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PHOTOGRAPHY AND MEMORY IN RONIT MATALON'S "THE ONE FACING US" AND W. G. SEBALD'S "THE EMIGRANTS"

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This paper examines the relation between photography and memory in two recent narratives of Jewish origins -- Ronit Matalon's "The One Facing Us" (1995) and W. G. Sebald's "The Emigrants" (1992). Though produced in different cultural contexts -- an Israeli exploration of one family's Levantine beginnings and a German chronicle of four expatriates -- both novels deploy photographs as an essential narrative device.

In "The One Facing Us," the photographs are largely personal portraits of the young narrator's extended family. They are the subject of discussion within the text and confirm various relationships and situations. Yet the authenticity of photographs is interrogated throughout the novel, and their veracity as documentary evidence remains dubious. On the one hand, the photographs compete with memory and the imagination, and are irrefutable witnesses to personal relationships and historic events. On the other hand, the family album's wholeness and integrity is belied by the family's actual geographic dispersal. This ambivalence is marked in the novel through the discussion of numerous missing photographs.

Though its use of photography differs from that in "The One Facing Us," W.G. Sebald's work, especially "The Emigrants," provide an interesting counterpoint to Matalon's family album.

In Sebald's novels, the photographs often appear to be simple illustrations: images of objects, architectural panoramas, interiors, postcards, etchings, maps and less frequently people -- family, friends or strangers -- dot the narrative, inserted in seemingly random fashion. As with Matalon, Sebald's images are signs of absence, reminders of what is no longer, or of places left behind by Sebald's peripatetic characters. Yet the photographs as a whole, in their relentless desire to document and categorize, typify Western modes of classifying knowledge. Ultimately, the photographic image for Sebald is a way of denoting a relationship between language, history and the imagination.

In both novels, I am interested in exploring how photographs help narrate a story that is otherwise untellable. What kinds of connections are made through images that are elusive or unattainable in narrative prose alone? What would these books be *without* their images? Finally, I use these novels to explore the general relation between postmodern Jewish narratives and the medium of photography.