Haunting Poetry: Trauma, Otherness and Textuality in Michael Cunningham's *Specimen Days*

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Early conceptions of trauma are intimately linked not only with modernity but specifically with the height of industrialisation (Micale and Lerner 2001). This is converged in the opening of *Specimen Days* particularly in the image of an industrial accident at the ironworks where a young man is killed by the stamping machine. His young brother, replacing him at the machine after the funeral, then experiences an apparition of the dead brother still trapped inside the machine, which leads him to believe that all machines house entrapped ghosts of the dead. Writing on the Victorians' anxieties about internal disruption caused by the advent of the railway, Jill Matus (2001, 415) has pointed out that,

> Freud himself remarked in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), [that] there is 'a condition [which] has long been known and described [and] which occurs after severe mechanical concussions, railway disasters and other accidents involving a risk to life; it has been given the name of traumatic neurosis' (12).

Freud's remark brings to the fore the traumas of the industrial age as both individually and publicly experienced and negotiated. This condition of trauma as private and public, individual yet also societal is held in tension throughout Cunningham's novel.

Reflecting on the otherness of trauma and its vexed relationship to representation, this article will consider some aspects of the writing of trauma in Michael Cunningham's 2005 novel *Specimen Days*; a text that offers a particularly powerful literary imaging of culture's disavowals that return to haunt. In my discussion of Cunningham's engagement with trauma, and in particular

social and 'insidious' forms of trauma, the main concerns will be firstly how the text conveys the workings of trauma structurally and stylistically and secondly the novel's distinctly self-reflexive discussion of the ethical implications of fictional representations of trauma. Having briefly introduced the novel and outlined some theoretical perspectives on trauma fiction pertinent to this reading, the article will turn to a stylistic analysis of some of the formal aspects of the representations of trauma in the novel, noting in particular how Cunningham employs repetition, paratactic syntax and multiple narrator voices. From here the article will turn to the question of the reader's relation to aesthetic representations of trauma and to the wider debates concerning ethical responses to trauma that the novel seems to question. It will be argued that *Specimen Days* offers an innovative writing of trauma that foregrounds the traumas of everyday violence, social injustice and oppression, whilst also making links to the types of cultural trauma that typically achieve more public recognition, such as traumas of war or environmental catastrophe. In doing so the novel moves away from the prevalent focus on types of traumas that the nation more readily mourns in public debates and artistic responses producing and maintaining a particular national self image and subsequently also opens up for new responses to trauma that require a rethinking of our relationship to otherness and the other. The novel thus attempts to formulate an ethics that aims to challenge the dominant responses to public trauma that are imbued by and dependent on injurious discourses of othering and by doing so also links individual affective experiences to social structures and historical experiences.

At the centre of *Specimen Days* is the story of how a young boy walks up to a stranger in New York's Central Park, gives him a friendly hug and detonates a bomb. The scene is at once banal and emotionally paradoxical. What happens is unpredictable, yet mundane, affectionate yet violent, familiar yet radically other. Undeniably, the scene has an element of sensationalism too. However, as we learn

more about the group of underage suicide bombers, the complexity of the scene emerges; the children are at once a public threat *and* the ones who are injured. The text implies that they are the abandoned children of drug addicts; their disfigured bodies a result of drug related birth defects. Having suffered traumas of abandonment and neglect, they are the victims of societal failures in terms of caring for its more vulnerable members. Yet they are at the same time 'the terrorists' and this, their positioning as simultaneous victims and perpetrators, brings out complex dynamics of power. Equally marginalised characters are the concern of the first and third part of the novel. The first part is narrated through the perspective of the twelve-year-old Irish immigrant working-class boy with a heart condition and a speech impediment and the third part, set in a technocratic future, is narrated by Simon the dissident minded android who is part of the workforce made up of 'simulos,' enslaved inhabitants of colonised planets exploited by the humans. From this short description we can see that the text moves fluently across historical times, narrator perspectives, tone, register and genres; a ghost story opening, followed by a detective mystery and a science fiction ending.[1]

