

The Poetry of Belonging

The Poetry of Belonging: Healing With the Language of the Wound

By Iris J. Gildea

Artwork by Iris J. Gildea

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my mother, whose music taught me about the healing power of art before I'd even left her womb. To Nur, who lights up my life. And to all survivors of childhood sexual violence for the courage, power & ingenuity by which we survive.

Forward

I first met Iris J. Gildea in 2021 in my role as Co-Editor of *The Canadian Journal of Theology, Mental Health and Disability*. In response to a call for content sent out to our communities, Iris submitted beautiful images of artwork she had created as a means of “exploring, communicating, coming to terms with, re-imagining and accepting childhood trauma.”¹ In her “Authors’ Note” that accompanies the artwork, she explains

Living in these margins of spirituality and mental health encounters can be isolating. In my experience, cultural approaches to trauma recovery tend to fail survivors. Yet, art as a means of self-exploration and creative transformation is able to support us as...we reclaim the parts of ourselves that cultural norms teach us to silence and repress. That spirituality and art intersect in the on-going recovery from childhood trauma is a beautiful reality...that I seek to explore creatively.²

¹ Iris J. Gildea “The Colours of Forgiveness: Visual Art, Spirituality, Trauma & Mental Health,” *Canadian Journal of Theology, Mental Health and Disability* 1, no. 2 (November 25, 2021): 193.

² Ibid.

As I reflect upon Gildea's words after a few years have passed, I see she was planting a seed in the article that would grow into the book you hold in your hands today. Throughout the pages of this book, Gildea invites readers to embark on a journey of self-exploration through art, and to "write with their wound" in order to explore their inner world, and to reclaim parts of themselves that may have become hidden, or silenced, long ago.

In addition to inviting readers to engage in self-exploration, in *The Poetry of Belonging* Gildea calls us to learn from other women who have also longed for reform in the field of trauma work. Canadian pioneers like Bonnie Burstow and Reneé Linklater have worked tirelessly to critique, dismantle, and re-build how trauma work is done. Their reforms call for survivors to be at the centre of developing theory, praxis, and innovative ways forward. *The Poetry of Belonging* deepens and enriches this conversation that has been going on for decades within the fields of Mad Studies, Antipsychiatry, Practical Theology and beyond.

In the pages that follow, Gildea shows how survivors of complex childhood trauma can begin to cultivate a practice of "poetic inquiry." We journey with her as she shares snippets from her journal, providing us with glimpses into what it was like to be "Little Iris J." who was deeply wounded by childhood violence. She remembers, writes, and weeps about the violence she survived, and reflects upon the person she is becoming: strong, tender, connected to others and the earth. She then calls upon the reader to join her as she writes, and to learn that they too can "write with the wound."

Here at the Mad and Crip Theology Press, we are excited to announce *The Poetry of Belonging* is the first title in a new series called “Doing Radical Trauma Work.” We recognize the need for more books, written by trauma survivors, to be a part of the current cultural conversation about trauma. We invite you to join us in community as we continue to break new ground in survivor-centered storytelling, artmaking, research, and praxis.

Amy Panton
Editor, Mad and Crip Theology Press
February 2024

A Note About This Book's Content & Reading Practices

While this is a book about poetry and the ocean and its focus is on healing and thriving, it is also a book about surviving childhood violence. It does not include graphic descriptions of violence, but violence is implied throughout and there are many references to sexual violence. Please take care of yourself as you read.

As this is a book about aesthetic inquiry, you are encouraged to engage in poetic inquiry (or any other aesthetic inquiry practice such as visual art making or movement) as you read! If you read a line of poetry that resonates with you, use it as a prompt. Write with it or riff off of it. Have markers or pastels near you and draw images as you read. These inquiry practices can support us as we move through our own depths and the depths of others. If you draw something or write something that speaks of your own embodied wisdom of reclaimed truth making and beauty that you want to share, Iris welcomes emails.

Table of Contents

FORWARD	VII
A NOTE ABOUT THIS BOOK'S CONTENT & READING PRACTICES	X
TABLE OF CONTENTS	XII
LIST OF ARTWORK	XIV
PREFACE	XV
INTRODUCTION	1
WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR	10
TRAUMA: A WOUND THAT SPEAKS	11
THE DEFICIENCY PRAXIS	16
FEMINIST PHENOMENOLOGY & EMBODIMENT	19
DEFINING TERMS	36
HOW I PROCEED	40
PART I	47
CHAPTER 1: REFRAMING TRAUMA: THE WOUND AS GATEWAY	48
INTRODUCTION: RECLAIMING OUR DEPTHS	48
TRADITIONAL TRAUMA THEORY: BEYOND DEFICIENCY PRAXES	57
ON MEMORY & TRAUMA	74
TOWARD INTEGRATIVE PRAXES	86
RELEASING SHAME	93
LEARNING TO LISTEN	100
CHAPTER 2: THE LANGUAGE OF THE WOUND	110
THEORETICAL GROUNDWORK	118

WHAT IS POETIC INQUIRY AND WHERE DOES IT COME FROM?	118
ARTS-BASED QUALITATIVE RESEARCH	121
EMBODIMENT AND FEMINIST APPROACHES TO POETIC INQUIRY	132
THE LANGUAGE OF THE WOUND	170
REFLECTION	180
PART II	187
CHAPTER 3: WRITING WITH THE WOUND: A FEMINIST PHENOMENOLOGY OF HEALING	188
CASS AND MY CAVE OF RECLAIMED DREAMS	198
AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC POETICS	219
DIALOGUING WITH MYSELF (AND CASS)	226
REFLECTION	252
CHAPTER 4: THE POETRY OF BELONGING	255
A YEAR IN VIGNETTES	259
A POETRY OF BELONGING IN VIGNETTES	263
REFLECTION	292
CRYING WOLF	299
TO THE END	308
CONCLUSION	317
POSTSCRIPT	320
BIBLIOGRAPHY	325
APPENDIX	338
POETIC INQUIRY GUIDELINES	339
POETIC INQUIRY PROMPTS	341
RITUALS TO ACCOMPANY POETIC INQUIRY & WRITING WITH THE WOUND	347

List of Artwork

ARTWORK 1: THE POETRY OF BELONGING, MIXED MEDIA	45
ARTWORK 2: MOTHER'S WOMB, MIXED MEDIA	109
ARTWORK 3: ACROSS TIME, MIXED MEDIA	159
ARTWORK 4: CONSENSUAL LOVE, MIXED MEDIA	249

Preface

This book is about embodiment, the ocean, and the taste of salt on my flesh as memories mix with imagination and an ancient healing wisdom unleashes itself in my dreams and waking life.

In the tradition of critical autoethnography, I work with my own poetically mediated memories as creative fragments to enter and explore an embodiment of liminal realms and what I call the language of the wound. This means that, while I discuss memory as a cultural theorist in the section on trauma theory, when it comes to embodying a phenomenology of healing through my own autoethnographic praxis, I work with an altogether more integrative and embodied approach to memory than a binary of truth and fiction. This book is not written with any intention of fitting into the predetermined and reductionist boundaries created by frameworks we apply in biomedical systems of meaning making. Its frameworks are feminist phenomenology, the ocean, earth-based spirituality and poetic inquiry.

Enter the flooding waves of the ocean.

Enter the beating of my heart.

Enter the infinite wisdom of breath.

Enter my feet sinking into the shore while the Salish Sea
embraces me, salt and brine across my shins, smile on my face
as seagulls dance through the cool air and my dog runs in
circles, barking the joy that I feel as well.

Now a little bit about how I went about writing this book.

To write the first draft, I rented a small room in the town of Sointula which sits on Malcolm Island, a Northern Gulf Island in British Columbia, Canada. The hotel where I rented this room is directly on the shore of the Salish Sea. I lived for these two months with the balcony door wide open, listening to the constant rhythms of the waves washing up onto shore and back out to sea.

It was about two weeks into my stay when I finally slowed down enough from my need “to do” and came into a slower state of presence and listening in. Suddenly, in one embodied moment, I felt as if I heard the ocean for the first time, even though the door had been open those two weeks prior. Suddenly, I was aware of the sound of the waves and the sea as if they were an extension of my own breath, body and psyche. My favorite moments were waking during the night, ever so briefly, hearing those waves, feeling them reverberate through my body, and falling back into dream.

Little did I know when I rented that room, that the steady pulse of the ocean would gift me a structure for this book and its chapters' various considerations of trauma, poetic inquiry, writing with the wound and belonging, all of which combine in the embodiment of what I term the poetry of belonging. The wholeness of nature, the consistency of its interchanging rhythms, the interconnectedness I felt and still feel with the Salish Sea, this is the embodiment of belonging I explore in this book, a belonging I connect implicitly and explicitly to healing with childhood trauma. This embodiment and how I came to awaken to a consciousness structured through embodiment is the story I'm going to share with you.

When I rented this room, I thought I came to isolate myself. Instead, I came to connect. And I am extremely grateful to the land and ocean on which I lived during these two months, that asked nothing of me and offered me so much. Land that is the traditional and the unceded territory of the Kwakwakw'akw, the 'Namgis, Mamalilikala, and the Kwakw'aka Nations.

While living on this land and shoreline in a tiny studio room, I fell in love with new smells and sounds of life breaking through my consciousness at unexpected moments. These breakthroughs were not altogether different than the breaking of my consciousness that I first experienced over a decade ago when I lived with flashbacks of childhood violence. The colours, sounds, tastes of experience – they are a language unto themselves and when we learn to listen and

quiet our conditioned expectations of meaning, new worlds and selves emerge. I feel strongly that these selves have more to teach us about trauma than any psychological theory can, because they signal our belonging to life itself. My story exists in sounds and smells and textures, in a deep intimacy with liminality. This intimacy of embodied presence and interconnection is the paradigm of healing I seek to share.

Introduction

I have been in love with Salish Sea since my late twenties. While I grew up in New England and took trips to the Atlantic Ocean, it was the wilds of the Salish Sea that broke straight through the protective numbing I'd worn over my psyche and heart since early childhood. There was something about the Salish Sea, the waters of the Pacific Ocean that curve up and flow into and around the northwest shores of the United States and Canada. When we met, my protective sheath crumbled almost instantly. Its waters spoke to me in a way I had not been spoken to before, taught me about myself and about my journey in this life. As I stood on the shore and watched the dance of those blue depths rising and washing back upon themselves with white capped waves – there is nothing that describes what happened to me other than the rapture that comes when we fall in love.

This relationship with the ocean has been the truest and most sustaining of my life. It would be a decade after that love at first sight meeting when I came to buy a small cabin in British Columbia, a ten-minute walk to the Salish Sea, and began to live between Toronto, where I teach at the University of Toronto, and close to the shores of the Salish Sea. We continue to have a steady rhythm of proximity and distance in our relationship, and I am reminded of this relationship now as I sit to write this Introduction in the room that I've rented on Malcolm Island. It is nighttime and outside my window, it

is pitch black. I stood there a few minutes ago before sitting at my small writing table. I saw only a dark void. No stars in the sky. No lights in the distance. Only darkness met my gaze. A seemingly infinite void. A void accompanied by the most soothing of soundscapes: waves of the Salish Sea washing gently up onto the shore and back out to sea.

As I looked out at that void, I could not see her there, the Ocean that returned me to myself, but I could hear her.³ There is something in this moment of staring out at infinite darkness, having no ability to see what is there but knowing it is there and knowing its presence and life force is vital to my own—this experience captures, for me, what it is to be a survivor of complex childhood trauma. I believe that we survivors are experts at seeing in the dark. We learn to understand the contours and textures of living in that realm. Those textures and contours speak a language that our society does not talk about, that many do not even know exists. As a result, we are systematically taught to forget that we understand this rich and implicit language. My love with the Salish Sea helped me to remember. It reminded me that I already knew how to speak this language - not with my mind, but with my body and my own spirit of survival. Throughout this book, I refer to this language as the language of the

³ Throughout this book, I often employ a female pronoun, here referring to the ocean, which relates to a feminist earth-based spirituality explored in Chapter 4. I also use a female pronoun when referring to a survivor in the third person. I use she/her, because this book is written within an auto-ethnographic praxis and this is the pronoun that aligns with my own healing embodiment. If you prefer they/their or he/him, I invite you to internally replace she/her with your pronoun of choice as you read.

wound. It is also, as I will show, an embodied poetry of phenomenological belonging.

