

The Real/Trauma and Aboriginal Life-Writing

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By employing a wide range of contemporary theory, primarily from work on Holocaust testimonies and Latin American *testimonio*, to examine Aboriginal life-writing, this article brings together diverse cultural and historical contexts of trauma and political agency. While acknowledging the incommensurability of these different cultural sites of trauma, I argue that there are processes involved in dealing with trauma and injustice that have cross-cultural significance. The most important of these are firstly, the need to address injustice (although the injustices differ) and, secondly, the project of recovering from traumatic experiences. Recovery is used here to encapsulate its historical, therapeutic and legal senses — “to bring back”, “to cure”, “a verdict giving right to the recovery of debts”¹ — because the work of recovery in working-through traumatic histories necessarily involves negotiating specific historical, therapeutic and political content. Judicial, political and therapeutic practices and concepts operate across different cultural domains by virtue of the fact that they are organising determinants of those domains. They thus provide a basis for cross-cultural comparisons.

Over the past fifteen years the interest in and practice of testimony has been present in many different countries in projects aimed at recovering and memorialising suppressed national histories. Instances include the growth of memorials to the Holocaust, South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and Australia’s *National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*. There are many other cases besides these ones. Nation-states,

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¹ *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 1993.

diasporic and dispossessed cultures employ testimony to address and contest unresolved and often traumatic historical material. From testimonial writing's antecedents in small-scale political and personal expressions of marginalised identities, it has been used in recent times as a strategy for large-scale nation-building with both progressive and conservative manifestations. Its growth as a practice for establishing and recording individual and collective identity has provided previously suppressed and heterogeneous accounts of history.

It is important to note that the testimonial mode can be deployed to efface heterogeneity and provide simplistic redemptive totalisations of national identity. As a mode of writing, it has no inherent political allegiances. It can be used by those who wish to deny the same traumatic historical events that others seek to have acknowledged by it. Nevertheless, I argue that those who use the testimonial mode to affirm hegemonic history and further render unheard subaltern histories aggravate historical sites of trauma and cultivate injustices. Testimony may have no inherent political allegiance as a mode of writing, but this article demonstrates that when employed by Aboriginal life-writers it does have an allegiance: to the articulation and advancement of Aboriginal cultural identity and social justice. This is not surprising. Testimonial life-writing's formation as a literary genre is characterised by its use as a means for registering of subaltern experience. This is why most texts written in the testimonial mode are written by those who have been dispossessed by a dominant power. However, this history does not mean that testimony cannot be and is not employed as a way by which historical trauma is manipulated to further neo-colonialist practices.

The convergence of testimonial life-writing as a form of political resistance with testimonial life-writing as a form of writing-through post-colonial trauma encourages an alliance between post-colonial critical theory and psychoanalytic theory. John Beverley, one of the most interesting voices in debate on testimonial discourse, asks in his essay "The Real Thing", "[d]o testimonial narrators such as Rigoberta Menchú have an unconscious, and would a psychoanalytic reading of their narratives be useful? The answer on both scores, it seems to me, should be yes" (268). Such a positive view about a coalition between psychoanalytic and post-colonial theory is only briefly outlined in Beverley's essay. He discusses how Menchú's testimonial writing can be read "as an Oedipal bildungs-

roman built around the working-through of an Elektra complex [...]” (268). This article does not employ notions such as the Oedipal or Elektra complexes or any other such archetypes to help understand Aboriginal life-writing, because I think, like others before me (Deleuze and Guattari), that such notions are overly-determining meta-narratives that misperceive the specificity of Aboriginal life-writing. Rather, this article uses the more mobile concepts to be found in psychoanalytic theory, such as working-through, acting-out, resistance, and repression, as well as a reformulated version of the concepts ‘the Real’ and ‘the Symbolic’, with the intention of providing more specific analyses than psychoanalytic complexes allow.

The post-colonial project of developing means by which dispossessed subjects strengthen their agency is compatible with the psychoanalytic project of working-through the disruptions to identity caused by traumatic experience. Both work towards a recovery and reinscription of identity. Importantly, to succeed, these projects must maintain the tension that arises from avoiding both simplistic redemptive identities/nationalisms and the crippling of identities/nationalisms in epistemological and ontological aporia. Psychoanalytic concepts like working-through, acting-out, resistance, and repression, can be usefully employed in post-colonial studies as theoretical tools for dealing with the cluster of problems associated with post-colonial cultural articulation and re-emergence, cross-cultural dialogue, and the relationship between history (often effaced and traumatic) and the present.

By extension, the compatibility of post-colonial and psychoanalytic theory is useful for combating that particular deployment of post-structuralist thought which emphasises aporia, impasse and infinite regression. There is a tendency in post-structuralist thought to oppose

total-mastery, full ego-identity, ‘totalitarian’ social integration, and radically positive transcendence . . . on the one hand . . . with endless fragmentation, aporias, and double-binds, on the other. Sometimes evident as well is a perspective fixated on failed transcendence or irremediable loss in which any mode of reconstruction or renewal is seen as objectionably recuperative or naive. (LaCapra, *History and Memory* 46)

Donna Haraway warns against the risks of such oppositions when she argues that “[r]elativism and totalization are both ‘god-tricks’ promising vision from everywhere and nowhere equally and fully [...]”. Both rela-

tivism and totalization deny “partial perspective; both make it impossible to see well” (191). LaCapra’s and Haraway’s interest in avoiding such extreme positions is also what drives post-colonial theorists Diana Brydon and Helen Tiffin when they write,

we [do not] mean to suggest that an uncontaminated alternative space exists outside imperialist discourse from which the subaltern may speak. Instead, we are suggesting that even dominant discursive systems are diverse and multiply fractured, opening themselves to different levers in different times and places. (26)

In criticising the idea of an uncontaminated space and, by extension, full-identity and mastery, Brydon and Tiffin do not become “fixated on failed transcendence or irremediable loss [...]” (LaCapra, *History and Memory* 46), but rather focus on specific instances of the registration of post-colonial agency, that is, “different levers in different times and spaces” (Brydon and Tiffin 26). I will argue below that some such levers in the post-colonial context are psychoanalytic concepts developed for understanding and dealing with traumatic experience. However, before their capacity for interpretation in the post-colonial context is explored, it will be useful to outline how trauma has been conceived more generally.

