

## **The University of Melbourne**

### **Bridget Haylock and Suzanne Hermanoczki**

#### **Writing Trauma: Traumascope**

“Trauma” is actually the word for “wound” in ancient Greek, so testimony is the healing of the wound by shaping and giving shape to the experience that’s fragmented, a healing way of pulling fragments together ...’ (Laub 2014: 49)

‘... trauma is not only the repetition of the missed encounter with death but also the missed encounter with one’s own survival. It is the incomprehensible act of surviving—of waking into life—that repeats and bears witness to what remains ungrasped ...’ (Caruth 2013: 6)

‘... it is at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic theory precisely meet ...’ (Caruth 1996: 3)

Writing is a crucial process to the understanding of trauma. Whether trauma is represented through literature, fiction, non-fiction, auto/biography, memoir, post-generational and Indigenous narratives, poetry, graphic novels, art, photography, dance, plays, film, or closely observed by practitioners teaching creative writing within a classroom or an academic context, this issue includes the many and varied ways writers are bearing witness to trauma in the written form. Writing trauma offers a way of confronting, unpacking, questioning, de/constructing and navigating, the silence and the space, the gaps and the holes, the aporia, the unrepresentable and unknowable, of the sayable and unsayable, in order to reach a better understanding of how trauma is being re-presented within these diverse narratives.

The aim of this Special Issue of ‘Writing Trauma’ has been to showcase a selection of papers from emerging and established Australian and international creative writers, educators, scholars and academics, with a strong emphasis on the complex creative/critical relationship when writing about and addressing trauma. As editors, the purpose in the final selection and compilation of the Special Issue, was to present to its readership a scope of current scholarship, textual reading and teaching practices regarding creative writing and trauma.

We have therefore compiled the papers into several categories ranging from: Australian Literature and Indigenous writing and the transgenerational traumatic experience; pedagogical and scholarly research into the trauma memoir as a form of creative writing, researching Australian academics and the supervision of RHD candidates writing about the traumatic experience, and trauma-informed practice within the creative writing workshop; autobiographical writing of the body as a site for trauma, performing trauma in the graphic narrative, and the visual affective

representations of trauma; the examination of individual and collective testimonial narratives and memoir, and works re-presenting second and third generation trauma, postmemorial narratives and Holocaust literature; the performative and feminine representation of trauma in Gothic literature and the spacial aspects of circumscribing trauma. Following the articles is an excerpt of autobiographical prose and a book review. Each article offers a unique contribution to the body of knowledge in the hope of raising greater awareness and recognition of the critical theory, practise and discourse currently being written about creative writing and trauma.

### Indigenous and Australian Literature and Trauma

In 'Australia is a crime scene: Natalie Harkin's intervention on national numbness and the national ideal', Meera Atkinson, draws upon Sara Ahmed's work on the socialisation of affect to argue how Harkin's collection *Dirty Words* (2015), a work of archival poetics, confronts, challenges and exposes the Australian past. In her reading of the collection, Atkinson demonstrates how Harkin's writing, which blends scholarly research with the creative/literary process, addresses Aboriginal trauma and the Anglo-centric national ideal. Atkinson witnesses and reads the testimony of the transgenerational trauma in the post-invasion context, and shows the significance of Harkin's work as she identifies the (post)memorial trauma that still affects the Australian present.

In 'Aboriginal testimony, trauma and fiction: transcribing massacre in Randolph Stow's *To the Islands*', Kate Leah Rendell argues that Stow's Miles Franklin-Award winning novel (1958), includes an account of a violent colonial massacre not elsewhere expressed in the fiction. Rendell contends that this represents a textual slippage whereby the localised trauma that Stow encountered on his four-month research trip has infiltrated the writing; indeed, Stow allows the intervention. This inscription of Aboriginal oral (hi)story-telling precedes the significant transcription work produced by contemporary cultural studies scholars, and as such, deserves wider attention.

### Pedagogy

In 'First the misery, then the trauma', [then the book deal, it seems], Professor Donna Lee Brien investigates the relatively recent phenomenon of the trauma memoir, especially the Australian trauma memoir. She investigates it for its contribution as a form of creative writing to the debate that considers the literary and social significance of the memoir as genre. Brien discusses the genre's commercial success internationally, particularly in America and Britain, and then details selected Australian trauma memoirs which she argues document society in all its dysfunction. In this way, rather than being seen as self-indulgent autobiographies, the trauma memoir serves to narrate the resilience of the human spirit in the face of trauma and makes a contribution to understanding of the past.

Sue Joseph and Carolyn Rickett present preliminary findings of a qualitative research project that investigates supervisory protocols and practices of supervisors of Higher

Degree Research (HDR) candidates who are writing about traumatic experiences. This project derives from the increase in enrolments in creative practice doctorates in Australia, and the subsequent need for ensuring integrity around the management of training for creative arts practitioners. The authors investigate what is known about trauma contextualised into the HDR space, and argue that potential inherent risks to candidates and supervisors might be better acknowledged and supported by higher education institutions.