While I appreciate all the work of trauma theorists and therapists, all the pairings of neuroscience with various types of recovery theories, even somatic, part of the reason I am writing this book is because as a survivor of extensive violence and complex childhood trauma, none of these professional and clinical realms served me very much. I tried so many of them. To this day, I have yet to meet someone educated by traditional trauma theory and in a position of clinical standing and power, be it a therapist, psychologist, or therapy-educator, who is fully capable of setting aside all the conditioning of that theory and able to sit with me a moment in the void of liminal darkness that some of us grow up befriending from before we are able to speak full sentences. I have met many survivors that will sit here with me. Many poets and artists and grass roots activists who are also survivors. But all the folks doing the well-intentioned work of our most dominant trauma paradigms in mainstream healing institutions, for me, failed repeatedly as they tried to insert me into their paradigms of wellness, recovery, and identity rather than just sitting with me for a moment and listening to the void. When we remember how to listen to this liminal realm

glimmering gold streaks through dissonant sounds of earth, survival, and becoming. A dance of flesh and spirit hum a tantalizing melody and non-linear truths surface on the goose bumps of knowing that rush across time and flesh.

Clinical trauma theory and paradigms failed me, I know now, because all the “experts” I worked with did not know there

was a language in that liminal realm to listen to let alone that this language could become the guiding path of embodied healing. They had not themselves remembered or ever known there was a rich, deeply embodied language of the wound that speaks through the void and whispers truths of love, presence, and belonging.

I now know, the well-meaning practitioners and teachers I encountered throughout my life never stood a chance at offering me authentic and embodied healing. For healing, I have come to understand for myself, is allowing this language of the wound to speak with me and through me such that I come to be a woman who is not ashamed of what I survived. Who is not ashamed that she herself is oceanic depths whose white caps rise, capable of destruction and of the gentlest of rhythms washing onto shore and back out to sea. It was not trauma theory or therapy that brought me safely here to the shores of my own psyche able to creatively access these oceanic depths that my childhood ties me to. It was and is the language of my wound, a poetry of belonging that taught me about my own watery and earth-borne entanglements of flesh and breath and, ultimately, love.⁴

A survivor-centred praxis of ocean-infused healing is what I wish to share with you in this book. I also want to mention right here at the beginning that as a cultural theorist, artist and feminist phenomenologist, my interdisciplinary approach invites the ocean as a valid co-inquirer into my

⁴ Throughout I refer to the language of the body, the language of the wound, the language of belonging – they are all entwined for me, and I center different aspects of them at different points in this book depending upon the chapter's focus.

considerations of embodiment, meaning making, story sharing and theory making. Working with my own embodiments and dialoguing with the ocean, I join other radical feminists and Mad Studies folks who write strongly against paradigms through which Western therapy and psychiatry evolved and maintain a reductionist view of our human experiences and journeys. The following definition of Mad Studies in the Introduction to *Mad Matters: A Critical Reader in Mad Studies* nicely summarizes a survivor-centred stance toward healing:

Mad Studies in this sense incorporates all that is critical of psychiatry from a radical socially progressive foundation in which the medical model is dispensed with as biologically reductionist whilst alternative forms of helping people experiencing mental anguish are based on humanitarian, holistic perspectives where people are not reduced to symptoms but understood within the social and economic context of the society in which they live.⁵

⁵ While this quote specifically describes a critique of psychiatry that I emphasize here at the beginning, my critique extends to psychotherapy models which, in my experience, also apply a strongly reductionist construct of identity and healing to praxes of healing. Brenda A. LeFrançois, Robert Menzies, and Geoffrey Reaume, eds. *Mad Matters: A Critical Reader in Canadian Mad Studies* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 2012), 2.

I add to the above survivor-centred framework by including spiritual and earth-based contexts in my holistic approach. I seek to bring an intersectional feminist stance of recognizing the ways social and economic contexts impact our identities and emotional, physical, spiritual, and mental wellness while also incorporating a lens of radical embodiment. Two feminist activist-writers-survivors that I am influenced and inspired by and with whom I dialogue often in this book because of how much their own work and writing incorporates embodiment are Latina Feminist writer and activist, Aurora Levins Morales and Chicana feminist activist, writer and poet, Gloria Anzaldúa.⁶

Given that traditional approaches to trauma altogether failed to orient me back to my own inherent embodied wisdom and sense of belonging, I yearn to produce a more holistic understanding of healing within a feminist phenomenology and cultural studies lens that is first and foremost survivor-centred and survivor-authored.⁷ It's also important to note that I do not write this book with an absolutist belief or politics that certain practices, be they psychotherapeutic or biomedical, are never productive or

⁶ Aurora Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories: Essays for Radicals. Revised and Expanded Edition* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2019); Gloria Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark = Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

⁷ For considerations of survivor-researcher work amidst the institutions of, for instance, psychiatry and academia see: Jasna Russo, "Towards Our Own Framework, Or Reclaiming Madness Part Two," in *Searching for a Rosegarden: Challenging Psychiatry, Fostering Mad Studies*, ed. Jasna Russo and Angela Sweeny, (United Kingdom: PCCS Books, 2016), 59–67.

cannot be integrated into holistic paradigms for adult survivors of complex childhood trauma. I believe strongly that when it comes to healing with extensive trauma, we survivors be allowed and encouraged to move through different stages, needs, and desires of what healing is for us, but this is the piece: what healing is *for us*. Not what a society and people in power and institutions rooted in colonial patriarchy that silences and stigmatizes survivors tell us healing is supposed to be.⁸ Moreover, how do we know about alternative and holistic approaches to healing and thriving if mainstream society continues to centre paradigms and narratives that are not survivor-centred?

For myself, I learned that I require a paradigm that goes into the roots of what I was taught about wellness, my body, and identity and transforms those roots from the inside out with earth and ocean and a wild sense of belonging that is often too messy to fit into the neat demarcations of patriarchal colonial rationality and/or the institutions based upon patriarchal, capitalist colonialism. I want a paradigm that not only lets my poetry bust open those neat demarcations of

⁸ Throughout this book, I often use this phrase “patriarchal-colonial” and other times, I extend it to emphasize other systems and ideologies of harm such as white supremacy, ableism, heteronormativity, etc.; however, my use of the phrase patriarchal-colonial always includes these other interlocking systems of power in the West, which is white, heteronormative, Christian, ableist, sanist, upper-class, male, sexist, etc., where these power structures also imply an identity that comes from and endeavors to create a family structure modeled after these marginalizing systems and markers of colonial-patriarchy. For the various ways these interlocking systems of power manifest in the West, see the collection of essays in bell hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

explicit theory-making and diagnosis but expects them to. For me, this expectation is built into a survivor-centred paradigm itself, because it knows that only poetry and other aesthetic mediums can come close to fully expressing the experiences of growing up in and surviving the type of embodied void I described above. In the tradition of autoethnography as a feminist-activist-research method of reclaiming, I use my own experiences as a survivor, researcher, theorist, educator, woman, and a facilitator of expressive arts groups as a dialogical entryway into traditional trauma scholarship and the on-going creation of new paradigms.⁹

It is important to note that by integrating my own autoethnographic narratives and aesthetic discourses as modes of inquiry into theory making within this book, my goal is not to interpret meaning for the reader or in any way to essentialize or even define the breadth of experiences that comprise complex childhood trauma and healing trajectories. I am a white cis-gender female. These privileges interact with a life of trauma, various abuses, familial addictions, a single mother working at times several jobs to feed us, a complicated relationship with disability, and many other experiences and identities that overlap with, reflect, and differ from the experiences of other survivors. My own embodied experiences weave in and out of theoretical, aesthetic, and liminal planes

⁹ For feminist autoethnography, see: Elizabeth Ettore, *Autoethnography as Feminist Method: Sensitizing the Feminist "I,"* (London: Routledge, 2017); Sandra Faulkner, "Crank Up the Feminism: Poetic Inquiry as Feminist Methodology," *Humanities* 7, no. 3 (2018): 85; Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, "You Don't Look Like a Baptist Minister: An Autoethnographic Retrieval of 'Women's Experience' as an Analytic Category for Feminist Theology," *Feminist Theology* 25, no. 2 (2017), 182–197.

of meaning making which will inevitably overlap with, align with, and diverge from readers' and survivors' embodied experiences. I view this divergence as productive and essential to survivor-centred paradigms which do not seek to control but explore healing within a supportive and flexible structure that assumes from the outset our similar and different experiences of identity in race, class, gender, sexuality, physical ability, mental health journeys, spirituality, family structure, ethnicity, intergenerational trauma, etc., will add to the kaleidoscopic and inherently creative and life affirming work that healing paradigms can become. It also recognizes the ways that institutions and meaning making systems historically and continuously marginalize and misrepresent the needs, desires, and rights of people of colour, trans folks, queer folks, folks with disabilities, neurodivergence, survivors of childhood violence, and so many other complex embodiments of identity.¹⁰

I am also so curious about how nature and liminality in general sings in and through all of our embodiments in these human lives. When I sit in a community poetic inquiry group with, primarily women, each diverse in identity and cultural background and we invoke our embodiments of liminality through poetic inquiry, I feel into an almost ancient texture of connectivity. Something emerges that is greater than us but also part of us. I felt this presence of belonging when I first met the Salish Sea. Throughout this book, I will return again and again to the ocean, to the vast body of the Salish Sea that sits before me now in evening's darkness. In

¹⁰ Taiwo Afuape, *Power, Resistance and Liberation in Therapy with Survivors of Trauma: To Have Our Hearts Broken* (New York: Routledge: 2011).

dialoguing with the ocean and allowing its relationship with me to be languaged into this book's praxis, the ocean allows me to model a phenomenology of healing that for me, trauma theory has yet to come close to replicating in its theoretical constructs and reductions of identity.¹¹ Reductions which obscure altogether the regenerative power that I believe we survivors of extensive childhood trauma store within ourselves, waiting to be acknowledged and languaged into embodied awareness of interconnectivity and belonging.

Who this Book Is For

This book is a type of dance between theoretical and poetic prose woven through with verse and occasional images. This dance aims to replicate the type of healing paradigm I advocate for: one capable of considering childhood violence and trauma as something that happens to us but does not define us. I focus particularly on adults healing with complex childhood woundings; however, this book is relevant to all types of survivors of all types of trauma on all types of healing journeys. At its core, this book is about feminist phenomenology and embodiment offering a creative and innovative praxis for healing. I use my own critical and autoethnographic perspectives and language of the wound to show this. This book is relevant to anyone interested in re-envisioning trauma and healing paradigms— survivors, loved ones of survivors, therapists, teachers, feminist researchers and

¹¹ Throughout this book, I use the verb languaging to express my conceptualization of bringing my embodied experiences into language.

readers, art-makers, activists, autoethnographers, and to anyone interested in considering holistic approaches to meaning making.

If you are not used to reading “academic” or theoretical books, that is ok! This Introduction and the first chapter are by far the most “academic,” because their job is to establish my framework for radically changing trauma paradigms. I have written this book for both survivors and for those working in educational and healing institutions with the responsibility and power of setting formal parameters for cultural paradigms. Certain sections will speak differently to different readers. As I say below, the second part of this book moves more freely through poetry and the language of earth, ocean, salt, and dream, though poetry is present in every part. Please read at your own pace and if you want to skip ahead to different parts, please do so. As I often tell my students, theory and even academia are not supposed to be inaccessible and I never want to alienate a reader with the use of academic language. Theory can be an artform just as poetry is (though, perhaps it is an acquired taste!). I am passionate about creating fluid movement between institutions of learning such as universities and other forms of education be it social media or the books we read. I have done my best to invite all survivors and readers into the waters of this book and of myself.

