Book Review

PAUL SOLOMON, AUT University, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand

Haunting legacies: Violent histories and transgenerational trauma. By Gabriele Schwab. (2010). New York, NY: Columbia University Press. 227 pp.

Gabriele Schwab is Chancellor's Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Irvine. Her books in English include *Subjects Without Selves: Transitional Texts in Modern Fiction* (Harvard University Press, 1994); *The Mirror and the Killer-Queen: Otherness in Literary Language* (Indiana University Press, 1996); *Accelerating Possession: Global Futures of Property and Personhood* (edited, with Bill Maurer, Columbia University Press, 2006); and *Derrida, Deleuze, Psychoanalysis* (Columbia University Press, 2007).

This book addresses the violent ghosts engendered by acts of atrocity: ghosts that live in the unconscious of both victims and perpetrators and shape the global cultural fabric and modes of self-experiencing down the generations. Schwab's starting point is her own experience of growing up in post-war Germany. She broadens her inquiry by considering autobiographical and fictional texts about violent histories in Europe, Africa, New Zealand, South America, and the United States, where she has lived and worked since 1980. Her writing draws on psychoanalytic thought, critical theory, literary criticism, trauma theory, and post-colonial theory. Such wealth of theoretical perspectives adds weight and rigour to an analysis and a call to action that this reviewer found both poignant and full of hope for healing. À propos of child soldiers, in her introductory chapter Schwab warns that "the destiny of traumatized children around the world is a signpost pointing to the future of our globe", and asks "What kind of trauma will these children pass on to their children if they even survive this violence?" (p. 40).

In the second chapter, "Writing against memory and forgetting", Schwab describes the genesis of her fascination with the language of stories, especially "life writing" (p. 41), that deals with violent histories. As a child at family dinners she heard the terrifying war stories of her family, but years later she realized that she had "picked up on something untold, silenced, violently cut out" (p. 43) and came to understand that the words of those stories could not be trusted because they had felt somehow dead, and "could be split into what they said and what they did not say" (p. 43). She contrasts those war stories with the frightening fairy stories she loved for their aliveness, and their ability to contain and transform the fear. Here I was reminded of Bruno Bettleheim's (1976/1991) *The Uses of Enchantment*, which applies psychoanalytic thinking to the psychological power of fairy tales to contain children's fears evoked by developmental challenges.

Correspondence to: Paul Solomon, AUT University, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand.
E-mail: psolomon@aut.ac.nz

Schwab invokes the body of theory that considers violent events such as the Holocaust, genocide, torture and rape to be beyond representation; and she notes that such events "also call for speech, testimony, and witnessing. This is an irresolvable paradox at the core of traumatic writing" (p. 48). Put another way, while words cannot ever represent (re-present) such horror and trauma, speech, testimony and witnessing can help healing. Using Abraham and Torok's (1994) concept of a psychic crypt, where unthinkable secrets are encoded in "cryptographic speech" (p. 49) and buried, Schwab outlines a framework for looking at traumatic narrative, using texts from the American history of slavery and genocide of Native Americans, e.g. Tony Morrison's (1987) *Beloved*, and Simon Ortiz's (1981) *From Sand Creek*; Holocaust novels and memoirs such as Sebald's (2001) *Austerlitz*; and other novels about various kinds of trauma by George Perec, Marguerite Duras and Samuel Beckett.

The third chapter analyses trauma in the children of perpetrators. Schwab considers the German experience in the light of the psychology of colonialism described by Ashis Nandy (1983), who maintains that perpetrator societies are subject to cultural and psychological pathologies that correspond to those in victims, a dynamic described by Hegel (1807/1977) in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* in terms of the master–slave dialectic.

Although friends cautioned her against including her own experiences on the grounds that "they are too personal to be exemplary" (p. 84), Schwab advocates "tracing the personal effects of historical violence" and thus facing "a responsibility that does not end with the generation of perpetrators" (p. 85). She considers first the story of her "phantom brother", that is, the story of her own history as a child who was supposed to replace the brother who had died in the war. She writes: "Beyond my scholarly commitment to this exploration, writing this chapter also performs a piece of necessary mourning for the brother I never knew" (p. 148). Her mother, mad with grief she could not face, a grief compounded by "unspeakable" feelings stemming from the Nazi era, had projected her traumas into the relationship with her daughter who was recruited to enact her mother's failed grieving.

