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**Becoming ‘The Gradual Instant’: The Vibrant Materiality of Diaspora in Anne Michael’s
*Fugitive Pieces***

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In Anne Michaels’s 1996 novel *Fugitive Pieces*, the main protagonist Jakob Beer asks, “at what moment does wood become stone, peat become coal, limestone become marble?” (140). A Polish survivor of the Holocaust who flees to Greece and later Canada, Jakob Beer develops a keen interest, along with his Greek companion, archaeologist Athos Roussos, in the aesthetic and conative relationships of material and immaterial bodies found throughout Western history. For Jakob, the moment of transformation from wood to stone, object to subject, diaspora to citizen, is never fixed but draws attention to an ongoing process of becoming, of which he paradoxically terms the “gradual instant” (ibid.: 140). Insofar as *Fugitive Pieces* is a “narrative of catastrophe and slow accumulation” (Michaels 1996: 48), to quote Jakob, the memories and experiences of events conveyed by characters may be seen to develop as material becomings and assemblages of persons and things both throughout and following the events of the Second World War.

The question of material becoming, a question intimately associated with the history of the Holocaust and the Jewish diasporic migrations that followed, is also a question concerning contemporary theorists of new materialism and political ecology, who continue to offer interesting linkages between the notions of thingness, embodiment, and the agency of human and nonhuman beings. In both *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* and *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Jane Bennett has sought to rehabilitate a form of relational vitality in contemporary discourse, showing not only how it is still possible to experience genuine wonder in the world but how such experience is crucial to understanding human connectivity and ethics. Without abandoning the largely humanist project of Michaels’ work, in this paper I will extend Bennett’s concern regarding vital materiality to the historical narratives of *Fugitive Pieces*, as survivors of these atrocities – diasporic bodies functioning as material witnesses – are seen not as anti-matter or passive objects, but as material actants,

subjects of gradual instances of becoming, members of material assemblages that form and reform throughout and following such events.

According to Méira Cook in “At the Membrane of Language and Silence: Metaphor and Memory in *Fugitive Pieces*,” Michaels’ novel begins by announcing its concern with the fragility of memory, as symbolized by the material loss and burial of “countless manuscripts – diaries, memoirs, eye witness accounts” (2000: 1), which were mislaid or destroyed during the Second World War. Bennett has similarly attended to the fragility and uncertainty of material history with respect to subject formations and affiliations, maintaining in *The Enchantment of Modern Life* that “so fragile are the particles” of the body that if they are robbed of their stability in the larger human body, that is “driven from the primordial-set that constitutes that body,” they would “not only be unable to last on through all time, but could not hold together even for a moment” (2001: 81-82). As the epigraph of *Fugitive Pieces* reads:

Some of these narratives were deliberately hidden – buried in back gardens, tucked into walls and under floors – by those who did not live to retrieve them. Other stories are concealed in memory, neither written nor spoken. Still others are recovered by circumstance alone. (Michaels 1996: 1)

An extended metaphor of memory is constructed in these opening lines, as the memoirist or the reader must painstakingly retrieve these narratives, which were so “deliberately hidden” (ibid.: 1). This speaks to the repressive and traumatic nature of this historical event, as Cook describes the pattern of memory and its discontents that introduce the reader to the killing of Jakob Beer’s family, an event that Jakob is in fact unwilling to witness. Jakob, who is hidden like a concealed manuscript behind the wallpaper of the cupboard, witnesses an event that is unrepresentable, an event in the words of Dori Laub that “precludes its registration” (1991: 91). Later in *Fugitive Pieces*, reflecting on the physical connection he develops with his second wife Michaela, Jakob Beer asks, “what does the body make us believe? That we’re never ourselves until we contain two souls. For years corporeality made me believe in death. Now, inside Michaela, yet watching her, death for the first time makes me believe in the body” (Michaels 1996: 189). With the unrepresentable nature of history and trauma, of which Dori Laub speaks, as well as the material connections that occur throughout the novel, one is inclined to question, in conjunction with

emergent theories of new materialism and speculative realism: can a similar kind of vibrant materiality, first initiated in Bennett's work, be read throughout *Fugitive Pieces*? And if so, how might we extend Bennett's theory of vibrant materiality to the various bodies and assemblages that form throughout these historical narratives?

