Queensland University of Technology

Samuel Finegan

Deaths that wound: the traumatic potential of ghost stories

Abstract:

Trauma presents any writer with difficulties. Trauma lays outside the realm of representation, by definition something that cannot be expressed and that lies beyond ordinary means of recollection and representation. This article examines the close relationship that exists between trauma and ghost fiction. It highlights the potential ghost fictions, as a form of writing about death, offer writers as translators of historical and social trauma. By reading ghost fiction in tandem with scholarship on trauma fiction and autobiographical trauma writing, the article demonstrates how ghost fiction both prefigures a narrative understanding of memory and history in trauma studies, dramatizes some of the processes and risks of first and second party engagement with trauma and offers a unique opportunity to approach, interrogate and alleviate trauma from the *outside*. In short, ghost fiction enables creative interventions in social and historical memory not by offering realist 'precise data', but by 'speaking for the ones who did not return'.

Biographical note:

Dr Samuel Finegan was awarded his PhD by the Queensland University of Technology in 2014. His ongoing research interests are ghost fiction, monstrosity, paranormal romance and the intersections between reality, fakery, philosophy, literature and cultural studies. His thesis 'Broken gates and leaky graves' was nominated for a 2014 Outstanding Thesis Award.

Keywords:

Creative Writing – Ghost stories – Death – Trauma – Narrative therapy – Testimony

Introduction

'Death was anything but forgetfulness' writes Toni Morrison in the opening pages of *Beloved* (1987: 4). The wrathful ghost of Beloved is insatiable and unable to forget. She can linger after death because she is wounded. The logic of the ghost story goes – the dead can escape death, but only if they die badly and only if they reject consolation and comfort. In other words, only if they give themselves over to trauma. The wounds Beloved suffered in the woodshed are matched by textual wounds. The narrative itself is wounded: its reality ruptured by the return of the dead and narrative closure is forestalled by an act that cannot be atoned for and a victim who cannot be rescued nor healed. This 'wounding' on the level of narrative is a prominent feature of the ghost story as a form and brings the explicit supernaturalism of that form into a profitable dialogue with trauma writing which is itself already described in terms germane to the ghost. The descriptions found repeatedly in the writing of theorists like Cathy Caruth, Anne Whitehead and Dominick LaCapra are of trauma writing as a literary form dominated by haunting, possession and endless return.

This article will highlight the advantages ghost fictions offer to writers as translators of historical and social traumas. It will read ghost fiction in tandem with scholarship on trauma fiction and autobiographical trauma writing to demonstrate how ghost fictions prefigure (seemingly intuitively) a narrative understanding of memory and history in trauma studies and also how ghost fictions offer new possibilities for writers by being oriented, not around survivors, but around the dead. Principally, ghost fictions offer writers a way to approach traumata and the traumatised from the *outside*. This orientation, where protagonists and as such readers may 'encounter' rather than 'inhabit' the traumatised subject foregrounds the importance of witness, allows traumata to remain 'offstage' behind ghostly re-enactments and offers a resilient narrative structure which can accommodate the unreality of traumatic experience within familiar structures. Before discussing ghost stories' potential as vehicles for exploring trauma, it is first important to understand how trauma sits within the broad field of creative writing and literature studies.

Trauma and trauma lit

In psychological terms, trauma refers to a wound to the psyche: a profound moment of physical and/or emotional distress that destroys the mechanisms of cognition, memory and communication. With these mechanisms destroyed, the traumatised subject is not present (is not cognisant, cannot remember, cannot communicate) at the moment of the traumatic event. To this extent, trauma is anti-literary, actively defying and working against communication and representation. The traumata itself is a void that actively distorts and resists attempts to revisit or review it. Trauma makes itself felt only in its aftermath. Trauma's manifestations or, rather, the symptoms that reveal a subject as traumatised are revealed only after the traumatic event is ended. They are post-traumatic. Ruth Leys, in *Trauma: a genealogy* (2000), outlines Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as:

> Fundamentally a disorder of memory. The idea is that, owing to feelings of terror and surprise caused by certain events, the mind is split or disassociated: it is unable to

> recollect: it is unable to register the wound to the psyche because the ordinary mechanisms of awareness and cognition are destroyed. As a result, the victim is unable to recollect and integrate the hurtful experience in normal consciousness: instead, she is haunted or possessed by intrusive traumatic memories. The experience of trauma, fixed or frozen in time, refuses to be represented as past, but is perpetually re-experienced in a painful, disassociated, traumatic present (2).