The Real and Trauma

The concept of the Real was first developed by Jacques Lacan and has been used by literary theorists and others to discuss problems of representation and the question of what escapes, if indeed anything can escape, representation. The Real is figured as the Other to representational systems and therefore corresponds with the figuration of trauma as the unspeakable. As I discuss below, the operations of the Real have striking similarities to the operations of traumatic experience. The concept of the Real has been central to psychoanalytic accounts of the relation between representation and subjectivity and, consequently, I argue that theorisations of the Real provide resources for discussing writing that strives to establish narrative and affective control over traumatic material, such as Aboriginal testimonial life-writing.

How we conceptualise the Real (that which is Other to representation) and, in this article, how I conceptualise trauma as the Real, necessarily

affects what we can say about representational systems. This is because what we determine to be outside of representation, to be the limits of representation, necessarily determines what can be represented. Traumatic material manifests itself as a tension between what can and cannot be represented in speech or writing. This tension at best creates a state of disruption and, at worst, a state of dangerous crisis for the individual. Such disruption to or crisis of identity comes about because traumatic material (terrible memories, fears, cognitive confusions) structures an individual's experience, yet the individual has slight control over that material. Traumatic material determines the painful manner in which an identity experiences the world, but that identity has little power to alter that pain. While traumatic experience structures the traumatised identity, that identity is not properly integrated with that structuring force. The traumatised identity is an identity at odds with itself.

The process of reconciling disruptive traumatic material within the subject is a process of establishing narrative and affective control. It might be said that some identities would benefit from disruption and that an overly comfortable identity may be an overly normalised one. However, traumatic disruption is of an order of experience where the survival of the subject (not the survival of an overly normalised conception of the subject) is threatened. Traumatic material is often expressed as potentially fatal violence towards oneself and others. Efforts of the person suffering from trauma to establish an integrated identity are repeatedly undermined and a functioning identity cannot be established because a personal life-story cannot be established until the traumatic material has been narrativised.

The concept of the Real is useful for understanding post-colonial conditions and the process of cultural recovery. In the following passage Beverly introduces the concept of the Real as a tool for understanding post-colonial processes, writing that "the Real is not the same thing as the concept we are perhaps more comfortable using, the 'reality effect', as it is used in Barthesian or Althusserian criticism. When [...] the blind man crashes against the stone post, [...] he is] experiencing the Real, not a reality effect" (274). Thus, the Real needs to be distinguished from the terms 'realism', 'reality', and the 'reality effect'. These three terms are to be distinguished from the Real in that they are operations of the Symbolic, whereas the Real is pre-Symbolic. The Real does not exist as an

entity in itself, but is better envisaged as that which is Other to the Symbolic, where the Symbolic is a specific and dominant configuration of a culture's signifying process.

Beverley makes a connection between the Lacanian Real and the post-colonial condition, writing:

the Real is, like the subaltern itself, with which it is connected both conceptually and 'really,' not an ontological category but a relational one, historically, socially, and psychically specific. Just as there are different strokes for different folks, one might say there are different Reals for different Symbolics. As subjects our (non)access to the Real is necessarily through the Symbolic. (273)

The connection between the Real and post-colonial 'reality' is a consequence of the fact that colonial practices, in their function as mechanisms of discursive control, generate extra-discursive silences; active silences that render some subjects mute. Not all colonial practice operates in the same way and, thus, the re-emergence of the Real in a post-colonial context takes different forms in, say, Australian and Canadian settler/invaser cultures than it does in South African Apartheid. As Beverley puts it, "there are different Reals for different Symbolics" (273). Beverley continues to tie together the Real, subalterneity and testimonial life-writing when he writes that "[*testimonio*] was the Real, the voice of the body in pain, of the disappeared, of the losers in the rush to marketize [neo-colonise], that demystified the false utopian discourse of neoliberalism, its claims to have finally reconciled history and society" (281). Here we see that the Real, as *testimonio*, is generated by the "utopian discourse of neoliberalism", that is, the Symbolic as neoliberal ideology. Beverley has provided a starting point for understanding the convergence of post-colonial and psychoanalytic theory in his use of the Real because, for him, there is an equivalence between the Real and the experience of trauma.

To mark the special significance of the Real, Beverley restates Lacan's use of the word 'thing' and shows that Lacan's analysis of the original German term *das Ding* was used, following Freud, to distinguish *das Ding* from the German term *die Sache*, which designates "'a product of industry and of human action as governed by language' in the sense of a created or linguistically elaborated object [...]" (266). In contrast, *das Ding* "designates a traumatic otherness that cannot be represented or incorporated by the subject in language [...]" (266). Paul de Man

employed the trope *prosopopeia* to describe this opposition between the linguistic object and ineffable otherness. Lacan's Real performs an almost identical operation as de Man's referent, in that both elude representation or are displaced by Symbolic representation, or as Kristeva figures the condition, "I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself" (Kristeva qtd. in Yúdice 27).

