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We Are Volcanoes: Writing Feminist Fiction as a Means of Processing Trauma

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of

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Following initial supervisory ethical discussion, full ethical approval from the Bath Spa University Ethics panel was not required. The research has been conducted in line with requirements in place at the time of this decision. Should you have any concerns regarding ethical matters relating to this study, please contact the Research Support Office at Bath Spa University (researchsupportoffice@bathspa.ac.uk).

No new datasets were created during the study.

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Abstract

This thesis comprises a work of feminist fiction – the novel *We Are Volcanoes* – and a contextualising commentary. The two should be read together as a piece of practice-led research answering the question: can writing a feminist novel change the writer's affective experience of personal trauma?

The main objective of this thesis is to explore the idea that trauma – what is felt and experienced as a result of a traumatic event – is transformable through the act of *poiesis*, or creating something new. In addition, I explore the idea that in an instance of politically situated trauma, like gender-based violence, the perspective of a relevant political movement, feminism, is necessary to that transformation.

The novel 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.

The contextualising commentary is a necessarily personal piece, documenting my process of conceiving and writing the novel, and the experimental journey of observing whether that process changed my affective experience of trauma.

Chapter One of the contextualising essay defines feminism, feminist fiction and trauma for the purpose of my research. Chapter Two is a reflection on my taking in of other people's trauma stories, how this affected me and what happened alchemically when these were added to my own experiences of trauma. Chapter Three is an exploration in the process of publicly telling a trauma story, and a brief consideration of how other artists have done this through artworking. Chapter Four documents my realisation that the novel needed to be multi-voiced, and discusses the therapeutic practice of creating imaginal dialogues and their potential as a method for

accessing voice and character writing. Chapters Five to Eight each focus on one of the four main characters of *We Are Volcanoes*, closely considering what aspect of my self and my trauma I explored and processed through the writing of that particular character. I conclude with an account of what has changed in relation to my affective experience of trauma, and my hopes that this research can contribute to the cultural work of feminism.

This research is closely focussed on my own experiences and processes in writing fiction about trauma, however there is potential for further research exploring other styles and genres of writing, as well as other writers' and, in fact, readers' experiences.

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We Are Volcanoes: Writing Feminist Fiction as a Means of Processing Trauma

Introduction

This thesis is comprised of two components. The first is the novel, *We Are Volcanoes*, the second is this contextualising analysis. As part of a practice-led PhD, in which the practice is the writing of a work of fiction, that work of fiction constitutes the main contribution to new knowledge. This contextualising component seeks to expand that contribution by helping to answer my research question: can writing a feminist novel change the writer's affective experience of personal trauma?

In my contextualising essay I will also document some of the reflective and reflexive processes involved in writing the novel, examining significant experiences and moments of decision making that were integral to the project. I hope my reflections on these processes can contribute to a framework for other writers wishing to write feminist fiction as a way of processing trauma.

Field of Inquiry

My novel and this contextualising essay both grew out of my own life and a desire to understand the relationship between feminist fiction and political activism and whether writing the former could constitute the latter. For me, that meant drawing on knowledge and experience accrued over the decade I spent working in the women's sector from 2010 to 2020. My role involved listening to women who were experiencing abuse, supporting and empowering them with their next steps, providing them with information, and signposting them to other services.

The drive for my initial inquiry was a sense of duty to what I consider part of the everyday work of the feminist movement, namely raising awareness of the interdependent patriarchal (systemic) and male (individual) violence against women and girls, as well as a response to the rise in popularity of 'dystopian feminist'

fiction, the themes of which in these current times feel ‘too close for comfort’ (Gilbert, 2018). What emerged within the first three months of my research, as a result of invaluable discussions with my supervisors and revisiting journals I had written during my time working in the sector, was a sense that my wanting to *do* something, to be *of service* to the movement was closer to a trauma response than a field of inquiry. The stories and vignettes I was crafting were essentially reworkings of real-life traumatic events, either from my own experience or the experience of someone for whom I had born witness.

I noticed that my perception of these events and my affective experience of them – what I felt emotionally and in my body – was beginning to undergo some sort of change. The precise nature of this change then became the focus of my inquiry. I wanted to see how the process of writing a work of feminist fiction based on experiences of trauma could transform the affective, ongoing experience of that trauma. In order to achieve this I combined my practice with relevant concepts from feminist theory and feminist literary criticism, along with psychology, psychotherapy and trauma studies, informed by my professional and personal experience in a supportive role to other women, and my personal journey receiving counselling and talk therapy.

Subsequently I believe this contextualising component’s main contribution to new knowledge is the offer of an explorative approach for those wanting to work with stories of personal and witnessed trauma, and the proposal of methodologies and techniques to fictionalise those trauma stories, with the aim of transforming the affective experience of the writer’s trauma.

My Purpose

Answering my research question has three main purposes. The first is a very personal one, that comes as a result of recognising the want and the need to heal from both first-hand and vicarious trauma resulting from male violence. I wanted to see whether the process of researching and writing, and consciously reflecting on this process, could shift and change how I was feeling for the better. Secondly, I wanted my reader to also benefit from me having gone through that process, by creating stories of empowerment as though they could be used as blueprints or templates for moments of real-life empowerment. And lastly, I was interested in the connection between writing a novel of this kind, for these reasons, and its potential for wider political significance.

The writing of *We Are Volcanoes* and this accompanying critical component was compounded by several high–profile real-life instances of male violence that took place during the writing process.

Nicole Smallman and Bibaa Henry were murdered in June 2020, followed by the racist handling of the case by police and the sentencing of two male officers who took selfies of themselves with the women's dead bodies (Skopeliti, 2021; Dodd, 2021). March 2021 saw the kidnap, rape and murder of Sarah Everard by a serving member of the Metropolitan Police, and the subsequent brutalising of women attending a vigil in her memory by predominantly male officers (Fox, 2021). And thirdly, the social media vilification of intimate partner violence survivor, Amber Heard.[1] Each of these cases exemplify the interdependent relationship between structural and individual male violence, the reporting of which deeply affected

[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).

myself and the women I know, as well as further sustaining my motivation for the project.

My Reader

I have imagined my reader as a woman, most likely personally affected by trauma but definitely affected by what feminist psychotherapist Maria Root terms 'insidious trauma' (in Caruth: 1995, 107), namely the cumulative effects of oppression and degradation felt by marginalised people, meaning that while my reader may be somewhere in her journey of processing and healing that trauma, she is living and operating in a world where she continues to be vulnerable to it and absorbs it vicariously.

With this in mind, I deem it possible that the novel could ultimately have political significance if I am successful in my pursuit of publication, thus finding multiple readers, but in the first instance I had to explore how I might serve myself through the creative and reflective process of this research and the subsequent sharing of my findings.

Within this contextualising thesis, I discuss and consider the invaluable feedback of several readers. These include my supervisors, other writers on the PhD programme, published writers, and friends.

Structure

In Chapter One I define feminist fiction and trauma for the scope of this research. In Chapter Two I reflect on the seeds of the novel; my *taking in* of others' trauma stories, and my roles within my family and while working in the women's sector. The third chapter considers the act of publicly telling the trauma story in various

forms, including comedy, film and graphic novel, touching on concepts of aesthetic transformation and aesthetic distance. Chapter Four explains my decision to write the novel polyphonically after reading Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*, alongside experimenting with the therapeutic exercise of creating 'imaginal dialogues', and the idea that characters can be written as an expression of different versions of the writer's self. In Chapter Five I closely consider Gloria, one of the four voices of the novel, with relevant analysis of the feminist fiction that has most influenced me, notably *The Colour Purple* by Alice Walker and Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina.* Chapter Six's focus is Connie, the second of the four voices I developed, and explores the significance of relaying a trauma story in the present tense. The seventh chapter considers Moll, the eldest in the line of women, and the purpose of reconstructing history. Chapter Eight addresses the character of Trix, the youngest of the women, and deals with concepts of futurity and the integration of legacy. My conclusion gives an account of what has changed in relation to my experience of trauma, and my hopes that this work can contribute to the broader cultural work of feminism.

A Note on Methodology

As a piece of practice-led research, the writing of *We Are Volcanoes* largely reflected the Geneplore model of creativity (Smith: 2009, 23), characterised by the process of generate-explore-select-generate, an iterative process in which broad ideas are generated and then an exploration of those ideas leads to their refinement. This process is cyclical and conducive to the emergence of new pathways of inquiry and exploration, and to shifts in relation to them. In addition to this, 'reflect' has been an integral part of the cycle, one that has allowed me to evaluate ideas which has then

informed future practice, paying close attention to what Haseman and Mafe call 'position[s] of enunciation' (Smith: 2009, 219), those significant moments of decision making that have great impact on the final work.

I would add that this is deliberately and necessarily a very personal piece of research, written largely in a subjective first-person voice. Pat Thomson and Barbara Kamler explain that feminist scholars have argued that the emphasis on the use of the third person in academic writing is

> a masculinist strategy intended to create the impression of an objective view that does not exist. Instead of resorting to what Donna Haraway (1988) described as a 'god trick', in which the researcher appears nowhere and everywhere via the use of the third person, researchers ought to explicitly situate the researcher in the text. If the reader can find out about the writer, then they can make judgments about the situated and particular nature of what is being offered to them. One way for the researcher to make herself visible is through the use of the first person. The use of 'I' allows the reader to understand that the research is a social construction, just like any other form of knowledge (2016: 149).

A Note on Scope

While I discuss the relevant responses of peers and supervisors in the form of feedback on the novel, it has not been within the scope of this project to formally collect data on readers' responses in relation to their affective experiences of trauma. Further research could include qualitative studies of readers' experience of the novel and any self-reported affective change.

Chapter One: Definitions

Defining Feminism and Feminist Fiction

Feminism seems to me to be kaleidoscopic – something whose shapes, structures and patterns alter with every turn of feminist creativity.
- Marilyn Frye[2]

Before I define 'feminist fiction' for the purpose of this project, it is perhaps necessary for me to comment on what I mean when I discuss 'feminism'. It is more accurate to consider the term as referring to a plurality of feminisms as opposed to one prescriptive set of views, nor feminists as one homogenous group.

In her book, *Liberating Literature*, Maria Lauret explains that ''speaking as a feminist woman' does not refer to one dogmatic framework, but rather to a knot of interrelated questions that play on different layers, registers and levels of the self' (1994: 101). Novelist and academic Patricia Duncker elucidates, 'feminism is a raw politics, still being shaped and made by the communities of women who are the divisive edge of revolutionary change' and 'it is neither a pious utopian hope for a better world, nor the sum of every woman's experience. It is a political analysis of the ways in which women are oppressed by men and the structures men have made' (1992: 1, 33). These insights emphasise feminism as necessarily diverse and in a perpetual state of process: there are perhaps as many different feminisms as there are feminists.

For Gayle Greene a novel may be termed 'feminist for its analysis of gender as socially constructed and its sense that what has been constructed may be

[2] Frye, M. (1983) *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. New York: Crossing Press. p. 95.

reconstructed - for its understanding that *change is possible* and that *narrative can play a part in it*' (emphasis my own, 1991: 2).

For Rita Felski, feminist literature refers to 'all those texts that reveal a critical awareness of women's subordinate position and of gender as a problematic category, however this is expressed' (1989: 14).

Both these definitions refer to a challenge of the construct of gender, as well as a change or an enlightenment as a result of that challenge. Duncker takes the idea towards confrontation, stressing that feminist fiction 'will always be oppositional', and stating that 'theory, polemic, narrative, fantasy, verismo soap opera and good advice often intertwine' in stories that are about the 'reclamation of power and control' and are 'necessarily confrontational' (1992: 15, 16, 32, 33).

Lauret adds that 'feminist first person narratives explore the social determinations (roles) and psychic structures (pleasure, fear, sexuality, fantasy) of female subjectivity rather than they assert 'woman' as a fixed and coherent identity.' (1994: 101). This is important because in writing *We Are Volcanoes* I have not sought to speak 'for women', as an attempt to be fully representative would be impossible. I have, however, sought to *endorse* female experience - by which I mean uphold, support, corroborate - both my own and that of the many women I have listened to.

At certain points in this project one or two readers brought into question the representation of men in the novel, with concerns that the narrative lacked 'aesthetic balance', feeding back that they thought the male characters were either dreadful or inconsequential, and that this constituted the pushing of an 'agenda'. Despite this not being an unfamiliar response to a feminist speaking publicly about the scale and breadth of male violence against women, it seemed relevant to address this question

noof imbalance. Although I did not have a particularly anti-men agenda, neither was I interested in portraying the male characters in my novel in a better light. I discuss how I addressed this specific reader feedback more fully in Chapter Eight.

