Race, Ethnicity and Nuclear War

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6 Race and the Manhattan Project

No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb.

Theodor Adorno

Anglo-Saxon science has developed a new explosive 2,000 times as destructive as any known before.

H. V. Kaltenborn, News Report, NBC (6 August 1945)

So we strive to save civilization, and we learn how to wreck it, all on the same weekend.

Raymond Gram Swing, on the eve of the atomic bomb test at Bikini (1 July 1946)

This chapter discusses three novels set during the USA’s project to construct the first atomic bomb. These novels, each written during a different period of the Cold War, explicitly refer to the racial politics of the Manhattan Project, and in particular the contested assumption that the first atomic weapons were white (specifically Anglo-Saxon) bombs. This assumption is made by characters within these novels, and was present in the US media of the period. Writing in the Chicago Defender in September 1945, NAACP Executive Secretary Walter White criticized Winston Churchill’s desire to keep the bomb under ‘Anglo-Saxon’ control. The same month, Roy Wilkins wrote an editorial in the NAACP magazine The Crisis linking the atomic bombing of Japan to the racist perception of Japanese subhumanity and asked ‘Who is barbarian and who is civilized?’

The successful development of this new military technology was publicly announced after the atomic bombs had been used against the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the assumption outlined above was not the dominant one in the American press. Instead, the significance of Nazi Germany’s persecution of the Jews in the race to build an atomic weapon was emphasized: several periodicals commented that the Manhattan Project scientists had originally lived in Europe and migrated
to the United States to avoid persecution. Journalists posed this as a just repercussion of Nazism’s anti-Semitic policies: fascist intolerance drove away the scientists capable of building a weapon to win the war, whereas the special conditions of the United States (and only those conditions) made the building of the first atomic bomb possible. One such condition was America’s class and ethnic diversity, as *Time* magazine noted in 1945: ‘Professors, including many Nobel Prize winners, deserted their campuses to live in dusty deserts. Workers trekked in their trailers – careful New England craftsmen, burly Southern Negroes, all the races and types of the great U.S.’ Historian Paul Boyer notes that proponents ‘of this theme stressed the diverse national origins of the key Manhattan Project scientists: the Italian Fermi, Bohr from Denmark, the Hungarian Szilard, Einstein and Franck from Germany, Oppenheimer, Compton, and others from the United States’; ‘American democracy’ and the country’s freedom from prejudice supposedly contributed to the Project’s success. The major African-American newspapers similarly ‘emphasized that African-American scientists […] had contributed to building the bomb [and were] American heroes, equal to the whites in their contributions’.8

One might expect novels depicting the US atomic-bomb programme to echo the atmosphere of racial tolerance and to contend that this inclusive climate permitted the intellectual cross-fertilization necessary for the Project’s success. However, the novels discussed in this chapter argue that the Manhattan Project, principally based in Los Alamos, New Mexico, was a success in spite of American racism. In these representations, the United States is afflicted by profound institutional racism, especially anti-Semitism, partly through the perceived threat Jews represent, and partly because of the virulent anticommunism, dominant in mid-twentieth-century American society, that understood European Jews as carriers of infectious Marxist ideology.

Dexter Masters’s novel *The Accident* (1955), from the first period of heightened Cold War tension, uses its protagonist’s experiences to expose how the extreme anti-Semitism the United States projected onto Nazism since World War Two elides America’s own racial intolerance. The *Accident* argues for the meaninglessness of racial categories while highlighting how endemic race thinking has become. Masters’s novel shows that the racism and acceptance of immutable racial difference disfiguring Nazi Germany, against whom the USA raced to build an atomic bomb, are equally present in American society.

In *Stallion Gate* (1986), written by Martin Cruz Smith during the 1980s resurgence of Cold War hostilities, protagonist Joe Peña (a Native American security officer at Los Alamos) is a witness and victim of racism.
Ordered to incriminate J. Robert Oppenheimer, the Jewish scientific director of the Manhattan Project, as a spy by an anti-Semitic superior, Joe must negotiate a network of racial sanctions and roles as the narrative progresses. One of the ways Stallion Gate complicates hierarchies of race is through Joe’s hybrid identity. However, Joe’s racial identity starts to coagulate towards the novel’s end, particularly when Oppenheimer’s racist vitriol stimulates Joe’s allegiances to other Native Americans. The novel ends without resolution, and I argue this narrative move is necessitated by the novel’s ambivalent position on Joe’s place in the racial hierarchies of Los Alamos: Joe’s racial identity can only remain unfixed if the novel suspends any indication of his future existence after the events in the novel.

Joseph Kanon’s Los Alamos (1997) was published after the end of the Cold War, and over 50 years since the defeat of Nazi Germany and the atomic bombing of Japan. Unlike the two previous novels, the protagonist of Los Alamos, Mike Connolly, is an Irish American easily accepted within the edifice of American whiteness. Investigating the murder of a Jewish security officer, Connolly encounters several émigré Jewish scientists hoping to use the Manhattan Project to strike back at Nazism. Los Alamos warns that the atomic bomb may be about to become a weapon used in a global battle between warring races, but paradoxically insists on the appropriateness of racial loyalty.

