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TITLE: The Historical Novel as a Metaphor: *La amante del ghetto* (2013) by Pedro Ángel Palou

AUTHOR: Eugenia Helena Houvenaghel

EMAIL: e.m.h.houvenaghel@uu.nl

AFFILIATION: Universiteit Utrecht; Department of Languages, Literature and Communication
Spanish; Trans 10; Domplein 29, 3512 JK Utrecht, Netherlands

ABSTRACT: The historical case of the Holocaust functions, in the novel *La amante del ghetto* (2013) by Pedro Ángel Palou (1966, Mexico), as a metaphor for genocide of all times. In the center of Palou's historical novel stands a particular, and paradigmatic, historical case of genocide, as a metaphor for contemporary genocides and conflicts such as Guerrero, Darfur or Syria. What answer can humanity give to these atrocities? The novel approaches this universal question through the particular and concrete story of Zofia, one of the Jewish Avengers who targeted Nazi war criminals in post-war Paris (1947) seeking revenge for the Holocaust. By telling the concrete details of her experience—the executions that she carries out, her silence on the sexual abuse in the camps and ghettos, and the way in which Christian Dior's new aesthetics reactivate her individual empowerment capacity—the novel reflects metaphorically on three elements that are crucial in the healing of societies after genocide: justice, memory and art.

KEYWORDS: Historical Novel, Metaphor, Nazism, Genocide, Pedro Ángel Palou, Crack writers

RESUMEN: El caso histórico del Holocausto funciona, en la novela *La amante del ghetto* (2013) de Pedro Ángel Palou (1966, Mexico), como metáfora global de las violaciones a los derechos humanos en tiempos de genocidio. En el centro de la novela histórica de Palou se hallan problemas contemporáneos relacionados con conflictos tales como Guerrero, Darfur o Siria. ¿Qué puede hacer la humanidad en respuesta a estas atrocidades? La novela aborda esta cuestión universal a través de la historia concreta de Zofia, miembro del grupo de los vengadores judíos cuyo objetivo era castigar a los responsables de los crímenes Nazi para conseguir justicia en la Europa de posguerra. Por medio del recuento de los detalles concretos de su experiencia—las ejecuciones de los Nazis que Zofia lleva a cabo, su silencio en torno al abuso sexual en los campamentos y ghettos, y la manera en la que la nueva estética de Christian Dior reactiva su empoderamiento individual—la novela reflexiona sobre tres elementos cruciales que facilitan el proceso de cicatrización de heridas en las sociedades que emergen de conflictos: justicia, memoria y arte.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Novela histórica, metáfora, nazismo, genocidio, Pedro Ángel Palou, autores del Crack.

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BIOGRAPHY: Eugenia Helena Houvenaghel holds the Chair of Spanish and Latin American literature at Utrecht University since 2015. She worked as a Research Professor (2005-2015, Special Research Fund), and as a post-doctoral researcher (2001-2004, Research Foundation – Flanders). She studies the cultural interaction between Europe and Latin America. She has published, in this framework, articles, special issues and books on the identity of exiles “in between” Spain and Latin America (Tomás Segovia, Angelina Muñoz-Huberman, Alfonso Reyes), and on the rewriting of classical myths in Latin American Literature.

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Eugenia Helena Houvenaghel, Utrecht University

A Historical Novel About the Holocaust?

La amante del ghetto (2013) by Pedro Ángel Palou (1966, México) gives a protagonist role to a historical topic: it foregrounds the Nokmim, or Jewish Avengers, who targeted Nazi war criminals in the Post War period with as aim the revenge of the Holocaust. The ‘Nokmim’ commando was created immediately after the Second World War by survivors of the Holocaust under direction of the Jewish poet and partisan leader Abba Kovner. At first sight, one might, thus, classify *The Lover of the Ghetto* as a historical novel about Nazism and the Holocaust. This statement would not surprise the reader of Palou’s work for two reasons: first, the Nazi topic is very present in Palou’s work, and secondly, Palou has become today one of Mexico’s most successful writers of historical fiction.

Palou has developed a strong line of historical fiction in his oeuvre, especially since 2006, by writing several literary portraits of Mexican political leaders, including Zapata (2006), Morelos (2007), Cuauhtémoc (2008), Porfirio Díaz (2010), Juan de Palafox (2011), Pancho Villa (2014), and Lázaro Cárdenas (2016). The author states that the purpose of his historical fiction is to create a different image of these major figures in Mexican history—by focusing, for example, on an unusual period in their lives, or by adopting a unique perspective on their personality. “His historical fiction,” in this sense, “is one of the most interesting subversions

of established versions of Mexican history” (Sánchez Prado).