In this paper, I use Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (and *The Enchantment of Modern Life* to some extent) rather differently from her theoretical project, as this examination of *Fugitive Pieces* is largely concerned with finding a new language for a particular kind of human experience. Bennett has admitted that certain forms of anthropocentrism are "impossible to avoid completely," and quoting Theodor Adorno, she points out that "we are (almost) blind to the gap between concept and thing, and we have a tendency... to privilege *human* efforts even when acknowledging the presence of other kinds of conative bodies" (2010: 102). Proceeding cautiously as I explore the bodies of Holocaust survivors, careful of chosen terminology and within a necessarily sensitive historical discourse, I seek to adopt the language of Bennett's theoretical work as it helps to illuminate some of the material aesthetic concerns of Michaels' novel. In her introduction to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Cathy Caruth asks how modern readers can have access to historical experience, namely to "a history that is in its immediacy a crisis to whose truth there is no simple access" (1995: 6). According to Cook, Michaels' novel responds to this "historical 'crisis'" with what appears to be a parallel inquiry:

How to articulate the trauma of history in language that is itself in crisis, language that is neither transparent nor opaque ... how to force language to signify on the extreme edge of signification in order to tell a story that is irreconcilable with words because [it is] unbearable. (2000: 22)

Fugitive Pieces is a novel concerned with the materiality of persons who survived the Holocaust as well as the materiality of persons who did not survive; it is a novel that sees those bodies who survived and those who perished as continuing to build new and different material and discursive assemblages across political, national, and geographic borders. I propose that Bennett's theoretical work and other associated theories of materiality and becoming are well suited to an examination of the diasporic bodies represented in Michaels' novel. In addition, I am also drawn to those speculative realists who seek to read the materiality of bodies and things in terms of a

process of “*anamnesis*,” that is a form of remembrance or reminiscence explored through the “collection and recollection of what has been lost, forgotten, or effaced,” one in which the subject is transformed, “always producing something new. To recollect the old, to produce the new” (Bryant et al. 2011: i). Thus I will develop a reading of vitalism and assemblage formation in *Fugitive Pieces* that is shaped by its historical and material contexts, one that extends beyond Bennett’s theory of vibrant materiality in order to work towards a new nomadic theory of diasporic becoming.

By vibrant matter, Bennett means the capacity of things, “edibles, commodities, storms, metals,” not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to “act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (2010: viii). According to Bennett, the tendency to parse the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings) is, borrowing from Jacques Rancière’s *The Politics of Aesthetics*, a “partitioning of the sensible” (ibid.: vii). This partitioning of matter and life has lead humans to ignore the vitality of matter and the lively powers of material formations. In a space created by this estrangement, a vital materiality can start to take shape and alter the most essential kinds of material relations. Bennett sees how the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter has fed “human hubris” (ibid.: ix) and anthropocentrism, and has prevented humans from “detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies... which can aid or destroy, enrich or disable, ennoble or degrade us, in any case call for our attentiveness, or even ‘respect’” (ibid.: ix). In *Fugitive Pieces*, as Jakob observes, Athos often applied the “geologic to the human, analyzing social change as he would a landscape; slow persuasion and catastrophe. Explosions, seizures, floods, glaciation. He constructed his own historical topography” (1996: 199). Athos represents the figure of the transhumanist, who crosses the boundaries of soft and hard science, human sociality and nature, to find new linkages and ways of reading the material world. Indeed the material relationship between human history and the ecological landscape is one conative relationship at stake here.

In *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett seeks to go beyond previously theoretical accounts of ecological or natural materiality, beyond the negative power of human-centered vitalism towards something more productive. In her section on “The Force of Things,” Bennett describes her material witnessing of the miscellaneous items found in the grate over the storm drain to the Chesapeake Bay on Cold Spring Lane in Baltimore: “one large men’s black plastic work glove/

one dense mat of oak pollen/ one unblemished dead rat/ one white plastic bottle cap/ one smooth stick of wood” (2010: 4). For Bennett, these items shifted back and forth from debris to thing, between, on the one hand, “stuff to ignore, except insofar as it betokened human activity (the workman’s efforts, the litterer’s toss, the rat-poisoner’s success)” and, on the other hand, “stuff that commanded attention in its own rights, as existents in excess of their association with human meanings, habits or projects” (ibid.: 4). Whether it is the primordial swerve, according to Lucretius, or the affectivity of the moment that determines the relations of these things, Bennett ultimately seems drawn to what Louis Althusser called the “materialism of the encounter” (Bennett 2010: 18), in which the world is not essentially determined but rather an element of chanciness resides at the heart of things (although I would argue for a more attentive reading of such chanciness, or causality, in interpreting narratives of the Holocaust). This also affirms that so-called inanimate things have a life – that deep within them is an inexplicable vitality or energy, a moment of independence from and resistance to us and other bodies that leads to a kind of thing-power. In *Fugitive Pieces*, Athos, seeing the same kind of primordial swerve or chanciness of events in time, and thus the potentiality of assemblages, tells Jakob:

