

Healing Echoes: Collective Trauma and Public Narratives in a Divided Homeland

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Abstract. This article explores the transformative potential of public storytelling in healing collective trauma, drawing on the case study of the author's mother, a Cypriot refugee's experience following the 1974 Turkish invasion. It examines how the shift from private to public narration of traumatic memories can facilitate healing by creating a collective witness and enabling projective identification as a form of communication and psychological change. The study employs an autoethnographic approach, analyzing personal narratives and audience responses to public testimony. It argues that public storytelling allows for a reimagining of traumatic experiences, fostering a new, more resilient collective self, comprised of individual fragments. This process is likened to kintsugi, the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with gold, symbolizing the potential for trauma survivors to emerge stronger through communal healing. The article engages with trauma theory, drawing on concepts like missing witnesses and collective selfhood, to elucidate the mechanisms of intergenerational trauma transmission and communal healing. It posits that public narration can transform personal trauma into historical trauma, creating a shared psychological framework that enhances group cohesion and preparedness against future threats. While acknowledging the limitations of generalizing from a single case study, this research contributes to the evolving discourse on trauma theory by highlighting the role of public narratives in trauma resolution. It suggests that focusing on present and future-oriented storytelling, rather than past-fixation, can promote resilience and adaptive coping strategies in post-conflict societies. The findings have implications for understanding the interplay between individual and collective trauma healing, offering insights into potential therapeutic approaches that harness the power of public testimony and communal support in addressing historical traumas.

Keywords: selfhood; trauma; Cyprus; public storytelling; autoethnography; collective healing; memory

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Echoes of Trauma: A Mother's Stories

Following the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus, my mother, Toula, was violently uprooted from her birthplace of Zodia and forced to flee to Kakopetria, a remote village in the mountains. Growing up under the weight of her personal stories about her experiences from the war, I became the unwitting inheritor of her suffering, feeling the ache of a home I had never known, seeing ghosts of places I had never visited, and being haunted by a suffering that I had not experienced. I absorbed her pain through bedtime stories and kitchen table conversations about lost homes, fleeing neighbours and life in refugee tents, intertwined with horror stories of death, mass rape and other brutalities perpetrated by the invading army, with the borders between her memories and my imagination blurring with each retelling. When, in 2003, she finally crossed the threshold of her childhood home after nearly three decades of exile, I watched her face crumble in confusion. The sacred space preserved in her memory existed no more, the world had continued without her. Standing beside her, I felt my own carefully constructed mental landscape of her past collapse, a disorienting untethering I could only process through writing. In that moment of shared disillusionment, I recognised how deeply her intergenerational trauma had shaped my own becoming, both as an author and as a person, carrying forward the echoes of a displacement I never personally experienced.

Fast forward to 2021, when my mother agreed to share those same private stories for the first time publicly, on camera, for a local school documentary and newspaper article. What happened next astonished us both. Thousands viewed this testimony, and strangers started approaching her in shops, sending messages and even calling; fellow refugees thanked her for articulating their unspoken pain and for lending words to their shared history. Watching this unfold, I noticed something remarkable: the crushing weight that had always accompanied these stories seemed lighter somehow. It seemed that the traumatic charge of her memories had diminished. When I asked her about this transformation, she reflected that the sharp dissociation between the way she remembered her childhood home and, well, reality, had functioned as a catalyst for a new sense of understanding life and a new way of thinking about who she is and what shaped her very being. She also alluded to the impact her stories had, reaching now well beyond our family circle. The public exposure and subsequent community response had essentially given birth to a new version of herself, one that could do something different with these stories rather than just being crushed by their weight and the trauma they hold. So, I began to wonder: had this audience somehow become active participants in her trauma, collective witnesses, so to speak, who, through their reception and response, helped reshape her relationship to her own past by witnessing and sharing the burden?

And what does that mean, if anything, to how we approach mass trauma and new approaches to healing today?

