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Bearing witness: trauma, testimony, scriptotherapy

In: Horáková, Martina. *Inscribing difference and resistance : indigenous women's personal non-fiction and life writing in Australia and North America.* First published Brno: Filozofická fakulta, Masarykova univerzita, 2017, pp. 155-173

ISBN 978-80-210-8531-2

Stable URL (handle): https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/136908
Access Date: 18. 02. 2024
Version: 20220831

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CHAPTER 5

BEARING WITNESS: TRAUMA, TESTIMONY, SCRIPTOTHERAPY

> Trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival.
>
> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* (58)

An analysis of Indigenous women's life writing and its testimonial nature from the point of view of trauma studies is inevitably informed by the extensive theoretical field which encompasses both the recent surge in trauma studies in the aftermath of the Holocaust and a much older intellectual history that includes the beginnings of psychoanalysis in modern Europe (Whitlock and Douglas 1). This chapter relates the selected narratives to the contemporary emphasis on the issues of human rights violations and the way these issues are inscribed into literary texts such as life stories. The chapter also incorporates the notions of collective trauma, memory, remembering, forgetting, and healing, which have become crucial in exploring the narratives of marginalized voices. In *Human Rights and Narrated Lives* (2004), Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith explain the recent surge of interest in the autobiographies and life writing of marginalized groups as a need to bear witness to the violent and painful histories that have shaped many modern nations. Primarily, they perceive bearing witness as an act of remembering that logically challenges the reluctance of many nation-states to recognize the rights (be it human rights, land rights or the rights to cultural self–determination) of marginalized groups. Schaffer and Smith claim that:

> These acts of remembering test the values that nations profess to live by against the actual experiences and perceptions of the storyteller as witness. They issue an ethical call to listeners both within and beyond national borders to recognize the disjunction

> between the values espoused by the community and the actual practices that occur. (Schaffer and Smith 3)

The stories of forced separations and assimilation that permeate many Indigenous women's life stories appeal to a mainstream readership precisely because they reveal the suppressed and hidden practices and policies that problematize the values promoted by the liberal humanism of modern settler colonies. Schaffer and Smith further discuss the capacity of these "narrated lives" to draw attention to the previously unspoken truths and their effects on both writers and readers:

> Some stories, formerly locked in silence, open wounds and re-trigger traumatic feelings once they are told. Some stories, recounted in the face of oppression and repression, of shame and denial, reinvest the past with a new intensity, often with pathos, as they test normative conceptions of social reality. All stories invite an ethical response from listeners and readers. (Schaffer and Smith 4)

In other words, the narratives that Schaffer and Smith have in mind bear witness to the problematic colonial histories in Australia, Canada, and the United States. The act of bearing witness also provides a link between the notion of re-writing history and inscribing traumatic experience, as well as between revealing subjugated knowledge and unlocking memory: indeed, the issues of speaking the individual, collective and generational trauma stemming from displacement, relocation, separation, and assimilation is what links Pilkington's, Sterling's, and Walters' narratives. To Indigenous women writers, bearing witness also provides a sense of empowerment and is sometimes framed in terms of a "healing process," a part of what Suzette Henke theorizes as "scriptotherapy," i.e. empowering oneself through writing, through engaging with the traumatic past and through investing one's own self and personal experience into dealing with the issues of colonial violence, broken family ties, and generational and internal conflicts.

In *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (1996), Kalí Tal reminds us that bearing witness is an "aggressive act" (7) because it ultimately challenges the power of political, economic and social pressures upon affected groups, the status quo that silences the voices of witnesses. Tal claims that:

> [Bearing witness] is born out of a refusal to bow to outside pressure to revise or to repress experience, a decision to embrace conflict rather than conformity, to endure a lifetime of anger and pain rather than to submit to the seductive pull of revision and repression. Its goal is change. The battle over the meaning of a traumatic experience is fought in the arena of political discourse, popular culture, and scholarly debate. (Tal 7)

Bearing witness is highly politicized and can become empowering; the narratives that bear witness to the trauma of colonization, for example, function as a tool in political activism. Bearing witness can also lead to seizing control over the representations and interpretations of a particular traumatic event, which in turn can lead to changing political and social structures. A problem, however, arises with the consumption, appropriation, and/or commodification of the representations of trauma by the dominant discourses, in which case the structures remain largely unchanged. In their introduction to *Trauma Texts*, Whitlock and Douglas comment on the recent proliferation of trauma narratives which are elicited by "the culture of confession" (2). Certainly there has been a notable surge in the production, readership, and criticism of these narratives, with a focus on the ways in which reader empathy is activated and engaged and stories of traumatic events marketed and consumed. Thus critics have become increasingly interested in the ethics of life writing, particularly in testimony and witnessing, voicing their concerns about the "commodification of traumatic story, and politics of recognition that shape this field of research and writing" (Whitlock and Douglas 3). Thus examining Indigenous life writing also means exploring the ways in which the genre intervenes in public domains and confronts the settler culture. In Australia, for example, Indigenous testimonies, particularly the Stolen Generations narratives, have come to occupy a double position; on the one hand, they became "a vehicle for the construction of Indigenous identity," and on the other hand "a transformative force in the dominant culture ... mobilised for the cause of national reconciliation" (Whitlock, "Becoming Migloo" 240, 242). Indeed, the Stolen Generations narratives became so central in the public discourse that, as Bain Attwood explains, the stories of Aboriginal children's separations were gradually assessed under an increasingly homogenous category of "Stolen Generations narrative" that "was produced and circulated in regional and national forums" (Attwood 195). Attwood argues that this homogenization of the "Stolen Generations *narrative*" (as opposed to earlier Aboriginal life *stories*) is due largely to the cultural and political milieu of the late 1980s and early 1990s, as well as to the pioneering work of Australian historians, namely Peter Read, Heather Goodall, and Henry Reynolds, who played a crucial role in disseminating, but also in homogenizing, the meta-story of the child removal in Australia. Attwood uses the term "narrative accrual" for the process in which the stories of removal were "reproduced again and again, and/or were being interpreted in terms of the 'stolen generations'" (196). Similarly, in Canada and the United States, the residential and boarding school narratives, together with numerous historical studies published during the 1990s, brought to light a repressed history of systematic cultural genocide and destruction of Indigenous social fabric. As a result, McKegney argues, "the reality of residential school oppression and abuse is now firmly established in historical and political spheres, no longer an alternative counter-narrative to official history but,