Trauma: A Wound that Speaks

Gabor Maté, Canadian-Hungarian medical doctor and trailblazer in compassionate approaches to adults healing childhood trauma, emphasizes that trauma is not what is done

to us, but is a wounding in our relationship to ourselves.¹² He takes this definition of trauma from the Greek root of the word, *τράυμα*, which translates quite literally as a “wound.” In Maté’s approach, this wounding is not the traumatizing event/s of childhood we survive but the impact those events have on our sense of self as our experience of selfhood shifts and morphs throughout our life.¹³ I agree with this perspective, and I greatly appreciate Maté’s work. I also believe that we must follow the wound further than Maté asks us to by learning to listen to what our wounds want to say to us in the languages with which they want to speak, which for myself, despite being a scholar-theorist-academic, has rarely been explicit or theoretical language.

That our wounds speak with a resonance beyond the explicit and categorical structures of meaning that dominate Western society is a piece that is missing from so much trauma theory and it is the focus of this entire book. As a result of this language of the wound, I argue that we need non-explicit methods of meaning making, like poetic inquiry, the topic of Chapter 2, to support survivors coming into the process of languaging ourselves and the stories of our bodies, wounds and healing trajectories. Through my work in feminist phenomenology, I bring embodiment into a transformative praxis to come into new ways of conceptualizing trauma theory. Embodiment as a mode of

¹² Gabor Maté, *When the Body Says No: The Cost of Hidden Stress* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2021).

¹³ Gabor Maté, “Trauma is Not What Happens to You, It’s What Happens Inside You,” YouTube, accessed 4 December 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nmJOUtAk09g&ab_channel=Skoll.org

meaning making is the piece missing from most traditional trauma work. This is why I bring feminist phenomenology and cultural theory into my living praxis. They are disciplines that open me more fully to other ways of knowing rooted in the body and in relational ways of being. Rarely do traditional paradigms of meaning making consider that there are other ways of making meaning than the explicit realms inherited from traditional epistemology, which is rooted in patriarchal and colonial worldviews.¹⁴

This centring of the explicit in Western culture's considerations of trauma is to be expected. These views of trauma emerge from psychiatry, an institution of meaning making and control rooted in the conglomeration of patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism.¹⁵ Traditional practitioners, be they psychiatrists or psychotherapists, even those like the renowned trauma therapist, Bessel van der Kolk, who does centre the body as a living object in which trauma resides, have most often not fully considered and/or deconstructed the roots of their own meaning making constructs and the socially situated interpretive frameworks the body-survivor is positioned within.¹⁶ By this I mean that practitioners doing seemingly progressive work will inevitably be reoriented toward the colonial and patriarchal roots of the praxes they are situated within unless they consciously and continuously interrupt those colonial and patriarchal praxes

¹⁴ Helen A. Fielding, "A Feminist Phenomenology Manifesto" in *Feminist Phenomenology Futures*, ed. Helen A. Fielding, and Dorothea E. Olkowski, (Indiana University Press, 2017), 11–27.

¹⁵ LeFrançois, Menzies, and Reaume, *Mad Matters*, 2.

¹⁶ Bessel van der Kolk. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2015).

and ideologies of harm. My position is that especially in the field of trauma work and deep emotional healing, such interruption requires not only cognitive intervention but learning, for oneself, to speak a language of embodiment. When doing this, we work from *within* the body rather than using intellectual constructs about the body. Thomas Csordas' comment on embodiment is helpful here. He writes, "Much as Roland Barthes (1986) draws a distinction between the work and the text, a distinction can be drawn between the body and embodiment."¹⁷ In embodiment, we enter the body and its implicit and affective ways of making meaning. We do not seek to objectify it or talk about the body. This book is as much about embodiment and meaning making as it is about healing trauma.

British author, Jeannette Winterson writes in her novel the *Powerbook*:

Break the Narrative. Refuse all the stories that have been told so far (because that is what momentum really is) and try to tell the story differently– in a differently style, with different weights– and allow some air to those elements choked with centuries of use and give some substance to the floating world.¹⁸

¹⁷ Thomas J. Csordas, "Somatic Modes of Attention." *Cultural Anthropology* 8, no. 2 (1993): 135.

¹⁸ Jeannette Winterson, *The PowerBook* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), 53.

Through Western culture's reliance on the explicit, those of us that go through traditional school systems have most often been taught not to allow our ourselves to speak through the implicit, affective and creative expressions of selfhood that, in my experience, are the languaged domain of trauma. We have been taught to impose constructs of linear and categorical meaning making onto ways of knowing that are not meant to fit within the confines of the categorical, the predetermined or the reductionist visions of identity. Now on the one hand, we need explicit language to write policy and secure statistics that shape legislation to protect vulnerable populations and work toward ending cycles of violence. We need it for survivors desiring to speak in such terms about their experiences. We also need to join Jeanette Winterson and break the narrative – in therapeutic and self-inquiry healing practices but also in community and cultural education practices. We need to refuse the stories we survivors have been inserted into but may not feel to be authentically ours.

Dominant meaning making praxes need to expand by considering embodied ways of knowing that can make languaged contact with the parts of ourselves that yearn to speak through implicit, aesthetic, and earth-based knowledge. From a feminist phenomenological perspective, these are the realms that embodiment takes us directly into. This is why I find feminist phenomenology a natural and necessary part of developing survivor-centred praxes. I will take some time here in the Introduction to present a framework of feminist phenomenology as the praxis I use for embodiment, because it grounds my approach throughout the entirety of what follows. First, however, I present the piece of feminist trauma

theory that is the foundation to my approach to reframing how I think about trauma and healing, the deficiency praxis. The deficiency praxis connects directly to why I believe Western trauma theory requires more survivor-centred and survivor-led nurturing paradigms to guide us toward leading joyful lives in which we thrive.

The Deficiency Praxis

Canadian psychotherapist, activist and educator, Bonnie Burstow, who was a trailblazing leader in feminist trauma theory and the anti-psychiatry movement and who has influenced my own work very much, argued that a predominance of institutional and clinical trauma work and intervention in Western culture operates from a “praxis of deficiency.”¹⁹ Simply put, she considers the standard praxis as deficient, because it views and measures survivors against an ideal of “normal” that by its very nature is rooted in experiences of identity and cognitive-emotional developmental patterns that have little relationship to the realities of surviving violence that intersects various social locations and inequities.²⁰ From this perspective, survivors are viewed from the outset as needing to aspire to some other way of being, often through a process of “fixing” or a “cure” model

¹⁹ Bonnie Burstow, “Toward a Radical Understanding of Trauma and Trauma Work,” *Women Against Violence* 9, no. 11 (2013): 1293.

²⁰ Bonnie Burstow, *Psychiatry and the Business of Madness: An Ethical and Epistemological Accounting* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

that requires us to surrender ourselves to the experts (doctors, therapists, etc.) in positions of power.

It is important to note that this deficiency praxis can be overt, but it can also be subtle and disguised by seemingly progressive and/or inclusive rhetoric. I have even experienced “trauma informed” programs and workshops that were entirely based within a deficiency praxis. This is because the core of a deficiency praxis is what bell hooks describes as the interlocking systems of power that dominate Western culture in its values, practices and institutionally organized social structures: colonialism-imperialism-capitalism-white supremacy-patriarchy.²¹ These ideologies have formed the core of meaning making structures in Western institutions of education – psychiatry being the system directly responsible for initiating a deficiency praxis into trauma theory that impacts diverse experiences of adults healing with childhood trauma. The deficiency praxis sneaks into all sorts of academic disciplines and cultural representations of mental illness and trauma in the media, especially as many scholars, including feminist, draw from psychiatry without considering how its constructs are deeply problematic.²² Most troubling for Burstow, is that often the experts doing the “fixing” or writing the theories of recovery have not had first-hand experience of surviving more extensive violence such as sexual violence/incest, war, poverty, extremely abusive childhoods,

²¹ hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking*.

²² For my discussion of this application of the deficiency praxis in various cultural settings see: Iris Gildea, “Autoethnographic Aesthetics as Feminist Arts-Based Trauma Work,” *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 11, no. 1–2 (2022): 6–31.

etc. Accordingly, Burstow calls into question any established paradigm of healing that projects so-called expertise onto survivors without first-hand lived experience, thus calling into question much of psychiatry and its diagnostic systems. She also calls into question so-called progressive practitioners that seek to change the system from within while still using a system's definitions and worldviews which stem from an institutionalized deficiency praxis.²³ Truly radical praxes require new paradigms, which I align with survivor-centred paradigms.

The first time I read Burstow's work, especially her position that survivors of sexual violence have more realistic understanding of the world than the so-called experts seeking to "fix" survivors without having ever lived through our experiences,²⁴ I felt a sense of solidarity I had never encountered in academia or trauma theory. In this respect, everything I write in this book moves forward from Burstow's call for a survivor-centered praxis rather than the dominant praxes of deficiency. I work to show, from my intimate first-hand knowledge of being a survivor of extensive sexual violence, and from my mixed methods scholarly research and community practices, why any positioning of the survivor as deficient, be that positioning conscious or unconscious, is a great disservice to survivors seeking to heal so that we may lead more fully integrated and joyful lives.

²³ Burstow, "Toward a Radical Understanding," 1298–1299.

²⁴ Ibid.

Feminist Phenomenology & Embodiment

Tisawii'ashii Manning writes from her Indigenous feminist phenomenology, "Intellection is thereby a second-order operation that is dependent on embodied knowledge as a prerequisite to cognition."²⁵ The body is always speaking. We simply live in a culture that does not teach us how to listen to it. Feminist phenomenologist, Helen Fielding, writes of embodiment:

What is by now a well-known phrase, Simone de Beauvoir asserts that the body is not a thing but a situation. A body that is a situation and is not a 'thing' that changes. So if the body is precisely the situation in which we grasp the world and set the process of discovery in motion, the situated woman is 'embodied, intersubjective, shaped by history, culture, and society,' and, importantly, actively engaged with the world. Thus, the situated, embodied woman's temporalization is intrinsic to her

²⁵ Dolleen Tiswii'ashii Manning, "The Murmuration of Birds: An Anishinaabe Ontology of Mnidoo-Worlding" in *Feminist Phenomenology Futures*, ed. Helen A. Fielding and Dorothea E. Olkowshi (Indiana: Indiana University Press) 207.

being, which is not that of an unchanging thing.²⁶

Acknowledging that our bodies are not static things but living, interrelated and evolving engagements of discovery shows why it is not enough to discuss embodiment through a theoretical lens relying on categorical and explicit prose that statically objectify the body, as is often the case in academic research and, more to the point, trauma theory. This is why I will show there is a need, especially when discussing a feminist phenomenology of healing and trauma, for a language of the wound to guide our reflexive practices of meaning making. I turn to poetic inquiry to provide a structure for such a languaging act, the topic of Chapter 2.

Beyond the scope of inviting non-explicit language to story embodiment, I also hold to a feminist phenomenological position that through embodiment we extend beyond human-centric views which can integrate into our healing praxes and integrative self-concepts. Writer and independent scholar Karin Amimoto Ingersoll brings in watery ways of knowing to explore feminist and decolonizing methods of meaning making in her Hawaiian context. She writes, “This [Ocean-based] work aims to bring the physical movements of he‘e nalu, ho‘okele, and lawai‘a, back into an ontological perspective that speaks to an ethical experience of movement through the world and life.”²⁷ The implications of these feminist phenomenological approaches for inquiry into

²⁶ Fielding, “A Feminist Phenomenology,” 4.

