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A Letter to My Children: Historical Memory and the Silences of Childhood

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Daddy, what are Nazis?" the older of you asked. "Are they bad guys?" the younger wanted to know. You were about eight years old and six at the time. We had been watching *The Sound of Music*. Your mother and I hadn't seen the film in many years, and we had remembered its singing and laughter more than its Nazis. You wanted to know, because Liesl's boyfriend in the movie, Rolfe, was a Nazi, and you could not understand why he turned out to be a bad guy. Rolfe's character hardens during the movie as he throws his lot in with the Nazis. At the dramatic climax of the film, he betrays the family, almost resulting in their undoing. Like all the really important questions of childhood, yours were matter-of-fact, and I wanted my answers to be matter-of-fact, too.

Your questions made perfect sense. Amid much singing, the orphaned Maria becomes the governess for the aristocratic Von Trapp family. Eventually Maria and the widowed father, a captain in the Austrian navy, fall in love. This idyll is destroyed when the Nazis occupy Austria and order Captain Von Trapp to report for service in the newly integrated German navy. As an Austrian nationalist, Captain Von Trapp finds his new position untenable, so he and his family (still singing) flee across the Alps to Switzerland. The film does not make clear why Captain Von Trapp does not like Nazis, nor what he risks in resisting them. It both articulates Nazism and is silent on it. While it represents nationalist opposition to the Nazi/German occupation of Austria, it shows neither the totalitarian-

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terrorist nor the racist natures of Nazism. Anti-Semitism is never even mentioned, nor overtly depicted. Indeed, had the film portrayed these things, I doubt that your parents would have let you watch it at such tender ages. In the absence of explanation, Captain Von Trapp's decision to flee Austria with his family seems disproportionate. Hence, "What are Nazis?" is a perfectly logical question. It even makes sense to ask the question in the present tense because the film populates a quasifictive location. Is this a docudrama or a "fact-based" account? Or is it a complete work of fiction? Did it happen long ago or more recently?

Yet, this straightforward and eminently logical question left me feeling utterly inadequate. I found it almost unanswerable, both in my own terms and in terms that I thought you could understand. As someone who has devoted most of his adult life to anti-racist work, as a historian of racisms and a supposed expert in critical multicultural/anti-racist education, I was especially troubled. Who is better placed to give a full and appropriate answer? And if I cannot, who can?

What are matter-of-fact answers here, I wondered? "The Nazis, or National Socialists, were the ruling party in Germany, 1933–1945," and, "Yes, they are bad guys," would have explained nothing. As answers they would also have been profoundly mistaken. National Socialism was an international movement.¹ Its international nature was even represented in the movie: Rolfe and his friends were Austrian Nazis who, like those of many other European countries, connived and collaborated in the German occupation of their countries, and actively worked to effect the genocide of the Jewish and other populations and to create "the Aryan race." Nor was Nazism just European. There were Nazis in the United States and in Canada too.² The "was" is wrong, too. Nazism is not merely historical. Today there are Nazis, sometimes mistakenly called neo-Nazis as if in fact they are something new, in many countries, including our own. Indeed, the growing respectability of white supremacist and fascist groups is one of the emerging crises of our time.³ To have given a "safe" answer suggesting that Nazism is far removed from the realities of our lives, by both time and distance, would have been simply wrong.

I also wondered, do I tell you about the central facts of Nazism: the Holocaust, the mass, industrialized, assembly-line murder of millions, many of them women and children, some no older than yourselves? Do I tell you about the systemic terror and its willing accomplices? Even if I knew how to explain these things, matters that I find barely comprehensible myself, I am not sure that you are old enough to carry such knowledge. At my patriarchal best, if that's not an oxymoron, I want to keep you innocent of such knowledge—

along with knowledge of the other terrors of my postmodern existence including thermonuclear destruction, global warming, and psychopathic rapists—until when? Age twelve? Sixty-five? Someday, I know you must know, or you will be unarmed to meet the future. But not now, not while you are so young. When?

Your questions troubled my desire to keep you innocent of such knowledge. I am well aware that creating a space in which you can grow up in selective silence constitutes my power, my masculinity, my location in the metropolis, and my ability to silence difference. To have given you full answers would have screamed difference, decentered my location, destabilized my manliness, established my powerlessness. It would have challenged the categories of my existence. Yet to have given lesser answers would also have constituted my incompetence both as a parent and as a witness to history. Your questions caught me, because I knew that my fantasy of your childhood innocence was just that, a fantasy. To really protect you from such knowledge is itself impossible. Nazism and its realities surround you. They surround you with silences, with hidden meanings, with limited possibilities.