The anti-literary nature of trauma here presents a writer with a difficulty: traumata's definitional *unrepresentability*. As Elizabeth Outka writes on the problem of reading trauma fiction like Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997):

> The very depiction of trauma is controversial; if, as many theorists argue traumatic events cannot be fully experienced or recorded by the victim at the time they occur and they are then, to a certain extent, unrepresentable, how can they be remembered by the victim later, and how in turn might the victim (and the writer – and the reader) give voice to something that is, by its very nature unrepresentable? (2011: 24).

What Outka eventually suggests is a literary figuring of traumatic symptom – a 'solution' also offered by Whitehead and Caruth. The attempt to capture trauma on the page becomes a translation of (post)traumatic symptom into a 'symptomology' of literary devices such as fragmentation, repetition, recurring motif and ellipsis which recreate or translate the disruptive *influence* of trauma on the psyche, rather than the traumatic events *themselves*. The symptomology adopted by writers aligns trauma fiction, in Whitehead's reading, with experimental and boundary testing writing styles:

> Trauma fiction emerges out of postmodernist fiction and shares its tendency to bring conventional narrative techniques to their limit. In testing formal boundaries, trauma fiction seeks to foreground the nature and limitations of narrative and to distorting impact of the traumatic event (2004: 82).

Writing about trauma in this way does not only solve a creative problem (how to represent the unpresentable) but may also have therapeutic benefit.

The therapeutic potential of trauma writing rests largely on the way the work of psychologist Pierre Janet has been adopted and critiqued by trauma writing theorists. Janet identified two kinds of memory which are summarised by Leys as '"traumatic memory" which merely and unconsciously *repeats* the past and "narrative memory" which *narrates the past as past*' (2000: 105) For Janet, the transference of traumatic memory into narrative memory was its cure. In her article 'The tale of two Bethanies', Vicki Lidner uses her experience as a creative writing instructor working with two traumatised students on autobiographical works as a case study for this kind of translation through writing. Of the initial attempts to articulate, Lidner writes: 'as the patient is often dissociated from the traumatic experience her initial account is liable to be repetitive, emotionless and incomplete, its images buried, or not verbalised' (2004: 8). In short, traumatised writing is poor writing. 'Poor' trauma writing recalls in its blurry imagery, repetition and incompleteness, the spectral figures that haunt ghost fictions – a similarity I will return to shortly. Lidner views her role as not only a sympathetic witness but a critical one. It is not enough to merely relay, in partialities, the basic data of abuse. Rather if 'writing is *better* than talking or repressing' it is

because of (creative) writing's ability to 'transform a painful, life-threatening experience into art, an abiding, transcendent, public testimony' which 'makes its significance available to others while obliterating its power over you' (Lidner 2004: 8).

If writing is able to rescript trauma and patch the wounded and disordered representations into a coherent, communicable story, it is because of writing's relationship with memory as a whole. In 'Memories under construction' (2014), Maria Cabillas demonstrates that writing never 'recovers' memory but rather creates it. Drawing on Nathalie Sarraute's autobiographical work, Cabillas argues that: 'the stories constituting our memory are not merely retrieved from the past, but emerging realities that require decisions involving dialogical dynamics at the present of writing' (314). All narrative ordering of memory, all translation of private to public experience requires invention and alteration – a negotiation between remembered experience and narrative coherence. As Cabillas also contends: 'writing and narratives are intimately related, and their connection is further more double, as writing acts as a mediating tool and as a semiotic platform to revisit, and to re-enact feelings of the past as they are narratively organised' (309).

