# Re-membering the politics of affective-empathic approaches towards the Holocaust: from identification to (mis)appropriation

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RESUMEN:

Utilizando como referente la aritmética narrativa de la que se vale el United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, este artículo se centra en los procesos de re-articulación a los que ha estado sujeta la memoria del Holocausto, para lo cual se incide en el papel que ha desempeñado la americanización del Holocausto, pero también otros procesos más recientes de (re)escritura. Se prestará especial atención a los usos que alientan, por medio de la analogía, un acercamiento afectivo y empático al sufrimiento del Otro. Estas (re)escrituras, promovidas por las interacciones que caracterizan diversos aspectos de la vida contemporánea, evocan el recuerdo del genocidio nazi como pretexto para que los grupos victimizados reclamen reconocimiento por el sufrimiento al que han estado expuestos e interpretan, con una maniobra a la que William F. S. Miles se ha referido como "nativización intelectual", el pasado a la luz de la experiencia histórica del Holocausto. Ese es precisamente el proceso al que recurre Caryl Philipps en *The Nature of Blood*, donde propone una respuesta al Holocausto mediada por los tropos y las figuras que definen la época postcolonial. Al hilo de las acusaciones de apropiación del Holocausto surgidas con motivo de estos enfoques basados en la identificación, el artículo reflexiona también sobre las cuestiones que suscita la transformación del Holocausto en un paradigma de moralidad abierto.

**Palabras clave:** Holocausto, memoria, identificación, apropiación, (re)escritura

ABSTRACT:

Starting with an analysis of the narrative arithmetic at work at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, this paper focuses its attention on the process of memory re-articulation to which the Holocaust has been subject, first and foremost, through its Americanisation but also through other more recent meaning-shaping forces. Special emphasis will be placed on uses that press —through analogy— for an affective-empathic approach towards cases of Others' suffering. These rewritings —fostered by the spiraling interactions that characterise various aspects of modern life— use the memory of the Nazi genocide as a venue for victims' groups to battle over recognition of the oppression inflicted upon them and also to understand, by means of a process which William F. S. Miles refers to as "intellectual nativization", their past in terms of the historical experience of the Holocaust. Such is, for example, the process at work in Caryl Philipps' *The Nature of Blood*, a response to the Holocaust mediated by the tropes and figures available at the postcolonial era. At the light of the accusations of Holocaust appropriation elicited by this kind of identification-based approaches, the paper shall also reflect on the issues at stake in the transformation of the Holocaust into an unbound "morality" paradigm.

**Keywords:** Holocaust, memory, identification, appropriation, (re)writing

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The preeminence of Holocaust memory, which reached its high-peak in terms of public awareness in the year 1994 (Cole, 2000: 177), has remained unabated into the new millennium in spite of voices that suggest that the *The Holocaust Is Over* (Burg, 2008). Certainly, the place of the Holocaust is at present firmly entrenched in public consciousness. Hillary Clinton's (2014) recent comparison of Vladimir Putin to Adolf Hitler in relation to Russia's invasion of Ukraine's Crimea region is a point in case. This Putin-Hitler commentary illustrates, furthermore, the decisive influence of Holocaust memory in the construction of current transnational politics. Films like *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (Herman, 2008), which is on the scale of *Schindler's List* (Spielberg, 1993) in terms of the impact of the story and the connection of the characters with the audience, or the spawning hundreds of YouTube videos entitled "Hitler Finds Out…" based on a pinnacle scene from *Der Untergang* (Hirschbiegel, 2004), show that Holocaust memory is still situated in the mainstream of cultural narratives. There is, in short, good reason for thinking, together with Berel Lang, that "the Holocaust *has* a future" (1999: 174).

On the basis of the examples above we may venture to say that such a future lies not in the sociohistorical factual reality of the Nazi world but rather in memory constructions accommodated to conform to more than just repositories of evidence and to facts and statistics. It lies, in effect, in dispersed and fractured discourses and layers of representation, increasingly deterritorialised from history and, hence, from the event's original historical reference. Given that forecasting must remain tentative at best, this paper will concentrate not on prospective Holocaust memory forms but rather on some of the most influential representations of the last decades. In particular, refiguring products enacted in the twenty-year lapse in between 1990 and 2010, which have determined the ways of looking at the Holocaust at the dawn of the twenty-first century and will probably determine the response to the event in the years to come.

