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The Lonely Girl: Investigating the scholarly nexus of trauma life-writing and process in tertiary institutions

Abstract

Memoir writing and publishing has surged in recent years and this pattern is reflected in a surge in the number of students seeking to undertake degrees in auto-ethnographic creative non-fiction writing within tertiary institutions, specifically in relation to their own personal trauma.

This paper discusses attempts to implement a pedagogical model to facilitate the supervision of students seeking to write trauma narrative, positing that because of the nature of their writing, they are closer to further psychic injury throughout the process than students not undertaking trauma writing. The result is that specialised attention is warranted and necessary, and indeed without specialised care, the offering of such degrees within tertiary settings could be framed as ethically fraught.

The paper will discuss the current pedagogical model, and its implementation. But then will look at a case study where the model fell dramatically short. The ensuing argument is that the model should only ever be regarded as a default to be constantly developed. It argues that students choosing to undertake life writing around personal trauma are exposed to further psychic danger as a direct result of their studies, and must be seen as individuals, with specific and hyper-vigilant supervision needs.

Keywords: trauma narrative, life-writing, supervision pedagogical model

*We need to let our hearts break in the face of some of the stories
our students bring to us...*
Elizabeth Dutro (2011: 109)

Introduction

As the resurgence of auto-ethnographic writing in the late twentieth century marketplace exploded, so too was this phenomenon reflected within tertiary literary creative studies. This is particularly so in creative nonfiction writing and literary journalism curricula.

This paper is premised on earlier work (Joseph and Rickett 2010) where attempts were made to devise a pedagogical model of supervising first person narrative creative nonfiction artifacts by Honours and higher degree students where such work related to personal trauma. The model was developed and specifically tailored for auto-ethnographic writing on trauma, for both

candidate and supervisor; the ethical and pedagogical tensions constellating the supervision of life writing on trauma; and how to navigate these.

The model has been used in several instances with a high level of success. However this paper is an explication of an instance during a supervision year where the model was adhered to and fell short because of outside circumstances in the student's life. One of the questions asked when devising the model was: without well established professional support and guidelines, is commodifying trauma in order to gain a degree, and/or a literary output, ethical professional practice (Joseph and Rickett 2010)? Without due attention to the special and specific but variable needs of these students writing trauma narrative, the answer to this question was no (Joseph 2011). The following case study presents a further warning that the model should only ever be regarded as a default, or starting point; that it should be not regarded as static and should be further developed at all times. Each candidate wishing to render creatively their personal trauma narrative must be viewed individually and carefully, and supervised and monitored closely, both for ethical as well as safety issues.

More Trauma Memoir

Miller and Tougaw identify the surge in trauma life writing not so much as one of wide scale narcissism but in terms of community. They write:

The culture of first person writing needs to be understood in relation to a desire for common grounds – if not an identity-bound shared experience, then one that is shareable through identification, though this too will vary in degrees of proximity. The memoir and all forms of personal testimony not only expand the boundaries of identity construction and the contours of the self but also lay claim to potential territories of community. In complex and often unexpected ways, the singular 'me' evolves into the plural 'us' and writing that bears witness to the extreme experiences of solitary individuals can sometimes begin to repair the tears in the collective social fabric. (Miller & Tougaw 2002: 2-3)

They are writing about universal resonances as a notion which keeps these types of tales on top selling lists. They go on to claim:

If every age has its symptoms, ours appears to be the age of trauma. Naming a wide spectrum of responses to psychic and physical events often with little in common beyond the label, trauma has become a portmanteau that covers a multitude of disparate injuries. (Miller & Tougaw 2002: 1-2)

This is because societal taboos have broken down throughout the years, allowing for the discussion of formerly taboo subjects. People write their life stories in an attempt to heal; to expose; to indict; to rebalance an injustice; as a community service; to help other victims; to empower. Many turn to the university as a framework to execute their work (Joseph 2011). As Miller and Tougaw explain: 'The private zones of the body have migrated into public domains and the limits of tellable experiences have expanded, almost dissolving the border of the conventional markers that separated the private self from the public citizen' (Miller and Tougaw 2002: 2). As such, many students who choose auto-ethnography of trauma are writing on a knife edge for the length of their project. As Arnold Weinstein famously writes:

I regard feeling as the driving force of our individual lives and I see it as the very stuff of which art is made ... art is our supreme record of human feeling over the ages, and it enables us, quite wonderfully, to access our own emotional depths.
(Weinstein 2003: 3)

