Avondale College of Higher Education, University of Technology Sydney

Carolyn Rickett and Sue Joseph

Beyond this point here be dragons: consideration and caution for supervising HDR writing trauma projects

Abstract:

As memoir and autobiographical/autoethnographic texts flourish in the market place, so this emergence is reflected in the tertiary education sector. Mostly sited within journalism, English and creative writing schools, a proportion of these texts incorporate trauma narrative as students turn to creative practice degrees as a means to write through disruptive autobiographical events.

Accordingly, supervisors of HDR candidates undertaking long form trauma narrative find themselves more and more immersed in the trauma, bearing witness to their students' potential unease. We argue that this type of supervision may potentially necessitate a differentiated management approach, with the establishment of additional protocols, informed by the potential dangers of re-traumatisation of the candidate; and vicarious traumatisation of the supervisor.

The aim of this paper is to report on some of the preliminary findings of a qualitative research project where a range of Australian academics supervising Higher Degree Research (HDR) candidates writing about traumatic experiences were interviewed regarding supervisory protocols and practices.[2] Here we focus on selected insights from supervisors who responded to one of the interview questions: 'what do you consider the potential risks for a student and a supervisor involved in HDR projects framed by trauma narrative?' We anticipate this paper will provide helpful perspectives from experienced academics for early career supervisors about to embark on trauma shaped projects.

Biographical Note:

Carolyn Rickett (DArts) is an Associate Dean of Research, Senior Lecturer in Communication and creative arts practitioner at Avondale College of Higher Education. She is co-ordinator for The New Leaves writing project, an initiative for people who have experienced or are experiencing the trauma of a life-threatening illness. Together with Judith Beveridge, she is co-editor of The New Leaves Poetry Anthology. Other anthologies she has co-edited with Judith Beveridge include: *Wording the World; Here, Not There*; and *A Way of Happening*. Her research interests include: trauma studies; writing as therapeutic intervention; medical humanities; journalism ethics and praxis; literature and poetry.

Sue Joseph (PhD) has been a journalist for more than thirty-five years, working in Australia and the UK. She began working as an academic, teaching print journalism at the University of Technology Sydney in 1997. As a Senior Lecturer, she now teaches journalism and creative writing, particularly creative non-fiction writing, in both undergraduate and postgraduate programs. Her research interests are around sexuality, secrets and confession, framed by the media; ethics and trauma narrative; memoir;

reflective professional practice; ethical HDR supervision; and Australian creative non-fiction. Her most recent book, *Behind the Text: Candid conversations with Australian creative nonfiction writers*, was published in 2016. She is currently Reviews Editor of *Ethical Space: The International Journal of Communication Ethics.*

Key words:

Creative Writing – Trauma – long form narrative – memoir – HDR supervision – life writing

Trauma is inescapable. Inevitable. It is not rare, but common [1]

How do we deal with a haunting past while simultaneously acting in the present?[3]

Introduction

Reflecting on impulses shaping narrative projects exploring psychic or physical distress Nerea Arruti argues: 'The urgency to tell the story is present after all trauma …' (Arruti 2007: 6). The 'urgency' of telling forms the loci of Cathy Caruth's foundational work on trauma where she articulates the core concept of voicing the wound:

> … trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also what remains unknown in our very actions and our language. (Caruth 1996: 4)

Caruth's notion of the writerly 'belated address' has formed and framed much of the literary discourse and scholarship around trauma texts for the past two decades. The idea that a writer's wound seeks a mode of address to process trauma has enjoyed increasing currency among psychoanalytic, literary and humanities disciplines. Conceptually, Sigmund Freud's talking cure has made way for notions of the writing cure, where the act of interpreting and integrating traumatic events shaped by the writing process is positioned as a type of therapeutic intervention.

