Since unification in 1990, and particularly since the late 1990s, Germany has seen a boom in the confrontation with memory, evident in the sharp increase in novels, films, autobiographies, and other forms of public discourse that engage with the long-term effects of National Socialism across generations. Taking issue with the concept of "Vergangenheitsbewältigung," or coming to terms with the National Socialist past, which after 1945 guided nearly all debate on the topic, the contributors to this volume view contemporary German culture through the more dynamic concept of "memory contests," which provides a circumstantial view of German debates on the past, departing, as have recent German debates, from the tone of censorship that has so often accompanied these discussions. Instead, the idea of memory contests posits that all forms of memory, public or private, can be understood as ongoing processes of negotiating identity in the present. The idea also captures the intergenerational dynamic of the ongoing confrontation with memory in Germany today.

Touching on gender, generations, memory and postmemory, trauma theory, ethnicity, historiography, and family narrative alongside many other topics, the contributions provide a comprehensive picture of current German memory debates, in so doing shedding light on the struggle to construct a German identity mindful of but not wholly defined by the horrors of National Socialism and the Holocaust. The volume will appeal to readers with a wide variety of academic interests, including cultural history, gender studies, film, and contemporary German literature.
German Memory Contests
Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture
German Memory Contests
The Quest for Identity in Literature, Film, and Discourse since 1990

Edited by
Anne Fuchs, Mary Cosgrove, and Georg Grote
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This volume consists of fourteen selected articles by scholars from Germany, Great Britain, the United States, and Ireland. Engaging in a dialogue on cultural identity in unified Germany, the contributors explore the dynamic of contemporary German memory debates from a range of interlocking positions.

In order to make the volume accessible to non-German speakers, all German quotations have been translated into English. Unless otherwise stated, all translations were made by the author of the respective article.

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A. F., M. C., G. G.
Dublin, March 2006
Introduction: Germany’s Memory Contests and the Management of the Past

Anne Fuchs and Mary Cosgrove

In an essay entitled “The Present as History,” the eminent British historian Eric Hobsbawm cites the famous opening lines of L. P. Hartley’s novel The Go-Between (1953): “The past is another country. They do things differently there.”¹ For Hobsbawm, Hartley’s aphorism aptly summarizes a key idea that should guide good historical research, namely that historical understanding is premised on the “otherness of the past.”² When historians fail to keep this insight in mind, they run the risk of producing anachronisms rather than credible historical explanations. And yet, the point of Hobsbawm’s essay is to turn this premise precisely on its head by examining how historians’ own experiences of history can influence their perceptions of it in a fundamental way. Citing John Charmley’s Churchill biography as an example, Hobsbawm argues that the biographer’s attempt to reassess Chamberlain’s long-discredited appeasement policy was only possible because Charmley was not a member of the war generation who had experienced this period first hand.³ For Hobsbawm, his generation of historians did not have to go to the archives to know that a deal with Hitler was simply impossible. Of course, Hobsbawm’s point is not that only old men write good history but rather that historical research is malleable: the passing of the political generation that had direct experience of the Second World War is a case in point in that it marks “a major, if often silent, shift in that country’s politics, as well as in its historical perspective on the war and — as is evident in both France and Italy — Resistance.”⁴

In the case of Germany, this shift has not been silent but in the years following unification a rather noisy affair fought out in a series of public debates about how Germans should manage the recent past. Among the most prominent examples are the much-cited Walser-Bubis debate, the debate about the Wehrmacht exhibition, the protracted discussion about the building of the Holocaust memorial in Berlin, the controversy about the relevance of 1968, and, with reference to the GDR past, the debates about the Stasi past, the legacy of Socialism, or — from an eastern perspective — the question of West German cultural hegemony. More recently, the (re)discovery of Germans as victims of war and expulsions from the eastern regions has added a new sentimental tenor to such collective
soul-searching. The ferocity of some of these controversies shows that the dates of 1945 and 1989 do not just refer to key moments in the shaping of Germany’s postwar political landscape; they are emotionally charged nodes on the gendered and generational memory map that guides the German identity discussions that are the topic of this volume. There are many complex reasons for these memory debates: above all, unification did away with the political underpinnings of the postwar era, foreboding the arrival of the global economy that would swiftly erode the social security of the GDR. Nearly fifteen years later, in the era of the declining welfare state, it has dawned on West Germans that they too are affected by the consequences of globalization. Massive social and economic uncertainty triggered a wave of debates about Germany’s past, as if public consensus about the past had to be established before a joined future could be mastered.