The focus will be on the process of memory rearticulation to which the Holocaust has been subject, first and foremost, through its Americanisation but also through other more recent meaning-shaping related forces, with special emphasis on uses that press—through analogy—for an affective-empathic approach towards cases of Others' suffering. These new readings use the memory of the Nazi genocide as a venue for victims' groups to battle over recognition of the oppression inflicted upon them and also to understand, by means of a process which William F. S. Miles refers to as "intellectual nativization", their past in terms of the historical experience of the Holocaust (qtd. in Rosenfeld, 2015: 92). Such is, for example, the process at work in Caryl Philipps' *The Nature of Blood* (1997), a response to the Holocaust mediated by the tropes and figures available at the postcolonial era. At the light of the accusations of Holocaust appropriation elicited by this kind of identification-based approaches, the paper will also reflect on the issues at stake in the transformation of the Holocaust into an unbound "morality" paradigm.

## 2. FROM THE AMERICANISATION TO ITS COSMOPOLITANISATION / NATIVISATION

What critics have termed the "Americanization of the Holocaust" (Berenbaum, 1987; Rosenfeld, 1997) is a multifaceted phenomenon involving intricate birthing processes that include, among others, popularisation and commercialisation. While our intention is far from offering a careful evaluation of the steps whereby the Holocaust has been made digestible for Americans, we consider necessary examining a widely-discussed example of a process that was a key player in making the Holocaust take centre stage and in propelling the cosmopolitasation (Levy and Sznaider, 2006) / nativisation (Berenbaum, 1986; Cole, 2004) of its memory. Our attention will thus be first directed to the institutionalised representation of the Holocaust that takes place in and through the United States' national museum, hereafter referred to as the USHMM.

The USHMM —with its prime location on the symbolic centre of American life and its popularity among visitors— is at present the worldwide leading institution of Holocaust research and documentation, and, by extension, a reference regarding current trends in Holocaust commemoration. Bearing these points in mind, a thorough analysis of the arithmetic of the museum's Holocaust narrative is likely to reveal the values at play in the museum's view of the event, defined as follows:

> The Holocaust was the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and *murder of six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators*. "Holocaust" is a word of Greek origin meaning "sacrifice by fire." The Nazis, who came to power in Germany

in January 1933, believed that Germans were "racially superior" and that the Jews, deemed "inferior," were an alien threat to the so-called German racial community.

During the era of the Holocaust, *German authorities also targeted other groups* because of their perceived "racial inferiority": Roma (Gypsies), the disabled, and some of Slavic peoples (Poles, Russians, and others). Other groups were persecuted on political, ideological, and behavioural grounds, among them Communists, Socialists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and homosexuals. [emphasis not in the original] ("Holocaust", n.d.)

As for the significance of the information specified in the USHMM's definition of the Holocaust, the first meaning-relevant factor is the wording, which includes an explicit reference to all Nazi victims. The gesture seems to indicate that the museum refuses to enter into a competition in suffering by being sensitive to human rights violations in general. However, at a more profound level, this definition shows a contested and problematic view of the Holocaust in the sense that its approach does not correspond to one-single shared and uniform idea of memory. If order of appearance is to be interpreted as the degree of importance attached to the information, then it may be inferred that the museum's vision of the Holocaust favours an institutional description of the Nazi crimes ("systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution"), for the targets of such crimes ("six million Jews" and "other groups") are specified in the second place.

It must be noted, moreover, that the purportedly non-competitive philosophy framework is set side by side with an approximation that lists Jews in the first place, granting them "special status" and recognising in this way differences between Nazi treatment of this group and of non-Jewish minorities. Even though there is no denying that Jews are maintained at the core of the museum, it is no less true that space is allowed too for the plight of non-Jews in the Holocaust. The decision may be interpreted as an attempt at brokering a compromise between portraying the Jewish genocide as unique and expanding the boundaries of memory to the suffering claims of other groups. Briefly put, it is possible to argue that the narrative constructed in the museum through this definition aims at reconciling the two rival narratives about the Holocaust: the uniqueness vs. universalist approach.

