

University of New South Wales

Dr Michael Richardson

Resonances of the Negative: Traumatic Affect and Empty Spaces of Writing

Abstract:

At the heart of literary theories of trauma is the trope of aporia: the unrepresentable, unknowable event that enters into literary language through its fracturing, its falling short of meaning-making (Caruth 1996, Felman and Laub 1992). Yet this aporia is more than collapse of meaning into paradox: it is a site of affective intensity. While this traumatic affect can arrive through language, it also emerges in the resonance of blank space – in writing that embraces absences of text. Tracing these resonances of the negative across two multimodal texts, this paper shows how the material limits of printed words and their relation to empty space evoke traumatic affect. *Negative Publicity: Artefacts of Extraordinary Rendition* (2015) by Crofton Black and Edmund Clark uses the resonance between documentary evidence, short essays and photographs of emptied sites and spaces to testify to torture and rendition. *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) by Claudia Rankine deploys poetry, layout and artistic images to re-imagine the traumas of Blackness in America. Together, these readings show how writing can use negative space as a site of resonance between forms, transforming the limits of written text into new zones for giving life to traumatic affects and granting new nuance to the capacity of literary theory to account for trauma.

Biographical note:

Dr Michael Richardson is Lecturer in the School of the Arts & Media at the University of New South Wales, Australia, where he researches the intersection of affect and power in media, literature and culture. He is currently working on a project about the aesthetics of drones in warfare, activism and everyday life. Michael is the author of *Gestures of Testimony: Torture, Trauma and Affect in Literature* (Bloomsbury 2016), which won the Dean's Research Award for an Early Career Monograph in his Faculty, and co-editor of *Traumatic Affect* (2013). Before academia, he was speechwriter to The Hon. Jack Layton, former leader of the New Democratic Party of Canada.

Keywords:

Creative Writing – Trauma – Affect – Materialism – Image – Extraordinary rendition – Poetry – Race

What goes unwritten is not always silent or silenced: the absence of language, of image, of the human, possesses a certain force. The writing of trauma circles the absent, the unaccounted for, the event that resists representation—or so it is often imagined. Spaces of negation are not simply failures of meaning or signifiers of the limits of language: they are zones of resonance, of the intensity of the unwritten, the unmarked, the uncaptured. Emptiness, blankness, absence – each vibrates with potential, resonates with what was, did not occur, or might still be. To write trauma is to reckon with that which destabilises language and calls visceral attention to the uneasy relationship between words and things, between writing and experience. This can be a political act: a demand for negation and erasure to be felt on the skin not simply grasped by cognition or figured in metaphor. When trauma is systemic and political in origin, when it arises from the collision of the body with the state or with the law, empty spaces—on the page, in images, within geographies and places and histories—can become the vital means by which writing writes its own limits without reinscribing the original violence. Resonances of the negative become forms of affective meaning making, of making textually material the writing of trauma when words themselves fall short.

This essay encounters this negative resonance in two multimodal texts, works that use empty spaces to intensify the traumatic affectivity produced by language, and give it a complexity of form that words alone would not allow. *Negative Publicity: Artefacts of Extraordinary Rendition* (2015) by Crofton Black and Edmund Clark uses the resonance between documentary evidence, short essays and photographs of emptied sites and spaces to testify to torture and rendition. *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) by Claudia Rankine deploys poetry, layout and artistic images to re-imagine the traumas of Blackness in America. Together, these readings show how writing can use negative space as a site of resonance between the written word, the image, and the materiality of the page. This resonance is not simply the signifying capacities of language and image working together to produce multimodal meaning, but transforming the limits of written text into new zones for giving materiality to traumatic affect and granting new nuance to the capacity of literary theory to account for trauma.