The topic of Nazism is not unusual in Palou’s work; the Crack writers are generally considered to take an interest in Nazi history. This interest is normally situated in the framework of the move that the Crack writers make, away from nationalism in literature, and away from the Mexican context as a setting for their novels. As a consequence, the Crack writers have been accused of writing “escapist” literature (Regalado López, *Historia personal*). Jorge Volpi (1968) is the first Crack writer to dedicate, *En busca de Klingsor* (1999), to Nazism (Hoyos 33-64, González 73-86). Second is Ignacio Padilla (1968-2016), who publishes the novel *Amphytrion/Shadow Without a Name* (2000) about a rising Nazi figure in the inter-war period (Hoyos 33-64). Hoyos notes that both Volpi and Padilla focus, in these novels, on superficial elements associated with Nazism: “Volpi and Padilla reclaim the surface of Nazism, so to speak—hence the emphasis on names and visual cues” (Hoyos 58). Next is Palou who publishes *Los malheridos/The injured* (2003), a historical novel which tells the story of an ex-nazi doctor who, after having participated in the extermination of handicapped children, goes into exile, and distances himself from his former activities in Nazi Germany (Houvenaghel, “La isla”). In 2009 both Volpi (*Oscuro bosque oscuro/ Dark Forest*) and Palou (*El dinero del diablo*) give a central role to Nazism in their books. Volpi concentrates in *Oscuro bosque oscuro* on the atrocities committed in Poland during the Second World War (Carlsen, Houvenaghel,

“Lector”). The mystery novel set in the historical context of the Vatican in the Postwar period, *El dinero del diablo* (2009) provides insight into the controversial role of Pope Pius XII during the Second World War (Houvenaghel, “*El dinero*”). Finally, Palou writes *La amante del ghetto* in 2013, a novel dedicated to the Jewish Avengers in Postwar Europe. Altogether, a limited number of Crack novels, published between 1999 and 2013, use Nazism or the Holocaust as a setting.

Even if *The Lover of the Ghetto* gives a central role to the Holocaust, and is situated mainly in postwar (1947) Paris, we maintain that it is more than a historical novel about the aftermath of the Holocaust. In line with Hoyos’ insight that “Latin American tradition has recurred to Nazism more as an allegory than as a historical referent” (36), we argue that *The Lover of the Ghetto* goes beyond this historical case and offers a second level of significance to the reader. This second level of significance brings universal ideas on how to give an answer to genocide, and how to prevent genocide from happening. In other words, we argue that the historical case of the Holocaust is used as a metaphor for genocide of all times, and all places, and that the characters, and their actions, are used to deliver a broader message about human response to genocide.

The Historical Novel as a Metaphor

Aristotle refers to the use of metaphor as follows:

We all naturally find it agreeable to get hold of new ideas easily: words express ideas, and therefore those words are the most agreeable to us that enable us to get hold of new ideas. Now strange words simply puzzle us; ordinary words convey only what we know already; *it is from the metaphor that we can best get hold of something fresh.* (*Rhetoric* 10-13, quoted and emphasis added by Peabody 33)

In this vein, we will argue that the metaphor of the aftermath of the Holocaust, well known as a cruel period of revenge, helps the reader of *The Lover of the Ghetto* to distinguish and compare, different responses to genocide. Concretely, we will read the story of the Jewish Avengers and their pursuit of Nazis told in *The Lover of the Ghetto* as an “extended metaphor” or “allegory” (Quintilian 9.2.46) of the different answers humanity can give to genocide. The term allegory is used to denote a figure or trope, a strategy in text, to express a further, deeper message in addition to the one superficially expressed. This figure or trope is part of rhetorical theory, and is defined as

a form of extended metaphor in which objects and persons in a narrative, either in prose or verse, are equated with meanings that lie outside the narrative itself. (Thrall 7)

The allegory, thus, serves as a disguised representation for meanings other than those indicated on the surface; the allegory “represents one thing in the guise of another—an abstraction in the guise of a concrete image” (idem). The establishment of a link between the intertextual level, and the extratextual level of significance is made possible by concrete elements of the narrative—such as the scenery, the agents, and their acts. This is how

allegory attempts to evoke a dual interest, one in the events, characters, and settings presented, and the other in the ideas they are intended to convey or the significance they bear. (Abrams 4-5)

One of the most famous allegories referring to Nazism in the second level of significance is *The Plague*, published by Camus in Paris in 1947. *The Plague* combines a literal and an allegorical meaning: the novel tells the story of a plague in the Algerian city of Oran that kills a large percentage of the population; the novel focuses on a group of men who

fight against the plague. At a second level, this novel can be read as an allegory of the French resistance against the Nazi Occupation in World War II. At the same time, the metaphorical meaning of *The Plague* goes beyond Nazism. For today's readers, the plague in the novel can symbolize a different kind of calamity or another variety of pestilence. The plague in the narrative symbolizes all evils in the world. The heroic attitude of resistance by the protagonists in the narrative represents human response to evil, and symbolizes how men rise above themselves in situations of oppression, terrorism, violence, destruction, and disease. Camus' allegory or metaphorical novel has, thus, a universal significance and is a story relevant and contemporary even decades after it was first written.