There seems, however, to be a certain degree of mismatch between the morphological structure of the museum's mission statement and its semantics—as observable in the narrative underlying the historical artefacts, atrocity photographs, explanatory notes and file footage that make the self-guided permanent exhibition. For the sake of brevity, we will focus only on the meaning to be derived from the *doppelgänger*-like phenomenon that museum organisers intend to create for visitors and that consists of putting them in the shoes of victims. In order to meet that purpose, they receive, upon entrance to the exhibit area, an ID card —similar in size and shape to a passport— of an actual person who lived in Europe in between 1933 and 1945. The particular Holocaust experience of this person, whose age and sex may be selected to make them match those of the card holder, is chronicled through biographical data; namely, details regarding the person, whether s/he was a Jew or a non-Jew and whether s/he survived the war or perished at the hands of the Nazis (DeCrane, 2004: 153; Shandler, 2009: 118-119; Crownshaw, 2010: 205-238). As for the aim of the cards, they seek —as explained by the USHMM— to bring the Holocaust closer to the visitors by helping them "personalize the historical events of the time", a purpose which, from our point of view, is not fully met ("Identification Cards"). Even admitting that the battle waged in the exhibition attempts at bringing individualism in conjunction with universalism, we consider that the effect caused by such dualistic thinking is far from being truly founded on a dialogue where there are several voices heard. As a matter of fact, the invitation to make the "I" become the "other" occurs in a context which is, using the terminology of Emmanuel Levinas (1961), asymmetrical: the position of the "I" (who is present) is different from the position of the "other" (who is absent), causing a methodological problem.

The museum's call for visitors to establish an emotional-affective tie with the victims does bring them into contact with the individual names and with the faces behind the abstract horror story of the Holocaust that emerges from statistics and death toll data. Yet, all of this information resonates in a semantic referential void or, more worryingly, in a context peopled with the connotations of a different language, culture and history, paving the way for visitors to rewrite the traumatic experience of a real person via narrative. Visitors, Richard Crownshaw argues, are urged to "re-echant" and "appreciate" the

objects that make up the exhibition's *mise-en-scène* in an "auratic" fashion and thus to build a fantasy-construct of their own (including elaboration, selection, edition or completion), confusing "irrefutable evidence that the Holocaust happened with the museum's particular interpretation". It is such a factor which, in his opinion, causes visitors to "naturalize the nationalisation of Holocaust memory" (2010: 230). Paradoxical though this may seem, this is a form of universalism and not of "individualisation", which was, according to the USHMM's mission statement, meant to be the initial goal.

The Americanisation of the Holocaust, however, is not the sole development that sustains the tendency towards universalism, which has, on a larger scale, been fostered by the spiralling interactions that characterise various aspects of modern life—especially increased globalisation, migration and other forms of mobility. With higher amounts of interconnectedness and interdependence among/of people, ideas and products, an "intensification of worldwide social relations" has occurred, allowing —in the words of Anthony Giddens— for "local happenings [to be] shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa" (1990: 64). Although not explicitly stated in this quote, Giddens' hermeneutical approach to sociology includes, in addition to a spatial matrix, a temporal dimension, for all phenomena occur in space-time series. Concerning this matter, it is now generally accepted that temporal boundaries are bridged in such way that the articulation of the past slides along the continuum of the present and that the presentation of the present necessarily uses voices of the past. Similarly, productive encounters between the local and the global have fostered an *as-yet-unfigured* horizon where space is conceived of as a dialogic milieu of exchange, in the best of cases, and of (mis)appropriation, in the worst possible scenario.

Within this trend, there have been scholars (Peires, 2008; Petersen, 2010) as well as fiction writers (Coetzee, 2007) who have championed, for example, the possibility of gaining insight into apartheid's discriminatory legislation and dogma by drawing parallels between the officially structured policy introduced in South Africa from 1948 to 1994 and the Nuremberg Laws, enacted by the Nazis in 1935 to establish racial segregation. In *History after Apartheid*, Annie E. Coombes puts the limelight on one of the mechanisms used "to historize the possible relationships between apartheid and fascism"

(2003: 84): the pairing of two exhibitions, "Apartheid and Resistance" and "Anne Frank in the World". Coombes stops to consider the comments that the two exhibitions —shown jointly in March 1994 at the Museum Africa in Johannesburg— elicited among schoolchildren: "We need to learn from history. If we had learnt from the example of Nazi Germany, apartheid wouldn't have happened here" (qtd. in Coombes, 2003: 85), which she takes as illustrative of the extent to which South Africans' collective imaginary is overlaid with memories of the Third Reich.

