

THE TRAUMA OF THE FLASHBACK: MEMORY AND ITS SUFFERING
NEGOTIATED THROUGH 'SEPTEMBER', A PAINTING BY GERHARD RICHTER.

**The Trauma of the flashback: Memory and its suffering negotiated through
'September', painting by Gerhard Richter.**

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Abstract

This paper explores the repetitive nature of the flashback and discusses Cathy Caruth's notion of the flashback as a traumatic event from outside that has moved inside without any mediation. Freud writes about *Nachtraglichkeit* - or deferred action trauma constituted by the relationship between two-events or experiences of two competing impulses. Included is a discussion of Gerhard Richter's painting 'September', a gesture towards the integration of the flashback. The intensity of the traumatic experience makes it difficult to remember but impossible to forget, and any form of recollection seem inadequate. Mediation in this instance becomes a tool of integration, a bodily or physical lens that brings fragments together into a coherent whole for filing away into the past. Trauma is an unfinished, un-integrated experience in search of a witness where the flashback functions as the haunting reminder.

Keywords: Trauma, Gerhard Richter, Freud, *Nachtraglichkeit*, Flashbacks, Memory, Cathy Caruth, Jacques Derrida, Brian Massumi, September 11th, 2001.

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So here, it seems, is what came about - what happened to them, then came down to us.

And this was an event, perhaps an interminable event. (Derrida, 71)

Flashbacks are noisy, dangerous, painful intrusions from the past that arise from the tension between the desire to forget and the necessity of remembering. Time, 'homogenous time' - as prescribed by Bergson (2004, p. 129), the linearity of which naturally erodes memory, is interrupted by the traumatic event, disturbing the integration of the past into a narrative, its assimilation into memory systems. Out of this conflict, of the body's re-ordering of time, the past returns repeatedly and intrusively through flashbacks in the form of auditory, visual and sensory hallucinations or dreams, sometimes precise, intensely clear and lifelike accompanied by a full spectrum of sensory and emotional associations, at other times fragmented and cloudy. Trauma defies understanding and breaches our comprehension of normalcy, time stills, a space opens up, a rupture, where the body moves into an uncertain future dramatically marked by the unknown.

The resistance of trauma to being placed within a narrative leaves an open-ended and unresolved relationship with a past that is constantly in motion through its insistent interjection into the present, repeatedly returning the traumatised individual to the original site of the trauma. Flashbacks are not new creations but repetitive replays of the past, displaced memories that fracture the present, reproducing traumatic events in an attempt to master and integrate the past into 'a psychic economy, a symbolic order' (Foster, 1996, p. 131). This creates many complex contradictions: the somatic desire to release the past trauma through remembering, defending against the trauma by not remembering, and reproducing traumatic affect through the inevitable return of the past through flashbacks. The trauma is

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singular event with a double wounding, it is never just one event that is experienced, for trauma splits time: '(being neither a 'then' nor a 'now') and meaning (being neither significant nor nonsensical); it is neither pure fact nor pure fantasy, it comes both from within the subject (the endogenous fantasy) and from without (the original scene of seduction, and the second, possibly quite banal event that recalls it)' (Brown, p. 239). Cathy Caruth wrote that 'the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located' (1996, p. 7). Such a body would live on as an unbearable interconnection of matter and potentiality, of organic aesthetic sensitivity and inorganic mechanical reproduction, a body steeped in conflict carrying within itself an impossible history, where the traumatised themselves become 'the symptom of a history they cannot entirely possess' (Caruth p.1).

