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Remembering trauma: the ghosts of self adaptation

Abstract:

When the writer creates text from personal experience, each text recreates the self through language, drama and adaptation. As one medium speaks to the power of memory and physical embodiment, another demands linguistic articulation for that same experience. It is through this process of adaptation, one finds the re-fashioning of a self both momentary and eternal. As a writer adapting her own biographical play into a work of creative fiction, it is this notion of the self as embodied in *geno* and *phenotext* that forms the basis of my exploration. Acknowledging the ghosts that exist within human memory, and the manifestations of identity they generate, what is most provocative is the process of turning the theatre of trauma and memory into symbolic language and image. Drawing from my own experiences of sexual and ritual abuse, I will reimagine my history as a work of creative fiction. Utilising Kristeva's concepts of the semiotic and symbolic, Bourdieu's *habitus* and field, and the meeting of simulacra and magic realism, I wish to interrogate the relationship that exists between drama and fiction, challenging notions of authority and the self their correlation presents. The symbiotic nature of memory as a conduit for what Baudrillard identifies as the hyperreal, demands from the writer a dichotomous tension between reality and recall, resulting in an identity that reflects duality, transformation and knowledge. Telling what is truth and seeking its linguistic expression, entails a brutal recognition of the fallibility of the human psyche and the medium through which it is articulated. It demands a recreation and remembering that challenges the limits of both language and the self.

Biographical note:

Kira Legaan is currently undertaking a Doctor of Arts at Sydney University. Having a background in professional theatre (NIDA graduate 2001), and dance (Qld. Ballet, 1991-1995) and having written and performed an autobiographical play at the Darlinghurst Theatre, Sydney, she is now turning that dramatic narrative into a work of creative fiction. It was produced by Lightyear Productions and sponsored by Mullinars Casting. Alongside the publication of her play, Legaan has also had work published in *The University of Sydney Anthology 2014*, Hodder and Stoughton's *Breaking The Silence*, and *Dance Aus* magazine. She has twice been awarded the university's Sir Walter Reid prize for academic achievement.

Keywords:

Memory – trauma – adaptation – re-creation – hyperreal

The Legacy

I have seen the face of evil
I have slept with it
this is who I am

It has courted to me through the dark
I have kissed it with lips of shame
this is who I am

I have ridden its crest in fervour and fear
I have risen and gone on
this is who I am

This was the poem that began the process of recording the story of my life. It started out as an acting exercise but became so much more. This poetic voice became the catalyst that allowed me to recognise the importance of a lived experience. And so I created and performed *The Legacy*, the play that broke the silence I had held about my own history. It was a story told by six different children, of different ages, all of whom held parts of me that I could not face. The work dealt with the challenging issues of incest, violence and ritual abuse. It was a play which focused on the relationship between a father, whose need for power drained the lives of his family, and a daughter who became the conduit for his damage and desire. In response to both the performance and its reception, it became clear that there was much more to uncover and more to tell. And so, in order to enhance the understanding of the impact incest and ritual abuse can have upon individuals and society, I have commenced the process of adaptation from what was an autobiographical play, into a work of creative fiction. Through the University of Sydney and its doctoral thesis program, I am creating a novel that tells of the complex lives of a family, for whom silence was its only means of survival.

The subject of abuse is one that has haunted society for centuries. Why does it exist? What motivates it? And most importantly, what is its legacy for those who experience it? My own history contains one of the most prevalent forms of incest, that is the one which occurs between father and daughter. However, my experiences fall outside the realm of what one may ironically call the 'normative' scale of sexual abuse. The satanic rituals that my father instigated, involved not only myself as the receptacle for his dysfunction, but also a number of grown adults for whom this secret society became the focus of their lives. Hidden within a small suburban town in the north of the country, these people and my family, were able to convince those around them, that they were just like everybody else. I knew differently. My childhood began with the violation of the inherent trust children place in their parents, and grew to the extremes of horrific degradation and human sacrifice. Paternal incest is one form of abuse that leaves its victims silenced and powerless, shattering family ties and disrupting social dynamics.

