

# The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma



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Meera Atkinson

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*Then a tongue  
rears up to speak into the silence,  
memory turns and blocks the door of sleep,  
draws out temper into a wire that streams  
names of lost relatives.*

—Robert Adamson, from the poem “Ballad of the Word Trauma”



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## Foreword

At the very moment that I am writing this foreword to Meera Atkinson's profoundly affecting and brilliantly conceived book, women across the United States (and beyond) are taking to social media to share the details of their personal encounters with male sexual aggressors. These experiences, many of them long buried (although not necessarily repressed), are reemerging, coagulating, and gathering heat in the light of Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump's lurid musings—"hot mike" and otherwise—over his own sexually predatory behavior. And suddenly something that may have happened, say, twenty or thirty years ago feels viscerally in the present. Memories rise up in this moment of electoral danger, maybe still half-shivering but with the renewed urgency of gender politics. Women's voices reverberate across an already charged public atmosphere, forcefully speaking back against sexual intimidation, assault, and patriarchal power. Foregrounding not just a personal but an *extra*-personal effrontery, this collective registering of women's voices asserts something more, something projective, something perhaps even transhistorical and transgenerational: not me/not what happened to our mothers and grandmothers/not us/not our daughters and our daughter's daughters/not again/not ever.

Stop.

How to give voice to trauma that is gendered, raced, etc., in acts of public testimony? How best to transmit, to finesse, to share? How to find each other, to receive, to listen? How to acknowledge the aesthetic and ethical stakes raised in such voicings and account for the pertinent demands that they make on the past, present, and future? How to achieve some sense of reckoning, of transformation? How to turn these testimonies of trauma into resonating machines that become generative without lapsing into something that can be too hastily discounted or recuperated, too blatantly voyeuristic, too hemmed in by those humdrum pathways that can often terminate at culturally prescribed roles for victim and victimizer? Daring to offer up evocative and scrupulously



conceptualized responses to challenges like these (and many more besides) are among the standout achievements of *The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma*.

It is impossible, I think, to enter into this work and, by its finish, not be shaken into a fresh set of critical tonalities attuned to how previous postures of embodied receptivity become unstuck in the tremulous vibrancy that resounds between trauma's wordings and worldings. Atkinson's writerly voice not only serves as a reader-friendly guide through various forms of traumatic testimonies—drawn from an astounding array of literary genres: fiction, Indigenous writing, graphic memoir, *l'écriture féminine*, and other modes—but also deftly navigates some notoriously treacherous theoretical waters (within and across trauma studies, literary theory, feminist theory, queer theory, postcolonial studies, affect studies, critical animal studies, critical race studies, environmentalist discourses, philosophy, and more).

It is perhaps no accident then, that “transmission” and “poetics” are two of the key animating concepts of this book. They serve as the crucial bywords by which trauma studies and affect studies can productively intersect and extend through one another, picking up on premises and further fulfilling the promises raised by Atkinson in her 2013 book *Traumatic Affect* (coedited with Michael Richardson). The “trans” of transmission and transgeneration addresses the virtual traversing of affective capacities and incapacities between bodies: nothing mystical nor otherworldly, just the thoroughly ordinary way that feelings often come to adhere, getting handed down (and up and over), living on in matter and atmospheres, always more and other-than-human. Hence, the role of poetics and Atkinson's emphasis on the literary—as the evocation and activation of these vital forces that exist/persist/insist/resist in and about bodies, in the shimmerings and shudderings and stutterings of their enunciation into language (understood in its broadest sense). There is much to gain in discovering how distinctive literary genres wrestle with their unique tellings of transgenerational trauma, and Atkinson has gifted us with a capacious critical methodology for unfolding these lessons into the everyday.

By the time this foreword is published, the matter of Donald Trump's presidential candidacy will have been resolved, but the operations at the root of it won't likely have been dissolved. What realities and injustices might

eventuate should such a man win office? There is no way of knowing precisely what shape or scope such traumas might take in the future. Thankfully, the conceptual formulations and affective formations that Meera Atkinson conveys so convincingly across the pages of this book travel a considerable distance in advancing the poetic strategies and tactics that can transform how we imagine coming out on trauma's other side.

Gregory J. Seigworth  
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*Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry*  
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October 18, 2016

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I would like to acknowledge previous publications in which parts of this book appeared in different forms. Chapter 1 includes material from the article “Strange Body Bedfellows: *Écriture Féminine* and the Poetics of Trans-trauma” (2014) in *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, vol. 18, no. 1. Sections in Chapter 3 appear in the essay “On *Carpentaria*” (2015), commissioned by *Griffith Review* for the Copyright Agency Reading Australia Program. And an edited version of Chapter 4 was published as “Transgenerational Trauma and Cyclical Haunting in Pat Barker’s *Regeneration Trilogy*” (2015) in *Cultural Studies Review: Interventions*, vol. 21, no. 4.

I am most grateful to the following publishers for granting permission to reprint. An earlier and alternate version of Chapter 3 was published as “Channeling the Spectre and Translating Phantoms: Hauntology and the Spooked Text” (2013) in *Traumatic Affect*, a collection I coedited with Michael Richardson, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Cambridge, UK. Thanks are also due to those who have permitted me to use material as epigraphs. Robert Adamson and Black Inc. kindly approved my use of an excerpt from Adamson’s poem “The Ballad of the Word Trauma” published in *Net Needle* (2015). The University of Chicago Press also generously permitted my use of an excerpt from Nicolas Abraham’s essay, “The Phantom of Hamlet or The Sixth Act: Preceded by the Intermission of ‘Truth,’” in *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis* (1994) as an epigraph in the conclusion.

Finally, I want to acknowledge all those who bear the most punishing brunt of transgenerational trauma transmissions. I salute those workers, in all manner of fields and functions, on the ground and at the front lines, who come to their aid. And I pay tribute to those writers and artists of varying persuasions who testify by way of creative practice to those operations, and thank most especially those whose work I explore. I have tried to honor their courage and match their dedication through the course of writing this book.

