Interview: Marianne Hirsch in conversation with guest editor Cristina Demaria and translation's *Siri Nergaard*

October 2014, Paris

Siri Nergaard: Marianne, I would like to start by asking you to introduce yourself, to tell us how you started to work on memory, and how you developed the idea of postmemory.

Marianne Hirsch: I was very late coming to questions of memory. I really started to think about it in the late 1980s which was, I guess, the beginning of Memory Studies and Holocaust Studies, when it became a field of inquiry. But actually, thinking back, my Master's thesis in 1970 was already on memory. It was a thesis in Comparative Literature and it was on Nabokov's *Lolita* and Musil's novella *Tonka*, and it was, in each case, about the protagonist's memory of a lost love. So it is in some ways an old topic, and also a much newer and different one, though it did not concern me for a very long time, because I was actually interested in the new. The new novel, the new wave, postmodernism and the beginnings of second-wave feminism, and the issue about how to remake the world: the past was very far from my consciousness for over a decade. If someone had told me in the '70s that I would be working on memory, and particularly my family history and the history of my parents during the Second World War, I would have said, "who's interested in that?" and "why would *I* be interested in that?"

When I did come to the study of memory, I think that it was actually through my work in feminism which was very much about analyzing, contesting, critiquing the ethos of family, of traditional family structures. I wrote a book on mothers and daughters in literature that then led me to genealogies: the story of genealogies that of course also leads to memory. This trajectory is

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not just about my own formation, it's really about my generation where actually, strangely, a number of people working in feminism and women's literature and feminist theory ended up working on issues of memory. I see a lot of threads of continuity between these fields and how we all suddenly, it seemed, moved from one interest to another. Not that we left behind the questions of gender. On the contrary, they're still infused in the work. It's a work that has a similar commitment to tell untold stories, to ensure that stories of suffering and catastrophe aren't forgotten—those kinds of commitments. So, this is how I see the relationship.

Cristina Demaria: I have a very similar itinerary. This is also how I started moving toward memory.

Marianne Hirsch: . . . How do you explain the continuities?

Cristina Demaria: . . . In a very similar way to the one you said: to give voice to untold stories, or narratives that can be told differently. And as you said before, in the 1970s the tendency of critical theory was oriented towards the new and the future. Nowadays memory is often seen in connection to the future; memory of course is written in the present to rewrite the past, but also for a future. So, the very role of memory has changed very much, but to me its connection to gender studies is still very important. I remember that the first essay I read of yours is the one on Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* and the women.

Marianne Hirsch: . . . that's really the beginning of my getting involved in that field, that was the very beginning. . .

Cristina Demaria: Do you agree with those who say that the concept of memory became important as a category in order to bring history and materiality back into theory?

Marianne Hirsch: Yes, I agree though it may not be the only explanation. In fact, materiality and bodies didn't really disappear: to say that deconstruction was completely antimaterial is not really true. But I think people saw it as the linguistic turn and, so, saw that not only materiality was missing but also history, in a sense. So, then we had the new historicism that was also about material

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objects, and memory studies kind of grew up around the same time.

I think that there are many other reasons for the appeal of memory, one of them, the attractiveness of the interdisciplinarity of this field, that anthropologists, sociologists, historians, philosophers, and psychoanalysts, literary and visual culture theorists could actually work together. That didn't really happen for me in any other context as vibrantly as around questions about memory.

Siri Nergaard: And also translation studies, later on, can be, in many ways, connected to memory. Bella Brodzki, with her book has demonstrated how strongly connected these two themes are. In regards to this interdisciplinary connection I would like you to develop what you just told us about your starting your research on memory through *Shoah*, a film in which you noticed the absence of women, but where the women were translators.

Marianne Hirsch: Exactly, *Shoah* shows a particular relation to the Holocaust, which was a very central site of the development of memory studies. *Shoah* really shows how central translation is to the whole, I mean, first of all to the experience of the Holocaust and its aftermath, and then to the representation and the study of it. Many films wouldn't do it that way, but because Lanzmann decided to take time to show the process of translation and to foreground it, I think he points to something that's actually very much a part of the field, which is that, a lot of people who lived through that historical moment, may not have had a primary language but lived their daily lives, at home, in the ghettos and camps, and in the aftermath, in and through translation.