rather, the contemporary orthodoxy" (6). McKegney perhaps overestimates the impact of this "counter-narrative," but it becomes increasingly visible that in the 1990s, in particular, it was possible to witness a momentum in which Indigenous testimonies *were* able to elicit empathy and compassion from non-Indigenous settler population to such an extent that political action as well as various forms of symbolic gestures of reconciliation followed. In her latest study *Postcolonial Life Narratives: Testimonial Transactions* (2015), Gillian Whitlock repeatedly points to the significance of the routes, sometimes unexpected, that testimonial narratives take across the globe: "Testimony can thrive and trigger powerful and transformative cycles—such as Truth and Reconciliation narratives in South Africa, and Stolen Generations and Residential School narratives in Australia and Canada" (69). In Canada and Australia, Whitlock continues, it is the child removal story that is "a powerful site of memory for indigenous peoples in the recent past that has impacted profoundly on non-indigenous individual and cultural memory" (138). Indeed, because of its testimonial *and* political nature, Indigenous life writing can be argued to have troubled significantly the sense of legitimate belonging and citizenship in settler colonies.

History as Trauma

> Everyone laughed at the impossibility of it,
> but also the truth. Because who would believe
> the fantastic and terrible story of all of our survival
> those who were never meant
> to survive?
> Joy Harjo, from the poem "Anchorage"

The definition of trauma has undergone many changes and modifications, from strictly medical descriptions to more inclusive sociological and historical applications. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth goes back to the original Greek meaning of trauma—a wound upon a body—and follows its further extension in medical and psychiatric use to include a wound upon a mind, as was later thoroughly explored in Sigmund Freud's work (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 3). Since then, the characterization of trauma has become more inclusive and has seen the development of the discipline of trauma studies, analyzing the impact of trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, memory, and the implications of trauma for both storytellers and writers as well as listeners and readers. In her study *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (2002), Laurie Vickroy has re-defined trauma as "a response to events so overwhelmingly intense that they impair normal emotional or cognitive responses and bring lasting psychological disruption" (ix).

However, recent definitions of trauma as an event so extreme and intense that it reaches beyond normal human experience have been contested particularly on the grounds of what constitutes the "normal" human experience. For example, Laura S. Brown, who offers a feminist perspective on trauma, contends that such definitions are insufficient, as they would imply that, for instance, because so many women around the world are subjected to sexual abuse, incest, and rape, by this logic it would not be an uncommon experience, and therefore not a trauma (Brown 101). Based on this, Brown insists that "human" experience often refers to "male" experience, thus trauma refers to an event that disrupts what is normal and usual in the lives of men, i.e. wars, genocides, natural disasters, vehicle crashes, boats sinking, etc. (101). Another important step in extending thinking about traumatic events was transcending the exclusive focus of trauma theory on Holocaust survivors and their oral accounts as well as on strictly psychoanalytical interpretations. Vickroy is one of the scholars who have incorporated racial trauma, such as slavery and colonization, in what she calls "socially induced trauma" (xiii), employing the methodology of combining literary, cultural, and psychological approaches to literary narratives.

In addition to extending the definitions of trauma, more attention has also been paid to theorizing about collective trauma, in which the social structures of particular communities were damaged or destroyed. The sociologist Kai Erikson made a significant contribution in his article "Notes on Trauma and Community" elaborating on the character of traumatized communities as distinct from traumatized persons and, similarly to Vickroy, working with trauma as a social concept. Erikson argues that:

> 'trauma' becomes a concept social scientists as well as clinicians can work with. ... Sometimes the tissues of community can be damaged in much the same way as the tissues of mind and body ... but even when that does not happen, traumatic wounds inflicted on individuals can combine to create a mood, an ethos—a group culture, almost—that is different from (and more than) the sum of the private wounds that make it up. Trauma, that is, has a social dimension. (Erikson 185)

