

Introduction

Mending Wounds?: Healing, Working through, or Staying in Trauma: An Introduction

John Masterson, David Watson & Merle Williams

The articles selected for this volume address the aesthetic, ethical and political dimensions of trauma in southern African and North American contexts. Focusing on the material, corporeal embodiment of trauma in wounds and scars (and their psychosomatic analogues), these articles explore the role that these embodied traces of traumatic experiences plays in imagining – or, on the contrary, refusing – the healing and mending of lived traumas. To put it differently, these articles trace the strategies through which attempts have been made within various contexts to give closure to trauma and to begin the process of collective or personal healing.

Trauma studies, as is well known, emerged in the 1990s as an offshoot of ethical and psychoanalytic criticism; like these fields, it was marked by an intense concern with otherness and the challenges it poses to the representational capacities of both language and the visual media. Trauma theorists, including Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman, and Dominick LaCapra, emphasised accordingly the unrepresentability of major traumas. Caruth, for example, argues in *Trauma: Explorations of Memory* (1995) that trauma disrupts the ordinary mechanisms and representations of consciousness and memory; instead, the traumatic event, dissociated from cognitive and representational processes, returns in the form of flashbacks, repetitive phenomena, and traumatic nightmares. According to this view, testimonies of trauma occur through the breakdown of representational forms, and the unleashing or transmission of a traumatised and traumatising otherness. Dominick LaCapra notes too that trauma “is a shattering experience that distorts memory”, rendering it thereby “vulnerable and fallible in reporting events” (2009: 61). Testimonies, then, are “authenticated or validated” (p. 61) through their continued display of the wounds left by the symptomatic effects of trauma. What emerges from these discussions as a serious challenge to the possibility of representing trauma is, in fact also, and primarily, a sobering check on attempts to imagine the working-through of traumatic experiences, however hesitant or limited these attempts might be. Certainly, trauma theory has consistently rejected the possibility of

granting closure to traumas or beginning anew for the subject of trauma. These possibilities LaCapra describes as stemming from “a truncated, stereotypical idea of working-through ... as a facile form of uplift, closure, identity formation, integration of the lost other, taking leave of the past, and denial of loss” (2009: 65).

From our perspective, trauma theory’s investment in the continuing working-through of traumatic experiences, an investment that also fixes in place and maintains the field’s disciplinary subject, raises more questions than it answers. While acknowledging and consenting to trauma theory’s caution against investing overhastily in accounts of the working-through or mending of trauma, the contributors to this volume are not inclined to dismiss too hurriedly accounts of healing, mending, reconciliation, reparation and the overcoming of trauma. Nor are they ready to concede out of hand that trauma remains unrepresentable: wounds and scars, after all, materialise and give visual form to traumatic experiences in the here-and-now, granting them a degree of corporeality and tactility. That is not to say that this embodiment of trauma necessarily makes the traumatic experience more interpretable or assimilable; it relocates it to a sphere non-identical to consciousness and memory, however, and thereby enables a potentially different relationship to traumatic experiences from those privileged by trauma theory. The narratives concerning the healing and mending of wounds addressed in this volume also suggest that trauma theory has given premature closure to discussions concerning the efficacy of working through traumas. Gabriele Schwab notes that traumatic writing offers a paradox: there are traumatic experiences that are unrepresentable, yet narrative, storytelling, and testimonies “are necessary for healing trauma” (2010: 48). From this, she concludes that there is a need for “a theory of traumatic narratives that deals with the paradox of telling what cannot be told” (p. 48); in other words, traumatic narratives might be conceived as restoring possibilities of healing and mending. The contributors to this volume traverse that paradox. In accounts of traumatic experiences and in traumatic histories, they discover narratives which undertake the difficult, and frequently improbable, task of disentangling bodies and words from the traumas holding them captive.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given this volume’s dual focus on southern Africa and North America, many of the narratives addressed offer accounts of collective traumas and healing. Histories of colonisation, imperialism, slavery, and apartheid bring about, after all, collective, transgenerational traumas, which activate collective, if not national, attempts at healing and reconciliation. This suggests that the original psychoanalytically driven, memory-orientated focus of trauma studies needs to be supplemented by wider accounts of sociocultural traumas and healing. Such accounts call for a broadening of the scope of trauma theory to include previously neglected philosophical, historical and geographical perspectives, as well as a sharper

awareness of the central role of the visual images supplied by photography and the media, particularly in an era that is saturated by media coverage. At the same time, breaking new conceptual terrain requires a fresh consideration of the generic possibilities of literature. While the conundrum of seeking to represent the unrepresentable has been explored quite extensively through fiction – for example, in the novels of such figures as Anne Michaels, Jonathan Safran Foer and Nicole Krauss – the revelatory or redemptive possibilities of poetry have been largely ignored.

