

“We’re never ourselves until we contain two souls”: Holocaust Postmemory and  
Intimacy in Anne Michaels’s *Fugitive Pieces*

by

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## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	iii
List of Abbreviations Used .....	iv
Acknowledgements .....	v
Chapter 1 Introduction .....	1
Chapter 2 “The captured past”: Postmemory and Appropriation .....	9
Chapter 3 Giving What We Most Need: Love, Intimacy, and Healing .....	26
Chapter 4 Conclusion .....	37
Works Cited .....	42

## Abstract

Marianne Hirsch's concept of Holocaust "postmemory" provides a theoretical framework for the children of Holocaust survivors to understand and explore their inherited memories of trauma and loss. In this thesis I place Anne Michaels's post-Holocaust novel, *Fugitive Pieces* (1996) in dialogue with Hirsch's theory of postmemory, and explore not only how the novel participates in a kind of postmemorial project, but that in doing so it deals with the complications of appropriating the memories of others. In particular, I look at the novel's second narrator, Ben, as most complexly engaging with postmemory through his cooptation and replication of the life and story of the first narrator, Jakob. By addressing these obstacles of postmemory in its risks for appropriation, I ultimately claim that Michaels's novel argues for a postmemorial project that is guided by love and intimacy as a way of ethically and productively working through both inherited and experienced trauma.

### **List of Abbreviations Used**

<i>GP</i>	<i>The Generation of Postmemory</i>
<i>FF</i>	<i>Family Frames</i>
<i>FP</i>	<i>Fugitive Pieces</i>

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

*Any discovery of form is a moment of memory,  
existing as the historical moment – alone,  
and existing in history – linear,  
in music, in the sentence.  
Each poem, each piece remembers us perfectly,  
the way the earth remembers our bodies,  
the way man and woman in their joining  
remember each other before they were separate.*

[. . .] *To praise memory is to praise the body.*

---“Words for the Body,” *The Weight of Oranges*, Anne Michaels

In her 1994 essay on memory, writing, and love, “Cleopatra’s Love,” Canadian poet and novelist Anne Michaels states, “Memory haunts us until we attempt meaning; this is how the poem can haunt us; both collective memory – things we haven’t experienced personally – as well as deep personal memory” (15). The locating and questioning of meaning in both experienced and inherited traumatic memories is prevalent throughout post-Holocaust literature, art, and scholarship. Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory” claims that later generation survivors of collective, cultural trauma can, in fact, remember the memories of their ancestors who lived through the event. Postmemory, Hirsch explains, “describes the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to the experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, and behaviors among which they grew up” (*GP* 5). According to Hirsch, postmemory exists in the (sub)consciousness of second- and third-generation Holocaust survivors; it facilitates the transmission, projection, and imagination of the memories of atrocities witnessed and experienced by

survivors and passed on to their children. Put simply, through her explorations of post-Holocaust art, literature, and photography, Hirsch affirms that we can remember other people's memories ("Generation of Postmemory").

However, the practice of postmemory is complicated by the ethics of claiming others' experiences as our own. More specifically, it introduces problems of empathetically identifying with and responding to the experiences of others. To empathetically identify with someone, as in to compassionately respond to another's pain or experience as one's own, requires, as Martha Nussbaum explains, an "aware[ness] of one's own *separateness* from the sufferer – it is for *another*, and not oneself that one feels. . . . If one really had the experience of feeling the pain in one's own body, then one would precisely have failed to comprehend the pain of another *as other*" (35). Thus the experience of postmemory, in which later-generation survivors of trauma understand themselves to have inherited their ancestors' memories as their own, can lead to the failure to remember the "monumental and insurmountable" distance "between the one who lived it and the one who did not" (Hirsch, *GP* 86). To neglect difference between the empathizer and the individual with whom she is empathizing can result in the appropriation, misrepresentation, and/or displacement of the original experience. With these challenges in mind, Dominick LaCapra's concept of "empathic unsettlement" offers a parallel definition to Nussbaum's empathetic identification; however, he stresses the importance of empathy to "resist . . . full identification with, and appropriation of, the experience of the other," and that this resistance "depend[s] both on one's own potential for traumatization . . . and on one's recognition that another's loss is not identical to one's own loss" ("Trauma" 723). In the case of second-generation Holocaust survivors, their

sense of loss or absence of family history and home cannot be correlated with the experiences of their parents who experienced the deaths and loss of family members in the camps and ghettos; nevertheless, their awareness of their inherited loss – for instance, a lack of family members, history, and mementos – can feel similarly traumatic.

These questions concerning the transference of Holocaust memory and the limits of empathetic identification preoccupy the early writings of Toronto-born writer, Anne Michaels (b. 1958). Writing at the same time that Hirsch first developed the notion of “postmemory” in the early 1990s,<sup>1</sup> Michaels published her first novel *Fugitive Pieces* in 1996. Set during the Second World War and its following decades in both Europe and Canada, *Fugitive Pieces* is broken into two narratives: the first, from the point of view of Jakob Beer, a Polish-Canadian Holocaust survivor, and the second from Ben, a first-generation Canadian and son to Holocaust survivors. The second narrative offers a compelling response to and elaboration of Hirsch’s postmemory, as it is told through the perspective of a second-generation survivor and explores the critical differences between identifying *with* and identifying *as* another, as Ben echoes and takes various pieces and events of Jakob’s life and story, and recreates them as his own. This appropriation of Jakob’s narrative by Ben, I argue, demonstrates the complexities of how we use another’s traumatic past to inform and influence our own lives, and whether this practice ultimately sustains an ethical responsibility to the past.

Writing retrospectively as a well-regarded poet and translator among Toronto literary circles, Jakob Beer, our first narrator, details his story of loss and love as a

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<sup>1</sup> Hirsch first introduces the term “postmemory” in an article on Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* in 1992 in the journal, *Discourse*, and goes on to fully theorize the idea in her book *Family Frames* in 1997.



member of the 1.5 Generation.<sup>2</sup> After his parents are killed by Nazi soldiers in his Polish village, the eleven year-old Jakob is found and adopted by a Greek man, Athos, who takes him to the island of Zakynthos for the duration of the war. The two subsequently immigrate to Canada. Throughout most of his life, however, Jakob is haunted by the memory of his older sister, Bella, whose uncertain fate in the Holocaust preoccupies his consciousness. It is not until he meets his second wife, Michaela, whose love and compassion allow Jakob to be “[un]afraid when harvesting [the] darkness” of his past (193), that Jakob lets go of his sister’s haunting presence, and instead allows her memory to live within himself, his marriage, and in future generations. Ben, the novel’s second narrator, is born to Holocaust survivors in the suburbs of Toronto. He describes being “born into absence” (233) while growing up amongst his parents’ “damp silence” (204) of their traumatic experiences in the Warsaw Ghetto and concentration camps. Following their deaths, Jakob learns from his wife, Naomi, that he has been excluded from his parents’ lifelong secret of the children they lost in the Holocaust. Frustrated with his inability to fully know his parents’ past and jealous of his wife’s relatively easy inclusion into their private lives, Ben turns to the “sensual” (207) life of the now dead Jakob Beer for guidance. Ben is enraptured by Jakob’s poetry, his family’s history, as well as his deep love for Michaela. However, when Ben is sent to Idhra, Greece to collect Jakob’s papers, he begins to mimic and reproduce bits of Jakob’s personal story within his own narrative, with many images and events, as Susan Gubar notes, “recast in a musical variation on the themes of the novel’s first narrative” (266). While on Idhra, Ben copies

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<sup>2</sup> Susan Rubin Suleiman defines the 1.5 Generation as “child survivors of the Holocaust, too young to have had an adult understanding of what was happening to them, but old enough to have *been there* during the Nazi persecution of the Jews” (“The 1.5” 277; emphasis in original).

lines of Jakob's poetry and reinserts them into his own narrative, and even attempts to emulate Jakob and Michaela's relationship in his affair with the young Petra, despite being married to Naomi. It is not until he finally discovers Jakob's memoirs that make up, I believe, the first half of *Fugitive Pieces*, that Ben realizes that the only way to reckon with his inherited past is to recognize the importance of empathy and difference through his marriage with Naomi. In other words, Ben must learn what it truly means to embark on a "lover's quest" as a way of arriving at an ethical understanding of and responsibility to the traumatic past (Michaels, *FP* 222).