In reunified Germany, the past is thus not so much another country where they do things differently, but a hotly contested territory. The idea of memory contests refers to the special features of German memory debates since unification. Several thematic strands dominate these debates: first, unification triggered an investigation of the wider cultural and social divisions between east and west; second, with the ever increasing historical distance to National Socialism, the 1990s saw a notable rediscovery of private family memories. Once these entered the public domain, they exposed the limits of Germany’s official remembrance culture that for decades sidelined people’s private memories of war. Third, against the backdrop of the aging of the generation of the 1968ers, the memory debates of the 1990s were characterized by a huge investment in the idea of generations, along with the scrutiny of generational conflict and transgenerational dialogue. Elsewhere we have argued that

in contrast to the old paradigm of “Vergangenheitsbewältigung” [coming to terms with the past], the term memory contests puts emphasis on a pluralistic memory culture which does not enshrine a particular normative understanding of the past but embraces the idea that individuals and groups advance and edit competing stories about themselves that forge their changing sense of identity. The notion of memory contests thus gives expression to the fact that memories always offer heavily edited versions of selves, groups and of their worlds.5

Memory contests are highly dynamic public engagements with the past that are triggered by an event that is perceived as a massive disturbance of a community’s self-understanding. In the case of Germany, this disturbance was of course caused by the period of National Socialism, which fundamentally dislodged Germans’ shared self-perception as an exemplary Kultnation. The city of Weimar as the seat of eighteenth-century literature, philosophy, and art had been the very embodiment of Germany’s heritage as a Kultnation. The idea of Kultnation was defined on the
one hand by concepts specific to the German culture, such as Herder’s notion of the German language and, on the other, by ideas that transcend the German culture, such as Goethe’s notion of “Weltliteratur” (world literature). After the war, the cultural leadership of the two Germanys tried to reconnect with this heritage pedagogically: East Germany claimed that the great German classics were the real precursors of the socialist state and could be used for re-educating the people for the emerging socialist order. Inexpensive editions of the classics were printed in the GDR, the so-called “Bibliothek deutscher Klassiker” (Library of German Classics), to popularize and spread the sense of a cultural heritage that since the eighteenth century had emphasized notions of freedom, justice, and beauty. West Germany’s cultural leadership also tried to reinvigorate such notions for a program of re-education. The historian Friedrich Meinecke proposed in his book *Die deutsche Katastrophe* (The German Catastrophe, 1946) that the German people should be reminded of the value of a particular version of German “Innerlichkeit,” an inwardness that was culturally defined. Goethe societies should be founded with the purpose of “die lebendigen Zeugnisse des großen deutschen Geistes durch den Klang der Stimme den Hörern ins Herz zu tragen” (carrying the living heritage of the great German cultural tradition by means of the tone of the voice into the hearts of the audience). The problem was that such programs saw the twelve years of National Socialism simply in terms of an “Unterbrechung der Überlieferung” (an interruption of tradition), as one contributor to the Christian-Socialist magazine *Frankfurter Hefte* put it. This disturbance of tradition, it was felt, could be overcome by realigning the nation with its true cultural values. The German *Bildungsbürger* of the postwar period sought consolation in cultural tradition. This explains the success of conservative Christian or even nationalistic authors and poets who ignored the challenges of the present and sought refuge in escapist poetry that gave expression to conservative ideas in conventional forms.