In her vital work on healing from trauma, psychiatrist Judith Herman contends: '... without some form of public acknowledgement and restitution, all social relationships remain contaminated by the corrupt dynamics of denial and secrecy' (Herman 2015: 243). In many ways, the dyadic relationship between a writer's published work and a reader can constitute acts of acknowledgement and some kind of symbolic restitution. In this way, Marilyn L. Chandler argues: 'All crises in some way involve a struggle with language, and to be healed we need to seem to find a way to tell our stories' (1990: 4). This supposition supportively links the process of narrating trauma to a positive outcome. Chandler further contends that as there are 'choices entailed in constructing a narrative', therefore it 'is not hard to see how closely analogous that process is to healing' (Chandler 1990: 6). Explaining why she determines writing as a healing exercise Chandler notes:

> Designing and telling a life story is purgative, reconstructive, integrative, transformative activity. The basic requirements of a narrative—pattern, structure, closure, coherence, balance—all engage a writer in creating a whole out of fragments of experience. (Chandler 1990: 6)

Her exposition outlines the stages involved in how a writer might 'work' through to this transformative experience, and for the flow of her argument we quote her here at length:

> In the process of composing an autobiography a writer may move through a variety of modes of writing that signal a progression toward broader perspective and greater control—from exploration to reflection to analysis to speculation. At each stage questions arise: What has happened to me? Why did it happen? How? How can I relate these events to the rest of my life? How can I communicate my experience to others, and why should it be told? The writer moves from the task of finding words and images, to patterning or recognizing pattern, and finally to forming a gestalt or

> narrative plan that brings the many discrete elements of experience under one rubric to make them into something that can be perceived as whole. (Chandler 1990: 7)

This idea of writing as a sense-making and sense-building performance is supported by the scholarship of Judith Harris, who comments: 'The creative writer contends with various types of fragmentation—temporal, intrapersonal, interpersonal, sensory, ontological' (Harris 2003: 5). Moreover, particularly in the context of the shattering effect of traumatic experiences, writers often draw on the 'uses of associative language to unify disparate experiences' (ibid). Increasingly publishing markets promote and valorise writers' autobiographical work which unify 'disparate experiences' and traumatic contexts such as war, rape, child abuse, domestic violence, self-harm, suicide, illness, and death. Confronting themes previously labelled taboo or unpalatable can now circulate and are rendered as agentic texts of empowerment for both writer and reader. There is conscious acknowledgement that trauma is widespread, as Monica J. Casper and Eric Wertheimer contend: 'There is no life without trauma. There is no history without trauma ...' (Casper and Wertheimer 2016: 42), leaving no doubt why trauma forms the trajectory of so many creative writing projects. Along with our colleagues who supervise HDR writing projects, increasingly we are seeing histories of trauma forming the central focus of student's autobiographical work.

Acknowledging the demand

In their significant work on doctoral degrees in the creative arts in Australia, Jen Webb, Donna Lee Brien and Sandra Burr (2010) highlight the increase of enrolments in creative practice doctorates throughout the past twenty years. Of critical importance to this paper is their observation: '… with this rapid growth comes the need to interrogate how effectively Australian universities manage research training for creative arts practitioners' (Webb, Brien and Burr 2010: 11). Based on our own experiences, and those of many of our colleagues, we believe the ways universities manage effective research training for both supervisors and creative arts HDR students undertaking autobiographical creative writing projects shaped by trauma needs greater interrogation. Leigh Gilmore maintains that: 'Trauma inflects so much autobiographical material that we should probably admit that it has already chosen us and acknowledge this demand' (2007: 368). The demand in students drawing on the HDR creative artefact as a mode of 'belated address' to work through personal, familial and communal trauma has been a reflexive response to the innovation of a non-traditional thesis model. It would be too simplistic to hail this innovation as offering a purely benign space that provides therapeutic potential for students to voice their wounds. In an age where neo-liberalist imperatives drive much university and cultural funding bodies' rhetoric and decision-making, institutions might too easily (and reactively) position and quarantine creative arts trauma projects as ones that promote advocacy, efficacy and autonomy, somehow ennobling such enterprises as only doing some good. Melanie Walker and Pat Thomson argue:

> Not only is the field of doctoral study far more diverse than it has been in the past, but it also attracts more diverse students with a wide range of reasons for choosing doctoral study. (Walker and Thomson 2010: 12-13)

Whether it is a conscious or subliminal motivation, it seems students are increasingly attracted to the creative artefact HDR model as a space to work through their trauma,

in whatever format. In terms of creative writing, the validation of life writing in the academy has enabled the legitimacy of autobiographical narration as a mode and method of inquiry. Margaretta Jolly offers this reflection:

> I have suggested that life writing's expansion in Higher Education is partly a question of market forces in both publishing and academia, and partly a question of macro debates about the relationship of intellectual work to craft, and ideas to bodies, newly refigured in an age of digitisation. To the degree that life storying remains useful for political advocacy, it is also a movement that goes well beyond the academy and the world of publishing too. As the locus of profound and probably unfinishable debates about selfhood, experience and art, it is not going away soon. (Jolly 2011: 887)

Beyond the political and publication purview raised by Jolly, one of the prescient points relevant to this discussion is the acknowledgement that HDR life writing projects dealing with trauma will not be going away soon. It is easy to make a psychological case for the benefits of narrating trauma and distress and sharing a *personally* shaped story with sympathetic witnesses/readers (Lepore & Smyth 2002, Murphy & Neilsen 2011, Pennebaker 1990).

Methodology

Through qualitative inquiry, we collected and collated how Australian supervisors of trauma narrative HDR candidates handle the almost 'therapeutic' role they are now undertaking with such work. This paper concerns itself with notions of risk, specifically, our question to each academic: 'what do you consider the potential risks for a student and a supervisor involved in HDR projects framed by trauma narrative?' With data collected and disseminated we hope this research will contribute to a more informed understanding of the supervisory relationship pertinent to candidates undertaking their own personal trauma narrative. We do not intend to discount the restorative possibilities of autobiographical writing here, but integral to our ongoing work related to the Journalism Education Research Association of Australia grant, we wish to widen the conversation to include a consideration of the prospective risks that may be involved in supervising work of this nature, both for the student and the supervisor. As part of the process of increasing this cognisance around risks and vulnerability, and shared understandings and practices amongst those working in the fields of creative writing and literary journalism, we interviewed thirteen experienced HDR supervisors working within the Australian academy, for their perspectives on what they consider the risks to be for both students and supervisors undertaking autobiographical projects narrativising trauma.

What do we know about trauma?

In her considered response to the question of risk, academic and author Gail Jones reflects:

> And you know, this is the one thing we know about trauma is belatedness. So belatedness is also to do with the fact that we don't always know when we're working on material or when we're working with distressed students until sometimes further down the track the effect that it has on us, and we've all witnessed students who have breakdowns or enter depression or just are vulnerable in all kinds of ways, but the effect on us perhaps happens through that traumatic mechanism of belatedness because

> we have to be the professional who deals with the moment of their distress if that comes up. (Pers. comm., Gail Jones 2016)

Here Jones flags the impact that belated narration can have both on the student and supervisor. Jeri Kroll and Webb highlight:

> Effectively, in about thirty years, the creative arts disciplines have built a body of knowledge and set of practices that are bearing fruit at the highest level of offerings in our universities (Kroll and Webb 2012: 168)

We emphasise the potentially heightened vulnerability of student and supervisors involved in creative writing trauma projects needs further interrogation of current practices. It would seem academics increasingly are no longer solely reflecting on the practice of the discipline itself, but are reflecting on and working towards improved supervisory practice. Jennifer Hammond et al note: 'Supervision no longer occurs just in the private space between supervisor and student. As research education has become more accountable, supervisory practices have become increasingly subject to scrutiny' (Hammond et al 2010: 7). While scrutiny is vital to improved quality, Jillian Hamilton and Sue Carson highlight one of the challenges for postgraduate writing programs: 'established practices and conventions of HDR supervision, as well training, ethical clearance protocols, writing genres and examination processes do not transfer seamlessly to creative practice PhDs' (Hamilton and Carson 2015: 1244). Though these types of PhDs have enjoyed a 'rapid and widespread uptake', Hamilton and Carson conclude that 'creative practice remains an emergent field of postgraduate study, and its definitions and approaches are yet to stabilise' (2015: 1243-1249). Part of our motivation for this research project is to gain an increased understanding of the ways in which experienced supervisors are now approaching their roles, and to explore if there are any shared insights which emerge that might benefit early career supervisors. We are specifically hoping to contribute to the body of scholarship on the supervision of the HDR by creative practice, initially in Australia but eventually, further afield.