Along the lines of these initial thoughts, the present article sets out to explore the hypothesis that when people share pain voluntarily, in this case by choosing to listen, this can allow individuals to confront and process traumatic experiences. Insofar as a constant necessity exists for new approaches and explorations that can help with trauma healing, public storytelling and any subsequent interactions can act like a collective testimony of sorts, allowing the trauma victim to re-imagine a new, less fragmented sense of self in the process, working through trauma and focusing on the possibility of collective healing. Prominent researchers in the field of trauma studies, such as Cathy Caruth and Dori Laub, have discussed the psychological aftermath of atrocities such as the Holocaust and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima at length. Their work extensively explores how these catastrophic events are portrayed and processed through imagination in literary works and cinematic productions (see for example Laub 1992 and 1995; Audergon 2004; Caruth 2014). The audience becomes the 'missing witness' as it were, and this realisation is fundamental in understanding the experience of trauma: "The fundamental dynamic of a missing witness and the replay of trauma is thus a historic and contemporary society-wide problem" (Audergon 2004: 20). Trauma can then be seen more like a collective experience to be shared, rather than an individual one. The listener shares the burden of the trauma through the very act of listening and interacting, partially experiencing trauma as well and, thus, alleviating the narrator to some extent (Laub 1992: 57).

The suggested approach involves focusing on the present and the future rather than solely on returning to the past in a way that can prove to be therapeutic. When applied to the sociological phenomenon of collective trauma, this approach illuminates the interplay between individual and group processes in trauma healing. It is argued that the formation of a novel form of collective selfhood is fundamentally tied to a process of transcending past-fixation and trauma re-enactment. Instead, this emergent self is characterised by a complex engagement with traumatic experience, one that emphasises comprehension, communal disclosure, and consequent therapeutic processing. This approach facilitates the cultivation of a new, more hopeful outlook for the future, potentially catalysing an improved way of being, without that entailing a complete disassociation from trauma. This sense of 'collective self' refers to a shared sense of identity and belonging that emerges within a group or community in response to a collective trauma, marking a shift from individual experiences of trauma to a shared understanding and experience of said trauma's impact. This new self is not only the sum of individual experiences but also a completely

new, complex entity that arises from the interaction and interdependence of individuals within the group.

We need to understand on a basic – and personal – level, why the act of giving public testimony can become therapeutic when dealing with trauma. I do not posit here that the therapeutic potential of narrative resides solely in the act of narration. Rather, it emerges from the symbiotic relationship and the subsequent interaction between narrator and receptive audience. The voluntary interlocutors, through their attentive presence, engaged discourse and genuine empathy, can function as a collective therapeutic entity. Their role approximates to that of multiple psychoanalysts collaborating towards a shared objective of trauma healing, with the added dimension of authentic interpersonal investment.

Of course, one person's experience cannot be universally applied. There are limitations in using my mother's personal case as the primary example for the current study. The experiences of one individual may not represent all trauma survivors or Cypriot refugees with generalisability being very limited. My close personal connection could also introduce bias in interpretation, and focusing on a single family's experience might not capture the full range of responses in the wider population. The self-selected audience responding to my mother's testimony might not represent broad public opinion and it might be challenging to attribute healing solely to public testimony. Lastly, there's a risk of overstating positive outcomes due to personal investment, while long-term effects might not be fully captured.

However, and despite these limitations, this case study offers valuable insights into the interplay between personal trauma, public narratives, and communal healing. A qualitative, autoethnographic approach is used, analysing personal narratives and audience responses to a public testimony of trauma. What is more, one could argue that such an intimate access to the subject's experiences can provide a depth of understanding difficult to achieve through more distanced, 'professional' methods. Such personal connection allows for a nuanced exploration of the transformations that occur when private trauma becomes public testimony. The Cypriot context, while specific, can inform approaches to healing in other divided societies, as its exploration can suggest broader implications for collective trauma healing in other post-conflict societies. The unexpected, overwhelmingly positive public response mentioned above, and its impact on the trauma victim's healing process highlights an understudied aspect of trauma recovery. So, by acknowledging these limitations and positioning this study as a starting point, new ways for future research in the field of trauma studies and collective memory are created. This case study can serve as a foundation for further enquiry into the role of public narratives on healing trauma.

