atrocities involved in the nation's treatment of Aboriginal people, Clendinnen has remained adamantly opposed to seeing this treatment in terms of

genocide, and objects even more to its likening with the mass slaughter of the Holocaust, this last being the subject of what is probably her best known book, *Reading the Holocaust*.[7] As Clendinnen says of the report,

> I remain persuaded that the persistent invocation of the term 'genocide' by the authors of the report and their later supporters to describe any phase of Australian policies to Aborigines was … a moral, intellectual and … political disaster … I am reasonably sophisticated in these modes of intellectual discussion, but when I see the word 'genocide' I still see Gypsies and Jews being herded into trains, into pits, into ravines, and behind them the shadowy figures of Armenian women and children being marched into the desert by armed men. I see deliberate mass murder: innocent people identified by their killers as a distinctive entity being done to death by organised authority. I believe that to take the murder out of genocide is to render it vacuous, and I believe along with Orwell that it is necessary to keep such words mirror-bright because, given the nature of human affairs, we will surely continue to need them.[8]

As Neil Levi has latterly argued, there is a curious logic to this statement, which frames genocide in terms of a 'bizarre condensation of visual motifs drawn from the European genocides of the first half of the twentieth century'.[9] Deferring historical authority to the eyewitness, Clendinnen's 'meta-vision' seems to suggest that 'one must be able to conjure up an image of mass murder for the event to qualify as genocide. … [It] follows from such logic that because [she] cannot see any Australian Aborigines in her vision, the word therefore does not apply'.[10] As Levi tellingly adds, 'the appropriate response of a critical intellectual [like Clendinnen] is surely to ask why sixty years of separating children from their families under the influence of eugenic precepts does *not* conjure up such disturbing images'.[11]

Levi attributes this omission in part to what some Holocaust theorists have called, after Freud, the concept of 'screen memory', i.e. a subliminal tendency to use the Holocaust to displace or repress other, perhaps equally traumatic, local historical events.[12] Another liberal-minded Australian historian, Bain Attwood, explains the workings of screen memory as follows, this time with reference to the work of his conservative adversary, Keith Windschuttle:

> In the case of public intellectuals such as Keith Windschuttle, invoking the Nazi German genocide seems to perform the role of a screen memory – a means by which they create a screen or block between themselves and some other trauma that they refuse to approach directly. By proclaiming the incomparable nature of the [Holocaust] as the real or the ultimate trauma, they can ignore another, local traumatic past that is more difficult – and therefore probably more useful – for settler Australians to face. As a result, they fail to find a proper way of remembering and memorialising historical trauma closer to home.[13]

As Levi points out, Attwood's use of the term 'screen memory' in this case is none too accurate. After all, Windschuttle isn't referring to the Holocaust as a means of 'screening' Australian history, but rather of confirming that Australia has never been the scene of a genocide *like the one* committed by the Nazis; that, even at its worst, the nation has no chapter in its history that remotely matches the evils of the National Socialist past.[14] I agree with Levi here, but am not so sure that screen memory applies either to Clendinnen, whose liberal sympathies, antithetical in several respects to Windschuttle's, will not allow for the latter's often crude gradations on the severity of the past. However, where I *am* sympathetic to Levi is on the usefulness of comparing extreme historical events that may or may not deserve the label 'genocide', but that certainly deserve to be seen in a transnational context in which 'one's [national] history is never [entirely] one's own', and in which the peremptory rejection of the Holocaust in favour of the distinctiveness of national history 'can mark a form of … defense against recognizing [those] larger historical processes, such as colonization and the expulsion or elimination of alien or native populations, [that were] involved in the formation of modern nation-states'.[15] And I also agree with Levi on the need to distinguish between those forms of fetishised Holocaust memory that insist that genocide must look a certain way (innocent victims, murderous perpetrators, etc.) in keeping with originary conceptions of the Nazi genocide, and those forms that enable an enduringly self-critical view of *both* national history *and* the various transnational processes that inform it; that use Holocaust memory as a way of energising discourses of the past. [16]

Huge problems remain whenever Holocaust memory is strategically invoked for purposes that are, at best, indirectly related to the Shoah. Two main categories of

difficulty obtain, which I will call for short problems of *appropriation* and problems of *attribution*. In his 1995 study *Twilight Memories*, Andreas Huyssen complains about 'the [current] proliferation of an often facile Holocaust victimology in a variety of political discourses that have [little or] nothing to do with the Shoah [itself]'.[17] Appropriations of this kind are almost impossible to justify, and always run the risk of being emotionally manipulative or trivialising the suffering of those on whose behalf they claim to speak. Similarly fraught are attempts to create moral equivalences between the Holocaust and other genocides, even if those genocides appear to share what Simone Gigliotti calls the 'semantics of unspeakability', and have acquired that aura of uniqueness and incomparability that attaches itself to what some post-war Holocaust scholars have called 'limit events'.[18] The attribution of 'equivalences' and 'similarities' is always likely to be a dangerous political exercise in such circumstances; but surely it is one thing to insist on the cultural and historical specificity of the Holocaust and another to imply that there is no relation between the Holocaust and other genocides at all.

