

## Urban Undressing: Walter Benjamin's "Thinking- in-Images" and Anne Michaels' Erotic Archaeology of Memory

"**A** Berlin Chronicle," Walter Benjamin's exploration of the spaces that house his childhood memories, contains a passage that resonates profoundly with Anne Michaels' novel *Fugitive Pieces*, in particular its guiding metaphor for historical inquiry:

Language shows clearly that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theatre. It is the medium of past experience, as the ground is the medium in which dead cities lie interred. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. . . . Fruitless searching is as much a part of this as succeeding, and consequently remembrance must not proceed in the manner of a narrative or still less that of a report, but must, in the strictest epic and rhapsodic manner, assay its spade in ever-new places, and in the old ones delve to ever-deeper layers. (*Reflections* 25–26)

In addition to this archaeological imagery and the historical materialism it illustrates, Benjamin's influence is evident throughout Michaels' work. At a stylistic level, his example figures in Michaels' proclivity for aphoristic, fragmentary, and meditative expression, as seen in her essays "Cleopatra's Love" and "Unseen Formations." One could also construct a lineage from Benjamin to Michaels in their depiction of the city as a supreme cultural artifact, richly inscribed with the traces of the past. As well as sharing Benjamin's spatial sensibility, Michaels is indebted to her Jewish literary forebear's correlative understanding of the temporal dimension, especially his secular brand of messianism, whereby the historicist illusion of continuity and automatic advancement is dissipated under a critical backward gaze. This vision is encapsulated in the enigmatic image of the Angel of History

from Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History." The recurrent figure of the witness in Michaels' writing has much in common with the angel, who, to paraphrase Benjamin, turns his face in mute horror toward the pile of debris that is the past, but is prevented from making whole what has been smashed as he is irresistibly propelled into the future by the storm we call progress (*Illuminations* 257–58). Thus, Michaels can be seen as heir to Benjamin's distinctive method of messianic materialism, which, as Annick Hillger expresses it, "uses the kabbalistic tradition to combine historical materialism with the concept of messianic time in order to lay to rest a marxist materialism indebted to the ideas of a homogeneous and linear time" (41).<sup>1</sup>

More specifically, the Benjaminian image of the ruin—of fragments and remains—is central to Michaels' portrayal of urban space in *Fugitive Pieces* and is fundamental, as a metaphor, to her reflections on history, memory, mourning, and community. Michaels evokes the broken and buried forms of the city as a way of critiquing monolithic, teleological modes of history that are premised on purity of descent, as exemplified by the perverted racial ideologies of Nazism. The trope of recollection as a perpetual process of digging for the fragments of the past is used in the novel to take issue with historiographic approaches that pretend, in their infallible, totalizing stance, to be immune to the vagaries as well as the moral obligations of human memory. Correspondingly, images of sedimentation are associated with deliberate forgetting, as when Ben, the child of Holocaust survivors, and the narrator in the second half of the novel, observes that history has "silted up" inside his family because of his parents' refusal to acknowledge the past (*Fugitive* 243). Moreover, by showing how her grieving protagonists learn to live in a city densely populated by "ghosts," Michaels offers a model for accommodating the trauma of history within our present lives. Her narrative gaze, like that of Benjamin's angel, is oriented not toward some bright, amnesiac future but toward the past that we, as its heirs, are duty bound to preserve in memory. *Fugitive Pieces* thus reminds us that community is both a synchronic and diachronic entity, comprising not only the living but also the dead who haunt a specific locale, extending down through the strata of time. This chronotopic vision is epitomized by Jakob's fascination with geological formations that reveal "the way time buckled, met itself in pleats and folds" (*Fugitive* 30), thereby enabling him to project himself back through the millennia in empathetic time travel.

Through scientific imagery, Michaels achieves exceptional depth in her modeling of social and historical relations. Besides her archaeological references, many of Michaels' spatio-temporal models are drawn from the earth sciences, namely geology and meteorology, and from Einsteinian physics. These images provide a means of investigating the invisible operations of time, such as the mysterious developments conventionally ascribed to fate or chance. The seemingly unforeseeable crises of public and private life—which in *Fugitive Pieces* encompass everything from the terrors of the Holocaust to the shock of falling in love—are likened, for instance, to geological processes: “Just as the earth invisibly prepares its cataclysms, so history is the gradual instant” (*Fugitive* 77). Michaels has described her use of scientific discourses as an attempt to get at the “unseen forces” that shape us but are not experienced first hand (“Narrative” 18). As part of the generation born after World War II, she is particularly concerned with understanding how those who come after can commemorate the catastrophes that have indirectly yet profoundly affected them. Michaels' approach closely resembles Benjamin's hallmark technique of “thinking-in-images” (*Bilddenken*) in which philosophical concepts are made visible through concrete historical images; however, the differences between their approaches are just as instructive as the affinities when it comes to addressing some of the criticisms that have been leveled at Michaels' work.

