Liquefactions: River floods and tides of memory in Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces*

CATALINA BOTEZ

In my article on Anne Michaels' fictional work Fugitive Pieces, I introduce the critical concept of liquefaction as thematic leitmotiv that connects psychological, transgenerational trauma to large-scale environmental catastrophes (like floods and hurricanes) across time and place, and across international, national and domestic spaces. Through this central trope, I show how psychological post-traumatic healing in Holocaust survivors and geologic post-traumatic healing operate in tandem in the novel, more precisely how the figurative unearthing and working through of traumatic memory across generations parallels the literal unearthing and re-situating of archaeological artefacts across geologic time. The interconnectedness of psychological wounds with geological wounds demonstrates the ethics of nature – a kind of co-healing of persons and places across generations and landscapes (both transgenerational and transhistorical). I also point out the restitutive ethics of nature and maintain that floods manifest themselves as counter-historic agents able to reveal and restore historic truth through obscuration and disclosure.

'Redemption through cataclysms; what had once been transformed might be transformed again.'
(Anne Michaels, Fugitive Pieces)

'He who controls the past controls the future. He who controls the present controls the past.'
(George Orwell, 1984)

Introduction

This article engages with the notions of historical and natural catastrophe as interwoven occurrences in the context of Canadian writer Anne Michaels' work *Fugitive Pieces*. I advance the concept of *liquefaction* to depict cataclysmic metamorphoses of landscape which involve floodwater, perceived alternatively as a medium that obscures and subsequently reveals the historical truth across generations and continents. By emphasising the dramatic liquefactive impact of floods onto layered urbanscapes, I lay stress on the relativity of time and historicity in the novel, as well as on the restorative ethics of nature involved in the periodic obscuration and revelation of truth.

I further argue that there is an intrinsic connection in Michaels' work between the gradual development of global environmental forces and the psychological disruptions caused by war and Holocaust trauma. I interpret this connection in terms of the rich liquefactive imagery deployed in Michaels' work, which opens up possibilities for similar geological and psychological healing. Since the instances of liquefaction addressed here involve both fast, violent aquatic motion, as well as prolonged liquid stasis, spanning across minutes or even years, I dwell on comparisons between psychological trauma and geological cataclysms: while both seem to occur suddenly and unexpectedly, their aftermath always involves slow gradualness. That is to say, post-catastrophic healing (human and geological alike) is possible, albeit conditioned by the slow tidal movements and specificities of personal traumas, on the one hand, and of the aggressed natural landscape, on the other.

I specifically argue that the historical-epistemological disaster approached in Michaels' novel, namely the Holocaust, is quintessentially rendered through liquefaction, that is the transformative liquid imagery of meteorological disasters, equivalent to instances of psychological upheaval and gradual, post-traumatic changeover. Natural calamities such as river floods, storms, hurricanes and earthquakes, and their archetypal, transhistorical impact on the geological landscape resemble the assault of Holocaust trauma on an individual's psychological balance. Much like environmental aggression involving floods, I argue, psychological aggression consists in a type of liquid, transformative evolution sometimes conducive to healing. I call it liquid trauma, a term by which I denote the liquefactive factor involved in the ability to continuously change the shape of trauma in order to accept loss, to mourn and potentially (and eventually) recover from it.

Anne Michaels' novel features Jakob Beer, a Polish child survivor from the so-called '1.5 generation' (Suleiman 2002: 277)[1], whose family falls victim to Nazi persecution. He escapes death by hiding in a closet and taking shelter in the moorlands of Biskupin, where the

Cambridge geology scholar Athos Roussos finds and rescues him. They flee the archaeological site of this flooded city in Poland and travel down to Greece. During the German occupation of the island of Zakynthos, the two live in hiding, and subsequently move to Toronto after the war following an invitation addressed to Athos to teach at a Canadian university. Years after Athos's death, Jakob – now a poet, translator and writer – with his young second wife Michaela moves back to Greece to the island of Idhra, only to die tragically in a car accident in Athens.

The second half of the novel is dedicated to Ben, the son of Polish-Jewish émigré Holocaust survivors from Toronto. Ben carries his parents' traumatic burden long after their death. An academic by profession, he researches the interconnection between biography, history and meteorology. He undergoes a terrible crisis after discovering that his parents had taken to the grave the secret of their wrenching loss, namely the death of both of his younger siblings during the Shoah. This prompts him to leave Canada and travel to Idhra in search of the late Jakob Beer's journals and presumably the meaning of Holocaust survival. At the distance of one generation, loss and grief unite these two fictional figures through their sustained efforts to comprehend calamities of war, (individual) history and nature.