'September' painted by Gerhard Richter in 2005, 4-years after the traumatic events of September 11th 2001, is a means of negotiating the traumatic past an opportunity to track that which has existed outside and has moved inside without mediation or assimilation. It would be difficult to locate an individual over the age of 25-years old that does not have a story or relationship with the events that took place on September 11th 2001, who does not remember exactly where they were when the Twin Towers were hit. On 9/11/2001 at 8.45am when the first plane crashed into the north tower, Richter was on a plane from Cologne heading to New York for an exhibition. At 10.24am FAA closed the air space over the US and diverted all incoming transatlantic flights to Canada where the artist watched the remainder of the day unfold before him on a TV screen. Two days later he returned home to Cologne. Like the majority of the rest of the world Richter was exposed to the media's deluge of imagery of the attack on the Towers an event so ceaselessly photographed that almost instantaneously the world was awash with hundreds and thousands of images telling and retelling the collapse

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and destruction of that day. The digital imagery, viewable at the moment of taking, occupied the same time and place as the tragedy that the imagery recorded. With little delay between the attack and the seeing of the pictures, the images ostensibly became part of the event.

'September' is not a big painting (52cms by 72cms) the size of a large television screen, the technology through which the most of the world's population learned about the attack on the Twin Towers. Robert Storr (2010) wrote that the size was Richter's effort to find more meaning in a domestic, even democratic size (p. 47). The painting's origin was from a photograph of the second plane crashing into the World Trade Center Towers. In 2011, in an interview with Nicholas Serrota, Richter described how he arrived at the painting - 'I was very struck by the images in the papers, I didn't think you could paint that moment and certainly not in the way some people did, taking the inane view that this most awful act was some kind of amazing Happening and celebrating it as a megawork of art' (p. 25). It was important for Richter to find a way to explore the subject without making it spectacular, 'concentrating on its incomprehensible cruelty, and its awful fascination' (p. 26). In his words:

'The picture I used for this painting was very beautiful, with flames in red and orange and yellow, and wonderful. And this was a problem. Of course I painted it first in full colour, and then I had to slowly destroy it. And I made it banal. It doesn't tell much. It shows more the impossibility to say something about this disaster'. (p.15).

Ironically when Richter rendered his representation of 9/11 full of the flames and explosive power delivered by the hijackers planes, he felt defeated as an artist by the 'failure of the work to measure up to the vividness direct photographic documentation of that collision achieved' (Storr, p. 49), and contemplated destroying the painting completely. It sat

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incriminatingly in the corner of his studio until one evening he took a knife rather than his usual squeegee or spatula and scraped and cut away at the flames, scoring back the paint to reveal the primer underneath. The finished painting exists somewhere between the abstraction of an image that is still decipherable behind the blur and an image that has become completely illegible having dissolved entirely. The flames from the explosion, having been scraped away from right to left of the canvas reveal a smoky ashen haze. The scoring of the top surface muddies the colours leaving behind a palette of dirty blues and greys. In a symbolic act Richter was delivering the grey ash of death of decimated bodies, making real what could barely be comprehended - rendering this act visually to confirm its reality, and within it embedding the separation and the loss, that so many experienced on that day.

Never shown in the UK before, 'September's' exhibition at Richter's Tate Retrospective (2011) marked the 10th Anniversary of 9/11. It was positioned on the edge of the wall in the last room of the exhibition next to three smaller paintings, 'White', 'White' and 'Grey' (2006). The painting loomed up like a spectre with its sharp unreal blue sky and scored blur. Its beckoning presence overpowered the gallery space, a haunting reminder of the moment in history that the painting represented. Through its portrayal of a traumatic event that had already occurred, by painting it in the moments of the attack as it was happening, 'the painting acts, not as a stand-in for memory, but rather as an instigator for reflection and remembrance' (Schwartz, p.1), it becomes a vehicle to navigate a pathway back to the past, through the complex temporality of what Freud termed *Nachträglichkeit*.

The dilemma of trauma, its obscurity, the inability to fully integrate the shock of the incident, constitutes its central and unfathomable core, 'the event is not assimilated or experienced

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fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it' (Caruth, 1996), a belated traumatic aftermath in which time elapses between the actual event and the appearance of the traumatic symptoms, creating a dissociated space of separation from the event where the outside moves inside without any mediation. Françoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillière have written of 'a dissociate truth, an 'unthought known' (Bollas, 1987) known through impressions that have been split off' where 'the subject of a history [is] not so much censored as erased, reduced to nothing and yet inevitably existing' (History Beyond Trauma, p. 47), a 'cut out consciousness' distinct from the repressed (Lacan, 1955-56, p. 200). Into this unknown, this cut off space the flashback takes up residence and engenders, as Brian Rotman has described, 'a clutch of interconnected discontinuities in the milieu of what preceded it: a disruption of the previous space-time consensus... an altered relation between agency and embodiment' (2008, p. 6).

