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Rev. of The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust, by MARIANNE HIRSCH

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brings about international recognition and economic success at the expense of a realistic representation of indigenous peoples and cultures.

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Rev. of ***The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*** MARIANNE HIRSCH Columbia University Press, 2012 320 pp., $27.50 (Paperback), ISBN 978-0-231-15653-0

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Marianne Hirsch's *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* is as difficult as it is rewarding. It is difficult, that is, for the acts of connecting to and grieving for the past that it engenders. And it is rewarding for the attention to and scrutiny of the verbal and visual narratives contained within—not to say of the theories of reading, affiliating, remembering, and seeing—that it inspires.

The book is ambitious: Hirsch attempts to build the context and framework, as well as to propose avenues of potential further inquiry, for the study of her concept of "postmemory"—and of memory studies more generally—in relation to feminist theory and practice. The various registers of intellectual inquiry of the text match the complexity of the task at hand. Early on, for instance, Hirsch reveals snippets of her personal history, of growing up hearing her parents' accounts of what it was like to live and survive as Jews in Romania during World War II. Her memories of these childhood transmissions prompt her to ask, "Why could I recall particular moments from my parents' wartime lives in great detail and have only very few specific memories of my own childhood?" (4). Soon, she confronts more encompassing investigations about "the generation of postmemory": "How is trauma transmitted across generations? . . . How is it remembered by those who did not live it or know it in their own bodies?" (11). As these latter questions attest, and as Hirsch explains, she has not necessarily embarked on an autobiographical project, though it is all the same "intensely personal and urgent" (15).

Hirsch's most important contribution to trauma and memory studies is her recognition that it is not only or especially through words, through oral and written narratives, that trauma gets transmitted or conveyed. Instead, she recognizes visual media not as privileged but as potent agents for evoking and communicating memories and experiences between generations (but, significantly, not necessarily or only for those connected through familial ties). Her close readings include photographs that have been re-contextualized or revised by contemporary artists using techniques such as collage or superimposition. She also

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examines iconic Holocaust photographs, as well as other related visual media, including Spiegelman's graphic narrative *Maus*, Tatana Kellner's artist books, and "testimonial objects" that have been passed on from survivors and victims of genocide. Hirsch contends that an examination of the visual in relation to trauma and Holocaust studies—and, particularly, a closer look at what she sometimes describes as a "shadow archive"—can, much like a feminist perspective, extend current frameworks and prompt connective approaches.

Hirsch defines feminist analysis as a "particular mode of knowledge about the other" (98), an "acknowledged subjectivity and positionality" (62). This methodology—an acute attentiveness to "the delicate balance between identification and distance" (20)—colors every page of *The Generation of Postmemory* as she attends to both the benefits and dangers of intergenerational transmission and identification. Hirsch uses a variety of theoretical paradigms to work through related ethical issues: Barthes' *punctum*, Charlotte Delbo's notion of "deep" or "sense" memory, Freud's discrimination between mourning and melancholia (and its numerous manifestations and reinterpretations in more recent theories of trauma and memory), Kaja Silverman's "heteropathic" as opposed to "idiopathic" identification, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "reparative reading," and many other approaches. Indeed, what is often most satisfying in reading through the text is the way in which the author both excavates and ties together notions relating to trauma, memory, and identification, offering a kind of etymological analysis of her own foundational theory of postmemory (which she first mapped out in an article published in the early 1990s on Spiegelman's *Maus*). For example, she presents an extensive list of terms *like* postmemory, which have been used to describe, in different ways and for different reasons, the relationship of the "second generation" (or, more generally, later generations) to those who experienced atrocities firsthand (3). In addition, in one section of her introduction, she provides a detailed and compelling intellectual autobiography accounting for her own journey from feminism and psychoanalysis (as evidenced in her early work, *The Mother|Daughter Plot*) to family photography (as accounted for in *Family Frames* and her edited anthology, *The Familial Gaze*) to postmemory.[1] By situating her analysis of postmemorial art and literature in these and other accounts, the author reveals how potentially interconnected and interconnecting this work of theorizing intergenerational memory and trauma can be.

