The insatiable crisis of memory: Maureen Duffy’s *Capital*

... it is an echo that speaks.

Rainer Nägele

Neurotics are often very reliable prophets.

Elissa Marder

Perhaps all cities at all times have been, are surreal.

Maureen Duffy

I

This chapter offers a reading of poet and novelist Maureen Duffy’s *Capital,*¹ the second work in her London trilogy, which I would like to describe, at least initially, as a chorographical text.² Though given relatively recent attention in the work of Gregory Ulmer, and bearing a passing resemblance to the Situationist International’s concept of psychogeography, chorography is an Early Modern discourse, the most famous extant example being Michael Drayton’s self-styled ‘topo-chrono-graphical’ poem, *Poly-Olbion,* printed in 1613. The purpose of chorography for Elizabethan intellectuals was to map the various historical, folkloric, and cultural resonances which could be unearthed in one location, specifically at the county level, as a means of producing a mythical and ideological identity that acknowledged singularity while showing analogically the resonance, both temporally and spatially, between local and national identity. It was also, often, an act of writing, which, like psychogeographical texts of the twentieth century, aimed to generate
complex and unanticipated relations in the reading of place, vertiginous dislocations of undifferentiated identity in the service of cultural mythologization. Frequently tied to early modern cartography, the chorographical intent was largely hegemonic. In the twentieth century, however, Duffy’s text functions differently; informed as it is by a spirit of place, it appears as the articulation of dissident, ambivalent, insurgent events.

To comprehend this, and the spectral work by which the text produces identities for, and from within, London, we should start with the title. *Capital* is undeniably a multiply resonant title. It signifies both the capital city and ‘capital’, material wealth. More than this, *Capital* announces behind its title another work of the same name, all too obviously, that by Karl Marx, even as, equally evidently, Duffy’s work produces a material history of the capital that is irreducible to, and in excess of, any consideration of capitalist economics. In this light though, it is important to recall what seems equally all too obvious, that, while London is the capital city, within it is another city, the City, location of the Bank of England, amongst many other leading financial institutions, and therefore the place *par excellence* of the control of capital. Yet, while the title echoes with each of these, it also speaks indirectly of the cost of thinking London as only the place of the production and management of capital, or as the capital city. The title of Duffy’s novel speaks volumes, and those volumes are all the occluded texts of the narratives of countless Londoners, who have existed within the capital, who exist and live on beyond material existence in *Capital*, and who return in the place of the text in excess of anything articulated directly in the name of the novel. For if Duffy’s title is available as the signature of a particular polyvalence, it also inscribes itself within its own limits, while simultaneously being traced by an undecidable excess beyond polyvalence, by everything else belonging and subject to the capital, to capital, which calls to be remembered, but which only arrives through this title, under the guarantee that this title signs apophatically. Moreover, without wishing to sound too fanciful, we should consider the material condition of the book as analogy for the material condition of the city: a capital has no existence without the millions who have lived and died and who live and work within it, who make it operate, and – quite simply – make it appear in any given *now*. *Capital* has no existence without the countless voices, more or less anonymous, of those who are *Capital*, and who both make the novel and make its narrative appear, in any given *now* of reading.