In the middle story, 'The Children's Crusade,'[2] it befalls Cat, a forensic psychiatrist in the department for 'deterrence', where her job is to listen to the 'callers' (who report all sorts of envisioned disasters or killings they intend to

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[1] Using three clearly distinctive genres within the one novel draws attention to the fictional structure and our expectations as they relate to conventions of genre and form in ways we rarely see in conventional novels. Foregrounding stylistic conventions of a work in the way this unusual combination of clearly identifiable and discrete genres creates an effect of postmodern defamiliarization or *verfremdungseffekt* (Selden and Widdowson 1993, 79). Cunningham's juxtaposition of different genres within the novel has affronted most reviewers (Faber 2005), but seems to me to be a comment on the relationship between textuality, affect and desire and the reader's relationship to the text. In other words, the unexpected change in register and form reveals to us the structure and nature of our investments in the text. This, I suggest, should be understood as an incitement to engage with the ethical implications of reading or witnessing traumatic narratives, which I will come on to in the final part of this article.

[2] Intertextual references not only to the myth/history of the Children's Crusade of 1212, but to Brecht's poem, the American Civil Rights Movement protest march in Alabama in 1963, and Richard Powers' novel *Operation Wandering Soul*.

carry out) to map the terrorist cell using intelligence gathered from the phone calls. However, eventually, she decides to change the predicted course of events by connecting with, rather than isolating, the boy next in line to blow himself up and they leave the city together. This story is located on a temporal continuum encompassing 'In the Machine' the first story set in the industrial heartland of 19th century New York City and extending into the post apocalyptic future of the last tale 'Like Beauty', possibly brought about by the uprising of the children crusaders of the previous chapter. As this brief introduction of the novel indicates, Cunningham's text is not only stylistically agile but works across multiple and multilayered frames of reference. The human cost of industrialism, chronic poverty, the marginalisation of non-normative forms of kinship, racial othering and the alienating effects of hyper-consumerism are among the themes of the novel and this multitude of references works to illustrate the complexity of trauma as both an individual experience and on that relates to collective memories and broader cultural representations, which I will come back to. Here I will first introduce some of the recent cultural theories of trauma that I will bring to bear on my reading.

The notion of trauma relates to the forceful wounding of human psyches or bodies and to experiences of loss and mourning. In *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, Laurie Vickroy refers to trauma as 'events so overwhelmingly intense that they impair normal emotional or cognitive responses and bring lasting psychological disruption' (2002, ix), which seems to hint towards the otherness of trauma by contrasting it to 'normal' emotional responses and landscapes. Cathy Caruth and others have further conceived of the otherness of trauma as intrinsically linked to its unspeakability, positioning trauma as outside or other to language in a sense.[3] Insisting on trauma's unspeakability may

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[3] More recently commentators such as Roger Luckhurst have taken issue with a fixation on the 'unrepresentability' and 'unspeakability' of trauma, resulting in a formulaic 'rhetoric of aporia' (Luckhurst 2010, 12) as the idealised mode for any theorisation of trauma. His argument is that the

not be very useful but it is still necessary to think about how trauma brings us up against the limitations of language and raises urgent questions about the politics of representation as well as politics of form. Also indirectly relating to a sense of otherness Vickroy's definition centres on disruption of, or perhaps the undoing of, identity but does not acknowledge how trauma is performative, producing ways of being in the world. Understandings of the constitutive and performative nature of trauma have developed with the theorisation of 'insidious trauma' (Root 1992); which is the conceptualisation of everyday life oppressive experiences as traumatic events.[4] The impact of living in severe poverty, or the impact of racism, colonialism, homophobia, or other social injustices may thus be understood as forms of 'insidious trauma'. Both post colonial and queer critique, and of course interventions coming out of their intersections, have been instrumental in this regard and have highlighted the psychological and emotional impact accumulated traumatic experiences in the everyday may have on groups of disempowered people as well as individuals.