In his idea of communal trauma, Erikson stresses its collective nature and the damage it causes to the relationships in the community. Primarily, he describes communal trauma as an injury "to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality ... [it is] a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared" (Erikson 187). This definition certainly applies to Indigenous communities worldwide; much Indigenous literature, especially those narratives focused on the alienation from tribal cultures and histories, reflects the process of disintegration in Indig-

enous communities. On the other hand, Erikson also claims that "trauma can create community" in the sense that it gives the victims the feeling of having been "set apart and made special" (185–186), an idea that immediately evokes the community of Holocaust survivors and the exceptionality of their shared traumatic experience. This argument allows Erikson to maintain that "trauma shared can serve as a source of communality in the same way that common languages and common backgrounds can. There is a *spiritual kinship* there, a *sense of identity*, even when feelings of affection are deadened and the ability to care numbed" (Erikson 186, emphasis mine). The idea that communal trauma, such as that stemming from colonization, creates spiritual kinship and a sense of collective identity contributes, in the case of Aboriginal, Native American, and First Nations peoples, to the notion of pan-Indigeneity, which underscores the historical parallels of colonization and settlement practices. Collective identities and communal ties are of course crucial to my analysis of Indigenous women's life stories which very often foreground the kinship structures, extended family ties, and relational selves as a reaction to the forced break-up of the communal tissues. In particular, the accounts that attempt to re-imagine and re-construct a functional tribal society, the "cultural maintenance" life writings, stress the need of Indigenous people within communities to stick together in the face of cultural assimilation pressures. Communal trauma is transgenerational: the younger generations of Indigenous people, although they have no direct experience with colonial violence, such as the massacres, deaths due to illnesses, hunger, and relocations, and they have not gone through the boarding, residential, and mission school systems, are still heavily burdened with the historical experience of their ancestors. The colonization trauma is transmitted from one generation to the next, and so it is always present in the collective memory. The past is perpetuated in the communal trauma, haunting the present and the future, as Erikson concludes: "Our memory repeats to us what we haven't yet come to terms with, what still haunts us" (184).

An important issue in trauma theory is the process of narrativization of trauma. Scholars working in trauma studies agree on the "imperative to tell" that is inherently present in survivors. In "An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival," the psychoanalyst Dori Laub, who worked with victims of massive psychic trauma and their descendants, explores the relation between survival and the urge of the survivors to tell their story: "The survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative to *tell* and thus to come to *know* one's story" (78, original emphasis). This urge to speak out may become a consuming life task, almost an inner compulsion. However, there is also an opposing tendency, something that Laub calls "the impossibility of telling," which refers to the impossibility to articulate something that cannot be fully captured in thought, memory, or speech ("An Event Without a Witness" 78–79). Even

though Laub's theory relies mainly on the oral accounts of Holocaust survivors, in my view his approach may illuminate some aspects of Indigenous women's life writing, such as its testimonial nature. It is noteworthy, for example, how Laub equals "telling" and "knowing" one's story, which also applies to all the narratives discussed in this section. The stories that Indigenous women tell reflect their struggles to come to terms with the history of their people's physical and cultural destruction, and telling their own and their people's traumatic experiences means consciously striving to learn and memorize what actually happened. Learning this knowledge through writing in turn empowers them.

The process of narrativization of trauma is essential in the psychoanalytical treatment of trauma survivors. Drawing on her clinical practice, Cathy Caruth suggests that "the treatment of trauma requires the incorporation of trauma into a meaningful (and thus sensible) story" (*Unclaimed Experience* 117). Similarly, in "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening," Dori Laub maintains that in order to break the circle of a fate which cannot be told or known, only repeated, but in which the victims are still subject to the previously mentioned imperative to tell *and* know, a therapeutic process must encourage the construction of a narrative, the reconstruction of a history, and, above all, what he calls the "re-externalization of the event" (69). This re-externalization, Laub continues, "can occur and take effect only when one can articulate and *transmit* the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back again, inside" ("Bearing Witness" 69, original emphasis). This is an important point for examining Indigenous life writing through the lens of its testimonial nature, as the accounts try to make sense of all those historical injustices. The history of colonization in settler colonies and its consequences for Indigenous populations are re-externalized in this way.

Creating a meaningful story out of a trauma experience results in establishing the genre of "trauma narratives." Trauma narratives are described as

> personalized responses to this century's emerging awareness of the catastrophic effects of wars, poverty, colonization, and domestic abuse on the individual psyche. They highlight postcolonial concerns with rearticulating the lives and voices of marginal people, rejecting Western conceptions of the autonomous subject and describing the complex negotiations of multicultural social relations. (Vickroy x)

This broad definition of a trauma narrative importantly stresses the global context of contemporary violent conflicts of the world and reiterates the social dimension of representing the trauma, leaving the door open for the inclusion of literary texts which themselves do not focus on the original traumatic events but rather retell and depict their consequences. The definition also suggests that trauma narratives do not have to be recounted by the actual survivors but can be creatively re-worked and interpreted by their descendants, both individually and collectively.

This would imply that a large portion of Indigenous life writing can be treated as trauma literature. However, as is the case of the narratives analyzed in this section, the aspects of trauma narratives are only one of the layers, and it would be reductive to read them only in this way since no matter how auto/biographical, these narratives are also fictionalized, multi-generic literary texts.

