This article examines the use of alternative texts to represent the Holocaust and to teach secondary students about this event. An alternative text is anything other than a traditional textbook. Alternate texts may include poetry, novels, graphic novels, films, or plays. By using alternative texts, teachers can engage students in multiple perspectives to stimulate critical thinking in their classrooms. Alternative texts, furthermore, can shift the paradigm of how teachers and students think about morally and ethically complex subjects. In order to facilitate such a shift, teachers, scholars, and students should view different ways of representing difficult subjects in the classroom. The Holocaust is a difficult subject to teach due to the scale of moral issues and scope of this crime against humanity. Traditional means of teaching the Holocaust, using maps, textbooks, and primary source documents are important but fail to create changes in students perspectives because there is little space for students to become more empathetic and apply history to current world events. Providing students with texts including narratives, poetry, and first-person accounts can add humanity into what some view as one of the most inhumane events in history and thus shift the paradigm for high school students.

Key words: Holocaust, genocide, alternative texts, pedagogy, history, literacy

The Holocaust is a subject taught to secondary students across the United States and is a topic that potentially challenges students. Questions of morality, ethics, and the sheer number of deaths make it a huge struggle to teach. As a former secondary Social Studies teacher who is now a teacher educator in a university setting, the main issue for me is how to represent the unimaginable. Traditional means of teaching the Holocaust, using maps, textbooks, and primary source documents are important but fail to create changes in students perspectives because there is little space for students to become more empathetic and apply history to current world events. Providing students with texts including narratives, poetry, and first-person accounts can add humanity into what some view as one of the most inhumane events in history and thus shift the paradigm for high school students. I wondered if there was another way using alternative texts. Alternative texts are any texts other than typical textbooks. Through the works of writer Alan Bennett, cartoonist Art Spiegelman, a nine-year old Holocaust victim, philosopher Hannah Arendt, and historian Timothy Snyder, students and educators are provided a broader picture of the Holocaust to attempt to find meaning in one of history’s darkest periods. The idea of using alternative texts to teach the Holocaust came out of a previous study (Schneider, 2014, pp. 23-45). This article examines how alternative texts can be used to represent the Holocaust, and to examine the curriculum issues surrounding the teaching of genocide.

The major question I ask is, “How can one make sense of the Holocaust using alternative texts?” As I attempted to answer this question, another question was revealed “What are the limits of representation?” In looking at the impact of how teachers can represent the Holocaust in the classroom, the two more questions arose of “Whose Holocaust?” “Which Holocaust?” Finally, a fifth question, “What are the curricular issues?” developed as well.
Before moving forward, I’d like to define the Holocaust. According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (2016), the Holocaust was “the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. *Holocaust* is a word of Greek origin meaning ‘sacrifice by fire’” (United States, Para 1). Based on this definition, the image that most people would think of would be the gas chambers, the emaciated bodies, and the smoke coming from the crematoriums. However, most Jews that were killed were killed in the Holocaust died by mass shootings in the areas between Germany and the Soviet Union (Snyder, 2015). I am arguing that the Holocaust should be taught as Snyder presented it. We need to shift from a Western-European viewpoint and shift more of our attention to Eastern Europe to get a richer picture of the Holocaust.

This creates a problem of representation for our students. For us to represent the Holocaust through alternative texts, we must also change the narrative that most Jews died in concentration camps like Auschwitz or Bergen-Belsen.

**The Sugarcoated Cyanide Pill: How Can One Make Sense of the Holocaust?**

In an oft-quoted statement, Theodore Adorno stated, “Poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (1982, p. 34). This is a strong statement, and one revisited by a number of scholars, including Saul Friedlander (1992). Art Spiegelman (2011) talks of the danger of Holokitsch or what I interpret to be an overwrought reaction to the Holocaust. When Spiegelman was creating *Maus*, he understood he was walking a thin line between profundity, and ridicule for attempting to represent the Holocaust in an entirely new way. He went on to say

There’s a kind of kitschification in our culture in general. It’s that thing of trying to always go for the sentimental money shot whenever one can that informs our debates…It’s all got to be reduced to Good Guys and Bad Guys…This is the perfect hero/villain paradigm…The Holocaust has become a trope, sometimes used admirably, or sometimes meretriciously… (Spiegelman, 2011, p. 70).