The work of Caruth (1996) and Shoshana Felman together with Dori Laub (1992) has been instrumental for theorising trauma as cultural discourse, beyond the individual, and as connected to systems of power. More recently, Ann Cvetkovich, in her writing on trauma as constitutive of public lesbian cultures, draws on both queer theory and trauma studies, demonstrating in particular the usefulness of such intersections for 'mounting critiques of normativity' (2003a, 46). As noted by Kleber et al., individual trauma never occurs in a vacuum (1995, 1). From this we can conclude that collective traumas are also individual traumas

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unrepresentability of trauma has become a truism and that the subscription to such a universalising condition of 'trauma' is problematic because it obscures the specificity of traumatic representations. See also (Kaplan 2005, 37) for a critique of Caruth's insistence on the 'unspeakability' of trauma.

[4] Within clinical psychology, psychoanalysis and trauma studies, there has historically been an overwhelming focus on 'the event', or in Freudian terms, the 'original trauma'. This gives the notion of trauma connotations of 'high impact' and 'the event' is commonly imagined as a violent attack from the outside.

and individual traumas are always determined by socio-cultural factors. With further Feminist debates illuminating the complex interplay of gender, race, trauma, cultural memory, the individual and the nation state we have seen an important development of understandings of the relationships between individual trauma and cultural trauma. It is this intersection that Cunningham's work seems to concern itself with in particular and that I will return to discuss in the latter part of this article.

The metaphors of ghosts and 'haunting' have been highly formative in how we conceptualise trauma and are also frequently used in trauma narratives as textual or visual vehicles for describing the workings of trauma on the individual psyche or indeed a culture. For example, with reference to the clinical definition of post traumatic stress, Caruth emphasises the 'structure of its [PTSD] experience' as a defining factor rather than the event or the content of traumatic memories and symptoms, using the metaphor of haunting in stating that it is the traumatic experience's 'repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it' (1995, 4) that characterises the pathology. Comparably, and famously, Toni Morrison literalised the trauma of the African American experience of slavery in the figure of the ghost in her novel *Beloved* (1987) where the spectre of Sethe's murdered daughter not only embodies the personal trauma of death but the abject conditions and consequences of the slave system. A similar ghost motif is used by Cunningham to reflect Lucas's experience of his brother's death. Envisioning his dead brother as a ghost in the machine provides Lucas with an 'explanation' for his death: machines are inhabited by the dead who seek to lure the living to join their world. It also offers the opportunity for a continuous imagined conversation and relation with his brother, deferring his absence. A more sustained engagement with the enduring ghost motif is however found in the intertextual 'haunting' of the text by Walt Whitman's poetry that registers both at the level of the printed text on the page we are reading and as part of the diegetic dialogue. The spectral

voice of Whitman emerges uncannily like a ghost or a double throughout the text, fragmenting the narrative voice, its ghostliness intensified by the compulsive and automatised delivery of the lines by some of the characters, reminiscent of spirit writing. Young Lucas, for example, has completely absorbed Whitman's lines into his cognitive and linguistic constitution and involuntary speaks the lines in ways that sometimes entertain and sometimes take on more disturbing qualities. This is also true for Simon who has a *Leaves of Grass* chip implant, which is meant to function as a form of emotional moderator and 'moral code' but the chip has a glitch generating lines that he speaks at random.[5] When characters cite Whitman, one reviewer has pointed out, 'they're displaying not an affinity but a symptom' (Cain 2005), which also bespeaks the notion of possession or emotional haunting. Towards the end of the next section which concerns itself with aesthetic form and the writing of trauma, I will return to the issues of the palimpsestic nature of the text and the figure of the errant voice raised here, discussing in more detail the bridging function of voice as the medium that connects the bodily dimension of trauma with language. This part of my discussion thus concerns itself mainly with how the text structurally communicates aspects of trauma beyond the content of the plot. Attending to Cunningham's novelistic techniques, I will attempt to unpick some of the stylistic and formal tools in relation the reader's affective responses to the novel.

