



Four Questions or More for Marianne Hirsch

by Marie-Louise Paulesc

Marianne Hirsch is William Peterfield Trent Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University and Professor in the Institute for Research on Women and Gender. She is the Second Vice-President of the Modern Language Association of America. She was born in Timisoara, Romania, and educated at Brown University where she received her BA/MA and Ph.D. degrees. Before moving to Columbia, she taught at Dartmouth College for many years, most recently as the Ted and Helen Geisel Third Century Professor in the Humanities.

Hirsch's co-authored book with Leo Spitzer *Ghosts of Home: The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish Memory and History* was published at University of California Press in 2010. Her co-edited book with Nancy K. Miller *Rites of Return: Diaspora, Poetics and the Politics of Memory* is forthcoming in Fall 2011. Other publications include *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (1997), *The Familial Gaze* (ed. 1999), *Time and the Literary* (co-ed. 2002), a special issue of *Signs* on "Gender and Cultural Memory" (co-ed. 2002), *Teaching the Representation of the Holocaust* (co-ed. 2004), and *Grace Paley Writing the World* (co-ed. 2009). Her book *The Generation of Postmemory: Visual Culture after the Holocaust* is forthcoming in Spring 2012. Marianne Hirsch is the former editor of *PMLA* and the recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the ACLS, the Mary Ingraham Bunting Institute, the National Humanities Center, and the Bellagio and Bogliasco Foundations. She has served on the MLA Executive Council, the ACLA Advisory Board, the Board of Supervisors of The English Institute, and the Executive Board of the Society for the Study of Narrative Literature, and is on the advisory boards of *Memory Studies* and *Contemporary Women's Writing*.

Marie-Louise Paulesc: In 2002, you have co-hosted with Valerie Smith a special issue of *Signs* on gender and cultural memory. In the introduction co-written with Valerie Smith you note that "to date there have been very few sustained efforts to theorize in... general and comparative terms about memory from the perspective of feminism." How would you appreciate the developments in the field since then? Are scholars doing work in cultural and collective memory more engaged with issues of gender?

Marianne Hirsch: You know, we were hoping to help spark such interest but I think that the relationship of cultural memory and gender has still not been fully theorized even now, almost ten years later. Certainly, there has been a lot of work done to understand women's experiences in the past in addition to men's, and to analyze the stories women tell about their lives,

and how they tell them. The field of women's history has developed its own significant methodologies. And there has been an effort, in many cultural and political contexts, to collect testimonies of women. Some traumatic experiences – rape and sexual abuse, for example apply particularly to women. But a more developed theoretical account of the intersection of gender and cultural memory would have to go beyond gender difference and certainly beyond treating women and men as unified essential categories.

Marie-Louise Paulesc: What are, in your own current work, the arguments that you develop for intersecting gender with cultural memory? What does it mean, for you, to theorize cultural memory through a feminist lens?

Marianne Hirsch: I am more interested in exploring the rhetoric and the politics of memory and transmission from a feminist perspective. First, I argue that gender, as sexual difference, can fulfill a number of functions in the work of memory. It can serve as a figure that can mediate the ways in which certain images and certain narratives have been able to circulate in the culture of the subsequent generations. In traumatic histories, gender can be invisible or hypervisible; it can make trauma unbearable or it can serve as a fetish that can help shield us from its effects. It can offer a position through which memory can be transmitted within the family and beyond it, distinguishing mother-daughter transmission, from that of fathers and daughters, or fathers and sons, for example. It can offer a lens through which to read the domestic and the public scenes of memorial acts. Feminist and queer readings can thus illuminate not just what stories are told or forgotten, or what images are seen or suppressed, but how those stories are told and how those images are constructed. They highlight the links between private experience and national and global crises, and the role of generational histories and genealogies in acts of memory and fantasies. This accent on the personal, the familial, the affective, and the intimate has been a constitutive structure of thinking in feminist theory and needs to be brought to bear on an analysis of cultural memory.

Secondly, and certainly related, I am interested in an analysis of the archive, understood not only as a repository of objects or texts, but also as the process of selecting, ordering, and preserving the past. Because all archives and archival processes are embedded in power relations and have political consequences, we need to study the particular ways in which the archives of official history and cultural memory privilege and make visible some objects, texts, and stories, while consigning others to oblivion. How can we shift the logic of intelligibility to make possible the creation of new archives, new forms of knowledge, new opportunities for the unspoken and the unthought to come into public awareness? How can we open the archive to invisible social subjects and new systems of making sense of the past and the present? This is a profoundly feminist project.