In a post-colonial context we could rephrase this to say that the colonialist symbolic abjects itself within the same motion through which it establishes itself. In such a context, Kristeva's point is dubious because it renders self-privileging as abjection. It suggests that the establishment of an abjected post-colonial subaltern, as experienced by living embodied persons, is a form of *self*-abjection. Kristeva's abjected object is the unrealised possibilities available for subjective becoming, in distinction from determining forces such as racist discourses that construct selves and worlds. In this sense, the criticism of the referent as the denied Other is based on a retreat into the self as abstracted possibility. De Man's and Kristeva's post-structuralist move to, and emphasis on, the defaced referent and the 'always already' effaced Real instantiates epistemological impasse. LaCapra identifies the potentially crippling consequences of such a move:

Theory itself in this context may take necessary critical and self-critical inquiry — including inquiry into one's own assumptions — and autonomize or fetishize it until it becomes an externally predictable but internally compelling process of disarticulation, disorientation, destabilization, dismemberment, and so forth. The discursive symptom of this understanding of theory is the repeated, moth-to-flame movement toward the paradox, aporia, or impasse that 'sublimely' brings language to a halt and renders impossible (or situates as helplessly naive) any form of recovery or viable agency. (*Representing the Holocaust* 192)

LaCapra suggests that although we can concede that traumatic material behaves like the Real, or as he sometimes puts it, the 'sublime', there is still the potential for symbolic representation of it. The Real, as repressed traumatic material, as the Other to the dominant Symbolic, uncannily returns and disrupts the Symbolic, similar to the way traumatic material continually disrupts the subject who lives in its grip.

“The traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of ‘normal’ reality” [...]” (Laub 69); and, *das Ding* denotes “a traumatic otherness that cannot be represented or incorporated by the subject in language [...]” (266).² Thus, the irruption of the Real, in its otherness and irreducibility, is similar to the experience of trauma. Post-colonial trauma, as experienced by the dispossessed Other to the colonial Symbolic, even if historically repressed, disrupts that Symbolic, its legacies, and similar neo-colonial formations. It undermines the normative claims of colonial ideology. Often such disruption is literary.

Testimonial life-writing is structured around the intrusion of the Real which, according to Lacan, as cited by Beverley, is “that which resists symbolization absolutely” (266). As my argument above suggests, I am in disagreement with Beverley regarding the Real’s absolute resistance to symbolisation because I agree with him that there are different Reals for different Symbolics. Just as there are differences between cultural Symbolics and dynamic changes within them, and because there are different Reals for different Symbolics, it follows that the Real shifts with shifts in the Symbolic.

The experience of trauma corresponds with the Real in its defiance to be spoken, but unlike the Real, it manifests itself over and above the sign of absence — *prosopopeia*. The Real supposedly can never be spoken because it is purely asymptotic, whereas trauma defies being spoken while simultaneously manifesting itself through repeated affective and linguistic disruptions. This is what distinguishes my analysis of post-colonial subaltern agency from deconstructive positions like that of de Man’s or Kristeva’s which state, to use Foucault as an example, that while “‘the ‘other’ is ‘that absence in the interior from which the work paradoxically erects itself’ (Foucault 1977, 66), it does not exist” (Yúdice 22–23). In contrast, subaltern life-writing’s negotiation with traumatic post-colonial material that resists representation is not a “‘representation’ [...] born of the exclusion of the ‘limiting otherness’ [...] but, rather, by dialogue

² It is important to consider how trauma relates to Jean-Francois Lyotard’s notion of the *différend*. The language gap between different cultures that divests the plaintiff of the means to represent his or her self is further complicated by traumatic material because even if one had an adequate cross-cultural means of representing oneself, the traumatic material remains difficult to access. Thus, trauma is another order of the *différend*.

and interaction with it" (Yúdice 27).³ Yúdice further defines the implicit difference between the practices of subaltern life-writers and what he terms 'hegemonic postmodernism', that is, infinitely regressing, impasse-enacting deconstructions, writing:

Again, in contrast with the hegemonic postmodern text, in which the 'I' is expelled as vomit, in which the body transforms into vomit, that which is expelled, separating it from nature (mother and father), thus making dialogue impossible — 'I abject myself within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself' (Kristeva, 1982, 3) — Menchú's text is, rather, a testimonial of incorporation, embodiment. (27)

The same problematic theoretical position that states that the Other is that which it is impossible to have dialogue with can be seen in the work of Lacan's scholarly disciple, Slavoj Žižek. In discussing trauma and the Real, LaCapra describes Žižek's position thus:

The 'sublime object of ideology' itself emerges as the Lacanian Real — an unsymbolizable limit or unrepresentable kernel of experience. Indeed, in Žižek the sublime seems to involve fixation on a radically ambivalent transvaluation of trauma as the universal hole in Being or the abstractly negative marker of castration. (*Representing the Holocaust* 206)

Furthermore, LaCapra argues that Žižek identifies Lacan "with Hegel as the negative dialectician who subverts speculative synthesis or wholeness (*Aufhebung*) and validates alienation and infinite desire as the horizon of thought and action" (206).

If traumatic material can function like the Lacanian Real in the way that it eludes representation, as I have argued, and if, in contrast to the Lacanian Real, it is often successfully articulated and narrativised in testimonial writing, I maintain that we can say considerably more about it than Lacan's schema allows theorists to do. This means that the deconstruction of voice can be contested. In contrast to Lacan's notion of *das Ding* as "a traumatic otherness that cannot be represented or incorporated by the subject in language [...]" (266), testimonial life-writing, as

³ The *nahual* is "[t]he word given to the double, the alter-ego, be it an animal or any other living thing, which, according to Indian belief, all human beings possess. There is a relationship between the *nahual* and a person's personality" (Menchú 250).