Schwab's own experience as a "replacement child" led her to investigate psychoanalytic literature on this topic, as well as memoirs and films. A well-known replacement child, born to Jewish parents after the Holocaust, is political cartoonist Art Spiegelman, who in his comic book *Maus* (1991) describes growing up with the sense that he had a "ghost-brother", who was in fact killed before he was born. His memoir features Jews as mice, and Nazis as cats. Schwab also refers to the New Zealand novel, *Whale Rider*, by the Māori writer Witi Ihimaera (1987), in which the protagonist is a girl whose twin brother died at birth. The film deals with the girl's struggle to take the leadership role that the boy was destined to inherit, and her eventual acceptance by her grandfather as a child who both replaces her twin, and also fights for her right to selfhood by fulfilling a traditional role usually reserved for males in Māori culture. Schwab discusses another Māori novel on this topic: Patricia Grace's (1998) *Baby No-Eyes*.

In her discussion of the psychic role of replacement children in trans-generational grieving, Schwab refers to psychoanalytic understandings as well as Mahatma Ghandi's idea of "a replacement child who would inherit the legacy of breaking the cycle of violence, revenge and retribution" (p. 147). Ghandi advised a Hindu parent whose child had been killed by a Muslim mob to adopt a Muslim boy whose parents had been killed by a Hindu mob, and to bring him up as a Muslim, as the only way to heal their pain, anger, and desire for revenge. This, Schwab proposes, "invokes the hardest possible task after mourning the loss of a child to an act of violence, namely, imagining oneself as the enemy" (p. 147). She cites the

remarkable and true story of Amy Biehl, a 26-year-old anti-apartheid activist, who was stoned and stabbed to death in a racial hate crime in South Africa in 1993, whose parents eventually forgave her murderers and adopted them as their sons.

Schwab had to forgive her mother, and also her brother for occupying the psychic space into which she was born, and for never being there in real life, as he was in her fantasies, when she needed him to protect her from her mother's rages. She also needed, in her own words: "to forgive my mother for never letting me be myself on my own terms" (p. 148). Schwab traces the intricate psychodynamics of these enactments in heartfelt and thoughtful detail, and the reader is left with a sense that her experience might be paradigmatic for that of her post-war generation, who were repositories for the parent generation's unprocessed and unspeakable feelings.

Schwab's second personal story concerns her hometown, Tiengen, in Germany, and her realization as an adult of the ghostly erasure after the war of the history of its Jewish citizens. This, she contends, can hardly be considered merely personal experience, but rather illustrates how pervasive and intricate was the silencing of the Holocaust, particularly in Germany after the war.

Schwab draws on Frantz Fanon's (1967) work on colonialism to consider the possibility of healing and of reconciling the psychological traumas of both victims and perpetrators, colonized and colonists, and argues that because their experiences are mutually constituted, healing and grieving are more likely to be successful if undertaken jointly in dialogue. She argues that "any redress aimed at ending the cycle of violence" will require a "different ethics of relating to the other" (p. 150). To imagine oneself as the enemy, or to forgive the murderers of your child as Amy Biehl's parents did, does not come naturally; and, as Schwab acknowledges, it "requires a profound rearrangement of the structures of our feelings and desires" (p. 150).

The final chapter deals with the dehumanizing effects of torture on both victims and perpetrators in the Holocaust; in African child soldiers; in Kenya; in South America; in the United States, and its exported torture centres at Abu Ghraib in Iraq, and Guantanamo in Cuba: torture is, indeed, a global phenomenon.

It is difficult to convey the breadth and depth of argument in this book, and, while Schwab's writing could not be other than personal, its political power is also evident. Jewish tradition calls for *Tikkun ha-olam*, that is, mending or healing the world: Schwab's writing is an original and thought-provoking contribution to that. Readers are left with the hope that we humans, all over the world, might someday be capable of understanding the need to "imagine ourselves as the enemy", and of doing the emotional and psychic work of "rearranging the structures of our feelings and desires" that Schwab argues we must undertake if we are to heal the world.

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Paul Solomon is a senior lecturer in the Department of Psychotherapy, AUT University, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. His Jewish family originated in Poland. In the 1960s he lived in a kibbutz and served in the Israeli army, where his interest in cross-cultural healing began. After working in London's East End as a social worker he trained in psychoanalytic psychotherapy and now lives in New Zealand.