

Gender, memory and connective genocide scholarship: A conversation with Marianne Hirsch

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Marianne Hirsch's groundbreaking work on the transmission of memories of violence across generations has deeply inspired many scholars working at the intersections of feminist theory, memory studies and genocide/Holocaust/war studies, including ourselves. Postmemory, a concept that she first introduced in the 1990s and continues to explore in novel ways, has added a whole new dimension to the debates on genocide, gender, and memory. On 30 September 2014, we were fortunate to come together in Budapest in the context of the COST Network Meeting 'In Search of Transcultural Memory in Europe' and have this stimulating conversation.

Marianne Hirsch was born in Romania after the Second World War and immigrated to the United States as a teenager. She currently teaches at Columbia University as William Peterfield Trent Professor of English and Comparative Literature and Professor in the Institute for Research on Women, Gender, and Sexuality. Her publications include *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (2012), *Ghosts of Home: The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish Memory* (co-authored with Leo Spitzer, 2010), *Rites of Return: Diaspora, Poetics and the Politics of Memory* (co-edited with Nancy K Miller, 2011), *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (1997), and a special issue of *Signs* on 'Gender and Cultural Memory' (co-edited with Valerie Smith, 2002). Hirsch is the former editor of *PMLA*, the former President of the Modern Language Association of America, and one of the founders of Columbia University Center for the Study of Social Difference and of its global initiative 'Women Creating Change' and 'Women Mobilizing Memory.'

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- Ayşe Gül Altınay:** As a feminist scholar who continues to make significant, and very creative, contributions to the intersections of genocide, gender, and memory studies, what do you see as the contributions of feminist scholarship to the debates on genocide in general, and the Holocaust in particular? We would also love to hear how you yourself have come into this field.
- Marianne Hirsch:** One way to approach your question is through the history of scholarship on the Holocaust. In the early years, scholars discounted gender as a category of analysis. If people were targeted for persecution, ghettoization, and extermination, it was as Jews or as Roma or as one of another targeted group, and thus other forms of difference, such as gender, class, economics, rural vs. urban, profession, ultimately did not count, or so it was thought. If human beings were going to be reduced to ashes, does it really matter whether they are women or men? The divide between human and subhuman, worthy of life or not, seemed to transcend gender. One need only think of the debate the historian Joan Ringelheim unleashed when she argued, in the 1980s, that Jewish women experienced the camps differently than men did. She gave an example from an account by Bruno Bettelheim in his book *An Informed Heart* about a young woman who was being sent to the gas with a number of her compatriots. The SS asked this naked woman to dance for them and as she danced, she seized the gun of the officer and shot him. She was shot in return. Bettelheim used this story to exemplify what it means to 'die like men,' but Ringelheim called attention to this as a particularly gendered form of violence that compounded the already dehumanizing violence and genocidal murderous violence she suffered. She shows how Bettelheim erases her in his writing. Ringelheim's article was tremendously critiqued for highlighting differences among the victims and Ringelheim then wrote a second article actually revising her original argument which, she admitted, was erroneously based on an idea of a distinct 'women's culture.' Since then, you know, there has been an explosion of materials on gender and the Holocaust, but the claim to difference remains contested. First, feminists simply wanted to add women's voices to the canonical narratives by Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel. Second, feminist scholarship on the Holocaust involved looking at testimony and other media through which Holocaust memory was being expressed and transmitted, examining modes of narrative and memory for gender dimensions and from feminist perspectives. Feminist scholars have analyzed women perpetrators, both individually and by way of a system of persecution and extermination that is structurally gendered in significant ways. And a system of socialization might prepare women for the experiences of ghettos and camps differently than men.

- AA:** Or help them survive through solidarity...
- MH:** Indeed, we see this in accounts like Charlotte Delbo's memoirs from her time in Auschwitz as a French political prisoner. I came to memory studies directly from feminist studies. My first work on Holocaust memory was the first piece that I wrote with Leo Spitzer on 'Gendered translations: Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*' and there it was overwhelmingly obvious that this film just cannot look at women's faces. In the film's nine and a half hours, there may be at most a half hour on which Jewish women fill the screen. In our article, we were trying to figure out why this really brilliant film was so utterly blind on the question of gender. What is it leaving out, or what is it saying by omitting women's faces, voices, and stories? How is its very structure gendered? But even stories on women written by women, like Cynthia Ozick's incredible short novel *The Shawl*, can be disavowed as a story about women by its author. There's a tremendous kind of hesitation in the scholarship on genocide to highlight gender because such a totalizing form of annihilation makes it very difficult to make differentiations among victims. And yet, once you raise the question of gender, your very terms of analysis are sharpened, certain structures of perpetration, of experience, memory, and transmission come into sharper focus.

