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Strange body bedfellows: Écriture féminine *and the poetics of trans-trauma*

Abstract
Écriture féminine *(the 'feminine' and revolutionary writing posited by theorists such as Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva) and 'traumatic' writing have each been positioned as attempts to liberate the unconscious and speak the unspeakable. However, they don't necessarily amount to the same thing simply because they privilege the articulation of repressed material, taboo subjects or unconventional narrative. This article interrogates the notion of feminine writing and proposes a poetics of trauma, exploring their common ground and relationship as highly somatic and affective forms of writing, as well as the ways they may critically differ; the nature of traumatic memory, its tendency to surface as repetition, its particular temporality, and its preoccupation with historical and generational shame distinguish it from* écriture féminine*. Here I argue that while the poetics of transgenerational trauma qualifies as* écriture féminine*, the reverse does not necessarily hold true. Further, I suggest the poetics of trans-trauma illuminates the processes of transmission and the cultural conditions and collective trauma associated with it, thereby becoming writing as a social force and political import.*
Keywords: poetics, trauma, affect, écriture féminine

Reading trauma theory one comes repeatedly across an interpretation that to speak or write trauma is to attempt to liberate the unconscious and express experience not representable in language. The claim that is made is that trauma is not readily available to conventional discourse in language. This claim is based upon a general understanding of trauma responses as 'the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena' (Caruth 1996: 11). Here, the subject is rendered speechless by delay, by a lack of psychic registration and the seemingly incoherent reverberations of belatedness.

The post-structuralist feminists, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva, both highlight another area of the unsayable, or at least the not sayable in ordinary language. In Cixous's works (Cixous 1981a, 1981b) this is depicted more or less, depending on the particular work, as writing the body (that which remains outside of figurative and conventional language) and writing the experience of woman (marginalised in phallocentric culture). Cixous has famously asserted that 'feminine' and 'revolutionary' *embodied* writing challenges cultural and literary gender operations, relating this practice to the affective and bodily depths, though as Oliver points out, the body for Cixous is 'not merely the physical body. She is not proposing some kind of biologism. Rather, for Cixous the body is a complex of social and biological processes' (Oliver 1993: 174).

Kristeva (1984) relates unrepresentability to what she calls the semiotic chora (the term chora is borrowed from Plato); following on from, and complicating Lacan (1977), she relates the semiotic to the maternal, which 'prefigures the Law of the Father and the onset of the Symbolic' (Oliver 1993: 3). This pre-linguistic 'semiotic aspect of signification indicates what is "below the surface" of the speaking being' (McAfee 2004: 18). It is bodily and linked to the energy of the drives and the relationality to the maternal, but it is not simply somatic; it is also linked to the liminal, the thetic and language, however socialised and conditioned, is always operative in relation to both the somatic and thetic, to greater or lesser degrees. For Kristeva then, the subject is involved in a signifying process that cannot be reduced to categories of simple representation. Though Kristeva resists the idea of sexed writing, even in metaphorical terms, it is this inference of the pre-linguistic maternal that has been read as denoting a feminine element in language, resulting in a differently nuanced comprehension of feminine writing to that of Cixous.

Yet, those at the forefront of literary trauma theory who have done so much to advance understanding of the operations of trauma and literary testimony, such as Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman, do not appear to have engaged with the question of sexual difference or the gender relations of, and within, language, when formulating their textual theories of traumatic writing. Even the psychoanalytic theorist Maria Torok (Abraham & Torok 1994), who takes an interest in both the literary operations of trauma and sexual difference, seems nevertheless to keep the two concerns separate in her work [1].

In both schools of thought the desire to speak, to write, to testify, contradicts the predisposition to elude language. Caruth refers to trauma as, 'the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available' (Caruth 1996: 4). Felman articulates the need to address and express trauma as a desire to, '*seek* reality' by exploring the 'injury inflicted by it' in an effort to 're-emerge from the paralysis of this state' and move on (Felman 1995: 33). In extolling writing that 'consists in saying the worst', Cixous appeals to us to 'go and see, and not only see but inscribe the abyss we are' (Cixous 1993: 42). And as Oliver states, Kristeva holds that, 'in poetic language the semiotic recalls its own repression and this is revolutionary' (Oliver 1993: 100). So it is that the desire for voice and reckoning calls forth experience that resists language, drawing us into therapy and/or the arts, into writing and reading, into spaces and relations in which affect can lead the way.