I believe *We Are Volcanoes* demonstrates the characteristics of a necessarily *feminist aesthetic*. In her essay 'Is There a Feminist Aesthetic?' (in Hein, 1993: 68-76), Marilyn French suggests that there are two fundamental principles to a feminist aesthetic when it comes to art: the first is that 'it approaches reality from a feminist perspective' in that it 'challenges patriarchal ideologies', and the second is that it 'endorses female experience' (63). Marilyn Frye, in her collection of essays in feminist theory, *The Politics of Reality*, explains that any relative side-lining of men can be 'seen as a device whose use needs much elaborate justification', yet it is really 'a matter of orientation of attention… the orientation of one's attention is what fixes and directs the application of one's physical and emotional work' (1983: 103, 172). The focus of my work within the scope of this research has been women, my 'interest in and commitment to the interests of women' (Robinson and Ross in Hein, 1993: 112). In this sense I do have an agenda, as I believe all writers do.[3]

Why feminism and trauma

About a year into my project an academic and novelist asked me why I had decided to focus on both feminism *and* trauma in my research, suggesting it might be more 'interesting' if I 'dropped the feminist part' and focussed solely on the topic of trauma. For me, my understanding, and perhaps my interest in the two is inseparable. Firstly, it is a feminist approach to trauma that has enabled the distinction between

[3] As Ismay Barwell points out, even in the most '"impersonal" case, the narrative is structured by a set of desires, attitudes, and interests which guide the choices made', revealing the text to be gendered, political (in Hein, 1993: 98).

'trauma as everyday and ongoing and trauma as a discrete event', something queer academic feminist Ann 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, Cvetkovich, 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.

Lastly, 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.

Defining Trauma

Given that I am in the business of storytelling, and that storytelling is cultural work, for the purpose of this contextual research it seems 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; Caruth, 1996: 7). Common responses such as dissociation mean that the event itself is often not remembered, at least in part,

rendering it ‘not locatable’, a ‘subjective non-experience’ (Atkinson, 2017: 85; 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’, often amorphous and ghostly, experienced as what Atkinson terms ‘a haunting’; it can re-visit upon us in the form of intrusive and disjointed thoughts and images (Viksnins, 2022; 2017: 86).

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 victim dissociation, bystanders turning a blind eye, gaslighting, the victim 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.

Chapter Two: Taking in the Stories

I am one woman but I carry in my body all the stories I have ever been told.
- Dorothy Allison[4]

At the Table in Gdynia

I started writing what would become my first novel in 2008, the same year I qualified as a teacher and began training at Women's Aid. In September of that year I visited family in Gdynia, in the north of Poland, with my mum. That family consisted of my great aunt Hela and her daughters, Basia and Gosia. Ciocia Hela, as I called her, was always a favourite of mine. She was a tiny, fierce and fiercely loving woman, who would kiss my cheeks so hard when she greeted me that it would hurt. I couldn't speak much Polish and she couldn't speak much English so we would communicate a lot of the time with sounds and facial expressions; our own language. If we wanted to talk with words, her daughter Basia would translate for us.

At the start of this visit, the five of us women gathered round the table with bitter coffee and pierniczki, spiced honey biscuits. We shared news and caught up. I told them about my new role at Women's Aid and then explained I was writing a book, a novel set in a small café like the one I worked in, based on the lives of the regular customers, and the pasts and memories I'd imagined for them.

For quite some time after I'd spoken, Ciocia Hela didn't speak at all. Her eyes roved over the table as though her mind was searching for something. When Basia observed that it was getting dark, we all five of us got up at once to put on lamps, draw curtains, boil the kettle again. Ciocia Hela and I were the first to sit back down;

[4]Allison, D (1996) *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*. London: Flamingo. p. 38

me with a notebook and pen, she with a bottle of clear liquid with what looked like orange pebbles at the bottom. We sat opposite each other, her eyes wide and her mouth slightly open, which meant she had something important to say.

She waited till her daughters and my mum were back at the table and poured us each a shot of amber infused vodka. The caustic smell hit my nose, dense and mineral, like medicine, with a perfumed sweetness at its edge. After we'd clinked our glasses and each had a sip, Ciocia Hela said something in Polish. I thought she was talking about the vodka but her daughters' faces told me she had said something completely unexpected. The two of them exchanged words for a while, Basia with her usual stern expression, speaking to her mother brow first, and Hela with her chin jutting out in defiance. They seemed to finally agree on something, and then Basia turned directly to me and said, 'Mum wants to tell you the story of when she was kidnapped in 1945'.

We were silent as they noticed the pen and notebook I had already set down in front of me, and Basia frowned in confusion, thinking I had known what Hela intended to do and was ready to record the story. I had actually fetched the pen to jot down the odd Polish phrase I liked the sound of, but I realised that my role had been decided for me in this case. And so I listened as Hela began.

Much like her brother - my grandfather, Leon, or Dziadek as I called him - who escaped the German army and hid in the Alps until he found safe passage to Bristol, Hela had never told her story from beginning to end. This is incredibly common among survivors of such atrocities, 'it is their way of sparing others and their children from suffering' (Ettinger in Pollock, 2013: 334). Instead, it came out in seemingly random moments in singular bite-sized chunks – 'the Russians were worse than the Germans', 'I was out buying bread when they took me' – compact like

honey biscuits, or sometimes only the crumbs if you asked one question too many. And never in chronological order, making it difficult for the rest of us to place any new pieces in relation to others on a timeline.

Circumstances sometimes brought detail to the surface – when I talked about becoming vegetarian and Dziadek angrily told me he'd had to kill his donkey to survive in the mountains, and news of my brother's broken leg prompting the disclosure that the Germans had broken both of his – but never elaborated on, never told as a story. And a direct question too quickly, such as 'when was that?' or 'how did that happen?' could cause a complete change of subject, or worse, a silent shut down. Growing up eager and hungry for these stories I had to learn to wait, and be grateful for what I got when I got it. I developed an understanding not only that I was being protected somehow in this silence but that my grandfather and great aunt were attempting to protect themselves.

However, feminist artist and psychoanalyst Bracha Ettinger makes the illuminating comment that, 'in this silence, all is transmitted *except* the narrative' (emphasis my own, in Pollock, 2013: 334). This observation rings strikingly true for me, in that growing up as a descendant of survivors of political trauma, I had far more understanding of the effects of that trauma, the largeness of its unspoken presence, than I did knowledge of the details of what had happened to my relatives. What was fully transmitted to me was a sense that whatever it was that had happened somehow still existed and loomed over our lives, however vague and shadowy.

When Hela decided to tell me her story, she was the last surviving member of her generation in her family and had lived to an older age than any of her siblings. She told it both with the urgency of someone without much time to spare and the calm of someone with distance – distance from the events themselves, which had

happened over sixty years ago, and relative distance from me; I was not her daughter, not even her granddaughter, and soon I would be returning to the UK.

The complex process of translation, out of necessity, came via someone directly affected and far closer to it all, Hela's own daughter, who was hearing the majority of what she was having to translate for the first time. I wondered whether having this role made the hearing harder or easier for Basia, whether the task of acting as a conduit for the story cushioned any of the content for her, and I felt in awe as I witnessed the process of Hela forming her story, for each part to be received, broken down and reformed into new sentences for me. I wondered what, if anything, was lost in that process, but more keenly I wondered what the effect of the process was on Hela, Basia and myself.

The initial effect on me was a feeling I can only describe as an honour-burden; honour in that I felt immense gratitude in being entrusted with the story, and burden in that with the telling there was a transference, something handed over, a weight, not necessarily a heavy one but not just a metaphorical one either, one that was somatic.

In an interview with academic Cathy Caruth, entitled 'Trauma and Survival', Robert Jay Lifton explains how we 'take in' stories and elaborate on what we hear by forming our own imagery and narrative, involving elements of the teller's pain, 'the causation of their conflicts and also the source of their knowledge, the nature of their experience' (in Caruth, 1995: 143). He explains that this in itself is 'a creative act'. It therefore follows that, as listeners, we might feel changed by a story. But as well as that, we are 'party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*', as psychiatrist and holocaust survivor Dori Laub explains:

> The testimony to the trauma thus includes the hearer, who is so to speak, the blank screen on which the events come to be inscribed for the first time (in Felman, 1998: 57).

This comes close to describing the feeling I had, that something new had been created in the process of her telling the story, and that, as the screen or page now filled up with words and images, I was holding that new thing.

When Hela finished her story we each hugged her and each other, then set about preparing dinner together. My perception was that she appeared noticeably lighter. It seemed clear that the process had changed or shifted something for her too.

What was less clear was what I could or should then do with the story she had given me.

I did not get to ask her why she chose to tell me, but I know that it seemed to be prompted by my sharing that I was writing a book, a set of stories, and that I was training to work on the helpline for Women's Aid, where I would be listening to women's stories of trauma and survival professionally, as though that signalled me as an appropriate place to deposit hers.

The four of us women gathered together and listening to Hela's story formed the initial threads of what would be woven into *We Are Volcanoes*. I imagined what it might be like to orchestrate another such meeting for other women in my family, where we would each get a chance to talk, to tell stories from beginning to end that otherwise loomed vague and shadowy over our lives. I imagined both of my grandmothers, their mothers, and my own. And I imagined what I would say, in response to them but also for myself. I wondered about the similarities and

differences that might present in our stories, about the interconnectedness and the lessons there.

On the Helpline

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.[5]

After my training I began my work at Women's Aid on the National Domestic Violence Helpline in 2010 at the start of what would be a period of the most drastic cuts and losses to services since the sector was first established.

Working to support and empower women experiencing abuse and living with trauma, most often at the hands of people they have intimate or familial relationships with, is hard for many reasons; the sheer volume and scale of the work, people's misconceptions of abuse, and vicarious trauma – the second-hand trauma experienced by those exposed to great amount of traumatic material – to name but a few. Trying to do that while the already grossly underfunded services you are working within are decimated, is profoundly more difficult. The entire experience has been life-changing. For me it instigated a process of growth and understanding so

[5] 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: https://www.womensaid.org.uk

wide and deep that it has affected every aspect of my life, personally and professionally, though I know better now than to believe these two aspects are binary opposites or, indeed, very separate at all.[6]

During my time at the 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 be the first person to tell the caller that what she was experiencing did sound like abuse, or I might be 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. Doing this work, I learnt a lot about women. I also learnt a lot about the men who abuse them.

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.

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[6] 'The Personal is Political', a phrase often considered as characteristic of second-wave feminism, is the title of an essay defending the political importance of consciousness-raising groups by Carol Hanisch, and was given its title by Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt as editors of *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation* in 1970.

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, of what I had experienced 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 sci-fi feminist 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 <u>absorbing the full force</u> of the woman's

> experience. She was aware that she was going to be deeply and violently ill (Gearhart, 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, the more the honour-burden feeling turned into 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 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 was the question of what I could *do* with these stories, and underlying that was the sense that I needed to do *something*.

In every story, including my own experiences, there was an element of hiddenness, of violence occurring away from the eyes of others. Shoshana Felman explains that these politically violent events prevent ‘the possibility of a community of seeing’ and ‘thus dissolve the possibility of any community of witnessing’ (1992: 211). It coheres therefore that publicly telling the story of a trauma can function as a way of subverting that secrecy and repression.

Chapter Three: Publicly Telling the Story

Public truth-telling is the common denominator of all social action.
- Judith Lewis Herman[7]

Stand-up Comedy

At the very beginning of my research in 2019, I got a ten-minute slot in a 'show and tell' showcase, a well-known local event that took place in a theatre at the back of a pub in Bristol. The premise was that performers had ten minutes to tell a story using visual prompts of their choice. The theme for this particular show was 'life and death'. I have no recollection of how I decided which story to tell, only that, once it came to mind, I knew with absolute certainty it was the right one.