Narrative theory suggests that storytelling can be therapeutic. In contributing to the evolving discourse on trauma, memory and healing, the question that needs to be addressed is whether the public narration of displacement stories and the trauma associated with it, can have a transformative effect, functioning, in essence, as a cathartic act that is simultaneously dissociative and associative. The short answer is quite possibly so, as it functions as a call for help, involving both the transmission and allocation of trauma, all the while marking the beginning of a therapeutic process that allows the narrator/projector to re-experience painful memories in a way that can alleviate suffering. To do so, the focus needs to be on the future rather than on the past, with the hope being that this approach can serve as a backdrop for exploring the profound implications of trauma, the urgency for re-evaluating existing frameworks, and the necessity for innovative approaches to healing, all the while aiming to highlight the nuanced ways in which public exposure and reception can influence the mediation of trauma and promote resilience.

Bearing Witness: Shared Testimonies in Public Narratives

Lindemann termed trauma as “the sudden, uncontrollable, disruption of affiliative bonds” (1944: 144) while Caruth, more recently, talked about trauma as a “singular possession by the past ... a traumatic nightmare ... [that] occupies a space to which willed access is denied” (Caruth 1995: 151). Furthermore, the concept of collective trauma, as defined by Gilad Hirschberger, is “a cataclysmic event that shatters the basic fabric of society” (2018). Trauma, then, is not treated here as merely a singularity, limited by individual constraints. Rather, it is approached as a collective phenomenon which, consequently, requires a collective approach to healing. As Audergon argues: “Entire communities are traumatized, and the dynamics of trauma have collective dimensions that influence the course of global history. Even when our focus is therapeutic, to support individuals with traumatic experience, orienting only to individuals’ symptoms is inadequate” (2004: 16).

In Cyprus, my divided homeland, the biggest, ongoing, collective trauma which shattered relationships, both communal and individual, and shocked the very foundations of society, was the Turkish invasion of 1974. On the morning of July 20, the Turkish army invaded Cyprus and has since occupied 37% of the country, driving nearly 200,000 refugees from their houses in the north part of the country, including my mother’s family. As the Turkish army began moving south, people started fleeing their homes. While the invasion was unfolding, there were stories of rape and brutality perpetrated by the army. Despite that, Andreas, my grandfather, refused to leave. With the army just hours outside

of the village, my mother finally confronted him in front of the entire family: "Look at us" she said, pointing at her and her two sisters. "Three girls alone. What do you think will happen?" According to my mother, my grandfather was visibly shocked, thinking about the potential horrors. They left within 2 hours on his bus, taking nothing but the clothes on their backs. This was one of the most traumatic stories shared by my mother of how my grandfather was finally convinced to leave his home with his family in the village of Zodia. Upon leaving, they became refugees, and the trauma began weighing down on everyone in my family, transferred through her stories.

Growing up, my mother would tell us stories almost daily about that time and I received them as personal truths, re-contextualised across time and space. So, I started writing about them, trying to understand how literary representation of trauma can circumvent rigid historiographical depictions of the past. Memory has been associated with individuals' and communities' transcendence of life and desires for immortality (Bradford 2010: 3) and so, understanding personal and artistic identities as involving the need to navigate self-centred, familial channels of remembrance, I essentially excavated a previous generation's self-constitutive memories. It was through this process, initiated by the personal storytelling of my mother to me, that I understood my own process of identity formation as being heavily affected by the unreliability of self, explored through projective imagination, which can lead to new ways of re-imagining subjectivities. Inasmuch as we construct meaning from our experiences by creating and interpreting stories, this process of meaning-making through narrative is not merely a passive reflection of events; rather, it is an active construction of understanding that shapes both individual and collective identities. My mother's personal accounts functioned as apparatuses through which she started making sense of her traumatic experiences, providing a structured framework for understanding and interpreting trauma. Storytelling then, as a mode of creative self-expression can function as tool to process and heal trauma, fostering resilience and recovery. A crucial line of enquiry emerges: to what extent can the inherent instability of the post-traumatic, imagined self and the hopeful future such an approach engenders, be conceptualised as a theoretical framework to understand the collective psyche in the wake of shared historical trauma?