In 'Beyond Trigger Warnings: working towards a strengths-based, trauma-informed model in the university creative writing workshop', Penni Russon argues that the creative writing workshop is an environment that relies on intimacy, empathy, trust, and connection. She contends that the writer's workshop in the university is not a therapeutic space, and that neither is it emotionally neutral. Students' capacity to engage is determined by whether they experience the workshop as a place of safety or risk. Russon's paper explores two positive, strengths-based models for supporting students with experiences of trauma and anxiety, and proposes a framework for trauma-informed practice in the workshop.

### The Autobiographical Post-Traumatic Body, Performing Trauma and The Visual Affect

In 'Autobiographical research in a post-traumatic body: a retrospective risk analysis' Angela Williams investigates the impacts of critically engaging with one's own memoir of survival while living in a body forged by early childhood trauma. Williams argues that recounting the story of trauma cannot help but involve a complex negotiation between the conflicting impulse to the truth of the story and to living within awareness of reawakened pain. Williams contends that while the risks of confronting old trauma are significant, with awareness of this likelihood, and good protocols in place to mitigate negative affect, the possible intellectual and curative benefits might be worth the risk.

Elizabeth MacFarlane and Leonie Brialey argue that the graphic narrative is a dynamic space which can perform experiences of grief, trauma, and post-traumatic stress disorder. In 'The Body is Just a Metaphor for the Soul: Performing trauma in the work of Leela Corman and Tom Hart', MacFarlane and Brialey discuss two separate but related works of Corman and Hart, centred around their child who died. They find that narrative repetition, visual metaphor, sequentiality, and the embodiment of the drawn line, also represent the experience of trauma in these works. But they also see that the performative process of creating graphic narratives as a working through of the trauma towards hope.

In 'Resonances of the Negative: Traumatic Affect and Empty Spaces of Writing' Michael Richardson argues that the material limits of printed words on a page and their relation to empty space evoke traumatic affect. He analyses two texts, *Negative Publicity: Artefacts of Extraordinary Rendition* (2015) by Crofton Black and Edmund Clark and *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) by Claudia Rankine, to show how writing can use negative space as a site of resonance between the written word, the image, and the materiality of the page. He shows that traumatic affect does not reside

in the texts but in the writing and reading of them. He sees resonances of the negative as one form that calls attention to tensions in writing, and the force of absence, of the material and the imagistic in the writing as that which resists language. He argues that writing can allow the forms that affects take to bring the bodily and worldly force of trauma into communicable sensation

### Testimonial Literature, Post Memorial, and Second and Third Generation Trauma

Maria Tumarkin in her paper 'The Alexievich Method' examines the works of Nobel Prize winner, the Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexievich. Regarded as 'a giant of testimonial literature', Tumarkin discusses Alexievich's detailed and meticulous process of gathering testimony in her works on the Soviet and post-Soviet era, in order to bear witness, and to represent through writing, the sayable and unsayable within individual and collective trauma.

In her paper 'Remembering and Rewriting the Familial Traumascape in Alice Pung's memoir *Her Father's Daughter*', Suzanne Hermanoczki through a close textual analysis, discusses the intergenerational impact of how Pung's father's present day narrative and behaviour reveals testimonial fragments of the trauma experienced in the former homeland. She argues how Pung's familial traumascape, Cambodia, is the *punctum*, and the site of the wound of her father's trauma and trigger memories but also the daughter's connection to his testimony and her postmemorial writing.

In her paper, 'Into the unknown: Daniel Mendelsohn's *The Lost* and the writing of third-generation Holocaust literature', PhD candidate in Creative Writing and the granddaughter of a Jewish-Austrian Holocaust survivor, Antonia Strakosh interrogates through Mendelsohn's narrative, the link between the difficulties and the complexities of intergenerational trauma and the impact of such a traumatic inheritance. Through her paper, she investigates the narrative choices, when confronted with the unknowable past, which still haunts many third-generation authors and post-Holocaust writing.

Sarah Dowling's paper 'The human hole: Problematic representations of trauma in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is illuminated* and *Extremely loud and incredibly close*' explores how Foer writes about trauma through a post-structural and postmodern lens. Dowling discusses how certain characters embody the inescapability of trauma, of those living with and possessed by trauma, and the recurring motif of 'holes' which serve to address the absences of experience and gaps in knowledge, as well as being representative of the trauma itself.