This article explores, via a close and comparative examination of two autobiographical novels, the workings of the kinds of text suggested by theories of feminine writing and the textual production I call the poetics of trans-trauma (trans-trauma being my abbreviation for the familial transgenerational transmission of trauma and its relations with cultural and collective trauma; poetics refers to the writing of trans-trauma). My aim is to position my theorising of the poetics of trans-trauma by situating it in relation to a significant literary and feminist theory in order to show how the traumatic and feminine are implicated in, and by, one another in certain writing practices that, though indeed revolutionary, have ultimately less to do with biological gender and more to do with the resonance of traumatic affect in bodily inscriptions.

The notion of *écriture féminine*, as primarily championed by Cixous during the late 1970s and early 1980s, sought to challenge phallocentric and logocentric gender relations with a vision of a feminist and revolutionary writing. Contentious from the start, it gave rise to international disputes about what constituted the feminine and whether or not a gendered casting of language was useful or advantageous. As well as highlighting gendered aspects of language,

écriture féminine also demonstrated an approach to writings that sit outside the dominant literary modes and the norms of the commercial publishing industry. Both Cixous's *écriture féminine* and Kristeva's revolutionary writing point to the production of writing that confronts established conventions, and it does so by means of an affective poetics.

I relate this understanding of *écriture féminine* to my conceptualisation of a poetics of the transgenerational transmission of trauma by reading two classics of poetic prose in order to undertake an analysis of the similarities and differences between *écriture féminine* and the poetics of trans-trauma. I hold *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, by Elizabeth Smart (1991), to be a prime example of feminine writing as described by Cixous and Kristeva; and *The Lover*, by Marguerite Duras (1992), as both characteristic of feminine writing and an illustration of the poetics of trans-trauma. As I hope to illuminate, the crossover between *écriture féminine* and the poetics of trans-trauma suggests that *écriture féminine* is, at root, a kind of traumatic writing, and that the poetics of trans-trauma is, at root, a form of *écriture féminine*, though one that focuses on the operations of the transmission of trauma, familial and cultural. I argue that both are informed by gendered trauma, shame, wounds and scars and that both seek to destabilise dichotomies in which qualities attributed to the masculine are privileged (such as logical and rational thought and language) by way of profoundly affective writing practices.

Revisiting and reclaiming *écriture féminine*

When contemplation of the body in writing trauma inevitably led to questions around gendered social, theoretical and literary operations, my undergraduate reading of Cixous's exuberant texts celebrating *écriture feminine* came to mind, a seemingly obvious portal for reflection. No sooner had the thought occurred than reticence set in: the bold concept of *écriture féminine*, as proposed by Cixous, has been, for all its poetic glory, a sticking point. Even Cixous herself admitted it was more a framework for exploration and a rallying cry rather than a theory proper, stating: 'It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded – which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist' (Cixous 1981a: 253).

Nevertheless, the notions of subversive writing proposed by the so-called 'French Feminists' generated a great deal of discussion, and dissent, particularly from American scholars and more materialist oriented feminists such as Jones (1981), an early commentator and critic. While it is not possible within the scope of this article to do justice to the debates around feminine writing, I would like to draw out at least a couple of the issues raised in those debates in order to clarify my embrace of the term, and to position my view of the poetics of trans-trauma in relation to it.

It is notable too that there has been some discussion as to where Kristeva should be positioned in relation to *écriture feminine* and certainly to any notion of women's writing per se [2]. Though Kristeva wrote about her concept of revolutionary, and in some sense feminised, writing around the same time as Cixous was publishing on *écriture féminine*, their propositions were constructed in distinct ways. This disparity is key to my understanding of feminine writing. For Cixous, *écriture féminine* redresses patriarchal social and literary operations through the practice of a bodily writing, while Kristeva theorises a revolutionary practice of/in language that facilitates social and

political revolution. In 'Sorties' (1981b), Cixous critiques the binary oppositions that culture, philosophy and literature are based upon, positing her 'qualifiers' of masculine/feminine as a way of critiquing this binary imbalance and phallocentric, logo-centric social and political order. Conversely, Kristeva's revolutionary writing takes place in what Oliver calls a dialectic oscillation between the symbolic order – the dominant discourse of making sense – and the disavowed semiotic, which speaks the unconscious and drives via the musicality of poetics and avant-garde writing, and which is most evident in tones, rhythms and gaps (Oliver 1993: 95).