However, this regression into an unchallenged tradition was relatively short-lived. The writings of these authors had no impact beyond the 1950s, and they are completely forgotten today. Especially after the highly publicized Auschwitz trials in the early 1960s in Frankfurt, it had become evident that Weimar did not just stand for the great German classics from Goethe and Schiller to Herder but also for the nearby German concentration camp Buchenwald. A new cultural elite emerged that embraced a discourse of critical engagement with the causes of National Socialism. One should of course emphasize that such attempts to work through the past were not an invention of the 1960s: the question of German collective guilt had already been raised in the immediate postwar period by intellectuals such as Thomas Mann, Hannah Arendt, and Karl Jaspers. In 1945, in his first lecture series after the war, at Heidelberg University, the philosopher Jaspers addressed the issue of Germans’ collective guilt. In
contrast to Mann, who after the war insisted on an insurmountable distance between himself as an emigrant and the German people, Jaspers used the collective pronoun “we” throughout his lectures to indicate that all Germans, even the exiles, had to deal with this issue in a comprehensive fashion. But such concern with the management of the past had little resonance in the wider public, which was, after all, preoccupied with economic survival. The climate of repression was one of the main targets of the students of 1968, who attacked their parents and teachers for their denial of the past. However, the wider public only began to engage with this topic after the screening of the American series *Holocaust* on German TV in 1979.

The example of 1968 demonstrates a second characteristic of memory contests. Memory contests question and investigate established cultural norms and values that have helped to define the nation since the eighteenth century. Memory contests are iconoclastic: they challenge the cultural heritage through which groups of people articulate and sculpt a positive self-image. Even where participants in such memory debates put forward traditional views about national identity and collective memory, they ultimately contribute to a critical investigation of the validity of these norms. Most modern (western) nations have traditionally managed their past through historical research, museums, artistic expression, literature, and the media, all of which feeds into what Benedict Anderson calls “imagined communities.” The imagined community of the modern nation employed a relatively homogenous set of cultural practices that created a sense of togetherness. In our globalized era, however, the binding force of high culture has been lessened considerably. The dispersion of culture into a range of alternative lifestyles, self-fashionings, or religious and ethnic sub-groupings that no longer share a set of cultural values makes the “invention of tradition” — a hallmark of the nineteenth-century nation state — a vicarious project of the impoverished cultural imagination. Faced with the fragmentation of society into a set of cultural niches, neoconservatives tend to advocate the proper management of the nation’s past. They propose to simply re-instate the delegitimized national narrative as a cure for the ailments of our fragmented reality. Recently, German center-right politicians have suggested that all ethnic minorities in Germany must subscribe to the German “Leitkultur” (dominant culture). On the occasion of the conservative Christian Social Party (CSU) conference in Bavaria, the party leader and Ministerpräsident Edmund Stoiber gave the following definition of German national identity:

Traditionelle Werte, nationale Identität, Zusammenhalt und Bindungen machen ein Volk stabilier, selbstbewusster, krisenfester gegen Gefährdungen. Das spüren die Menschen im rauen Wind der Globalisierung und der Bedrohungen durch Terror und religiösen Fanatismus. [. . .] Unser Volk ist eine Schicksalsgemeinschaft. Diese Gemeinschaft ist entstanden
aus einer gemeinsamen Geschichte im Schlechten wie im Guten, gemeinsamer Sprache und Kultur, gemeinsamen Traditionen und gemeinsamer christlicher Religion. Alles zusammen ist Teil unseres geistig kulturellen Wurzelgeflechts.16

[Traditional values, national identity, solidarity, and close ties make a people more stable, more self-aware, and better equipped to deal with crises and danger. People sense this in the raw wind of globalization and the threat of terror and religious fanaticism. [. . .] We as a people are a community united by fate. This community has emerged out of a shared history both good and bad, shared traditions and a shared Christian religion. All of this forms part of our spiritual and cultural roots.]