Following the psychoanalytical stream in Caruth's and Laub's treatment of individual trauma and the ways in which that trauma is transformed into a "meaningful story," it is necessary to enquire what happens when the collective and communal trauma is narrativized. Scholars suggest that traumatic events are "written and rewritten until they become codified and narrative form gradually replaces content as the focus of attention" (Tal 6). Tal demonstrates how this occurred with the Holocaust trauma, which was converted into a metonym, "a set of symbols that reflect the formal codification of that experience" (6). A similar process might be traceable in the narratives representing aspects of colonization trauma, particularly the Stolen Generations and the boarding and residential schools experience. Pilkington's, Sterling's, and Walters' accounts confront the readers with a specific set of images, symbols, and vocabulary to convey the experience of having been forced to submit to government institutions. Thus they abound with images of shabby buildings with barred windows that evoke prisons; bad food; military-like regime; gender and sibling separation; harsh punishment from the staff; the total confusion of the children at the beginning; descriptions of their trauma from having been separated; homesickness; occasional resistances; and so on. Although these images are based on the actual experience of the authors (Sterling and Walters) or their immediate family (Pilkington), the narratives give the impression that they also depict something larger, something reaching beyond the individual experience. This process of extending traumatic impact is what Kalí Tal identifies as "mythologization," defined as reducing a traumatic event to a "set of standardized narratives (twice- and thrice-told tales that come to represent 'the story' of the trauma) turning it from a frightening and uncontrollable event into a contained and predictable narrative" (6). Tal claims that mythologization is one of the three strategies of coping with a traumatic event, the other two being medicalization, which "focuses our gaze upon the victims of trauma, positing that they suffer from an 'illness' that can be 'cured' within ... institutionalized medicine and psychiatry," and disappearance, which is a "refusal to admit to the existence of a particular kind of trauma ... usually accomplished by undermining the credibility of the victim" (6). While Tal examines the traumatic effects of the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, and sexual violence against women and children in her analysis of trauma narratives, some of her conclusions are applicable to the Indigenous women's life writing explored in this section.

The process of reducing the traumatic event to a recognizable set of images does not mean that this mythologized trauma becomes an empty and meaning-

less story repeating the same forms, strategies, and symbols. Rather, it puts the emphasis on extending the personal testimonies into a larger narrative of the colonization trauma where the narrators and storytellers serve as mediators and cultural translators of the past from an Indigenous point of view. Their singular personal experience to some extent represents the experience of the whole community, one story standing for all comparable stories of the other community members, the unique accounts being drawn together to form a single "meta-experience" (Hughes D'aeth, n. pag.). This collective aspect of the Stolen Generations narratives and boarding and residential school narratives is also noted by Laurie Vickroy, who underscores that "testimony narratives do not just concern individuals but also the individual as representative of a social class or group" (5). This emphasis on the collective meta-narrative has been reiterated by various scholars in different context, most recently by Gillian Whitlock in *Postcolonial Life Narratives: Testimonial Transactions*. Whitlock again draws attention to the power of testimonial narrative to intervene in the public discourse, to give voice to the subaltern, albeit in a limited degree: "In testimonial narrative a narrator speaks publicly on behalf of the many who have suffered, and lays claim to truth and authenticity in accounts of social suffering. ... Testimonial narrative can enable subaltern access to a powerful voice to speak as a political subject" (67), although, Whitlock admits, this access is limited.

When examining the testimonial nature of Indigenous narratives of the Stolen Generations and boarding and residential school experiences, it is useful to revise the main characteristics of a specific subgenre of *testimonio* which is closely related to trauma narratives and which heavily influenced the theory of testimonial narratives. It was theoretically developed in the work of John Beverly, who defines *testimonio* as "a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a 'life' or a significant life experience" (Beverly 30–31). It has also a specific geographical aspect as it is mostly associated with Latin American narratives. Beverly's discussion of *testimonio* is useful because of its emphasis on the act of truth telling, which supposedly lends *testimonio* an "ethical and epistemological authority" which "derives from the fact that we are meant to presume that its narrator is someone who has lived in his or her person, or indirectly through the experiences of friends, family, neighbours, or significant others, the events and experiences that he or she narrates" (Beverly 3). The issue of the truth-telling effect has been subject to a number of scholarly debates, not only in the subgenre of literary testimony and *testimonio* in particular, but also in the theory of auto/biography as such. All these debates underscore its ambiguity: in his own discussion of the famous Latin American *testimonio* of a Guatemalan activist and guerrilla fighter *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1983), John Beverly, for example, reacts to

the anthropologist David Stoll's argument which questions and accuses Rigoberta Menchú of adjusting, if not fabricating, certain facts from her life in order to meet the public and political demands of the day. Beverly claims in his response to this controversy that the crucial question is not whether the author "lies" or not, but rather who has the "authority to tell the story" (5). In a similar way, Dori Laub also discusses challenges to factual accuracy in testimonies, for example in the case of an oral account by a Holocaust survivor whose remembered "facts" about Nazi concentration camps were "corrected" by historians. Laub explains: "Knowledge in the testimony is, in other words, not simply a factual given that is reproduced and replicated by the testifier, but a genuine advent, an event in its own right ... The woman was testifying not simply to empirical historical facts, but to the very secret of survival and of resistance to extermination" ("Bearing Witness" 62). The same is confirmed in Henke's discussion of the twentieth-century women's trauma narratives:

> Testimonial life-writing allows the author to share an unutterable tale of pain and suffering, of transgression and victimization, in a discursive medium that can be addressed to everyone and no-one—to a world that will judge personal testimony as accurate historical witnessing or as thinly disguised fiction. No matter. It is through the very process of rehearsing and reenacting a drama of mental survival that the trauma narrative effects psychological catharsis (Henke xix).