Contemporary events have exposed many forms of sexual abuse within institutions, educational facilities and other organisations, however the greatest incidences of this damage are still found within the familial home. I believe that to recognise the inadequacy of the family unit to protect its members from harm, is an undertaking that Western society still deems taboo. As much as we validate and compensate those who have been violated in places such as the football field, the classroom and the confessional, it still appears that our most idealised social construct- the nuclear family, is the one place in which trust and safety are most compromised. My own work towards addressing these concepts has propelled me again and again to the same question. Why does familial incest occur so frequently, and when it does, how do we understand and articulate the devastation and prophetic legacy it manifests?

The creation of my play attempted to examine some of these issues. Exploring the fertile and frightening ground that links familial abuse to domestic violence and misogyny, examining the causality that exists between incest and extreme satanic ritual. However now, my challenge is to take this dramatic embodiment of a story, one that utilised movement, voice, dance and poetry to express the experience of my history, and find a way to articulate those same experiences through the construct of language and fiction. How do I create a written text that captures the essence of gesture, of rhyme and rhythm, and the kinaesthetic responses of a body to profound trauma? Is it even possible? As Julia Kristeva tells us, the process of signification itself is reliant on a rational and grammatical formula which inherently prevents us from accessing the sensory and corporeal elements of the human experience. Language is limited in its ability to embody the components of trauma and suffering, as its very structure situates us in the realm of codified and ordered meanings. Within the work of critical theorists such as Kristeva, Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Baudrillard, lie concepts that are useful for the adaptation of a theatrical performance into a piece of creative text. Seeking to develop a phenotext,¹ the literary model of form and structure, one that can express the kind of articulation available through the medium of drama, is a complex task. In order to confront this complexity, this paper will examine Kristeva's notions of the semiotic chora and explore its efficacy to inform the writer's experience, and examine the navigation of the semiotic components of literary and linguistic expression. I will also turn to the symbiotic nature of memory and trauma, utilising Baudrillard's concepts of hyperreality and simulacra, in order to elucidate what the term re-creation means for the process of adaptation. I will then move to Bourdieu's theory of *habitus* and field, to navigate the intricate connections that exist between family and memory, and symbolic and social construction.

To initiate this challenge, I will begin by interrogating the ability of literature to successfully convey the impact of trauma. Trauma and its theoretical foundations have experienced a resurgence of attention in contemporary and postmodern discourse. The negotiation of history and memory that trauma carries with it, is one that speaks directly to familial and social iteration, resulting in an intricate nexus between the individual, the family unit and the social arena in which trauma takes place. Cathy Caruth, in her work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, suggests that history itself must be reformulated as a site of trauma. She posits that factual records and historical data are not sufficient when comprehending

the complexity and suffering inherent within human antiquity. Caruth is concerned with the mode of reference through which modern history is examined. She states that, 'we can understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting *history* to arise where an *immediate understanding* will not' (1996: 11). As my own biography reveals, memory and trauma are a symbiotic fusion of sensorial, corporeal and psychological elements, and the articulation of such provides challenges that language may not be able to meet. Through the medium of performance, I was able to access the physical expression and visceral impact of traumatic events. Allowing my own memories and an amplification of the images and sensations that accompanied them, to invest the theatrical work with semiotic accessibility, and the resonance of a kinaesthetic experience. In the creation of a written text that attempts access to these same modalities, I have looked to sources that enhance my understanding of the relationship between these two mediums, and the challenge of using the essence of one, to enhance the architecture of the other.