In all three novels, the Holocaust retains its status as the ultimate racist atrocity. However, racial categories seem strongest in the most recent novel. The anti-Semitism cited in the novels often takes place because its proponents rhetorically situate Jews outside of humanity and civilization. As noted earlier, the term ‘civilization’ is not a value-free concept, nor is it a universal one. Referring to an advanced stage of humankind, the term legitimized the exposure of non-Europeans to European culture, and seemingly explained the technological superiority that made expansion possible. The political utility of civilization has made the concept appropriate in times of war as the ultimate justification for one’s actions. The public pronouncements in the USA surrounding the end of World War Two hailed the national qualities that the Manhattan Project embodied: no ‘country except the United States, with its industrial know-how’,10 was sufficiently affluent, democratic, pluralist and technologically developed to bring such a project to fruition. On 20 August 1945, Time magazine proclaimed ‘the weapon had been used by those on whom civilization could best hope to depend’.11 However, the racial tolerance of the United States and the quality of its ‘civilization’, both part of the interpretation of the Manhattan Project in the public debates of the mid-1940s, are extensively questioned in The Accident, Stallion Gate and Los Alamos.
American Anti-Semitism

Dexter Masters’s *The Accident* is narrated through a series of flashbacks, unfolding in Los Alamos immediately after World War Two, set against the ongoing objective of the Manhattan Project to develop more powerful nuclear weapons. The title refers to an accident exposing the physicist Louis Saxl to a fatal dose of radiation, in which he knocked over an experimental uranium pile to save the lives of others. The novel explores the anti-Semitism Saxl has faced across American society, contradicting the official postwar narrative of American racial tolerance that supposedly sealed victory in 1945. *The Accident* shows how antiracist and anti-Semitic characters alike assume the ‘Jew’ is a discernable racial category, and against that categorization, the novel collapses the legibility of racial distinctions.

Assumptions about Jewishness occur early on in the novel. Louis Saxl perplexes one of the soldiers guarding the Manhattan Project because Saxl confounds his physiological expectations:

[The soldier] is puzzled by Saxl’s failure to look like other Jews he has known. The soldier has studied Saxl covertly […] and is puzzled further because Saxl does not, he thinks, have any conspicuous feature at all, except shining eyes.

As Saxl dies slowly of radiation poisoning, his Jewishness marks him as an object of surveillance for the soldier, studying him closely in order for Saxl to fit the ideology to which the soldier adheres. *The Accident* reveals that Saxl was taunted as a child, ‘Jew eyes!’, which still haunts him in his sleep: ‘how durable the old wounds were!’ Constant presumptions about Jewishness have dulled Saxl’s sense of offence at ‘prejudice’: He has learnt that it simply is not expedient to feel fully the pain of anti-Semitism, since he has experienced ‘so many’ moments of ‘prejudice […] that too often one reaction would not be ended before another would have to begin’. Perception of difference is not always threatening or abusive. The friends of Ben Saxl, Louis’s father, are readily sympathetic about the Holocaust, but unable to see beyond Ben’s Jewishness:

‘You know, he never says a word about what’s happening to his people in Germany […] It must be a burden to him, though. It must be a terrible thing to think about if you’re one of them.’

‘They don’t make them any nicer than Ben Saxl. I don’t mean just for a Jew, neither.’

Ben’s friends assume an uncomplicated racial affinity stretching across the Atlantic to include all Jews; the victims of Nazi anti-Semitism are Ben’s
‘people’, he is ‘one of them’, and the language of the first speaker not only asserts that Ben belongs to the Jews, but that the Jews are a group identifiable distinct from ‘us’ and their fate is automatically assumed not to be a burden of ‘ours’. The second speaker commends Ben for reaching the spectacularly unprecedented status of being valued on his own terms, not just when judged against his race. This speaker implies if a Jew is recognized for his sociability, it is usually from a sliding scale adjusted to a behavioural bedrock of Jewish coolness. In fact, Ben Saxl chooses not to think about the extermination of European Jews. They ‘were as remote as the Poles. In this he was much like most of his neighbours; he was only expected to be different.’

The perception of Jewish difference expects Jews to think and behave in ways unlike Gentiles. The possibility that Ben’s friends do not entertain is that Jewish thoughts and actions are not traceable to a unique racial essence, but come to being in a shared social context of which all Americans, including Jewish Americans, are part.

American anti-Semitism and casual references to Jewish difference collide in a flashback in The Accident from the eve of war in Europe, as Louis Saxl enters the restaurant-garden of Mr. Biscanti. A young American man defends isolationism, speaking ‘about strength, morality, the German genius, Jews and Poles, the Versailles Treaty, certain admitted excesses of the men around Hitler, and now was on the unmistakable dedication of the latter’. In contesting the young man’s speech, one of his opponents calls for Saxl to intervene:

‘Hey Saxl […] come on out here. We’ve got a regular Nazi here saying a lot of things. Come on out. You’re a Jew, aren’t you? You tell him.’

Even as he said it he was ashamed of himself. Then he rationalized: he is a Jew, it is perfectly sensible, it only sounds bad. Then he was ashamed again, all in a second […] Behind him the young man spoke.

‘There’s really no point in discussing these things with a Jew.’

In order to combat explicit anti-Semitism, the tall man mobilizes the idea of ‘the Jew’. To hail Saxl as ‘a Jew’, to bring him into the argument as an authentic witness of racism, is to reduce him to a racial type that overlaps with the pejorative meaning of ‘Jew’ that the Nazi sympathizer uses. The shame that the tall man feels is an acknowledgment of this assumption; his following rationalization compounds the misjudgment by retreating into the language of self-evident difference (‘he is a Jew, it is perfectly sensible’); that this self-justification is flawed brings shame again to the speaker. The tall man draws attention to Saxl’s identity to invite his
authority as a victim of anti-Semitism, but the Nazi sympathizer refuses to let him enter into the argument on those very grounds, so certain is he of racial difference (the Nazi sympathizer’s ‘words had been said quite reasonably, as a first principle might be stated’). The narration makes explicit the equivalence between American anti-Semitism and Nazi ideology; the young man’s recourse to rational principles in the cause of racism ‘was the very distillate of the reverberations that could be felt across continents and oceans’. Like those Germans disinterestedly tolerating Nazism, in Mr Biscanti’s garden a plump man casually supports the young man’s racism: ‘still I suppose there’s some truth to it’. Mr Biscanti physically ejects the Nazi sympathizer, but to avoid embarrassing his other customers he omits any ‘references to the crime that had brought forth the punishment’, maintaining the invisibility of American anti-Semitism.14