You asked me earlier, "what's your first language?" and I said "German," but neither my parents nor I lived in a German-speaking country, except for one year in Vienna, so we were always minority speakers of a language that we claimed as ours, but that was actually denied us as Jews. So, it's a very complicated relationship to a first language, but many survivors of the Holocaust, may not have had a first language at all. Many people were young and they might have grown up speaking Yiddish in school and then Polish on the street, they were deported to a camp where they learned German, and later they ended up in a DP camp

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in Italy, and in the end they went to Israel or the United States. When you listen to or watch their testimonies, they are most often speaking a "foreign" language. What is the status of those testimonies? In the study of memory, testimony, and witness in the first person is really important, but the witness's relation to the language she speaks is very often mediated by the multilingualism in which she lived and lives.

Siri Nergaard: Yes, and when you then have the person to whom the memory is transmitted, the generation of postmemory, further languages are involved. As you told us, you spoke German with your mother, but the language you are writing in is English, so you are really translating these memories again, for I don't know, the third, fourth, or fifth time.

Marianne Hirsch: Well, you know, it's very complicated and, I'm always wondering, what am I doing to these stories, to their authenticity. The book that Leo Spitzer and I wrote on the community that my family grew up in, Czernowitz, *Ghosts of Home*, was based on a lot of interviews, a lot of readings and documents and literature as well, but a lot of interviews. We interviewed people in German, we interviewed them in English, we interviewed them in Romanian, you know, whatever they wanted to speak. But the book is in English, so most of the quotes we used had not only to be edited but also translated. We also used my father's memoir quite extensively. He wanted to write it in English because he wanted to write it for his grandsons. His English was a language acquired very late in life, and the experiences he wrote about were in German and Romanian. So, his words are already a process of translation, of multiple translations. I think these language issues are at the core of memory studies.

Siri Nergaard: There is also the time of translation in the metaphorical and literal way.

Marianne Hirsch: It is time, but it's also the mediation of the translator, especially significant if the translator is the child of the person and wants to hear certain things, then it's more than just a professional translation, right? There's a kind of investment that's part of what I talk about as postmemory; the personal investments

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and the desires, and the curiosities of the second generation. Then, you get the parents' words but you have to translate them; how do you trust that your investments aren't somehow also structuring the translation?

Siri Nergaard: As I see it from a translation point of view again, what you are telling here about the transmission and mediation of a memory, through language, the personal involvement by the translator, her investments, are assuming in a way what I see as the core aspects of what translation is about. In the translation of the other's memory you can find a kind of archetype of what translation really is. Translation always implies change because of personal and cultural investments giving memory a new nature, a new identity of that memory since you have put it into another context and another language.

Marianne Hirsch: Yes, I think that's true. And then, of course, a lot of these stories are diaspora stories with memories of migration and refugeehood that are inherent as well. There, of course, you have multiple translations, cultural translations, and linguistic [translations] as well.

Siri Nergaard: Could you tell us how you define and how you developed this concept that has been so helpful and fruitful for us—the concept of postmemory?

Cristina Demaria: And together with that, let us include the question Bella Brodzki wanted to ask you: Have there been applications or appropriations—translations into new and different contexts—of your very generative term "postmemory" that have surprised or perhaps even enlightened you in ways you hadn't anticipated or envisioned?

Marianne Hirsch: Well, it started as a very personal need for a term, not just for me but also for a number of colleagues who met at feminist conferences in the 1980s. Informally, at lunch or breakfast we started talking about our family history and then it turned out that we had similar family histories, and similar symptoms and syndromes that came from them. It was the moment when important texts like Art Spielgeman's *Maus* and Toni

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Morrison's *Beloved*, monuments about memory were starting to come out. We realized that we are the inheritors of these histories but we hadn't really thought about what that meant. For me it was really reading *Maus* and thinking about it and talking to people like Bella, who had actually gone through similar family experiences. We all felt like our parents' memories of their youth were overshadowing our own memories of our childhoods. It was a really powerful sensation that demanded a term that was like memory but it wasn't actually memory. So, that's where the idea actually came from, so it was quite personal and it was rooted in this history of inherited histories.

But of course this is part of a much larger story. Just yesterday, we had a discussion with the filmmaker Laurent Bécue-Renard who made the film *Of Men and War*, based on interviews with traumatized veterans of the Iraq War in a treatment program in California. He said that the reason he made this film, and his previous film about Bosnian widows called *Tired of War*, is because he felt like he needed to understand his own grandparents. His two grandfathers fought in the First World War; he never met them, but he wanted to understand how these very young men went into trench warfare, came back, started a family of which he is the product. The widows, wives, grandmothers whom he met lived with an unspoken history. As he said, "aren't we all the inheritors of the wars of the twentieth century?" If this is postmemory, it is so in the sense not even of stories, it's really about the affects and the behaviors and the kinds of. . .