Recalling traumatic memory and rendering it on a page has the potential to edify, or destroy, or fall somewhere in between the two; or move up and down that scale dependent on outside forces as well as the student's own internal responses. It is hard enough managing what happens throughout the process of intense personal reflection but when other events, outside the scope of university or their own writing project further impacts, arguably these students are in much closer proximity to further psychic danger than your average student. As Felman and Laub point out: 'Whatever theory of trauma one embraces, there's no escaping the promiscuous application of the diagnostic, which tends to universalise suffering with little attention paid to the singularity of the experiences' (Felman & Laub 1992: 6). This universalising cannot be applied to students undertaking life writing of trauma. 'The singularity of experiences' must be the framework with which supervisors approach such creative artefact, understanding that once it has been agreed to supervise, there is an onus on the supervisor to tend to the holistic experience and safety of the student. I suggest that anything less is unethical.

The Current Model

I have been attempting to implement and refine the current model of supervision of students writing personal trauma narrative now for the past two years. There is a strong case for developing a universal model of supervision where the ethical framework of safeguards is constantly expanded. I now understand that this cannot be static but must be applied purely as a starting point. That is, individual students come with identifiable individual constraints and needs and these constraints and needs engender and demand bespoke responses. The current model includes:

- a formal support network to help manage self harm, including available counselling for the student and the academic;
- a system of mentoring from or co-supervision with more senior academics, with direct experience of supervising creative projects involving potential harm for both student and supervisor;
- an appropriate process to address issues face to face with possibly vulnerable students who insist on revisiting traumatic memory creatively; and
- formal debriefing processes when and where necessary for both student and academic. (Joseph & Rickett 2010)

These suggestions were only ever meant to be regarded as the starting point for discussion around the development of a model and supervisory pedagogy. I have been able to partly use the model, with successful outcomes. But the case study below clearly outlines that it must be regarded as a starting point only, to be reviewed and developed constantly.

In past work (Joseph 2011) I have written on two case studies demonstrating an earlier, problematic trajectory, then a relatively smoother trajectory in supervising creative projects of memoir, specifically in the writing of child sexual abuse and the death of an 'other'. I attempted to present them as comparative supervision pedagogy and outcome and as a study in the

refinement of professional practice. I regard both case studies at either end of a spectrum – the first almost a worst case scenario; the second a vast improvement, and at time of writing, demonstrating a successful outcome.

The case study below depicts a third position on the spectrum, somewhere between the two original case studies. The outcome was successful but the trajectory to it was fraught with tragic and surprising circumstances which were outside the supervisor and student's control. The student's story was about growing up with an alcoholic father. Working with her throughout the rest of the year taught me one main thing: that there is no static model – there cannot be a uniform pedagogical model for this form of writing. There can be a default starting point; an idea about how to conduct the supervision, with default safety precautions and default fallbacks. But a universal, easy to follow pedagogy is impossible and possibly, inherently dangerous.

Every student who presents, wishing to write about their innermost pain and what Elizabeth Dutro calls 'exposed wounds and the exposing of wounds' must be handled with fresh eyes and an awareness that at any minute, everything can change (2011: 194). I have written before that there are inherent dangers of undertaking this type of supervision without due thought or caution (Joseph 2011). I now believe that there are inherent dangers in thinking we have devised how to supervise this type of work. The crafting of the work as a literary artifact is important of course but it is the process that needs most of the attention, most of the time, including when outside forces impinge. Minimising and managing the potential harm that can result from retelling trauma narratives must be an imperative at all costs and there is no universal road map or simple, or even complex, pedagogy because every new student with every new and individual story to write arrives with their own original and highly personal psychic injuries and their ramifications to navigate, and skills or lack of skills, to manage them. Supervisors of this form of life writing therefore must come to the table ever vigilant, with the literary expertise to help mould and shape the creative and scholarly artifacts, but most importantly, to adjust expectations when necessary and to bear witness. The latter is an integral, overwhelming and simplest of notions – bearing witness. As Dori Laub explains: 'For the testimonial process to take place there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of another – in the position of one who hears. Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude' (Felman & Laub 1992: 70-71). Part of the job of supervisors working with auto-ethnographic trauma narratives is to listen and bear witness to students' artistic impulse to get their psychic injury onto the page. The experience with the student from the case study below resonates with the work of American author and feminist bell hooks when she writes:

There is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred ... our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin. (hooks 1994: 13)