Andrea

- Pető:** If you review contemporary genocide studies, you can hardly find a reference to its roots as you described here. At the same time genocide studies scholars seem to be very often blaming Holocaust studies for its totalizing view and a kind of monopolizing way of looking at atrocities. So my question is: how do you deal with this in your own work? As you are one of the few scholars whose work is taken up by others who are not necessarily working on the Holocaust but other genocides, making this bridge which is very often not considered to be viable. I wonder if you have been attacked or criticized for the monopoly of Holocaust studies within genocide studies at large.
- MH:** I haven't been attacked, and I'm not sure I would say there has been a monopoly. But I do believe that the Holocaust has provided an enormously powerful template and point of reference in the field of genocide studies and to the work of memory and forgetting of other kinds of atrocities, like the dictatorships in Latin America and apartheid in South Africa. I do feel that Holocaust studies has been influential because of the way it has been able to theorize some of the questions that these histories have in common: questions of transmission, of memorialization, questions of testimony and witness, questions of language in the aftermath of such a total annihilation of a culture, such destruction of a social fabric. If you read Elizabeth Jelin on the Argentinian dictatorship, for example, Chapter 5 is about Holocaust testimony and the way that it helps her read the testimonies and memories of the people who were disappeared and tortured by the dictatorship. But mapping these histories onto the Holocaust has also occluded a number of questions and created blindnesses: these histories are not parallel. And, at

the same time, there has also been something quite exclusionary in Holocaust scholarship, the uniqueness argument has made comparative work fraught in various ways. Working on the Holocaust has also become a lot more complicated as this extremity of Jewish suffering is used as an alibi in the politics around Israel and Palestine. There's still so much work to be done that's specifically on the Holocaust, archives are still being opened, people are finding documents in their attics, there are some sites which haven't been researched by historians, but it becomes more difficult actually to do that work if it becomes connected to a nationalist agenda. I have argued not so much for comparative as for a connective scholarship that enables different histories to illuminate each other and to explore their interconnections without implying that they are comparable. I am now thinking that an attention to gender has itself provided one of the points of connection among these histories of violence, as this special issue shows.

AP: What I was thinking was that Holocaust scholarship basically started as something which is describing, documenting, proving, so it has got this very strong descriptive epistemological and positivist basis. And then there is the additional package that you have described of how very difficult it has been to gender Holocaust scholarship. The question for me is how have these heritages, if we can use this in the plural, influenced the study of other genocides?

MH: Indeed, the historical scholarship on the Holocaust was initially under the shadow of denial, establishing evidence and proof in positivist ways. But parallel to the positivist history was work that was more interdisciplinary and more philosophical, work with oral history archives, for example, and with representation. There is no doubt that these disciplinary differences have shaped the field in some ways, determining clear divisions. I would say, however, that this is now changing, that these directions have been accepted as more complementary. But these divisions affect scholarship on genocide more generally. I have found genocide studies to be very much dominated by social science approaches, not just history, but political science, sociology, relying on evidence and data in positivist ways as well.

AA: I would think that precisely because much of the earlier genocide literature was so much focused on 'proving,' on coming up with proofs of the genocide itself, that dealing with questions of gender and class, moving beyond that totalizing narrative of evidence, was initially more difficult. It should not be a coincidence that it becomes possible to talk about gender at the moment when less proof is needed, or enough people have been convinced. Of course, there are other dynamics behind the diversification of the literature.

MH: Feminist methodologies become especially relevant and perhaps more easily accepted when dealing with perpetrators. I'm thinking of the important work on Nazis, the gender of militarism, as well as Nazi psychology and family, and on women perpetrators more generally. In recent genocide

scholars' conferences I have attended, sessions on gender have proliferated and many of them have been on perpetrators.

AA: And of course when we are talking about the Rwandan genocide, and other recent genocides, we have to keep in mind that they were committed in a different moment in the larger history of the women's movement. I mean when there is an international women's movement leading up to the UN Security Council Resolution 1325, recognizing gender based violence as an international crime, it's a very different moment, and has ramifications about the public awareness of the gendering of genocide. Going back to your own trajectory, you write about watching *Shoah* being a really important moment in your entry into the field. Could you say a bit more about the personal and historical context behind *your* initial interest in the intersections of gender, genocide, and memory?