In the context of the rise of Nazism in the 1930's, the metaphorical conception of the historical novel causes a polemic in Germany. On the one hand, scholars of the 1930's interpret the historical novel on (often non-German) topics from times long past as a flight from reality. Kurt Hiller, for example, accuses German historical novelists of fleeing from the reality of fascism:

We are Germans. [...] For us, the core problem of the day is: How to clean out the German Auegan stables. [...] [Is it right] to write books about Machiavelli, Ignatius of Loyola or Moses Mendelssohn today? [...] The day after tomorrow Hitler will be emperor of Europe because you are eagerly and cravenly fleeing from the demands of the present. (Hiller, cited by Skolnik 159)

As a response to this accusation of escapism, another group of scholars convincingly defend the historical novel as a genre that has the potential to connect with the problems in Germany, and offers possibilities to struggle against the rise of fascism. The Jewish German historian, novelist and playwright Feuchtwanger stresses, for example, that "historical fictions, from Homer on, always

have as their object an oblique commentary on contemporaneous issues and problems" (Coward 8). Indeed, "the point of using historical wrappings" is to "achieve some degree of distance" that makes you see more clearly (Spratt 11). In this metaphorical capacity, historical novels are

never a turning away from the Now but one of the ways in which our experience of the contemporary is revived. Janus-like, such books look both to the present and to the past. (Miller quoted by Spratt 17)

The historical novel that constructs a metaphorical meaning, holds up a mirror to the present:

In the area of the historical novel, it was the task of the politically conscious author to activate the events of the past for the present and the future. (Feuchtwanger cited by Hermand 77)

In Camus' allegorical novel, as in the German allegories written in the 1930's, Nazism is situated in the second, hidden, level of meaning. Other allegorical novels, such as *Morirás lejos/ You Will Die Far Away* (1967), by Pacheco, foreground the Holocaust in the first layer. The siege of Jerusalem by the Romans, the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto in 1943, and the life in the Nazi concentration camps are different actions, separated in time, which repeat the theme of the persecution and destruction of the Jewish people. These historical cases serve as an allegory of the persecutions and *desaparecidos* in Latin America in the 1960's. A third meaning is woven through the text: the repeated persecution of the Jewish people stands for persecution—for political, ideological or racial motives—of all times. All layers together make Pacheco's novel a "truly contemporary and universal work:"

For it is important to remember that the book is not solely oriented towards the past. Pacheco is not just concerned

with commemorating atrocities that happened in another continent before many of his readers were born. (Duncan 38, 61)

Carlos Fuentes has observed, in the same vein, that

the historical metaphor of *Morirás lejos* is the updating of a model, and its demand is that we not forget, that we remember, in other words, that we make legible our response to violence. (Ortega 181)

The starting point for Palou's historical novel on the Jewish Avengers also lies in the present. The author dedicates *The Lover of the Ghetto* to the crimes against humanity that were committed in today's political conflicts: the organized homicides in the Mexican state Guerrero, the genocide of Darfur in Sudan, the Civil War in Syria. "Human beings have been capable of humiliating and destroying other human beings," warns Palou, "and human beings could do the same again." Palou gives, with this statement, an unmistakable contemporary and universal signification to his novel. Palou situates the historical case of the Holocaust in the first layer of the narrative, and refers, on a second level, to current issues. Nazism functions in his novel as the paradigm of the destruction genocide generates. "We need a moral lesson now more than ever," says Palou when he explains the meaning of his novel *The Lover of the Ghetto* on NotimexTV, "to make sure that genocide will never take place again." Palou stresses, thus, that genocide, in general, and not the historical case of the Holocaust, is the subject of his book. *The Lover of the Ghetto* focuses on the universal question of how to respond to genocide.

How Can Humanity Respond to Genocide?

According to our hypothesis, the main characters in the novel, the Jewish Avengers

Shlomo and Zofia, and their actions, symbolize three different types of response humanity can give to genocide. First, both the Avengers, by executing Nazis, represent the pursuit of justice to punish persons guilty of genocide. Second, Zofia is also a victim of sexual abuse during the war. By trying unsuccessfully to wipe out the past, her attitude draws attention to the necessity to preserve the memory of the crimes and abuses committed during genocide. Finally, Zofia, by her participation in the Dior *défilé* in Paris in 1947 represents, metaphorically, the power of creating art and sharing beauty as a token of hope in the aftermath of genocide. In short, the metaphorical novel brings up, and compares, metaphorically, three components of humanity's reaction to genocide: justice, memory, and culture.