The Affective Mattering of Aporia

Aporia can be found at the centre of trauma theory: it figures as both the precise absence of knowing that makes an event traumatic and the inherent inability of language to represent ‘a shattering break of cesura in experience’ (LaCapra 2001: 186). Aporia animates Cathy Caruth’s famous insight that, ‘trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature - the way it was precisely not known in the first instance - returns to haunt the survivor later on’ (1996: 4). Developing theories of trauma from the conjunction of Lacanian psychoanalysis and the reading strategies of post-structural deconstruction, Caruth, Shoshana Felman and others sought to ‘link high theory with specific material events that were both personal and which implicated history, memory, and culture generally’ (Kaplan 2005: 35). Trauma theory aimed to return the body to the study of literature, but from the very beginning it privileged literary language over bodily experience. Caruth and Felman were both students of Paul de Man at Yale, and their reliance on his distinctly linguistic interpretation of deconstruction yoked the traumatised literary body to textuality at the expense of

affectivity. Accounts of trauma in the humanities draw deeply on these theoretical wells, finding fertile ground in contemporary culture to grow a rich field of work. Poetry and fiction bearing witness to the Holocaust and other historical and personal traumas, ‘rather than narrativising traumatic experience, are seen as bearing the imprint of trauma’ (Bennett 2005: 23). Yet in such readings, the centrality of aporia itself to the theoretical formulation of trauma is rarely questioned. That it might present a problem for translating bodily experience into writing, for the very materiality that trauma theory desired to make known, passes unrecognised.

This failure of theory to account for the body as a lived, corporeal entity was one of the drivers of the affective turn (Clough 2007: 5). Affect recognises what much linguistic poststructural theory either elides or minimises: intensities in the encounter with texts that register experience outside the bounds of signification, linguistic play, or the unconscious. As Jill Bennett argues, traumatic art might be

understood as putting us in touch, neither with the ostensible subjects of trauma nor with a specific inner condition, but with the force of trauma as this inhabits space, both external and internal to the body. (2005: 49–50)

Understood in this way, trauma is not simply affecting but is itself affective, composed of ruptured relations in the experience of self and world. Many of the essays Meera Atkinson and I collected in *Traumatic Affect* (2013) reveal that while traumatic affect might be most obviously apparent in art, cinema and performance, it is just as crucial to the workings of trauma in literature. And, as Anna Gibbs has argued, equally essential to understanding the affective dangers of writing trauma (2006: 164). Traumatic affect might thus be understood as what aporia does, what encountering the limits of comprehensible experience does to bodies and their relations to the world. Traumatic affect is what resonates in certain empty spaces and negative zones. What remains to be articulated is the form such affect takes.

To suggest that affect can take specific form is not without controversy: any genealogy of affect would certainly devote considerable resources to mapping debates between proponents of the discrete, biological affects described by Silvan Tomkins (1963–1992), the abstract intensity descended from Benedict de Spinoza (1677/1982) by way of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987), as well as Brian Massumi (2002), and even the neuroscientific understandings advocated by critics of the field such as Ruth Leys (2011). If there is any sensible resolution to such debates, it is in recognising that affect can be an autonomous intensity and emergent in particular forms. That is, affect is both the capacity to affect and be affected, and that this capacity takes shape in specific contexts, circumstances, and dynamics described in different ways by Spinoza and Tomkins alike. That is, affect is affecting precisely because it does things, it generates relations that are necessarily specific. It is this specificity, this situatedness, that gives affect its politics: affect as change in state. This is why it makes sense to understand the political as affective, whether in the contagion of media images (Gibbs 2001) or the circulation of fear, disgust, shame and love (Ahmed 2004), but it is also crucial to affect workings in the field of aesthetics.

In the aesthetic encounter, specificity is what brings affect into necessary dialogue with signification. Affect does not make meaning as such, but forges passages for its carriage, intensification and transformation: ‘affective encounter becomes the means by which thought proceeds and ultimately leads to deeper truth’ (Bennett 2005: 37). Despite what critics such as Leys suggest, affect does not work against signification but rather composes experience alongside it. Affect is what intensifies and gives a

bodily register to meaning. As Massumi points out, ‘there is no antimony between affect and language’ (2015: 212). Rather, affect is what ‘primes and stokes language’s singular ability to exceed the given (its power to fabulate)’ (213). Extending this line of thought into affect itself, Eugenie Brinkema argues that affect should not be read against signification, but rather as produced in specific forms by specific texts—and generated through the attunements of close reading. ‘Treating affect in such a way,’ she writes, ‘deforms any coherence to “affect” in the singular, general, universal and transforms it into something not given in advance, not apprehendable except through the thickets of formalist analysis’ (2014, xv). While Brinkema’s insistence on the lack of a generalised affectivity can be readily contested, her call to attend to the ways in which affect is constituted by the specificities of textual form is well made. Traumatic affects are no exception—and the remainder of this essay will show how they take specific form in resonances of the negative.