Leaving aside the inadequacy of establishing a connection between the Nazis' extermination programme and a policy that —no matter how abhorrent— was never an attempt to annihilate the black community, reflections such as the one above are illustrative of the fact that a via for dialogue and transfer has been opened in our contemporary world. The example is indicative, moreover, of the fact that even conventional historical research has come to accept that occurrences belonging to a specific spatio-temporal context can be explained by reference to other events. The crossed purposes that have accumulated around the Holocaust uniqueness debate also show that it is increasingly difficult not to relapse into comparison. Michael Berenbaum has made the point, reflecting on the irony implicit in the fact that the foundations on which uniqueness defendants base their theory of incommensurability are premised on analogy: "[A] secular translation of Jewish choseness wherein a people's specialness, once derived spiritually from the divine revelation at Sinai, is now recast as the inheritance of those wronged by the demonic anti-God […] who acted at Auschwitz" (2008: 27). In light of such paradoxical evidence, in this paper we are advancing the position that it is shallow and reductive to dismiss comparison as a valid methodology, though room should be allowed to admit that insistence on the comparability of the Holocaust is no less deprived of intentionality.

In "From History to Memory and back Again", where Gavriel D. Rosenfeld (2015: 78-121) expounds on the competing lines— mixing envy and hostility—along which the question of Holocaust uniqueness has unfolded since it erupted in earnest in the 1990s, attention is drawn not only to the articulation of uniqueness proponents but also to the polemical arguments used by some minority groups in America when putting forth their favour claims relating to Holocaust comparability. The conflicting points of view offered by African

Americans and Native Americans in order to make their case, include arguments as the one held by David E. Stannard. This Professor of American Studies, who is the author of the *American Holocaust* (1992), has gone as far as accusing Jews of acting in the same way as those whom they accuse of trivialising or diminishing their experiences, so that, in the process, he has implicitly ordered victim groups along a hierarchy of suffering:

> The wilful maintenance of public ignorance regarding the geno-cidal and racist horrors against indigenous peoples that have been and are being perpetrated by many nations in the Western Hemisphere, including the United States […] is consciously aided and abetted and legitimized by the actions of Jewish unique-ness advocates, [whose] claims of uniqueness for their own people […] are synonymous with [the] denial of the experience of others. (Stannard, 1996: 198)

The problem is that entering into such calculus of victimisation —a quest for vis-ibility pejoratively referred to as "Victim Olympics" (Govier, 2015: 60)— is sterile because it leads nowhere; or, if not to such an extent fruitless, it is at least ill-constructed and has thus baneful effects, for it directs claims for recognition against other victims, rather than against perpe-trators. In the case of the Holocaust, the phenomenon has, additionally, contrib-uted to creating an ever-increasing divide between those who are critical and those who are supportive of Holocaust compara-bility, allowing only an oblique approxima-tion to the understanding of the context in which the Holocaust is remembered. In other words, efforts to repudiate com-parison or, on the other hand, to chant the virtues of examining the differences and similarities between genocides / trau-matic events divert attention away from the reality of Holocaust commemoration at the dawn of the twenty-first century: the fact that Holocaust memory —whether we like it or not— is increasingly cosmo-politanised / nationalised and that the future lies in considering the politics at work in such processes (informed by dif-ferent forms of othering) as well as in the interests at stake in the positions of iden-tification and appropriation.

3. THE ROLE OF ANALOGY IN PROCESSES OF "OTHERING"

In reality, the processes that have pushed dialogism further are, in the words of Michael Rothberg, "negotiation, cross-ref-erencing and borrowing" (2009: 3), which, in turn, are nothing but the final result of the passage of time. Time has produced an ever-increasing quota of detachment from the historical event, making the Hol-ocaust lose geographic and national spe-cificity and opening the ground for new meaning possibilities —including perspec-tives that involve looking at the Holocaust from cultural lenses.

In addition to such a natural and unavoid-able trend, another of the reasons for the emergence of social-discourse sets around the memory of the Nazi genocide is the fact that the Holocaust stands as a generalised symbol of radical evil and human suffering. Even "if not unique, [it is] exemplary" in the sense of a paradigmatic window through which other issues may be addressed (Hungerford, 2003: 112). It has, in fact, attained such emblematic status that the memory of the Holocaust is now viewed as a signifying shortcut to abstract categories or values: evilness, inhumanity, brutality, dehumanisation, hatred, etc. It is within such a context that Holocaust memory has started to be used as a discursive framework that allows for the effective theorising of issues emerg-ing from genocide and other criminal offenses (e.g. patterns of extermination; popular receptivity to propaganda; ways in which mass violence originates and develops; civic prospects for the promo-tion of tolerant, inclusive and pro-social behaviour, etc.) and for forming alliances and partnerships (e.g. cross-referenc-ing, identification, appropriation) among oppressed and victimised groups —both in the academia and the larger society.