In his replication of Jakob's past while on Idhra, Ben partakes in a kind of postmemorial project as a way of reconciling with his parents' trauma and his own traumatic upbringing. Froma Zeitlin contends, "Himself wounded, [Ben] uncannily replicates in part the unhappy sequencing of Jakob's still unresolved hauntings from the past" (188). However, his imitation of Jakob's story points to, I argue, an examination of the limits of postmemory, particularly in its potential for (un)ethical practices of empathetic identification, and for the disregard of difference and alterity. Though Hirsch attempts to distinguish her concept of postmemory as a process of transmission that respects the "enormous distance" (*GP* 86) between those who lived the event and those that did not, she adds that "the *challenge* for the postmemorial artist is precisely to find the balance that allows the spectator to enter the image and to imagine the disaster, but that simultaneously disallows an overly appropriative identification that would make the distances disappear and thus create too available, too easy an access to this particular past" (161; emphasis added). How this balance is found, or how we can move away from appropriative approaches towards traumatic memory within a postmemorial context is not

necessarily made clear. Hirsch claims that her notion of postmemory is a form of what Kaja Silverman calls “heteropathic identification,” through which the postmemorial subject engages in “identification-at-a-distance,” which is an “identification that does not appropriate or interiorize the other within the self but that goes out of one’s self and out of one’s own cultural norms in order to align oneself, through displacement with another” (85-86). Heteropathic identification requires a resistance to uniformity and instead acknowledges and respects difference between the two individuals “even as the heteropathic imagination struggles to overcome [them]” (86). To partake in what Silverman terms “idiopathic identification,” Hirsch explains, would border into “self-sameness” and replication (161). What then, I ask, can guide a postmemorial project towards an ethical understanding of the past? How can we veer from mimesis and appropriation?

By placing Michaels’s novel in dialogue with Hirsch’s postmemory, I not only demonstrate how *Fugitive Pieces* participates in a kind of postmemorial project, but that in doing so it deals with the complications of appropriating from and reinventing oneself in the image of another. More specifically, I view Ben’s narrative as most interestingly and complexly engaging with postmemory through his cooptation and replication of Jakob’s life and story. I argue that Ben’s portion of the novel serves as Michaels’s extended meditation upon the ethical limits of postmemory, since Ben’s failed attempt to replicate Jakob’s life as a way of coming to terms with his own inherited trauma demonstrates the precarious “balance” Hirsch claims is necessary for a successful postmemorial project. However, through his failure, Michaels offers a new approach to postmemory that allows for a distinct acknowledgment and negotiation of difference.

More specifically, I see Michaels using Ben's narrative as a way in which she can inject conceptions of love and intimacy as a way to guide Hirsch's postmemory towards a more respectful and affective approach for traumatic healing.<sup>3</sup> In particular, her novel puts forward what may be called an ethics of love, which preserves otherness by way of altruism, thus affirming one's own as well as his/her partner's individuality through their affective and empathic union.

In "Cleopatra's Love," Michaels states, "Memory, like love, gains strength through restatement, reaffirmation; . . . It is probably no coincidence that when we speak of memorizing something, we refer to it as learning it by heart" (15). Memory, for Michaels, maintains and strengthens itself through repeated, affective, and intimate acts. Upon his decision to return home to Naomi in Toronto, Ben understands that "[he] must give what [he] most need[s]" (294), which I believe is love. Love, as Alain Badiou contends, "is a quest for truth" in which we can see the world "from the point of view of two and not one," and learn "[w]hat the world is like when it is experienced, developed and lived from the point of view of difference and not identity" (22). If postmemory poses as a danger to the authenticity of trauma, and risks appropriation and replication through over-identifying with another, Michaels's novel offers a more affective approach towards reconciling with both experienced and inherited traumatic memories. In particular, it suggests that if we place ourselves within intimate relationships that seek to transcend difference while also respecting it, we can partake in a postmemorial project that is guided by love and alterity as Jakob and eventually Ben both do in their respective

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<sup>3</sup> This argument builds upon Froma Zeitlin's assertion that Michaels's novel "suggests that it is the transfer of affection to others not related by blood that can bring some closure to the act of mourning and authorize the sense of an individual identity" (189).

marriages. Put simply, the novel invites us to consider the idea that, as Jakob tells us, “[m]emory dies unless it’s given a use” (195). That use, I argue, is love; it is a kind of love that can truthfully negotiate with and respect difference, as Badiou argues, and can ultimately lead us towards an ethical and productive working through and healing from both experienced and inherited trauma.

## Chapter 2 “The captured past”: Postmemory and Appropriation

Memory, or the act of remembering, from both an individual and collective standpoint, is an integral part of Jewish experience and traditions; it is ingrained within religious holidays and rituals, as well as in cultural and emotional practices of mourning and grieving.<sup>4</sup> However, in the decades following the Holocaust, many descendants of survivors experienced feelings of disconnection from their history, or were unable to feel a sense of belonging within their familial and cultural histories and memories. Hirsch explains:

European Jews of the postwar generation are forever turning left, but we can never catch up with the past; inasmuch as we remember, we remain in a perpetual temporal and spatial exile. Our past is literally a foreign country we can never hope to visit. And our postmemory is shaped by our sense of belatedness and disconnection. (*FF* 244)

Herself a child of Holocaust survivors, Hirsch was born in Romania in 1949 and immigrated to the United States with her family in the 1960s (Hirsch, *FF* 17). She developed her postmemory theory out of “the need for a term that would describe the *quality* of [her] own relationship to [her] parents’ daily stories of danger and survival,”

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<sup>4</sup> Every year at Passover, Jews remember their ancestors’ exodus from Egypt; at Hanukkah, we light the menorah or *hanukkiyah* to remember the perseverance of the Maccabees thousands of years ago. For deaths in Jewish families, relatives and loved ones sit *shivah* for an entire week to mourn and remember the deceased. On the anniversary of a death, the *yahrzeit*, the family of the deceased attend synagogue, and the children of the dead say *kaddish* or a prayer of mourning in honour of their mother or father (“Death and Mourning”). Today, many Jewish people observe *Yom HaShoah*, Holocaust Day of Remembrance, to pay their respects to the six million Jewish lives lost to the atrocities of the Shoah.

and to thus define “the qualities and symptoms” that make second-generation survivors a “*postgeneration*” (GP 4; emphasis in original). While many members of the postwar generation might feel defined by their sense of absence and homelessness, Hirsch contends that postmemory “is as full and as empty, certainly as constructed as memory itself,” and therefore demands scrutiny and conversation (FF 22). To experience absence<sup>5</sup> within our sense of familial and cultural memory, and to thus have that feeling come to define your life and consciousness is, for Hirsch, a “structure” of transgenerational transmission of memory; it is not a mode of being or a kind of identity, but rather an ongoing “consequence” of imaginative recall by later generations of collective, cultural trauma (GP 6).