Baudrillard's notion of the hyperreal, is one which lends itself to the notion of memory and re-creation.² Although his models of simulacra and hyperreality are depicted more in terms of social systems and codified reproductions, I would posit that cognitive memory, as it recreates again and again individual history and psychological trauma, becomes by its very nature a simulation of itself. As the psyche recalls images and responses sourced from our own experiences, it is difficult to ascertain whether what we are remembering is the actual event, or the neurological recreation of it as it amplifies over time. And so Baudrillard's suggestion that 'the simulacrum dimension of hyper realism determines social responses' (1989: 83), is one that can be transferred onto the framework of traumatic memory. As the individual impact of trauma reiterates our responses to the social codifications that surround us, a cultural consensus of trauma becomes an inherent part of the fabric of postmodern society. It is this imperative of re-creation contained within individual recall, that is one of the most complex human conditions, and one which is extremely difficult to capture within the written form. For example, the scene of a profound ritual assault at the age of 10, and my memory of its occurrence, was captured in the theatre through the use of contoured lighting, the chanting of adult voices, and the use of a small cupboard in which the child sat whilst recalling the distress of the experience. The scene was staged in this particular way through the navigation of the trauma and confusion I felt at the time, and the work I had done psychologically, in order to be able to access its impact and express it onstage. Aurally, it began with the reconstruction of unidentifiable voices moaning in a satanic chant, which to a ten year old child seemed acutely terrifying. From this position of vulnerability, the character then proceeded to describe the horror of human sacrifice and gang rape. But to capture the essence of this dramatic scene within the construct of linguistic representation is another matter entirely. How do I signify the terror of that sound, the visceral shock of a decapitation, the overwhelming memory of powerlessness and annihilation? Of course as I have just proved, I have access to the language that describes the experience, and can signify through the linguistic meaning of such, a cohesive concept of such a traumatic memory. However this descriptive faculty and its structure, does not carry the same resonance as the more semiotic nature of dramatic

performance. Is it that one medium is more successful in embodying the essence of memory or trauma, or can we find a more effective way to articulate this kind of experience through the symbolic form? I believe it is possible to achieve through the written word, perhaps not the identical impact of dramatic or visual performance, but certainly an impact that is of equivalent provocation and power, however differently delivered.

In *Revolution In Poetic Language* (1984), Kristeva identifies the two core components of human linguistic expression as the symbolic and the semiotic. The symbolic order encompasses what is signified through words, punctuation and grammar, and its structure is taken from Jacques Lacan's concepts of the symbolic father law.³ Kristeva tells us that this symbolic order is one which does not allow for the transgressive forces of sensation, emotion and the feminine. It is only within the semiotic space, the space that comes before language, that we find a modality which allows access to these deeply primal and essential forces. As Anne Marie Smith attests in her work on Kristeva, 'the semiotic can be seen as an articulation of unconscious processes which fracture the common idealisation of those images and signs which secure the status quo, and guarantee the establishment' (1998: 16). If the unconscious primal force that existed before we became ordered speaking beings, still exists within us now, Kristeva suggests we must look to it for deeper signification. The relationship between the conscious symbolic rationale and the constant yet hidden semiotic force that runs beneath it, can assist the work of artists and writers to access and articulate difficult memories and emotions. Kristeva herself states, 'since the subject is always both semiotic and symbolic, any signifying system he/she produces is never 'exclusively' symbolic, but necessarily marked by a debt to the other modality' (in Smith 1984: 19). It is this constant disruption of the symbolic order by this semiotic force, that serves to destabilise the iconic status of rational language, and allows for a shifting and perhaps more effective way to express the extremities of perception and experience. However, Kristeva identifies trauma as an area of the human experience that is most problematic in its representation. She has identified certain kinds of traumatic experience as those that are 'unspeakable', unable to be articulated due to the extreme and abject nature of the experience. It is within this paradigm that we find issues such as incest, rape, paedophilia and death. Within this schema, it is the language we use to describe and articulate the experience, which fails to accurately contain the phenomenological effects of trauma, signifying their manifestation as unspeakable.

One of the ways in which Kristeva seeks to access this arena, is the location of the semiotic chora. This is a space in which the unspeakable and irrational find definition, it is a negative schema of loss and separation. Taking the notion of the chora from Plato's *Timmaeus*, Kristeva utilises the notion of the 'Beginning' and its links to the psychic drives of the unconscious. This concept aligns itself to Plato's statement that one plus one must equal three - a provocative notion of identity and the self. This equation consists of the concept that within each individual being there exists the one (or self), the other' (the repressed or semiotic) and the space or energy drive that exists between the two. Kristeva identifies this drive is a place of motility, an entity which Maria Margaroni describes in her essay 'The Lost Foundation', as 'transverbal,

that is moving through and across logos, and trans-historical, (existing alongside, opposite to and in the margins of history') (2005: 84). This un-articulated space is where we find the essence of the chora, a space that is always mobile, always present, and provides a continual drive to negotiate between the Lacanian Father Law of signification, and the constant breaks and disruptions to it, that engagement with the semiotic entails.