Still another order of difficulty, however, is the attempt to draw parallels between the Holocaust and a set of historical events (e.g., the Stolen Generations) that are *not agreed on* to be genocide. Part of the problem in this particular case is that memory has been allowed to run ahead of history, which is definitely not the case with the Holocaust, whose archival and empirical records have long since accorded to it the status of an 'irrefutable narrative truth'.[19] As Gigliotti suggests, *Bringing Them Home* may thus be seen as an exercise in appropriated Holocaust memory that overlooks the further, equally irrefutable truth that the Holocaust and the Stolen Generations were structurally different events.[20] However, the *fact* remains that a moral investment has been made in invoking the kind of language that is usually reserved for 'a far more radical eliminationist historical [practice]'.[21] And the *possibility* remains that the Holocaust is useful (if still always vulnerable to abuse) as a 'standard when discussing the restorative outcome of witnessing as healing, and the symbolic weight invested in reparations'.[22]

While I am perhaps more optimistic than Gigliotti that the restorative function of Holocaust witnessing may translate to other, more recent contexts of crimes against humanity, I share his unease about using the Holocaust as a model in a variety of hotly contested contexts where it seems almost inevitable that political expediency, as well as historical accountability, will be at stake. However, after this lengthy but necessary detour, the two larger points I want to make here are (1) that the instrumentality of Holocaust memory is not *inherently* exploitative or disrespectful, and (2) that

comparative approaches to genocide are not *necessarily* misguided, even in cases where the legitimacy of the lead category is disputed and very different interpretations of the historical events in question are at work. Comparative work of this kind is, perhaps by definition, hazardous, but this doesn't mean that it is a self-defeating exercise, or that, in extreme cases such as the Holocaust, it is undesirable or impracticable given the limits such events impose on the protocols of representation itself.

Following on from this, I would say that the comparison between German and Australian history is useful – with several caveats. For one thing, any similarities between Germany's and Australia's History Wars are easily outweighed by significant differences, e.g. those pertaining to Australia's specific status as a postcolonial settler society, in which the dispossession – in some cases, extermination – of Indigenous people was to become one of the necessary preconditions for the emergence of the modern nation state.[23] For another, the rival nationalisms of white and Aboriginal Australia – sometimes reductively distilled into the alternative slogans 'assimilation' and 'Aboriginal sovereignty' – have no parallel in modern Germany, where Jews were a highly integrated minority before National Socialism, with a hybridised subculture, retaining elements of both Jewishness and Germanness, that was very much their own.[24] And for a third, theodicies—those 'progressive philosophies of history that redeem suffering'[25]—have not been discredited in Australia, resurfacing for example in some of the more conservative versions of national debates about the need for reconciliation; whereas in Germany's own post WWII version of the History Wars,[26] these were dwarfed by a powerful 'perpetrator trauma' whose most visible side-effects were scepticism towards nationalist self-affirmation, a tendency to side with the victims of National Socialism, and vigilance towards backsliding into the fatal errors of the National Socialist past .[27]

Despite these differences and others, there is evidence to suggest that, as Dirk Moses – on whose work I have been drawing heavily here – puts it: '[t]he genocide issue [in Australia] has become the functional equivalent of the uniqueness of the Holocaust in Germany: the blemish that soils the myth of origin by preventing it from doing the magic work of social integration and healing'.[28] Hence the public furore over *Bringing Them Home*, which drew indignant responses from reconciliation-minded conservatives, including *Quadrant* editor Padraic McGuinness, who complained bitterly that the report had yielded symbolic capital to the Left and that 'the [strategic] invention of charges like genocide and the holocaust [had provided a means of imposing] a kind of moral ascendancy intended to stifle [national] policy debate'.[29]

Moses's conclusions are as convincing as his analysis. Australia, he says, has much to learn from the German experience, not just in the sense of revisiting its own continuing history of racial discrimination and exclusion, but also of confronting national myths that have been used, either to hold back Indigenous Australians from full participation in current society, or to shield non-Indigenous Australians from historical truths about the colonial past.[30] Nor is it just that lessons can be learned from Germans' ongoing attempts to confront the perpetrator trauma that surrounds their *national* past; *transnational* connections also need to be established that link racial discriminations of all kinds to the global modernities within which they are co-implicated – connections that, avoiding the twin temptations of sacralising and banalising the Holocaust, still recognise its authority as a moral source for combating racisms of both the present and the past.[31]