Anne Whitehead points out that 'the term "trauma fiction" [in itself] represents a paradox or contradiction', because 'if trauma comprises an event or experience which overwhelms the individual and resists language or representation, how can it be narrativised in fiction?' (2004, 3). We can see this issue of the unrepresentability of trauma dramatised at the heart of *Specimen Days*; it is not engaged in 'representing' trauma in the conventional sense of

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[5] The little boy spitting out verse like a poltergeist conjures the visual image of popular culture's horror films such as *The Exorcist* (1973).

giving testimony that gives priority to the first person voice and 'realistic' narrative mode (although it borrows heavily from the convention of realism). Rather, it oscillates between affective and material perspectives, prose language and poetic language, external and internal voice. Cunningham's novel bespeaks a variety of traumatic elements, both historical and contemporary, both personal and cultural, and the text is involved in the writing of trauma both thematically and formally. The novel, in addition to engaging with loss, abandonment and trauma on a thematic level, seeks to express through its structure some of the characteristics of the impact of traumatic experiences on the mind, by 'internaliz[ing] the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of traumatic experience' in the fabric of the text (Vickroy 2002, 3). The writing of trauma in Cunningham's work thus entails going beyond plot and beyond testimony to reproduce some of trauma's linguistic properties in the structure of the text. So, the narrative often only indirectly hints at the traumatic stress endured by a character – the devastation of Lucas's loss of his brother which also meant the loss of the family's only income for example is conveyed in the laconic description of his apathetic parents, their deprived living conditions and the boy's delirium resulting from days without food. Such indirection, together with an occasionally collapsing chronology, repetitions of phrases and motifs conveys the traumatic content of the novel, beyond plot. And it accentuates the affective dimension of the narrative, producing a 'registering [of] the shocking and un-assimilable nature of its subject matter in formal terms' (Whitehead 2004, 83). In other words by reproducing some of the dynamics of trauma the text also conveys a sense of its 'otherness'.

Cunningham's subtle treatment of the effects of long term abject poverty and systemic social injustices on the individual characters aptly reverberates the slowly and subtly destructive nature of 'insidious trauma' and 'the widespread effects of trauma across time and space, the way that it is felt in the textures of

experience of everyday life and not just as a cataclysmic shock' (Cvetkovich 2003b, 60). In addition to repetition and temporal disruptions, already mentioned, such formal marks may further include broken syntax, contradictions in register, tone, voice, and so on – several of which Cunningham employs in his novel. One example is how the repetitive, cyclic structure of the novel indirectly 'represents' the workings of trauma.

The tripartite structure divides the text by cutting short one narrative and beginning another, seemingly unrelated, thus also withholding closure.[6] The three sections are set in three different periods and narrated by three different voices. First, Lucas: the disfigured boy with a heart condition, then Cat: the forensic psychologist, and lastly Simon: the android. However, while the tripartite structure results in fragmentation, it is also a form of deeply embedded repetition. The three parts constitute a retelling of the same story, three times repeated. Each chapter repeats the same constellation of characters; a man, a woman and a child, although in different configurations and reincarnations. Each repeats a narrative of loss and mourning. And in all three sections people read, speak or are otherwise concerned with Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Thus the structure offers three circular movements rather than a linear development divided into chapters. By way of repetition the three parts are interweaved: objects, places and dreams recur. Artefacts like a white porcelain bowl trace their way through history from one character's hand to another; and we note in the second chapter that old and yellowed pages from *Leaves of Grass*, used as wallpaper in a flat where sect-leader Walt lives with her foundling children, may well be from the very same copy of the book that features in the first movement set in the nineteenth century.

