

Lost in Transculturation: Evicted Travellers in Lily Brett's *Things Could Be Worse* and Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces*

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In der Luft, da bleibt deine Wurzel, da,/In der Luft
(Paul Celan)¹

In a recent book titled *The Grammar of Identity*, Stephen Clingman addresses the notion of the “transnational self”² as intrinsically transitive or navigational, by which he implies both the internal and external navigation, as well as the navigation between one self and the others. In his view, “navigation does not mean crossing or having crossed, but being in the space of crossing,” as in “accepting placement as displacement, position as disposition.”³ This interpretation of the transnational encompasses to a large extent the transcultural, itself understood as both a navigation across or negotiation of differences within the one self and between other selves.

Thus, if the transnational and transcultural can be imagined as the transitional space between differences or boundaries, which Clingman regards as absolutely necessary for the possibility of navigation, then the transnational identity, and more specifically the migrant identity emerges as both nomadic and hybrid. As such, a transnational identity inhabits the space of crossing or the location of dislocation (be it national, cultural, etc.), while at the same time probing the various possibilities or combinations within itself or with other selves, as manifested through the so-called “transitive versions of identity”.⁴

Among the many categories covered by the notion of the transnational are also those identities “for whom the transnational is not a matter of choice,”⁵ as in the case of individuals affected by postwar forced migration. Thus, the

¹ “In the air your root remains, there/ in the air” (my translation). First verse of the poem ‘In der Luft’ in Paul Celan, *Die Niemandsrose. Sprachgitter. Gedichte*, (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2002), p. 81.

² Stephen Clingman, *The Grammar of Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 8ff.

³ Clingman, *Grammar*, pp. 24–25.

⁴ Clingman, *Grammar*, p. 15.

⁵ Clingman, *Grammar*, p. 25.

traumatic disruption experienced by the Holocaust survivors (and their descendants) trapped or lost in transculturation constitutes a case in point. For them and for those set to make sense of their tribulations, transnationalism and transculturation translate not only as *modi vivendi*, but also as the alternative 'space' for negotiating the old culture. As Dori Laub pointed out, "In the wake of the atrocities [...] cultural values, political conventions, social mores, national identities, [...], families and institutions have lost their meaning, have lost their context. As a watershed event, the Holocaust entailed an implicit revolution in all values, a reevaluation or, to use a Nietzschean term, a 'transvaluation' of which we have not yet measured the array of cultural implications for the future."⁶ Whether or not this historic transvaluation really entails the "disintegration and deflation of the old culture"⁷ or just a sublimation or regrouping of elements pertaining to the old values rearranged within new temporal and spatial settings is the issue that this paper sets out to explore. How much of the old self is retained in Clingman's notion of the transnational, navigational identity and how transmutable can be, in fact, transitive identities? How viable a notion is it to inhabit 'the space of crossing' in the Holocaust survivors' case and does that position equal, in essence, a simultaneous dwelling in both the past and the present? And if so, can one really and fully relinquish the grip of trauma while lodged in the transitional space?

While the answers to these questions are neither easy, nor permanent, they become even more complex in the context of contemporary Aftermath literature, where the tensions between history and the fictional representation of individual memory and identity relativise the discourse on transculturality. In this light, I suggest that post-traumatic transculturality be understood as only a temporary act of dwelling in the space of crossing, en route to a newer and more precisely defined sense of home/placeness, once/if regeneration and healing occur. So, instead of viewing cross-culturality as perpetual transgression, I propose an exploration of the progressive stages of dislocation as transitory steps towards relocation, as superimposition of transparent layers of experience, whose reshuffling is aimed at reaching a comforting level of stability or closure.

Among those artists concerned with the representation of traumatised, hyphenated identities forged within the transnational space are two contemporary poet-novelists from Australia and Canada, whose works

⁶ Dori Laub, 'Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening', in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 74.

⁷ Laub, 'Bearing Witness', p. 74.

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foreground the complexities of post-Holocaust trauma and transmigration. They are, on the one hand, Lily Brett who, in 1992, published a collection of short-stories titled *Things Could Be Worse*⁸ and Canadian writer Anne Michaels, author of the 1996 novel *Fugitive Pieces*⁹, on the other. Both writers evoke the challenge of dealing with Aftermath trauma to which first-generation survivors are severely exposed in the wake of genocide, in the labour/displaced persons' camps and post-war migration, as well as the difficulties encountered by their offspring (i.e., the second-generation survivors) when dealing with parental distress and their own confused sense of self in the transcultural environment. While both works feature psychologically damaged individuals, they also negotiate the possibility of post-traumatic healing and explore the need for and effect of long-term recuperative efforts. Essentially, either piece evokes the transcultural with a noticeable sense of urgency and explores the *topoi* of disruption along the crosscultural route, while envisaging modalities to bridge the inherent gaps. Equally important, the fundamental stress on poetic creativity and affect as crucial to healing and self-acceptance is common to both narratives.

