

Cultural Appropriation and Historical Recursion: On the Systemic Violence of “Indian Night” in *Nemesis*

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Abstract

Philip Roth's *Nemesis* uses the 1944 polio epidemic in Newark to explore the repeated violence and exclusion in American society. This thesis argues that the “Indian Night” celebration at the Indian Hill summer camp is not only a background event in the novel. Roth uses this scene to show how violence from the past can appear again in new forms. The white children imitate Native American's clothing, customs, and behavior during the celebration. Their performance makes Native American's traumatic memory something like entertainment and hides the history of colonial violence behind it. To analyze this chapter, the thesis uses Michel Foucault's idea of heterotopia and Jacques Derrida's idea of hauntology to further examine the meaning of the summer camp. The camp is at first a safe place away from the polio epidemic. However, it later becomes a hell when the disease spreads. This change tells the readers that the camp has two different meanings: it is both a refuge and a place of danger. The break of polio in the camp also shows that, the violence of the past can come back into the present. It connects the suffering of the Jewish people with a longer history of anti-Semitism and colonial violence. Through these connections, Roth shows that exclusion and cultural appropriation do not simply disappear with time. These forms of violence can return when new social crises break out and continue to affect the marginal groups.

Keywords

Philip Roth; *Nemesis*; cultural appropriation; systemic violence; heterotopia; hauntology; American identity; anti-Semitism; colonialism.

1. Introduction

Through the description of the polio epidemic in Newark in 1940s, Philip Roth's novel *Nemesis* presents a public health crisis which swept through the whole community. Scholarly interest on *Nemesis* mainly is about three fields: The first category of articles such as “Beyond Theodicy?: Joban Themes in Philip Roth's *Nemesis*” and “The Book of Job: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Hermeneutics” focuses on the framework of mythology and theology, arguing that the narrative of Arnie follows the structure of Greek mythology and comparing Bucky to Oedipus or Job for analysis (Batnitzky 213; Ilana 6) [1] [2]. The second category, for example, “My Father's Face: Judaism, God, and Ritual Practice In Philip Roth's *Everyman*, *Indignation*, and *Nemesis*” focuses on Jewish identity in the novel, exploring the characteristics of Judaism itself (Kessler 34) [10]. And other articles including “Lashed to the Mast of That Recollection: Philip Roth's *Nemesis*, Polio, and Post-Traumatic Memory” and “An Ambivalent *Nemesis*: Philip Roth, Commentary, and the American Jewish Intellectual” emphasize on the anti-Semitism (Heister 68) [7] and Trauma theory, holding that polio is a hint of the Holocaust during World War II (Jardine 26) [9].

These studies have gained fruitful findings. However, existing scholarship on *Nemesis* predominantly focuses on the interpretation of the protagonist, Bucky Cantor, with little attention paid to other core scenes in the novel. This thesis holds that, the “Indian Hill” summer

camp and its “Indian Night” celebration depicted in the second chapter of the novel constitute a complex cultural text that transcends plot function. White children playing around the campfire and imitating the dancing and crying of Indian people in the night seems like a kind of amusement on the surface, however, it deeply shows the cultural appropriation of native people.

Taking “Indian Night” as the core of analysis, this thesis aims to delve into the following viewpoints: Roth reveals that cultural appropriation is not an isolated cultural phenomenon, but a repeated mechanism for the continuous violence of the colonial era. This mechanism demonstrates a continuity and repetition in modern society, like in the outbreak of the epidemic and the isolation of the Jewish community.

To conduct an in-depth analysis of this systemic violence, this thesis constructs a multi-dimensional theoretical framework. First, based on the research of Philip Deloria in *Playing Indian*, this thesis examines how white children “playing Indian” functions as a kind of identity politics. They reduce the complex Indigenous cultures to consumable symbols and hide the historical colonial plunder. Second, this thesis introduces Michel Foucault’s concept of “heterotopia” and Jacques Derrida’s concept of “spectral presence” to interpret the spatial politics of the “Indian Hill” summer camp. The Indian Hill appears to be a safe place for escaping the epidemic at first, however, its naming, activities, and historical context turn it into a heterotopia.