Within this confusing amalgam of time, the traumatic and displaced past seeks resolution. 'September' encompasses far more than the event itself, drawn from photographs taken on that day (therefore a specific time in history), and through the painter's action of erasing the flames, it conceptualises the passage of time from September 11th 2001 to its painting in 2005 and to its destination within the gallery space 10-years later. It has the potential to activate within the looking the reminder of the body and the world before the wounding of 9/11, the stages that accompanied the wounding, and the post-traumatic state that followed. For trauma is not just an overwhelming experience that can be encapsulated into one moment in time, there is always a sequence of events that come before, alongside and after. Painted well after the event, 'September' depicts the towers still standing tall in *their* burning aliveness and therefore still in the process of dying. Richter brings the past into being and galvanises an on going process, a place where memory builds upon memory where remembering is always

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present and always expanding. He offers up a constantly changing discourse with the past. Even though we all know the outcome of the tragedy, Richter holds it in deferment – he postpones the falling, contains the moment and therefore the potentiality of what is yet to come. A deferment that creates the opportunity for a shifting relationship with the traumatic event, he slows things down long enough for the past to catch up.

For Freud, in *Moses and Monotheism*, the subjective experience of trauma is structured through a sequence of anticipations and reconstructions: 'It may happen that someone gets away, apparently unharmed, from the spot where he has suffered a shocking accident ... In the course of the following weeks, however, he develops a series of grave psychical and motor symptoms, which can be ascribed only to his shock' (p. 84). This time of latency or what could also be termed an incubation period is an interesting phenomena of defence strategies and theatricality, where *Nachträglichkeit* - the belated experience, or deferred action trauma constituted by the relationship between two-events or experiences of two competing impulses, endows the memory rather than the original event with traumatic significance. Jean LaPlanche (2001) translates *Nachträglichkeit* as *afterwardsness*:

'...the question of time as the experience of the outside world, which is linked to perception and to what he calls the system of consciousness... the biological aspect of time. And that aspect of time is very limited; it is immediate time, immediate temporality. But what Freud tried to discover, through *Nachträglichkeit*, is something much more connected with the whole of a life. That is another type of temporality. It is the temporality of retranslating one's own fate, of retranslating what's coming to this fate from the message of the other. That's a completely different aspect of temporality.' (p. 11)

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Here LaPlanche talks of a complex interweaving of double meaning and temporality, the repetitive insistence of the traumatic event's constant return, in opposition to the flow of life where the compulsion takes hold to halt the re-experiencing of the traumatic event. 'It is not lived experience in general that undergoes a deferred revision but, specifically, whatever it has been impossible in the first instance to incorporate fully into a meaningful context' (1973, p. 112). *Nachträglichkeit* is an exchange between two moments, the second of which retrospectively determines the meaning of the first. In Freudian thought, as understood by Laplanche, it always takes to traumas to make a trauma, where one event is only registered through another in deferred action which is occasioned by events and situations or by experiences that allow the subject to gain access to a new level of meaning (p. 112). Within the *nachträglich* structure, the direction of meaning moves from the present back to the past to understand the significance of the first scene and also from the past to the present where the content of the first scene is projected forwards to fill, or inhabit the present. Building on this intricate interplay of time Derrida describes *nachträglich* as that which 'turns out to disrupt, disturb, entangle' the distinction between the past, present and the future. The dual temporality and the latency period are essential components of the principle of *Nachträglichkeit* which facilitate new perceptions of the past, a non linear temporality where the unmediated traumatic event from the past not only disrupts the present but also has consequences for the future into which the traumatised carry their impossible history.