It’s a mistake to think it’s the small things we control and not the large, it’s the other way around! We can’t stop the small accident, the tiny detail that conspires into fate: the extra moment you run back for something forgotten, a moment that saves you from an accident – or causes one. But we can assert the largest order, the large human values daily, the only order large enough to see. (22)

It is not only the materiality of the encounter but the scale to which Athos sees control or causality in relation to materiality. As Bennett declares in *Vibrant Matter*, in witnessing the connection of the items in the storm drain, she “glimpsed a culture of things irreducible to the culture of objects” (2010: 5), a culture affectively connected not as objects but as things with agency, actants able to disrupt or change things around and among them.

In *Fugitive Pieces*, Jakob describes how “letters to absent children, photos, are buried. While the men and women who place these valuables in the ground have never done so before, they go through the motions with centuries of practice guiding their hands, a ritual as familiar as the Sabbath. . . . All across Europe there’s such buried treasure. A scrap of lace, a bowl. Ghetto diaries that have never been found” (Michaels 1996: 40). Not only were things, such as letters,

photos, and keepsakes, being buried across the European landscape, but also people, buried in self-preservation, in hiding, or in mass graves, as Michaels's novel reads: "Jews were filling the corners and cracks of Europe, every available space. They buried themselves in strange graves, any space that would fit their bodies, absorbing more room than was allotted them in the world" (ibid.: 45). Thing-power, including the "buried treasure" (ibid.: 40) and hidden survivors of the Holocaust, calls to mind a sense of the world filled with all sorts of animate beings, human or nonhuman, organic or inorganic. It draws attention to an efficacy of objects in excess of human meanings, designs, or political purposes they express or serve. Thing-power is thus one way of thinking about the life-matter binary in Michaels's novel, which has been the dominant organizational principle of political experience, in particular during the Holocaust.

With the relational power of things in mind, the term assemblage offers an important ontological metaphor in an examination of *Fugitive Pieces*. In *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett defines assemblages as "ad hoc groupings of diverse elements" (2010: 23) as intentional collections of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are "living, throbbing confederations" which are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that "confound them from within" (Bennett 2010: 23-24). In Michaels's novel, Jakob admits how, in recalling the assemblages of his past, he "learned to tolerate images rising in [him] like bruises" (1996: 19), as connections to the past and present are experienced at the level of the body. Assemblages have uneven materialities or topographies, both at the geographic and bodily level, because some of the points at which the various affects and bodies cross paths are "more heavily trafficked than others" (Bennett 2010: 24), and so power is not distributed equally across its surface. Furthermore, for Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman, the "latitude" of a body comprises its associative affects in an assemblage, including its "capacities to act and to be acted upon," of which a body is capable of and susceptible to any one time in an assemblage (2011: 393). These emergent qualities will either "mesh productively" with the affects or materiality of another body, or "clash with them" (ibid.: 393).

Some bear the traumas of history at the level of the body differently than others, and the assemblage is always already changing, as the effects generated by an assemblage are rather emergent properties, emergent in that their ability to make something happen is distinct from the sum of the vital force of each materiality considered alone. Jakob and Athos form their own assemblage in the forest when Athos discovers a mud-covered Jakob. Athos tells Jakob: "your

mud mask cracked with tears and I knew you were human, just a child. Crying with the abandonment of your age” (1996:12). This is not to suggest, without cause, that such assemblage formations overrode systems of sovereign power or subverted the genocidal violence that occurred throughout the Holocaust, but merely to account for the material affiliations and desires of writers following the Holocaust, such as Michaels, who sought address the unspeakable, unrepresentable events and material conditions that occurred between bodies and things. As Bennett writes in *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, there are “always elements that do not arrive on *time* ... and these tardy bits mean that lines of possible connection are constantly being formed and reformed between entities” (2001: 168).