²⁷ Karin Amimoto Ingersoll, *Waves of Knowing: A Seascape Epistemology*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 3.

embodied being and meaning has many implications for trauma theory. As Aurora Levins Morales questions:

But what if we rolled back the
diagnoses and opened the floor?
What if each body could speak in its
fullest voice and be heard?
Every form of social injustice
demands that we silence our
bodies.²⁸

Indeed, when we invite embodiment to speak, which is not a simple task given the internalized and normalized silencing practices of the interlocking systems of domination of patriarchy, colonialism, white supremacy, ableism, sanism, homophobia, transphobia, etc., we may discover new survivor-centred paradigms of meaning making that shift how we individually and collectively view living with our traumas.

My work with phenomenology and trauma theory always moves from this feminist consideration of identity and the body as positioned within a web of complex social locations. As intersectional Black feminists, Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins have clearly shown, no single axis of social identities exists. Hill Collins writes,

The term intersectionality references the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive

²⁸ Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories*, 49.

entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities.²⁹

When it comes to feminist phenomenology, the reality of our social locations, most often described and contextualized in explicit language that objectively presents socially constructed identities, merges with our experiences of what feminist phenomenologist Astrida Neimanis articulates as, bodies of water. As bodies of water, identity cannot necessarily be contained within the constructs of theoretical language and thought. Neimanis writes in her phenomenology of water:

To rethink embodiment as watery stirs up considerable trouble for dominant Western and humanist understandings of embodiment, where bodies are figured as discrete and coherent individual subjects, and as fundamentally autonomous. Evidence of this dominant paradigm underpins many if not all of our social, political, economic, and legal frameworks in the Western world. Despite small glimmers of innovation,

²⁹ Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “Unmasking Colorblindness in the Law: Lessons from the Formation of Critical Race Theory,” in *Seeing Race Again*, ed. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 52–84; Patricia Hill Collins, “Intersectionality’s Definitional Dilemmas,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 41, no. 1 (2015): 1–20; see also Savneet Talwar, “Beyond Multiculturalism and Cultural Competence,” in *Art Therapy for Social Justice: Radical Intersections*, Savneet Talwar ed. (New York: Routledge, 2019), 6.

regimes of human rights, citizenship, and property for the most part all depend upon individualized, stable, and sovereign bodies – those ‘Enlightenment figures of coherent and masterful subjectivity’... as both a norm and a goal. But as bodies of water we leak and seethe, our borders always vulnerable to rupture and renegotiation.³⁰

Like the watery parts of my body and psyche that “leak and seethe,” my embodied awareness shifts its tones and textures with each inhale and exhale. When it comes to expressing this sense of self in the context of healing complex childhood trauma, I seek a language capable of pouring my inner world, my inner sanctuaries and my inner hells, onto the page in a survivor-centred praxis that embraces a reality of interrelational being and resists all structures and frameworks of a deficiency praxis.

Csordas writes, “Embodiment as a paradigm or methodological orientation requires that the body be understood as the existential ground of culture – not as an object that is ‘good to think,’ but as a subject that is ‘necessary to be.’”³¹ Or as phenomenologist-psychotherapist Aaron Mishara expresses, “the subjectively experienced body is very different than considering, theorizing or treating the body as a

³⁰ Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), Introduction.

³¹ Thomas Csordas, *Body, Meaning, Healing* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 2.

thing or material object.”³² Refraining from objectifying the body requires a language of the body. Such a language takes us into implicit and liminal realms which do not necessarily align themselves with the constructs of theoretical language. When I speak with my body, I enter a domain of communication and consciousness where wind speaks with breath and the blood flowing through my veins makes contact with the tides of the ocean washing onto the shores of my psyche.

From this perspective, considering trauma through a feminist and phenomenological lens creates an altogether new orientation for healing. Feilding writes, “This means we account for human existence in and through the social sphere with an understanding of agency as the spontaneous capacity to begin, to set in motion what is unpredictable in its outcome with effects we cannot anticipate in advance.”³³ Imagine if every survivor of complex childhood trauma were taught of this ‘spontaneous capacity to begin.’ It reminds me of my favorite line from Canadian poet, Anne Carson, “To be running breathlessly but not yet arrived is itself delightful, a suspended moment of living hope.”³⁴

This capacity to begin is not naïve repression of what was, but embodied acceptance of what is. Allowing such acceptance requires an integration of mind and body to reclaim embodied ways of knowing. I do not think offering

³² Aaron Mishara, “Narrative and Psychotherapy: The Phenomenology of Healing,” *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 49, no. 2 (1995): 184.

³³ Fielding, “A Feminist Phenomenology,” 7.

³⁴ Ann Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), xi.

survivors such an emancipatory framework can happen so long as our trauma theory remains encased by language and orientation determined by the explicitly reductive categorical thinking of cognitively-driven meaning making which is also patriarchal and colonial.³⁵ Simply put, the explicit is not the domain of embodiment or of trauma. Trauma lives in the body, just like consciousness does.³⁶ I have learned that to access both, I must enter the rhythms of my own leaking and seething parts. Here, the second part of Fielding’s quote cited above is important as well. She acknowledges that in embracing this orientation of healing and meaning making, we “set in motion what is unpredictable in its outcome with effects we cannot anticipate in advance.”³⁷

When I read this last sentence just now as I wrote it, I exhaled a sigh of relief and said out loud, “thank god.” While I understand that folks entirely conditioned by ideas of cognitive determinism and the sense of control it offers may find this unpredictability frightening, for me in my survivor-centred praxis, it is so incredibly liberating. It means my body and emotions are free to flow in their own rhythms. It means that if there is no projected outcome of what healing or identity looks like from the start, then I am simply Iris always becoming herself more authentically from one moment to the next.

³⁵ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Edna Maniwabi, “Theorizing Resurgence from Within Nishnaabeg Thought,” in *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies*, ed. J. Doerfler, N.J. Sinclair, and H.K. Stark (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2013), 279–93.

³⁶ Tiswii’ashii Manning, *The Murmuration of Birds*, 203.

³⁷ Fielding, “A Feminist Phenomenology,” 7.

Gloria Anzaldúa perfectly articulates this type of embodied path with her own Latina feminism, and I would add, phenomenological and poetical orientation. She writes,

For me, writing is a gesture of the body, a gesture of creativity, a working from the inside out. My feminism is grounded not on incorporeal abstraction but on corporeal realities. The material body is center, and central. The body is the ground of thought. The body is a text. Writing is not about being in your head; it's about being in your body.³⁸

To come to know and identify my trauma from within my own embodiments includes my belonging to nature and the ecosystems I am a part of as a leaking and seething body. It includes how my leaking and seething body bleeds every month as a mark of my own experience of womanhood harmonizing with these tides pulled by the moon and washing up on these shores of Malcom Island. My own material body becomes an integrated part of consciousness. But my material body does not “think” like my mind thinks. Accordingly, my view of trauma is going to be different than that defined by a speculative tradition that is part of a broader patriarchal and colonial matrix and tradition of cultural silencing. In this book and in my own work and self-concepting, I use the words “trauma” and “wound,” but I do not orientate myself or my theory-making to the colonial,

³⁸ Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark*, 5.

patriarchal and/or ableist paradigms that dominate mainstream culture's established uses of these words. I centre my body and its own ways of speaking because my body speaks

with earth and grit and sweat

and the smell of roses

blooming in my psyche.

Reclaiming this language every day *is* me reclaiming my spontaneous capacity to begin. Throughout this book, this active intention and creative spirit of reclaiming is structured into my use of words tied to traditional trauma theory. Below in this Introduction, I therefore redefine key words to clarify how my use of them aligns with the survivor-centred praxis I seek to create.

Working with the senses and enfleshment, a primary tenet of feminist phenomenology is that consciousness exists in the body *and* the mind, not in the mind alone. Csordas articulates embodiment as “an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and the mode of presence and engagement in the world.”³⁹ As mentioned above, working with embodiment as such, in an intersectional feminist phenomenology, always includes the social and political realities and structures that influence our identities and embodied experiences. As Csordas suggests, this “paradigm of embodiment means not that cultures have the same structure as bodily experience, but that embodied

³⁹ Csordas, *Body, Meaning, Healing*, 242.

experience is the starting point for analyzing human participation in a cultural world.”⁴⁰ Race intersects gender intersects age, religion, ethnicity, ability, family structure, class, sexuality and *all* of these social locations impact and speak through our individual yet interrelated embodiments.

From this perspective, embodiment is not a state of being that resists rational and speculative insight. It is a way of being and perceiving from within the body that is integrated into structures of meaning making, including the rational and speculative. As a starting point and orientation, especially when considering trauma, embodiment as I am working with it does not suggest a competition between mind or body but a bridge to integrated presence. Disability activist and poet Eli Clare’s description of their own articulation of the relationship between body and mind is helpful here. They write:

I followed the lead of many communities and spiritual traditions that recognize the body and mind not as two entities but as one, resisting the dualism built into white Western culture. Some use the word bodymind or mindbody; others choose body/mind or body-ad-mind. I settled on body-mind in order to recognize both the inextricable relationships between our bodies and our minds and the ways in which the ideology of cure operates as if the two are distinct – the mind superior to the body,

⁴⁰ Ibid.

the mind defining personhood, the mind separating humans from nonhumans.⁴¹

My own languaged response to resisting the dualism Clare describes is to use body-psyche throughout this book. I use psyche rather than mind, because while the psyche includes the mind, it also refers to the implicit and liminal realms that exist in the body-mind connection. As expressive arts therapist Steven Levine shows with his work on the psyche, it also potentially transcends both given the word translates as soul and mind.⁴²

Feminist phenomenologist Dorothea E. Olkowski nicely expresses this axiom of a connection between mind and body when she writes:

The connection is existential, meaning lived; no thematization is necessary to bring the body to the mind if it is already a contingent point of view from which it is impossible to withdraw. From this point of view, the body is not an object; the body is the translucent matter of consciousness, a revelation for consciousness, a condition of consciousness, suffered as pleasure and pain, love and hate.

⁴¹ Eli Claire, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017) xvi.

⁴² Steven Levine, *Poiesis: The Language of Psychology and the Speech of the Soul* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1997) xvii.

What need is there to bring this body to consciousness? ⁴³

By reclaiming our intuited embodiments that Olkowski considers “revelations for consciousness” and learning to interact with them, we can enter a type of dialectical dance between embodied presence and cognitive reflection, a dance I will model in the second part of this book. Most importantly however, we come into the truth that the body is not an object. It is already conscious. Already conscious, I seek to show how it is also already speaking. It is speaking of deep healing wisdom and knowing that traditional trauma theory and the traditional research models that theory is situated within has silenced. As such, practitioners and researchers educated within traditional trauma theory may not even know the embodied wisdom I am talking about exists. They have been taught to exile their own embodied wisdom from their mind’s conscious understanding of what knowledge is.

When I allowed my body to speak with me, everything changed, almost all at once. I began to story myself into a different kind of existence and life purpose, one that rejects traditional recovery and curative models. I reject them, first and foremost, because they do not align to my body-psyche, identity, or to my experience of survival. Recovery implies there was a state of being before my trauma that I am trying to get back to. Burstow shows this concept of getting back to a

⁴³ Dorothea Olkowski, “Using Our Intuition: Creating the Future Phenomenological Plane of Thought” in *Feminist Phenomenology Futures*, ed. Helen A. Fielding, and Dorothea E. Olkowski, (Indiana University Press, 2017), 12.

previous mental state before the awareness opened by violence or loss is highly problematic in general trauma theories for adult experiences of sexual violence.⁴⁴ For those born into intergenerational bloodlines of violence, addiction, poverty, sexism, etc., or for those who grow up in experiences of violence entwined with lessons of love, this established language and model of recovery is simply irrational.