a process of working-through trauma, demonstrates that it is possible to transform traumatic memory into narrative memory. Trauma, as the closest approximation of the Real, can be spoken and, I think that, following LaCapra,

instead of becoming compulsively fixated on or symptomatically reinforcing impasses, it [testimonial narrative] would engage a process of mourning that would attempt, however self-questioningly and haltingly, to specify its haunting objects and (even if only symbolically) to give them a ‘proper’ burial. (*Representing the Holocaust* 193)

The difference between impasse-enacting deployments of post-structuralism and subaltern negotiation with post-colonial trauma is as follows: post-structuralism contends that the Real is always negatively inscribed through narrative and, thereby, the self cannot represent itself without effacing possibilities of itself; post-colonial negotiation with trauma suggests that the Real, or the closest approximation of it, traumatic experience, can be productively represented in language and, in fact, demands to be represented in language in order for it to be integrated into the individual’s life-story and cease being a disruptive force. Such representation is an act of survival. The former position dismantles and risks crippling subaltern agency and the latter affirms agency, demonstrating the effectiveness of its position by the therapeutic benefits provided by narrativisations of trauma that are claimed by testimonial life-writers. Evidence of this success is that testimonial life-writing comes to form an important and empowering written history for the testifier/writer, their family and cultural community and, in the case of contemporary Australia, an important contribution to the vocabulary of debates on national identity and history.

In testimonial life-writing’s claim to represent the Real/trauma, it aligns itself with the mimetic practice of realism. But, while testimonial life-writing may explicitly align itself with realism, it need not necessarily be categorised as such. In the case of Aboriginal life-writing, testimonial life-writing might be categorised as a variety of projects aimed at historical object-specification within a process of mourning. Nevertheless, object-specification is a process that is never entirely completed because, as Lyotard explains, “that what remains to be phrased exceeds what we can presently phrase” (13). Testimonial life-writing is not best described by

the broad brush strokes of realism or impasse-oriented deconstructions, but is better described as a literary practice oriented towards specifying particular historical events that by their nature are both transparent and opaque, phraseable and beyond phrasing.

The existence of a desire to reduce traumatic post-colonial events to theoretical categories may be the result of confusing what LaCapra calls historical trauma and structural trauma. He writes that it is important

to argue for a problematic distinction between structural or existential trauma and historical trauma that enables one to pose the problem of relations between the two. [...] It is deceptive to reduce, or transfer the qualities of, one dimension of trauma to the other, to generalise structural trauma so that it absorbs historical trauma, thereby rendering all references to the latter merely illustrative, homogeneous, allusive, and perhaps equivocal, or, on the contrary, to 'explain' all post-traumatic, extreme, uncanny phenomena and responses as exclusively caused by particular events or contexts. Indeed the problem of specificity in analysis and criticism may be formulated in terms of the need to explore the problematic relations between structural and historical trauma without reducing one to the other. (*History and Memory* 47–48)

LaCapra provides evidence of the desire to collapse historical trauma into structural trauma with reference to Žižek, citing him thus:

All the different attempts to attach this phenomenon [concentration camps] to a concrete image ('Holocaust', 'Gulag' . . .), to reduce it to a product of a concrete social order (Fascism, Stalinism . . .) — what are they if not so many attempts to elude the fact that we are dealing here with the 'real' of our civilization which returns as the same traumatic kernel in all social systems? (qtd. in LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust* 206 fn. 2)

LaCapra comments on this: "One should also not forget that these various historical cases have different valences and pose specific problems [...]. Žižek's stance often seems to be that of the high-altitude theorist obsessed with the Real and its putative effects" (206 fn. 2). There is damage to be done in collapsing historically specific traumatic events into instances of the structural operations of trauma because the complexity and intensity of the experience is concealed by generalisations.

There have been two dominant ways of conceptualising trauma: one that argues that traumatic experiences may be understood as ahistorical instances of traumatic structures and that different historical instances of trauma are commensurate; and, in opposition, the view that historical instances of traumatic experience are always incommensurable. Such an opposition presents an either/or conception of the problem that may ultimately limit understanding of historically specific trauma, such as post-colonial Aboriginal trauma, on which I now focus in more detail. For example, not only do Apartheid and settler/invaser forms of colonialisation differ, they both differ from the Holocaust or a Sudanese war, and all differ from the killing fields of Cambodia. Furthermore, the individual experience of trauma within each of these tragedies differs one from another. However, it is important to note that the functions of structural trauma are not necessarily at odds with historical trauma. As with my discussion of different Reals for different Symbolics, the analysis of structural trauma benefits from historically specific analysis.

The relationship between Holocaust Studies and the cultural memory work underway in Aboriginal testimonial life-writing is a productive one for addressing issues of cross-cultural commensurability and incommensurability with regard to trauma. Below I outline two different views on cross-cultural comparison and take a position that incorporates them both.

Theoretical work on cultural memory and trauma has been most extensively undertaken in Holocaust Studies. This helps explain why some of the most dominant public voices in the debate on the traumas of Australia's Stolen Generation employ a theoretical framework based on Holocaust Studies. For instance, Inga Clendinnen's *Reading the Holocaust* and Robert Manne's *The Culture of Forgetting* precede their public engagement with the Stolen Generations debate and provide them with a vocabulary with which to articulate the issues involved. As I discuss below, some of the issues that have demonstrated cross-cultural significance are the importance of, and the disruption to, personal memory and, by extension, cultural memory, the destructive effects of trauma, inter-generational toxicity, the importance of telling stories that need to be told, and the ethical significance of listening to those stories.