These are not the only historical silences that surround your childhood. You live among people about whose pasts and whose conditions you know nothing. Some of this is the result of your age and your lack of experience with the world. Some comes from the deliberate efforts of your parents and the other adults around you to keep you insulated from certain realities. Still other silences come from the social structures that shape your lives. At the school that your parents send you to, you participate in lessons recreating “pioneer times,” as if the human past of our city only begins with the arrival of Europeans. The same school unapologetically fosters loyalty to the very institutions that obliterated Aboriginal people from our memory as well as from the land we now occupy. Like all other public schools in Canada, this school fosters a nationalism that exists in relation to vast silences and their exclusions from our collective memory.⁴ Even the language that we now speak, English (with some help from French), has displaced and silenced the languages of the people who had populated the land on which our house now sits. You know that some of your classmates speak neither English nor French, but you do not know that some people see this as proof that they are not, and can never be, “Canadian.”⁵ Cantonese, for example, the language of one set of your great-grandparents, has been spoken in parts of what is now Canada as long as any nonaboriginal language, yet it is still seen as a “foreign” language, in a way that English in most parts of Canada never is.⁶ In our city are people who speak many languages. You can barely even imagine the stories that they have to tell. Yet, almost all of the time,

what you learn in school, in books, and on television celebrates only some of these stories, those of Europeans.⁷ Such institutional silences are the stuff of racisms.⁸

I am well aware that not all children are privileged to live in such silence. Remember in kindergarten when one of the boys in your class came to school, his face swollen and bandaged? We found out that he had been beaten up by a group of bigger kids who had gone around the playground assaulting anyone who was nonwhite. You said the class laughed at him, because he looked so funny. I wonder where the real damage was. Which assault will he live with, maybe for the rest of his life? I know that the response of your doubtless well-meaning teacher, first trained in the sixties and now close to retirement age, was inadequate. Would my response have been any better? I can't even tell you matter-of-factly what Nazis are. How could I spontaneously deal with something really important in a kindergarten class of twenty-five?

When we watched the movie, "What are Nazis?" didn't occur to me the way it did to you. In his second scene in the movie, Rolfe gives Captain Von Trapp a Nazi salute. I automatically read this, and the Captain's reaction, as a foreboding of trouble. Of course, Rolfe was a Nazi (and an almost certain bad guy), while the Captain as an anti-Nazi was a good guy, even if it took him three-quarters of the movie to hook up with Julie Andrews's character, Maria. Only your questions made problematic what I took for granted.

Why didn't these questions occur to me? In large part because the portrayal of Nazis in *The Sound of Music* is conventional. I have seen countless movies and television shows in which the appearance of Nazis has signaled trouble. Nazis were part and parcel of the mass culture of my childhood. There were Nazis on *Combat*, on *Hogan's Heroes*, on countless war (i.e., World War II) movies (the first movie that I went to see without adult accompaniment was *The Longest Day*). All of these taught me that the Nazis are always the bad guys.⁹

Your questions also made me wonder how old I was when I first knew about the Holocaust. It seems to me that I have always known, but knowledge must have come in increments. I think awareness came from television. Unlike your parents (who see TV as an evil, brain-destroying device for thought control and mass consumerism), my parents—your grandparents—thought it was a blessing. It brought the world into the living room, they said. It meant that their children knew so much more about things than they did. It also meant that the only censorship of TV your father experienced as a child was at bedtime. (I even did my homework in front of the TV.)

Maybe they were right. I have memories of seeing archival footage of the mass disposal of bodies in the newly liberated concen-

tration camps, and of my big brother asking my father, "Are they Jews?" and of him swallowing hard and nodding. I am not sure how old I was at the time, but I don't think I was that much older than you are now. Even though I was horrified at the images, I remember thinking, "Of course they are Jews." I think I already knew, in general terms, about the Holocaust.

Unlike you, I grew up in a neighborhood that was largely Jewish. The Holocaust and its consequences were part and parcel of the stories and silences of my friends' families. Holocaust survivors included my friends' parents. The Holocaust was the reason, although I didn't know it at the time, so few had aunts and uncles, unlike me. But these are things we discussed as teenagers, not as children. Knowledge may have come from my parents' talk, from my asking "What are Nazis?", but I don't think so.

All of this made me wonder, can I use your mass culture to explain Nazis? Are Nazis like Darth Vader and the evil Empire? Are they similar to Cruella De Vil in *101 Dalmations*? The jackals in *The Lion King*? Yes, and no, I thought.