Let me step away from this theoretical rendering of the feminist and phenomenological praxis of this book and say, I know that making this return route into embodiment when it involves traveling through and with complex childhood wounding is not an easy journey. It is a journey that deserves the deepest respect. Respect for those of us that make the journey, with however many starts and stops and back steps and side steps this non-linear path involves. Respect also for those that witness us as caregivers, lovers, friends, family, and teachers. I will show with my own autoethnographic journey of side steps and back steps and giant leaps forward that by learning to be at home in my own embodiments, expressing them and transforming them through the creative act that is poetic inquiry, I learned to feel how my own embodied rhythms are routes into awareness of connection with the world at large and the ecosystems that I am always a part of. I learned that I can cultivate an embodied sense of presence that carries with it strength, beauty and belonging amidst the reality of all the violence that I have survived in my life and the ongoing violences in our diverse and global communities. Healing for me is about reclaiming embodied access to these rhythms. In my experience, once the embodied reality is

⁴⁴ Burstow, "Toward a Radical Understanding," 1293.

reclaimed, the mind realigns itself into an integrative praxis all on its own. Indeed, often when I hear folks talk of cognitive dissonance, which is becoming a very popular term these days, I wonder what would happen if the body and its desire to speak was brought into the mental conversation causing so much dissonance. I suspect that if the body is brought in, the cognitive dissonance might not be...so dissonant. Perhaps that dissonance exists, because the body is already speaking and we have forgotten how to listen and consider its conscious point of view.

Of course, when we are talking about journeying with our oceanic depths of embodiment, there is also fear. Without a doubt, much like the ocean, there is great power present when we enter our own depths. We must do so with the proper tools that build supportive structures and boundaries. Poetic inquiry is one such tool for healing and transformative intervention. This practice of poetry-making that I invoke is not an intellectual, academic and/or a commercial understanding of poetry. It is a practice seeking to cultivate a poetic consciousness able to see life and nature in the reflection, imagery, and interconnection of our own embodiments we give expression to. Much like the waves washing onto shore as I write, still washing as you read, and once I am no longer on these lands or even alive in this body, life is not static and trauma is always part of life. To say this is not to excuse or allow the violence that some of us come into this world knowing more intimately than others could ever imagine. It is to suggest that we need to adapt paradigms that shift the ways we are taught to see ourselves and our wounds so that we can embrace our lives entirely without shame

and/or fear, honouring the children we were and the sense of self we are always cultivating throughout adulthood. Such an approach asks what would happen if we allowed ourselves to look at trauma differently. What if we approached trauma through the steady waves of the ocean that allow us to, when we quiet our mind's thoughts, hear these waves echoed in the steady rise and fall of our own breath, regardless of how near or far we are from the water? What if I need the presence of earth and aesthetic interventions to adequately talk about and represent my trauma and my life? What if without these other ways of knowing I am further marginalizing and further traumatizing myself by forcing myself to adapt to a way of meaning making that is simply not aligned with the deepest spectrums of pain that my experience of being a woman involves?

Corporeal feminists working in Newfoundland, Sonjay Boon, Lesely Butler and Daze Jefferies, write of the ocean in their co-authored book, *Autoethnography and Feminist Theory At the Water's Edge*:

Within our current political order, the fluid cannot be theorized; it remains outside of structures of knowledge. The fluid is feminine, the unruly, the disruptive. Alternately emancipatory and liberatory, or abject and polluting, the fluid is that which resists and refuses normative structures, that which cannot be defined...All of this thinking relies on boundary breaking, of moving beyond the presumptively fixed

borders of the self-contained, rational Cartesian self towards something altogether different. No longer discrete, self-contained, rationally-organized entities, the bodies of feminist theorists are porous. They leak. They seep. They expel. This is theory that reimagines social relations through touch, on porosity, on connection.⁴⁵

Boone, Butler, and Jefferies align the fluidity of embodiment with feminist theory as an active reclaiming of feminine ways of knowing from the patriarchal and Cartesian methods that dominate Western society. I apply this integration of water, embodiment and language as reclaiming to wound tending and trauma work, especially when healing involves reclaiming the deepest parts of oneself that society and personal experiences have silenced.

I know when these parts of myself speak they do, as the authors above write of water, break boundaries and reject artificial borders. I have found that for me to thrive in this life, I must be willing to break artificial and inauthentic borders. These are the very boundaries my body-psyche was shaped within, those created by perpetrators and by the white-hetero-patriarchal-colonial-Christian-ableist-classist paradigms of meaning making my child and adult self were shaped within. They also come from within myself. From the ways I

⁴⁵ Sonjay Boon, Lesely Butler and Daze Jefferies, *Autoethnography and Feminist Theory at the Water's Edge Unsettled Islands* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018) 62.

appropriated boundaries and rules that, while I may have never agreed with, I did not know I had a right to refuse.

But then my wound began to speak.

Then the water of my being began to rise and wash itself upon the pages of my life.

Then I gave up the trauma books and eventually therapy.

Then I became the artist-survivor-theorist that I am today.

It is she

a woman

who has finally allowed herself

to start breaking those artificial rules

and boundaries

put upon her by

people and systems

of meaning making

that do not

make space

for survivors of childhood sexual violence & incest

to speak

scream

cry

dream

rest

and laugh.

Defining Terms

Before proceeding I want to address how I will work with certain terms throughout this book. Words such as “trauma” and “healing” appear often and when I use them, I am using them within, firstly, a survivor-centred praxis that seeks to extract itself altogether from a deficiency praxis. The difficulty is that the deficiency praxis is so normalized into our cultural fabrics of meaning making that when it comes to trauma and mental health, these words sometimes have connotations attached to them that I do not intend.

Accordingly, here I give brief definitions/descriptions of some of the keywords that will occur throughout this book.

Trauma⁴⁶

I define trauma as a wound whose centre and edges ebb and flow into, out of, and through my sense of self, my sense of belonging, my sense of identity, and my ability to trust my emotions, my body, my intellect, my spirituality, and my intuition. I also use the word trauma to refer to a wound of the body-psyche related to but not equated with the violences we survive that marginalizing societal systems may continue to aggravate and impact.

Wound

The Oxford Dictionary defines a wound: “an injury to living tissue caused by a cut, blow, or other impact, typically one in which the skin is cut or broken.”⁴⁷ I agree with this definition and add that the living tissues of my body entwine and intersect with the living tissues of my emotions which seep

⁴⁶ I use the words *trauma* and *wound* because, in the ways I define them here, they align with my ongoing healing (also as it is defined here). I also have encountered survivors and clients and friends who do not like the words *trauma* or *wound*. I fully understand this. Some of us come into having these words forced upon us by people in power in ways that do not support us and others simply do not align with these words. If you are reading this book and you strongly dislike/do not resonate with the word *trauma* or *wound*, firstly, I do ask that you consider my own re-languaging of these words which is what the first chapter seeks to do and secondly, that you replace them with another word you prefer.

⁴⁷ “Wound,” Oxford Dictionary, accessed 5 December 2023, [https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803124922348#:~:text=\(woond\),in%20A%20Dictionary%20of%20Nursing%20%20C%20BB](https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803124922348#:~:text=(woond),in%20A%20Dictionary%20of%20Nursing%20%20C%20BB).

through my thoughts and dreams and entwine with the spiritual tissues of embodied and interconnected life. I also specify that the cut, blow or other impact that pierces, cuts, or breaks can come from humans, myself, ideologies, intergenerational trauma, and cultural practices and narratives that in one way or another impact my living tissues.

Violence

When I use the word violence, I apply Tibetan Buddhist teacher and author Rod Owens' approach from his book, *Love and Rage: Liberation Through Anger*, by signalling that violence occurs as physical, emotional, psychological, sexual, cultural, and/or spiritual violence.⁴⁸ I would add ecological violence as another lens to weave into the complex matrix of violences that humans create. Sometimes I will specify one type such as sexual violence; however, when I use the word violence generally it can apply to any or all of these spheres and does not just denote physical violence.

Recovery

I rarely use the word recovery. This word has never resonated with my own survivor- centred praxis regarding childhood violence and healing. Its use almost always leads back to a deficiency praxis which survivors are taught to unconsciously internalize.

⁴⁸ Rod Owens, *Love and Rage: Liberation Through Anger*, (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2020).

Healing

Healing is the process of becoming aware in my body-psyche that my humanness and my womanhood, my scars of survival and my openings to grace are embodied and that embodiment shifts its tones and textures, its tastes and smells with each inhale and exhale as my state of selfhood emerges and re-emerges within relational being. For me healing is always embodied and phenomenological. Phenomenological healing looks like:

A beautiful black hole at the centre of my embodied memory that birthed itself in the image of a nest in my body-psyche. A Nest of safety that I longed for but never found until just a few days ago, walking down the street on my way to work, there was a nest in the middle of the sidewalk and looking around to make sure no birds would mind if I took it home, I now have a nest sitting on my desk and I put words written on bits of paper into it, words that represent the type of nest I always longed to have and just as that black hole has receded and de-centred itself so does my definition of healing (like trauma), ebb and flow in these waters that are the

language of my body co-creating meaning with the ecosystems

I am a part of.

How I Proceed

I separate this work into two parts. Each part contains two chapters. Part I builds a theoretical foundation from which to engage with traditional trauma theory through survivor-centred praxes and poetic inquiry. The first chapter deals entirely with reframing trauma. Here I integrate the work of contemporary scholars and poets to suggest why and how traditional trauma frameworks centered around a praxis of deficiency are not only a disservice to survivors but part of a colonial and patriarchal paradigm and lineage that must change if we want cycles of violence and cultural silencing to end. The second chapter is on poetic inquiry as a practice for exploring the language of the wound. I present the research methods of poetic inquiry that have most influenced my own approach and I discuss this practice through a feminist and phenomenological lens for healing.

The second part of this book is based more strongly in narrative, poetic-inquiry, and critical autoethnography. I demonstrate through my own poetic inquiry practices the type of embodied trauma praxis I advocate for in Part I. The third chapter deals more experientially with the shifting tides of a poetic consciousness. The fourth and final chapter explores belonging through what I consider a phenomenological bridge between the psychopoetic and the

psychospiritual realms. After the conclusion, I provide an appendix which has guidelines and prompts for poetic inquiry practices, be it for one's own practice or for working with a group in a more formal community and/or teaching practice.

There is an intentionally progressive structure to this book. The second chapter builds in relationship to the survivor-centred trauma praxis put forth in the first chapter. The second part builds onto this theoretical ground laid out in the first part. That said, I advocate for non-linear meaning making and you do not need to read the chapters in their listed order. Depending upon who you are and why you are reading this book, you may want to jump to the second part first. Then if you are curious, read more of the theory-making in trauma studies and poetic inquiry. If you are more interested in my oceanic depths, they write themselves more in the second part of this book. In the spirit of non-linearity and survivor-centred agency, it is your choice as to how you proceed.

To close this introduction, I return to the ocean, with which I began. The Salish Sea is my co-inquirer and as you will see throughout each chapter, part of the ocean's consistency is the changing nature of its form. Such gentle sounds of water rolling across the surface of itself can so suddenly rise upward into mighty crashing waves. I try my best not to fear these shifts and turns, ebbs and flows within the ocean or within myself. I seek to journey alongside them. At this point in my life, I no longer separate my own shifts of internal currents into 'trauma' responses as I was once taught to do by therapists teaching me how to cognitively control my body. To come into an embodied, fulfilling, and thriving life,

I have had to unlearn most of what I was taught about “recovering” from trauma.