Students (re)entering spaces of distress and risk

In her work on illuminating the exegesis, Kroll notes 'the supervisor-candidate relationship itself is critical to the development of the creative thesis' (Kroll: 2004). Alison Lee and Bill Green also highlight that 'supervision remains conceptualised as essentially a one-to-one relationship' involving '... a still largely individualised exchange between a doctoral student and a supervisor' (Lee and Green 2009: 616). What such observations imply is the responsibility that interpersonal proximity carries. We know that within the traditional model of one-to-one supervision, the supervisor and the student can deeply impact the other. The significance of the intimate relationship is of course obvious and relevant to any HDR project discussion, but when the student writes about deeply traumatic content there can be a greater risk and strain applied to the relationship, and to the project itself. As one interviewee who requested to be de-identified in publication concludes:

> It might be you're [the supervisor] talking about structure of the narrative or how it might work for a reader. You might be coming from quite a literary perspective on the work, whereas they [the student] are emotionally invested and so they might be taking it as a kind of – there's a whole range of ways that they might be taking it. But there can also be things going on in their lives. They can be experiencing greater or lesser levels of anxiety or depression or whatever, and so you can be coming at it again as a

> kind of academic project and they are – their space is somewhere else. Those kinds of things I think can lead to some tensions at various times, I suppose. Dangers, yes. (Pers. comm. 8 2015)

As Willa McDonald observes: 'Potential risks? Well, I think they are many. Manifold… where to start ... I think the main one for students is the risk of re-traumatising them and this is one that I've directly encountered' (Pers. comm. McDonald 2015). Her comments underscore some of the key conclusions of Meera Atkinson and Michael Richardson who question: 'Even when the knowledge of trauma is refused, justified, minimized or rationalized, can anyone ever hope to escape the affect that often generates it, and is generated by it?' (Atkinson and Richardson 2013: 3). This concern of not being able to escape the 'affect' of trauma is echoed by Kate Douglas who states:

> I think that the biggest risk for RHD candidates is ... re-traumatisation, that opening up of old wounds and then there not necessarily being something in place for them to support that if that happens. (Pers. comm. Douglas 2016)

Her thematic observations on re-traumatisation are echoed by Fiona Giles who elaborates:

> I'm not a trained psychologist, but I assume going back into disturbing or distressing memories revives them, can make them return. So they [the student] can re-enter the same states of anxiety or sadness or grief that they may have experienced in what might have been many years ago. And to write a good memoir, in some way, requires that I think. From the small experience I've had writing a memoir that you really need to re-experience it to feel it again. To put it on the page accurately and evocatively. And to discover things. (Pers. comm. Giles 2015)

As Giles notes: 'It is re-entering a space of distress or risk of, risk of distress' (Pers. comm. Giles 2015). When re-entering such spaces with a student, supervisors 'not trained as psychologists' can quickly find themselves without the requisite expertise.

While Webb and Brien highlight some of the problematic aspects of examining creative arts doctorates, we believe their conclusions could also be applied to the supervisory phase of a doctoral project:

> The nature of a creative arts dissertation, which combines an art form with an epistemological, methodological or theoretical framework, means that examiners are often called on to evaluate work that is, in some parts, beyond their real expertise. (Webb and Brien 2015: 1325)

The scenario of not only examiners, but also supervisors functioning outside the parameters of 'real expertise' is something Kevin Brophy reflects on:

> ... the very big risk is that both supervisor and student will at some point find themselves out of their depth. I'm not quite sure how – find themselves out of their depth in terms of re-experiencing the trauma, going back into the shock or whatever the reaction was and the supervisor not being prepared for dealing with that. What do you do when someone starts crying in front of you in a supervision session and doesn't stop crying? Maybe that's a daily occurrence for a psychiatrist or a counsellor or a therapist but it's not for a supervisor. (Pers. comm. Brophy 2016)

Brophy's comments signal similar apprehensions expressed by others who were interviewed, and perhaps some of the most telling considerations from him relate to the ethical clearance of HDR projects:

> The university ethics committees – I might sound a bit cynical here – but they are predominantly defensive committees looking after the interests of the institution, that's their default position so that doesn't help. That's their first 'duty' if you like, even if it isn't stated, then they do have some awareness – not awareness – they have their eyes clearly on the people who are being researched. It's worth coming back to the kind of things you're talking about are more life writing and writing about your own trauma, whereas I'm … more thinking about when you're going out and interviewing people who've been through a traumatic event. They do have their eyes on those and they have various categories of people they regard as vulnerable, whether it's indigenous people or refugees … or children, or victims of abuse of one kind of another as we've been talking about, so they have an eye on them. They have less of an eye on the student who's doing the work, as in what impact the work might have on them. (Pers. comm. Brophy 2016)

Brophy's observations register some of our shared collegial concern, that often the same ethical rigour and duty of care applied to projects involving the interviewing of *other* vulnerable subjects might not necessarily be applied to a potentially vulnerable student undertaking an autobiographical project (Joseph 2011; Joseph and Rickett 2010). Perhaps too, in the early days of the introduction of the creative doctorate, supervisors might not have insisted their students gain ethical clearance for autobiographical projects arguing they only deal with the *self*, thus avoiding perceived bureaucratic red tape which can slow the momentum of projects. However, as scholarly knowledge of the impact of trauma increases, some of the previous aversion of creative writers to ethics committees' processes may have changed. From other informal discussions with a range of our colleagues over the past several years, a number of them indicated they are now much more inclined and attuned to exploring and employing their institution's ethics committee protocols for projects that typically in the past may not have strictly required ethics clearance. Anecdotally, a number of our colleagues progressively see ethics committees offering an important additional safeguard rather than impasse to creative writing projects framed by trauma.

Given her background in psychoanalytic research, Dominique Hecq raises another central issue:

> The first problem that I can see will affect the student because often the student will start a project without being aware of the risks involved. There's a complex transference occurring there between the student and their research which may involve people alive or characters they are constructing and the links to the actual writing of it. So that's the first problem I see. The second one is the one that flies back to the supervisor, if I can use this turn of image, but I think that we are not equipped in the Academy to actually, what shall I say, to help students in a satisfactory way to deal with issues they have not thought about or anticipated. So the risk can potentially affect both student and supervisor, and thirdly their relationship. (Pers. comm. Hecq 2016)

For Hecq, it is not only the 'complex transference', but also what she knows can occur when re-entering spaces of trauma: '... I'm first thinking of not retriggering but just triggering and not even gone into retriggering when I'm talking about what can affect the student' (Pers. comm. Hecq 2016), and here she articulates one of the key issues:

> The student comes to the research quite sometimes naive thinking they are, how should I say, they're strong and balanced and so forth, and sometimes the research can trigger things they had not thought about ... (Pers. comm. Hecq 2016)

At times it is not only the student who can be naïve about the possibility of triggering, but also the supervisor. Hecq also cautions when a student does not appear to be at risk:

> ... it's more problematic because it's like an iceberg, we don't know people's history and often we don't talk about that but things emerge in the research and some students are self-aware and can seek help, others need their supervisors to actually point that to them and it can be very problematic. (Pers. comm. Hecq 2016)

Another academic, who chose de-identification, articulates concerns similar to Hecq:

> One risk that could happen, and I think this is the whole issue of transference, the countertransference and the transference, because I noticed a couple of times that I thought that kind of psychoanalytic process, where you have a student and a supervisor where it could almost become that instead of – the supervisor is not an analyst but they are a kind of analyst, aren't they, because they're analysing the work all the time and discussing the work. So I think there is a danger that the student can transfer problems to the supervisor, and that can realise some tensions, but there could also – the supervisor might not understand but there could be things going back the other way as well. (Pers. comm. 8: 2015)

'**because they're supposed to be the repository of all knowledge and wisdom**'

Kaarina Määttä notes: 'The supervisor's roles vary from a guide to friend and critic, and everything in between' (Määttä 2015: 185). Inadvertently some supervisors have found themselves positioned in more of a therapeutic role as distressing personal material is drawn on and narrated by the student. Jones offers the following consideration, and the way in which she deals with difficult material with her candidates:

> it can be distressing and exhausting, as you probably know, dealing with this material and I've found, particularly around Holocaust material I found a certain amount of recurring distress, and the Indigenous material as well ... I think that for me there's a couple of things that are useful in identifying the points of risk. I mean, I don't want to say that it has all the answers, but for me it's just a starting point and I always talk to students about the difference between a generalised academic project and one that deals with named people and named science and the sort of horror of specificity actually, hard to talk about that. (Pers. comm. Jones 2016)