The public narration of these stories and subsequent audience engagement suggests a fundamental shift. Rather than examining the personal identities of individual listeners, we observe the emergence of trauma's inherently collective dimension, a phenomenon that transcends private experience and speaks to the ability of a community to come together and narrate itself into a new kind of existence following a shared sense of trauma? This transformation occurs when

personal narratives enter the public sphere and generate communal dialogue. The stories no longer function merely as individual testimonies but become vehicles through which the shared, social character of trauma reveals itself. In this context, trauma ceases to be understood as purely psychological or personal; instead, it manifests as a historical force that shapes collective memory and communal identity alike. The interactive nature of public storytelling thus unveils what we might term trauma's 'true nature', not as isolated suffering, but as a fundamentally social and historical phenomenon that binds communities together through shared recognition and collective witness.

Mohatt et al. argued that for a trauma to be categorised as historical it needs to be shared by a group of people, rather than being individually experienced, and needs to span "multiple generations, such that contemporary members of the affected group may experience trauma-related symptoms without having been present for the past traumatizing event(s)" (2014: 128). My mother suffered greatly from her traumatic experiences from 1974. The manifestations of her trauma revealed themselves in the form of nightmares, inability to sleep, long periods of silence, flashbacks and so on. These symptoms were intensely and repetitively present in her life, making it hard for her to work through the trauma for many years following the invasion. Such psychosomatic symptoms pointed to the fact that, despite her sharing her stories with me, she did not (visibly) get better; clearly, this was not enough for her to work through her trauma. Change came when she shared them publicly, which triggered a tsunami of interaction. Audergon (2004: 19) argues that the experiences of traumatised individuals include both the numbness of dissociating from the traumatic experience and the "violent replay and intrusion of events in flashbacks, nightmares, visceral experience of the events and body symptoms. Collectively, we participate in dynamics of trauma by both silencing and cutting off the unspeakable events of our history and continually repeating them" (Audergon 2004: 19).

When my mother was approached by a student newspaper to tell her stories, as part of a project on survivors of the war in Cyprus and their memories, I was almost certain she would refuse, due to her aversion to publicly sharing intimate stories, especially on camera. To my amazement, she readily agreed. The student journalists came to the house to document her stories with video equipment. As I sat there, watching her share the same stories she had told me for a new audience this time, I noticed an immediate change in her demeanour. The events were horrible: the killings and disappearance of family members, the mutilations and mass rapes of teenage girls that the Turkish army perpetrated as close as two villages over, all the way up to the final flight from the village. So, through narration she reached out widely; many people who heard her knew what she was talking about, because they had lived through similar events, so

their response proved to be therapeutic: “the need to narrate and to listen to the story, rather than split it off or feel swallowed in it, is also a community need, not only an individual need (Audergon 2004: 20)”.

Upon the release of the interviews, many people saw the footage on social media and read the stories in the newspaper. My mother started getting phone calls and messages from people who either witnessed or were the victims of similar events, sharing their own traumatic stories. She also talked to younger people who were also the recipients of similar stories from their parent, sharing their trauma, which was infused with their imagination, in a process like mine, with imaginative projections that filled the voids in the stories and created an image of what the traumatic event was like. Talking about it with all these people and listening to them made her feel good about it; she told me that she felt that she had opened a door and now others could share their stories with their community. She went as far as to say that she should have told her stories a long time ago. She felt, more so than ever, at ease. This confirms the idea put forward by Laub (1995: 57) that, essentially, those who listen to and read about trauma become participants and co-owners of those traumatic events. Some of them may have witnessed similar traumas in different parts of the country during the invasion and some may not, but they all became ‘missing witnesses’ of the specific events my mother narrated.