Justice as a Response to Genocide

In *The Lover of the Ghetto*, the Jewish Avengers Shlomo and Zofia seek justice and therefore use violence against those responsible for the genocide of the Jewish people. The Avengers find that the political murder of the Nazis, however violent and destructive this murder may seem, is, in fact, a constructive and justified deed as the cause they defend is related to the future of the Jewish people. The two Avengers who are the protagonists of *The Lover of the Ghetto* consider their violent actions justified because they act in the name of the Jewish people. The name Nokmim means "vengeance" in Hebrew but, as affirms Dina Porat, the chief historian of the Yad Vashem Holocaust remembrance center in Jerusalem, the Nokmim wanted justice more than revenge:

They wanted justice to prevail after a horrible injustice was inflicted upon the Jewish people so that no one would dare raise his hand against them again. (Porat quoted by E. Langer).

The Nokmim felt that a deep sense of justice was denied to the Jewish people, as the vast

majority of Nazis were not brought on trial. Many Nazis fled Europe or even melted back into the post-war Germany that was being rebuilt. As a consequence, a group of some 50, mostly young men and women who had already fought in the resistance, could not allow the crimes to go unpunished and actively sought to exact at least a small measure of revenge. They did proceed to take justice into their own hands as they “they were extremely efficient in tracking people down and conducting extrajudicial executions” (Cesarini cited by Freedland) and “killed hundreds of former SS and Gestapo men in Italy, Austria and Germany” (Plaw 36).

The Lover of the Ghetto opens with two executions of former Nazis. The executions follow one another at a rapid pace and are realized efficiently. Two Nokmim soldiers, both Jewish survivors of the Nazi camps, have received the mission by orders of the Nokmim commanders, to kill the ex-Nazi Heinrich Kaufmann, Gruppenführer of the SS, as a sanction for the many Jews he killed in the Dachau camp. They prepare the execution carefully and travel to Munich, where Kaufmann is waiting for the necessary documents to escape to Argentina. They wait for him in his room. When he arrives, they accuse him of the murder of thousands of Jews in the new crematorium of the Dachau camp, the so-called Barrack X. The male Nokmim soldier reads out loud a long list of names of the Jews for whose death Kaufmann is responsible. After the soldiers have accused him of killing thousands of Jews, Kaufmann proposes to the two Nokmim soldiers to let him go in exchange for his money, a small fortune, that will enable them to start a new life:

Let's make a deal: let me free and take the money, you will need it for your future. Remove me from your list, let me live and I will go away as if I were dead. (28)

The female Nokmim avenger pities him for this cowardly offer. Shlomo does not answer:

he gives Kaufmann the death sentence and shoots him in the head (29). All this takes place very quickly. The Nokmim soldiers never consider the offer made by the Nazi seriously: they seek justice and give priority to the cause of the Jewish people.

After this first mission, the two Nokmim soldiers move on quickly to the next one and travel to Paris. This time, they agree that the female soldier will read the accusation, find the Nazi Werner Höllriegl guilty, and execute him. Again, they wait for the Nazi in his room, and the female Nokmim soldier accuses him of the death of more than a hundred Jews in the Mauthausen camp:

You are accused of the murder of more than a hundred prisoners during your period in Mauthausen; by your own hand, battering them to death. (160)

After having recited their names, the woman soldier shoots the Nazi in the head. During this mission, very few words are exchanged, the guilt of the ex-Nazi is established and the death sentence executed quickly by the Nokmim, who exhibit no doubt before the execution and no subsequent remorse: they act in the name of a whole people and consider their action righteous.

In his pursuit of justice, the male Jewish Avenger, Shlomo, dies, and represents thus, the consequences of violent response to genocide. In a similar way, the Jewish Avenger Zofia does not consider the life of the Avengers a real *life*. Zofia considers her mission as an avenger and her search for justice as a kind of death, even if she is still alive: “I cannot have a life,” explains Zofia, “I’m condemned to travel around in Europe until my mission is completed” (156). In the light of this connection between revenge as a response to genocide and death, Zofia symbolizes, in the following chapters of the novel, two alternative ways to react to genocide.

Memory as a Response to Genocide

The female Avenger, Zofia, represents a second response to genocide related to the memory of crimes and abuse committed during genocide. In the ghetto, before being deported to the camp, Zofia had sexual relations with a Nazi officer. In exchange, she and her family were not sent to the camp. Even if she did not want to have sexual relations with this Nazi officer, Klubert, she realizes that obliging the officer is the only way to survive:

Zofia did not want to see him, but she knew that was the price she had to pay to stay alive, she and her family; the deportations to the camps took place on a daily basis and [Zofia and her family] were saved thanks to Klubert. And as a result of her own humiliation. (132)

The sexual relations with the German officer are remembered by Zofia as “a fight:” “the two were fighting instead of loving each other” (132). Indeed, love and tenderness were not present during these war experiences: women used their sexuality to survive or in order to earn a favor in the ghetto or in the camp; they humiliated themselves to save a family member, or to obtain a slice of bread. According to historical testimonies, even if not permitted, “providing sex to individual camp guards in exchange for food and basic necessities was sometimes survival tactic” (Hedgepeth 288). It was not an abnormal way of surviving: diaries document how “erotic availability became an invaluable currency, in exchange for which it was possible to obtain the opportunity to survive” (Hedgepeth 289).