Such use of *mise en abyme* playfully approaches the materiality of text, but perhaps more important here, also underscores the cyclic, repetitive structure

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[6] The novel's three chapters appear at first quite distinct and unrelated, leading some reviewers to comment on them as 'novellas'. The title plays on this tension between the pluralities of stories, by using the plural form of 'days', and the work's unity conveyed using the subtitle 'a novel'.

of the text and through the passing on of ordinary objects the precarious existence of a person is accounted for and carried forward in a resonance of some of the character's lived and emotional experience. Aris Mousoutzanis has pointed out that such narrative repetition is a form of 'traumatic repetition' (Mousoutzanis 2009, 132). Insightfully, he identifies Cunningham's use of repetition as a deliberate strategy to convey the uncanny nature of trauma. We feel compelled to repeat or revisit trauma in order to 'neutralise' its otherness by attempting to integrate it into a context that through symbolisation and mythologisation (Tal 1996, 6), reducing its devastating impact on us. But traumas also have a tendency to repeat; hauntingly reappearing as fragments or sensations in a repetitive way that the subject finds hard to shield itself from. Both these forms of repetition are present within Cunningham's text. The most disturbing instance of such reliving of the trauma is exemplified by Lucas's attempt to replicate his brother's death by deliberately and devastatingly placing his hand in the moving parts of the machine, the same machine that caused his brother's death. In that same moment the elasticity of time becomes evident. Intense pain, Lucas notes, makes only the absolute present exist. Thus, through repetition and other forms of non-linear deployment of temporal narrative structures the novel reflects some of the uncanny qualities of trauma's temporality.

Another innovative stylistic move employed to convey the impact of trauma is Cunningham's unconventional use of intertextuality: the insertions of Whitman's lines are deployed to create multiple voices and layers of meaning, as well as to disrupt, or move away from, the realist narrative.[7] This breaks with the well established conventions of testimony and survival narratives associated with trauma fiction and that privilege a single narrative voice and the realist mode. My argument here is not that poetry is (idealistically) put forward as the 'better' form

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[7] Yet another layer of intertextuality is added by the use of a different work by Whitman to double as the title.

for the working through of trauma but that the poetic voice in the text nevertheless seems to be given the 'role' of registering trauma. Indeed it is present mid destruction, implicated even, we may say, as Whitman's lines at one point are transformed into mantras for a group of suicide bombers. The poet's voice is sometimes internal and sometimes external and moves between providing inspiration or commentary. Whitman's lines offer momentary frameworks only to disintegrate moments after. It is here in the juxtaposition of the prose narrative and the sections and lines from *Leaves of Grass* that we find an analogy between the textual composition of the novel and the disruptiveness of traumatic symptoms in relation to a person's consciousness or being. Like errant reminders, or obtrusive flashbacks, the lines of poetry cut through the narrative, seemingly at random. But every now and then, filled with an uncanny sense of coincidence, they appear indirectly semantically charged in relation to the context. Such juxtaposition also affects the temporal dimensions of the text, noted above; in that the way Whitman's lines interrupt the narrative's progression causes shifts in tempo and tone. Time is rendered strange and we momentarily, but quite literally 'lose the plot' which uncannily evokes the dislocation, distortion and otherness of the experience of loss and of traumatic symptoms.

The notion of voice seems to be a key to the narrative as well as to the problematic nature of representing trauma. Thinking further about the function of the errant voice of Walt Whitman in this novel with relation to trauma theory, we can see how the material qualities of voice become important in providing a link between embodied experience and the narrativisation of trauma. Laura Di Prete, writing on 'body memory' and 'embodied memory' in relation to trauma narratives, characterises trauma fiction as a 'mode of telling that acknowledges an indissoluble bond between voice and body, trauma and corporeality' (2006, 2) and I would here like to focus for a moment on this link between trauma and voice and

