



Writing Feminist Fiction as a Means of Transforming Trauma

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Abstract

Many forms of creative writing explore the idea that a writer's experience of trauma can be transformed, or to some extent moved forward, by the process of "artworking" (Pollock 2013: 6); the act of *poiesis*, or making something new. In this article I address several examples of this, from stand-up comedy to graphic novel to surrealist fiction, considering concepts of aesthetic transformation and aesthetic distance, looking at what each example can illuminate in terms of the nature of this process. What follows is a reflection on my own affective experience of trauma, both personally and as a result of a decade of working within the women's sector, and how this intersects with the necessary politics of feminism. I then conduct an analysis of how I sought to transform both my own experience of trauma and that of a fictional character, Connie, in an extract from my novel *We Are Volcanoes*. Lastly, I share the ways in which this research experience has affected me, both in terms of my wellbeing and in the development of my creative practice, and I argue that research such as this can contribute to a more trauma-informed creative writing classroom.

Keywords: trauma, fiction, feminism, process, transformation, political, witnessing, testimony, dissociation, survivor

Art, in its varying forms, has long been a site where real life traumatic experience can be configured and reconfigured by the artist-survivor[1]. Seventeenth century Baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi famously created many subversive works portraying women inflicting violence upon men. As a survivor of rape who was then tortured during her rapist's trial in order to "prove" she was telling the truth, Gentileschi later depicted herself in her masterpiece, *Self-Portrait as Saint Catherine of Alexandria* (1615-17). In the painting, her tenacious gaze is fixed upon the viewer, and she holds fragments of the instruments of her torture as if to show it is those that are broken – not her (Williams 2018).

In *Literary Aesthetics of Trauma*, Reina Van der Wiel discusses modernist literature's approach to trauma, particularly that of Virginia Woolf in the early twentieth century. Distinct in its tendency towards writing that "instigates, facilitates or represents the transformational process of symbolization, thinking and working through" (2014: 18), Van der Wiel suggests that as well as an abstractive process, to write in a way that "attempts to work through trauma" can constitute a therapeutic process (6). Woolf speaks to this herself in her autobiographical essay, 'A Sketch of the Past', in which she writes candidly about her childhood trauma in relation to her mother's death and the sexual abuse she experienced at the hands of her step-brother. Of the transformational process of writing a novel she says, "I suppose that I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest." (Woolf 2002: 119).

This transformational process of "working through" trauma can also be explicitly depicted *within* the writing, in a form of meta-text or meta-narrative. In comedian Hannah Gadsby's groundbreaking show *Nanette* (2017), they describe the methods they use when writing for comedy performance; setting up tension and then relieving it. Later Gadsby confronts the fact that they have regularly used this formula to create jokes out of their experiences of trauma, explaining how they had "fused" their stand-up telling of events with what "actually

happened”, and in so doing, “froze[n] an incredibly formative experience at its trauma point” (2017), repeating it, making it routine. As a way of breaking from this formula, and in a sort of live unfreezing of their trauma, they then tell the real ending to a story from earlier in the show – one in which they reveal they were brutally attacked – offering no consoling punchline. “This tension is yours,” they say, “I’m not helping you anymore. You need to learn what this feels like” (2017).

In Michaela Coel’s semi-autobiographical BBC drama series *I May Destroy You* (2020), the protagonist, Arabella (played by Coel herself), is a writer struggling to meet a deadline with her publisher due to the trauma of being drugged and raped while on a night out. In the final episode, as the drama plays out a series of possible made-up endings to her story – in one version she is enacting revenge upon her rapist, in another befriending him in an act of compassion, now and then breaking with the action to scribble on and rearrange post-it notes on her bedroom wall – we see Arabella fully regaining her sense of agency in the process of reconfiguring her traumatic experience through writing.

Aesthetic Transformation and Aesthetic Distance

In *After Affects/After Images: Trauma and Aesthetic Transformation in the Virtual Feminist Museum*, Griselda Pollock distinguishes between the material process of writing something down and “artworking”, a process which generates “aesthetic transformation” (2013: 6). Aesthetic transformation is the process of arriving, belatedly and therefore differently, at a knowledge that is “affective rather than cognitive”, and thus more conducive to eliciting a “shared encounter” (7), or to being *witnessed*.