Yet, while the dimension of anxiety and alienation is comparable in the two pieces, Lily Brett and Anne Michael's narrative styles and actual engagement in the cross-cultural aspect of transmigration could not be more different. The most contrastive aspect that sets the two works apart is that Brett's perspective is primarily autobiographical and matrilineal, focusing mainly on stories of what she calls "left-over daughters/and missing mothers,"¹⁰ whereas Michaels' outlook is almost exclusively fictional and patrilineal, centring on imagined stories of fathers and sons. In rendering the disastrous effects of trauma, Brett's horizontal perception of time counterpoints Michaels' vertical conception of time, whose layers superimpose in a perfect palimpsest fashion. Not incidentally, her poetic, highly figurative approach of time extends to her unique narrative style, in contrast to Brett's more straightforward, literal technique.

Last, but not least, the comparative juxtaposition of these literary productions is interesting in the way it reveals two fictional modes of the national and, conversely, the transnational. Poland, Greece, Canada and Australia are the national landmarks against which different aspects of post-

⁸ All quotations will refer to this edition: Lily Brett, *Collected Stories* (St Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press, 1999).

⁹ All quotations will refer to this edition: Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998).

¹⁰ Lily Brett, *After the War*, cited in Roberta Buffi, 'Things Could Be Forgotten: Women's Remembrance in Lily Brett's Poetry and Fiction', *Westerly*, vol. 1, no. 4 (1996), p. 60.

WW II transnationalism become evident. In the fraught context of the Holocaust, post-genocidal exile and the consequential mutations in the (self-) perception of Jewishness, the concept of nation becomes blurred and is more often than not replaced by 'ethnicity' or revised notions of belonging. As such, the nation as identity signifier undergoes crucial changes, in that it becomes a defamiliarised notion which no longer encompasses the close-knit blend of country/Heimat/land, place, language, culture and family. On the contrary, the traumatised, alienated survivors identify with either one or none of the above constituents of nationhood. The question rises then: what is, in fact, a traumatised transnational identity if the 'national' has lost its meaning? How can we distinguish the new from the old self and imagine the transnational as navigation between the two, when their boundaries are blurred? Is there really such a thing as a space of crossing and transition that one can occupy in the figurative sense in the post-traumatic phase, and how is that space different from what Dori Laub dubs "the black hole"?¹¹ This paper will explore the aforementioned issues by looking at the fictional protagonists depicted in these works and following their transcultural and transnational trajectories along their more or less successful regenerative paths. Their émigrés or 'evicted travellers' status will inflect the manner in which they experience transculturation, while the depth of their trauma will determine their preference for communality or alienation.

Lilly Brett's collection of so-called 'life' pieces illustrates in the fictional third person narrative of Lola's sorrowful search for selfhood as a second-generation Holocaust survivor born in a displaced persons' camp in Germany and living in suburban Melbourne since the age of two. Her parents Josl and Renia Bensky, both Polish nationals before the war, survived the Lodz ghetto, then Auschwitz, and finally a German DP camp. They emigrated to Australia in 1948 carrying with them the burden of a past that their daughter Lola would subsequently struggle to understand, accept and inhabit as her own acquired space:

Lola seemed like a good journalist, a good wife and a good mother. But Lola was crooked [...] She was at an odd angle. And no-one noticed. Arrows of anger and shafts of self-pity pitted her thoughts. Fear ruptured her nights. Fantasies and dreams were intertwined with her daily life. She thought she was Renia and Josl. She thought she had been in the ghetto. She thought she had been in Auschwitz, too.

¹¹ Laub, 'Bearing Witness', pp. 64–65. The "black hole" is that manifestation of trauma through the simultaneous feeling of "impossibility of remembering and of forgetting," i.e., the inner crisis caused by the simultaneous inability to either speak about or forget the atrocities.