In Kristeva's view, the semiotic is more active in this oscillation in revolutionary writing than in traditional literatures, and she conceives of the semiotic as preverbal and linked to the maternal. It is this gendered aspect of Kristeva's semiotic that has seen it linked to Cixous's characterisation of the feminine in literature and to Kristeva's being associated with Cixous's *écriture féminine*, despite the fact that Kristeva herself has rejected the claim to a 'woman's writing', stating: 'there is nothing in either past or recent publications by women that permits us to claim that a specifically female writing exists' (Kristeva 1987: 111). Interestingly, though Cixous has often been charged with essentialism for her conception of a feminine writing, and though she herself fanned the flames of that heat in the kitchen with her waxing lyrical about women writing in the same breath with which she speculated on the glories of *écriture féminine*, Cixous has been careful to distance her gendered 'qualifiers' from 'socially determined' sex.

Granted, some Cixous passages do muddy the waters. She states: 'Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies…' (Cixous 1981a: 245). She also writes that while men are 'coaxed toward social success, toward sublimation', women 'are body' and to her mind this calculates as 'More body, hence more writing' (257). These read as direct equations of woman, body and writing. On the other hand, she stresses the cross-gender potential of feminine writing. Unsurprisingly, many failed to grasp the complexity of the apparent contradictions of Cixous's vision, which at one level championed the writing of women, while at another went to pains to stress the metaphoric and non-biological foundation of her *écriture féminine*. In 'Sorties', Cixous argues that 'socialized and metaphorized', via the production of signs and relationships of power and production, 'an entire immense system of cultural inscription readable as masculine or feminine' (Cixous 1981a: 93). She stresses that she uses masculine and feminine as 'qualifiers of sexual difference', as cultural signifiers as it were, and that the 'difference is not, of course, distributed according to socially determined "sexes"' (93).

This claim would appear to be verified by the fact that Cixous wrote her PhD thesis on Joyce, has often spoken of Genet as an exemplary practitioner of *écriture féminine*, along with Latin American writer Clarice Lispector. I propose, then, a meeting place between the thinking of Cixous and Kristeva, a casting of *écriture féminine* that leaves the heady advocacy of the 'second wave' women's liberation movement behind in a renewed effort to challenge the patriarchal bearing and heritage of society at the deepest strata through language and literature, beyond the specificity of the given individual body or its biological sex. So long as culture is rooted in and by, binary oppositions, in which the masculine is privileged, the term *écriture feminine* remains useful, if for no other reason than that conceptions of revolutionary and feminine operations and writings reminds us of the conditions in which we participate in culture, write, read, and theorise.

On the poetics of trans-trauma

My use of the term 'traumatic affect' is an attempt to address trauma in an affective framework and affect in a trauma framework by exploring how affect works in relation to writing trauma and how trauma is written affectively. What might it mean for affect to lead the way? Traumatic affect refers to what Gregg and Seigworth define as 'an impingement or extrusion' of 'a state of relation … of forces or intensities' (Gregg & Seigworth 2010: 1) stemming from traumatic experience. I suggest that the operations of affect are key to the exploration of how trauma is transmitted transgenerationally and to writing and literature that speaks it. The phenomenological approach to affect, as theorized and discussed by Tomkins (1963), was taken up by Sedgewick and Frank (1995) who critiqued the post-structural tendency toward abstraction and the hyper-sensitivity to perceived essentialism evident in the Humanities in the twilight of the twentieth century and insisted on the importance of Tomkins' theory of affect and the affective reality of the body. This reclamation of Tomkins might go some way to providing a basis for demonstrating the subjective and interpersonal dynamics of trans-trauma and its poetics.

Of particular interest here is his concept of shame-binds, which, I argue, are critical in trauma transmission due to their capacity to attach the shame of trauma to other affects and to thoughts and behaviours, individual and cultural, a point I address more substantially later on. In their introduction to *Scenes of Shame: Psychoanalysis, Shame, and Writing* (1999), Adamson and Clark remind us that Freud acknowledged that poets and philosophers had discovered the unconscious before him. This nod by Freud to literature was elaborated in Cixous's and Kristeva's celebration and promotion of this textual potential in notions of feminine writing. The poetics of trans-trauma, then, describes such literary and philosophical mining of the unconscious as it relates to violation and trauma and affect – familial and cultural.

Shame is the central affect operative in trauma transmission, and therefore it is of key importance in the poetics of trans-trauma. Tomkins cited shame as the most negative of the negative affects, declaring that of all the affects it is shame that 'strikes deepest into the heart of man' (Tomkins 1963: 118). For this reason, as well as its adhesive quality, Tomkins viewed shame as the most pernicious of affects, going on to theorize shame-binds as the way in which shame readily becomes bound with drives and other affects, which Adamson and Clark discuss in relation to writing (Adamson & Clark 1999: 15).