This kind of fluidity between these two modalities, may inform the relationship between dramatic performance and written text, moving from what Kristeva defines as the genotext, the 'textual inscription of semiotic modalities' (1998: 21), into the more structured form of the literary or phenotext. Of course the performance of my play used symbolic articulation in its spoken word form to relay the timeline of my history and make a cohesive structure, but the very fact that it was delivered through a living, breathing body, allowed it access to the semiotic arena. Through the conduit of physical articulation, linguistic symbols can embody the kinds of ruptures that defines the semiotic chora. Kristeva's exploration of this drive that exists between stasis and movement, the word and the body, is one of rich potential, as it allows for the possibility of rendering language in such a way that enables a manifestation of the inexpressibility of traumatic experience.

Shoshana Felman approaches the inability of language to capture individual traumatic experience, through the concepts of testimony and witness. In her iconic text, *The Claims of Literature*, Felman seeks to discover what sits beside the discourse surrounding trauma and witnessing, arguing for 'the absolute necessity of speaking' (2007: 10), whilst recognising the limitations of language to provide accurate communication. The subjective nature of memory and language raises questions about legitimacy, truth and the process of adaptation. When a work is cited as autobiographical, the very nature of the text carries with it a burden of proof. Ideologies of what is truth and what is memory become immersed in attempts to define agency and ownership. Leigh Gilmore, author of *The Limits of Autobiography* asserts that 'when the contest is over who can tell the truth, the risk of being accused of lying, (or malingering, or inflating....) threatens the writer into continued silence' (2001: 3). This is the kind of artistic coercion that Felman seeks to challenge and overcome. Gilmore's suggestion that 'the autobiographical project may swerve from the form of autobiography' (2001: 3) is a provocative notion, as she suggests that 'these departures offer an opportunity to calibrate our attention to the range of demands made by autobiography and the silencing or shaming effects they impose' (2001: 3). In *Telling Incest*, Janice Doane and Devon Hodges argue for the ability of autobiographical material to 'uncover the complex ways in which incest narratives are told and embedded in the world' (2004: 11). This notion speaks to the difficulty these kinds of text have in separating the ambiguity of memory and the trauma of the lived experience. As Kristeva states in her response to Felman's work on the power of testimony – 'the truth of trauma destroys all possibility of narration, all imaginary speech, even the most enigmatic poetry' (2007: 318). However complex, to encompass the narratives of trauma is an important challenge and one which remains at the foundation of human experience. If the theatrical performance of a play attempts one form of expressing that trauma, it is incumbent upon the creator of that

work to allow that same veracity to be accessed through the adaptive literary medium. In the textual form of my story, the reader will witness the embodiment of profound transgressions, becoming, through their own linguistic cohesion, both witness and survivor.

Another methodology to which I have turned in order to enhance this adaptation is the correlation between Baudrillard's concepts of simulacra and those of magic realism. The way in which we experience reality and memory are deeply tied to the notions of stimulation and recreation, as is the way respond to dramatic performance and the written text. The complexity of dramatic memory finds signification in the capacity of the magic realist image. In its ability to capture ambiguity, to signify the extraordinary or the supernatural, and to express the uncanny or the horrific, magic realism serves to produce images that may embody the unspeakable. According to Eugene Arvo, this type of image reflects the internal contradictions of the lived reality and is one that is able to 'recreate the real' (2008: 61), allowing it to become rendered as an 'immediate, felt reality' (2008: 61). This notion of a 'felt' reality, differs from Baudrillard's constructs of simulation and simulacra, in that instead of merely representing the image or experience, 'felt' reality attempts to signify it. Arvo suggests it is the 'artistic reality produced by magical realist writing in its attempt to reconstruct violent events' (2008: 61) that succeeds in rendering an effective expression of trauma. The meeting of memory and history can be framed through the representation of the paradoxes inherent in magic realism. Arvo argues that it is 'through the authors' and the readers' traumatic imagination, traumatic memories are turned into narrative memory' (2008: 61). This question of signification is one that Roland Barthes considered in his iconic essay of 1967, 'The Death of the Author', where he suggests that 'the writer's language is not expected to *represent* reality, but to signify it' (1973: 137).