This highly regressive notion with its emphasis on a “shared fate,” Christianity, and tradition did not go unchallenged. For example, in a lead article in Die Zeit, the editor Marion Gräfin Dönhoff dismantled the idea in the following way:


Wir leben heute in einem sich immer mehr integrierenden Europa. Die Globalisierung in Wirtschaft und Finanzen hat sich weitgehend durchgesetzt. Desgleichen der Supranationalismus im politischen Bereich und im Kommunikationswesen. Die Kultur wird folgen.17

[When I first got word of the “Leitkultur” discussion, I automatically had to think of the provocative, insolent, high-handed Wilhelmine sentence: “One day again the world will heal itself through the essence of Germany.”

Today we certainly live in an increasingly integrated Europe. Globalization in economy and finance has asserted itself extensively. The same goes for supranationalism in the political arena and in communications. Culture comes next.]

There is consensus among intellectuals that such attempts to reinstate a heritage culture offer little more than a placebo in the face of the deepening cracks and rifts within our transnational, multi-cultural societies. However, the idea of a stable and normative Leitkultur appealed to those sections of the wider public that feel threatened by the forces of globalization. Although Leitkultur is a regressive concept, it reflects fears that are also fairly widespread in other Western European nations. Evidence of this fear is the rise of the Right in the Netherlands and popular doubts about further European integration as expressed in the rejection of the European Constitution by the French people in 2005.
And yet, while most nations of Europe are struggling with the global and economic forces that have already eroded a good deal of national sovereignty, the management of the past is less contentious in some western countries than in others. Public discourse in France, for example, regularly invokes the French Revolution as an unquestionable identity marker of Frenchness that affects all French citizens, regardless whether they are of Algerian or domestic French origin. However, the violent street protests in France in the autumn of 2005 show that this national narrative is under jeopardy too: the street battles and fires in the outskirts of the big cities drew attention to widespread discrimination and marginalization of second generation immigrants in France. By contrast to France’s colonial legacy, Germany’s management of the past is still fraught by the haunting legacy of the Third Reich. It is obvious that the twelve years of National Socialism have caused a massive disturbance in the national narrative. In spite of West Germany’s institutionalized pedagogy of Vergangenheitsbewältigung, which has indeed managed to establish a discourse of contrition, there remains a nearly imperceptible anxiety of influence that manifests itself in the regular assertion that Germany is a normal democracy.

The notable ferocity of recent German memory contests reflects the deeply personal tenor of these attempts to understand German history. The last decade has witnessed a sharp increase in autobiographies, talk shows, and TV documentaries that engage with the personal experience of eyewitnesses of the Third Reich. The boom in the memory industry voices an awareness of the passing of the last generation of first-hand witnesses of National Socialism, who lived through the period as children and young adults. The personal accounts and stories of the last generation of eyewitnesses have produced a new transgenerational dialogue. In many ways, this dialogue is less antagonistic than when the ’68ers confronted their parents with the past in the 1960s. After more than forty years of an institutionalized “discourse of contrition,” it has become possible at last to address the floating gap between the subjective experience of history and scholarly historical explanations. Memory contests set the personal and the historical, the private and the public, fact and imagination in dialogue with one another. This dialogue concerns the question of how we can make room for the articulation of the bottom-up experience of history without, however, opening the door to complete historical revisionism. Since the groundbreaking work of Maurice Halbwachs it is generally accepted that personal memories of eyewitnesses that are passed down in family legends are highly malleable and subject to multiple practices of editing and historical revisionism. By contrast, historiography emphasizes a structural or functional perspective on history that takes little interest in personal life stories.