Hirsch recognizes the contradictions inherent in postmemory: how can one remember what was never personally experienced? How can someone else's memory become something of my own? But these contradictions do not prevent her from furthering her own analyses. Over the course of the text, she continually and purposefully poses explanations, addendums, qualifications, and even interventions into the very constructions she seeks to account for. Postmemory, she explains in her introduction, "is not a movement, method, or idea; I see it, rather, as a *structure* of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience" (6). In the next chapter, she includes "multiple

forms of mediation" as a key component of the transmission of postmemory, an addition that connects that sense of embodiedness with the haptic forms that can sometimes bring it to life (35). Finally, in a later chapter, she makes the important addition that "postmemory implies a temporal distance" (86). This attendance to temporality is especially important as she strives to account for the reasons that photographs—so tied to notions of temporality and loss—are such effective vehicles for the work of postmemorialization. Hirsch's continually modified versions of postmemory are all united in the "structure of irresolution" (225) that they point to, a structure that characterizes the experiences and expressions of the generations that come after (of artists and, as Hirsch's own work attests, of theoreticians as well). However, as she strives to make clear, postmemory is not a melancholic framework, but instead "an open-ended narrative that embraces the need for return and for repair, even as it accepts its implausibility" (225). In other words, it is a process that strives for, and in some ways achieves, connection and memorialization at the same time as it endeavors to account paradoxically for irreparable loss, for the impossibility of returns.

The book is arranged into three main parts in addition to the introduction. In Part One, "Familial Postmemories and Beyond," Hirsch examines familial memory by looking primarily at literature composed by Art Spiegelman, W. G. Sebald, and Toni Morrison, art created by Jeffrey Wolin, Muriel Hasbun, and Tatana Kellner, and a family photograph that inspired a collaborative analysis with historian Leo Spitzer, which pictures her parents during the war. This part of the book offers ways that familial interactions can help provide a framework for understanding how postmemory works, but it also argues that certain familial relations (like the mother|daughter dynamic) can potentially pose a liability for second- or post-generational remembering. Part Two, "Affiliation, Gender, and Generation," explores how and why certain "surviving images" can propel forms of affiliation and identification by those who are not necessarily related by blood ties. For instance, Hirsch challenges the idea that the proliferation and repetition of images of atrocity inevitably leads to a melancholic or "appropriative identification" of those images (108). Instead, as she demonstrates, viewing certain iconic Holocaust images that have been "redeployed, in new texts and new contexts" can allow for more restorative ways of looking (122). Part Three, "Connective Histories," engages in perhaps the most contested and yet urgent discussion in the text, which is how we can challenge and revise the more damaging ways of understanding memory, trauma, and intergenerational narratives. Here the author stresses the means by which a feminist perspective can help prompt "*connective* rather than *comparative*" readings, or approaches to trauma studies that forego competitive assessments in favor of analyses that "animate each case even while enabling the discovery of shared motivations and shared tropes" (206).

The Generation of Postmemory is a powerful and comprehensive analysis of how contemporary works of art and literature can inspire active connections to the

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past that nevertheless maintain a careful and critical distance. This interdisciplinary analysis performs the very affiliative and reparative readings that it espouses, demonstrating as well how academic work can prompt itself organically and animatedly, branch out, and suggest new ways of looking and telling. Finally, the book suggests that the future of feminist studies—and of memory and trauma studies too—is bound to be tied up to such connective and not comparative approaches to identity and experience.

Note

1. In addition to *The Generation of Postmemory*, Hirsch's more recent books relating to this notion of postmemory include *Ghosts of Home: The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish Memory*, co-authored with Leo Spitzer, and *Rites of Return: Diaspora, Poetics and the Politics of Memory*, co-edited with Nancy K. Miller.

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