Flashbacks fill that space of *afterwardsness*, they rise in an attempt to make known or make sense of the trauma that cannot be fully comprehended or experienced at the time, and like Richter's painting make us witnesses to the traumatic event and our own survival, functioning as a constant reminder of our mortality, of the past we want to contradictorily

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both remember and forget. Trauma unsettles and forces us to rethink our notions of experience, and how to communicate that experience, which paradoxically requires a witness but cannot be adequately represented. Its incomprehensibility makes remembering difficult but forgetting impossible and any form of recollection seem insufficient alongside the actual event. Kali Tal looks at the representation of trauma in her book 'Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literature of Trauma', she explores the memories of individual psychic traumas which through their telling and retelling 'enter the vocabulary of the larger culture where they become tools for the construction of national myths' (p. 6). For her mythologizing the memory reduces the traumatic event to a 'set of standardised 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, which once 'codified' has political consequences (p. 6). Caught up in this 'Catch 22' scenario questions arise about what is appropriate representation, sensitive recollection or accurate witnessing. Dori Laub asks for new tools to be 'developed and employed in order to give form, structure, and intelligibility to *the incomprehensible past that does not have an ending.*'

Which brings me back to Richter's painting of September 11th 2001. Within the painter's symbolic act of destroying the flames of 'September' exists the erasure of time itself. The painting is a testament to a suspended reality. His rendering of this particular moment in time, his delivery and distortion captures all moments and therefore none. The scraping away of the flames is the violent wiping away of time that delivers its truth, its reality. Though the painting focuses on the South Tower just after Flight 175 hit, the exactitude wavers in the scrape of the paint across the canvas. Through the act of erasure, the painting becomes a fiction of the decisive moment refusing to embody the exact event, and so the viewer becomes complicit in its indeterminacy. In the blur of the thick grey ash that pours out from

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the tower, the boundaries and demarcations fall away to reveal the raw rupture of the psychic field. Scored down to the very bone, the raw vulnerable self, beyond the body's boundary, lost, stripped back and bare, Richter exposes the very rawness of humankind, the fragility of physicality juxtaposed against the towering steel and concrete of the towers, the exploding plane bombs. The erasure functions here as double negation, through the obliteration of the flames of the palette knife's scrape he destroys the exact timing of the event and therefore halts the collapse of the Towers replacing the outcome with a greater embedded sense of ash and dirt. The blurred and fragmented score of knife across canvas slows down the onslaught of time, it does not freeze, or stop it the way a photograph does – it is the painter's hand that reaches in to the solidness of matter, and erases the paint with a knife, the blur becomes motion captured and controlled, Richter's action delivers the belief that everything is possible and everything is controllable, which of course in reality is a lie.

Richter (1995) has said of his early representational works 'something has to be shown and simultaneously not shown, in order perhaps to say something else again, a third thing' (p. 226) Hal Foster (2003) wrote that Richter's paintings deliver credible beauty, 'but only when 'wounded' (p 102)... a beauty no longer opposed to the sublime, for it is both sublimatory and desublimatory; a beauty that foregrounds its own inability to deliver reconciliation or promise happiness...' (p. 128) 'September' hovers within this place of suspended reconciliation and contains within it the lingering promise of future disasters and therefore traumas, of future unresolved and irreconcilable narratives. An open-ended and breached field that Brian Massumi (2010) has described as 'the nagging potential of the next after being even worse, and of a still worse next again after that. The uncertainty of the potential next is never consumed in any given event' (p. 53) is an 'anticipatory reality in the present of

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a threatening future. It is the felt reality of the non-existent, looming present as the affective fact of the matter' (p. 54).

Freud (1926) described such a rupture as the breached protective shield, where, in *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* he noted:

'...the experiences which lead to traumatic neurosis the protective shield against external stimuli is broken through and excessive amounts of excitation impinge upon the mental apparatus; so that we have here a second possibility - that anxiety is not only being signalled as an affect but is also freshly created out of the economic conditions of the situation'. (p. 130).