Some scenes in *The Lion King* represent the jackals in terms of stock images of storm troopers, their triumphant march past Scar harkening back to Leni Riefenstahl's 1934 propaganda portrayal of the Nuremberg rallies, *Triumph des Willens* (*Triumph of the Will*). In some ways, the logic of Nazism is also the logic of *The Lion King*. Both rest on biologicistic notions of difference, and on uncritical acceptance of racialized and racist logic. In *The Lion King* the jackals are evil because of their evil essences. There is no texturing of this. Apparently they do what they do because they are jackals. Simba's essence, inherited genetically from his father, is noble and kingly. His true self emerges when he rediscovers this essence. These essences are marked by the beauty of the lions and the ugliness of the hyenas. By contrast, Scar, Simba's uncle who usurps the throne, is flawed, both morally and physically. In this movie, essences are fixed, unchanging and inherent. They are presented as a simple binary of nobility/beauty and corruption/ugliness, and a religious conviction that the former must win out over the latter (an all-too-frequent theme in Disney movies). A similar binary was one of the central tenets of Nazism.

But at the same time, Nazis are not like the hyenas of *The Lion King*. Nazis are not Nazis because they inherited their Nazism from their parents. Unlike being a hyena, being a Nazi does not have a genetic basis. Rather, Nazi propaganda spreads its mythology of an "objective" scientific basis to its creed. Like all racisms, it creates the categories of "race" that it polices.¹⁰ The thought crossed my mind that the Nazi occupation of Austria was like the Empire's takeover of Luke Skywalker's home planet in *Star Wars*. But the evil Empire, for

all of the special effects, did not constitute its dominance along “race” lines. In the *Star Wars* universe, entire civilizations may be destroyed as means to the end of imperial dominance, but such destruction is not the ultimate goal of its dominance. Like *The Lion King*, *Star Wars* also presents Manichean images of good and evil. Evil is all-powerful, corrupted and merciless. This evil can only be opposed by a good that is similarly powerful, but corruptible. Good can become evil, it seems, but not the other way around.

While *Star Wars* can supply analogies for the occupation of a country by Nazis, for the power that this involved, it cannot account for the characters of Nazis themselves. Nazism and its minions have been disturbingly banal. Hitler, unlike *Star Wars*’ emperor who had mastered the secrets of the “dark side of the Force,” was not all-powerful. Rather, he was merely the head of a vast bureaucracy whose members were significantly distanced from the human consequences of its actions, at the same time that they competed with each other on how best to implement the Nazi program. The perpetrators of the Holocaust, unlike the fictional perpetrators of the evil Empire, were more like me than I would care to admit.

I even momentarily thought that the Holocaust might be explainable in terms of Cruella De Vil and the puppies from *101 Dalmatians*. Despite its comic relief, *101 Dalmatians* is about the ruthless, mass murder of iconic children. At heart it is a terror movie for children. In this sense Cruella’s plotted extinction of the Dalmatian puppies is like that of the Nazis’ plot against Jewry. But I realize that this analogy quickly breaks down. First, the puppies escape; millions of Jews did not. Second, unlike the Nazis and their “Final Solution,” Cruella, for all her faults, did not want to kill all Dalmatians. Third, the Nazis who perpetrated the Holocaust were not incompetent buffoons.

Indeed, as I thought about the mass culture of your childhood, nowhere could I find an analogy for Nazism and its evils. Nazis are not like anything else that has been represented to you. Thus, your questions probe an enormous and dangerous silence. Even as your mass culture articulates reality, it displaces it. In representing Nazism, *The Sound of Music*, for example, displaces its victims. How many other families fled over the Alps, only to be turned back by Swiss border guards, their stories never to be made into movies? Children’s television (and most adult television, for that matter) is filled with depictions of good and evil as fixed, and mutually exclusive, essences. It is replete with redemptive narratives in which somehow evil is in the end redeemed by good. The drearily mundane reality of ordinary people doing evil things, without redemption, is silenced, displaced by a glamorized world of radical essences.

Such Manichean depictions gave rise to the question whether

Nazis are bad guys. In *The Sound of Music*, they seem rather ordinary people, yet they are also the bad guys of the plot. I wanted to answer that Nazis are indeed bad guys. To me Nazism is the epitome of evil. This sense is so deeply ingrained within me that I can remember years ago, half a lifetime really, when I was visiting a friend in Hong Kong, feeling violently ill as I looked out his window and saw a building covered in swastikas. It took me a moment or two to realize that it was a Buddhist temple—the swastika, reversed in its corrupted Nazi form, is an age-old symbol for life—but I was never entirely comfortable in its shadow. My visceral reaction testified to my sense that Nazism is the essence of evil.