This kind of representation oversimplifies the discussions we should have in the classroom. It may be not enough to say, “Hitler was a bad man” or “Every victim was a good person.” The students with whom I worked, were thinking beings. They knew a gimmick from a mile away. This oversimplification of the Holocaust is a huge problem in representing a historical nightmare.

The pedagogical force of *Maus* was further explained:

There was also the misguided notion that *Maus* was some kind of ‘Auschwitz for Beginners.’ I had no faith that one could make the world better by telling someone what happened in the past, but there has been a kind of secondary life for the book as a didactic tool. ‘Well, it’s a comic, it’s a sugarcoated pill’ - a sugarcoated cyanide pill that we can get people to swallow to understand the horrors of history (p. 102).

The notion of a “sugarcoated cyanide pill” is a strong image. If *Maus* is a powerful learning tool, since it is a graphic novel, or comic book, perhaps it might be a good way to get students to study history. A distinction must be made here. Reading alternative texts can teach valuable English Language Arts (ELA) skills, but I am advocating the use of ELA to teach social studies. This is part of the NCSS (2013) C3 Standards (p. 56). As teachers, we must use the imagery of alternative texts, including *Maus* to help our students understand the Holocaust in ways that go beyond dates, facts, and figures. The issue, at least for me as a teacher, is how to depict the Holocaust to my students in ways that spur critical thinking without going into Holokitsch or without shutting down my students with imagery that they may be ill equipped to handle.
The complex history of the Holocaust is wrapped up in the problem of how to represent it. The problem of representation is paramount to understanding the history of the Holocaust. Representation can contextualize history. I’m often struck by how the narratives of individuals are multiplied by about 6 million (Jewish victims). Do these stories form a cohesive narrative? Does that even matter much? In Bennett’s (2004) *History Boys*, this is the exchange that most directly questions pedagogy of genocide:

Hector: But how can you teach the Holocaust?
Irwin: Well, that would do as a question. Can you…should you…teach the Holocaust?
Akthar: It has origins. It has consequences. It’s a subject like any other.
Scripps: Not like any other, surely. Not like any other at all (p. 71).

It is a subject with a beginning, middle, and end. The Holocaust is not just a simple story. There are too many characters people? lost to the gas chambers and mass graves. When I teach history, I am attempting to represent the events of the past and trying to contextualize them to students who may not have any other connection to the event itself. This contextualization leads naturally into representation of the genocide. Perhaps the other major issue is teaching students an academic subject that naturally fosters an emotional response.

According to Gail Ivy Berlin (2012), academic language being void of emotion is an issue when doing serious scholarship. Berlin makes the case that an emotional response to the Holocaust is natural. The problem of how to respond emotionally to a work of literature is taken on by Berlin in a poem left by a young girl. The poem was soaked in blood and sewn into the young girl’s coat. The girl was most certainly shot by the *Schutzstaffel*, or SS in a forest near Majdanek, Poland during the Harvest Festival in 1943. During the festival 40,000 Jews were shot (p. 404). This is the best historians can come up with in terms of what the fate was for Elzunia. The poem Elzunia wrote as a nine-year-old girl reads, in part:

Once there was Elzunia.
She is dying all alone,
Because her daddy is in Maidanek,
And in Auschwitz her mommy…(Berlin, 2012, p. 397).

These four lines are striking for a number of reasons. First, she recognizes that she places herself in the past. She is dying all alone, and answers for us, why as her parents died in death camps (pp. 407-409). For Berlin, academic language does not allow for the kind of emotional exploration evoked by subjects like the Holocaust. If we are not allowed to feel anything in the name of objectivity, how can we passionately argue that looking at this painful, tragic part of history should serve as a warning to all future generations?

In looking at the ways that I taught the Holocaust, I constantly question myself. What, after all, can possibly represent this? One could explain the history of anti-Semitism in Europe, or the rise of the Nazi party, or even the steps taken to eradicate Jews from the world. The goal, instead, is to carve out a space in which students can come to understand that the most horrific nightmares were reality.

The Hannah Arendt scholar Richard Berkowitz discusses the discourse of which Arendt wrote. In his work *Thinking in Dark Times* (2009), Berkowitz quotes *To Posterity*, which was penned by Bertolt Brecht (1939):

Truly, I live in dark times! An artless word is foolish. A smooth forehead Points to insensitivity. He who laughs has not yet received the terrible news.