2. Playing Indian: The Drama of Cultural Appropriation

In Philip Roth’s *Nemesis*, the second chapter “Indian Hill” is a crucial narrative link between the protagonist Bucky Cantor’s past and future experiences. Roth describes the “Indian Night” celebration at the summer camp in particular details. In this scene, both children and adults wear feathers and face paint. They also perform a kind of “Indian” dance and other rituals (Roth 213) [11]. Roth’s detailed description gives us two important questions. Why do the white campers want to perform the Native American culture? What role does this scene play in the novel?

Philip Deloria’s *Playing Indian* provides useful historical and cultural background for understanding this performance. Deloria does a lot of research on how white Americans have long used imagined forms of Native American identity to shape their own national identity. He traces the practice of white Americans “playing Indian” back to the Boston Tea Party. He writes, “A chorus of Indian war whoops sounded outside the hall, and a party of what looked like Indian men sprinted down the street to the wharves” (Deloria 2) [3]. Deloria also shows that the event was just like a stage performance: “The tea party had been street theater and civil disobedience of the most organized kind. In full costume, the actors had waited patiently in the wings for Francis Rotch to deliver his lines” (2) [3]. The Boston Tea Party later became an important part of the story about white American’s national history. However, this story also involved white Americans acting as imagined Native Americans. So in this sense, performance has played an important role in the creation of American identity. White Americans repeatedly borrowed Native American images and used them to express their own ideas about freedom and national identity. As a result, the boundary between historical reality and cultural imagination became less clear.

Roth brings this tradition into his description of Indian Hill. This is an important detail in the beginning of the chapter: “A metal pole stood at the center of the oval flying an American flag and, below it, a flag bearing the camp emblem” (Roth 143) [11]. The position of the two flags is important. While the camp uses Native American images as part of its identity, the American flag stands above the camp flag. This detail suggests that Native American culture is under a larger American national identity. Marcia later tells Bucky about the history of the camp. Mr.

Blomback founded Indian Hill after leaving his academic career. He wanted to create a place where he could teach children about what he understood as Indian culture. However, Mr. Blomback was not a Native American. He learned about Native American life mainly through books such as Ernest Thompson Seton's *The Book of Woodcraft*. Such books presented a romantic and simplified image of Native American culture (Roth 146) [11].

Deloria argues that "playing Indian" has served two main purposes in American history. In modern society, some Americans used it to search for a more natural and "authentic" way of life when they felt uncomfortable with urban and industrial society. During wars and political change, Americans also used Native American images to help create a new national identity (7) [3]. Roth's *Nemesis* shows both of these functions.

The title "Indian Hill" also creates a clear contrast with the first chapter, "Equatorial Newark." The two settings represent different kinds of life. Newark represents the city, social rules, and modern industrial life. Indian Hill appears to represent nature, freedom, and escape. In Newark, Bucky lives under strong social pressure. He has to control his anger when Italian youths provoke him (Roth 13) [11]. He also has to face verbal attacks and unfair blame from grieving parents (Roth 80) [11]. The crowded urban environment also increases the fear of polio. Roth explains that "Escaping the city's heat entirely and being sent off to a summer camp in the mountains or the countryside was considered a child's best protection against catching polio" (7) [11]. The camp therefore appears to offer Bucky an escape from both the disease and the pressures of city life.

However, Indian Hill does not provide a truly natural or Native American way of life. The camp creates its own imagined version of that life. Mr. Blomback treats books such as *The Book of Woodcraft* and *The Manual of the Woodcraft Indians* as Bible. He tells Bucky, "This book was my inspiration. This too." However, Bucky soon discovers he actually knows little about nature. When he sees "Forty Birds That Every Boy Should Know," he realizes that he can identify only a few of them (Roth 146) [11]. This shows the gap between the camp's ideal image of outdoor life and the campers' actual knowledge of nature. The same gap also exists in their relationship with Native American culture. They want to experience a natural and "authentic" identity through Native American images, but they are separated from the real native people and cultures behind it.