In *Fugitive Pieces*, the narrator stresses the materiality of an “unearthed” history over any allegorical interpretation:

It's no metaphor to feel the influence of the dead in the world, just as it's no metaphor to hear the radiocarbon chronometer, the Geiger counter amplifying the faint breathing of rock, fifty thousand years old. (Like the faint thump from behind the womb wall.) It is no metaphor to witness the astonishing fidelity of minerals magnetized, even after hundreds of millions of years, pointing to the magnetic pole, minerals that have never forgotten magma whose cooling off has left them forever desirous. We long for place; but place itself longs. Human memory is encoded in air currents and river sediment. (53)

Despite this insistence that it is “no metaphor,” clearly a figurative dimension of Michaels' images equates human memory with the anthropomorphic notion of the earth remembering—images that are born, I would suggest, of the latent desire to find a “scientific” and hence incontrovertible basis for the responsibility to bear witness.<sup>2</sup> Critics have identified this conflation of conscious and unconscious processes as problematic in the context of Holocaust representation in that it seems to naturalize and hence potentially redeem historical crimes by obscuring questions of agency.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, the act of investing places, objects, and the physical body with the power to hold our memories *for us* would seem to relieve us of the individual and collective burden of remembering and thus to actually promote forgetting. While a fair amount of scholarly concern has already been directed at Michaels' aesthetic treatment of the Holocaust, often in the form of a rehearsal of Theodor Adorno's famous dictum that to "write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (*Prisms* 34),<sup>4</sup> less has been made of the way in which Michaels' search for material images to symbolize the abstract, invisible workings of memory and history also manifests itself in the erotic objectification—and thus the diminished sense of agency—of her female characters. As intimated by the image of the womb wall, Michaels' concept of "embodied memory" relies on the female body as its metaphorical vehicle. In their substitutive function, Michaels' metaphoric images differ from Benjamin's material (or dialectic) images, which are concerned with showing the truth of the historical object in itself. In fact, Benjamin identifies a tendency toward the "consumption" and devaluation of the material world, and in particular the human body, in allegorical and emblematic representations of immaterial ideas, where the material thing is always something "other." As Sigrid Weigel elaborates in her discussion of Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*: "For him, there was a connection between allegory and practices of stripping naked sensuous things . . . , of rigidification, dismemberment, and deprivation of life" (98). The related problematic not addressed by Benjamin is that this devalued matter or body is conventionally associated with "the feminine" in a reductive opposition with masculine spirit or mind. In order to plot this complex argument through Michaels' work, we must return to Toronto, the city of her childhood and her imagination, and consider how the unseen forces of loss and longing are given shape in this most important of her material images.

Throughout Michaels' poetry and shorter prose, recurrent images of Toronto shed light on the extended portrait of the city in *Fugitive Pieces*. The piece "Where Once We Dwelled," written as the Foreword to John Sewell's *Doors Open Toronto: Illuminating the City's Great Spaces*, typically presents the theme of loss through both geological and architectural imagery (the ravines, pressurized limestone, the ancient lake bed, and abandoned or converted edifices): "lost places (lost possibilities) that continue to live their ghostly absence inside the same space as new buildings, or in the empty air of parking lots" (xiii). When these images of nature and artifice are applied to the theme of memory, however, the uneasy convergence of determinism

and accountability in Michaels' writing becomes apparent; she observes that in the city "geological and human memory meet, like fate and free will" (xiii). "Where Once We Dwelled" also exemplifies Michaels' native love for the city, at times nothing short of erotic in its focus and intensity. Indeed, this essay might best be described as an intimate declaration of love for Toronto, captured in rapturous, lyrical prose. In an extended simile, Michaels compares discovering the city's secret places to exploring a lover's body, beginning with an evocation of Toronto's distinctive geological formations: "Long before, and long after, I imagined undressing the city as one undresses a lover: each time differently. In the city's creases—the ravines, the twenty streams, the folds of the escarpment—a lifetime of desire slipped into laneways and cafés, like prayers slipped between the stones of a temple" (xii). Moving into a more explicatory mode, Michaels then invites readers to take advantage of the "Doors Open" weekend as an exercise in self-discovery and social history:

The city is a body, with its hidden histories, with its structures and infrastructures, and for two days we have a chance to take a good look at who we are; all that a building can teach us—not only about its own usefulness and all that has gone on inside it and continues to, but about those who designed it and those who built it, about the local and not-so-local materials it's made from and the memory of the site itself. Every building, like every human, represents its times, its context. (xiii)

This passage, with its spatial, object-based sense of history, is reminiscent of Benjamin's materialist hermeneutics. Michaels directly acknowledges her literary mentor when she writes of the built world of the city as a memory site *par excellence*: "Every building is an intersection, where one's experience meets the experience of others, where the past lives in the present, Walter Benjamin's 'waking world toward which the past is dreaming'" (xiii). The reference here is to the dialectical image of dreaming and waking that underpins Benjamin's unfinished *Arcades Project*, as set out in his 1935 exposé of the project, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century." In this précis, Benjamin describes the "arcades and interiors, the exhibitions and panoramas" that are evidence of the mid-nineteenth century's commodity fetish as "residues of a dream world" and goes on to elucidate his thesis:

The realization of dream elements in waking is the textbook example of dialectical thinking. For this reason dialectical thinking is the organ of historical awakening. Each epoch not only dreams the next, but also, in dreaming, strives toward the moment of waking. It bears its end in itself and unfolds it—as Hegel already saw—with ruse. In the convulsions of the commodity economy we begin to

recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled. (Reflections 162)<sup>5</sup>

While Michaels does not pursue Benjamin's analysis of the phantasmagoria of capitalist culture, her more general treatment of the themes of memory and loss from a post-Holocaust perspective is indebted to Benjamin's materialist historiography. Based on the "dialectic image," this mode of critique involves unearthing the detritus of the urban landscape and reading it as a record of the real history of repeated destruction, violence, and institutionalized forgetting.<sup>6</sup> The shock value of the dialectical image in revealing the discarded historical object triggers a revolutionary awakening from the collective dream of fated historical progress. Awakening, in this metaphoric sense, is linked to the politically charged act of remembrance.

The mood of unfulfilled longing in "Where Once We Dwelled," or what the author calls the "eros" that saturates "[e]very city, no matter how modern or ancient, populous or abandoned" (xiii), also has a precedent in Benjamin's city essays. In "A Berlin Chronicle," for instance, Benjamin takes an imaginative journey through the city of his childhood, exploring memory in relation to the topography it inhabits. He draws a connection between the many "places and moments when it [Berlin] bears witness to the dead" and the "evanescent" quality these places and moments confer on childhood memories, making them "as alluringly tormenting as half-forgotten dreams" (28), while simultaneously mapping his earliest sexual experiences, his erotic history as it were, onto Berlin's public and domestic spaces. This conjunction of the morbid and the erotic as the unique register of memory can be recognized in psychoanalytical terms as unfulfilled longing—expressed in both mourning and sexual desire—for an original state of plenitude. Such a reading is supported by the oppositional relationship in both Benjamin's and Michaels' work between the mythical "true" language of the body and symbolic language, where the latter is both the marker of a primal loss and its consolation.<sup>7</sup> Weigel, who highlights the influence of Freudian psychoanalysis in Benjamin's concept of an unmediated, silent language of things or matter,<sup>8</sup> also elucidates Benjamin's theory of "language magic," or mimesis, in his allegorical interpretation of the Book of Genesis. According to this theory, the lost immediacy or "magic" of Adamite language only becomes visible through the predominating language of signs in momentary flashes of similitude (see Weigel 72). A psychic drama of absence and longing also plays out in a number of Michaels' poems, with the speaker straining to break through the barrier

of language into a corporeal mode of expression that is immediate, undivided, and authentic. For instance, Michaels' long poem from *The Weight of Oranges*, "Words for the Body," can be read as an expression of the insatiable desire for an ideal unity. The human body, like the "body" of the earth, is regarded as a fully present repository of memory and thus as an alternative to the indirection of symbolic language:

The body has a memory:  
 the children we make,  
 places we've hurt ourselves,  
 sieves of our skeletons in the fat soil.  
 No words mean as much as a life.  
 Only the body pronounces perfectly  
 the name of another. (4.22–28)

A similar interplay between lack, desire, and language is found in another long poem, "What the Light Teaches" from the *Miner's Pond* collection. Here, language is characterized as an inadequate medium, as is most clearly revealed in the attempt to translate the extremes of human experience, both the horrors of history—"We can only reveal by outline, / by circling absence" (8.19–20)—and the passion of lovers—"Language was not enough / for what they had to tell each other" (10.28–29). Yet in spite of its failures, language is also presented as the only refuge for the exiled self: "It's a country; home; family: / abandoned; burned down; whole lines dead, unmarried" (11.6–7).