All autobiographical writing, trauma motivated or otherwise, involves revisiting the past. This action does not leave the past untouched, but rather mediates it – translating raw experience into a semiotic system by which the past can be rendered coherent. When these tools are used by survivors of trauma, they become potentially therapeutic as Lidner and others show. With this understood, it is now time to return to the ghost, and what the ghost offers to public, social and historical interventions in trauma.

Ghost fiction and the traumatised dead

Ghost fiction offers several advantages to an author wanting to approach impersonal traumas. Like autobiography and memoir, ghost fictions are oriented towards the past. Rather than only the personal past, ghost stories open up the field. Ghosts confront protagonists and readers with violence, murders and injustices that they have not experienced and that do not originate in their psyche. By taking up an external position, ghost fiction dramatizes not the experience of trauma itself, but the experience of bearing witness to the trauma of others. The witness is *always* implicated in trauma narratives. Nora Strejilevich opens her article 'Testimony: beyond the language of truth' (2006) with a recount of the tortures practiced in the modern age. Of the survivors of these tortures she asks:

> Why do survivors of such a sinister scenario insist on telling their story? [...] not because they can give precise data about horror. But maybe because they are speaking for the ones who did not return, and their suffering would be meaningless if this story was silenced (702).

Strejilevich offers a compassionate reading of the need for testimony, even when the 'truth' of the official record cannot be reconciled with the stirring, and deeply believed accounts of the traumatised. As she writes, there is no 'precise data about

horror' but the hearing out of testimony, while fraught and uncomfortable, serves a public good. What is clear is that testimony needs to not only be spoken, but *heard*.

Not all atrocities produce survivors. When an event leaves only the dead, or when the survivors of unspeakable historical horrors, the holocaust, slavery, colonialism and the whole battery of societally and state sanctioned abuses, tortures and mistreatments age and die, how do we prevent those stories from becoming silenced? One method by which the victims of history (no one 'survives' history in the long run) can be resurrected is the ghost story. The ghost story, in its orientation towards death and its aftermath, can become a vehicle for historical allegory and social conscience. As Bliss Cua Lim writes (here specifically of ghost film, but the point is broadly applicable) in 'Spectral times' (2001): 'in the nostalgic allegory of ghostly return, what is dead and long past comes to life, old concerns acquire new urgency and relevance, and a radicalised historical consciousness fathoms the past's entanglement with immediate concerns' (288). Despite this, what the ghostly return heralds, like the disjointed and partial memories of the trauma survivor, is not always clear. The apparitions, inexplicable events, strange visions and intrusive thoughts that the living encounter in ghost stories are no more coherent, or narratively complete than those partial and blurred images and recollections of traumatic symptom. Like the representational crises symptomatic of PTSD, early encounters with ghosts and hauntings in fiction draw attention to underlying traumas through supernatural symptomology without explicating or laying bare the actual nature of the trauma itself.

An example of the 'traumatised' representation of the ghost can be found in *Dead Europe* (Tsiolkas 2005). The narrator's haunting by a murdered Jewish boy is only made visible to him in his photographs of Europe (the narrator is a photographer). Of these, the narrator says:

> They were the cities of modern Europe. The modern streets of Europe: Alexanderplatz, Rue d'Alsace, Kalverstraat. The streets were modern and sleek but the bodies in these cityscapes seemed ancient and damaged and broken. In print after print, there appeared the same reptilian face. The dark ghoulish boy, his face sometimes leering, sometimes grimacing, always emaciated, always hungry, always reaching out grimly for my eyes (336).

The ancient, damaged and broken bodies of his photography do not connect directly with the story of the 'dark ghoulish boy'. Or rather, these images do not connect in precise, factual ways. Rather, the haunted imagery that returns to Tsiolkas's protagonist via his camera is a symptom of trauma – of the holocaust, of the Greek civil war, of his particular family history – but not an explication of it.