Methodology

I had taught this particular student in a previous, mandatory creative non-fiction class, so when she approached me about undertaking her supervision, I felt I already had an idea of who she was – clever, sweet, quiet, studious and polite. What I did not know, and probably quite correctly at this stage, was that

she is the daughter of an alcoholic, still living within the family home, and her life is founded on the emotional adverse trauma this has created within the family. Compounding her own is the trauma of her mother and her younger sister, also dealing with the father. She set out to find meaning in some of her rawest and conflicting emotions, repackaged as academic investigation. In her own words, from her thesis, she writes:

In my creative ... thesis my aim was to investigate personally if expressive writing was an effective and valuable form of self-therapy. The rapidly expanding literature of this academic field prompted me to view a personal investigation into the theories of writing as therapy as a worthwhile contribution to the field. My intention was to discover whether writing about past painful experiences could help repackage those experiences and give them new meaning – theoretically beneficial new meaning – for the writer.

Through producing my own life writing artefact, in the form of a creative memoir, my aim was to examine the academic arguments for the benefits of life writing as therapy, and to personally discover if there were benefits through my own writing experience. (Author name withheld 2012: 6) [1]

Some of the questions she chose to explore were: Can writing about traumatic experiences aid recovery and healing? Is confessing and revisiting trauma in writing a healthy, valuable way to initiate deep healing, in a bid for recovery? Or does it exacerbate and damage further?

The student undertook a Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Test (PTSD) test [2] before she began the work and appended her result sheet; and then retested herself at the end of the creative writing year, also including results in the appendix [3]. She also set out to test her own perspective of selected various personal memories, by interviewing both her mother and her sister about the same memories. Additionally, she interviewed each family member in order to insert mini biographies of them which she threaded throughout the creative work. She included her father in this part of the process, although he was not interviewed for his perspectives of her memories. She was inspired by John Barbour's work *Judging and not Judging Parents* where he reveals that in order to avoid being unfairly judgmental of parents there is a need to understand all the things that influenced their capacity for moral agency (Barbour 2004: 73). Through the biographical interview she conducted with her father, she learnt about her father's childhood and family life which helped her understand a little better the choices he made throughout her life with him. She writes, it: '... enabled me to understand him and his addiction a little more and made me realise that his character had been shaped by poverty, an alcoholic and mentally ill father, and a culture where drinking every day is considered normal' (29).

The student also set out to test Jill Littrell's (2009) assertions that to minimise harm, trauma must be reappraised. She continuously 'recounted, reflected on and reappraised' some of her own traumatic experiences.

But I knew we had a long way to go when she failed, in her first exegetical draft, to even mention her alcoholic father or that he and his drinking were the site of her trauma. On pointing this out to her, she physically cringed and laughed nervously and agreed. It seemed that growing up with her alcoholic father had become so 'normal' and unspoken, that to do so was going to truly effect the fabric of her life. But she then proceed to insert this into her text: 'My methodology for this thesis involved the production of 10,000 words of

my own life writing creative artefact, to test the theories of this field by writing about my own traumatic experiences growing up with an alcoholic father’.

Writing as Healing

The student methodically and pragmatically set out to devise a plan to investigate the notions of life writing as therapy, according to the James Pennebaker protocols, and I watched her closely. She followed his writing as healing paradigm from *Writing to Heal: A Guided Journal for Recovering from Trauma & Emotional Upheaval*:

For the next four days, you will be asked to write about a trauma or emotional upheaval that profoundly affected your life... Write for twenty minutes a day... You can write about the same event on all four days or about different events each day... Once you begin writing, write continuously without stopping... You are writing for yourself... Deal only with those events or situations that you can handle now. (Pennebaker 2004: 25-26)

She draws on Pennebaker when she explains:

Pennebaker’s emphasis in his writing program is on opening up; on the writer really delving into their deepest thoughts and emotions associated with the trauma (Pennebaker 1997: 32). Participants must also examine their trauma from all angles and reflect on how the emotional upheaval has affected all aspects of their life (Pennebaker 2004: 32).

The student, assiduously adhering to the Pennebaker model, had a very difficult time. In her words:

Initially, after each session of writing I felt worse than before I had started; I experienced the saddened, depressed state that Pennebaker warned of (2004; 1997a). This state of negativity, however, was emotionally heavier than the comparison Pennebaker had made, stating that ‘emotional writing can be likened to seeing a sad movie’ (2004: 8). Similarly, this emotional state, instead of lasting ‘only for an hour or two’ (ibid) lasted for the length of time that I was writing about my traumatic experiences and negatively influenced my mood between the sessions of writing. (22)

But she managed to implement coping strategies, which she now believes is a positive contribution to the literature. Her strategies included: writing fiction; reading fiction; and weekly visits to a counsellor. But perhaps the best mechanism we came up with was switching from first person to third person.

