# Literary Perspectives on Cultural Memory in Jewish American and Native American Women's Writings

by

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# ABSTRACT


LITERARY PERSPECTIVES ON CULTURAL MEMORY IN JEWISH AMERICAN AND NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN'S WRITINGS



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This project examines representations of cultural memory in late twentieth-century writing by Jewish American and Native American women working in the United States. As a Jewish, non-Indigenous scholar, I compare the work of prominent Ojibwe writer Louise Erdrich with works by a few different Jewish American women writers in three categories of literature: poetry, children's and young adult novels, and fiction. I found that these texts figure women's intergenerational relationships as central to the transference of cultural memory in response to the respective histories of trauma (the disenfranchisement of Indigenous peoples in America, and the Holocaust). By creating a dialogic relationship between the texts, this project demonstrates how a reader from one culturally specific group might engage with representations of their own and another marginalized history alongside one another, without neglecting the cultural specificities of each experience.

## Dedication

For Zaidy, who we lost while I was writing. I miss you. I wear your mother's ring with pride.

For Oma, whose spirit and strength are inimitable.

For Saba, whose speech started it all.

For Savta, who would have loved to read this.

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# Introduction

At the bar mitzvah of his grandson, a man in his late seventies takes to the podium in the luncheon hall to address friends and family with "a tale of two bar mitzvahs." He begins: "First bar mitzvah; it is cold. The bombs are falling." The boy's shoes leak and he is shivering. He arrives at the shul and requests an *aliyah*;[1] when asked, he informs the *shamash*[2] that he does not know the whereabouts of his father. "The big event is a *chamishi*.[3] He gets one *mazal tov* from the *gabai*.[4] Thus ends the story of the first bar mitzvah." At the second bar mitzvah, he notes, it is cold and snowing like the first, but the shul is warm, the guests are happy, and nobody's shoes are leaking. The family is proud of the young man, who did a wonderful job with his *aliyah*, and the rabbi gives a speech. "The *mazal tovs* are flying," he says. "It is a beautiful affair." He concludes that "there must be a moral, or a connection between the two stories."[5]

Among the listeners is his nine-year-old granddaughter. She feels dizzy and starts to tear up, and quietly, she darts out of the reception. Once the speech is over, her mother finds her and promises that the story is ultimately a celebratory one. For some reason, this does not help pull the girl out of her angry fog. She is hesitant to talk to her grandfather for the rest of the event.

<u>The development of this project</u>

The fact that I once fled the room because my Saba[6] was talking about his past seems antithetical to the person I have since become, but this anecdote demonstrates my initial response to a family history that I had never heard discussed in terms of its lingering traumatic effect. In an abstract sense I was already aware that three of my grandparents were Holocaust survivors, but this moment marked the first time I was implored to consider the resonance of these

histories. As a child, my instinct was to run away from what I perceived as an uncharacteristic darkness in my family. I now understand this moment as being formative to my interest in the study of intergenerational trauma, resilience, and memory. The first time my Saba spoke publicly about the Holocaust, he chose to frame his story in explicitly intergenerational terms, drawing a link between his own bar mitzvah and my cousin's nearly seven decades later.

During my undergraduate degree in English, I was exposed to literatures exploring the intergenerational processes of cultural memory. I was interested in texts written by women in relation to histories of crisis, and was especially taken with the work of author Louise Erdrich, a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibwe who grew up in North Dakota and now lives in Minnesota.[7] During her acclaimed writing career, Erdrich has published novels, short stories, children's books, poems, and nonfiction. I credit her explicit treatment of cultural memory concerns with inspiring this project; reading her work prompted me to reflect on my own experience of cultural memory, and this became the basis for a cross-cultural literary analysis.

I searched for a Jewish woman author whose work I could read alongside Erdrich's but failed to find one whose body of work was comparable in both its diversity of genre and its cultural specificity. Upon reading the article "Breaking the Silences: Jewish-American Women Writing the Holocaust" by scholar of Jewish literature David Brauner, which highlighted Jewish American women's contributions in the short story genre, I realized that the intended one-to-one comparative structure was unhelpfully rigid. I elected to restructure my analysis in terms of three literary modes: poetry, children's literature, and fiction. Erdrich has written in each of these modes, and her work will be read alongside the works of a few Jewish American women writers: the poet Irena Klepfisz, the children's and young adult literature writer Jane Yolen, and three

authors of short stories, Cynthia Ozick, Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, and Lesléa Newman. I can attend to the concerns in these works with an underlying cultural understanding, while I view Erdrich's writing as a window through which I, a non-Indigenous scholar, can learn about culturally specific issues. While Erdrich does not claim to speak for the whole of the Ojibwe or wider Native American[8] community (Kurup 10), she has committed to "telling the story of the Ojibwe people" as a way of upholding her cultural heritage (2). As there are many different cultural groups within the Native American community (and anyway there can be no sole representation of a culture's memory-making experiences), I am using Erdrich's extensive body of work to focalize my study, and will be conducting my analyses based on her vision of Ojibwe memory.

This project is concerned with the literary representation of crises whose effects were felt in the United States in the late twentieth century, when the texts were written, and continue to resonate today: specifically, the colonization of Indigenous populations, and the legacy of the Holocaust across borders and generations. I have localized my study to works emerging from the United States because they inherently respond to "American amnesia" (Peterson 4), a crisis affecting marginalized groups whose often painful histories do not share the optimistic, teleological values of mainstream American history (1). Literature thus becomes a "crucial means of narrating [the] wounded and lost histories" (4) of cultural groups minoritized in the United States. My choice to focus exclusively on women writers stems from my desire to explore specific concerns and insights that come from the ethos of womanhood, and to give these concerns further academic and cultural consideration. I am interested in how cultural memory manifests through women's experiences, relationships, and bodies in literature.[9] My goal is to

suggest that reading these texts alongside one another can contribute to active solidarity between marginalized groups. By uniting Native American and Jewish American women's voices through literary analysis, I hope to create a critical dialogue between varied representations of women's cultural memory, trauma, and resilience, and to demonstrate that engaging with another culture's literary expressions can be a gateway to productive communication.

## Background: cultural memory, crises of historical memory, postmemory, and trauma

This thesis is fundamentally concerned with how the authors creatively relay experiences of cultural memory through poetic speakers and fictional characters. Cultural memory is described by scholars Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney as an umbrella term for the "complex ways in which societies remember their past using a variety of media," and the longevity of literary texts allows them to capture the long-term process of cultural memory-making (111). The representation of memory and its associated processes are, and have always been, an important part of literature (Neumann 333), and correspondingly, literature actively contributes to the cultural negotiation of memory (335). I intend to analyze how these texts enforce the intergenerational remembrance of histories of crisis.

Referring to the disenfranchisement of Native Americans, Nancy Peterson notes that histories of colonial violence are often overwritten by the developments of the twentieth century (18) and thus ignored. Contrastingly, the Holocaust, the defining crisis of recent Jewish memory, has become a part of American public discourse (99). There is a legible, well-known narrative associated with the Holocaust, whereas the historical narrative of Native American peoples has been systemically silenced in public memory. Thus, there are different tasks associated with these two prescient crises of memory, and the authors studied in this project undertake different

projects of memory-making in response. Erdrich's works contribute to an ongoing mission of "worldbuilding," writing against the historical attempt to prevent Native Americans from authoring their own histories and experiences. She responds to the expansive, painful history of Indigenous peoples' treatment in America by building a culturally specific narrative on her own terms. James E. Young says that "the initial impulse to memorialize events like the Holocaust may actually spring from an opposite and equal desire to forget them" (181). Thus, the writing of complex Holocaust texts suggests that a singular, flattened narrative of the event is insufficient and stifles historical understanding.

The Holocaust appears to constitute all of Jewish history according to the American cultural canon; since it is so catastrophic, there is a temptation to focus on it alone. The poet Irena Klepfisz, herself a Holocaust survivor, cautions against using the Holocaust (or surviving it) as a way to define what it means to be Jewish in America. Focusing exclusively on the Holocaust alienates people from the extensive history of the Jews, and the other realities of contemporary Jewish life (Peterson 135). This is a difficult yet necessary task for me and many others: since the war years, to be a Jew in America (or Canada, where I am from) often means you arrived there because of the impact of the Holocaust. I would not have been born had the Holocaust not uprooted the lives of my grandparents and their families, and therefore my life and identity are intrinsically bound with their journeys of survival. While my Jewishness does not revolve around Holocaust history, I cannot (and should not try to) extricate myself from it. The enduring ramifications of this attempt to destroy an entire people can never be reversed, and it is important to continue to address the ways in which it has changed Jewish life going forward. In

this project, I am allowing myself the space to parse through literary representations of this part of my history, and to analyze women's Holocaust writing on my own terms.

Through her prolific career, Erdrich has worked to overwrite a fundamental, dangerous American narrative. She creates a complex literary world through specific stories of Ojibwe communities, while the Jewish women writers undertake the task of deconstructing the commodified narrative of a particular historical event. Though these approaches to literary memory-making are theoretically divergent – one writes a history into consciousness and one breaks down a supposedly "known" history – they both respond to the dangers of cultural erasure and co-option by a dominant American narrative in order to communicate nuanced and innovative understandings of their cultural histories.

Marianne Hirsch addresses the evolving discussion about the premise of intergenerational transfer of trauma and memory, in which the Holocaust is a theoretical "touchstone" (1-2). An American academic and professor of English, Hirsch was born in Romania to Holocaust survivors shortly after World War II. She asks the fundamental question of what it means to "relive" a memory that is not one's own, and settles on the term "postmemory." Postmemory is described as something experienced by the "generation after" a personal or collective cultural trauma, as transmitted through stories, images, and behaviours. Simply put, it is the way in which the events of the past resonate potently and affectively in the present for descendants of crisis (4). The notion of postmemory can be related to the more widely studied theory of traumatic memory, which seminal trauma scholar Cathy Caruth describes as "a fundamental enigma concerning the psyche's relation to reality" (91). A history of trauma "is not fully perceived as it occurs; [it] can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence" (18). The

significance of the "latency" (a term Caruth borrows from Freud) of this type of memory is twofold: it is a period during which the effects of the trauma are not readily apparent, as well as referring to the fact that the traumatic experience is not fully known even *while* it occurs (17). Considering these theories together, what does it mean for the "generation after" to feel that they are experiencing the blowback of a reality perhaps not even wholly perceived by their ancestors who lived it? Tending to circulate years after they are written, literary texts can function as touchstones of cultural remembrance and bridges between generations (Erll and Rigney 112); in writing about events from their collective cultural past, the authors of these texts recollect a traumatic history through culturally charged narratives, creating a generational link.

Self-positioning

Creek-Cherokee[10] scholar Craig S. Womack notes that Native voices are emerging from "a historical reality wherein Native people have been excluded from discourse concerning their own culture," and that Native perspectives must be prioritized in the study of Native literatures (242). As someone who is not Indigenous, I recognize the precedence of Indigenous scholars' analyses of their own cultural works. Since I have elected to study an Indigenous writer's work, it is critical that I ground my analyses of Erdrich's texts using principles outlined by Indigenous scholars from various backgrounds and areas of study, and I will draw upon this theoretical work throughout the body of the project.

I find useful the words of Helen Hoy, a non-Indigenous scholar with significant experience studying Indigenous texts, who acknowledges "the impossibility of maintaining the impersonality of the scholarly voice [and] the necessity to make increasingly visible my own implication in the readings" (26). In this project I attend to representations of two types of

historical pain and resilience: my own culture's and somebody else's. Inevitably, this positioning will affect what I do and do not notice in the primary and theoretical texts. I cannot address ideas about cultural production through an impersonal standpoint, so I should not aim for a façade of objectivity. Through reading work by Native American scholars, I have learned that the ability to situate one's own experience within the research and writing process can be important and productive. My intent is never to claim authoritative cultural knowledge, nor is it to focus on my personal experience. I am choosing to put these two different expressions of cultural memory in dialogue with one another because I believe them to be mutually vindicating and enlightening. I also believe that my position as a member of one cultural group (Jewish) and not the other (Indigenous) will intrinsically illuminate certain learning processes.

The principle of cultural specificity and reflexivity that permeates this project leads me to dealing with the texts in different ways. I will work with one specific Native American writer's voice precisely because I am an outsider to this culture, so studying Erdrich's unique vision will allow me stay focused and true to the aim of cultural specificity. The principle of specificity also applies in reverse: with the voices of Jewish American women writers, I acknowledge cultural specificity by using the critical tools I possess as an insider to this culture. I will several times refer to poetic speakers and literary characters acting as recipients and carriers of cultural memory. I also view myself, as a reader and scholar of these texts, in relation to this construction. As a Jewish woman and descendant of survivors, I understand myself as a living carrier of Jewish memory; conversely, I understand myself as someone who is observing and learning from the representation of cultural memory in Native American writing.

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[1] Hebrew for "ascent;" when a member of the Jewish congregation is called upon to read from the Torah.
[2] Director of the synagogue service.
[3] From the Hebrew for "five;" the fifth *aliyah*.
[4] The person who calls upon the congregants to read from the Torah.
[5] I have included direct quotes from the writeup of my grandfather's speech, and summarized the rest.
[6] Hebrew for "grandfather."
[7] This information comes from a recent (2017) edition of her novel *Tracks*, which will be studied in Chapter 3 of this thesis. The Ojibwe are among the culturally related Indigenous groups that make up the Anishinaabe peoples. There are variant spellings and pronunciations; I will use either "Ojibwe" or "Ojibwa" depending on which appears in the text under discussion.
[8] I tend towards the term "Native American" in this project because I am exclusively reading primary texts by authors living and working in the United States.
[9] It should be noted that this analysis reflects a construction of gender and womanhood that does not account for the nuances of gender identity and politics that have come more recently into wider public discourse. While these issues are important, they are not the focus of this project.
[10] See "About the Contributors" section in *Learn, Teach, Challenge: Approaching Indigenous Literatures* (p. 546).

# 1 Poetry: the fragmentation and distillation of cultural memory

> The poet writes from imagination and memory and from a feeling inside that says, "I must write," but also as a way of taking action/of reflecting and doing/of entering into herself in relation to the times in which she lives and the times she is trying to remember and record.
>
> -Esther Altshul Helfgott, from "Irena Klepfisz, loss, and the poetry of exile."

This chapter will address how women's cultural memory is represented in poems, through the fragmentation and distillation of culturally specific experiences and themes. As counterpart to the study of Louise Erdrich's poetry, I will discuss the work of Irena Klepfisz, a lesbian feminist poet, Yiddishist, and child survivor of the Holocaust. Through its necessarily fragmented nature, Klepfisz's poetry works to disrupt the illusion of a neat, singular Holocaust narrative. Conversely, through the condensed use of images inherent to the genre, Erdrich's poetry contributes to her larger literary project of "world-building" in response to the erasure of Native American history. The idea of fragmentation is articulated differently and serves a different purpose in each body of work, in order to address the distinct crises of memory. Klepfisz evokes fragmentation through poetic technique, breaking down a "clean" understanding of the Holocaust and simultaneously communicating the ruptures inherent to Jewish women's lives. Meanwhile, many of Erdrich's poems address a certain culturally specific experience, to provide the reader a window into her distinct vision of Native American life, and with the overall effect of piecing together parts of a neglected history. Put simply, Klepfisz's poetry creates gaps in understanding, while Erdrich's poetry fills in particular gaps in understanding.

Both poets invoke aspects of oral culture in their work. The function of dynamic, adaptable oral communication in sustaining a culture is well exemplified through the poetic

form, and the lyrical, speech-based nature of poetry helps reinforce the critical processes of fragmentation and distillation. Some of Klepfisz's poetry deals in the documentation and exploration of Yiddish, a fundamentally oral language with variant spellings and pronunciations of words. In her seminal text *The Sacred Hoop*, critic and writer Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna, Sioux, and Lebanese)[11] states that "The oral tradition, from which the contemporary poetry and fiction take their significance and authenticity has, since contact with white people, been a major force of Indian resistance, [keeping] the people conscious of their tribal identity, their spiritual traditions, and their connection to the land and her creatures" (53). While Erdrich does not tend to use Anishinaabe vocabulary in her poetry as she does with her fictions (largely in her children's texts), she does use her poems to access the rich tradition of oral history integral to many Native American cultures.

## 1.1 The dynamic Jewish history of Irena Klepfisz

In *Against Amnesia*, Nancy Peterson explicitly addresses the difference in crises of memory associated with Indigenous and Jewish histories, using Erdrich's novels and Klepfisz's poems as examples. Unlike systemically forgotten Native American history, the Holocaust, the defining crisis of contemporary Jewish history, is a part of America's official historical discourse (Peterson 99). However, its inclusion in the canon presents a new problem: when a marginalized history becomes ingrained in public consciousness, its ubiquity may erode the quality and complexity of the knowledge (100). The late philosopher Gillian Rose terms this specific phenomenon "Holocaust piety," meaning the Holocaust has been mythologized in popular memory to the point of incomprehension (43). This is why it is critical that Holocaust memory remains dynamic: the problem is not a lack of remembrance, but the depth of this remembrance

and the intent behind it. To avoid erasing the multitude of specific experiences, and to avoid alleviating people of the critical burden of bearing witness to history, Holocaust memory "must speak a language of fragments," disrupting neat historical narratives and revitalizing cultural memory (Peterson 100).