One of the specific characteristics that differentiate the poetics of trans-trauma from *écriture feminine* is the way in which the poetics of trans-trauma exposes the traumatic shame-binds inherent in patriarchal familial and cultural operations. This is not to say shame-binds are not present in *écriture feminine*; only that they are not necessarily explicitly outed and engaged with in relation to familial and cultural transmission. Adamson and Clark discuss the way in which shame is an integral aspect of any textual embodiment of the unconscious. To quote: 'When violations occur in chronic or traumatic form, shame becomes the core of severe structures of defence in the traumatized individual or community' (Adamson & Clark 1999: 18). This implies that the circulation of traumatic affect plays out past the subject and family to networks beyond – events, movements, collectives, institutions, milieus, trends, communities, politics, creeds, religions, genders, sub-cultures, races and nations. It is this circulation and transmission that is illuminated when the writerly practice of the poetics of trans-trauma breaks through individual and social defence structures; the poetics of trans-trauma, in its writing of familial and cultural trauma, involves a heightened presence of traumatic shame, and a kind of literary outing of it as a social force.

I turn now to Smart and Duras to advance exploration of the affinities and points of departure between *écriture feminine* and the poetics of trans-trauma.

Of love affairs and language

Lauded a masterpiece by Angela Carter, and widely held to be a rare gem of poetic prose, *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* chronicles Smart's passionate affair with the married British poet, George Barker, with whom she bore four children. *By Grand Central Station* was published during their four-year affair in 1945. In her foreword to the 1991 publication of the book, Brophy defends it as a 'novel' despite stating that it is little more than 'the bare three lines of a love triangle, and even those have to be inferred from the narrator's rhapsodizing or lamentation over them' (Brophy 1991: 8). This comment is crucial because though the book is, I contend, a fine example of *écriture féminine* as espoused by Cixous – poetically somatic, penetratingly affective, and stunningly unconventional at the time of its publication – its narrative is, for the most part, confined to the conditions of the affair.

The Lover, another critically acclaimed experimental memoir, hailed as one of the greatest autobiographical novels of last century, is, at least in part, about Duras's teenaged affair with a wealthy Chinese man in the dying days of colonial Saigon. In it, Duras demonstrates the feminine in and of language – that which is bodily, affective, and in Kristeva's terms, semiotic. (Kristeva's 'semiotic' does not refer to de Saussure's structuralist theory of semiotics. Her semiotic is the emotional underbelly of the Symbolic Order.) She also illuminates transgenerational and intergenerational trauma and the traumatic shame-binds of patriarchy, imperialism and racism. As Maxine Hong Kingston says in her introduction, 'The couple with no names in *The Lover* also reach each other through history that moved populations singly and en masse to and fro across the earth and into its every corner' (Kingston 1992: vi); it is primarily the traumatised relation with the Other that Duras mines – erotically, familiarly, and culturally.

Later in her introduction, Brophy notes the 'liturgical' (1991: 9) nature of Smart's work, its 'plundering classical mythology' and 'mastery of metaphor' (10), and she likens the book to the work of 'the only other supreme prose-poet of our age, Jean Genet' (11), whose work, we may recall, Cixous holds as exemplary of *écriture féminine*. In yet another connection to Cixous, Brophy declares the text's 'insistent rhythm' to be the 'rhythm of a throb', stating that, '[e]ven when its rhythm expresses the throb of pleasure, the pleasure is so ardent that it lays waste the personality which experiences it' (Brophy 1991: 9). Pounding with poetic immediacy in the first person, present tense, Smart's text explodes in the manner Cixous espouses in 'The laugh of the Medusa' when she says that 'a feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust' (Cixous 1981a: 258). Smart's illegal and fecund desire does 'shatter' the hallowed institution of marriage, and further, in her giddy rapture, she imagines she can 'break up the truth' of World War 2 and of the meeting places of powerful men with her expectant adulation:

> With it I can repopulate all the world. I can bring forth new worlds in underground shelters while the bombs are dropping above; I can do it in lifeboats as the ship goes down; I can do it in prisons without the guard's permission; and O, when I do it quietly in the lobby while the conference is going on, a lot of statesmen will emerge twirling their moustaches, and see the

> birth-blood, and know that they have been foiled. Love is as strong as death. (Smart 1991: 66)

War, traditional marriage, the law, and other 'masculine investments' are present in the novel, but only as fantasied and surmountable obstacles to the narrator's central mission of loving and desiring.

