Earlier this year, the Australian Prime Minister accused Labour of a ‘holocaust of defence jobs.’ Memory scholars suggest that the memory of the Holocaust has become ‘cosmopolitan’ (Levy & Sznайдer 2006, 2010), ‘transnational’ (Assman & Schwarz 2013, Assmann 2014), and ‘multidirectional’ (Rothberg 2009), to name but a few of the concepts used, and that the pervasiveness of Holocaust memory has led to a new ethical memory imperative in our approach to other cases of human suffering. However, Tony Abbott’s comment, which has evidently little to do with remembering the genocide of European Jewry but with employing the Holocaust as a trope to attack political opponents, suggests that the ‘memory optimism’ espoused by movements of Holocaust memory needs to be explored more deeply.

In this talk, I position Holocaust memory more neutrally as a global language and apply it to the specific Australian case of ongoing debates concerning the country’s race relations and genocidal history. In a discourse analysis drawing on a wide corpus of life writing, scholarly discourses, the Bringing them Home report, Sorry Books and other sources, I explore where and, if so, how the Holocaust trope is invoked in debates about Aboriginal Australian suffering. I propose that in this context, Holocaust memory is used to address the still controversial question of genocide in ‘the land of the fair go’ and to negotiate Australian identities - of victims, perpetrators, those who are on the fence about how to conceive of the past and those who deny culpability outright. Through the lens of one specific national case, I thus open up the debate in the field of memory studies concerning the global movements of Holocaust memory and the question of whether knowing about other suffering causes us to remember and care more.

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