

The logo for the Anthropology Book Forum, featuring a stylized blue and white circular design on the left side of a dark blue banner.

Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Teaching the Holocaust in an Uncertain World

Review by Naomi Calnitsky

Anxious Histories: Narrating the Holocaust in Jewish Communities at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century

by Jordana Silverstein

Berghahn Books, 2015

Anxious Histories is a sensitive work, which sets out to relate how the differing migration stories and urban settings of Jewish communities in New York and Melbourne led to the establishment of Jewish communities that teach the Holocaust in divergent ways. It does so, not by seeking to offer a “totalizing” study of Holocaust education, but rather offering a glimpse into twelve schools, fifteen teachers, and a variety of denominations in Melbourne and New York (from Orthodox to secular) (p. 5). A somewhat daunting project upon first glance, the book reveals teachers of the Holocaust as “anxious” about the ways in which “Jews” might “fit into the Australian, U.S. and Jewish worlds in which they live,” and often adopting overtly Zionist orientations (p. 3-4) It locates diasporic Jewish communities within broader social worlds and points to challenges of Holocaust narration to suggest “there are many impossibilities involved in such pedagogical pursuits” (p. 5).

Holocaust education here takes place in what are termed “settler colonial” conditions. The author proposes to open conversations, formerly “foreclosed, about anxiety and the Holocaust” (p. 8). While this literary gap is recognized at the outset, there is little thorough examination of the problem of anxiety as a specifically psychological state applicable to Jewish communities in the diaspora world. The book focuses on ways that “anxious Jewishness(es)” has had “protracted effects” (p. 9) on Holocaust education and in this sense the book succeeds. Education is under scrutiny as it commingles with definitions of collective identity and the reproduction of ethno-religious culture among young Jews of the Diaspora. Jewish communities’ past historical engagement with European modernity is

considered, as are shifting characterizations of Jewish belonging in the modern non-Jewish West.

The book incorporates postcolonial thought, offering interpretive flourishes that in most cases succeed, but on occasion, concepts like mimicry are taken out of context and can risk detracting attention from the central research problem. The extent to which an analysis of what the author terms settler-colonial societies in which modern Jewish diaspora communities live is pertinent remains somewhat ambiguous, influenced perhaps more by modern discursive trends than Jewish realities. While national contexts are critical, Jewish pasts and histories of migration into these societies may be even more so, yet those stories are often eclipsed by the structure and intention of the work.

Chapter One introduces post-Holocaust migrations to the “non-Jewish West” (p. 37) and proposes a discussion of racialized national pasts in Australia and America. It moves into a discussion of Holocaust memorializing in the United States, changing conceptions of “whiteness” in post-war America, and the de-marginalization of Jewish identity gained through inclusion in an American culture often defined more by class than by religious indicators. Marginality as it relates to Judaism in diaspora communities, whether imagined or real, is considered in a fruitful way. The author situates Jewish migration to Australia in its formerly racialized immigration climate in which quotas defined Jewish migration before and after the war, to probe connections between whiteness and Jewishness in Australia. She refers to “strands of anxiety” (p. 55) experienced by Jews in their ability to integrate into Australian society, and considers Diaspora and Israel in gendered terms, with Diaspora understood as a state of “disempowered exile” (p. 54) and Israel a realization of masculinity and strength. The dichotomy is useful but does not open room for interpreting perforations between the two.

The book goes on to look at how “chronological fact-based narrations” (p. 63) served as a primary way to represent “truths” of the Holocaust. Putting pedagogy under scrutiny, it considers Diasporic ways of *knowing* the Holocaust. It also refers to patterns prevalent in Holocaust pedagogy, including modernist narratives that position the creation of the State of Israel as an uplifting Jewish progression from the Nazi period. In relation to the problem of teaching trauma or unknowable pasts, “coherence and knowability” were ultimate aims when narrating traumatic pasts (p. 65). Knowledge of the Holocaust was often “unquenchable” terrain (p. 70). While Holocaust curricula were described as totalizing or segmented from other histories, narrating the Holocaust offered solidity or a “bedrock” upon which “uncertain identities” could sit (p. 71), and survivor testimonies could serve as “truth-telling” devices or “primary evidence” (p. 77). *Anxious Histories* also considers liberation’s ambivalence for many survivors, due to their perpetual suffering, pointing to a “lack of closure” associated with the Holocaust and its positioning as an often “unresolvable” moment in history and history education (p. 87).