With these sentiments in mind, I want to switch in the next part of this essay to a discussion of *representations* of Nazis and/or the Holocaust in recent Australian literature, focusing on a recent novel – Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2005) – that reflects interestingly on the ways in which Old and New Worlds become mutually entangled in such a way as to suggest that the one is haunted by the other, and that Australia's multicultural future depends on the impossible necessity of dissociating itself from Europe's racist past. Although I will use Zusak's novel to reflect to some extent on general (aesthetic) issues surrounding the representability of the Holocaust, my primary interest will be in the specific ways in which Holocaust memory is instrumentalised for particular (political) ends. I am also interested in Zusak's approach to the perpetrator trauma that has been a central anxiety in both German and Australian versions of the History Wars, but is strikingly missing from such recent progressive memory projects as the *Bringing Them Home* report. As the Australian philosopher Raimond Gaita has said of the report,

> The most puzzling aspect of [its] reception is that … hardly anyone who has broadly accepted the facts it records and its conclusion that genocide was committed has proposed that there be criminal trials to determine who is guilty and to punish them … How can one say that genocide has been committed, yet ask only for an apology and compensation? How can you think genocide always to be a serious crime, yet find it unthinkable to call for criminal proceedings?[32]

Or, as Levi asks, what does it mean to leave out the perpetrators when the laying of criminal charges has been intrinsic to other national reconciliation processes – Germany's most obviously, but also South Africa's – that see the exposure and punishment of individual agents as an integral part of the process of coming to terms with the past?[33]

The Book Thief, or, on not coming to terms with the past

Markus Zusak is one of the more interesting figures in recent Australian literature and, especially with his 2005 best seller *The Book Thief*, has quickly attained name recognition well beyond the country of his birth. Zusak, who currently lives in Sydney, was born in 1975 to German and Austrian parents. Although he is obviously too young to have any direct memory of Nazi Germany, he grew up hearing stories from his parents – themselves young at the time – about the bombing of Munich and Jews being marched through the streets. *The Book Thief* is also set at this time and involves a young girl, Liesel Meminger, who, previously abandoned by her parents, is taken in by a foster family in Molching, a fictionalised small town in Munich's outskirts, shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War. The novel recounts Liesel's attempts to come to terms with her new surroundings, her school experiences and, above all, her increasing addiction to reading, which sustains her through the worst the times have to offer and which eventually, if fortuitously, saves her life.[34] Liesel's developing friendships with her foster father and, later, a Jewish refugee, Max Vandenburg, who becomes a stowaway at their house before being captured by the Nazis, allow insights into the complexities of German-Jewish relations at a time when to be a Jewish sympathiser was, quite literally, to risk one's life. The book has been praised for its vivid portrait of wartime Germany and its sensitivity to the shared, if not necessarily equal, suffering of all those caught up in a vicious totalitarian regime. In my own approach to it, I want to focus on two aspects: the novel's engagement with *perpetrator trauma* and its ambivalent status as a vehicle of *postmemory*; I will then come back to the question of its Australianness – which is not just a function of the nationality of its author – and its relevance to a global memory industry in which commodified images of the Third Reich and the Holocaust circulate as consumer goods.

The Book Thief has been described in terms of a contemporary 'grief narrative' centring on the experience of death and searching for imaginative possibilities of

transcending death 'through memory and courage and love'.[35] Like other grief accounts, *The Book Thief* centres on the grieving figure of the *survivor* – in this case Liesel Meminger, who loses almost everyone she holds dear in the narrative: both birth and foster parents, loved ones, friends. To some extent, *The Book Thief*, which is the novel Liesel writes, is also the consolatory fiction that allows her to move on with her life (in Sydney) away from the deceased. However, as in other grief accounts, the novel 'asserts the continuation of relationships with the deceased, even in their absence'.[36] It is as much a work of continued haunting as one of gradual recovery in which both Liesel and the primary narrator, a generic Death-figure, are traumatised by the experiences they have been though – experiences imaginatively transfigured but never definitively transcended by the book's repeating gestures of cross-generational friendship and filial love.

To some degree, these traumatic experiences constitute a collective 'perpetrator trauma': a term initially developed by Cathy Caruth in her work on trauma theory and later applied by Moses and others in their analysis of the German History Wars. As Moses suggests, perpetrator trauma, the delayed consciousness of the crimes one's forbears have committed, 'continues to haunt the perpetrator-collective until it changes sufficiently to narrate it into a new legitimating story as a constitutive part of its self-understanding'.[37] Perpetrator trauma, in the context of the German History Wars, takes several forms, from the installation of the Holocaust as a 'negative myth of origin' to a melancholic fixation on the evils of the National Socialist past.[38] *The Book Thief*'s own particular presentation of perpetrator trauma is similarly plural, ranging in form from the hallucinatory vision of Jewish corpses at Auschwitz, saved by Death from further indignities in the afterlife, to the self-defeating melancholia of Ilsa Hermann, the mayor of Molching's pathologically apologetic wife. Perpetrator trauma, like other forms of trauma, blocks the past to which it seeks access in a narcissistic process driven by the inability to mourn – an inability paradoxically instantiated in Liesel's narrative, which consequently remains haunted by its incapacity to throw off the shackles of the past.