the uncanny nature of voice.[8] Literature's generally unquestioned condition of speaking in someone else's voice is something that Nicholas Royle has brought attention to as a quality that makes literature uncanny in itself. This quality is highlighted rather than unacknowledged in Cunningham's work. Other scholars working within the framework of psychoanalysis, such as Slavoj Žižek, have theorised the notion of voice as a phenomenon that reminds us of the strangeness of the self (Žižek 2006). Voice, in itself, already has an uncanny quality, as it transitions the boundaries of the body and appears at once natural and as a strange element that we harbour within. A strange presence in the 'home' (the self, the body) voice is uncanny, at once constituting and rupturing the self. The novel includes several episodes where the nature of voice is reflected upon, drawing attention to the strangeness of voice. Lucas's father's voice, for example, is rendered unfamiliar and strange by the breathing machine he relies on. More eerie still is the noise that comes out of the boy's mouth as the drum of the machine crushes his hand. He doesn't recognise it himself noting how it comes out 'in a strange voice' (Cunningham 2005, 75).[9] Voice, Žižek describes, is 'neither dead nor alive: its status is, rather, that of a "living dead", of *a spectral apparition* which somehow survives its own death' (2006, 195, my italics), and this is also the status of the apparitional figure of Whitman as an errant voice in *Specimen Days*.

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[8] It's worth noting here that voice is remarkably absent from Freud's account of the uncanny (1919). His preoccupation is mainly with visual uncertainties and symbolic meanings of the eyes, a key trope in the tale of The Sandman, which his essay offers a reading of.

[9] The novel is also otherwise concerned with the uncanny quality of voice. Cat is described as having a special ear for what's in a voice. She prides herself on being able to identify a caller's age and race by listening to their voice, but what is more, she also has a special ability of detecting in a voice 'the ping of true intention' (Cunningham 2005, 97). This sensibility is a great help in her line of work, separating the hoax callers and the attention seekers from the serious ones, but unnerves her when in conversation with a work colleague, he triggers 'the ping'. (Cunningham 2005, 140) Voice here takes material qualities and a life of its own, uncannily emphasising its autonomous status from the self.

The relationship between the characters and Whitman's verse is far from straight forward. Their reciting of his text is less an expression of admiration than a creed or compulsion. On the page, Whitman's verse appears sometimes as separate sections in italics and, sometimes, as fully integrated into the main text. And it figures as an inner monologue as well as spoken dialogue. Ambiguity is sometimes resolved by a character commenting on what they just said: 'I didn't mean to speak as the book', thus signposting Whitman's distinct presence in the text. The text's prominently palimpsestic structure makes the text multilayered and open-ended, giving, not only the effect of a fragmented voice, but an uncanny notion of ghost text – a text or subtext that is there yet cannot be fully acknowledged. The competing layers of texts also seem to reflect how the writing of trauma is open-ended and ongoing. *Specimen Days* is far from a therapeutic aid aiming for resolution. It is, in fact, unclear whether the text can offer any closure. Intertextually, this is underwritten by the nature of Whitman's work as a continuous, ongoing project of writing and rewriting that carried on throughout his life. *Leaves of Grass* was published in numerous editions, the last one hauntingly referred to as the 'Deathbed edition'.

Remaining sensitive to the complexities and 'impossibilities' of representing trauma Cunningham's text also raises questions about current dominant politics governing public responses to trauma and it is to this political and ethical question I will now turn in this last section. In a self-reflexive move the text wrestles with not just the paradoxical nature of narrating trauma, but of reading it, touching upon the reader's ethical and emotional involvement with the text. Trauma literature seems more acutely than other types of texts, perhaps, to bring out the uncanny dimension of reading that Nicholas Royle has put as such: 'one tries to keep oneself out but cannot. One tries to put oneself in: same result' (2003, 16). Encouraging us to rethink responses to trauma and loss, the book problematises the relationship between reader and text. As Whitehead (2004) has

noted, the relationship between speaker and listener (narrator and reader) in the case of trauma fiction is characterized by a delicate balance of recognition and resistance towards appropriation, on the listener's behalf. Caruth, also, has called for new ways of listening that have the capacity and imaginative flexibility to accommodate the complexities and differences of trauma narratives (1995, viii). Whitehead emphasises that 'speaking beyond understanding, testimony requires a highly collaborative relationship between speaker and listener' (2004, 7). Her observation points to the difficulties of resisting either assimilation or rejection in any encounter with otherness. For these reasons, *Specimen Days* deploys a range of techniques to negotiate the relationship between the reader and the text and the novel tries to maintain this precarious balance by variously appearing humorous, sentimental, serious, distant, and immediate.

