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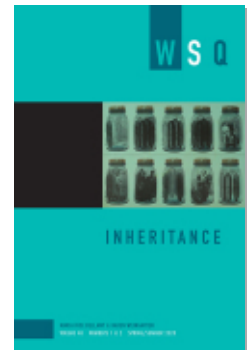
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In"

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## Postmemory and the “Fragments of a History We Cannot Take In”

Tahneer Oksman

“The embrace of history and fiction is what I was concerned with, or rather the effort to disentangle the grip of history while remaining in its palm, so to speak. Especially this particular piece of history and this particular novel” (Morrison 2019, 307). So writes Toni Morrison in “The Source of Self-Regard,” an essay included in a recently published collection of her works carrying the same name. Based on a speech she gave in 1992 at the Portland Arts & Lecture series, Morrison initially said these words about her novel *Beloved*, just four years after it won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.<sup>1</sup> I could not help but think about Morrison’s *Beloved*, and indeed, her career-long concern with imagination and history in relation to African American literature and culture, as I revisited Marianne Hirsch’s groundbreaking essay, “Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning, and Post-Memory,” in the wake of Morrison’s recent death.

Hirsch’s essay, which introduced her now widely employed term, *post-memory*, around the same time that Morrison delivered her speech, was composed, like *Beloved* was, at a moment when the atrocities of the early and mid-twentieth century had begun to recede into the background in light of fresh communal emergencies, like proxy wars related to the Cold War and the subsequent fall of the Soviet Union, and more locally, the AIDS epidemic and the U.S. economic crisis of the early 1980s. As Holocaust scholar Michael Rothberg points out, by then, too, “Intellectuals interested in indigenous, minority, and colonial histories challenged the uniqueness of the Holocaust and fostered research into other histories of extreme violence, ethnic cleansing, and genocide” (2009, 8). Two years following the Rwandan genocide, 1996, marked the publication of Alan

S. Rosenbaum’s widely cited edited volume, *Is the Holocaust Unique?: Perspectives on Comparative Genocide*. Many scholars, artists, and writers were starting to think about negotiations between communal and individual experiences, past and present, and about how to maintain the relevance of history in light of urgent contemporary unfoldings. And finally, the children of survivors—the second and third generations—were asking themselves about the impact that the previous generations’ trauma had had on their own lives; they were starting to consider themselves “possessed by a history they had never lived” (Epstein [1979] 1988, 14).<sup>2</sup>

As Hirsch attests in the introduction to her 2012 book, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*—a work in which she partly recounts the factors that led to her earlier scholarly pursuits—it was Morrison’s *Beloved* that helped her see that “latency need not mean forgetting or oblivion” (2012, 11).<sup>3</sup> For Hirsch, as for Morrison, a careful fostering of imagination, or of transparent mediation from within the “palm” of history, is what might help us maintain powerful and evocative associations between then and now, between here and there. It is what might help us feel more proximate to a distant past we think we already know. And, as Hirsch reminds us, the “connective,” not the comparative, is what drives this mission, a determination rooted in feminist methodologies (2012, 21). As she writes, postmemory is “not identical to memory: it is ‘post’; but, at the same time . . . it approximates memory in its affective force and its psychic effects” (2012, 31). It is a structure—affiliative or familial—that ethically binds even as it attests to, and stems from, as she writes in her pioneering essay, “fragments of a history we cannot take in” (Hirsch 1992–93, 27).

Photography is at the heart of Hirsch’s theorization of this network. “Family Pictures” opens with descriptions of the author’s encounters with various photographs from different points in her own personal story, images brought about in starkly divergent contexts, containing disparate representations—of those who survived and those who did not. But the images all gesture to the same impenetrable past. “Photography is precisely the medium connecting memory and post-memory,” she writes, describing the “contradictory and ultimately unassimilable dimension of photography—its hovering between life and death” as a useful prop for grasping at the horrors of events that feel, and that in many ways *are*, ungraspable (1992–93, 9). Hirsch uses the first volume of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*—a

book she taught in several introductory courses at Dartmouth as early as 1987, before the second volume saw publication—as a kind of linchpin for her conceptualization of postmemory (2012, 9). It would receive its own Pulitzer Prize four years after *Beloved* (*Maus* won in a “Special Citations” category). For Hirsch, Spiegelman’s use of photography in *Maus*, not to say the graphic memoir’s distinguished and in some ways originary manipulations of various modes, mediums, and registers, including comics, singularly brought to the surface the “levels of mediation that underlie *all* visual representational forms” (1992–93, 11; italics in original). In essence, Hirsch found a work in *Maus* that properly embraces history without embalming it, that never relinquishes, even momentarily, an awareness of how our understandings of personal and collective pasts are always formed through and framed by a variety of intersecting forces.

About halfway through “The Source of Self-Regard,” Morrison transitions from what she describes as a move from African American “*history*” to “*culture*” (2019, 315; italics in original). She talks about her latest novel at the time, *Jazz*, a book published in 1992 that focuses mainly on Harlem in the 1920s. Bringing together her thoughts on these two novels, she argues that, with both texts, she was trying to explore what she describes as “self-regard,” or the way a person sees herself under different circumstances. With “jazz,” she explains, as a work, a form, and an idiom, of “creative agency,” of “individual reclamation of the self,” she senses “the way in which imagination fosters real possibilities” (2019, 319, 320). I wonder, revisiting Hirsch’s essay as we hasten toward the middle of this new century, what comes *after* postmemory, with the phasing out of those directly involved in, or living at the time of, the Holocaust, with the passing, in time, too, of the next generation? Does memory, or postmemory, simply transition into history, into a distant, untouchable legacy? After 9/11, and in a time when the digital image, the digital archive, has transformed our relationship to photography as something no longer as easily identifiable for its indexicality, its traceability in relation to the real world, will the photograph, in theory and practice, remain as useful or impactful? Are there hopeful, productive, and ethical ways to move beyond memory in order to more fully inhabit the present, with all of its “real possibilities”? These questions, already being asked by many, are undoubtedly waiting to be addressed by scholars, artists, and writers galvanized by the legacies of those, like Hirsch, who hazard to make their mark.

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## Notes

1. The original speech, revised and updated in the print essay, can be found online. See Morrison 1992.
2. Helen Epstein’s *Children of the Holocaust* is widely cited as one of the first books to explore this question.
3. Hirsch also fleshed out and refined her concept of postmemory in earlier works, including her 1997 book, *Family Frames*, and in numerous other articles and collections.

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