# Introduction: Trauma, Affect, and Testimonies of Transmission

Seventy-nine women were killed by violence in Australia alone in 2015 (Destroy the Joint 2016), the majority by partners or ex-partners. That's more than one violent death per week. And the World Health Organization has announced suicide as the leading cause of death for young women aged 15–19 the world over, linking this disconcerting finding to “gender discrimination” (Valenti 2015). Yet despite some political rhetoric acknowledging the sexism and misogyny that give rise to epidemics of violence against women and children, there is no direct correlation made to the traumatic and traumatizing social organization that breeds underlying attitudes and behaviors. These deaths and the mental and emotional states that motivate them are treated as aberrations in an otherwise healthy society. Rosie Batty became a tireless domestic violence campaigner and the 2015 Australian of the Year after her 11-year-old son Luke was beaten to death with a cricket bat by his father at a sporting event in 2014. Batty has declared that family violence calls for a response akin to terrorism:

We see whenever there is the slight threat of terrorism it's amazing how funding can be found to combat that where seemingly there was no funding before: let's start calling family violence terrorism and then maybe we can start to see funding flowing to this area. (Scarr 2015)

Clearly, terrorism is political and politicized in a way these murders are not. Votes are not won or lost on whether women and children unknown to us are safe from untimely and violent death. The new age of global terrorism, we understand, affects us all. It is unpredictable, and might strike any one of us down in myriad horrific ways and random situations. But relational violence, we imagine, is someone else's problem, unless it's not. We'd rather these crimes not occur, but generally speaking most people don't feel directly threatened by them. This is a dangerous miscalculation.

Our collective denial around the social effects of familial trauma is supported by an elaborate system of slanted communications and representations. For example, the media routinely reports the murder of women and children by men in the context of family violence with quotes assuring the public that the perpetrator was a pillar of the community, a loving husband and father, who “snapped” or suffered mental illness. Granted, mental illness is often a factor, and is often closely linked to traumatic events, but this kind of reporting does not address the question of why, if mental illness were the sole cause, women aren’t committing these violent crimes in the same numbers as men. There are other kinds of violence stemming from social structures of power and privilege, but they are less likely to be framed with a focus on, and sympathy toward, the perpetrator, and they are less likely to involve a glossing over of the social conditions within which the unfortunate event has taken place.

Though these crimes are publically discussed as epidemics warranting urgent attention and action, they are rarely acknowledged as intrinsically linked to a broader patterning rooted in patriarchy. They are most commonly cast as tragedies, implying both that they are exceptional events and that they are unavoidable. They are neither, though they are, within the context of patriarchal social structures, inevitable. Even maternal infanticide—the horrific murders of children by disturbed women like Andrea Yates and Susan Smith—can be seen as a consequence of these social structures. Mental illness is obviously a factor, but as Adrienne Rich (1976) and Jane Gallop (1988) point out, murderous maternal anger is a symptom of a “darker, deeper violence that systematically constitutes motherhood as a patriarchal institution” (Gallop 1988: 2). These deplorable crimes are examples of “violence by and to the mother” (2). Why and how is it, then, that attention is so routinely diverted from the operations surrounding and generating such “tragedies”? And what is necessary to break this trance?

There is a profound problem posed by these questions that *The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma* in part seeks to address: How is it that certain traumatic acts and transmissions are understood as discrete events disconnected from the structural realities of social organization? And what can literature do to help disrupt the spell of denial and naturalization, to challenge the common tendency to cast some traumas as personal plights that would more accurately

be positioned within cultural operations we all inhabit? Trauma is gendered, raced, classed, economized, and otherwise shaped by relations of power, privilege, and disadvantage. Despite this, family violence is still commonly represented as an ahistorical anomaly, a fundamentally individual catastrophe rather than a social one.

Troubling and daunting social realities have beset the first decades of the twenty-first century: legally dubious warfare, global terrorism, financial crisis, human-induced climate change, new addictions (internet, gaming etc.), neocolonialism, and increased family and intimate partner violence. While traumas involving large-scale or historical violence are widely represented in literary trauma theory, familial trauma has had less attention. This book contributes to the emerging field of feminist trauma theory in exploring the transmission of trauma across generations and its literary testimony, revealing crucial operations at the dynamic intersection of affect and trauma between subject, text, and society. I propose this literary testimony constitutes a feminist experiment and encounter, offering new understandings of the political significance of the literary testimonies of familial trauma within the context of broader society. By interpreting a diverse range of literary works, I theorize an experimental writing capable of illuminating the ways in which trauma is transmitted affectively across generations, and between subjects, families, and societies at large. These works and my reading of them confront systematic denial of trauma as a cultural operation. Intervening on debates around trauma transmission and the nature of the literature that exposes it, this book asserts that such works stand as vital political accounts, cultural critique, and political action.

In disciplinary terms, trauma straddles the fence between clinical “trauma studies” on one side and cultural “trauma theory” on the other. It is paradoxical, then, that though I align this work with the latter I take my starting point from the former. It was the discovery of the term “chronic trauma,” coined by Judith Herman (1997) that first piqued my interest in an exploration of familial trauma and the subsequent writing of it. Herman depicts chronically traumatized individuals as isolated subjects who experience acute aloneness and a social alienation and disconnection that “pervades every relationship, from the most intimate familial bonds to the most abstract affiliations of religion and community” (37). This, for me, raised the question of the role

of writing as a form of communication capable of transfiguring debilitating isolation. I was also drawn to an exploration of the ways writing familial trauma addresses social connections and disconnections. Testimony, as a particular mode of communication, came into focus during the second half of the twentieth century, and as *The Future of Testimony: Interdisciplinary Perspective on Witnessing* (Kilby and Rowland 2014) makes clear, its relevance in the twenty-first century highlights witnessing in an increasingly technologized and globalized environment. These piques of interest naturally led to consideration of transgenerational transmissions, since familial trauma tends to run in multigenerational cycles, and it does not do so in a vacuum: social connections, disconnections, and historical contexts are contributing factors.

*The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma* examines the ways in which literary testimony communicates affective and relational contagion, illuminating transmissive cycles of trauma grounded in structural social organization and that have consequences across generations. I use the term “transgenerational trauma” to describe both intergenerational trauma transmissions, and multigenerational transmissions as occurring outside specific family units. As such, my understanding of transgenerational trauma focuses on familial trauma, though it is by no means limited to it. It is because my investigation involves consideration of the relationship between familial, intergenerational, and multigenerational trauma, and trauma as a social phenomenon, that I primarily use the term “transgenerational” rather than “intergenerational” or “multigenerational,” which might suggest traumatic transmissions as limited to a specific familial lineage (in my view such compartmentalization of trauma is impossible). *The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma* examines the ways literature elucidates the processes of transmission and the cultural conditions that give rise to it.

I pause here to highlight my interdisciplinary approach, lest an expectation of traditional literary criticism lead to disappointment. My survey of selected texts is not one of exhaustive textual analysis that seeks to identify the formal properties of each text in terms of classical literary studies. Instead, I read the texts as portals for cultural critique and in a broadly interpretative spirit that foregrounds those aspects that relate to transgenerational trauma.