Vickroy points to a problematic distinction between *testimonio* and trauma narratives, seeing Beverly's definition as rather general and applicable to trauma narratives which, in Vickroy's view, are also "'a literary simulacrum of oral narrative' that seeks to create a truth effect, a feeling of lived experience, and expresses a 'problematic collective social situation' through a representative individual" (xii). Even though the distinction between *testimonio* and trauma narratives may seem blurred, *testimonio* seems to refer to a more realistic account, while trauma narratives may also be fictionalized to various extents. While *testimonio* is used to discuss a very specific subgenre tied to a particular location and history, a trauma narrative must be understood as a broader and more inclusive term representing any kind of trauma, be it collective trauma, such as colonization or slavery, or individual trauma, such as psychic and domestic violence. It is conventionally presented in a semi-fictional form but with accurate historical, sociological, or psychological foundations. In the end, Vickroy makes a subtle distinction between testimony and fictionalized trauma narratives in their symbolic representation: while *testimonio* attempts to tell the story as it is, trauma narratives represent trauma on a symbolic level; the choice of third-person narration, for example, certainly engages readers in a different way than an autobiographical voice. This, however, does not mean that these symbolic representations are not accurate or

truth-telling. Vickroy therefore concludes that while testimony may be more confrontational in its realistic approach and the symbolic representations of trauma may be challenged as distorting the nature of traumatic experience, it is important to take into account that "an audience needs assistance in translating unfamiliar experience in order to empathize with it" (Vickroy 11).

As was already suggested in Beverly's definition of *testimonio*, the genre typically presents a direct involvement of the author-narrator in a traumatic event; if they are not direct witnesses to the traumatic experience, they are somehow affected by it. The author-narrator may therefore bear witness to historical traumatic events that were passed on to them by their ancestors. This phenomenon has been famously theorized by Marianne Hirsch as *postmemory*, a term originally related to the second-generation of Holocaust survivors but since then adapted to other contexts and histories to connote the sense of transgenerational trauma and suffering. Hirsch writes that *postmemory* "characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated" (*Family Frames* 22). Anne Brewster makes a direct link between Hirsch's concept and Indigenous life writing; in her latest book, which features in-depth interviews with Aboriginal writers, she refers to *postmemory* to comment on Doris Pilkington's strategies in her third-person narration in her autobiography *Under the Wintamarra Tree* (2002), arguing that Pilkington's "gaps" in memory (e.g. her "forgetting" about her grandmother)—a result of traumatic experience of her removal as a child–allows her to fictionalize events from the past (Brewster, *Giving This Country a Memory* 249). In this way, the process of "transference of traumatic responses" can continue for generations, especially between parents and children where children often "inherit patterns of traumatic response" (Vickroy 19). This is rather symptomatic of Indigenous life writing, in which the younger generation of writers often succumbs to the imperative to represent the traumatic past as well as the post-traumatic present in their narratives.

The last aspect of trauma narratives this overview seeks to foreground is the notion of *scriptotherapy* and its function in healing and recovering from both individual and collective trauma. In her introduction to *Shattered Subjects*, Suzette Henke defines scriptotherapy as "the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic reenactment" (Henke xii). It is an outcome of her research into women's life writing in the twentieth century in which she argued that autobiography and life writing can be effective substitutes for psychoanalysis by providing a therapeutic alternative for victims of traumatic experience. This "writing out and writing through" that characterizes scriptotherapy may, if successful, lead to both individual and collective closure and contribute to subsequent healing, which is explicitly called for in most Indigenous women's

personal non-fiction and life writing, as it empowers the individual authors as well as the whole community through sharing and writing about various aspects of the colonization trauma. Ideally, the result of this process is what Henke calls "narrative recovery" in referring to a community's recuperation from the "past experience through narrative articulation and the psychological reintegration of a traumatically shattered subject" (xxii).

The life writing narratives analyzed in this section tell, in one way or another, stories of collective, communal, and transgenerational trauma, and call for healing of the community. Thus they perform what Sidner Larson, discussing Native American literature, calls a "curing phenomenon" (60). In the first section, it was suggested that the urban, politicized, and activist texts by Jackie Huggins and Lee Maracle empower their authors by engaging them in a public intellectual and academic environment, and give voice to their long-term struggles for Indigenous human rights and sovereignty. In these texts, healing is possible when Indigenous communities gain equal access to the resources and privileges that the dominant society offers and their political sovereignty, cultural plurality and self-determination is recognized. Even before that, Paula Gunn Allen argued that the current abyss between the modern patriarchal society of settler colonies and traditional Indigenous heritage can be bridged by the spiritual restoration of tribal gynocracies and the feminine principle that guided them. How the scriptotherapeutic elements make their way into the stories of both separation and homecoming written by Pilkington, Sterling, and Walters, where the healing process depends on the possibility (or impossibility) of a physical and/or spiritual return home while ensuring survival and continuance, is examined in the following subchapter.