But my mature understanding is not that Nazism is an evil of fixed and radical essences. Rather, I understand it as an evil based on what Hannah Arendt called “loneliness.” According to Arendt, “loneliness is at the same time contrary to the basic requirements of the human condition *and* one of the fundamental experiences of every human life” (Arendt 1951, 475, original emphasis). Writing in the sexist idiom of the 1950s, she argued that loneliness violates human beings’ contact with others, and undermines common sense “which regulates and controls all other senses and without which each of us would become enclosed in his own particularity of sense data which in themselves are unreliable and treacherous. Only because we have common sense, that is because not one man, but men in the plural inhabit the earth, can we trust our immediate sensual experience” (475–76). With the severing of common bonds and myriad links between human beings, cause and effect become separated from each other. It then becomes possible to follow the logic of an idea to its ultimate conclusion or to implement a political program to the point where it defies common sense.

And yet, the very Manicheanism of mass culture fosters such separation. It thrives on loneliness. After all, the lonely person can be sold anything. The underlying message of the million commercials you will see in your lifetime is that buying this product will end your loneliness. By representing evil as an essence, radically different and removed from our selves, as Other, mass culture furthers disconnection. Mass culture then becomes our popular culture, the shaper of meanings in our day-to-day life. It replaces others with whom we are connected with Others whom we fear. It encourages the folly of abandoning the public sphere for the dubious safety of private fortresses. By reducing us to mere consumers, rather than producers of communal cultures, it makes us parties to our own loneliness.¹¹

Understood in this way, I see my own implication in the conditions that foster Nazism. Every time I distance myself from the social phenomena of my times, every time I give in to my post-

modern fears, I construct loneliness. In myriad small ways, I tear what Arendt called “common sense” and the totalitarian condition is furthered. This does not mean that I am responsible for all the ills in the world. It *does* mean that I am not as removed from them as I would sometimes like to imagine.

As a parent, this leaves me torn between a sense of powerlessness and an awareness of my responsibility to keep you safe until you are old enough to take care of yourselves. Nazism does not belong only to some faraway time and place, something to be remembered, perhaps, but not to be relived. Its dangers surround you: the essentialist logic of the mass media, the growing atomization of our social world, the deepening inability of political forces to meet our needs, the racist and fascist groups waiting for their moment. At the same time, I know that it is also my responsibility to give you hope, to provide you with reasons to embrace life and its possibilities.

Education is the only solution that I know to these dilemmas. Education, understood not as technique or training, not as schooling, but as part and parcel of “the engagement of being human,” i.e., the shared act of making meaning of meanings inherited from others.¹² For it is education, and not mass culture, that has the potential to counter disconnection. Only an educated understanding can critically engage with the essentialism of mass media. Only the remaking of meanings can build our connections to others and overcome loneliness. These connections necessarily are not just to the things that we like, or would choose for ourselves. They also include our connections to things we would rather forget or rather not know. Education understood in this way is rarely easy, often dangerous, but through its dialogue with others always affirms our humanity.¹³

Your questions made for the teachable moment and demanded answers. The answers could not come from elsewhere. They had to come from me, because I was the one you asked. They needed to be truthful, and open-ended, for I also knew that like all other truly important questions, these are questions that you will ask many times as you mature as members of a human community.

So I answered: “Nazis were, are [I corrected myself], people who believe that if you are blond-haired and blue-eyed, and especially white-skinned, you should rule the world, and that everyone else should either be your slave or be killed. In the 1930s after coming to power in Germany, they took over Austria, and many other countries in Europe. This resulted in the Second World War in which both your grandfathers fought against the Nazis. Although they do not control governments anymore, Nazis are still around. And no, Nazis are not ‘bad guys’ like Darth Vader or Cruella De Vil. They were pretty well ordinary people like you and me. But what they did

was murder millions of people, mainly Jewish people, because they weren't blond-haired and blue-eyed, and what they did was evil. Indeed it is the essence of evil."

It was the first time I had used the term *evil* in describing something to my children. And as I answered, I mourned.

Notes

1. My understanding of the history of Nazism is largely taken from Michael R. Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (New York: Penguin, 1987).