For me, at this stage in my healing, to try to cognitively control my embodied life would be to severely limit my interrelational being and connectedness. The reason I say this and why I know my trauma is not a marker of deficiency in my being is that I have been writing with my wound for over a decade now. Through that practice, I have discovered an intimacy of self-love that in my earlier adulthood I did not know was possible. Perhaps the magic of this practice for me has been to discover that this self-love never occurs in isolation and the “self” invoked in this phrase and through this book is far from a patriarchal idea of individualism rooted in capitalist and colonial models of power-over. As I said above, everything changed once I allowed my embodied ways of knowing to integrate into my conscious awareness, including my sense of selfhood. This self-love connects me immediately back to earth, to the Salish Sea, to all that is. This connectivity of belonging is an embodiment of my inner and outer worlds ebbing and flowing, rising like a wave and potentially crashing on the shores of my own psyche. Trauma is part of those worlds because it is part of me. It ebbs and flows with all of me and I no longer seek to categorize or separate the “traumatic” from the “normal” from the “ideal” from “love” from “dysfunction” from the grace of Spirit and life that flows in my blood and in the oceanic depths of the Salish Sea. Rather than try to cognitively silence or control these ebbs and flows, approaches that never resonated with my artist-survivor-theorist self, I would rather surf those giant waves of myself when they occur, learning that instead of meeting such

an inherent force of life with fear, I can smile at the feeling of the wind and water running along and inside my flesh and psyche.



Artwork 1: The Poetry of Belonging, mixed media

A rectangular image with a backdrop of interwoven colours, mostly greens, reds, oranges, and blues. Splatters of lilac and yellow across its entirety. A blue wave rising on the right side.

Part I

Chapter 1: Reframing Trauma: The Wound as Gateway

Introduction: Reclaiming our Depths

As I write this chapter, I am not alone. I sit with the sound of the waves washing up onto the shore here on Malcolm Island. I hear and feel the ocean's companionship, a gentleness that rolls onto the shore and recedes back out into the Salish Sea. As I listen, I wonder how the water's presence and rhythm accompanying my writing speaks to this chapter's focus and scope. What does the ocean – its fluidity, strength, power, and its ability to simultaneously hold depths of mystery and life yet bear such shallows on the shore, all of it reaching me in a current gentleness of sound – what does this have to do with reframing contemporary considerations of the complex ways childhood trauma accompanies us through our adulthood? What does the ocean have to do with coming to view childhood trauma as a gateway to healing and belonging rather than a predetermined marker of lifelong suffering and isolation?

Asking this question reveals the intersecting methodologies and frameworks I bring to a reconsideration of trauma theory. I begin from a place that acknowledges how nature, here the ocean, speaks to and with my own embodied reality. In doing so, I'm enacting what Neimamis considers a

posthuman and feminist phenomenology of water, one that invokes other ways of knowing.⁴⁹ In Neimamis' case, acknowledging our watery ways is central to human understanding. Yet my goal by invoking a phenomenological orientation right from the start is not to produce an isolated work of phenomenology or philosophy. Reorienting trauma theory to cultural studies through mixed methodologies and interdisciplinary approaches, my goal is to allow a soft opening to emerge as feminist phenomenology and its embrace of nature-based ways of knowing provides a lens through which to consider embodiment. This lens itself becomes the embodied and interconnected landscape from which I reconsider trauma theory. Feminist phenomenology is the methodological framework I use to allow the ocean's presence and companionship to expand a field that has been traditionally cut off from ways of knowing that transcend the reductionist determinism of Western psychology and psychiatry. In this chapter, I will take time to present those traditional approaches and then express, from my embodied survivor-theorist-artist-poet-activist perspective, why I believe they are not enough to carry survivors into embodied thriving. First, however, I return to the question prompted by the sound of waves waxing and waning across the shore: what does the ocean have to do with healing childhood trauma?

The first response that surfaces for me is the ocean's fluid form, its constant movement through depths and shallows. For, even to talk about, let alone reframe considerations of complex trauma is not a simple task. Like the ocean, trauma, despite our culture's equating it with a

⁴⁹ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, Introduction.

sense of being stuck, of immobilizing heaviness, a state of fragmentation, or of an insurmountable barrier, is fluid. We see this fluidity in that the meaning, perspective and experience of deep traumatic wounding shift depending upon who is doing the viewing. Is it the survivor? The therapist? The psychiatrist? The journalist? The audience? The researcher? The survivor's children? If it is the survivor, is she 25 years old or 50 years old? Are the memories of her wounding explicit, implicit or do both surface in her body, psyche, dreams, and everyday reality? Does she align herself with the word "survivor"? With the word "trauma"? Does her trauma intersect social marginalization such as racism, homophobia and/or classism? There are so many more questions I could ask that reveal the ever-shifting kaleidoscopic reality that an adult survivor of complex childhood trauma and violence embodies. A guiding question emerges clearly from acknowledging this fluid and ever-shifting complexity. When it comes to creating healing paradigms, how do we do so in a way that accounts for all the varying embodiments and perspectives of identity, social inequity and land-based connections present in our wounding and healing?

My response is that we cannot create such a fully inclusive scope. This is why Australian trauma theorist Emma Tseris writes in her book on female-identifying individuals living with trauma that no two survivors respond to traumatic wounding in identical ways. From this lived reality, she argues that there can be no "master narrative" of trauma.⁵⁰ I agree with her conclusion. I also do not view an inability to create a

⁵⁰ Emma Tseris, *Trauma, Women's Health and Social Justice: Pitfalls and Possibilities* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 43.

master narrative of trauma or a one size fits all method for healing as a failure or, more importantly, as something to be overcome. I view it as the realistic outcome of the immense complexity that is to be a socially located human being living and growing within a body and psyche that has survived significant violence and/or wounding. More importantly, I view it as a call to bring our cultural understandings of complex trauma into greater accountability by supporting survivors through the formulation of what the Introduction discussed as survivor-centred praxes.

From the perspective of building such praxes, my stance is that within the multitude of ways we come into doing trauma work, be that as community workers, therapists, life coaches, teachers, researchers, parents, theorists, artists, friends, activists and/or survivors healing ourselves in order to lead more fulfilling lives that do not reproduce violent lessons of our own childhoods, we must accept that our healing journeys are first and foremost embodied.

Embodiment means that our primary contact with trauma is enfolded and intrapsychic. These are rich and complex dimensions of experience that cannot be overlooked or reduced to rationally determined and objectified categories of meaning, the traditional approach of psychology. To acknowledge embodiment is to accept that the very structures of how we approach constructing methodologies of healing must also be embodied. As presented in the Introduction, bringing this view of embodiment from a feminist phenomenological perspective into trauma theory is the task of this chapter. I will then move into poetic inquiry as a path for encountering a language of the wound which then speaks

to deeper considerations of belonging and healing in the following sections through my own autoethnographic poetics.

Neimanis writes that we are all “bodies of water.”⁵¹

Perhaps I’ve come to Malcolm Island to write this book while sitting just above the shoreline to be reminded of my own body of water as I interact with the ocean’s. Perhaps I need such an expansiveness of power and depth by my side as I consider how we navigate the depths of our own bodies of flesh and water when they include memories of terror and pain. Such a task is no easy feat. Anyone that lives with complex childhood trauma and embodied memories of violence knows our depths can be scary and psyche-splitting to visit and inhabit. And yet I do not write this book to chronicle horrific events from my own life or to reinscribe myself and others into traditional paradigms that condemn survivors to lives of struggle and deficiency. I seek to show a different perspective through which, while difficult and sometimes full of pain, our embodied lives and the traumas they include become gateways into deeply integrative and fulfilling lives.⁵² As this chapter will show, coming to this embodied

⁵¹ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, Introduction.

⁵² A note of caution, perhaps, and a reminder that my definition of trauma is not the violence we survive. Therefore, a statement such as this, that trauma can become a gateway into deeper meaning in one’s life has nothing to do with the violence I survived but my acceptance of the woman I am always in the process of becoming. I claim my trauma as a wound within my own sense of self, embodiment and existence as an interconnected being. Trauma is a gateway because it is part of me and my embodied experience. I extract myself from a cultural deficiency praxis, in psychotherapy yes, but in Western culture at large and with that extraction the very orientation of my life, my wounds, my purpose, and considerations of trauma reorients as well.

viewpoint has everything to do with how we define trauma and how we centre embodiment in the meaning making journeys of our lives.

In her work with childhood sexual abuse survivors (CSA), Canadian psychologist-survivor-researcher Jacqui Linder calls for survivors to be at the forefront of devising healing methodologies and approaches.⁵³ Allowing survivors to lead with our own experiences, Linder argues, shifts paradigms toward an inside out approach rather than an outside in approach, where outside in represents traditional power-over structures aligned with traditions of psychiatry and pathology. Linder writes so succinctly: “In contrast, scholars without direct experience of csa are limited to exploring the topic in much the same way that ethnographers describe the exotic cultures they visit.”⁵⁴ Linder calls for a survivor-centred and a survivor-authored approach that is not common in the traditions and practices of qualitative and quantitative research that dominate trauma theory and the psy-fields.⁵⁵ The reason I am writing this book is because the tenets to my own healing – loving curiosity, self-compassion, creativity, and deep respect of my wound – are not what I learned from traditional trauma theory/and or traditional

⁵³ Jacqueline Linder, “Through the Looking Glass: Child Sexual Abuse from the Inside Out” in *Topography of Trauma Fissures, Disruptions and Transfigurations*, ed. Danielle Schaub and Jacqueline Linder (Boston: Brill, 2019).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁵⁵ Bonnie Burstow, “A Rose by Any Other Name: Naming the Battle Against Psychiatry” in *Mad Matters: A Critical Reader in Canadian Mad Studies*, ed. Robert J. Menzies, Brenda A. LeFrançois, and Geoffrey Reaume (Toronto: Canadian Scholar’s Press, 2013), 79.

therapy. I learned them primarily through the embodiments of my own self-inquiry process mediated through poetic inquiry which allowed me to language myself. Languaging myself, I actively and consciously extracted my embodied self from a deficiency praxis that dominates Western approaches to trauma.

To write with this inside out approach right now, I return to the rhythm of the ocean. I pause and listen. I am greeted by a steady rolling of waves washing onto shore and returning to sea. I hear and feel the movement in my body. Especially in my chest from my solar plexus up into my throat, I feel a type of rhythmic echo of the ocean's pulse. Today it is sunny and there are no high winds. The sound reaching out to me is gentle, as if nature's lullaby holds and accompanies me as I write. Yet I am so aware that the weather could shift suddenly as it is prone to do here on the edge of the Canadian west coast. Waves could rush at the shore and bring a sudden almost violent crashing of sound and force. Even in that crashing, however, a rhythm would emerge, the primal directive to wash up onto shore and back out to sea, that pure embodiment of the oceanic directive will remain. Despite the shifts of environmental influences on the water, despite the language I use to describe its rhythm or how the rhythm speaks to my own embodiment, and despite whether I perceive the water as threatening or gentle, the water is still water and its pull to wash onto the shore and back out to sea will not cease.

I have learned that I too am like this oceanic force and drive of water. My psyche and body have rhythms within them, rhythms that shift and vary depending upon internal

and external factors. These rhythms are full of information that speaks to my lived realities of selfhood and interconnection. Experienced individually, these rhythms unfold themselves through awareness in thoughts, memories, affective feelings, insights, dreams, sensations in the body – all of which are housed in the complex intermingling of the body-psyche. This matrix of embodied information, when brought into cultural pedagogies of healing and learning, can serve as rich material for knowledge making that supports us individually while shifting collective and cultural paradigms of meaning making.

Like the ocean, our bodies and psyches are linked to the earth, to the ocean and to the waxing and waning of the moon. Reclaiming felt awareness and appreciation of embodied rhythms, and learning to communicate with and from them, is a focus of this book's approach to healing. This returns me to Neimanis and her phenomenology of water. She writes:

Blood, bile, intracellular fluid; a small ocean
swallowed, a wild wetland in our gut;
rivulets forsaken making their way from our
insides to out, from watery womb to watery
world:

*we are bodies of water.*⁵⁶

Neimanis' phenomenology of water shows how our embodiments are ways of knowing that can integrate into

⁵⁶ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, Introduction.

consciousness and into social organization and meaning making. This type of feminist phenomenology approach blends with my own critical autoethnography. I situate this mixed methods approach within a cultural theory of trauma, because my goal is to show how healing requires cultural praxes capable of embodying such watery wombs of watery worlds and watery selves. The earth and the ocean, its rhythms and innate belonging with our bodies and psyches must be integrated into healing paradigms. When we do so, it completely transforms how we – survivors, researchers, practitioners and loved ones of survivors – approach trauma. However, reclaiming such embodied ways of being requires language capable of speaking with such depths. This is why the focus of Chapter 2, poetic inquiry, is an essential step within this formulation of a survivor-centred trauma praxis.