D. H. Lawrence gives us another view to understand this conflict. Lawrence describes American consciousness as "unfinished" (160) [5]. European Americans built a society based on rules, reason, and modern life. At the same time, many of them imagined Native Americans as free, natural, and closely connected to the land. They wanted some of this imagined freedom for themselves, but they could not actually become Native American. This conflict created an unstable relationship with Native American identity. White Americans often separated themselves from the image of the "savage" Indian, but they were also attracted to native Indian's freedom and closeness to nature. Their attitude therefore contained both attraction and distance.

Roth uses the polio epidemic to make this conflict more visible. Bucky is attracted to the freedom and natural setting of Indian Hill, but he also feels uncomfortable with the camp's "Indian" performances. His mixed feelings reflect a larger problem in American culture. Americans may use the culture of another group to search for freedom, belonging, or a stronger sense of identity. At the same time, this process can separate those cultural images from the history and people to whom they actually belong. Roth therefore uses Indian Hill not only as a place of escape from Newark. He also uses the camp to question how American identity has been built through the repeated use of imagined Native American culture.

Furthermore, "playing Indian" also functions as a clarion call to inspire patriotism and national consciousness. Just as in the antebellum United States, aspiring national poets would wear

Indian garb and recite their lyrics around midnight campfires (Deloria 7) [3]. For Euro-Americans, the Indian spirit renders the “national spirit” and “American identity” complete and sublime. In *Nemesis*, this function is underscored by Jake’s death, the sudden shift to war news, and the glorification of the United States at the end of the Indian ceremony: “Bearing in mind the American troops fighting in Europe and the Pacific, and bearing in mind you boys who, like me, have relatives in the service, the next-to-last song to end the campfire will be ‘God Bless America.’ We dedicate it to all of those who are overseas tonight, fighting for our country” (Roth 216) [11].

In conclusion, activities at the Indian camp involving “playing Indian” ostensibly draw upon a romanticized imagination of “nature,” “freedom,” and “wildness.” This imagination reduces Indigenous cultures to a set of symbolic spiritual resources used to alleviate modern anxieties, fill voids in identity, and even perform national mythology collectively.

However, these performances are not simply innocent forms of cultural borrowing. They take place within an unequal relationship between different groups. The people who imitate Native Americans come from a society that has a long history of colonial violence. In contrast, Native Americans lost their land, culture, and lives during this history. This unequal relationship changes the meaning of the performance. It is not an equal exchange between two cultures. Instead, one group takes cultural images from another group and uses them for its own purposes.

This one-sided use of another group’s culture is at the heart of cultural appropriation. On the one hand, it extracts and oversimplifies Indigenous cultural symbols: “All wore beaded headbands, fringed tunics that were originally ordinary shirts, and leggings that were trousers stitched with fringe at the outside seam...A number of the boys had feathers in their headbands—dropped bird plumage that they’d found in the woods” (Roth 206) [11]. On the other hand, it systematically obscures the true history behind these symbols—colonial massacres, land expropriation, and cultural genocide.

Roth foreshadows this through the depiction of the “Mishi-Mokwa” hunt: “twenty of the campers, each armed with a war club and wearing necklaces of beads and claws, set out by the light of the fire to hunt Mishi-Mokwa, the Big Bear” (Roth 213) [11]. The seemingly exciting and joyful atmosphere of Indian Night is fueled by a cult of murder and killing: “Slay him! Slay him! Slay Mishi-Mokwa!...The campers’ cheering continued, the delight enormous at finding themselves encompassed by murder and death” (Roth 214) [11]. The participants become excited in the violent performance of the game. However, they do not understand the real history of violence behind the performance. The ceremony ends with the song “God Bless America.” This ending connects the performance with American national identity. It shows that, Native American culture is taken from its original context and placed into a larger American national story.