The *encounter* with the symptom of trauma is only part of the process. In order for the trauma to be resolved, it first needs to be made coherent and the raw horror of ghoulish figures, bloody spots and disembodied voices linked to particular histories and events translated into a story or history. Hauntings and ghosts are not a 1:1 return of history. Rather, like writing, they are semiotic systems which draw upon, but are not confined to, the past. Just as psychological trauma continues to inform the lives and experiences of traumatised subjects, the ghost draws attention to traumas which continue to influence the present. As Lim writes:

> The hauntings recounted by ghost narratives are not merely instances of the past reasserting itself in a stable present, as is usually assumed; on the contrary, the ghostly return of traumatic events precisely troubles the boundaries of the past, present and future, and cannot be written back to the complacency of homogenous, empty time (2001: 117).

Ghosts are not themselves testimony. Rather, ghosts are clues, threats and traces that can be used to produce testimony – even in the absence of survivors. In this way, the engagement of ghost fiction protagonists with the ghost is also an engagement with history. Excepting those, mostly short, stories where the inexplicable is promptly explained by a passer-by who happens to know the true history of the renovated manor or abandoned colonial house, the principle dramatic action of the ghost fiction is not ghostly encounter but *research*. That is, the work of finding an explanation for the ghost and rendering it coherent. This kind of fiction fits closely with what Suzanne Keen terms 'romances of the archive' in her 2001 book *Romances of the archive in contemporary British fiction*. According to Keen, these romances are detectable as:

> They have scenes taking place in libraries or in other structures housing collections of papers and books; they feature the plot action of 'doing research' in documents. They designate a character or characters at least temporarily as archival researchers, as questers in the archive. They unabashedly interpret the past through its material traces; they build on a foundation of 'documentarism', answering the postmodern critique of history with invented records full of hard facts (1).

As with the ghost story, these romances are opposed to the post-modern project. In this way, the ghost story is a less boundary pushing way of exploring trauma than the post-modernist/experimental writing demanded by Caruth and Whitehead. Within the archetypal ghost story there is a truth that can be reconstructed through material relic and record. Ghostly narratives feature many of the same techniques of traumatic symptomology. The unreality of this 'ghost narrative' however, is embedded in a more traditionally realist and less disorienting text that allows the reader to approach the instability of trauma and the traumatised from more familiar footing.

In an example that hesitates between direct and indirect symbolism, there is Lucy Sussex's short-story 'Frozen Charlottes' (2005). In this text, the misdeeds of the past are represented by a type of doll called Frozen Charlottes found in the foundations of an old, much remodelled house. An infertile couple purchase an old inner-city bluestone looking for a 'Project' to distract them from 'the sunny room upstairs, all filled with nursery things, in their cardboard boxes, never unpacked' (201). Lured by 'a scratching, as if something's trying to get out' (203) the female protagonist falls through the rotten floor of an 1890s annexe and discovers the first of the dolls:

> The doll is china, and it has, quite definitely, been buried. The clay is hard as concrete, but she hesitates to use more than a trowel less she shatter the china. At the end, she has a blistered pal, but holds a baby doll, moulded all in one piece: head, legs, arms and torso (205).

The doll is of a type made between 1850 and 1914: 'the same era as the front of the house' (205) and, like most ghostly artefacts, immediately recalls the question of history: 'or herstory, given that a little girl must have played with this' (205). Like

many haunted objects there is nothing objectively strange about the dolls. They were a 'popular, mass produced' (206) model. The dolls derive their strangeness from their questionable probability and their numbers. Eventually a 'whole army of dolls' is discovered beneath the house, 'all buried' (207). The husband and wife are informed by an old homeless woman that: '"they dug up every inch of the land there was, and they found nuffin"' (207). From the homeless woman and their own research at the library archives, the couple come to understand the dolls' meaning. Their house was once home to Mrs Wynne, a 'mass murderer' (210) who ran an adoption agency 'which consisted of various PO boxes and one woman with a carpet bag' (210)