Anxious Histories makes for a nuanced study of the intricacies of Holocaust education, its omissions and points of emphasis. The study fits into a category of post-Holocaust inquiry, not dissimilar to Carolyn Dean's recent work on post-Holocaust discourses of victimhood and empathy. Modern Jewish culture is also considered alongside Zionist culture wherein a Jewish Diaspora often operates in dialogue with the postwar establishment of Israel. Australian Zionism and other incarnations of diasporic Zionism are explored. A view into patterns of teaching about postwar concerns, including the problem of implementing the rule of law vis-à-vis Nazi war crimes, locates Israel as a center for post-Holocaust justice making and education, and problematizes framings of Israel as a culmination or "happy ending" of wartime trauma. Viewing patterns in Holocaust pedagogy with a critical eye, Silverstein charts out how teachers position Israel as a "redemptive national end," following a "Zionist narratorial path" (p. 110). Her discussion of Israeli masculinity vis-à-vis diasporic femininity risks essentializing Israeli culture but is also reflective of certain realities.

The book suggests that "settler-colonial" societies often pursue acts of "forgetting" to establish a sense of belonging. The discussion locates Jewish diasporic identities in their broader national settings. Specifically in the discussion of America, the "Americanization" of Holocaust memory is manifested overtly through museum culture, (149) but settler-colonialism's relationship with Jewish culture in the Diasporic world is not considered in any meaningful way. U.S. Holocaust memorialization is critiqued as a "brand" of memorializing, yet the context of American museum culture is not discussed. America's positioning as a secondary (after Israel), or even foundational headquarters for the public display of Holocaust memory is to some extent taken for granted, and there is a misplaced emphasis on the historical injustices performed by "settler-colonial" societies of which modern Jews are a part, and the lack of Jewish institutional attention to those pasts. Holocaust education's potential connection with histories of conquest or slavery in America, or its role in "obscuring" those histories, is claimed; while this might seem a matter of pedagogical emphasis, the author fails to probe why the often-insular institutions of the Diaspora emphasized their own histories at the expense of others. Stories of Jewish migration to the "settler-colonial" societies under study are given little attention. Similarly, the freedom of Jews to practice their faith in host societies, or their relative comfort in doing so, is not considered. Due to the narrow emphasis of the central research question, that of how Holocaust pedagogies operate in two Diasporic contexts, the broader political problems and cultural questions raised by the study, which are interwoven into it – the potentially precarious location of Jews in Western societies, the controversial place of Israel in the world, and how Diasporic Jews relate to Zionism – are considered as they relate to Holocaust education but not more broadly. The mosaic of outcomes uncovered through fieldwork, however, reveals a multiplicity of

positions and intersections with these larger narratives and themes.

The final chapter departs from earlier themes to consider how Jewish women's experiences of the Holocaust are narrated. The author applies university level feminist discourse to secondary level teaching, to reveal complexity in the ways in which women's roles in and experiences of the Holocaust are taught at Jewish institutions. The book ends, somewhat ambivalently, with Said's observation about a lack of neutrality in the study of history. While the book's findings effectively prove this to be the case, readers are left with somewhat ambiguous conclusions. Holocaust educators outside of Israel indeed do more than teach histories of the Holocaust; their curricula extend to fundamental questions relating to Jewish diasporic identity, "how to be" in a non-Jewish world, how to study and "know" past trauma, how to contend with Jewish anxiety in a post-Holocaust world (p. 208). A disclaimer, stating an emphasis on pedagogy, positions the book as fundamentally anthropological, rather than historical, and it serves ultimately as a study more so of discourse than of culture, serving as a transplantation of post-secondary thought upon the more primary (and oftentimes foundational) levels of Jewish educational life, to reveal their strengths and weaknesses, gaps, fissures and omissions, and enduring victories.

References Cited

Carolyn Dean

2010. *Aversion and Erasure: The Fate of the Victim after the Holocaust*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Carolyn Dean

2004. *The Fragility of Empathy After the Holocaust*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Naomi Calnitsky is a PhD Candidate in Canadian and Latin American History at Carleton University. She was a Commonwealth Scholar at the University of Otago, New Zealand where she received a Master of Arts in History. She specializes in research on labour migration from peripheral to first world economies, including Mexico-Canada migration routes and postwar Pacific Island seasonal migration to New Zealand.