3. Heterotopia and the Return of the Specter: A Cycle of Systemic Violence

In *Nemesis*, place and space are not only basic role as settings, they have meanings beyond them. Roth uses different spaces to show how systemic violence works in society. Indian Hill is one of the most important spaces in the novel. The camp is not simply a background for the story. It also represents certain social ideas and values. We can better understand these meanings through theories about space.

In his seminal essay *Of Other Spaces*, Michel Foucault defines heterotopias as real, material spaces that function in society as “counter-sites”: spaces that can compare and reflect multiple realities, often embodying the qualities of “connection” and “external presence” within the network of all existing social positions (25) [6]. Foucault argues that heterotopias can be

categorized into six primary types, and Indian Hill embodies at least three of these: the heterotopia of illusion, the heterotopia of crisis and the heterotopia of time.

When defining the heterotopia of illusion, Foucault cited the example of colonies. On the surface, colonies appeared to be “mirror” of the suzerain state’s social system; in reality, however, the violence of colonial rule turned them into heterotopic spaces that differ from the suzerain state’s “civilization narrative.” These colonies exposed the “barbarism” behind “civilization,” standing as contradiction of reality and illusion (Foucault 10) [6]. Indian Hill gives us an interesting counterpart to this “mirror replication”, though it does not mimic the suzerain state’s social system. Instead, it depicts white people’s imitation of Indigenous peoples. Through the contradictory psychology of white Americans, Indian Hill reveals the fragility of so-called “civilization” and “American identity.” More importantly, this scene shows American identity was built partly through the use of other cultures. The name and location of the camp is the evidence. The camp is called “Indian Hill,” but it is mainly designed for white children from the city. The camp uses Native American culture to create an attractive image of nature and freedom. However, this image hides the history of Native Americans who lost their land and way of life during colonial expansion.

At the same time, Indian Hill can also be understood as a heterotopia of crisis. Foucault describes such places as “privileged, sacred, or forbidden places intended for individuals experiencing a state of crisis within society or their environment” (12) [6]. Indian Hill fits this idea because the camp is presented as a safe place for children during the polio epidemic. Roth writes, “Escaping the city’s heat entirely and being sent off to a summer camp in the mountains or the countryside was considered a child’s best protection against catching polio” (7) [11]. The children leave Newark because their families believe that the countryside can protect them from the disease. However, Indian Hill eventually fails to protect them. The camp becomes another dangerous place when polio spreads and death occurs. This change gives the camp an opposite meaning. Indian Hill first appears to be a safe place away from the problems of the city. In the end, it shows that these problems cannot simply be escaped. The same violence and fear outside the camp also enter this seemingly safe space.

Jason Baird Jackson discusses this unequal relationship in *On Cultural Appropriation*. He writes: “In a framework of appropriation, the powerful group takes aspects of the culture of the subordinated group, making them its own. If the subordinated group were happy or indifferent about a particular instance of such adoption, neither we nor an on-the-ground observer would resort to the label ‘appropriation’” (88) [8]. Jackson’s argument helps explain the problem with the “Indian Night” scene. Many readers may not immediately see the celebration as cultural appropriation. One important reason is that real Native American people are completely absent from the scene. The campers can use Native American clothing, names, and traditions for entertainment, but Native Americans themselves have no voice in this performance.

This absence also connects Indian Hill with another function of heterotopia. The camp brings different periods of history into the same space. The campers live in the present, but they bring the past of Native American to present through their activities. This connection between the past and present also embodies Jacques Derrida’s theory of “specter.” The specter represents a past that has not completely disappeared. It returns because the problems of the past have not been fully solved. In *Nemesis*, the history of colonial violence works in a similar way. The real victims of this history are absent from Indian Hill, but the effects of that history remain present. The campers may not see this history, but they continue to repeat parts of it through their performance (Derrida 185) [4].

Roth makes this connection clearer during the “Indian Night” celebration. He writes, “Twenty of the campers, each armed with a war club and wearing necklaces of beads and claws, set out by the light of the fire to hunt Mishi-Mokwa, the Big Bear” (Roth 213) [11]. The name “Mishi-Mokwa” comes from Ojibwe. Ojibwe is an Indigenous language spoken mainly by the Ojibwe

people, who are also known as the Chippewa or Anishinaabe in North America. Roth's use of this Indigenous name gives the camp performance an appearance of cultural authenticity. However, the campers remove the name from its original cultural setting and use it as part of their own game.