In the second movement the reader's ambivalent position is played out through the character of Simon, Cat's boyfriend. Simon's excitement over the 'second hand crisis' he gets to experience when Cat talks to him about her work mirrors our reading of the novel. Simon is very excited by Cat's proximity to the bomb threats, which she in turn plays on to enhance her appeal to him. She 'talks dirty' to him, as she puts it – by which she means she indulges his fantasies about threats, imagined and real, with teasing snippets from her world of police work. The novel here raises questions about our motives for seeking out trauma narratives and the pleasures of aesthetic representation. We could say that Simon embodies what Mark Seltzer, in describing contemporary culture's fascination with 'shock, trauma and the wound', has termed 'wound culture' (1997, 3). Such consumption of trauma narratives is alluded to in the book's third part where we encounter a form of violent gaming that involves customers paying for a 'player' to assault them in public in a way that is scripted and pre-arranged. Thus punters get to experience fear and trauma in a sanitised and safe, synthetic version. This fascination's rooting in popular media and fiction tells of a need for a very public

negotiation of traumas through the constant 'probing of the wound' that Seltzer argues is the preoccupation of our culture when we consume mediated scenes of distress and trauma in the form of reality television, news reporting and fiction focussing on violence or accidents. Such negotiating of traumas, revealed in Simon's mixed feelings of desire and fear towards the otherness of the terrorists, testifies to a 'collective desire to be reassured as well as scared shitless' (Cunningham 2005, 216), to use the words of the novel. Implicitly, the dramatisation also raises the charged question of what it takes for the reader to empathise.

In the second movement, 'The Children's Crusade', set in post 9/11 New York city, the tension between trauma as at once personal and societal is most successfully played out in the concurrence of the trauma related to the apprehension of imagined subsequent terrorist attacks, a series of incidents involving children suicide bombers and Cat's loss of her young son. The attachment that Cat develops to one of the nameless children 'soldiers' is at once a highly personal attachment, related to her bereavement, and a commitment to a new way of life and ethics that goes beyond the private and that clearly challenges the prevailing norms of kinship and structures for how we relate to otherness and the other. She breaks the chain of othering on which society seems to rely to uphold itself as sound, rational and American. We can see here that Cunningham locates trauma at various intersections of the public and the private, the historical and the personal, problematising the place of trauma in culture in a way that truthfully engages with its social conditions.

As feminist critics have pointed out, in the wake of a national trauma, there is a mobilisation of traditional, hegemonic values relating to nationalism, gender and sexuality, as well as notions of the family and other social structures. Anne Cvetkovich, writing on the construction of cultural memory around

September 11, argues for the usefulness of considering what queer perspectives on sexuality may teach us about de-pathologizing the non-normative, to:

> acknowledge and embrace the queer or non-normative dimensions of our emotional responses and to see them as a resource for public cultures of feeling that can challenge violent retribution and narrow or exclusionary patriotisms (2002, 472).

Such violent retribution is something that we see being played out as well as radically resisted in *Specimen Days*. Queer models of kinship variously represented by the 'inter-species' relationship of Simon, an android and Carateen, a non-human immigrant from another planet, the 'siblings' that make up the children crusaders, and the non-conventional mother-son relationship of Cat and her informally adopted son Luke, open up alternative ways of relating to the other.