Cristina Demaria: As you said, "products."

Marianne Hirsch: . . . Yes, the products, it's really in the DNA that we have inherited, we are all the products of that. We all live with those legacies. Laurent Bécue-Renard is trying to understand how that shapes masculinity and femininity and the culture, and how these histories are transmitted even if they're not really told. And that really kind of subsumed what I wanted to do with that term. It was fascinating that he's third generation and he didn't talk about his parents in France during the Second World War, but about his grandfathers. When he was interviewing the veterans of Iraq who were, probably, twenty years younger than he is, it was as their grandson, in a sense. This is something I didn't quite

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understand in the beginning—that the temporal implications [. . .] are so complex that history stops being linear and is somehow simultaneous rather than genealogical.

So, something else I learned is that although I never saw postmemory as a strictly biological, biographical, or familial structure, for some the literal connections are supremely important. I saw it more as a generational structure and I think that memory is always mediated through stories, through narratives, through images, through media. Even when it's within the family, it's still mediated. So, I was always very insistent on that, but then people who are children or grandchildren of survivors or actors within certain histories, wanted to preserve a special place for that literal relationship. In my book on postmemory, I tried to make space for them by distinguishing between familial and affiliative postmemory. At first it surprised me that people felt very protective of that space which is a position I'm not always that sympathetic to, because it feels like identity politics to me, or some sort of authenticity that I've always been suspicious of.

The other thing that happened in the time that I've been working on postmemory is that a lot of interesting work in queer theory that complicates linearity, linear histories emerged. A critique that complicates the idea of genealogy and that looks at alternative kinds of family structures. And so I felt like my work was, in some ways, already doing that, even though it looked like it was about family, it wasn't really, it was about a contestation about a kind of traditional family structure. Those are things that surprised me because I felt like there were some conversations that I didn't quite realize I would be in but, I ended up in.

Cristina Demaria: I was thinking of this very idea of affiliation and the ways in which different forms of commemoration of post dictatorship have developed in Latin America, very much linked memory is preserved, as in the movements of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo: the bearer of a certain memory is legitimized as such through a family connection. But there is a tendency now in Argentinean Memory Studies to go towards a more affiliative idea of memory and postmemory, since the very idea of family in a Latin culture can be also very much of a problem; it can be very traditional and has been used to support the dictatorship: God, the traditional family, and the country. . .

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Marianne Hirsch: Well it's fascinating in Argentina because of course, that's where family have DNA tests actually, so that a very literal, biological definition of identity has a political impact unlike many other places. Each context has its own politics and I think that's what's so interesting about working transnationally as you do and as I have. It is actually, if I can say it in more metaphorical terms, the untranslatabilities between these contexts: in any other context, if you wanted to do a DNA test to find out if you're really the daughter of this person who's already handed down to you all of these histories, you might think that that was a kind of identity politics, but, in Argentina it's actually really important, because the people raising you could be the perpetrators of the crimes against your biological parents.

Cristina Demaria: In the same context there are different layers. This idea of limiting the "property" of memory to the biological family, and to the associations of direct victims had stopped the more affiliative and cultural ways of elaborating the past. But now it is changing.

I would like to move to your work within Women Creating Change, where there are scholars but also artists and performers. How do you work together, do you translate? And what happens when you go to a place like Istanbul, as you recently did, where you confront, different cultures, a very particular past and a troubled present. . .

Marianne Hirsch: The larger project is called Women Creating Change but the working group within that that some of us have started, is called Women Mobilizing Memory and it really has to do with what you said before: how can memory be mobilized for to the idea of family transmission. Think of Argentina and how change in the future? Rather than being weighted down by a past that you can never get over.

The trauma paradigm that came out of this wonderfully rich theoretical work of the 1990s is very much about keeping the wounds open and understanding the unspeakability of certain crimes, the kind of crushing of the human and of language through acts of persecution and genocide and the destruction of a culture. That's been a very powerful paradigm in the study of memory. Our thought in working more comparatively and transnationally was to

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look at whether the practices of memory look the same in different places. One of the key questions is how can memory become activist and how can it become more future-oriented? How can the past be transmitted, how can we make sure that certain histories aren't forgotten…

Cristina Demaria: Not just to be "preserved," but as living memories…

Marianne Hirsch: Right, and not for monumentalization in some kind of a museum, but for change. That's where the feminist angle is coming in. To do that work, we really thought it would be interesting not just to have an interdisciplinary academic group but to work together with practictioners—artists, activists, curators, museologists… and to see what kind of collaboration would emerge from that. We are working together with the Hemispheric Institute on Performance and Politics: Performance Studies is already the field that takes the kind of embodied nature of memory very much into account. In those conferences, in the *Encuentros* of the Hemispheric Institute, we've had working groups in which we talked about mobilizing memory, but we also always talked about embodiment. It's really interesting to have academic conversations in a room with artists, dancers, theater practitioners, visual artists, and scholars.