The fracturing of the protective shield is an anxiety 'which plunges the ego into disarray owing to the interruption of the protective shield: anxiety becomes both cure and cause of psychic trauma; an excess of stimulation by traumatically breaching the boundary between inside and outside which shatters the unity and identity of the ego' (Leys, p. 28). Anxiety which simultaneously functions as the ego's protection against future shocks and contradictorily preparation for worse things to come in which the body becomes armed and ready. The paradox created within the breached field is a challenging but interesting dilemma for body and psyche. The premonition of a trauma to come which prepares the body for fight, flight or freeze, where forewarned is forearmed also initiates an irreconcilable physiological cycle whether the trauma happens or not. Trauma is thus characterised by a distinct feed back loop in which the intervention of a second unforeseen event appears as the reminder of the original trauma that has existed separate from consciousness and therefore representation. The flashback is the symptom of the traumatic excitation, the bridge between the deferral and the delay, it is the discharge from one affective state via a subsequent and similar experience,

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'a knot of mutually implicated alternative transformations of itself, in material resonance'
(Massumi, p. 154).

The flashback functions as the haunting reminder, interrupting the psyche, seizing hold of the bodily system, from which there is no escape. The body in a state of perpetual remembering presents huge problems for historical consciousness (Roth, p. 82) and begs the question 'What desires are satisfied by keeping the traumatic past as unfinished business?' (Roth, p. 83) What are the implications of flashbacks? When one becomes witness to a history that cannot be fully assimilated and yet responsible for its narration, as Laub (2005) writes:

'From the perspective of the historian, such a breach with the past as the admission of one's speechlessness in the face of trauma or the acceptance of the limits of rational thought in attempting to comprehend or explain events beyond one's grasp and imagination represents a surrender to mystification and sacralisation. It is tantamount to self-betrayal, or rather betrayal of the self-ideal, for scholars and scientists with this mindset'. (p. 255).

This naturally raises questions about the mechanics of remembering, the exactitude of re-experiencing the past, which at times feels so vivid. The bearing witness to the trauma through the flashback is based on the notion of the event being a literal representation rising against the will of the traumatised. As Caruth has noted- modern analysts have remarked on the literality and non-symbolic 'nature of traumatic dreams and flashbacks, which resist cure to the extent that they remain, precisely, literal.' She has put this down to '...the delay or incompleteness in knowing, or even seeing... that then remains in its insistent return absolutely true to the event,' which has been argued by Leys and McNally, (amongst others) as a

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misconception. Seeing and therefore remembering is entirely subjective, giving rise to the potential of false memories of trauma (McNally, p. 229-259). As Freud wrote in a letter to Fliess in 1896:

'I am working on the assumption that our psychological mechanism has come into being by a process of stratification: the material present in the form of memory-traces being subjected from time to time to a *re-arrangement* in accordance with fresh circumstances – to a *re-transcription*'. (p. 207)

But memory is not only selective it is also malleable. Remembering whether consciously or through flashbacks offers up only a partial lens that can often lead to profound misunderstandings. Flashbacks in this instance can make for a false witness, compensatory processes and victimisation, designating victims and scapegoats rather than resolving the past. They are there to prevent the death of the past and so its integration and until we come to an understanding or face-to-face with the trauma we so desperately want to avoid we will not be free from the flashbacks. Ironically Caruth (1996) wrote you cannot actually fully confront death in trauma, numbed the first time around you cannot directly face it when it returns only in flashes, the experience is partial and carries but the illusion of meaning. When a flashback forces us to return to a place that we have no desire to go and ironically were never fully there in the first place – the conflict is profound – battling rejection with the desire for understanding or integration further embeds the flashback, the anxiety into our psyche. Flashbacks are the ghosts of history – a subjective and specific history – but a history nonetheless. This singular possession by the past- a past never fully experienced as it occurred does not simply serve as a record of what happened but registers the emotional force of an experience that is not fully owned.