What times are these, in which
A conversation about trees is almost a crime
For in doing so we maintain our silence about so much wrongdoing!
And he who walks quietly across the street,
Passes out of the reach of his friends
Who are in danger?

Berkowitz uses this piece as the starting point to explain, “Darkness as she [Hanna Arendt] would have us understand it, does not name the genocides, purges, and hunger of a specific era. Instead, darkness refers to the way these horrors appear in public discourse and yet remain hidden” (Berkowitz, 2009, p. 3). This is the type of dark times Bennett explored in The History Boys. One example is Auschwitz itself. Once considered the world’s largest cemetery, it is now considered a museum. Hannah Arendt, according to Roger Berkowitz, is saying that much of what we do not want to see is hidden in plain sight. Humans have a capability to ignore atrocities. “It is the vapid clichés that mar speech on TV news channels and by water coolers” (Berkowitz, 2009, p. 4). We cannot have students simply recite “vapid clichés”. Students should really analyze alternative texts to get at some sort of accurate representation.

Here, is an analysis of one part of Maus. In reading Maus (1991), there is a sense that Spiegelman, by virtue of telling his father’s story, is fighting against reason. The drawings look like black and white woodcuts, rough in nature. It is divided into parts where Spiegelman is talking to his father in the present, but his father’s story is in the past. The imagery is stark, filled with shadows. In Maus: My Father Bleeds History there is a panel showing Spiegelman’s parents walking to avoid being caught on a road that looks like a swastika with bare trees and smokestacks (gas chambers) in the background. They are wearing pig masks to appear Polish, and have nowhere to go. The plight of Spiegelman’s parents is outside the realm of reason. Through the two volumes of Maus, Spiegelman’s telling of his father’s story seems rational, a sort of survival handbook. Yet, if we dichotomize the realms of reason and emotion, Spiegelman only seems to get angry when he discovers his father burned all of his mother’s notebooks. It is then that, as he is leaving his father’s apartment, he says, “murderer” (p. 159). This is the end of the first volume. The second volume commences with Spiegelman trying to draw his French wife as an animal and returning to his father’s apartment. Spiegelman’s stepmother has just left his father. Spiegelman notes that he cannot make sense of his own relationship with his father so, how can he make sense of Auschwitz? This is a point that I tried to make with my students. The Holocaust was made up of individuals on both sides. The perpetrators were human, as were the victims. Reducing these individuals to statistics is a big problem when teaching the Holocaust. The use of Maus retells a true story with which our students can engage. Numbers are abstractions; people are not.

Problems and Limits to Representation

Representation has been tackled in several ways. In Berel Lang’s work Holocaust Representation: Art Within the Limits of History and Ethics (2000), the issue of how ethics, aesthetics, history, and imagination come together. Richardson (2005) states,

As Lang notes: “by definition there must be a difference between a representation and its object un-represented, with the former adding its own version to the ‘original’ it represents” (2000, p.51). In other words, any representation of the Holocaust in literature or art can never adequately convey the reality of a lived experience; it will always be bound to convey a representation of that experience particular to the situation in which it (the representation) was produced (p. 51).
Richardson explains the conundrum of any representation. This is the same problem as depicted in the *Phaedrus* (Plato, 1989, pp. 520-521). If one writes something down, it can be interpreted, and re-interpreted in different ways. There is a connection to a particular event, but it can never produce the truth of lived experience. Even with the copious amount of documentation the Nazis left behind, there is the quandary of humans becoming data. Even for the Nazis, the representation of camp prisoners, as numbers, was a type of nefarious representation. Numbers are a way to dehumanize a person into a statistic. Stripped of identity, the numbers can be liquidated or deported or exterminated.

Lang (2000) goes on to qualify:

any form of representation as essentially a ‘representation-as’, in which case we can see that any representation is entirely subjective: whereas a survivor of Auschwitz might represent the Holocaust *as* a living hell, a surviving SS officer might represent the same experience *as* an excellent career opportunity” (p. 51).