Now, I think that question about embodiment and how memory functions in the body is a very different question for a dancer than it is for an academic like me who's going to write about it. That's also a process of translation when you think about it, it's really understanding the multidimensionality of knowledge. When we have visual artists in the group, they're translating our ideas into a visual work and I feel that we could use that work to think with. As literary critics we do that anyway with the texts that we read, but the multiple texts are very interesting.

And, then, you have the embodied practices of memory, like the walk of the mothers on Thursdays in Buenos Aires, or the walk of the Saturday Mothers in Istanbul; similar strategies, very different kind of impact, politically different moments in the histories of these mothers–activists. These practices are a kind of performance, and its cultural impact then becomes a way through which ideas about memory and memory practices can be

developed. I find these multidimensional conversations really helpful.

So far, we've worked in a triangular structure with Chile, Turkey, and the US but people in the group may be working on other sites as well, so it's more about the conceptual connections than just about the sites. Often we think we understand something and we really don't. So I think, in terms of translation, one of the things we decided from the very beginning is that we should just assume that we don't understand. We shouldn't just assume that things can be easily translated. For example, when the group was in Chile, we went to the Museo de la Memoria, which is a museum commemorating the coup against Allende and the crimes of the dictatorship of Pinochet. The narrative of the museum starts on September 11, 1973—that is, the day of the Golpe. Where's the background? How are people supposed to understand how this happened? Isn't there a prehistory? To us from the US, it seemed flawed as a museological choice. But our Chilean partners responded, "here in Chile, when you talk about the background, that's the right-wing thing to do," because the right said the reason Allende was toppled was because he was failing, and there were strikes because of his bad government. . . The progressive history starts on the day and its aftermath. This is the kind of untranslatability that I think is at the core of this kind of work which I don't even want to call comparative work anymore, because it implies that you can compare things, so I'm trying to talk about "connective" histories; we provide the connections but often, they're not easily connectable. We have to start with, "maybe we don't understand," rather than walking into a situation assuming you know how it should be done, because it's different in different contexts.

Siri Nergaard: It's very interesting what you are saying about untranslatability and that you don't want to use the comparative concept. . .

Marianne: I mean, I was in comparative literature so you can imagine it's not so easy for me to say that. . .

Siri Nergaard: I understand. I am saying this also because recently there has been a sort of shift in translation studies towards

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a stronger attention towards untranslatability, an aspect that has been somehow neglected. We have been so focused on translatability, and recognizing it everywhere, that we have almost forgotten that untranslatability exists. Untranslatables exist: as you said, sometimes universes are uncomparable because they are untranslatable, but we can create the connections.

Marianne Hirsch: In the conference that we had in Turkey, which was about mobilizing memory for change, there was a really interesting talk by the anthropologist Leyla Nezi who interviewed Kurdish youth and Turkish young people, about the relationship between the two cultures. She said, "in these interviews, nobody meets anybody else," because for the Turkish young people, the important moments of their lives are ahead of them, but for the Kurdish young people, the important things have already happened for them in the losses that preceded their birth. They live in the same country, but they're not in the same time zone. I think that's a really interesting idea of the nonmeeting. How might their lost past be turned toward the future as well? What will make these histories translatable to each other? What kinds of solidarity might be forged between them? And what can we learn from each other's experiences of memory and activism? These are some of the questions that I've been thinking about and translation is at their core. Thank you for giving me a chance to think with you about this.

Cristina Demaria and Siri Nergaard: Thank you very much.

Marianne Hirsch writes about the transmission of memories of violence across generations, combining feminist theory with memory studies in a global perspective. Her recent books include *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (2012); *Ghosts of Home: The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish Memory* (2010), coauthored with Leo Spitzer; and *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory* (2011), coedited with Nancy K. Miller. Hirsch is the William Peterfield Trent Professor of Comparative Literature and Gender Studies at Columbia University. She is one of the founders of Columbia's Center for the Study of Social Difference. She is a former President of the Modern Language Association of America and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

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