The Accident insists on the uneasiness of Saxl’s position within American scientific institutions because of perceptions of his Jewishness. Before joining the Manhattan Project, Saxl is refused a ‘teaching job’ at a university because of anti-Semitism. An acquaintance wants to get him a good job – ‘if only he weren’t a Jew’. Saxl’s friend Skip Seago arranges a job for Saxl upon his return in 1939 from fighting in the Spanish Civil War. Before he meets the new boss, Jessup, Seago cautions Saxl to restrain his temper and his racial pride. Seago warns that Jessup ‘shoots his face off about Jews […] he doesn’t really mean anything by it […] But he’s apt to say something. Can you – handle that sort of thing, Louis?’15 Saxl’s childhood friend asks him to accept anti-Semitism as unfortunate but unchangeable, something that he will have to learn not to take offence from if he is to progress in the American workplace.

Anti-Semitism is absent amongst the scientists during Saxl’s time at the Manhattan Project: ‘Among the people he worked and lived with there was none of it, none that he had experienced or had heard of’. In The Accident, the Holocaust haunts the community at Los Alamos, such as the fictional Jewish physicist Herzog, who came to America fleeing Nazi Germany. Saxl is described as smiling at ‘the enormous irony of the situation’ when considering the famous Einstein letter, the missive devised by the physicists Einstein and Leo Szilard, which urged President Roosevelt to begin an atomic weapon programme to compete with Germany. Einstein had been dispossessed of his home in ‘Caputh, near Potsdam’, and his ‘apartment in Berlin’. The work of the Manhattan Project scientists is depicted as inseparable from the war in Europe. The fictional Jewish-Hungarian physicist Voss declares, ‘As of September first [1939, the day Germany invaded Poland] the theory of nuclear fission cannot be discussed without reference to politics and war.’ Voss argues that an American atomic
bomb must be produced to ‘prevent a spectacular threat to civilised life’, a bomb to scorch genocidal anti-Semitism from the Earth. David Thiel, another of Saxl’s friends, believes the émigré physicists’ heightened appreciation of what a Nazi victory would mean drives them to develop an atomic bomb first:

I know a guy here who can prove [the atomic bomb] won’t work. Like you and me, he was born and brought up in the United States. But Fermi and Szilard and Wisla and Wigner and Weisskopf and Teller and some others, all here by virtue of travel more or less enforced, seem to think it will work [...] nature always gives the same answers to the same questions. But a guy running from a concentration camp maybe asks some questions harder, or refines them some, or maybe just listens harder for the answers.

Personal knowledge of Nazi atrocities concentrates the attention of these émigrés on building a weapon that will wipe the ‘virus’ of Nazism from the ‘tissue’ of Europe. This process is prefigured in The Accident by a poem written by Saxl in the mid-1930s in response to German anti-Semitism: ‘pray / For the hate that will steady the knife in our own sure hand’.16

The writings of Theodor Adorno, himself a Jewish émigré living in California in the 1940s, cautions against these characters’ talk of total revenge:

As long as blow is followed by counter-blow, catastrophe is perpetuated. One need only think of revenge for the murdered. If as many of the others [Nazis] are killed, horror will be institutionalized [...] If, however, the dead are not avenged and mercy is exercised, Fascism will [...] get away with its victory scot-free, and, having once been shown so easy, will be continued elsewhere.17

The Accident echoes Adorno’s insistence on the impossibility of adjudication on Nazism’s crimes. The novel refutes the claims of racial absolutes, and warns against using the atomic bomb in defence of civilization. Dr Beale, a pathologist brought to Los Alamos, who taught Saxl biology, becomes a mouthpiece in The Accident for the refutation of race, and a spokesperson for the ethical complications of America’s atomic-bomb programme. Beale scorns the idea that the Jews are a different race:

Maybe Jews have more [curiosity], that’s what they tell me, only I never saw it. I’ve known some awful dull Jews. Dull or bright, though, they always seemed to me ninety-seven per cent like everyone else. What people make out of the other three per cent! Goddammit, everybody’s ninety-seven per cent like everybody else.
Every goddamn one of us has got the blood of Tutankhamen’s grandparents in him.18

Beale seems to recognize that Jews are different from ‘everyone else’, but confounds this by suggesting that the extent of that difference, ‘three per cent’, is the same measure of difference that characterizes human life in general – ‘everybody’s ninety-seven per cent like everybody else’. This reinforces the biological inclination that unifies humankind as a whole, ‘the blood of Tutankhamen’s grandparents’ that we all share, and that to magnify the ‘other three per cent’ that Jews differ by into racial difference is erroneous, and defies the evidence of difference within Jews themselves, ‘Dull or bright’. Beale’s words prefigure the American Anthropological Association’s position on racial difference by over 40 years: ‘there is greater variation within “racial” groups than between them’.19

It is also Beale who reflects critically on the atomic bomb. It may not be American civilization’s weapon against Nazism but an expression of Europe’s self-destruction during World War Two: ‘Does it give you pause that virtually all of the science that went into this project came out of Europe?’ In Beale’s interpretation, the hatred seen in the Holocaust will not be destroyed by, but is concentrated in, America’s atomic bomb. For Beale, this device serves neither civilization nor humankind; rather, the atomic bomb benefits one section of humanity (the Allies) by exterminating another (the Japanese): ‘you’ve been serving people here with your bombs? […] You’ve been serving some people at the expense of others […] forgive me if I vomit at the mention of science serving people’. Thiel voices the similar view that America’s atomic bombs are not preserving civilization. They promise an alternative future: ‘civilization cannot stand up under the pressure of a Third World War augured by the new weapons.20

On Saxl’s death by radiation poisoning, Beale’s response rings with the language of poetic justice: ‘I cannot honestly […] say I feel worse about him than I did about all those people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki who were killed by the bombs he helped build.’ Saxl himself had protested in advance against using the atomic bomb against Japan. In an extended flashback, he suggests the USA is parroting the Nazis’ excuses for bombing defenceless populations: ‘Senators and generals say this is the way modern wars are fought, which is what the Germans said when they bombed out Rotterdam.’ In developing atomic bombs to defend civilization against Nazi atrocities, have the physicists of the Manhattan Project created weapons that perpetrate atrocities?