This uncanny signification is one that finds its genesis in magic realism, and with these tenets in mind I have created a character that draws on a fusion of magic realism, the Gothic and dramatic personification. Through the figure of a life-size walking doll, one that has been passed down through the maternal side of my family, I am attempting to embody the challenging nature of both testimony and signification. Within my text, this lifeless entity is witness to the history of a family inculcated into violent ritual and sexual abuse. This doll acts as narrator for the novel, and will articulate the powerlessness and enforced silence of a childhood engulfed by family dysfunction. This uncanny figure will signify the years of coercion and fear, and will seek to amalgamate the notion of magic realism with the desire to expose familial abuse and its devastating consequences. Through the use of an inanimate object I wish to draw attention to the inhumanity of paternal incest and satanic ritual, highlighting the coercive nature of the nuclear family and gender reiterations. Because I was female, I was given this doll as a gift from my mother, continuing the maternal tradition of her lineage, in gifting this heirloom to the first born daughter on their fifth birthday. However I now intend to use this particular gift, and its markers as a gender specific and socially codified object, to interrogate the role of gender and history within my own family, and to expose the inculcation that lies behind the façade of normativity it contains.

This concept of tradition and familial inculcation, is one which Pierre Bourdieu examines, notably through his tenets of *habitus*, field and agency.⁴ Bourdieu suggests that we can trace our adult behaviours, fears and tastes, through our early socialisation within the field of family history. He argues that the familial dynamic and relational interactions experienced as children, inculcate the individual mind to perform and reiterate certain dispositions, leading us to recreate situations and relationships in our adult lives that reflect the earlier social structures of our upbringing. This is what Bourdieu identifies as the *habitus* and it is through the symbolism of the Doll, I represent this notion of historical inculcation. Bourdieu posits that the *habitus*:

Ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the ‘correctness’ of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms (1995: 34).

The character of the doll testifies to not only my own abuse, but to the past generations of abused women within my own family who have been taught to seek relationships with men who perpetrate and reiterate the cycle of trauma. This figure will also bear witness to the constant psychological training experienced by the female members of my family, resulting in the manifestation of incest and violence. My own mother was abused, as was her mother before her, and this generational pattern can be better comprehended through the theoretical framework of *habitus* and field, as we come to understand the way in which our early socializing structures compel us to repeat damaging and devastating patterns of behavior. This facet of incest is one which I will be able to signify more effectively in the novel form than in dramatic performance. My play focused only on the relationship between father and daughter, whereas the novel will encompass the whole family unit, and trace the historical influences and social interactions that allowed such actions to occur.

As a writer and survivor, the desire to comprehend the power of my own history motivates me to work towards the final product of a creative fiction that may enhance our understanding of profound human trauma. To utilise language and its capacity to transgress boundaries and articulate new understandings, remains the driving force behind my continued creative process.

Endnotes

¹ Kristeva defines the phenotext as ‘a symbolic product’, one which is regulated by the ‘constraints of biological and sexual difference and by generation and historical differences’ (1998: 21). The literary text falls into this category. Its corollary is the genotext which Kristeva identifies as ‘the textual inscription of semiotic modalities’ (1998: 21).

² Baudrillard defines simulacra as ‘reproductions of objects or events, while the orders of simulacra form various stages or orders of appearance’ (1989: 78). Baudrillard argued that through the social masses, simulacra came to dominate society and became the referent for fixed hierarchies and structures.

³ Lacan identified three ‘essential registers of human reality, the symbolic, the imaginary and the real’ (1953). Kristeva utilises Lacan’s notion of the symbolic, the structure through which language becomes the function for expression and articulation, defining it as the Law of the Father, in its correlation to the patriarchal function in Freudian psychoanalysis.

⁴ Bourdieu states that it is through the field, the place in which the habitus finds its expression, that we find the structures that hold dispositions and ideologies in place. He describes this set of structures as 'something non natural, a set of acquired characteristics, which are the product of social conditions and which, for that reason, may be totally or partially common to people who have been the product of similar social conditions (2002: 29).

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