Derrida emphasized that specters manifest as the return of suppressed symbols. As a language that has been stolen and marginalized, the "presence" of an Ojibwe term in a white summer camp signals the absence of Ojibwe culture in mainstream historical memory. This term has become a "linguistic specter," showing the history of cultural appropriation and erasure.

Derrida argues that the specter is not a relic of the past but a persistent presence that disrupts the linear flow of time, creating a state of "hauntology" (180) [4]. The polio epidemic fulfills this role perfectly. It acts as a "material specter," drawing a direct line between the historical "murder and death" of colonialism and the contemporary, indiscriminate death suffered by Jewish campers. In doing so, it blurs the lines between past and present, colonizer and colonized. Thus, the line "The campers' cheering continued, the delight enormous at finding themselves encompassed by murder and death" carries significant meaning. It foreshadows the real deaths that follow the polio outbreak at the camp (Roth 214) [11]. The children's delight in fictional death is brutally answered by the specter of real death: "Donald, and another nine of the Indian Hill campers fell ill and had to be hospitalized with polio when they got home, among them Marcia's sister Sheila" (Roth 237) [11].

Plague narratives have long been used as "vehicles for allegory," and both readers and literary critics have been eager to attribute symbolic meaning to the epidemic (Stephanson 226) [12]. Michael Jardine notes: "In allegorizing the polio virus as a phenomenon that both invites and resists forgetfulness, Roth found in *Nemesis* a means to revisit and renew Holocaust memory, itself at risk of attenuation with the passage of time" (27) [9]. This anti-Semitism is not abstract: when Bucky decided to leave the camp mid-summer to join Marcia, his supervisor O'Gara hurled anti-Semitic slurs at him, deliberately misnaming him "Cancer" instead of "Cantor": "You Jewish boys got all the answers. No, you're not stupid—but neither is O'Gara, Cancer" (Roth 138) [11]. Another example of this parallel emerges when Bucky's grandmother told him, after he had left for camp, about the worsening polio epidemic and the rising tide of anti-Semitism: "The anti-Semites are saying that it's because they're Jews that polio spreads there. Because of all the Jews—that's why Weequahic is the center of the paralysis and why the Jews should be isolated. Some of them sound as if they think the best way to get rid of the polio epidemic would be to burn down Weequahic with all the Jews in it" (Roth 193) [11].

When we compare the violence suffered by Native Americans with the suffering of Jewish Americans, we can see an important connection. Systemic violence did not disappear after the colonial period. Instead, it continued to affect different marginalized groups in different forms. Roth connects the history of colonial violence with the polio epidemic to make this point clear. Society may try to hide or soften the violence of the past, but its effects can still return in the present. These effects continue to harm marginalized groups. This connection also shows a deeper problem in the construction of American national identity. American society tries to celebrate its ideas of freedom and unity, but its history also contains violence, exclusion, and oppression.

4. Conclusion

Through the performance of cultural appropriation, Indian Hill turns a painful history into a simple and entertaining cultural show. The campers enjoy Native American names, clothing, and rituals without facing the violence behind them. However, Derrida's idea of the "specter" shows that this history cannot simply be forgotten. The use of the Ojibwe language brings traces of the colonial past into the camp. The arrival of polio also shows how danger can suddenly

enter a place that appears safe. In different ways, both elements bring hidden forms of violence back into the present.

Roth therefore shows that systemic violence does not simply disappear with time. It can return in different forms and affect different groups. The past continues to shape the present even when people try to ignore or forget it. Indian Hill is therefore much more than a setting in *Nemesis*. Roth uses the camp to show how American society remembers some parts of its history while forgetting others. The camp also shows how the violence of the past can remain part of the present. In this sense, Indian Hill becomes an important symbol of America's difficult relationship with its own history.

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