The story is as follows. When I was three years old I had an accident on a slide in a park and I injured myself internally. My mum called the doctor surgery and they advised her to bring me in. Around this time I desperately wanted a pet hamster and was told firmly that I could not have one, despite a very persistent and imaginative campaign on my part. On our way in to the surgery my mum informed me that the doctor would need to examine me. Upon entering the sterile room with the unfamiliar male doctor, it became very clear I wasn't going to allow that to happen. I refused to be examined. The doctor was frustrated. My mum was embarrassed. A plan was made to try again tomorrow. On our way to the surgery the following day my mum promised me a hamster if I let the doctor examine me. After all, he was only trying to help. I agreed. Once again, that disintegrated as I entered the room and

[7] Herman, J.L. (2015) *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. London: Pandora. p. 208

was faced with the actuality of the situation. This time, the amalgamation of an even more frustrated doctor, an even more embarrassed – or to use her word, 'mortified' – mother, and, I suppose an increasing concern for a small girl child's welfare, led to said girl child kicking the doctor in the face, causing a nosebleed all the more dramatic against his crisp white shirt. Needless to say, the examination did not take place.

Back to 2019, as an overworked secondary school teacher I had relied heavily on the medium of the PowerPoint, and so decided to create a partially animated presentation to accompany my story, knowing that it would be brilliantly crude and ill-suited to the subject matter. One particular slide featured a toddler-sized Mary Jane shoe spinning and then launching across the screen towards an image of a stethoscope-clad doctor, his arms up in angry despair, a wash of red erupting upon impact. It was my most impressive PowerPoint yet.

I could not see the majority of the one hundred and fifty people in the audience, but their gasps and laughing often meant there was no need for me to say all that I had written. As is commonly the case with storytelling, what I did not say wielded more tension and therefore power. The visuals were a great help, also. I very much enjoyed it and decided I would try stand-up comedy again.

I had turned this story into a joke long before I was aware that I had. It was a story my mum used to tell as a series of traumatic memories for her, times that she had watched me 'go under, eyes rolling back' in my head (after the incident with the doctor I was admitted to hospital and examined under general anaesthetic). I was used to *her* telling of it but recognised that it was different from my memory of it. What I also recognised was that certain elements of it elicited laughter in her audience. For example, that I had refused to wear my underwear that day (I had

stuffed it into her handbag in a stubborn bid for freedom, as was my current habit), along with the unfairness of the fact that I never got that hamster.

My joining in with her retelling of the story, my emphasis on what made it comical, changed what the story meant for both of us. Though I had broken our agreement in the doctor's surgery all those years before, in telling the story with and for her, we created a new agreement. One that made what had happened more palatable, more bearable for everyone.

At the end of the show several people approached me in the bar to thank me for the hilarious story, a few asking me whether it was true. Although one woman came towards me with a concerned expression, and gently touched my arm when she spoke, telling me I was a very brave child and an even braver adult for sharing the story. I wanted to ask her whether she found it funny, and tell her that I was really okay, but instead she asked whether my mum was in the audience. I told her no, she wasn't, wondering why that might be relevant, and knowing that I had purposely not invited her. She replied that that was understandable, it being such a traumatic thing that had happened to us.

Not long after, I watched *Nanette*, a ground-breaking stand-up show by queer Australian comedian Hannah Gadsby. Ground-breaking because at about the halfway point, Gadsby tells the audience that she cannot continue to do comedy. She explains how one writes comedy, setting up tension for the audience and then masterfully relieving it at just the right moment. Almost like a contract, the audience agrees to allow themselves to be made tense, in exchange for her relieving it and making them laugh. After this analysis of her own art, she demonstrates the audience's reliance on it by breaking the agreement; she tells the real ending to a story from earlier in the show - one in which she reveals she was brutally attacked – offering no consoling

punchline. ‘This tension is yours,’ she says, ‘I’m not helping you anymore. You need to learn what this feels like’ (*Nanette*, 2017).

After twelve years of writing and performing comedy, she had lost count of the number of times she had told another story: her coming-out story. The joke version. In *Nanette*, Gadsby goes on to confront this, explaining that she had ‘fused’ her stand-up telling of the event with what ‘actually happened’, and in so doing, ‘froze an incredibly formative experience at its trauma point’, repeating it, making it routine. She wanted to face the fact that the joke version of the story was not ‘nearly sophisticated enough to help [her] undo the damage done in reality’ (*Nanette*, 2017).

Of course I had an awareness of what the joke version of my story had omitted, I had after all done the omitting myself. My experience of the events required a certain breaking up and sealing off, so that, in assemblage, or re-assemblage, they constituted comedy. For example the omission of my distinct traumatic memory of the doctor’s hands trying to prise my knees apart, and the impatient words he spoke that I did not understand at the time: ‘she’ll need to learn to do it sooner or later...’. But what Gadsby seemed to be saying was that this was no good, this freezing, this sealing off. At least, not for the teller of the story, not ultimately. In the final ten minutes of the show she goes on to disclose that she was sexually abused in childhood, and raped in her early twenties:

> I need to tell my story properly… because my story has value. I tell you this because I want you to know what I know, I need you to know what I know… I will not allow my story to be destroyed… what I would have done to have heard a story like mine… to feel less alone. To feel connected (*Nanette*, 2017).

How does one tell a story properly? Is this more difficult when telling a trauma story? For Gadsby, it seems the act of repeating a clipped version of a story inhibits it from being fully witnessed, both by herself and others. Instead it becomes a sort of regurgitation of the same disconnection, something that might work for comedy but not as a way of helping to 'undo the damage done in reality'.

With this in mind, perhaps in order for a change or a shift to take place, the story must be told in an entirely new way, a form of poiesis, of making, of bringing something into being that did not exist before.

Aesthetic Transformation

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', or to being witnessed (7).

Art, in its varying forms, has long been a site where real life traumatic experience can be configured and reconfigured by the artist. 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 her book, *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 and, at the end of the twentieth century, that of Jeanette Winterson. Distinct in its tendency towards writing that 'instigates, facilitates or represents the transformational process of symbolization, thinking and working through', 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 (2014: 18, 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 felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest.' (2002: 119).

Pollock provides another example in the experience of Polish-Jewish writer and film-maker Chantal Akerman. In 1942, Akerman's mother, Nelly, was taken from her home in Belgium to SS-Sammellager Mecheln, a transit camp for those who would later be transported to Nazi death camps. Nelly was hidden, moved and eventually rescued, then reunited with another surviving family member. However very little of what actually happened was ever understood by Akerman, as her mother could not tell the story in any detail. In 2003, with the intention of collecting raw footage that might help to inspire her next film, Akerman visited her mother, along with her friend and cameraman, and had him record a conversation in which

she asked Nelly questions about her traumatic Holocaust experience. Later, when filming *Tomorrow We Move* - a film about a writer and her complex relationship with her Holocaust survivor mother - Akerman showed the raw footage to the actress playing the mother, again to influence and inspire the artistic interpretation of the character and the scene. It was after that, when Nelly Akerman herself was invited on set, in a twice-removed witnessing of her own trauma story, now aesthetically transformed, she was able to tell her daughter, 'I finally feel better' (Pollock 2013: 339). It seems that the trauma story, when held outside of both of them, was resituated, literally and symbolically, by the aesthetic process of film-making, and that subsequently this catalysed a positive change.

Aesthetic Distance

Another storyteller interested in witnessing her own trauma story is Alison Bechdel, not only in terms of how aesthetic processing can bring about transformation but also in the use of artistic enquiry as a therapeutic process. Her bestselling graphic novel *Fun Home* 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' that he had killed himself (2006: 27). 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’, observing that he might have been eager to witness in her some of the horror he was unable to invoke in himself (44). 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’ (2006: 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 her 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-externalizating 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-externalizating’, that which makes the trauma ‘other’, and therefore its state of alterity, that can facilitate a transformation in how the trauma sufferer experiences it.

Could this notion of alterity be applied to the fictionalising of events and people in relation to trauma in my novel? Or even in relation to self?

Chapter Four: The Multi-voiced Novel

One person alone is not a full person: we exist in relation to others.
- Margaret Atwood[8]

When I began writing the first draft of *We Are Volcanoes* I thought it would consist of one voice; the voice of the person bearing witness, the one entrusted with keeping the stories: Gloria. A character who, after years as a counsellor, listening to women and supporting them, would be faced with the challenge of holding her beloved aunt's story, and the painful feelings of rage and helplessness it would evoke.

What was it that made me decide against this single-voiced novel in favour of a polyphonic one? Early drafts of Gloria's first-person voice felt strangely formal and detached. My literary agent at the time commented that there was something 'muted' about the tone, a 'flatness' he hadn't experienced in my writing before, and a trusted writer friend described the feeling that there was 'something between Gloria and what she was telling, like a gauze or veil, preventing her from getting at it properly'.

I started to notice the issue of distancing language; phrases such as 'I thought', 'almost as though', 'perhaps', tic-like in their overuse, creating a sense of guardedness, politeness, as though Gloria was speaking to someone she did not know very well. Because of this I became preoccupied with the question, who exactly was she talking to?

I've no doubt this was heavily influenced at the time by the fact that I was rereading Samantha Harvey's *Dear Thief* – a novel-length letter directly addressing

[8] Atwood, M. (2019) *The Testaments*. London: Chatto & Windus. p. 148.

an old friend – and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, both for lessons on voice, the latter in anticipation of the upcoming release of its sequel, *The Testaments*.

Fiercely underlined in my old battered copy of *The Handmaid's Tale* are the lines:

> I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling… I need to believe it…. But if it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else (1996: 49).

The Handmaid's Tale was published in the year of my birth, 1985, and so I had successfully convinced myself that I'd been waiting for the follow-up my whole life. Without knowing a single thing about the new book, I was already intrigued by the semantic shift in the titular language, from the almost mythical, yarn-spinning singular 'tale' to the plurality of 'testaments', with its connotations of proof, confession and covenant.

At the time of *The Handmaid's Tale's* publication (and many times since), Atwood famously stated that there isn't a single detail in the book that does not have a corresponding reality, either in contemporary conditions or historical fact: 'I didn't put in anything that we haven't already done, we're not already doing, we're seriously trying to do, coupled with trends that are already in progress... So all of those things are real, and therefore the amount of pure invention is close to nil' (Neuman, 2006). This statement, along with her reluctance to be thought of primarily as a political writer and her belief that it would be 'naïve' to think that fiction could 'change lives' formed the basis of my obsession with the book (Atwood, 1982; Davidson, 1986:

24). I wondered to what extent many other novels could be said to consist entirely of things that have already happened somewhere, sometime. And I strongly disagreed with her about the capacity for fiction to change lives.

The Handmaid's Tale changed my life when I read it, aged twenty. It helped to spread the wings of my fledgeling feminism. It tended to the theoretical seeds planted by Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* and Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*, and opened up the flowers of my understanding in the way only fiction can, turning well-explained ideas into colourful, textured truths. Other books in this category for me are Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple*, Marilyn French's *The Women's Room*, *Rubyfruit Jungle* by Rita Mae Brown and *Bastard Out of Carolina* by Dorothy Allison. What pulses through all of these novels is the distinct first-person female voice, coming to consciousness, powerfully constructing accounts of trauma and (mostly) triumphing. Though *The Handmaid's Tale* is the only novel in the bunch labelled as dystopian, it is by no means any more harrowing than the others. But it is distinctly the least hopeful.

The first interview I read in which Atwood spoke about her much-awaited sequel, she declared it had 'tons of hope' (Allardice, 2019). In the same interview, when asked why she had chosen to write *The Testaments* now, she replied, 'For a long time we were going away from Gilead and then we turned around and started going back towards Gilead, so it did seem pertinent.'[9] She seemed to be saying she wrote it as a response to what was happening, and she wrote it because it was what was needed. Perhaps her views on what fiction can do have changed since 1985,

[9] As I write this, the story of a leaked draft US Supreme Court document dominates the headlines, revealing that justices appear to be planning to overrule landmark abortion case Roe vs. Wade, overturning nearly fifty years of legal precedent and rolling back female reproductive rights.

particularly since the election of Donald Trump and the donning of handmaid's costumes in women's right protests all over the world (Holpuch, 2018).

I read *The Testaments* in one greedy sitting, late into the night, something I could never have done with *The Handmaid's Tale*, with its highly self-aware, self-referential monologue-like prose, claustrophobic and dark and rich in obfuscation; prose I needed to digest in smaller chunks, go away and come back to.

The Testaments is polyphonic, told in three utterly different first-person voices, each with its own tone, ways of expressing and syntactical tendencies. I have always been especially gripped by novels employing this technique; distinctly separate voices each telling their own part of the story, a collective in the sense that their common objective is the telling, even though the parts they play and their perspectives may differ wildly. Novels like Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, Andrea Levy's *Small Island* and *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver. With the shifts in perspective and, more than that, shifts in sound and cadence, comes a sense that the reader is viewing the narrative through a prism.

