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Title
In Memoriam. Ad Futurum

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Author
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Publication Date
2023-12-13

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IN MEMORIAM. AD FUTURUM

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Keywords:

Memory, trauma, slavery, genocide, Holocaust

Summary:

The essay offers a reflection on memories of traumatic histories, including African American slavery, Native American genocide, and the Holocaust. I weave personal memories together with a consideration of poetry, monuments, and other representations that sometimes tend to efface, sometimes come to grips, as best they can, with these appalling events and their legacies.

This is the longitude and latitude of the impossible;

this is the epicenter of the unthinkable;

this is the crossroads of the unimaginable:

the tomb of Frederick Douglass, three days after the election.

So begins the poem “Litany at the Tomb of Frederick Douglass,” composed in November 2008 by Martín Espada. During his pilgrimage to the Rochester cemetery where Douglass is buried Espada discovers that fresh offerings adorn the gravesite of the great Abolitionist. Someone has affixed an Obama campaign button to the tombstone, over the engraved “O” in Douglass’s name. A sticker on the sleeve of a labor union T-shirt reads, “I Voted Today.” A newspaper announces, “Obama Wins.”

Espada’s verse arcs across the 150 years separating the escaped slave and the new president. Like Espada and millions of other Americans, I welcomed Barack Obama’s election with a sense of joyful incredulity that seemed to well up from the depths of that chasm.

Fig. 1: Tomb of Frederick Douglass, Rochester, New York (Tony Fischer)

Fig. 2: Ann's Place, Akron, Ohio, election morning 2012. A photo of Barack Obama's campaign visit to the café sits on the ledge behind the juice machines. (Daniel Linger)

Two great crimes have propelled American history. The first, referenced by Espada, is the enslavement of Africans. The second is

the genocide of Native Americans. A criminal record is not unique to the United States; national crimes range from the mundane to the monstrous, but all nations have an iniquitous past. Nor are these particular crimes unambiguously "American." The indigenous territory that was to become the United States and the site of a grim plantation regime was first settled by British, Spaniards, French, Dutch, Swedes, and Russians. Conquest of that territory and the establishment of slavery within it were European colonial enterprises. Thus in an important sense – because, after all, where shall we begin our story? – these were European crimes. The slave trade was a commercial venture organized and run by a host of Europeans, as well as Americans; some Africans colluded. Moreover, the land cleansed of Native Americans later became, and continues to be, the home of people whose origins encompass the entire globe: English and Irish, Germans and Poles, Japanese and Chinese, Persians and Arabs. Martín Espada, of Puerto Rican descent, was born in Brooklyn, an area taken by the Dutch from a Native American group they called "Canarsie." All live within these borders courtesy of the ravages of European conquerors; it could be said that all are retrospectively complicit.

There are perplexing cross-currents. The conquered land has itself provided a home for refugees and survivors of horrors elsewhere, even for the descendants of slaves. From the end of the Civil War until the 1890s, African Americans in segregated cavalry units battled

Native Americans, helping to pacify the West.[1] Indians sometimes fought Indians: the U.S. government awarded its highest military decoration, the Medal of Honor, to sixteen Native American soldiers who served in the frontier wars (“Native American Medal of Honor Recipients”). At the same time, the fate of defeated Native Americans set off alarm bells for nineteenth-century black leaders, including Frederick Douglass, who feared that whites could mete out an equal disaster to African Americans.[2] And Native Americans, despite their terrible trials, have continued to enlist in disproportionate numbers as soldiers for the nation that arose on their territory (“Native Americans and the U.S. Military”). In Vietnam, one of the many wars in which Native Americans have distinguished themselves, U.S. soldiers routinely referred to Viet Cong domains as “Indian country.”[3] The bitter irony was not lost on their Native American comrades (Espy).