Klepfisz's poems are a powerful example of how fragmentation can be used to communicate elements of Jewish women's experiences, in relation to the Holocaust and beyond. Postmemory, which describes how the generation succeeding a traumatic event experiences the memories of the previous generation through affective transmission (Hirsch 5), is a useful concept here. While Klepfisz herself is a Holocaust survivor, she was a small child during the most tumultuous period, including when her father smuggled her and her mother out of the Warsaw Ghetto to the "Aryan" side of the city (Peterson 114). In Hirsch's theory, one's relationship to the past exists through "imaginative investment" as opposed to recall, and the experience of trauma occurs through fragments that "defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension" (5). In some ways, Klepfisz is "between generations," having lived this traumatic past during a time where she was too young to form concrete memories of it. Her poetry embraces the inherently fragmented nature of this type of memory and uses the fragments to create enlightening narratives of Jewish women's trauma and resilience, with no attempt to uphold an illusion of total comprehensiveness. To call Klepfisz's poetry autobiographical would be to limit the scope of experiences that she seeks to access through her poetic voices. However, as Adrienne Rich notes, much of Klepfisz's poetry is grounded in the circumstances of her life due to "historical necessity" (16). While these themes emerge from her experiences, they also reflect upon a broader history of Jewish women. In this analysis, I intend to acknowledge and

explore ways in which Klepfisz's experiences have informed her poetry, without the belief that the poet herself is the direct speaker.

The collection *A Few Words in the Mother Tongue: Poems Selected and New (1971-1990)* demonstrates Klepfisz's enduring attention to Jewish women's experiences throughout her career. The first section, "Early Work," consists of two poems ("Searching for my Father's Body" and "The Widow and Daughter"), written in 1971 but not previously published. They both concern the legacy of Klepfisz's father Michał, who was a member of the Jewish Labor Bund and was killed while fighting Nazis in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising on April 20th, 1943 (Peterson 114). In the next section, from Klepfisz's first poetic publication, *periods of stress* (1975), the poems in part I explore (particularly women's) experiences of the Holocaust, while the poems in part II are more concerned with experiences of the everyday, including lesbianism and women's intimacy, interpersonal communication and relationships, loneliness, and notions of home and belonging. Next is *Two Sisters*, a 1978 monologue written from the perspective of Helen Hesse, who in 1936, with her sister Eva, was among the Jewish children sent on a *kindertransport* train from Germany to relative safety in Holland. The poems in the fourth section, drawn from Klepfisz's collection *Keeper of Accounts*, are "rooted in the political reality of [her] life" (Feldman 4). Most of the new poems in the final section are bilingual, written in English and Yiddish (or at least containing some Yiddish vocabulary), so it is titled *A Few Words in the Mother Tongue*. These poems are concerned with the loss and recovery of language, as well as the experience of trying to communicate across cultural and linguistic boundaries. In this chapter, I will closely read "The Widow and Daughter," "death camp" from *periods of stress* part I, and the bilingual poem "*Di rayze aheym*/The journey home" from the

final section. Each of these poems reflects a different facet of Jewish women's relationship to the Holocaust: the first is about the survivor as defined in the aftermath of trauma; the second imagines a non-survivor as she experiences death; and the third tells of a survivor's return to the site of her trauma and her attempt to recover parts of a lost history. Each poem seeks to break down the possibility of a "coherent" articulation of Holocaust history, or a singular reading of Jewish women's experiences.

There is a strong element of autobiography present in "The Widow and Daughter," as it refers to an event in the poet's life, signalled by the use of the family's real names. Due to the poem's tone, I contend that its nearly twenty-years' belated publication suggests something beyond, as Peterson says, a delay in processing trauma or a hesitance to publicize a personal history (116): a fear of "disrespecting" the father's sacrifice. Michał's participation in the Uprising renders him historically as a hero; however, Irena's affective experience of the situation is that her father chose a martyr's death over a life with his family. The poem's title is taken from a translated description of Irena and her mother Rose, originally written in an archival Yiddish book called *Doyres Bundistn* (in English, "Generations of Bundists"). The description serves as an epigraph to the poem: "The widow Rose and small daughter Irena survived and now reside in New York" (Klepfisz 35). Klepfisz and her mother are defined by the survivor/non-survivor dichotomy, but also, crucially, they are defined in terms of gender: as two females who have lost the patriarch of their family. The husband/father has been taken from their lives, but he becomes such an "enormous presence" (Rich 17) precisely because of his absence. It is through this absence that Irena and her mother continue to be defined, even after having left the place of his death. Publicly, Rose and Irena are situated in relation to Michał's death; they are "the woman

and girl" understood in terms of the man's sacrifice. The poem demonstrates how this positioning affects their private lives, as Michał's presence demands to be acknowledged even in a domestic space he never physically inhabited.

The first stanza opens with a description of Irena's mother that is consistent with the image put forth by the poem's title: "The widow / a shadow of the wife Rose," and concludes, "at one time expected / to live / not survive" (Klepfisz 35). As a widow, Rose is seen as incomplete, a shadow of her former self. This is paralleled with the end of the stanza, which asserts a difference between what it means to "live" and what it means to "survive": much as the widow is the shadow of the wife, survival is the shadow of life. The relationship between the words is reinforced aurally through the half rhymes of "widow"/"shadow" and "live"/"survive," in which the final consonants match, but the vowel sounds do not.[12] This suggests that although the words are linked, their relationship is predicated on a fundamental difference in meaning. The pattern of documenting death more thoroughly than life (Peterson 117), and therefore understanding history in terms of death, sets a precedent of defining survivors by their relationship to death: instead of being understood as the ones who *lived*, survivors are the ones who *did not die*. The second stanza of the poem breaks from this perspective, highlighting some of Rose's personal qualities: "In those days / she was romantic," "She read many novels, / knew all the love songs" (35), and then goes on to describe the future she had imagined might have been if not for the war (36). The third stanza returns to the original tone, opening with, "Instead she survived" (36), and then compartmentalizes Rose's existence into four experiences, framed as things she was forced to survive rather than as features of a life lived:

motherhood

(she was in labour for three days […]

the Aryan side

(she became a maid

and was polishing silver for *them*

while the ghetto burned)

widowhood […]

and finally New York

(she became a dressmaker

and did alterations). (36)

Rose, and all survivors, are forced to exist in constant relation to those who did not survive, as well as in relation to the unrealized versions of themselves that were written out of possible existence by the traumatic history of the war (Helfgott 155). Notable as well is the specifically "feminine" nature of these experiences. In order to survive the war period, Rose was forced to disguise herself as "Aryan" and work as a domestic servant for the enemy, and upon emigrating[13] to New York, she made a career as a dressmaker. The widow survived the war and the death of her husband, but the poem implies that one too becomes a survivor through challenges associated with womanhood more generally, such as difficult childbirth and single motherhood.

The experience of "surviving" the trauma does not end with the traumatic event (Peterson 119), as the lives of the poet's living subjects continue to be defined in terms of survival:

These two:

> widow and half-orphan
>
> survived and now resided
>
> in a three-room apartment. (Klepfisz 37)

The line "survived and now resided" comes directly from the epigraph and reflects on the choice in *Doyres Bundistn* (whether conscious or not) to use the word "resided" rather than "lived," suggesting a life that has become "less than" after the loss. The father's image is

> staring out of the picture
>
> on the piano
>
> staring out of the picture
>
> in the living room
>
> (vying with her mother for attention). (38)

Even in her own home, where her late husband never resided, the living woman feels displaced by a memory. The line "staring out of the picture" repeats three times in total in this stanza, emphasizing the overwhelming presence of the hero-martyr father as a monument to the traumatic past. The final stanza begins:

> And when the two crowded
>
> into the kitchen at night
>
> he would press himself between them
>
> pushing, thrusting, forcing them to remember,

even though he had made his own decision. (38)

This segment embodies the intergenerational nature of the poem, as the deceased member of the previous generation implores the "small daughter" (a member of the successive generation) to remember a loss she experienced as a baby. Michał was part of what is already understood to be a monumental historical event – the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising – and precisely because he was a part of this monumental history, his existence is lost to the people to whom it mattered most. As the daughter gets older and develops her capacity to remember, she experiences her father only, albeit powerfully, through his absence. He exists through postmemory, as an afterimage of a past that is just beyond recall. She is subjected to the impossible coexistence of heartbreak and bitterness over the circumstances of her father's sacrifice: she misses and mourns him, while simultaneously feeling that her own life is subsumed by the fact of his death.

The non-survivor's enduring, potent presence is symptomatic of the survivor's living connection to the past. The poem demonstrates the risks of treating survivors as relics of history, since relegating them to the past denies them the space to live their present lives. While the poem "offers no post-Holocaust redemptive vision" so that the reader is forced to grapple with this articulation of pain (Peterson 119), it also acts as an untraditional form of mourning, in this case allowing Klepfisz to write through her experience of loss in the absence of traditional closure (Helfgott 159). This is especially poignant when considered alongside her other 1971 poem, "Searching for My Father's Body," a rendering of her real-life, unsuccessful attempt to locate her father's grave in Warsaw (Peterson 116). Lacking the body of the deceased, she uses the poem to "complete" her mourning by articulating her experience of memory. Thus, she activates an established post-Holocaust tradition of the *yizker-bikher* (memorial books), compiled by

survivors to commemorate their dead (Kugelmass and Boyarin 173). “For a murdered people without graves [or] corpses to inter,” the books serve as “symbolic tombstones” (Young 182).

“death camp” moves into exploring an experience very far removed from the life of the poet herself. Its source text, *periods of stress*, extends the poetic form in ways intended to meaningfully voice Holocaust memory. Nancy Peterson identifies two techniques used to accomplish this: the use of exclusively lowercase letters, and placing extra physical space between words (119), suggesting the “fundamental inarticulateness” of Holocaust history (119). In “death camp,” Klepfisz produces a poetic voice that speaks to a part of Jewish history no living person can comprehend: the speaker is a victim of the gas chambers, so the subject matter is uniquely and inextricably linked to the Holocaust. The poem embodies the new possibility of “knowing” history as described by Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience*, which looks for a way to restore history within our own understanding where a traumatic lapse has made immediate understanding unavailable (11). In “The Widow and Daughter,” Klepfisz creates a voice referencing a period of her life that, because she was a young child, she likely cannot access through direct memory (Peterson 134). However, in “death camp,” the inaccessibility of the voice that Klepfisz writes into existence is literal, because we can never hear from those who were gassed. Here, Klepfisz moves away from basing poetry on her lived experiences in order to reanimate the potential voices of – and provide some characterization to – victims who were denied the right to speak their own histories.

With extended caesurae between words, “death camp” is by design an uncomfortable poem to read. The spacing between the words reflects the speaker’s physiological struggle (Peterson 120) as she gasps for breathable air, knowing she will not find it. The poem traces the

speaker's experience in four stanzas, as she encounters the familiar rebitsin (the rabbi's wife) when they are both about to be murdered in a gas chamber. In the first stanza, they enter the chamber; in the second, they are gassed; in the third, their bodies are cremated; and in the fourth, the speaker exits the crematorium through death. The poem begins, "when they took us    to the shower" (Klepfisz 47). A seemingly innocuous word such as "shower," to a reader familiar with Holocaust imagery, invokes an association beyond its surface meaning: "For a mind engraved with the Holocaust, gas is always *that* gas. Shower means their shower" (Rosen 52). This may also be an instance of dramatic irony, as many victims of the gas chambers were led to believe that they were, in fact, entering a real shower. At this point in the poem, the speaker may not be aware of her fate, whereas a reader who possesses a historical perspective on this word is aware.

The line continues with the speaker's realization that the rabbi's wife is there too, and adds another layer of taboo to an already painful subject by juxtaposing the presence of a religious woman with forced nudity. Despite the dire circumstances, the speaker finds herself instinctively trying to preserve the rebitsin's modesty:

> i saw
>
> the rebitsin    her sagging breasts    sparse
>
> pubic hairs    i knew    and remembered
>
> the old rebe    and turned    my eyes away. (Klepfisz 47)

The poem then establishes that there is a pre-existing relationship between the two, but one that is marred with resentment: "i could still hear    her advice    a woman / with a husband" (47), implying that the speaker deviated from social norms (likely by being unmarried), and that the

rebitsin was judgmental. When the gas turns on and the speaker realizes they will die together, amidst her terror, she somewhat confusingly focuses on her feelings of vindication that they have been "equalized" in this moment of crisis. She cries out,

rebitsin   rebitsin

i am here with you   and the advice you gave me (47),

seeming to say that despite the rebitsin's previous air of social and religious superiority, the two women have been condemned to an *identical*, inescapable fate.

However, twice in the poem, the speaker describes the events in such a way that implies she feels more persecuted than the rebitsin. The second stanza begins, "when they turned   on the gas   i smelled / it   first   coming at me" (Klepfisz 47). In the third stanza, while they are in the oven, she says, "and they flung   her on top   of me" (47). She differentiates herself as the first to be targeted by the gas, and before she is cremated, she notes that her body is beneath the rebitsin's. Though there is no such consideration by their murderers, the speaker cannot help but read the sequence of events as a continuation of her previous life experience, wherein the rebitsin was "superior" to her. But in the poem's last line, once the women have been "unbodied" through cremation, there is a reversal. The speaker – who is now a cloud of smoke emerging from the crematorium chimney – "rises above" the rebitsin: "my smoke / was distinct   i rose quiet   left her / beneath" (47). The speaker feels in some way that she has retained her individuality, in the form of distinctness from the rebitsin, even in death.

This poem negates the possibility of a coherent understanding of the experience it gives voice to, by complicating notions of victimhood. While it is easy to view victims of gassing as

just that, Klepfisz's short poem creates a shadow of the possible lives of two Jewish women, intersecting with one another in their final moments. The speaker's resentment towards the rebitsin can be read as misplaced anger: this anger is manageable, while her anger towards the perpetrators whose hatred has led to their deaths is transcendent and perhaps beyond articulation. I believe that this strange expression of anger also represents the speaker's refusal to relinquish her individual experience of the world even in the moment of death. Her final act is an insistence on validating the particularities of her own life, even though it is only marginally related to the "true" crisis. Although there is solidarity in that the two women are brought together as they are condemned to die – demonstrated, as Esther Helfgott notes, when the speaker experiences the shame of the rebitsin's nakedness (156) and tries to preserve her modesty – the speaker refuses to let herself forget what her experience of life was like before she became a victim.

In 1983, Klepfisz went to Poland for the fortieth anniversary commemoration of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and found no acknowledgment of its Jewish victims. As a result, she experienced a deep feeling of exile and witnessed, simultaneously, two distinct crises of memory: in her supposed homeland, Poland, Holocaust history was erased, and in America, where she had resided since, the Holocaust was commodified for public consumption (Peterson 115). This experience led to the sense of displacement which is central to the poem "*Di rayze aheym*/The journey home." But while this poem finds its roots in Klepfisz's life, it communicates more broadly the sense of social exile often felt by Jewish women.

This bilingual Yiddish-English poem is divided into nine parts. It tells a story about the instability of language and identity (Weiman-Kelman 29) and traces the speaker's journey to reconnect with a lost language and culture. Throughout the poem, the speaker tries to make the

two languages coexist, reflecting the larger struggle for coexistence between the two parts of her identity: the person she was before the Holocaust, and the emigrant/survivor of trauma. By using Yiddish, Klepfisz simultaneously works to revive a language that has mostly fallen into disuse, and acknowledges the irreparable damage wrought upon it – and upon all of Ashkenazi Jewry– by the Shoah (Peterson 134). Furthermore, the use of Yiddish functions as an inherently feminist tool (135). Klepfisz has stated that she sees Yiddish as a forum for social critique and the honest discussion of sexism and sexuality (Jones and Klepfisz 60), and according to feminist scholar Zohar Weiman-Kelman, the bilingual form can be used to undermine patriarchal discourse because the practice of meaning-making and identification is inherent to feminist politics (29). Yiddish is considered a language of the people and even a "woman's language," known as the *mame-loshn* (mother tongue), and the use of Yiddish also disturbs English's rhetorical dominance (22). Yiddish words and phrases are more prominent in the latter two thirds of the poem. Part one, "1. *Der fenster*/The window," only uses Yiddish in the subtitle. In part two, "2. *Vider a mol*/Once again," there are a few Yiddish words, and by part three, "3. *Zi flit*/She flies," the use of Yiddish and English is approximately even. The shift towards Yiddish signifies that the speaker's journey to rediscover her mother tongue is gradual: by the end, Yiddish is the more potent of the two languages, thereby allowing the feminine, Jewish, "othered" experience to overtake the mainstream discursive culture (33).

I will focus the rest of my analysis mainly on the ninth and final section of "*Di rayze aheym*/The journey home," which shares its title with the poem.[14] Adrienne Rich posits that the carefulness with which Klepfisz uses English in her poetry is not meant to demonstrate her mastery of the language, but rather "her refusal to pretend that it is the language of choice" (22),

representing the anguish faced by the surviving Jewish community who struggled with linguistic and cultural retention. There is a sense that in the past the speaker would have been more comfortable with Yiddish; the English is present out of necessity, due to the speaker's loss of culture, but also for the reader's benefit. The speaker acknowledges,

*In der fremd*

among strangers

*iz ir heym*

is her home. (Klepfisz 224)

Although she is an outsider in a new environment, the return to the original home proves too painful. Peterson relates that Klepfisz's visit to Poland, a nation which ignored the experiences of Jews altogether, reinforced the necessity of writing in America (116). Like Klepfisz choosing to stay in "exile" and write a nuanced expression of Holocaust history, the poetic speaker feels it is better to make a home "among strangers" than to return to the homeland she was forced to leave.