In her bestselling graphic novel *Fun Home*, Alison Bechdel dissects her fraught relationship with her father, who died by apparent suicide after his affairs with his male students were almost exposed. In Chapter 2, “A Happy Death”, Bechdel works through what she knows about her father’s relationship with death and suicide, the literature he read, and his work as a

mortician in the family funeral home, as though collating evidence in order to enable her understanding of what happened. No one witnessed his death, either literally or emotionally, in that there was “no proof, actually” (2006: 27) that he had killed himself. Bechdel was away at college when she found out, and in her illustration of this day she is pictured telling a fellow student, “I have to go home. My father got hit by a truck.” (46). Though, above an illustration of Bechdel looking almost bored, sitting at a café table opposite her date, is the caption, “For years after my father’s death, when the subject of parents came up in conversation I would relate the information in a flat, matter-of-fact tone...”, and then in a speech bubble, “My dad’s dead. He jumped in front of a truck” (46). The shift here is clear, from the passive voice, positioning her father as “getting hit”, to the active voice, positioning him as having jumped.

Underneath, another caption reads, “...eager to detect in my listener the flinch of grief that eluded me” (45). She compares her need to access the emotion of the trauma vicariously, with that of her father purposely calling her into the room at the back of the funeral home when she was just a child, while he worked on a cadaver at the prep table, “bearded and fleshy...his chest split open...a dark red cave” (44), observing that he might have been eager to witness in her some of the horror he was unable to invoke in himself. This intergenerational connection when it comes to dealing with traumatic experience – Bechdel’s and her father’s similar numbness and dissociation, the desire to elicit in another what they cannot feel themselves – is discovered through the creation of the meta-text that is the book. It is in her writing and drawing about her and her father’s difficulty processing or witnessing these emotions that she is able to move them forward.

In Chapter 3, ‘That Old Catastrophe’, Bechdel works through the trauma of learning about her father’s secret life. After a series of illustrations in which he appears to be seducing a student in the library of the family home, coupled with captions where she tells us of his love for F. Scott Fitzgerald and likens her father to Gatsby, Bechdel reaches the understanding that, “My parents are most real to me in fictional

terms”, calling this perception “aesthetic distance” (67).

There is a fascinating dissonance here, both in terms of the images being incongruent with their captions, and in the notion that something can be made *more real* by fictionalising it. Perhaps it is precisely because of and within this gap – the gap between Bechdel’s knowledge and experience and the new form it has taken on the page – that a new perspective or affective experience is created.

Shoshana Felman calls this process “re-externalizing the event”, a “therapeutic process” in which one can “transmit the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back in again” (emphasis is original, 1992: 69). Perhaps it is this “re-externalizing”, that which makes the trauma “other”, and therefore its state of alterity, that can facilitate a transformation in how the trauma survivor experiences it.

Defining Trauma

Given that I am in the business of storytelling, and that storytelling is cultural work, for the purpose of my research it has been important to define trauma culturally rather than clinically.

Distinguishing between trauma as an isolated event and trauma as structural and ongoing is integral to a cultural understanding of it. In *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Ann Cvetkovich uses “trauma” to name “experiences of socially situated political violence” that expose “connections between politics and emotion” (2003: 3), establishing a distinction between traumatic experience as a result of an accident, and that perpetrated by individuals which also implicates a system.

The latter kind of trauma is the focus of this work; it is part of something structural and ongoing, and often feels as perpetual as culture itself. I say this because those who experience socially situated political violence cannot live outside of the structures that enable or inflict it against them, and as feminist psychologist Laura S. Brown stresses, despite The American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and*

Statistical Manual (DSM) defining trauma as “outside the range of usual human experience”, this kind of trauma could be considered “common” for those not in “the dominant class” (in Caruth 1995: 101).

Trauma itself is very often not experienced as a single isolated event (Pollock 2013: 2). Atrocities such as rape, assault, and other forms of sexual and domestic violence tend to overwhelm the sympathetic nervous system, fracturing or suspending our sense of control, connection and meaning, causing a “collapse of understanding” (Herman, 2015: 33). Common responses such as dissociation mean that the event itself is often not remembered, at least in part, rendering it “not locatable” (Atkinson 2017: 85), a “subjective non-experience” (Pollock 2013: 2). Afterwards, though the event itself is largely directly inaccessible, the trauma can exist as a perpetual but evaded presence, it is “unfinished business” (Viksnins 2022), often amorphous and ghostly, experienced as what Atkinson terms “a haunting” (2017: 86); it can re-visit upon us in the form of intrusive and disjointed thoughts and images.

Moreover, often involved in these types of trauma is a degree of unwitnessing (Felman 1992: 211), both during and after the violence, with phenomena such as survivor dissociation, bystanders turning a blind eye, gaslighting, the survivor not being believed, denial, repression, lack of punishment or acknowledgement for the perpetrator, lack of reporting, and condoning of the violence.

This can culminate in a profound disconnection from what happened, from oneself, and from others. In a sense, trauma can therefore preclude the possibility of community. It is often, therefore, in the naming of the trauma and the telling of a trauma story that we can begin to properly witness what has happened for the first time.

