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Review of Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*.

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Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. 305 pp. ISBN 9780231156530.

Reviewed by Dorian Stuber, Hendrix College

Marianne Hirsch has at least two aims in *The Generation of Postmemory*. The first, in which she succeeds admirably, is to bring insights from feminist theory into the fields of memory and Holocaust studies. The second, in which her success is much less assured, is to rethink comparative work regarding genocide, particularly in response to visual cultural studies and digital technology. Hirsch has been an important figure in the study of the memory of the Holocaust ever since the publication of her book *Family Frames* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997), which included a now-formative reading of the photographs in Art Spiegelman's comic *Maus*. There she first formulated the idea of "postmemory," a term that, as the title of her latest book suggests, remains central to her thinking.

As Hirsch puts it, postmemory "describes the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before" (5). The trauma that most concerns her is the Holocaust; the "generation after" refers both to those who survived the war as young children and to the so-called second generation, the children of survivors. Postmemory is not identical to memory: whatever one experiences as postmemory is something one did not experience directly. But the stories and behaviors that children of survivors grew up with have the emotional power of memories. The distinction between postmemory and memory is like the one Freud made between psychical and material reality, between our experience as it is governed by unconscious and conscious processes. The former may not be directly present but their effects are no less palpable. As Hirsch concludes: "postmemory's connection to the past is . . . mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (5). The "post" in postmemory thus suggests not simply a pale imitation that comes after the real thing, but rather a meaningful experience in itself that we best understand as additive to the so-called original, the way a post-it is layered on top of a document.

By making mediation central to her concept, Hirsch insists that postmemory is not an identity position or social movement. (Here she distinguishes herself from other second-generation theorists such as those published in the collection *Second Generation Voices* [2001].) Rather, postmemory is best understood as a structure of transmission and a way of thinking. This definition allows Hirsch to sidestep the criticism that Ruth Franklin, for example, in her generally excellent study of Holocaust literature *A Thousand Darknesses* (2010), levels against second-generation literature, calling it a form of emotional vampirism that lives parasitically on the suffering of others.

Hirsch takes a more nuanced view. She acknowledges—from her own position as a child of Jewish parents who survived the war in hiding in Romania—that survivor memories can indeed overwhelm their children, but refuses to accept that this experience makes those children victims. Instead, she insists on the productive tension of postmemory, which is at once direct (immediate and powerful affect) and indirect (projection and fantasy). To return to Freud, postmemory offers us something like his screen memories. These are distortions, to be sure, but they can be generative rather than imprisoning. As in psychoanalysis—where the symptom becomes

bearable when it is made conscious to the patient through the therapeutic process—in postmemory everything depends upon how critically and self-consciously people respond to past traumatic events.

Accordingly, the key term in Hirsch's development of the idea of postmemory is identification. How can the second generation respond appropriately to the overwhelming trauma of others, which it has only "experienced" indirectly? In nine closely argued chapters, Hirsch considers various memorial objects as she searches for "nonappropriative" forms of identification (99). For help in this task, Hirsch turns to gender theory, particularly the work of Eve Sedgwick and Kaja Silverman. The book begins with a detailed but never indulgent intellectual autobiography, in which Hirsch explains how she came from feminist scholarship to Holocaust and memory studies. She describes two key experiences on that journey. The first was a screening at Dartmouth College of Claude Lanzmann's epochal nine-and-a-half hour documentary *Shoah* (1985), the first film about the Holocaust she had been able to watch without becoming physically overwhelmed, and which fascinated her in part because of its reduction of women to the role of translators or mediators. The second was the publication of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987), which, in its depiction of the repercussions of slavery, helped her to categorize competing ways of remembering traumatic events. Morrison coined the term "rememory" to describe an unhealthy relation to the past. Despite the terms' seeming similarity, rememory is the opposite of postmemory. The former is an immersive experience that lacks the critical distance of the latter, meaning that it is, in Hirsch's words, an over-identification leading only to "self-wounding and retraumatization" (86). The latter is a mode of identification that transmits "the bodily memory of trauma" but retains critical distance from that event.