### Performing Trauma

In her paper 'Emerging from Entrapment: Sue Woolfe's modern Gothic *Painted Woman*' through Gothic generic, narrative and conceptual strategies, Bridget Haylock closely examines Woolfe's text as a tale of incest, familial violence and disavowed female artistry. She discusses how the contemporary Australian setting in the Gothic enables the subversion of expectations of gender relations through Frances, to

demonstrate both presence and the lack of agency that resides within the traumatic feminine space. Haylock shows how Woolfe's text is able to develop a new form of writing – one which challenges genre conventions by reframing the embodied experience through experimentation and employing radical language to testify to trauma.

In her paper ‘“a separate world, a small and enclosed universe”: Phobic de/construction of space in Joan Barfoot's *Dancing in the Dark* to circumscribe trauma’, Danielle Schaub investigates through a close reading of Barfoot's text, the effects on the protagonist, Edna Cormick, of cumulative childhood trauma and subsequent social and psychopathological trauma. Using psychoanalytical theories, such as those of Dana Amir (2014), Michael Balint (1968), Ester Bick (1968 and 1986), Wilfred R. Bion (1959) and Judith Mitrani, Schaub argues that when faced with trauma, people can struggle to recover, feel dispossessed, and can inscribe their life narratives in patterns that emphasise their disconnection from others and themselves. She contends that Barfoot shows that this can result in a complex life determined by self-confinement, spatial apprehension and eventual seclusion, one with the unlikelihood of posttraumatic growth.

### Prose

Laura Kenny's autobiographical fiction piece ‘The 45 Parallel’ deals with the residual issues and traces of childhood trauma. Presently a PhD candidate in Creative Writing at Queensland University of Technology, Kenny own experience as an adult survivor of childhood trauma and a sufferer of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) greatly inform her work. Kenny defines her life writing as fiction which combines elements of both the autobiographical; blending select memories and the fictive in an attempt to write about trauma and address the liminal spaces within the traumatic memory. This is exemplified in ‘The 45 Parallel’ a narrative which is strongly shaped by place and time and a character, whose childhood recollections is punctuated by trauma.

### Review

Michael Richardson's book, *Gestures of Testimony: Torture, Trauma and Affect in Literature* (2016) is reviewed by Bridget Haylock for this Special Issue. Richardson discusses testimony and torture's cultural and ethical representation in text. This gesture is in itself towards that which he argues is unrepresentable, a position consistent with the problematic representation of trauma.

The editorial process has been long and filled with challenges, but despite some minor setbacks [illness, distance, work, holidays, life], it has proven to be an enjoyable collaborative two year process, of reading, researching, and regular discussions, all in preparation of getting this special issue ready. Both of us would also like to acknowledge the overwhelming response to the call out and that there were more articles and contributors that unfortunately could not make it into this current issue of ‘Writing Trauma’.<sup>1</sup> As editors, we would like to extend a long list of thanks and gratitude to the authors for the articles showcased in this issue, and to all the

reviewers and colleagues along the way, for their generosity of time, feedback, insight, expertise and guidance.

## Endnotes

1. We would like to add that we had the honour of meeting Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer at the Australia Centre for Jewish Civilisation (ACJC) at Monash and hearing their closing keynote address 'Improbable Images: School Photos in Holocaust Europe' (2016). We also wish to mention that we did ask them both if they could contribute to this current Special Issue, but unfortunately they were unable to, due to prior commitments. Yet, as you will see, their work is of great influence to many of the papers in this issue.

## Works cited

Caruth, Cathy 1996 *Unclaimed Experience: trauma, narrative, and history* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press

Caruth, Cathy 2013 *Literature in the Ashes of History* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press

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*Dr Bridget Haylock is a writer who holds a PhD in Creative Writing from The University of Melbourne, which examines the literary representation of post-traumatic creative emergence through a critical feminist analysis of selected Australian women's novels, Women Writing Traumatic Times, and a creative exploration in The Saltbush Thing. Her current research interests include writing for performance, twentieth and twenty-first century women's literature, trauma studies, literary studies, and creative writing as research practice. Recent publication of critical work includes: Hecate (2015), "The Strangled Cry": The Communication and Experience of Trauma (2013), Voicing Trauma & Truth: Narratives of Disruption & Transformation (2013), Is this a Culture of Trauma? (2012), and Traumatic Imprints: Performance, Art, Literature and Theoretical Practice (2011). She co-edited Traumatic Imprints: Performance, Art, Literature and Theoretical Practice (2011) and is co-editor of TEXT Journal Special Issue: 'Writing Trauma'.*

*Dr Suzanne Hermanoczki is a writer and teacher of fiction and creative non-fiction. She holds a PhD and Master degree in Creative Writing from The University of Melbourne. Her current fictional novel-in-progress won The University of Melbourne's Affirm Press Creative Writing Prize (2014). Her critical and creative writings on place and identity, mixed code, bi-ethnicity and multiculturalism, trauma and the immigrant's journey, have appeared in numerous local and international publications. She is co-editor of TEXT Journal Special Issue: 'Writing Trauma'.*