Matthew Ricketson is also aware of the way in which traumatic content and context can impact both student and supervisor:

> Let's say you go and interview or collect data about the Stolen Generation or something like that, yes, it's going to be difficult for them and there's going to be trauma involved for the people who are being written about, but there will be trauma involved potentially, for the people who are doing that work ... and that includes the student and the supervisor, I would suggest, is thought about even less because they're supposed to be the repository of all knowledge and wisdom, you know, which of course they aren't and if we know one thing about academics in general, they prize the rational and intellectual and so on over the emotional and the human, and that tends to get them into some difficulties. (Pers. comm. Ricketson 2015)

One of the key difficulties can relate to creating and maintaining appropriate distance and boundaries as Jen Webb describes:

> it's very difficult to separate yourself from someone if you're intimate with them and you are always professionally intimate with the students because you know what's going on in their heads and you see what they're writing and you've given them feedback which is a very intimate thing to do. You get that stuff, you start thinking about it too much, you see your student in tears. (Pers. comm. Webb 2015)

As Webb notes a 'supervisor can start thinking about it' too much. It is not only students who are vulnerable to triggering and re-traumatisation through material generated; depending on the supervisor's personal context a student's project can also have a similar psychic impact on them. Catherine Cole highlights the importance of a supervisor assessing their own emotional capacity and motivation:

> I also think the idea that a person who has had major trauma in their own personal life – I mean the supervisor – to take on a student who's also had major trauma; this is almost like entering a therapy process over a three-year period that is going to become deeply intense. Now it may well be that that supervisor is going to be an excellent supervisor. But I do think, right from the beginning, a person has to ask why they're taking on a particular supervision**.** (Pers. comm. Cole 2015)

As a practitioner and supervisor, she acknowledges the very real possibility of transference and the duty of care supervisors will need to have for themselves, offering this practical strategy:

> But I think if you start to feel traumatised yourself from the student's experience, then you do need to go and talk to someone yourself about it. I've seen a more senior supervisor or someone who you trust. Also, just think it through yourself. Because people know this – it is a kind of transference, almost, isn't it? I think it's something we have to be alert to. (Pers. comm. Cole 2016)

Identifying the additional emotional burden that HDR trauma projects can place on a supervisor, Kate Douglas offers this account:

> it creates different kinds of pressures to work with someone working on a trauma memoir to other kinds of projects. And I've done this really successfully with some candidates and much less successfully with others and I think a lot of it has to do with the kinds of pressures that it puts on you to be this witness to the project to kind of I guess put your own sort of sense aside of – I think sometimes candidates feel like they're the vulnerable one and you couldn't possibly have any vulnerability with working with them. And I think it becomes a kind of very client-centred model or student-centred model to the extreme where we might obviously work on the general principle of being very student-centred or very candidate-centred, but we don't have any kind of recourse for kind of backing out of a relationship or to say to somebody 'I'm not feeling good or coping with what you're presenting me this week'. We're kind of meant to be kind of 100% resilient at all times and if you've got sort of five or six trauma projects on the go with different candidates it's really hard. (Pers. comm. Douglas 2016)

Minimising some of the risk

While the main focus of this paper is not on the adaptive coping strategies that some supervisors implement, the insights shared by Cole are helpful:

> I also think that if they [the student] are doing the creative process – they may wish to look at the theoretical elements of it before they start writing the creative. Because it allows, sometimes, to develop a bit more headspace around the emotional elements of what they're writing. So if they're reading a feminist theory; that's sometimes very empowering. The process of doing those theoretical explorations are often very empowering around the creative. So in a way, it can de-emotionalise some of the creative elements of it, if that makes sense. So the trauma is addressed in a way that broadens it into a theoretical framework and a more universal framework. You see transformation happen around that. (Pers. comm. Cole 2015)

Another supervisor (who requested de-identification) further highlights what processes would help minimise potential risks by only taking on an HDR student who is:

> actually adequately qualified. I think part of the problem is taking students into research programs who've done kind of no academic training sometimes. I don't think the risks are that high, if you're all kind of on the page that you should be and I think probably the greatest risk is the risk to the student in terms of self-care ... but I don't see any of that is really problematic unless you've got inexperienced supervisors. Sometimes I think someone comes in and it looks like a great project, but they don't come with any kind of knowledge about what is writing as research and what's involved, or what even is ethics let alone having to think about it, then I think it gets riskier. (Pers. comm. 7 2015)

Though universities often put pressure on staff to produce doctoral completions, and staff loading often requires a contribution to the HDR space, this interviewee also highlighted the importance of resisting some projects on the basis of self-care, and acknowledging the limits of supervisory capacity:

> I would say too, that all of mine have not been deeply, deeply the most kind of severe trauma. A lot of people who've come to me with those kind of stories, I've actually hedged away, and now I have that luxury. I have so many students now I can kind of pick who I'm going to supervise because I have to with how much workload. People come to me with wanting to do something and I just think I wouldn't know how to help you with that. (Pers. comm. 7 2015)

Academic Nigel Krauth signals the role a school plays in promoting and ensuring safe supervisory practice for HDR trauma projects:

> Probably the crucial factor in all of this is the trust the student has in the supervisor, and vice versa, and the commitment of the supervisor. If there is a breakdown of trust or commitment, then there needs to be quick action to find alternative supervision arrangements. This requires a culture in the school where the student feels safe about speaking freely regarding their supervision. (Pers. comm. Krauth 2015)

We would also add there needs to be a culture where supervisors feel safe about speaking openly and confidentially about their supervision challenges.

Not crossing the road to censorship

Not all of the writing academics interviewed necessarily perceive supervising students writing about trauma as a potentially risky enterprise. Debra Adelaide offers an alternate perspective:

> I think if you're a professional supervisor there isn't – the question of risk doesn't apply to you, and that as far as I'm concerned, to me my role as a supervisor is really clear to me, and I make that clear to my students too. As far as writing a trauma narrative is concerned, I think it's a very grey area because I – I actually say to all of my students, every single one of them, at some point, including the undergraduates, being a writer, being a creative writer, is going to be confronting. You're going to get upset, you're going to feel pain, you're going to get rejected, you're going to get criticised, and it's going to hurt, and that's part of the job of being a writer.
>
> If you didn't feel like that then it would probably be a problem. But it's better to confront this upfront and be aware that if you're going to write, you're going to be exposing yourself and you're going to be vulnerable. There's no other way – I don't know any other way of writing. If you're going to be honest, if you're going to drill

> into the emotional core of what it means to be a creative producer, it's inevitable that you're going to get hurt and that you're going to be vulnerable.
>
> To me it's a bit of a – it's a very grey area because I think you kind of can't expect to be a creative writer without being affected, without being hurt, without being traumatised, and that's actually a good thing for the writing. Because if you weren't, then you're emotionally dead, and what kind of writer – what kind of work would you produce if you were like that?
>
> The perverse side of me would like to say to that question well, that's a good thing. You need to be hurt, you need to be traumatised, and that's where the writing comes from, the good writing will come from. But I get what the general thrust of your question is, obviously, and I think that's – again it's only something you could evaluate on a case by case basis. (Pers. comm. Adelaide 2015)

Others too note the importance of enabling a student to draw on and write through trauma: 'your fear is always about censorship and you don't want to cross the road into censoring your student' (Pers. comm. 8 2015). Such concerns about potential silencing are expressed this way:

> if they [the student] are going to get therapeutic benefit and you're saying basically you don't want to listen to some particular thing that they're trying to say, it might be taken as a kind of rejection of their experience or their emotional investment, and then you don't want to leave them in that position too where they feel that what they have to say is too awful to be said, or other people shouldn't have to hear it ... what are they supposed to say? 'Well, I'll just carry this silently then'? (Pers. comm. 8 2015)

A case for the role of writing about trauma as an antidote to a student's shame is also argued:

> I mean, often the thing is about the silencing of this experience, and what writers are trying to do is say this shouldn't be silenced, I want to get over my shame, or whatever. I want to undo this shame through being able to speak about it. (Pers. comm. 8 2015)