The formatting of the poem contributes to the sense of linguistic tension: most of the Yiddish phrases are read first, on the left (primary) side of the page, while the English translation is located further to the right. Only in one phrase is this pattern reversed: "*Do* / here" (Klepfisz 224). The speaker's cultural dislodgment is reflected visually, in the choice to situate the Yiddish word for "here" among the otherwise English words on the right side. The poem ends:

*Ire zikhroynes*

her memories

will become monuments

*ire zikhroynes*

will cast shadows. (224)

On the left, the English phrase physically shadows the Yiddish, signifying that the English words are an outward expression of the speaker's internal Yiddish memory. The placement of the words on the page creates an active relationship between the two languages, reflecting the back-and-forth of dislocation and reclamation. It embodies the related processes of mourning and cultural renewal, and states outright the importance of dynamic memory, which has been threatened by the notion of an absolute, authoritative historical record (Peterson 136). The final stanza asserts that the speaker's memories will become monuments to a lived past, and will continue to impact the present by casting their shadow upon it.

In these three poems, Klepfisz creates speakers who grapple with the painful project of reclamation: reclaiming a life after the war, reclaiming one's sense of personhood in a moment of crisis, and reclaiming lost speech and culture. She uses the poetic medium to communicate these challenges through the "language of fragments." Her poems create different types of disruptions: thematic disruptions, visual disruptions (for the reader looking at the page, due to the unconventional positioning of words), and auditory disruptions (for the person listening to the poem, which, if read aloud, demands to have this positioning of words acknowledged). These thematic and physical breaks disrupt the pretense of a neat, easily understood Holocaust narrative altogether, communicating a dynamic vision of Jewish history, and reminding the reader or listener that a survivor's experience cannot be relegated to the past.

## 1.2 Louise Erdrich's poetic culture of resistance and renewal

S'Klallam[15] poet Duane Niatum relates the significance of poetry to Native American culture, rooted in the practice of transforming one's lived experiences into song (71). He states that due to the history of oral tradition, words, understood as sacred objects, are the carriers of culture through past, present, and future (65). As such, a poem upholds the rhetoric of oral tradition (Hafen 147); it can be used as a medium of connection to one's community, enacting "the cultural history of Native oral discourse" (Rader 149) while simultaneously using linguistic power to rhetorically dismantle sources of colonialism (Niatum 79). Scholar Seema Kurup argues that while Erdrich tends to be recognized more for her fiction, her "poetic impulses" are made evident through the lyrical nature of her fiction prose (91). While it may be true that Erdrich's most prolific work is as a novelist, I notice a consensus among the critics I have read that her poems act as distilled embodiments of the themes that are most important to the literary world she has built, a perspective I concur with as a reader of her work.

Erdrich has published three collections of poetry: *Jacklight* (1984), *Baptism of Desire* (1989), and *Original Fire: Selected and New Poems* (2003). This chapter will focus on *Jacklight*, which "presents a holistic view of Erdrich's multifaceted universe" (Hafen 148). The core focus on cultural legacy in Klepfisz's work also looms large in Erdrich's poems, but it tends to manifest powerfully in terms of communal experience and in relation to the more-than-human world. The title poem "Jacklight" stands alone at the beginning of the text. It deploys the hunting practice jacklighting (using a blinding light to disorient animal prey) as a metaphor for the power struggle within sexual dynamics between men and women (Kurup 92). The narrative voice is a collective "We," but the telling is individualized, which marks the process of individualization

through a sense of tribal community (Hafen 152). The remaining forty-four poems are divided into sections entitled "Runaways," "Hunters," "The Butcher's Wife," and "Myths."

"Indian Boarding School: The Runaways" poeticizes the experience of Native American children who were taken from their homes and sent to Christian boarding schools. Run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, these schools were located extremely far away from the students' tribal lands, so that the children were starkly uprooted from their families and community support systems at a very impressionable age (Niatum 77). The poem begins, "Home's the place we head for in our sleep" (Erdrich 11). Like in "Jacklight," the poetic voice is first-person plural, emphasizing the communal sentiment of this experience. Unlike white students, who may flee their homes in search of greater independence from their families, the Native students in the poem dream of a return to their familial and tribal supports (Niatum 77). In the second stanza, the escape to home shifts from being understood as a dream, to a real attempt. The speaker says, "We know the sheriff's waiting at midrun / to take us back" (Erdrich 11), meaning the students run away despite knowing they will almost certainly be caught. The choice to head towards home is an act of deliberate, if consequentially futile, resistance. Everything they experience as students at the boarding school is meant to subjugate them, and they are targeted especially after the escape attempt: "We scrub / the sidewalks down because it's shameful work" (11). These lines contain an alliteration of "scrub" and "sidewalks," followed by the sibilant[16] word "shameful." Psychological research on linguistic comprehension in poetry suggests that alliteration may help elevate straightforward language and trigger memory, thereby reactivating the reader's knowledge of similar ideas within the text (Lea et al. 709). Following this line of thinking, the reader may become subconsciously aware of how the idea of shame resonates

throughout the poem, even where it is not explicit, reinforcing the idea that the primary purpose of the boarding schools was to make Native children feel ashamed of their culture. This is enhanced by the harsh "hiss" of the *s* and *sh* words. In her analysis, Kurup points out an inherent irony expressed through the poem: while boarding schools sought to deindividuate Native American children and alienate them from their cultures, the opposite effect would sometimes take place in response (94). Physically isolated from home and deeply affected by the distance, many children's longings for their actual cultures only increased, thereby affirming a love for their own identities amidst the crisis. Despite being held hostage by an oppressive system, the students' escape attempts act as a refusal to relinquish their sense of Indigenous identity.

By participating in contemporary culture and using it to express their own experiences of the world, Native poets can resist its colonizing, often oppressive influence (Rader 149). Taos Pueblo[17] scholar P. Jane Hafen says that while Erdrich's poems are written in English, they represent an Indigenous rather than an Anglo worldview (149). This is consistent with Kimberly Blaeser's theory of bi-cultural works by Native writers, in that the poems emerge from oral-based cultures but are presented through the literary forms and language of the dominant, Anglo culture (234) and can thus be received by an outsider audience. Blaeser (who, like Erdrich, is Anishinaabe and German from Minnesota)[18] states that Native and "mixed-blood"[19] people must be aware of how their experiences are "re-expressed" by the dominant cultural voice (231). *Jacklight* demonstrates such an awareness in a very literal way: many of Erdrich's poems open with epigraphs in the form of quotations from colonials or settlers who had some type of encounter with Indigenous peoples. This tactic demonstrates Erdrich's awareness of how the experiences of Native people are interpreted and made palatable for a colonial audience and uses

these outsiders' perspectives to frame her own engagements with cultural questions. "Jacklight" is prefaced with a quotation from R. W. Dunning's 1959 anthropological text *Social and Economic Change Among the Northern Ojibwa*, explaining that they use the same word to mean flirting and hunting (Erdrich 3). "Captivity" (from the "Hunters" section) is prefaced with a passage from the 1682 narrative of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, a colonial woman who was famously taken prisoner by the Wampanoag in Massachusetts (26). This poem is written as a narrative account from Rowlandson's perspective, wherein she struggles with her simultaneous disgust towards Native American behaviours and her attraction to her captor (Kurup 94). "The Red Sleep of Beasts" (from "Myths") is prefaced with an excerpt from a letter written by Father Belcourt, "a priest who accompanied the Turtle Mountain Michif on one of their last buffalo hunts in the 1840s" (Erdrich 80), and the poem memorializes the hunting ritual (Hafen 152). Each of these epigraphs is a statement by a white person who has somehow gained increased access to the everyday lives of a Native American group, and thus possesses the cultural power to influence outsider perception of Native Americans. The inclusion of such epigraphs in select poems impacts the reader's overall experience of *Jacklight*, as the awareness of outsider perspectives that Erdrich demonstrates permeates the volume.

This awareness manifests keenly, yet differently, in the poem "Dear John Wayne" (from "Runaways"). The poem acts as an indirect address to the eponymous film star, who appeared in numerous classic Westerns portraying the "hero cowboys versus savage Indians" trope. It tells of a group of young Native Americans at a drive-in theatre, watching a big-screen projection of one of Wayne's films. The poem begins: "August and the drive-in picture is packed. / We lounge on the hood of the Pontiac" (Erdrich 12). The ethos of communal experience central to Erdrich's

poetry prevails, as the speaking voice is again first-person plural. The Pontiac vehicle serves as an allusion as well as a characterizing detail: the now-defunct brand was a division of General Motors and produced cars originally in the city of Pontiac, Michigan. Like the city, the company drew its name from an eighteenth-century Ottawa chief, the leader of a tribal confederacy that launched an ultimately unsuccessful attack against the British amid fears of encroachment.[20] The poem thus makes reference to an Indigenous namesake that was co-opted by corporate America, analogous to John Wayne's films co-opting the image of Native Americans to create cultural products consistent with the American settler narrative.

The theme of cultural predation is also developed through extended metaphor. The stanza continues, "surrounded by the slow-burning spirals they sell / at the window, to vanquish the hordes of mosquitoes. / Nothing works. They break through the smoke screen for blood" (Erdrich 12). The presence of mosquitoes is established near the beginning, and the image returns in the second last stanza of the poem, after the speaker has watched Wayne and the cowboys gleefully slaughtering Indians: "We get into the car / scratching our mosquito bites, speechless and small / as people are when the movie is done" (13). The parasitic nature of a bloodsucking mosquito parallels the settler practice of exploiting Native images for cultural gain, to the detriment of actual Indigenous people. The itch from the mosquitoes follows the characters into their own space, as does the effect of the image of dying Indians in the film. Like in "Indian Boarding School: The Runaways," Erdrich uses the hissing *s*: "scratching," "speechless," and "small." Here, the rhythm created through alliteration dramatizes the lingering impact that the screen narrative has on the group. In the film, "Always the lookout spots the Indians first / spread north to south, barring progress. / The Sioux or some other Plains bunch" (12). This phrasing

suggests that the group is aware that despite there being great diversity among the Indigenous population, all Indigenous groups are seen as interchangeable in the eyes of the colonizing outsider. There is an attempt to flatten the numerous and varied cultures into a convenient trope that subordinates Native Americans, purporting that they are hindering societal progress and thereby justifying white supremacy. By opening this stanza with the word "always," Erdrich flips the practice of collapsing Native identities and experiences, by collapsing the entirety of Wayne's film career into a predictable plotline. In fact, at no point does the poem give an indication of which film specifically being screened, suggesting that it simply does not matter.

After the fourth stanza, a standalone line reads, "*Everything we see belongs to us*" (Erdrich 13), a succinct embodiment of the worldview underlying Euro-American colonial activity. The italics and the physical removal of this line from the structure of the rest of the poem demonstrate contrast: this is a view that, while it asserts its presence in the poem, is not shared by the speaker and their friends. In the final stanza, this sentiment is echoed, again in Wayne's ominous voice: "*Come on, boys, we got them / where we want them, drunk, running. / They'll give us what we want, what we need*" (13). Immediately following is an ending which suggests a cosmic irony in the illness that ultimately led to Wayne's death:[21] "Even his disease was the idea of taking everything. / Those cells, burning, doubling, splitting out of their skins" (13). From the speaker's perspective, the process of "taking" is so culturally ingrained within the image portrayed by Wayne, that it manifested physiologically in the form of cancer. This also likens the destruction cancer wreaks upon the human body to the destructive process of Euro-American expansion and encroachment.

"Turtle Mountain Reservation" (from *Jacklight*'s final section, "Myths") is dedicated "For Pat Gourneau, my grandfather" (Erdrich 82). Gourneau was the tribal chair of the poem's namesake, the Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota, and his masterful storytelling abilities influenced Erdrich from a young age (Stookey 2). As Hafen points out in her analysis, the first stanza demonstrates a mix of Catholic and Native cultural images, meant to represent the Roman Catholic influence among the Chippewa[22] (152). "The heron makes a cross / flying low over the marsh. Its heart is an old compass / pointing off in four directions" (Erdrich 82): the symbol of the cross, which opens the poem, is immediately tethered with the sacred compass, an image used by many Native groups (Hafen 152). Thus, the first stanza establishes the theme of the poem, which reflects how the place and the lives of its inhabitants are permeated by the ongoing pull between cultures. According to Niatum, the "mixed blood"[23] Native American is constantly reminded that they do not fit into America's social framework, and therefore tribal ancestry is often the strongest guiding force in their art (77). As a "mixed blood" writer, Erdrich blends symbols from different cultures, and reflects on her tribal ancestry (in the form of her grandfather) to communicate a distinct worldview.

Established initially through the dedication to her grandfather, the poem is deeply concerned with intergenerational relationships. In the fourth stanza,

> Grandpa leans back […]
>
> and repeats to himself a word
>
> that belongs to a world
>
> no one else can remember. (Erdrich 82)

This passage confronts the reality of generational loss and forgetting. Later, the grandfather is portrayed talking to

> the spirits of the stones that line
>
> the road and speak
>
> to him only in their old agreement.
>
> […] “the old man is nuts.” (84)

The person being dismissed is the one who remembers a world inaccessible to others; by considering him unable to contribute meaningfully to contemporary society, we lose access to an entire world of perspectives and relations that he carries with him. Hope is reinstated in the final stanza, as the speaker’s recognition that she carries her grandfather’s past into the future reinforces the importance of intergenerational transference: “Grandpa, all the time that there is in his hands / […] Hands of earth, of this clay / I’m also made from” (85). Through the end of the poem, the speaker acknowledges that she is his legacy, in some ways able to carry his past world with her into the evolving present and future. Like the subject in Klepfisz’s “*Di rayze aheym*/The journey home” is a monument to the history of Jewish displacement and cultural reclamation, this speaker’s grandfather is a living embodiment of tribal history. However, while Klepfisz’s poems work with the idea of humanmade documents and memorials, Erdrich’s poem emphasizes the impact of nonhuman presences, beginning with the title itself (the poem is named for the place, and dedicated to the person). References to the landscape, wildlife, and other-than-human world are near constant, thus reinforcing the importance of their lifegiving, generative properties.

Hafen says that "As a poet, Erdrich demonstrates how the individual voice presents a collective people through culture" (154). Throughout this project, I will continue to suggest that Erdrich demonstrates this possibility through all of her literary endeavours. Within her literary repertoire, I believe the function of the poem is to distill the theme of cultural resilience through lyrically presented narratives. "Indian Boarding School: The Runaways" voices the experience of a group of children who resist the process of assimilation, quietly affirming their sense of tribal belonging amidst the trauma of removal. "Dear John Wayne" addresses the pervasive, contemporary concern of how popular media affects those with marginalized identities, and fights against the attempt to flatten Native experiences through stereotyping. "Turtle Mountain Reservation" reiterates the centrality of intergenerational transfer to cultural survival, and illustrates a worldview that is tethered with other-than-human presences. The three chosen poems also embody three phases of life with distinct qualities: first, childhood, during which an initial sense of identity is developed; second, young adulthood, where the poem's subjects are increasingly aware of how they are perceived by others; and third, older adulthood, where the speaker's grandfather transfers his history to a successive generation. Each poem presents a segment of cultural experience, and together they build towards a story of Native cultural life.

## 1.3 Inciting cultural curiosity

Through reading the works of women poets from both cultures, I noted the resonances of principles, perspectives, and techniques associated with each culture's literature in the poems of the other. While analyzing "Turtle Mountain Reservation," I observed an interesting parallel between the understanding of the grandfather as the carrier of a particular world, and a well-known Jewish principle from the Talmud: "whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved

an entire world."[24] Though the lifesaving is not literal, the grandchild speaker of the poem recognizes her inextricable link to her grandfather's past, and by doing so, saves an entire worldview that he has embodied through his lived experience. The transitional use of Yiddish in "*Di rayze aheym*/The journey home" reminds me of Erdrich's use of Anishinaabe vocabulary in her children's book *The Birchbark House*, which will be examined in the next chapter. In order to reinforce the gravity of the language – which is fundamentally oral, and not the language of the narrative text – Erdrich first includes an Anishinaabe word alongside its English translation, and from then on uses the Anishinaabe on its own. Klepfisz uses a similar technique in her poem, as she effectively "teaches" the reader some Yiddish by first translating a phrase and later using the Yiddish without its translation.

My grasp of certain allusions and other rhetorical choices in Klepfisz's poems occurred relatively naturally, due to my Jewish heritage, my awareness of Jewish history, and my deep identification with Jewish culture, while my unfamiliarity with the culturally specific themes present in Erdrich's work prompted a different response. For example, upon rereading "Dear John Wayne," I found myself unsure of the history of the brand name Pontiac, and I was only able to recognize the layered significance of this reference upon further research. Somebody without my pre-existing knowledge of the Holocaust and its aftermath would likely have to work in similar ways to grasp certain meanings in Klepfisz's poems. Although Klepfisz's imagery reverberates powerfully within my culture, it does not reflect the specific memories of the Holocaust that I have inherited through my family's experiences, and Klepfisz herself uses poetic voices to access experiences unknown to her personally. Despite this distinction, as a Jewish woman reader, I can identify with her poetic subjects and thus see myself as a recipient of the

memories that her poems invoke. My position prompts a particular affective response: reading "death camp" induces visceral anxiety because it recounts specifically the murder of Jewish women, and "*Di rayze aheym*/The journey home" reminds me of my family's history of exile.

Correspondingly, I understand there to be multitudes of histories, memories, and experiences raised in Erdrich's poems, which might prompt a similarly specific emotional response from a "cultural insider." While this is categorically not my reading experience, attending closely to these images can help me branch into further learning about Native American literary expression. I would like to suggest that, while an "outsider reader" should never expect to obtain a complete understanding of any culture through literature, culturally specific texts are at their most effective when they encourage the reader's cultural curiosity. The poetic form serves this purpose by enhancing the significance of word choice through concentrated images, thereby highlighting the potential cultural resonances of each detail. The effect of reader positioning will take on another degree of importance in the next chapter, which focuses on cultural literatures aimed at children and young adult readers.