Ben and Jakob are featured in the novel as Polish-Canadian male identities marked by first- and second-generation Holocaust trauma. They tell parallel, yet similar, stories of psychological harm carried across continents, both their life stories being rendered more eloquent by explorations of geologic and meteorological disasters across time that are so relevant to the notion of liquefaction proposed here. As dialogic characters, their damaged lives touch upon each other both directly and indirectly. Even though they meet only once and do not interact, their destinies seem to communicate deeply with each other via the written word. I argue that this strengthens the idea of intergenerational exchange through empathic channels among Holocaust survivors who are equally confronted with the liquefactive energy of their personal traumas.

But what is the result of Jakob and Ben's struggles to overcome psychological distress in the aftermath of atrocity? Anne Michaels' fine-tuned study of characters conveys the impression that Ben and Jakob's choice of professions reflects the way each of them works through trauma, which entails an engagement with either steady solidity or fluxing liquefaction. As Paul Malone points out, 'where Jakob's ongoing passion for archaeology and geology contributes to solidify his identity, Ben's interest in meteorology and association with flood […] make clear that his identity remains in flux' (2000:95). While agreeing with that, I further argue that a clear sense of identity is contingent on *liquefaction* in Michaels' because there is a necessity to balance solidity and fluidity in order to master one's sense of self when confronted with trauma. Ben's final trip to Greece, as illuminating as it is to him, remains inconclusive in terms of settling his emotional life. In that regard, as Kelly argues, 'the speaking of the trauma', far from determining meaning and closing a 'familial, cultural, or historical chapter' '*opens* meaning, is productive of meaning, and necessitates a willingness […] to bear witness to the catastrophic event […] which takes precedence over any desire for finality' (Kelly 2010: 102). That is to say, lingering in liquid trauma, in the (self-)exploration of the development of personal and environmental trauma, helps towards understanding catastrophic occurrences and prospective self-restoration. By acting as Jakob's proxy witness, Ben filters and re-evaluates first generational trauma through the lens of the second generation, which reassesses catastrophe and healing through empathy.

On both chief characters, the Holocaust as an historical cataclysm leaves, directly or indirectly, an indelible mark. Etymologically speaking, the notion of 'catastrophe' is central to 'Shoah' (the Hebrew term for 'catastrophe'), while the Yiddish name for it denotes 'destruction', and the Greek term 'Holocaust' suggests 'complete burning'. As Shoshana Felman indicates, the word 'Shoah' used without a definite article points to 'the very foreignness of languages, the very namelessness of a catastrophe which cannot be possessed by any native tongue and which, within the language of translation, can only be named as the *untranslatable*' (Felman and Laub, 1992: 213-14). In my interpretation, the term 'Shoah' defamiliarises an event that is impossible to be owned, comprehended and clarified. Its cataclysmic impact that spans across generations requires, therefore, a necessary distance.

The same dilemma of incommunicability is addressed by Derrida in *Of Grammatology,* where he refers to the writing about the Holocaust as 'the place of unease (lieu de malaise), of the regulated incoherence within conceptuality' (1976: 237-38). This horrendous event brings logical understanding to a halt. Beyond the world of theory, literature is the medium where facts 'encounter strangeness' and where the reader is compelled to meditate on the relationship between history and narrative by 'bearing literary witness to the Holocaust' (Felman and Laub 1992: 7, 95). This is, I argue, precisely the role intended and played by Michaels' narrative.

Jakob's Drowned City: Biskupin in Poland

In *Fugitive Pieces*, Biskupin is the site of a drowned city in Poland, the spot where geological liquefaction brings about political controversy and subsequent obliteration. When the Gasawka River receded in 1933, it revealed an archaeological treasure, namely an ancient civilisation believed to be the oldest in Europe. As of 1937, Athos became involved in preserving the original infrastructure

of the flooded city, which soon enough antagonised the Nazis' ambition to proclaim, against all odds, the Aryan civilisation as the oldest in Europe. What liquefaction revealed, ideology forcefully decided to conceal.