Why Feminism and Trauma?

It is a feminist approach to trauma that has enabled the distinction between “trauma as everyday and ongoing and trauma as a discrete event”, something Cvetkovich calls its “most profound consequence” (2003: 33). Secondly, it is a feminist perspective, or more precisely a *queer* feminist perspective,

that has recognised the importance of “safe spaces” and their relevance to trauma and art: “the power of the notion of safe space resides in its double status as the name for both a space free of conflict *and* a space in which conflict and anger can emerge as a necessary component of psychic resolution” (emphasis in original, 87). This understanding has greatly influenced my perception and intention when it comes to writing feminist fiction that deals with the topic of trauma. I want my writing experience – both my own personal experience of the process of writing, and my readers’ experience of reading my work – to be a place that is safe *from* what has caused trauma, and also a place where it is safe *to* express responses to that trauma.

If a space does not prove “safe” – in that a survivor does not feel believed or acknowledged, or that their experiences and the nature of their trauma are not understood or held – it is possible that the survivor may be re-traumatized. In her ground-breaking text *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, feminist psychiatrist Judith Lewis Herman states, “To hold traumatic reality in consciousness requires a social context that affirms and protects the victim and witness in a common alliance... [and] therefore depends on the support of a political movement... [and] becomes legitimate only in a context that challenges the subordination of women” (2015: 9). From this I glean further confirmation that there is a necessary connection between trauma and feminism; if the infliction of certain types of trauma is inextricable from its political context, then so is any journey of healing and recovery from that trauma.

My ten years of experience working in the women’s sector has enormously influenced how and why I write [2]. During my time working at a national helpline, I listened to thousands of women’s disembodied voices, each with her own articulation of what was happening to her, each at her own point on the support-seeking timeline. This timeline covered anything from the first instinctive hunch that something wasn’t right, to having twenty minutes in which to escape. Any time I answered a call I might have been the first person to tell the caller that what she was experiencing did sound like

abuse, or I might have been the person who has twenty minutes to help facilitate that escape. Or anything and everything in between or beyond. Sometimes a woman would call several years after her abusive husband had died, to talk about it for the very first time.

I kept journals throughout this period with the intention of recording my observations and keeping track of how the work was affecting me. I was continually struck by the multitudinous nature of the problem. While the women I listened to were different from one another, often vastly in terms of age, class, culture and race, the abuse, hurdles and oppression they faced were markedly similar. This kind of observation, of similar experiences lived by very different individuals, led to deeper insight into the profoundly structural nature of violence against women and girls. When it comes to understanding the scale and breadth of an injustice, there is nothing like hearing thousands of different voices saying ultimately the same thing.

This also helped me make personal connections. Immersed in the echoes of common experience, it was while working on the helpline I realised that I had been in abusive relationships, and I was able for the first time as an adult to address the abuse I witnessed in my parents’ marriage when I was a child. At first these memories and realisations came in the form of flashbacks, intrusive thoughts and night terrors, related to my personal experiences but spliced with experiences disclosed to me over the phone.

It got to the stage where I could not enjoy time off. If I was not answering calls at the helpline, I felt guilty. My vicarious trauma cup was full and my burnt-out brain interpreted this feeling as a need to do more, to find more time to help, more ways to serve. The problem felt too big.

Reading feminist fiction enabled some of the processing and understanding of these elements of my trauma. At the time I was reading *The Wanderground* by Sally Miller Gearhart, a work of science fiction about a utopian future where the Earth has rebelled against the domination of men and confined them to the cities, allowing the women to escape and live in communities together in

nature. The women have the power of telepathy and there is great emphasis on remembering and re-witnessing the violence inflicted on them in the past, so that they can better protect themselves and each other.

In my journal from this time, I wrote three direct quotations from the book, one in the centre of each page. The underlining is my own and the first reads as follows:

For the second time in a day Alaka realised that she had failed to shade herself. In grand old-fashioned female style she had tried to protect Seja, but she’d left her own lower channels open. As Seja re-knew Margaret’s horror, Alaka, too, was absorbing the full force of the woman’s experience. She was aware that she was going to be deeply and violently ill (1985: 22).

The second reads only, “In her function as a remember-guide Alaka had re-channelled thousands of rapes” (24). And the third:

The trick, she knew, was to offer the attention only when it came from her own fullness, never from duty or obligation. “If I do not give from my overflow, then what I give is poison,” she reminded herself (129).

These entries demonstrate that I was able to interpret clues as to what was happening to me in the feminist fiction I was reading, along with suggestions of what I might need to do to help myself.