Even more than this, they transformed into what C. Fred Alford calls “missing listeners” (2016), in that they willingly listened to the stories. Alford writes that the listener needs to be conscientious to participate in the healing process: “healing takes place when someone listens carefully, over and over and over again” (2016). In this case, the listeners were so understanding, and present, that some of them felt the need to call and express their support, which became, in a sense, a form of psychoanalytic healing process. My mother would talk for hours on the phone and message some of these people who, collectively, seemed to have helped her overcome her trauma to an extent, helping her much more than I could ever have on my own, despite me also being a conscientious listener. It was not the narrative in and of itself that healed; it was the relationship which was formed with the people who listened, asked questions and engaged in dialogue with her: “it is the attachment to this trusted presence who is willing to hear the unspeakable that heals ... [it is the] relationship with someone who cares and listens to the victim’s testimony over and over again [that] heals” (Alford, 2016). As a result, my mother’s PTSD symptoms subsided, appearing much less frequently.

The fact that the listeners from current and previous generations were able to contact my mother, transformed the process into a supportive, interactive experience, echoing her stories, adding their own and engaging in what came

to be the beginning of a therapeutic process through the re-imagining of a new, collective self with the agency to carry on healing and carry on becoming – a “trans-generational collective self” as Hirschberger puts it (2018). Robert Jay Lifton, in a discussion with Cathy Caruth, says that although the listener is not exposed to what the narrator is exposed to, one must take one’s feelings through “what they went through and allow that in. It’s an encounter ... and a dialogue” (2014: 18), and, moreover, as De Klerk reminds us, “It is not the trauma itself that can produce disorders ... but rather the failure to process trauma adequately that can lead to dependencies or pathological behaviors” (2007: 37).

Reforging the Self: *Kintsugi* and the Art of Collective Healing

The brain changes with every new thought, learning experience or act of remembering. When we reflect on past events, we are not just recalling static information; rather, we’re actively reshaping our neural pathways, altering our relationship with our memories. This ongoing process of change underlies our ability to adapt, learn, and potentially reframe our experiences over time. This understanding can be further advanced if we include in the discussion the possibility of the emergence of a new kind of collective self from the fragments of the old one. As De Klerk (2007) has argued, when discussing trauma in organisations, trauma typically begins with individual experiences. But if the spectrum is broad enough, other individuals can identify and associate with it, which ultimately leads to group trauma: “through further projection and projective identification, the trauma can spread to other groups” (De Klerk 2007: 36). What starts as personal trauma can evolve into a pervasive, collective one, affecting multiple levels and facets of society, and so the solution needs to be collective and social as well. I think that because of the set up for the interviews and the fact that my mother was able to address a large audience from home, the process became a safe space that allowed her to reveal her trauma to the world and thus begin the healing process. This was not the case when she privately shared the stories. Now she was able to tell her stories and expose her trauma publicly. The response she received from the listeners, the readers and even the interviewers (who were quite understanding) was imbued with “sensitivity to the traumatic effects of change, compassion, empathetic listening skills without explanation, awareness of their own emotions, and vulnerability to show their own pain and sorrow” (De Klerk 2007: 38), as they added their own elements to the stories.

De Klerk (2007) goes on to say, following Niederhoffer and Pennebaker, that “an effective way to symbolize trauma is to develop a narrative. Developing

and telling one's story bring order to the insensibility and chaos of your recollections and emotions. Putting upsetting experiences into words allows people to stop inhibiting their thoughts" (2007: 39), speaking the unspeakable as it were. Narrating her stories was akin to symbolising them, but instead of pictures, she used words. Judith Herman in *Truth and Repair* adds to that by saying that the survivor must revisit the past to grieve and understand the trauma: "she will never be the same person she was before the traumatic events in her life, but out of her grief she can forge a new identity that neither denies her past nor allows it to define her entirely" (Herman 2023: 8)." Such an approach can offer a comprehensive possibility of examining how narratives can contribute to the understanding of trauma and the journey towards healing, as well as to an intricate exploration of the interplay between storytelling, culture, and resilience. In doing so, it is possible for the subject to reinvent him- or herself, creating a new sense of belonging in the process. This process of reinvention is not a linear progression towards a fixed endpoint; rather, it is a dynamic and ongoing negotiation with the past, present, and future.