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[11] See biography on Hanksville.org: http://www.hanksville.org/storytellers/paula/.
[12] See: Baldick, Chris. "half-rhyme." *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms,* Oxford University Press, 2015. *Oxford Reference*.
[13] Throughout *A Few Words in the Mother Tongue* (such as in the "About the Author" section and in certain epigraphs), Klepfisz exclusively uses "emigration" rather than "immigration." This distinction places emphasis on the act of leaving a place, rather than the act of going somewhere.
[14] I am drawing parts of this analysis from an unpublished undergraduate paper I wrote about "9. *Di rayze aheym*/The journey home."
[15] See biography on the Poetry Foundation website: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/duane-niatum.
[16] See: Baldick, Chris. "sibilance." *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms,* Oxford University Press, 2015. *Oxford Reference*.
[17] See p. 147 of Hafen's article.
[18] See biography on the Poetry Foundation website: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/kimberly-blaeser.
[19] Term used in Blaeser's essay.

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[20] See: "Pontiac." *A Dictionary of World History*, Edited by Anne Kerr and Edmund Wright, Oxford University Press, 2015. *Oxford Reference*.
[21] Wayne died in 1979, almost five years before *Jacklight* was published.
[22] Hafen's article, published in 1993, uses the term "Chippewa" to refer to Erdrich's national affiliation.
[23] Term used in Niatum's essay.
[24] See: https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/61301?lang=bi.

# 2 Children's and young adult literature: writing cultural memory for young readers

"Children understand the power of words and the magic of stories."

-Dr. Clifford Trafzer (Wyandot Indian and German)[25], from "'The Word is Sacred to a Child': American Indians and Children's Literature"

This chapter is concerned with a few key issues in the study of Native American and Jewish American texts for young people: how the authors of culturally specific texts address their young readers; how "familiar" cultural narratives are used to access marginalized histories; and the portrayal of intergenerational memory and women's experiences in texts for young people. There is often a layered responsibility associated with writing texts for children: Lorna Hutchison and Heather Snell note the argument that "cultural memory [is brought] to the fore only once a new generation of individuals who do not possess a living memory of the past begins to come of age" (1). Though they are not overtly didactic, I believe that due to the younger age of the target audiences, the texts under study work to clearly communicate the core themes of cultural memory and resilience, and especially the role of intergenerational familial relationships between women.

This chapter's primary texts are Louise Erdrich's *The Birchbark House* (1999) and *Briar Rose* (1992) by Jane Yolen, an author especially prolific in the field of children's literature and "well known for her command of fantasy, folklore and myth" (Frischer). *The Birchbark House* tells of Omakayas, an Ojibwa[26] girl whose family lives "on an island in Lake Superior that her people called Moningwanayakaning, Island of the Golden-Breasted Woodpecker" (Erdrich 6). Taking place over the course of four seasons, the book follows Omakayas and her family's

shared experiences. The rhythm of their lives is devastated in the winter by an outbreak of smallpox, which affects the family and the rest of the Ojibwa on the Island. While coping with great loss, Omakayas continues to discover her skills, roles, and relations within the community and the larger interconnected world. *Briar Rose* is about a young Jewish American woman named Becca, who is implored by a deathbed promise to her grandmother Gemma to recover an untold family history. In search of a past her grandmother was never able to plainly articulate, Becca travels to Poland (where Gemma was born) and learns that Gemma was the lone female survivor of the extermination camp Chelmno. She comes to realize that her favourite bedtime story – Gemma's version of "Sleeping Beauty" – was a covert expression of her tale of survival.

Aside from their respective subject matters, there are clear technical differences between the two books, the most notable of which I will point out before defining the terms of analysis. The two books are geared towards distinctly different age groups. Since most children prefer to read about a protagonist their age or slightly older (Nikolajeva 7), the majority of children's books have a young protagonist (Joosen, *ACL* 75), which is true of *The Birchbark House*'s seven-turned-eight-year-old Omakayas.[27] Meanwhile, the reading guide at the end of *Briar Rose* puts the expected reader between the ages of thirteen and seventeen (Yolen 265), so it is generally classified as a book for teens or young adults rather than for children. At twenty-three years, *Briar Rose*'s protagonist Becca is older than might be considered typical for a teen novel, and quite a bit older than the target audience. *The Birchbark House* includes several illustrations by Erdrich; conversely, *Briar Rose* contains no visual components. The narrative events of *The Birchbark House* take place entirely in a past time period, during the mid-nineteenth century. *Briar Rose* alternates between the present day (the 1990s, when the novel was written), and

various points in the protagonist's childhood, with one section of the novel set in the more distant past, as a character recounts his experiences from the time leading up to and during World War II. Finally, *The Birchbark House* is the first in a series, throughout which the reader can engage with Omakayas's progression through life, whereas *Briar Rose* is a standalone novel.

Despite several fundamental differences, I posit that the books take comparable approaches to their address of their intended young readers, and contain similarly resonant messages about the importance of cultural memory. Both texts are concerned with the transfer of cultural memory between generations, and situate their female characters as the critical conduits. In both texts, the protagonist is female and has an important, life-shaping relationship with her grandmother that revolves around storytelling. Whether implicitly or explicitly, they both reference narratives that are likely more accessible to American audiences, which to some effect inducts the reader – an implied cultural "outsider" – into an understanding of a presumably unfamiliar cultural narrative. *The Birchbark House* and *Briar Rose* also use certain strategies to deal with writing fictional texts about culturally specific historical experiences. There is an added layer of complexity in that these are histories of crisis, because the cultural groups are each under siege by an outside force. The books treat their young readers as actively engaged with the narratives and use paratexts (materials outside the narrative) to contextualize the fictional stories within the historical events they pertain to (settler encroachment on Native lands and the Holocaust, respectively).

## 2.1 Cultural memory for children, critical terms, and the fairy tale

Noting the effects of stereotypical portrayals of Native Americans in children's literature, Pueblo Indian[28] scholar Debbie Reese conducted a study about cultural representations in

children's texts, published in 2000. Reese points to the increasing recognition of children's literature as an important medium for meaningfully and accurately teaching children about cultures outside of their own, as well as to the growing interest in "culturally authentic" literature to replace texts that reinforce stereotypes about people of colour (40). As demonstrated by Reese, texts for children occupy a unique position regarding the consolidation of cultural memory in literature. To define some of these central points, I will turn to the theories proposed in Hutchison and Snell's *Children and Cultural Memory in Texts of Childhood*.

According to Hutchison and Snell, children are the "privileged recipients" of "attempts to remember [the past], because it is assumed that eventually they will [be] capable of influencing the worlds they inhabit" (8). The *what*, *how*, and *why* of children's cultural remembrances is laden with sociopolitical importance. Within these constructions of memory, there is the related aspect of nostalgia and adult longing for the "good things" childhood can be made to represent (such as "play, beauty, and innocence"), exemplifying how present feeling influences our perspective of the past (5-6). Both of the texts studied in this chapter are concerned with remembrances of the past, which are "inscribed by the prevailing ideologies and perceived needs of disparate groups in the present" (7). Written by minoritized women writers, *The Birchbark House* and *Briar Rose* each reflect on a significant historical moment, and use this context to render the memories of a marginalized or unarticulated cultural past. Cultural memory in children's texts can be shaped "in opposition to dominant national narratives, and often for the benefit of young readers who are assumed not to possess any prior cultural memory" (8). Although I seek to complicate this perspective on the young reader in this chapter, it is important

to consider how the perceived social positioning of the implied child reader affects the terms in which the authors write these culturally specific texts.

The "implied reader" is part of Wolfgang Iser's conceptualization of reader-text interaction, which I identify as being particularly important in the study of children's literature due to the dissonance between the ages of the authors and those of their target audiences. It is a hypothetical figure that "embodies all [the] predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect," and must be understood as a textual structure rather than a reflection of actual readers (Iser 34). Scholars of children's literature Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer posit that the implied readers are the children that the writers *imagine* as their audience, and that it is important to consider what the text expects a child to bring to their reading in terms of existing knowledge and strategies for interpretation (20). I will demonstrate that the novels imply a child or young adult reader who is a "cultural outsider" and who can, through the text, learn about cultural narratives that may be less accessible to them otherwise.

The enduring influence of fairy tale narratives can be largely attributed to their simultaneous stability and mutability over time, as "Each new telling recharges the narrative, making it crackle and hiss with cultural energy" (Tatar 1). Many of the most enduring fairy tales in English-language print culture can be traced to late seventeenth-century France and nineteenth-century Germany (Schacker and Jones 24). Since the narrative form of the fairy tale is often very familiar to English-language readers, fairy tales continue to serve as the inspiration for products of contemporary culture (21), including Yolen's book. Here, Caroline Levine's conceptualization of "affordances" is useful. Adopted from design theory, the term is used to describe potential latent uses of literary patterns: in other words, we should consider not just

what a text *does*, but what it is *capable* of doing (Levine 6). The concept of affordances recognizes that an updated version of a traditional tale can be creative in its own right, while also working with the latent potentialities of the traditional story. This model may be helpful for understanding why fairy tales are such a persistent cultural form, and it functions as "an alternative to the language of purity and contamination" that frames certain tales as "authentic" and others as "deviant" (Schacker, *SF* 22). Notable here is a parallel with the type of language that is used to classify and marginalize Native people who do not fit easily into a non-Native construction of Indigeneity.

The agreed-upon understanding of a particular fairy tale is achieved through the sum of its versions, so that the general plot outline becomes the tale's defining feature (S. Jones 4). However, it is important to note that versions of stories recognized as part of the "fairy tale tradition" emerge from specific cultural and historical contexts, and are not universal (Schacker and Jones 24). Two of the most recognized variants of the story now best known as "Sleeping Beauty" come from Charles Perrault's 1697 collection *Histoires; ou, Contes du temps passé* (English trans. *Stories; or, Tales of Times Past*), and the Grimm brothers' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (English trans. *Children's and Household Tales*) from 1812 (Joosen, "SB"). Along with the rest of the collection, Perrault's "La belle au bois dormant" was translated into English by Robert Samber and published in London in 1729 (Bottigheimer 2), under the name "The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood" (5). Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's "Dornröschen" was first translated into English as "Rose-Bud" as part of *German Popular Stories*, a collection translated, edited, and adapted by English lawyer Edgar Taylor (Schacker, *ND* 13). Nowadays, the translation of the Grimms' tale is typically referred to as "Briar Rose." Compared to Perrault's

version, upon which the Disney film *Sleeping Beauty* is based, "Briar Rose" is relatively marginal in American popular culture. It is significant that in a novel about the revival of latent cultural memory, Yolen chooses to name her text after the lesser known version of the tale.

## 2.2 Accessing a marginalized past through national narratives and fairy tales

Hutchison and Snell state that the essays collected for their volume treat the figure of the child as ubiquitous with regards to cultural memory: the child is "a subject and object to be filled or emptied according to the whims of authors or other persons involved in shaping texts of childhood" (8). They conclude that the child readers of the texts they have studied are treated by the authors essentially as "empty vessels." I argue that Erdrich and Yolen do not address their child and young adult readers in this fashion, and that they in fact take a radically different approach. These authors implicitly acknowledge that young readers have absorbed particular understandings of certain social, cultural, and political issues and narratives, whether they are aware of it or not. *The Birchbark House* poses a challenge to these understandings, and *Briar Rose* enhances their complexity; both accomplish this, in part, by manipulating these presumably well-recognized cultural narratives. The implied child readers are treated as receptors of (and participants in the creation of) cultural products and meanings.

Both Erdrich's and Yolen's texts reference cultural narratives that are generally accessible to mainstream American society, as a part of voicing the respective marginalized histories. Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney refer to a significant practice in literary production that involves the rewriting of canonical texts and earlier cultural narratives, including folktales and myths; these retellings, they say, can be either "commemorative or critical" (113). *The Birchbark House* embodies both of these qualities, as it is simultaneously reminiscent of, and highly critical

of, Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* series. The *Little House* series is a widely read multigenerational story that portrays a settler-colonist experience in America. To quote Barbara Bader, "it takes no deep thought to name *Little House in the Big Woods* [the first book in the series] as the most important book of the first half of the twentieth century – the work of fiction that, with its sequels, made the largest imprint on the national consciousness" (657). It can be reasonably argued that Wilder's series has taken on mythic status in the United States, and though Erdrich was not planning to write a "Native American counterpart" to these books (TeachingBooks), she has said that her writing was affected by disdain for the series' racism and "'valorization of those who took Native lands without a thought'" (Farris). Despite her frustration with Wilder's portrayal of Native Americans, Erdrich has said that she sought to invoke the level of detail and "specificity of everything that the family [in *Little House*] made or used" (TeachingBooks) in *The Birchbark House*, which is rife with detailed descriptions of Omakayas and her family performing daily and seasonal tasks. In this vein, *The Birchbark House* both acknowledges its cultural reference point and subverts the associated ideology. Kimberly Blaeser explains that because stories possess political power, Native and mixed-blood people need to be especially aware of how their cultural narratives have been "re-expressed" by the American canon (231). Understood partially as a "literary retaliation" to the deeply racist elements of Laura Ingalls Wilder's books, *The Birchbark House* demonstrates Erdrich's awareness of how Native experiences are interpreted and told by a (literally) colonial voice.

*The Birchbark House* contests two of the three predominant stereotypes of Native Americans in children's literature identified by Debbie Reese. The "aggressive savage" appears in books about the western frontier and attacks settlers for no apparent reason, while the "noble

Indian" possesses mystical powers and lives in harmonious communication with nature (Reese 39). The Ojibwa community in the book is not portrayed as violent as per the first stereotype, but they also do not vanish in the face of encroaching settlers who diminish their access to resources. For example, Omakayas's father, known as Deydey, is able to outwit a trader to whom the family has incurred a large debt by betting on a game of chess: he plays poorly at first to trick his opponent into a false sense of security, and then wins the game "in six swift moves" (Erdrich 165). Deydey's clever approach to solving a problem with a settler indicates that the characters possess nonviolent agency. The community members conduct themselves with an understanding of their interconnectedness with the natural and spiritual worlds. Contrary to stereotypical representations of "mystical Natives," this relationship is not simplistic and imagined, but is a deep and consequential facet of the characters' realities. Paula Gunn Allen usefully gives voice to this distinction: "the American Indian perceives all that exists as symbolic. This outlook has given currency to the concept of the Indian as one who is close to the earth, but the closeness is actual, not a quaint result of savagism or childlike naiveté" (70).

The commitment to portraying a complex Ojibwa worldview is reflected in the book's chapter breakdown: named in terms of the cycle of seasons, the book is structurally interwoven into the natural and spiritual landscape, rather than insisting on a binary division between "sacred and secular realms" and the premise of human mastery over the rest of the world (Gargano 28). An important example of this interweaving is the way Omakayas develops a kinship with the bears. Early in the text, she comes across two baby bears in the woods: she bonds with them by playing and feeding them berries, until the mother bear approaches. Omakayas knows she must stay still and calmly asks the bear's forgiveness, promising to "leave quietly" (Erdrich 31), after

which the bear realizes "that Omakayas was no threat" to her or the cubs (32). Even as a young child, Omakayas demonstrates a humble understanding of their shared world, and this is why she is spared by a creature that could have easily harmed or killed her. Having solidified a trusting relationship with the bears ultimately helps Omakayas discover her calling, as a later encounter with them indicates to her grandmother, Nokomis, that she has been chosen as a healer (206).

In place of the dominant national narrative (like the one seen in *Little House*) that portrays Native Americans as a "primitive, disappearing race" and a hindrance to settler progress, *The Birchbark House* tells the story of a productive, self-reliant Ojibwa community. The harbinger of destruction in national narratives is the "aggressive savage;" in *The Birchbark House*, it is a voyaging white "visitor," who brings death and suffering to a vibrant community in the form of smallpox (Erdrich 142). Laura Ingalls Wilder's reimagining of her own girlhood extends into a national longing for an idealized past, meaning that her books function as "surrogate historical texts [which generate] a nostalgia in many of their readers for the US frontier" (Slater 56). Wilder's books are a prime example of the "relentlessly optimistic" nature of mainstream American history, which has long made it difficult for minority histories to "come into full cultural consciousness" (Peterson 1). Often, literary "engagements with children comply with or challenge [the] parameters of the nation and [sanctioned] versions of the national past" (Hutchison and Snell 8). The *Little House* books are not only compliant with a sanctioned American history – they are arguably formative in this vision. *The Birchbark House* is an implicit yet clear challenge to this perceived national past, but regardless, it is important not to understand Erdrich's text as being purely reactive to a dominant narrative. Gerald Vizenor's conceptualization of "Native survivance" is useful here: survivance "creates a sense of narrative

resistance to absence, literary tragedy, nihility, and victimry. [It] is an active sense of presence over historical absence [and] a continuance of stories." (1). *The Birchbark House* resists the "literary tragedy" of Native representation in *Little House* series, but it goes beyond this to write its own cultural narrative. Implicitly, the text situates itself in opposition to this dominant narrative. But explicitly and importantly, it is self-oriented, attending primarily to the creative expression of life in a particular Indigenous community. By regenerating a historical world, Erdrich uses the text to assert the vivid and complex cultural presence of her Ojibwa characters.