[The physicists’] failure (they feared) might mean the loss of the war
and the beginning of barbarity. But the fear of success was no less a fear, for they were [...] preparing an instrument [...] not easily [...] separated from barbarity.

The scientific experimentation on Jewish subjects in the concentration camps was more evidence of Nazi barbarism. The spectre of this is summoned up in *The Accident* by a Japanese physicist’s report on the radiation victims at Hiroshima and Nagasaki: ‘you Americans, you are wonderful, you have made the human experiment’.21 In *Hiroshima* (1946), journalist and writer John Hersey records that the survivors of the atomic bombings resented the Americans for regarding ‘them as laboratory guinea pigs or rats’.22 Towards the end of *The Accident*, the question is posed of America and its hydrogen bombs, ‘what kind of nation will they save?’ The novel implies the accident that irradiated Louis was subconsciously motivated, a self-inflicted punishment for his part in the Manhattan Project.23 Comparisons can be drawn with New Zealander James George’s novel *Ocean Roads* (2006), where the character Isaac, a Jewish physicist who has fled Europe and joined the Manhattan Project, eventually breaks down and realizes ‘he has been complicit in the military irradiation of the planet’.24 In a premonition of World War Three, Thiel asks whether Saxl is ‘the first casualty of what could be a second atomic war’.25 These comments correct the eagerness of the émigré Jewish scientists to build an atomic bomb. Nuclear weapons will kill Jews as easily as anti-Semites. In an era of atomic bombs, their ashes are indistinguishable from one another.

When Louis’s grandfather Abraham Saxl, dying, saw Louis as a boy playing with Seago, he ‘felt very happy to see Jew and Gentile, eleven and fifteen, together’, a future of fruitful coexistence between supposedly different racial groups. There is little in *The Accident* to amplify this sliver of hope: the novel shows how anti-Semitism in American society survives after Nazism, and the perception of racial difference, even at its most benign, denies individual subjectivity and addresses racial spokespersons. *The Accident* makes legible the desire of Jewish scientists, including Saxl, to strike back against Nazism, in the form of an atomic bomb supposedly defending what is left of civilization. But that atomic bomb project is poised to escalate out of control during the nuclear arms race, and escalation is explicitly compared to the experiment that doomed Louis: ‘Possibly something was done in the expectation that it would build up intensity a little – much as someone might say let’s build a few more bombs and see where we are then – and instead it took the experiment right across the critical threshold’.27 Beale suggests the Manhattan Project’s European lineage is no coincidence, and it is to be expected that the continent that produced
Nazism would plant in the New World a weapon as apocalyptic as the atomic bomb. Against Abraham Saxl’s hopes for peaceful coexistence, *The Accident* characterizes the recent past, present and future as an era of genocidal racism, mass extermination technology and an American populace complicit with casual anti-Semitism. This is epitomized by the plump man in Mr Biscanti’s garden, consenting (in Adorno’s words) ‘to a few statements that one knows ultimately to implicate murder’. In his dying delirium, Louis calls out, ‘The hate! The hate!’ This reworking of the character Kurtz’s deathbed statement, ‘The horror! The horror!’ from Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) evokes the legacy of Kurtz in the postwar world. This legacy includes the hypocritical assumption of superiority by the European colonial project in its rampant exploitation of and contempt for colonized subjects, encapsulated in Kurtz’s ‘Exterminate all the brutes!’ *The Accident* shows the lingering of these assumptions, and the reference to Kurtz gives a specific racial and colonial context to the ‘hate’ that the dying Saxl passes judgment on and prophesizes. The racial hatred of modern European colonialism that contributed to the Nazi genocide, the racial hatred for which *The Accident* indicts American society, will dominate the new nuclear age. The character Thiel is saddened by the supplementation of anticommunist hysteria with the language of racism: ‘Everybody is beginning to fear the Russians all over again […] half mysterious Orientals on top of everything.’ Scholars have noted that after World War Two one of the mechanisms to help turn the Soviet Union into America’s enemy was ‘re-racialising’ Russians as an essentially ruthless people, a message circulated in US schools. Perhaps Saxl killed himself for helping to usher in this era of hate. The novel argues against the rigidity of race and civilization, positing that those who claim superiority in these terms committed the Holocaust in Europe and developed atomic bombs against America’s enemies.

‘We See What Kind of Indian You Really Are’

The plot of Martin Cruz Smith’s *Stallion Gate* (1986) follows the Native American Joe Peña, a disgraced serviceman transferred to the Manhattan Project and secretly ordered to protect the Project from Jewish corruption. Captain Augustino, who enlists Joe into the security personnel at Los Alamos, seeks to purify the Manhattan Project’s racial ingredients. Augustino confides to Joe his fears that the architect of the atom bomb, J. Robert Oppenheimer, is a Soviet agent intent on developing an ‘atomic weapon here only so that he can deliver the finished plans to his Soviet friends’. Riddled with conspiracies, in Augustino’s mind the twentieth
century is ‘the Century of the Jew’ and Oppenheimer is the ‘Third Great Jew’, following Marx (who overthrew ‘traditional authority and religion’) and Einstein (who destroyed ‘every absolute in the laws of science’). Augustino’s anti-Semitism also derives from his hatred of atheism and communism: ‘The Russian Revolution was largely led by Jews’. He tells Joe that the global conspiracy ‘does not mean that [Jews] haven’t suffered. When I hear of the suffering of the Jews under Hitler, I wish I were a Jew myself. You see, in the Century of the Jew they’ve taken our hearts, when they already had our minds.’