Alert to this dilemma, Zusak's novel seeks refuge in what might be called the *supplementarity* of postmemory, i.e. that surfeit of stories, voices, images that tries – and inevitably fails – to compensate for lack of direct access to the past. As I have argued elsewhere, partly following Hirsch, post-Holocaust elegy is a primary mode for both the transmission and critical exploration of postmemory, looking at ways in which 'memories are encoded and decoded across the generations, but also at … ways in which these memories are explicitly textualized in a loosely connected body of writings that travel

across both time and space'.[39] Post-Holocaust elegy can thus be seen as a study in *intertextuality* that, while always potentially therapeutic, balances the imaginative refashionings provided by creative writing against an agonised knowledge of the irretrievability of the past. Postmemory is a congenitally haunted condition; and it as likely to haunted by the idea of inhabiting someone else's memories as it is by the fear of losing sight of memory itself.

These anxieties acquire their most visible form in *The Book Thief* in the stories composed by the Jewish refugee, Max Vandenburg. These stories are paradigmatically Freudian: parables of friendship, openly opposed to a totalitarian culture of suspicion and hostility, they are also melancholic reminders of the inevitability of separation and loss. As exercises in reconfiguration they are constantly reminded of the earlier stories they attempt to obliterate: for example, *The Standover Man*, a short anthropomorphic fable in the self-ironic manner of Spiegelman's *Maus* tales, is inscribed palimpsestically over the not-quite-blanked-out pages of *Mein Kampf*.[40] Commenting on Spiegelman's work, Michael Rothberg observes that 'it represents the power and risk of writing (and drawing): the ability and the need of those raised in what Hirsch calls "postmemory" to reconfigure their parents' stories without escaping their failure to revive the dead or their recuperation by a dominant non-Jewish culture'.[41] This is very much in the spirit of *The Book Thief*, which, like *Maus*, is a 'survivor's tale … of crystalline ambiguity', giving voice and image to the missing stories of earlier generations and inscribing 'absence in narrative without sacrificing the need for the kind of historical knowledge made possible by art'.[42] Also like *Maus*, *The Book Thief* is a survivor's story that consciously inhabits the condition of its own belatedness, using it to reflect on the impossible necessity of representing the Holocaust and of recovering the lost memories of another's past. To attempt to do so is an act of benign theft – at once the novel's central activity and its controlling metaphor – that involves the 'stealing' and rewriting of other people's stories: not only Spiegelman's, but those of a whole range of European Holocaust authors, encompassing the *Trümmerliteratur* of Grass and Böll, the testimony of Primo Levi, and the diary of Anne Frank.[43] But what does it mean for a contemporary *Australian* author to do this? What difference does it make that *The Book Thief* is a *German*, not a *Jewish*, survivor's tale? And what is the significance of the fact that Zusak's novel is usually classified as a work of *young adult* literature: what implications might this have for the politics of memory in the text?

The uncanny Australianness of Markus Zusak

Postmemory, as I suggested before, is defined by temporal distance: by the insurmountable gap between primary experiences and their secondary recall. However, postmemory is also defined by *spatial* distance: by the geographical separation of the remembering subject from other, 'original' remembering subjects and, perhaps more crucially, from the 'original' site of remembrance – a reminder that memory itself is as much a spatial as a temporal mode.[44] In the case of *The Book Thief*, this separation is extreme: after the war, Liesel Meminger settles in Australia, and if we are to read the book as rightfully hers, rather than as the inherited possession of the author, Zusak, we are well positioned to appreciate the irony that she is only reunited with it at the moment of her death.[45] The book is a survivor's account written by someone who is now no longer living, since it is only returned to its writer (by Death) at the moment her life has run its course. It is Zusak's task to breathe life back into this account while at the same time paying homage to the stories his own parents told him. The site of storytelling (Australia) is thus irreparably split from the site of remembrance (Germany), though the text still attempts to heal this rift by means of its multiple re-doublings, narrative strategies by which recalled experiences are lived through in 'real time' in the pages of the text.

There is a similar uncanniness to the text in terms of both the nationality of its author and the location of its utterance, as the Sydney-based Zusak effectively takes over Liesel's narrative, thereby robbing Death of his authority over the text. This is perhaps the last trick of postmemory in *The Book Thief*, the stealing of its story from Death, which also provides the conditions of possibility for the retelling of the narrative. However, the narrative makes it clear from the outset that it is painfully separated from its subject. Germany, like Australia, is *unheimlich*, either the unhomely home that is both comfortingly close and disturbingly distant, or the homeland that is no longer home and permanently estranged from itself.[46] *Absence* structures this narrative: it is no coincidence that Liesel is abandoned by her parents, whose loss she feels keenly despite the love shown her by her foster family; and no coincidence either that Germany is the remembered homeland of Zusak's parents, not Zusak himself.