Gradually, the longer I worked on the helpline, I developed a sense that I was a living repository for these stories. Many of them contained joy or triumph, humour and empowerment, but not always. Most of them had no end, no resolution, because the women were still living inside them. This emulated the very nature of living with trauma itself, as according to Dori Laub, “trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and

therefore...continues into the present and is current in every respect” (in Felman 1992: 69).

What I kept coming back to after I left the helpline was the question of what I could *do* with these stories, and underlying that was the sense that I needed to do *something* to change their role in my life and their effect on me. I needed to somehow resolve or conclude them for myself.

In Dorothy Allison’s semi-autobiographical *Bastard Out of Carolina* – perhaps the novel that has influenced me most in my writing *We Are Volcanoes* – Allison’s first-person narrative in the voice of Bone, a child growing up in South Carolina in the 1950s, has all the impetus for a hopeful, triumphant ending for the character. The novel is full of Bone’s anger and acts of resistance and rebellion in response to the horrific abuse she endures from her stepfather, along with acts of self-care and self-preservation, building a sense that despite everything, the character is strengthening, and that Allison is paving the way for her to triumph over her abuser in a final climactic resolution. But in the most devastating ending, we witness Bone being beaten and brutally raped in a detailed seven-page ordeal, only for her to afterwards see her mother cradle the crying perpetrator, despite walking in on him raping her child. The perpetrator’s hateful dialogue is scripted, and every movement and action of his choreographed, as well as every injury inflicted on Bone detailed. In the very last pages of the narrative, Bone’s mother abandons her completely, leaving her “empty”, “understanding nothing” (1992: 308).

The first time I read the book, I experienced several different trauma responses; flashback, nightmares, intrusive thoughts, dissociation, stomach ache, headache; quite common responses for somebody who is “triggered” or re-traumatized. But, gripped by the voice and story, I decided to – or needed to, considering what I had invested – read to the end. I felt certain that Bone would prevail, that Allison would offer some form of payoff for having put Bone, and me the reader, through all of this. So why didn’t she? Is it because for many survivors, perhaps including Allison, this is

predominantly true of their experience, that there was no triumph or payoff after their suffering, no resolution or feeling of justice? If so, is this reason enough to depict it time and time again in fiction? Isn't fiction an ideal site for re-envisioning, reconceptualising, a place for "alternate ways of imagining... a better world" (Piercy in Lauret 1994: 43)?

Emma Glass's protagonist, Peach, in her surrealist novel of the same name, is given a not dissimilar fate to Bone. After Peach kills her rapist, Lincoln – a man who is portrayed as a sausage, whose greasy residue has remained on Peach's body since the attack – she puts the meat of him in "stacks of sacks" (2018: 83). Her mother then unknowingly uses this to make sausages, cooked on the barbecue the following day, ingested and enjoyed by family and friends, including Peach: "I watched them all devour my demon and I joined in" (92).

However absurdist and gruesome this may be, in the context of the novel it is Peach triumphing over her abuser, and for the first time she feels "contented", "the trauma and tension fall away like an old dry scab" (93).

But in the final chapter, entitled 'Final Pieces, Final Peace', Peach purposely "unfurls" herself, unravelling her own flesh until she is "nothing but solid stone" reduced only to the pit of a peach (97). In one review of Glass' novel, Sarah Ditum states, in an almost pleading final comment, "there must be other kinds of story to tell about being female than ones that end in nothing" (2018).

In her memoir, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, Dorothy Allison says, "the story becomes the thing needed" (1996: 3). Perhaps then, for her, in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Bone's abject suffering needed to be presented and witnessed fully, along with the conditions under which it took place at this intersection of class and gender.

Perhaps Allison needed us to experience it and be affected by it with no reprieve or relief. Or perhaps this was meant to be read not only by survivors, but by those who are in denial or ignorance that these horrific acts of male violence so commonly take place, as an act of forced witnessing.

I do believe there is a place for this type of unapologetic reconstruction of violence and trauma that resists resolution. I have witnessed, countless times, the use of it as a processing tool for survivors. However, these days the type of feminist fiction I want to read and certainly to write has some elements of hope and affirmation, at least in the form of agency and autonomy in female characters, where we see them on more than one occasion take action which produces their desired effect. I feel empowered when I read and write about empowerment.

Writing in itself can become an act of empowerment.

In writing a work of fiction, I get to decide, I get to play, to test out what takes place and what the consequences are; I have control. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, in writing a novel I "acquire the ideological and linguistic initiative necessary to change the nature of [my] own image" (in Champagne 1996: 4). The narrative "I" becomes a "constructed being" (Lindner 2004: 13), no longer constrained by factual veracity.

Writing trauma stories into a work of fiction – specifically those involving male violence, given that this kind of trauma is largely defined by the way in which control and autonomy are taken away from the survivor – is nothing short of a powerful act of subversion.