The clarification, then, is that my engagement is less concerned with the technical workings of the texts or with a forensic analysis and more concerned with the cultural realities addressed within the works and the ways in which writing reveals them. I believe this methodology is necessary for consideration of the complexities of trauma transmission and writings inspired by them.

Trauma refers to experience that occurs too quickly or suddenly to be processed, that alters brain function and other aspects of subjectivity, returning in delayed symptomology, which may or may not appear pathological. Some posttraumatic symptoms are not only accepted as normal, but are socially rewarded, while others are pathologized and stigmatized. The forefathers of psychoanalysis laid the fundamental groundwork for trauma studies and trauma theory, with an understanding of trauma as a psychic experience of an event that results in “permanent disturbances of the manner in which the energy operates” (Freud 1974: 315). Sigmund Freud’s perception of trauma evolved over the course of his career and across much of this thought. Freud famously abandoned his early seduction theory, which stated that hysterical patients continued to suffer from the effects of sexual assaults that occurred in childhood, and this is still seen by many, particularly feminist theorists and survivors of child sexual assault, as a betrayal. However, other aspects of his work, including his notion of *Nachträglichkeit*, translated from German as deferred action, or afterwardness, prove productive for my conceptualization of phylogenetic heritage and its writings.

In *Nachträglichkeit*, it is not simply that a trauma or traumas that took place in the past return in the present. The word describes the way an impossible event—one not consciously registered due to its shock or speed—is registered with disproportionate affective discharge, by a subsequent, and often seemingly trivial, or at least not necessarily traumatic, experience. Trauma is related to an overwhelming or sudden experience, and it is characterized by a delayed response that features involuntary and often repetitive disturbing phenomena, such as nightmares and flashbacks, and symptomology that includes depressive and anxiety disorders, suicidal ideation, and addictions. Far from being a simple upsetting memory of an event located in the past, trauma involves a complex psychic operation that challenges the notion of a distinct psychic past and present.

The implications of what this means for testimony have been explored by leading trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth, whose focus on literary testimony is underpinned by her view of trauma as “always 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” (1996: 4). Shoshana Felman echoes this vision of literature as “an alignment between witnesses” (1995: 14). These views are at odds with Ruth Leys’s (2000, 2007) preoccupation with intention and signification and her cognitivist inclination regarding affect and emotion.

Leys has critiqued post-Holocaust theorists like Dori Laub, writing from a psychoanalytic position, and literary trauma theorists Felman and Caruth at length. While it is not my intention to weigh in on the debate or to engage in academic score settling, a targeted review of certain key sticking points is useful for teasing out the understanding of trauma that is elaborated upon in this book. For example, Leys objects to what she calls Caruth’s “literalist version of history as chronicle, conceived as a nonsubjective, nonnarrative, and nonrepresentational method of memorializing the past” (2000: 273), because what concerns Leys most is individual accountability. Leys sees Caruth’s post-structuralist leanings as constructing an ethically shaky understanding of trauma that grants perpetrators a proverbial get-out-of-jail free card. While Caruth and Felman don’t explicitly figure transmission as occurring at the nexus of trauma and affect in the way I do, they do gesture toward some kind of transmissive operation. There are crucial questions to do with ethics in the theoretical arguments in play. These are not questions easily addressed, but I am obliged to speak, however briefly, to Leys criticisms and offer some explanation of my position in order to frame the ideas in this book in relation to influential works in the field of trauma theory.

I am aligned with Caruth’s view of trauma, but I stop short of claiming that the poetics of transgenerational trauma operates entirely independent of authorial agency, intention, or interpretation. I do maintain that a writer can testify significantly, linguistically, and affectively to aspects of transgenerational trauma and its transmissions that elude those meditative functions and direct expression in language. Leys’s focus on responsibility and indignation at what she sees as a conflation of victim and perpetrator informs her critique of Caruth’s conception of trauma. Leys later extends these same preoccupations

and objections to affect theorists who theorize the autonomous or virtual potentials of affect. I respond to those criticisms in Chapter 4. For now, I want to acknowledge some validity to Leys's point that "trauma does not present itself as a literal or material truth," but as a "psychical or 'historical truth'" (282). Leys takes Caruth to task for expanding her model to include transmission, homing in on Caruth's suggestion that "one individual is understood as capable of haunting later generations—as if ghosts of the pasts could speak to those living in the present, contagiously contaminating them" (284). Leys's moral outrage in defending the victims of extreme and historical trauma is expressed as theoretically rigorous evaluation. Accusing Caruth of a logic that would turn "the executioners of the Jews into victims and the 'cries' of Jews into testimony to the trauma suffered by the Nazis" (297), Leys herself collapses into the literalism for which she reproaches Caruth. Sustained by catching Caruth out on analytical detail, Leys fails to acknowledge the enormity, and importance, of Caruth's vision.

Viewing trauma as a social force does not amount to promoting an equivalence of traumatic experience between "victim" and "perpetrator," an absolution of responsibility for those enacting violent crimes, or a negation of the gravity of genocide in general or the Holocaust in particular. Caruth is concerned not just with individual testimony but also with trauma at a social and political level, and one of my areas of concentration is the way trauma repeats/reoccurs at those levels. Underlying these explorations is a sense that a more sophisticated understanding of the strata of trauma might contribute to breaking the cycles of perpetration and victimhood that continue with devastating consequences in ever-new manifestations. It is not that the Nazis can, or should, be thought of as victims of the Holocaust—clearly Nazi war criminals and those who colluded with them can never be held to have suffered the persecutions and tortures of the genocidal trauma European Jews experienced. But if we take the long view, we might consider that Nazism had its roots in trauma, which partly informed its rampant anti-Semitic affective transmissions and found such deadly collective expression in the "ethnic cleansing" agenda of the fascistic Third Reich.

Acknowledging that a traumatic national condition was necessary for Hitler (himself the product of an abusive childhood) and Nazism to have taken

root does not amount to a condoning of it, or to a pardoning of the crimes committed. It is even possible that traumatic numbing, in combination with the discursive production of a certain kind of historically specific subject, was the foundation for what Hannah Arendt famously termed “the banality of evil” (1963). And so it goes on. We hope never again, and yet the world watches on as Israel blockades and routinely conducts brutal military operations in Gaza and Palestinians blow up busloads of Jews. The Syrian crisis scatters millions of refugees around the globe; many arrive at closed borders. In West Papua New Guinea, the Indonesian government continues what activists refer to as “slow motion genocide” decade after decade as other nations, including Australia, its closest neighbor, turn the other cheek (Elmslie and Webb-Gannon 2013). And racists and misogynists are emboldened by Trump’s victory, while we wait to see just how much damage his Presidency will leave in its wake. At some point, each crisis ends (or temporarily abates) with many lives lost and many others shattered, and perpetrators are called to account, if not in their lifetime then often enough in the history books. Still, this does not prevent another cycle of violent trauma playing out.

