Presidential Address 2014

Connective Histories in Vulnerable Times

MARIANNE HIRSCH

For Patsy Yaeger

You don't have a story until you have two stories. At least two stories. That's what I always tell my students.

—Grace Paley

The First Story

WHEN I ARRIVED IN RHODE ISLAND IN THE SUMMER OF 1962, I didn't know English. I was almost thirteen and due to enter eighth grade, though, as it turned out, I went to ninth, prodded by my father's ambition for me, so typical of immigrant parents. But his ambition came to seem unwarranted as I lost my confidence and regressed into speechlessness in the unfamiliar surroundings into which I had been misplaced, through no choice of

Mirta Kupferminc, *On the Way*, 2001. Metal-plate etching, 15¾ × 25¼ in. Courtesy of the artist.

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my own. Even my name no longer belonged to me—from Marianne I became Mary Ann, and since I was unable to pronounce the English *r*, I struggled every time someone asked, responding, inaudibly, head hanging, "Mady Ann." Lonely and out of place, the only child of parents anxiously preoccupied with their own transition, I resorted to the one constant I had brought with me, one that could transport me to more familiar worlds—reading. But the trunk containing the few German books that would become the germ of a new family library had not yet arrived from across the ocean.

It was thus that I found my way into the Rochambeau branch of the Providence Public Library. Why was it pronounced "ro-SHAM-bo," I wondered, instead of "ro-sh'm-BO"? I tried out the French pronunciation I'd been working on, and practiced that *r*. Small for my age and further infantilized by my broken speech, I surprised the librarian when I asked for books in German. "We have some German books, little girl," she tried to explain, gesturing to convey her meaning, "but none for children." I had found some books by writers I recognized in the card catalog, and I pointed to a title by Thomas Mann. "That's an adult book," she said. "You're too young for that." Seeing how close my tears were to welling up, she went to check with someone behind the desk. "Perhaps if your parents give you permission." I came back with my mother the next day and checked out *Buddenbrooks*. And that's how I got through that summer.

What could Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* possibly have offered a thirteen-year-old immigrant girl who had grown up Jewish and German-speaking in postwar communist Romania? I have no recollection of my response to Mann's multifaceted family saga of decline, set in nineteenth-century Lübeck, in northern Germany. Surprisingly, perhaps, the world into which *Buddenbrooks* drew me that summer was not entirely unrecognizable. In Romania I had been an avid reader of another epic German story that was equally remote from my surroundings. The popular ten-volume Nesthäkchen series by the Berlin children's book author Else Ury follows the lively and rebellious Annemarie Braun from her bourgeois childhood to white-haired grandmotherhood in early-twentieth-century Berlin. By the time I read *Buddenbrooks*, I had repeatedly read all the Nesthäkchen books I could acquire in Bucharest's used-book stores. Sadly, one or two of the volumes were missing, and that left gaps in Annemarie's life story. As a child growing up in vulnerable circumstances—in a linguistic and religious minority under a politically repressive regime—I longed for the reassuringly stable, conservative world of Ury's early-twentieth-century Berlin, especially the idealized version of comfortable bourgeois German femininity that her books evoked. Only recently I found out that Else Ury was Jewish and was murdered in Auschwitz in 1943 (Asper, Kempin, and Münchmeyer-Schöneberg). This was a shock, because nothing in these classic children's books would allow one to guess that their author was in any way marginal to bourgeois German society.

My parents encouraged my reading that summer: my mother, especially, resisted Americanization by maintaining firm links to her past. Thomas Mann was a great favorite of theirs, as was Brecht—both, unlike Ury, exiles from Nazism. German Jewish writers (Werfel, Feuchtwanger, Kafka, Stefan Zweig) were in the trunk, but so were classics: Goethe, Schiller, and, of course, Heine. The bookcases in my home were structured by poignant contradictions. My parents had been raised in Czernowitz, the capital of the outlying Austro-Hapsburg province of Bukovina, in an assimilated community of Jews who, a generation earlier, had enthusiastically embraced the German language and its lifeways in exchange for secular education, modernization, and political rights.[1] After the collapse of the empire in the First World War, they were educated in

what became greater Romania, but they still stubbornly perpetuated and passed down their allegiance to German—even after it had become the language of the murderers and after their world and its promises had imploded many times over. German was, after all, their language too, a kind of anchor for them through decades of persecution by fascist and communist dictatorships and the trials of emigration and refugeehood. I believe that they continued to speak German less out of nostalgia for a world of yesterday than as a complex gesture of resistance to Romanian anti-Semitism and loss of rights and, I would say, also out of a refusal to accept the failures of the cosmopolitanism they had so hopefully adopted along with their German. By the time this German came to me, it was inflected by its contiguities with Yiddish, Romanian, and Ukrainian, contaminated by fascism and genocide, and politically reshaped in the German-language elementary school I attended in Bucharest, where we read only bona fide communist German Romanian and GDR writers. Ironically, in Providence, in my second displacement—just when I was supposed to be learning English—my readings reconnected me to my so-called native language.