Creating Connie

My novel, *We Are Volcanoes*, takes the form of a conversation between four generations of women in the same family, and explores themes of intergenerational trauma, violence against women, and the importance of listening to women when they speak about their experiences. Connie Bell is one of those women; she is elderly and suffers from dementia, which triggers her into a traumatic reliving of when she was raped at sixteen years old by two American GIs who were lodging with her family in Surrey during the Second World War.

There are many ways that the effects of such trauma can manifest in daily life for survivors. One example of these adverse

experiences is flashback, a type of traumatic memory distinct in its 'predominance of imagery and bodily sensation' as well as an absence of verbal or linear narrative (Herman 2015: 38). My experience of flashback is precisely that, a flash or slice of intrusive memory, often without context, that cuts through what is actually going on in front me, and is just as vivid or *real*.

Another common experience is dissociation. Both a trauma response and a survival mechanism, to dissociate is to disconnect in some way from events that have taken place. This perceptual shift can result in "feelings of indifference, emotional detachment, and profound passivity" (Herman 2015: 43). For me, in relation to my own experiences of trauma, dissociation feels like a mechanical fragmentation, a splitting up of the parts that make me an entire being. I use the word "mechanical" because of the distinct sensation of the separateness of these parts, a deconstruction – limbs, fingers, organs laid out like car parts on a mechanic's cloth – how this becomes the main or only sensation, and also to convey the involuntary, automatic nature of the experience.

With Connie's character I wanted to address experiences of both flashback and dissociation, to portray trauma as a "perpetual present", and to try to give form to that which has no form – the lived affective experience of traumatic memory (Pollock 2013: 2).

These intentions together formed the basis of a broader intention, which was to transform the trauma; I wanted to see whether I could move Connie forward in the processing and healing of her trauma through its telling, and subsequently explore whether this changed my own affective experience of trauma.

In the following two excerpts, in the fictive present Connie is in her mid-eighties and has recently been experiencing flashbacks associated with when she was raped at sixteen years old. Here she attempts to retrace and reorganise the traumatic memory. The first piece takes her further into the event than her conscious memory has allowed before, and then, having done that, the second piece – which takes place later in the novel – enables a moving away

from the traumatic encounter and towards a memory of safety and care.

Connie (1)

Too quiet in here, in this house. Where are the noises? Where's Alan with his trains? Moll with her dishes and her banging about? It's so quiet I can hear the clock. But the soldiers are here, are they? Now I hear their voices. Low. And I smell their tobacco. They've not said a word since I saw. That you, Connie? the shorter one calls. Then something else I don't hear. I go to see. In the room I know I've not been alone with them yet. Shorter one is talking. Talking, talking as he closes the door. Taller one not looking at me. Is it about them leaving soon? Them sad and scared to go? There's no air in here. Can I go now? I wonder. Then short one is closer. Too close. Where's Alan? I hear my voice say. No one's in. I smell the brown of his breath. The sour. I know you saw, he says. Smiling then. A smile like there's a trick. Like there's a joke but I missed it. Then they move around me, almost dance around me, awkward. Until shorter one moves, quick. And I'm flat. He's flattened me. And my voice gone, out of me. Only my legs kicking, until they're gone too. Then I'm nothing. There's jolt. There's spit. But it's not me that's feeling it. Head lolls like they've wrung my neck. And just there, outside on the wall. It's a butterfly. She flames but she is still. Blue eyes on her wings. I see her and she sees. The curtains slice. And then it's all swirling black. What's next? Wake up. Sitting up and knickers back on. Legs back on. Then out of the front door, that's right. Running. All the way to the trees to hide. The hard ground jolting up through me. Then the soil, the leaves, the twigs. On my hands and knees. Burning but cold. The wet of it. The grit. I dig. Dig and dig. Hard soil and stones stabbing under my nails. Then tear the knickers back off me, scrunch them into a ball and stuff them down, make the ground swallow them. I lie down then. Curl myself around myself.

Hold the hurt. Cup it in my hand. And try to think of water. Of river. And wait for something, something certain.
I wait for it to be dark.