Leys, it seems, sees a global populous that can clearly be divided between victim and perpetrator, and while to some degree we all do (as I have done in the preceding paragraph); and those distinctions do pointedly matter, taking an individualist-oriented moral high ground fails to address the recurrent traumatic cycles that have marked every epoch of human history. Such cycles now pose an even greater danger to an increasing number of people, as well as to nonhuman animals and the earth itself, due to advanced technological capabilities and global mobility. It is not, then, that I refuse to distinguish between those traumatically acting out destructively and those who are traumatically acted upon destructively. Rather, I propose that there is a desperate need for new understandings of the way trauma works cyclically and in assemblage in order to better recognize, intervene on, and prevent traumatic cycles.

My notion of cyclical haunting picks up on theories suggestive of the potential of trauma transmission. Allowing for an intergenerational transmission of trauma does not equate to claiming the same traumatic experience of the survivor forebear, nor does it mean license to claim verbatim knowledge or cognitive memory of the traumatic event(s). It does

not even necessarily involve “remembering,” as we commonly think of it, at all. Most people will never be aware of the trauma passed on to them let alone specific events or details, but lack of consciousness of a traumatic legacy does not prevent its being carried from one generation to another. Even with little to no cognitive knowledge, it is possible for an individual to exhibit posttraumatic symptoms from which they can and do act, speak, and write.

When I speak of traumatic event(s), I do not mean to suggest that I see the traumatic encounter as a static or fixed occurrence. In an interview with Jordan Greenwald, Lauren Berlant offers a heuristic from *Cruel Optimism* (2011), in which she describes a more fluid, open-ended, affect-tinged view of event:

An episode is a perturbation in the ordinary’s ongoingness that raises to consciousness a situation that follows from something without bringing with it conventions or prophecies about what its ultimate shape as event will be. Episodes are defined first by causality, but their affective charge derives from confronting the enigma of their ultimate shape. Something has an impact: What will happen? I call this process the becoming-event of the situation. A situation usually gets its shape from the way that it resonates strongly with previous episodes. (Berlant and Greenwald 2012: 72)

I view the traumatic encounter, whether catastrophic or covert, as a becoming-event, an event that both reverberates with previous traumatic encounters and generates an affective charge destined to later, and again, resonate.

The lived, politically positioned, socially inscribed body is often absent from, or minimized in, these debates about psychic trauma. As Lisa Blackman makes clear, the body is “now no longer peripheral to humanities study” (2012: 4) and “sociology of the body” is now an “established subdiscipline of sociology” (3), but body studies and affect theory pose challenges to each other, despite the obvious and intimate relationship between the body and affect. Trauma transmissions are a contradictory operation in that they involve subjective and familial experiences of trauma in which shame, fear, anger, and other affects reinforce a sense of being bound to a body and subjectively and socially confined within it; they also exceed this boundedness in interrelational contagions. I align my conception of transgenerational trauma testimony with feminist thinkers who propose the practice of “thinking through the body” (Gallop 1988) and writing through the body, as well as those theorists who propose modes of intersubjective and transsubjective affective transmission.

This is to say that the chapters that follow focus on a seeming paradox: thinking (and writing) through affect, and specifically traumatic affect—which describes affect that is bound to, and by, trauma. My use of the term “traumatic affect” signals an attempt to address trauma in an affective framework and affect in a trauma theory framework. I bring this to bear on writing about transgenerational transmissions, exploring both the role of affect in trauma transmissions and the question of what it means for affect to lead the way in literary accounts of those transmissions. Highlighting an understanding of affect as “a state of relation . . . of forces or intensities” (Gregg and Seigworth 2010: 1), traumatic affect describes that movement of affect as stemming from traumatic experience.

The history of affect theory is multifaceted, with developments on different fronts and at different time periods. Traditionally, influenced by Plato, and later Descartes, Western thinkers have tended to view emotion as obstacles to higher functioning in social, political, and intellectual life, at best harmless or trivial indulgences and at worst hysterical and dangerous diversions from reason and common sense. The “affect theory” that has emerged in response to this historic devaluing is not just one theory; it is a complex, and often contradictory, jostling of theoretical approaches, some of which existed before the term “affect theory” gained currency. Baruch Spinoza, Enlightenment philosopher, was the first major Western thinker to challenge this essentially negative view of emotion and affect, and his work remains crucially relevant today, over three centuries later.

It is for this reason that I draw on his theory of affect and ethics throughout this book, and most notably in Chapter 2. But there are other important precursors to the contemporary, interdisciplinary “affective turn” in the humanities. Psychoanalysis theorized affect in relation to the libido and “life drive,” and the feminist and queer theories that emerged throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s also proved influential. Holocaust studies made significant contributions, and it paved the way for the study of intergenerational trauma. The trajectory that led from trauma studies is thus seen as central to the rise of affect theory. Due to the diversity of thinking within the field, an introduction to affect theory in general, and specifically to the ways in which I work with it, will lay a foundation for more nuanced explorations in the following chapters.

The American psychologist Silvan Tomkins (1963) theorized a phenomenological approach to affect, and theorists such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (1995) returned to his work in order to critique the post-structural tendency toward abstraction and the hypersensitivity to perceived essentialism in the humanities in the twilight of the twentieth century. Recentering the affective reality of the body, Sedgwick and Frank highlighted the importance and productive potential of Tomkins's view of affect. Though there have been energetic challenges to this revitalization of his theory, namely from Ruth Leys, the reclamation of Tomkins provides a valuable starting point for understanding the subjective and interpersonal dynamics of transgenerational trauma and its testimony in literature.

