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# Ensayo Connective Arts of Postmemory

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Can we remember other people's memories? I believe that we can and that we do. Descendants of individuals and communities that have survived powerful collective experiences –catastrophes such as war, genocide and extreme violence, but also transformative political movements such as coups, revolutions and uprisings– often feel as though they were shaped by events that preceded their birth. They experience these events not as memories, but as postmemories; they are belated, temporally and qualitatively removed.

Postmemory describes the relationship that the “generation after” bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma or transformation of those who came before –to events that they “remember” only by means of the stories, images and behaviors among which they grew up–. But these events 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 –by what Robert Jay Lifton (1968) has called “formulation.” To grow up with such overwhelming inherited memories is to risk having one's own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present. We see this clearly in second-generation works such as Art Spiegelman's two-volume graphic memoir *Maus* (1986), the story both of Vladek Spiegelman's survival of Auschwitz and of the artist-son who tries to tell and draw his father's story, doing justice to it even as it overshadows and determines every part of his own life.

In recent years, neuroscientists have substantiated these accounts by showing how trauma can be transmitted across generations epigenetically. Thus, parental trauma can be encoded in children's DNA structures, making them more vulnerable to traumatic and post-traumatic stress symptoms. Although this research is in its very beginnings and not yet conclusive, it does corroborate the accounts of members of what writer Eva Hoffman (2005) has called the “postgenerations.”

And yet, I would suggest that postmemory is not strictly an identity position, but rather a generational structure of transmission embedded in multiple forms of mediation. The family is not the exclusive site of this powerful form of transfer. Family life, even in its most intimate moments, is imbricated in a collective imaginary shaped by a shared archive of stories and images, by public fantasies and projections. These inflect the transfer of individual and familial remembrance. Thus, Spiegelman's comics are based on the father's testimonies as recorded by the son: the tape recorder appears often in the two volumes of *Maus*. But they are also

based on publicly available documents, images and stories, some of which are in conflict with *Vladek Spiegelman's* account of Auschwitz. Such contradictions are part of the cultural and artistic work of postmemory (see Hirsch, 2012).

If we adopt the transformative or traumatic experiences of others as ones we might ourselves have lived through, if we inscribe them into our own life story, however, can we do so without imitating or over-identifying ourselves with them? This question applies equally to the process of identification, imagination and projection of those who grew up in survivor families, and of those less proximate members of their generation or relational network, who share a legacy of trauma or transformation, and thus also the curiosity and urgency to know about the past. Still, their relationship to these powerful distant events is certainly not the same. To outline the border between a strictly familial and a more broadly “affiliative” postmemory, I have tried to account for the difference between an intergenerational vertical identification of child and parent occurring within the family and the intra-generational horizontal identification that makes that child’s position more broadly available to other contemporaries. Affiliative postmemory can encompass a larger collective in an organic web of transmission.

The “post” in “postmemory” is not a concession simply to linear temporality or sequential logic. It signals the complex relationship between proximity and distance, overlaid with the multiple effects characterizing mediated acts of transfer. Like other “posts” marking the end of the twentieth and the beginnings of the twenty-first centuries –posttraumatic, postmodern, postcolonial, posthuman–, postmemory reflects an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture.

As a structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic, transformative knowledge and embodied experience, postmemory characterizes post-conflict psychology and social interaction. It is a consequence of traumatic recall, but unlike post-traumatic stress disorder, at a generational or geographic remove. I believe that the structure of postmemory can apply to the contemporary co-witness –in Irene Kacandes’ formulation (2003)– as well as to powerful events occurring in distant parts of the world. For the co-witness, the challenge is to be able to make ourselves vulnerable to what Susan Sontag (2001) has called “the pain of others”, whether our ancestors or more distant subjects or populations, in the past or present, without appropriating their experiences as our own, and without promoting our own, or our own group’s, suffering as extreme or exclusive. Postmemory, thus, offers an openness to attunement, solidarity and responsibility, in the sense in which the legal theorist Martha Minow (1992-1993) has identified, not as blameworthiness, but as the ability to respond. Response in this sense resists both

appropriative empathy and competitive memory. It preserves a boundary, however tenuous, between self and other, past and present, and, at the same time, is open to perceiving connections between divergent histories and populations.