MH: I'm dating this entry into the field of memory in the mid-1980s, which was also the moment that my feminist theoretical work and practical engagement had reached a great intensity. I had just spent a year at the Mary Ingraham Bunting Institute, then a women's research institute at Harvard/Radcliffe. We had formed a feminist theory group both at the Bunting Institute and at Harvard and thus gender and feminist theory were foremost on my mind as I encountered works like Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* and Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, both important sources of my interest in Holocaust memory. Around the same time, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* came out, another inspiration for me. I remember reading *Beloved* for the first time the minute it came out and thinking that there is no such novel on the Holocaust and I wished there was. Maybe it takes one hundred years for somebody to be able to write a novel – not a memoir, but a novel – about such a devastating history of dehumanization. This conjunction of works, *Shoah* and *Maus*, were important because they were works of testimony that were aesthetically complex rather than straightforward narratives. Before I encountered them, I had been staying away from Holocaust imagery in photography and film. I was exposed to Resnais's *Night and Fog* as a college student without any preparation of what I was going to see and it was really a terrible experience for me because I didn't grow up with that imagery in Romania. We didn't see those pictures or hear about that history but it was in the family background, of course, which made me more susceptible. But both of these works are self-reflexive and foreground their mediation – and it is that mediation that enabled me to find a way in. But then, you know, coming as a feminist scholar to both *Maus* and *Shoah* – the gender questions kind of hit you on the head because these narratives are both such gendered narratives. For both, women's perspectives were missing. For me, it wasn't just a question of filling in the women's stories but also to find out why that narrative had to be so masculinized.

AA: Which of course is a great contrast to *Beloved*...

MH: It's a great contrast to *Beloved*, a text that actually underscored the connection of gender to narratives of atrocity.

- AA:** How about since *Beloved*? Have you been particularly inspired by other novels?
- MH:** There are not many novels like *Beloved* in the world, so I don't know. There are new memoirs and novels coming out all the time. For me, the most inspiring work has been Sebald's, particularly *Austerlitz*, another self-conscious text that foregrounds the very process of representation, narrative, witness, and transmission.
- AA:** How about postmemory as a concept? How has that come about? We are particularly curious about its afterlife precisely because it has become so widely used across various contexts, across what you would perhaps call 'connective histories.' How do you feel about that?
- MH:** I mean really it was a literary response in the beginning. First as a reader of *Maus*, an autobiographical reader, one might say. When I first read *Maus* and when I first talked about it, it really spoke to me personally. I'm not a reader of comics, I mean I did not grow up reading comics, though the layered complex narrative of comics appeals to me as a reader of postmodern narrative. But when I read *Maus*, I recognized myself in the character of Art. I found that there is something about the complex relationship with his parents and his ways of trying to relate this relationship to a history that he didn't live but that somehow determined his life that touched me profoundly. Something clicked, reminding me of the ways that I felt like. I could remember the scenes that I heard about as a child from my parents that I didn't myself remember, there was something about the quality of these 'memories' that required a special term. Not just for my own experience but for a certain community that began to form. There was a moment in the mid till late 1980s when some of the colleagues that used to meet at different feminist conferences would sit at lunch or at breakfast and talk about something else, and I suddenly realized we were all children of survivors. We had not known this about each other, we had met due to our feminist work. Somehow some of our preoccupations with the question of gender and feminist theory were transformed into questions of memory and how to relate to these stories, really what kinds of ethical questions we had about our relationship to our parents' lives, how to tell their stories, and all this felt like an extension of some of the feminist work. These new theoretical and really ethical questions came to transform our work but they were in continuity with our feminist commitments. For me, it was an extension of the work that I had done over a decade on family stories, how families tell stories about themselves. And always writing about the power of the family as a paradigm and as a metaphor, but writing against the Oedipal family and the genealogical family, always writing from the position of somebody who understands the power of family metaphors and is committed to questioning that power. These stories of broken transmission have helped me understand how family structures are embedded in history and not just psychology.
- AA:** And also aesthetics, right?