I do not think it a coincidence that Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*, joint Booker Prize winner with Atwood, is also multi-voiced, heteroglossic (though not in the first-person), as Evaristo's story, like the others, feels all the more vital and powerful for being refracted through a diversity of female experience.

In *The Testaments*, the three women are speaking as witnesses, with the purpose of being put on record, saying what they have seen. Gloria is also a witness, but her purpose in speaking is to lay out what has happened in sequence so that its threads are clearer, and she can attempt to reconcile it in its entirety.

It was at this point I was brought back to the image of the women gathered round the table. What emerged was the sense that I must explore the narrative

through the voices of those other women as well. The title was, after all *We Are Volcanoes*, not *I am a Volcano*, it made sense that these other voices be given the opportunity to speak.

Imaginal Dialogues

In counselling I had the opportunity to experiment with what psychologist Mary Watkins terms 'imaginal dialogues': 'conversation between a self and an imaginal other(s), between aspects of the self… or between imaginal others with a self as audience to the imaginal scene' (2000: 2). She uses the term 'imaginal' as opposed to 'imaginary', according to philosopher Henry Corbin's distinction:

> Corbin rejects the word imaginary when referring to these phenomena, because in modern non-premeditated usage, the 'imaginary' is contrasted with the 'real'… equated with the unreal, the non-existent. Our high valuation of the sensible world, the material and the concrete (what we take to be 'real'), shines a pejorative light on the 'imaginary'. By using the term 'imaginal' Corbin hoped to undercut the real-unreal distinction, and to propose instead that the imaginal not be assessed in terms of a narrowed conception of 'reality', but a broader one which gives credence to the reality of the imaginal (4).

In this process I could experiment with the voice of someone else, my mother or a friend, for example, and then create a dialogue in which I speak *as* that person. It is an exploratory exercise not only concerned with shifts in perspective but in deepening understanding of events and people's behaviour or responses to those

events. The most illuminating of my experiences has been imaginal dialogues I have created with my younger self.

In her book *Invisible Guests: The Development of Imaginal Dialogues*, Watkins draws on the work of developmental theorists Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky and George Herbert Mead in order to analyse the ways in which trends in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy have permeated culture, tending toward the view of a singular, unified self as preferable, this being opposed to the idea that we are made up of multiple selves, identities or personalities.

Not only does she believe that we can benefit from embracing the idea that we are composed of many selves, she also thinks much can be gained from approaching and addressing these selves as separate, often disparate, identities or characters.

She argues that this 'multiplicity of voices do not simply appear in thought from time to time but actually characterise thought' (2000: 7), and so the process is an invitation to bring those characters into a more distinct awareness for yourself, a sharper focus. She explains that in an imaginal dialogue the 'therapist acts like a novelist might', facilitating the naming of the different characters, eliciting their individual voices, opinions and concerns, leading to the exploration of dialogical interaction between them (158).

And so conversely, I wondered whether the novelist could act as a therapist might, naming other selves as characters in a novel.

It is a well-established phenomenon that writers, particularly writers of fiction, report that that they experience hearing the voices of their characters (Foxwell, 2020: 102901). Novelists such as Virginia Woolf, Charles Dickens, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Joseph Conrad, Evelyn Waugh, Muriel Spark, JM Coetzee and Hilary Mantel have reported such experiences, as well as reflected on how these voices may express

lesser or 'unacknowledged aspects of the self' (Waugh, 2015: e54). Perhaps all novelists to some extent intuit that inner voices lend themselves to fictional characters and vice versa. For some this means the character has their own agency.

Alice Walker writes:

> Just as summer was ending, one or more of my characters – Celie, Shug, Albert, Sofia, or Harpo – would come for a visit. We would sit wherever I was, and talk. They were very obliging, engaging, and jolly. They were, of course, at the end of their story but were telling it to me from the beginning. Things that made me sad, often made them laugh. Oh, we got through that; don't pull such a long face, they'd say (1983a: 359).

What I find particularly fascinating here is how Walker implies that her characters are more knowledgeable than her, especially on the topic of themselves, and how not only are they telling her their story 'at the end' of it, but while doing so they seem to be *comforting* her.

I decided to experiment with a combination of these ideas, to conduct a 'listening' for these other voices with the question of what aspects of my self they might represent, in the hopes that they might provide me with new understanding, or even some form of reassurance.

Chapter Five: Gloria, The Survivor Mission and Completing the Cycle

Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes…is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival.
- Adrienne Rich[10]

In *We Are Volcanoes*, Gloria is Connie's niece, Trix's mum, Moll's granddaughter and partner to Echo. She has been a women's counsellor for two decades, but decides to give up work to take care of Connie full-time.

In writing Gloria, I wanted to capture the feeling of what it is like to bear witness to trauma. I wanted to write a character who had spent years listening to women talk about their trauma, and explore the ways in which this had affected her. I did not want Gloria to be speaking in her professional capacity, rather to show how the weight and drain of her professional life was affecting her personal life.

The unintentional distancing language I started with littered the prose of Gloria's voice. I decided to copy and paste the document creating another one to work on, and deleted all phrases that could be considered distancing, for example the first four words here: 'it was as though she was relieved to see that I was relieved' (14). I then read both versions aloud and was struck by the difference. The new version felt more candid, more sure, yet also immediately more vulnerable, embodied: '~~A sort of~~ Sadness rose up in me then' (104). In contrast, the first version sounded *professional*. I saw that I had written Gloria as my professional self. I understand why I had done this; distancing language can be a characteristic of a necessary professional boundary. To write Gloria as vulnerable, fallible, could feel

[10] Rich, A. (1980) 'When We Dead Awaken: Wrtiting as Re-vision,'*On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*. London: Virago Press Ltd. pp. 33-49, 35.

like a breaking of that boundary, something my professional self had been trained not to do for the sake of the women I worked with, but also for my own protection.

Literary critic and trauma theorist Shoshana Felman explains:

> The professionally trained receivers of testimonies [who] bear witness… cannot fulfil their task without, in turn, passing through the crisis of experiencing their boundaries, their separateness… at risk… They have to learn how to bond with the narrator in a common struggle to release the testimony, which… will allow the telling of the trauma to proceed and to reach its testimonial resolution (1992: xvii).

This led me to thinking about whether this is also true of a writer and her character, or even a writer and her reader, in that all are engaged in the active process of witnessing. This process puts the witness at risk of being affected negatively, but also engages the witness in the hope of a journey towards testimonial resolution.

Completing the Cycle

Drs Emily and Amelia Nagoski, describe our need to 'complete the stress cycle' in their book, *Burnout*. A stress response is an evolutionary adaptive response humans have to an acute stressor or threat, involving 'a cascade of neurological and hormonal activity that initiates physiological changes to help you survive', for example, an increase in heart rate to get more blood to your muscles quickly, heightened senses, increased alertness and vigilance, and a slowing down in digestion and immune functioning, as the energy is needed elsewhere (2019: 4, 5).

With trauma, including vicarious trauma - the nature of it being that which persists, continues, remains - the response of the body and mind is to a chronic stressor, as opposed to an acute one (Nagoski, 2019: 9). Drs Nagoski argue that what is important in both cases of chronic and acute stress is to complete the stress cycle. The example they give as a complete stress cycle in response to an acute stressor is being chased by a predator, a lion, running for your life, getting help from others in your village who slaughter the lion, then feasting and having an 'honorary ceremony together' (6). This type of full completion of the stress cycle is obviously not possible in the majority of instances of stress. This is especially true in cases of trauma, where during the traumatic event, it is very common for the parasympathetic nervous system to 'swamp' the sympathetic nervous system, causing a 'shut down' commonly known as a 'freeze' response (11). The Nagoskis explain that what is 'essential to our wellbeing' is to find some way to *enact* the resolution to the stress cycle – the most effective ways to do this include but are not limited to 'physical activity, affection, laughter, creative expression' such as writing and painting - literally tricking your body into believing the stressor has gone so that it will act accordingly, believing you are no longer in danger, thus completing the cycle (19).

Learning this has helped me in my day-to-day life, as well as clarifying what I needed to do in the novel: write a story that attempts to guide me, initially, and then subsequently the reader, through a complete emotional cycle.

Gloria's Session Notes

Taking my lead from what Lisa Marie Hogeland terms the 'consciousness raising' novels of the 1970s (1998: ix), and as a way of utilising my character Gloria in her professional capacity, I began experimenting with writing her fictional session notes,

those commonly written and kept as a record by the professional after a therapy session, summarising what took place.

Hogeland explains that in this type of feminist fiction, 'certain tasks in consciousness raising' are offered to the reader:

> to compare the problems encountered by female literary characters with her own, to explain similarities in terms of causes, and to decide an appropriate action… What makes a novel feminist in this analysis is *what a reader can do with it* (emphasis my own, 1998: xiv).

Gloria's session notes, then, are a fictionalised composition of various experiences of mine as a client in talk therapy sessions. I identified several reasons for their inclusion in the novel.

The first is that I am fascinated by the idea that a novel could have potential practical application, that a reader can 'do something' with it, particularly with a topic as affecting as trauma, and so I saw the opportunity to share information, exercises and processes that have helped me or those I have worked with. These include the use of poetry and symbolic objects to aid processes, references to somatic work such as breathing and grounding exercises, the use of physical and conceptual exercises such as *descansos* (154), and explorations of dream analysis and imaginal conversations.[11] I found the act of writing Gloria's session notes very grounding in itself, almost conjuring the feeling of having gone through the exercises myself in

[11] For a full explanation of the descansos process see Estés, C. P. (1995) 'Marking Territory: The Boundaries of Rage and Forgiveness', *Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories from the Wild Woman Archetype*. New York: Random House Publishing Group. pp. 375-403, 394.

that moment, and noticed that I gravitated towards writing or editing Gloria's notes directly after having written a scene I found stressful to write. Referring back to the notion of 'safe spaces', briefly discussed in Chapter One, I positioned these session notes at the end of each part of the novel they felt most relevant to, in order to create a sense of holding or containment for myself and potentially for the reader.

This is linked to the second reason I included Gloria's session notes, which is that I intended for them to offer a reprieve from the intensity of the first-person testimony, punctuating the narrative with a relatively distant tone, given their purpose.

Thirdly, I had in mind Julia Kristeva's concept of literature as depicting the 'subject in process' as not fixed but developing, 'being tested against the various contexts in which she has her being' and its particular relevance to feminist fiction, as Lauret describes the act of 'drawing on autobiographical discourse, telling a story of private failures [and successes], which are then re-edified as enabling and real because necessary for growth.' (Robbins, 2000: 290; Lauret, 1994: 99).

Lastly, I wanted the session notes to give a sense of the multitudinousness of trauma, both through the different ways women are affected, and as an indication of all the stories Gloria has been entrusted with over time, giving the filing cabinet 'ludicrous weight' (64), as mentioned in part one of the novel.

The Survivor Mission

Both Judith Lewis Herman and Cathy Caruth discuss the concept of a 'survivor mission' in relation to trauma processing and both relate this concept to a notion of 'responsibility' and reintegration (Herman, 2015: 207; Caruth,1995: 38). Responsibility here refers to a survivor's or witness' sense that something unjust has

happened, and their knowledge of this equating to a feeling that they are responsible for ensuring that something is done to address the injustice. What is to be done is not always clear to begin with, but the doing of it is crucial to the survivor's integration of what took place. 'Integration' here refers to what Herman describes as the 'third stage of trauma recovery', restoring connection to self and connection between a survivor and her community (2015: 3).

My hypothesis here was not only that I needed to write Gloria's survivor mission through to its resolution, but that the writing of it could function as a form of survivor mission for myself.

So what was Gloria's survivor mission and what was mine? What did they have in common?

My survivor mission was very much about humanising Gloria, my professional self, giving her a body, making her assailable, allowing her to be messy and make questionable decisions, and allowing her to centre herself and her experience. None of these qualities are suitable or relevant for a professional role supporting women in crisis, but I wanted to see what granting them to Gloria could do for me and my process. Perhaps is could enable me to feel more compassion for myself on reflection, both as someone who has listened to many stories of trauma, and as a survivor of my own trauma. And perhaps that could be something translatable into future work, both within the women's sector and as a writer.

I had another very strong, instinctive pull concerning mine and Gloria's survivor missions. I needed her to kill a rapist. I wrote that sentence first as 'I wanted her to kill a rapist', however that did not feel honest. It was not a preference or a whim, rather a requisite for my having gone through the process of writing the novel. It was to be my resolution in the writing, the way I completed the stress cycle.