Hirsch initially explores postmemory through photographic and visual projects. In *Family Frames* (1997), she particularly focuses on what she calls the “Holocaust photograph,” which primarily refers to photographic portraits of Jewish families taken before and after the war. Hirsch deems these photos “the work of postmemory,” as “[t]hey affirm the past’s existence and, in their flat two-dimensionality, they signal its unbridgeable distance” (23). Additionally, Hirsch looks at Jewish *yizker bikher*, or memorial books, which, traditionally, were created in the aftermath of the anti-Jewish

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<sup>5</sup> I use the term “absence” with Dominick LaCapra’s definition in mind. Distinguishing absence from its oft-conflated concept, “loss,” LaCapra contends that absence is defined by a recognition that “one cannot lose what one never had” (“Trauma” 701), and is thus “the absence of an absolute” (702). Instances of loss, however, “are specific and involve particular events, such as the death of loved ones on a personal level or, on a broader scale, the losses brought about by apartheid or by the Holocaust” (700). The type of absence LaCapra is interested in functions on a “transhistorical level,” while loss is situated within a “historical level” (700). I think LaCapra’s “absence” speaks well to experiences of postmemory as second-generation survivors are denied an experience of familial/cultural history and memory, and therefore their postmemorial experience relies upon that absence.

pogroms in Eastern European in the early twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> After the Holocaust, however, these books, Hirsch observes, “contain accounts of survivors’ efforts to locate the remains of their family members in order to give them a proper burial, and they detail the acts of commemoration devoted to the dead” (246). These memorial books, like the pre- and post-war family photographs, showcase the “before” and “after” of the event, and thus become, as Hirsch states, “sites where subsequent generations can find a lost origin, where they can learn about a time and place they will never see. . . . [They] are documents to be invested with life” (247). Canadian-Jewish photographer, Rafael Goldchain, similarly attempts to locate a site of familial origin through his digitally altered self-portraits as he dresses up as his ancestors, both real and fictional, in his project, *Familial Ground* (1999-2008). Goldchain claims that his self-portraits “suggest that we look at family photographs in order to insert ourselves in them and recognize ourselves in the photographic trace left by the ancestral other,” and thus to “visually articulate a process of identity representation through mourning and remembrance” (27). Like Hirsch’s Holocaust photographs and the *yizker bikher*, Goldchain’s *Familial Ground*, and, as we will soon see, Michaels’s *Fugitive Pieces*, demonstrate an attempt to (re)gather the lost pieces of a history in order to (re)create a site of familiarity and cohesion out of fragmentation and dislocation.

The preface of Anne Michaels’s *Fugitive Pieces* briefly describes the “countless” documents and written memoirs, “lost or destroyed,” that recounted the experiences of those who lived during the Second World War. However, some of these accounts, the unnamed voice tells us, “are concealed in memory, neither written nor spoken,” while

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<sup>6</sup> *Yizker bikher* were originally created to preserve the culture, traditions, and memories of Eastern European *shtetl* life (Hirsch, *FF* 246).



“others are recovered by circumstance alone.” While Kim Verwaayen contends that this unnumbered page serves as an “*apologia* . . . where anamnesis leaves off” (139), this opening also places *Fugitive Pieces* at the heart of a postmemorial project; it immediately asks the reader: what are we to do with memories or stories we are denied access to? What are we to do with the narratives that we chance upon? How can we arrive at a place in which these narratives can allow us to both mourn and re-build?

The novel’s preface goes on to report the death of the sixty year-old poet, Jakob Beer, who was “struck and killed by a car in Athens in the spring of 1993,” and whose wife “survived [him] by two days.” The reader then learns that “before his death, Beer had begun to write his memoirs.” I believe we are meant to read *Fugitive Pieces* as a fragmented, double-memoir of both Jakob and Ben that has been compiled by Ben after he discovers Jakob’s memoirs at the end of his stay on Idhra. It is made up of lost and found bits, or fugitive pieces, of each man’s story. While Verwaayen argues that the fragmented construction of the novel “reminds readers that it is the particular history of Holocaust violence that ruptures the form of this text and the memories that it inscribes and provokes” (133), I think that its fractured form bolsters the idea that, as the novel’s prelude tells us, “[a] man’s work, like his life, is never completed.” Much like the practice of postmemory, *Fugitive Pieces*, as a text, demands ongoing work, recording, and understanding by witnesses and listeners of its story; it requires creative engagement, empathy, and a recognition of difference in order to learn, to know, to write, and finally, to move forward from the traumatic past.

While the aim of postmemory and, arguably, the introductory section of *Fugitive Pieces* seek to imaginatively bridge the gap between the traumatic memories of the past

with its ongoing effects in the present, or to creatively continue or complete the work of another, there still remains the risk of coopting others' experiences or narratives in order to inform or influence our own stories. I would like to call attention to the ways in which Ben partakes in a form of "affiliative postmemory," rather than "familial postmemory," – that is, engaging within an *intragenerational* form of postmemory rather than an *intergenerational* one. I will show how this undertaking ultimately results in his echoing and appropriating from Jakob's narrative, which we can see not only through his copying of Jakob's language into his writing, but also through his attempts to relive and reproduce stages and events from Jakob's life. Ben's co-optations of Jakob's narrative demonstrate Michaels's own questioning of the limits of postmemory to "adopt[. . .] the traumatic experiences – and thus also the memories – of others as one's own, or, more precisely, as experiences one might oneself have had, and [to] inscrib[e] them into one's own life story" (Hirsch, "Projected" 8-9). More specifically, it is through Ben's reenacting of Jakob's life and experiences that Michaels ultimately puts forward a more affective approach in considering and negotiating with the transmission of memory and trauma.

While the focus of this project is to study the ways in which Ben's narrative interacts with Hirsch's postmemory, it is also important to briefly acknowledge how Jakob's narrative engages with postgenerational, transmitted memory. Jenni Adams contends that since Jakob's life is "shaped by [the] losses" of his family and home and "by his inability to bear witness to his family's final moments," Jakob can thus be placed "in what might be understood as a postmemorial relation to his family's deaths" (146). Though Jakob occupies a unique position within the framework of Hirsch's postmemory due to his membership in the 1.5 Generation, and therefore as a "blind" witness

(Michaels 17) to the Holocaust's events, he is preoccupied by the uncertain fate of his sister, Bella. Unlike his parents whose "sounds" of their deaths the young Jakob hears as he hides behind a wall in his home, he explains that "worse than those sounds was that I couldn't remember hearing Bella at all" (Michaels 10). What stands out for Jakob is Bella's mysterious "silence" (10). He is, in a sense, exiled from knowing what happened to his sister, and therefore can only connect himself to what occurred in that moment by "imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (Hirsch, *GP* 5), thus placing him in a postmemorial position to Bella's indefinite fate.

Adams argues that Jakob's study of geology, which he learns from his godfather, Athos, a geologist, "provides a consolatory alternative to the indeterminacy surrounding Bella's disappearance, a surrogate geography for the uncertain landscape of her death" (149-50). In order for Jakob to make sense of what happened to Bella, he must excavate, or dig up the memories that are "encoded in air currents and river sediment," since, he writes, "[e]skers of ash wait to be scooped up, lives reconstituted" (Michaels 53). Ian Rae interestingly notes that "although there is no etymological connection," Jakob's last name, Beer, "constitutes the first half of two German verbs," the first of which, he states, is "*beerben* (to bury)" (*From Cohen* 282, n.85). However, what is buried for Jakob, a translator by profession, must always be uncovered. Jakob explains his attempt to "bury images, to cover them over with Greek and English words, with Athos's stories, with all the geologic era. . . . But at night, my mother, my father, [and] Bella . . . simply rose, shook the earth from their clothes, and waited" (93). Jakob must literally and metaphorically dig himself out of the marshes of his traumatic history; he must place his

hands into the earth's memories in order to creatively and empathetically come to terms with the past. In his research of Holocaust survivor accounts, Jakob states:

When the prisoners 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. . . . Their arms were into death up to the elbows, but not only into death – into music, into a memory of the way a husband or son leaned over his dinner; a wife's expression as she watched her child in the bath. (52)

Memory, and, presumably, postmemory for Jakob, is to allow the memories of the dead enter into us, and to thus respectfully acknowledge the unique qualities that once lay behind those lives. As Adams rightly points out, Jakob's attention to the ways in which landscape and nature can hold on to memories of the past demonstrates his attempt to return to a "familial place of origin," and to "reconstruct his unwitnessed familial past" (Adams 148). Here, Jakob engages across affiliative lines of postmemory through his investigation of survivor accounts in order to ultimately reconcile with his familial postmemory. More specifically, Jakob's negotiation with his familial postmemory requires embracing its darkness, something that his first wife, Alex tries to prevent him from doing by "constantly turning on lights" (Michaels 144). In order for Jakob to come to terms with the past, and to allow his sister's haunting presence to "push [him] back into the world" (170), Jakob must not only welcome and "harvest" (193) the darkness of his past, but he must also allow himself to be guided and healed by his intimate relationship with an empathic other, as we will later see in his second marriage to Michaela.