The gap between historical research and the communicative memory of the Third Reich is the subject of a recent study entitled Opa war kein
Nazi (Grandpa Was No Nazi): the sociologist Harald Welzer and his researchers analyzed the dialogue about the Nazi past in three generations of forty contemporary German families. Focusing on the transformations of history in the archive of family memories, the sociologists found that even in families in which one or both grandparents were deeply enmeshed with National Socialism, the family narratives tend to be characterized by a high degree of loyalty to the family members. Although the grandchildren showed no signs of sympathizing with National Socialism, and although they regarded the Holocaust as a heinous crime, they tended to represent their grandparents’ role during the period in an embellished light. Welzer and his researchers call such editing of family narratives across generational thresholds a process of “kumulative Heroisierung,” cumulative heroization, which draws attention to the malleability of family memory.

Although Welzer’s study highlights the gap between historical knowledge on the one hand and the production of social memory on the other, his methodology has its clear limits. The study included only families in which the three generations shared stories about the past; it thus lacks a perspective on those significant cases where the generations did not communicate directly about the past.

In contrast to Welzer’s concern with overt communication between the generations, Gabriele Rosenthal analyzed the significance of communicative silence about the past in families of Holocaust survivors and perpetrators. Although Rosenthal and her team also found that perpetrator families tend to produce family myths that cover up the underlying hidden family history, they also dealt with families in which the children or grandchildren become delegates of their parents’ or grandparents’ unmastered guilt. This illuminative study demonstrates that it is not sufficient to analyze only what is being said about the past in postwar families. The unsaid, the *sous-entendues* (ghost-notes), can function as a powerful transmitter of an unmastered inheritance that is silently passed down the generational line. The transmission of family secrets through a generational chain is the concern of a number of contributions in this volume.

At this point it is useful to distinguish between two types of memory contests: first, those that are instigated by public actors, and second, those that are the result of what we will call the “historical uncanny.” In the first category belong such controversies as the well-known Walser-Bubis debate. Another more recent example is the debate about Germans as victims of the Allied bombing raids, which was first triggered by W. G. Sebald’s lectures titled *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (The Air-Raids and Literature, 1999). Sebald raised the question why there were hardly any credible literary accounts of an experience that had traumatized Germans for generations, a topic that will be examined in more detail in this volume. The publication of Günter Grass’s novella *Im Krebsgang* (Crabwalk) in 2002 shows that Sebald had hit a nerve of the times by homing in on feelings
that had led an underground existence in postwar German discourse. While Grass’s novella explored from an intergenerational perspective and without a hint of historical revisionism the theme of German wartime suffering, the same cannot be said of *Der Brand* (The Fire, 2002) by the historian Jörg Friedrich. This book did not just adopt the perspective of Germans as victims of the carpet bombing campaigns but employed a somewhat inflammatory register that, as Alcida Assmann argues, portrays the Allied bombings as a war against the civilian population and the treasures of German culture. Reaching its tenth edition in the first year of publication, the book is a symptom of a highly popular trend to recast Germans as victims of war and expulsions. This tendency was already apparent in the 1950s, when many Germans considered themselves Hitler’s first victims. These examples show that memory contests can be triggered by public figures who intervene in what they perceive to be a too-consensual remembrance culture. In each case, these interventions aim to push the boundaries of Germany’s cultural memory beyond the institutionalized discourse of remembrance. Furthermore, these debates do not take place exclusively in a rarified space of intellectual discussion. The German media plays a key role in propelling these debates forward and in disseminating their messages: the televised debate between Martin Walser and Ignatz Bubis on 14 December 1998, arranged by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, is one such example of the media-fueled visibility of contested memory in Germany today.