Meg Jensen (2016) discussed the therapeutic potential in fictional representations, challenging traditional approaches that privilege factual accuracy in trauma narratives, arguing instead that the act of storytelling itself, regardless of its adherence to historical 'truth', serves as a vital mechanism for processing and integrating traumatic experience. No one really knows whether my mother's stories were historically accurate. But it does not matter – they were personally and collectively true. Conventional historiographical demand for rigid, factual representations of the past can impede recovery by forcing survivors into restrictive narrative frameworks that might not accommodate the complex, fragmented nature of traumatic memory. Jensen contends that fictional or semi-fictional approaches to trauma representation allow for greater psychological authenticity (Jensen 2016: 431). The fluid, evolving nature of memory, particularly as it transforms through retelling and public engagement, enhances the healing process. This fictional mode permits survivors to explore emotional truths that might be inaccessible through strictly factual accounts, creating space for the kind of meaning-making that facilitates genuine recovery. The creative liberties afforded by fictional representation don't compromise the trauma narrative's validity; instead, they enable a more profound engagement with the psychological and emotional dimensions of traumatic experience, ultimately serving the survivor's need to make sense of themselves and the world around them. Jensen writes that through narrativisation a new sense of perceived identity can emerge, one that interrogates 'who the victim is' as well as 'who he or she was' (Jensen 2016: 431). Thus, a factual account of what did and did not happen misses the point. "Metaphoric and fictive forms allow victims

of trauma the chance to confront, reinvent and revise the past ... and come to construct a new, socially acceptable narrative identity necessary to our survival. *Surviving to tell the story, here, is the point.*" (Jensen 2016: 445, emphasis added)

This new self is not perfect; it is, if anything, fragmented and unreliable. However, because of this unreliability, one can engage in an inner dialogue with present and future selves, through the creation of a space of possibility pertaining to belonging, which can then lead to the development of a novel framework for dealing with trauma. In the end, our self-concept and identity can be reconstructed in a better way through the stories we tell. McLeod, in his reading of Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* (1993), says that novel possibilities will emerge when one substitutes the rigidity of roots with the freedom of routes (McLeod 2000: 215), thus establishing a connection between history, present and future, away from traditional fixities. In such a process, an imagined space of possibilities can be created, a sort of third space, which can serve as a "place of immense creativity and possibility" (McLeod, 2000: 215). My mother's stories became more about an imaginary, communal attempt to understand a multiplicity of selves not bound by linearity. The storyteller, by exposing the most traumatised parts of her psyche, asked the audience to participate in the construction of a new subject, essentially inviting them to read her as the embodiment of her stories; and they did. Using the Gestalt approach to addressing historical trauma, which emphasises a collective self and focuses on the present rather than the past, those narratives were reframed within the present context. By doing so, the strength demonstrated by the survivors was highlighted, showcasing a sense of positivity in dealing with adversities, which also served as a valuable lesson for the missing listeners. Consequently, this approach facilitated a shift from a perspective of inherited trauma to one of inherited strength and wisdom, fostering healing and growth in the present through collectiveness.

My mother, as a survivor, did not simply retell some traumatic events; rather, she re-imagined them, with the focus being on what those stories meant both for her and everyone who either experienced them or was told about them. In the foreword to Peter Levine's *Trauma and Memory* (2015), Bessel Van der Kolk (2014) suggests that the fundamental challenge posed by trauma extends beyond the time it occurred, and that it affects body and mind alike. The crux of the issue lies in trauma's persistent effect on an individual's present experience, inhibiting their capacity to engage fully with their life today (2014: 88–89). This ongoing effect manifests as an inability to participate meaningfully in life, thus compromising emotional well-being. Therefore, the power of relationships, in this case the one created between the narrator and her audience, as well as the subsequent exchanges, speaks to the healing properties of such interactions. This, in turn, can facilitate a shift towards a more stable

psychological state in the victim. Trauma often disrupts social connections and fosters isolation, both as a protective mechanism and because of its psychological impact. A possible healing process involves re-establishing social bonds and engaging in interpersonal experiences. This social dimension of recovery is, ostensibly, what happened to my mother following her interviews.