However, it should be asked, as Gillian Whitlock does: is there damage to be done by articulating Aboriginal testimonials of trauma through a

structural vocabulary template of Holocaust discourse? Whitlock writes:

As I have argued, the geographies of Holocaust work on cultural memory have been fundamentally important in the emergence of a response to [Aboriginal] testimonies. [...] But the Holocaust template doesn't quite capture an element of the anxiety induced by these testimonies, and why discursive justice is so difficult to produce here. Why do we, the second person, the witness, the non-indigenous element in the transaction, why do we have to be told so didactically, so repetitively, what our response should be? (207)

Whitlock is not suggesting that Holocaust discourse is not relevant or useful for discussing Aboriginal testimonial life-writing, but is drawing attention to the cross-cultural differences between the two. One difference Whitlock is interested in is the position of the addressee in Aboriginal autobiography. She writes:

Holocaust testimony draws all of us into a horrified questioning of what it means to be human. In response to this, there is almost always some kind of compensatory movement in that we can install the Nazi as the Other, and so displace our immediate responsibility. We can imagine that we might refuse to become that figure, that third person who is the object of the testimony, the perpetrator of the crime [...] whereas in] interracial narratives there is a quite different movement [...] wherein] the second person, who is the witness and the narratee, is called upon to witness her own complicity and implication in the loss and suffering which is finally being spoken. (209)

It is also important to acknowledge that cross-cultural differences exist not only at the level of the addressee, but also in the very event and experience of trauma itself.

To balance this interest in difference, it is also useful to investigate similarities that exist between supposedly incommensurable historical instances of trauma, for instance, in the disruption of temporality (in the phenomena of latency and flashback), the disruption of narrative control and cosmological security, in inter-generational toxicity, the role of memory in the process of coming-to-terms with trauma, and the importance given to the recognition of trauma by the wider community. It seems

clear that the subjective experience of trauma cannot be reduced to being either absolutely cross-culturally commensurate or incommensurate. An instance of commensurability is seen in the way Australia's *Bringing them Home Report* was developed. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) recommended to the Inquiry that

'Support be provided for the collection and culturally appropriate presentation of the stories with the approval of those who experienced separation policies' (submission 684 page 18). Link-Up (NSW) called for the establishment of an Aboriginal Oral History Archive. This Archive would be 'modelled on the Shoah Foundation set up to record the oral histories of Jewish victims of the Nazi holocaust' and would 'fund and facilitate the collection of oral histories of Aboriginal survivors of our holocaust' (submission 186). (*Bringing them Home* 21)

Here we see Australia's once peak (and now dismantled) Indigenous political body borrowing the language of and forms of memorialisation from Jewish responses to the Holocaust. In addition to the similarities I have outlined above, the commensurability between the Jewish and Aboriginal responses to trauma arises in part from the active, performative modelling of one experience on another.

Writing on inter-personal relationality, Paul Redding writes, "[a]s mutually presupposing but *differently* embodied and located self-consciousnesses, [. . . subjects] are linked by recognition, a relation that maintains difference as essential; they are not submerged within some overarching supermind" (125). One can expand this insight into the cross-cultural relationality of trauma: traumatic events are events connected neither by an overarching supermind nor absolutely separate, but are rather intersubjective and relational. Just as subjects are generated within the relational systems of their communities as well as cross-culturally, so too does traumatic experience range across a spectrum of similarity and difference. Thus LaCapra invites exploration of the problematic relation between structural and historical trauma and, by extension, between the commensurate and incommensurate. To repeat, the best approach is not to emphasise structural trauma or historical trauma, incommensurability or commensurability, realist transparency or the opacity of impasse-oriented deconstruction, but rather to emphasise phenomena that lie between these extremes.

To present different material as being either fully commensurate or incommensurate is a recurring and illogical tendency often encountered in discussions of trauma theory. If one assumes A (commensurability) and evidence proves this assumption to be false, there is a tendency to assume B (incommensurability): if not A then B. Writing on examples in trauma theory of the ‘if not A then B’ kind, where A is a false assumption to begin with, LaCapra argues that trauma theory itself

may be correlated with two complementary ways of responding to trauma that may mistakenly be seen as alternatives. One response involves denial or repression, for example, in a redemptive, fetishistic narrative that excludes or marginalizes trauma through a teleological story that projectively presents values and wishes as viably realized in the facts, typically through a progressive, developmental process. (*Representing the Holocaust* 192)

With regard to the complicit and opposite tendency, LaCapra writes:

The second and complementary response tends intentionally or unintentionally to aggravate trauma in a largely symptomatic fashion. This may be done through a construction of all history (or at least all modern history) as trauma and an insistence that there is no alternative to symptomatic acting-out and the repetition compulsion other than an imaginary, illusory hope for totalization, full closure, and redemptive meaning. (193)

Thus there is a tendency in theorising trauma to simulate typical either/or logical responses to trauma itself. Often, trauma theory either argues for simplistic redemptive narratives that mirror victims’ desires for redemption from traumatic experience, or argues that any attempt for narrative or affective control results in another traumatising impasse — a position that mirrors the destructive acting-out witnessed in victims of trauma. LaCapra discusses the proposition of an

extreme version of totalization [. . . which serves] as a foil to its radical undoing. An extreme and compulsively repeated undoing may nonetheless bear witness to the attraction of totalization and remain within an ‘all-or-nothing’ frame of reference. For the extreme reaction to an assumption that everything ultimately makes sense may be the assumption that ultimately nothing makes sense. Or, through an overly generalized theory

of romantic irony, one may believe that one always remains suspended between sense and non-sense in a manner that stymies all possible judgment and action. (191)

The desire for redemptive closure is found in testimonial life-writing that works-through traumatic injustices. Relevant here is LaCapra's insight into the desire for closure:

Ideologically, the achievement of full identity or closure is the telos of totalization, and the full redemption of meaning and value is the very essence of discourse. Mourning in this sense is a process that succeeds to such an extent that it negates or overcomes itself, and (to paraphrase Hegel) the wounds of the past are healed without leaving any scars. (191)

The either/or approach in responses to trauma, the desire for full identity or the complete collapse of identity, is best avoided. To better understand the complex narrative engagements with trauma found in testimonial life-writing one must forego the either/or approaches outlined above and instead focus on more subtle interstitial approaches. Responding to the need for these latter approaches, LaCapra writes, "[o]ne may nonetheless insist on a third sense of theory related to Freud's notion of working-through" (193). LaCapra also identifies this desire for a third way in Jacques Derrida's notion of 'generalised displacement' when he writes that a certain displacement "must accompany the reversal of hierarchically arranged binary opposites if one is not to remain entirely within their frame of reference" (*Representing the Holocaust* 193 fn. 18). Reading Aboriginal testimonial life-writing's negotiation of traumatic material requires such displacement and the psychoanalytic practice of working-through can be such a 'third' way of dealing with it.