Where 'Frozen Charlottes' distinguishes itself is in the self-conscious respect for history that its protagonists display. Even before finding the doll, they are fascinated by the building's history – 'I should go to the library, the local historical society, see what they know about it' (203), states one character – and their excavation of the dolls is marked by the same care displayed earlier. The couple are active in uncovering the narrative, encouraged rather than forced to do it, by their discovery of a singular doll. Only once they have uncovered the signified history for themselves, and demonstrated again their care and compassion towards these relics, do the supernatural events actually occur:

> It seems like sacrilege, after what they know, to just dump the dolls on the brick or concrete, so he lines the claw-footed bath with an old blanket and carefully lays the dolls on top. […] The contents of the bath seethe, sending dolls falling out onto the concrete. They break, a plaintive plink like drops of rain, then a shower, as they continue to tumble. The remaining dolls in the bath have transmogrified into chubby toddlers, who totter on the rim of the bath, fall to join their fellows. […] A pause, then a doll dressed flapper-style appears over the side of the bath, sexily posing as she walks. Another doll approaches, pushes her off (211).

Violence intrudes into the text in a rarefied form. The dolls however, are not recreating their demise – there are no slaughtered infants or suffocated babies in the tableaux, instead they are playing out the lives they would have led if not for Mrs Wynne, complete with death. The couple is shaken, and the story closes with a minor epiphany: hand in hand they stand before the mass of china and clay dust pondering their lives and those of these poor broken others, pondering the 'what-might-have-beens' (212).

What is the result of 'Frozen Charlottes' excavations and supernatural eruption? Are Sussex's protagonists now traumatised? Many ghost stories seem to realise the implicit threat of engagement with trauma – that trauma is contagious. For those attempting to work with, or merely engage with subjects of trauma whether as traumatised individuals or narratives there can be a profound psychological cost. The possibly contagious effects of trauma have already been identified in psychology. Cubilič demonstrates that the DSM IV recognises the potentially far reaching causes of trauma: 'the italicised phrases [from the DSM IV] emphasise that people can be traumatised without actually being physically harmed or threatened with harm. That is, they can be traumatised simply by learning about the traumatic event' (2005: 4). Many ghost stories seem to take up this warning. The halls of ghost literature are

littered with the corpses and wrecked psychologies of the curious. As there is a growing body of literature documenting the cost of witness on those working or living with traumatised people. Haunting and ghostly narrative's place within horror relies in fact on the idea that the wronged dead are reaching out for more than peace and reconciliation and the possible costs of reaching back.

Even in cases where the reader's empathy is assumingly fully engaged as in the murdered children and subsequent ghosts of *Dead Europe* and *Beloved*, there is no guarantee of a happy ending or final rest. In both of these cases, the returned dead cannot be propitiated, and their presence in the livings' lives threatens to overwhelm and destroy those they haunt. The final chapter of *Beloved* begins with a warning:

> There is a loneliness that can be rocked. Arms crossed, knees drawn up; holding, holding on, this motion, unlike a ship's, smooths and contains the rocker. It's an inside kind – wrapped tight like skin. Then there's the loneliness that roams. No rocking can hold it down. It is alive, on its own. A dry and spreading thing that makes the sound of one's own feet going to seem to come from a far off place (Morrison 1987: 274).

Beloved cannot be sated, and the 'problem' of *Beloved* cannot be read into coherence. No amount of investigation or empathic concern can make Sethe's actions, and history of slavery that drove them, reasonable. In these narratives, the best that can be done is for the ghost and its unsolvable, unconquerable trauma to be repressed again. Writing on Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and Morrison's *Beloved*, Ramos sees the ghost as a breach in realism that while calling attention to the unhealed wounds of history is also 'warning the reader of the dangers of becoming possessed by a powerful history' (2008: 49).