I had become used to shuttling between incongruous worlds. Reading Mann by way of Ury in Rhode Island must have enabled me to respond more flexibly to my new vulnerability. In the fall, however, I was further humiliated in the ninth-grade English class, where I was supposed to be reading *Julius Caesar*, and in American Civics, where I failed to recognize a single point of reference. Thus, I reluctantly set my mind to studying English and to acclimating, as best I could, to an American teenagehood that was inimical to such disjointed histories. It would be a long time before I could again claim language—any language—as my medium.

I've never had the chance to write about the ironies of my first American summer, though I have occasionally thought back to that threshold moment when encountering students—more and more each year—who, like me, come to school in the United States from multilingual and multicultural immigrant backgrounds that force them to shuttle between incongruous realities. Like the figures in Mirta Kupferminc's *On the Way*, they carry heavy legacies. I've often wondered what kind of education responds to *their* needs.

The Second Story

When I became MLA vice president three years ago, that summer returned in a different way. Most people do not know about the MLA's important advocacy work in response to myriad questions confronting our profession. Throughout the year, MLA committees work on many of the issues facing the humanities in present-day higher education, issues that are the topics of numerous sessions at this convention: reduced funding and the alarming cost of a college degree to students; the drastic cutbacks in jobs, especially tenure-track jobs, and the exploitation of part-time and non-tenure-track faculty members; the growing disparity between public and private institutions; fundamental changes in scholarly publishing and communications; the ways in which the humanities are instrumentalized for their utility and monetary value in the public sphere at every turn; the precarious situation of language departments, of languages, and of language itself in the era of globalization and "security"; the challenges to faculty governance at many institutions and the increasing threats from outside the academy to academic freedom and the free exchange of ideas. All this and more came to the foreground for me all at once when I became one of the MLA's officers. I was equally struck, however, by the imagination and energy MLA members are devoting to finding creative and just solutions as well as renewed and inventive ways to practice our teaching and scholarship. What could *I* contribute? Despite my nearly

four decades of academic work, I felt as lost as I did in that library full of books in a language I could not read. But maybe that's not such a bad place to be, I came to think, after some panic attacks. The academy gives us the freedom not to know everything. Why not use it?

And that is how I noticed a strange disjunction. There's so much creativity, but the fundamental intellectual structures of the MLA itself, the divisions and discussion groups—and the parallel organization of many of our departments—are, in the words of one of my colleagues, "depressingly the same" as they were when I first entered the profession, in the mid-1970s. Arguably, our economy of scarcity has prompted caution in our core disciplinary and departmental organizations. In appearance at least, many of these remain largely unaffected by the enormously exciting interdisciplinary and transnational forms of reinvention that have taken hold around the edges of departments and on the margins of the building blocks of our field—and that are *everywhere* visible at this convention. Indeed, for the last four decades we have been living with, and working around, an intellectual structure that was forged in the mid-1970s. Though there have been significant additions to the MLA's division-and-discussion-group structure over the years, there has been no regular self-study or reconceptualization.

Isn't renewal needed in response to the ongoing vulnerabilities of our academic work? What kinds of institutional structures might best serve us now? And what kind of process might enable us to work together as an enormous membership with diverse and conflicting stakes and priorities so that we might agree to include new languages and new fields that might shift basic assumptions? Most important to me, how can we mobilize our work as humanities teachers and scholars in the interests of connective engagement and political intervention?

These are open-ended questions that confront the future not through the unhelpful lens of crisis but through pragmatic engagement with the work of education and its consequences for the lives of our students and colleagues. They have led me to think hard about how our current sense of vulnerability could redirect the paradigm of crisis that has dominated our profession and the humanities and about how it might help us imagine forms of creativity that are not simply reactive.

This is how I came to join with a group of colleagues to review the MLA's divisions and discussion groups. First, we cleared the slate—do we really need divisions? do we need national literatures? do we need periodization by century? It was a helpful, and fun, exercise to explore the usefulness and also the limits of our persistent taxonomies. But the process soon became more pragmatic. We came to think that to survive in vulnerable times we need to develop mobile and connective intellectual structures that will evolve and revitalize themselves. And we need to do so by way of a patient and inclusive process that takes us beyond our own specific areas of expertise and self-interest, keeping broad intellectual, pedagogical, administrative, ethical, and political commitments in view. This work requires old and new forms of comparison and interconnection, practiced with an openness to contradiction and incongruity. It fosters an embrace of irony and ambiguity—indeed, an acknowledgment that, to repeat that great lesson offered by Grace Paley, "[y]ou don't have a story until you have two stories. At least two stories" (Paley and Nichols 1).

Literary studies are everywhere being mapped and remapped, and new field formations cross histories, geographies, and disciplines in ways that echo the new forms of instant connectivity and interaction enabled by a single swipe or click on our digital devices (e.g., Moretti; Wallace). Whether we want to be or not, we are all implicated in this connectivity, and, as humanities educators, we need to think about how to shape our categories of knowledge and our pedagogies to