As far as the gamut of issues behind the use of the Holocaust as an evocative met-aphor is concerned, it has already been noted that one of the outcomes of the Nazi genocide becoming culturally multi-accentual is that the memory of the event has moved —namely through analogi-cal reasoning— beyond the constraints imposed by the historical facts (i.e. the what, the who, the when, the why and the where). This way, a multiplicity of mean-ings —built upon insights taken from con-texts such as academic feminism (Patraka, 1999; Raphael, 2003), postcolonial theory (Rothberg, 2009; Craps, 2013) or geno-cide studies (Smith, 2002; Bloxham and Dirk, 2010)— have emerged, envisioning what Rothberg has termed a "multidirec-tional matrix" (2009: 34) of resistance. This matrix guides discussions on a wide range of issues: from AIDS to abortion or gay rights (Novick, 2000: 241). The pro-

found transformation undergone by Holocaust memorialisation reveals, therefore, the need of speaking of memories in the plural rather than memory in the singular and also of taking into account that memory-work is increasingly encroaching onto non-Holocaust related issues, a process that produces cultural tensions and f(r)ictions and whose resolution is far from simple. One of the challenges concerned with regard to the dynamics of meaning-construction is the danger of (mis)appropriation through forms of "othering".

Before looking at the actual dangers of using analogy as a means to come to terms with the Holocaust (namely, misdirection, oversimplification and appropriation), it seems reasonable to determine, first, how do these perceptions of likeness work and what do they serve for. In the explanation provided by Bourmans and Davis, analogy is the transfer of "a conceptual content from one subject, termed the source, to another subject, termed the target, so as to re-characterize the meaning of the latter" (2010: 70). That is to say, it is a form of comparison, whose value lies in providing a gateway to the comprehension of realities which are either new or unusual by establishing a connection with something already known or, at least, more familiar to us. The process allows gathering a big amount of cognitively relevant content in a simple and efficient way, yielding a valuable survey from which to probe into complex subjects and to inquire into their implications. It serves, for instance, to impart insights and knowledge, to form hypotheses and to determine problems.

Considering, on the one hand, the epistemological dimension of analogy and, on the other hand, the meaning-resistant quality surrounding the Holocaust, it should not be surprising that this mechanism has been used to open a gateway through which to gain some degree of understanding to the aftereffects and reverberations of this event's ineffable significance. The exploratory tools on which analogy is built (mental representation, simulation and hypothetising, among others) provide, in effect, the means to bridge the gap caused by an event which has been repeatedly described as potentially unknowable because it does not fit in the figures, forms, archetypes and conventions available to us (Lanzmann, 1995: 104; Lyotard, 1988: 13; Wiesel, 1990: 166). Being a heuristic means of knowledge, analogies contribute to framing perspectives and it is from this altered viewpoint that it is possible to translate

the event's status as a black hole that swallows meaning into a familiar mimetic universe. It is in that sense that we argue that analogy, which enables outreaching the unimaginable brutality derived from the conversion of the murdered dead into statistics, is fertile with possibilities; though also with problems.

The potential of analogy as a source to construct relations can be seen through one of the threshold events in the creation of global awareness of the Nazi genocide: the Eichmann trial, whose commentators used analogy in order to build frames of reference and raise questions relating to justice and crimes against humanity. The State of Israel, for example, justified jurisdiction over the Eichmann case by invoking the piracy analogy (Kontorovich, 2004). Apart from paving the path for the internationalisation of jurisdiction over mass atrocities, analogy was utilised during the run of the proceedings to gain historiographical and psychological understanding of the Nazi genocide. Several critics, including Susan Sontag (1966), Judith E. Doneson (1987) and Jeffrey Shandler (2001), have revealed the role of the media in making accessible and understandable the historical, juridical and moral issues surrounding the case and in offering background on Nazism and the so-called Final Solution. In his research into the conceptualisation of the Eichmann trial offered by Israeli and American televisions, Jeffrey Shandler (2001: 100) sheds light on the associations invoked by journalists in their attempt to offer some insight into Eichmann's character and, in turn, into the reasons that may have motivated planned annihilation. Although differing in approach, Shandler argues that both Israeli and American journalists made the most of the inherent possibilities of visual records (camera angles, length of shots, videotaped editing, among others), seeking to place emphasis on aspects which are normally discarded as unimportant but are highly symbolic: physical presence and demeanour, voice and eye and face movements. More specifically, he notes that the footage of the trial was used to shape the public's perspective, magnifying key aspects and leaving the door open to interpretation through analogy. In relation to this, he suggests that the televised image of Eichmann served to lay the ground for the public to draw comparisons between the defendant's external appearance and his inner Nazi character; or, from a more general perspective, to establish connections between his behaviour and the nature of evil. The association made by Leyb Rakhman, who called

attention to the similarities between Eichmann and other famous anti-Semites, is singularly telling in this sense: "Torquemada and Chmielnicki, Haman and Hitler, their shadows filled Eichmann's glass cell" (1961: 2).