Jakob also alludes to the assemblage that forms from his encounter with Athos, describing it like a second birth, a second life: “No one is born just once. If you’re lucky, you’ll emerge again in someone’s arms; or unlucky, wake when the long tail of terror brushes the inside of your skull” (Michaels 1996: 5). However, Jakob’s assemblage with Athos differs from his assemblage to the dead he encounters in his dreams and in his memories throughout the novel. His relationship to his dead relatives is described as a kind of bodily assemblage that shifts throughout his own movements from Poland to Germany to Canada. He describes how his mother was “inside” him, “moving along sinews, under my skin the way she used to move through the house at night, putting things away, putting things in order” (1996: 8). There is an emphasis here on how the materiality of blood relations continues on after the death of a relative, the feeling of a person still coursing through one’s veins and evoking memories of the past. Furthermore, Jakob describes how the ghosts of his past

waited until I was asleep, then roused themselves exhausted as swimmers, grey between the empty trees. . . . The grotesque remains of incomplete lives, the embodied complexity of desires eternally denied. 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. (1996: 24)

According to Bennett, each member and proto-member of an assemblage has a certain vital agency of the assemblage, whether Jakob, Athos, the geologic or scientific materials they extract from the landscape, the buried treasure hidden across Europe by Jewish victims, or the ghostly

spectres that haunt Jakob. Precisely because each member-actant maintains an energetic pulse slightly off from that of the assemblage, an assemblage is never a solid block but an open-ended collective, a non-totalizing sum. An assemblage not only has a distinctive history of formation but a finite life span, because it will expand and change its connections in formations of new assemblages.

Furthermore, the image of affective bodies forming assemblages enables one to consider the limitations in human-centered theories of action, as well as to investigate the implications in adopting the language of agency and assemblage formation for the purposes of analyzing diaspora in Holocaust literature. As Salman tells Ben in the second half of *Fugitive Pieces*, “when we say we’re looking for a spiritual advisor, we’re really looking for someone to tell us what to do with our bodies. Decisions of the flesh. We forget to learn from pleasure as well as pain” (1996: 210). As a text concerned with the materiality of diaspora following the Holocaust, Michaels’ novel emphasizes the materiality and movement of bodies in aesthetic, rather than exclusively biopolitical ways, in an attempt to preserve the vitality of both individual and collective narratives. Yet how can theory arrive at this materially specific representation of diasporic bodies without falling into a series of problematic traps regarding the agency and representability of subjects? How might one account for the vital materiality of the body of history, alongside instances of trauma? Or rather, as Jakob asks early on in the novel, “how can one man take on the memories of even one other man, let alone five or ten or a thousand or ten thousand; how can they be sanctified each?” (Michaels 1996: 52). Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman claim that if there must be “a materialist understanding of how, with matter, we get sensitivity, life, memory, consciousness, passions, and thought, such an understanding demands an interpretive adventure that must be defended against the authority of whoever claims to stop it in the name of reason” (2011: 372). Indeed, this defense against the exclusionary and authoritative practices of some theory extends to material and more affective readings of bodies and things, for which the “name of reason” may not reign.

There are certain risks in overemphasizing thing-power, or vital materiality, especially in the context of the Holocaust, which are outlined in Bennett’s work and must likewise be outlined here. One risk is that thing-power tends to overstate the thinginess or fixed stability of materiality, whereas in *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett’s goal is to theorize a materiality that is “as much force as entity, as much energy as matter, as much intensity as extension” (2010: 20).

Likewise, a further challenge to thing-power has been its latent individualism, by which the figure of the thing lends itself to an “atomistic” rather than “congregational” understanding of agency, as Bennett concedes that while the smallest or simplest body or bit may indeed express a “vital impetus, conatus, or *clinamen*, an actant never really acts alone” (ibid.: 20). Furthermore, in *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, Bennett reminds us of the ongoing stratifying and destratifying potential of material relations, how such relationality “requires a great intimacy, with a ‘meticulous relation’ to, the organism and its world” (2001: 26). Its efficacy or agency always depends on “collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces” (ibid.: 21). Such challenges to thing-power, as well as its necessary contingencies, are particularly significant in an exploration of the vital materiality of diaspora, as there is an ongoing tension between the individualism of the diasporic subject and his or her own set of traumas, and the maintenance of communities or assemblages across national borders. With these challenges in mind, challenges rooted in the subjective ethical terrain of the Holocaust, there is still great potential in the concept of agency that derives from vital materiality, once nonhuman things are figured less as social constructions and more as actants, and once humans themselves are assessed not merely as autonomous isolated bodies but as actants with vital materialities.