As suggested by the reference to exile, Michaels' response to longing and loss is deeply rooted in the history of voluntary and forced migration, particularly the Jewish diaspora. Accordingly, she examines the themes of miscommunication and dislocation in relation to the trauma of separation from one's native land and culture. This is most apparent in *Fugitive Pieces*, where immigrant Toronto is described as a "city of forsaken worlds; language a kind of farewell" (89). Yet as Michaels demonstrates, alienation is not just an injury to be suffered in isolation; it can also form the basis of an empathetic kinship. In this respect, silence may be regarded as its own form of communication: an expression of solidarity and an evocation of the ineffable that need not be filled in or recuperated.<sup>9</sup> This positive view of silence as receptivity is illustrated when Jakob, a holocaust survivor and exile, takes a stroll on a summer's evening through one of Toronto's immigrant neighbourhoods. An overheard word sparks the memory of a song his mother used to sing as she brushed his sister Bella's hair. Believing the dark

street to be “safely empty” (109), Jakob lets the remembered words tumble out of him, his “spirit shape finally in familiar clothes” (110):

But the street wasn't empty as I thought. Startled, I saw that the blackness was perforated with dozens of faces. A forest of eyes, of Italian and Portuguese and Greek ears; whole families sitting silently on lawnchairs and front steps. On dark verandahs, a huge invisible audience, cooling down from their small, hot houses, the lights off to keep away the bugs.

There was nothing for it but to raise my foreign song and feel understood. (110)

Darkness and silence are figured not so much as nothingness but as the presence of absence, a space or pause in which one might be encountered on one's own terms.

In *Fugitive Pieces*, partial and fragmentary urban forms remind of a social space in which the shared status of outsider constitutes a fundamental communal bond. Michaels presents derelict or disused sites as the outward manifestation of her protagonists' inner desolation. Paradoxically, then, the impression of desertion enables newcomers to feel that they belong in the city. Jakob, for instance, develops an affinity with those locations that echo and hence accommodate his own sense of loss. His explorations of Toronto mark his painful passage into adulthood. Surveying the city from the escarpment on Davenport Road, Jakob is drawn to the ghostly industrial landscape:

At night, a few lights marked port and starboard of these gargantuan industrial forms, and I filled them with loneliness. I listened to these dark shapes as if they were black spaces in music, a musician learning the silences of a piece. I felt this was my truth. That my life could not be stored in any language but only in silence; the moment I looked into the room and took in only what was visible, not vanished. (111)

Again, in darkness and silence Jakob finds a means of expressing the unspeakable horrors of the past. Ben, who was born after the war and so, in a sense, like Jakob, “did not witness the most important events” of his life (*Fugitive* 17), is similarly attracted to absence and aftermath within the urban landscape: “The ravines, the coal elevators, the brickyard. . . . The silent drama of abandonment of the empty factories and storage bins, the decaying freighters and industrial ruins” (228).<sup>10</sup> *Fugitive Pieces* uses such vacant imagery to gesture toward the irredeemable while also demonstrating the necessity of working through grief by giving events shape and meaning. Thus, Michaels addresses the paradoxes of Holocaust historiography and the impossible imperative of testimony, of presuming to speak for the silenced and forgotten victims.



The manner in which Jakob adapts to Toronto by turning it into a repository of memory further illuminates Michaels' notion of the city as an object of love. Just as Ben comes to "an irregular and intimate knowledge of the city" (238–39) through the stories his wife Naomi shares, Jakob learns to make a personal connection to place. As a young boy travelling with his guardian, the Greek geologist Athos, through the ancient terrain of the Peloponnesus, which has been scarred by innumerable natural and human disasters, Jakob feels his "own grief expressed there" and has his first experience of "intense empathy with a landscape" (60). This impression will recur half a century later in Toronto, where Jakob manages to create a sense of home by finding a form for his own strangeness and longing within the physical features of the land. By comparison, Athos remains tied to the land of his childhood. Thus, when Athos dies, Jakob writes to their Greek friends Kostas and Daphne to tell them he will one day bring Athos' ashes to the island of Zakynthos: "I will bring Athos home, to a land that remembers him" (118).