Augustino is either denying the Holocaust or – perhaps satirizing the ability of the paranoid mindset to accommodate contradictory items of evidence – believes it was engineered to manufacture sympathy. He orders Joe to accumulate evidence that will incriminate the head of the Manhattan Project. However, Oppenheimer’s Jewishness does not match the racial identity Augustino projects onto him. At one point, Oppenheimer changes into all-American ‘Western gear: jeans, boots, silver buckle, hat at an angle’. He is religiously cosmopolitan, ‘not a very orthodox Jew. He sort of gets around the whole religious issue by going Hindu.’

Joe has geographically and culturally distanced himself from the Pueblo community, endorsing the medical superiority of white American culture and commenting that only a ‘fanatic […] wouldn’t use Anglo medicine’. Oppenheimer commends Joe’s modern sensibility and hails him as a ‘progressive Indian’. Joe does not see himself as wholly ‘Indian’: ‘I’ve spent half my life away from here. I’ve got a half-breed brain now. Lost the old natural dignity.’

Sharp contends that at the novel’s beginning, Joe’s ‘immersion in the black musical culture of Harlem’ has led to his ‘alienation’ and ‘rejection of tribal values’. Accordingly, the local Pueblo elders label Joe ‘a fake Indian’. They propose that the non-Native-American communities Joe has passed through have erased his racial authenticity: ‘He went away an Indian and came back a black man […] He went into the Army and became a white man. Maybe there’s no one there at all any more.’

The plot of the novel explores Joe’s ethnic personae and as the conspiracy narrative moves towards closure so too does the unresolved question of Joe’s identity. Joe feels he is ‘not really from’ white America or Native America, and as a consequence he serves ‘as a go-between’. The novel intimates that Joe’s boundary-crossing may not disqualify him as Native American, and neither can the authenticity of the Pueblo elders be taken for granted. Although Joe does not recognize it, he fits the ‘traditional trickster figure’ of Native American culture, ‘constantly crossing boundaries, [having] sexual adventures, [and] frequently involved in some
sort of scheme that gets him into trouble’. Joe thinks one of the Pueblo elders ‘had such a long nose and his hair was so brown, he had to have some French trader or horny Mormon in his background’. Despite (or perhaps because of) this, the elders embrace a traditional, homogeneous Pueblo culture, and seek Joe’s help in sabotaging the technology of the Manhattan Project they believe is a threat to that culture. Jaskoski proposes that Stallion Gate plays out a contestation of space between ‘Native American thought’ and a ‘Western – European or Euroamerican – world view’, with the former holistic, respectful of the Earth, and finding knowledge through prophesy and storytelling, the latter based on dissection, calculation, exploiting the land as ‘inert commodity’ and learning through discourses of ‘reductive analysis’ and ‘mathematical’ models. While broadly accurate, Jaskoski’s account is itself reductive for eliding those Native Americans in the novel who use United States Army explosives to search for valuable turquoise by blowing holes in the land.

For most of the novel, Joe is suspended between two types of identity. One is traditionally Native American and situated in opposition to white American appropriation of the land. The other is ethnically polyphonic, signified by Joe’s friendships and cultural borrowings. The future home of this second identity is the Casa Mañana, the ‘only authentic jazz [club] in New Mexico’. Its existing owner, the African-American businessman Pollack, sells it to Joe for half its value, after being racially abused by the white Texans trying to buy it. Pollack, too, has felt American racism: ‘he didn’t go cross-country in a train because he never wanted to be mistaken for a porter’. Experiencing different forms of racism has bonded these characters in Stallion Gate, and Pollack’s parting words suggest that in the postwar Casa Mañana, the racial equality the Allies profess to be fighting for will be realized: ‘We’ll show the white trash what this war was all about.’ The Casa Mañana – ‘house of tomorrow’ – is at the centre of the future Joe is planning, which Joe plans to share with his love interest Anna Weiss, a Jewish-German mathematician, and Ray Stingo, a ‘primitive Sicilian’ who accepts a job as maître d’ when the Casa Mañana reopens. The Casa Mañana is a future oasis for the ‘geographically and culturally diverse allegiances Joe is trying to establish to thwart the racist hierarchies of American society.

In Joe’s relationship with Anna, Stallion Gate plays with the characters’ imprecise and contingent racial identities. Neither matches the European colonial context’s original terms of whiteness and its Other; Joe is a ‘progressive’ Indian, and Anna’s whiteness was not sufficient to belong officially to the German Volk. The complexity of Joe’s racial identity is at its most keen in the representation of his relationship with Anna; the novel
suggests their sexual liaison is partly due to her perception of his animal primitivism. At an early meeting, ‘She looked at Joe’s shirt and could have been scrutinizing the gore on a beast that walked on all fours.’ Anna raises an explicit colonial subtext when she discusses her fantasies:

‘[I thought I might be a female aviator who crash-landed and had to live with someone like Tarzan while the rest of the world searched for me. When I was rescued, they would understand that I had been forced to submit. There may have been wild Indians involved.’

‘In any respectable fantasy.’

The transgressiveness of Anna’s desire for a racial Other (it is undisclosed how the ‘wild Indians’ are involved) is recognized in the masquerade of submission; even in her fantasy, she does not publicly reveal her lust, evidencing the taboo on interracial relationships that a teenage Jew in Nazi Germany presumably felt keenly. Joe’s dry comment, ‘In any respectable fantasy’, draws attention to the racial hierarchy implied by narratives of white virgin maidens ravished by non-white men. By licensing the surveillance of non-white men, Anna’s fantasy is the official version of sexual encounters in Europe’s colonies and America’s plantations.