Trauma and the empty spaces of writing, the places where text gives way to the blank page or the image or the material, have an enduring metaphorical relationship. Trauma theorist Shoshana Felman, for instance, conceives of the traumatic event as a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate of experience. This *tabula rasa*, she argues, is ‘not the simple erasure of an event but its actual inscription’ (1992: 145). In other words, the blank absence of the event is more than simply the lack of memory but in fact how the very event is written: as blankness, as absence. Yet this convenient alliance between absence, aporia and trauma does not give heed to the force of their affective resonance. What, then, does the literal blank space of the page do in texts that bear the imprint and produce the affects of trauma? What of the absence of bodies that might in their mere presence testify? And what of how all of these jostle against language, narrative and image? Negative spaces—whether the white page, emptied image, or erasure of life—are material as much as they are affective, linguistic or formal. In what follows, then, I wish to attend, too, to what Jane Bennett calls the ‘vital materialism’ of these texts (2010: 17). An art book, a collection of poetry and images: each has its own vibrancy, its own material quality that is part of the work its writing does. A materiality that is part and parcel of how writing into the resonance of negative space enables traumatic affect to take specific form and do work that the written word alone cannot.

Negative Publicity: Artefacts of Extraordinary Rendition

Black sites. Sites unseen, unremarked, unrecorded. Sites to which the bodies of detained men and women were rendered after 9/11, transported across the globe by a network of front companies and private airlines to be interrogated and tortured. Sites of violence and absence: of negation. Their traumas are not solely physical, but institutional, juridical and geographic. To write them is to encounter absence not only at the level of individual experience but in localities, techniques of movement, bureaucratic records, legal codes, and executive orders.

Negative Publicity: Artefacts of Extraordinary Rendition (2015) is a collaboration between photographer Edmund Clark and human rights researcher Crofton Black. Each of its five chapters begins with a short essay by Black, followed by unearthed documentary records of the rendition and photographs by Clark of black sites in Poland, Afghanistan and elsewhere. Writing, here, is not only the composition of words but materials: the framing and arrangement of images, the collection and position of documents. Each essay is a gesture, an invitation into the collection of

documents. They describe places and events—the building of a prison in Vilnius, Lithuania; the establishment of an air transport network—in unadorned language: ‘Workmen arrived; not locals. They came in cars with tinted windows, in convoys, four at a time ... The work was carried out at night’ (037). Evocative language is left to quotation. As a resident of Vilnius says, ‘We thought they were going to build hotels, develop a business, but they sold all the horses and then this certain emptiness started’ (037). Those words—‘this certain emptiness’—title the chapter, and each of the chapters draws its name from words said by some witness or another to rendition and torture. At times, Black narrates the disappearance of records and the reluctance of officials to testify to what the CIA did in their countries (196), or the anxieties of the aviation company Richmor about the ‘negative publicity’ it had received (239), and from which the book takes its title. Yet the language retains its journalistic distance, an intensity of facticity against which the photographs and documents that make up the bulk of the book can resonate.

