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Generations of Postmemory

Abstract

This final report of the Q-tutorial "Generations of Postmemory" documents the results of the research I have conducted in this collaborative project with participants of the seminar. It presents the research questions we developed during the tutorial as well as it considers our approach to tackle them. It furthermore includes methodological reflections on the general organization, implementation and format of the tutorial. The report also points out problems we encountered during this project and suggests potential solutions. All in all we have generated a multitude of relevant research questions that are connected to the overall topic of the project. Moreover, students were able to come up with their own research ideas, which they approached in their individual projects. In consequence the methods with which we approached the research questions varied from project to project, depending on each student's area of interest. Despite these obstacles we were able to develop, discuss and investigate a variety of research questions and thus to contribute to the overall research regarding the topic of postmemory.

1. Background of the Tutorial

In the summer semester of 2016, I was given the opportunity to conduct a research tutorial titled "Generations of Postmemory" in order to explore the concept of postmemory, developed by Marianne Hirsch in her book *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (2014). Initially, my reading of her work as well as a personal interest in trauma and memory studies sparked my motivation to apply for the tutorial.

In her work, Hirsch focuses on the topic of trauma and to what extent the children of traumatized generations are affected by the experiences of their parents. Thus, it considers in how far trauma can be inherited and also how it manifests itself in literature and visual art of the people, who according to Hirsch, belong to what she terms the "post-generation" or the "generation-after". Mainly I was curious if her theory, which centers on visual and textual narratives produced by descendants of Shoah survivors, would also be applicable to other contexts. Were there generations of postmemory?

Especially because I was interested in different sociopolitical and cultural contexts, the interdisciplinary character of the Q-tutorial was appealing to me, since it would bring together students from different areas of studies. The project promised to create a unique space to discuss and investigate Hirsch's theory from a variety of angles that were different from the usual program-centered seminars, which I am attending to complete my MA.

1.1 Format and Objective

Thus, the overall goal of the tutorial was to work with Hirsch's theory in the context of an interdisciplinary seminar that incorporated the didactic method of research-based learning. The idea behind this approach was for participants to develop a more practical understanding of the topic and to critically engage with Hirsch's theory. Hence, participants were encouraged to find their own projects, which fit into the overall framework of the tutorial and furthermore reflected on the topic of the seminar itself. The final objective of the tutorial was for students to contribute to the current academic discourse by producing a booklet of essays related to the topic of postmemory.

1.2 Participants

The tutorial was open to BA as well as MA students from Humboldt-University from various fields of study such as English and American studies, gender studies, German literature, African studies, culture and media studies, social sciences and European literatures. Exchange students were also welcome to join the seminar. Participants would be able to earn 3 ETC credits if they attended the tutorial regularly and submitted their final project at the end of the semester.

The tutorial started out with approximately 15 participants and ended with six students handing in their final projects and therefore fulfilling all requirements for the credits. Those students were all enrolled at Humboldt-University in the programs of German studies, English studies, American studies, cultural studies, Russian literatures and gender studies.

2. Research Questions

In the course of the tutorial we came up with a multitude of research questions that ended up serving as a guideline for our individual research projects. Mainly they centered on the concept of postmemory and related notions such as memory and trauma. Yet, we furthermore scrutinized the concepts themselves and how they impact on our own lives and shared realities. Also the ideas of generationality and passed-down trauma figured heavily in these discussions, as they at times seemed to be somewhat fuzzy and imprecise. Research questions that we asked in our discussions of theoretical texts included:

- What is memory and what is postmemory? How do both relate to generationality?
- Can we define a generation in terms of who belongs and who does not? Who is excluded and who is included?
- What are the links between trauma and postmemory?
- Can trauma be inherited?
- Is trauma always an actual experience? How is it related to witnessing? Who do we accept as witnesses? Who is a credible witness and who is not and who determines this? Can there be witnesses who have not experienced the traumatic event themselves but only experienced it indirectly? When does expanding the notion of witnessing become problematic?
- Are there problems with linking trauma to a biologistic understanding of inheritance and generationality? Should we rather talk about cultural memory?
- How have historical accounts been shaped by power structures? Who is heard and represented in these narratives and who and what remains invisible?
- In what ways can visual and textual narratives be regarded as an archive of alternative stories, which nevertheless contain the realities the artists navigate? Where does fiction start and where does science end?

Obviously this is just a selection of the questions we came up with in our discussions. However, what becomes clear is that the tutorial actually went beyond the rather narrow understanding of postmemory and explored a wider range of philosophical questions that nevertheless were related to the overall topic of the seminar.

3. Steps

During my initial preparation I structured the seminar into four blocks: theory, research preparation, research phase, and discussion of research. In the first session, together with the participants we discussed this structure and also the overall syllabus in order to add the necessary changes, which the students were encouraged to suggest. However, the overall structure remained the same.

3.1 Theory

The theoretical part of the tutorial comprised three sessions in which we familiarized ourselves with the theoretical texts that served as a starting point for our tutorial. In both group-based and plenary discussions we explored Hirsch's concept of postmemory but also read other theorists such as sociologist Avery Gordon, who proposes the alternative concept of "haunting" to describe intergenerational trauma. Furthermore, we read some basic texts on trauma and memory by Aleida Assmann and were also concerned with the literary representation of trauma, for which we read a text by Marita Nadal and Mónica Calvo.