The enormous wealth of time stored up in the city also offers consolation of another sort. A non-linear examination of the past enables Jakob to escape the tyranny of a preordained present and to imagine other possible futures. In so doing, Jakob comes to sympathetically identify his plight with that of the First Nations peoples of the Toronto region, who saw their culture razed by European settlers. Again, Athos' geological and archaeological knowledge provides the figure for Jakob's view of history: "Athos's backward glance gave me a backward hope. Redemption through cataclysm; what had once been transformed might be transformed again. I read about Toronto's dried-up, rerouted rivers—now barely gutter streams—that once were abundant tributaries fished by torchlight" (101). Jakob evokes here a distinctly messianic conception of history as a cycle of cataclysm and disruption, while the motif of redemption is likewise related to a Jewish tradition of remembrance that involves gathering up a fragmented and threatened past. Toronto's numerous forgotten rivers provide Michaels with a particularly apt metaphor for memory—which can long flow underground before rising to the surface again—since these waterways, so central to the material and spiritual life of the First Nations, were buried and diverted in the name of "progress" and "civilization," to make way for an industrial infrastructure. *Fugitive Pieces* critiques the perversion of these Enlightenment values where they underpin a linear, triumphal conception of history that was discredited by the Holocaust and, in particular, by Nazi Germany's attempts

to consign all voices that contested their vision of human destiny to oblivion. Michaels' description of Toronto's subterranean streams constitutes a dialectic image that in order to challenge the civilizing impulse links the Holocaust with the genocidal treatment of Canada's aboriginals.<sup>11</sup> The affinity between Athos' historical perspective and that of Benjamin's Angel of History is encapsulated in Susan Buck-Morss' commentary on the "Theses": "A construction of history that looks backward, rather than forward, at the destruction of material nature as it *has actually taken place*, provides dialectical contrast to the futurist myth of historical progress (which can only be sustained by forgetting what has happened)" (95).

Whereas Michaels' concrete archaeological images of historical destruction and denial constitute a politically effective way of reading the world, her topographical treatment of the female body points to the representational pitfalls of "thinking-in-images." Insofar as the women in *Fugitive Pieces* provide "matter" for Michaels' metaphors of memory, they become reified aesthetic objects of diminished autonomy relative to the male protagonists. As we have seen, Michaels, like Benjamin before her, carries on the tradition of representing the city as a sexualized body with feminine connotations; and just as space is eroticized and implicitly gendered in *Fugitive Pieces*, the female sexual body is, conversely, spatially "mapped out" to serve as a physical link between past and present. As D. M. R. Bentley's article makes clear, the dual theme of recovery and repression of the past is associated with the principal female characters, who are figured either as vessels of or impediments to memory. In the former ("positive") capacity, the bodies of Michaels' women are made to carry symbolic weight as vehicles of transmission, often by virtue of their concern with the body: in mourning the dead, in domestic nurturing, and, above all, in childbearing. A gender-specific division of labour is thus perpetuated in the novel, with feminine procreation being set in opposition to male creation. In fact, the novel's fundamental structure is based on the non-biological patrilineal transmission of memory from Athos to Jakob to Ben through their work as writers.<sup>12</sup>

The female characters in Michaels' novel serve an auxiliary function within the overarching masculine quest for self-knowledge, and as such their roles can be defined according to three allegorical archetypes: the woman may represent the ostensible goal of the quest, someone who needs to be found or rescued; she may be a beguiler, someone who poses an obstacle or threat to the hero; or she may be a guide, sage, or mediator for the