The corporeality of this memory, so tricky to manage, is one of the reasons Hirsch is so indebted to Roland Barthes's reading of photography. She takes his influential notion of the *punctum*—that element of the photo, separate from its subject matter, which reaches out from across the years to prick or even wound us—and renames it "point of memory." Photographs remain the preeminent vehicle for postmemory; they are Hirsch's most privileged art form. She dutifully follows Barthes and his acolytes, especially Susan Sontag, in their belief that photographs offer not only revenants from the past but even actual emanations from it. (This theory feels increasingly outdated, given the prevalence of digital photography, but it remains relevant to the photos from the pre- and postwar period that Hirsch mostly considers here.) For Barthes, Sontag, and Hirsch, photography rematerializes or brings to life the past even as it distances us from the past through its reminder of the absence—or more grandiosely, the death—that is constitutive of it. The people or things we see in the photograph once were but are no longer.

Hirsch's work on family photographs—the subject of *Family Frames*—returns in the present work in a chapter co-authored with her husband, the historian Leo Spitzer, about a photograph of Hirsch's parents taken, according to a handwritten caption, in Czernowitz, Romania in 1942. Hirsch tries to reconcile the image of a carefree, debonair young couple out for a stroll with the historical reality that by 1942 most of the city's Jews had been deported and those who remained were subject to many restrictions, not least the wearing of the yellow star that is nowhere to be seen in the picture. Photos, Hirsch concludes, tell us as much about the present-day desires of those who look at them as they do about the events of the past. Postmemory is thus performative, and what it performs can be healthy, in the sense of attaching us to the past, or unhealthy, in the

sense of deluding us to its nuance (we see what we want to see) or of unacceptably taking on, even reenacting a past that was never fully ours. Hirsch considers this dilemma in a chapter that compares the family photos in *Maus* to those in W. G. Sebald's last novel *Austerlitz* (2001); the former enable the reconstitution of the nuclear family destroyed by the war; the latter, pored over by a child survivor but then told to the narrator whose investment in them is less personal, enable the delusory idea of a "safe prewar world" that might "avert[] the disaster that was to come" (52).

The distinction between Spiegelman and Sebald in this regard is significant, says Hirsch, because it exemplifies the shift in narrative presentation and audience that underlies the entire purpose behind her book. What happens when traumatic events from the past are told not by survivors, and not even by survivors of the survivors, but rather by people who, however sympathetic, have no direct connection to that past? What happens when a literal second generation gives way to a metaphorical one?

Hirsch uses the terms "familial" and "affiliative" to define two responses to family photographs. (Hirsch's love of opposed terms isn't merely a gimmick; they're genuinely helpful. But they are hard to keep track of.) Those who have a personal connection to traumatic events, i.e., the children or relatives of survivors, respond familiarly; those who do not, but who nonetheless feel a connection to the people or events affected by them, respond affiliatively. The distinction allows Hirsch to differentiate a literal postmemory generation from a figurative one. How broadly we ought to define the "generation after" is not something Hirsch ever takes up directly. In fact, her use of "second generation" is sometimes loose enough that it could conceivably include everybody born after 1945. What Hirsch is most often responding to, I think, is our increasing sense of losing direct contact with the past, especially as the number of Holocaust survivors dwindles each year. Ultimately, postmemory enables us to evade the distinction between direct and indirect experience; indeed, Hirsch suggests that direct descendents don't have a direct experience. The familial isn't necessarily more authentic than the affiliative. Many years ago, Primo Levi made the even more radical claim that not even survivors have a direct experience of the Holocaust; the only people who could be said to possess such immediacy did not survive to tell us about it.