Each of these documents captures interest, even those that are startlingly banal. A list of airplane routes, the layout of an interrogation room, page after redacted page of a CIA report. An accumulation of evidence that functions as history’s remnants of loss, fragments of the violence done to particular bodies in particular places. These documents reveal the bureaucratic architecture of what Michel Foucault (2007) called governmentality, or the techniques of power by which the state perpetuates itself. ‘Something of the past always remains,’ writes Dominick LaCapra in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, ‘if only as a haunting presence or symptomatic revenant’ (2001: 49). The documents collected in *Negative Publicity* are just such a spectral presence, but they are also more than this: evidence of the limitations of the historical archive, of its failure to account in full for history’s traumas. Their very thinness suggests an unlikely existence, mere hints of the violence and activity they stand in for. It is their arrangement that matters, the suggestion it gives of the work done by Black, the attorneys of detainees, and a small cohort of human rights organisations to retrace renditions from war zones to black sites. But *Negative Publicity* is more than a pastiche of intertexts: what is arranged and structured is not simply words but traumatic affect. This traumatic affect is resonant, ‘a concatenation in which affect resonates with like affect, so as to link otherwise unrelated scenes without producing articulable meaning’ (Gibbs 2013).

The photographs interleaving the evidentiary documents and essays are unsettling in their mundanity. A copse of pine trees obscuring a white warehouse, an office building in Alexandria, Virginia; an unmarked corridor with grey floor and white walls. Moving from one to the next, absence accumulates. Not absence of place, because each image is finely composed, naturalistic in style, but of bodies. Where the Abu Ghraib images made torture visible, these show only the negation of the modes and mechanisms of power that made it possible. These are places of human habitation without the human: an empty desk and chairs in an office overlooking the tarmac at Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan; an empty bed below a gauze-draped window. What happened in each of these scenes, each of these sites? Were renditions planned or carried out? Were invoices composed and sent and disputed? Was violence done? Torture? Murder? As Karen E. Till observes, ‘places are embodied contexts of experience, but also porous and mobile, connected to other places, times and peoples’ (Till 2008: 104). These photographs document what Till calls ‘wounded places,’ sites “understood to be present to the pain of others and to embody difficult pasts’ (2008: 108). In doing so, they gesture towards the intersubjectivities that emerge in the

relation of place to body. Yet visual art, writes Jill Bennett, ‘does not offer us a privileged view of the inner subject; rather by giving trauma extension in space or lived *place*, it invites an awareness of different modes of inhabitation’ (2005: 12). These images do not speak – their captions are located on a later page – their white borders frame them into a kind of isolation yet their juxtaposition with the documentary archive sets them vibrating. Their aesthetic is itself documentary—unvarnished, neutral colouration, the camera lacking artifice in its direct approach. Their very simplicity, their ordinariness and familiarity, accumulates: trauma as the force of what no longer remains visible in a place. Nor are there markers of what might have occurred, not even in a white-walled Libyan interrogation centre. The *punctum* of these images, what Roland Barthes called ‘that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)’, is not to be found in any specific detail but in the sheer absence of bodies (1981: 27). These photographs without bodies resist the demand to represent violence in the realist mode, to submit to the criteria of legal evidence (Tagg 1993: 60–5). In their attention to the affective facticity of the empty sites as negative spaces, the images refute the very capacity of photography to alone bear witness and assert the necessity of its relation to language, to speech.

All this absence: the publicity of the negative, the unknown networks of traumatic dislocation and bodily violence of the war on terror. It resonates here in and between the proliferating negations of *Negative Publicity*: redacted passages of text; photographs of sites without habitation; white space on page after page. This resonance is materiality: it is writing manifest not only in the essays, with their crisp factuality, their preponderance of dates and figures, but as material narrative. Matter, as Jane Bennett (2010: 1–19) has observed, possesses a certain vibrancy, a vitalism that eludes reduction to the narrow subjectivity of the human. That the composition of this text is political is uncontroversial, but the politicality of its material mattering is perhaps more so. It has weight, spiral bound, a set of records, the pages varied in texture, stock and shape. Maps and aerial photographs, occasionally annotated by hand but otherwise presented unadorned, the captions waiting towards the end of the chapter. These captions, printed on heavy yellow stock, do the work of linguistically placing and delimiting the affectivity of progressing through the documents: they do the work of sense-making that the evidence and photographs alone could not. Each contains a short title—‘Redacted image of a house belonging to a pilot identified as having flow rendition flights’ (190); ‘Corridors connecting cells to interrogation rooms, Libyan intelligence service detention facility at Tajoura, Tripoli’ (191); ‘Series of photographs taken from a moped passing through Bucharest, Romania’ (235)—followed by a longer explanation of what took place, why the evidence matters, what the image means. Yet these captions are not the last word, so to speak. In each chapter, that is given over to a final photograph—a photograph of the homely space from which a rendered body is absent. The politics of networks, governmentality and torture cannot but resonate with bodies lost to intimate spaces. Neither photography, nor evidence, nor language can testify alone. It is the resonance of what is absent in each that attends to the trauma of which they cannot fully speak, and suggests that any aporia is not so much a limit point as an opening onto what writing unbound by language might do.

