

Marianne Hirsch (contemp.)

American literary critic. Extensive research into individual and cultural trauma documents the effect of horrible events on individuals and societies. But it is not just individuals who suffer aftereffects: their children do as well. In this excerpt, Hirsch, a scholar who has written extensively on photography and other media of memory, introduces the concept of "postmemory" to describe the relationship that the generation after those who experienced trauma directly bears to those experiences. The second generation "remembers" not because they were there, but through stories, images, and behaviors that transmit the traumas of the first generation to their offspring. In Hirsch's account, however, postmemory is not only a quality of intergenerational transmission; rather, it characterizes the entire contemporary age, an age of postmemory. See also Eyerman, Alexander, and Welzer.

From "The Generation of Postmemory"

If "memory" as such a capacious analytic term and "memory studies" as a field of inquiry have grown exponentially in academic and popular importance in the last decade and a half, they have, in large part, been fueled by the limit case of the Holocaust and by the work of (and about) what has come to be known as "the second generation" or "the generation after." "Second generation" writers and artists have been publishing art works, films, novels, and memoirs, or hybrid "postmemoirs" (as Leslie Morris . . . has dubbed them), with titles like "After Such Knowledge," "The War After," "Second-Hand Smoke," "War Story," "Lessons of Darkness," "Losing the Dead," "Dark Lullabies," "Fifty Years of Silence," "After," "Daddy's War," as well as scholarly essays and collections like "Children of the Holocaust," "Daughters of the Shoah," "Shaping Losses," "Memorial Candles," "In the Shadow of the Holocaust," and so on. The particular relation to a parental past described, evoked, and analyzed in these works has come to be seen as a "syndrome" of belatedness or "post-ness" and has been variously termed "absent memory," . . . "inherited memory," "belated memory," "prosthetic memory," . . . "mémoire trouée," . . . "mémoire des cendres," . . . "vicarious witnessing," . . . "received history," . . . and "postmemory." These terms reveal a number of controversial assumptions: that descendants of survivors (of victims as well as of perpetrators) of massive traumatic events connect so deeply to the previous generation's remembrances of the past that they need to call that connection *memory* and thus that, in certain extreme circumstances, memory *can* be transmitted to those who were not actually there to live an event. At the same time—so it is assumed—this received memory is *distinct* from the recall of contemporary witnesses and participants. Hence the insistence on "post" or "after" and the many qualifying adjectives that try to define both a specifically inter- and trans-generational act of transfer and the resonant aftereffects of trauma. If this

sounds like a contradiction, it is, indeed, one, and I believe it is inherent to this phenomenon.

Postmemory is the term I came to on the basis of my autobiographical readings of works by second generation writers and visual artists. The "post" in "postmemory" signals more than a temporal delay and more than a location in an aftermath. Postmodern, for example, inscribes both a critical distance and a profound interrelation with the modern; postcolonial does not mean the end of the colonial but its troubling continuity, though, in contrast, postfeminist *has* been used to mark a sequel to feminism. We certainly are, still, in the era of "posts," which continue to proliferate: "post-secular," "post-human," "post-colony," "post-white." Postmemory shares the layering of these other "posts" and their belatedness, aligning itself with the practice of citation and mediation that characterize them, marking a particular end-of-century/turn-of-century moment of looking backward rather than ahead and of defining the present in relation to a troubled past rather than initiating new paradigms. Like them, it reflects an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture. And yet postmemory is not a movement, method, or idea; I see it, rather, as a *structure* of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. It is a *consequence* of traumatic recall but (unlike post-traumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove.

As Hoffman . . . writes: "The paradoxes of indirect knowledge haunt many of us who came after. The formative events of the twentieth century have crucially informed our biographies, threatening sometimes to overshadow and overwhelm our own lives. But we did not see them, suffer through them, experience their impact directly. Our relationship to them has been defined by our very 'post-ness' and by the powerful but mediated forms of knowledge that have followed from it." Postmemory describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory's connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with such overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present. This is, I believe, the experience of postmemory and the process of its generation.