The novel focusses on Zofia’s memories, after the liberation, about this sexual relationship with a Nazi officer. After the war and when joining the Nokmim soldiers, Zofia never mentions her sexual relationship with the Nazi officer, and tries to forget the abuse. Research shows that it is very hard for Jewish

female survivors to admit and to talk about their sexual relations with German officers.

Whether they were victims of sexual assault or provide sex in the service of survival, women who had these experiences tended to refrain from speaking about them. In published diaries and in interviews, survivors related how they personally managed to avoid rape and how someone else was raped instead. They also spoke of other women or teenage girls, not themselves, paying for food or survival with sex. (Hedgepeth 288)

Many women are not able to cope with the memories of their sexual trauma, with the consequences of this choice they made. During the Shoah, this behavior was not exceptional, but later it was condemned, and many Jewish women found it hard to admit the truth when they reconstructed their memories of the camp experience and war period.

These women feel ashamed of what happened; they feel that telling the truth and preserving the memory of these actions, would damn their integrity and the integrity of their people. Scientific research confirms that these sexual activities in the ghettos and camps are too shameful to even talk about for Shoah survivors. In Yiddish there is a word, *shanda*, that means shame, “the one that, if revealed, might cast one’s family or even the entire Jewish people in a bad light” (Ravitz). Female survivors that used sexual relations to stay alive, whether they were forced or not, would consider it a *shanda* to talk about these things. Zofia, also struggles with her memories. She expresses that she wants to forget her past completely. “Don’t you have truths you won’t confess?” Zofia asks, “Albert Klubert is a part of the past that I would like to wipe out” (148). Zofia wants to hide what happened: “I have the right to decide what I will do, if not with my future, at least with my past, don’t you think?” (149). However, the narrative shows that it is impossible to bury her memories.

Indeed, in post-war Paris, Zofia runs into the Nazi officer with whom she had a sexual relationship, Albert Klubert, who has changed his name and identity. This Nazi officer brings back the memories, and forces her to remember: by confronting Zofia with her memories of this sexual abuse, the novel shows that silencing the past is not an option.

Art as a Response to Genocide

In the novel, another path—very different from the search for justice or the struggle with the past—is opened for Zofia: she can work for Christian Dior as a model and she can participate in Dior's fashion *début* show that takes place in Paris in 1947. Despite the protest of her fellow Nokmim, Shlomo, who wants to concentrate on the search for justice as a response to genocide, Zofia accepts the invitation, while toasting on her "future in fashion" (36). She links this job as a model in Dior's fashion show metaphorically with a new beginning, a new life, a second chance of happiness.

By assigning a protagonist role to Dior's New Look, the novel stresses a symbol of hope in post-war Europe. Indeed, Christian Dior's *début* show opens a new era. Dior was a pioneer "who had concern about the aesthetics of the world in which he had lived: his interests are in art and music, flowers and costumes" (Pochna xii). His debut show of 1947 was a great example of "the power of fashion" (Pochna 39): it changed the way of looking at women radically and brought an earthquake of glamour and innovation to the liberated city of Paris. "From the ruins of post-World War II Europe," the New Look came "like a blast of optimism that resuscitated" the city of Paris. Dior initiates "a new era of defiance, resilience, and hope" (Czerwinski 16). Indeed, after a period in which women were dressed like men, in military fashion, Dior introduced a change in the female image:

We were emerging from the period of war, of uniforms, of women-soldiers

built like boxers. I drew women-flowers, soft shoulders, fine waists like liana and wide skirts like corolla. (Dior quoted by Arts 77).

With its clearly articulated feminine silhouette, the Dior collection gave women back their beauty and femininity. "It's quite a revolution, dear Christian!" said Carmen Snow, editor of *Harper's Bazaar America* after Dior's debut fashion show in Paris in 1947: "Your dresses have such a new look!" (quoted by Palou 125). Dior's "New Look" meant more than a mere revolution in fashion: it brought the beginning of a new society in post-war Europe.

The post-war period in Paris, the *décor* for this novel, was a period of cruel revenge against the collaborators, of food shortages and hunger, and of sadness for all the loved ones that had been killed in the War. It was also a period of brutalities against women: many women in France were accused of sleeping with German soldiers and they were punished brutally without a trial. The city of Paris takes revenge in a brutal way on the French women that were sexually available for German soldiers during the war. At least 20,000 women (Fenby 272), scapegoats for the whole community, were humiliated without a trial after the liberation: their heads were shaved, they were paraded through the streets on the back of a lorry. Some of them were seminaked, some daubed with tar, some painted with swastikas. In Paris, there were reports of prostitutes who had accepted German clients during the occupation being kicked to death (*idem*). Did these women have a choice? Did they have a sexual relationship with a German to keep their children or parents from starvation? Those questions were not asked during the period immediately after the liberation, the *épuration sauvage*.