Originally the plan was to come up with our own definition of postmemory that would expand Hirsch's notion. Yet, it turned out to be more productive at this point to just work with our questions, which became the guideline for our explorations.

Furthermore, the theoretical part of the tutorial was an attempt to not only familiarize us with theories that for some were still new, but also to address the heterogeneity of the seminar. As participants were not only majoring in different fields but also were at different points regarding their overall course of studies (we had BA and MA students, to provide a rough idea about range of different levels students were at), it was necessary to create a theoretical common ground. Yet, addressing heterogeneity was also meant to reflect on and to address our own positionalities, in the context of an all white university classroom. These reflections were extremely productive, especially with regard to the sensitive topics we were planning to address in our tutorial. Precisely because socially constructed categories such as race, class, gender and ability figure heavily in the histories of, for example, the Shoah or African American slavery, which were among the topics we wanted to approach, a basic awareness of one's own privileges was of importance. Reflecting on our own positionalities also helped to refine our research questions in ways that made them more sensitive to the issues themselves.

Thus, in this phase of the tutorial, we mainly generated a variety of research questions (included in the section before) and set a framework for the overall class. This also meant defining the objective of the tutorial. Together we agreed on producing an essay collection that would document our seminar and be open to the public.

3.2 Research Preparation

After our theoretical discussions we entered the phase of our research preparation. In order to slowly transition from theory to practice, we went on a field trip to "The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe" and "The Memorial to the Sinti and Roma Victims of National Socialism" in Berlin. Students were also provided with a chapter from *Maus*, Art Spiegelman's canonical graphic novel, which Hirsch also analyzes in her work.

The excursion as well as the text served as a starting point to apply the theories we had discussed in the tutorial so far. After the visit we took some time for a discussion in which we reflected on our personal experience at the memorials as well as the connections we saw between the graphic novel and the architectural works with regard to Hirsch's and Gordon's concepts. This was an important step as it was the first time we talked about the theories in more practical terms.

After this field trip, students documented their experience in a one-page reflection. This reflection was also meant to spark the idea for a personal project, which they would introduce in class in the next session. Overall this approach to come up with ideas for our final essays proved to be very productive, as each student was able to present at least one idea for the final project in the subsequent session.

It turned out that a lot of the participants were interested in creative projects that were different from the original idea of writing academically. However, as we were free to decide which form our final essays took, we decided to also include creative texts and more personal essays as contributions to our seminar, since it seemed to fit the theories to which we had devoted our first sessions. Yet, we also agreed that a creative project would also have to include some reflections on the theories we had read by means of an introduction.

3.3 Research Phase

The research phase comprised about six sessions in total. During this part of the tutorial we met only every other week, at which time each of the students presented the current state of their individual project. In the sessions that were devoted to "independent research" students were given questions, which had to be answered before the next in class meeting. These questions served as a guideline for the research and aimed at encouraging students to work continuously (find the questions attached in the appendix).

This way it was possible to not only work on particularly individual, yet very different projects, but also to maintain the overall structure of the seminar. The answers were posted on the platform Moodle and so each of the participants was able to access all texts. Therefore it was possible for all students to prepare for the next session and know about the state of each project in advance.

In the actual session students then shared their projects in mini-presentations. This way it was possible to also leave the realm of academic writing and talk about the struggles and obstacles they came up against. The seminar became a platform in which we were able to share feedback, comment on the others' projects and exchange ideas and new theories we discovered during our individual research.

Those six weeks were thus rather unconventional, especially with regard to the usual structure of seminars in university contexts. Given the research character of this project, however, I believe it was rather adequate to truly devote some time to the projects themselves, rather than burying participants with readings, which might or might not be relevant to their own individual research. Yet, Moodle was obviously still a great tool to distribute and provide additional optional sources for the entire class.

3.4 Discussion of Research

In our final session participants then presented their projects in fifteen minute long final presentations. Unfortunately most students were not able to finish their projects entirely and asked for more time to complete their essays during the summer. Yet, each of them nevertheless presented their research

and drew connections to the overall topic of the seminar. This session also included reflections on the overall structure and the seminar itself.

4. Results

All in all, we were able to consider the topic of postmemory in a variety of different contexts. Some of the projects focused on African American slavery, others continued to look at the context of the Shoah. Students were also interested in the related topics of trauma and memory and thus their projects focused more on these issues.

Hence, we were able to discuss and show that Hirsch's concept of postmemory can also be applied to different contexts. Yet, this was by no means an attempt to compare traumata or different genocides in terms of establishing a hierarchy. Especially in terms of the African diaspora, Gordon's concept of haunting posed a suitable and sometimes more fitting alternative to Hirsch's theorizing. It became evident that trauma directly and indirectly impacts on familial structures affectively and can be passed-down, as Hirsch already suggested, from one generation to the next. Yet, in different contexts e.g. African American slavery and its legacies and continuations, also other factors such as structural and institutionalized forms of oppression and discrimination may obscure the impacts of intergenerational trauma, as forms of direct and indirect trauma affect individuals simultaneously.