Connie (2)

It's dark.
The dark's always darker in the woods.
What wakes me up is rain, not the feel but the sound of it. The trees protect me now, but soon it'll come through.
I sit up.
My toes are curling, gripping in the soil.
Did I run here with no shoes on? Must have.
I look around. Don't see any shoes. Just trees and dark, and a pitter patter.
I'm up before I know I'm up, and dizzy, head swirling round. I hear a tawny owl and that sets me straight. She tells me to walk. So I'm walking the way home. But not going home.
My mouth tastes like I've been sucking a spoon, all tinny like blood and dirt. There's pain rolling round my belly. My hands are tingly. It's my legs I can't feel, but they're still carrying me.
Over stones like marbles, though we're not falling down. We're on our way.
But where?
Got to think of something.
Out of the trees and back on the road. The night is grey and I smell the rain on the concrete. A few kids are out, a couple of them stare. My hands tug down my dress. My legs walk me quicker.
Then there's this light, all pink and warm in the window of twenty-one. Where Janet lives. She lives alone.
I knock on the door three times, hope she's heard me.
When she opens it her face drops and I know I must look a state.
I look down at my dirty bare feet and so does she.
Sorry, I say.
Come in, you poor lamb, she says. What on earth's happened?
She leads me through to the pink lit room and sees me properly.
Sweetheart, she says. And asks me again.
I open my mouth. My tongue's too big and swollen to talk. I can feel my eyes bulging, like they're trying to say it. But nothing comes.
Janet makes sweet milky tea and says she'll help me get all cleaned up. I try to slurp while the pans boil. She tuts to look at me, scrunches her brow and looks sad. Her hair's in rollers.
Sorry, I say.
You're not to say sorry, she says. Poor thing.

I nearly say it again.
Then, water's ready.
She chatters away like a nursery rhyme.
There we are. There we are.
Arms in the air, up we go. And my dress is off.
I'll get you a nice clean one, she says.
When she comes back she stops and looks. I still can't speak any words but she reads the words on my body.
There we are. There we are.
It's the warm of the water and the softness of her touch that make me cry. Not anything before.
There we are. There we are.
When I'm dry and dressed and wrapped in blankets she tells me I should get some sleep. She tells me in the morning we'll have a proper breakfast and a good chat.
What do you say to that, Connie love?
I nod, eyes wide, wondering how they'll ever close.
Then by the door she turns and says, shall I stay with you, love?
I nod again and try to smile.
Be back in a minute, she says, and climbs the stairs.
And I'm alone. Alone but with myself.

Occupying the Present

Imagining oneself in a real-life traumatic event and potentially reconjuring some of the sensations of one's own experience is an intimidating task. It can feel exposing, as if the risk of feeling re-victimised or weakened is too high, particularly by survivors who have responded to trauma with the coping mechanism of hyper-resilience. In effect it makes the trauma survivor vulnerable again, giving new meaning to the phrase "opening up old wounds". But it could be that it is precisely in this revisiting, this opening up, that we truly have the ability to make the wound old, because in so doing, we are committing it to the past.

Shoshana Felman explains:

To seek reality is both to set out to explore the injury inflicted by it – to turn back on, and to try to penetrate the state of being stricken, wounded by reality – and to attempt, at the same time, to re-emerge from the paralysis of this state, to engage reality as an advent, a

movement, and as a vital, critical necessity of *moving on*. It is beyond the shock of being stricken, but nonetheless within the wound and from within the woundedness that the event, incomprehensible though it may be, becomes accessible (emphasis in original, 1992: 28).

So how could I write "beyond the shock of being stricken", yet also "from within the woundedness"? My thoughts were that I needed to write belatedly, after the event, but in the present tense.

Writing Connie's voice in the present tense was a way of giving equal weight to recent or current events and those that took place decades ago, so that she appears to inhabit this continuously unfolding here and now. I felt that writing in this way was both *representative* of traumatic memory – specifically flashback – and *subversive*, in that, commonly, during episodes of flashback, the specific areas of the brain involved with words and language are not immediately accessible (Rauch 1996: 383). With the scene in which Connie remembers when she was raped, I wanted to create something as close to an experience of flashback as I could, rather than a detailed, literal blow-by-blow account of the violence, as Allison did. I wanted to write a scene that was relatable but not re-traumatizing.

Transformation

In order for writing to reflect the experience of traumatic memory, it needs to include, "vivid sensations and images", striking in their lucidity, yet disjointed, with "intense focus on fragmentary sensation, on image without context" (Herman 2015: 38). Connie remembers the quiet, so quiet she can "hear the clock". Then the clear image of one of her rapists as he, "talking, talking... closes the door", though not what he says. The rapists "move around" her, "until shorter one moves, quick. And I'm flat. He's flattened me. And my voice gone, out of me. Only my legs kicking, until they're gone too". Here the short, juddery sentences and clauses reflect the fragmentary structure of the memory, and make visceral the sense of an unfolding

powerlessness, with each clause acting as confirmation of the one before.

My next sentence, "Then I'm nothing.", is the epicentre of Connie's traumatic memory, in that it is the place she must get to, one of complete annihilation, in order to then rebuild and reassemble. It is not an endpoint, as it is for Emma Glass' Peach.