Herman explains that some form of ‘revenge fantasy’ is common for survivors as well as those experiencing ‘witness guilt’, which is the feeling of helplessness or of desperately wishing one could do more in the face of someone’s suffering. Revenge fantasy is ‘one form of the wish for catharsis’; others include a forgiveness fantasy, or a compensation fantasy, in which there is ‘an acknowledgement of harm, an apology, or a public humiliation of the perpetrator’. The revenge fantasy can be helpful if the survivor ‘finds a way to vent her rage in safety’ (2015: 189, 145, 189, 190, 189). Perhaps writing it into a novel could be one such way, and perhaps this could even have a similar effect for the reader?

When I talked with people about Gloria killing a rapist, their reactions differed greatly, ranging from concerns that the reader would feel unsympathetic towards Gloria, all the way to concerns that the killing wouldn't be violent enough. Those worried that my reader would see Gloria’s character as having gone too far or ‘lost the plot’ suggested that I might consider writing the scene in question as ambiguous, the action of killing itself alluded to rather than stated directly. The problem was that I did not see how this could constitute a resolution for me. I had experienced, many times, reading, loving, feeling inspired by incredible feminist fiction that left me with little sense of resolution when it came to the survivor-protagonist taking action as a way of addressing the injustice and violence inflicted upon her. Often these characters would express the desire or the impulse to take action, whether in the form of a fantasy or even a carefully drawn-out plan, but rarely would they *enact* these urges, and in the few novels where they did, further suffering or destruction was on the other side.

In *The Colour Purple*, Alice Walker brings her protagonist Celie face to face with one of the character’s rapists and his latest child bride, showing the reader that

this was not a character who had changed or understood that what he had done was wrong. Celie herself says earlier in the narrative, to her friend and lover Shug, 'I think I feel better if I kill him. I feel sickish. Numb, now', and later, after learning of his death, 'I think of killing, being hit by a truck, struck by lightning, lingering disease' (2004: 129, 220). However, in front of him, neither Celie nor Shug confront the heinous actions of this man. Instead, he approaches them, they sit briefly on his porch with him, as he instructs them to, and calmly ask him the questions Celie wants answered about her biological father.

I felt the power imbalance keenly when reading this scene; he has the largest portion of dialogue, also gives instructions to two other women (his new wife and his cook), lies, grins, and goes unchallenged, while Celie tells the reader, 'I feel so sick I almost gag' (2004: 164).

While Walker ultimately grants Celie happiness with the return of her abducted children, a reunion with her sister and the inheritance of the rapist's grand property (which was rightfully hers all along), I would argue that Walker does not grant her much power or agency.

The reverse of this can be seen 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. 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-traumatised. 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)?

As a reader and a writer I require some element of hope, 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.

In her book *Liberating Literature*, Maria Lauret expresses a wariness of feminist fiction with a 'claustrophobic vision of female subjectivity determined by outside forces, a vision designed to induce fear' and Gwyneth Jones argues against 'too many pages dwelling lovingly on the nasty powerful men and the poor helpless women. This is cathartic but dangerous. It is bad magic; reinforcing the models of

defeat', and Duncker adds, 'recitations of our oppressions like a masochistic rosary do little to advance The Cause' (Lauret, 1994: 184; Duncker, 1992: 105).

In *The Women's Room*, Marilyn French's internationally bestselling novel[12], the character who takes the most direct, vehemently feminist action is murdered as a result, machine gunned to death, reduced to 'a mass of exploded flesh piled into a grave' (1977: 627). And Emma Glass's protagonist, Peach, in her surrealist novel of the same name, is given a not dissimilar fate. 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 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). When writing

[12] As of 2009 the novel had sold over 20million copies and been translated into 20 languages: https://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/04/arts/04french.html

trauma stories into a work of fiction, specifically those involving male violence, this is a particularly subversive act, given that this kind of trauma is largely defined by the way in which control and autonomy are taken away from the survivor.

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 in a similar way to Gadsby offering no consoling punch line (see Chapter Two), Allison needed us to learn 'what this feels like', to experience it and be affected by it with no reprieve or relief.

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, as Herman and Caruth explain, an integral drive for the survivor mission is a sense of responsibility, and this is relevant to the responsibility I felt for my reader. I could not let the story end in nothing.

Taking Action

Gloria's survivor mission is marked by a series of actions set off by the scene in which Connie is finally able to tell her that she was raped. In this scene there is a transference, one that feels inevitable, as Gloria tells us she was waiting, 'lying on top of the duvet' when Connie called her, knowing 'it was time' (90). This is a familiar feeling for Gloria, one of preparedness. When Connie's trauma story is transferred, the crisis of a breached boundary occurs; a less familiar feeling for Gloria. She is unable to hold what 'pours' out of Connie, and instead she swallows it. Because this is one trauma story too many and one too close to her - it being from the

woman who has cared for her her whole life, whom she now must care for - her professional self disintegrates. Her immediate thought is a search for meaning, and then a search for action. Feeling paralysed by both, and with the knowledge of what happened now moving around her body, ‘pulsing, threatening to burst out’, the only thing that unfreezes her is imagining setting fire to the house the rape took place in and watching it ‘burn it to the ground.’ (92). This thought slows her heart and loosens the initial grip the disclosure has on her body, but not for long.

Her first action is to visit the National Archives, a frustrating trip as she realises she does not have enough information about the rapists, and she doesn't feel able to talk about why she is looking for them. At this stage, she is not sure she actually is looking for them. Rather she is attempting to see what looking for them would feel like. She decides it would be too difficult, cost too much, and she swallows it again so that it is ‘forced down’; ‘There weren't going to be any answers, I told myself. And I tried to listen.’ (103). At this point in her narrative she comes back to her body - something each of the characters do for comfort or reassurance at different stages - and she meets her own eye in the mirror, admitting that she'd ‘become quite skilled at avoiding mirrors’ (103). In this scene, she contemplates the body as a site of resilience and therefore power, as well as sexual power. But as feelings of powerlessness return and intrude, her thoughts turn to concerns about Trix. Then a vivid memory comes ‘swooping in and landing in front of her’, of a ‘client from years ago’, whose abuser would ‘force her to remove her clothes in front of a mirror’. With this thought, she is brought back to Connie and the question of whether trauma leaves traces in the body, asking ‘what was her body to her?’. At this stage it feels impossible for Gloria to know how to help or move forward. But by the end of this chapter, Connie asks Gloria if she has spoken to the soldiers, and for

Gloria, this confirms that it is something she must try to do. The chapter ends with her telling Connie unequivocally ‘I'll find them.’ (107).

I wanted to create a similar certainty in the reader, a feeling of total support for Gloria's survivor mission, and for each step or action she takes to contain something that enables the next, making each one worthwhile.

Before Gloria takes her next action, a sequence of events spurs her on and triggers what she then decides to do. These include her conversation with her long-time friend Rae, in which Rae questions whether Connie's disclosure is a result of confabulation, followed by Gloria’s memory of when Rae was raped thirty years before. The combination of Rae’s doubt in Connie and Rae doubting her *own* experience – ‘I don't even believe me’ (115) – serves to strengthen Gloria’s conviction, as though she is sure her survivor mission will result in solidifying something which feels otherwise ungraspable. Then Connie's death, and the subsequent discovery of Janet's letter, propel her forwards, at first as though on ‘automatic’, ‘without thinking’ (136) in her search, but then stealthily, manipulatively in her developing a relationship with Eileen. In fact, these events propel her all the way to Bill Bridges’ porch and the confrontation she believes to be the goal of her survivor mission.

In writing the scene in which Gloria confronts Bill Bridges, I wanted to ensure that I presented her as having the most power. I did this by framing the scene with acts of resistance and rebellion from Echo and Trix. Echo firstly makes the bold move of ‘plonking herself’ down in the ‘forbidden chair’, one that, as Gloria is warned earlier, Bill ‘don't like nobody sitting in’ (174). Gloria is often inspired or reassured when observing the way Echo or Trix takes up space or confidently handles an interaction. Here she is emboldened to approach Bill by Echo’s protest,

embodying the idea Trix later explains, ‘because the other women were her mirrors.’ (193). This act also cuts through the oppressive atmosphere of the scene and sends Bill outside, making it then Gloria’s choice to go to him.

She steps out onto the veranda and positions herself with a view of Trix playing football on the lawn and the ‘dancing lights of the fireflies’ (179), reminiscent of Gloria’s descriptions of Connie (112), as though feeling her presence in the ‘orbs of light’.

Breath and sound are important in the scene. Gloria works hard to keep her breath steady and even, her voice ‘soft’ and ‘low’, as though she's talking to a child, while Bill's breathing is ‘laboured’, ‘forcing its way out of his nostrils’ (180). With Gloria’s senses heightened, she registers the smallest of sounds, like an animal hunting, the ‘creak’ of Bill's chair, the ‘click’ of his mouth, and while she is charged with energy, expanding, her ‘whole body fizzing like a dead limb filling with new blood’, in contrast, he is ‘ridiculous’, ‘small’, ‘clenched’. In the closing bracket to the scene, Gloria sees Trix triumphantly tackle Greg and score a goal, before she notices what is happening and takes her mum inside.

More often than not, when crafting a scene, I will write more dialogue than is necessary and snip away at it, starting with surplus to give shape, and then whittling it down to the essence of what is being said. With this scene, however, I began with barely any speech at all, wanting Gloria's words to feel distilled, essential, stark against the quiet. It wasn't until the third draft that I realised Gloria hadn't told Bill he was a rapist, and wondered whether I had subconsciously avoided it as though it might have a too seismic an effect on the scene.

Rape is a word many people find difficult to use, particularly survivors of rape. In my experience, rapists themselves react strongly to the word, often objecting to its use, even on the rare occasion they are actually convicted of it.

Out of the five novels discussed in this chapter, only one, *The Women's Room*, uses the word. As a therapist, Gloria knows the significance of naming as part of the healing process, and will have facilitated the process of naming regularly as part of her practice. But naming is also important as part of a process of 'public truth-telling' (Herman, 2015: 208), something that is necessary for social change. As Trix understands, the 'un-naming' of something can give it power over us (23). Where an abhorrent, always political act such as rape is concerned, not calling it by its 'true name' (Herman, 2015: 67) can contribute to the culture of silence feminists have worked hard to begin to lift it out of, reinforcing the idea that it is a private issue, and even a shameful one. Herman explains that 'refusing' to partake in this culture of un-naming is 'insisting that rape is a public matter' (73). In short, Gloria had to say it, and this would be what urges Bill to speak, telling her to get off his property. In the final draft of the scene, I added Gloria's parting shot, 'Gladly', as by now, I had had enough imaginal conversations with her to know that she would want the last word.

What was clear to me after writing this confrontation scene was that it wasn't enough, neither for me nor for Gloria. It would be enough for Trix near the end of the novel when confronting her father (305), but Gloria was past that stage. As a representation of my burnt-out professional self, she was not assuaged by my writing a compensation fantasy into being, no matter the words I gave her to use. As my instinct had predicted, I still required the enactment of some form of revenge fantasy in the writing.

Gloria's next action, that of leaving Janet's letter for Eileen, informing Eileen that her father had raped Connie, is desperate and destructive in nature, and born out of her feeling devastated that the confrontation was not enough. My readers were shocked at Gloria's decision to do this, and therefore questioned mine, calling the action 'cruel' to Eileen and very un-therapist-like. It was important for me to portray Gloria as capable of this act, one that part of her was hoping might bring about a greater good (such as Eileen leaving her husband and father, which it does, as we find out on p.287), but also one intended to hurt and fracture. This is because, as I signposted to myself in my journal, (see Chapter Two), when we give not from our 'overflow', then what we give 'is poison' (Gearhart, 1985: 24). It is also because Gloria is acting out of grief.

Having supposedly completed what she set out to do, and feeling that her use of words alone fell short, Gloria is now faced with the full force of her loss of Connie. Grief is inextricably linked with trauma, even without an actual bereavement. But facing the loss of Connie without the consolation that Gloria had achieved what she had hoped, causes her to lash out by leaving the letter.

In an exploration that sounds equally pertinent to understanding the complexity of the revenge fantasy, Judith Butler explains:

> Perhaps the wager is that this I, in destroying, suddenly becomes pure action, finally rid of passivity and injurability… Or perhaps in destroying, one insists that the rest of the world become mired in one's own sense of devastation. If the world is unlivable without those whom one has lost, perhaps there emerges a despairing form of egalitarianism

> according to which everyone should suffer this devastation (Cohen, 2014).