There is a straightforward interpretation of representations in general. The relationship between the author of the text who lived the experience and the reader who makes an interpretation of the representation is entirely subjective. Because of this subjectivity, it can be said that representing the Holocaust is barbaric, or even worse, meaningless.

This begs the question, Richardson (2005) asks.

If no form of representation is adequate to convey the extreme pain and suffering experienced by the Holocaust survivor (that experience itself being a mediation of the original object (van Alphen, 1999, p. 27) is it morally and/or ethically correct to attempt representation at all? (p. 2).

This is a loaded question. Will the Holocaust be forgotten if there are no representations of it? This is why we need alternative texts to teach the Holocaust. Students need representations to hold on to in order to keep generational remembrance.

Another issue arises when attempting to represent and think about the Holocaust, especially in Eastern Europe. Much of what my students envision about the Holocaust are the gas chambers and trains leading to them. Most of the killing was done in Eastern Europe by guns (Snyder, 2010). Representations from those killing fields are not as numerous. As teachers, we tend to focus on what is familiar to the students to help them make the connections. Our representations of the Holocaust need to include the Eastern killing fields. The Bloodlands (Snyder, 2010) explains the horrors subjected to the people between Russia and Germany in the interwar and World War II years. “Today, Auschwitz stands for the Holocaust, and the Holocaust for the evil of a century” (p. viii). Fourteen million were deliberately killed between 1933-1945, most shot out in the fields of the Bloodlands, gassed in lesser-known camps like Treblinka, and gassed by the Einsatzgruppen, or death squads, in vans using carbon monoxide. Snyder places the Holocaust in a relative situation. He does not choose a few instances and create a big-picture narrative. The Holocaust is treated in the context of Eastern European history. The question, “Why did the Holocaust happen in Eastern Europe rather than anywhere else?” is imperative (Mikics, 2012). This question opens up a physical space that grounds the mass atrocity of many different groups. Eastern Europe was invaded three times between 1939-1945, by the Soviet Union, then Germany, and then by the Soviet Union again (Snyder, 2015). In order to place the Holocaust in perspective, this is a key point. The Germans and Soviets each hated the occupants of the land between them. This area was coined “Bloodlands” by Timothy Snyder and is the subject of his book. In an article published after the release of *Bloodlands*,...
Snyder discusses the historiography of the Holocaust. There are two levels that historians and teachers generally operate on: the micro-level, which includes individual or national narratives, and the macro-level, which deals with the big picture of the Holocaust. There are also dashes to the meta-level that includes theory or ethics. Snyder raises the interesting point that “we cannot understand questions at the micro-level, such as the motivations of collaborations and the experience of victims, without the meso-level, the policies in question as implemented in the time and place” (Snyder, 2012, p. 150). Snyder points out that an additional 8 million non-Jews were killed in the same place where 6 million Jews were murdered. The meso-level transcends the national narratives that have flourished because it takes place in a specific region of the world. This region of the world has three concurrent definitions. Snyder gave those definitions on September 25, 2011 at the Ukrainian Museum of Modern Art in Chicago, Illinois (Snyder, 2011). The three definitions of the Bloodlands are as follows:

1. The geographic area from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea which included the western part of the USSR, Belarus, the Baltic States, Ukraine, and parts of Poland where some 14 million non-combatants were killed. The figures are about 6 million Jews during the Holocaust and 8 million non-Jews.

2. Where the Holocaust took place.

3. The area in Europe where both the Nazis and Soviets had power.

There is literature about national level suffering, be it Polish, Lithuanian, etc. There are also books on the Holocaust, which are completely separate from Soviet terror. Snyder imparts that it is as if we normally think of these two ideas are not connected (Ukrainemedia, 2011). The literature on the Holocaust tries to fit a story whose victims did not know Germany yet was within the context of Germany, be it the political history between 1933-1939 and the Holocaust of 1940-1945. The issue is that the literature that explains what happened 1933-1939 does not explain what happened in 1940-1945. What Snyder attempts to articulate the Bloodlands by avoiding strictly nationalist accounts, such as the Soviet Union’s narrative that they may have killed millions, but won World War II. Snyder avoids talking about the concentration camps and gulags as much as possible. This is where most histories of the era take place. He tries to talk about how the racist ideology of the Nazis and Marxist ideology led to the killing. By themselves, they do not kill. The ideologies led to economic policies that led to killing (Snyder). For the Soviets, it was a plan to modernize as quickly as possible that led to instances like the famine in the Ukraine. For the Nazis, Germany was an industrialized nation that needed a farming-heavy Eastern Europe, complete with Slavic slaves working the land (Ukrainemedia, 2011). The Nazis needed to colonize Eastern Europe for Lebensraum or living space. Both the Nazis and Soviets were reliant on the Bloodlands for food production. As the Nazis states, it was “the most dangerous place on Earth” (Ukrainemedia, 2011). Most Jews were killed in the Bloodlands, in the place where there was conflict over the fertile land of Eastern Europe. The state-destruction by both Soviets and Nazi Germany left no bureaucratic or legal protection for the Jews of Eastern Europe (Snyder, 2015).