These uncanny doublings in the text potentially rescue it from the charge that it is a foreigner's attempt to capitalise on the global exchange value of Holocaust memory, though this charge would need in any case to be complicated by the obvious fact that it is an Australian's simulation of a *German* survivor narrative, not an Australian Jewish or

German Jewish text.[47] It bears asking in fact whether *The Book Thief* is 'about' the Holocaust at all; rather it is 'about' the violence – both physical and psychological – done by a particular regime to its subject people, in which suffering is shared, if hardly in equal measure, by Jews and non-Jews alike. However, passages like the following one certainly belong to the poetic realism that is sometimes associated with Holocaust narrative:

> Summer came.
> For the book thief [Liesel Meminger], everything was going nicely.
> For me [Death], the sky was the colour of Jews.
> When their bodies had finished scouring for gaps in the door, their souls rose up. Their fingernails had scratched at the wood and in some cases were nailed into it by the sheer force of desperation, and their spirits came towards me, into my arms. We climbed out of those shower facilities, onto the roof and up, into eternity's uncertain breadth. They just kept feeding me. Minute after minute, shower after shower.[48]

Writing such as this is risky in the extreme, flying in the face of the taboos that are sometimes constructed around the imaginative dimensions of Holocaust narrative. It is worth considering here whether *The Book Thief* is protected, to some extent, by its status as 'young adult' literature, and whether that status affords it a poetic licence – an invitation to sentiment – that might otherwise be unavailable to the text.[49] My own view on this is that the text succeeds – to some extent at least – in warding off these criticisms by drawing attention to (1) the impossibility of its own imaginative recall and (2) its intermediate status as neither a 'children's nor an 'adult', neither a 'German' nor an 'Australian' text.

It still makes me uneasy, however, that the text fails to problematise its own location in other ways: it would be perfectly possible, for example, to construct an exceptionalist – cultural-nationalist – reading of the novel around the celebratory view of Australia as a 'safe haven', consequently ignoring Australia's own history of anti-Semitism or the possibility of comparing the Holocaust to the treatment of Aboriginal people, however risky in its turn. It would be possible to read the novel, that is, as an implicit commemoration of Australian 'civility' over and against German 'barbarism', although it admittedly complicates such easy distinctions by showing the efforts of

‘ordinary’ Germans, both children and adults, to disrupt enforced obedience to the Nazi regime. (An added problem here, integral to the *Historikerstreit*, is the implication that ‘ordinary’ Germans were as much involuntary victims of as willing parties to National Socialism, though the novel’s self-conscious exploration of perpetrator trauma challenges this – up to a point.)

Finally, it would be possible to read the novel, for all its narrative trickery, as another addition to what Norman Finkelstein has provocatively called the ‘Holocaust industry’, or what Andreas Huyssen sees as ‘the [vertiginous] excess of Holocaust imagery’ in our times.[50] Huyssen, among others, sees evidence here of a ‘melancholic fixation [that,] reach[ing] far beyond victims and perpetrators’, reveals an intimate connection between the ‘unchecked proliferation’ and the ‘traumatic ossification’ of the master Holocaust trope.[51] On the other hand, he says, such ‘multiple fracturing of the memory of the Holocaust’ can be considered paradoxically enabling insofar as the ‘multi-layered sedimentation of images and discourses’ that arises from it offers a ‘potential antidote to the freezing of memory into [a single] traumatic image or the mind-numbing focus on numbers’.[52]

This is perhaps the best – and certainly the most generous – way, not just of looking at works such as *The Book Thief* but at the discourses of traumatic memory they engage with, which deliberately cross the boundaries of the national narratives they implicitly contest. It seems worth returning at the end, then, to the argument Huyssen and others make for a transnational approach to Holocaust memory that insists on the cultural and historical specificity of the Holocaust, but also shows its usefulness in energising other discourses of traumatic memory, including those not necessarily related to the Shoah itself.[53] In an Australian context, this sounds a cautionary note against using the Holocaust, either as a form of screen memory to avoid confronting colonial violence (among other ‘dark’ aspects of the nation’s history) or as a negative analogy by means of which Australians persuade themselves that the Australian past is by comparison benign.[54] Even if Australian government policy is accepted, at different stages of the nation’s history, as having had genocidal tendencies, these were certainly *unlike* the Nazi genocide; but this does not mean that genocide itself is ‘neither a necessary nor a useful concept’ in the Australian context, as Bain Attwood among other Australian historians asserts.[55] Nor – to repeat – does this mean that all comparative approaches to genocide are inherently misguided, or that all transnational uses of Holocaust memory are inevitably misjudged. To insist on the instrumentality of Holocaust memory is not

necessarily a recipe for abuse or a pretext for being ahistorical; nor are all strategic invocations of the Holocaust inevitably tantamount to a trivialisation of Jewish suffering or a show of disrespect for the dead. Rather, Holocaust memory may be deployed to combat anti-Semitism and other forms of racism in a variety of historical contexts which, while often markedly dissimilar in kind and degree from those affecting the Shoah's victims, attest to the continuing need to remember and, in so doing, confront those 'crimes of commission and omission' that help shape racist futures from the raw material of a racist past.[56]