Citizen: An American Lyric

Injury starts small in Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*, routines of naming and language and recognition: 'a close friend who early in your friendship, when distracted, would call you by the name of her black housekeeper' (2014: 7); being told by a colleague that 'his dean is making him hire a person of color when there are so many great writers out there' (10); the therapist who opens her door to yell, 'Get away from my house!' when arriving for an appointment (18). Wounding moments, picked away at by Rankine's relentless poetics of race and belonging, by her knitting into visibility of the affective socialities that racialise certain bodies and not others. At play here is what Sheldon George calls the 'overvaluing of the black body' at the expense of an individual, subjective self (George 2016: 8). What manifests in such moments is an African-American subjectivity in which 'vulnerability to dominant discourses productive of racial otherness leads also to exposure to a psychic trauma that issues from the racial past and repeats itself in the present' (2016: 7). The collection of poems—some in blank verse, some in prose, some alongside or woven between works of visual art—concerns the composition of Black life in America. They are poems written in what Christina Sharpe calls living 'in the wake' of slavery: 'to be *in* the wake is to occupy and be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding' (2016: 13–4). It is to be inevitably caught in the turbulence of the passage of a ship of state founded on racism, dispossession and trauma. Faced with this reality, it is essential to 'think "the wake" as a problem of and for thought' and 'to think "care" as a problem for thought' (2016: 5). Doing so affords the potential to not trace the costs and consequences of the wake, but to articulate new capacities for living in and through it.

Rankine's poems can thus be read as writing of and from life within the wake. Yet they are more concerned with the subtle yet deeply injurious ways the wake shapes the intimacies of daily life than in directly cataloguing the sweeping traumas of Black history. Their emphasis is not simply or solely the capacity of racism to crudely denigrate or erase, but, as Rankine writes, how it is that

language that feels hurtful is intended to exploit all the ways that you are present. Your alertness, your openness, and your desire to engage actually demand your presence, your looking up, your talking back, and, as insane as it is, saying please. (2014: 49)

Traumatic affect circulates in mutable form and to varied effect. It leaks into the optimistic attachments that compose the affective present (Berlant 2011: 23–4). What Rankine writes is not oppression writ large (although that is there too), but written into the intimate familiarity of the everyday, permeating her daily world despite her celebrated work, her university professorship, the elite circles through which she moves. The poems attend to what Sharpe calls the 'monstrous intimacies' of post-slavery subjectivity, shaped in enduring yet changing ways by the traumatic passages of slavery itself: 'their projection onto and erasure from particular bodies, and the reformulation, reproduction, and recirculation of their intimate spaces of trauma, violence, pleasure, shame, and containment' (2010: 4). In the quotidian contours of the poems, Rankine's living of life is willful, what Sara Ahmed describes as 'what we do when we are judged as being *not*' (2014: 15). This being judged as not is as affective as it is linguistic. Rankine's writing captures this affectivity in disappearance, in the way injury slips into the unsaid, or the can't-be-said, or the without-response. This is injury that lives in the body, in the poet's writing body, and in her words, and in the way they themselves settle against the whiteness of the page. Because this is what so many blocks of poetry in *Citizen* do: they halt abruptly, black

text populating only part of the page, as if demanding that the paper's whiteness not be allowed to become mere unremarked background, the natural normal upon which language rests.