Unlike the natural catastrophe leading to the submersion of Biskupin, which first obscured, then revealed through *liquefaction* an invaluable cultural asset, the disaster inflicted by the Nazis is final and intended to obliterate all traces of this site. In a savage political act of ideological liquidation meant to complete the unfinished work of natural liquefaction, the Nazis and the Ahnenerbe officials destroy all findings, and kill or deport all archaeologists involved in the project. For the German Reich it is imperative that no culture superior to the Aryan survives. Significant to this vehement act of obliteration is the intentional setting on fire of Biskupin, as opposed to its natural drowning in flood water: here, Michaels seems to suggest that the natural element of fire causes far more irreversible damage than the fluid menace.

It is only through Athos' scholarly effort in the post-war years that this flagrant manipulation of historical truth is exposed in a book project called *Bearing False Witness*. In it, Athos unpacks the idea of corrupted humanity and questions the moral right of radical political regimes to falsify and control history to their advantage. In her critique of humanity embedded in the novel, Michaels suggests that such destructive attempts can be successfully hindered through concerted efforts of responsibility and goodwill, while at the same time stressing nature's liquefactive power to restore balance through gradual geologic movements that both conceal and reveal, inter and excavate historic truth across time. Thus, floodwater becomes the exponent of the ethics of nature that triggers the outward motion of buried historic truth.

I further argue that natural disasters such as the flooding of Biskupin (and their centuries-long aftermath) work as counter-historic forces that bring to light traces of historical evidence deliberately and abusively elided from mainstream historiography. Thus, the restorative ethics of nature can initiate collective healing by rehabilitating historical truth. Just like empathic love, nature makes a compelling case for regarding catastrophe as catalyst to healing. The receding waters of Biskupin, Michaels claims, stand proof to that.

Natural calamity, especially relevant to Athos' interest in archaeology, involves material metamorphoses from solid to liquid and vice versa: flood water and sea tides turn into mud and solidified dirt, before another liquefaction takes place. There is constant movement, transformation and structural change in nature, which involves elements like fire, air and wood, as well. In Michaels' narrative, these overlapping changes and alterations in geo-history span across time and impact on human history beyond pre-established national and geographic boundaries. Most significantly, they 'act as intertexts that decentre nation, subject and history', and 'advocate diachronic/ synchronic identities, multiple subjectivities which, by heavily relying on spatial considerations, transcend the Canadian panorama' (Rodriguez 2003: 12). Michaels shows how the transnationality of emotional liquefaction works towards alleviating Holocaust trauma.

As shown in *Fugitive Pieces*, two different places (Biskupin and Weston) and two different characters (Jakob and Ben), although spatially and temporally removed from one another, experience comparable destinies conditioned by analogous historic and geologic changes. Clearly, the contribution of extreme global natural phenomena to local historic events highlights similar patterns, which shores up the need to regard historiography transnationally and translocally, and to scrutinise traumatised identities of different generations as sharing similar manifestations of psychological damage and possibly similar healing choices.

Matter, Catastrophe and the Holocaust: Solid vs. Liquid

Throughout Michaels' narrative, the matter imagery is rich and inscribed within the dialectics of fluctuation and stasis characteristic of geological upheavals and human trauma alike. This liquefaction imagery usually consists of upward earth movements and violent or subtle water motion. Michaels' obvious concern with matter, dealt in a phenomenological manner in this novel, stands in stark contrast to the Nazis' disregard of matter and their treatment of Jews as mere objects: '[it] was beyond racism, it was anti-matter, for Jews were not considered human […] but […] "figuren," "stücke," – "dolls," "wood," "merchandise," "rags" ' (Michaels 1998:165). The vilification of Jews and their reduction to matter is consistent with the Nazis' self-exemption from responsibility, and with their placing genocide beyond morals: 'Humans were not being gassed, only "figuren," so ethics weren't being violated' (Michaels 1998: 165). This abusive act of dehumanisation presumably absolved the perpetrators of ethical conscience. It partially explains how the catastrophic barbarity of the Holocaust could occur in a seemingly 'civilised' Europe – a point of view articulated with much irony in Michaels' critique of decaying humanity in the novel.