hero. In the case of *Fugitive Pieces*, as in many quest narratives, a fundamental correspondence unites the women who perform the functions of “goal” and “guide.” The three women who fulfil the roles in Jakob’s quest are Bella, Alex, and Michaela, respectively, each of whom is described in topographical images. Jakob’s defining relationship is with his sister Bella, or rather her “ghost.” His romantic idealisation of her memory, his obsession with her unknown fate at the hands of the German soldiers who killed their parents, and his endless melancholia all govern his subsequent relationships with women. Jakob’s first wife, Alexandra, is shown to hinder his connection with Bella. Alexandra inherits from her English father a fascination with British military history, especially the “large-scale strategic illusions” used during World War II to disguise key sites from the enemy (129). In Jakob’s narrative, Alex is implicitly linked to these topographical ruses because her name recalls the story of British intelligence agent Jasper Maskelyne, who “moved Alexandria harbour a mile up the coast; each night a papier-mâché city was bombed in its stead, complete with fake rubble and canvas craters” (129). The references to “phantom architecture” (129), which Jakob primarily associates with Hitler’s chief architect, Albert Speer, underscore Alex’s disorienting, suppressive influence. Jakob feels that she is brainwashing him, trying to make him forget the Holocaust by immersing him in her unfamiliar Canadian ways: “Alex wants to explode me, set fire to everything. She wants me to begin again” (144). Most tellingly, he wonders how the sister he has lost will ever find him “here, beside this strange woman” (126).

If Alex is a false landmark, Jakob’s second wife, Michaela, enables him to integrate Bella’s memory into his everyday reality, thus healing the psychic split between his past and present selves caused by the trauma of the war. Rather than creating an obstruction, Michaela facilitates memory and mourning by offering her own personal, erotic history to Jakob. This process is portrayed in distinctly topographical and corporeal terms, as when Michaela guides Jakob through the literal and figurative terrain of her past: “I enter the landscape of her adolescence, which I receive with a bodily tenderness as Michaela relaxes and imperceptibly opens toward it” (186). The sexual nature of this exploration is signalled earlier when Jakob describes “cross[ing] over the boundary of skin into Michaela’s memories, into her childhood” (185).

Where Alex’s restlessness and love of novelty suggest that she is future-oriented, a talent for living with the past characterizes Michaela, the archae-

ologist and museum conservator. The reader is encouraged to draw this comparison between the two women when the city of Alexandria is once more evoked. Jakob's description highlights Michaela's ability to negotiate the past within the present: "Her mind is a palace. She moves through history with the fluency of a spirit, mourns the burning of the library at Alexandria as if it happened yesterday. She discusses the influence of trade routes on European architecture, while still noticing the pattern of light across a table" (176). Michaela's greatest gift to Jakob is the wealth of ancestral memory stored up in her physical being: "In Michaela's eyes, ten generations of history, in her hair the scents of fields and pines" (178). Jakob hungrily devours these memories, and by laying claim to his wife's body finds a means of incorporating his own family history into his new life in Toronto, thereby making peace with the dead. Thus, their sexual relationship is presented as Jakob's physical exploration of Michaela, which is simultaneously an unlocking of memory. He inaugurates this process by tracing every line and shape of her body, and only after he "explore[s]" her this way, "an animal outlining territory, does she burst into touch" (180).

Jakob finally achieves physical and psychic release when, in a characteristically eroticized scene, he transmits Bella's memory to Michaela, who sheds tears for the dead girl (182). Michaela's ability to mourn heals for Jakob the broken link to the past.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, when she bakes a pie she keeps alive the traditions and knowledge passed down through the women not only in her family but also in Jakob's. Reminded of his mother teaching Bella in the kitchen, Jakob observes that Michaela's "hands carry my memories" (192). Michaela restores hope to Jakob and enables him to feel, "for the first time, a future" (267). In her reproductive role she also represents the potential for cyclical renewal. Husband and wife both die, however, before she can tell him that she is pregnant with a child whom she intended to name Bella if she was a girl or Bela if he was a boy (279). As King observes, "the possibility of redeeming the loss of his [Jakob's] sister is offered but not fulfilled" ("We Come After" 103). The decision to suspend the narrative between life and death is consistent with Michaels' sophisticated handling of the theme of loss. While the past can be imaginatively "re-presented" through language and memory, it can never be fully restored; gaps and silences remain; and the longed for reunification of self/other—of Bela/Bella—remains an impossible dream.