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She grew a cocoon around herself. And in this unoccupied territory, this haven, this no man's land, Lola spent her youth.¹²

This constant attempt on Lola's part to identify with the experience of her parents and transgress the boundaries of incomprehension echoes Lily Brett's own crisis, which she touched upon in an interview with Fiona Giles in 2000 entitled 'Walking Among Ghosts': "I wanted to be one of them, I felt very left out. If I could have, I would have been in Auschwitz next to my mother, on the bunks, pressed right up against her, sharing everything with her [...] I didn't want to be separated from her by this enormous gulf."¹³

In the Australian cultural context, spatially and temporally removed from the Holocaust, the intergenerational gap takes on transcultural forms. Like Lily in real life, Lola is depicted as having been "born with a backlog of sadness,"¹⁴ constantly trying to research, imagine and later on speak about her parents' past: "I have had a compulsion for many years now to bring that past to life... To be a voice for all the voiceless. To have a language for all those who didn't have a language. Without language – and English was my parents' fourth or fifth language – they had no voice."¹⁵

If the Holocaust victims or, in Italian survivor and writer Primo Levi's words, "the drowned" have no language and no voice, then what does remain of the pre-war Europe? Hannah Arendt replied in a German television programme in 1964 that "Die Muttersprache bleibt"/"The mother tongue remains", which prompted Giorgio Agamben to ask in *Remnant of Auschwitz*, "What is language as a remnant? How can a language survive the subjects and even the people that speak it? And what does it mean to speak in a remaining language?"¹⁶ The fact that Lola attempts to bear witness in English, that is a universal, adoptive language, could account for the translinguistic nature of testimony and the transculturality of witnessing. Furthermore, by choosing, as Lola does, to testify through poetry, one can conclude, along with Hölderlin and Agamben, that "the poetic word is the one that is always situated in the position of a remnant and that can, therefore, bear witness. Poets-witnesses found language as what remains, as what actually survives the possibility, or impossibility, of speaking."¹⁷

But could language and poetry as acts of witnessing simultaneously constitute a home or Heimat for the evicted travellers or immigrants? In a

¹² Brett, *Collected Stories*, p. 89.

¹³ Fiona Giles, 'Walking Among Ghosts: An Interview with Lily Brett', in *Meanjin*, vol. 59, no. 1 (2000), p. 56.

¹⁴ Giles, 'Walking Among Ghosts', p. 12.

¹⁵ Giles, 'Walking Among Ghosts', p. 57.

¹⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz* (New York: Zone Books, 1999), p. 159.

¹⁷ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 161.

recent interview for the TV channel Sat3¹⁸, the German Nobel prize winner of Romanian origin Herta Müller stated, against the trend,¹⁹ that language can be neither home nor a substitute for home for the exiled individual:

Q: Das Nobelpreiskomitee hat Sie in der Begründung gewürdigt als Autorin von Landschaften der Heimatlosigkeit. Fühlen Sie sich heimatlos oder ist die Deutsche Sprache eine Art Heimat für Sie?

H.M.: Also, die Sprache ist keine Heimat. Ich habe auch einmal in einem Essay gesagt: gerade dieser Spruch 'Sprache ist Heimat', den haben wir ja von den Deutschen Emigranten, die von Hitler geflogen sind. Und die haben ja natürlich Recht gehabt, das zu sagen, weil sie haben das ja in eigenem Mund gesagt [...] Aber ich glaube, wenn man in Deutschland in einem demokratischen Land lebt, wo man kommen und gehen darf, wie man möchte, sollte man vielleicht auf diesen Satz nicht rekurrieren. Und außerdem ist ...man nimmt eine Sprache ja mit, wenn man ein Land verlässt, weil sie ja zu einem zum Körper gehört. Man hätte sie nun nicht dabei, wenn man ja tot wäre. Was hat das mit Heimat zu tun? Und Jorge Semprún hat ja auch gesagt, nicht die Sprache ist Heimat, sondern Heimat ist das, was gesprochen wird und ich finde diesen Unterschied sehr wichtig. [...] Dieselbe Sprache ist oft nicht die gleiche und [...] dieser Spruch ist für mich nicht so gültig.²⁰

¹⁸ Interview with Herta Müller for German TV channel Sat3 on 15 October 2009, *Kulturzeit*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=piV1ZRygXG0>, accessed on October 1 2010.

¹⁹ For example., Theodore Adorno, exiled to America during the war years, was to write upon his return to Germany that dwelling has become impossible, and that it is morally right not to feel at home in one's home. For Adorno, the home could no longer be understood as a place of physical refuge, although exile also taught him that language, rather than spatial territory, was what ultimately constituted a sense of belonging. Since then, the loss of home and the impulse of return have become universal themes of the recent history of migration.

²⁰ My translation: "The Interviewer: The Nobel prize committee called you an author of homelessness in the statement of grounds for their choice of this year's winner. Do you consider yourself homeless or is language perhaps your home?"