The Lover is set mostly between the wars in 1929, but the stench of war pervades the young girl's French heritage, and the never-ending tensions of the colony are palpable throughout. War and the masculine investment in violence are personified in the figure of the narrator's disturbed and disturbing brother, a bully, and thief, gambler and lay-about manipulator. As she explains to her lover following yet another meal in which her family has steadfastly ignored him in a flagrant display of racist and colonial snobbery: 'My elder brother's cold, insulting violence is there whatever happens to us, whatever comes our way. His first impulse is always to kill, to wipe out, to hold sway over life, to scorn, to hunt, to make suffer' (Duras 1992: 54). Later, when the narrator is older and living in France during the liberation of Paris, the elder brother shows up, having previously duped her out of what was due her of her mother's will. He's on the run (the narrator suspects he is an anti-Semitic informer), and he promptly cleans her out of her rations and savings (77).

The affair in *The Lover* is also illegal (Duras was 15 and under the age of consent when the affair commenced) – subject to derision, punishment and the law – but there is no romantic and exalted claim in it to love's overcoming realities such as war, colonialism or racism. The desire the narrator shares with her Chinese lover is intoxicating in its way, but somehow always measured in relation to the culture in which it is conducted and tempered by its gaze, which manifests as a kind of self-consciousness, evident in passages such as: 'He gives me my shower, washes me, rinses me, he adores that, he put my make-up on and dresses me, he adores me. I'm the darling of his life' (63) and:

> he'll wash her under the shower, slowly, as she used to wash herself at home at her mother's, with cool water from a jar he keeps specially for her, and then he'll carry her, still wet, to the bed, he'll switch on the fan and kiss her more and more all over. (Duras 1992: 91)

It is the self-consciousness of a girl who takes refuge in sexual pleasure and comfort, and in doing so holds her shame and grief at arm's length, and who then, in an older incarnation, manages to write it.

Shame-bound

The roots of Duras's love affair lie deep in the traumatic soil of her family and the meeting of cultures, and even at her young age our heroine, a budding writer, understands the limits of its power in surmounting them. This is a telling difference between the texts: Smart sympathetically depicts the harm she does to Barker's wife, as well as her own suffering, which becomes most acute when the affair finally falters. And the world of others does cross her path: there are gossips, well-meaning then abandoning friends, and a section in which she goes to live with her disapproving mother and disappointed father. It is her psychosexual world of desire though that is centre stage of the novel.

In *The Lover,* the affair is only one strand of a richer, more complex and profoundly shame-bound fabric. In fact, despite its singular title and reviews suggesting otherwise, it is Duras's family – her 'mad' (30), ferocious and

widowed mother, malicious older brother, and beloved and doomed younger brother – who dominate the text, even while her weak, adult lover devours and finally forsakes her in his dependence on the money and approval of his father. And significant though the figures of her brothers and lover are, it is women the narrator is most preoccupied with; chiefly her mother, but also school friend Hélène Lagonelle whose beauty our nameless narrator admires and covets. There are intimate memories of, and musings on, the lives of women she knew in wartime Paris: an American named Marie-Claude Carpenter, and another named Betty Fernandez. Perhaps most poignant is her description of the 'beggar women of the towns, the rice fields, the tracks bordering Siam, the banks of the Mekong' (Duras 1992: 86) in which the tragic lives of the native women of the colony are lived out in poverty, bearing children not wanted and who cannot be fed, who die, walking, always walking, and ending up in Calcutta (97). 'My memory of men is never lit up and illuminated like my memory of women', says the narrator (66). In a sense, the gendered trauma of women in the conditions of colonial patriarchy is more the story than the narrator's scandalous adolescent affair. Through her relationship with her deranged mother and these other women, Duras's protagonist reveals the toxic circulations of traumatic affect at the heart of the fading French empire. The shame-binds of colonial culture become her mother's shame-binds, which in turn become the narrator's; circles upon circles of transmission.
Smart also addresses shame, as well as guilt and grief, more overtly and superficially than does Duras, in passages like the following, in which the narrator mourns the suffering of her lover's wife:

> On her mangledness I am spreading my amorous sheets, but who will have any pride in the wedding red, seeping up between the thighs of love which rise like a colossus, but whose issue is only the cold semen of grief? Not God, but bats and a spider who is weaving my guilt, keep the rendezvous with me, and shame copulates with every September housefly. My room echoes with the screams she never uttered, and under my floor the vines of remorse get ready to push up through the damp. (Smart 1991: 31-32)

Smart writes this woundedness of the Other, a woundedness that might be argued as grounded in gendered trauma, but she never strays far from her obsessive insistence on the romantic and somewhat narcissistically transcendent paradigm within which she frames her story. By contrast, Duras seeks not only to write the woundedness of her life and those who immediately surround her, but also to write beyond it, into the woundedness of history.