For Hirsch, familial structures of memory only seem to provide a model for affiliative ones—the former seem authentic in a way the latter desires. But the familial, Hirsch adds, has in the second generation already been weakened by the very trauma under consideration. Consider the example from *Maus* of the child Richieu, the brother Spiegelman never knew, who died in the war but whose ghostly presence causes such a rift in the family structure. In general, family photographs from this period are likely to be of people who are absent or missing. Hirsch concludes, then, that there can be no firm distinction between familial and affiliative, especially when the familial is already understood within terms set by public structures and representations. In the original version of *Maus*, for example, a comic drawn in the early 1970s, Spiegelman places his father in a drawn version of the famous photo by Margaret Bourke-White of the liberation of Auschwitz. Even ostensibly authentic and genuine familial memory, then, is always structured according to the phantasmatic investments of the generations that come after.

Ensuring that we are able to be conscious about our investment in the past—that we can interpret our fantasy and choose between its enabling and disabling elements—requires “a particular kind of visual literacy” (52), one that, it must be said, Hirsch doesn’t always clearly explain or practice. The primary weakness of this generally important book is that its readings of particular texts aren’t nearly as compelling as her more wide-reaching theories. The theories don’t develop from the readings; rather the readings are made to fit the theories.

That disjunction arises from Hirsch’s belief that our interpretations are predetermined in various ways, most significantly by gender. Hirsch isn’t always consistent in her understanding of this idea. Sometimes she says that we might strategically use existing positions—such as that of the daughter in relation to her mother, a position of intense, embodied closeness—as models in our response to trauma. At other times she suggests that we are always already placed in such subject positions, so that it is not a question of choosing how to look, but of being enmeshed in something like unconscious, preexisting patterns or ways of looking. From the time of her first essay on *Shoah* to the present work, Hirsch has taken the problem of gender in Holocaust studies to be about structure or position rather than about representativeness. That is, her response to the paucity of female voices in Holocaust literature and testimony has not primarily been to find or champion other voices—though she states in passing that one of the things memory studies has taken from feminist and gender studies is a desire to recuperate otherwise occluded or maligned forms of experience—but rather to think about “a feminist mode of knowing [the] past” (98).

Her most subtle and effective contribution in this book is to apply earlier feminist work to the creation of a “feminist postmemory work defined by a particular mode of knowledge about the other, a particular intersubjective relation” (98). Significantly, Hirsch takes this position to be affiliative, which is to say, it is open to anyone. At its best, then, Hirsch’s argument is not governed by identity politics. And yet her readings don’t always match her theorizing. Consider her take on Jeffrey Wolin’s photographs of survivors, which include written texts taken from their own testimony. She particularly values a photo that includes a mother and her adult daughter, concluding that the image “enables us to envision mother/daughter transmission not as an identity position, but as an affiliative space of remembrance, available to other subjects external to the immediate family” (93). Yet the photo is of a biological mother and daughter, and her interpretation leaves us in doubt that the photo wants us to be able to forget that fact.

But even if this photo isn’t the best example, Hirsch’s larger point regarding the problem of how to respond to difficult or traumatic events without being overwhelmed by them remains important. In the middle part of the book she increasingly turns to the language of another feminist scholar, the film theorist Kaja Silverman, to make sense of the issue. To the distinction between postmemory and rememory, between working through and acting out, Hirsch now adds allo-identification and auto-identification, terms which Silverman, herself borrowing from the philosopher Max Scheler, has called “heteropathic” rather than “idiopathic” processes of identification. In each case, the first term indicates difference and distance (if not detachment), in sum, an ability to align one’s self to the other without becoming subsumed by it in the way suggested by the second. Such distancing is particularly important in fields—paradigmatically, feminism—in which we wish to identify with oppressed others without taking on, to the point of becoming incapacitated by, their oppression. Hirsch’s goal, ultimately, is for a closeness that is not too close. We have mistaken our task, Hirsch suborns us, if we think that we can best do

justice to the suffering of others by suffering ourselves. The challenge for postmemorial artists is to define an aesthetic that takes what is valuable in identification without indulging in or being ourselves hurt by over-identification.