Herta Müller: "The language cannot be a home./The language is not my home. As I once declared in an essay, particularly this saying that language is home, we inherited it from the German emigrants who were running away from Hitler. And they were right to use it, since they were saying it in their mother tongue. Yet I think that if one lives in a democratic country like Germany, where one can come and go as one pleases (unrestrictedly), one shouldn't fall back on the old saying just for the sake of it. And besides, one takes one's language with them when they go (leave a country), because their language is as close to them as their own body. However, one doesn't take their language with them when they die. So what's language got to do with (the notion of) Heimat? As Jorge Semprún also said, language is not your home. Home is what you express through language. And I find this

Jorge Semprún's distinction between the notion of 'language as Heimat' versus 'home as something one expresses through language' and not necessarily language as a whole, constitutes, as Herta Müller avers, a very fine and necessary distinction, especially in our postmodern age when language is politically and historically charged. As far as Lily Brett's intention vis-à-vis language goes, the utility of language involves its capacity to bear witness and be lyrically charged. Lola's preoccupation with poetry writing is circumscribed, as it is, to her postmemorialistic intentions, since postmemory is, as Hirsch points out, "a powerful and very particular form of memory [...whose connection] to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation."²¹

This urge in second-generation survivors like Lola to come to terms with what Marianne Hirsch dubbed "postmemory"²² prompts her to commit determined attempts at understanding, ranging from the self-inflicted physical abuse to extensive readings on the Holocaust, repeated travels to Lodz in Poland and later on the tape- and video-recording of her parents' devastating memories. These postmemorialistic efforts are targeted at constructing "a secondary, belated memory mediated by stories, images and behaviours among which she grew up, but which never added up to a complete picture or linear tale."²³ In fact, they are mere palliatives and do not ensure long term "reparation" and "recovery," as Henri Raczymow contends,²⁴ although they stem from the need to mend "the ruptured fabric of a painfully discontinuous, fragmentary history"²⁵ and from an inner urge for placeness and rootedness, and an origin other than the war or utter nothingness.

Postmemory, as Hirsch pointed out, differs from memory "by generational distance" and from history "by deep personal connection" and it is as constructed a notion as memory itself, but intrinsically connected to Henri

differentiation very important. A language is not always the same (not always equal with itself), and therefore this adage doesn't say much to me."

²¹ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames. Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 22. "[...] Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that precede their births, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood, nor recreated."

²² Hirsch, *Family Frames*, p. 22.

²³ Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, "'We Would Not Come Without You': Generations of Nostalgia", in *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*, eds Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 85.

²⁴ Henri Raczymow, 'Memory Shot Through with Holes', trans. Alan Astro, *Yale French Studies*, vol. 85 (1994), pp. 103–104.

²⁵ Hirsch and Spitzer, 'We Would Not Come Without You', p. 85.

Raczymow's "mémoire trouée" or his "memory shot through with holes" in that it encompasses "the indirect and fragmentary nature of second-generation memory."²⁶

Marianne Hirsch further distinguishes between the necessity for rootedness in second-generation survivorship and the notion of home or Heimat. Unlike the first-generation survivors who long to revisit their countries of origin and their long abandoned homes, their children cannot identify with those places in identical ways, as they cannot call home a place they never experience or 'touched'. Instead, she explains,

Children of survivors who 'return' to former homes need to soften overwhelmingly negative postmemories of coming 'from the war' by making a material connection with a 'before' — a time (and a place) in which their parents had not yet suffered the threat of genocide. They need to bring to the surface what the trauma of expulsion has submerged, to witness the sites of resistance and survival, and thus to construct a deeper and more nuanced understanding of history and of memory.²⁷

Hirsch's case, like Brett's, is a typical and evocative case of second-generation "evicted traveller" with diasporic roots, intrinsically relevant for the understanding of the transnational, layered and fragmentary identities featured in both *Things Could Be Worse* and Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces*. Like Czernowitz for Hirsch, Lodz has an aura, a meaningful fascination for Brett, which she transfers onto her character Lola and helps construct that bridge of memory (and survival) that makes her parents' past more accessible and meaningful to her protagonist.

The perpetuation of memory, which is equally a gesture of recuperation and a wish to belong to the Jewish collective, is achieved later in life by Lola through both the creative and memorialistic work as poet and prose writer. Significantly, Esther Faye underlines the importance of second-hand "witnessing as remembrance" in an article entitled 'Impossible Memories. Lily Brett as Essayist': "the *memorialisation* of a traumatic past experienced by the members of one generation is imbricated in and enervated by the need to write about the ways that the Holocaust is *witnessed* in the *lives* of those descendants who did not experience that trauma directly."²⁸ Thus, witnessing in the form of memorialisation can be understood as an intergenerational attempt at transculturation.

²⁶ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, pp. 22–23.

²⁷ Hirsch and Spitzer, 'We Would Not Come Without You', p. 85.