Temporality

Temporality is another significant point of difference between *By Grand Central Station* and *The Lover*, with the latter embodying what Caruth calls the 'delayed appearance' and 'belated address' of trauma (Caruth 1996: 4). *The Lover* mirrors the unpredictable and repetitious temporality of traumatic memory in a narrative that alternates between first and third person, present and past tense, creating subjective shifts of intimacy and distance, and in which time precedes in a non-linear manner capable of crossing continents, seas, decades and narrator selves. Despite its poetic obscurities in relation to time and its refusal of literal disclosure, *By Grand Central Station* is a chronological first person, present tense narrative, beginning with the beginning of the affair, charting its course, and ending with its end.

The structural temporality of these texts is important because embodiment of traumatic temporality is, I argue, a central feature of the poetics of trans-trauma and as such it involves certain characteristics and experimental strategies. This is significant in the context of relevant debates of the 'trauma turn'. Caruth describes the problem of traumatic memory as an inability to fully witness the traumatic event. In her view the immediacy of the traumatic experience involves 'a gap that carries the force of the event' and this process compromises and/or alters cognitive function, resulting in a loss of knowledge and memory: 'The force of this experience would appear to arise precisely, in other words, in the collapse of its understanding' (Caruth 1996: 7). Elsewhere she explains: 'Not having been fully integrated as it occurred, the event cannot become, as Janet says, a "narrative memory" that is integrated into a completed story of the past' (153). She also raises the somewhat paradoxical matter of the resistance of some 'survivors' when offered a 'cure' and the not uncommon ambivalence to telling what of the traumatic story and experience they feel they possess lest such steps 'imply the giving-up of an important reality, or the dilution of a special truth into the reassuring terms of therapy' (vii). The poetics of trans-trauma, then, in its textual embodiment, offers something of the working-through of telling the story but not in a way that it risks being lost when spoken and witnessed. Rather it speaks it in a way that keeps it alive, immortalises it, that testifies to its ongoing existence in its continual availability as a site of witnessing and empathy.

By Grand Central Station features a solid, if lyrical, and self-possessed narration. The narrator suffers, is vulnerable, exhilarated and diminished by turns yet she remains subjectively coherent with an orderly sense of time and place throughout. It is far from simple reporting on the progression of a substantial affair that encounters various complications. The prose is profound and it does speak of distress butthis does not equate with traumatic temporality. So it is that much of the novel's power and poetry comes most from the many passages in which nothing of significance happens on the external plane and the inner world of the narrator is explored and the numerous mythological and metaphorical references contained within them. In this sense there is a continual play between inside and outside time, and this inside time has a kind of timelessness about it, an archetypal suggestion, as if it speaks not just for this one woman in love with a man less available and possessable than she would have it, but for the unbridled libidinousness of all womankind. It is not, then, that *By Grand Central Station* has a simplistic temporal operation, but rather that it is more a narrative that engages with the kind of collective unconscious, to reference both Cixous's and Kristeva's foci on the importance of the unconscious in feminine writing and Carl Jung's well-known notion of the collective unconscious (Jung 1981).

In the poetics of trans-trauma the family of origin, as the foremost site of transmission, is explicitly or implicitly present in the narrative in such a way as to situate it as the locus of traumatic affect. In *The Lover* the family is introduced on page five, while they appear in *By Grand Central Station* well into the novel and exist as fundamentally peripheral figures, essentially as outsiders to the drama of the affair. But even more than this, it is the subtle, skilful and constant shifting of time in *The Lover* that marks it as a prodigiousembodiment of trans-trauma.

The narrative breaks every rule in the book in terms of conventional literary practice: in the first paragraph the first person narrator is introduced as old, though referenced as young. In the next the narrator begins to reminisce about her adolescent self. This interweaving of present day awareness and perspective and recollections of youth continues until the narrator assumes first person present tense, announcing herself as aged fifteen and a half, about to

board the ferry on which she is fated to meet her Chinese lover. In one passage the precocious young narrator states:

> I already know a thing or two. I know it's not clothes that make women beautiful or otherwise, nor beauty care, nor expensive creams, nor the distinction or costliness of their finery. I know the problem lies elsewhere. I don't know where. I only know it isn't where women think. (Duras 1992: 18)

The narrator continues, recounting her observations of women in the streets of Saigon and 'upcountry' who 'save themselves up for Europe' in what amounts to a pithy critique of gendered colonial life. 'They wait, these women. They dress just for the sake of dressing. They look at themselves', she says, concluding with: 'Some kill themselves' (18-19). In the very next sentence the narrator has shifted back to a mature, reflective self who declares: 'This self-betrayal of women always struck me as a mistake, an error' (19). The shifting subjectivity in *The Lover*, evident in both the points of life from which the narrator speaks and the alternating past and present tenses, encapsulates the belatedness and what I call the 'after-wounding' – the tendency to repeat or revisit – of traumatic experience. And so it is that time circulates between a never solid past, present and future, and subjectivity slips in and out of ages and gazes backward and forward.