So why is Snyder’s book so important in terms of representation and pedagogy? In terms of representation, Snyder brings up a host of important ideas drawing a different mental image of the word Holocaust. When one thinks of the Holocaust, the image of Auschwitz comes to mind. Auschwitz lives in the popular imagination of what genocide is. When one conjures up images of the Holocaust, Auschwitz is usually the first mental picture. In reality, the Holocaust, as the vast number of genocides tends to do, takes place in open fields, on the streets of cities, leading
to mass graves. The Holocaust in pop culture, takes place with a Western European twist. The majority of deaths in the Holocaust were of Eastern Europeans. Pedagogically, we simply do not teach the Bloodlands as a place where 14 million were killed as a single entity. We teach the Holocaust, and may briefly talk about Soviet terror. Educators need to look just as hard as what happened in Eastern Europe to get a fuller account.

**Pedagogical Issues**

As a teacher, shifting high school students’ perspectives is not always easy. Representing the Holocaust using alternative texts was a difficult task. My students, most of whom were familiar with the Holocaust, had very similar narratives. By recreating my lessons on the Holocaust by using alternative texts, I was able to get students to think about the Holocaust in new ways. The first thing I did was assign them *Maus* (1991). By using this graphic novel, students could see images and read a survivor’s story to open them up to the topic. Although *Maus* focuses on the Auschwitz narrative, having my students discuss what was already familiar to them was a useful starting point. To shift them beyond this narrative, I assigned them the poem *There was Once Elzunia* (2012). The conversations surrounding this very short poem changed the paradigm of the focus. The poem reads:

Once there was Elzunia.
She is dying all alone,
Because her daddy is in Maidenek,
And in Auschwitz her mommy…(Berlin, 2012, p. 397).

I looked at this poem with regards to emotions earlier in this article. Pedagogically, I was able to connect the Holocaust in Eastern Europe, which was mostly shootings, with the concentration camps that held many Western European Jews. This was the opening for me to introduce the idea of the *Bloodlands* by Timothy Snyder (2010). This text is one my students had the most difficulty with. I think that the major problem was that students did not comprehend how the Holocaust shifted from shootings and mobile gas vans to the concentration and death camps. Or maybe they couldn’t understand how the Holocaust happened at all.

Teaching the Holocaust is not an easy task. The horrors are unimaginable. We owe our students the right to learn a more complete version of the Holocaust by using multiple genres from different voices. The lessons of the Holocaust are critical for human society. Students need to know and be reminded that even a civilized, intellectual place can succumb to unfathomable acts.

**Conclusion**

The use of alternative texts to teach the Holocaust may be essential to students understanding of the subject. There are limits of representation as well as limits to our current curricula and standards. Frequently, there are issues of how much time teachers can devote to the Holocaust, or the availability of alternative texts. The issue of how to teach genocide is an important one to raise moral and ethical concerns about human rights. By answering the question of “How can we teach genocide”, we may be able to raise better awareness for future generations of students.

The Holocaust was not the only genocide. It is one that is well documented and has multiple sources for educators and students. The question of how we can represent the Holocaust to students in a way that can further their understanding of such an event will help them in studying other genocides and mass atrocities in history.
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**Author Bio**

**Stephanie Schneider** is currently an Assistant Professor in the School of Education at the State University of New York College at Old Westbury. Her research interests include: social studies pedagogical practices using alternate texts, as well as interdisciplinary instructional strategies. Email: schniders@oldwestbury.edu