Unlike *The Birchbark House*, which makes an indirect allusion to an American cultural reference point, *Briar Rose* directly references, and in some ways adapts, the fairy tale "Sleeping Beauty."[29] Yolen deploys the tale as an unlikely access point through which to tell a story of the Holocaust and its impact on the descendants of survivors. Though the novel does reference the name "Sleeping Beauty" several times throughout, it is significant that the title, *Briar Rose*, emerges from the German context. The English translation history of the Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* reveals certain tendencies in tale interpretation that become relevant in the novel. Edgar Taylor's *German Popular Stories* was gentler in tone and structurally more coherent than its source material (Schacker, *ND* 27), and it influenced later editions of the Grimms' tales, including "contemporary English versions […] directed at children" and "conceptions of the "true" nature of the traditional fairy tale" (45). As I will explore shortly, the premise of an "authentic" source with a singular, unmediated narrative (as well as the habit of excluding a tale's more gruesome elements) contributes to the marginalization that Gemma experiences while using the tale to articulate her survival. Fairy tale themes and structures permeate German Romantic literature, and German Romantic Nationalism served as the ideological backdrop for

*Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (21). The Romantic Nationalist underpinnings of the text are expressed through the Grimms' search for the remains of a "purely German" literary heritage (22). Here, a Jewish perspective on "German-ness" becomes especially thought-provoking, as this tradition can be associated with the abuse of folklore by the National Socialist Party. Folklore was central to the Nazi Party's ideological framework (Kamenetsky 233), as they tried "to prove a superior civilization of the Germanic North" (227) and purge any "alien" elements that had "infiltrated" Nordic-Germanic folklore (226). Springing from the Romantic movement, the Third Reich sought to glorify the heroic "fighting spirit" of the German community (229), and because it was co-opted by the Nazis, the Romantic Nationalist context resonates on the level of *Briar Rose* as a Holocaust novel. Many readers will not make the distinction between the French-derived story of "Sleeping Beauty" and the German tale of "Briar Rose"; but much as the protagonist Becca must reconsider what she knows about her grandmother as the story unfolds, the book asks the implied reader to reconsider their preconception of the fairy tale and what it offers as an enduring narrative medium.

As a child, Becca is profoundly impacted by Gemma's regular retellings of "Sleeping Beauty." The depth of this impact is communicated through the novel's alternating timeline structure: the main story takes place as Becca learns about Gemma's past in the present day, and every other chapter is a vignette from Becca's childhood, as Gemma narrates the story that Becca has known only as "Sleeping Beauty." Gemma's family believed that she immigrated to America from Poland before World War II, but when Gemma insists on her deathbed, "I am Briar Rose" (Yolen 35), Becca is compelled to undertake the difficult task of discerning what she means. Only then does Becca realize that her grandmother's strange version of this fairy tale reveals the

truth of their family history. The narrative of "Sleeping Beauty" functions as a point of access for Gemma herself, as well as for the implied reader. After learning the truth about Gemma's survival, Becca confesses that she suspects Gemma did not consciously remember her own lived experience, saying, "'It had *all* become a fairy tale for her. She must have told us the story of Briar Rose a million times. But it was all there, buried'" (253). Lydia Kokkola says that Gemma wishes "to pass on her history to her grandchild but can only express herself through the framework of a fairy tale" (31), using "alterations and metaphors that are only comprehensible in the context of her life story" (30). Gemma's experience is consistent with the theory of traumatic latency, meaning that her experience of the event has been suppressed and is not fully known to her (Caruth 17). Due to the trauma of what (we eventually learn) she lived through in the Holocaust, she has displaced the memory of her own experience using a modified story, incorporating the few true-to-life components she is able to articulate. Such is the power of the narrative: because it is essentially the distillation of a human experience (S. Jones 5), even as Gemma suffers from apparent dementia, her fairy tale seems to be the only thing to have stuck with her. As she nears death, though she still cannot articulate her life story plainly, she makes Becca promise to find "the castle," "the prince," and "the maker of spells" (Yolen 34).

Cristina Bacchilega identifies a category of fairy tale versions called "activist adaptations," which question the uses of the canonical texts in hegemonic culture (80). There are a number of details that Gemma changes when she tells the story of Briar Rose, and two textual events demonstrate what happens when outsiders to the family – Becca's schoolmates – are disturbed by Gemma's version because it deviates from what they know about "Sleeping Beauty." These moments reflect the affective power of culturally specific assumptions. The first

time Becca has a friend, Shirley, stay overnight, Gemma tells them "Sleeping Beauty" as a bedtime story. Shirley wonders why Gemma's story has no spinning wheel or needle (Yolen 51), and angrily insists, "'That's not how it goes. You've got it wrong'" (52); eventually she is so distraught by Gemma's telling that she goes home. When Becca gets a little older, Gemma accompanies her class on a school trip and tells the story on the bus ride. A lonely child named Barney is the only one besides Becca who listens, but once he becomes confused by the narrative, he tells Gemma, "'I don't like stories I don't understand'" (116). Like Shirley, he is outraged by Gemma's version, because "'There aren't any kidnappers in Sleeping Beauty'" (117) as Gemma had said. Although *Briar Rose* is not explicitly critiquing the tale on which it is based, it critiques the "purist" perspective, represented in the text by Becca's schoolmates, that is unreceptive to culturally infused retellings of a tale. Gemma is infuriated by Barney's questions and is silent for the rest of the trip (117); thus, the difficulty of voicing her history is reinforced. Shirley and Barney both take for granted the long history of translation, adaptation, and cultural inscription that has led to their present understanding of the story. They ignore the tale's latent potentialities, assuming their inherited knowledge of it to be universal and "correct."

The "Sleeping Beauty" story model affords Gemma the ability to invoke images of her past, but she is met with disdain from listeners who see this as an affront to the narrative's perceived "purity." *Briar Rose* is an "activist adaptation" in that it asks the reader not to reject a version of a story for not adhering to twentieth-century American understandings,[30] which leads me to an example of how the issues raised in one text resonate with the cultural concerns of the other. Anishinaabe[31] writer Kateri Damm says that the stereotypical image of the Indigenous writer as a "traditional storyteller" discounts the reality of many Indigenous writers and thinkers

(13), most of whom “do not fit easily into [this] construction” (14). Native American artists are “scrutinized for authenticity” (Dumont 47), devaluing their identities through the romanticized vision of what constitutes a “real Indian,” and the popular image of “Nativeness” is upheld to the detriment of real Indigenous people. Similarly, Yolen’s text uses the fairy tale framework to address the risks of dismissing a story as being “inauthentic” because it does not adhere to preconceived cultural notions.

By altering the premises of the dominant versions, certain reworkings of fairy tales inherently prompt the reader or listener to identify differences (Tatar 4). Gemma incorporates seemingly random, specific details that are explicitly relevant to the Shoah into her retellings of “Sleeping Beauty.” Gemma’s “bad fairy” wears “big boots and silver eagles on her hat” (Yolen 37), a description clearly resembling an S.S. uniform. She also describes the various sleeping villagers as follows: “lords and ladies, teachers and tummlers, dogs and doves, rabbits and rabbitzen and all kinds of citizens” (61). “Rabbitzen” is the only non-English word in this list (though it is typically spelled differently). Here, there is a specific link to Klepfisz’s “rebitsin” in the poem “death camp,” and it is notable that both texts use this word to invoke a past image of Jewish womanhood. Seemingly out of place in the sentence, the word recalls a pre-war, Yiddish-speaking Polish community. The implied culturally unfamiliar reader is taken aback by the inclusion of these details, as they pose a significant interruption to the “familiar” narrative of “Sleeping Beauty.” By identifying the eccentricities in Gemma’s story, the reader is asked to critically engage with her subversive expression of cultural memory. For a fairy tale, “the transformative power of its imagery far exceeds that of its plot” (Bacchilega 93): *Briar Rose* uses the imagery associated with “Sleeping Beauty” and transforms it in the pursuit of a lost historical

truth. An inherent knowledge of "Sleeping Beauty" prevented Gemma from being silenced entirely by giving her a framework onto which she could apply fragments of her experience. The bad fairy is Gemma's way of referring to the Nazis; the list of villagers, the victims of Chelmno; the castle, Chelmno itself; and the forest, the barbed wire surrounding the camp.

Beginning with either the suggestion or explicit use of cultural narratives that are more recognizable to the implied reader, both books are able to voice a "counterhistory" – a historical narrative that does not share the values and characteristics of the dominant narrative (Peterson 1) – to a young reader, one who is presumably on the outside of the culturally specific experiences depicted. *The Birchbark House* challenges the nostalgic colonial narrative thoroughly represented in the *Little House* books by articulating a vivid Ojibwa history, while *Briar Rose* brings a layered cultural interpretation to a generally ubiquitous fairy tale. As Hutchison and Snell suggest, "The figure of 'the child' embodies futurity, and it is in the name of the future that fixed points in the past are remembered in the first place," often to avoid repetition of what we, in the present, acknowledge as the mistakes of the past (7-8). However, I believe that Erdrich and Yolen both address these past crises not by treating their readers as blank receptacles for ideology. Instead, they demonstrate the productive possibilities of engaging the reader in a different worldview through which they can learn about marginalized histories. The authors allow the implied readers to access their cultural content using narratives they already recognize, at which point they are asked to read actively and engage deeply with these revitalized understandings of the past. Erdrich "pays her readers the ultimate compliment: rather than adapting her cultural content to an easily accessible linear structure, she opens the door on a [world] that readers themselves must strive to experience" (Gargano 37-8). She invites the reader

into the characters' lives by presenting a holistic and complex worldview that is not limited by the structural and thematic conventions of the dominant literary culture. To achieve the effect of active engagement, Yolen uses a structure that is "highly intriguing and appealing to the reader who must play detective" (Kokkola 30), following along as Becca uncovers the mystery of her grandmother's past.

Both authors challenge their readers to develop a complex understanding of cultural histories, one that does not stop with the reading of their books. This is achieved in part by the inclusion of supplementary materials, or paratexts. By including a glossary of Ojibwa words that appear in the text, Erdrich encourages the implied reader to deepen their knowledge of an unfamiliar culture. She includes an "Author's Note on the Ojibwa Language" and identifies her own struggles with attempting to codify a language that is originally spoken and not written, and which contains numerous dialects (Erdrich 240). Even as a cultural "insider," Erdrich acknowledges that she cannot achieve "total understanding," as such a thing is impossible. This reminds the implied reader, a cultural "outsider," that they cannot walk away from this text believing that they "understand" Ojibwa culture, and that they must continue to work towards cultural awareness and engagement (Gargano 38). Yolen's "Author's Note" at the end reminds the reader that *Briar Rose* is a work of fiction, and that "Happy-ever-after is a fairy-tale notion, not history" (264). It includes some specific historical details about Chelmno that complicate the neatness of the narrative the reader has just absorbed: she concludes by saying, "I know of no woman who escaped from Chelmno alive" (264), meaning it is extremely unlikely that anyone survived in a similar manner to Gemma. In *The Birchbark House* and *Briar Rose*, truths about

two distinct cultural experiences are articulated, but with the reminder that such articulations are necessarily incomplete and therefore, not a stopping point for learning.

## 2.3 Processes of intergenerational storying

The second concern of this chapter is with how practices of storytelling and listening – primarily between women – are used to assure cultural continuance. Both *The Birchbark House* and *Briar Rose* situate their female protagonists as the primary recipients and carriers of intergenerational memory, and both books highlight moments in which their protagonist is absorbed in her grandmother's stories. It is mostly women who are seen to be the guardians of the storytelling practice, valued for its ability to simultaneously preserve memories of the past and generate new meaning in the present. As a result, it is relationships between women that tend to be prioritized in these narratives. Since Deydey is often gone hunting or trading, the adult female presence in Omakayas's household is the more significant, and it is the women who generally manage the family's everyday life. Her mother (Yellow Kettle) and Nokomis are mostly responsible for raising her; she also has an older sister named Angeline, and Old Tallow, a surly, independent woman in the community, has a special fondness for her. The end of *The Birchbark House* reveals that as a baby, Omakayas was the sole survivor of a smallpox outbreak on a different island, and was rescued by Old Tallow (Erdrich 233) and adopted into her community. In *Briar Rose*, Becca is one of three daughters. In addition to her mother and father, Becca's grandmother clearly had an important role in raising her. Becca does not get along particularly well with her older sisters Shana and Sylvia, which seems related to the fact that neither of them value their family's history as deeply as Becca does. Despite her distance from her actual sisters, Becca develops a sister-like relationship with a Polish, half-Jewish woman

around her age named Magda, who acts as her interpreter during her visit to Poland. Finally, it is important to note that Gemma raised her daughter, Becca's mother, by herself. The family does not know the identity of the man with whom Gemma became pregnant; Becca is the first to learn when she travels to Poland.

Structural choices in both texts emphasize how oral communication is a vessel for intergenerational memory and active engagement with history. Directly addressing the reader in the "Thanks and Acknowledgments" page preceding the text of *The Birchbark House*, Erdrich writes, "Dear reader, when you speak this name [Omakayas] out loud you will be honoring the life of an Ojibwa girl who lived long ago." This address explicitly encourages reading aloud, thereby upholding the practice of orality. As well, the glossary contains a pronunciation guide for the Ojibwa terms, indicating to the reader the importance of speech in this book. In the narrative text, orality is deployed especially powerfully using a few self-contained "stories within the story." Written as subsections of chapters, there are three instances of Omakayas's family members, and sometimes friends, gathering to listen to a story: one told by her father ("Deydey's Ghost Story"), and two by her grandmother ("Grandma's Story: Fishing the Dark Side of the Lake" and "Nanabozho and Muskrat Make an Earth").

I find the circumstances surrounding Nokomis's telling of "Fishing the Dark Side of the Lake" to be especially interesting, particularly because I would argue that Omakayas's bond with her grandmother is the most formative relationship in her life. To quote scholar Jim Charles, "Elders in many American Indian communities are respected for their storytelling ability. […] Elder storytellers convey codes of moral behaviour, historical information and family heritage to youth" (58). As Nokomis is an elder member of the community, her stories are particularly

important for the transfer of memory and historical knowledge. This scene in the novel demonstrates the special significance of women's roles in the continuance of oral tradition: "there was a little space of quiet around the women, all together. The time seemed just right to ask Nokomis for a story" (Erdrich 132). It is just as the women convene that Omakayas senses it is time to partake in the practice of storytelling. Omakayas's younger brother Pinch joins in, but just as the story is about to start, he is called by the men to join them outside, and thinks, "Being called by the men was better than a story […] any old day," and so "Once again, the women [...] were left alone" (133) to listen.

In this story, Nokomis speaks about her grandparents, thus enacting a link between generations and reviving her family's past "through the eternal present of storytelling" (Gargano 32). As a child, Nokomis disobeyed her grandfather's orders "never to fish the dark side of the lake" (Erdrich 134), and her grandmother, who got lost at the bottom of the lake as a young woman, resurfaces (137). Nokomis's grandfather appears, and with his youth restored, he joins his wife and is never seen again (138). The telling has a profound impact on the listeners: "When Nokomis finished, no word was spoken. Omakayas could say nothing because stiff hairs prickled at the back of her neck" (138). Every listener is rapt by the vivid world of the past that Nokomis reanimates in the present, and the intergenerational theme of the book emerges powerfully through the inclusion of this story. Not only does the reader witness Nokomis's experience as a young girl, exactly Omakayas's age, but we witness her own relationship with an older generation. In telling this story, Nokomis demonstrates a model of intergenerational transfer, consciously ensuring that the experiences and memories of her own grandparents will be passed

down by her daughter and granddaughters. Furthermore, the reader is now exposed to this model, and to the significant affective power of intergenerational storytelling.

Jane Yolen has a strong interest in oral storytelling and is a founding member of the Western New England Storytellers Guild (Frischer). Her use of the fairy tale framework in *Briar Rose* recalls oral tradition, providing a compelling link between Jewish storytelling and the practice of orality. *Briar Rose* is broken down into three sections entitled “Home,” “Castle,” and “Home Again.” The first and longest section, “Home,” alternates timelines. In the present, where the narrative action takes place, Becca is implored by the memory of her grandmother to understand the gaps in her tale. Between each present-day chapter is a vignette of Becca listening to Gemma’s stories during her childhood. The vignettes emphasize Becca’s developing role as the legacy bearer of the family, often through contrast with her older sisters. In Chapter 9, when Sylvia and Shana bombard Gemma with questions about “Sleeping Beauty,” Gemma is “oblivious to the two, watching the sleeping Becca” (Yolen 76-7). When the sisters’ bickering becomes overwhelming, “Gemma [cannot] be persuaded to finish the story” (77), and it is significant that she does not feel compelled to speak when she knows Becca cannot listen. As Becca gets older, she starts to actively negotiate the terms of Gemma’s story by asking meaningful questions: for example, in Chapter 13 she asks, “‘Why is it always a prince who rescues her?’” (104). It is Becca’s consistent engagement with the narrative that keeps Gemma’s story alive, and her willingness to conduct difficult research and travel to Poland is the only reason that a clearer picture of the past is eventually revealed. The magnitude of generational transmission is made explicit when Becca first learns the name of the place she must visit, Chelmno, and feels “as if the word itself had been imprinted in her genes” (122).

The latter part of “Home” includes Becca’s visit to Poland, as she explores the town of Chelmno while trying to learn about Gemma’s experience there. She and Magda are put in touch with an elderly, non-Jewish man named Josef Potocki, who is overcome when he recognizes a photo of Gemma (Yolen 175). Josef then becomes the notable exception to the rule of prioritizing women’s communications with each other. “Castle” is made up of Josef’s recounting of his experience in the Holocaust, first as a prisoner in Sachsenhausen (a concentration camp mainly for political prisoners, where he was interned for his homosexuality), and then with a group of Jewish partisans, which is how he met Gemma. Becca learns that Josef is the “prince” who gave Gemma the “kiss of life,” although he is not her grandfather. Along with two other partisans, he discovered Gemma moving slightly amid a pile of corpses recently dead from gassing (228). Josef resuscitated Gemma by breathing into her mouth (229), and she joined with the group. Gemma then fell in love with a partisan named Aron Mandlestein, known to the group as “The Avenger,” and married him in a ceremony in the woods (240). After Aron was killed in a rebellion (242), Gemma, pregnant with his child, escaped using forged papers identifying her as Josef’s wife (244). Along with the literal form of orality that is implied by the “mouth-to-mouth” incident, orality in storytelling is indicated in this section using the first sentence of each chapter, which is always punctuated with the words “(he said),” referring to Josef. For example: “You must understand (he said) that this is a story of survivors, not heroes” (183). However, once Josef is finished telling the story, he indicates to Becca that this is not a regular occurrence for him, saying, “‘I told you more of the truth than I have ever told anyone’” (252). When Becca departs, he allows her to keep his ring, a memento of his and Gemma’s shared past, effectively “giving” Becca their story so that she may tell it into the next generation: “‘I gave it to her as

corroboration for her story. And now it belongs to you for yours'" (253). As a result, Becca becomes the inheritor of another previously unspoken story of the Holocaust.