I wanted Gloria to demonstrate this questionable, reactive behaviour as a way of acknowledging the burdens she has had to bear and their increasing effect on her. However, I did not want to alienate my reader. To address this, I wrote some of that initial reader response into Echo's reaction as a way of absorbing it and giving it space in the narrative: 'Did you not think it might make it harder for her…that she'll just have to live with that now, on top of everything else?' (186), and this conflict, acting as a wedge between the characters, partially and ultimately enables Gloria to take the necessary steps for her final actions in the novel.

Much later in the narrative when Gloria is finally in the room with the other rapist, Dennis Miller, whom she has managed to locate with the help of Eileen, Gloria has more power than in the previous encounter. Dennis is in a nursing home, infirm, 'shrivelled' and most importantly, voiceless (320).

With my first draft of this scene, it seemed I had unintentionally taken on the suggestion of an ambiguous encounter, as one reader fed back an uncertainty as to whether Gloria had in fact smothered Dennis with the pillow, and several others said they thought the actual act needed to be clearer, more direct.

In my initial draft, I had intended two things: the first was to present the killing as having not been premeditated. The second was to present it as a non-violent act. My hope was that these would ensure the reader's support of Gloria, and if not support, then at least their understanding. I wanted there to be a simplicity to it, but with this, I think I robbed the scene of its physicality, the actual *doing*. Instead, in my eagerness to complete the stress cycle, I had written a paragraph in which Gloria

denounces the use of words, or ‘bones’, declaring, ‘better to do something. Better to give them flesh, make them live, enact them.’ (324). Upon reflection, I saw that those were words spoken *in* reflection, and so I made the decision to move them out of the scene, making room for the act itself - ‘I moved that pillow over Dennis Miller’s hateful face. I pressed down, hard, my hands sinking further into the shape of it, my arms stiff, bolts of energy running down them’ - finding a place for the words later, when Gloria is in the restaurant.

It is here, when beginning to reflect on her actions, that she once again meets with her own reflection, ‘the same woman’, though no longer avoidant of mirrors, and this time with no appraisal, but able to look herself ‘in the eye’, with a sense of realignment, and the beginnings of reintegration.

Chapter Six: Connie, Occupying the Present and Transforming the Trauma Story

I will take it all to pieces, I will resolve it to its parts, and then I will put it together again. I will reconstitute it in a form I can accept, a fictitious form.
- Margaret Drabble[13]

In the novel, Connie is Gloria's elderly aunt. She suffers from dementia and this triggers her into a traumatic reliving of when she was raped at sixteen years old.

With Connie I intended to do three main things: the first was to give voice to my own wounded self via hers, the second was to portray trauma as a 'perpetual present', and the third was to give form to that which has no form - the lived affective experience of traumatic memory (Pollock, 2013: 2). These three intentions together formed the basis of a broader intention, which was the transformation of the trauma.

Cathy Caruth explains that a defining characteristic of a traumatic event is that it 'is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time' or to use Dori Laub's words, 'trauma precludes its registration…It is a record that is yet to be made.' (Caruth, 1995: 4, 6). Or, if the event *is* to some extent 'witnessed', it is 'only at the cost of witnessing oneself' (7). An important part of this process of making a record was to integrate the self that survived the event with the event itself. I relate to this idea with my reference in Chapter Three to stories becoming frozen, 'clipped' or 'sealed off', almost script-like in that their repeated retelling, using the same lines for the same effect, can inhibit connection to what is being recounted, therefore also inhibiting any processing or transformation of the trauma.

[13] Drabble, M (1977) *The Waterfall*. New York: Fawcett Popular Library. p. 53.

All of this struck me as a question of access, and whether writing, or more specifically, fictionalising – reimagining, reconceptualizing - a traumatic event can enable the accessibility required for it to be assimilated or integrated fully.

Giving Connie's character's dementia was a way of emphasising or further drawing out the aspects of trauma I was particularly interested in: its complex relationship to memory and clarity, and its capacity for unreliability or doubt, from others or oneself. I had also, to my knowledge, never worked with a survivor suffering from dementia. And so it was a useful distancing tool, as well as one that would enable access in the writing.

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 sufferer 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 s*tricken*, *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.

A study in Denmark observed the effects of constructing and subsequently telling trauma stories through the method of 'flooding' (Agger, 1990). Using the flooding method, patients prepared written scripts with their therapist, describing traumatic events in detail, then read them aloud in the *present tense*, with the therapist encouraging them to express their feelings as fully as possible, using the narrative to give structure and voice to an intense 'reliving' experience. This was then repeated weekly for roughly twelve to fourteen sessions. Patients reported significant reductions in symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, including fewer nightmares and flashbacks, along with a general improvement in anxiety and depression, as well as psychosomatic symptoms such as pain and digestion problems, and these were reported as having continued to improve in the six months following the study. It appears that reconstructing trauma in this way, as part of a so-called 'reliving' of the event, can produce a change in the processing of the traumatic memory, and with this transformation a relief from many of the major symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, leading Herman to theorise that, 'the *physioneurosis* induced by terror can apparently be reversed through the use of words' (2015: 183).

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).

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. This is because writing as and for my wounded self, as well as my imagined reader, quite possibly a survivor, I wanted to write a scene that was relatable but not re-traumatising.

In Allison's case, the perpetrator's hateful dialogue is scripted, and every movement and action of his choreographed, as well as every injury inflicted on Bone detailed. Perhaps this was meant to be read not by a survivor, 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. Though, as I mentioned earlier in this chapter, I can only speculate as to what effects the process of writing it had on Allison herself, and whether it was for her, 'the thing needed' (1996: 3).

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' (88). Then the clear image of Dennis 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 personally experienced sexual assault, and I have had sexual assault disclosed to me most likely thousands of times[14]. If I were to find any common threads in all of these experiences, including my own, 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 session notes, 96).

In their essay 'Floccnaucinihilipilification', a word defined as 'the action or habit of estimating something as worthless', 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

[14] Both in my personal and professional life. In fact, disclosure from people in my personal life noticeably increased during the time I worked in my professional role, perhaps because knowledge of my work identified me specifically as an ideal person to disclose to for the survivor.

> secrete them and separate them, to depoliticize their body by rendering it detachable, violable, nothing (in Gay, 2019: 137, 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.' (in Gay, 2019: 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.' (89), 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' (89). She is commentating as a form of self-support, and continues to use this commentating as an aid to her sequencing what follows, 'What's next?', 'Then out of the front door. That's right.' (89).

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' (89), 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’ (89), 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 been 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’ (89). This is not where I ultimately leave her - after this, we hear the triumph of her conquering the pond and teaching herself to swim. Then at the very end of the novel, Connie confirms Trix’s hopeful imagining that she got to experience the joy and pleasure of romantic love and consensual sex. Nevertheless, the woods was where I 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’ (108) light of Janet'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.

Chapter Seven: Moll, Dissociation and Reconstructing History

Who am I? How many generations are in that pronoun?
- Griselda Pollock[15]

Moll is Connie's mother and Gloria's grandmother in the novel. Her treatment of Connie after Connie is raped destroys their already fractured relationship.

When I first started writing in Moll's voice, her anger struck me. Not anger like Trix's, fresh, 'energising', crackling off the page, but sardonic, stale, 'like rotting vegetables' (141). She didn't want to talk about what was going on for the other characters, or, at first, what I'd hoped she would talk about. She had her own agenda. She was acerbic, non-linear. She would interrupt me while I was shopping or on a train, demanding I listen. She especially liked to do this when I was somewhere without a pen, and so I would have to record her words in her voice on my phone when on a walk, waiting in the doctor's surgery, cleaning the bathroom. Her visitations were like hauntings. If I sat down at my desk to write her, she wouldn't show up, like someone who doesn't like being put on the spot or can't make eye contact. If I was direct with her, ready with pen poised, she evaded me. In an uncanny way, this reminded me of my dziadek and Ciocia Hela (see Chapter Two), their wriggling under my naively direct questioning, and how their offerings of story and history had to come on their terms.

But Moll was dead. I had never written in the voice of a dead character before. There was something freeing in it, a removed-ness, something to do with her being less bound to the world of the living, its self-awareness and awareness of others and

[15] Pollock, G. (2013) *After-Effects and After-Images: Trauma and Aesthetic Transformation in the Virtual Feminist Museum*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. p. 189

their feelings. Moll could speak in the novel in a way the other women couldn't because she was not amongst them.

In her book, *The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma*, Meera Atkinson writes about the usefulness of certain aspects of psychoanalytic theory when thinking about trauma and narrative. She draws on the work of Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok and their concept of trauma transmission as manifesting in the form of a phantom, a spectral presence, marking the way in which the 'undisclosed traumas of one generation influence and disturb the life of another' (2017: 92). The essence of the phantom is secrets, the unspoken, the residue of 'entombed traumatic events' (93). In a deep sense, this unspoken-ness is what gives the trauma its power. Trix knows this, and is 'not on board with the un-naming of things'; 'they wouldn't say his name… Without him having to do anything they *gave* him power' (23). And so listening to Moll, writing her, was an exercise in seeing what happens when the phantom speaks, to 'crystallise' that which is 'shapeless' (Pollock, 339).

Atkinson's explanation of this process is volcanic: 'traumatic effect rumbles, spills, bursts forth, erupts… from its restless grave because at the deepest level it seeks recognition, it demands witnessing and memorial and haunts until it gets it', and I wanted Moll's voice to embody this (2017: 131).

I tested her voice in short, sharp, almost unprompted bursts. Her first contributions are like interjections, prompted by what the other women are saying: Trix wondering what Moll would think, Gloria learning who Bill was, Connie disclosing to Echo that Moll didn't believe her. Moll begins to speak about her relationship with the soldiers and what they did to Connie only after Trix directly addresses her and asks her questions.

Dissociation

The first time Moll speaks in the novel she acknowledges the importance of language and naming. She ‘never let anyone’ call her Margaret, ‘it's fousty, dry’, and when the unnamed man in her company doesn't understand her, he's ‘an idiot’ (41). Her use and her rejection of language is a site of resistance. Her refusal to be ‘ignorant’ like others and to be associated with the saintly/parasitic name her mother gave her, her inability to hold back, to say something nice when she doesn't mean it, to ‘unbruise’ (42) the man’s fragile ego, these small acts of resistance sit directly alongside her profound capacity for 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).

Connecting to Connie's suffering and trauma would mean Moll connecting to her own. How can a woman believe and accept that her daughter has been raped if her main method of survival after she herself was raped and abused was to disconnect and downplay those events? It would be the emotional equivalent of dismantling a house you've built and digging up the earth underneath.

Both in my role in the women’s sector and in my own personal life, I have learned a great deal about and witnessed the short-term benefits of dissociation. It is dissociation that enables Moll to get up after Dennis attacks her with the brandy bottle in her final chapter, to clean up before Alan can see what has happened, and the same with the blood from her induced miscarriage, ‘sticky as paint’ (42). I have heard and witnessed countless examples of this. And the novel is full of these acts of dissociation, both helpful and unhelpful, when Connie focuses on the butterfly (89),

when Gloria doesn't register that she's put baby Trix to bed (136). What was emerging, for me, in writing in Moll's voice, was a deeper understanding of how and when dissociation happens, and what can happen if it is overused, or relied upon, as someone's default or only coping mechanism.

Perhaps this knowledge was already there for me after listening to thousands of examples of it at Women's Aid, but the later poietic process of making a character, a composite, crystallised something for me. Writing about dissociation felt, at times, to be its very antithesis, bringing awareness, connection and language into a space the brain purpose-builds for the opposite. I noticed that with Moll in particular, perhaps because of her removed-ness in time as well as her own relationship with dissociation, I was able to address my own dissociative experiences.

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.

Putting my characters' dissociative experiences into words – 'the wooden banister perfectly in line with my spine…the rungs of my back…I'd been thinking I was the banister' (43), 'Went limp in his arms…it was all of a jumble…hard to pin down really', 'didn't feel a thing' (118) – was a process of reconstruction, of reconnecting what had been severed, of meaning-making, and this writerly process enabled the writing of the paragraph before this one. Thus for me, writing this novel has been directly helpful in integrating repressed parts of my experience into conscious understanding.

Reconstructing History

Renowned psychologist Alice Miller writes about the reconstruction of traumatic memories and feelings 'not experienced consciously' 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', something Shoshana Felman calls 'witnessing [one]self for the first time' (Miller, 2008: 70, 2; Felman, 1995: 258).