In Ben's half of the novel, a similar drama of remembrance is played out in relation to Ben's wife, Naomi, and the young American woman, Petra,

with whom he has a brief and passionate affair when he travels to Idhra to recover Jakob's journals. Again, the bodies of the two women become the symbolic ground of the male protagonist's pursuit of understanding. With a hint of complacency, Ben describes Naomi's body as "so familiar a map" (256), while in his infatuation with Petra he spends hours learning every intimate "line," "crease," and "curve" of her body as if it were a site to be sectioned and surveyed (276). Indeed, Petra's name links her to the earth—as well as to the ruins of the ancient city of Petra, with its famous Treasury and tombs carved into the stone cliffs—and thus to Michaels' extended archaeological metaphor of exhuming the past. This connection is made explicit when Ben notes: "Like conversation drifting up from the courtyard, single words rise into consciousness: Petra, earth" (275). Like Alex, Petra represents the erasure or betrayal of memory. During their lovemaking, Ben is seized by the violent impulse to obliterate himself and the spectre of the Holocaust in her body. The semen he spills is figuratively equated with the ghosts that weigh on his conscience: "*I shook myself free of a million lives, an unborn for every ghost, over Petra's firm belly and brown thighs and slept carelessly, while souls seeped into the extravagance of sheets and flesh*" (278). Ironically, when Petra "desecrate[s]" the house that has been "lovingly preserved" (281) as "a shrine" and "a museum" (278) to Jakob's memory, she inadvertently uncovers the notebooks that Ben hoped to "excavate" (261).

As Michaela is to Alex, Naomi is the foil to Petra. Whereas Ben's relationship with Petra is non-generative, Naomi participates in a symbolic form of matrilineal reproduction when Ben's mother entrusts Naomi, the "daughter she longed for," with the memory of her children, Hannah and Paul, who died during the Holocaust, so that "the truth would eventually be passed on" (252). In another parallel to the Jakob-Bella-Michaela triangle, then, the wife becomes a proxy for the lost sister. The shared history that connects Naomi and Ben—"I know her memories" (285), he declares—are instrumental in his decision to return to her in Toronto. The description of this anticipated homecoming in the final section of the novel hints at Ben's recovery of a sense of history and willingness to confront the past. Naomi thus completes the motif of the woman who embodies memory and initiates consciousness or "awakening" in the male subject.

As a novelist, poet, and essayist, Anne Michaels builds images that give spatial form to the intangible, mysterious processes of memory and history. To this end, she adopts Walter Benjamin's mode of materialist historiography, with its technique of thinking in images rather than abstract concepts.

In particular, she reworks the Benjaminian trope of the city as a site of exploration, where artifacts, fossils, ruins, and outdated or neglected objects of all kinds reveal the historical dialectic of redemptive hope and its violent betrayal. Benjamin's and Michaels' urban topographies both reproduce, however, the traditional sexualized metaphor of a masculine figure navigating the feminine landscape in search of enlightenment and a sense of self. In *Fugitive Pieces*, gender stereotyping also manifests itself in the representation of women in the passive corporeal role of a conduit or guardian of memory. Thus, while Michaels' writing exemplifies the powerful potential of Benjamin's historical materialism to make philosophical truths visible (and to keep the bodily fate of history's victims present in our collective memory and conscience), it also underscores the need for a feminist intervention to liberate "thinking-in-images" from a tradition of over-determined images that metaphorically equate the feminine with the "other." The need for this intervention would suggest that much is still to be learned from the history of symbolic or representational violence. The Nazi policy of "anti-matter," as Jakob describes it, represents a limit-case for humanity: "An old trick of language, used often in the course of history. Non-Aryans were never to be referred to as human, but as 'figuren,' 'stücke'—'dolls,' 'wood,' 'merchandise,' 'rags'" (*Fugitive* 165).

#### NOTES

- 1 In her study of Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, Buck-Morss observes that, in contrast to Christianity's purely spiritual and private vision of redemption, "the Jewish Messianic conception, which already has the attributes of being historical, materialist, and collective, translates readily into political radicalism in general and Marxism in particular" (231). In "Unseen Formations," Michaels similarly gestures toward a reconciliation of materialism and mysticism: "For me, the best writing doesn't let me forget the body for too long, the way the best theology binds us to the earth, to the mysteries and responsibilities of our mortality" (98).
- 2 In *Fugitive Pieces*, the trope of testimony is particularly associated with the indisputable evidence of mass graves: "In the holy ground of the mass graves, the earth blistered and spoke" (143, cf. 209). Images of memory being stored in the body or in other physical places are also central to many of Michaels' poems, such as "Lake of Two Rivers" and "Words for the Body" from *The Weight of Oranges*; "Miner's Pond," and "What the Light Teaches" from *Miner's Pond*; and "There Is No City that Does Not Dream" and "Fontanelles" from *Skin Divers*. The poem "Phantom Limbs" is representative in its attribution of human activities and qualities to the inanimate world: "Even the city carries ruins in its heart. / Longs to be touched in places / only it remembers" (6–8).