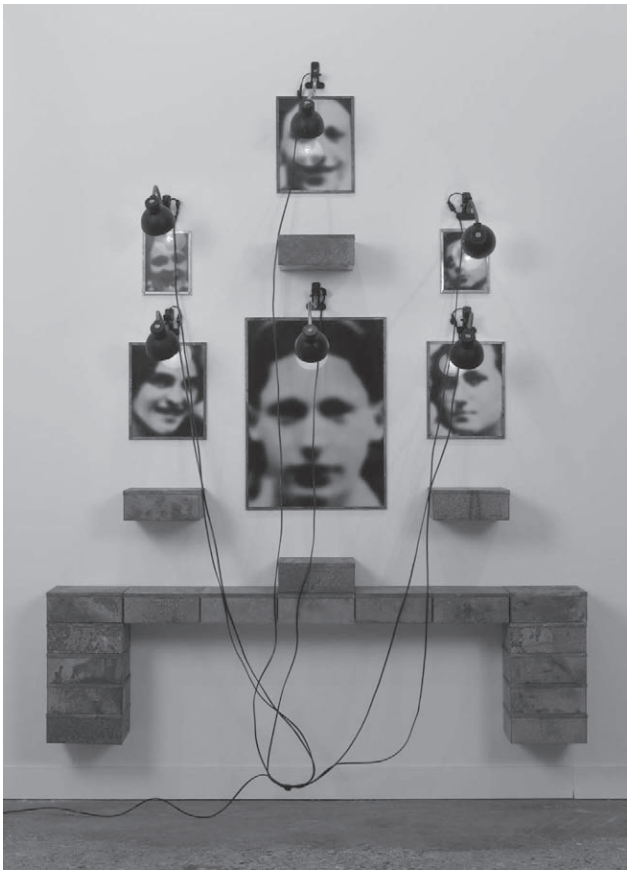
be responsive to the multiplicity of networks of which they are a part. This is a question not of digital literacy but of tough thinking about the possibilities and limits of what we used to call comparison and difference. Recently, I've begun to think about "connectivity" instead of "comparison," hoping to eschew the idea that distinct contexts and histories are easily comparable. I believe that such a cautious connective practice, accountable to historical and cultural specificities and to differences that cannot be bridged, might enable us to develop some of the flexibility needed to confront retrenchment and other threats.[2]

The Third Story

How can we think beyond our own moment so that others who follow us will not be weighted down by our present preoccupations and obsessions? One answer might lie close to home, in the work we do—that is, in the aesthetic practices we study and teach and in the forms of response and attunement that they can foster. Aesthetic encounters, I would suggest, elicit a sense of vulnerability that can move us toward an ethics and a politics of open-endedness and mobility, attuning us to the needs of the present, to the potentialities for change, and to the future.

In the past years, however, my work has turned not to the future but to the past, to confront the long-term legacies of political violence. I've spent a long time studying and thinking about an aesthetics of the aftermath—representations particularly of the Holocaust in the work of second and subsequent generations, but of other, related histories as well.[3]

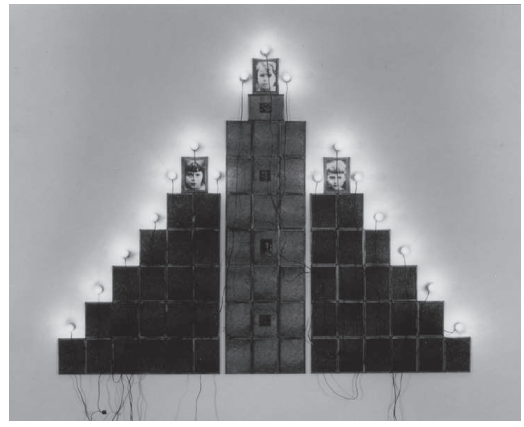
The French artist Christian Boltanski, for example, has been instrumental in shaping such an aesthetic, one that, in his terms, is not "about" the Holocaust but "after." His *Lessons of Darkness* installations are afterimages—blown-up faces cropped from photos of Jewish school classes in Vienna, Berlin, and Paris in the 1930s and mounted on boxes, with wires and lights that echo surveillance and torture (Gumpert). Powerful works such as Boltanski's and their ghostly emanations incite us to ask how we might respond to the visceral knowledge of genocidal murder and mourning that these photographs carry forward from the past. And also to our own sense of complicity that the artist provokes with the technologies to which he subjects these children. How can we allow the knowledge of past atrocity to touch us without paralyzing us? What aesthetic strategies might galvanize memory in the interest of activist engagement for justice and social change?



Christian Boltanski, *Autel Lycée Chases (Altar of the Chases High School)*, 1988. Black and white photographs, lamps, and tin boxes, 68 × 55 in. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris / New York. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

Trauma, memory, and postmemory have proved to be generative concepts in this work on the archives of violence. They've offered a lens through which to recognize forgotten or disposable lives and stories, and also to acknowledge injury and injustice and their afterlives for subsequent generations. The concept of trauma in its psychoanalytic, social, and embodied resonances certainly illuminates our present moment and the effects of the multiplying historical catastrophes we have witnessed since the Second World War. Trauma offers new conceptions of time, in that it always occurs in the present, as a form of perpetual return. It offers new epistemologies in the ideas of unknowability, unspeakability, and aporia—ideas hotly contested (Caruth; Felman and Laub). The tough debates surrounding these fundamental contributions have enriched our understanding of the aftermath of personal and historical catastrophes. Debated as well has been the widespread conception of trauma as a singular, if multifaceted, event—an accident, a war, or a genocide. This punctual conception of trauma occludes the insidious, cumulative, and daily experiences of poverty, persecution, enslavement, and abuse suffered by populations across the globe and the "slow violence," to use Rob Nixon's term, that humans are perpetrating on the planet and thus also on vulnerable species and populations. Trauma studies have evolved beyond a concentration on the event and beyond their European psychoanalytic origins (Brown; Craps; Fassin and Rechtman; Rothberg).