Psychologist Emily Soroko found that this is especially effective when reconstructing the experience in a 'narrative manner', because of the specific way our brains structure and organise information when forming narrative (in Kubacka-Jasiecka, 2012: 218). 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 Moll 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-externalizating the event', so that I can 'take it back again, inside' (Felman, 1992: 69).

After Trix directly addresses Moll, what begins for her is a more linear recounting of what happened. Moll's reconstruction starts much earlier, at the age Connie was when she was raped, and then the same age as Trix is in the fictive present. In this way I think of the narrative as like a Russian doll, allowing us to go deeper layer by layer, un-weaving the web of how these characters and events came to be. As Griselda Pollock asks, 'Who am I, how many generations are in that pronoun?' (2013: 189). For the scope and capacity of this novel, the answer was four.

When Moll begins to tell the story of her teenage years, her first love and her relationship with her mother, one thing readers I consulted found palpable was her shame, the shame instilled in her by her mother which she in turn instils in Connie. Her references to shame are like a trail of breadcrumbs she leaves herself in order to find her way back to why she behaved the way she did - her mother calling her 'filthy', her sexuality, the way men have treated her, and later, Moll reading judgement into Connie's reactions to her behaviour (148). I wanted to explore the idea that shame is as transmissible as trauma, and that this is a cultural operation.

I would say that virtually every call I dealt with in my role at the helpline featured an element of shame, most commonly in the form of an apology.

Several studies indicate there is a significant relationship between dissociation and shame, and also withdrawal in response to shame and dissociation.[16]

When Moll is shamed by her mother, she withdraws. When Connie is shamed by Moll, Connie withdraws. In this way, shame, like trauma, can create gaps between a person and what they experience, between a person and another person, and even a 'subjective split' within oneself (Atkinson, 2017: 93). Moll's later chapters are an attempt to explain herself, to address some of the gaps that that shame created, and in so doing, reclaim them.

Atkinson states that it is the central work of literature dealing with transgenerational trauma to recognise those gaps, 'reinstating life within [them] through the acts of witnessing and living attention', so that instead of haunting the text, the phantom is monumentalised, memorialised in language (2017: 143).

Trix, as the youngest of the four generations of women in the family, is the only character who can summon Moll across the distance of those generations and

[16] Talbot et al., 2004, Lyons-Ruth, 2008, Ogawa et al., 1997 (as cited in Dorahy, 2013: 72-79)

the time between them. She is open and aware, wanting to learn from the past and from its stories, developing a 'delayed but vital sensitivity' to what has been inherited in the hope that this will prevent it from being inflicted again (Pollock, 2013: 351).

In her discussion on how the belatedness of trauma processing lends itself especially well to the process of art-making, Pollock asks the question, 'is it possible that the past only arrives once a future has been built to contain it?' (2013: 345). The answer I discovered in writing *We Are Volcanoes* is, yes, and that future was Trix.

Chapter Eight: Trix, Boldness, Futurity and Integrating the Legacy

> *The child within us is accustomed to speaking out… to those who have died and those who are absent, to those invisible guests who grace our table of thought.*
> *- Mary Watkins*[17]

In *We Are Volcanoes,* Trix is Gloria's daughter and Moll's great-granddaughter. Connie is her great-aunt. Trix narrates the 'At the Table' sections as she waits for Gloria's safe return from Paris.

Trix's voice was the last out of the four I constructed. I decided to try and write her as a manifestation of my teenage self, embodying my precociousness, anger at injustice, and a thirst for wisdom and understanding, but with a free rein over what she says and does in a way I could not grant myself at the same age. At the core of her character is her longing to know and to understand why things are as they are, along with a distinct boldness when it comes to asking questions and talking about those things. She represents the role I have had in my family, as I explained in Chapter Two; the youngest in the line of women, the one to ask the questions, to bring up the topic of trauma, the one who has arrived to contain the stories of the past, whose role it is to elicit these stories, keep them safe and integrate them for the sake of the future.

I first began writing Trix's voice in the form of spoken word pieces, in which she recounts her experiences of getting into trouble at school, questioning authority and rebelling. I performed the first two of these at an open mic night with the intention of doing this again, before the coronavirus pandemic halted these types of events. This experience was interesting because it meant that people were hearing

[17] Watkins, M. (2000) *Invisible Guests: Development of Imaginal Dialogues*. Berkeley: Analysis Press. p. 175.

Trix's voice rather than reading it. It allowed me to edit and make word or syntax choices based on what the piece needed for performance. However, I was aware that these choices might not translate directly to the page.

At first, I had no clear idea how these pieces would fit into the narrative of *We Are Volcanoes*, but had an increasing awareness that some form of process was taking place as I was writing and performing them. I was experimenting with writing my own teenage experiences - ones where I felt I had been unfairly treated - as having happened to Trix, and altering the outcome so that she took action, protested, triumphed, when in reality I hadn't always felt able to. Her voice was confident, intrepid, and at times strident, qualities I was punished for displaying at school and so dissuaded from exercising. But with Trix I could exercise them fully, knowing that the outcome was entirely within my control. With each one there was a small sense of resolution that came with the changed way I was telling the story.

I began to wonder what other experiences of mine I could give her that she could resolve in this way, and how these might fit into the scope of the novel.

After submitting the first fifty pages of the first draft, my supervisors raised the issue of the fictive present, asking when was the 'now' of my novel.

In their first sections, both Trix and Gloria refer explicitly to the position in time that they are speaking from, but where and when this is was not explained in the writing; I had not told the reader and so there was this sense of vagueness, of floating voices, which was affecting pace and the momentum. Though I knew I wanted the novel to feel like a conversation, a necessarily reflective one, that conversation needed to take place somewhere, it needed grounding, so that the reader could feel they were being drawn forward to a particular place and situation.

When my supervisors asked me when and what the ‘now’ was, two very clear images came to mind. The first was of the four women sitting around the table, the room dark outside of their circle, and my sense that they had gathered with a purpose, or were summoned. The second image surprised me. It was Trix, sitting at the table alone, with various items in front of her, cards, pencils, paper, and my feeling that she was waiting for something or someone, as though she were holding the fort.

With this image, I saw that her role had the potential to be more than my original plan for her. I knew that I wanted Trix to have her own quest, one that would track alongside Gloria's and at times would be in conflict with it, but would ultimately enable them to have a closer relationship. What I saw now was the possibility that Trix could hold the stories in a structural way, framing sections of reflection and storytelling with moments of reflexivity that would both root the narrative and propel it forward. In effect, Trix was the ‘now’. These moments of reflexivity would become the ‘At the Table’ sections that begin each part as well as opening and ending the novel. I did not feel able to write these sections, however, until I had completed the second full draft, and will discuss these further towards the end of this chapter.

Boldness

Trix’s boldness manifests in her emphatic voice, as well as in the decisions she makes. The rhythms and emphasis of the prose written in Trix’s voice were largely inspired by all the spirited teenage girls I have had the pleasure of working with in over ten years of secondary and A level teaching, as well as my own and friends’

teenage diary entries. Her sections, her arc and her voice have been the most contentious in terms of reader feedback.

At first, readers were averse to my use of italics, suggesting I find ways within the writing itself to create emphasis.

Comments included that it was distracting for the eye, or ‘too much’. I surmised that this might be a characteristic that was not smoothly translating from the performance pieces to the page. One or two readers commented that it seemed like a quirk or idiosyncrasy in her voice, and so it might be something they would get used to. This was enough for me to decide not to abandon it completely, but instead to refine how and when I use the italics for emphasis. I was interested in the idea of Trix’s voice being ‘too much’, a comment I began receiving as a teenager about my own voice and one I have heard in relation to women, particularly outspoken young women, countless times, but never in response to men or boys. For me personally, it begs the question ‘too much what?’.

With Trix’s voice I felt I needed to find a balance between its pitch and its ability to endear readers to her, tempering her tenacity with humour and vulnerability.

I noticed that another of Trix’s idiosyncrasies - her single word sentences - was effectively communicating her fervour, and so in instances where I had used both devices at once, I de-italicised the word: ‘displaced’ (34), ‘indecent’ (35), ‘interfering’ and ‘disbelief’ (305).

I also found ways for the plot to explore a tenderness and vulnerability in Trix, in her struggle for independence and the painful, destabilising discovery that her father raped her mother (206).

Exploring her character's responses to trauma in this way meant that it was not necessary to lessen or reduce her as a response to reader comments, but rather to make more of her, to create more space and opportunity for her character, to ensure she was not one-note.

Trix's ultimate act of boldness is perhaps confronting her father, Robert. Over the course of this project, through the processes of sharing my writing and receiving feedback, readers have frequently shared their personal experiences with me and explained how events in *We Are Volcanoes* have resonated with them. This happened most strikingly in relation to Trix's dynamic with her father. Readers spoke or wrote to me about their own fathers and the complexity of their relationships, some with awareness that this was affecting their reading of Trix and their responses to her character's actions, some without explicitly making that connection. I noticed that one or two who had talked about their decision to forgive or reconcile with their fathers questioned the scene in which Trix confronts hers. One in particular questioned the scene's function, suggesting it did nothing but 'confirm the message of the book', that 'men are irredeemably nasty and unrepentant', and that it might be better and more interesting for Robert to be 'left in ambiguity' with Trix receiving his birthday card, allowing the possibility of reparation for any reader who wanted it or not for those who did not.

For me, this scene is not about Robert. It is about Trix's assertion of a boundary with someone who has, and continues to, negatively affect her life, an assertion she was not capable of making at the beginning of the story. In that sense it is entirely about a young woman's triumph, rather than a particular comment about men.

Much earlier in my research the same readers expressed a concern that the novel was rather flatly presenting women as 'good' and men as 'bad'. To address this my supervisors suggested I pay special attention to the dynamics between the female characters, ensuring that I take care to depict their flaws and the tension between them.

Alice Walker had to respond to a similar challenge in an interview about her novel *The Colour Purple*, in which the interviewer stated: 'The women in your book are people that you cry over, you identify with, you want to love, you want to care about. The men in your book are, for the most part, despicable', to which she replied:

> I think that the book really accurately reflects what is happening in the world today and what has always happened in the world today. In fact, women are dominated by men…I think in any book, you choose your main characters, and the main characters in this novel are Celie, Shug and Nettie, and it is about the bonding of women. And these are women for whom men are not central. I say of myself and I say of them that men are not the center of my universe; I am the center of my universe. So I think if you look at it from that perspective, you can understand the structure of the book and the characters of the people (Walker, 1983b).

Other readers said that the scene in which Trix confronts her father was 'crucial', 'necessary' and 'strong', commenting on Trix's empowerment and her sense of closure.[18]

[18] Two readers told me that if Trix had reconciled with her father then they would have stopped reading the book.

I believe this scene is vital both for me personally and for the novel for several reasons. Firstly, I believe the scene earns its place as the climax to Trix's character arc. Throughout the novel we learn of her behaviours and experiences, sometimes through others, for example when Gloria describes her piling up books, 'creating a makeshift slide she then used to escape' her gated bedroom as a toddler (60), but mostly through Trix's own words and actions: her leaving the bloody tampon on the chair (35), her eating all the cocktail sausages (282), her leaving the hostel to have an adventure in New York (210). Trix is a doer. She is also a storyteller who understands the power of voice as well as taking action. She is brave but she is not fearless. She describes feeling 'like a coward' (34) and is honest about pretending to be more bold than she is in the hope that her actions will make her so. She explains she 'decided to play off quitting college as some empowered decision' when in fact she was scared of Robert waiting intimidatingly at the gates (39). Her fears frustrate her, make her 'angry' (145), and she addresses this by boldly confronting them as though she is not afraid at all.

To give her an ambiguous ending I believe would have been anticlimactic and incongruent with the momentum of her narrative, the way the narrative builds with her confidence as she gradually develops the tools that will equip her for the final confrontation.

Secondly, to return to Dori Laub's comment in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History,* and the notion that trauma survivors live 'with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure', as with Gloria's narrative, it seemed pertinent that I try not to replicate this sense of unended-ness (in Felman, 1992: 69). I wanted to see how an affective, ongoing experience of trauma could be transformed

by the process of writing it into fiction. For this to be at all possible I needed to put my characters in situations that enabled or even forced change to take place.

For me, on a personal level - one I am always operating at within this project – Trix's conversation with Robert was an opportunity to play out a conversation I never got to have with my father, as he died when I was Trix's age. Here I had a chance to steer, to script and direct that interaction, and to observe the effects of this process on me.