‘I’ became ‘she’: The Lonely Girl appears

I remember distinctly how this sea change eventuated. I was supervising remotely and the student contacted me one day by SKYPE, devastated. She had a workshop with her student peers in another subject and had presented a piece of writing – one of her memories we had discussed would be effective to include in her final thesis. At this stage, I had not read it. In that workshop, her

first person narrative draft was ‘ripped apart’, both stylistically as well as its credibility. Classmates and her lecturer at the time, believing they were undertaking ‘constructive criticism’, told her it was not believable. This had a shattering effect on her, not so much because of the stylistic comments, but the personal comments; I believe her psychic injuries became even greater at this point, because of the vulnerability of her writing and the raw exposure she endured in both writing it and presenting it. She felt she wanted to scrap it completely but I asked her to go away and rewrite it in the third person. She then rewrote and experimented and later reflected:

I found it too difficult and confronting to write about my memories from a first person perspective. Third person narration allowed me to write about my trauma from a distance. As DeSalvo explains, third person perspective enables us to ‘regard our lives with a certain detachment and distance when we view it as a subject to describe and interpret’ (DeSalvo 1999: 73).

Third person narration helped me to become an observer of my trauma instead of the victim of the episodes again, using ‘she’ instead of ‘I’ as ‘a strategy of narrative distancing and reflexivity’ (Gabara 2006: 157).

Phillip Lejeune, in his article entitled *Autobiography in the Third Person*, explains that often writers who choose to narrate their life story from a third person perspective do so in order to achieve an ‘internal distancing’ from the event (1977: 41). Writing in the third person enabled me to reappraise my trauma from a more objective viewpoint. (22)

In an email to me after her submission, the student wrote:

Writing the memory sections was extremely difficult, it made me feel like a little girl again – scared and completely vulnerable to what was happening. It brought up all of these emotions that I thought I had dealt with and it was very difficult. Due to the fact that I was still living with Dad I began to feel very anxious and scared around him and found it hard to cope. I used reading and writing fiction as distraction techniques as I would feel very anxious when I knew I had to write another memory scene. So it wasn’t a very good period of time but I think it was a necessary part of the process, thinking back. (personal correspondence, 10 April 2012)

Since learning of this student’s experiences in a writing seminar class outside my supervisory relationship with her, I have added a further point to the default pedagogical model of supervising life writing students writing about trauma:

- preliminary supervisory consultation with any other lecturers/tutors who may be handling this work, outside of the supervisor/student relationship.

With the permission of students and without breaching confidences, I believe a supervisor with knowledge of psychic injury and the potential for further injury of a student, must consult with colleagues who may come in contact with that student through course work. I now believe this space has fallen through the net and potentially, without any context to filter work, is fraught with danger. This is not to say this type of life writing should not be rigorously scrutinised for literary merit at all time throughout the candidature – but it needs to be

undertaken with contextual knowledge, hopefully leading to sensitive management by other academics within a classroom/workshop situation.

Notwithstanding the dangerous elements of the draft writing class the student was mandated to attend for her coursework, I recognised in her a new energy and drive after she went from a first person to a third person perspective. She appeared at each fortnightly meeting more robustly in my office and surged ahead with her work.

Transformation of *Father's Ghost* to *Lonely Girl*

One of the most inspiring moments of her thesis writing came when the student started shaping her narratives and putting them together as whole, interweaving memories around the biographies, linking each memory to each personal perspective. During this process, she realised that the original working title of her project, *Her Father's Ghost*, was no longer apt. She realised that her work was not even about her father any more but had transformed into an elegy for her younger self. She wrote in an email some time later:

After I finished these memories and started on the short biographies I felt a lot better. When I began to see my creative work taking shape I felt proud of what I had done. I no longer resented it as I had before. One day when I was looking through my piece I had this massive epiphany. I realised that the piece was not about my Dad primarily but really it was about my younger self – and I think this realisation was key to why the process of writing was ultimately therapeutic and not detrimental. It was a piece of writing which gave a voice to my inner child, to my younger self at a time in my life when I didn't understand what was going on, when I felt weak and powerless. I felt like the piece was a healing work of love to her. (personal correspondence, 10 April 2012)

This constitutes the true emotional heart of her memoir and the moment when The Lonely Girl appeared, as a character in the student's story. She lists the characters at the beginning of her creative component, now entitled *The Lonely Girl*: The Lonely Girl; Her Mother; Her Sister; and The Father. She dedicates the thesis to The Lonely Girl.