A creative writing teacher in a modern day undergraduate writing program would likely shriek in horror if a student took such liberties with narration, but Duras, writing as a mature-aged and masterful author, shows us that just as trauma breaks fundamental rules, so too must writing that dares to speak it, and in doing so she illuminates something of the never quite graspable yet utterly gripping and distinctive temporality of the traumatic condition.

The Strange Body

As previously stated, *écriture feminine* has often been linked to 'women's writing'. In service to my desire to see *écriture feminine* recuperated in its most non-essentialist guise for the purposes of exploring the body and affectivity in the writing of trauma, I categorically state that I don't mean to position *By Grand Central Station* as an example of 'woman's writing'. Instead I want merely to point to its proximity to that contentious association. And I mean to set up the poetics of trans-trauma at a remove from it with the assertion that the poetics of trans-trauma is in no way a matter of 'woman's writing'; rather, it is the writing of a 'strange body' (Kristeva 1987: 111).

Kristeva views radical writing as writing in which gender is displaced and replaced by an enigmatic strange body. This strange-bodyness is not gender absence or oblivion, but a space in which gender is shifted out of its moorings and confines. Positing revolutionary composition within the timeless, lawless realm of the unconscious, Kristeva holds that writing 'ignores sex or gender and displaces its difference in the discreet workings of language and signification (which are necessarily ideological and historical). Knots of desire are created as a result' (Kristeva 1987: 111).

Oliver (1993) points out that in 'The laugh of the Medusa' Cixous also suggests a similar idea when she envisions a writing that surpasses the metaphoric confines of the masculineand the feminine to become writing that is, in Oliver's words, 'not masculine or feminine but in between. It is bisexual. The between seems to exist within each of us, the presence of difference within' (Oliver 1993: 175). This puzzling reference to bisexuality in feminine

writing has to do with the description of Medusa put forth by Cixous – a feminine head with phallic tendrils for hair – an image taken to represent bodily, affective, feminine writing that appears in dynamic relation to the masculine principles it subverts.

For Kristeva, who sees writing as a reaction to the radical split of the speaking subject, this shift is described by way of the conceptual metaphor of birth rather than the conceptual metaphor of sex. 'The eternally premature baby', she writes, turns to language as an act of desperation: 'prematurely separated from the world of the mother and the world of things, remedies the situation by using an invincible weapon: linguistic symbolization' (Kristeva 1987: 111). The subjective operation that takes place in such a development is one in which a network is constructed where, says Kristeva, drives, signifiers, meanings, and, I would add, affects, 'join together and split asunder in a dynamic and enigmatic process. As a result, a strange body comes into being, one that is neither man nor woman, young nor old' (111). In this vision, revolutionary writing privileges the disavowed semiotic, which speaks the unconscious. More active than the symbolic order – the dominant discourse of making sense – this writing is born of the 'radical split of the speaking subject' (Kristeva 1987: 111). This suggests that feminine writing is inherently traumatic, in terms of arising from an experience of subjective splitting. It is in this sense that I maintain *écriture feminine* is a form of traumatic writing, one that depends not necessarily on the biological body of woman, but on the affective strange body that comes into being upon writing.

Smart's novel more closely aligns itself with the contentious blurring between *écriture féminine* and the advocacy of 'women's writing' than does Duras's. Of the two texts, *The Lover* demonstrates most perceptibly the writing of the strange body of which Kristeva speaks. Duras's nameless, ageless narrator travels through time; speaking now, as a mature woman, of her past, and next as a young girl in her present, and yet again as an omnipresent eye tracking old friends in Paris and beggar women en route to Calcutta. The poetics of trans-trauma, I propose, is concerned less with a preoccupation around gender, and more with strange-bodied traumatic memory and its affective circulations.