Just like the formerly mentioned 'figuren', the figure of the golem is described as anything but human. In the novel's first scene, Jakob, the runaway child, emerging from the bog with tears cracking open his mud-covered face resembles a golem brought back to life. The moment has cosmic dimensions and is depicted as legendary rebirth or 'afterbirth of earth': 'I surfaced into the miry streets of the drowned city. For over a thousand years, only fish wandered Biskupin's wooden sidewalks' (Michaels 1998:

5). The boy rising from the pit is an image of mythical force, an archetype: 'I squirmed from the marshy ground like the Tollund Man, Grauballe Man, like the boy they uprooted in the middle of Franz Josef Street while they were repairing the road, six hundred cockleshell beads around his neck' (Michaels 1998: 5). According to this description, Jakob is nothing short of an archaeological artefact that survived millennia, defying both time and his oppressors with his mud-covered face, a perfect embodiment of the unhindered ethics of nature. As Michaels suggests, there is panhistoric hope to invest in catastrophe: what a geologic age covers with violent speed, another uncovers gradually over time.

By eroding the boundaries between the material and the human, Michaels restores the life-giving quality of matter: mud is not only an element of internment, but also a vehicle of rebirth. In fact, Annick Hilger claims that the 'golem' 'has come to stand for an imperfect being, for informed matter', but also for 'Adam, the man made of clay' (1999: 38), which takes us back to the beginning of humankind. According to Anne Whitehead, this is a profoundly cabbalistic image:

> At the heart of kabbalism lies the notion that it is with nature, rather than with God, that the Jews are to be reconciled; […] healing or redemption comes through the contemplation of nature, which contains within it the scattered sparks of God. […] the first act of Creation became a gesture of hiding or withdrawal. […] For Michaels, the world after the Holocaust is a world of hidden spaces, which is characterised by acts of concealment and withdrawal (2004: 58-59).

This image strengthens the idea that Jakob's voyage of survival and self-preservation is essentially defined by the dichotomy of concealment and revelation, which stands at the heart of my proposed liquefaction imagery.

Later Athos, his master or koumbaros, explains to Jakob in healing words that the paradoxical reason why the bog men are so serene upon the excavation of their bodies is that having been 'asleep for centuries, they are uncovered perfectly intact; thus, they outlast their killers – whose bodies have long dissolved to dust' (Michaels 1998: 49). This case of symbolic retribution is in no way compensatory, but ironic and rendered useless by the numeric realities of the Holocaust. Attempting to link his adoptee's fate to that of the mythic bog men, Athos projects Jakob's life onto a transnational, cross-temporal background in order to highlight the importance of his existence (unjustly diminished by persecution) and give perspective and meaning to a life almost crushed by the Holocaust. What saves Jakob from self-destruction, Michaels argues, is a mixture of temporary abstraction from one's destiny, and sustained affective support.

Liquefaction or the aquatic imagery deployed by Michaels in relation to natural catastrophe and the Holocaust also involves the water-wood imagery, as transparent in the description of Biskupin as the 'magnificent timber city' with wooden sidewalks now covered in mud (Michaels 1998: 6). In contrast, it is the water-air imagery that provides an eerie first glimpse of the reality of Jakob's trauma, envisaging a possibility of recovery: 'From the other bank, I watched… The dead passed above me, weird haloes and arcs smothering the stars' (Michaels 1998: 7); 'I leaped from the streets of Biskupin; from underground into air' (Michaels 1998: 12). In the process, however, it seems that Jakob is no longer able to distinguish between the world of the living and that of the dead, between what is real and what is loss-related fantasy. The description of his disorientation, marked by sensorial interaction with natural elements such as mud, water and air involved in catastrophic imagery, provides us with a vivid picture of Jakob's emotional distress and lays the ground for his healing.

But healing is not possible without subduing traumatic memory. Since water and air are carriers of memory, remembrance is entrenched in every contact with nature: 'Human memory is encoded in air currents and river sediments'; 'everywhere nature remembers' (Michaels 1998: 53, 211). Therefore, healing occurs only in as much as a certain balance is reached between the memory of the offence and the working through of trauma, which often involves partial forgetting. Liquefaction tackles exactly this tension between remembrance and forgetting.

The combination of water and fire completes the spectre of natural elements deployed as recurrent tropes in my argument based on the interconnection between natural calamity, historical trauma and gradual healing. Fire, beyond its destructive connotation in relation to the Holocaust, is also a natural force involved in the dynamics of destruction and survival. It is by fire that Biskupin is demolished by the Nazis, after surviving the flood: records and relics are burnt and Athos' fellow workers are shot by gunfire. What liquefaction as aquatic catastrophe isn't able to achieve through gradual dissolution in time, arson and bullets accomplish within minutes, turning Biskupin into the 'Polish Pompeii' (Michaels 1998: 104). Thus, controlling the historical time was on the Nazis' agenda just as much as the *lebensraum* expansion.