While we agree that powerful writing often draws on trauma, which can produce transformative effects for both writer and reader, we also acknowledge the complex supervisory space such projects inhabit. Krauth offers a timely account of his supervisory journey:

> Trauma writing doctoral projects are likely to be highly emotional situations that last for up to four years. They can be rocky, winding roads with unexpected branchings. The supervisor has to make decisions at the start (and keep making them) about the capacity of the student and the supervisory team to undertake the journey and withstand the stresses along the way. Encouragement and empathy are vital supervisory skills. But also, in my experience, the PhDs that end up being trauma projects do not necessarily start out as such – discussions and work in the early phases can lead to uncovering underlying narratives that are far more interesting for research than the initial proposals. Any project can turn out to be about trauma if you push through to its psychological aspects: that's a key thing creative writing does, it pushes through. (Pers. comm. Krauth 2015)

There is often an artistic and psychological dividend when an HDR student and supervisor 'push through', but we, like Matthew Ricketson, hold the view that:

> A lot of work [still] needs to be done in this area, both at a policy level and at a practice level. Policy because the policies provide the framework and the guidelines by which supervisors and students have got something to work with, but equally important is ... the actual knowledge of practice and how it actually works because as you know, you can have a terrific policy, but if people aren't actually experienced with a particular

> area, they just have tin ears and you can't afford to have a tin ear when you're dealing with such sensitive material. (Pers. comm. Ricketson 2015)

As writers and practitioners, we know that a 'register of trauma is ever more frequently employed to account for understandings of ourselves, our actions, and the things that are done to us (and that we do to others)'. We also know this 'invites consideration and, inevitably, intervention' (Casper and Wertheimer 2013: 5). Unsurprisingly then, autobiographical writing is reflexively and strategically employed as an intervention:

> I think we do and need to supervise these kinds of projects because I think it adds to the research body, and I think the students' findings in the essay parts too, when they write about all this, is such useful material ... I think it would be terrible if we were to decline these sorts of projects because they're difficult. (Pers. comm. 8 2015)

Conclusion

Colleagues were forthcoming and generous with both their time and thoughts about HDR supervision around trauma narrative. It is clear from our research that there is shared concern in the field across the Australian tertiary sector that the idea of risk, for both candidate and supervisor, needs more support and acknowledgement from institutions. One of our aims is to engage in future collaborations on protocols around risk mitigation. Some colleagues are dismissive, framing risk as a constituent of any creative writing. This of course is true, but ramifications flowing from activity impinging on mental health, of either candidate or supervisor, cannot be dismissed.

We are not suggesting that supervisors decline HDR projects which focus on the narrativisation of personal trauma, but we are advocating for more transparent conversations with our students and colleagues about the potential risks and limits of such undertakings. We also raise here the importance of further developing supervisory protocols and training guidelines designed to promote and support ethical practices for students and academics working in this area; a commitment forming the second phase of our national research project which we hope in time to share with our community of writing practice.

Endnotes

1. Atkinson and Richardson 2013:2
2. Made possible by the Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia (JERAA) 2015 research grant; UTS HREC Approval Number: 2015000377
3. Schwab 2010: 2

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Interviews

Professor Catherine Cole, University of Wollongong, 13 October 2015: Skype; France

Dr Fiona Giles, Sydney University, 22 October 2015: Skype; Sydney

Dr Willa McDonald, Macquarie University, 29 October 2015: Skype; Sydney

Professor Kevin Brophy, University of Melbourne, 29 October 2015: Skype; Melbourne

Associate Professor Matthew Ricketson, University of Canberra, 27 November 2015: face-to-face; Melbourne

Professor Jen Webb, University of Canberra, 30 November 2015; face-to-face; Melbourne

De-identified interview 7, 15 December 2015: telephone

De-identified interview 8, 17 December 2015: telephone

Associate Professor Debra Adelaide, University of Technology Sydney, 18 December 2015: telephone; Sydney

Associate Professor Dominique Hecq, Swinburne University, 29 January 2016; telephone, Melbourne

Professor Nigel Krauth, Griffith University, Queensland, 26 January 2016; email; Queensland

Professor Gail Jones, University of Western Sydney, 29 January 2016; telephone, Sydney

Associate Professor Kate Douglas, Flinders University, 6 May 2016; telephone, Adelaide