Even if the example of the Eichmann case shows that analogies can be useful in transferring knowledge of one concept to an unknown reality and in suggesting the manner in which A and B are alike, consideration should also be given to the fact that they necessarily constitute a step towards generalisation. As part of the search-for-meaning process that characterises analogical reasoning, analogies simplify knowledge by resorting to deletion and essentialism: they involve, indeed, the formulation of a reality by reducing it to its basic essentials and by putting factuality to one side, which makes some degree of distortion inevitable. All these things added it is possible to say that there is a sense in which analogy is highly problematic. The true meaning of the problem becomes clear when examining the conflicting stakes and ethical implications surrounding Holocaust commemoration. Adorno set the stage for this fundamental concern, which revolves around the moral appropriateness of struggling to know, understand and find meaning in the Holocaust. Little more needs to be said about how alarming it is to attempt to create the illusion that the Holocaust is graspable. Among the variety of questionable turnings that this practice may lend itself to, we may include steps that involve transforming the complex and multifarious events that make up the Nazi genocide into identifiable meaning units. Steps on such path lay the ground for what Ruth Franklin (2004) calls an "identity theft" or, without going so far, they confuse the position of the self and the other. Commenting on the risks associated with such kind of identification, Elke Heckner notes that there exists the possibility that "the position of the victim is potentially usurped" by the self who empathises with the other (2008: 78).

Using Holocaust-based analogies as a mechanism to gain access —through emphatic identification— to the experience of a subjectivity other than ours and to feel somebody else's discomfort, trauma and disorientation is —to say the least— problematic. Concerns have been largely expressed with regard to those representations of victimhood where the distinction between the I and the Other is blurred, so that dissociation leads to a complex web of interrelations between the

concepts of "borrowing" and "utilisation". Illustrative of such trend are groups that have borrowed the memory of the Holocaust to draw analogies with a landscape of prejudice and racism that is beyond the oppression encountered by the victims of the Holocaust. Individual identification has also occurred, as revealed by the unmasking of Benjamin Wilkomirski's fraudulent autobiography of a child-Holocaust survivor, *Fragments* (1996).

Although understanding the clamour around the possibility of Holocaust (mis) appropriation, Michael Rothberg contends that identification and cross-referencing also give way to "complex acts of solidarity in which historical memory serves as a medium for the creation of new communal and political identities" (2009: 11). He goes even further arguing that postcolonial studies can learn from the Jewish experience and the other way round: "Shared histories of racism, spatial segregation, genocide, diasporic displacement, cultural destruction, and —perhaps most important— savvy and creative resistance to hegemonic demands provide the grounds for new forms of collectivity that would not ignore equally powerful histories of division and difference" (2009: 23). This is singularly true at a time at which the pervasiveness and popularity around human rights and equality in political discourse makes it ever more difficult to judge a certain memory on its own terms, for doing so triggers accusations of ethnocentrism. In relation to this, several scholars have called attention over the dangers implicit in looking at genocide exclusively from the point of view of its surviving victims or its ethno-kin. H. R. Huttenbach, for example, warns that taking such stand may lead genocide research and study to be "more apologetic, hagiographic, public relations-minded, and politically correct" (2004: 90), which he considers contravenes the need to look at history from a distanced, objective point of view.

## 4. AN EXAMPLE OF "OTHERING": CARYL PHILIPPS' *THE NATURE OF BLOOD*

Caryl Philipps' Holocaust contribution, *The Nature of Blood*, deserves mention in connection to Holocaust (mis)appropriation, for it situates the Nazi genocide in relation to blacks' history. At its most basic, the novel, whose characters share the weight of having suffered persecution and hatred, offers an exploration of the author's plural identity by developing a complex plot made up of several storylines that overlap across space and time. All of its characters struggle against the dislo-

cation and alienation caused by social definitions of the nature of their blood: Eva Stern, whose story is the novel's major narrative, has lost her family to the Nazis despite being a member of an acculturated German Jewish family; fifteenth-century German Jews are admitted at Portobuffole because they are needed as money-lenders, but Venetians —obsessed with keeping their blood pure— fear them and cannot avoid a blood-libel execution that puts three of these Jews to death; Stephan Stern (Eva's uncle) leaves his wife and child behind in Nazi Germany to fight for the racial consolidation of the new Jewish state; the Othello-like character makes clear the difficulty for a Moor to fit in with the white Renaissance Venetian society despite his position as a general; Malka, a black Ethiopian Jew who meets Stephen at the end of the novel, encounters racism in present-day Israel at the hands of her white co-religionists—feeling an outcast in the Jewish homeland.