Working-Through/Writing-Through Trauma

The above discussion of testimonial life-writing outlined two dominant and flawed strategies for grappling with traumatic experience: simplistic redemptive narratives and impasse-enacting narratives. I have also argued that effective post-colonial historicism requires an ability for both historical specificity and cross-cultural reach. Such an approach is necessary to account for the incommensurability between different historical con-

texts while maintaining openness to the structural commensurability between cross-cultural experiences of trauma. The concepts of structural trauma, historical trauma, redemptive narratives and impasse-enacting narratives, and historical and cultural incommensurability were discussed. While I examined the above three oppositions separately, they are connected in important ways in testimonial life-writing. Structural trauma is complicit with a comparative historicism that argues for the commensurability between different historical instances of trauma, while historical trauma emphasises the incommensurability of different historical instances of trauma. Both strategies are capable of emphasising either redemptive narratives or impasse-enacting narratives and to avoid this we must balance the work of historical object-specification with that comparative work that highlights structural similarities.

Central to the project of specifying historical objects of trauma that disrupt cultural agency is the concept of working-through, or as I sometimes term it in the case of testimonial life-writing, writing-through. Working-through functions to defetishise the compulsion towards narrative impasse and aims to establish narrative control over traumatic material. Working-through requires a distance between the present and the past and “involves the attempt to acquire some perspective on experience without denying its claims or indeed its compulsive force” (LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust* 200). LaCapra writes:

working-through, as it relates both to the rebuilding of lives and to the elaboration of a critical historiography, requires the effort to achieve critical distance on experience through a comparison of experiences and through a reconstruction of larger contexts that help to inform and perhaps to transform experience. One’s sense of one’s own problems may change to the extent one comes to see their relations both to the experience of others and to a larger set of problems, some components of which may escape one’s purview. (200)

Ruby Langford Ginibi’s writing is a case in point with regard to the building up of larger contexts in the process of writing-through post-colonial trauma. Langford Ginibi’s writing begins to take on a significantly stronger testimonial style after the writing and publication of her more autobiographical text *Don’t Take Your Love to Town*. The vicissitudes of her personal life increasingly come to be connected to larger

cultural and racial experiences. There is a strong sense that the process of working-through her personal life and its hardships is the cause of the increasing politicisation in her later books. The titles of her books suggest a widening out of her concerns. From a personal title like *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, her later books are titled *My Bundjalung People* and *Real Deadly* (which deals with Aboriginal-specific humour). *Real Deadly* aims to highlight the significance of Aboriginal humour in countering the corrosive effects of cultural dispossession. These later titles evoke her place in her Aboriginal community. Her writing moves from being distinctly autobiographical to distinctly testimonial in tone. A later publication, *Haunted by the Past*, focuses on her son's struggles with crime and the justice system, explicitly connecting his struggles with cultural dispossession. In the narrative reconstruction of her life the reader witnesses "the effort to achieve critical distance on experience through a comparison of experiences and through a reconstruction of larger contexts that help to inform and perhaps to transform experience" (LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust* 200).

Repetition is central to the process of establishing wider contexts for interpreting personal experience in writing-through post-colonial trauma. To illustrate: large textual chunks in Langford Ginibi's *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, *My Bundjalung People* and *Haunted By the Past* deal with the same material. A sense of finalisation regarding particular political and traumatic issues is not comprehensively achieved, rather there are repeated approaches to deal with the same traumatic events. LaCapra offers an insight into why this is the case:

the radical ambivalence of repetition — its 'undecidability' if you prefer — implies the possible role of counter-vailing forces that may not entirely heal wounds but that allow mediated ways of surviving survival — forces such as mourning itself, where grief is repeated in reduced, normatively controlled, and socially supported form. (*Representing the Holocaust* 199)

Repeated approaches towards traumatic material allow a space for the person experiencing traumatic material to gain narrative and affective control over that material. As I have noted, traumatic material continues to irrupt into the sufferer's life and is a destructive force. Repetition in a "normatively controlled, and socially supported form" (199), like that of

testimonial life-writing narratives, allows greater purchase on traumatic material.

Testimonial life-writing becomes progressively more politicised through the process of repeated confrontation with personally traumatic material, as illustrated in Langford Ginibi's life-writing. Her writing moves from an engagement with the personal to an engagement with her cultural group to the nation as a whole, and back again, in a dialectical movement that broadens the stories' significance. LaCapra, citing J. Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, writes: "[i]ndeed, for them 'working-through might be defined as that process which is liable to halt the repetitive insistence characteristic of unconscious formations by bringing these into relation with the subject's personality as a whole'" (*Representing the Holocaust* 209). Furthermore, as I have been arguing for the social, rather than strictly personal, significance of psychoanalytic theory, the process of writing-through trauma in testimonial life-writing not only brings traumatic material "'into relation with the subject's personality as a whole'", but also brings it into relation with the nation as a whole (209). In a post-colonial context the process of writing-through trauma is a process of specifying the material that needs to be reinscribed in post-colonial cultures. Importantly, it is also effective in countering neo-colonial and racist practices.