²⁸ Esther Faye, 'Impossible Memories: Lily Brett as Essayist', *Meridian*, vol. 17, no. 1 (1998), p. 63. Emphasis mine.

In representing Lola's second generation survivor's profile against the background of her parents' horrendous first-hand memories, Brett also covers the family's immigrant experience in the Melbourne suburb of Brunswick. Depicted as an unfriendly and lonely place at first²⁹, Melbourne gradually becomes their home, but one that requires compromises on their part. This becomes evident in a dialogue between an early emigrant to Australia named Esther and Renia, the post-Holocaust immigrant: "Esther said to Renia: 'You should buy yourself an Australian dress. Here it is called a sunfrock. It will help you look like an Australian. We Jews are just beginning to be accepted, and you shouldn't cause trouble for us [...] It is important to be normal.'"³⁰ Throughout the novel it is implied that part of the transnational experience consists in the tacit treatment of the Holocaust as taboo. Brett's irony transpires in dialogues like: "Josl tried to tell Max what had happened to Max's niece in Poland, but Max stopped him: 'I know, Josl, she had a terrible time. You know, Josl, we didn't have it so easy here in Melbourne during the war. We couldn't get any herring.'"³¹ And when Renia tries to engage Frieda in a conversation about the camps, Frieda interrupts her: "Renia, darling, it is over now. You are here, safe in Australia. It is best to put those things out of your mind. It is best not to disturb yourself with those thoughts."³² Thus, 'acclimatisation' to Australia bordered on assimilation and forgetting, and it is interesting how mingling becomes a synonym for transculturality.

In the above-mentioned interview, Lily Brett also engages with the difficulties inherent in her condition as displaced family member and daughter of first-generation survivor, which she tackled narratively in her novels, as well: "Her presence [Lily's mother's] was massive in my life. She just had so much to shut out in order to survive, in order to keep on having any faith at all in life. [...] And while she wanted to protect me, I felt awash in her degradation."³³

While the Melbourne experience might have not been what the Bensky's had dreamt for, Australia became their adoptive country and offered them a home and a sense of belonging as Australian nationals, in contrast to their previous status as marginalised/oppressed members of the Polish state. With time, Josl's textiles business prospered and Renia "became patriotically

²⁹ The city of Melbourne is described as an alienating space: "Renia Bensky hated it... the cheese tasted like wax and the bread was like cotton wool... [Renia] she felt so alone." Brett, *Collected Stories*, p. 6.

³⁰ Brett, *Collected Stories*, p. 6.

³¹ Brett, *Collected Stories*, p. 6.

³² Brett, *Collected Stories*, p. 6.

³³ Giles, 'Walking Among Ghosts', p. 63.

Australian. She hummed ‘God Save The King’ and wouldn’t let anyone voice any criticism of the country or its people.”³⁴ Although they both stemmed from Jewish orthodox families in Poland, they are both introduced as secular Jews in Brett’s book. Their Jewishness manifested itself in their sense of belonging to a family and a close-knit community of European Jewish expatriates or transnational émigrés who would gather for meals, celebrations and occasional dialogues in Yiddish. Thus, as Rachel Feldhay Brenner contends in an article titled ‘Genealogy and Identity: Excavating the Self in Canadian and Australian Auto/fictional Writing,’ Renia and Josl’s “sense of self [was] predicated upon the sense of stability contingent upon historical continuity and social belonging.”³⁵ In this sense, the New World seems to compensate to a certain extent for the broken roots to the Old World and be the much sought for haven for these characters. Even though Renia and Josl occasionally absent themselves from their current lives to slide into nostalgic reveries or blissful recollections of their lost families, they raise their daughters’ awareness and sense of belonging to a new, quasi-multicultural environment inherently different from their original Polish-Jewish roots, which they can all call home.

As for Lola, her constant confrontation of her fears and the realities of the Holocaust, help her eventually gain enough confidence to affirm her identity as daughter of first-generation survivors and “most prominent naratee of the Holocaust story,”³⁶ as wife, mother and poet. These multiple positions were extensively dealt and reaffirmed in Lily Brett’s writings: “I’ve felt a sense of belonging in my own skin, and in my own life. I have greater access to myself. I’m not clouded by ridiculous notions of who I am. I have a much clearer picture of who I am. I have myself.”³⁷ Significantly, Lola’s public appearance and her decision to shout out her poem in a public speech she holds in the presence of Australia’s prime minister reflect her final and definite acceptance of her multifold identity. As Dori Laub concludes her chapter on transvaluation and the burden of bearing witness, “Survivors [and their descendants, perhaps] have, in fact, rebuilt new friendships, new careers, new families, and have kept the careers highly successful and the families intensely bonded and cohesive. Yet in the center of this massive, dedicated effort

³⁴ Brett, *Collected Stories*, p. 9.