Rae further claims that Jakob's surname may also stem from the German verb "beerdigen (to inherit from)" (*From Cohen* 282, n.85). While on the one hand this connection speaks to Jakob's own postmemorial inheritance of a traumatized and haunted consciousness from his own Holocaust experience, on the other hand, the origin of his name also points to his relationship with the novel's succeeding narrator, Ben. In his attempt to come to terms with his own familial postmemory due to his parents' "silence" of their past (Michaels 204), Ben adopts, or to some extent, purposefully inherits the legacy of the now dead Jakob Beer. Like Jakob with the survivor accounts, Ben affiliates himself with his predecessor by way of his poetry and by living in Jakob's house on Idhra following the poet's death. Ben engages in a form of Hirsch's affiliative postmemory, in which he "constitutes . . . himself by means of a series of identifications across temporal, spatial, and cultural divides" (Hirsch, *GP* 159). Born half a generation later, Ben takes on Jakob's memories in order to fill the "absence" of his family's past, ignoring the fact that, as Jakob notes earlier, "[t]here's no absence, if there remains even the memory of absence" (193). Additionally, while Jakob imagines and empathetically identifies *with* the experiences of those in the camps, Ben instead comes to identify *as* Jakob, forgetting the "insurmountable" (Hirsch, *GP* 86) gap between what Jakob himself has been through – the loss of his parents, sister, childhood, and homeland – and Ben's own experience.

At the beginning of his portion of the novel, Ben writes, "There was no energy of a narrative in my family, not even the fervor of an elegy" (204). Growing up in the outskirts of Toronto as an only child, Ben feels disconnected from his parents' past lives before the war, and their experiences in the camps and ghettos. Ben only accesses his parents' past obliquely through his father's tortured relationship with food, his mother's

constant concerns over her family's safety, and his father's disciplinary teachings of the Holocaust's atrocities. As a child, Ben would sit, "safe[ly] in [his] room with the cowboy curtains and [his] rock collection," while his father would "thrust books at [him]," full of photographs of life in the ghettos and camps, and say to Ben, "You are not too young. There were hundreds of thousands younger than you" (219). As a postgenerational subject, Ben is only given indirect access to his parents' traumatic past. He is forced to learn about his family and culture's past by affiliation, in which Ben must "conceiv[e] [him]self as multiply interconnected with others of the same, of previous, and of subsequent generations, of the same and of other – proximate or distant – cultures and subcultures" (Hirsch, "Projected Memory" 9).

As an adult, Ben becomes an academic who specializes in the intersections of biography and weather studies. He defends his interest in the subject stating, "The hindsight of biography is as elusive and deductive as long-range forecasting"; however, he adds that the act of recreating or telling another's story "amounts to nothing if you can't find the assumption your subject lives by" (222). Ben's familial postmemory is not only shaped both by his parents' traumatized behaviours among which he grew up, but also by his severe inability to fully understand or know what exactly his parents had been through. It is not until after their deaths that Ben finds an old photograph of his parents holding two young children, while on the back of the card "floats a spidery date, June 1941, and two names. Hannah. Paul" (252). Here, Ben is confronted with what Hirsch calls "the work of postmemory," as the photograph of his parents' former family and life captures "the utter conventionality of the domestic family picture that makes it impossible for us to comprehend how the [people] in the picture [were], or could have

been annihilated” (FF 21). However, Ben’s discovery of this photo *after* his parents’ deaths, I argue, only amplifies his disconnection from his parents’ past lives; it evokes the lost lives he, unknowingly, could never replace. What is more, once Ben learns that his mother, years before, had divulged Naomi, Ben’s wife, with this secret, he also discovers that his parents named him “Ben, not from Benjamin, but merely ‘ben’ – the Hebrew word for son,” so that “the birth of their third child would go unnoticed” (253). Though Ben comes to face the root of his parents’ trauma and their lifelong behaviours of secrecy and paranoia, he only feels further removed from his familial (post)memory.

Frustrated with his parents’ secrecy, and Naomi’s inclusion into their lives, Ben turns away from his family and instead looks outward to the writings of Jakob Beer, who, Marita Grimwood argues, becomes for Ben, “a communication channel to the past” (122). In addressing his narrative directly *to* Jakob, Ben engages in an imaginative discussion with the now dead poet, affiliating himself across lines of time (since Jakob has died by the time Ben writes this story), space, and even familiarity (the two men met only once at a party). At first, Ben’s decision to “reach again for [Jakob’s] words” shortly after his father’s death (Michaels 255) can be perceived as what LaCapra terms “working through” the traumatic past of his parents, particularly in the sense that “language functions to provide some measure of conscious control, critical distance, and perspective” to his traumatic memories (LaCapra, *Writing History* 90). However, working through trauma, LaCapra argues, requires “laying ghosts to rest, distancing oneself from haunting revenants, renewing an interest in life, and being able to engage memory in more critically tested senses” (90). When Ben takes the opportunity to travel to Idhra to gather Jakob’s writings and return them to Canada, he forgets his initial project to work through

his own grief by way of Jakob's poetry. Further, instead of laying Jakob's ghost to rest, Ben finds his spirit "alive" in his Greek villa (269), and consequently begins to reenact several elements of Jakob's life. Put differently, Ben disregards the need for distance or recognition of difference that is fundamental to his affiliation with Jakob; instead of working through the writings of Jakob in order to arrive at a better understanding of his parents' past, he appropriates Jakob's story as his own and ultimately reinvents himself in Jakob's image.

Similar to Jakob's aim to unearth the buried memories of the victims in the concentration camps, Ben sets out to unearth the secrets and memories of Jakob's Idhra home. After "promising" their mutual friend Maurice that he would "excavate gently," Ben quickly compares himself to "an archeologist examining one square inch at a time," uncovering the life Jakob and Michaela shared together in the house (261). His desire to locate meaning out of Jakob's "sensual" life is his attempt to affiliate himself with something that stands outside of his family's life, yet is also close enough to still inform his own feelings of familial absence and narrative-lacking history. In other words, Jakob's house, for Ben, stands as a kind of Holocaust photograph. Its various parts, such as the "blanket still dripping from one end of" the couch, the "jumble of sandals by the door" (265), or the "stubs of candles" (266), "hover between life and death, to capture only that which no longer exists, to suggest both the desire and the necessity and, at the same time, the difficulty, the impossibility, of mourning" (Hirsch, *FF* 20). Ben describes feeling "the power of [Jakob's] place speaking to [his] body" (266), and even claims to sense the intimacy behind the final days that Jakob and Michaela spent in this house. He begins to see their place like a "museum" (278), treating its objects like the "families



frozen into stone by the eruption of Vesuvius” (266). In contrast to the lingering silence of his parents’ apartment even after their deaths (204), Ben discovers a sense of vibrancy within Jakob’s home that through his affiliative postmemory, he can adopt as his own.

However, while Ben believes to be experiencing an “intimate glimpse” (Michaels 265) into the life of Jakob and Michaela, he attaches false meanings to and misreads many of the artifacts in their home. In particular, Grimwood points to Ben’s flawed reading of Jakob’s home when he observes what he thinks is “an obviously mislaid copy of Pliny’s *Natural History*” in the kitchen (Michaels 265), when in fact the book “was used by Athos as cookbook when wartime desperation led him to hunt out rarely used edible plants and roots” (Grimwood 123). Grimwood further states that “Ben’s inability to understand these objects signals him as a failed reader, an over-interpreter” (123). His attempt to interpret Jakob’s past life through his attaching of meaning to the objects in the house, points to Ben’s single-minded aim to bind himself to Jakob Beer’s life. His over-reading of Jakob’s house and his aestheticizing of Jakob’s life operates as a cautionary example of Michaels’s warning that language can be “poisoned” by way of “[t]he simple absorption of events without ethical consideration” (“Cleopatra” 15). Additionally, Ben’s misreadings of Jakob’s life also points to Michaels’s own commentary on the ways in which postmemory can over-attach meaning to inherited memories; in particular, it highlights the potential risk for misreadings in the postmemorial viewer’s “horrific” aim to “fill in what has been omitted” from the Holocaust photograph (Hirsch, *FF* 21). In “Cleopatra’s Love,” Michaels writes that memories can preoccupy our consciousness “until we attempt meaning,” but clarifies that “[m]eaning isn’t truth, though we long for it to be” (15). In contrast to his family’s inaccessible past, Ben longs to locate a sense of

truth and certainty through his affiliation with Jakob. However, he fails to acknowledge or reckon with the privacy of meaning as he exhumes Jakob's home; he does not consider, as Jakob has already warned the reader, that we should "[n]ever trust biographies. Too many events in a man's life are invisible" (141). Memory, as Ben fails to recognize, is intrinsically personal – it is partial to the subject's own consciousness and, in this way, is constantly changing and, ultimately, is never complete. Additionally, he also ignores the importance of the relational nature of memory, in which, as Sue Campbell argues, "our memories are associatively linked in ways unique for each individual and thus have meaning not captured or exhausted by their collective dimensions" (*Relational* 199). Ben's placement of meaning into Jakob's life in such a way that makes the poet's life visible to himself, not only demonstrates Ben's attempt to over-identify with, or rather, to identify *as* Jakob, but also his unawareness of the connective frameworks inherent to Jakob's memories that are beyond Ben's own comprehension.