The Knife Edge Cuts

We had just returned for the final semester of the year. It was Week 3, and the student appeared as scheduled in my office. She seemed unwell and I knew something had gone terribly wrong. Fearing that the writing process throughout the break had finally defeated her; that recalling memories of trauma about her father, sometimes with her father in the room next door, was just too much, I was intensely concerned. Her body language was closed and she seemed very distant, not quite finishing sentences and appeared to be on the verge of tears. I sat with her for a while, trying to get her to talk about anything, including her writing.

I eventually discovered that her distress was caused by something different, outside her inner realm of writing. A close friend – her mother's best friend – had committed suicide the day before and the student was quite clearly in deep shock. She had known this woman her entire life. She did not ask for an

extension but I immediately guided her to requesting one. I remember telling her to pretend she was not doing Honours this year, and to go away and be with her family and to deal with this and to see her counsellor. I felt relieved and content that with time, she would get back on track. Adhering to the pedagogical model, I believe it had allowed me permission to dig more deeply into the student's personal life, beyond the usual and appropriate scope, in order to support and guide her through the bureaucracy of the university when she was least able to do this for herself.

But two months after this, when the student was just getting back on her feet, the father of the woman who committed suicide died. That same week, the father of one of the student's best friends died of brain cancer, suddenly; and one month after his father died the brother of the woman who originally committed suicide, also committed suicide, by burning his home to the ground with himself in it.

It was a litany of tragedy and pain almost unendurable for the student and her family, and her Honours Degree and university life understandably dimmed in priority. I chose not to contact her for about three months apart from assuring her that her extension was still active. Later, when I did contact her again, it was to check on her welfare rather than the progress of her work. She still seemed very sad but said that what had surprised her was that beginning to write again formed an escape for her from the deep sadness all around at the time, and she had made substantial progress. We slowly began working together again – I basically left her to create her own schedule and deadlines, and to seek me out when she was ready. We worked steadily throughout the Christmas and New Year period, finessing her work, ready for submission.

The student submitted a day early, in mid-January. I attended her graduation where she received a First Class. Both her mother and her little sister were there.

Conclusion

I will continue to work on a pedagogical model of supervising student auto-ethnographic life writing on trauma, adding to it as I learn more, but will only ever regard it as a starting point; as a default pedagogy. The main points I set out to highlight in this paper is that supervising students writing auto-ethnographically about their own trauma needs specific and individualised attention, more so than your average student. Already writing of traumatic moments in their lives, further trauma or tragedy, outside their writing sphere, compounds the already fragile space. Recalling and re-rendering traumatic memory to paper brings with it a haunting and often, a series of trigger points which must be recognised and managed. Crossing boundaries with these students is appropriate in a bid to determine that there is a safety network around them of both emotional and psychological support. Special care needs to be taken and given to these students. Elizabeth Dutro asks the question:

Could the metaphors of testimony and witness be useful reminders of the benefits of stepping away from the shield of position, the front of the room, the pen, the lens, as we navigate the personal, emotional dimensions of relationships in classrooms? (Dutro 2011: 209)

After working and supervising this student, I answer her rhetorical question with a resounding 'yes'. The year taught me much as a supervisor but perhaps

the most important thing of all, the well being of the student far outweighs any deadline or university rules.

Acknowledgement

Many thanks to the former student whose story frames the case study in this paper. Her remarkable courage in persevering and writing her memoir, and then in consenting to my re-representing both her story, components of her academic work, and, various personal correspondence we had, in the way that I have, is respectively, admired and appreciated.

Notes

[1] This student's work is not public. While she has granted me permission to use her story in this article, she wishes to remain anonymous. There is no copy of her thesis in the library and it cannot be accessed online. For that reason, while I quote from her work (off the bound copy she gave me) I do not cite her work as it is not published in any form at this stage. return to text

[2] A rating scale for PTSD severity, comprising of the 17 most common symptoms of PTSD. The test the student used was sourced from:
http://mirecc.va.gov/docs/visn6/3_PTSD_Checklist_and_Scoring.pdf (accessed 6 January 2013) return to text

[3] When the student first took the PTSD test, before starting the project, she experienced thirteen of the seventeen common side effects of PTSD; taking the test for the second time, she only experienced three of them. return to text

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