³⁵ Rachel Feldhay Brenner, ‘Genealogy and Identity: Excavating the Self in Canadian and Australian Auto/fictional Writing’, *MEDEA:—Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada*, vol. 7, no.7 (1992), pp. 63–79.

³⁶ Thomas E. Tausky, ‘Old Ghosts in New Countries: Memory and Renewal in Canadian and Australian Fiction of the Holocaust’, *Antipodes*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1993), p. 121.

³⁷ Giles, ‘Walking Among Ghosts’, p. 65.

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remains a danger, a nightmare, a fragility, a woundedness that defies all healing.”³⁸

The other poet-novelist to “emphasise the complexities of the ethical and psychological dimensions of the post-Holocaust existence,”³⁹ and equally those of transculturality, is the Canadian writer Anne Michaels, whose touching story of placelessness and human frailty in the face of trauma is dealt with in her first novel called *Fugitive Pieces*. In splendid poetic prose, she evokes the ever-shifting sense of space, place and identity inherent in transnational immigrant experience and the necessity to rebuild a shattered self.

Thus, Anne Michaels features three male characters as readers, listeners and producers of texts, invested with the role of questioning the validity of official history, while valuing counter-histories and individual experience. Although belonging to different nations, cultures and generations, and brought together by serendipity alone, Michaels’ protagonists, like Brett’s, share in the gift of creativity. Be they first or second-generation Holocaust survivors, geologists, explorers, poets or academics, these characters bring forth substantial textual testimony to the Nazi crimes against historical truth and buried narratives of collective identity, while at the same time being each other’s empathic proxy-witness and textual editor.

While Lily Brett marks the distance between her parents’ trauma and her impossibility to understand it thoroughly by employing third person narrative, Anne Michaels’ way to distance herself from un-lived experience is signaled by her choice male protagonists. As Susan Gubar rhetorically asks, “What better way to underscore her attempts to imagine suffering Michaels never experienced firsthand than by writing through and about male witnesses?”⁴⁰ Unlike Lily Brett, however, whose female leading character strongly empathises with her mother and repeatedly attempts identification with her physical and emotional pain, Anne Michaels’s male characters experience what Dominik La Capra calls “empathic settlement”, to denote the hypothetical situation when someone overtakes someone else’s “position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place.”⁴¹ The notion of “empathic settlement” is in some ways contiguous with

³⁸ Laub, ‘Bearing Witness’, p. 73.

³⁹ Tausky, ‘Old Ghosts’, p. 122.

⁴⁰ Susan Gubar, ‘Empathic Identification in Anne Michaels’s *Fugitive Pieces*: Masculinity and Poetry after Auschwitz’, *Signs*, vol. 28, no. 1 (*Gender and Cultural Memory*, Autumn 2002), p. 253.

⁴¹ Dominik La Capra, ‘Trauma, Absence, Loss’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 25, no. 4 (1999), p. 699.

Stephen Clingman's notion of navigation across boundaries as essential image of transculturality at the individual level.

As the novel's narrative unfolds, the extra-textual reader is presented with three destinies that embrace each other like Russian dolls in symbolically significant ways. Rescued from the flooded ruins of the ancient city Biskupin, in wartime Poland, the fugitive Jewish child Jacob Beer is smuggled into Greece and adopted by the Greek geologist Athos. On the island of Zakynthos, his mentor hides him from the occupying Nazis and teaches him Greek through scientific and fictional narratives meant to both alleviate the trauma of witnessing his parents' death at the hand of the Nazis, and stimulate the child's imagination and interest in transcultural navigation. On these occasions Jacob also learns about the Nazis' execution at Biskupin of Athos' fellow geologists, whose excavations would have fully uncovered an ancient civilization superior to the Aryan one, which further emphasises the perils of cross-cultural and transhistoric distortion of truth under National Socialism. After the war, the master and his adopted apprentice move to Toronto, after a short visit to Athens, following an invitation for Athos to teach geography in Canada. Several years after Athos' death in Toronto, Jacob completes his *kumbaros*'s research and gives the final touches to the latter's work on the Nazi crimes and abuse of history, subsequently published under the title *Bearing False Witness*. This inherited text, with profound historic, ethic, and scientific implications, documents a paternal and transcultural transmission of knowledge, just as it testifies to a unique transnational, transgenerational and affective relationship based on symbolic and literal adoption. In Anne Michaels's words: "The best teacher lodges an intent not in the mind but in the heart."⁴²