There are a number of instances in which Ben actually copies or takes passages of Jakob's writing and places them directly into his own narrative. For example, in the novel's first half, the fifty-something year-old Jakob imagines taking his new, younger wife, Michaela, to his house on Idhra, where, he says, "she will be the foreigner, agape at an unfamiliar landscape, [but] her body will take to it like a vow. She'll turn brown, her angles gleaming with oil. *A white dress shines against her thighs like rain*" (186; emphasis in original). I believe we are meant to read this last phrase as a line of poetry from Jakob's collection, *Groundwork*. In the second narrative, however, Ben creates a comparable image as he enters into an affair with the young and beautiful Petra, despite being married to Naomi who remains in Toronto. He writes, "[Petra's] hair was a sleek

curve of water. Her large mouth and blue eyes. The sun was in her skin, from long days spent entirely outside. *A white dress shines against her thighs like rain*” (274). Ben takes Jakob’s poetry, his intellectual property, and uses it in a similar way to how Jakob himself describes his lover.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, Ben mimics and re-enacts Jakob and Michaela’s relationship through his own affair with Petra. The two lovers follow Jakob’s “footsteps . . . over the island,” as Ben speculatively points out places to Petra stating, “Here’s where Jakob began ‘The Compass.’ Here’s where he and Michaela swam. Here’s where they read the newspapers every Saturday” (277). Like his false misreadings of Jakob’s house, Ben becomes a kind of sham expert on Jakob Beer. He also describes “memorizing” Petra’s “body, every smoothness,” and “every line between light and dark, every shape” (276), much in the same way that Jakob describes “search[ing] Michaela for fugitive scents” (191) and “trac[ing] every line, her lengths and shapes” (180). Ben attempts to live and experience the world as Jakob once did, both in his taking on of Jakob’s memories and in his replication of his love life. There is no recognition of difference between Jakob and Ben’s experiences in Ben’s undertaking to know and live the life of Jakob Beer; if his initial aim was to use Jakob’s poetry and life as a way to work through his inherited, familial trauma, Ben only learns what it means to step into the life of another as a way to

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<sup>7</sup> Other instances of Ben’s copying of Jakob’s words include his descriptions of Jewish prisoners having to dig up the bodies of the camp’s victims to cremate the corpses. In italics, Ben recounts that the prisoners “*put their bare hands not only into death, not only into the syrups and bacteria of the body, but into the emotions, beliefs, confessions. One man’s memories then another’s, thousands whose lives it was their duty to imagine*” (279). This can be compared with a passage from Jakob’s narrative cited earlier in this paper, when he describes how camp “prisoners were forced to dig up the mass graves, [and] the dead enter them through their pores and were carried through their bloodstreams to their brains and hearts. . . . And those lost lives made molecular passage into their hands” (52).

escape his frustrated postmemory and tense marriage. To engage in a form of affiliative postmemory, as Michaels shows us through Ben, can lead into an escapist and dangerous practice of over-identification and thus the erasure of the ethics of privacy and difference, or towards “a too facile appropriation” of the traumatic past (Bos 99).

On the one hand, Petra’s presence in the novel may signal the circuitous nature of memory, as we can see through Ben’s own replication of Jakob’s life.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, she also serves, like Bella’s ghost for Jakob, as a way to push Ben “back into the world” (170), to move him out of his postmemorial affiliation with Jakob, and instead look to more affective and relational forms of healing and mourning. Once Ben banishes Petra from his life after she has “desecrated” his careful preservation of Jakob’s writings (Michaels 281), he finds the memoirs by Jakob that, I believe, are the writings that make up the first half of this novel. Additionally, he discovers a scarf that resembles one belonging to his wife, Naomi (285). In contrast to the vibrancy of Jakob’s house, Ben sees the scarf as “a tiny square of silence” (285) that causes him to recall his parents, their apartment, and his life with Naomi. Once Ben reads Jakob’s memoirs in their entirety, he immediately shuts up the house, and returns to his wife in Toronto whose memories he claims to “know” (285). To break out of his appropriative project, Ben must confront the difference between the liveliness of Jakob’s life and his own inherited “silence,” but he must also acknowledge the relational nature of his own memories that are a product of his

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<sup>8</sup> D.M.R. Bentley considers how Petra echoes Bella’s character, arguing that this repetition “raises huge questions about the structure of the novel, the nature of memory, and the presence – or absence – of order in human life,” and ultimately asks whether “the repetition of Bella’s ‘black hair’ in Petra’s be interpreted as a sign that [Ben] believes in some form of recurrence” (14). Here, we may also be reminded of Michaels’s statement in “Cleopatra’s Love” that “Memory, like love, gains strength through restatement, reaffirmation” (15).

affective and empathic relationship with Naomi. Ben's "know[ledge of] what [Naomi] makes of her memories" (285), partakes in what Campbell calls "inter-individual memory," in which, she explains, "[s]haring memory is how we learn to remember, how we come to reconceive our pasts in memory, how we come to form a sense of self, and one of the primary ways in which we come to know others and form relationships with them" ("The Second" 42). By recalling the relational nature of his marriage with Naomi in his ability to "know" her memories, Ben can ultimately come to realize that "[his] unhappiness is [his] own" (292). In other words, Ben must re-affiliate himself with another in a mutually empathic relationship that will allow him to recognize the uniqueness of his own memories and his own life. Campbell contends that "[w]e come to understand our lives through how others respond to us" (*Relational* 156). Rather than affiliating himself and in turn recreating himself through the image of the dead Jakob Beer, Ben must instead look to his ongoing, affective relationships with others as a way to arrive at a productive and ethical understanding of the traumatic past.

While Hirsch defines postmemory as respectful of the differences between those who lived through the traumatic event and those who did not, Ben's mirroring and echoing of Jakob's narrative demonstrates its inherent risks for appropriation. If the imagination is powerful enough to empathize with those experiences which are, broadly speaking, unimaginable and incomprehensible, then to what extent can we, as Jakob asks, "escape [our] fate" by "step[ping] into" the lives of others (48)? We must inevitably be cautious when adopting or taking on the lives or memories of others, but as Ben's replication of Jakob's life shows us, when we are not careful, our attempt to participate in the postmemorial project oversteps the line of empathic understanding, and enters into

appropriation and mimesis. Ben's objectification and sentimentalizing of Jakob's life, to a certain extent, could likely be playing into what Pascale Bos sees as the difficulty of creating "'access' to the Holocaust in postmemory projects" (105); that is, the over-willingness to identify and place oneself within a visible or easily identifiable group of people and to thus romanticize that sense of cultural belonging and identity.<sup>9</sup>

However, if Ben's participation within the postmemorial project leads to the denial of difference between the experiences of others, and our ability to coopt others' stories as our own, then what, as Michaels's novel asks us, will allow us to effectively and empathically heal from the past in a way that acknowledges the ethics of privacy and difference? If we can return to a relational engagement with the past, and, in doing so, ultimately arrive at a place in which we can better understand ourselves and come to terms with our own memories, as Ben does at the end of his narrative, then perhaps what is needed is a postmemorial practice that is guided by empathy and listening. More specifically, it is through actions of love and intimacy that are guided by these aforementioned practices that can allow us to arrive at a postmemorial project that is ethically sound. As will be explored in the following section, Michaels's novel appears to suggest that we require more affective and relational ways of working through and understanding traumatic memories.