That irony came alive for me one long winter night in the mid-1970s, as I was riding a Greyhound through the desert. Perhaps nowhere in the United States are the bones of conquest laid so bare as in the American Southwest. The territory was taken by the United States from Mexico, which had taken it from the indigenous peoples. The geography is a many-layered historical pentimento; the inhabitants, an uneasy mix of Anglos, Native Americans, and descendants of Mexicans and Spaniards. I shared the back seat of the bus with a young Navajo man, traveling through an invisible terrain;

only the starlight pierced the darkness. We passed the hours of limbo in talk. I was going home to New Mexico, where I was living at the time. My companion was traveling to Flagstaff, an Anglo outpost in the Indian country of northern Arizona.[4] The sole purpose of his journey was to visit the graves of his two brothers, both of whom had been killed in Vietnam.

The grandson of Jewish immigrants from Russia-Poland and Austria-Hungary, I was born in Akron, a medium-sized city in the northeast corner of the midwestern state of Ohio. Akron is a Rust Belt town that has lost a third of its population and most of its industry since I left there in 1963. Long the manufacturing home of Goodyear, Goodrich, Firestone, and General Tire, it was once Rubber Capital of the World. Today, the blackened smoke stacks and mottled brick factories stand like ancient ruins. No more auto tires are made in Akron, shuttered houses of former workers slowly decay, and the city's vitality seems to have been sucked away by some global economic vortex.

Several years ago I visited during midsummer. The heat was oppressive, the greenery overwhelming, the rain persistent, the air alive with the chatter of insects. I was staying in the westside African American ghetto, near the house where John Brown lived for some years. Brown, a white man, was a tanner, sheep breeder, and wool dealer by profession; by commitment, he was an anti-slavery

insurrectionist “whose zeal in the cause of my race,” wrote Frederick Douglass, “was far greater than mine—it was as the burning sun to my taper light—mine was bounded by time, his stretched away to the boundless shores of eternity” (Douglass). Douglass knew Brown well, and respected him; Brown tried unsuccessfully to enlist Douglass to join him on the fateful 1859 Harper’s Ferry raid in Virginia, which Douglass rightly considered a “trap of steel” and which ended in Brown’s execution.[5] As it happens, John Brown’s house lies directly on what used to be a Native American portage trail between the Ohio River and Lake Erie watersheds. This path was the far boundary of the United States in the late 18th century. Looking west, I could almost descry the lost forest. I was struck with the strange and overwhelming sensation that the grass and trees and vines and flowers and foliage, all suffused with heavy July haze, were inhabited by ghosts intent on reclaiming the now exhausted region that was once their home.

I lived in Akron for my first 16 years. I never knowingly met anyone there of Native American ancestry.

Yet, strangely, spectres are everywhere. Dotting the city are romantic sculptures that are modeled after no Native American in particular, though some have been given fanciful Indian-sounding names. A cynic might call them mere gestures, but I think this would go too far: there is a melancholy aspect to the figures, almost a grieving quality. Along the boulevard that follows the old portage

route there stands a statue of a buckskin-clad Indian carrying a bow and arrow. It was commissioned in 1905 by a local German-born real-estate entrepreneur. I wonder: Why did a German immigrant wish to commemorate the vanished Indians? Farther out on West Market Street, Hungarian-born sculptor Peter Wolf Toth, who has settled in Akron, fashioned a 12-meter tall Native American head, made of red oak.[6] Elsewhere are other representations: men bearing canoes, visages decorating public buildings. Akron’s first semi-pro football team, established in 1908, was called the Indians, as is the nearest major league baseball team, 50 kilometers distant in Cleveland.

Figure 3: 1905 Native American statue, Portage Path, Akron (Akron-Summit County Public Library)

Akron's name is, fittingly, derived from the Greek, but the European linguistic blaze barely scratched the landscape. The area is laced with rivers. "Ohio" comes from an Iroquois phrase meaning "good river." A branch of the Cuyahoga winds through the heart of the city: the name is probably derived from the Iroquois for "crooked river." The Tuscarawas is named for the Tuscarora tribe; the Muskingum, after a Shawnee word for "swampy earth."