If I am bringing the notion of vulnerability and, specifically, *vulnerable times* to the



Christian Boltanski, *Monument*, 1985. Black and white photographs, frames, lightbulbs, and electric cable. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris / New York. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

Albert Chong, *The Sisters*, 1993. Photograph with inscribed copper mat. Courtesy of the artist.

Deforestation for oil palm plantation, Riau, Indonesia. Photo: Aidenvironment (Creative Commons).

Bracha L. Ettinger, from *Mamalangue—Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism*, no. 5, 1985–90. Drawing. Courtesy of the artist.

study of trauma and memory, it is in response to a different concern—a frustration with the unforgiving temporality of trauma and catastrophe, the inexorable repetition of the past in the present and future in which injury cannot be healed or repaired but lives on, shattering worlds in its wake. I have been trying to think about how the retrospective glance of trauma might be expanded and redirected to open alternative temporalities that are more porous and future-oriented and that galvanize a sense of urgency about the need for change, now.

In her book *Time*, Eva Hoffman writes, "[I]t is tempting to say that finitude is the intrinsic cost of life, and that vulnerability is a necessary correlative of vitality" (45–46). As an embodied species, we share a common vulnerability emerging from the condition of living in bodies and in time. But, importantly, vulnerability is also socially, politically, and economically created and unequally imposed. An acknowledgment of vulnerability, both shared and produced, can open a space of interconnection as well as a platform for responsiveness and for resistance. Vulnerability shapes a temporality different from that of trauma, defining the threshold of an alternative, reimagined reality. In this vein, Ariella Azoulay has written about what she calls "potential history"—what might be or what might have been (*Civil Imagination*). But to envision such different possibilities instead of a linear history would mean to envision different temporal trajectories and conflicting truths that would lead to alternative futures and, counterintuitively perhaps, to alternative pasts as well (Hirsch and Spitzer, "Vulnerable Lives"). Indeed, each past envisioned its own future in response to its own vulnerabilities, and thus vulnerable times can encompass many distinct historical moments and temporalities—in the vein of Walter Benjamin's writings about messianic time, Giorgio Agamben's essays on potentiality, and Reinhard Koselleck's and Jennifer Wenzel's work on the past's future. If we think of vulnerability as a radical openness toward surprising possibilities, we might be able to engage it more creatively—as a space to work from and not only as something to be overcome.

Jo Spence, in collaboration with Rosy Martin, *Calling Card: Phototherapy (Cultural Sniper)*, 1986. Color photograph. © Estate of Jo Spence. Courtesy of Richard Saltoun Gallery.

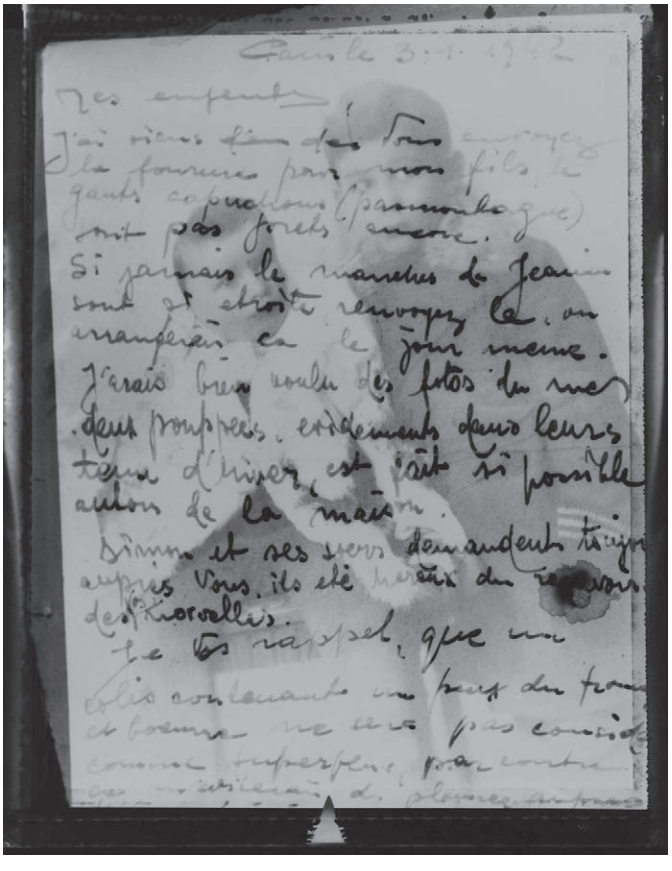
When the feminist legal scholar Martha Fineman and her colleagues adopted the notion of vulnerability for their initiative at Emory Law School, jettisoning the idea of dependency, which Fineman had worked with previously, they wanted to counteract liberal and neoliberal ideas of autonomy, self-reliance, and equality prevalent in the United States. They aimed to create a space for a political discourse of interdependence and care in which state intervention in human communities would not be seen as exceptional. The Emory group contests popular conceptions of vulnerability as a condition of weakness, victimhood, or stigma. Vulnerability, they claim, outlines our sometimes necessary reliance on social institutions that can enhance resilience and reduce susceptibility to injury. Recently I was privileged to attend a workshop organized by Judith Butler and Zeynep Gambetti in Istanbul on "rethinking vulnerability and resistance" from a transnational feminist perspective. Building on Butler's work on precarity (*Precarious Life*) and her more recent work on bodies on the

street ("Bodily Vulnerability"), the workshop aimed to mobilize various socially imposed, gendered vulnerabilities as resources for "developing new modes of collective agency [and] alliance . . . characterized by interdependency and public action."