The final section, "Home Again," is the shortest, comprised of one present-day scene where Becca returns to America from her trip to Poland, between two vignettes of the past. The final vignette parallels the opening of the story. In Chapter 1, Becca as a toddler begs for Gemma to tell her favourite story, "'Seepin Boot'" (Yolen 21). The story ends with a moment from the very recent past, not long before Gemma's illness and death, in which Becca's two-year-old niece Sarah also asks Gemma for "'Seepin Boot'" (261). This final moment in the novel shows Gemma with her great-granddaughter and emphasizes the novel's core theme of intergenerational transfer. An echo of Becca as a young girl, Sarah shows promise as the member of the next generation who will communicate Gemma's history.

*The Birchbark House* and *Briar Rose* are both concerned with communicating processes of cultural continuance and intergenerational memory to young readers. Women's agency is central to these processes, and thus to the patterns of resilience enacted through storytelling. The generative telling and active listening experiences of women and girls in *The Birchbark House* are a critical component of the community's productive relationships with one another and the interconnected world. Nokomis's stories provide Omakayas with a link to the past, as well as ensuring that her own history will resonate with her descendants in the future. In *Briar Rose*, it is through the practice of storytelling that Gemma can reclaim some of her agency as a survivor of intense Holocaust trauma, despite her loss of voice, and through which Becca is eventually able to make sense of a fragmented cultural past.

[25] See faculty profile: https://history.ucr.edu/people/clifford-trafzer.
[26] I draw this term and this spelling from Erdrich's "Thanks and Acknowledgments" page preceding the narrative text of *The Birchbark House*.
[27] It is worth noting that Omakayas is slightly younger than most child readers of *The Birchbark House* would be. Most reviews place the expected reading age at about 9 to 12 years, likely due to the more advanced vocabulary and the overt nature of the difficult, historically complex subject matters addressed in the book.
[28] See Reese's description of herself on p. 37 of the article.
[29] For a concise plot summary, see entry on "Sleeping Beauty" in *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales Volume 3: Q-Z*, pp. 881–883.
[30] It should be noted that presumed familiarity with Perrault's "Sleeping Beauty" itself tends to be very limited, ending with the awakening and marriage and omitting the plotline about the Prince's mother who wishes to eat their children. See, for example, "The Beauty in the Slumbering Woodland" in Christine A. Jones's *Mother Goose Refigured: A Critical Translation of Charles Perrault's Fairy Tales*.
[31] See author website: http://www.hanksville.org/storytellers/damm/.

# 3 Fiction: women's cultural memory in novels and short stories

"The truth about stories is that that's all we are."

-Thomas King (Cherokee and Greek),[32] *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*

Speaking from marginalized positions in society, the Native American and Jewish American women writers studied in this chapter use fiction to create "affective, emotive, and political dimensions" (Tagore 3) of resistance to erasure by a dominant historical narrative. I am interested in how their texts represent the nature of storytelling and cultural continuance, and how they figure women's lives and relationships as central to the experiences of intergenerational trauma and memory.

Up until now, this thesis has engaged with Erdrich's poetry and fiction for children, but she is best known as a writer of fiction for adults. Perhaps most recognizable in the longer form of her novels is Erdrich's literary purpose of bearing witness "to the trials and tragedies, the victories and accomplishments, and the recovery, perseverance, and survival of the Ojibwe people" (Kurup 16). Her extensive work as a novelist undertakes the task of unravelling a longstanding American colonial narrative through the writing of a counterhistory,[33] centring the experiences of a people who have been literally and figuratively marginalized in their own territory, and the ways they continue to produce living memory. Erdrich has published what is presently an eight-book series referred to as the "Love Medicine" series. The novels feature several separate yet interconnected stories spanning the twentieth century, which revolve around the lives of Ojibwe[34] families within and outside of a reservation in North Dakota (Peterson 20).

A work of historical fiction, *Tracks* (1988) is Erdrich's first overtly political novel, focusing on the forces dividing an Ojibwe tribe as they try to retain their land in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (20-22). The characters deal with the ramifications of colonial imposition and violence on their land, community, and personal relationships, and the novel speaks to the resilience of Indigenous culture and memory amid this assault.

Though it is the defining crisis of modern Jewish history, the Holocaust has frequently been absent in the novels of American Jews; in what Norma Rosen refers to as a "burnt opening" (3), prolific Jewish American novelists have tended not to address it directly. The intensity of the Holocaust as a subject matter may not lend well to novelistic interpretation: to put it bluntly, how does one write a novel about the unprecedented, state-sponsored, industrialized murder of millions? This is not to say that Jewish American novelists have avoided the theme of antisemitism altogether. As Rosen notes, many writers who have addressed aspects of Jewish life have done so because observation of its quirks and problems would be inherent to their everyday lives (8). While antisemitism was (and remains) prevalent, the Holocaust was an extreme, concentrated event so hideous and outside of the norm that these writers did not know how to address it in the usual format of the novel. Novels may ruminate on Jewish life in its many forms: but as philosopher Giorgio Agamben puts it, the Holocaust was life *outside* of life, a state in which the sacredness of human life was no longer the "rule" of humanity (168-9). In the research building towards this project, I could not find a female Jewish American novelist whose work explores cultural concerns of trauma and memory comparably to Erdrich's novels. As a result, I have turned to the short story when looking at Jewish women's fiction. This chapter will study three Holocaust-themed short stories: "The Shawl" (1980) by Cynthia Ozick (which was

later combined into a novella with a sequel story, "Rosa"), "The Legacy of Raizel Kaidish" (1984) by Rebecca Goldstein, and "Flashback" (1988) by Lesléa Newman.

## 3.1 Genre, gender, and the role of orality

*Tracks* maps the possibility for a revitalized historical understanding of Native American experiences, thereby resisting a static narrative of erasure propagated by dominant society (such as the one referenced in Erdrich's poem "Dear John Wayne," as discussed in Chapter 1). In her theory about memory in literature, Birgit Neumann posits that novels can create new textual models of memory (rather than replicating existing versions) by using discourse to produce, rather than reproduce, the past they are describing (334). She identifies a few specific devices in these types of novels – which she calls "fictions of memory" – that are used to represent the collective past, cultural memories, and values. Perspective structure endows the narrative figure(s) with a particular point of view that allows the reader to understand their psychological disposition, information level, and the norms that influence their behaviours (338). Intermedial references (for example, allusions to stories outside of the text) suggest that through processes of cultural memory, "fiction" becomes just as indicative of the past as is documentary "fact" (339). The unreliable narrator is another common characteristic, used to underscore the subjectivity and elusiveness of memory (338). Novels provide a forum through which to experiment with new concepts of memory and give voice to marginalized memories, revealing the process of both individual and collective memory creation (340). I believe that Erdrich uses these techniques in *Tracks*, but with the ultimate goal of creating what Ojibwe[35] critic Armand Garnet Ruffo describes as her own unique way of seeing and imagining that is fundamentally distinct from Western cultural values (174).

Conversely, "the short story can be best understood as a type of fragment […] prone to snap and to confound readers' expectations […] and to resist definition" (March-Russell viii). Rooted in flexible storytelling traditions, short fiction narratives tend to be mutable and less transparent (22). Paul March-Russell notes the late German philosopher Walter Benjamin's disdain for the short story (23), but I believe Benjamin's theses "On the Concept of History" actually provide an interesting perspective on the short story's capabilities as a potent mode of historical articulation. As Benjamin says, to articulate the past historically necessitates "appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger" (391). I interpret the short stories by Jewish American women as brief articulations of particular historical truths about silencing and trauma related to the Holocaust, but also about survival and cultural resilience in the face of crisis. These short bursts of memory-telling rupture the premise that we are able to fully conceptualize this historical tragedy, contributing to a necessarily fragmented and complex understanding of Jewish and Holocaust history.

As theorized by David Brauner, there is a gendered aspect to the genre disparity in Jewish fiction. Post-World War II, Jewish men's novels became part of the American literary canon, with writers such as Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, and Philip Roth entering the mainstream (Brauner 24). Works by prolific Jewish American men tended away from discussing things like family and religion and towards a "thematic focus [on] angsty, secular comedy" (25) – and while not every story need address the legacy of the Holocaust, its absence from the entire canon is palpable and indicative of a wider concern. The later twentieth century saw a significant increase in published writing by Jewish American women, who were primarily working in short stories (as was typically the case for women's fiction), and treated the subject of the Holocaust more

explicitly (25). By writing about the Holocaust in the form of the short story, Jewish American women violated a dually-faceted, problematic norm: the silence established by the male canon which made writing about the Holocaust taboo (37), and the widely accepted notion that the novel, a male-dominated format, is the measure of great fiction (24-5).

Reluctance to address the Holocaust in longform fiction may also be related to the fact that American writers are not only temporally, but also geographically displaced from the experiences they are writing about. Rosen notes a difference in the European approach to the subject: European literature and art tends to be less insecure about dealing with the morbidity of the Holocaust, while Jewish writing in the U.S. has been characterized by humour rather than horror (10). Even when surreal, European Holocaust writing "felt like documentary" (10), as the subject matter warranted addressing as a part of its continental history. Conversely, in America, the crisis was always "over there," never at home (11). Though literally "distant" from where the writers are positioned, issues related to the Holocaust resonate across geographical, temporal, and linguistic gaps, particularly because many survivors immigrated to America and started families. By addressing the Holocaust through short rather than long fiction, the three short stories studied work intensively within these gaps to address concerns of Jewish women's identity, memory, and trauma. Erdrich's novels, by comparison, are about a community that is (relatively) similar to what she might have experienced and witnessed in real life (and perhaps this geographical proximity helps her to move more freely back and forth through time in the different books in her series). The colonial disaster she writes about is not a "far away" problem to contend with – it is something deeply, yet insidiously, ingrained in the very fabric of the United States' national identity. Following this line of thinking, the specific crises of oppression

dealt with in these Indigenous and Jewish works are reflected in the form of fiction they each use. The comparison of genres provides a compelling starting point for addressing how these works of fiction call attention to the act of storytelling itself.

The history of oral tradition is of critical importance and emphasizes the centrality of the spoken word to the transmission of culture from past into present into future (Niatum 65). However, the stereotyped and propagated image of the Indigenous writer as a "traditional storyteller" might falsely suggest obscurity in the modern world, and risks erasing the varied experiences of contemporary Indigenous writers and thinkers. Many Indigenous writers, including Erdrich, emphasize the significance of orality while simultaneously debunking the stereotype that Native people are not culturally or intellectually productive. The clear practice of storytelling is also a critical component of Jewish cultural survival, and notions of storytelling play a significant role in the study of Jewish American women's fiction. Though the study of orality is most explicitly relevant in the context of Indigenous literatures, it can also be productive in Jewish literatures, and theory about the short story as a medium suggests that it is inherently related to the flexibility of oral tradition (March-Russell viii).

### 3.2 Creating and transferring histories of liveness

"[S]tories can control our lives" (King, *TAS* 9), says Thomas King, in the introduction to his lecture series *The Truth About Stories*. In the lecture, he uses the idea of creation narratives to demonstrate how this control is enacted, since creation stories contain "relationships that help to define the nature of the universe and how cultures understand the world in which they exist" (10). Following King's line of thinking is a challenge to a dominant Western division between "stories" and "real life," which insists on a binary distinction, whereas *Tracks* develops upon the

idea of a "circular" existence through the unification of spiritual and physical worlds (Ruffo 165). Paula Allen Gunn notes that Native thought regards the material and spiritual worlds as two "different expressions of the same reality," and that reality "manifests its spirit in a tangible way" (60). Stories are responsible for creating and maintaining what we understand as "reality," and thus the two cannot be separated. According to Ruffo, in Native American culture, vision "is a view of creation as one complete whole; the world of objects and the spiritual world, the conscious and the unconscious, thought and feeling, are the embodiment of one great and powerful essence" (164). A common Western definition suggests that a "vision" is something essentially "unreal" or imagined (169), but vision from an Indigenous perspective is part of what constitutes reality, because the mingling of spiritual and physical worlds is inherent (172). Many of the events in *Tracks* challenge Western notions of what is and is not "possible" (168), and as a result the reader is inducted into Erdrich's representation of an Indigenous cosmology, wherein reality is explicitly rooted in stories. She invites her readers, many of whom are presumably outsiders to Indigenous culture, into the particular worldview underpinning her text, thereby asking them to consider that a construction of reality outside of their own is legitimate. It goes beyond asking a settler reader to ignore the perceived boundaries of their own reality, bringing them into this interconnected worldview as a necessary part of reading the text.

*Tracks* "tells the story of different generations of witnesses" to the histories of colonial trauma (Tagore 70), as well as histories of resilience. Stories from within the community are responsible for creating and salvaging life in *Tracks*, and a communal relation is represented through Nanapush, one of the novel's two alternating first-person narrators. We are made aware that he is speaking to Lulu, the daughter of Fleur, the enigmatic lone survivor of the Pillager

family who were killed by colonial illnesses. The other narrator, Pauline, is part Ojibwe and part white, and her loathing of her Native background creates significant problems for the tribe, as well as, predictably, for herself. Constantly wishing to assimilate with the colonizer, Pauline talks and talks, but speaks to no one. Perspective structure allows the reader an understanding of both narrators' dispositions and motivations. Nanapush wants to ensure that Lulu understands her family's legacy so that she will incorporate it into communal memory going forward (Tagore 71); meanwhile, Pauline's "self-mutilating" (Peterson 30) misery and volatility render her an unreliable narrator, signifying that her worldview of "white progress" is non-credible (34). The importance of stories and oral communication to the survival of the community is emphasized primarily through Nanapush's narrative and voice.

Rooted in an Anishinaabe cosmology, the novel communicates the effects of forces outside the realm of Western experience (Ruffo 172). *Tracks* allows its characters to possess power beyond what Western culture accepts as possible (173), and in the case of Nanapush, this power manifests as a result of orality. He acts as a healer multiple times, and speech and storytelling are the key to his abilities. Of the time he survived an illness that killed his family and much of the rest of the community, he says: "when I was the last one left, I saved myself by starting a story. [...] I got well by talking. Death could not get a word in edgewise, grew discouraged, and traveled on" (Erdrich 46). This passage suggests to his listener Lulu, and to the reader, that as long as storytelling continues, life will prevail over death. The lifegiving nature of oral tradition embodied by Erdrich's poetry finds its role in the narrative of *Tracks*: through talking, singing, and telling stories, Nanapush is on two occasions responsible for healing physical ailments. The novel begins with him discovering Fleur among her deceased community

and effectively "talking" her away from dying herself (7), and he uses this same technique years later to heal Lulu's frostbitten feet, preventing the need for an amputation (167). When we are first introduced to Nanapush's healing abilities, he says, "I talked both languages in streams that ran alongside each other, over every rock, around every obstacle" (7). His use of "both languages" indicates that he is able to revive Fleur by speaking the Anishinaabe language as well as by appropriating the language of the colonizer, English, for his own purposes. Nanapush manages colonial trauma through his ability to turn the two often conflicting cultures into "streams [running] alongside each other," because he must adapt somewhat out of political necessity (Peterson 32). His blending of cultures is not to suggest that the tribe is better off for having been colonized, but that the conditions inflicted upon them have forced them to adapt so that they will survive to preserve cultural memory and to rewrite the narrative of hegemonic history. By combining cultures and languages, he overcomes not only the obstacle of Fleur's sickness in the beginning, but works to navigate the many obstacles befalling his community throughout. At the end of the novel, he manages to retrieve Lulu from a residential school by becoming tribal chairman, "reaching through the loophole" (Erdrich 225) of the government's attempt to control the tribe and using it for their self-preservation.

King notes that "easily understood language [is] not welcome in legal documents" (*II* 224), pointing to the tendency for documentary records to be intentionally misleading. The mistrust of recorded history is a recurring theme in *Tracks*, which as a whole seeks to bear witness to the multifaceted violence of colonization that is missing from official record (Tagore 66). The use of literacy as a tool for sustained assault on Indigenous life is juxtaposed against the ever-evolving, reciprocal nature of oral communication. Although *Tracks* is a literary text, it

privileges the values of oral communication while warning of the dangers of documentation, which is widely accepted in Western society as the pinnacle of historical correctness. Orality is structurally inherent, as Nanapush's narrative, which both begins and concludes the text, is spoken aloud to an identified listener. By invoking oral storytelling modes, *Tracks* pushes back against the literary and discursive methods of the colonizer (Peterson 24); however, its bi-cultural nature is structurally reinforced through the chapter headings, representing the culturally conflicting frameworks. Each chapter contains a triple naming of the date: the English time, the Ojibwe time, and the English translation of the Ojibwe. This time period (the years 1912 to 1924) marks a particular shift in the nature of Indigenous-U.S. government relations, as "the loss and theft of Indigenous land by colonial powers [became] further institutionalized through governmental policy" (Tagore 69). The intermedial reference to this era links the novel's production of cultural memory to events that have been well documented in mainstream history, but it marginalizes these events, displacing the linear notion of how things occurred. Nanapush will not grant the reader access to the names of pertinent documents: "we signed the treaty" (Erdrich 1), he relays. By not specifying a particular treaty, he detracts from the document's legitimacy, refusing to reference the thing that has worked to disenfranchise his community, and refusing to tell their stories through colonial language.