The second type of memory contest is not the product of direct discursive intervention but the result of what we will call “the historical uncanny.” The significance of the 9th of November in twentieth-century German history is a case in point: it is the date when the Social Democrat Philipp Scheidemann proclaimed the first German Republic in Berlin, the date of the Hitler Putsch in 1923, the date of the pogrom night known as the “Reichskristallnacht” (Night of the Broken Glass) in 1938, and finally the date of the Fall of the Wall in 1989. Clearly, the 9th of November is laden with historical significance. Faced with the ambiguity of the date, the German Bundestag felt that it carried too uncanny a burden to make it Germany’s national day. Instead, a completely neutral date, October 3, was chosen as the Day of Unification. In this instance, the historical uncanny is the result of the strange coincidence that historically interrelated events actually did occur on the same date. While the Hitler Putsch and the Reichskristallnacht are haunting signatures of the Third Reich, which caused the division of Germany that was finally overcome on 9 November 1989, Scheidemann’s proclamation of the first German Republic is an equally haunting reminder of the failure of democracy. After 1989 no one wanted to be reminded of previous historical failures. The correlation between these dates creates an uncanny repetition effect that historians do not normally deal with since it exceeds a rational framework of analysis.
The historical uncanny is the proper domain of fiction; it suggests that historical change can be motivated by subconscious factors that act across generational thresholds.

The historical uncanny is also a vessel for the expression of the personal experience of history. In recent years, it has become the focal point of a growing number of family narratives that adopt a transgenerational perspective on Germany’s past. Among these are Monika Maron’s *Pawels Briefe* (Pavel’s Letters, 1999), Hans-Ulrich Treichel’s *Der Verlorene* (The Lost One, 1999), Günter Grass’s *Im Krebsgang*, and Uwe Timm’s *Am Beispiel meines Bruders* (On My Brother’s Example, 2003), which appeared in English translation under the somewhat misleading title *In My Brother’s Shadow* (2005). Other notable examples in this respect are Reinhard Jirgl’s *Die Unvollendeten* (The Incomplete Ones, 2003), Stephan Wackwitz’s *Ein unsichtbares Land: Ein Familienroman* (An Invisible Country: A Family Romance, 2003), Thomas Medicus’s *In den Augen meines Großvaters* (In My Grandfather’s Eyes, 2004), and Dagmar Leupold’s *Nach den Kriegen* (After the Wars, 2004). The narrators of these stories, who research their families’ histories, are as interested in the silences and gaps in the family narrative as they are in the overt family legends that have been passed down through the generations. Tuning into the unsaid that punctures the archive of family legends, these narrators adopt the role of “phantomologists” who explore an unmastered inheritance within the domain of the family. This body of literature is the topic of a number of chapters in this volume.

In the majority of these narratives, the unifying experience of a generation is used as an explicit reference point that either validates or questions a particular set of historical explanations. However, the relationship between a generation and its historical experience is far from clear; it requires urgent critical attention. The common understanding of the concept of a generation is based on membership in an age group, which predisposes individuals to similar historical experiences and cultural influences. Straddling the biological factor of birth and cultural influences that shape a generation, the term thus always carries the risk of explaining historical phenomena with reference to natural processes. In order to avoid this pitfall, the term requires careful handling and historical analysis. Cultural critics have come up with a range of explanations. In the nineteenth century, Wilhelm Dilthey defined the concept in terms of a harmonious relationship between the individual’s biography and his times. Dilthey’s explanation implicitly presupposed that it is great men who make great history. His concept of a generation did not really encompass the lives of ordinary people; rather it referred to the biographies of great men whose lives provide an age with a mirror of its historical and cultural achievements. In an article entitled “Das Problem der Generationen” (The Problem of Generations) the sociologist Karl Mannheim tried to move away from Dilthey’s
understanding of a “geistige” (intellectual) bond among members of a generation by analyzing the concept in analogy to class: like class membership, membership in a generation was not a question of choice but one of birth; a generation needs its members’ conscious awareness to form a generational bond. Mannheim thus advanced the level of analysis considerably by putting forward a social understanding of the idea of a generation. And yet, in spite of his achievement in this regard, he too ultimately subscribed to the notion that the Zeitgeist of a particular age is the product of the intellectual elite that puts its stamp on its times.