Yet fire is also a metaphor for suicide, not a rare peril among Holocaust survivors. Athos deploys it to stress the 'I can't save a boy from a burning building. Instead he must save me from the attempt; he must jump to earth' (Michaels 1998: 45). Thus, the stable, rescuing ground is offered as preferable alternative to the harmful force of fire. Unlike water and mud, which have ambivalent qualities in the novel, both positive and negative,

fire is exclusively connected to final devastation and total calamity. The natural element earth is offered as alternative to survival.

Instances of Liquefaction

Forms of liquefaction and various instances of elemental transgression are used to convey loss, damage and the isolation and estrangement during the hiding years. On Zakynthos, 'I [Jakob] sat near him [Athos] while he wrote at his desk, contemplating forces that turn seas to stone, stone to liquid […] Two lost souls alone on deck on a black and limitless ocean' (Michaels 1998: 20, 22). Here, liquefaction helps depict geological processes of fascinating magnitude that depict our planet as a living, breathing entity able of constant renewal and reversed transgressions, which is precisely the kind of global change that Athos knows Jakob needs to envisage in order to recover from his devastating trauma. The vast ocean imagery also translates into the true dimension of their alienation in a war-torn world, in contrast to the closeness of their empathic bond.

The sea water is also instrumental in conferring the liquefactive imagery that conveys Athos' own trauma after the loss of his wife in World War I: '[Athos] is like his limestone. The sea will dissolve him into caves, dig holes into him, but he lasts and lasts' (Michaels 1998: 78). Thus, water erodes stone just like trauma bites into the human psyche. Being a damaged soul himself, Athos understands Jakob's frailty and offers him solace from his recurrent nightmares, which lure him for many years into the liquid underworld of the dead. Jakob's dreams are replete with liquefaction imagery:

They [the dead] waited until I was asleep, then roused themselves, exhausted as swimmers. […] They floated until they grew heavier, and began to walk, heaving into humanness; until they grew more human than phantom and through their effort began to sweat. Their strain poured from my skin, until I woke dripping with their deaths (Michaels 1998: 24).

Thus, the liquefactive medium of nightmares occasions the identification with the Holocaust victims through marsh waters and dripping sweat. Liquefaction functions as a remembrance channel between the survivor and the victims and it perpetuates trauma. The bog from Jakob's past resurfaces in his nightmares as catalyst for the repeated rebirth of his dead relatives.

Collective trauma, as touched upon in Michaels' work, also involves liquefaction as a medium of inflicting genocide. As such, natural and geographic elements (specifically the Aegean Sea) become instrumental in mass murder. The Jewish population from the city of Hania, a two-thousand-year-old ghetto on the island of Crete, was sent to sea by the Nazis and wiped out a hundred miles off Polegandros (Michaels 1998: 43). Liquefaction and fire imagery is deployed here by Michaels to show how the victims' fate was sealed: 'The water rose […] bullets tearing the surface for those who took too long to drown. Then the peaceful sheen of the Aegean slipped shut again' (Michaels 1998: 43). The bodies become one with the sea water, they liquefy, and the sea turns into a memorial site, a synecdoche for the drowned victims of the Holocaust.

The wrapping up of dead bodies by the sea water does not signify forgetting. It marks instead the beginning of remembrance and healing as a form of gradual closure, with the sea water involved in the symbolic funeral[2] ceremony: 'We threw camomile and poppies into the cobalt sea. Athos poured fresh water into the waves, that "the dead may drink" ' (Michaels 1998: 75). Paradoxically, the ritualistic quenching of thirst as a symbol of perpetuating remembrance of the dead involves liquefactive imagery (fresh water), yet a different kind of water to the one in which they drowned (salt water). This shows the differentiated role of liquefaction in the act of mourning, of dealing with trauma and healing.

However, according to Athos, the solid ground as memorial site is preferred to sea water, because earth has a memory of its own. This prompts Jakob to travel to Zakynthos to bury Athos' ashes in ground that will remember him, i.e. under the stones of their hiding place during the war, according to his koumbaros' wish. Yet later in Toronto, after Athos's death, '[Jakob] pour[s] fresh water into the sea, recalling not only the Greek lament […] but also the covenant of the Eskimo hunter, who pours fresh water into the mouth of his quarry' (Michaels 1998: 121). As such, the act of memorialisation becomes transnational, transcontinental and pantemporal. Honouring the dead through similar practices across the Atlantic speaks for the communality of mourning: grief is inherently human, it involves liquefactive practices and does not know national boundaries.