Suspecting Weiss of conspiring with Oppenheimer, Augustino orders Joe to use his ‘Indian charm’ to extract information from her. Joe reflects that he may be assuming a racist stereotype as he recounts a Native American Creation myth to Anna, since ‘it smacked of noble-red-man-seduces-tourist’. Her response fits this clichéd cultural encounter – ‘tell us more fascinating Indian experiences’ – and while it is not signposted as ironic, it is difficult to imagine the description of Joe ‘as dumb as a yearning brute’ could have any other tone when published in 1986. The stereotypes do not ring true for these two characters, but they are available for verbal abuse, as when Anna tells Joe she will leave New Mexico after the war and he accuses her of using him in a sexualized colonial adventure: ‘I’ve been some sort of conquest for you. Entertainment. Part of your tour of Indian country.’ In context though, this is likely to be read as proof of his love for her, not a valid criticism of her as sexual tourist. The ‘noble-red-man-seduces-tourist’ encounter is a cultural template they do not fit, but cannot discard completely, so powerful is its influence in structuring their perception of gendered contact between races. Anna’s comments on Tarzan (and elsewhere King Kong) illustrate the role of the mass media in the prevalence of these racial templates. Their desire for each other overturns the expected racial positions. The stereotype of insatiable non-white men ravishing chaste white women is inverted when they finally have intercourse in a motel room. Anna ‘dropped [her shoes and hat] as soon
as she came in’, her jumpsuit lying ‘sprawled, empty, across the middle of the floor’, evidently thrown away in a moment of uninhibited passion. In contrast, Joe removed his clothes in an orderly manner. ‘His uniform lay over a chair.’

Despite the sanctuary of hybridity represented by the Casa Mañana, despite his interracial relationship with Anna, Joe is drawn deeper into the Pueblo elders’ war on the atomic bomb and white America. Joe discovers a cow’s carcass in a valley near Los Alamos, killed by the ‘poisonous isotopes’ dumped there. The cow’s skin has changed colour, pointing to the pigmentation of those responsible: ‘A hide turned white? That was new.’

Stallion Gate asserts the Manhattan Project’s whiteness, its Eurocentrism – ‘the logical and inevitable culmination of western empirical thought’. The Manhattan Project is represented as a form of cultural arrogance, riddling Native American land with radioactive isotopes, naming the test site ‘Trinity’, a name taken from Christian European culture (a religious sonnet by John Donne), and erasing the Native American name it already had, Stallion Gate. Jaskoski sees the depiction of the Trinity site in the novel as a ‘giant laboratory’, testifying to the Western assumption that the Earth is ‘an exploitable source of wealth that can be destroyed for the amusement of the destroyers’. Oppenheimer declares the atomic bomb to be at the forefront of technological engineering, while the Native American culture immediately outside Los Alamos remains premodern: ‘We are the future surrounded by a land and a people that haven’t changed in a thousand years.’ This contributes to the reserve Joe starts to feel towards the Project. Having served in the Pacific, earlier in the narrative Joe wanted the Project completed: ‘build the bomb and end the war’. He comes to see the Manhattan Project as the imposition of white American culture, obliterating the Native American culture around it, and by the novel’s end he renounces his own contribution. He tells Oppenheimer, ‘This is your bomb, not mine.’ Oppenheimer mistakenly believes Joe is complicit with the elders’ plot to sabotage the test site, and verbally attacks him. Oppenheimer insists on the mutual exclusivity of the Manhattan Project’s modernity and Native America’s backwardness. With the Trinity test about to begin, Oppenheimer tells Joe, ‘What an incredibly stupid time for you to turn into an Indian.’ For Oppenheimer, the eruption of Joe’s racial allegiances makes him hostile to the atomic bomb and Oppenheimer will not let the Project ‘be endangered by a…tribe’. Because of Oppenheimer’s racial abuse, Joe aligns himself with Native America: ‘Everyone insisted he was Indian. So, why not?’ Joe tries to prevent the test magically, using the Pueblo elders’ ‘yellow wands’, but he is unsuccessful and in the novel’s last moments he runs for cover as the clock ticks down
towards detonation. The novel finishes with Joe silhouetted against the atomic bomb blast, his fate uncertain: ‘From the eye of the new sun, a man diving.’ Sharp reads Stallion Gate’s abrupt ending as precluding Joe’s reabsorption back into his Pueblo tribe: ‘Though Joe helps preserve his community by ensuring the elders’ escape to Mexico, he may be destroyed before his reintegration into his culture is complete.’

The ambiguity of Joe’s survival embodies the novel’s ambivalence towards any single position on the atomic bomb; readers are offered a spectrum of perspectives, from the necessity of using it to end the war against Japan, to the damage it has done to local Native American communities and the ecosystem. The novel withholds final narrative sanction on any one interpretation of the bomb. The ambiguous ending leaves it unclear whether Joe is dead, or whether his future lies in the jazz club, or the culture of his tribal elders. Joe’s final actions suggest he has been seduced by renewed racial pride, but by foreclosing knowledge of his life (if he survives) after the Trinity test, a racially and culturally heterogeneous future remains possible. The novel rejects racial identities, showing their fraudulence and complicity with colonial narratives, such as in the descriptions of Joe and Anna’s relationship. Alternatively, Stallion Gate promotes Joe’s Pueblo allegiances, defined in opposition to the Manhattan Project’s destruction of Native American living space. The Project poisons the land of the Pueblo Indians, and in opposition to this racism inherent in the Manhattan Project (also symbolized by Augustino’s pronouncements), Joe finally agrees to sabotage the Trinity test. In its (lack of) conclusion, Stallion Gate keeps Joe’s identity suspended between these guises of ethnic authenticity and cultural cosmopolitanism.