Against this background, the Dior style was based on respect for women and on Dior's premise that fashion is "one of the last refuges of the human" (quoted by Hilton 83). Even if for most women Dior's designs were far too

expensive, the important thing was the idea behind the collection: a celebration of feminine grace and elegance. The most prominent features of the Dior look, including a cinched waist and a full A-line skirt, the new look was a celebration of the female figure and a nostalgic longing for the female elegance of the *Belle Époque*. In the center of this collection stands the woman herself.

Conclusions

Through this historical novel, set in post-war Paris, and protagonized by the fictional Jewish Avengers Zofia and Shlomo, Palou addresses in a metaphorical way the response human beings give to genocide in all times and in all places. Allegory “says one thing and means another” (Fletcher 2), and “destroys the normal sequence we have about language that our words *mean what they say*” (idem). The narrative of the pursuit of Nazis realized in post-war Paris by the Jewish avengers *means* something else: the novel addresses, in fact, three issues that are crucial to understanding how societies can respond to genocide, and can heal and rebuild after genocide. These three issues are: justice, memory, and art.

First, delivering justice for mass atrocities is a daunting challenge. By telling the individual story of two victims who become violent perpetrators themselves, the novel engages with dilemmas, both universal and specific to this history, about how justice is necessary to help societies recover after genocide. Through this narrative, the novel brings the reader to understand, in a broader way, the victim’s reaction towards the lack of justice and, at the same time, underlines the need of holding the perpetrators of genocide accountable for the crimes they committed.

Second, remembering and telling the atrocities of the past can repair and heal societies. The individual case of the untold sexual abuse that is foregrounded in the novel brings up, metaphorically, several universal

questions. What are the consequences of not remembering certain aspects of genocide? Why do individuals and communities choose silence instead of memory? Through the emotions of anger, shame, and sadness expressed by this individual victim of sexual abuse, the novel helps the reader understand why many victims don’t reveal their secret. At the same time, the novel argues that speaking up is an important way to prevent other people from becoming victims.

Finally, restoring culture and art provides the opportunity for healing, reconciliation, and repair to the survivors of violence. The aesthetic revolution that is central to the novel, and is metaphorically represented by the participation Zofia in the fashion show is very characteristic of post-war Paris, and yet, this narrative makes the reader reflect on more than just this historical case. The metaphor of Dior’s beauty brings the reader back to the power of creativity, culture and artistic activities for restoring humanity. It makes the reader remember that victims of genocide are individual human beings, moved by the beauty of shapes, fabrics, and colors.

The author stresses, in his afterword, that his novel *The Lover of the Ghetto* aims to “turn on a small light of universal comprehension, or at least a light of compassion and empathy.” The novel, continues Palou, does not “philosophize nor moralize” (209). However, the reader is encouraged, in the intersection between the historical case, and the metaphorical meaning, to reflect on these three responses to genocide. First, the question whether or not the surviving victims of genocide have the right to take justice into their own hands is an issue of debate in the novel. Is violence the right answer? The novel seeks to make the reader understand, through the story of Shlomo and Zofia, why victims of genocide often become aggressors. On the other hand, the novel and its paratext offer more than one passage through which the reader is stimulated to go beyond these feelings of “compassion” and “empathy” for the historical Avengers, who

symbolize all victims of genocide and use violence in search of justice. In the narrative the executions of the Nazis by the Avengers are described in a cold and cruel way, and in his "Foreword" the author stresses, precisely, that "the Post War period in Paris in 1947 was extremely cruel, as described in the novel" ("Advertencia" n.d.). Another reference to the vicious cycle of evil is introduced by the author on the threshold of the novel: "I and the public know/ What all schoolchildren learn,/ Those to whom evil is done/ Do evil in return." (Auden quoted by Palou n.d.) Furthermore, in two strategic places in the novel, the violent actions committed by the Avengers are put in perspective. In the first chapter, the line between a Jewish Avenger and a murderer is very thin:

Who has she become, now that she is a Nokmim soldier? She is a murderer. This is not the same as the killing she had to do in the last days of the ghetto in Warshau when she tried to stab her aggressors to death. At that time, there had been no premeditation, there had been no planning in advance of the killings *in cold blood*. (23)

In the same vein, in the last chapter, the Jewish Avengers are accused by the third and last Nazi officer who is shot in *The Lover of the Ghetto*, of being murderers themselves and therefore no different from the Nazis (191). Finally, the author, in his afterword, "Kadish" (201-10) gives a choice to the reader: the executions realized by the Jewish Avengers can be classified either as "vengeance" or as "thirst for justice, as you wish to see the matter" (202). The author does not give his own opinion. Instead, he gives a significant testimony of a victim who refuses to consider violence and vengeance as an answer:

In our times, of Civil Wars and Revolutions, we hear people say, with regrettable frequency: I have to kill the person who killed my father. This

reaction is human and vulgar at the same time. How can we pay the murderer back by using the same violence as the murderer used towards the victim? How can the victim be downgraded to the same level as the murderer? How can they go down together? We have to keep away from the dogs that are howling between the graves. We should not give them the chance to redeem us in a moment of weakness during which we cannot resist the desire of vengeance. (Gil Albert quoted by Palou 202)

The second issue raised in the novel, related to the question of whether it is best to bury or to preserve the memories of the war crimes committed, is not commented in the paratext by the author. However, the novel itself shows which position Palou takes in this matter. The story told in *The Lover of the Ghetto* lifts the taboo on sexual abuse during the Holocaust. The attention of the reader is driven to an aspect that is seldom highlighted in the cultural production and in the scientific research dedicated to the Holocaust. This way, *The Lover of the Ghetto* emphasizes the necessity of telling the stories of sexual abuse in the context of genocide for the sake of future victims in similar situations. Indeed, in contrast with Zofia's decision to wipe out the past, research shows that remembering the past is crucial and that the preservation of the memory can help to prevent events from happening again. Professor Gideon Greif, chief historian at Shem Olam confirms the general tendency among the researchers:

There has been a lack of information about this topic because of a desire among those who study the Holocaust not to hurt the dignity of the victims. (quoted by Ghert-Zand)

Steinem stresses, on the other hand, that it is important to know these experiences of sexual violence, for the sake of future women in similar circumstances of genocide:

Perhaps we would have been better able to prevent the rapes in the former Yugoslavia and the Congo if we had not had to wait more than 60 years to hear the truths that are anthologized in *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*. (quoted by Ravitz).

Concerning the third response to genocide, the novel makes a strong contrast between postwar violence and revenge as a response to genocide, on the one hand, and postwar creativity as a response to genocide, on the other. It is the difference between life and death: Shlomo dies symbolically when executing an ex-Nazi, Zofia can feel alive again when she shares in the creativity of Christian Dior. By this contrast, the novel suggests, metaphorically, that art can help forge a new path after war and genocide, against violence. Zofia's choice is a way to respond to genocide, through art, a way to create a different world. In *The Rebel*, published in 1951, four years after Dior's debut show in Paris in 1947, Camus states that art is "rebellion in its pure state:"

In every rebellion is to be found a metaphysical demand for unity, the impossibility of capturing it and the construction of a substitute universe. Rebellion, from this point of view, is a fabricator of universes. This also defines art. The demands of rebellion are really, in part, aesthetic demands. (255)

Rebellion and the arts are ways of fabricating a different world. In other words, the artist and the rebel are aiming toward the same goal, the creation of a different universe: "Through style, the creative reconstructs the world and always with the same slight distortion which is the mark of both art and protest" (277). From this point of view, the alternative path that Zofia chooses in the narrative represents a meaningful answer to genocide.

Coda: The Nationalism/ Cosmopolitanism Controversy

By connecting with, among other cases, the mass violence in the Mexican state of Guerrero, this analysis partially corresponds to the interesting idea proposed by Van Delden according to which the Crack novels on Nazi topics can be analyzed from a different viewpoint when associated with Mexican historical events. Van Delden proposes to re-examine the Crack novels on Nazism—usually associated with the poetics of the Crack to create a distance from the local Mexican setting—from a Mexican point of view. Van Delden gives the example of Padilla's novel *Amphytrion*: the assassination of presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio in 1994 is an important key to understand how Padilla interprets Nazism (572). On the basis of this analysis, we can add, in the same vein, that the metaphorical meaning of *The Lover of the Ghetto* is connected to today's mass violence in the Mexican state of Guerrero. As the metaphorical meaning of Palou's story on the Jewish Avenger reminds us, "the century or decade to which a fable belongs does not decide its meaningfulness for the present day" (Marcuse quoted by Beutin 441). Palou tells, in 2013, the story of Zofia's revenge in 1947, in order to make a statement regarding the need to bring justice for the mass killings in Guerrero (2005-2012, and continuing after the appearance of *The Lover of the Ghetto*). Zofia's story is closely related to the emotions of the victims' relatives in Guerrero. In both cases, the frustration related to the lack of justice and to the failure of the judicial system to hold accountable those responsible for the brutal killings is poignant (Open Societies Foundation).