Catastrophe and Affect

Michaels insists throughout her novel that catastrophe, be it natural, historical or psychological, is a slow event: 'Nothing is sudden. Not an explosion – planned, timed, wired carefully – not the burst door. Just as the earth invisibly prepares its cataclysms, so history is the gradual instant' (Michaels 1998: 77). That is to say history, trauma, love and healing are all based on the same principle of slow accumulation, in spite of us perceiving them as sudden events. Michaels further explains that the loss of both siblings and romantic love in a catastrophic event takes time to work through because 'destruction doesn't create a vacuum, it simply transforms presence into absence' (Michaels 1998: 161). Coming to terms with the heaviness of absence stands at the core of tackling trauma, and liquefaction is central to the evocation of loss.

To Jakob, the instinctive knowledge of his sister Bella's death in the Holocaust is conjured up through unsettling imagery of tidal floods: 'At this precise moment, Bella becomes flooded ground. A body of water pulling under the moon' (Michaels 1998: 12). The river flows and their turmoil become a powerful image of death, brotherly loss and devastation. In fact, all his relationships with women are perceived by him as either violent or calm forces of nature. For instance, his first marriage to Alexandra is experienced as a sudden cataclysm that disrupts his inner, fragile balance, arduously restored by his koumbaros after the Shoah: 'Athos replaced parts of me slowly, as if he were preserving wood. But Alex – Alex wants to explode, set *fire* to everything. She wants me to begin again' (Michaels 1998: 144, my emphasis). In contrast, his encounter with Michaela, his second wife, is experienced as '*the catastrophe of grace*' (Michaels 1998: 175, my emphasis). This cataclysm, unlike the previous one, restores his inner peace like a home-coming:

> In Michaela's face, the loyalty of generations […] a thousand intimacies, dreams of foreign lands, first nights of love […] after long years of marriage. In Michaela's eyes, ten generations of history, in her hair the scents of fields and pines, *her cold smooth arms carrying water from springs*' (Michaels 1998: 178, my emphasis).

Thus, healing feels like fresh liquefaction. What Jakob needs is continuity with his past, not complete rupture, because happiness, like catastrophe, 'is wild and arbitrary, but it's not sudden' (Michaels 1998: 185). The gradual instant is crucial in experiencing love as comfort, purge and healing, and Michaela seems to be able to provide him with the peace to liberate himself from the past without destroying or abandoning it: 'When we wake [after tenting in the birch wood during an April storm], there is a pool of water by our feet. It is not on Idhra or on Zakynthos but among Michaela's birches that I feel for the first time safe above ground, earthed in a storm' (Michaels 1998: 189). This paradoxical comfort in a storm, this liquefaction imagery of sorts best describes his cleansing of troubling memories, and particularly the moment when he abandons grief for the sake of love.

Ben's Drowned City: Weston, Toronto, Canada

The novel's second half is devoted to Ben, whose story commences with yet another drowned city. During Hurricane Hazel in October 1954, when Ben was only five years old, the Humber River rises and floods the Weston neighbourhood of Toronto, including his parents' house, which is swept downstream: 'My river was unrecognizable; black, endlessly wide, a torrent of flying objects. A night planet of water' (Michaels 1998: 245). Luckily, though, the family is rescued before the house is taken away by the torrent: 'One might say my parents were fortunate, for they didn't lose the family silverware or important letters of heirlooms however humble. They had already lost those things' (Michaels 1998: 245, 246). But one thing they did not lose on their transatlantic journey was fear: fear to cash their post-catastrophe restitution money, fear to even take the neighbour's warning before the flood: 'They banged at the door and shouted at us to leave. For your father, that was the worst […] Who dares to believe he will be saved twice?' (Michaels 1998: 247). Michaels' keen meditation on the depth of post-calamity, post-liquefactive loss, is thus subtly punctuated with a touch of irony.

Many years after the flood, just like Biskupin back in Poland, Weston resurfaces from the Humber River to reveal yet another instance of temporal layering:

> Four wooden knobs, evenly spaced: excavate an inch or two and the legs of a chair will emerge […] a dinner plate […] sticks out of the bank horizontally like a shelf. You can slip a silver spoon out of the mud like a bookmark […] The buried tables and shelves, lamps, dishes and rugs remain. The river washes over pebbles of crockery. Fragments of a ceramic flowered border, or of the words "Stratfordshire, England," are underlined by reeds (Michaels 1998: 202).