Categorically detailing the specific ways in which traumatic affect is transmitted is beyond the scope of this project and the disciplines from which it emerges. There are numerous avenues of exploration, including scientific investigation and experimentation, and psychological clinical studies, and I am not equipped to theorize transmission on these fronts, suffice to say that universally agreed upon and scientifically verifiable knowledge is restricted at this point, and many questions remain as to the potential of affect in relation to transmission. I speak to some of the possibilities I view as most viable for our present capacity of knowledge, and as most convincing from an observational and experiential standpoint. Throughout the chapters that follow, readers will encounter various propositions about the ways in which traumatic affect might proceed, both in trauma transmissions, and in the writing of them. If it at times seems as if I utilize disparate theories and contradictory views, it is both because there are so many different conceptions of what affects are and do and because affects themselves are somewhat mutable, hence so too are their transmissive operations. What the various conceptions of affect share, though, is an emphasis on relation as constitutive of affect and thus its relevance to explorations of familial and cultural transmissions. Tomkins offers a useful vocabulary of affect that provides a foundation for understanding the ways in which affect might work within those contexts.

Tomkins describes *affect* as a distinct biological, innate response to stimulus. He relates this to biology and defines it as transcultural and universal. He uses the word *feeling* to denote the awareness of a given affect as it is experienced,

and the ability to comprehend it as a subjective experience. He relates this to psychology and to individual interpretation of the story of affective experience. Tomkins casts *emotion* as affect and feeling filed away as memory, which he relates to biography and individual life experiences. This describes the way that affect, noted and recorded as memory (conscious or unconscious), leads to a sensitivity to the particular feelings associated with those experiences, resulting in a tendency toward certain emotions (feelings attached to memory) in response to certain stimuli. This simplified breakdown is not the last word (there are different accounts, many of which are insightful and have productive promise), but it does suggest variable possibilities of transmission and may help clarify the seemingly conflicting discussions of transmitted traumatic affect throughout this book.

Where I discuss affective autonomy and virtuality, I speak in terms of embodied affect as it escapes biological confines due to speed and intensity, and as it may transmit through the atmosphere and in those enigmatic yet undeniable engagements between the energetic and material realms. Teresa Brennan's work on the transmission of affect (2004) outlines numerous ways in which such movements of affect may proceed. Citing Marx and Foucault, who argued for a social constructivist view of subjectivity, she describes the transmission of affect as "a process that is social in origin but biological and physical in effect" (3). Brennan calls for a new metapsychology capable of gaining insight into the mysteries of affective transmission, and her propositions draw on both cultural theory and science to explore a range of possible modes that include sensory (she is particularly interested in olfactory transmission), hormonal, and in utero transmission. Though the process, in her view, is social in origin, it becomes individual and psychological to the extent that thoughts and beliefs are attached to the transmitted affect, thereby shaping subjectivity (and relationship). Crucially, she states that "feminine beings" (15)—not only women, but children, nonhuman animals, those racially ascribed into the realm of the feminine through discursive processes such as Orientalism (Said 1978), and those otherwise not exhibiting the standard signs of masculinity—bear a disproportionate degree of negative affect. I speak to this by way of an intersectionality framework in Chapter 5.



While Brennan's otherwise valuable exploration of transmission makes some unsubstantiated and less than entirely convincing claims regarding pheromones and the like, Sara Ahmed articulates a compelling approach to the transsubjective movement of affect in her materialist exploration of the cultural politics of emotion. Casting emotion and its circulation in terms of cultural practice, Ahmed shows how affects transmit through language and signs and between bodies, with varying degrees of "stickiness" (2004). Ahmed explores the question of what affect does. For her one of the most notable things it does is differentiate between people in ways that define their perceived value. As such, emotion works as prime political currency. For Ahmed, recovery from injustice (and I would add the trauma so often associated with it) involves exposure through testimony. And the work of exposure is "both political and emotional work" (200). This is central to my view of the poetics of transgenerational trauma. Drawing on Tomkins, Ahmed's account of shame focuses on the way that the shaming of Australia's Indigenous people has served a racist, imperialist, nation-building agenda. I address this history specifically in Chapters 4 and 5. Though Ahmed doesn't explicitly raise Tomkins's (1963) conception of "shame-binds," she does suggest the ways in which the consequences of the politics of shame translate into systematic injustice and shame-bound "minorities." This disparity is reflected in statistics showing that the suicide rate among Indigenous peoples is more than double that of non-Indigenous Australians (Mindframe 2016).

For Tomkins, shame-binds are processes in which various affects/emotions become bound to shame. When it comes to trauma, it stands to reason that shame would likely bind most commonly to fear, sadness, and anger, because these are the affects most associated with an experience of powerlessness. In terms of familial transmissions as they affect the youngest members, shame can attach to a great deal more. Traumatic shame-binds can wound the very fabric of developing subjectivity, and can in turn make traumatized children particularly vulnerable to further shame and shame-binds. For Tomkins, shame is, to borrow Ahmed's term, super "sticky" and its propensity for adhesion to other affects can repress the capacity for feeling in general. Joseph Adamson and Hilary Clark discuss shame-binds as "particularly crucial in understanding the significance of shame in psychodynamics" (1999: 15).

I would extend this to transmission, for it is those affective repressions and binds that are most likely to give rise to transmissive language and behavior, and that the poetics of transgenerational trauma can loosen.

Affect bound to trauma might be understood as what Tomkins calls a “script.” Russell Mearns (2000), writing within the context of clinical trauma studies, presents a compatible conception in his “traumatic memory system” (53), in which cognitive/affective/behavioral formations come into play, which he rather poetically refers to as “satellites of trauma” (112). The tendency of traumatic shame to bind in indirect ways was addressed by Gilles Deleuze (Negri 1990) when he described being struck by Primo Levi’s repeated references to the Nazi camps producing a sense of shame at being human. It is not, Deleuze points out, that Levi suggests we are all responsible for Nazism, but that “we’ve all been tainted by it: even the survivors of the camps had to make compromises with it, if only to survive” (Negri 1990). Relating this to what Levi famously refers to as the gray area, Deleuze declares such shame “one of the most powerful incentives toward philosophy, and it’s what makes all philosophy political.” Freud made a similar point when he acknowledged poets and philosophers as having discovered the unconscious before him (Adamson and Clark 1999).

The writers that would testify to such operations mine both conscious and unconscious material (individual, familial, and social) as it relates to violations and movements of traumatic affect—through familial and cultural scripts. And the poetics of transgenerational trauma is political in that it reveals the shame-bound gray area of traumatic transmissions that taint us all, to greater or lesser degrees. I do not claim that such works are new, but rather that they have a new significance as expressions of what Julia Kristeva has termed “intimate revolt” (2002). A “new world order” that constitutes a “society of spectacle” means that “political revolt is being mired in compromise” (2), necessitating the (re)turn to the “sensory intimacy” of literature (3). Ann Cvetkovich also speaks to a contemporary reality in which “political depression” results from “the sense that customary forms of political response, including direct action and critical analysis, are no longer working either to change the world or to make us feel better” (2012: 1). But, she qualifies, if this sounds like a downer, there is yet positive possibility for dark “moods, and sensibilities become sites

of publicity and community formation.” Cvetkovich suggests the expression and circulation of public feelings “to generate the affective foundation of hope that is necessary for political action” (2).