But even if this connection with a Mexican case of genocide helps to understand the meaning of the novel—a meaning that goes beyond the paradigmatic case of the Holocaust—*The Lover of the Ghetto* has to be put in a broader, international perspective. Indeed,

the other examples of contemporary humanitarian crises that the author mentions when presenting *The Lover of the Ghetto*—in the same breath with the case of the Mexican state of Guerrero—are set in places far away from Mexico, such as Darfur and Syria. Universality is essential to the novel, explains Palou in *The Poetics of Crack*:

The novel is an international genre, and its influences need not be specific to its country. Trying to conceive of a Latin American novel—or an “Arequipán” or “Northern” novel, for that matter—is like trying to conceive of Protestant horseback riding. [...] When it comes to the novel, nothing is more pernicious than nationalism. (197-98)

In this context, the novelist “is a displaced cosmopolitan person who ceases to have a homeland.” (199) The Crack writers, in synthesis, “bet on universality” (199). The poetics of the Crack connect with the universality of human experience expressed by the rhetorical figure of allegory: the localized and individualized fiction is placed in a medium of universality by the figure of the extended metaphor. The allegorical reading detaches the reader from the local, and concrete, level of meaning and leads the reader to a universal interpretation.

Notes

¹ In his professional activities, the Mexican novelist Pedro Ángel Palou (1966 Mexico) combines politics, history and literature: besides being a prolific writer, he has worked in the public service as Minister of Culture of the State of Puebla (1999-2005), has been the president of the University of the Americas in Puebla (2005-2007), and has lectured as a Professor of Latin American Literature at various universities both in Europe and America. Accordingly, Palou’s fiction often mingles politics, history, and literature.

² The following novels are included in Palou’s commercially successful line of historical fiction: *Zapata* (2006), *Morelos*, *Morir no es nada* (2007), *Cuauhtémoc: la defensa del Quinto Sol*

(2008), *Pobre patria mía. La novela de Porfirio Díaz* (2010), *Varón de deseos* (2011), *No me dejen morir así* (2014), *Tierra roja. La novela de Lázaro Cárdenas* (2016).

³ For more information on the Crack—a group of Mexican writers emerged in 1996 including Jorge Volpi, Pedro Ángel Palou, Ignacio Padilla, Ricardo Chávez Castañeda and Eloy Urroz—see: Alvarado Ruiz (2016), Jaimes (2017), Brescia and Estrada (2018), Regalado López (2018).

⁴ For an overview of Mexican historical novels on the Holocaust in the 20th and 21st century, see Van Delden, Hoyos (33-68).

⁵ In contrast with Bolaño’s approach to Nazism in *Nazi Literature in the Americas*: “Bolaño examines the roots of fascism as a global phenomenon” and “is interested in the underlying traits of various forms of fascism, or what Umberto Eco would call *ur-Fascism*” (Hoyos 37, 58).

⁶ With this novel and *The Devil’s Money* (2009), Palou begins, according to Sánchez Prado, a new line in his oeuvre. Sánchez Prado considers this combined genre as the line of “learned thrillers.” *El dinero del diablo* reminds us of Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*, and tells the story of father Gonzaga, an experienced detective, who investigates a series of murders in the Vatican, linked to papal intrigues of the past. *El impostor* (2012), another example of the same combined genre, is a novel of espionage set in ancient Rome: the novel’s protagonist, Saul of Tarsus, is a Roman spy who infiltrates the community of the early Christians. *The Lover of the Ghetto* (2013) is, again, a complex and hybrid novel that combines historical novel and novel of espionage. In this line, Palou combines the commercial genres of mystery and spy novels with literary complexity. According to Sánchez Prado, in this new line,

we can see Palou struggling with one of the fundamental questions of the writer today: how to be faithful to literature and the literary in a world where readers can perhaps only be reached through the market.

The recent *Todos los miedos* (2018) is another example of a similar “learned thriller” hybrid novel. *Todos los miedos* is a thriller set in contemporary Mexico: the novel combines the dangerous search for truth and justice, realized by the journalist Daniela Real, with the portrait of Mexican society, mired in narco-violence and corruption.

⁷ Palou chooses the same time and place for the setting of *The Lover of the Ghetto*.

⁸ Such as Weiskopf and Hiller (see Beutin et al, 441).

⁹ See: Feuchtwanger (*On the Sense and Non-sense of the Historical Novel*, 1935), Döblin (*History and no End*, 1936) and Lucaks (*The Historical Novel*, 1937).

¹⁰ This ethical concern is also present in the novels written by Crack writers on Mexican subjects: in *Las elegidas* (2016), Jorge Volpi writes about women stolen by drug cartels to be trafficked for sex. Ethical issues of today's Mexico are also in the center of the novel *Todos los miedos* (2018), in which Pedro Ángel Palou explores questions such as corruption, drug traffic and the assassination of journalists.

¹¹ In 2015, a documentary film *Screaming Silence*, has brought Shoah survivors who were raped or sexually abused in the ghettos and concentration and labor camps to speak on camera about the abuse. Characteristically, these survivors kept this abuse a secret from everyone and never told about it to their partners or children. Psychologist Fogelman, on the other hand, underlines that it is important for the women to talk about the experiences: "They need the validation for that particular pain and suffering, to help them in their healing process" (Fogelman, quoted by Ravitz).

¹² "Kadish" is a Jewish prayer. "This is my Kadish," says Palou, "my personal prayer for her [Zofia]" (209).

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