The seven articles which constitute this volume have been organised on a regional basis in order to highlight the historical and cultural concreteness of their engagement with carefully selected aspects of the complex field described above. The North American sequence opens with David Watson's discussion of the notion of sympathy in relation to Catharine Maria Sedgwick's frontier romance, *Hope Leslie*. This nineteenth-century novel is set in the aftermath of the genocidal war launched by the Puritan colony of Massachusetts against the Native American Pequots. The piece by Merle Williams explores the pervasive, and seemingly irremediable, woundedness of a South fractured by the Civil War, as William Faulkner unfolds his elusively multilayered narrative in *Absalom, Absalom!*. Inger Pettersson reads *Dreaming in Cuban*, Cristina Garcia's seminal novel of uprooting from communist-dominated Cuba and resettling in the United States, in terms of the scarred body and traumatic disorientation of the abused Lourdes Puente. John Masterson, in his turn, interprets "The Vietnam Project" from J.M. Coetzee's *Dusklands* as a prescient prefiguration of the avid global consumption of multimedia images of trauma, which has come to be known as "war porn". Since "The Vietnam Project" is juxtaposed to Coetzee's counterbalancing examination of fierce racial conflict in the hinterland of the Cape Colony, Masterson's essay provides a bridge to the southern African part of the "Mending Wounds" collection. Lara Buxbaum movingly discusses the correlation between broken bodies and narrative fragmentation in Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf* and *Agaat*. This perspective on the painful legacy of apartheid is set against Sandra Young's reassessment of the functioning of prison narratives. For Young, the vital challenge facing former political detainees is a reconstruction of identity that will liberate them from the criminalising vocabulary of their interrogators. Yet the imagined reader of such memoirs is potentially an adversary as well as an ally, thus mimicking the interrogator in expecting a true record of events. Finally, Lynn Custers and Yves T'Sjoen take the enquiry beyond North America and southern Africa to Auschwitz, which arguably stands as a modern hieroglyph for the limiting conditions of individual and collective traumatic experience. By offering an innovative reading of the poetry of Hugues C. Pernath, and an original translation of his Flemish texts into English, they bear contrapuntal witness to the inscription of past suffering in the fabric of a debilitated present that remains indelibly marked and wounded.

Although the articles have been grouped in this fashion, they might easily have been organised according to a different pattern. This collection was conceived holistically; while each contribution is a self-sufficient work of scholarship, the boundaries between essays are also porous, even open. A guiding purpose of this project is to allow individual articles to enter into fruitful dialogue with one another. To borrow from Michael Holquist's study of Mikhail Bakhtin (1990: 15), "dialogism" is fundamentally implicated in "the history of modern thinking about thinking". In accordance with this principle, "Mending Wounds" consistently eschews narrowly self-enclosed positions in its interrogation and remoulding of current thinking about the endurance of trauma and the possibilities for its resolution. The language of these pieces therefore becomes "double-voiced" (Bakhtin 1984: 189; Danow 1991: 28-29), or more accurately "multi-voiced", as the arguments or insights of one essay are implicitly compounded with, and enriched by, the contributions of other authors. The wounded body, for instance, stands at the heart of Lara Buxbaum's essay on Marlene van Niekerk, but it features in supplementary contexts in the rape and disfigurement of Lourdes Puente (in Inger Pettersson's article), in the maiming and killing of the Pequots (in David Watson's article), in the fascination with erotically mutilated bodies (in John Masterson's article), and in the chiasm or "intertwining" of the perceiver with the perceived world that forms a central tenet of Merle Williams's understanding of *Absalom, Absalom!*. Similar instances abound; these range from the wounding consequences of racial discrimination, through the traumatic effects of violently hegemonic initiatives, to the scarring of the individual or national psyche. The volume is haunted by the bloodstained *revenants* of Faulkner's South and the ashy spectres of Auschwitz in contrast to the benevolently healing ghost of Jorge Puente in *Dreaming in Cuban*. These apparitions may, in turn, be mapped onto the recurrence of disturbing images as an index of vicarious traumatisation: the stealthily concealed photographs in Eugene Dawn's briefcase and the perversely fascinating, flickering film footage of his research. Moreover, the image is closely co-ordinated with literal and metaphorical practices of powerfully evocative writing. Trauma is inscribed on the body as open wounds and scars in various stages of healing. Autobiography allows victims to rewrite the histories that their interrogators have written for and of them, only to find themselves rewritten again by their readers. The refolding of commentary upon interpretation, and interpretation upon meta-reflection, is characteristic of this collection.

"Mending Wounds", then, has made its intervention in the prevailing debates that at once define and undermine the contours of trauma studies. These articles do not lay claim to definitive status. However, each contribution has attempted to ask appropriately searching questions and to provide considered insights that unsettle established theoretical constructs, whether it is a question of healing, working through, or staying in trauma.

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