I consider the works I survey to be examples of literature that encompass these potentials. They each emerge not only, or necessarily, out of a thematic of trauma but as renderings of trauma transmissions in structure and temporality, graphic panels, experimental grammar, and, of course, language itself. In her classic text, *The Words to Say It*, Marie Cardinal (1993) paid homage to the power of words:

Words could be inoffensive vehicles, multicolored bumper cars colliding with one another in ordinary life, causing sparks to spray that did no harm. Words could be vibrating particles, constantly animating existence, or cells swallowing each other like phagocytes or gluttonous corpuscles leaguuing together to devour microbes and repulse foreign invasions. Words could be wounds or the scars from old wounds, they could resemble a rotten tooth in a smile of pleasure. Words could also be giants, solid boulders going deep down into the earth, thanks to which one can get across the rapids. Words could become monsters, finally, the SS of the unconscious, driving back the thought of the living into the prisons of oblivion. (239)

Testifying to transgenerational trauma confronts the task of outwitting the Schutzstaffel (SS) of the unconscious who would drive back the thought of the living into the prisons of oblivion, or, in other words, denial. As Cardinal’s writing suggests, this process is bodily and the power of words serves as a sort of salve.

This book addresses writing that embodies and translates traumatic familial events, despite the unreliability of traumatic memory, and I assert that this writing involves an ethical intricacy less black and white than the common association of a fixed “truth” in memoir and autobiography allows. This writing, despite its possible, or probable, factual unreliability, can nevertheless serve as an important site of testimony and witnessing. These texts do not seek to represent a single violent or original event or events in the past, or an individual or family history, so much as they express the unassimilated reverberations of traumatic affect by writing between and around trauma’s paradoxical lack of registration and its belated hauntings. As such, this kind of

writing cannot hope to tell the truth exactly; nor does it attempt to, if truth is taken to mean an objectively verifiable claim. It would be more apt to say that it does some work toward *undoing lies*. In *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* (1993), Hélène Cixous, writer, philosopher, and literary theorist, writes: “I circle ‘the truth’ with all kinds of signs, quotation marks, and brackets, to protect it from any form of fixation or conceptualization. . . . It is what writing *wants* [italics in original]. But ‘the truth’ is totally down below and a long way off” (1993: 6). Praising writers of texts that “say the worst,” Cixous is quick to distinguish this saying of the worst from confession, stating: “I am not talking about religious people; these are poets. It’s not about confessing oneself” (41).

My conception of the poetics of trauma distinguishes the kind of truth of which Cixous speaks from hard evidence and fact. When the kind of truth a writer is called on to bear witness to is not a straightforward disclosure, the writing might be thought to constitute the art of unlying. If absolute truth is an impossibility the next best thing is to move in the direction of it, to at least not knowingly lie, to attempt to undo lies in the act of writing. “Our lives are buildings made up of lies,” elaborates Cixous. “We have to lie to live. But to write we must try to unlie” (36). This writerly unlying is not just the unlying of the construct of the self, but also of the familial foundation and the cultural turf on which that self has been built. Defining truth as “the thing you must not say,” Cixous calls it the miracle of the child and the poet who walk toward home (in the direction of truth): “And for this home, this foreign home, about which we know nothing and which looks like a black thing moving, for this we give up all our family homes” (1993: 36).

When it comes to trauma, truth is not only the thing you must not say, but also *the thing you cannot say*. The thing you cannot say, as such, may best be expressed creatively, imaginatively, poetically, and affectively. Words, however malleable, can never completely convey the visceral surge of terror or profound shame, or the subjective splitting at the root of trauma, and yet, when set loose in linguistic or structural experimentation they get closer to doing so than when confined in orthodox mores and routine strategies. This writing practice makes possible communication of that which evades rational thought and conventional genre limitations. It also allows for testimony outside what Ernst van Alphen calls indexical memory. Arguing against the

transmission of trauma between generations, van Alphen insists that memory is fundamentally indexical in terms of continuity between event and memory and that this is therefore inherently individual and cannot be transferred (van Alphen 2006: 485–6). But as Marianne Hirsch points out, this objection only holds if you view memory as a purely cognitive indexical operation. In this sense, van Alphen would be more compatible with Leys's approach than mine. Hirsch (2008) argues, as do I, for a view of memory that encompasses bodily and affective imprints. My understanding of the poetics of transgenerational trauma is in keeping with Hirsch's assertion that "postmemorial work" endeavors to "reactivate and re-embodiment more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression" (111).

Since trauma creates a condition of unreliability in its telling, it is an act of empowerment for a writer to knowingly work with this unreliability, to bring imagination to bear on the psychic and bodily remnants and traces of trauma in order to produce a literature that offers itself to witnessing and unlying. The dreamlike quality of traumatic memory would seem to lend itself to poetic and novelistic treatments and to memoir/fiction fusions. I do not use the now dated term "faction" because I do not want to forge an assumed alliance between memoir and factual account in this writing (though of course it may contain some factual accounts). "Autofiction" is another term used in literary criticism to describe the practice of bringing the contradictory styles of fiction and autobiography together in one work. It is a preferable term for several of the works I examine since it leaves out the explicit claim to truth. As Shirley Jordan (2013) suggests, this "slippery hybrid" involves a "privileged connection" to trauma, but it falls short because some testimony to transgenerational trauma is not memoir. Natalie Edwards (2012) analyzes the controversial work of Christine Angot, declaring it "relational autobiography."

This is interesting because a subjective slant and the impossibility of objective fact is implicit in the relational, but ultimately none of these terms quite captures the nature of the texts I examine. To endorse an assumed alliance between memoir and factual account, when the memoir in question involves traumatic operations, would be to do violence to the nature of traumatic memory by attempting to force it to conform to a dualism that favors fact

over affect. When it comes to the perplexing territory of transgenerational trauma, such conformity refuses the opportunity for a unique process of artistic production and testimony, one that enables vital expression of, and engagement with, traumatic affect for both writer and reader. A few words about the term “the poetics of transgenerational trauma”—poetics refers to both the study of formal techniques in poetry and literature generally and alternatively to the craft of writing poetry. My usage of “poetics” relates more to the latter as it extended to include the art of writing poetically and/or experimentally in testimonies of transgenerational trauma. Further, the surveyed texts not only testify to trauma transmissions, but also are themselves transmissive texts, and I speak to the dangers of writing and reading this testimony in Chapter 2.