NOTES

[1] See Bruce Rosen's hard-hitting essay, 'Australia, Nazi Haven for the New Millennium' (October 2001), http://www.jewishmag.com/48mag/nazis/nazis.htm, accessed 6 July 2009. A notorious case is Konrad Kalejs, who died in 2001 at the age of 88 before being convicted of Nazi war crimes in Latvia. While the Australian government drew criticism for its failure to convict, it is probably worth noting that Kalejs had previously evaded prosecution in Britain, Canada and the U.S.

[2] Suzanne D. Rutland, *The Jews in Australia* (Cambridge, 2005), pp.155 and 158.

[3] Paul P. Bartrop, *Australia and the Holocaust 1933-45* (Kew, Victoria, 1994). See also Rutland, *Jews in Australia.*

[4] Helen Demidenko, *The Hand that Signed the Paper* (Sydney, 1994); Christos Tsiolkas, *Dead Europe* (Sydney, 2005). On the historical dimensions of the 'Demidenko affair', see the work of Robert Manne, e.g. *The Culture of Forgetting: Helen Demidenko and the Holocaust* (Melbourne, 1996). On 'performative anti-Semitism' in Tsiolkas, see Graham Huggan, 'Vampires, Again', *Southerly*, Vol. 66 (2006), pp.192-204.

[5] For a concise account, see Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars* (Melbourne, 2003).

[6] See Inga Clendinnen, 'First Contact', *Australian Review of Books* (May 2001), p.7; also Clendinnen, 'The History Question: Who Owns the Past?' *Quarterly Essay* 23 (2006), pp.1-72.

[7] Inga Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust* (Cambridge, 1999).

[8] Clendinnen, 'First Contact', p.7.

[9] Neil Levi, '"No Sensible Comparison?" The Place of the Holocaust in Australia's History Wars', *History & Memory*, Vol. 10 (2007), p.140.

[10] *Ibid*. p.140. It seems worth pointing out here that some Aboriginal intellectuals, notably Marcia Langton, share Clendinnen's views on the potential symbolic violence perpetrated by terms like 'genocide' and, particularly, 'Holocaust', although there is also historical evidence of their mobilisation by Aboriginal leaders, e.g. in the immediate wake of the Second World War (see Levi, 'No Sensible Comparison?' p.143). In response to a piece by Alexis Wright in which Wright argues for the 'breaking of taboos' on the use of Holocaust analogy to draw attention to the continuing suffering of Aboriginal people, Langton agrees that 'Aboriginal writing, scholarship [and] research are all [increasingly] taking on the feel of Holocaust studies' today. Still, she insists that 'crimes of such enormity [as the Holocaust and the expropriation/elimination of Aborigines] are not comparable in essential ways'. 'There are always original and special taboos', she continues, and 'the taboo on permitting any decency towards Aboriginal people in Australia has a different psychological trajectory and historical origin from the taboo on permitting full citizenship and humanity to Jews'. See 'Marcia Langton Responds to Alexis Wright's "Breaking Taboos"', *Australian Humanities Review*, (Sept./Oct. 1998), http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/copyright.html, accessed 8 July 2009. The original Wright piece is in the same issue.

[11] Levi, 'No Sensible Comparison?', pp.140-41. Emphasis added.

[12] For Freud's original definition of the term, see 'Screen Memories' in J. Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 3. (London, 1955), pp.88-133. For

further discussion of screen memory, see also Miriam Hansen, 'Schindler's List is not Shoah: The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 22 (1996), pp.292-312; Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, 2003); Michael Rothberg, 'The Work of Testimony in an Age of Decolonization: *Chronicle of a Summer*, Cinéma Vérité, and the Emergence of the Holocaust Survivor', *PMLA*, Vol. 119 (2004), pp.1231-46.

[13] Bain Attwood, *Telling the Truth about Aboriginal History* (Sydney, 2005), p.140.

[14] Levi, 'No Sensible Comparison?' p.150.

[15] *Ibid*., p.126.

[16] *Ibid*., pp.141-42. See also Huyssen, *Present Pasts*.

[17] Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (London, 1995), p.215.