- MH:** Yes, indeed. I always realized that these structures are not particular to the Holocaust or to one history, but my way of understanding them has been to derive the theoretical notions from the works that I was reading, not to impose them on those works. In some ways I'm still trying to do that, to use works of art to think about some of these questions with. I am also learning a great deal from the ways in which others have used the idea of postmemory in different historical contexts. I wanted it to be applicable to different situations and in this sense I defined it as a structure of transmission, not a theory.
- AA:** In your work, you help us think through it with a great diversity of examples.
- MH:** I was hoping it would be an open creative space to think with. Of course, the structures change and evolve in different contexts and in different generations – the third is different from the second, less proximal, less conflicted. I've been particularly interested in the memory of the Armenian genocide now because of the level of denial and its traumatizing effect. Denial solidifies bonds rather than loosening them so I think it's very interesting to think about how people in the third generation have gotten even more attached to ancestral histories than in other cases. I think the notion of generation is useful even if it's genealogical. But for me it was always about mediation – about the ways in which histories come down. Not just in embodied practices and family life, but through iconic cultural texts, broadly available to anyone. In distinguishing between familial postmemory, on the one hand, and affiliative postmemory, on the other, I also would like to transcend identity and biology. Identity questions are not interesting to me at all, it's really much more how certain stories and certain histories circulate through a generation where some people feel drawn to them, being responsible and holding them and caring for them to hand them down, though they may or may not be familially connected. I think that's another way that feminism can help us in this work. Understanding how solidarity works, what it means to be a co-witness, to engage in a form of care for people and stories that would otherwise fall out of history.
- AP:** We are here speaking in Budapest, at the EU funded COST network meeting on transcultural memory. I was just wondering what your impressions were when you were listening to those papers on Eastern Europe about the specificity of transmission and mediation of memory? Because my impression, reading all this literature on the memory of communism and the memory of the *gulag*, is that very rarely they are using the concepts and theories coming from the Holocaust literature. Moreover the authors are very rarely referring to postmemory as a concept. You have mentioned how the feminist movement and how feminist scholarship actually played a key role here. I was wondering whether you were following, how to say, the traveling of the concept of postmemory to other parts of Europe and how this is actually used or not used for speaking about the experiences in the *gulag* and during communism.

- MH:** I think that some people are using it for those levels of transmission, particularly of the *gulag* memories, and for ways in which the *gulag* is aesthetically represented. There have also been some papers on the postmemory of communism, also conceived in generational terms. Particularly concerning the generation that came of age on the threshold moment in the 1980s, just as perestroika began to happen.
- AP:** You talked about how Holocaust studies actually integrated gender much later than the feminist movement came about. I was wondering how you see the present situation. What is the relationship between feminist scholarship and genocide studies?
- MH:** This special issue will certainly define new directions. Valerie Smith and I edited the special issue of *Signs* on 'Gender and Cultural Memory' in 2002, about 12 years ago. We gathered some fabulous articles that were meant to kind of serve as a little bit of a provocation, to motivate people to work on some of these questions but I don't think it has been taken up as a general topic except in some specific people's monographs, but not as a larger conversation. This special issue of the *EJWS* is going to do that in this comparative way and that will be really important in posing questions of gender in a new way.
- AP:** But I mean if you look at the mailing lists, there is a mushrooming of genocide studies, there is a mushrooming of memory studies, and there is a mushrooming of gender studies.
- MH:** They are still not coming together.
- AP:** Why is that the case, do you think?
- MH:** As I was looking at the different memory networks in Europe, I realized that there is none that focuses on gendered memory, right? How often has the question of gender come up in the last two days of this major conference of this European network here in Budapest? This is one of the reasons we formed our transnational 'Women Mobilizing Memory' group. The idea of mobilizing memory for the future, for progressive change, also underlies this COST training school. Can we mobilize the memory of painful pasts in the interests of a more progressive future? This seems to me to be a fundamentally feminist question. And the transnational connections we are making are also part of a practice of solidarity and mutual responsibility, a way to combat the competitive aspects of memory, and the nationalist inflections we are seeing.
- AP:** There is such a solid scholarship at the intersection of media studies and gender studies inside gender studies. Maybe we should ask why pioneering feminist scholarship which is otherwise theoretical and cutting edge in so many fields cannot really break through in this so-called home discipline. You have got so many interesting and rare well-educated and productive women who are moving from this discipline to feminist media studies but somehow they cannot bring back gender here. Basically what we see is a separation instead of integration.