Trauma as a Story

> And today, we are talking about the imagination of tribal stories, and the power of tribal stories to heal. Stories that enlighten and relieve and relive. Stories that create as they're being told. And stories that overturn the burdens of our human existence.
> Gerald Vizenor, "Trickster Discourse: Comic and Tragic Themes in Native American Literature" (68)

It was suggested above that Indigenous women's life writing can be also read as trauma narratives, as it represents traumatic experiences stemming from violent colonization, racial oppression, and cultural genocide. The genre also manifests elements of personal testimony and scriptotherapy. The texts discussed in this section, Doris Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, Shirley Sterling's *My Name Is Seepeetza*, and Anna Lee Walters' *Talking Indian*, are auto/biographical but partly

fictionalized accounts that inscribe both individual and collective trauma from forced separation and assimilation and provide testimony to the destructive system of mission, residential, and boarding schools in Australia, Canada, and the USA. The authors narrativize their own encounters with the system of regimented surveillance, unmasking a severe invasion of the private by the public sphere and documenting the difficulties, if not the impossibility, for Indigenous people to keep their families intact in the face of state intervention.

The separation of children from their families has different motives and takes place under different circumstances in the life writing narratives. In *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, Molly, Daisy, and Gracie are literally "stolen," or, as Pilkington deliberately calls it, "abducted" from the midst of their family and community (45). The Aboriginal family are somehow immediately aware of what is happening when Constable Riggs appears, all of a sudden, amongst them:

> Fear and anxiety swept over them when they realised that the fateful day they had been dreading had come at last. They always knew that it would only be a matter of time before the government would track them [the girls] down. When Constable Riggs, Protector of Aborigines, finally spoke his voice was full of authority and purpose. They knew without a doubt that he was the one who took their children in broad daylight—not like the evil spirits who came into their camps in the night. (Pilkington, *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* 44)

This scene shows that there was some awareness among Aboriginal people of the dangers that their children faced. In Pilkington's narrative, the fear of separation affects both children and the community who feel they are powerless to prevent the removals. The only action the family can take to protect their part-Aboriginal offspring is to hide them in the bush or let the Aboriginal women give birth in the bush rather than in a hospital where the child would be registered and might be taken away soon after the birth (Pilkington 40). The little strategies of trying to prevent the children from being removed are further described by historian Anna Haebich: "They had look-outs and warning systems and kids might rush off into the bush. Some families put them in suitcases, sat on the suitcase, they might have, if they knew about it, might have the children blackened up with charcoal" (qtd. in "About Stolen Generations" n. pag.). *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* demonstrates, among other things, how the traumatic experience of the removals and the long-term, if not permanent, separation is destructive for the community. The children could be taken away any time and very unexpectedly, with no time to prepare the family or the children, so the mothers had to be alert at all times. In addition, the probability of the children returning to their families was very low, as the children were deliberately removed to very distant settlements or cities as far from their original homes as possible, as is visually recorded on the first pages

of *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* by the map of the girls' journey from Jigalong and back home. This is in contrast to the depiction of residential and boarding school experience in Sterling's and Walters' narratives, in which the children are not so far away from home and they usually go home for Easter, Christmas, and summer holidays. This does not diminish the traumatic impact of the residential and boarding school environments on Indigenous children in Canada and the USA; it is, however, a different life experience than that of the Stolen Generations in Australia where the links were often cut off abruptly by a single removal with very slim chances of return, while North American residential and boarding schools were responsible for a rather gradual process of alienation from the Indigenous background.

In Sterling's *My Name Is Seepeetza* and Walters' *Talking Indian*, the separation seems to be guided by different motives. Rather than "stolen," the children are "sent away" by their parents who often see this as the only option they have. By no means does this indicate that the parents would voluntarily send their children to boarding and residential schools; rather, they are pressured to do so by various circumstances, such as poverty and the struggle to keep all of their children fed and clothed, the pressure from the churches running the schools, or legal orders. Often the parents themselves are traumatized by their own childhood separation from family and the institutional experience and try to prevent their children from getting into "trouble." Some parents even refuse to teach their children Native languages, as they know the children would be severely punished for using them at residential and boarding schools. This is repeatedly expressed in *My Name Is Seepeetza*, where the parents, despite speaking their language fluently, consciously prevent their children from learning Indigenous languages in order to "prepare" them for the residential school experience (78, 89). This strategy, however, confuses Seepeetza who perceives speaking Native languages as something natural and desired: "Dad says I have to be a nurse or a teacher but I would like to be an interpreter like him. He speaks lots of Indian languages, but he won't teach us. Mum won't either. She says the nuns and priests will strap us. I wonder why it's bad" (36). Of course, Seepeetza is soon to discover the residential school rules about speaking languages other than English. Another important motivation for the parents to send their children to residential and boarding schools is their belief that education will secure their children a job and help them survive in the mainstream society, as is suggested in the quote from Sterling's text above. But again, this is proved wrong as the main "education" Indigenous children were receiving in residential and boarding schools was not in academic subjects but in various household and farming skills, mostly to be practiced in the service of white people (Kuokkanen 703). In this the system was very similar to mission schools and Native settlements in Australia. Interestingly, in *My Name Is Seepeetza*, it is Seepeetza's great-grandmother who protests sending the children to the resi-

dential school as it "would turn them into white people" and they "wouldn't be able to hunt or fish or make baskets or anything useful anymore" (Sterling 30). The clarity of her vision is, however, obscured by the next generation's struggle to survive in the environment of encroaching Anglo-Canadian society. In spite of some Native parents' false but understandable belief that they were doing the best for their children by sending them to residential and boarding schools, their awareness of the fact that they are denying their children their Indigenous identity and sending them into the arms of assimilation is depicted nonetheless as debilitating and paralyzing for the family and community life. Having no means to change this course of events is as traumatizing as the experience of the Stolen Generations and their families in Australia.

