



COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGE

*COMPARATIVE SUFFERING AND ITS
CONSEQUENCES FOR UNIVERSAL
HUMAN RIGHTS*

THE FOUNDATIONS OF HUMAN RIGHTS

“There are such things in the world as human rights. They rest upon no conventional foundation, but are external, universal, and indestructible...I know of no rights of race superior to the rights of humanity, and when there is a supposed conflict between human and national rights, it is safe to go to the side of humanity”

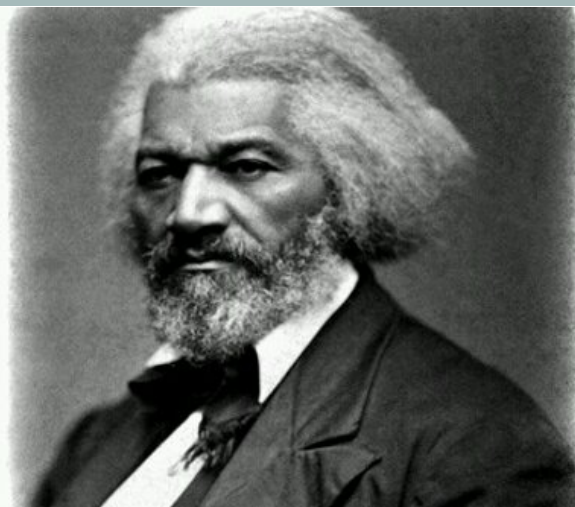
-Fredrick Douglass

“Act only according to that maxim whereby you can will that it should become a universal law”

-Immanuel Kant

“All men are created equal...endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights”

-Thomas Jefferson



POST-1945: WHAT WAS NEW

- A new discourse about human rights grounded in the *ineffability* of atrocity

“Poetry after the Holocaust is barbaric”
-Theodor Adorno

“You, who have never lived under a sky of blood, can never know *what it is like.*”
-Elie Wiesel

THE NEW CRIME OF “GENOCIDE”

Raphael Lemkin’s new language of atrocity

► **Genocide:**

Genes (Genes, tribe) + *Cide* (Caedre, killing)



“I have taken the liberty of inventing the word, "genocide." The term is from the Greek word genes meaning tribe or race and the Latin cide meaning killing. Genocide tragically enough must take its place in the dictionary of the future beside other tragic words like homicide and infanticide.”

-Raphael Lemkin, (April 1945)

UNIVERSALITY AND EXCEPTIONALITY: A PARADOX

- The Holocaust, as a new form of atrocity, stands as an *exceptional form*
- Simultaneously, the Holocaust emerges as a *universal* form

"The practices of genocide anywhere affect the vital interests of all civilized people. Its consequences can neither be isolated nor localized [...] Minorities of one sort or another exist in all countries, protected by the constitutional order of the state. If persecution of any minority by any country is tolerated anywhere, the very moral and legal foundations of constitutional government may be shaken."

—Raphael Lemkin, April 1945

THE COMPARISON TRAP

“Never again means ‘Never again will Germans kill Jews in Europe in the 1940s.’”

-David Rieff

“Perversely...the public awareness of the Holocaust often seems to set the bar for concern so high that we were able to tell ourselves that contemporary genocides were not measuring up” (504).

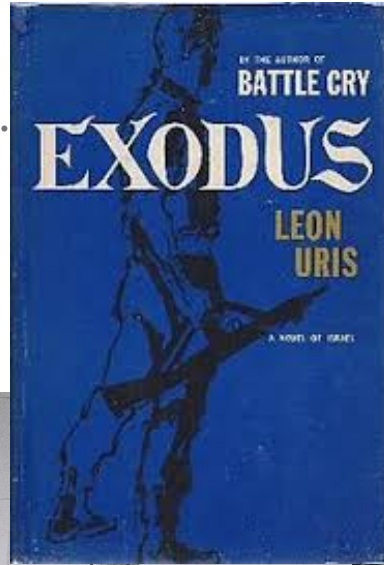
—*Samantha Power, The Problem From Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*



SHIPS PASSING IN THE NIGHT

BLACK/JEWISH MEMORY AND THE PRACTICE OF COMPARISON

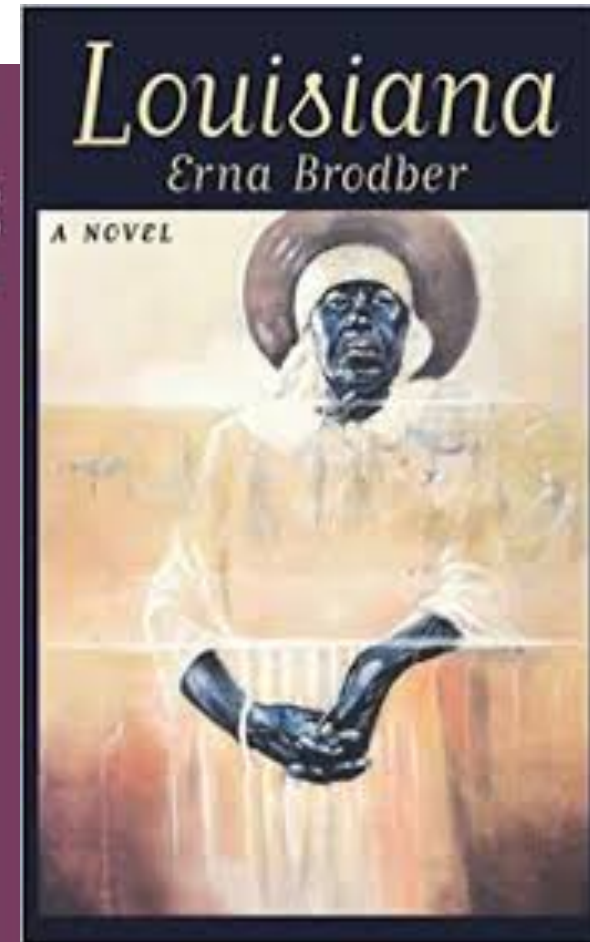
COLLECTIVE METAPHOR



“In the silence surrounding my own history and my own memory, I took to myself the pain of what had happened to the Jewish people in Europe. While I am sure that at some deeper level I knew what had happened to my own people...the journey to my own past came instead through what I *did* know about the suffering of Jews”