Nanapush begins his narrative by describing the colonizers "bringing exile in a storm of government papers" (Erdrich 1), and at the end, he states that the government has "[sunk] their barbed pens into the lives of Indians," using colonial literature to turn them into "a tribe of single-space documents, directives, policy […], of chicken-scratch that can be scattered by a wind, diminished to ashes by one struck match" (225). These metaphors associate a particular

fragility with written history. An understanding of history which exists in writing alone can be easily dispersed or burned away into obscurity, suggesting that documentary records are by themselves an insufficient means of preserving memories. A process of communication that is anchored in the fluid, active practice of storytelling and retelling is more sustainable, and closer to an understanding of "truth" in that it rejects the idea that any singular perspective is sufficient. *Tracks* acknowledges the importance of understanding both oral and written histories (Peterson 30), but invokes the possibility of articulating history through a community-oriented narrative ethos instead of a narrative of singularity. Erdrich's literary worldbuilding voice is unique, and through her text she renders her own version of Indigenous cosmology. This reinforces the impossibility of a single Native American narrative, as each writer has their own way of seeing and imagining.

When Nanapush says to Lulu, "My girl, I saw the passing of times you will never know" (Erdrich 2), he acknowledges that his own narrative capabilities are limited, and that absolute understanding of history inevitably eludes those who did not witness it. This premise is valuable for the study of Holocaust writing as well, because the affective truth of life for survivors and victims cannot be directly articulated. In the short story "The Shawl," Cynthia Ozick's largely metaphorical writing implies the limits of representation on behalf of the characters. Rosa is a young woman living in the camps, who hides the existence of her infant child, Magda, by keeping her wrapped in a shawl. With Magda in tow, Rosa marches alongside her fourteen-year-old niece, Stella, towards a concentration camp. Once Rosa is no longer able to lactate, Magda occupies herself by sucking on Rosa's shawl, a literal form of orality that is directly tied to her ability to communicate. Comforted by the shawl, Magda is always silent, allowing her to remain

hidden from the Nazis until Stella, herself suffering from extreme cold and malnutrition, "took the shawl away and made Magda die" (Ozick 6). In the absence of the shawl, her mouth unoccupied for the first time, Magda finally cries out; she then is discovered by the Nazi soldiers and kicked into an electrified fence (9).

John Roth describes "The Shawl" as "a combination of short, unembellished descriptive and narrative sentences and nightmarish metaphors" (469). The bluntness of phrases such as "Rosa knew Magda was going to die very soon; she should have been dead already" (Ozick 5) stands in stark contrast to the story's frequent use of figurative, sometimes even aesthetically pleasing language, so the story implicates itself in what Brauner describes as a "beautification of the sordid" (28). Emaciated and not even aware of her own hunger, Rosa is described as "already a floating angel" (Ozick 3). Though on the surface this description is oddly pleasant, it seems to imply that Rosa is, effectively, already dead. The story posits that Magda survived as long as she did because "she had been buried away deep inside the magic shawl" (5-6). The language in this sentence juxtaposes two contrasting ideas: the premise of Magda's "burial" (although she would of course not be buried upon her actual death), and the premise that the shawl itself is imbued with "magic" powers and is therefore keeping her safe. There is no way to entirely avoid this aestheticization of the Holocaust when attempting to represent it (Brauner 30), because in writing about a history, one inherently must "transcend" the reality of what occurred (Rosen 9). The particular horror of the Holocaust has long been termed "indescribable," "unspeakable," or "unimaginable" (Lang 72), and such a designation is "the void by which the Holocaust challenges its would-be representations" (73). Though the story uses direct phrasing at times, it ultimately lapses into transcendent metaphorical writing, demonstrating the challenge associated

with articulating Holocaust trauma. The tension between these two types of language indicates both the limits of and the affective power of storytelling.

Common in fictions of memory is a narrator imposing meaning onto surfacing memories of their past from their present perspective (Neumann 335). This is seen in *Tracks*, with Nanapush using the community's past to teach Lulu about cultural resilience, and in Rebecca Goldstein's "The Legacy of Raizel Kaidish," although it is never made clear to whom the narrator is speaking. It begins matter-of-factly: "In 1945 the following incident took place in the death camp of Buchenwald" (Goldstein 229), and goes on to relay the story of a girl named Raizel Kaidish who, in an effort to save a weak friend slated for extermination, devised a plan to switch places with her, so that they would see a girl fit for work and spare her life. "Someone informed on the girls and they were both gassed. The informer was rewarded with Raizel's kitchen job" (229), the explanation of this story concludes, before the narrator Rose reveals that she is named after Raizel, whom her mother knew in the camp. In the story, Rose relays her experience of being raised by a survivor mother whose "moral framework was formed in Buchenwald" (229). Much of the story seems to be an exercise in detachment, as the narrator has internalized her mother's moralizing voice with a cool cynicism. This detachment also mirrors the way in which her mother worked to view her experience of survival as a moral lesson, presumably to distance herself from the visceral trauma of what she witnessed. The only affective response that Rose shows at any point in the story is frustration, when she tries to goad her mother into having a fight about philosophical perspectives, and her mother remains unbothered by the provocation. Rose finally explodes, lamenting, "My speech was not delivered in that calm voice of detached reason I had so obsessively rehearsed" (239): this comment

reflects the measured way in which she is so clearly trying to report these experiences to the reader. The story ends with Rose stating her mother's deathbed confession "that it had been she who had informed on Raizel Kaidish" (240). This suggests that Rose's plain use of language throughout may be a way to displace the horrific reality, for to replace "someone" with "my mother" in the story of Buchenwald – "*My mother* informed on the girls and they were both gassed" – changes the effect entirely. Putting these two phrases together might be too unpalatable for the narrator, who ends the story without granting any insight into her emotional reaction to this revelation.

As the child of a survivor, Rose embodies what Hirsch calls postmemory, rooted in her own affective experience of the "generation after." Hirsch notes "the magnitude of [her] parents' recollections and the ways in which [she] felt crowded out by them" (4). Like Klepfisz's speaker in "The Widow and Daughter," this is precisely what happens to Rose as a child. She muses that "The people in my life didn't seem so real to me as the people in the tales" from the camp; while her imaginings of her personal lived experiences were blurry, her "images of the camp were vivid and detailed" (Goldstein 230). The effect of traumatic transfer may see the "generation after" becoming subsumed by the events and narratives preceding their existence (Hirsch 5). While Rose works hard to keep these narratives at a critical distance, the protagonist of Lesléa Newman's "Flashback," Sharon, is subsumed by them completely.

Newman's story takes place in 1985: Sharon is a twenty-year-old Jewish university student obsessed with learning about the Holocaust, and after having a "flashback" of the concentration camps, she becomes convinced that she is the reincarnation of a Holocaust victim. Her mental state deteriorates further when she sees a swastika graffitied in public and reads a

newspaper article relating how President Reagan said that "the SS men were just as much victims of the Holocaust as were the Jews" (Newman 134). Believing that the Nazis have risen to power in her contemporary America, Sharon has a breakdown and goes into hiding in her apartment. Sharon embodies life in the state of postmemory, as she literally relives an experience that is not her own. The key difference between Rose's and Sharon's experiences of postmemory is that Sharon is ostensibly *not* a direct descendant of survivors. However, the story does leave some room for doubt, suggesting the possibility of an unspoken Holocaust history: "No one in her family, that she knew about anyways," was a survivor, and she is "puzzled" and "frightened" by her family's silence on the subject of the war (131). Through postmemory, one is shaped (even if indirectly) by "traumatic fragments of events that […] exceed comprehension" (Hirsch 5), and the family's unwillingness to discuss the Jewish past reflects the trope of the Holocaust's "inexpressibility." Despite a lack of familial narrative, Sharon's connection to the past exists through "imaginative investment [and] projection" (5): she builds a psychological reality entirely through stories she has internalized through her learning, such that they become her mind's life.

Of all the characters in the three short stories, Sharon is simultaneously the most removed from the actual horrors of the Holocaust, and the least measured in her affective response to them. She is positioned to be conscious of the Holocaust's historical magnitude, and is acutely aware of survivor and victim experiences very similar to those represented in the two other short stories. When her friend Abbie comes to her apartment to check on her, she refuses to answer the door, afraid that Abbie might be helping the Nazis collect other Jewish lesbians to spare her own life (Newman 139). Sharon's fear springs from "stories about prisoners who had survived at the cost of other people's lives, people they knew and loved" (140), which describes exactly the

decision made by Rose's mother in "The Legacy of Raizel Kaidish." Near the end of the story, Sharon hears a voice in her head compelling her to "*Tell them how they took away my child*" (146): this could be the voice of someone like Rosa, whose baby Magda was killed in front of her. While the protagonist is keenly aware of the importance of memory, this story warns of how an obsession with memory can be destructive. Sharon is so obsessed with learning and memorializing that she brings the stories into a psychological life of their own, and is completely incapacitated as a result. This reveals the dangers of appropriating someone else's experience of victimhood in the process of trying to learn, remember, and comprehend a painful cultural history. Ultimately, however, the story ends on a hopeful (albeit still disturbing) note, as the protagonist is implored by the voices of the dead to carry on with her life – however afraid she may be of the antisemitism (and homophobia) in her midst – and to keep their memories alive. In some ways, "Flashback" is about Sharon's journey as a learner and storyteller herself, and therefore as a carrier of cultural memory, with its associated triumphs and burdens.

For marginalized groups whose memories have been tethered with colonial erasure or genocide, a historical truth cannot be separated from the associated practices of storytelling. These short stories by Jewish American women each reconstitute an experience of the Holocaust through a different way of telling these experiences, while *Tracks* suggests that the image of the past is most poignantly reflected in how memories reverberate in the present. Because Lulu is adopted by Nanapush, she learns about cultural survival and becomes the primary bearer of oral tradition (Ruffo 166). Telling Lulu about her return to the tribe, Nanapush says: "your grin was as bold as your mother's, white with anger that vanished when you saw us waiting. You […] tried to walk, prim as you'd been taught. Halfway across, you could not contain yourself and

sprang forward" (Erdrich 226). Her anger is characterized, significantly, as "white," reflecting the pain caused by forcible assimilation into white Christian culture.

The traumatic impact of government policy, including its devastating effect on young people, is a recurring theme in Erdrich's novels (Kurup 93). In reading *Tracks* as part of Erdrich's overall worldbuilding project, I imagine Lulu as a potential speaker of the poem "Indian Boarding School: The Runaways." Although it is not shown directly, Lulu is treated cruelly at the boarding school and longs for home. She does not have a narrative voice in the novel, but the poem grants a first-person voice to an experience that echoes hers. In the moment of return, Lulu is overcome with feeling at seeing her grandparents Nanapush and Margaret, and is able to shed some of the constrictive attitude she had been taught to adopt at the school. Contextualized almost as a direct response to Fleur's disappearance, with a "bold grin" resembling her courageous mother's, Lulu's enthusiastic return to her family ultimately "suggests [the] ability of the people to survive the wounds of history" (Peterson 34), seeming to symbolize the hope for a better future amid the cultural crises and land shrinkage brought about by colonists. Through Lulu, the novel resists the literary trope of the "vanishing Indian" (21), as she has rejoined her family, refusing to relinquish her identity or community. Lulu's return is the final image of the novel, firmly identifying her as the legacy bearer and conduit of memory, and she embodies the community's resilience and commitment to cultural preservation.

### 3.3 The importance of womanhood in fictions of cultural memory

The novel and three short stories each figure relationships between women as central to the preservation of cultural memory. History is represented through female figures and their relationships with one another, as the carriers of intergenerational trauma, memory, and cultural

resilience. The texts each reflect essential crises associated with womanhood under conditions of colonization, genocide, and oppression, including traumatic experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, and child-rearing. But the texts move beyond this trauma, by exploring how women act as a source of communal regeneration, as the relationships between them amid these circumstances are responsible for generating cultural memory.

Interpreted one way, *Tracks* is a story of two extremely different women – Fleur Pillager and Pauline Puyat – whose lives, traumas, and memories are inextricably linked through their shared, yet differently internalized, experiences of colonization. Fleur is the fiercest defender of the tribe's land until her disappearance at the end of the novel, and her lack of narrative voice represents the systemic silencing of Native (and particularly Native women's) voices, while Pauline's pervading desire to become a part of white Catholic society drives her to masochism and eventual insanity. The narrative sees both of these women giving birth to daughters, who represent women's intergenerational experiences of colonial trauma and survivance. The first child to be born is Lulu; according to Nanapush, "they were sure Fleur was dead, she was so cold and still after giving birth. But then the baby cried. […] At that sound, they say, Fleur opened her eyes and breathed" (Erdrich 60). Lulu's immediate ability to revive her mother after childbirth establishes how she will maintain Fleur's legacy, later through her engagement with oral culture.

Pauline's traumatic experience of an unwanted pregnancy by her lover Napoleon reflects the potential consequences of Christian sexual guilt, and she worries that having an illegitimate child will squander her chances of becoming a nun (Hessler 42). She initially attempts to abort (Erdrich 131) but is convinced to carry to term by Bernadette, Napoleon's sister with whom she lives, and then tries to "hold in" the baby during the birth until Bernadette "[wrenches] her into

the world" using spoons (135). The child Marie is "named for the Virgin" (133), but Pauline believes she is "soiled" and thinks of the bruising from the spoons as markings "'by the devil's thumbs'" (136). Thus, Marie's life and body are immediately engraved with her birth mother's internalized colonial self-loathing, and she is handed off to be raised by Bernadette. Pauline's unwanted pregnancy is juxtaposed with Fleur's devastation over her subsequent miscarriage. Unlike Pauline, Fleur is invested in the continuation of the Ojibwe community, and the loss of her child is especially ominous as it "coincides with the steady advance of white civilization and the dwindling of her powers" (Hessler 43).

Fleur's sexuality is linked with danger, but paradoxically, it is linked with survival as well. She "drowns" several times in her youth, but while the men who try to interfere always die shortly thereafter, she survives each time. Pauline observes that "Even though she was good-looking, nobody dared to court her because it was clear that Misshepeshu, the water man, the monster, wanted her for himself" (Erdrich 11). Fleur's desirability to the dangerous "lake monster" entity actually works to the advantage of protecting the Pillagers' land. Three of the men who rescue her from drowning, whom she subsequently condemns to death by cursing them, are employees of the extortive lumber company (Hessler 40). However, Fleur herself has a dangerous and traumatic sexual experience during the summer she spends in Argus, the neighbouring white town. She is raped by three white men, who are assistants at the butcher's shop where she works with Pauline, after she beats them in a poker match. As we are not given access to Fleur's narrative voice, the rape is understood primarily through Pauline, who was hidden nearby and witnessed Fleur's cries for help (Erdrich 26). Though Pauline does not attempt to intervene in the moment of crisis, she is haunted by the rape and begins to feel as

though she experienced it for herself. She relives it each night in her dreams, as "witness when the men slapped Fleur's mouth, beat her, entered and rode her. I felt all. My shrieks poured from her mouth and my blood from her wounds" (66). That Pauline is the one to articulate Fleur's pain represents the interconnectedness of their lives and traumas. However, they are impacted differently by their experiences of colonial domination. Despite her experience of sexual violence, Fleur later develops a passionate relationship with a young Anishinaabe man named Eli Kashpaw, with whom she has Lulu. Lulu becomes the most important part of Fleur's life, and she uses motherhood as an opportunity to teach ways of life that are under colonial threat to the next generation. Meanwhile, Pauline's internalized view of white progress, and her own repressed sexual desire, lead her to see Fleur's Ojibwe values and family as dangerous.

The markings of colonization on Pauline's life often manifest through her tortured sexuality, so she resolves this dilemma by denying her sexuality altogether. This occurs in two interconnected ways: she strangles Napoleon to death (without consciously realizing it is him), and she dedicates herself to the church to become a nun. As her madness becomes even more palpable, she takes to the water in a quest to kill Misshepeshu, who has throughout the novel been associated with Fleur. While strangling what she thinks is the lake monster, she believes she is defeating Fleur by punishing her for her "dangerous" sexuality. However, she is instead punishing herself, because what she perceives as the monster turns out to be Napoleon: "the thing grew a human shape, one that I recognized in gradual stages. […] I felt a growing horror and trembled all through my limbs until suddenly it was revealed to me that I had committed no sin. […] How could I have known what body the devil would assume?" (Erdrich 202-3). Having

completed and justified this violent act, Pauline feels as though she has triumphed over her perceived shortcomings and can be fully indoctrinated into white Christian society (204).

Pauline's masochistic implementation of Christianity represents the tragic, extreme internalization of colonial attitudes, while Fleur is the tragedy of what colonialism has tried to silence and eliminate. Although Fleur is depleted by the end, her connection with Misshepeshu no longer enough to protect the ancestral territory from encroachment, she leaves behind a female legacy in Lulu, who becomes the receiver of stories through Nanapush. Lulu's triumphant return to her family opens the possibility for a new ending to the community's traumatic history (Peterson 22). The compression of narrative events occurs so that Fleur's vanishment and Lulu's return to the reservation happen within pages of each other, almost as though the two events are directly linked. The fact that Lulu returns seemingly very quickly after Fleur departs signifies her larger purpose as a carrier of female memory in the community, and she becomes a symbol of hope amid the land crisis that has dispersed the tribe and driven Fleur away. Unlike Lulu, Marie is given no presence in the end: her last appearance in the narrative is when she is unsuccessfully used to lure Pauline back to shore (Erdrich 198). Marie has been denied a communal relation and thus, her cultural voice, at least in this novel.[36] While Fleur's voice has been lost to colonization, her legacy remains through her daughter. The (cautious) hope that Lulu's return represents is the novel's way of recentralizing a female presence within the community and the narrative after the disenfranchisement of its two most important female characters.