In her memoir, Dorothy Allison writes about her real-life confrontation with her abusive stepfather on her sixteenth birthday, after over a decade of abuse.

> 'You can't break me,' I told him, 'and you're never going to touch me again.' It was a story to tell myself, a promise. Saying it out loud - that was a piece of magic, magic in the belly… the terror place inside where rage and power live…for the first time I knew no confusion, only outrage and pride… In the worst moments of my life, I have told myself that story, the story about a girl who stood up to a monster. Doing that, I make a piece of magic inside myself, magic to use against the meanness in the world (1995, 68).

Allison describes this powerful final encounter with her abuser as something akin to alchemy, a spell that transmutes the story to armour; by saying it she makes it true, she speaks it into being.

This is very similar to how I felt in writing the scene with Trix and Robert, in that the process of poiesis enabled a new feeling of self-governance, where before there was a distinct feeling of lack of choice and agency. Perhaps more so than a

piece of protective armour, I felt as though I was forging a sophisticated set of tools that could be used to clear and cut back overgrown bracken, to create new pathways in thought and behaviour.

Alice Miller claims that imagined dialogues are a necessary part of the therapeutic process, explaining that in order to 'free ourselves from patterns at work within us…we need an emotional confrontation with our parents in an inner dialogue' (2008: 130).

The distinction between the process Miller describes and my own analogous one is that in fiction the writer must 'externalizate' the dialogue through the physical acts of writing it out and editing it, as well as through 'alterity', the making it 'other', through the process of fictionalising it.

What Trix says to Robert and to Gloria during scenes of conflict between them, is not necessarily what I would say to either of my parents in a real or imagined dialogue. Neither are Gloria or Robert portrayals of either of my parents, nor do they say what I imagine my parents would say. I believe it is the difference between my parents as I have experienced them and Trix's parents as I have created them, as well as the control I have in the outcome of their interactions, that allows for the powerful feeling of transformation I've described.

Significantly, neither Moll, Connie or Gloria gets to have these important dialogues with their parents. The closest is Moll in part six when she describes returning home from The Duke and recognising the power she feels in frightening her mother (293). However this is not a healthy working through of their problematic dynamic. It is not boundary setting or line drawing; it is a battle for domination and control, and continues to damage Moll's capacity for healthy relationships, most destructively that with her own daughter.

The fact that Trix is the first in the line of women to have those conversations is important to the concept of generational change and futurity.

Futurity

Lisa Maria Hogeland cites generational change as an important feminist characteristic of a consciousness raising novel, observing that, 'daughters and historical mothers represent change over time, the movement towards a future or the movement away from the past' (1998: 119). This seems apposite to the processing of trauma in that it allows an exploration of how trauma has moved down and through each generation with the potential to offer evidence of progress.

It is Trix's relative distance from Moll, both in time and relationship, that enables Trix to invoke her great grandmother, at first for the sake of figuratively mining Moll's stories for information that is relevant and significant to her life, and then as a means to enrich her understanding of the world, her family, her trauma, and ultimately herself. References to how Trix is similar to Moll occur throughout the novel - sometimes from other characters such as Gloria, 'Mum has always said I have your eyebrows. And your anger.' (141), and Connie, 'She looks like my mother, which is unfortunate' (48) – and sometimes from Trix herself – 'I wear it to honour all that is the same in us. When I shape my eyebrows, I literally do it with that picture of you next to my mirror as a guide.' (144). Trix relates to Moll through their shared capacity for resistance, and the reader's awareness of this grows out of the comparisons between them made by the others in the family.

These commonalities serve as grounds for a sense of belonging from which Trix can explore what is perhaps more important to the process of trauma transformation, and that is the differences between herself and Moll.

Hogeland explains the significance of ‘a notion of political feminist progress grounded specifically in personal generational change – in our difference from our mothers, our mothers’ difference from their mothers and our daughters’ difference from us.’ (1998: 125).

I explore these generational differences by giving Trix experiences that echo Moll’s in some way, showing that they differ both in the content of the story the character is telling, and in their mode of telling it. These contrasting experiences enrich and expand on Trix’s feelings about ‘this generational shit’, as she tells Moll, ‘I’m supposed to do better. I see you and I’ll *raise* you’ (143).

Moll recounts in a distinctly detached way her traumatic experience of being pressured into eating raw sausage meat by a male peer after her resistance to his sexual assault, ‘I told him to sod off and said I’d rather eat them split sausages straight from the bag. So he made me do that. Sick as a dog, I was.’ (219). Without the tools to process it, Moll freezes the story, telling it as a joke to Mabel, who laughs (220).

Trix also has an experience of being made sick from consuming too much sausage though hers is through choice, in a heady mixture of triumph and protest after confronting a bully, and she tells the story as a way of remembering Connie's mantra, ‘you can just leave’ (281) and of reassuring herself. She later briefly considers using it as a way of reassuring Gloria, when she thinks she might tell her of her plan to meet with Robert (285).

Both Moll and Trix describe their early encounters with sex and masturbation, and a growing awareness of their bodies’ capacity for pleasure.

Moll’s earliest experiences are connected to shame because of her mother. This is why she uses euphemisms in place of the language she does not have - ‘me down-

theres' (254), 'had a little fiddle' - and can only refer to DH Lawrence, a straight male writer, and his limited representation of female queerness and sexuality[19]. Although Moll does overcome this enough to find pleasure with Mabel, to experience 'the warm bursting' (253), and to learn that she deserved 'to have softness, a soft word, a soft touch' (290).

Trix's induction into the world of pleasure is largely political, with emphasis on autonomy and liberation, with guidance from her own personal pleasure mentor, Afrodite, and Black lesbian mother warrior poet, Audre Lorde[20].

Trix embarks on a journey of active research at the intersections of history, biology and sociology, developing her own language to name the different ways her body experiences pleasure. This section felt particularly important to the futurity of the novel, as Trix's character, in her familiarly playful way, creates a list of the 'many different types of wank' (246) she is perfecting. I deem this, along with Trix's envisioning of Connie's consensual and pleasurable sexual experience, a necessary balance in representation to the depictions of sexual violence in the novel, one that feels crucial to the relationship between trauma processing and feminist writing. As Ann Cvetkovich explains, 'sexual practice serves as a vehicle through which trauma can be articulated and reworked, often in somatic ways, and writing about it makes these practices public' (2003: 66).

[19] The chapter in DH Lawrence's *The Rainbow* in which Ursula Brangwen has a lesbian affair with her teacher, Miss Inger, in entitled 'Shame'.

[20] Afrodite's comments on pleasure as empowerment are inspired by Lorde's pioneering essay 'Uses of the Erotic': 'The erotic…is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honour and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves.' (in brown, 2019: 29)

Integrating the Legacy

The listening to the telling and retelling of these stories is, for Trix, a means to the integration of her family legacy, both of traumatic experience and experiences of learning, triumph and joy.

Psychoanalyst Judith Kestenberg uses the term 'transposition' to refer to intergenerational trauma: 'the uncanny experience where the past reality of the parent intrudes into the present psychological reality of the child' (in Pollock, 330).

In the novel, I use objects to symbolise this transposition. Moll's Russian doll, which was handed down to Connie and then to Trix, having been used by Gloria with clients in counselling sessions, represents the complexity of intergenerational trauma, as well as the concept of multiple past selves or layers of self. Trix understands this symbolism of transference, telling Gloria about the 'different versions of suffering stacked up inside each other. But yours was the biggest.' (207).

We see Gloria's client involved in a reintegration exercise as she separates and names each of the dolls, then, takes 'her time packing each of the dolls away' (229). But it is Trix who separates out the smallest one, the one that represents her, and gives it to Gloria to take to Paris in an act of supportive role reversal (315).

Another object is Connie's yellow suitcase, which Trix inherits at the start of the novel. It is she who eventually takes it apart to retrieve the letter and she who also plans to sew the lining back together again (131). And it is Trix who contemplates the symbolism of Moll's table, thinking of 'the trees that made [it]…who planted them, who chopped them down' (74).

Trix learns that to some degree her place at the table was already laid long before she was born, though she is also involved in the transformative process of artworking, in poiesis, as she draws and paints herself a new dinner party (215).

In Trix's final section at the very end of the novel, as Gloria returns and is safe, and when all the elements of the story have been laid out, and then taken back in, we see Trix get up from her 'place at the table and move forward', and she tells us, 'as I move, I feel it all, everything we've felt and done and said is all crackling at my fingertips like a superpower' (326), thus confirming the integration of the legacy.

Conclusion

we hatch the world anew

we stir up time

we shed our shadow skin

fire breaks out

- Verena Stefan[21]

In this contextual accompaniment to my novel, *We Are Volcanoes*, I have considered the ways in which writing feminist fiction can change the affective experience of the writer's trauma, experimenting with this idea in relation to my own processes and experiences.

As a piece of practice-led research, I have demonstrated how the Geneplore model of creativity (Smith, 2009: 23), characterised by the process of generate-explore-select-generate – or as I have come to think of it, a Geneplo*reflect* model – has led to the discovery of a combination of approaches to writing that has changed my felt experience of trauma.

This is, chiefly, the creation of a multi-voiced narrative that explores the writing of different versions of self as a method of addressing those aspects of trauma that could benefit from change. For me, those aspects were: the question of intergenerational trauma and what we *do* with what we inherit, the occurrence of adverse experiences such as flashback, intrusive thoughts and dissociation, and the concepts of trauma resolution and integration. By creating fictional characters out of

[21] Stefan, V. (1979) *Shedding*. London: Women's Press. p. 85.

explorative imaginal dialogues with various versions of self, and utilising those characters to explore different areas of traumatic experience that might benefit from a new perspective, 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.

Writing this work of feminist fiction, and, importantly, writing about the process of writing 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. They have said things I needed to hear.

My propensity for dissociation has significantly decreased, as has my tendency to experience intrusive thoughts. Both of these developed out of a necessary disconnection from what I was experiencing or witnessing, but have often prevented my processing of trauma healthily or effectively. Very recently a friend disclosed a traumatic experience to me, and for the first time in my memory I experienced feelings of sadness and horror *in the moment*, as opposed to feeling as though a switch had been tripped for endurance mode. This would normally trigger a hardening, so that I can be the vessel for the story and not *feel* it, only to have it intrude, disrupt or incapacitate me later. Whereas this time I was able to stay

connected to myself and to what my needs were. This has enormous implications for my wellbeing and also for my writing and my work. I am eager to see what else I can write and process, and how this might enable deeper connection to myself and others.

Fiction can essentially act as a narrative recasting of events and experiences that have otherwise not been documented or witnessed. Writing this fiction in the form of a novel, in its expansive alterity, has allowed me to simultaneously hide and share my traumatic experiences, something that felt wholly necessary to the process of effectively addressing them.

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).

With this empowerment comes a renewed sense that one person's experiences of trauma do not exist in isolation, and while I observe and feel these changes within, how trauma is approached, discussed and treated in the broader social landscape I inhabit is also integral to any notion of recovery I might have.

Elizabeth Hirsh states that 'the possibility of individual recovery of course depends on the quality of the social fabric', the threads of which are members of society, their interactions and connections (2005: 210). I believe that art exploring trauma situated within its political context can contribute to that 'social fabric', to culture and community, and that this is an important part of a survivor's trauma

recovery and also the prevention of that trauma. With an increase in awareness of trauma as political comes an awareness that each individual trauma sufferer is not broken, not the problem. And from this, the potential to feel empowered to transform how we live with trauma.

It is my hope that this research can contribute to a 'continually available loci of empathy and witnessing' for writers and readers alike, one that attests to the tenacity of survivors and the transformability of traumatic experience (Atkinson, 2017: 43-4). I hope to develop the ideas in this work into a feminist creative writing programme for survivors, and can see the potential for further research into exploring other writers' and readers' reflexive experiences.

Gayle Greene explains this powerful quality of feminist fiction: it can be 'a fruitful intertwining of endings and beginnings, a sense of the past as nourishing, feeding and renewing the present and future…this backward and forward movement dramatises that we *can* change the past by imaginatively recreating it, and that by changing the past, we can transform present and future' (emphasis in original, 1991:165).

Writing the final lines of the novel, I saw how profoundly the entire process had helped to alleviate the feeling that my experiences of trauma were burdensome. I no longer feel that I am carrying the stories on my shoulders. Instead I begin to feel like Trix, that they are magic at my fingertips, to be used at my disposal.

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