Some of these contradictions and challenges emerge from the monumental gaps in understanding caused by the catastrophic violence of the Holocaust. But now, in the twenty-first century, neither the Holocaust nor any other collective catastrophe can serve as a conceptual limit case in the discussion of historical trauma, memory and forgetting: the memories of the Armenian, Cambodian, and Rwandan genocides, the histories of slavery, colonialism and empire, the expropriation of indigenous lives across the globe, the massive violence of war, terror and authoritarian dictatorship –these are transmitted from generation to generation by similar or related pathways–. While these histories are not comparable, their memory is in the cultural critic Michael Rothberg’s terms “multidirectional” (Rothberg, 2009). They are or can be connected, whether historically, politically or structurally. In the neoliberal politics of the twenty-first century, the legacies of nineteenth and twentieth century mass violence perpetrated on diverse populations have created more and more lives that are disposable. It is only if we think of these violent histories alongside and in connection to each other that we can be open to resonances and entanglements between them.

Commemorative artistic practices can themselves function as the connective tissue between divergent but related histories of violence and their transmission across generations. The arts offer a fruitful platform to practice the openness and responsiveness that allow such connections to emerge for the postgenerations.

What aesthetic and institutional structures, what tropes and technologies best mediate the complex psychology of postmemory, the continuities and discontinuities between generations, and between proximate and more distant witnesses? How can the gaps in knowledge, the fears and terrors that ensue in the aftermath of trauma, the excitements and disappointments that follow revolutions best be expressed and transmitted? Across the globe, contemporary writers, filmmakers, visual artists, memorial artists and museologists have forged an aesthetic of postmemory in relation to past and geographically distant catastrophic histories. Some of these tropes and artistic strategies have been remarkably consistent, constructing a global memory aesthetic that both bridges and occludes political and cultural divides. Groups of mothers walk or sit in squares from Buenos Aires to Istanbul, memorializing their disappeared children, demanding justice and accountability. The wall of photos at the Museo de la Memoria in Santiago, Chile, recalls similar walls in memorial museums in Phnom Penh, Paris, Amsterdam, and New York. Lists of

names recall victims of the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, the September 11, 2001 bombings, and more. Memorial artists like Horst Hoheisel have worked in Germany, Argentina and Cambodia; Daniel Libeskind in Berlin, Stockholm and New York. Their memorial sites are dominated by idioms of trauma, loss and mourning, invoking tropes of absence and silence, unknowability and emptiness. They tend to rely on archival images and documents, highlighting ghosts and shadows, gaps in knowledge and transmission. They use projection, reframings, recontextualization. They juxtapose or superimpose past and present, without allowing them to merge. The art of Christian Boltanski, for example, has offered a template for this aesthetics of trauma. In Boltanski's terms, his art is not "about" the Holocaust, it is "after," and indeed, his is an aesthetics of the aftermath. Yet, we find similar formal dimensions also in Toni Morrison's postmemorial novels about slavery or in the post- 9/11 works of Jonathan Safran Foer, in the novels of W.G. Sebald and Patrick Modiano.

What are we to make of the remarkable aesthetic continuities in the arts of postmemory across the globe? The challenge of allowing connections between divergent histories and the structures of transmission they engender to emerge is to avoid obscuring important historical specificities and particularities. But there is another challenge as well, and that is, amid the aesthetics of loss and mourning, to make space for memories of resistance and the anticipation of change—to mobilize memory and postmemory oriented not only to the past, but also toward a more hopeful future—. A focus on the memory of resistance and refusal, on small and large acts of political opposition, and of rescue offers a different paradigm of postmemory. It makes space for alternative potential histories, enjoining us to imagine what might have been, in addition to what was. It attempts to circumvent linear trajectories leading, inevitably, to disaster.

In striking a path from generation to generation, and from population to population, in eschewing competition and nationalism, the connective art of postmemory can become a practice of repair and transformation. It reminds of multiple pasts while facing potential futures.

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