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<sup>9</sup> Bos explains that in the decades following the Holocaust, "America changed from a culture in which adaptation had been the main cultural norm to one in which 'survival' became the primary virtue, making it particularly receptive to the events of the Holocaust" (101). Many second- and third-generation Jews were/are finding access to their ancestors' past by way of the immense trauma and violence of the Holocaust, even if they did/do not have family members who survived/lived through the Shoah. Bos worries that "postmemory work invites . . . a process which can lead to a too facile appropriation," thus strengthening a growing trend of how "the Holocaust has been used within the American-Jewish community since the 1970s as a 'unifying theme' intended to promote Jewish identity" (Apel in Bos 99-100).

### Chapter 3 Giving What We Most Need: Love, Intimacy, and Healing

Hirsch's postmemory is an inherently creative practice. In several of her writings on the theory, she distinguishes postmemory from other kinds of memory theories by the fact that "its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation" (*FF* 22). While her theory, as previously stated, emerges from her study of family photographs and memorabilia, Hirsch later goes on to study the power of photographic art, literature, and its intersections, to move towards more "connective approaches" (*GP* 21) of memory. By "connective" methods of memory, Hirsch is not only referring to interpersonal relationships by way of "individuals and social institutions, but also through technological media" (22). By framing her theory as "multidirectional" (21),<sup>10</sup> Hirsch not only opens up postmemory as a multimedia practice, but she also reinforces the relatability and thus the intrinsic creativity of postmemory itself.

While Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* does allude to photographic media by way of the Holocaust photographs that Ben encounters,<sup>11</sup> I would argue that her employment of a lyric and highly metaphorical style is a primary way in which she engages within the "connective approach" of postgenerational and postmemorial experience. Like Michaels, Ben and Jakob are writers, both by way of their professions – Jakob a poet and translator, Ben an academic – and in their writing of their memoirs that make up this novel. In all three of their endeavours to "write the Holocaust" – Jakob as a Holocaust survivor, Ben

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<sup>10</sup> The concept of "multidirectional memory," however, was coined by memory scholar, Michael Rothberg in his book, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (2009).

<sup>11</sup> At one point in his narrative, Ben writes, "We think of photographs as the captured past. But some photographs are like DNA. In them you can read your whole future" (251-52).

as a member of the postgeneration, and Michaels in her post-Holocaust project<sup>12</sup> – their use of allusions, similes, and metaphors connect to the reader just as affectively and intimately as Hirsch argues Holocaust family portraits do with their viewer (*GP* 38). While some critics have accused her poetic language of inappropriately aestheticizing atrocity,<sup>13</sup> or as a “shapeless showing off” of her writing (Henighan 150), others have described Michaels’s lyricism as “a kind of vibrant ‘soul-music’ that captures the subtle intensities of sadness, love, guilt, and longing” (Zeitlin 186). Michaels’s language imbues the fragmentary nature of her novel with a sense of vitality and emotion, much in the same way that the act of postmemory can bring to life an otherwise absent or belated past. In “Cleopatra’s Love,” Michaels contends, “Memory, like metaphor, is heightened by relation. The metaphor unifies separate components into a complex whole, creating something greater than a sum of parts” (14). Similar to Campbell’s notion of relational memory, metaphor, for Michaels, requires the recognition as well as the negotiation of difference by placing one thing in relation to another as a way to come to a greater understanding of a particular object or idea. When we do not think comparatively, we risk appropriation, and sameness, ultimately stripping away the uniqueness of a person or idea.

Verwaayen argues that *Fugitive Pieces* “is a metacritical reflection on the processes, limitations, and liberations of autobiographical and biographical genre,” and that “what Michaels’s book insists on most strikingly is simultaneously the absolute failure of – and necessity for – these forms” (127). In other words, the genres of memoir

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<sup>12</sup> While Michaels’s father, Isaiah Michaels, was a Polish-Canadian Jew who immigrated to Canada in the 1930s, Michaels herself has not publically identified as Jewish. In a 2009 *Guardian* interview, Michaels expressed that she felt that to confirm herself as Jewish “would be a cop-out...And it would diminish the enterprise” of her writing (Crown n.p.).

<sup>13</sup> See Cook



and auto/biography, particularly in personal narratives of trauma and healing, are, in themselves, precarious forms of writing due to their susceptibility for invention and blurring of fact and fiction, or for what Verwaayen calls the “saming” or the erasure of identity (132). We can see this notion most clearly in Ben’s replication of Jakob’s narrative. However, Verwaayen contends that (re)imagining ourselves and our narratives through autobiographical writing by way of our relationships to and with others is necessary. More specifically, if survival requires, as Jakob contends, “step[ping]” into the lives of others (Michaels 48), then we must allow in our writing of auto/biography “for intersymbiotic/ intergeneric/ intersubjective fusions that [will] contest othering” (Verwaayen 136). In other words, we must place ourselves in relation to others that will not succumb to othering or objectifying their experiences, or claiming them as our own. Instead, we should consider how we enter into affective bonds and relationships with others that both welcomes and negotiates difference as way for two individuals to be brought together as one, while still maintaining their disparate identities.

It is ultimately Ben’s love for his wife, Naomi that allows him to come to terms with his inherited, traumatic past. More specifically, his ability to acknowledge Naomi’s subjectivity – that is, in his knowledge of her memories (Michaels 285) – helps Ben understand that he “must give what [he] most need[s]” (294): love. If postmemory compels us to write our story by way of the experiences of others, yet maintains the risk of appropriation and infringement, then as Michaels’s novel suggests, we ought to look towards more affective channels of remaining “empathically unsettled” (LaCapra, “Trauma” 699). Zeitlin argues that Michaels’s novel “suggests that it is the transfer of affection to others not related by blood that can bring some closure to the act of mourning

and authorize the sense of an individual identity” (189). In particular, it is through the love that each couple – Jakob and Michaela, and Ben and Naomi – has for each other that the novel’s narrators move towards healing and rebuilding themselves out of the traumatic past. Put simply, Michaels’s novel suggests that in order to arrive at a postmemorial understanding of the past, one that is ethical in its “connective approaches” (Hirsch, *GP* 21), and also respectful of difference, we must be guided by love.

In his treatise *In Praise of Love*, philosopher Alain Badiou claims that love “is an existential project: to construct a world from a decentred point of view other than that of my mere impulse to survive or re-affirm my own identity” (25). This explanation echoes Hirsch’s definition of postmemory, as it argues that in order to understand our place in the world we must engage with perspectives that are different from our own; it requires looking at the world through difference rather than sameness, and respecting and acknowledging variance between ourselves others rather than trying to overcome those distinctions. However, when we consider the philosophy behind intimate or affective encounters and relationships between individuals, we can, as Lauren Berlant argues, “aspir[e] for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others” (1). To be intimate, to be physically and emotionally close with another, is to create a new narrative together; it is not so much a consideration of how the experiences of another can affect my own identity and how I approach or understand the past; rather, to be intimate with another is both a recognition of and a reckoning with difference in order to come together and create a shared experience that is both respectful of each other’s memories and unique qualities.