Citizen comes at the same dilemma again and again, searching out angles of approach, lines of flight, modes of inquiry. 'You can't put the past behind you,' writes Rankine. 'It's buried in you, it's turned your flesh into its cupboard' (63). Injuries of gaze and word accumulate in the body, traumas large and small. Yet these poems do not so much seek to pin them down as to gesture them into affective form, to produce a resonance between what can be said and not, written and not, printed and not. Race is lived only by certain bodies: how skin is lived produces differential attunements to the encounters that Rankine describes, evokes, critiques or excoriates. Negation emerges as both form and theme:

In line at the drugstore it's finally your turn, and then it's not as he walks in front of you and puts his things on the counter. The cashier says, Sir, she was next. When he turns to you he is truly surprised.

Oh my God, I didn't see you.

You must be in a hurry, you offer.

No, no, no, I really didn't see you. (77)

These words rest sparse on the white page, clinging to its upper reaches. Blackness is always hyper visible, until it is not. Whiteness is blind and blinding, and how else to show this than in the sheer moment? 'No, no, no, I really didn't see you.' What this does to a body looms in the force of the unsaid, in what need not be said yet is affectively present—an absence that produces a present-tense of experience that can only reside beyond the words themselves. A woman parks her car facing Rankine's, sees her, moves to the other end of the lot: too visible, a body of threat and fear, affectively othered. Then invisible: not able to be seen at the drugstore, skipped over. A body of fear and a body that does not matter. Written not in words, but in where they do not go.

Politics resonates with increasing intensity as the text progresses, the poems pushing beyond Rankine's experience to respond to incidents of racialised conflict: Hurricane Katrina, the death of Trayvon Martin, New York City's 'Stop-and-Frisk' policing policy. With this progression towards the more overtly political, the text itself opens outward. Images and artworks become more prominent, while typographic watermarks—'long form birth certificate' (112–3); 'black-blanc-blear' (120–9)—create a layered textuality. Negative space becomes the space of the body, the space to which Black bodies are consigned. In the script for a video titled 'February 26, 2012 / In Memory of Trayvon Martin' (87–90), lyrical language curls around loss, segregation, poverty. Praying, but not to any god, the poem brings the shooting of Trayvon Martin into conjunction with the destruction of Black life by prisons and lynchings, the disappearance of bodies into sky. And then, on the page opposite a last plea not to be left waiting alone, is the image: a black and white photograph, white

faces smiling or curious or turned away beneath night sky, the trunk of a tree. An arm points skyward to what is not there: the lynched Black body. The image sits at the bottom of the page. Around it is white, because this is the background of the negative. As if the gesturing hand, its upraised finger, points to the Black body lost to the white page. ‘Stop-and-Frisk’ accumulates the indignities of police harassment, of living as ‘not the guy’ and still fitting ‘the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description’ (105). Again, the text ends, the page turns and there is an image: Black figures in a crowd, layered over with black ink, obscured and become a dark mass (*Untitled (speech/crowd) #2*, by Glenn Ligon). Turn the page and it is the first Black President who is stopped and frisked: ‘Long Form Birth Certificate’ reads the heavy grey text over which a poem about President Obama’s stumbled oath at his swearing in (112–3). Affectivity amplified by absence, by the shift from text to image to text, by the passage of negation of the body from police officer to the guy who is always the guy fitting the description to Black crowd to Black president.

Late in the book, resonance of the negative comes to the fore in a remarkable double page. On the first, a list of names of men and women killed by police:

In Memory of Jordan Russell Davis

In Memory of Eric Garner

In Memory of John Crawford

In Memory of Michael Brown

And so it continues to Sandra Bland, found dead in a Houston police station after a traffic stop, each line printed more and more faintly, names not yet listed, waiting more bodies, until it is only the words ‘In Memory’ fading into the white of the page. Opposite, three short lines:

because white men can’t
police their imagination
black men are dying

The disjuncture of this textual moment is startling: blank white pages and the fragility of the list, its slow fading, and then those eleven stark words. A surge of the traumatic affect that constitutes writing memory in the wake of Black bodies destroyed by the state. Beyond the limits of language, writing submits to the complex affective formation of trauma, its intense yet tenuous emergence in poetry itself—and the reading of it.