Yet Hirsch's critical middle ground, though certainly laudable, is more clearly envisaged than encountered. She is better at stating the stakes involved in postmemorial art than in reading its particular instances. Hirsch doesn't always convincingly connect her theory of critical identification to the specific details of her chosen texts. It's not clear, for example, why mixed media pieces by artists Tatana Kellner and Jeffrey Wolin at once assert intimacy and detachment, other than that this is the premise of Hirsch's investigation. She names what she wants before she finds it in the texts she reads. Hirsch's vague suggestions about what she takes those texts to be doing—for example, that Kellner and Wolin “create a resistant textuality for the viewer” (99)—don't help.

Hirsch has a lot to say about why photographs are privileged in post-memorial art, but she makes too easy an equation between photographs and the visual more generally. Most of the texts considered by Hirsch are indeed photographs, but some are paintings, drawings, or installations. The Barthes-Sontag theory of referentiality to which Hirsch subscribes doesn't apply to these other media. They are not “ghostly revenants” (36) in the way she believes photographs are. More nuance at the level of the very comparability of her chosen objects would help us understand other parts of the book, too. I'm thinking in particular of the second chapter written with Spitzer, on what they call “testimonial objects” (178)—objects made, usually at great personal risk to the creator, by inmates of various camps. These range from miniature carved books to woodcuts to a collection of recipes remembered from pre-war life and assembled in Terezin (Theresianstadt). Hirsch and Spitzer never consider the distinction between art and artefact (even to refute it); ultimately, their interest is in reading the objects, via the oscillation between invisibility and hyper-visibility, as allegories for the “process of reading gender within the context of the catastrophe” (198). Allegory necessarily reduces particularity. Significantly, Hirsch concludes that woodcuts made in Vapniarka, a camp in Romania, are “works of impressive quality and superb testimonial value” (184). The separating out of the aesthetic from the cultural-historical, and the more insistent praise given to the latter (“superb” trumping “impressive”) speaks to Hirsch's (and presumably Spitzer's) ultimate preference for cultural processes over questions of representation. A good example of Hirsch's disinterest in particularity comes in her discussion of Lily Brett's second-generation novel *Too Many Men* (2001). Hirsch glosses a line of dialogue from the novel—a daughter tells her mother, “so much of what happened in your life became part of my life”—to mean: “Along with stories, behaviors, and symptoms, parents do transmit to their children aspects of their relationship to places and objects from the past” (213). Here, as elsewhere, the move is away from the particular to the general; the text itself is reduced to the status of the straightforward example, so straightforward that it's not even clear that we needed the text at all—Hirsch's claim here is more convincing as a psychological-historical tendency than as a reading of this textual moment.

One benefit of this tendency, however, is that Hirsch's understanding of Holocaust studies is expansive. And it is in her desire to expand the field that Hirsch's book is most generative, even if it doesn't think through the concept fully. Hirsch is responding to recent works in the field that seek to relate Holocaust studies to fields such as post-colonialism and globalization theory. Her

own aim is more delimited, in that she seeks, without ever naming the task as such, to reconcile the study of the Holocaust with that of other genocides. (The two key moments from Hirsch's intellectual biography—seeing *Shoah* and reading *Beloved*—already suggest this desire.) For Hirsch, at issue is ultimately comparison itself. Although the work in this book fits neatly with established practices within the field of Comparative Literature, she eschews the term “comparative” in the final chapter of this study, preferring what for her remains a more generative term—“connective.” For Hirsch, the term “comparative” raises the “implication that catastrophic histories are comparable, and it thus avoids the competition over suffering that comparative approaches can, at their worst, engender” (206). The connective-comparative distinction is the last of the book's many oppositions. In each case, terms that might seem synonymous are presented as antonyms by virtue of their respective qualities, critical and generative on the one hand, disabling and insidious on the other. In this final case, I think Hirsch protests too much; unlike her earlier distinctions it is unclear what this one enables. What Hirsch even means by “connective” is unclear. The nearest she comes to defining it is to say that connective reading “moves between global and intimate concerns by attending precisely to the intimate details, the connective tissues and membranes, that animate each case even while enabling the discovery of shared motivations and shared tropes” (206). Why this wouldn't be the very task of comparison isn't explained. Without question, it does no one any favors to compete over suffering or the status of victim. But the fact remains that, at least in Hirsch's discussion, the Holocaust remains the preeminent traumatic genocidal event. She frequently gestures to the need to relate it to others, but in the end she is pleading for true comparative work more than she is practicing it. In the final chapter, she compares two online archives of images of lost communities, one assembled by Polish gentiles about their (former) Jewish neighbors, and one assembled by Kurds in Iraq about the violence done to their community before and after the first Gulf War. Hirsch spends much more time considering the first example; her discussion of the second is so cursory that we don't learn anything about how to understand these two genocidal events via the juxtaposition (whether connective or comparative) of these two archives.