Despite this promising recent feminist work with the idea of vulnerability and with its potential use as a political platform of demand, the notion has a complicated and troubling history (Ziarek, "Feminist Reflections" and Remarks). Vulnerability is widely used in the language of security and defense, and it has served as an alibi for arms buildups and violent conflict during the Cold War, the "war on terror," and other disputes around the globe. Talk of vulnerability to attack, terrorism, atomic threat, natural disaster, and crime is rampant and contributes to a crisis mentality that can always be invoked for repressive political purposes, as we see every time we dutifully take off our shoes in an airport or discuss gun legislation in the United States or "security" walls. The insistence on invulnerability can become a tool for shutting down debate and silencing dissent.

These discourses of defense and denial are gendered and culturally marked, as Jo Spence so humorously shows. In fact, their purchase is particularly contested among feminists: claiming a disproportionate vulnerability for women or for any other socially disadvantaged group brings with it a plea for protection that potentially signals weakness and perpetuates disempowerment (Butler, "Bodily Vulnerability"). At the same time, the appeal to shared vulnerability as a fundamental species condition carries its own risk, that of ignoring differences in power and privilege.

These drawbacks notwithstanding, vulnerability has emerged as a productive concept in a number of seemingly unrelated fields—in studies of environment, social ecology, and political economy, on the one hand, and in developmental psychology and health sciences, on the other. Here vulnerability is opposed not to invulnerability but to resilience. Scholars in these fields study the ability of people, particularly children, and of environments and other systems to adapt to shock and change. While *vulnerability* describes the predisposition of people or systems to injury, *resilience* (from the Latin *resilere*, "to recoil or leap back") denotes a form of suppleness and elasticity that enables adaptation to and recovery from shocks, surprises, and even slowly evolving changes and afflictions. In martial arts, moreover, the acceptance of vulnerability is seen to provide passive power, and vulnerability is



Muriel Hasbun, *Mes enfants/Photographe Sanitas, 1943*, 2003. Gelatin silver print. Courtesy of the artist.

similarly used in studies of leadership and in pop psych theories of relationship. By admitting vulnerability, it is said, one grows stronger and more connected to others.

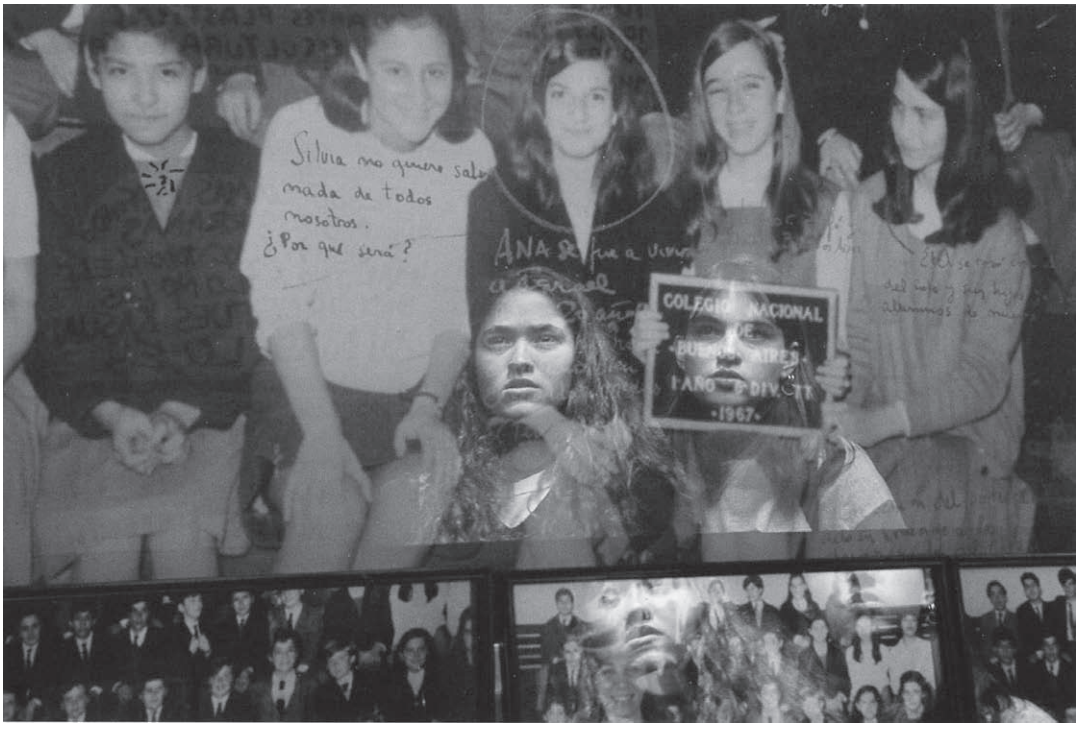
This synergy between social-political fields and ecological-biophysical-medical sciences in thinking about vulnerability is promising—pop psych truisms notwithstanding. I've already suggested that the humanities, particularly literature and the arts, can join these rich interdisciplinary conversations if we consider the forms of responsiveness fostered by aesthetic encounters. In reading, looking, and listening, we necessarily allow ourselves to be vulnerable as we practice openness, interconnection, and imagination and as we acknowledge our own implication and complicity. I have thought about this specifically in my work on ethics and aesthetics in the aftermath of violent pasts.