-M. NourbeSe Philip
Black/Jewish Relations

AFRICAN / AMERICAN LITERATURE: ROOTS AND ROUTES



THE REPETITION OF A LIKENESS

“White people were, and are, astounded by the holocaust in Germany. White folks did not know that people could act that way. But I very much doubt whether black people were astounded—at least, in the same way...I was, of course, authoritatively assured that what had happened to the Jews in Germany could not happen to the Negroes in America, but I thought, bleakly, it already had.”

—James Baldwin, *Letter from a Region in My Mind*

“Justice Robert H. Jackson, who now sits in the United States Supreme Court bench, described this holocaust to the world in the powerful language with which he opened the Nuremberg trials of the Nazi leaders. Every word he voiced against the monstrous Nazi beast applies with equal weight, we believe, to those who are guilty of the crimes herein set forth. Here we present the documented crimes.”

—*We Charge Genocide: A Historic Petition to the United Nations for Relief From a Crime of the United States Government Against the Negro People*

THE COMMA SPLICE

- (b) *War crimes*: namely, violations of the laws or customs of war. Such violations shall include, but not be limited to, murder, ill-treatment or deportation to slave labour or for any other purpose of civilian population of or in occupied territory, murder or ill-treatment of prisoners of war or persons on the seas, killing of hostages, plunder of public or private property, wanton destruction of cities, towns or villages, or devastation not justified by military necessity;
- (c) *Crimes against humanity*: namely, murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation, and other inhumane acts committed against any civilian population, before or during the war, or persecutions on political, racial or religious grounds in execution of or in connection with any crime within the jurisdiction of the Tribunal, whether or not in violation of the domestic law of the country where perpetrated.

THE POST-HOLOCAUST LEGACY OF COMPARISON

- *Does a post-Holocaust legacy of figuration and metaphors enable or disable articulation and response?*
- *Has metaphorical pairings of Holocaust memory actually activated policies and responses to “never again?”*

“Hiroshima is explained by Auschwitz; Vietnam is described in terms that were used one generation ago.”

-Elie Wiesel, “Why I Write”

COMPETITIVE MEMORY

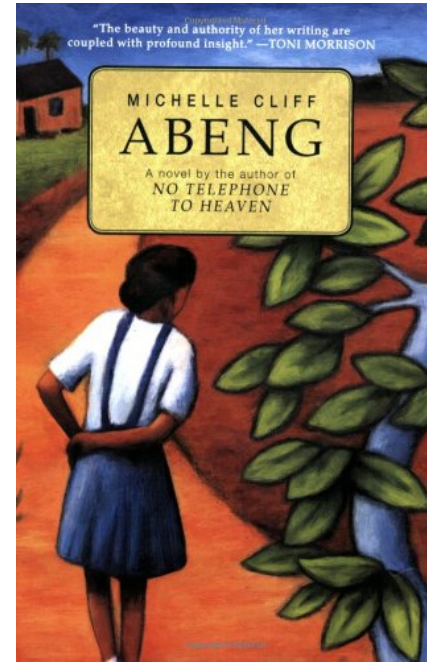
- *Does the centrality of Holocaust memorial culture in articulate and bring to light other cases of atrocity?*
- *OR: has the Holocaust taken center stage, thus keeping other historical events of atrocity in the margins?*

“The assertion that the Holocaust is unique—like the claim that it is singularly incomprehensible or unrepresentable—is, in practice, deeply offensive. What else can all this possibly mean except ‘your catastrophe, unlike ours, is ordinary; unlike ours is comprehensible; unlike ours is representable?’”

—Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*

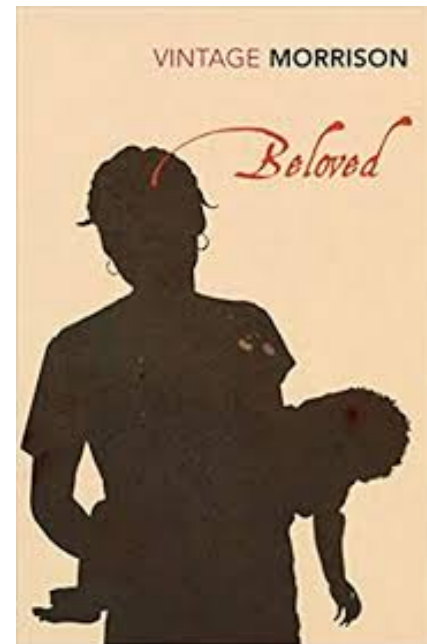
“The smoke from six million bodies burning had passed across the surface of continents [...] across land masses and bodies of water. The smoke from the bodies and the dust from the bodies made a change in the atmosphere—in the air that people breathed and the water they drank.”

-Michelle Cliff, *Abeng*



“To the *sixty million and more.*”

-Toni Morrison, *Beloved*



THE ETHICS AND THE EFFICACY OF COMPARISON

ADVANTAGES of Comparison:

- Intersectionality
- Enables articulation and redress
- Benefit of Holocaust remembrance for futurity

*“Jews are not metaphors.”
-Cynthia Ozick, “A Liberal’s
Auschwitz”*

AGAINST Comparison:

- Overwrite or mute claims to representation
- False Analogies
- Specificity of Jewish experience