I have had sexual assault disclosed to me most likely thousands of times. If I were to find any common threads in all of these experiences, including my own experience of sexual assault, one of them would be this feeling of being reduced to nothing, whether in relation to objectification – "I am nothing" equating to "I am nothing but an object" – or nothing in terms of meaning or worth – "I am not a person".

In their essay 'Flocnaucinihilipilification', a word defined as "the action or habit of estimating something as worthless" (in Gay 2019: 137), So Mayer explains that this is the entire purpose of rape:

Rape was and is a cultural and political act: it attempts to remove a person with agency, autonomy, and belonging from their community, to secrete them and separate them, to depoliticize their body by rendering it detachable, violable, nothing. (140)

Facilitating a survivor in their reaching this point, this acknowledgement that they felt reduced to nothing also facilitates the next realisation, one that I have attempted to elicit alongside every relevant disclosure: even to recognise the feeling that you are nothing means you must be something, or, as Mayer so powerfully puts it, when applied to the event of the rape itself, "I was alive enough to be annihilated." (141).

It is when Connie is "nothing" that she sees, through the window on an outside wall, the butterfly, perhaps the ultimate symbol of transformation. Not only is the butterfly an example of vivid, intense focus, the pattern on its wings resembles a pair of eyes, giving Connie a witness: "I see her and she sees.", a confirmation, however detached and brief, that she is in fact something.

From this point in the act of remembering, even amidst the horror of it, Connie can put herself back together, “knickers back on. Legs back on”. She is commentating as a form of self-support, and continues to use this commentary as an aid to her sequencing what follows, “What’s next?”, “Then out of the front door. That’s right.”. Once in the woods, Connie has the compulsion to ground herself, to “dig and dig”, and in an act directly subverting Allison’s narrative – in which we are given this image of Bone’s rapist: “he ripped my panties off me like they were paper” – it is Connie who “tear[s] the knickers back off herself, in order to “scrunch them into a ball and stuff them down”, making “the ground swallow them”, granting her the use of violent verbs and the power to symbolically erase (Allison 1992: 284).

She then remembers her attempts to self-soothe, “curl myself around myself. Hold the hurt. Cup it in my hand”, here embodied in the repetition and the alliteration of the breathy “h”, so that I, and subsequently the reader, might feel held also, imagining Connie re-enacting this foetal position, enclosed, thus bringing the memory to a close.

As well as prioritising the telling of the traumatic memory as true to affective experience, throughout its composition I have tried to be intentionally mindful of my wellbeing, as well as that of my reader. The process of writing the scene and in fact, the process of writing about the process of writing the scene have been incredibly powerful for me, significantly reducing the frequency and severity of intrusive thoughts and night terrors.

Griselda Pollock states that, “artworking about trauma risks... being traumatic; but it can also stage at one and the same time, both a passage to the [traumatic] encounter... and a passage away from it” (2013: 8). After completing the second draft of the novel, I realised that I had left Connie in the woods, waiting “for it to be dark”. This is not where I ultimately leave her – after this, we hear the triumph of her teaching herself to swim. Then at the very end of the novel, Connie confirms her niece’s hopeful imagining that she got to experience the joy and pleasure of romantic

love and consensual sex. Nevertheless, the woods was where I had left her in terms of traumatic memory. To address this, I wrote her path away from the encounter, “out of the trees and back on the road”, and into the “pink and warm” light of a neighbour’s home, where she is taken care of and comforted. And although at first she cannot speak, we know from elsewhere in the narrative, and from this very testimony, that she will eventually regain that power and reclaim what happened.

Renowned psychologist Alice Miller writes about the reconstruction of traumatic memories and feelings “not experienced consciously” (2008: 70) as essential to healing. In *The Drama of Being a Child* she explains: “we can repair ourselves by choosing to look more closely at the knowledge that is stored inside our bodies and bringing this knowledge closer to our awareness” (2), something Shoshana Felman calls “witnessing [one]self for the first time” (1995: 258).

Psychologist Emily Soroko found that this is especially effective when reconstructing the experience in a “narrative manner” (in Kubacka-Jasiecka 2012: 218), because of the specific way our brains structure and organise information when forming narrative. She explains that this process creates opportunities for the integration and assimilation of experience and feeling which has not been possible before. In this sense, I have used Connie as a conduit, transmitting unassimilated experience through her so that I might then be able to re-integrate it fully for myself, once again “re-externalizing the event”, so that I can “take it back again, inside” (Felman 1992: 69), transformed.