In *Fugitive Pieces*, carrying with him the memories of his struggle to survive, Jakob recalls, while in Canada, the ideological features of Nazism, the policies against the Jewish population that were “beyond racism” and “anti-matter” (Michaels 1996: 165). Jewish people were not considered human, an “old trick of language” Jakob describes that was used throughout the course of history. According to Jakob, non-Aryans were never to be referred to as human, but as “‘figuren,’ ‘stucke’ – ‘dolls,’ ‘wood,’ ‘merchandise,’ ‘rags’” (ibid.: 165). Thus humans were not being gassed, only those considered as anti-matter and so accordingly, ethics were not believed to have been violated: “[n]o one could be faulted for burning debris, for burning rags and clutter in the dirty basement of society” (ibid: 165). In her section on the “Culture of Life” debate in *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett similarly describes how a kind of ideological materialism, or rather anti-materialism, was used by the Nazi regime against the Jewish population, that “Nazis invoked entelechy to make their case that the German nation had to fulfill its vital destiny and wage a vital war” (2010: 89). Here, Bennett wonders whether there is something intrinsic to vitalism and to faith in the autonomy of life that allies itself with violence. *Fugitive Pieces* explores this relationship as it relates to bodies and power, as Michaels’s novel attests that the

Holocaust was a war waged against the vitality of the Jewish body, a body that represented spiritual, ethnic, economic, and social ties, bodies deemed anti-matter by the Nazi regime. Jewish bodies thus were denied their humanity, seen as biologically inferior, figures to be eradicated by the state for various political and ideological purposes. In *Fugitive Pieces*, Jakob accounts for the risk of becoming anti-matter in his own journey, and so rather than risk becoming a severed body in history, he explores and forms alternative assemblages of bodily experience among other diaspora, including Athos, Ben, and Salman, throughout the novel.

As *Fugitive Pieces* makes clear, it is impossible to fully retrieve the material history of the Holocaust, including its victims and survivors. On the outset, Michaels's aesthetic representation of the diasporic Jewish body, as a means of retrieving a kind of materiality that was lost, is surely both idealistic and problematic, as it seeks to represent a renewed materiality of bodies as a way of emancipating them from the histories of Nazism. In response to the Nazi policies of anti-matter, Jakob recognizes the practice of preserving and remembering the materiality of bodies following the Holocaust: "I know why we bury our dead and mark the place with stone, with the heaviest most permanent thing we can think of: because the dead are everywhere but the ground" (Michaels 1996: 8). Later on in a dream-like scene recounted by Jakob, though not his own firsthand experience, he describes how prisoners of the camps were forced to dig up the mass graves:

The dead entered them through their pores and were carried through their bloodstreams to their brains and hearts. And through their blood into another generation. Their arms were into death up to the elbows, but not only into death – into music, into a memory... into beliefs, mathematical formulas, dreams. As they felt another man's and another's blood-soaked hair through their fingers, the diggers begged forgiveness. And those lost lives made molecular passage into their hands. (ibid.: 52)

The prisoners participate in an observable agential, micropolitical community, as they encounter the dead by haptically moving across other material witnesses to the events; the micropolitical nature of this encounter includes the subsuming feeling of soil extending up to the elbows of the living victims, their muscle memories in confronting the dead for whom they wade through, the musicality of the death scene itself, and the molecular passages that the prisoners take in digging up and burying their own respective traumas. Indeed, Cook suggests how, in this scene, Michaels

represents memory and materiality as “contamination, a fleshly laying on of hands from the dead to the living and back again” (2000: 18).