‘The Most Demonic Success of Hitler was His Ability to Hitlerize His Enemies’

The narrative device driving the plot of Joseph Kanon’s novel Los Alamos (1997) is the investigation into the murder of Karl Bruner, a Jewish German working as an intelligence officer on the Manhattan Project. Michael Connolly, from the Office of War Information, is transferred to Los Alamos to uncover Bruner’s murderer and any possible security leaks. In the first scene, Bruner’s body is found, preparing readers for an investigation into anti-Semitism as discussed in the two previous novels. However, the casual, institutional anti-Semitism featured in The Accident is absent, as is the conspiratorial anti-Semitism exhibited by Captain Augustino. Los Alamos constructs Bruner as a metaphysical victim, a symbol of Jewish victimization throughout history, and bearing that semantic
burden means that Bruner’s physiology is described as the condensed form of his people’s essence. Looking at a photograph from Bruner’s file, Connolly notes that before the Nazis tortured him, he had ‘the pale Jewish face of a hundred other photographs’. For Connolly, Bruner’s face is a paradigm for all Jews whose lives have been taken across Europe. Bruner’s life is narrated through the language of the Bible: the cycle of violence that consumed his life is ‘an endless series of biblical begats’, echoing the genealogies in the Old Testament. Bruner’s ‘spare, clean room’ at Los Alamos is interpreted as his attempt to live ‘as unobtrusively as possible, wanting to be passed over’, a reference to the Jewish slaves spared God’s punishment of the Egyptians (Exod. 12:13). Bruner was tortured by the Nazis for being a communist, and then exiled to the Soviet Union; it is suggested his parents have been murdered in Germany for being Jewish. The Russians ‘pulled [Bruner’s] teeth out, one day at a time’. When Connolly expresses surprise at Soviet anti-Semitism, the fictional Jewish-German scientist Friedrich Eisler scolds Connolly’s naivety: ‘Do you think it was only the Germans –’.55 Despite Bruner’s murder, Los Alamos seems like a sanctuary compared to Europe.

Connolly attends one of scientist Hans Weber’s musical evenings, and finds Weber and Eisler in a bedroom looking over a magazine filled with photographs of the concentration camps. As Bach plays outside, Connolly’s ‘eyes swam. He darted from picture to picture, trying to make any sense of it, but the world had tilted slightly on its axis’:

bodies were heaped in piles, limbs at unnatural angles, mouths wide open to the air. [...] Children. The men at the fence seemed to hang there, as if they needed to hold the wire to remain upright. In another picture, a vast open pit was filled to overflowing with shaved heads and naked bodies. Everyone was dead, even the ones pretending to be alive at the fence.

European cultural treasures have coexisted with this capacity for barbarism: “German music,” Eisler said ironically. “Such beautiful music. You must admit, we are an extraordinary people.”56 Now, that European culture is revealed in new light. Adorno’s comment on the status of aesthetic pleasure after the Holocaust is relevant in this context: ‘to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’.57 The enjoyment of European fine art, such as lyric poetry or the music of Bach, is compromised since both are presented as products of a European culture calling itself civilized as it commits genocide. Civilization is the mocking claim made by European classical music, ‘the rasp of the viola tuning’58 in the novel, obscene in its obliviousness to barbarism. Weber joins the other musicians, and plays
with tears running down his cheeks.

As in *The Accident*, in Kanon’s novel Jewish émigré scientists contribute to the Manhattan Project in order to retaliate against Nazism: ‘This was our way of fighting. With our slide rules. Our tests. […] We would build a bomb to kill all the Nazis […] with the Nazis, anything was permissible. Even the bomb.’ Eisler voices a fight to death, making it legitimate to become as authoritarian and fanatical as the enemy in order to eradicate them. But Eisler complicates this scenario by considering himself as German as he is Jewish. For Eisler, America’s atomic bomb is a German invention because its conception was a reaction to Germany’s plans to build an atomic weapon, and many of the Los Alamos physicists have come from Germany. For Eisler, Germany represents an apocalyptic European sensibility being reborn in America through the USA’s conflict against Nazism:

our culture is over. Perhaps it had to end this way – killing ourselves. Very German. The end of the world. But now it is really over […] Only this bomb is left – our last gift. I wonder what you will do with it. Perhaps you’ll become Germans too. Everybody can become monsters now.

Eisler’s condemnation of the country he has fled from compels Connolly to change his vision of the Manhattan Project as a cosmopolitan gathering of international personages. Instead, the atomic bomb becomes an exhibit to German national tendencies, here framed as creativity, vision, absolutism and monstrosity: ‘Los Alamos had struck [Connolly] as some overgrown international campus, everybody’s project, but that seemed irrelevant now. To Eisler, the Americans, the Hungarians, the Italians, the whole polyglot community were simply spectators to some violent national drama.’ Eisler’s prognosis haunts *Los Alamos*: the Americans have become ‘Germans’ in their campaign to defeat the Axis. At Trinity, Connolly adapts the national anthem to register his changing view of America: ‘The rockets’ red glare, Connolly thought, the bombs bursting – a macabre new version of the song.’ Eisler’s moral quandary over his role in the Manhattan Project leads him to irradiate himself fatally, announcing ‘one of us should feel [the] effect of what we’re doing here’. This is a self-imposed judgment for constructing an apocalyptic weapon at Los Alamos, a point of comparison with *The Accident*.

One reads *Los Alamos* aligned with Connolly, whose thoughts are often mirrored in the narrative. The web of espionage Connolly is drawn into complicates his national allegiance, and he is sufficiently embedded in the émigré community of physicists to rehearse their contention that the atomic bomb should never be used: ‘We’ll be the Nazis.’ At the test site,
Connolly senses that it is ‘Not just a weapon’ but the promise of extinction without the comfort of transcendental faith:

People had ideas about death. Pyramids and indulgences and metaphors for journeys. Connolly saw, looking out at the cloud in the desert, that none of it was true, that all those ideas, everything we thought we knew, were nothing more than stories to rewrite insignificance. This was the real secret. Annihilation. [...] Now we would always be frightened.