2. On Canadian Nazis, see Lita-Rose Betcherman, *The Swastika and the Maple Leaf* (Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1975) and Marilyn F. Nefsky, "The Shadow of Evil: Naziism and Canadian Protestantism," in *Anti-Semitism in Canada: History and Interpretation*, ed. Allan Davies (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid University Press, 1992). On Canadian complicity in the Holocaust, see Irving Abella and Harold Troper, *None Is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe, 1933–1948*, 3rd ed. with a new epilogue. (Toronto: Lester Publishing, 1991).

3. An obvious example is the rising respectability of David Duke in the United States. For his Canadian connections, see Julian Sher, *White Hoods: Canada's Ku Klux Klan* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1983). On racist and fascist groups in Canada, see Stanley R. Barrett, *Is God a Racist? The Right Wing in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987) and Warren Kinsella, *Web of Hate: Inside Canada's Far Right Network* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1994).

4. See Timothy J. Stanley, "'Chinamen, Wherever We Go': Chinese Nationalism and Guangdong Merchants in British Columbia, 1871–1911," *Canadian Historical Review* 77.4 (1996): 475–503.

5. The role of historical narratives in articulations of popular racisms is explored in Leslie G. Roman and Timothy J. Stanley, "Empires, Émigrés and Aliens: Young People's Negotiations of Official and Popular Racism in Canada," in *Dangerous Territories: Struggles for Equality and Difference in Education*, edited by Leslie G. Roman and Linda Eyre (New York: Routledge, 1997).

6. Cantonese has been continuously spoken in Canada's westernmost province, British Columbia, since before that territory "joined" the Canadian confederation. On the significance of this population to that territory's history in the middle of the nineteenth century, see Robert Galois and Cole Harris, "Recalibrating Society: The Population Geography of British Columbia in 1881," *The Canadian Geographer* 38.1 (1994): 37–53. On racialization of the category "Chinese," see Kay Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875–1980* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991).

7. For critiques of the imperialist and racist underpinnings of Western culture, see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); and Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993). See also Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Con-*

sciousness (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). On the curricular implications of such critiques, see George J. Sefa Dei, *Anti-Racism Education: Theory and Practice* (Halifax: Fernwood, 1996). See also William F. Pinar, "Notes on Understanding Curriculum as a Racial Text," in *Race, Identity and Representation in Education*, edited by Cameron McCarthy and Warren Crichlow (New York: Routledge, 1993); and Ali Rattansi, "Changing the Subject? Racism, Culture and Education," in "*Race, Culture and Difference*," edited by James Donald and Ali Rattansi (London: Sage Publications, 1992), 11–48.

8. David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Oxford, England, and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993).

9. While being silent on the international nature of Nazism, many of these representations I grew up with differentiated between Nazis and "good" Germans, i.e., those patriots distastefully serving their country and the perpetrators of the Holocaust. Indeed the conflict between the two was often a device for dramatic tension. The effect of such representations was to rescue nationalism as a worthwhile project.

10. Robert Miles, *Racism* (London: Routledge, 1989). See also Goldberg, *Racist Culture*.

11. As it becomes popular, mass culture also produces possibilities. Thus, it both constrains and defines possibilities in teaching. For examples, see Henry A. Giroux, *Disturbing Pleasures: Learning Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994) and Peter M. Appelbaum, *Popular Culture, Educational Discourse, and Mathematics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995).

12. My conception of education comes from Michael Oakeshott, "Education: The Engagement and Its Frustration," in *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education*, edited by Timothy Fuller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) as reworked by Maxine Greene, "What Counts as Philosophy of Education?" in *Critical Conversations in Philosophy of Education*, edited by Wendy Kohli (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 3–23.

13. See Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader*, edited by David Theo Goldberg (Oxford, England, and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994), 75–106.

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- The Longest Day*. 1962. Produced by Elmo Williams. Directed by Den Annakin, Andrew Marton, and Bernard Wicke. 180 min. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation. Distributed by Foxvideo, Inc., P. O. Box 900, Beverly Hills, CA 90213. Videocassette.

101 Dalmatians. 1961. Produced by Ken Anderson. Directed by Wolfgang Reitherman, Hamilton S. Luske, and Clyde Geronimi. 79 min. Walt Disney Co. Distributed by Buena Vista Home Video Dept. CS, Burbank, CA 91521. Videocassette.

The Sound of Music. 1965. Produced by Argyle Enterprises, Inc. Directed by Robert Wise. 174 min. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation. Distributed by Foxvideo, Inc., P. O. Box 900, Beverly Hills, CA 90213. Videocassette.

Star Wars. 1977. Produced by Gary Kurtz. Directed by George Lucas. 121 min. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation. Distributed by Foxvideo, Inc., P. O. Box 900, Beverly Hills, CA 90213. Videocassette.