The power of intimacy and affection between two people is significant to the healing processes of both Jakob and Ben. As Mei-Yu Tsai argues, “Michaela’s physical presence and empathetic identification awakens Jakob from his Holocaust-haunted nightmares to a first morning of human connectedness” (58). After meeting each other at a party, Jakob describes being opened up to Michaela’s palatial mind (Michaels 176), with her face full of “the loyalty of generations,” her eyes “ten generations of history,” while her hair carries “scents of fields and pines” (178). Michaela’s “offering” of her ancestors and family history, and Jakob’s subsequent “hunger for her memories” (179), is an empathic connection between the two individuals, one that allows for the recognition of varying experiences, and to allow those exchanges of difference to bring them together. This acknowledgement of alterity was something Jakob could not achieve in his marriage to Alex, who “built up an arsenal of word wit” (130), and “spent a lot of energy being modern to the minute” (131). In addition to her superficiality, Alex would pry Jakob out of the darkness of his memories, begging him to “begin again” (144). Michaela, in contrast, embraces the tragedy and darkness of Jakob’s past. After their first night together, during which Jakob recounts his family history to Michaela, Jakob explains that she “has heard everything – her heart an ear, her skin an ear. Michaela is crying for Bella” (182). Michaela’s listening to Jakob’s trauma, as Cathy Caruth argues, allows for the “inherent departure” of trauma, in which the traumatized individual, through narrativizing his/her experience, finds “a means serves of passing out of the isolation imposed by the event: that the history of trauma, in its inherent belatedness, can only take place through the listening of another” (10-11). For Jakob, this movement out of his isolating trauma manifests through Michaela’s emotional reaction to his story, but also in her supremely

physical and intimate response. This conflation of affection in both Michaela's emotions and her physical body, speaks to Sara Ahmed's notions of touch and "touchability," in which she argues that "[b]eing touched suggests becoming closer to each other in which *movement* across the division of self-other may take place, but a movement which does not abolish the division as such" ("Intimate" 27-28; emphasis Ahmed's). In other words, by allowing oneself to be touched, that is by "being moved or affected" (27), or in being *physically* touched, barriers of difference or alterity between the two individuals are not broken down, but rather lead to "ripples and movement which re-form rather than overcome such borders, giving them animation" (28). Touch is a way of bringing two individuals together, but it is also a movement away from one another – not in the sense that they cannot *be* together, but that by being close together they are able to see the unique identity of the other person, and to thus place ourselves in relation to that individual. This concept of touch can also explain why Jakob experiences "the joy of being recognized," but also "the stabbing loss: recognized for the first time" (182), after he tells Bella's story to Michaela; on the one hand, Jakob is brought closer to Michaela in their intimate encounter, on the other, his "loss" of Bella, his having lived through the trauma of losing his family, is what also sets him apart from her. In this encounter, however, both in their physical closeness to one another and through the deep emotion of Jakob's story, the lovers unite in a shared, intimate moment that redefines the parameters of their relationship, and of themselves.

Like Jakob, Ben longs for touch and intimacy as a form of comfort and recognition. As a child, he would yearn for the occasional moments when his father would run his fingers through his hair while they would listen to classical music (218).

However, in contrast to Naomi, for whom loving is as “natural as breathing,” Ben’s ability to love his “silent” parents “was like holding [his] breath” (233); this is why Ben misreads Naomi’s deep love for his parents – her reciting the kaddish for them and bringing flowers to their grave – “as [an] insinuation, [a] manipulation, a play of power” (248), a pronouncement of their affection and trust that she had earned and to which Ben was never given access. However, after learning that Naomi was already aware of his parents’ lost children, Ben cannot bear to be near his wife. As they go to bed that night, Ben describes how Naomi lies down next to him “in her favourite position” and feels “her small stockinged feet against [his] calves, a gesture of intimacy that filled [him] with hopelessness” (254). This moment of attempted intimacy demonstrates a change in their relationship. Though once, as Ben states, “Naomi’s body to me was so familiar a map,” he finds that he “never unfurled her anymore; opened her only a small square at a time” (256). As the contours of Ben and Naomi’s relationship change, so too does the way in which the two lovers touch. Here, too, Ahmed is useful: the skin, she explains, “provides a way of thinking about how the boundary between bodies is formed only through being traversed, or called into question, by the affecting of another” (*Strange Encounters* 45). In other words, the ways in which bodies come to touch is inextricably linked to the ways in which they emotionally affect or touch one another; barriers of difference and alterity are still not broken down, but rather continue to be “rippled” and “re-formed,” as does the state of Ben and Naomi’s marriage since Ben quickly departs Toronto for Greece in their test “separation” (Michaels 255).

Badiou aligns his views on sexuality with those of Jacques Lacan, stating that in sex, “each individual is to a large extent on their own . . . Naturally, the other’s body has

to be mediated, but at the end of the day, the pleasure will be always your pleasure. Sex separates, doesn't unite" (18). While this statement may overlook feminist scholarship on sexual intimacy, including Ahmed's own notions of touch as noted above, Ben's purely physical, and to a certain extent, superficial encounter with Petra, prohibits him from fully communicating with or *hearing* Petra, thus signaling his ignorance of difference with his new lover. Love, Badiou contends, "is what comes to replace that non-relationship" in sexuality (19), since pure sexuality or desire "focuses on the other, always in a somewhat fetishist manner," rather than "focus[ing] on the very being of the other" (21). When Ben is with Petra, he admits that he fails to "listen too closely" to what she says (277), preferring to "empt[y]" (278) himself into her, both literally and figuratively. Unlike in his relationship with Naomi, the ways in which Ben and Petra touch do not transform any such borders of difference and alterity, but instead only draw Ben further into himself, and further into his over-identification with Jakob.

However, Rae aptly notes that in *Fugitive Pieces*, "failure is part of the process of developing new forms of empathy and understanding" ("Converting Failure" 209). Ben must not only learn what it means to fail, as he does in his affiliation with Jakob and his affair with Petra, but he must also learn what it truly means to embark on a "lover's quest," which he defines as a search "to discover another's psyche, to absorb another's motives as deeply as your own" (222). While he initially undertakes this journey through his affiliation with Jakob in order to work through his inherited trauma, in actuality, Ben must instead look at how he can intimately come to know, or rather *love* a person in such a way that maintains an empathic understanding both of that individual and of their past. While Ben admits that, unlike his knowledge of Petra's body, he does not know what

Naomi's "wrists look like, or the knot of bone of her ankle, or how her hair grows at the back of her neck," what he does know, he says, is "what she makes of her memories. I know what she remembers. I know her memories" (285). What is critical here is that Ben does not say that he possesses Naomi's memories; they are *her* memories, and his ability to know them and know them *as* Naomi's, demonstrates an acknowledgment of difference through his choice to listen and become the empathic, "second voice" to Naomi's past (Wertsch in Campbell, "The Second" 42).<sup>14</sup> Additionally, by recognizing his intimate knowledge of Naomi's internal life, Ben realizes that he must take ownership of his traumatic upbringing, or rather that he must claim his "unhappiness as [his] own" (292). In other words, while his parents' trauma and memories might be his "molecularly" (280), Ben can define himself outside of his familial postmemory, and instead work through his trauma through the empathic nature of his marriage. In her discussion of narratives that she calls "auto-ethno-graphies," Ahmed contends that "[t]he act of remembering through engagement with others creates the present identification as one that lives for the future of a dis-placed community. Crucially, then, the story involves becoming intimate through engagement with others whom one is already, in some sense, close to, and yet apart from" ("Intimate" 38). The same argument can be made for Ben, who, as Rae states, must think "comparatively," in order to "realize . . . how he might regain the power to love" (*From Cohen* 280), and rebuild himself out of his traumatic, inherited past.

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<sup>14</sup> Campbell explains James Wertsch's view that memory takes place within a "triumvirate of characters," comprised of "the one who speaks (the first voice); the one who listens (the second voice); and all others who have contributed to the meaning of the words that the speaker uses (the third voice)" (Wertsch in Campbell 42). Campbell believes that "the second voice, which is rarely silent, enters intimately into our experience of memory" (42).

Badiou asserts that “love is . . . a ‘truth procedure’, that is, an experience whereby a certain kind of truth is constructed. This truth is quite simply the truth about Two: the truth that derives from difference as such” (38). If memory is meaning, and meaning does not always equal the truth, as Michaels contends in “Cleopatra’s Love” (15), then what is missing from the search for truth in both inherited and experienced trauma, or, more specifically, the postmemorial project, is love. While Tsai states that “[p]sychoanalysts have shown that the ability to love others and to communicate this love points to signs of recovery from trauma” (68), I would add that love is not only a form of recovery, but rather it allows victims of trauma to genuinely move forward, so that they may live a life that is not dictated or defined by their past, but rather informs the ways in which they can bring the past with them into the future. Love requires a continuing acknowledgement and respect of difference; it allows two individuals to come together in a shared narrative, while still maintaining their two, disparate selves and their unique experiences. What is needed, then, is a postmemorial practice that is guided by love that recognizes and honours difference as a way to ethically engage with the past, but to also bring a more productive and forward-looking approach to how we can “(re)build and mourn” (*FF* 245).