In what follows, I dialogue with traditional trauma theory to show, firstly, that I understand and, in part, appreciate the approach, rationale and scope of the paradigm I departed from. I first present a summary of the traditional views of trauma and memory as they have commonly been conceptualized in modern psychology and clinical practices of cultural trauma theory. I then enter a dialectically transformative and watery discourse with traditional trauma theory. Watery, because I return always to interact with the rhythm of the Salish Sea as it accompanies, supports, shapes and inspires the embodied scope with which I come to speak to you.

Traditional Trauma Theory: Beyond Deficiency Praxes

In their thoroughly researched book, *Trauma*, trauma theorists Lucy Bond and Steph Craps provide a comprehensive study of the ever-evolving field of contemporary trauma studies.⁵⁷ They discuss how the field emerged from the eighteenth century's focus in psychology and biomedical science into modern contexts and interdisciplinary approaches that include cultural studies and literary studies. Bond and Craps explicitly state that their goal is not to produce a clinical history of trauma but an interdisciplinary study of the field's growth throughout the past few centuries. I cite their work because it very comprehensively represents dominant interpretations and approaches to trauma. To define the term, they settle on literary trauma theorist's Richard Crownshaw's view that despite ongoing shifts in the field, "critics generally agree that trauma is that which defies witnessing, cognition, conscious recall and representation."⁵⁸

Note that immediately within a traditional paradigm of trauma, we enter a somewhat nebulous state that merges the actual events with the individual's cognitive memory of those events, with no attention to the body's role in witnessing and/or cognition. Recall from the Introduction, my approach to trauma, aligned with Maté's, maintains that trauma is a wound in the body-psyche that is impacted by but separate from the violence, neglect and/or loss we

⁵⁷ Lucy Bond and Stef Craps, *Trauma*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

survive. Traditional paradigms often elide the events we survive and the cognitive impact these events have on the survivor with no critical attention to this elision or its impact on a survivor's self-perception, let alone the place of embodiment within cognition's function.

Again, my stance is not that the two realms are unrelated. An intersectional feminist practice begins by acknowledging and centring the ways social realities and histories of violence impact individual and collective identities. This also necessarily involves the way social realities are part of our relational identities, which is often present in childhood trauma. However, when it comes to adults healing with their childhood trauma and working with micro level experiences of embodied healing on emotional, physical, psychological, and spiritual levels, the distinction between the self's wound and the violence we survive is incredibly important and can become foundational to how we define and work with, let alone heal, trauma.

I will shift into my autoethnographic poetic praxis to show you some of the implications of eliding my identity as an adult female survivor with the violence I survived.

The contours of my selfhood merge and equate themselves with the violence I normalized into a condition of embodied girlhood. This conflation manifests in the endless cycles of shame that in my mind sounds something like: 'If I had been different, perhaps they wouldn't have...'; 'If I had been

better, perhaps they would have...' My adult woman's thighs and breasts and spine can barely support the weight of such guilt and shame directed by myself toward myself and yet my thighs and breasts and spine are not mentioned in any definition of trauma that relates only to the mind and my cognitive (non) memory of pain and shame and violence so my thighs and breasts and spine are erased while I equate myself with what was done to them and a destabilizing confusion adds more weight to my shame and further distorts my sense of self from the inside out compromising my ability to feel at home inside my own body which knew violence before I could form complete sentences.

Under

So. Much.

Weight.

My adult spine

collapses

in on itself.

For me, conflating the violence we survive as children and the wounds or traumas we bear as adults in our bodies-psyches is itself traumatizing. I consciously chose to interrupt the healing paradigms I interacted with, doing my best to extract my body and my mind from lenses that conflate childhood violence with trauma. In doing so, I did not find further confusion, isolation, fear, or shame. I found a vitality of life that pulses through my body and syncs with my mind's ability to understand this pulse is a living testament to strength, courage, and creativity. I found and continue to find joy that can grow amidst destabilizing moments. I found the embodied wisdom to know that such destabilizing moments are not a sign of any deficiency in me. I found a liberatory praxis that when embodied orients me to a different view of life than one structured around colonial-patriarchal-ableist-classist-white supremacist notions of identity, family, and healing. I found the ocean. And I find her still in my watery ways of being that leak and seethe themselves onto the page and beyond.



I return to this chapter's task of defining traditional trauma praxes and put aside the elision of violence and selfhood found in the core of most trauma theory. Bond and Craps argue the defining characteristics of trauma are experiences of shock, violence and/or sudden loss. These experiences are deemed too much for the mind to compute

and therefore they “defy witnessing.”⁵⁹ Bond and Craps continue to describe responses to extreme events that emerged out of decades of interdisciplinary Western trauma studies. Below I cite the definition they give at length, because it represents a common and widely accepted description of trauma that is utilized by various researchers in many disciplines such as theology, feminist theory, cultural studies, literary studies, and pop culture. This description of trauma is what I refer to as “traditional trauma theory”:

Most cultural and literary theories position trauma as a belated response to an overwhelming event too shattering to be processed as it occurs. Traumatic memories are repressed as they are formed, leaving them unavailable to conscious recall; subsequently, they recur in various displaced ways, as hallucinations, flashbacks, or nightmares. When the traumatic experience returns, unbidden, to consciousness, the sudden collision of past and present ‘violently opens passageways between systems that were once discrete, making unforeseen connections that distress or confound’ (Luckhurst 2008: 3). Trauma is both highly resistant to articulation and wildly generative of narratives that seek to

⁵⁹ Ibid., 50.

explicate the ‘unclaimed’ originary experience (Caruth 1996).⁶⁰

This perspective from observation-based research describes the experiences of individuals living with complex traumatic memories. While I will not disagree with this description, I will qualify it as exactly that – observed and objectified descriptions of survivors’ experiences of living with traumatic wounding made in comparison to “normal” experiences, i.e. people who do not survive significant violence and loss in their lives, especially their childhoods.

Survivors are taught to internalize this comparative function of determining who is traumatized and who is not. Such internalizing creates a system whereby survivors attempting to reconcile ourselves and our wounds are taught to view our survivor-self as other than “normal.” Thus, the very basis from which this interpretive paradigm works on a structural level is, firstly, to set up an immediate binary of “traumatic” and “non-traumatic” where people with traumatic experiences are compared to normal, non-traumatized peoples. This is an example of Burstow’s deficiency praxis discussed in the Introduction. From this point, a second level of identification occurs within the survivor herself, as she is divided within, taught to separate her “traumatized” self from her non-traumatized or ordinary self. Within the survivor, there is the self that can process her “normal” experiences and the “abnormal” part of herself which cannot, which is, most likely, a source of deep shame and fear for the survivor. Indeed, how could one read the above description and not feel

⁶⁰ Ibid., 4.

fear at its suggestive language describing the return of traumatic memories that, according to this traditional approach, necessarily wreak havoc on the normal, linear, and cognitive way of being a non-traumatized person in this world.

Within such a dualistically structured model, explicit memories, (ordinary, everyday cognitive retrieval of factual-based descriptions), are aligned with ordinary experiences and personhood while implicit memory, (affective often somatically accessed memory), is aligned with traumatic experiences.⁶¹ This paradigm, rooted in the founding structures of psychology and psychiatry, is what establishes a standard deficiency praxis in trauma theory. From this perspective, simply surviving violent or overwhelming events functions to

“other” the survivor from “normal” personhood. Applied to childhood trauma, this theory creates a foundation upon which survivors become by our very existence, deficient in social, biomedical, and cultural paradigms of identity. There is a status of normal functionality associated with non-traumatic experience, especially childhood experiences, and we are by our very nature deficient from attaining the psychological outlook of one who has never survived, for example, repeated violence in the home or in intimate relationship. To see how this paradigm is at the core of trauma theory, one need only read the clinical literature on CSA survivors to see that oftentimes the first few paragraphs begin by listing the ways in which survivors, regardless of whether violence and abuse occur in the home or through

⁶¹ Ibid., 5.

relationships outside the family, are deficient by the plethora of symptoms and struggles they will almost necessarily endure, such as personality disorders, intimacy issues, power struggles, inability to learn personal boundaries, etc.⁶² Think of the implications this model has for would-be therapists who have not themselves experienced CSA. Before they have even met survivor-clients, they are taught, consciously and/or unconsciously, to view their clients as deficient and in need of deep fixing.



The deficiency praxis is pervasive. It is present in psychotherapy, psychiatry, the biomedical sciences, and it dominates popular culture narratives through the films we watch and the social media feeds we scroll. The pervasiveness of this praxis is why Linder, from her bridged position of survivor-theorist-psychologist, critiques most traditional approaches to healing complex childhood trauma, especially in her own survivor-context, CSA. As mentioned above, she argues such approaches are constructed from the “outside in” perspective and this greatly fails survivors.

According to Linder, standard trauma methodology is written from the position of an external observer looking in, oftentimes a person who has not lived through the situations being “studied.”⁶³ This outside looking in perspective is the basis of dominant research methods and it is one that

⁶² For an extended discussion of the implied deficiency praxis in clinical survivor literature see: Iris J. Gildea, “Body-Speak: Poetic Intervention for Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse (CSA) – An Autoethnographic Approach” in *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 74 (2021): 101796.

⁶³ Linder, “Through the Looking Glass,” 62.

ethnographers like Avery Gordon, who works with queer theory and ethnography, bring into question as inherently problematic.⁶⁴ In terms of healing with childhood violence, such paradigms of knowledge production are problematic. To Linder's inside out approach and critique, I add that traditional trauma theories fail, be it in Linder's context of CSA or other experiences of childhood violence, because they do not capture or acknowledge the embodied complexities and realities of living with and potentially thriving with the experiences being considered. As is, traditional trauma theory sets up, from the very start, a paradigm by which survivors, therapists and individuals at large are taught to view complex childhood trauma as something to be "overcome." If trauma is a wounding that *is* part of myself, separate from but intimately related to the violences and experiences I survived and potentially continue to endure, I find this language of *overcoming* extremely troubling.

Firstly, such a stance suggests that childhood trauma necessarily ends as we mature, that there is a clear demarcation of before and after. While this may be true for some contexts, for others it is not. If one's perpetrators are family members, family friends, and/or trusted community members, the reality and process of negotiating those relationships in a way that yields less harm to the survivor can be a life-long journey. Moreover, if the violence one survives intersects social inequities such as racism, classism, ableism, transphobia, etc., these violent realities exist outside the childhood home and environments in which they may have

⁶⁴ Avery F. Gordon, "Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity," *Borderlands* 10, no. 2 (2011).

first been encountered. Negotiating violent and harmful environments does not end but, depending on one's identity, is potentially part of everyday adulthood. All the more reason to separate one's own trauma from the violence we survive. Beyond the reality that trauma intersects our social realities and does not "end," normalizing the language of "overcoming" trauma also implies we adapt a divisive and combative relationship to our own embodied selfhood. In such cases, I must divide myself into parts: one part of me is better than the other, or one part of me needs to be stronger than the other, and one part of me needs to, quite literally, be conquered. This language of overcoming our traumas so commonly adapted to trauma paradigms in clinical and popular spaces speaks directly to the colonial and imperialist ideologies that Western psychiatry is rooted within.