While Biskupin preserves traces of an ancient European settlement, the Humber River obscures a modern history of emigration from Europe to Canada. Both cities develop a palimpsest narrative of overwritten life stories, as well as a discourse of submersion and excavation across time, a story of liquefaction. Even though they belong to two different spatial and temporal spheres, the items that emerge from the waters after the floods bear witness to former lives preserved intact in the river beds. The superimposition of past over present is almost surreal, as it poses questions about the relativity and simultaneity of time. As Michaels repeatedly states, every moment is two moments.

Yet the drowned city of Ben's childhood is not his only reason for grief. As a second-generation Holocaust survivor, he is confronted with his parents' silence, their incomprehensible restrictions and aberrant deeds. The walls of silence are only rarely taken down for the sake of fleeting explanations occasioned by present-day catastrophes: a Texan tornado reminds his mother of mounds of apples, onions, jewellery and clothing amassed from the Jews on the camp grounds, while the lightning sign in the sky resembles the SS symbol embroidered on the Nazi uniforms. After the father's death, his face appears to Ben in contorted and disintegrating shapes of liquefaction: 'My father's face […] a reflection in the still surface of a lake smashed by a stone. In dreams, I can't stop his disintegration' (Michaels 1998: 249). This further illustrates the son's despair at being born too late, at not having been able to rescue his parents from catastrophe. To his parents, Ben – which

in Hebrew means nameless son – is not a 'separate individual but a symbol of everything the parents had lost in the course of their lives' (Wardi 1992:27). They deny his right to singularity by typifying his existence and by making him stand for something that he is not, which deeply damages the son's sense of self.

The final blow for Ben comes after his parents' death, when he discovers a photo of his siblings who had died in the Holocaust. Kept as a well-hidden secret by his parents, this picture strikes Ben like lightning of catastrophic proportions:

> The past is desperate energy, an electric field. It chooses a single moment, a chance so domestic we don't know we've missed it, a moment that crashes into us from behind and changes all that follows (Michaels 1998: 253).

This photo violently fills in the gaps of postmemory, which was denied to him when his parents were alive. According to Marianne Hirsch, 'postmemory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation' (Hirsch 1996: 662). For Ben, postmemory has devastating effects. This is not only because he cannot fully understand or recreate his parents' past, but mainly because of the way he was left out of it, and forced to make do with an absence or with what Hirsch dubs 'empty postmemory' (1996: 664). Unlike full postmemory, the empty kind refers to the lack of stories and images that would have stimulated Ben to imagine the world of his parents before he was born, and thereby understand them better and empathise with their suffering.

Yet his parents' decision cannot extinguish Ben's need for bonding and empathic kinship: 'full or empty, postmemory seeks connection' (Hirsch 1996: 664), which he explores in Jakob's memoirs and poetry. Intrigued by Jakob's persona, and despite being his foil character, Ben is, or strives to be, in many regards, Jakob's double. His narrative discourse is mainly a dialogue with Jakob, who he attempts to understand and whose road to healing he tries to retrace for himself. Even though their traumas are inherently different, they both seek comfort in love to counteract absence, isolation and the spectres haunting their lives.

Their connection, though, is part of a more complex pattern of male adoption and transfer of influence. As Stephen Clingman claims in The *Grammar of Identity*, for 'Athos, Jakob and Ben: the syntax runs through the male line, almost a form of male parthenogenesis' (2009: 165). There is a process of adoption and influence taking place between both Athos and Jakob, and further from Jakob to Ben. Since motherhood is quasi-absent from the novel, fatherhood as male custody compensates for the gap and confers relief and alleviation of trauma. Moreover, as Meredith Criglington observes, 'the novel's fundamental structure is based on the non-biological, patrilineal transmission of memory from Athos to Jakob to Ben through their work as writers' (2006: 95). Thus, the postmemorial communication of experience is achieved outside the blood line, and according to an inter-generational pattern.