- MH:** I don't think queer theory has come into memory studies and one would certainly think that it would in relation to generations, time, temporality and the important ways of rethinking these that queer theory has brought us.
- AA:** There was a beautiful paper in the Istanbul workshop 'Women Creating Change: Mobilizing Memory for Action' in Istanbul in September (2014) on queer postmemory. Among young scholars, there are people integrating queer theory into memory studies, like Dilara Çalışkan's work on queer postmemory among trans sex-workers, but in the larger field, there seems to be a resistance.
- MH:** So where is the resistance?
- AA:** I don't know. When Andrea and I reviewed the memory and genocide studies journals and readers for our edited book *Gendered Wars, Gendered Memories: Feminist Conversations on War, Genocide and Political Violence*, we were quite surprised to see that gender continues to be either totally missing or seriously marginalized. In most readers, there's at most one token article on gender, if that, and the rest of the reader is completely blind to gender and feminist theory, let alone queer theory. And it's not that there is no literature, it's really that the growing literature is not taken seriously by those who are compiling the readers, editing the journals, and organizing the major conferences.
- AP:** The challenges ahead of feminist scholarship are institutional, disciplinary, and generational challenges. One might think that in countries where there is a longer history of the women's movement and feminist scholarship, the situation would be different, but obviously this is not the case. For example, one of the major feminist memory studies scholars heads a department called Cultural Studies and, in the same university, there is a separate department called Women's Studies, with very little interaction between them. So then you see that sometimes the institutionalization of gender studies is backfiring. If there are no personal or professional connections, sometimes this separation or ghettoization is not necessarily promoting development.
- MH:** I guess that we need to think that memory is necessarily a contested field and this is one of the contests, what the place of gender is and what the place of difference is. Gender probably has a different place in different histories, for example in German history it is totally okay to work on perpetrator women and there is a clear gender focus there but why is it still contested to talk about resisters as women? That is clear when we think of how the Warsaw ghetto uprising is remembered, and how women leaders of it, like Zivia Lubetkin, have been largely forgotten.
- AA:** You write in your book *The Generation of Postmemory* that we still haven't done enough in terms of the feminist theorizing of memory studies or the feminist theorizing of postmemory. Do you see that happening now? Or where do you see promising work being done in terms of the feminist theorizing of memory?

MH: I am inspired by Ariella Azoulay's work on what she calls 'potential history,' in other words, what might have happened, or what could still happen. This is a rethinking of time, linear time, a way to consider alternative scenarios. I see this as a deeply feminist approach to histories that rush toward destruction, and as a feminist political practice of seeking and finding alternatives to prejudice, persecution, and oppression, if only hypothetical ones. I am also inspired by practices of resistance and their transnational resonances, and by the theoretical frameworks we might derive from them. Certainly being in Istanbul and hearing the work of and on the Saturday Mothers and the connections with the mothers' movements in Latin America enable feminist analyses of activism and resistance from a transnational perspective. But these are happening in other parts of the world, not so much in Europe.

AA: How about your latest work? Lately you have been working on what you call 'mobile memories' and you seem to be focusing more and more on art. How do you see the prospects of feminist memory work particularly through art?

MH: My work on memory and mobility emerges from two sources. The first is my term as president of the Modern Language Association of America, and my reflections on how the humanities can contribute to a larger social and political conversation today. As in a lot of my work, my thoughts emerged in feminist collaboration, this time with Margaret Ferguson, who was president the year after me. We each got to shape the annual convention around a theme, mine was 'Vulnerable Times' and hers 'Negotiating Sites of Memory.' Both vulnerability and negotiation emerge from feminist concerns and practice, not a surprise since we are both feminist scholars trained in the 1970s. Both of us used our themes to connect social and political to aesthetic structures, looking at how literature and art have, over the centuries, responded to urgent social concerns. I turned toward vulnerability and then toward mobility and mobilization to think about activist practices. I wanted to redirect the backward glance of trauma, the sense that violent traumatic pasts repeat themselves in the present and future, and to think about ways in which that teleological arrow can be interrupted, breaking cycles of violence. I see this as a feminist gesture – defining not vulnerability in the sense that certain groups, like women, are more vulnerable, but to differentiate between a vulnerability we all share, as embodied beings, and the vulnerability that is socially and economically manufactured. Acknowledging a shared vulnerability is a way to acknowledge a fundamental interdependence – again a feminist stance.

The second source of my work on mobile memories, as I mentioned, is the interdisciplinary transnational working group we are building on 'Women Mobilizing Memory.' Here we analyze activist memory practices that move us toward the future rather than being weighed down by a painful past. These aesthetic and activist practices migrate across the globe and I look at them in distinction to the monumental museums and memorials that are

approaching memory in nationalist and ethnocentric ways. The new memorial in Budapest erected to commemorate 'victims of the German occupation' in 1944 is a case in point! And the counter-memorials are just what I am talking about, small, mobile, fleeting, and oppositional.

Memory is not necessarily progressive. It can be used for whatever political purposes you want to use it for. We saw recently in the Bosnian war that you can mobilize people by digging up 600 year old resentments and memories of previous incarnations of the nation and get people to kill for them. Endowing these with affective power is a way to unite people, especially in moments of economic crisis or other kinds of political crises. A feminist analysis can look at structures of militarism and violence and how they can be mobilized at such moments precisely to deny vulnerability and interconnection. This is why we need to develop feminist strategies to combat nationalism and militarism, bringing together scholarly analysis, art, and activism. We need to go back to the past to study instances of resistance, solidarity, and collaboration, outside official structures of commemoration. That is my hope for the future of memory and genocide studies, not just more attention to women and gender, but a shift in attention and methodology.

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