Mannheim wrote his article in 1928, that is, in the interwar era when the so-called “lost generation” had returned beaten and demoralized from the war. Deprived of a proper education and job prospects, the former soldiers retreated into a group identity that was largely modeled on their camaraderie during the war. Resentful of the Weimar Republic, this generation channeled its disappointments into a feverish form of nationalism that wanted to tear down class barriers in favor of a community like theirs, which had been forged in the trenches of the First World War. In the discourse of the generation of young men that had participated in the war, the concept was largely used to refer to particularly male forms of bonding in response to national humiliation and defeat. Against this background it is hardly surprising that the concept became increasingly contaminated by proto-fascist notions of the German nation as a “Schicksalsgemeinschaft,” a community shaped by fate. From here it was only a step to the idea of a racially defined community that was predestined to change history.

The fascist contamination of the concept of generations explains why the term played a small role in the humanities after the Second World War. Although the generation of defeated soldiers expressed its shared set of experiences within a generational framework, the concept of generations had become too enmeshed in National Socialism to help with the critical analysis of cultural and historical change. While it continued to play a role in everyday life, especially in youth culture, it was written out of academic discourse by the 1960s. Instead, the 1960s saw the upsurge of paradigms that emphasized the structural or functional perspective on historical change. Marxism, structuralism, functionalism, feminism, psychoanalysis, and, finally, deconstructivism swept away the biographical method that had underpinned much of generational discourse; these intellectual movements also challenged the idea that great men change and write history.

So, why is it that the concept of the generation has become such a fashionable idea in contemporary memory debates? Why has it been embraced by popular culture and academics alike? Finding plausible answers to these questions is a main concern of this volume, which, on the one hand, examines recent cultural expressions of generational discourse in literature, film, and political culture, and on the other, offers a range of critical perspectives on the usage of the term itself.
The discourse on the generation in contemporary memory contests is often accompanied by the idea that historical experience is intrinsically traumatic. This is an idea that has gained momentum through the complementary works of Cathy Caruth and Marianne Hirsch. In her work on the relationship between trauma and historical experience, Caruth puts forward the argument that we are always separated from historical experience by the repression inherent in trauma. We can therefore only ever approximate historical experience belatedly through traumatic re-enactment. This is a highly selective, imbalanced, and narrow view of what constitutes history in that it privileges traumatic experience over all other forms of historical experience. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Caruth’s work takes the Holocaust specifically as the defining benchmark of historical experience, a problematic argument that has been analyzed and critiqued by a growing number of scholars. For if the paradigm of historical experience is indeed the feeling-structure of trauma and repression, as Caruth argues, then the Holocaust loses its historical specificity altogether and runs the risk of becoming just another calamitous event in the traumatic history of mankind. This sweeping perspective also implies, somewhat contradictorily, that all of history collapses into the structure of traumatic repression for which the Holocaust is paradigmatic. Caruth does not seem to take into consideration that there might exist other equally valid but non-traumatic kinds of historical experience. Thus, we could say that Caruth does two mutually exclusive things simultaneously: first she introduces a paradigm of valid historical experience that is based on trauma and that prioritizes the Holocaust; second, this very uniform view of history makes the Holocaust indistinguishable from the rest of history, so that it loses any sense of uniqueness.

Hirsch was the first to introduce the concept of postmemory into debates about the memory of the Holocaust. The idea of postmemory attempts to provide theoretical underpinnings for an inevitable development in contemporary Holocaust memory culture: the increased reliance on mediated versions of the past, visual and written, due to the passing away of the generation that experienced the Holocaust and the resulting disappearance of communicative memory. Postmemory describes the increasingly constructed nature of memory for the generations born after the Holocaust. It shows how the descendents of victims and perpetrators invest historical documentation — in the form of family photos, diaries, memoirs — with varying degrees of imaginative fantasy and employ fictional strategies in order to produce a family narrative that bridges the generational gap. While this might provide continuity, tradition, and identity in an otherwise fractured and fragmented family history, the fictionalizing perspective of the belated generation often succumbs to the temptations of sentimentalizing narrative and thus revises history from a subjective perspective. Hirsch’s argument concerning the mediation of Holocaust