In the post-nuclear New York depicted in the third movement, all forms of social interaction are hyper-regulated and government is moving towards clamping down on 'illegal' life forms, which reflects the exclusionary politics Cvetkovich talks about. However, in the previous chapter, Cat's decision to, in response to the suicide bombers' attacks, leave her relatively secure and privileged way of life with her white and well to do boyfriend to instead form a family that includes the 'monster', indeed homes the other in a way that risks rendering the home permanently 'unhomely', is a clear resistance to such turning to conservative values. She is haunted by guilt for the death of her son some years earlier, which stems from her failure to query the medical doctor on his fatal misdiagnosis of the child. The link between the children crusaders case and her own son is highlighted by one of her colleague who warns: 'don't mix it up with what happened to your own kid' (Cunningham 2005, 155). But her commitment seems to go beyond her personal life situation. She realises that what society holds as the 'solution' to the child terrorists, to catch them and lock them up, may be another fatal mistake. Such an act would but perpetuate the marginalisation of

these individuals and reproduce that culture's hegemonic structures. She is aware that the boy, albeit temporarily disarmed, will kill her. Yet, for her, attempting to connect with him is the only possible response. It will not change their trajectory; but it will potentially offer to give the journey there an alternative meaning. Importantly, Cunningham does not provide a solution and thus does not offer us a neutralisation or mythologisation of the trauma. His is instead an 'open' call for a different ethical approach. When Luke, smiling insanely, says 'now you are in the family, too', we can't be sure if this is in recognition of their alternative form of kinship, or if it means that he regards her as one of the 'crusaders', or indeed if he simply signals the oncoming of her death brought about by his affection. One day he will love her enough to kill her (Cunningham 2005, 196). In that moment, sitting on a train face to face with the boy, Cat runs through the possible gains and losses in her head:

> … he could always choose to kill her. She could always decide to do away with him. But for now, she thought they could go on together. They could put it off hour by hour and maybe from month to month or year to year. … in a sense he had killed her already, hadn't he? He had ended her life and taken her into this new one… *To die is different from what any one supposes, and luckier* (ibid).

Importantly, the novel raises questions about how to maintain a sense of self in the face of loss and how to resist grasping for ready made solutions and responses to loss or trauma and in the paragraph above, Cunningham seems to suggest the importance of alternative ethical responses to trauma. This is also then to suggest a move from effect to affect. A radical shift in how we relate to otherness and the other, requires a move away from rationality as a normative regime (and its imperative to 'know' the other) towards diversity and affiliation. This foregrounding of affect also relates to the importance of understanding how the imprint of trauma and emotions register in, and are performed through, the formal aspects of the text, its syntax, silences, and dynamics of tensions and

release, as this article has discussed and demonstrated. Without devaluing the importance of the politics of representation, and issues of representability, it is equally important not to ignore what we may call 'the politics of form', particularly when it comes to understanding how trauma is manifested in text.

Luckhurst's recent article, 'Beyond Trauma', warns against the 'trauma paradigm' becoming 'embedded in neat conceptual formulations, standard historical moments and canonical literary or visual texts' (2010, 11). Whilst such tendencies should not be underestimated it is also important to recognise what is done to ensure diversity and open debates. In particular we should consider interventions that work across disciplines or schools and across genres and constitute an ongoing (re)reading and (re)evaluation of both literary texts and critical work allowing for new or underrepresented marginalised perspectives. But, equally important, are novels such as Cunningham's *Specimen Days* that do not settle on one particular historical moment or are not rigidly focused on one 'type' of trauma, or even definition of trauma. Instead Cunningham's interest lies in looking at the various and manifold points where the distinction between the personal and public verge and it becomes clear that a personal trauma always is culturally contingent and that the public cultures of trauma can house a multitude of personal responses. Such fictions thus importantly offer narratives where vicarious and mediated responses to trauma are discussed undogmatically within the framework of popular culture.

Reading *Specimen Days* through the category of trauma shows how the politics and emotion, personal and public intersect and how representations of trauma can be situated as 'the hinge between structures of exploitations and oppression and the felt experience of them' (Cvetkovich 2003a, 12). Deliberately confusing categories by working across genres and using both historical modes and fantasy, it offers both historical specificity and a means to question normative forms of collective memory, using fantasy's more symbolic and metaphorical

register. And it becomes effective perhaps just because of its audacious insistence on maintaining 'the fluidity of movement between the registers of history and fantasy' that Luckhurst remarks on as being key to any advancing and reconfiguring of the representation of trauma (2010, 17).

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