A similar process of repetitive engagement with traumatic material is seen in *My Place* in which Sally Morgan's grandmother initially resists discussing her Aboriginality because she is ashamed of it but progressively attains a sense of pride in it. For instance, the different colours of the grandmother, mother and grandchildren are a source of shame in the family. When Morgan's grandmother first describes herself as black, it is done in an emotionally-pained manner. The narrator, ostensibly Morgan, writes, "[s]he [Morgan's grandmother] lifted up her arm and thumped her clenched fist hard on the kitchen table. 'You bloody kids don't want me, you want a bloody white grandmother, I'm black. Do you hear, black, black, black!' With that, Nan pushed back her chair and hurried out to her room" (97). And later:

Mum and I had small conversations about the past, but they weren't really informative, because we tended to cover the same ground. Sometimes, Mum would try and get Nan to talk. One day, I heard Nan shout, 'You're always goin' on about the past these

days, Glad. I'm sick of it. It makes me sick in here', she pointed to her chest. 'My brain's no good, Glad, I can't 'member!' (145)

Such shame is transferred to the younger generations of the family. When Morgan discovers through her sister Jill that she is not Indian but Aboriginal, Morgan identifies her family's sense of shame in being Aboriginal. Jill describes her family in derogatory and racist terms, a consequence of internalising white racist views, an internalisation that is at conflict with their Aboriginal identity. Morgan quotes her sister: "You still don't understand, do you', Jill groaned in disbelief. 'It's a terrible thing to be Aboriginal. Nobody wants to know you [...]. You can be Indian, Dutch, Italian, anything, but not Aboriginal! I suppose it's all right for someone like you, you don't care what people think. You don't need anyone, but I do!'" (98). Yet, through Morgan's insistence throughout the text on confronting and acknowledging the family's Aboriginality, there are moments of breakthrough in the process of working-through in which the acknowledgement of Aboriginality as an act of object specification leads to a sense of pride in Aboriginal identity:

About this time, Nan's favourite word became Nyoongah. She'd heard it used on a television report and had taken an instant liking to it. To Nan, anyone dark was now Nyoongah. Africans, Burmese, American Negroes were all Nyoongahs. She identified with them. In a sense, they were her people, because they shared the common bond of blackness and the oppression that, for so long, that colour had brought. It was only a small change, but it was a beginning.

In a strange sort of way, my life had new purpose because of that. (138)

Likewise, the family's journey up the West Australian coast to connect with their Aboriginality is an act of working-through a sense of lost identity. Morgan recounts the journey on which she was accompanied by her mother, husband and children. On meeting two older Aboriginal women, Topsy and Nancy, it takes some time for these women to identify the connection between them all. In fact, they grew up with Morgan's grandmother and great aunt. They tell Morgan about her aunt and their early life at Corunna Downs. The discovery of this information about Morgan's family history is an instance of working-through important and difficult material connected with Aboriginal identity. Morgan writes:

I pointed to the photo containing Nanna as a young girl and got them to look at it carefully. Suddenly, there was rapid talking in Balgoo. I couldn't understand a word, but I knew there was excitement in the air. Topsy and Nancy were now very anxious about the whole thing.

Finally, Gladys [Gladys Lee, Morgan's interpreter] turned to me with tears in her eyes and said, 'If I had have known Daisy's sister was Wonguynon, there would have been no problem'.

'Who's Wonguynon?' I asked.

'That's Lilla's [Morgan's great aunt] Aboriginal name. We only knew her by Wonguynon. [...] She was related to my father. I am your relation, too'.

Topsy and Nancy began to cry. Soon, we were all hugging. Gladys and I had tears in our eyes, but we managed not to break down. [...] 'They lived as one family unit in those days', Gladys explained. 'They lived as a family group with Daisy and Lily and Annie. This makes them very close to you. They are your family. Daisy was sister to them. They call her sister, they love her as a sister.'

By this time, we were all just managing to hold ourselves together. I tried not to look at Gladys as she explained things, because I was trying to keep a tight lid on my emotions. It wasn't that I would have minded crying, it was just that I knew if I began, I wouldn't be able to stop. It was the only way to cope.

Later, we retraced our steps back down through the Reserve [...]. By the time we reached the other end of the Reserve, we'd been hugged and patted and cried over, and told not to forget and to come back.

An old full-blood lady whispered to me 'You don't know what it means, no one comes back. You don't know what it means that you, with light skin, want to own us.'

We had lumps in our throats the size of tomatoes, then. I wanted desperately to tell her how much it meant to us that they would own us. My mouth wouldn't open. I just hugged her and tried not to sob.

We were all so grateful to Gladys for the kind way she helped us through. Without her, we wouldn't have been able to under-

stand a word. Our lives had been so enriched in the past few days. We wondered if we could contain any more. (228–29)

Finally, on their return to Perth, a different and more complete sense of their relationship to their own Aboriginality is experienced:

That afternoon, we reluctantly left for Perth. None of us wanted to go, Paul [Morgan's husband] included. He'd been raised in the North and loved it. We were reluctant to return and pick up the threads of our old lives. We were different people, now. What had begun as a tentative search for knowledge had grown into a spiritual and emotional pilgrimage. We had an Aboriginal consciousness now, and were proud of it.

Mum, in particular, had been very deeply affected by the whole trip.

'To think I nearly missed all this. All my life, I've only been half a person. I don't think I really realised how much of me was missing until I came North. Thank God you're stubborn, Sally.'