Lorie Novak, *Past Lives (for the Children of Izieu)*, 1987. Courtesy of the artist.

In developing the notion of postmemory to account for the aftermath of catastrophic histories, I have thought precisely about the ways in which we might make ourselves vulnerable to what Susan Sontag has called "the pain of others," whether our ancestors or more distant subjects, in the past or the present. Postmemory describes the relationship that later generations or distant contemporary witnesses bear to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of others—to experiences they "remember" or know only by means of stories, images, and behaviors (Hirsch, *Generation*). The contact with past or distant atrocities is thus mediated by imaginative investment, projection, and creation—by what Robert Jay Lifton has called "formulation." Current pedagogies encourage students to respond to the pain of others through identification and empathy, but my work with postmemory has introduced a distancing awareness emphasizing that "although it could have been me, it was decidedly not me." I thus prefer to think in terms of a form of solidarity that is suspicious of empathy, shuttling instead between proximity and distance, affiliation and disaffiliation, complicity and accountability.

Postmemorial aesthetic strategies, visible in many of the images reproduced in this essay, can offer ways in which we can practice vulnerability as a form of *attunement* and *responsibility*—responsibility not as blameworthiness but as the ability to respond, a sense that the legal scholar Martha Minow has so helpfully suggested (118–47). Response in this sense works against appropriative empathy, enabled by incongruities that preserve the boundaries between past and present, self and other, without homogenizing suffering.[4]

Marcelo Brodsky, *The Class Photo, 1967*, 1996, from *The Classmates, Buena Memoria*. Hahnemuhle photo rag print, 49¼ × 72¾ in. Courtesy of the artist.



Marcelo Brodsky, *Memory Bridge 05*, 1996, from *Memory Bridge, Buena Memoria*. Lambda color print, 19¾ × 27½ in. Courtesy of the artist.

The American artist Lorie Novak's 1987 work *Past Lives* enables such an exercise in responsiveness. *Past Lives* superimposes two images: a picture of the children of Izieu, hidden Jewish children deported to Auschwitz in 1943 by the chief of the Gestapo in Lyon, Klaus Barbie, and a well-known portrait of Ethel Rosenberg, executed as an atomic spy in the United States in 1953. Both are projected onto a picture of the artist as a child held by her mother in the early 1950s. When the artist, who grew up in the shadow of traumatic histories that she did not experience, grafts them onto her skin, is she identifying and empathizing with the victims—is she appropriating their story? Or, rather, is she allowing herself to be marked by their stories, taking responsibility for their legacies and for her own implication, in the present in which Barbie was being brought to trial? In reframing archival images by making them more difficult to see, Novak's projections, like Boltanski's and like the images by Hasbun, Ettinger, and Chong, paradoxically render visible what Roland Barthes has called the "blind field" that exceeds the frame, and thus also aspects of the past that the images themselves render invisible (57). Reframing, as well as holding and touch, projection and superimposition—these are some of the aesthetic strategies I find helpful in thinking through vulnerability and its complex temporality. But what do these entangled responses *do* in the present? What do they demand of their viewers?

Discussing these strategies in distinct historical and political contexts certainly reveals the divergent vulnerabilities created by different forms of state violence and exposes additional possibilities of intervening in a present that is both retrospective and anticipatory. Take an aftermath project emerging from another history, *Buena Memoria*, by the Argentinean photographer and human rights activist Marcelo Brodsky. His original image was also a school picture, Brodsky's own class photo from the Colegio Nacional de Buenos Aires, taken in 1967, several years before some of these children would be "disappeared" and murdered by the Argentine dictatorship. Each of the children's bodies in the image is inscribed with a brief text that brings their stories into the present. Some faces are circled, and others—the faces of the disappeared—are circled and crossed out. In *Buena Memoria* the violent mark of erasure on the skin-like surface of the photographic print recalls the violence of selecting individuals out of the social body with the intention of annihilating them and their memory. The cross-outs transmit that violence, puncturing us as viewers.

But in this broadly exhibited installation, shown also in the Colegio Nacional itself for current students to see, these lines of erasure transmit something else as well. Brodsky reunites members of the class and photographs them as they hold the class photo, literally holding their living and disappeared schoolmates' memory in their arms and close to their bodies, touching the photo and permitting it to touch them. Their touch touches us and moves us from personal grief and mourning to anger, defiance, and intervention. *Buena Memoria* performs the determination to make visible the murder of classmates whose presence it asserts and whose memory it recalls. In a society suffering from what Diana Taylor has so aptly called "percepticide"—the self-blinding of a population living under terror (*Disappearing Acts* 119–38)—this aesthetic work provokes a politics of visibility and accountability.