We also came to the conclusion that it would require more time and even more research to fully approach the rather explorative and broad question whether there are generations of postmemory. Yet, within the realms of possibility the tutorial offered, we were able to successfully contribute a range of research questions and ideas and therefore added to the academic discourse surrounding the topic of postmemory.

5. Reflections on the Tutorial

In conclusion, this research tutorial provided a great opportunity for students of different backgrounds and different levels to collaboratively work on a research project. Students remarked that they especially appreciated the freedom to work creatively and truly focus on their individual interests, while at the same time being provided with theoretical input. Especially because the seminar was rather small toward the end, it was easy to devote a lot of time to the students' projects and give extensive feedback, which in context of traditional university seminars is difficult due to higher numbers of participants.

Yet, although we had generally devoted a lot of time to the research itself, many of the students were not able to finish their projects until the end of the seminar. This was due to the short time we were given to tackle this rather broad topic. In the course of one semester it is hardly possible to start and complete a research project of this size and to furthermore adequately document this research. Especially since the interdisciplinary character required us to address the heterogeneity of the seminar and to devote quite a bit of time to establish academic common ground.

Despite this critique, students, according to their own feedback, felt positive about the seminar. Also given the rather small time frame, the results we generated nevertheless present a relevant contribution to current academic research concerning postmemory.

6. Works Consulted In the Tutorial

Ahmed S. (2004) *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Andres Julia and Stephen Joyce BL, Wilfried Raussert and Althea R. Wait. (2010) Introduction. *Remembering and Forgetting: Memory in Images and Texts*. Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag.

Assmann A. (2010) Re-framing memory. Between individual and collective forms of constructing the past. In: Tilmans et. al (ed). *Performing the Past: Memory, History and Identity in Modern Europe*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Assmann J. (2008) Communicative and Cultural Memory. In: Erll ANaA (ed) *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*. New York: DeGruyter, 109-118.

Coates T-N. (2015) *Between the World And Me*, Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company.

Erll A. (2008) Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction. In: Erll et al (ed). *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*. New York: DeGruyter, 1-15.

Franklin R. (2011) Identity Theft. *A Thousand Darknesses*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 215-234.

Gordon AF. (2008) *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Minnesota: New University of Minnesota Press.

Hirsch M. (2012) *Generation Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*, New York: Columbia UP.

Nadal MaMC. (2014) Trauma and Literary Representation: An Introduction. *Trauma in Contemporary Literature: Narrative and Representation*, New York, NY: Routledge.

Neumann B. (2012) The Literary Representation of Memory. In: Erll et al (ed). *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*. New York: De Gruyter, 333-342.

Sontag S. (1979) *On Photography*, London: Penguin Books.

Sontag S. (2003) *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Farrar,Straus and Giroux.

Spiegelman A. (2003) *The Complete Maus*, London: Penguin Books.

Straub J. (2012) Psychology, Narrative, and Cultural Memory: Past and Present. In: Erll et al (ed). *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*. New York: De Gruyter.

Strawson G. (2015) The Dangerous Idea That Life Is A Story. *Aeon Magazine*.

6. Appendix

These were the questions posted for students on the platform Moodle for the "Independent Research" sessions.

Independent Research: Session I

Write at least 1 page (Times New Roman, 12, 1.5 spaced) in which you answer the following questions about your project (Introduction) until 12th of June:

- What: is my research topic? Brief introduction of author/artist; situate piece historically (when was the novel written/ the piece produced)?

- Why: why did I choose this artist/author/novel/drawing/photograph/exhibition?

- How: which theories am I going to use to analyze this piece? What methodology will I apply (close reading? Data analysis etc.)

If you are working on an informal/non-academic text or work of art, present your work in progress. The questions might also be different in this case (please include a picture if this is a visual project):

- What: is the project I am working on? Brief introduction of what you are doing exactly. Which theories and ideas, works of art, novels, and poems did inspire you? What are you trying to express?

- Why: did you choose this format?

- How: what materials are you going to use? How are you going to proceed? What are problems you have encountered?

Independent Research: Session II

Please write a page about the theories and secondary sources you use.

- summarize at least two secondary sources that inspire your project or substantiate your argument

- you can either use a text provided in the seminar or your own findings.

- write at least a page about the main theoretical argument of these texts and how this relates to your project

- include bibliographical information

Also be ready to talk about the problems you've encountered in your research.

- identify at least two problems that complicate your argument/research

- how did you cope with them?

- write a paragraph about this

Independent Research: Session III

For next session: as we have talked about what, why and how and also discussed the theories we want to use, it's time to start with the actual project.

- this means the actual analysis, for those who are planning to write essays about graphic novels or novels.
- or the discussion of a photograph you want to include in your analysis
- or your collage
- or simply a section of the creative text you are working on
- remember: this is only an 8-(max) 10 page essay, so it will be enough to do a close reading of only one section of a book or to only include one photograph. You won't have the time to discuss an entire work of art but simply work on a topic, theme and connect this to the seminar.