Conclusion

By creating fictional characters and utilising those characters to explore different areas of traumatic experience that might benefit from a new perspective – the occurrence of adverse experiences such as flashback and dissociation, and the concepts of trauma resolution and integration, for example – a writer may have a starting point to work from with traumatic material. This framework entails a method in which the essence of what needs “working through” is

taken from real-life experiences and feelings and is altered, as though refracted through the process, and put somewhere else outside of the writer in an alternative fictional space, where that new perspective can be achieved. Putting my characters’ dissociative experiences into words has enacted a process of reconstruction, of reconnecting what has been severed, of meaning-making; a writerly process that has helped to integrate repressed parts of my experience into conscious understanding. Writing about dissociation has felt, at times, to be its very antithesis, bringing awareness, connection and language into a space the brain purpose-builds for the opposite.

Creating a work of feminist fiction, and, importantly, writing about the process of creating it, has transformed the way my trauma *feels* and the way I feel *about* my trauma. In creating the characters and plot I have been able to take some of my experiences and put them into another form, one that is malleable and workable, and can progress and resolve in the way I decide. I have been able to *enact* what has otherwise felt impossible to express. I have developed understanding and compassion for my characters, their decisions and behaviours, and have translated this into deeper compassion and understanding for myself. My characters have said things I needed to hear.

It has amounted to something that exceeds what is commonly called “therapeutic” for me. It has shifted the landscape of my affective experience of trauma entirely, so that rather than feeling I am “on the ground” so to speak, at the mercy of the weather of my trauma, a more appropriate metaphor would be that my experiences have become instruments in an orchestra, and I am the conductor. Judith Lewis Herman best describes this feeling when she writes that a “significant sharing of the trauma story... serves a purpose beyond simple ventilation or catharsis; it is a means toward active mastery” (2015: 222-3).

Implications for Teaching and Learning Environments

Awareness of the prevalence of trauma and of its impact is greater than it has ever been

before, as is evidence that suggests that writing about our traumatic experiences can “open up transformative opportunities” (Spear 2014: 54). With this comes a heightened understanding of creative writing as a pedagogical discipline that would benefit enormously from a trauma-informed approach, both in the planning and delivery of content and in the response and practice of educators. Therapist and writer Foluke Taylor states that wherever ‘creative writing is praxis (action and reflection) [Friere, 1972] and offers space for the development of critical consciousness, it has liberatory – and therefore therapeutic – potential’ (2022: 122).

Many traumatised people are drawn to creative writing courses, wanting to write about their experiences as a “sense-making, witnessing and testimonial project” (Atkinson 2023: 340), and even for those who might not *begin* with this motivation there is a great chance that they will encounter writing material and exercises that invite them to draw from personal experience and emotional or sensory memory. It even appears that the relationship between fiction and trauma is in some way reciprocal, as Goldsmith and Satterlee explain, “fictional representations facilitate cultural understanding of trauma and can offer additional pathways to recovery” (2008: 35).

In addition, we are most likely to *write* well when we *are* well (Lindner 2004: 8). A deeper understanding of the poietic process detailed in this work, using creative writing to work with traumatic experience and reflecting upon that, has the potential to enable new feelings of self-governance, forging a set of writing tools that can be used to clear and cut back overgrown bracken, to create new pathways in thought and behaviour.

Practice-led research such as this, including detailed accounts of the self-reflexive processes it involves, has an important part to play in developing trauma-responsive learning environments, not with the intention of creating a therapeutic process for students, but rather as a way of increasing awareness and therefore the capacity to acknowledge, hold and accommodate that process, should it occur.

BIOGRAPHY

Dr Zosia Crosse has been an educator for 16 years and in 2023 was awarded a PhD in Creative Writing at Bath Spa University for her novel and contextualizing thesis, *Writing Feminist Fiction as a Means of Processing Trauma*. Her current research explores the use of biomythography as a writing method for marginalized people. She recently guest lectured at the University of Naples "L'Orientale" and Cardiff Metropolitan University, on the use of creative writing as a tool for decolonizing academia, digital writing and writing for performance. She lives in Bristol and is currently writing her third novel.

[1] The use of the word "survivor" as opposed to "victim" is largely to signify the political meaning made of the traumatic experience: "survivors reject the demand to stay politely silent. They remember, speak up and take every opportunity to 'make politic' their experiences of abuse" (Champagne 1996: 2).

[2] The women's sector broadly refers to a network of organisations borne out of second-wave feminism, specifically radical feminism and the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s, and the development of the "feminist public sphere" (Hogeland 1998: 1), in which writers such as Andrea Dworkin drew attention to the male violence that women and girls experience at an endemic level. Activists addressed the desperate need for support services by establishing the UK's first Rape Crisis Centre in 1973 as well as domestic violence refuges. They also campaigned for increased awareness and further protection for women in the law. The first Women's Aid federation was instrumental in lobbying for the 1976 Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act, and for having women and children at risk of domestic violence to count as homeless under The Housing Act 1977. For more information see: www.womensaid.org.uk

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