What are we to make of these memorialized absences? The question occurred to me again during a 2005 visit, with a group of University of California students, to Cracow, Poland. Cracow is an elegant medieval city whose architecture and atmosphere appealed to the wartime German occupiers: because they considered it "ur-Deutsch," deep German, unlike cosmopolitan Warsaw, they spared it devastation ("Cracow Under German Occupation"). It became the headquarters of the ill-fated eastern territories the Germans blandly called the General Government. The General Government occupied much of the vast zone, sweeping from the Ukraine through Belarus, Poland, and the Baltic states, that the historian Timothy Snyder has termed "the Bloodlands." Between 1933 and 1945, Soviets and Germans and their minions murdered 14 million defenseless civilians in the Bloodlands (Snyder). Prominent among these victims, though hardly alone, were the Bloodlands Jews.

Cracow's old Jewish quarter, Kazimierz, has been partially restored, and despite its atmosphere of abandonment and neglect was a highlight of the tour we followed. Our Polish guide proudly described the formerly vibrant life of this neighborhood. We visited deserted synagogues, stopped in forlorn cemeteries with Hebrew-lettered tombstones, and wandered through streets with battered old houses, some of which displayed commemorative plaques bearing the names of their long-departed Jewish residents. Kazimierz is such an authentic

prewar locale, we were informed, that Steven Spielberg chose it for the filming of *Schindler's List*. We passed tourist-oriented restaurants that advertised Ashkenazi Jewish-style food and klezmer bands.

Lining one city block were reconstructed store fronts of Jewish tailors, grocers, carpenters: dioramas reminiscent of wigwams at a natural history museum. Hidden behind the shop facades was a beer lounge and café which, in consonance with the Disneylike mood, called itself "Once Upon a Time in Kazimierz."[7]

Fig. 4: Shop facades, Kazimierz (Daniel Linger)

Figure 5: Jewish cemetery, Kazimierz (Daniel Linger)

I liked our guide; she was sincere and well-meaning. Nevertheless, I found the visit to the city profoundly unsettling. Yearning for a lost cosmopolitan past cohabited too comfortably with less savory sentiments. In Cracow's open-air old-town market, cheek by jowl with Kazimierz, you can buy kitschy portraits of stereotypical hook-nosed ancient bearded Jewish men, suggestive of, though far more crass and demeaning than, Akron's Indian statues. And the afterglow of life has a deathly cast.[8] Less than two hours away by rail lies the gigantic Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination complex, where over a million Jews, along with many others, were gassed, shot, and

incinerated. To be sure, few Polish Jews lived long enough to meet their end in the Zyklon B chambers there, which did most of their work after Poland itself had been cleansed. Much earlier, in 1941, the Kazimierz Jews were relocated across the Vistula to a walled ghetto specially built in Cracow's Podgorze district. Most soon were swallowed in the maw of Belzec, the prototype for, and most lethal of, all the annihilation mills. Cracow's Jews, who had inhabited the city for half a millennium and who numbered 60,000 in 1939, vanished in a historical instant. [9] Today, perhaps a few hundred dwell in a neighborhood that has become an uncomfortable hybrid of grief and nostalgia.

I have a childhood friend from the Bloodlands, whom I will call Zalman. Before the war his parents and grandparents lived in a shtetl about 100 miles from Minsk, in what was then eastern Poland. Enabled by the sordid Molotov-Ribbentrop Agreement of 1939, the Red Army invaded. The Soviet occupation was brutal, but then, calamity times calamity, the Germans came. Zalman's parents fled east. His grandparents, hoping to ride out the storm, stayed. They should not have.[10] His parents ended up in Siberia. When the war finally ended, they made their way west. Zalman was born in early 1946 on a refugee train destined for a displaced persons camp in Germany. His place of birth is officially listed simply as "Poland." Eventually, in 1949, the family made their way to Bremerhaven and thence to the U.S.

They settled in my hometown, Akron, close to the old portage path, not far from John Brown's house. My friend's parents lived there peacefully until their natural deaths many decades later.

Superficially, Zalman's story seems to close a circle. A place of Native American victimization providentially becomes, centuries later, a place of Jewish refuge. That the United States has often served as a shelter for the persecuted is admirable, a reason for justifiable national pride. But I am not telling you a tale of redemption. The circle of deliverance can never close. Crimes such as genocide and slavery cannot, should not be erased and cannot, should not be forgiven. The sensibilities of perpetrators, the self-regard of nations, or the search for absolution and closure weigh like feathers on the scales of history. What does count is Espada's arc of possibility.