In a similar vein, poet Jacob Beer's poetic and profoundly autobiographic work itself becomes the object of a particular kind of patrilineal adoption through its discovery and subsequent publication by Ben, a casual acquaintance of Jakob's, who is also a Canadian citizen, second-generation Holocaust survivor, and writer in his own right. Thus, in the novel's second half, the narrative voice shifts to that of Ben, the third child of deeply traumatised Holocaust survivors and Canadian immigrants, whose previous children (Ben's absent, would-be siblings) were killed in the camps. A stranger to his parents' past, Ben travels to Greece out of fascination for Jacob's life narrative and work, while in fact attempting to escape his own inability to cope with his condition as survivor. Living in the now deceased poet's house on the island of Zakynthos, where Jakob had moved with his wife Michaela prior to their fatal car accident, Ben discovers details of Jakob's private life and life

⁴² Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, p. 121.

work. Thus, the symbolic chain of textual, patrilineal, transgenerational and also transcultural adoption is being carried on.

And so, as Jacob reads Athos and Ben reads Jacob, the atemporal, extra-textual (and perhaps transnational) reader completes the circle of adoption by engaging with Ben's own academic work on literature and weather. Additionally, in fact, the transcultural act of textual adoption and inheritance is reiterated with every random reader of Michaels' own book. Beside the essential act of remembrance carried out through reading, these acts of textual perusal reflect – in fact – the more important gesture of empathic identification with each other's form of Holocaust trauma. Like Lola in *Things Could be Worse*, both Athos, Jakob and Ben experience various degrees of physical, emotional and cultural transmigration, as well as family/friends loss, which they attempt to recuperate symbolically through meditation and writing. Unlike Lola, though, who in the end reaches that moment of self-clarity and reconciliation with her position as survivor, her masculine counterparts in *Fugitive Pieces* do not find significant relief from the clutch of confusion regarding their identity.

Jakob, the child survivor of the Shoah is presumably the most eloquent case of transnational traumatised identity in Anne Michaels's novel. Born in Poland to Jewish assimilated parents, he speaks Polish, Hebrew and Yiddish – all three languages undergoing various degrees of forgetting under the later siege of Greek and English. The last one, in fact, is repeatedly alluded to as the language of forgetting, meant to silence the inner torment of loss. Fittingly, Jakob begins working on English translations of poems banned in Greece, on which Michaels notes reflexively:

Translation is a kind of transubstantiation; one poem becomes another. You can choose your philosophy of translation just as you choose how to live: the free adaptation that sacrifices detail to meaning, the strict crib that sacrifices meaning to exactitude. The poet moves from life to language, the translator moves from language to life; both, like the immigrant, try to identify the invisible, what's between the lines, the mysterious implications.⁴³

As immigrant in Greece, then in Toronto, then back in Greece, Jakob's transgression of national and natural borders does not seem to have brought him any closer to himself. The places he transgresses throughout his life only speak to him culturally, geologically and historically (like, for instance, the ravines and valleys in Toronto, which he walks along with Athos). The stories buried underneath locations he visits and revisits with Athos are usually narratives of placelessness and dislocation. Emotionally and psychologically emplaced, he

⁴³ Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, p. 109.

feels safe only in the presence of human love, like that of Michaela, his Canadian wife, whose soothing words and genuine affection restore his balance and creative impetus.

Jakob's figure is central to the novel's understanding of place as both a site of loss and a sphere of belonging. Jakob is introduced to the novelistic scene as a child refugee⁴⁴, a bog-boy emerging from the Biskupin marshes of Nazi-occupied Poland. All through the novel, he "adopts 'surrogate' places of partial belonging through spatial doubling and translations, all of which facilitate an imagined continuity between past and present places."⁴⁵ While in Greece and hiding from the Nazis on Zakynthos, Jakob has flashbacks of his pre-war life in Poland, involving his family and especially his sister Bella⁴⁶, whose disappearance he can never account for. The topography of community and isolation is a constant denominator in Jakob's life and a recurrent theme in his transnational and transcultural peregrinations.

Athos, however, whose Greek wife Helen died in her youth remains inconsolable throughout his life, carrying the weight of loss in his transnational and cross-cultural peregrinations inherent in his academic work. Last, but not least, Ben's excursion into Jakob's life and art on the island of Zakynthos in Greece does not annihilate his fear and lack of understanding of his own parents' trauma:

Naomi [Ben's Canadian partner] says a child doesn't have to inherit fear. But who can separate fear from the body? My parents' past is mine molecularly. Naomi thinks she can stop the soldier who spat in my father's mouth from spitting into mine, through my father's blood. I want to believe she can rinse the fear from my mouth. But I imagine Naomi has a child and I can't stop the writing on his forehead from growing as the child grows. It's not the sight of the number that scares me, even as it bursts across the skin. It's that somehow my watching causes it to happen.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Jakob is categorised as a child survivor of the Holocaust, usually classified as 1.5 generation. See Susan Rubin Suleiman, 'The 1.5 Generation: Thinking About Child Survivors of the Holocaust', *American Imago*, vol. 59, no. 3 (2002), pp. 277–295.