Verwaayen defines the “ethical imperative” of Michaels’s text as the need “to resist the violence of objectification, the brute force of othering,” and that “one must not only to [*sic*] engage personally and deeply with others, but to embed them as part of one’s self” (139). To achieve this objective is to engage in a form of love that is built out of and depends upon ethically sound, empathic identifications, as well as empathetic listening. Michaela’s welcoming of Jakob’s memories allows him to learn what it means



to “love . . . so deeply” (Michaels 191), and understand that “we’re never ourselves until we contain two souls” (189); Jakob realizes he can carry his memories of his sister forward within his love for another, which becomes clear when he and Michaela decide to name their future child, “[if] she’s a girl: Bella. If he’s a boy: Bela” (279). Similarly, Ben’s recognition of Naomi’s alterity shows him the power of intimate bonds to support and carry one another *as* another. He recalls Naomi once saying to him, “Sometimes we need both hands to climb out of a place. Sometimes there are steep places, where one has to walk ahead of the other. If I can’t find you, I’ll look deeper in myself. If I can’t keep up, if you’re far ahead, look back. Look back” (292). We can look into ourselves to find our way back to the people we love, as they have become a part of us, but we must also remember to recognize our loved ones as separate, unique beings, who still require support and comfort in times of need. In his realization that he “must give what [he] most need[s]” (294), Ben must complete his postmemorial project by allowing love and difference to guide him towards healing. In other words, in order to come to terms with our own trauma and memories, and to see them *as* our own, we must write ourselves by way of our relationships with others, and how our encounters of love, touch, and intimacy can *move* us – both emotionally and physically – forward towards restoration and peace.

## Chapter 4 Conclusion

At the time Michaels writes *Fugitive Pieces*, several false Holocaust and other memoirs of trauma were being published in different parts of the world; the most notable works included Benjamin Wilkomirski's (b. Bruno Dössekker) child Holocaust memoir, *Fragments*, in 1996, and Helen Demidenko's (b. Helen Darville) autobiography, *The Hand That Signed the Paper* in 1993. However, the novels' authenticity were only put into question two to three years following their publications and subsequent critical acclaims (Egan 15, n.2; 17, n.5). While these works may appear as extreme cases of the appropriation of survivor voice and experience, like Ben's narrative, they similarly raise critical issues of who gets to tell whose story, and how much of other people's trauma can we allow to affect our consciousness and inflect our memories. Susan Rubin Suleiman, however, suggests that they can be powerful in their raising of questions such as: "Where does literature end (or begin) and psychopathology begin (or end)? Where should the line be drawn – should the line be drawn? – between personal memory and imagined or 'borrowed' memory? To whom does the memory of the Holocaust belong?" ("Problems of Memory" 554). For myself, I wonder what place does artifice have within post-Holocaust art and literature? How do we detect artifice? How do we acknowledge its limits? If we do reckon with its limits, then how do we go forward?

In his artist statement for *Familial Ground*, Rafael Goldchain states that in creating his self-portraits in which he dresses as members of his family, the project "suggests that grounding identity within a familial and cultural history subject to erasures, geographic displacements, and cultural dislocations entails mixing measures of fact and imagination" (27). Similar to Hirsch's objective of postmemory, Goldchain's works aim

to arrive at an empathic (re)construction of the past, one that is based both on the recalling of memories, as well as imaginative creation. However, he clarifies that his photographs “are the result of a reconstructive process that acknowledges its own limitations. The construction of an image of the past unavoidably involves a mixture of fragmented memory, artifice, and invention. Ultimately, this mixture evolves as it is transmitted from generation to generation” (27). Memory, and the way we present it through art, photography, and literature are inevitably highly constructed and self-conscious. Similarly, Stuart Hall contends that cultural identity “is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth” (226). However, it is critical to note, as Goldchain does, that the ways in which we engage within memory practices must acknowledge its limits, and recognize that we cannot necessarily recreate those “lost origins,” since memory and cultural identity, as Hall states “undergo constant transformation” (225).

Michaels’s engagement within the postmemorial project in her novel *Fugitive Pieces*, particularly in Ben’s narrative, highlights the constructed nature of engaging within a postmemorial transmission of memory, as well as the limits or the likelihood of faltering into an appropriative undertaking. This is not to say that Hirsch’s postmemory is unhelpful or invalid – it is, if anything, a compelling and useful concept for looking at and contemplating the postgenerational experience, particularly in photography and gendered experiences of Holocaust postmemory – but, like any theory, we have to be cautious and aware of its limits, particularly when it involves such abstract and personally-invested ideas such as memory. Literature and art, however, have the ability to expose the limits of a particular theory through both *enacting* and pushing *against* those

restrictions. Simultaneously, these works can also present us with new alternatives to approaching and putting forward those theories in ways that are both ethical and productive.

The end of Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*, I argue, reckons with the inevitability of the artifice and limits in the postmemorial project, and helps point both the novel's characters, as well as its readers, towards something that can help guide postmemory towards a more adequate consideration of difference. For instance, the final image that we read in Michaels's novel is of Ben imagining a scene from his childhood, in which he observes his parents in an intimate moment. His father is crying over his food, while his wife "strokes his hair. Like a miraculous circuit, each draws strength from the other" (294). As Ben breaks out of the artifice of his affiliation with Jakob, he realizes that what he needs is an affective approach to traumatic healing, in particular, one built out of love and empathy which he will consequently return to in his relationship with Naomi.

Nevertheless, as Jakob tells us in the preface to *Fugitive Pieces*, "A man's work, like his life, is never completed." Similarly, Badiou claims, "[Love] is the desire for an unknown duration. Because, as we all know, love is a re-invention of life. To re-invent love is to re-invent that re-invention" (33). Both love and memory continually require the need to form new connections, or, as Michaels puts it, to arrive at "an interpretation" ("Cleopatra" 14). We have to continue to build upon the "fugitive pieces" we come across, and, as Michaels explores in her most recent work, go on to form connections and *correspondences* with others.

*Correspondences* (2013) is Michaels's most recent collaborative project with Toronto-based artist, and child of Holocaust survivors, Bernice Eisenstein. Situated in an

accordion book, Michaels's long poem, "Correspondences," lays on one side of its unnumbered pages, while the other side showcases Eisenstein's portraits of various figures like Paul Celan, Charlotte Delbo, W.G. Sebald, and Helen Keller, which are accompanied by various quotations usually by the depicted individuals. Written as an elegy for her late father, Michaels explores loss, grief, and love in her poem; however, like *Fugitive Pieces*, she pays particular attention to the ways in which we build our language, our narratives, and ourselves out of our intimate correspondences with others.

She writes:

for only a moment, we belong  
to ourselves, not to  
parents, nor yet to a lover,  
only to ourselves,

and then gravity returns,  
the pull of other bodies

as it should be  
as it must

For Michaels, the only way to be in the world is to place oneself in affective and close relationships with others. Additionally, to grieve a death, as Michaels does in this poem, is to keep the dead with us, but only insofar as it pushes us to create something greater, drive us further into a new experience, or, as Michaels says,

not two to make one,  
but two to make  
the third,

just as a conversation can become  
the third side of the page

By thinking comparatively, particularly within the contexts of death, trauma, and memory, we can arrive at something greater than the sum of its parts. In *Fugitive Pieces*, both Jakob and Ben ultimately realize that it is the power of love that will guide them towards a more ethical and valuable understanding of the past. For Ben in particular, doing so allows him to create and compile his and Jakob's memoirs into a single work, while simultaneously granting these narratives the ability to stand on their own. By allowing ourselves, as Jakob says at the end of his narrative, to "never be deaf to love" (195), we can, as both Jakob and Ben eventually achieve, be guided toward understanding, creation, and healing.

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