Resonances of the Negative

Resonance of the negative is one form traumatic affect can take when, of necessity, it slips beyond the capacity of language to evoke it. It calls to attention the formal qualities of writing as they arise from and relate to its textuality. As Brinkema writes,

‘reading affects as having forms involves de-privileging models of expressivity and interiority in favour of treating affects as structures that work through formal means’ (Brinkema 2014: 37). In the context of trauma—which constitutively resists containment in language or direct signification of any kind—this formal structuring of affect allows its relational force to be encountered in spaces, objects, geographies and places. Such an encounter is not about the communication of meaning, but the sustaining of sensation (Bennett 2005: 18). It is the formal encounter, the reading of affect as composed and generated in the composition of the text that gives these resonances of the negative their potency. ‘Wounds are surfaces which are seemingly unwritten,’ writes Sarah Irwin, ‘yet they are actually the repository of profound meaning’ (1992: n.p.). What matters, she suggests, is to write into the disappearance of bodies from places. Writing on art, Jill Bennett points out that ‘the issue is where an image *takes us* once an initial affective connection is established’ (2005: 64). In art, affect can be unmoored from narrative framing to spark different modes of thought. In writing, affect takes shape in the ebb and flow of language, in the evocation of image, metaphor, rhythm, and more. Because trauma resists the demarcations of language—its structuring is an un-structuring of representation—its force becomes generative in the form its affectivity takes. In *Negative Publicity* and *Citizen*, that form is found in the aesthetic conjunction of image, materiality and text.

Emptiness invites us in, it allows atmospheres to form, develop and envelop. Its invitation is not always comfortable – far from it. Blankness, emptiness, absence: these are anxious phenomena, as pregnant with risk as reward. For the writer, the anxiety of the page that must be filled finds its complement in the page that cannot but remain blank, the image that replaces text, the document unexplained or redacted. Yet writing that embraces the resonant capacity of empty space gives room for the traumatic to become sensation without being traumatising. In *Negative Publicity*, the black sites encountered in essays, photographs and documents remind us that, as Jill Bennett attests, ‘affects arise in places rather than human subjects, in a way that allows us to isolate the function of affect, focusing on its motility rather than its origins within a single subject’ (2005: 10). This affectivity without the human body shifts the locus of traumatic affect to the materiality of the text itself: it is not a force in the world, but a force of the text forming in just this way. So too in *Citizen*, where traumatic affect is written into being not as the evocation of an abstract intensity but in its structuring into specific experience. This is how affect becomes political: a politics of the body, expressed aesthetically in the tension between words, white page, artistic image.

Literary theories of trauma have tended not to think beyond language. Focusing on the gap between signification and experience that is rendered unbridgeable by the traumatic event leaves such theory with few places to turn. As LaCapra points out, seen from a certain angle ‘there is no such thing as writing trauma itself if only because trauma, while at times related to particular events, cannot be localized in terms of a discrete, dated experience’ (LaCapra 2001: 186). Writing as witnessing often turns to the question of tracing the imprint of that un-locatable, un-writable event, but whether or not reading such a text can be *traumatising* is perhaps beside the point. Better to ask what new forms of experience might be made possible ‘if we loosened the tie between participation and human language use, encountering the world as a swarm of vibrant materials’ (2010: 107). Rejecting the notion that an aporia constitutes the limit point of language involves just such a loosening of ties and de-privileging of subjectivity. Neither *Negative Publicity* nor *Citizen* suggests that

trauma can be pinned down or directly represented—far from it. In different ways, both texts make clear the necessity of writing trauma with a recognition of what is truly at stake: not only the limits of language, but the very relations between body and world. And not just as any body or any world, but particular bodies, places, objects and spaces.