- 3 See, in particular, Nicola King's chapter on *Fugitive Pieces* in her book *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self*. King argues that the biological and geological metaphors Michaels applies to the Holocaust "draw attention away from the subject; the elision of natural, instinctive processes with politically motivated murder seems a mystification, and the kind of immortality here suggested a false consolation" (145). King refers specifically to a passage in which the transportation of prisoners to the concentration camps is likened to the migration of birds, with the suggestion that the dead, like migrating birds, might return. This is immediately followed by a description of the prisoners who were forced to dig up the mass graves: "the dead entered them through their pores and were carried through their bloodstreams to their brains and hearts. And through their blood to another generation" (*Fugitive* 52).
- 4 Méira Cook, for instance, argues that Michaels' solution to the problem of representing the unrepresentable is to employ "figurative devices that alternatively reveal and conceal the materiality of the event"; yet she finds this metaphorical approach problematic as it "unwittingly conceals the decidedly unpoetic nature of genocide" (16). Likewise, Adrienne Kertzer maintains that "by choosing to tell a transformative story about the Holocaust . . . Michaels risks adopting a narrative strategy that tends . . . to distract and console many readers with the 'beauty' of her story, the pleasure of her intensely woven language" (203). Such representations of the Holocaust are particularly troubling, of course, in that they restage the aestheticization of political violence associated with Nazi propaganda.
- 5 The notion of an urban environment that dreams its past is also found in her poem "There Is No City that Does Not Dream," which appeared in Toronto Transit Commission vehicles in 1998 as part of the Poetry on the Way series. For subway commuters, the lines "Dinosaurs sleep in the subway / at Bloor and Shaw, a bed of bones / under the rumbling track" (7–9) would have been particularly evocative of the spatio-temporal depths of the subterranean world they travelled through on a daily basis.
- 6 Max Pensky elegantly summarizes the materialist method of the dialectical image in the *Arcades Project*: "The slight aging of the "failed" commodity, through criticism, reveals capitalism's darkest secret: the allure of the brand-new hides the essence of capitalism as an endless compulsion to repeat. Stripped of their gleam, and reconfigured, cultural goods revert to their true status: as fossils unearthed from an ongoing history of compulsion, violence, and disappointment" (187–88).
- 7 I am referring specifically to Jacques Lacan's theory of "the Word," as expounded in "Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage en psychanalyse," which builds on Sigmund Freud's recognition of the role of language in the differentiation of self and other.
- 8 "Benjamin follows Freud's lead," Weigel explains, "in the way he focuses on bodies, things, commodities, monuments, topography, and so-on, reading these as wish-symbols and as materializations of collective memory; and in so doing, he restores matter to its central significance for psychoanalysis and for the means of expression of a language of the unconscious" (11).
- 9 Compare Weigel's analysis of Benjamin's dialectical language theory, which conceives of muteness, sorrow, and sexual pleasure—all associated with passive feminine receptivity—as the other side of language (83–85).
- 10 Another parallel with Benjamin (and Baudelaire) is suggested by the ambulatory explorations of urban culture undertaken by the two narrator-protagonists in *Fugitive Pieces*. Jakob and Ben share the marginalized, critical perspective of the *flâneur*, who is not fully

integrated into the urban spectacle. As Benjamin describes in “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” “The *flâneur* is still on the threshold, of the city as of the bourgeois class. Neither has yet engulfed him; in neither is he at home. He seeks refuge in the crowd” (*Reflections* 156).

- 11 Michaels draws on archaeology in order to juxtapose different layers of history in the Toronto region, including those of the prehistoric Laurentian People and the later Iroquois, who displaced the Huron Confederacy in the region. See pp. 89, 102 and 105 in the novel for references to the First Nations.
- 12 Compare Weigel’s discussion of the connection between (female) sexuality and (male) intellectual activity in Benjamin’s work. In the *Arcades Project*, the whore, as a non-procreative producer, is conceived of as the female counterpart to the genius. “The problem,” Weigel notes, “is that women remain silent, banished to that mute region of a different productivity” (88).
- 13 Given the similarity of their names, it is tempting to conclude that Michaels identifies herself with Michaela, who is certainly the most sympathetic and “fleshed-out” female character, as the keeper of memory.

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