The novel can be read thus as an exploration into the complex interrelations between black and Jewish cultures, the aim of which is to invite the reader to get involved with cross-culturality and heterogeneity by connecting the racially-motivated attacks on blacks with Jews' share of hatred and displacement. Such attempt is best exemplified through Malka, in whose character three defining traits (black, Jewish and woman) coalesce into a single identity, in such way that the essentialist thinking that fits people into separate categories is called into question (Maxson, 2014: 19). Through Malka, Philipps illustrates one possible way in which Jews' and blacks' identity may be connected and goes one step further by bringing together the suffering history of these two groups. During her encounter with Stephan Stern, Malka (displaced in the State of Israel from the cultural modes and values of her native Africa) ponders on the irony that her people, who "[…] lived as farmers and weavers […] [o]ut in the desert", were being "stored like thinning cattle" (Philipps, 1997: 200) on embassy concrete. For Stef Craps, the crowded cattle image is singularly significant because it explicitly connects blacks and Jews: the passage, he notes, "recalls Eva's description of the crowded boxcar trains in which she and her parents had been forced to travel, like animals, to the concentration camp" (2008: 161).

It is precisely Philipps' decision to draw an analogy on the grounds of Jews' and blacks' common experience of suffering atrocity that has met certain opposition. In a review of the novel that gained notoriety because of its damning tone, Hilary Mantel charged against Philipps for the expropriative scheme of his work: "It is indecent to lay claim to other people's suffering: it is a colonial impulse, dressed up as altruism. The heart may be pure, but more than heart is needed; good motives sometimes paralyse thought. We are not all Jews. That is a simple fact. It is why the Holocaust happened" (1997: 40). In other words, Mantel accused Philipps of having appropriated the experience of Jews by establishing a comparison with black suffering and she criticised the fact that he had had the audacity to violate Holocaust singularity, which she found deeply disturbing. While not a direct response to Mantel's challenging accusation, one of the anecdotes included in *The European Tribe* (1987) —a book of essays where Philipps chronicles a year-long journey through the multiracial Europe of the 1980s— contains the clue to understand the author's decision to promote cross-cultural engagement with others' suffering:

> As a child […] I was staunchly indignant about everything from the Holocaust to the Soviet persecution of Jewry. The bloody excesses of colonialism, the pillage and rape of modern Africa, the transportation of 11 million black people to the Americas, and their subsequent bondage were not on the CV and certainly not on the TV screen. As a result, I vicariously channelled a part of my hunt and frustration through the Jewish experience. (1992 [1987]: 54)

From this exposition of motives, it can be inferred that Philipps' act of bonding is fostered by purity of intention. More specifically, his goal seems to have been driven by the desire to expose colonial genocide in Africa with the aim of providing blacks' suffering some of the manifold visibility of the Jews (acknowledged as the world's historical victims). The passage, however, does not clarify the exact way in which Philipps thinks of blacks' and Jews' history in terms of comparable experiences. It is in an interview conducted shortly after the publication of *The Nature of Blood* where he is more explicit about commonalities:

> It seems to me that what the things that are in common are, you have a people who have suffered geographical displacement, which in itself is a traumatic thing for any group of people to suffer based on their race, their ethnicity, their religion, but […] in the modern world that has definitely

happened to the Jewish diaspora and that has happened to people of the African diaspora [...]. (Romain, 2013: 135)

In light of these words, it is possible to argue that Philipps bases the similarities of Jews' and blacks' experiences not on a common "root" but rather on the central role that "routes" play for Diaspora cultures; or, put differently, not on national homogeneity but rather on cultural exchange. Such a paradigm of thinking, which is based on cross-cultural engagement, provides the groundwork for overcoming Eurocentric biases and offers a perspective from which it is possible to give recognition to the suffering of those belonging to non-Western countries. Most significantly, in this formulation —where emotion acts in conjunction with critical inquiry— identification emerges from a feeling that goes beyond mere affinity, empathy, similarity or liking. It involves, as a matter of fact, the capacity of feeling for another in the sense of being that other; that is to say, the capacity to acknowledge the difference between one's own feelings and the experience of the other.