The novel expresses the reign of fear that the nuclear arms race would foster, and the democratic compromises to which the US state would be susceptible during the Cold War. The novel concludes with Oppenheimer’s musings on the atomic bomb’s future. Connolly warns that the American military will appropriate and monopolize the technology, and Oppenheimer’s eyes are ‘tired and knowing. “Well, we’ll see,” he said. “I’m going to hope for the best.”’61 The optimism of Oppenheimer’s statement is discredited by his ‘tired and knowing’ eyes, reflecting the deceptions and belligerence of the United States military. Retrospectively informed by the Cold War, readers are invited to see Oppenheimer’s vocalized hope as misplaced and the legacy of the atom bomb as dubious and uncertain.

The sense that the atomic bomb does not herald a happy ending of American democracy and pluralism recurs as Connolly confronts Daniel Pawlowski, a Jewish-Polish scientist, at the Trinity test site. Connolly tells Daniel about his affair with Emma, Daniel’s British wife. The scientist’s failure to imbibe Americanness is revealed when Connolly provides him with transport back to Los Alamos and the émigré asks, ‘A car. Is that the American custom?’ Connolly asks Daniel to give Emma his blessing to leave him. However, Daniel snarls at the closure Connolly and Emma seek to resolve their illicit union, and suggests that like America and its atom bomb, or America and its disparate cultures, some difficulties cannot be reconciled into a neat whole. ‘In America, always the happy ending. Better than the truth. And so easy. Even a car and driver [...] But always there’s the loose end, you know. Even here.’62 That ‘even here’, uttered at the first atomic-bomb test, might specifically target the ‘happy ending’ of American victory in the Pacific as ‘better than the truth’ of the terrifying arms race the Trinity test has inaugurated. This scepticism about the national enshrinement of the ‘happy ending’ and the danger it represents is foreshadowed in another nuclear-themed novel, Helen Clarkson’s The Last Day (1959): ‘I believe the most dangerous American tradition is the cult of the happy ending. We just can’t believe that anything really bad can happen at the end of our story [...] we have absolute faith that everything will
turn out all right in the end, no matter what we do.’63

Bruner was murdered because he uncovered a Soviet-sympathetic spy ring at Los Alamos, of which Eisler was a member, and Oppenheimer’s disappointment is concentrated in Eisler’s failure to observe group allegiance. Oppenheimer reprimands him for Bruner’s murder with the plaintive, ‘A Jew, Friedrich. A Jew.’64 In Los Alamos, the Oppenheimer character’s moral authority lends this comment the force of a truth claim, condemning Eisler for his collusion in an act of violence against a Jew. Eisler’s complicity seems hypocritical and illogical, and a greater crime as a result. But while this seems to be the meaning of Oppenheimer’s words, his condemnation does not seem logical either. Bruner’s murder was not anti-Semitic, it was realpolitik. Oppenheimer’s words are one example of the way the novel renders the supposed betrayal of ethnic allegiance as morally reprehensible. In the course of the inquiry, an American of half-Mexican, half-Irish descent called Kelly is arrested for Bruner’s murder. The language of racial physiology that characterized the representation of Bruner in Los Alamos reappears to account for the terrain of Kelly’s features, imbibing the cartographic tendencies of imperialism discussed in chapter 3: ‘His face was like a map of his mixed ancestry, the copper skin and Aztec slant of his cheekbones set off by the surprising blue of his eyes.’ In Los Alamos, racial intermixture is physically proclaimed: ‘Behind the bar was a tall Indian woman, clearly of mixed blood, her long Anglo face set off by unexpected high cheek-bones and long braided hair.’ The narrative enforces the incongruity of the physiological traces intermingling in these two characters with the words ‘surprising’ and ‘unexpected’. Furthermore, Kelly and the barwoman are depicted as degrading physically. Kelly’s arms are ‘thin, sinewy’, and there ‘was no disguising the meanness of his face’; the barwoman’s ‘breasts, drooping from years of nursing, spilled into a white blouse’.65 Their bodies’ lack of definition points to physical degeneration, and serves as a marker of the dangers posed when racial sovereignty is compromised (the history of these attitudes is briefly discussed in chapter 4).

Los Alamos is significantly different from Stallion Gate and The Accident in this respect. Kelly’s and the barwoman’s parents were unfaithful to their own race by reproducing with a member of another, and the degraded fate of their offspring testifies to their imprudence. Los Alamos horrifyingly represents the racial genocide of the Holocaust in Europe and repeatedly makes problematic the pretence of European civilization. It unflinchingly and at times poetically confronts the barbarism of atomic bombs. But while the novel is aghast at racism, it endorses the concept of race. Kelly and the barwoman’s physical incongruity professes the inappropriateness of inter-
racial reproduction, although this is a subtle, implicit point. What is less subtle is the way Bruner’s death is turned into a symbol of Jewish suffering across time and space, and because the novel stresses that suffering so forcibly the political contingency of racist violence disappears in comparison to the supposed moral imperative of maintaining one’s allegiance to one’s racial essence. Which is not to say the novel is completely unaware of how his Jewish identity might be contingent: to the Mexican-American woman who discovers his body, Bruner is just another ‘Anglo’.66

Notes
2. Quoted in Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light*, p. 5.
3. Quoted in Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light*, p. 82.
34. Smith, *Stallion Gate*, pp. 34–35.
35. Smith, *Stallion Gate*, pp. 130, 111.
36. Smith, *Stallion Gate*, pp. 90, 130, 163.
38. Smith, *Stallion Gate*, p. 139.
43. Smith, *Stallion Gate*, pp. 170, 257, 171, 120.
50. Smith, *Stallion Gate*, p. 82.