Amidst the blindness and confusion of the mass grave that Jakob describes, a kind of assemblage takes form among the living and the dead bodies, constituted first in the hands that touch and feel in order to understand. Jakob describes how “though they were taken blind, though their senses were confused by stench and prayer and screams, by terror and memories, these passengers found their way home. Through the rivers, through the air” (1996: 52). According to Bennett, a life, rather than being deemed as anti-matter, can name a kind of “restless activeness,” a “destructive-creative force-presence” (2010: 54), which does not coincide fully with any specific body. In this scene of divergent, confused bodies, a kind of activeness does occur, in which the life-like movements of the living and the dead tear “the fabric of the actual without ever coming fully ‘out’ in a person, place, or thing,” pointing to “matter in variation that enters assemblages and leaves them” (2010: Bennett 54). A life points to matter in variation that enters assemblages and eventually leaves these assemblages, later forming new ones “molecularly” (ibid: 82). A life is a “vitality proper not to any individual but to 'pure immanence,' or that protean swarm that is not actual though it is real” (Bennett 54). Furthermore, a life is made up of “virtualities” (2010: Bennett 54), of proximities to and exchanges with other lives and vitalities. Like the more human-centered assemblages and transformations that take place among the victims and survivors of the Holocaust, as depicted in the scene of the mass grave, Jakob is also drawn to other material exchanges. In describing the relationship between the particle, wave, and electron, as less tangible microforms of vibrant life, he reflects: “Perhaps the electron is neither particle nor wave but something else instead, much less simple – a dissonance – like grief, whose pain is love” (1996: 211).

In *Fugitive Pieces*, in explaining how his wife believes that “a child doesn’t have to inherit fear or trauma,” the novel’s secondary protagonist Ben wonders “who can separate fear from the body,” as his parents’ past was his own “molecularly” (1996: 82). In “Introduction: The Materiality of Diaspora – Between Aesthetic and ‘Real’ Politics,” Pnina Werber has contemporarily defined diasporas as “historical formations in process” (2000: 5), contending that the immaterial homeland is the latter, always reconstituting itself in historically-present processes of becoming. Diasporic life is thus implicated in the same relationships as that of vibrant life, including its restless-active orientation, its processes of material becoming and

shifting belongings, as well as the more historical sites of affective exchange. Diasporic bodies form and reform their assemblages in harmony and proximity, while simultaneously facing aspects of historical and contemporary dissonance, a material phenomenon that reminds diasporas of the shifting nature of life itself.

In his best-known statement against writing about the atrocities of the Holocaust, Theodor Adorno declared that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today” (2003: Adorno and Tiedmann xv). Although Adorno’s statement ended up rebounding for having criticized a culture as a whole on the grounds that it failed to do justice to the sufferings of the victims, it does draw attention to the difficulty of finding a language adequate enough to describe the most unrepresentable events in history. Likewise, Bennett’s work has posited the danger in asserting human speech for nonhumans as a way of providing them with a false sense of agency. Despite these warnings, I would like to suggest that such an attitude towards history ultimately closes off new understandings of human experience for the sake of preserving a single and essentialized version of events. For Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman, the common denominator among the multiple manifestations of materialism and speculative realism, aside from the shared use of the label ‘materialism’ itself, has been an agreement on the “irreconcilable split between idealist and materialist orientations” (2011: 92) in the fields of theory and history. According to Cook, both Jakob and Ben become aware of how atrocity, only once narrated, becomes narratable, representable (2000: 16). For Cook, Michaels’s project may be seen as both an attempt to “metaphorize history, memory, and narrative precisely in order to challenge the literal ... catastrophe in language,” and yet also “reveal[s] and conceal[s] the materiality of the event” (2000: 16). To read the material bodies of Michaels’s text through a kind of vibrant materiality is to discover that “gradual instant” of diasporic becoming, to witness how the histories of trauma are numerous and always reconstituting themselves through new assemblages, to witness how trauma is shared, extending from the human body outward to nonhuman actants who also bear witness to history.

Finally, such an approach draws attention the very real assemblages still found in historical grave sites, such as old war zones, today – including the shifting and ever changing fields of landmines and munitions that continue to affect human and nonhuman lives as well as the preservation of concentration camps and other war camps, containing material artifacts,

which serve as an ongoing shared sites of historical memory. On this final note, Jakob remarks in *Fugitive Pieces* how Athos knew in his own research of such historical sites and ongoing vitalities, claiming that “no ship is an object, that a spirit animates the ropes and wood, that a sunken ship becomes its ghost” (1996: 20). The historical responsibility comes in never forgetting how the ghost ship, as much as its survivors, possess a kind of vitality – that each actant may invariably speak to one another, and speak to the vitality and agency of history. For this to be possible and true, Jakob proposes how “on the map of history,” where lines have been drawn and redrawn by human actants over time, “perhaps the water stain *is* memory” (1996: 137).

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