To suggest that writing trauma might entail the absence of language and a recognition of the material and formal is neither a simple gesture nor a universal answer. Many texts do not work with negation and emptiness in the manner described here, nor does traumatic affect resonate in all textual absences, at the point at which language falls short. Traumatic affect does not reside *in* these texts but in the writing and reading of them, as the aesthetic form of production and encounter. Resonances of the negative are one such form, but a form that calls attention to the tensions in writing, and the force of absence, of the material and the imagistic in the writing of that which resists language. Its forcefulness suggests the necessity of continuing to find ways in which writing, as a textual practice, can allow the forms that affects take to bring the bodily and worldly force of trauma into communicable sensation.

Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sara 2004 *The cultural politics of emotion*. New York: Routledge
- Ahmed, Sara 2014 *Willful subjects* Durham, NC: Duke University Press
- Atkinson, Meera and Michael Richardson (eds) 2013 *Traumatic Affect* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press
- Barthes, Roland 1981 *Camera Lucida* Translated by Richard Howard London: Vintage
- Bennett, Jane 2010 *Vibrant matter: a political ecology of things* Durham, NC: Duke University Press
- Bennett, Jill 2005 *Empathic vision: affect, trauma, and contemporary art* Stanford: Stanford University Press
- Berlant, Lauren 2011 *Cruel optimism* Durham: Duke University Press
- Black, Crofton and Edmund Clark 2015 *Negative publicity: artefacts of extraordinary rendition* New York: Aperture Foundation
- Brinkema, Eugenie 2014 *The forms of the affects* Durham NC: Duke University Press
- Caruth, Cathy 1996 *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press
- Clough, Patricia Ticiento 2007 'Introduction' in P T Clough (ed) *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* Durham: Duke University Press, 1–33
- Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari 1987 *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia* in B Massumi (trans) Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub 1992 *Testimony: crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history* New York: Routledge
- Foucault, Michel 2007 *Security, territory, population: lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–78*. in G Burchell (trans) M Senellart, F Ewald and A Fontana (eds) New York: Palgrave Macmillan
- George, Sheldon 2016 *Race and trauma: A Lacanian Study of African American Racial Identity* Waco, TX: Baylor University Press
- Gibbs, Anna 2001 'Contagious feelings: Pauline Hanson and the epidemiology of affect' *Australian Humanities Review* 25 (March)

- Gibbs, Anna 2006 'Writing and danger: the intercorporeality of affect' in T Brody and N Krauth (eds) *Creative writing: theory beyond practice* Tenerife, QLD: Post Pressed, 157–67
- Gibbs, Anna 2013 'Apparently unrelated: affective resonance, concatenation and traumatic circuitry in the terrain of the everyday' in M Atkinson and M Richardson (eds) *Traumatic Affect* Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 129–47.
- Irwin, Sarah 1992 'Language of disappearances' *Span: Journal of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies* 33
- Kaplan, E Ann 2005 *Trauma culture: the politics of terror and loss in media and literature* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press
- LaCapra, Dominick 2001 *Writing History, Writing Trauma* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press
- Leys, Ruth 2011 'The Turn to Affect: A Critique' *Critical Inquiry* 37 (3):434–472 doi: 10.1086/659353
- Massumi, Brian 2002 *Parables for the virtual: movement, affect, sensation, Post-contemporary interventions* Durham, NC: Duke University Press
- Massumi, Brian 2015 *The politics of affect* Cambridge, UK: Polity
- Rankine, Claudia 2014 *Citizen: an American lyric* Minneapolis, MN: Greywolf Press
- Sharpe, Christina 2016 *In the wake: on Blackness and being* Durham, NC: Duke University Press
- Sharpe, Christina Elizabeth 2010 *Monstrous intimacies: making post-slavery subjects* Durham, NC: Duke University Press
- Spinoza, Benedict de 1677/1982 in S Shirley (trans) *The Ethics and Selected Letters* London: Hackett Publishing Company
- Tagg, John 1993 *The burden of representation: essays on photographs and histories* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press
- Till, Karen E 2008 'Artistic and activist memory-work: Approaching place-based practice' *Memory Studies* 1 (1): 99–113
- Tomkins, Silvan S 1963–1992 *Affect, imagery, consciousness* 4 vols New York & London: Springer & Tavistock