We all laughed and then, settling back, retreated into our own thoughts. There was much to think about. Much to come to terms with. I knew Mum, like me, was thinking about Nan. We viewed her differently, now. We had more insight into her bitterness. And more than anything, we wanted her to change, to be proud of what she was. We'd seen so much of her and ourselves in the people we'd met. We belonged, now. We wanted her to belong, too. (233–34)

A similar sense of completion is identified when on leaving Morgan's uncle Arthur's wife's house, Morgan writes, "We felt very full inside when we left. It was like all the little pieces of a huge jigsaw were finally fitting together" (232).

There is always a risk involved in working-through post-colonial trauma of falling into totalising redemptive narratives or impasse-oriented racial and cultural divisions. The failure to work-through racial and cultural conflict is described by LaCapra in a psychoanalytic sense:

Here deceptive transfiguration is necessarily supplemented if not displaced by what may be an equally deceptive disfiguration or disarticulation. This reaction becomes particularly compelling in

a posttraumatic context, particularly when the object of mourning is concealed or foreclosed and the process of mourning is arrested by (or even identified with) continual melancholy and the acting out of a repetition compulsion. (*Representing the Holocaust* 192)

However, writing on the benefits and risks of working-through trauma and by extension of testimonial life-writing, LaCapra suggests that the nonfetishistic narrative that resists ideology would involve an active acknowledgment and to some extent an acting out of trauma with the irredeemable losses it brings, and it would indicate its own implication in repetitive processes it cannot entirely transcend. But it would also attempt to conjoin trauma with the possibility of retrieval of desirable aspects of the past that might be of some use in counteracting trauma's extreme effects and in rebuilding individual and social life. (199)

In the language of Holocaust Studies:

One may agree with the view that the Holocaust is, in a manner that would have to be further differentiated, 'a communal wound that cannot heal.' But does this view entail that countervailing tendencies in the lives of victims — and by seeming implication in modernity in general — are merely constitutive of a surface life or murmur that is somehow less authentic than what is argued to lie beneath? (196)

Similarly, I argue for a non-totalising view in the manner of LaCapra, one that posits a mutable array of presences and silences, different Reals for different Symbolics, and is capable of identifying the different successes and failures involved in working-through post-colonial trauma. LaCapra cites Phillip K.'s (a testifier for the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale) testimony, which argues that "there are as many ways of surviving survival as there have been to survive" (197).⁴ LaCapra writes that Phillip K.'s observation "points to the danger of homogenizing or overgeneralizing about the experience of victims and survivors. I think one may also argue that it indicates the danger of massive generalizations about modernity and points instead to the importance of careful compar-

⁴ Phillip K.'s last name is withheld by the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies to protect his privacy.

ative history” (197). LaCapra further argues that Lawrence Langer (an important theorist of Holocaust trauma) “may go too far in the opposite yet complementary direction” towards salvationist, heroic narratives of surviving the Holocaust (197).⁵ In place of either extreme, LaCapra argues that

values have to a significant extent been jeopardized by trauma and evacuated by banalization, and they may be invoked as mere clichés or rhetorical topoi by those who do not believe in them and may not be shocked when they are radically distorted or transgressed. In this respect, there is a need for a discourse on values that is not purely transcendental or detached from social and historical inquiry but critically related to problems of empirical research as well as to the rebuilding of agency, which is required for the situational transcendence of existing relations toward more desirable possibilities. (201–202)

As LaCapra argues:

One may nonetheless suggest that certain discursive movements [...] indicate how one might approach the issue of working-through in its relation to acting-out. A principal conceptual means would be the relation of the Imaginary to the Symbolic (with the notion of the Real defetishized to allow for other possibilities in the response to trauma). (207–208)

I contend that testimonial life-writing and its theoretical explication in this article can be viewed as such a discursive movement. Aboriginal testimonial life-writing defetishises the Real through its faith in the political and therapeutic efficacy of the writing process, while this study theoretically defetishises the Real by insisting on its specificity and thereby the potential for it to be leveraged in different ways at different times. The relationship between working-through and acting-out in testimony and theory provides the opportunity to extend vocabularies and imaginaries for responding to post-colonial trauma. The off-setting of working-through and acting-out, in relation to trauma recovery, is therapeutically and in-

⁵ LaCapra criticises Langer for his ‘strategy of reversal’, his ‘opposite yet complementary’ approach to redemptive narratives. LaCapra writes: “He [Langer] explicitly states that historical investigation of the Holocaust ‘cannot promote life’” (*Representing the Holocaust* 198). However, on page 202, LaCapra cites Langer to illustrate that Langer often holds a less absolute position.

tellectually valuable. However, there is always the risk of re-traumatizing subjects by off-setting working-through with acting-out and by not providing adequate conceptual tools through which to specify traumatic objects and establish narrative control over the traumatic material being activated. Yet, when such object-specification is achieved, a sense of closure may result.

However, Aboriginal testimonial life-writing and the theory examined in this article is not interested in working-through post-colonial trauma simply to close it off. It is also about opening out traumatic experiences on to the world and through doing so enriching Aboriginality and tracing the progressions and regressions of social imaginaries. Closure, as employed in this article, does not signify the presentation of a final story. Indeed, testimonial life-writing presents the disjunctions between what can be phrased now and what is yet to be phrased; a disjunction that creates a dynamic identity rather than a rigid and illusory authenticity. The concept of closure is better understood as the increased descriptive and exegetic power of language whereby what was not phrased but needed to be phrased can now be phrased. Closure is concerned with object-specification, not conclusiveness.

The concept of trauma itself is an example of a concept/object that has proved a useful tool for thinking through the effects of colonial dispossession and has increased the vocabulary available to Aboriginal peoples for better articulating their experiences. Trauma is also a useful concept for literary and interdisciplinary critics who wish to better explicate the processes involved in testimonials. What once was not phrased and which now can be better phrased assists in establishing narrative and affective control over traumatic experience and, thereby, crucially, assists in establishing identity and agency.

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