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Fear takes up residence, dominates, the fear that the past will eternally consume the future, a perceived future based on the past that perpetuates the never-ending cycle of anxiety. As Massumi (2010) has asked:

'What are the existential effects of the body having to assume, at the level of its activated flesh, one with the becoming, the rightness of alert never having to be in error? Of the body in a perpetual innervated reawakening to a world where signs of danger forever loom? Of a world where once a threat, always a threat? A world of seriating menace –potential made actual experience, with a surplus of becoming, all in the instant?' (p. 65)

Suffered in silence the traumatised are exiled witnessing the flashback as a purely internal interaction, a cycle of endless inner pain and cut off fragments of torment, secrets impossible to contain, separating the traumatised from the rest of community and communities from society. The traumatic flashback in itself is not life threatening, they are the leakage of a tightly protected mind a necessary defensive device for survival but un-integrated into memory it continues to enervate and stress bodily systems. The contemptuous self-recrimination at the lack of containment reinforces the shame of feeling out of control subject to our biology. This can ultimately lead to mental and physical deterioration and as has been reported violence, addiction, illness and suicide. Trauma based shame is painful and crippling and a traumatised mind cannot accommodate new ideas or alternative ways of seeing the world. The emotion provoked by trauma blocks new thinking. These conditions create cycles of violence and a hunger for retribution, and can often permeate through entire cultures - passed down from generation to generation where whole communities live out the trauma of the past. Trauma fractures our trust, our safety in the world, influences the way we see the

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world - encourages marginalisation, humiliation and powerlessness, negatively affecting our ability to resolve conflict.

The flashback provides a form of recall that survives at the cost of 'willed memory or the very continuity of conscious thought... The traumatised are called upon to see and to relive the insistent reality of the past, they recover a past that encounters consciousness only through the very denial of active recollection' (Caruth, 1995, p. 152). Engaging each seemingly isolated overwhelming event that presents itself as trauma, we often find ourselves delving into the realms of today's most pressing and intractable global issues. Surviving and witnessing become necessary to the transmutation of the shame and guilt where the pain of suffering can serve as a mirror into entering into the world of the other. This demands a level of self-awareness often not readily available for the traumatised, in which we are able to detach ourselves from the trauma and observe our own minds and bodies at work. Trauma and its intrusive reminder through the flashback calls us to consider our pain as well as the pain of others, to step out of victimisation integrate the past and connect to, respect and tolerate the difference of others. Flashbacks function as indications of something extreme having occurred, an event out of the ordinary, painful recollections of partly remembered moments of the event, but they are also clues to completing the story, indications of the extremity or overwhelm of the trauma, fragments of survival that remind us of our relationship with death, our mortality and the need to hold the polarity of life and death in equal balance.

Dislocated in time and space, existing neither here nor there, the trauma body occupies neither the past nor present but the traumatic place of something other, a place of near-death existing beyond the normal, the realm of the non-ordinary, the mystical, where Bergson's

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'pure duration' and the supranormal exist alongside each other. Through 'September', Richter delivers into this space that *something other* and as such the painting becomes a device to navigate the past. He temporarily holds the outcome of September 11, 2001 in suspense gives permission to the viewer to complete the trajectory through their own remembrance, allows the sequence of events to catch up. If trauma is to be understood it cannot be located on either side of a personal or public divide but rather as one that reverberates across the entire political and 'social field in the manner of a haunting presence permeating the surface' (Meek, 2010, p. 15). To paraphrase psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion (1962), we do not learn until we risk falling apart, it is not until this moment of crisis or potential relapse that we are presented with the opportunity for change? It is important that we pay attention to the fragility of witnessing the past, the fragmentation of accounts, the searching for a narrative however abstract in an effort to lay memory to rest. Experiencing trauma demands a constant returning to complete the cycle of memory. Open-ended the trauma continues to perpetuate body and site. Mourning the past is to hopefully establish an active dialogue with history and an on-going relationship with loss and its remains – where trauma exists as a flash of emergence, an instant of emergency, that opens up the new possibilities of viewing the past, prompting a 'rewrite' of the conceptions of history we have so far encountered, and thus allowing us to experience the present differently, to see what has not yet been seen and move into a future without the need for such repetition (Eng & Kazanjian, 2002, p. 1).

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