Herman (2023) adds another layer to this approach. She says that “the suffering of traumatized people is a matter not only of individual psychology but also, always, of social justice” (Herman 2023: 7). She argues that PTSD became a legitimate diagnosis only after Vietnam War veterans started throwing their medals over the White House fence, while sexual violence was recognised as an epidemic only when women found their voice in the women’s liberation movement and began testifying. Indeed, “if traumatic disorders are afflictions of the powerless, then empowerment must be a central principle of recovery. If trauma shames and isolates, then recovery must take place in community” (ibid.). It is in this newfound community that my mother found solace. She testified in front of a new community, made up of people and their descendants from the villages of Zodia and Kakopetria. Her audience then acted as caregivers, imparting social justice through multifaceted, supportive communication: “Social support is a powerful predictor of good recovery, while social isolation is toxic. People cannot feel safe alone, and they cannot mourn and make meaning alone” (Herman 2023: 8).

Lastly, what is worth noting is that there was a complete absence of desire for vengeance against the perpetrators. In fact, she has made friends with the woman currently occupying her ancestral home, a Turkish Cypriot woman called Safiye, whom she visits from time to time. Herman (2023) explains that by saying that “when the community rallies to the victim’s support, vengeful feelings are transformed into shared righteous indignation, which can be a powerful source of energy for repair” (2023: 45). The last stage of recovery, Herman argues, is when the survivor refocuses on the present and the future, forging new relationships with the community and finding a new purpose in life: “Some extraordinary survivors, recognizing that their suffering is part of a much larger social problem, are able to transform the meaning of their trauma by making their stories a gift to others ... [developing] what ... Robert Jay Lifton (ibid. 2023: 8) has called a ‘survivor mission’, seeking a better world”. In sharing her narrative with the broader community, my mother precisely exemplified this transformative process. She was able to rethink her own self, ‘repairing’ it in a way, through the positive flow from this new communal self, in a process reminiscent of *Kintsugi*, the Japanese art of reassembling broken pieces using gold, which serves as a metaphor for embracing your flaws and

creating a new, improved self in the process. It does not matter if it breaks. You can put it back together in a new way.

Exploring a new sense of self through unyielding notions translated from the past cannot fully frame our present, so we must keep returning to the present to be able to create a new, collective, transgenerational route to the future, instead of understanding (and limiting) ourselves based on rigid roots, allowing the past to weigh on us. In doing so, the storyteller shares the pain and the bad memories, and can merge fragmented pieces of self with others, thus creating a more stable, collective sense of self in the process. This attempt to construct a collective self out of individual fragments inevitably means that there are as many outcomes as there are readers. Upon release, a story's interpretation extends beyond the storyteller's control, suggesting a sense of multimodality that reframes 'lived histories', and challenges notions of unity and autonomy. The concept of multimodality refers here to the various ways in which trauma is experienced, expressed and processed, something which goes beyond traditional verbal or textual accounts, since it recognises that trauma's impact is not limited to one form of communication or representation, but can be manifested through narrative modes (the stories of my mother), embodied experiences (the psychosomatic symptoms my mother experienced) and behaviours.

Re-imagining the Self: A Transformative Approach to Dealing with Trauma

Vignoles et al. (2006) say that "identity construction ... comprises the sense of self-esteem, continuity, distinctiveness, belonging, efficacy, and ultimately a sense of meaning" (2006, in Hirschberger 2018). My mother's interviews were not the end of the road, but an important milestone. Trauma changes you forever; but the self is equipped with the capacity to carry on becoming. Through her public testimony my mother was able to 'narrate' a new self, a self with the agency to evoke new understandings of identity. The hope is for my mother – and any other trauma survivor for that matter – to keep getting better through constantly re-imagining identities and selves. The concept of collective trauma represents a profound crisis of meaning. Hirschberger's (2018) framework illustrates how such trauma evolves into collective memory and ultimately becomes a system of meaning, potentially redefining group identity, as "For victim groups there may be secondary gains to collective trauma, that are often overlooked, that function to keep the memory of trauma alive, and lead subsequent generations to incorporate the trauma into their collective self" (Hirschberger 2018). This transformation process is crucial for understanding how societies reconstruct themselves after catastrophic events, highlighting the intricate

relationship between trauma, memory, and collective identity formation as for both the victims and the perpetrators, “deriving meaning from trauma is an ongoing process that is continuously negotiated within groups and between groups; it is responsible for debates over memory, but also holds the promise of providing a basis for intergroup understanding” (ibid.).