Similarly to the history of the Stolen Generations in Australia, the residential and boarding school history in North America remains a deeply embedded trauma among Indigenous peoples today, with many survivors and eyewitnesses speaking out about the abuse and maltreatment they received in various kinds of institutions. What the following quote suggests about the impact of the residential school system in Canada is also applicable to the USA and Australia: "Residential schools were instrumental in the breakdown of the family, causing strain and mistrust as language barriers arose and children were taught to devalue their cultural traditions" (Grant 46). The separation of Indigenous children from the familiar environment and the need to come to terms with the new, hostile surrounding is accompanied by feelings of loss, confusion, fear, internalization of one's difference and sometimes by psychosomatic symptoms such as bedwetting. Hence Seepeetza comments: "We get stomach aches when we have to come back to school after summer. It starts when we see the first leaves turning yellow at the end of August" (Sterling 36). The fear of having to return to the school, of being taken away from the family not once but every year after the summer of course has a severe impact on the children's physical and mental health, resulting in alienation and internalized shame.

Similarly, even though Anna Lee Walters' narrator in *Talking Indian* goes through a boarding school experience for a shorter period than Seepeetza in Sterling's narrative, she also admits it was the most traumatic experience in her life as she was taken away from the very traditional, tribal environment of her grandmother's household when five years old. However, Walters provides an insight into yet a different experience with a government boarding school. Until her school age, she lived with her Otoe-Missouria grandparents with whom she was very close. When the grandfather dies, she is "returned to [her] parents," which is described by Walters as "an extremely traumatic experience" because "this act, in itself, loosened [her] grip on the picture of a completely tribal world" (*Talking Indian* 50). In the following paragraph Walters confesses her feelings of anxiety and alienation stemming from having been taken away from her grandparents:

> A chain reaction began when I was in the second grade that, once started, reverberated through my world. For the first time, the picture I was always able to envision began to dim. I seemed to float alone in space with nothing to pin me down, cut away from the safe and nurturing world that my grandparents had given to me. (*Talking Indian* 50)

"Floating alone in space" is an apt metaphor for the trauma Walters suffered when very young and it intensifies when first her sister and then mother are also "taken away" from her as they both develop tuberculosis and must be hospitalized. She remains alone with her father and little sister and in this difficult moment for the family, she and her sister are sent to the government boarding school (51).

Walters' text is rather conventional in terms of genre conventions, giving a fairly straightforward autobiographical account of her experience in the boarding school, and thus the representation of trauma is unmediated by an unreliable child narrator, as in *My Name Is Seepeetza*, or by a third-person biographical mode, as in *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*. Instead, the boarding school experience in *Talking Indian* is depicted in a raw, factual, documentary style of writing. What Walters' text adds, however, is the introspective mode describing her inner feelings and reflecting on how this experience shapes her identity in a negative sense: "This was the first time my sister and I were completely separated from our family. ... The picture of the Otoe world was not yet entirely gone, but it was now *away* from me. I could *almost* see it, but I was definitely outside it" (51, original emphasis). Even though Walters admits that the boarding school did "take care of them" in terms of clothing, food and a place to sleep (51), she does not see anything positive about the experience and the strongest memory Walters has of this time is the "feeling [she] had no control of what was happening to [her]" (51). In addition to her own traumatic story, Walters also gives a similar account of the boarding school experience of her Navajo husband who could not speak much English when arriving at the boarding school, and who therefore experienced many communication problems. "Those years were painful and lonely, and my husband still has difficulty talking about his experience there" (216), says Walters. In contrast to Walters, who decides to alleviate the painful memory through narrativizing it in a scriptotherapeutic mode, her husband seems to be unable to work through his traumatic experience, preferring, like so many trauma survivors, to suppress it and remain in silence.

The issue of silence and the impossibility of representing the unspeakable is of course one of the major themes in trauma theory. Remaining silent as a response to trauma is, according to Dori Laub, common in trauma survivors:

> [T]he speakers about trauma on some level prefer silence so as to protect themselves from the fear of being listened to—and of listening to themselves. That while silence is defeat, it serves them both as a sanctuary and as a place of bondage. Silence is for them

> a fated exile, yet also a home, a destination, and a binding oath. To *not* return from this silence is rule rather than exception. ("Bearing Witness" 58, original emphasis)

Even though trauma theory has explored the issue of silence mainly in relation to testimonies by Holocaust survivors, Stolen Generations and boarding and residential school narratives also address similar issues. The protagonists of personal testimonies often have to make decisions about speaking out or remaining silent, or even strategically withholding some information about their traumatic experiences. All writers under analysis here have managed to break the silence by sharing the life stories of themselves, their families, and their communities, yet they must also negotiate the ways in which they present the painful memories. In some cases, the younger generation writers/biographers who record oral accounts of their family members, and whose traumatic experience is not direct but transgenerational, must sometimes confront the silence and reluctance to fully disclose the impact of their parents' or community elders' traumatic experience. But it is also common that the elder relatives finally decide to tell their stories with the prospect of their stories being documented for their own children as well as for the non-Indigenous reading public. This is the case of Australian Indigenous life writing and auto/biographical narratives such as *My Place* by Sally Morgan, *Auntie Rita* by Rita and Jackie Huggins, *When the Pelican Laughed* by Alice Nannup, and *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, in which Doris Pilkington says at the beginning of her narrative that her mother and aunt are "anxious for their story to be published before they die" (xi). Although Molly and Daisy, Pilkington's main informants, are willing to share their memories in the end, there is no doubt that they are selective about which facts and details are revealed and which are not. In addition, the whole story is mediated by Pilkington who also inscribes her own imaginative and creative skills as a writer. In Sterling's and Walters' narratives, the traumatized parents (and a husband in Walters' narrative) refuse to share their experience with their children. As a result, mostly the recent generation of Indigenous writers narrativize the suppressed traumatic experiences of their parents and grandparents as well as their own, negotiating the silences and becoming mediators between the traumatic past and post-traumatic present.

Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence, *My Name Is Seepeetza*, and *Talking Indian* can thus be identified as participating in both individual and communal scriptotherapy. The idea that testimonial and trauma writing can perform a healing effect on the author and her immediate environment actually permeates all the life narratives discussed in this book. The scriptotherapeutic elements are perhaps most visible in Anna Lee Walters' *Talking Indian* where there is also the strongest sense of the autobiographical "I." Walters describes how after the traumatic boarding school experience in which she totally separated from tribal culture, writing helped her find her own identity through reconnection with the tribal and oral traditions of

her people: "Writing released years of oppression. It made me whole and free. [It] seemed to express my renewed self, the sense of identity that was given back to me when I stopped trying to follow the mainstream, stopped denying the tribal essence of me, as I started listening for the familiar voice of tribal oral tradition again" (53). For Walters, the process of writing down her people's version of history, of re-writing the history, is a means of empowerment, particularly in the moments of emphasizing the survival of her community, rather than the defeat which has been presented in so many white historians' and anthropologists' publications. This aspect of her narrative runs through *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, too. Reconstructing the trek of the three girls in a textual form is a process of healing and reconciliation, both for Molly and Daisy, and for Pilkington herself as she becomes directly involved in the continuation of the story. *My Name Is Seepeetza* explicitly plays upon the concept of writing as a means of dealing with traumatic experience: Seepeetza, the protagonist, writes a diary to release her childhood frustrations and confusions in the fictional residential school, while Sterling, the author, writes the diary-like fictionalized autobiography to obtain closure for her own trauma from a real residential school. While Walters tells her story in an autobiographical mode, the other two narratives by Pilkington and Sterling are much more fictionalized, which has led some critics to read them as novels. Rauna Kuokkanen calls *My Name Is Seepeetza* a "fictionalized lifewriting" to argue that this form allows the writers "to confront and deal with their own, often painful experiences in an indirect way that is less personal than writing in first person" (700).

Testimonial elements are inscribed in Pilkington's, Sterling's, and Walters' texts on two different levels. First, there is the sense of the testimony and bearing witness to the forced separations and assimilation pressures, to the system of the state intervention and "educational" institutions—in other words the testimony to the cultural, economic and political destruction. On this level, the three narratives have a disturbing effect on readers who are confronted with previously silenced deeds. On the other hand, there is a strong sense of testimony to survival and continuance. The epilogue to *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* titled "What Happened to Them? Where Are They Now?" gives a brief overview of the further fates of the three protagonists. Although they are still filled with many sad episodes of repeated removals and state interventions, it is also interesting to note that the stress is put on the continuance—namely the three women's descendants. So it is carefully recorded that according to Aboriginal kinship, Molly has eighteen grandchildren, twenty-nine great-grandchildren and two great-great grandchildren; similarly, Daisy and Gracie also have great numbers of offspring (132), contributing to the community's growth. As the whole narrative concludes with this statement, it somehow counteracts the traumatic content and, as was already suggested, demonstrates the failure of the central assimilationist ideology which motivated the practical policies of removals. The same strategies are employed by Sterling

and Walters who, apart from bearing witness to residential and boarding school trauma, emphasize the strong connections with their Indigenous background that they were able to restore. In spite of her traumatic experience and partial alienation from her family, Seepeetza manages to remain grounded in her Indigenous identity because, as someone who has been brought up in a traditional environment in the midst of functional extended family, she is able to remember and bring back, albeit in secret and only in the company of other selected Native children, the cultural practices and customs learned at home when times are bad at the residential school. Similarly, although Walters' Indigenous identity has been severely disrupted by her years in the boarding school, away from the family, in the end she stresses the survival of her people and their resilience; for example, she describes how in spite of everything she kept Otoe and Pawnee cultural traditions close to her heart, and even added her husband's Navajo culture, passing all of these cultures on her own children. Therefore, the life writing narratives analyzed in this section, with a particular focus on Stolen Generations narratives and residential and boarding school experiences, record in detail the severe impact of what has sometimes been called "historical trauma" and they also inscribe ways of healing this trauma. Healing is almost always constructed through the trope of returning home, both in the physical sense of a journey home and the metaphorical sense of returning to traditional cultures, languages, places, landscapes, and kinships. This notion of homecoming-as-healing also refers to writing, as Doris Pilkington, Shirley Sterling, and Anna Lee Walters all write with home in their minds: Pilkington records the heroic journey of her relatives to their Aboriginal home; Sterling returns home in her journal entries; and Walters writes a love letter to her grandparents' tribal cultures and histories.