Arrived on the island of Idhra in Greece, where Jakob wrote *Groundwork*, (his auto-biographical collection of poems) while sharing a simple, happy life with Michaela, Ben meditates on the analogy between catastrophe and life-writing, and notes how the latter betrays the original life, since so much of it eludes the biographer's awareness: 'Never trust biographies. Too many events in a man's life are invisible. Unknown to others as our dreams' (Michaels 1998: 141). A gaze at that man's house says more than any biography, since 'a house, more than a diary, is the ultimate glimpse […] a life interrupted. A thought of the families frozen into stone by the eruption of Vesuvius, with their last meal still in their bellies' (Michaels 1998: 266). Catastrophes cut biographies short in most brutal ways, but buried cities around the world and across time – such as Biskupin, Weston/ Toronto or Pompeii – resurface as 'counter-monuments' to the established history amending it according to the ethics of nature; they resurface as counter-memory, i.e. the hidden version of truth (Criglington 2004: 141).

Essentially, each of these drowned cities and the liquefaction imagery they project expose the kind of counter-memory that proposes 'an alternative historiographic model' that recontextualises historic events (Criglington 2004: 141). To evoke 'the broken and buried forms of the city' and the Benjaminian topography of the ruin is to critique the 'monolithic, teleological modes of history that are premised on purity of descent' (Criglington 2006, 189). This new position on the past stresses the historian's role in assessing the records, depending on background, time and place, which is conducive to a relativised, experience-specific standpoint on historical catastrophe. The concept of liquefaction helps nuance this standpoint through a complex understanding of geological and psychological change as intrinsic to healing trauma.

Conclusion

In this essay I have introduced the concepts of liquefaction and fluid trauma, and have discussed the ethics of nature in the context of the necessity to interconnect (personal) traumatic histories with mainstream historiography and natural catastrophe. These concepts mark the lives of Jakob and Ben, the two fictional protagonists who, although belonging to different generations, nations and cultural spaces, still face similar issues of coping with traumatic memory and loss in the aftermath of historical disaster. I have also explored questions of ethics of nature and the integrity of scientific research, and have

analysed the ways in which nature can both obscure and reveal traces of veridical history, through concealment and revelation, fluidity and solidity.

From the standpoint of Holocaust trauma and transnational survivorship, I have stressed the importance of connecting liquefaction as tidal movements to the workings of memory, mourning and memorialisation, and to notions of transhistoric progress. I have also examined calamity as elemental co-work between floodwater, earth (mud), fire, air and wood, all of them seen as both agents of damage and (with the exception of fire) reconstruction and healing. As part of this dual impact, I emphasised the connection between love and catastrophe, and also highlighted the dialectics of love and liquefaction, memory and fluidity. Finally, I have highlighted counter-memory as alternative historiography, as an essential tool for reinstating counter-histories when dealing with catastrophe narratives in general and the Holocaust, in particular.

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End Notes

1. By 1.5 generation, Susan Rubin Suleiman means 'child survivor of the Holocaust, too young to have an adult understanding of what was happening to them, but old enough to have been there during the Nazi persecution of Jews' (2002: 277). The term is controversial in its relative use of the term 'generation', but usually encompasses children of different ages who survived the Holocaust in hiding or by being transported to England during the Kindertrasporte in 1938-1939.
2. To that same memorial service belongs the urge to do good on the dead's behalf, an act of proxy witnessing that William and Polatinsky reflect on as a 'surrogate action […] The call is to live as they might have lived, or as their descendants would have wished them to have lived. Yet again, traumatic memory requires substitution' (2009: 11). I would argue that this advice goes beyond substitution as means to alleviate trauma, in that it reinforces and carries on the traditional life of a Jewish community as it was before the tragedy.

Author

Catalina Botez is a doctoral fellow at the University of Constance, Germany. She has studied and pursued research at Yale University, the University of Sydney, Australia, and the University of Iasi, Romania. Her fields of research are Post-Holocaust fiction, Trauma Studies, Memory and Identity Studies, Transnational Identity, Transculturalism and Migration. She has published critical studies on fictional works by Primo Levi, Anne Michaels, W.G. Sebald, Lily Brett and Raymond Federman, and edited the essay collection on 'Pluralism, Inclusion and Citizenship'.

Pyramid

These things of stone, all the plans, so necessary -
lines of slaves
they blind us. Fundamental issues –
bread & gutter. This war
was over something, then
over.

A regency of weeds
new palaces of clump.
We rub shoulders with the bitch & powerful.
Beside a spent bullet casing
two frogs, a silence
& the orphans of our page

Les Wicks
Sydney, NSW