The texts have been selected because each demonstrates distinct features of the poetics of transgenerational trauma, in content and form, because each of the texts arises out of a compelling context, and because each makes an important and spirited contribution to literature. All are contemporary works written by women. Being contemporary and authored by women are not essential qualifications of this testimony, as I detail in Chapter 1, but it is also no accident. If feminized beings are conditioned and positioned to carry negative and traumatic affect, it is hardly surprising that they will be at the forefront of testimony to such operations. The textual interpretations offered in the following chapters focus on seven texts: Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006), Hélène Cixous’s *Hyperdream* (2009), Marguerite Duras’s *The Lover* (1992), Pat Barker’s *Regeneration Trilogy* (1999), and Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* (2006) and *The Swan Book* (2013).

I count each of these as masterful works that proffer crucial contributions to our understanding of trauma and its transgenerational transmission as it has played out throughout history, its operations in literature and in culture, and its creative potential. It is not my intention to romantically aver that writers somehow transcend trauma by virtue of being able to work with it in the production of literature. That would be sheer folly given the number of artists and writers who have displayed conscious awareness and creative capacity around trauma only to ultimately succumb to its ill effects (i.e., probable suicides such as Primo Levi’s, confirmed suicides such as Anne Sexton’s, and

the many who have met untimely addicted, alcoholic, or otherwise reckless and untimely fates). Many who initially survive traumatic experience and go on to work with its presence productively, sometimes brilliantly, in various art forms or endeavors are later felled by it, overtly or covertly lured into its deathly embrace. Likewise, I am wary of claims that conflate writing with the therapeutic cure of trauma. But as I argue in the coming chapters, each of the selected works serves to facilitate a reckoning with trauma. There are certain questions at the heart of this book: How does a chronicle of transgenerational trauma reveal the processes of transmission and the cultural conditions and collective trauma associated with it, thereby becoming a social force of political import? And what might motivate a writer to undertake such a daunting project? Each of the works surveyed demonstrate different tactical approaches to the challenging brief in the first question, as the chapters that follow detail. Along the way, I make some suggestions as to the personal and political motivations and benefits of such works.

In the first chapter, I conduct a comparative reading of two novels touted as autobiographical: Elizabeth Smart's *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* (1991) and Marguerite Duras's *The Lover* (1992), arguing that the latter is an example of the poetics of transgenerational trauma, while the former, despite many similarities, is not. *The Lover*, set in the dying days of French colonial Vietnam, and most celebrated for its erotic tale of the affair between a teenaged French girl and a rich Chinese man, is a postmodernist classic with translations in over forty languages. Duras is said to have been surprised by its success, and she went on to renounce it, declaring it "an airport novel," written while inebriated, which is quite possibly true since Duras, who wrote the book in her twilight years, having already published over forty works, was alcoholic (Mastroianni 2015). Debate continues as to the weight of its contribution to literature; I side with those who view it as an accomplished text. In my reading, its achievement is not diminished by the insobriety of the writer, or by Duras's own assessment. If for some it is the "disconnected musings of a seventy-year-old writer" (Mastroianni 2015), it is to my mind an example of the (aged) organic fracturedness of traumatic experience. Duras's backtracking on her initial description of the novel as autobiographical, her casting into doubt its factual reliability, might be read as traumatic symptom of both writer and text. Even its

drunken production might be considered a part of its (symptomatic) traumatic testimony.

Situating the poetics of transgenerational trauma in relation to the significant literary and feminist notion of *écriture féminine* (Cixous 1981), a controversial conception that seems to be enjoying something of a revival, I argue that Smart's novel exhibits the qualities of *écriture féminine*, while *The Lover* both qualifies as *écriture féminine*, and crucially departs from it. This comparative reading shows how the traumatic and feminine are implicated in, and by, one another in patriarchal culture and in *écriture féminine*. In proposing the poetics of transgenerational trauma, I also draw on Julia Kristeva's notion of the "strange body" (1984) to complicate the question of gender, arguing that the writing of transgenerational trauma is not defined by a particular biologically determined or gendered writing body.

Next I consider the ethics of writing (through) a history of familial trauma and the possible dangers of this testimony. I contextualize Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006), and Hélène Cixous's fictional memoir, *Hyperdream* (2009), in a broader discussion of genre (and genre resistance). *Fun Home*, a cult classic by the author of the popular and long-running comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*, is set in rural Pennsylvania. The book tells the story of Bechdel's childhood and early adulthood, wrangling with trauma relating to verbal and emotional abuse, homophobia, and the probable suicide of her homosexual father. *Fun Home*, inspired—as much recent graphic memoir has been—by Art Spiegelman's powerhouse transgenerational trauma testimony *Maus* (1996), joins the ranks of graphic works that have successfully tackled transgenerational trauma post the Second World War. Graphic memoir has perhaps been the most prolific and fruitful of literary genres in terms of trauma testimony, in large part because it facilitates ready and direct "access to non-verbal and highly affective embodiment and materiality of trauma, subjectivity, emotion and experience" (Chute 2012). As exacting and demanding as the process of creating graphic memoir must be, the poetics of transgenerational trauma seems an even more daunting challenge for those, such as Duras and Cixous, working with language only. In this case, the writer must find ways to birth the "embodiment and materiality" (Chute 2012) of trauma with words alone,



hence the heightened use of poetry, metaphor, and linguistic and structural experimentation.

In *Hyperdream*, Cixous achieves this in poetic prose by bringing her sharp critical eye for the cultural underpinnings of personal experience and the personal underpinnings of political realities, to bear on her keen poetic impulses. A novel/memoir hybrid, *Hyperdream* is about the tender ties between living and dying, a relationship between an ailing mother and her carer daughter, and the specter of a traumatized Europe. “I write at length, and without interruption,” Cixous once said in a public talk about her writing process. “As if I were a runner, a marathon runner. . . . And when I don’t write, I sleep, and when I sleep, I dream, which means I write” (New York State Writers Institute 2007). This relentless day/night, waking/sleeping writing process gives rise to an elliptical narration that demonstrates the power of poetic language in trauma testimony. Working with Spinoza’s theory of affect, I argue that in depicting trauma and enacting writing as a social force, these texts, as diverse examples of the poetics of transgenerational trauma, constitute a specific mode of literary testimony involving a particular affect-ethic. There is, I show, a substantial difference between testimony in which personal history becomes a portal for the illumination of cultural conditions, and testimony in which this portal remains closed, or at least obscured.