Like *Tracks*, the three short stories are concerned with how history is represented through women and their experiences. The bodily trauma of childbirth experienced by both Fleur and Pauline during a moment of cultural crisis resonates in "The Shawl," as Rosa must somehow

take care of an infant while in a death camp. In *Tracks*, Lulu embodies Fleur's legacy, demonstrating how the "generation after" bears witness to what they did not experience; likewise, Rose is an embodiment of her mother's memories in "The Legacy of Raizel Kaidish," and like Pauline with Marie, Rose's mother is only able to see her in terms of her trauma. "Flashback" articulates the theme implicit to the other texts, explicitly centralizing the role of women's actions, bodies, and memories to the process of cultural survival.

"The Shawl" emphasizes how the horrors of the Holocaust specifically afflicted the female body. The story comments on the state of both Rosa's and Stella's breasts: Rosa walks "with [her baby] Magda curled up between sore breasts," while Stella is "A thin girl of fourteen, too small, with thin breasts of her own" (Ozick 3), implying that Stella's transition through puberty has been halted due to malnutrition and exhaustion. Ozick also emphasizes the abnormality of the situation by writing that both Rosa and Stella "did not menstruate" (5). Rosa's experience of child-rearing is deeply troubled, as the horrific conditions have rendered her unable to produce breastmilk, so that Magda no longer has anything to nurse from. Her nipples, painfully cracked from Magda's constant suckling, are described as "extinct, a dead volcano, blind eye, chill hole" (4), all metaphors which suggest the idea of an empty vessel unable to fulfill its purpose. In the absence of a breastfeeding ritual, previously the perpetual attachment between Rosa and her baby, Magda turns to Rosa's shawl to "nourish" her. The shawl, therefore, becomes the lifeline between the mother and daughter (Klingenstein 163). The story comments on the expectations associated with motherhood by providing an example of a woman who has no choice but to abandon them. Rosa inevitably "fails" to protect her child in their deadly circumstances, but her maternal instinct remains and manifests in complex ways. Once Stella

takes the shawl away, we again witness a bodily reaction from Rosa, this time in response to Magda's suffering: "She saw that Magda was grieving for the loss of her shawl, she saw that Magda was going to die. A tide of commands hammered in Rosa's nipples: Fetch, get, bring!" (Ozick 8). Even though her body has been brutalized, the physiological instinct to protect her daughter from danger is still overwhelming. However, in this life-or-death moment, another facet of Rosa's maternal concern surfaces. Since Magda had been mute "ever since the drying up of Rosa's nipples," Rosa worried that her baby might be "defective," "deaf," or "dumb" (7), and in spite of the danger of the situation, she is relieved that Magda able to vocalize after all. These conflicting feelings reflect an essential crisis of motherhood in the conditions of the Holocaust: Rosa is made to confront the horrific question of whether she would rather force her child to live in perpetual silence, or let her reclaim her agency by "speaking" and then die as a result.

The idea that relationships between women are the basis for life and death in the Holocaust, sometimes simultaneously, appears in each of the three short stories. This theme is presented in the opening paragraphs of "The Legacy of Raizel Kaidish," as Rose describes the relationship between two young girls her mother knew in the camp. In light of having lost their families, the girls (Raizel and the other, who is unnamed in the story) become one another's family, and their bond provides them a sense of purpose through the horror and desolation of Buchenwald. Their attachment becomes such that Raizel – Rose's namesake – develops a plan that puts her own life at risk when her friend is condemned to death, on the chance they might both be spared, but an informer tells the authorities of their plan and the girls are both murdered in the gas chambers. Raizel was otherwise strong and able to work, and had a higher chance of surviving the camp; her willingness to endanger herself for her friend's sake made her own death

possible. Therefore, the bond between the girls proves to be both their reason to survive amid the losses of their families, and the reason they ultimately die.

The main story of "Raizel Kaidish" revolves around the fraught relationship between a daughter, Rose, and her morally grounded, extremely rigid survivor mother, Marta. It focuses on Rose's experience of the "generation after," as she is raised by a traumatized parent. Through the reveal at the end that Marta had been the one to inform on Raizel – which she did in the hopes it would increase her own chances of survival – we come to understand how Marta's experience of the Holocaust, while it formed her essential moral "goodness" (Goldstein 231) for the rest of her life, also predicated her inability to be a loving mother to Rose. Marta develops an entire moral code out of one life-shaping event, and comes to idolize the ethical, "impersonal" (232) pragmatism of the girl whose death she was indirectly responsible for – i.e., Raizel's friend had been sentenced to die, but Raizel believed that she and her friend might both survive if she put herself into the more directly dangerous situation designated to her friend. Marta decides to become a mother, thereby creating a life – one founded upon and educated through the fallout of her mistake – in order to compensate for the young life that she had a role in ending. In the process of "[giving] back the life she stole," Marta ends up "depriving her daughter" (Klingenstein 171) of a genuine maternal bond.

Even before Rose knows the truth, she resents her mother because she can sense that the purpose of her existence is directly related to Marta's experience in the Holocaust. She knew "what no child should ever know: that my mother had me for some definite reason, and that she would always see me in terms of this reason" (Goldstein 235). Rose concludes that Marta failed as a mother because Rose's personhood could never overcome the "purpose that originated in the

camp" (Klingenstein 171), which should have become insignificant when Rose was actually born (Goldstein 235). Her stifling due to a parent's experience is reminiscent of the speaker in "The Widow and Daughter," who describes a "melted existence" (Klepfisz 37) in the wake of her father's martyrdom. Rose is only able to acknowledge the resentment she feels after her mother dies and she spends years considering whether or not to have a child herself, stating, "The mental delivery of that decision was so much more agonizing than the physical birth" (Goldstein 234). Here, Goldstein invokes a common experience of motherhood – childbirth – to emphasize the dilemma Rose faces, in that her personal concept of motherhood is framed through her own mother's failure to acknowledge the fundamental individuality of her existence. Marta's trauma, and her subsequent ethical theorizing, prevents her from ever being able to separate Rose's evolving life from the young, halted life that became the basis for her whole worldview.

Though it is not the story's focal point, the notion of motherhood is addressed also in "Flashback," as Sharon develops a compulsion to reproduce when she is in hiding. Believing she might be "the only Jew left on the earth, […] she fantasized about having babies […] until she was well into her nineties, like Sarah when she had Isaac" (Newman 139). In this case, the hypothetical concept of Sharon's "motherhood" is explicitly linked with survival. However, it goes beyond the survival of the individual or immediate community to encapsulate the overall survival of the Jewish people; this is reinforced through the Biblical reference to Sarah, the first of Judaism's four foremothers. Sharon's unambiguous lesbianism adds another layer to her traumatic understanding and "experience" of the Holocaust: she is afraid of not only the antisemitism, but also of the homophobic element of Nazi persecution. While she is in hiding,

her fear of being discovered by the authorities is compounded by the fact that her neighbours know about her sexual orientation (138).

Many of Sharon's fixations stem from her educated, implicitly feminist preoccupation with women's experiences. When she ruminates on Holocaust history, she almost exclusively thinks of it in terms of a women's history. Sharon reads and obsesses about female-specific experiences of sexual abuse, such as the "woman who traded bunks with a sixteen-year-old girl every night for almost a year," so that a German soldier would rape her instead of the virginal young girl, "in the hopes that somewhere someone was doing the same for her daughter" (Newman 143). However, she also focuses on other experiences, including "women sharing food with each other," and "women who didn't want to die [laying] their lives down for each other, just to show there was still a little bit of humanity left in the world" (143). Though these latter two examples are more broadly applicable to many Holocaust survivors and victims irrespective of gender, Sharon almost unfailingly chooses to frame her thinking around the experiences of women. Her obsession with learning about women in the Holocaust is correlated with what I am characterizing as her lesbian feminism,[37] which is pertinent due to the story's historical moment.

Taking place in the 1980s, the story occurs during a time that would generally be considered the late part of second-wave feminism (Buchanan), a movement concerned with lesbian issues "as part of a broader challenge against sexism" (Valk 488). For some women, this evolved into lesbian separatism, which was most prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s, and refers to a "separation into women-only communities," thereby "advocating an end to male domination and the strength of connections between women" (489). Though Sharon does not seem to live her life by a code of separatism, her story evokes the associated values of women-centric

communities and connections. Before she goes into hiding, Abbie finds that Sharon can no longer talk about anything but the Holocaust: since "other women [feel] the same way," Sharon begins to spend most of her time alone (Newman 132), implying that Sharon's social community is comprised entirely of other women. More specifically, it seems that most if not all of her friends are lesbians (142), and these women demonstrate a theoretical, social, and political engagement with lesbian issues. As a woman who loves women, particularly during the feminist practices of the 1980s, Sharon prioritizes women's lives and experiences, as well as the social, familial, and intimate bonds between them. This value system carries over to her obsession with the Holocaust. When near the end of the story she finally commits to leaving the apartment and joining her friends, she fears that reuniting with her beloved community might be a death sentence; however, she also resolves that it is the only way they might survive the perceived Nazi threat, and that if she dies, it will at least be "among women who love [her]" (143). In the end, it is her love for her friends, and her respect for the women who lived and died in the Holocaust – she thinks to herself, "Too many women have died already" (146) – that brings Sharon out of hiding. The bonds between women become the reason Sharon survives the ordeal. Her need to see her friends and to honour the legacy of women in the Holocaust forces her to leave her apartment, where she was tormenting and depriving herself out of fear, and the story ends with her departure to "meet her friends and her fate, and whatever else was waiting for her beyond her own front door" (146). Despite Sharon's continued unawareness of her own reality, the reader is left to presume that reuniting with the women in her life will ultimately pull her out of her breakdown.

When Sharon finds the will to venture outside in "Flashback," she notes that "What she had learned from her project about women in the Holocaust was becoming clear. It was their love for each other, their bonding, that had kept them alive" (Newman 142). Though the correlation between women's bonds and their physical survival is not always positive – as evidenced in "The Shawl" and "The Legacy of Raizel Kaidish," which both tell of girls who die in the camps – these bonds are shown to be key to the preservation of cultural memory. In *Tracks* as well as in the short stories, women's experiences and relationships are centralized in the process of generating complex understandings of history as a response to cultural trauma. Though some of the female characters in these texts have become disenfranchised or silenced, there is a significance to the fact that their stories remain to be told by women writers, suggesting the resilience of cultural memory in spite of persecution and attempted erasure.

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[32] See biography on The Canadian Encyclopedia website: https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/thomas-king.

[33] Peterson argues that the creation of a "counterhistory" results from Erdrich's union of Ojibwe tradition with postmodern literary methods (21-2).

[34] I draw this term from its use in the characters' family tree diagram that precedes the narrative text of *Tracks*. Though the characters generally use "Anishinaabe" when referring to themselves, I am electing to use "Ojibwe" because the term is used in the story's framework, while "Anishinaabe" is used by a culturally specific first-person narrative voice.

[35] See faculty profile on Queen's University website: https://www.queensu.ca/english/ruffo.

[36] Marie appears as a central character in other books from the "Love Medicine" series.

[37]The *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society* describes the lesbian feminist ideology as "[recognizing] the legitimacy of love between women, using it to frame individual sexual and political identities and as a basis for community building and collective action. [It] challenges the perceived normalcy of heterosexuality and male supremacy and presents alternate ways of thinking about gender and power."

# Conclusion

## Fragmentation as a vessel for historical integrity

Fragmentation is a potent theme across the texts in this study, and it warrants considering why this idea looms so large in literatures of cultural memory. To begin with, the poems, novels, and stories all give voice to histories of crisis and trauma, and the experience of trauma itself creates a fragmented relationship to memory. This is exemplified by Gemma in *Briar Rose*, who is only able to access parts of her traumatic experience by applying them onto a different cultural framework. The weight of fragmentation across these texts signifies the importance of embracing cultural narratives that are categorically not "coherent" or "complete." Fragmentation is an intrinsic part of histories of crisis and is used in these texts to articulate experiences of loss, exile, and displacement under oppressive conditions. Irena Klepfisz's poetry reflects the notion of fragmentation clearly through the potent visual (and, if read aloud, auditory) disruptions. The poems embody a state between the generation *of* and the generation *after* extreme cultural trauma, and the fragmented processes of mourning and recovery. The imagery in Erdrich's poetry draws attention to distilled cultural details, and together her poems can be read as segments building towards a unique story of Native American life.

Literary fragments also work to remind the reader of the ethical imperative to continue learning. Acknowledging the fragmentation of a cultural history encourages the reader to attend to the significance of the gaps, and to the historical truths they may uncover. This is exemplified well through the framing of the novels geared towards young readers. *The Birchbark House* and *Briar Rose* both use paratexts, allowing the authors to directly address their readers and alert them to the knowledge gaps associated with histories of crisis. They communicate that while

histories of crisis are not fully knowable, lessons of the past can be explored through deeper engagement with cultural texts. *Tracks* suggests a new model of understanding history that does not rely on documentary record alone, as it can be misleading and even detrimental, but also on the generative and regenerative power of storying. It reminds the reader to be wary of attempts to claim absolute authority, as no single narrative is capable of communicating an entire truth. Short stories themselves are often understood as fragments, and the choice not to conform to a legible Holocaust narrative is evident in the three short stories, which complicate notions of women's survival and victimhood and demonstrate that we cannot fully conceptualize the tragedy. Both *Tracks* and the Jewish women's short stories imply the presence of multitudes of cultural histories, by committing to their own distinct narratives.

If a history is neglected, like the history of Indigenous peoples in North America, the knowledge risks being lost; but trying to view history in a purely sequential manner, as with Holocaust history, can lead to empty memorialization and commodification. Through fragmentation, all of the authors studied in this project map more effective creative models of cultural memory, functioning in response to two distinct crises. Erdrich works to overwrite the narrative of historical absence, but does not push towards a commodification of Native American memory. She never claims to speak for all of the Ojibwe or Native American population at large; she commits to the specificity of her own literary worldview and to building one fragment in a mosaic of cultural stories. Her literature "fills in the gaps" only in the sense of closely attending to histories that have been marginalized, silenced, or ignored; she does not try to replicate the pretense of a neat historical narrative. Conversely, the Jewish women writers push back against

the tendency to use the ubiquity of the Holocaust as an excuse not to pay attention to the variety of complex stories contained within this history.

The uses of fragmentation in these texts reflect the respective cultural experiences of displacement. Native Americans have been displaced within their own land by settler encroachment, and this displacement is systemically maintained to this day through government policy. Meanwhile, the Jews have always been a diasporic people, many of whom are in America as a result of persecution in other parts of the world. Such experiences of displacement lead to the production of cultural memory that is inherently fragmented, complex, and nonlinear; but these memories become resilient and regenerative in response. The experiences of dislocation from the past reverberate in the present, and subsequent generations have become the inheritors of fragmented and sometimes even unspoken histories. As members of communities descended from crisis, we are responsible for engaging critically with expressions of history and memory. However, we must never think it possible to form a "complete" picture of a marginalized past, as this would risk eroding our understanding of its complexity.

## Final thoughts

Experiences of disenfranchisement, oppression, and trauma are always culturally specific. Dominant discourse often seeks to alienate marginalized groups from one another, leading to conversations about who can "claim" to have experienced the "most significant" oppression. This type of rhetoric threatens our ability to communicate productively. I wrote this project to demonstrate how reading works that reflect one culturally specific perspective from a different culturally specific perspective might gradually lead towards a form of solidarity that does not erase the specificity of experience. It is critical for marginalized groups to form a united front

against white supremacy, and against an authoritative notion of history that silences our complex and varied experiences. By focusing externally as well as internally, we can align for the purposes of empathy and common socio-political benefit. I believe that deeply considering and validating one another's memories, histories, and ongoing lived experiences might have a healing effect for people with histories of cultural crisis. It was through reading the work of an author from a cultural group other than my own that I initially came to meaningfully reflect on my experiences of intergenerational Jewish memory. By situating the literatures in a dialogic relationship, comparing the authors' techniques and interests, I was able to enhance my exploration of memory, trauma, and resilience in both Native and Jewish women's writing. The specificities and commonalities of cultural expression emerged because of my simultaneous attention to both sets of literatures. I hope that the future will see an increase in the creation of collaborative media that tells stories about the generative intersections of historically marginalized cultures.

Let me return to the beginning. After telling a part of his story in front of a crowd for the first time at my cousin's bar mitzvah, my grandfather Alexander Eisen began volunteering as a survivor speaker for the Holocaust Education Centre. He spoke regularly for over a decade, mostly at elementary and middle schools, mostly to non-Jewish youth, and published his memoir, *A Time of Fear*, in 2010. A few weeks ago, my family and I attended a launch event for an anthology entitled *Confronting Devastation: Memoirs of Holocaust Survivors from Hungary*, in which an excerpt of his book appears. One of the event organizers referred to a quote by Rabbi Tarfon from *Pirkei Avot* (Hebrew for "Chapters of the Fathers"), a book of ethical teachings. It says: "It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it."[38]

I thought about the little girl who fled the reception and about the person she had grown to become; she is the product of stories and storytellers.

Saba's ninetieth birthday is next month. It is in honour of his commitment to preserving our memories that this project was written.

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[38] See: https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_Avot.2.16?lang=bi.

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