Looking at a photograph of people and knowing, as in these images and installations, that some of them were violently kept from living the future they were anticipating when they stood in front of the camera confronts us with the poignant irony inherent in still photography. Barthes has termed this the "lacerating" "punctum" of time: the juxtaposition of what will be with what has been (96). This juxtaposition is what I have been calling vulnerable times. The photograph, Barthes

Dinh Q. Lê, *HWY1, in Different Shades of Grey*, 2013. Photo tapestry, 49¾ × 78¾ in. Courtesy of the artist.

writes, "tells me death in the future" (96), but artists like Novak, Brodsky, and Dinh Q. Lê reframe the archival images so as to grant them multiple afterlives in which they continue to develop, making past injustices and atrocities newly visible in future presents. Still photography becomes a durational process, a relation evolving over time.

To end this story, let me turn briefly to an aftermath project by the American artist Susan Meiselas, whose images engage precisely in such forms of relation and collaboration. Meiselas's images of war and conflict in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chile, and Kurdistan instantly became iconic, but her practice is not aimed at a single moment of witness and exposure, however intimate and concerned. Her durational work of return is directed to a future that looks back not just to extreme acts of destruction and violence but also to fragile moments of hope.

Meiselas first went to Nicaragua as a photojournalist during the popular Sandinista insurrection against the repressive Somoza regime in 1978 (Meiselas, *Nicaragua*). Her images recorded much more than a violent struggle, however. "In Nicaragua I experienced an extraordinary optimism," Meiselas writes, "a moment in which a whole society was mobilized, uniting together as they overthrew a dictatorship. The images I made came to stand for that optimism. If I've returned to Nicaragua so often, it has been to see what has remained of that hope among present generations, born after the revolution" ("Return" 166). Iconic images are static. Even if they are recontextualized in myriad news outlets, they continue to point back indexically and to be used to reinterpret the moment when they were shot, a moment of political witness recorded by the camera.

Hence, Meiselas returned to Nicaragua for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the overthrow of Somoza with a project called *Reframing History*. From among the images she had taken in 1978–79, she brought nineteen mural-sized photographs back and installed them at the sites in which they had been taken. These public installations acted as provocations, prompting conversations that

Susan Meiselas, youths practice throwing bombs in the forest surrounding Monimbó, Nicaragua, 1978. Courtesy of Susan Meiselas, Magnum Photos.

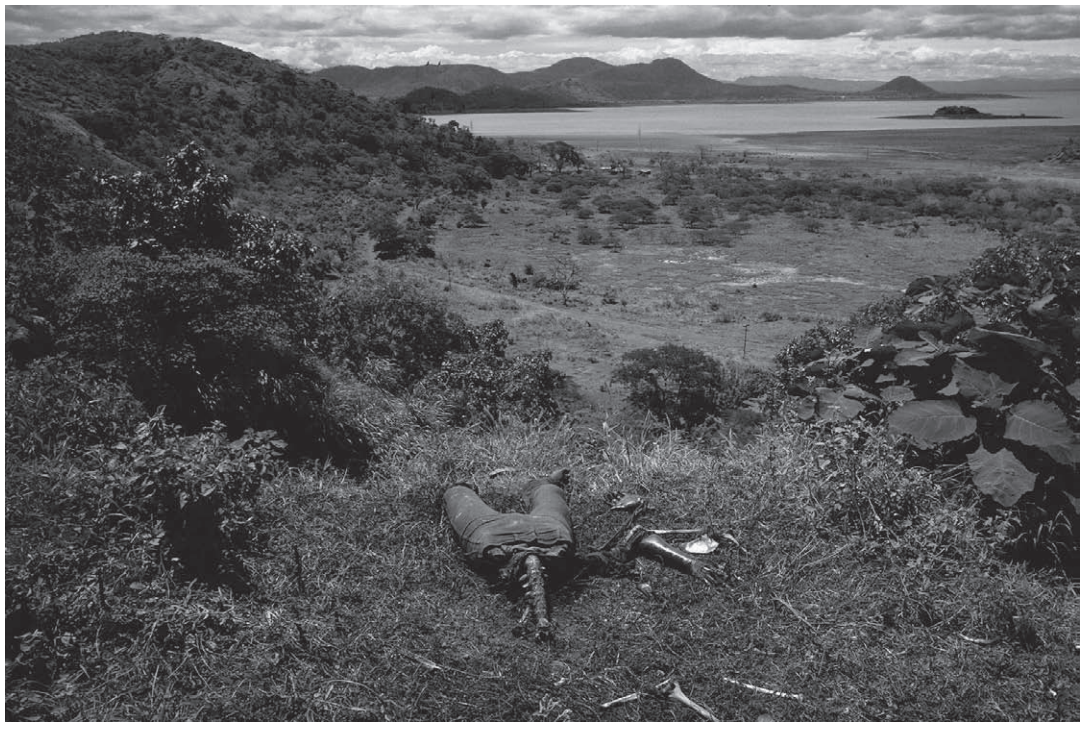
Susan Meiselas, residential neighborhood, Matagalpa, Nicaragua, 1978. Courtesy of Susan Meiselas, Magnum Photos.