While Smart's richness of imagery, ripeness of phrasing and poetic skill cannot be denied, *By Grand Central Station* doubtless exhibits excess, sustaining a grandeur of prose that teeters throughout on the brink of purpleness. Duras resists this temptation, producing a less flamboyantly, but no less densely, affective testament to love and loss. Her narrator encompasses a subjectivity which, in attempting to address the magnitude of trans-trauma, is 'split asunder in a dynamic and enigmatic process' that produces one of the strangest bodies of all – that of the trans-traumatised subject. Such a body writes not only out of the strangeness of this radical split of the speaking subject, but also out of the fractured, shame-bound, fearful and grief-stricken legacy of chronic and multi-generational trauma. Perhaps the only literary body stranger is that of the psychotic writer. Smart writes out of a desiring strange body haunted by the spectre of self-absorbed femininity; while Duras, much older than Smart at the time of writing, morphs lucidly into a strange-bodyness, oceanic enough to bear transgenerational multitudes.

The inference of herstory

The first nod towards a poetic of trans-trauma comes on the last page of *By Grand Central Station*. Smart (1991) writes of her son:

> Look at the idiot boy you begot with that night. He is all the world that is left. He is America, and better than love. He is civilization's heir, O you mob, whose actions brought him into being. He is happier than you, sweetheart. But will he do to fill in these coming thousand years? (Smart 1991: 112)

The novel Brophy calls 'one of the most shelled, skinned, nerve-exposed books ever written' (1991: 13) winds down with this gesture towards the generations that came before, come after and exist alongside the blistering affair that had until then gripped the text. Duras, less surprisingly, given her movement through time and across generations and continents, also closes with a reference to the next generation with a melancholic passage about her Chinese lover's arranged marriage to a rich Chinese girl: 'Through a lie he must have found himself inside the other woman, through a lie providing what their families, Heaven, and the northern ancestors expected of him, to wit, an heir to their name' (Duras 1992: 116).

In another striking resemblance, both texts end with lines that recall the lover and proclaim the continuity of affective relationship, but this parallel belies a notable difference, a difference that can perhaps be summed up in Caruth's conception of history, which she says is 'referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs' (Caruth 1996: 18). By this she means that 'history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence' (18). The first critical move of the poetics of trans-trauma is its illumination of this operation of traumatic and transgenerational history. Caruth elaborates that it is the 'constitutive function of latency' in history that ensures the 'indissoluble, political bond to other histories', or: 'To put it somewhat differently, we could say that the traumatic nature of history means that events are only historical to the extent that they implicate others' (18). If this holds true, perhaps the next, and most radical, move of the poetics of trans-trauma is here, in its potential for uncovering and embodying the ways in which certain historical and cultural events implicate others through an experimental narrative in which these implications manifest in familial and cultural dynamics and legacies.

The poetics of trans-trauma, then, as I define it, qualifies as *écriture féminine* (regardless of the gender of the writer), but *écriture féminine* isn't necessarily a poetics of trans-trauma. In other words, the poetics of trans-trauma is always aligned with the subversive impetus of *écriture féminin*e and revolutionary writing, but *écriture féminin*e and revolutionary writing is not always aligned with the project of the poetics of trans-trauma, with its undertaking of testifying to traumatic familial and historical transmissions.

Écriture féminine retains its relevance not as a static and provable theory (which it was not fashioned to be in the first place), but as a contemplative model that facilitates consideration of the workings of gender and the body in writing and literature. Further it serves as a foundation from which to explore implications of traumatic history and the possibility of a poetics of trans-trauma. In other words, in my employment of Kristeva's strange-bodyness I am following on from Cixous's acknowledgment that feminine writing can't be formally theorised, and folding into strange-bodyness the idea that the various views – of writing as feminine, and as bisexual and unsexed – might somehow co-exist.

Ultimately the strange-bodyness I put forth in relation to the writer of trans-trauma stands for an admission that the gender operations (or not) of literary production, including writing or poetics of trauma, can never be fully knowable or theorised, though a text such as *By Grand Central Station* would seem to demonstrate the proposition of *écriture féminine*. It stands too for the assertion

that even in the face of this impossibility, trauma, affect and the body demand voice and require witness, and that when this demand is met in a literary work like *The Lover*, it is nothing less than traumatic history itself that is testified.

Notes

[1] Maria Torok's 1964 essay, 'The Meaning of Penis Envy in Women', pre-dated other feminist critiques of Freud. It was published with other collected essays by Torok and Nicolas Abraham in *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*. return to text

[2] Following Anne Rosalind Jones, a number of feminist writers teased out the similarities and differences between Cixous and Kristeva, including Kelly Oliver in *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-bind* (1993). return to text

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