Turning my reflection on familial trauma to focus on Indigenous understandings of family, I go on to examine the postcolonial and cross-cultural testimony of Australian author Alexis Wright. Her groundbreaking novel *Carpentaria* (2006) followed several notable publications (1998, 1997a,b) and put Wright, an Aboriginal land rights activist, academic, and educator, firmly on the map in Australian letters. The story is set in Australia’s Top End, where the Aboriginal people of the region live in the long shadow of colonialism, only to have a multinational mining corporation move in on traditional sacred land. Hailed an instant classic by critics, *Carpentaria* took the better part of a decade to bring to completion. This is understandable given the scope of its ambition and the innovating complexity of its testimony to transgenerational dispossession. Bringing together Derrida’s post-structural figuring of hauntology and Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok’s psychoanalytic concept of the “phantom” in my reading of *Carpentaria*, I argue for a deconstructive reading of the phantom,

outlining a view of the affective operations of the poetics of transgenerational trauma as a record of historic trends of transmission. Specifically, I show how trauma can operate as social and political inheritance, and the crucial role of cross-cultural literary testimony in bearing witness to the crimes of colonialism and Indigenous cultural heritage.

Continuing my engagement with hauntology, Chapter 4 brings together the strands of my argument in what I call “cyclical haunting,” a concept that draws on Deleuze and Brian Massumi’s work on the virtuality and the autonomy of affect to describe the way historic and social currents of traumatic affect feed into, and out of, subjective and familial experience. I consider these operations in light of Pat Barker’s *Regeneration Trilogy* (1999), three books that observe the profound sufferings of the First World War and life for British people, home and abroad, during that period. The trilogy is notable for its inclusion of numerous, meticulously researched real-life characters, including the poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, the writer Robert Graves, and the anthropologist/psychiatrist William Rivers (Rivers appears in all three books). These remarkable books were written by an Englishwoman not yet born when the “Great War” raged; an ex-teacher with a degree in history and economics from the London School of Economics, who likes to describe herself as “an ordinary mum from up north” (Riding 1995). Despite that seeming distance, it turns out that there was, as with the other texts I survey, significant personal investment and involvement in the project. Barker, who was raised by her grandparents, was conceived during a wartime fling. She had been told her father had died in the war, and her grandfather had also fought and sported a bayonet scar on his back, which the young Barker was sometimes allowed to touch while listening to him recount war stories (Riding 1995). Having learned of Rivers’s work through her husband, a Professor of zoology, Barker began her lengthy research. Though that research provides the spine of the trilogy, and much of its compelling weightiness, it would seem that the heart of *Regeneration’s* antiwar politics is Barker’s own lived experience of transgenerational trauma. The result is that these novels, blending nonfiction and fiction, reveal a dynamic between interpersonal realms and networks beyond them: movements, collectives, institutions, communities, creeds, religions, subcultures, nations, governments, terrorism, and globalism.

The hypothesis of cyclical haunting as applied to Barker's trilogy adds a further dimension to the understanding of transgenerational trauma testimony. I argue that despite (and because of) the crucial role of personal experience in the poetics of transgenerational trauma, such literature should be respected as political account rather than simple subjective revelation or fictional story.

Chapter 5 charts connections between gender, race, and the environment, demonstrating the ways in which the poetics of transgenerational trauma witnesses to intersected injustices and traumas. Returning to Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006), and extending focus to her follow-up novel *The Swan Book* (2013), this speculative chapter ponders cyclical haunting beyond the human. *The Swan Book*, Wright's third novel, is even more innovative and high-stakes than the celebrated *Carpentaria*. It tells the story of a young Aboriginal rape survivor, Oblivia, first adopted by an old woman immigrant and later kidnapped by an Aboriginal politician. *The Swan Book* projects the concerns of today—the severity of posttraumatic experience among Aboriginal Australians, the retraumatizing policies of present-day government, the threat of human-induced climate change—into a not-too-distant future in which global warming has already wiped out the Northern Hemisphere on page one. Employing the framework of intersectionality, I show how the novel exposes traumatic intersections of injustice in society in relation to gender, race, and age. *The Swan Book* is unique in its depiction of trauma transmissions that exceed human society. Nonhuman animals are threatened and becoming extinct at an unprecedented rate, and there are claims from the scientific community that the consequences of climate change are poised to increase to levels that endanger human life and community. Challenging entrenched humanist and speciesist preoccupations with trauma, I show that human trauma transmissions routinely impact the environment and other sentient beings. Employing material from the environmental sciences and critical animal studies, I argue that these considerations are urgent and necessarily feminist in orientation, and that the literature that exposes this constitutes a radical form of political action and activism.

Finally, in conclusion, I expand on the question of “how” and “why” in relation to the poetics of transgenerational trauma. Building on the tacit implication throughout the book that trauma is not static or an entirely negative

experience, assuming it is satisfactorily survived (physically and sufficiently psychologically), I link Abraham and Torok's understanding of introjection to the Deleuzian notion of becoming in acknowledgment of the creative facets and potentials of trauma.

As my readings of the surveyed works reveal, the writing of traumatic transmissions is an act of courage because the writer faces the ethical dilemmas and discomfort of negotiating a way through the gray area of which Deleuze (after Levi) speaks; this testimony also involves writing of, and through, traumatic affective binds. The writer who undertakes this task acts as a kind of lantern bearer. The very expression of affect can be bound by shame, and the degree to which it is permissible or disallowed varies between individuals, families, and cultures. Thus, art and literature become indispensable pathways for the recognition of trauma and affect as social forces. As Adamson and Clark state, "In art and literature, shame and repression are diminished, and the richness of emotional life, its stimulation and turbulence and nuance, is investigated in its complexity" (1999: 15). It is here, at the forefront of this claim, that I place my conception of the poetics of transgenerational trauma.

Why, it might be asked, does the claim to this writing being primarily social and political matter? It matters because it rocks the intellectual and institutional traditions that unwittingly enable the continuation of a social organization that breeds deathly and damaging cycles of trauma. My insistence that this testimony is political involves a challenge to the common perception that traumatic and traumatizing acts are isolated anomalies affecting unfortunate individuals, rather than the organic consequences of an entrenched patriarchal and ruthlessly capitalist social and political system. It is a system that dominates the entire planet, causing women, children, men, people who identify as nonbinary or genderqueer, and nonhuman animals to suffer unnecessarily. It is a system in which the vast majority of us are, in one way or another, implicated.