“It is not just physical violence, but the emotional scars that take their toll.” Examine this idea in relation to the two texts.

Tom Wright’s play ‘Black Diggers’ and Fred D’aguiar’s novel ‘The Longest Memory’ both depict events in times of profound injustice and prejudice against a minority group; where Indigenous Australians and Negro slaves of the America were subjects to traumatising experiences and violations that left behind not only physical, but more notably, emotional and psychological scars. The impacts of living under a higher ruling echelon that perpetuates and institutionalises racism as a form of physical and verbal violence are portrayed by both texts; however, to a more shocking extent in the longest memory than Black diggers; as the trauma of war and combat are more prominent in resulting in haunting memories and wounds for the characters of Black Diggers.

Both texts portray worlds where violence is prevailing/dominating and seemed as an acceptable and even appropriate at the time; where in Black Diggers, the violence takes a form in invading, dispossessing and traumatizing the lives of Aboriginals; while in The Longest Memory it is the profound acts of racism, injustice and oppression towards the Negro slaves. The authors expose societies where it has been acceptable for the white dominant social classes to use or threaten violence against those who they looked upon as their “inferiors”. D’aguiar presents the Virginian world of slavery where violence is routinely used by masters to keep the slaves subservient, which in turn leaves them with a constant psychological reminder to “behave well out of fear”. However as human beings, these fears are bound to gather in one’s mind and destroy any chance of hope and joy in one’s life, such that “Beatings that turning children’s faces from glee to a stony obedience”. D’aguiar represents this notion through Whitechapel, as he accepts that his son would receive beating and hopes that he (chapel) would learn from the punishment and to give up his dreams for freedom in a world where they were regarded as subhuman and animals who lacked in “intelligence and human standing before God”. Quite similarly in Black Diggers, Wright reveals the ugly sides of an era in Australia, where Aboriginals not only had to endure the invasion of their homes, land and freedom by settlers who didn’t hesitate to “fill” their “back with pellets”, but where also under a similar threat of racist violence in case they crossed the invisible racist boundaries that were prevalent in the society. By living under this implicit threat of physical and verbal violence which was also common at the time; it is easy to form emotional scars as their families were killed; they were being hunted to be eliminated, were given no rights and much similarly; were treated as animals for decades, which Wright reveals through Bertie’s grandad; while by time-shifting to world war 1; the situation remains the same; as violence still leaves scars not necessarily through beating and killing; but through language and verbal abuse; “when a coon thinks it’s alright to...touch the same spoon and drink the same bloody water as a white man” reveals of the disgraceful attitudes of the society at the time toward aboriginals and how their individual and collective psyche was hugely affected after generations of racism, violence and dispossession.

Wright and D’aguiar depict characters whose lives are burdened by the physical, psychological and most traumatizing of all, emotional scars that death, loss and grief resulting from violence brought to them. Both writers employ characters that are devastated as a resulting of being overwhelmed and scarred by the weapons of society and in Black Diggers, by the impact of war. Bertie and other soldier’s loss of mates in the war is a prominent example of the emotional scar that witnessing physical violence can leave behind. Bertie is left devastated, staring into the distance, speechless, while holding onto a lock of hair of his mate after returning from what he dreamed would be a fun opportunity to serve his country and an attempt for equality. However, his emotions and mentality have been damaged and as Wright implies; are left to daunt him for the remainder of his life. “still alive... he hasn’t got a face but he’s still alive”; is Archie’s distressing quote that implies Wright’s intention of depicting how being alive experiencing and witnessing the war is far more difficult to comprehend and accept than if one was to
kill themselves; highlighting the intensity of effect of emotional scars on one’s life. This is similarly shown in The Longest Memory by Whitechapel’s loss of his beloved wife; followed by his only ‘son’ which follows him into a depressive episode of not knowing how to “function” anymore with these many sorrowful and painful scars left on his mind, as he wants to “forget as hard as [he] can”.

Both writers of the Black Diggers and The Longest Memory suggest that trauma can have a lasting impact on the human spirit, not only on an individual level, but also on the collective society. By showing how deeply living through an unjust society and war can affect the individuals and communities; the texts show how outcomes of mental trauma shape the lives of many and are extremely difficult to redress as opposed to physical pain. Black Diggers depicts how the survivors of war suffer the most, as in addition to physical, emotional and psychological trauma they dealt with due to the war, they also have to contend with the unexpected resumption of racism, discrimination, abuse and neglect on their return back home. “for us, it’s [the war] never going to end” is Mick’s remark that reflects the never-ending emotional dilemma of aboriginals. These experiences of psychological injuries that will never heal; shows how the trauma of living is quite comparable to the experience of death in the longest memory. This lasting impact of emotional scars remains a legacy for the future generations as well; as seen in Whitechapel’s attempt in passing down his trapped memories of horror, loss, guilt and suffering to his son as a slave. Bertie’s grandad also conforms to this idea as he reflects on how Bertie’s false dreams and hopes have been crushed throughout the generations and devastated many. “you’re going to lick their boots, same boots that have kicked us for years.” The writers of both texts highlight the inevitable ability of the human spirit to evoke emotional pain by merely remembering distressing events as opposed to the inability to re-experience physical pain.

By exploring the significance of many lives and hopes doomed by the appalling acts of psychological violation, the writers of both texts aim to express and preserve the stories that history ignored, while accounting for a sense of hope present even back then. Throughout both texts; the focus on the invisible pain that Indigenous Australians and Negro slaves endured without any empathy and recognition is tied to how life shattering the impact of emotional scars are where human beings were treated under the impacts of a dehumanising and unfair echelon that ruled their lives, as if they were living only to have their emotional scars worsen gradually and forcibly. Though there are still minor elements of hope included in each text; from the intervention of the taxidermist to save Nigel from the massacre of his community; to the RSL secretary that sees “beyond a person’s colour” in Black Diggers, to the sorrow and guilt felt by Sanders junior towards Whitechapel and his half-brother whom he killed and the opposing view of Lydia and Mr Whitechapel towards Negro slaves in The Longest Memory. However, even if hope and recovery are present; the writers suggest that the toll that emotional wounds take and are passed on to future generations are far more powerful than any human capacity to overcome it; and hence is it important for the stories of these traumas to be remembered so lessons can be learned from the ignored, forgotten but important parts of our history as human beings.

The play ‘Black Diggers’ by Tom Wright and the novel ‘The Longest Memory’ by Fred D’aguiar provide an insight into times filled with minority groups living under racist social structures; violence and oppression in many different forms. Subsequently, both writers seek to signify the impact of physical and emotional trauma on the human spirit, individually and collectively; in an attempt to highlight the importance of recalling the ignored histories and allowing the readers of future generations to learn from them.