Ghost fictions are an ambivalent form – both heavily invested in hearing out the dead and demonstrative of the dangers of doing so. This ambivalence can both obscure its inherent ethical impulse towards compassionate witness, as well as offer it as particularly fruitful territory for authors to tread out the complexities of dealing with the traumas of others. While it is not possible, I would contend, for a character to come through the ghostly encounter, the research and the propitiation completely unscathed the ghost story can allow a particularly incisive way of engaging with trauma and the traumatised, while leaving the trauma itself offstage.

While shaken and moved, I would contend that the married couple of 'Frozen Charlottes' is not traumatised. They are not traumatised as they have had no contact with the genuine trauma. The characters approach the past with not only curiosity but engaged and appropriate empathy:

> Written testimonials by survivors require a similar move on the part of the reader – a willingness to engage openly with the witness's text and to acknowledge the aporias of the text as sites of witnessing that are bounded by, but not articulated within language (Cubilič 2005: 10).

As violence intrudes into the text in a rarefied form – symbolised rather than represented (or re-presented) in the dolls' shadow-play – the characters are able to process the narrative and pay the dead their empathic due without encountering the original trauma and as such becoming themselves traumatised. Outka comments that

The God of Small Things solves the problem of representing trauma by showing its symptoms rather than its substance: 'as readers have not experienced the trauma, they may experience the symptoms, but the originating traumatic moment is not lurking within their consciousness' (2011: 32). This is what the ghost story offers a writer interested in digging into social and historical traumas – a semiotic system which can call up the misdeeds of the past, but leave the essential traumatic matter itself in the aporia appropriate to even survivor testimony. As in genuine testimony, there remains an element that is unspeakable and must remain unspeakable. In the final chapter of *Beloved* Morrison repeats three times 'this is not a story to pass on' (1987: 274-275) and yet, she has passed the story on for a reason.

Works cited

Cabillas, Maria 2014 'Memories under construction: writing, narratives and dialogues' *Culture and Psychology* 20 (3), 308-329

Caruth, Cathy 1996 *Unclaimed experience* Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP

Cubilič, Anne 2005 *Women witnessing terror* New York: Fordham UP

Keen, Suzanne 2001 *Romances in the archive in contemporary British fiction,* Toronto: U of Toronto P

Kilby, Jane 2007 *Violence and the cultural politics of trauma* Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP

Lidner, Vicki 2004 'The tale of two Bethanies: trauma in the creative writing class' *New Writing* 1(1), 6-14

LaCapra, Dominick 1998 *History and memory after Auschwitz* New York: Cornell UP

Leys, Ruth 2000 *Trauma: a genealogy* Chicago: U of Chicago P

Linowsky, Naomi, R 2011 'History is a ghost story: reflections on South Africa, collective trauma and the uses of poetry' *Psychological Perspectives* 54(4), 388-413

Lim, Bliss Cua 2001 'Spectral times: the ghost film as historical allegory' *Positions: east Asia cultures critique* 9(2), 287-330

Morrison, Toni 1987 *Beloved* London: Chatto and Windus

Ong, Walter J 2002 *Orality and literacy: the technologizing of the word,* Routledge: London

Outka, Elizabeth 2011 'Trauma and temporal hybridity in Arundhati Roy's *The god of small things' Contemporary Literature* 52(1), 22-53

Ramos, Peter 2008 'Beyond silence and realism: trauma and the function of ghosts in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Beloved*' *The Faulkner Journal* 23 (2), 47-66

Roy, Arundhati 1997 *The god of small things* India, IndiaInk

Strejilevich, Nora 2006 'Testimony: beyond the language of truth' *Human Rights Quarterly* 28(3), 701-713

Sussex, Lucy 2005 'Frozen Charlottes' in *A tour guide in utopia* Parramatta: MirrorDanse, 200-212

Tsiolkas, Christos 2005 *Dead Europe* Milson Point: Vintage

Whitehead, Anne 2004 *Trauma fiction* Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP

White, Michael 'Working with people who are suffering consequences of multiple trauma: a narrative perspective' in *Trauma: narrative responses to traumatic experience* Adelaide: Dulwich Centre, 25-86

Wisker, Gina 2005 *Horror fiction: an introduction* New York: Continuum