Susan Meiselas, Matagalpa, Nicaragua, July 2004 (*Residential Neighborhood, 1978*), from *Reframing History*. Courtesy of Susan Meiselas, Magnum Photos.

reflected on the past and its legacies—both its atrocities and its promises of a more equitable life, largely suppressed and now forgotten. As images of violence and of resistance, brought back to their original sites, they acted as revenants very different from the faces of children we saw earlier. "The photographs were alive again," Meiselas writes ("Return" 170). In the twelve-minute film *Reframing History* and the documentary *Pictures from a Revolution*, still photographs are animated. We see these mobile memorials go up and engage in the present street scenes, we listen to the discussions, we watch people pass without looking.[5] Superimposing a moment of hope on a present of disappointment, these memorial images manage briefly to reaffirm that hope and to interrupt the trajectory of resignation and forgetting. But bringing memory back to its site means also to confront missed encounters, lack of recognition, oblivion, and loss. It is to try to live with the jarring physical beauty of a landscape that wants to forget a half-eaten corpse of a quarter century ago but cannot.

If Meiselas is inviting us to return with her to a moment of hope, she certainly undercuts any possible nostalgia with this scene. What are we to do with this disturbing incongruity between horror and beauty? How can we respond? The Polish poet Adam Zagajewski surveys a similarly disturbing scene and writes a remarkable poem, in the second person, asking us, counterintuitively, to "try to praise the mutilated world." This poem was widely disseminated in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks, but Zagajewski wrote it in response to a much earlier trip he took with his father through Ukrainian villages in Poland whose inhabitants were forced out during the population transfers following the Second World War.

Here also, in the call to memory and to an intimate past, there is a nostalgic backward glance, but I think that this strange and haunting praise poem, like Meiselas's



Susan Meiselas, "Cuesto del Plomo," hillside outside Managua, a well-known site of many assassinations carried out by the National Guard, Nicaragua, June 1978. Courtesy of Susan Meiselas, Magnum Photos.

Susan Meiselas, Managua, Nicaragua, July 2004 (*"Cuesto del Plomo," Hillside outside Managua, a Well-Known Site of Many Assassinations Carried Out by the National Guard. People Searched Here Daily for Missing Persons. June 1978*), from *Reframing History*. Courtesy of Susan Meiselas, Magnum Photos.

Susan Meiselas, Masaya, Nicaragua, July 2004 (*Returning Home, September 1978*), from *Reframing History*. Courtesy of Susan Meiselas, Magnum Photos.

installations, is doing something else, something I hope we can use as we move forward from our own difficult present—something to do with trying to praise:

Try to Praise the Mutilated World
Adam Zagajewski (trans. Clare Cavanagh)

Remember June's long days,
and wild strawberries, drops of wine, the dew.
The nettles that methodically overgrow
the abandoned homesteads of exiles.
You must praise the mutilated world.
You watched the stylish yachts and ships;
one of them had a long trip ahead of it,
while salty oblivion awaited others.
You've seen the refugees heading nowhere,
you've heard the executioners sing joyfully.
You should praise the mutilated world.
Remember the moments when we were together
in a white room and the curtain fluttered.
Return in thought to the concert where music flared.
You gathered acorns in the park in autumn
and leaves eddied over the earth's scars.
Praise the mutilated world
and the gray feather a thrush lost,
and the gentle light that strays and vanishes
and returns.

What does it mean to praise the mutilated world? Perhaps to praise it is to be responsive to and responsible for its contradictions, without trying to resolve them. Perhaps it is to embrace the potentialities of a vulnerability that is also resilient, "the gentle light that strays and vanishes / and returns." Meiselas's and Zagajewski's aesthetic of vulnerability confronts us with the fragile beauty of hope and resistance, despite repeated assaults.

The encounter with these images and words—in museums across the globe, and even on this screen, here in this ballroom at the MLA convention—enjoins us to hear the devastating stories they tell and the inspiring moments they come back to reclaim. This invitation, to praise, is an invitation to do what we have learned and what we teach, and what sustains us as scholars, teachers, and human beings—to read, to look, and to listen openly and

vulnerably. And in inviting us to consider what might have been, these works also propel us to imagine and to fight for what might yet be.

Notes

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1. On the vanished German Jewish culture of Czernowitz, see Hirsch and Spitzer, *Ghosts*. Chs. 4 and 10 address the vicissitudes of the German language that continued to be spoken there after Czernowitz was annexed by Romania in 1918 and renamed Cernăuți (72–98, 232–56).

2. On different uses of the notion of connectivity, see Hirsch, *Generation*; Hoskins.

3. This work has been part of a set of rich interdisciplinary conversations and collaborations with scholars, artists, and other practitioners interested in memory studies across numerous histories and sites. For an account of my long-term engagement in this field, see Hirsch, Introd.

4. Azoulay argues for a "civil" rather than an empathic spectatorial gaze elicited by photography (*Civil Contract* 128–35).

5. Taylor discusses *Reframing History* in "Past."

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