[18] 'Limit events', according to Gigliotti, are defined in terms of their 'manifestation of the potential barbarism of modernity, as … extreme event[s] of such uniqueness and incomparability that [they are rendered] incomprehensible to "those who were not there", and of contested representational possibility in historical discourse, literary and visual culture, and in testimonial narratives'. See Gigliotti, 'Unspeakable Pasts as Limit Events: the Holocaust, Genocide, and the Stolen Generations', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* , Vol. 49 (2003), pp.166-67. This begs the question of course of how to compare the incomparable, which is why I have used the qualifying phrase 'aura of incomparability' in order to suggest the possibility of non-identical *relations* between otherwise highly specific 'limit events'.

[19] *Ibid*. p.167.

[20] Gigliotti, 'Unspeakable Pasts', p.169.

[21] *Ibid*., p.167.

[22] *Ibid*., p.168. No space exists in this essay for a discussion of the continuing historical trajectory of debates around the Stolen Generations, one of whose most important landmarks was the official apology offered in 2008 by Kevin Rudd. The critical literature I am drawing on here (Gigliotti, Levi, etc.) is 'pre-apology', though the reparations issue is still very much a live one, and the apology arguably accords with what Levi describes as liberal (or even conservative) views of a reconciliation process organised around the strategic expression of shame rather than the full acknowledgement of guilt. 'Shame' and 'guilt' are organising categories, too, for many of the central debates in the German History Wars. For an important essay comparing the German to the Australian History Wars, see Dirk Moses, 'Coming to Terms with Genocidal Pasts in Comparative Perspective' in Anja Schwarz and Russell West-Pavlov (eds.), *Polyculturalism and Discourse* (Amsterdam, 2007), pp.4-9.

[23] *Ibid*., p.14.

[24] Moses, 'Coming to Terms', p.16. See also David Sorkin, *The Transformation of German Jewry, 1780-1840* (Oxford, 1987).

[25] Moses, 'Coming to Terms', p.17.

[26] Germany's History Wars, like Australia's, are inherently complex despite the polarising rhetoric that often surrounds them, and themselves historically differentiated, often operating along the history-memory axis in an attempt to account for the multifaceted nature of the National Socialist past. For a useful introductory discussion, see Martin Broszat and Saul Friedländer, 'A Controversy about the Historicization of National Socialism' in Peter Baldwin (ed.), *Reworking the Past: Hitler, the Holocaust, and the*

Historians' Debate (Boston, 1990). Also like the Australian, the German History Wars are best seen in terms of a number of not necessarily compatible debates and possibly incommensurable 'stages'. Moses picks out three such 'stages' in the 1980s and 1990s: the 'Historians' Debate' (*Historikerstreit*) of the mid to the late '80s, the 'Goldhagen Debate' a decade later, and discussions about the travelling exhibition on German war crimes and the Berlin Holocaust Museum in the late '90s ('Coming to Terms', p.6). For alternative perspectives on the *Historikerstreit*, see Baldwin, *Reworking the Past*; also Charles Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: Hitler, Holocaust and German National Identity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1988).

[27] For a detailed discussion of the term 'perpetrator trauma' and the forms it takes, see Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore, 1995). It is interesting that in Australia, as in Germany, debates around the Holocaust and/or genocide are nearly always debates around the viability of national identity, whether this is seen (by the Right) in terms of a recovered, if necessarily more inclusive, nationalism or (by the Left) in terms of a nation purged of nationalist hubris and/or aware of the 'bankruptcy of the national ideal' (Moses, 'Coming to Terms', p.6). I will come back to this point later in the essay.

[28] Moses, 'Coming to Terms', p.11.

[29] Padraic McGuinness, 'Aboriginal History: Black and White Views Won't Do', *The Sydney Morning Herald* (16 Nov. 2000); also quoted in Moses, 'Coming to Terms', p.12.

[30] Moses, 'Coming to Terms', p.19.

[31] Moses, 'Coming to Terms', p.18. See also Colin Tatz, 'Genocide in Australia', *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 1 (1999), pp.315-52; Tzvetan Todorov, 'Abuses of Memory', *Common Knowledge*, Vol. 1 (1996), pp.6-26.

[32] Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice* (London, 2002), p.127; also quoted in Levi, 'No Sensible Comparison?', p.146.

[33] Levi, 'No Sensible Comparison?', p.146.

[34] Liesel is saved when, reading in the basement, she is improbably protected from bombs that destroy her entire neighbourhood. This event, which is recounted quite late in the text, establishes *The Book Thief* as a retrospective survivor narrative. For the novel's approach to this genre, and its possible relation to (post-) Holocaust elegy, see the discussion below.

[35] Michael Robert Dennis's useful definition of the grief account is as follows: 'Grief accounts are written and published tales of fiction or non-fiction that prominently feature grief, its meanings, and its inevitable mystery. Unlike pathography and illness narratives, the grief account focuses primarily on the bereavement and grieving of survivors'. See his essay 'The Grief Account: Dimensions of a Contemporary Genre', *Death Studies*, Vol. 32 (2008), p.802.

[36] *Ibid.* pp.817-18.

[37] Moses, 'Coming to Terms', p.3.