Marie-Louise Paulesc: The recent book you have written together with Leo Spitzer, *Ghosts of Home: The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish Memory*, is appreciated for its significant contributions to memory studies and to the literature of return. I would add that it also enriches and further nuances your concept of postmemory. What are some personal difficulties you have encountered while researching, but also while writing the book?

Marianne Hirsch: In spite of the similarity of our backgrounds and early experiences as immigrant children (Leo was born in Bolivia to parents who were refugees from the Nazis, and I in Romania to survivors from Cernăuți), we have different disciplinary backgrounds, history and literary studies, and we each have a different relationship to the city of Czernowitz and to its history. Each of us was drawn into the project by a different pull. For me the relationship is personal and familial. Born in Romania after my parents left their native Cernăuți under cover of night with false papers in 1945, following the Soviet takeover of the region, I grew up in a community of displaced “Czernowitzers” who maintained a strong nostalgic relationship to the city of their birth and who communicated to me, as well, the many traumatic events that they endured there as well. Leo’s knowledge of Czernowitz was more academic, historical, more firmly situated in the present of research and writing, than in his own personal past. He brought to the project broad cultural understanding and historical skills that complement mine.

What is perhaps the most basic element of *Ghosts of Home* also posed its greatest writing challenge – the fact that it was co-authored. What voice would do justice to the project, to the history we wanted to tell and to our own investment in that history? The two of us were writing collaboratively, but at no time did we think we could write the book in the “we” first person plural voice – a voice that is rhetorically weak and ineffective, as you can tell from the very sentence in which we are conveying this observation.

We agreed that both our individual voices and perspectives had to be present within the book, singly and in dialogue. And yet, we needed a *writing* voice that would hold the narrative together and that could be followed by our readers. After a great deal of discussion, experimentation, and agony, we made the decision to write the book in the first person singular, in the “I” voice. But we also had to contest the assumption that our distinct disciplinary training, or our biographical relationships to the story, was necessarily reflected in different sections of this book – that the “I” we used in different chapters was in any way stable. On the contrary, what happened was that in the process of writing and rewriting, our voices began to merge and cross. Sometimes we identified the “I” clearly, but at other points it was no more than a narrative voice, a device, perhaps even a “character” in its own right, embodied but not directly corresponding to either of us in strict biographical sense. Sometimes we wrote our own “I” sections, at others we wrote each other’s.

Marie-Louise Paulesc: Many scholars are discussing the notion of a unified European memory. Others are pointing out to a certain division of the memory between Western and Eastern Europe. Many of them point out to the fact that while the Holocaust has become central to Western European memory, Eastern Europeans have difficulties in addressing their involvement in the Holocaust, while focusing, in various ways, on the memory of communism. What is your insight in regard to the terms and the implications of this discussion? Even though it might not specifically address this particular issue, how would you place your *Ghosts of Home* in this larger discussion? (If you even would want to...)

Marianne Hirsch: Well, I think this is a story of uneven developments. That became so obvious when Claude Lanzmann released *Shoah* in 1986 and exposed the testimonies of Poles who lived in the vicinity of the concentration and extermination camps. Their words were not yet embedded in the official discourses about this past that shaped thinking and recall in Western Europe, they were fresh, unprocessed and some statements seemed outrageous. People just had not had the chance to speak about this under communism.

When Leo Spitzer and I began working on the memory of the Jewish culture of Czernowitz, now Chernivtsi in Ukraine, in the late nineties, that memory had been all but erased from the urban landscape. Yes, buildings Jews had built and lived in were intact, but their connection to the history of the lively Jewish community there had been severed. The main Jewish temple was now a movie theater and billiard hall, the largest synagogue was a factory for Christian tombstones. The Jewish ghetto formed in 1941 prior to deportations to Transnistria was marked only by a small plaque at the top of a building. In Transnistria itself, the local population was totally ignorant of the history of Romanian and Nazi persecution of Jews and of the deadly camps and ghettos that had been installed there. So, yes, our going there to do the research is in itself an act of exposing a history that is virtually absent. And now, with more international attention, and with the return of survivors, memory is more visible in the place itself. There is, for example, a plaque on the house of Traian Popovici, the mayor of Cernăuți in 1941, who saved ca. 20,000 Jews but who was totally unknown in the Ukrainian city. And there is a small museum of the history of Bukowinian Jews. It's a beginning, but of course it cannot be compared to the much more sophisticated memorial landscapes of Western European cities. So no, there is not unified European memory—memory is contested, divided, competitive. Different histories collide. Take the horrible Museum of Terror in Budapest! It will be a long time before this is sorted out, if ever.

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