My mother shared her stories to preserve them from dying out. She put them out in the public sphere, on tape, so that more people than just her family would be part of them, and thus avoid the inevitability of oblivion. Her documented stories will carry her in the future, embedding the subject into a resilient collective. The interplay between individual experience and this broader symbolic entity can point to the prevalence of mechanisms that can help with growth and survival. Trauma’s collective memory is different from individual memory, precisely because collective memory persists beyond the lives of the direct survivors of the events and is remembered by group members who could be far removed from the traumatic events in time and space. The meaning that emanates from the power of the group emphasises an ability to rehabilitate and change in the aftermath of calamity: “These consequences are especially pertinent as these new generations of victim and perpetrator descendants attempt to construct social meaning that can explain the past, provide a roadmap to navigate present challenges, and prepare the group for the future” (Hirschberger 2018).

This new collective self, or better yet, a new self infused with collective elements strengthened by the power of the group, just like a *kintsugi* piece, will outlive the old, individual, physical one, embedded as it is in the collective memory of peers, in addition to which the new, adorned, result can be better than the original. Collective retention of traumatic memories acts as a shared psychological mechanism that can enhance group cohesion and preparedness against future threats. This adaptive process necessitates a transformative approach to trauma resolution. Re-imagining a transgenerational social identity of sorts, entails a complex psychosocial process wherein the affected community engages in meaning-making and narrative reconstruction that integrates the traumatic experience, potentially fostering resilience and adaptive coping strategies. Shay (1994) writes that “... narrating the story is only healing for the individual when there is a community of people who can listen, feel, and respond (Shay 1994: 188, in Audergon 2004: 20).

We can never, really, fully come to terms with the past. My mother’s interviews are those of a person broken and haunted, trying to tell a new story about what it means to be her, to escape the past, only to realise that there is no escaping it; not really. But the subject can also be a complex, impossible entity in a world where the self can exist only if it is faltering and contingent. Maybe one does

not need to escape the past precisely because one cannot change it; rather, one must accept it and focus on the present and the future, also appreciating that there is no concrete, unitary sense of self to be found. There is only the realisation that we are made up of fragments and that identity is conditional and forever incomplete. Caruth (1996) says that it is within this “incomprehension and in our departure from sense and understanding that our own witnessing may indeed begin to take place” (1996: 56). Such a realisation points to the impossibility of an autonomous self which, in turn, underlines the polyvalent nature of selfhood. My mother is not who she is despite her past, but because of it, since she was able to deal with hitherto excluded past selves tied up with traumatic events. Cathy Caruth (1996) argues that we can:

[...] read the address of the voice here, not as the story of the individual in relation to the events of his own past, but as the story of the way in which one’s own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another’s wound. (Caruth 1996: 8)

The connection between personal narrative and larger societal trauma highlights the universality of the struggle for meaning in the aftermath of suffering. Trauma generates a search for meaning, which can be found in any stable, strong group. In exploring the intricate landscape of collective trauma and public narratives, we are reminded of the profound strength of the human spirit. The journey through trauma is rarely linear, and healing often comes in unexpected ways. In this examination of one woman’s experience, the act of publicly sharing traumatic stories can serve as a powerful catalyst for both personal and collective healing. It is imperative that we come up with new ways to think about ourselves in dealing with trauma. The constantly evolving field of trauma theory offers new pathways for understanding and healing. Recognising the interconnectedness of mind, body and social context in trauma recovery, we open doors to more holistic and effective interventions. By embracing a more fluid and interconnected notion of selfhood, we open the door so that new possibilities for dealing with trauma can enter the discussion, in the hope that a deeply human perspective on how trauma, while irrevocably altering the self, can also become a catalyst for growth. In doing so, we can pave the way for a society that is both more understanding and resilient, one that finds strength in shared experiences and can transform the narrative of trauma into one of growth, hope, and ultimately, healing.

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