The memory of slavery embodied in Frederick Douglass's tomb secures an arc along which Barack Obama's election engraves a momentous national marker. Not all memories, however, generate such impressive arcs. The ubiquitous signs of the hounding, displacement, and elimination of Native Americans are hidden in plain sight: non-Indians barely notice. Sometimes representations paste fantasies over repugnant realities, as do Akron's Indian statues or Cracow's shop facades. And some memories seem like cul-de-sacs. Consider Belzec, where most of Cracow's Jews died. Over the years, details of its operation have surfaced. The methods were primitive but

efficient. The processing from railroad platform to charnel pit, through vaults flooded with diesel fumes, took hours at most. Though more people were murdered at Auschwitz-Birkenau and Treblinka, a few emerged even from those hells. At Belzec, half a million were killed and the survivors can be counted on the fingers of one hand.[11] The death factory operated for only nine months in 1942.[12] Its operators then tried to consign it, like its victims, to oblivion. The stains proved hard to erase. Because the bodies in the mass graves were so numerous, their decomposition caused the ground to split. They were disinterred and torched. During the burning, which produced a pervasive stench and a miasma of thick black smoke, nearby villagers reportedly scraped human fat from their windows ("The Belzec Death Camp"). Special machines crushed remaining bones. The Germans then landscaped the area and established a farm. Guards were posted to discourage scavengers.[13]

Belzec is an "epicenter of the unthinkable," a "crossroads of the unimaginable," in the most hopeless sense. Its mute, heaving earth seems to provide no foundation for any arc of possibility. The bleakness is rendered starkly in a poem by Dan Pagis, called "Written in Pencil in the Sealed Freight Car." Born in Romania in 1930, Pagis survived the war despite three childhood years in a Ukraine labor camp. In 1946, he escaped from the Bloodlands to Palestine. Written in 1970, his poem imagines a desperate last message scrawled by a

caged, doomed mother. In 2004 it was incised in black letters on a stone memorial wall at Belzec. Pagis suggests that criminals and victims are fatally and intimately bound together and that we are destined to commit and suffer from unspeakable and unforgivable crimes until the end of time.

One can understand why Martín Espada chose to trace a line between Douglass and Obama, honoring the roots of an astonishing, world-shifting moment. But Pagis's motives are more elusive. Perhaps there is a clue in his refusal, or inability, to publish anything about the Holocaust for a quarter century. His reticence brings to mind my own few relatives who survived the inferno and, like Zalman's parents, managed somehow to reach the United States in the years after the war. They rarely recounted their experiences and never in detail. They hardly spoke, at least in my presence, of those who perished, the ones who inhabited the shadows around them. And I wonder about my own hesitation. I was born a year after the war ended. From an early age, I knew what had happened in Europe, an ominous continent in our family atlas. Yet it was only while writing this paper that for the first time I consulted the roster of victims kept by Yad Vashem, the official Israeli memorial authority. I could reliably check only for those with my paternal grandfather's distinctive original surname. To my knowledge, everyone on earth with that name is related to me. My search at the Yad Vashem website filled my computer screen. I just

stared at the list of names – of people. I know nothing about any of them.

Silence is the natural language of despair, an emotion that coils inward and recoils from connection. To make the pain concrete is perhaps to evade or diminish the authenticity of the feeling. Then why speak at all of these many trails of tears? Because, finally, like the putrefying bodies erupting from the manicured soil of Belzec, the public memory may drive a paradoxical wedge into the knot of despair. Not all public memories can serve this purpose: banality and self-pity are dangers. But Pagis's wedge strikes deeply. It takes the form of a last-ditch challenge. His delayed, universal words push all of us to an existential precipice. Germans, Poles, and Jews; Russians, Chinese, Cambodians, Americans, Japanese, Turks, and citizens of the many other nations whose actions have spawned calamities; victims, persecutors, facilitators, collaborators, beneficiaries, bystanders, rationalizers, dissemblers, and heirs of these and other crimes: Stand here. Regard this. Make something of our future if you can.