Instead, the interest of the final chapter lies elsewhere, in Hirsch's consideration of the digital medium of these collections. (Although both had initial physical iterations—and Hirsch usefully describes the material qualities of those albums—their more recent and more compelling existence is online; in this regard, they undoubtedly prefigure many other similar projects to come.) Tellingly, when Hirsch thinks about the link between these archival projects in terms of their medium rather than their content, she unwittingly drops her connective/comparative distinction: “A reflection on the practices of comparative and connective memory work and the qualities and textures *it* assumes in the digital becomes even more vital” (230; my emphasis). The pronoun suggests that comparative and connective memory work is a single entity. Although Hirsch at first emphasizes the loss of materiality of digital archives, she soon turns to the things that the digital enables, specifically connectivity and interactivity (for better and for worse; the Kurdish archive was hacked by Turkish nationalists, for example).

Despite Hirsch's laudable engagement with new media, this final chapter is cursory, performing only the preliminary work enacted by one of its concluding sentences: “I believe that such an emphasis on connective histories maps a future for memory studies beyond discrete historical events like the Holocaust, to transnational interconnections and intersections in a global space of remembrance” (247). These are stirring words, but neither they nor the book enacts the outcome

called for here. In the end, the most powerful but also unintended conclusion of *The Generation of Postmemory* is that the theory of photography inaugurated by Barthes ought to be tempered, even put aside. As Michael Wood has put it in a recent overview of film, “the relation of picture to world was always weaker than the grand myths of photography claimed, and ‘digital’ is in one sense just a name for our belated sense of how much manipulation is possible in any mode of imagery.” Hirsch’s thoughtful claims about how best to relate to past traumas—especially those that haven’t directly affected us but that remain affecting nonetheless—would be even more compelling if it came with a sustained mediation on how new modes of visual representation function. What Hirsch is uniquely poised to do is to bring the insights of feminism into an investigation of these new visual media. I hope that in so doing, she will insist upon the specificity of the cultural objects she reads.

Postmemory is an instructive concept, allowing us to pose an important question about how best to manage our identification with traumatic scenarios. But at least when it comes to the trauma of the Holocaust perhaps our task isn’t to adjudicate good from bad identification but instead, as the scholar of Yiddish literature and Holocaust Studies Anita Norich would have it, to refuse identification altogether. Thinking about Hirsch’s book, I wonder whether identification, however carefully calibrated, either by a literal or figurative second generation, is just a way of avoiding the harder task of understanding.

The scope of Hirsch’s work here is impressive, but almost too wide-ranging. The study of Holocaust representations is necessarily interdisciplinary and comparative, comprising written texts in a dozen or more languages, visual texts, cultural artifacts, and historical documents. And we are always going to need theoretical frameworks within which to compare that material meaningfully. Yet here we have too much theory unmoored from textual evidence, even as we also have not enough theory to respond to the new kinds of texts the book turns its attention to in conclusion. So the book falls between its various stools. The phrase of its title—the generation of postmemory—suggests as much an ongoing activity as a defined group of people. The very existence of Hirsch’s valuable if flawed book, with its wide-ranging aspirations to bring the insights of Holocaust Studies to new and larger audiences, means others are more likely to contribute to that ongoing process.