[38] *Ibid*., pp.5-7.

[39] Graham Huggan, *Extreme Pursuits: Travel/Writing in an Age of Globalization* (Ann Arbor, 2009), p.150. See also Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, Postmemory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1997). Postmemory is seen by Hirsch in terms of a condition of belatedness characterised by the impossibility of access to the original experience. Post-Holocaust elegy, which is separated both

temporally and spatially from survivor accounts, is perhaps the prime example of the literary engagement with postmemory; in this sense, Zusak's *The Book Thief*, a post-Holocaust elegy rather than a simulated survivor narrative, stands in a *further* relation of postmemory to Memerling's embedded text of the same name. For further reflections on (post-) Holocaust elegy, see Huggan, *Extreme Pursuits*; also Jack Zipes and Leslie Morris, *Unlikely History: The Changing German Jewish Symbiosis, 1941-2000* (Basingstoke, 2002).

[40] Markus Zusak, *The Book Thief* (Sydney, 2008), pp.244-56.

[41] Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis, 2000), p.218.

[42] *Ibid*., pp.218-19.

[43] This wholesale borrowing might give the impression that *The Book Thief* is postmodernist, but a better term for it is Michael Rothberg's 'traumatic realism', which – in his own words – 'revives the project of realism, but only because it knows that it cannot revive the dead' (*Traumatic Realism*, p.140). Traumatic realism, Rothberg suggests, is 'an aesthetic bound to survival' and, as such, is future-oriented. 'The traumatic realist project is an attempt not to reflect the traumatic event mimetically but to *produce* it as an object of knowledge and to *transform* its readers so that they are forced to acknowledge their relationship to posttraumatic culture' (*Ibid*. p.140; emphasis Rothberg's). To what extent *The Book Thief* succeeds in this task is discussed in the section below.

[44] On the spatiality of memory, see *The Art of Memory* (London, 1966), Frances Yates's seminal work on the architectonics of memory in Classical, Medieval and Renaissance philosophy. More recently, see *Landscape and Memory* (New York, 1995), Simon Schama's historical reflections on the sedimentation of memory in landscape; and Pierre Nora's exhaustive seven-volume study, *Les Lieux de mémoire* (Paris, 1984-93).

[45] Zusak, *Book Thief*, pp.583-84.

[46] The classic study of *Unheimlichkeit*, of course, is Freud's 1919 essay 'The Uncanny' in J. Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 17 (London, 1955), pp.217-52. For an interesting application of this concept to Australia, see Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation* (Melbourne, 1998).

[47] The exchange value of Holocaust memory can be seen as belonging, not only to what Norman Finkelstein indelicately calls the 'Holocaust industry', but to a wider global memory industry characterised by the increasing commodification of memory in consumer-driven late-capitalist society – a society in which, as I have argued elsewhere, an ever-growing number of pseudo-historical reconstructions and commercially viable memorabilia has granted the illusion of access to, while effectively substituting for, the lived experiences of the past. See Norman G. Finkelstein, *The Holcaust Industry: Reflections on Jewish Suffering* (London, 2001); also Graham Huggan, 'Cultural Memory in Postcolonial Fiction: The Uses and Abuses of Ned Kelly', *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 20 (2002), pp.142-54. For an account of the dangers attendant on the commodification of Holocaust memory, see Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*; for a more general discussion of the global memory history, see Sherwin Lee Klein, 'The Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse', *Representations*, Vol. 69 (2000), pp.127-48. See also the further discussion of Finkelstein and Huyssen below.

[48] Zusak, *Book Thief*, p.372.

[49] Zusak is sometimes seen as a children's author, though this tends to be for works other than *The Book Thief*, which is generally categorised by publishers and retailers as a 'young adult' book. 'Children's literature', in any case, is a remarkably capacious category, and is sometimes taken as including books for younger readers, books featuring child protagonists or narrators, and books that self-consciously mediate between child and adult perspectives. *The Book Thief* is probably best seen in this last category, as an adult projection on a child's world, although much of the novel oscillates between a teenage perspective, e.g. in some of the scenes between Rudi Steiner and Liesel Meminger, and a more childlike apprehension—not necessarily restricted to children—of the adult world. For an interesting set of approaches to the representation of history in children's literature, see the essays in Ann Lawson Lucas (ed.), *The Presence of the Past in Children's Literature* (New York, 2003).

[50] Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*, p.215.

[51] *Ibid*. p.216.

[52] *Ibid.* p.257.

[53] A recent example, already influential, is Michael Rothberg's *Multidimensional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, 2009). Taking his cue in part from Huyssen, Rothberg makes a powerful case for the value of a comparative approach to Holocaust memory in which histories of suffering and victimisation speak to one another across time and space.

[54] Levi, 'No Sensible Comparison?', p.125.

[55] Attwood, *Telling the Truth*, p.92.

[56] Levi, 'No Sensible Comparison?', p.147.