Here in this carload

I, Eve,

With my son Abel.

If you see my older boy,

Cain, the son of man,

Tell him that I

Fig. 6: "Written in Pencil in the Sealed Freight Car," Belzec (Yarek Shalom)

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Acknowledgments. Thanks to Per Gjerde, Alex Hinton, Steve Parish, Hugh Raffles, Matan Shapiro, and Carolyn Martin Shaw for their thoughtful suggestions for improving this essay. I did my best to attend to their concerns. This paper was originally prepared for a conference, The Politics of Memory, scheduled to take place in Tokyo on June 12-13, 2013, sponsored by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens (OAG), The Japan Initiative, and Embassies of the Federal Republic of Germany and the Republic of Poland in Japan. I thank them, and especially Dr. Volker Stanzel, then the German Ambassador in Japan, for inviting me to attend. The conference was cancelled owing to the last-minute retraction of funding commitments by certain Japan-based organizations.

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[1] As Kuhl points out, the so-called Buffalo Soldiers were making claims to citizenship through demonstrations of their courage and fidelity to the United States.

[2] Talk of race war was rife in the post-bellum U.S., particularly among whites in the former Confederacy. Douglass was often torn between a basic inclination to nonviolence and a worry that forbearance, interpreted as submissiveness by whites, might simply guarantee eternal oppression. In the end, Douglass and other African American leaders "read the fate of the Indians as a cautionary tale and crafted leadership strategies to avoid extermination" (Kuhl 42).

[3] See FitzGerald and many other sources.

[4] Flagstaff purportedly gets its name from the hoisting of a U.S. banner on a ponderosa pine tree in celebration of the U.S. centennial on July 4, 1876. See City of Flagstaff.

[5] See Douglass for an appreciative appraisal of Brown that recognizes their strategic differences. Douglass's friendship with Brown prompted Douglass to question, but not abandon, his pacifist stance (Kuhl).

[6] Toth has sculpted at least one Native American likeness in every state, and several in Canada.

[7] This area of Kazimierz has earned the sardonic nickname "Jewrassic Park" (Gruber). Although the frankly commercial and gauzily sentimental sites of present-day Kazimierz are most obvious, there are several more serious ventures, including, for example, the Center for Jewish Culture, which sponsors an annual festival.

[8] A striking, if unusual, attempt to confront this issue directly is recounted by Dutkowska, who describes a street art project mounted by the Galicia Jewish Museum in 2007. Students "drew chalk silhouettes on the housefronts of

Kazimierz. The idea behind the project was to commemorate the absent inhabitants of the district. The form, a chalk silhouette, evokes the atmosphere of the crime scene, but also refers to the haunting presence of the former inhabitants. Although the chalk traces are subtle and easy to efface, some of them are still visible and become yet another sight for passers-by."

[9] Belzec was the first of the three Operation Reinhard death camps, which were established specifically to exterminate Poland's millions of Jews, a goal they largely achieved. The others were Sobibor and Treblinka (Arad). For an account of the fate of the Jewish population of Cracow during the German occupation, see United States Holocaust Museum, "Krakow."

[10] They were probably shot; family members do not know. That was the usual fate of Jews located east of the Molotov-Ribbentrop line (Snyder).

[11] Bergen reports, for example, that just one person survived Belzec until the end of the war (185). Snyder puts the number of survivors at "two or three" (260). For more on Belzec, see United States Holocaust Museum, "Belzec."

[12] Snyder refuses to call such places "camps," observing acidly: "People spend the night at camps" (256). At Belzec, Jews went straight to the gas chambers, unless they were shot first or were assigned to the grisly work of oiling the death machine, which offered only a momentary reprieve. There were thousands of other Nazi facilities that could more reasonably be called camps, although fatalities there, caused by disease, harsh labor, starvation, or outright murder were always high, and the inmates were viewed as dispensable subhumans.

[13] Essentially the same drill was followed at all the Reinhard camps. Mortality at these facilities approached 100%; when they had done their work, they were shut down and masked. Ghastly details, based on testimony from the few

survivors, Poles, and Germans, are recounted in Arad.