⁴⁵ Dalia Kandiyoti, "'Our Foothold in Buried Worlds': Place in Holocaust Consciousness and Anne Michaels' 'Fugitive Pieces'", *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 45, no. 2 (2004), p. 301.

⁴⁶ The daily visions and nightly nightmares involving Bella are significant of Jakob's trauma, described by Cathy Caruth as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the events occur in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena." In *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative and History* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 11.

⁴⁷ Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, p. 280.

Lost in Transculation

Emotionally charged as both novels are, they depict stories of individual survival in contemporary, transnational contexts that influence, to a greater or lesser extent, the way direct or indirect Holocaust trauma is worked. In most situations, creativity in the form of poetry, academic writing, or translation provides the medium to express the significant transition from the first phases of trauma to relative forms of relief. In this regard, Lola, Athos, Jakob and Ben are but four of the many fictional characters in Aftermath literature involved in humanising the face of trauma, and, thus, in carrying out the essential act of remembrance across cultures.

In the broader context determined by transnationalism/ cross-culturalism, forced migration, and Holocaust-related survivorship and trauma, these characters could be indeed looked at as fictional representations of what Stephen Clingman dubs “navigational” or “transitive identities”, yet their mobility should not be understood exclusively as a physical or spatial migration. Rather, these characters, and the types of survivors they stand for, also undergo various phases of emotional and therapeutic transmigration, in which case their relocation is synonymous with varying degrees of healing. The habitation in the ‘space of crossing’, especially in the case of first-generation Holocaust survivors depicted in these works, is a form of transition from post-traumatic anguish to gradual emotional resettlement intrinsically determined by the multi-layered realities of the adoptive country.

Secondly, these transitive identities are only as transmutable as the particularities of origin, individual trauma, and the specific conditions in which their adoptive countries allow them to be. While Lily Brett’s female characters seem to adapt well in the end to their exilic, diasporic status in Australia, and show themselves able to overcome an initial sense of placelessness and non-belonging, Anne Michaels’s male protagonists find a relative and short-lived relief from anxiety and grief. It is also interesting to notice how affect and linguistic⁴⁸ creativity as expressions of shared experience are doubly validated as factors of emotional transmutation and healing in both works. And while neither of the two pieces of fiction places huge emphasis on Jewishness per se, or the victims’ country of provenance, they both explore the potential of familial support (be it blood family or adoptive family) in transnational and transcultural reintegration or relocation. The ‘family’ therefore, be it real or adoptive, is reflected

⁴⁸ By linguistic, I refer to the choice of language-related forms of creativity in these works of fiction, expressed particularly through poetry writing, translation, academic writings, memoirs versus other forms of artistic creativity.

upon as the space where the transcultural input and tensions are evaluated, accepted or rejected on an everyday basis. Comparatively, the family occupies a central position in Brett's collection of short-stories, while in Michaels's novel it is represented as a continuously thwarted aspiration, nevertheless a core of cross-temporal, transcultural values.

Thirdly, the idea of 'transvaluation' is clearly not perceived as deflation of the old⁴⁹ culture in these works of fiction, but rather as a (not unproblematic) accommodation of what survived of the old culture and behavioral patterns to the novel cultural, social and even political environment. The various degrees of transvaluation displayed in these fictional worlds are predicated upon the severity of trauma and the protagonists' (in)ability to relate to the pre-war experience in their country of origin-Poland in our case. The deeply shaken sense of Heimat coupled with the emotional displacement forces characters like Jakob, Ben, Renia and Lola to often tiptoe on the edge of Dori Laub's "black hole" before they can achieve a renewed sense of settledness.

Difficult as it may be to evaluate the defining elements of a transnational and transcultural identity in the fraught case of Holocaust survivorship mirrored in Aftermath literature, it is nonetheless rewarding to observe the meandering trajectory of human resilience in the face of trauma and forced migration. The evicted travellers depicted in these literary pieces tackle not only national and cultural borders, but the very limits of the human capacity for suffering and understanding. They probe, in fact, the boundaries of what epitomises the uniqueness and universality of the human being.

⁴⁹ 'Old' translates culture of origin here.