It is in that sense that Stef Craps considers that Philipps' venture is ethical, to the point that he classifies *The Nature of Blood* as a form of "critical empathy", in the terms used by Brecht (1964), or of "empathic unsettlement", using the terminology of Dominick LaCapra (2004). In Craps' own words, the novel goes "some way towards redeeming the ethical promise of trauma studies by promoting such a critical and self-reflexive empathy as conductive to the establishment of a truly inclusive post-traumatic community marked by openness to and respect for otherness" (2008: 158). As for the strategy used by Philipps to establish such a "truly inclusive post-traumatic community", he resorts to the possibilities opened by inter-narrativity and, in particular, to the connections inter-textuality builds with the "outsider" or the "other". Although it is well out of the scope of this paper to consider the novel's inter-textual procedure, we consider necessary to conclude this section highlighting the ambivalent condition that Philipps creates in readers by building contact zones —in the manner of "routes"— through which to come to an encounter with an identity other than the individual's personal identity. Such is, for instance, the intention underlying the rewriting of Othello, where Philipps uses Shakespeare's noble Moor as an example of a demonised stereotype of otherness through whom the experiences of those who are marginalised and excluded are studied.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The examination into some of the various forms of memory politics that have mediated the representation of the Holocaust from the early 1990s into the new millennium reveals, in the first place, that the memory of the event has been deprived of part of its "uniqueness". As a result of this more comprehensive speculative position, a path for the establishment of a degree of likeness/unlikeness with other events has been opened. As pointed out throughout the paper, there are a number of contingent reasons that explain increasing recourse to elaboration and interpretation. The trend has been reinforced by historical changes —especially globalizations and cross-border flows— and also by the fact that contemporary representations are at a temporal remove from the event and are, in consequence, less constrained by historical impositions. This way, the conditions have been created for enabling individuals and communities —regardless of the precise connection to the Nazi crimes— to re-member the "factual" reality of the Holocaust and to contribute in such way to reconfiguring the "official" Holocaust meaning by making it fit the needs, desires and concerns of the present.

Running parallel to these politically-charged responses to the Nazi genocide is the desire for a critically-informed public memory that is respectful to the intellectual and emotional sensitive nature of the Holocaust, which explains why moral concerns have emerged in the case of perspectives that depart from a monological conceptualisation of the events; i.e. open-ended constructions allowing for recontextualisations of the event that put forth a view of the Nazi past that is not static but dynamic and that use its memory for a variety of purposes. Among the number of approaches regarded as controversial are representations that offer the opportunity to bridge —through vicarious identification— the synapse between victim/survivor and, thus, to see through another's eyes or which rip Holocaust memory out of context and make it an abstract conundrum where meaning construction is informed by a wide discursive frame.

The easiest position is to dismiss all new articulations as ill-informed or venal. In this paper we have attempted instead to draw attention to such configurations, which we consider central to understanding the preconceptions, priorities and politics that envelope and influence the present and the future of Holocaust commemoration and to stay alert to abuse.

Moreover, we have put forth the idea that the status of the Holocaust as a paradigmatic genocide and its strong place in the collective memory provides worthwhile opportunities to examine situations and to raise questions that may be very different in terms of culture, politics and history from the reality of Nazi Germany but that can constitute a starting point and a foundation for strengthening awareness about a number of issues. For example, possible responses to criminal offenses, ways to advance in real understanding among ethnic and national groups, the roles and responsibilities of the global community in cases of human rights' violations, measures for the detection of discriminatory actions setting the stage for genocide, capacity to show empathy for the suffering of others or knowledge of the risks of identification becoming a gesture of appropriation.

As seen in this paper, such was the determination of Caryl Philipps in *The Nature of Blood,* where he draws attention to the way in which blacks' and Jews' experiences interfere and overlap, mutually constituting themselves. In bringing together the history of these two groups, the question of what may be gained by drawing a comparison and concerns about the possibility of his analogy representing a case of appropriation have emerged. Admitting that there is a danger that othering results in (mis)appropriation, the point has been made that the solution to reach an ethical compromise may lie in developing a resistance strategy that offers the possibility of participation to different voices, though ensuring that identity does not get mixed up in the process; this way, the specificity of history shall not be downplayed by discursive supremacy.

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