When I separate trauma from the violence I survive, I reject the violence inflected upon me by individuals and cultures, both the cultures of my inherited intergenerational bloodlines of trauma and violence, those I grew up in, and those I move through as an adult. I seek to come into to cherished and compassionate contact with a part of myself that I was taught I had to overcome. I have found that when I discard my learned appropriation of colonial imperialistic psychology that would send me out to conquer a part of myself, *this* is when healing happens. I come into an embodied revelatory meeting with my wound. This encounter is non-linear and allowed to change from day to day and year to year. In this encounter with myself and my wound/s, I have met shame and fear. I have also met power and strength. I continue to meet a child's innate genius that knew how to

survive incomprehensible pain. I continue to meet a grace tucked into the slouch of my shoulders from carrying so much weight over the years that was never mine to carry, and again and again I meet the joy of a spine learning to unlock itself from all that weight, breath by breath, day by day.

My own healing approach integrates survivor-centred paradigms like those of Linder and Burstow into the radical embodiment I find in feminist phenomenology. Doing so asks me to move directly into the language of the body and the language of the wound, where this languaging act grants me access to the non-categorical oceanic depths of myself. In such depths, establishing binaries of good and bad, functional and non-functional, even real and imagined, is insufficient. Such binaries are the language of categorical and explicit discourse, and in my experience, this is not the language of trauma, of healing, of the body, or of the earth's ecosystems of which we are a part and can find refuge in.

Within that refuge, a reorientation of belonging and purpose can emerge. This reorientation shatters deficiency praxes because the interpretive scope we make meaning with shifts. The ocean emerges as the co-writer of my story and the ocean's diagnosis of my body-psyche's state is one I align with much more than a classist, patriarchal, and colonial system of meaning making that never included my body and its wounds, not to mention my earth-deep spirituality, in its considerations of identity formation. Nor did it include how my body's wounds harmonize with my mother's and grandmother's wounds. How they enter into dissonance with my father's, build to a crescendo as they entwine with the lower registers of other ancestors' and unravel into the softest

of lullabies in the ocean's rhythmic interplay that lulls me to sleep at night here in my little room on the Salish Sea. Over and over this symphony of intergenerational and cultural trauma plays in our bodies and with the ecosystems we are a part of and yet, we are not taught how to hear this symphony or how to tune ourselves in and out of its co-creative emergence of presence. Most importantly, my mentioning this symphony is never a lyrical metaphor that psychology or scholarly criticism can translate into categorical understanding of explicit and cognitively reductionist meaning. There is a symphony playing in me, through me, and with me all the time. Nature helps me to hear it and hearing it, I heal. Not because I am cured, but because I am present with what is real.



Throughout my life, I have had well-intentioned counsellors try to insert my body-psyche into constructs of how I should be in order to heal and recover. If methodology begins from its outset with a look to where we should be, rather than where we are, then any modality used, even creative and/or somatic modalities, shape a consciousness based on that methodology, in this case, on a praxis of deficiency. This is why Mishara, working within a paradigm of phenomenological psychotherapy, rejects the binaries at the core of traditional psychotherapy and psychology. He writes that the interpretive framework of empirical and traditional psychology:

presupposes not only the oppositions of mind and body, cognitive/affective, verbal/nonverbal, and closure/nonclosure or incompleteness; but also the related oppositions, active/passive, self/other, and inner/outer. The oppositions active/passive as well as self/other are to be found in the distinctions of speaking/listening, confronting/being confronted, confessor/authority, and producer/audience. The duality inner/outer is present in opposing inner (mere ruminations, thoughts) to outer (an external medium that records in both the writing and speech examples) as a criterion for the therapeutic effectiveness of the experiments.⁶⁵

Mishara rejects these binaries and presents them as causing harm in that they prevent the development of an integrated consciousness, one that moves from both/and perspectives rather than either/or.

I agree with Mishara. I also emphasize that the presence of binary reductions of experiences in traditional trauma theory does not mean the therapeutic experiences rooted in them are not supportive to survivors or that incredible functionality can be reached. To take such a stance would be to enact a binary of either/or that I just refuted! Of course, support and functionality can and often do occur. Yet the overarching paradigm remains one in which the

⁶⁵ Mishara, "Narrative and Psychotherapy," 185.

interpretive gaze is always directing what emerges to where we should be rather than honouring where we are. Nor does it adequately acknowledge what is a complicated entanglement of individual and social realities that cannot necessarily be untangled, at least into clear categories of either/or. Yet if we do not have the tools to make meaning and see beauty and empowered self-presence within such entanglements, the impulse to direct self-perception and healing toward the categorically predetermined constructs of identity will continue to dominate in Western culture. This is the fundamental problem of traditional trauma theory: it does not have a route into recognizing such beauty, because the interpretive scope it uses does not speak a language of the body, a language of the wound, a language of trauma, or as my final chapter will show, a language of belonging.

My own healing shifted drastically when I abandoned traditional trauma theory, always having felt at odds with the “expert” clinical writing that did not express any embodied understanding of living with the trauma of coming from incredibly difficult experiences that interweave love, abuse, addiction, and violence into a complex knot within the body-psyche. The “experts” I read wrote about what they observed from a distance, not from inside the experience. Finally putting away books written about survivors and turning to my journal, over time I learned to befriend my own body-psyche rather than to subject myself to a cognitive reconditioning modeled after the minds, bodies, experiences, identities, and life trajectories of those who observe and write without having journeyed through the oceanic depths of surviving years and years of sexual, emotional, and spiritual violence.

I lived for years in these waters of self-discovery in which I learned to language myself through my daily writing practice in which I had no goal to understand or categorize what I was feeling. My only goal was to express the knot many survivors embody that weaves experiences such as violence, love, and/or abuse into a presence within the body-psyche. As I wrote daily, the knot began to loosen. Again, I did not write into that knot with a cognitive imperative to “heal.” I taught myself to write with embodied impulses, as I will describe later in the sections of this book that formalize this practice as writing with the wound. Overtime, I came to look forward to my morning or evening journaling, because this was the moment of my day when I did not have to pretend to be anything other than what I was in that moment of expression. I will talk about this process-oriented approach to meeting my own embodied realities in detail later, but I mention it here because it was a saving grace for me. It allowed me to unlearn so much cognitive distortion created by the trauma theory that never centred or even acknowledged my body’s survival and my embodied consciousness through that survival.

Perhaps it is important to contextualize these years I’m referring to, so that I may prevent my reader from envisioning me living a somewhat romanticised life of daily journaling amidst joyful rediscoveries of self-love with little concern for much else. Indeed, this was not my reality. I lived at this point, on my own, recently divorced, with no financial security – be it from a partner, full-time employment, or family. I had few friends, though am eternally grateful for the one friend who journeyed with me through these years and all that have followed since (dear Half-Pint, you know who you

are). I worked odd jobs until I found temporary administrative work that brought me back into the university and eventually began teaching, which led to my current position. I lived for years with daily flashbacks of violence and I began a career as a professor where I would leave a meeting when it finished, a meeting in which I'd performed with perfect composure and intellectual presence, a skill I perfected at a very young age, to go sit on the floor of my office and breathe and/or write my way through flashbacks. Simply put, it was exhausting. At this time, I also experienced the intense emotional labor of negotiating colonial patriarchal work cultures, at times as the only female faculty member, not to mention as a female with a history of gendered violence. It was also during this period of five to seven years that I stopped drinking, having had a relationship with alcohol since my early twenties, though longer than that given alcoholism has run in my family for generations.

And yet, amidst all of this, I wrote. And I wrote. And I wrote. And, amidst all of this, joy and self-love did emerge.

When I did return to seeking out support in the words of others, I turned to survivor-authored works such as Becky Lane's *Between Two Rivers*, Jane Campbell's *The River of Forgetting*, Tanya Lewis' *Living Beside*, and Anna Camillieri's *I Am a Red Dress*.⁶⁶ These works did not seek to explain,

⁶⁶ Becky Lane, *Where the Rivers Join* (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1995); Jane Rowan, *The River of Forgetting* (Shelburn Falls: Booksmynth

rationalize, fix, or cognitively control the experience of living with trauma. They sought to represent and understand the journey from the inside out. All of these authors write very differently. They survived different experiences of childhood abuse/violence and they have different social locations of class, race, sexuality, ability, ethnicity, etc. Yet, all the varied textures of their willingness to explore and journey alongside their trauma, as Tanya Lewis' title, *Living Beside*, suggests, rather than be marked deficient by it or work to cognitively train their mind to overcome a part of themselves, aligned in a praxis of survivor-centred and survivor-authored healing. These different examples of authors creatively languaging their wounds into being became sources of authentic companionship in my own journey.



A reason for so much of traditional trauma theory's inability to open to embodied realms relates to its interpretive framework of memory. This is especially true of trauma theory applied to adults living with childhood trauma. Rarely is memory considered from a perspective of radical embodiment which does not view the body as an object to be conquered by the mind. Traditional views of memory, rooted in colonial

Press, 2010); Tanya Lewis, *Living Beside: Performing Normal After Incest Memories Return* (Toronto: McGilligan Books, 1999); Anna Camillieria, *I Am A Red Dress: Incantations on a Grandmother, a Mother and a Daughter* (Vancouver: Arsenal Press, 2004).

and patriarchal traditions of meaning making that, in the West, solidified in the Enlightenment, reject the body as a source of meaning making. This is incredibly ironic, given that the nervous system and the mind are housed within and part of the body.⁶⁷ The reality is that memory is always embodied and therefore an understanding of embodiment must be brought into Western culture's approach to working with memory in a way that does not insert survivors into deficiency praxes.

Below I present a brief consideration of memory to support this chapter's call for building survivor-centred praxes that are embodied and entwined with the air we breathe, the flesh, bones, and blood of these bodies that hold us, and the land-based and watery ecosystems we are always a part of.

On Memory & Trauma

In trauma studies, memory is commonly divided into explicit and implicit memory. To demonstrate the difference, I will use an inside out approach. For instance, many of us have personal memories of the ocean. There are the explicit memories that comprise the facts of when we went to visit the ocean and the events that occurred by or in the water. Whether you visited the ocean as a child, continue to schedule getaways on the shore, or live by it now, do you have deeper memories that may take a little longer to access? Pause a moment here, close your eyes and imagine the ocean before

⁶⁷ See: Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985).

you, feel it washing onto your bare feet. Can that affective summoning of the ocean unravel a feeling of your own experience of freedom or fear, of companionship, or isolation? Do you have in your body-psyche a feeling of the sudden shift between the two states of freedom and fear, where one moment a primal urge of energy has you floating in perfect balance on waves when so suddenly, caught in an undertow without warning, balance is replaced by an all-consuming panic at the realization you have lost control to a force greater than yourself? From this place of embodiment and somewhat visceral memory, can you feel the panic dissolve as the waves recede and you find yourself swimming with ease once again as your head emerges above the surface? Can you go one step further and feel how that shift from freedom to panic and isolation might mirror other experiences and inner renderings of selfhood?

Explicit and *implicit* memory are different.⁶⁸ They speak to different experiences of selfhood and belonging. The explicit are the cognitive demarcations of experience in the linear narrative of life. They are centered around the event and our mental construct of it— the vacation, the family gathering, etc. The implicit is the body-based and affective realm I evoked by recalling the experience of swimming in the ocean. Implicit memories have a visceral quality to them. Sometimes they take time to surface and emerge and sometimes it takes us time to orient ourselves to that emergence. The implicit can combine perfectly with their

⁶⁸ For a discussion of memory and trauma see: Yocharia Ataria, “Traumatic Memories as Black Holes: A Qualitative Phenomenological Approach,” *Qualitative Psychology* 1, no. 2 (2014): 123–140.

explicit counterpart and/or they can emerge in an entirely disjointed and contradictory manner.

A relationship between explicit and implicit memory is often a focus if not the foundation of trauma studies and our diagnoses and cultural representations of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).⁶⁹ For example, the traditional formulation of implicit and explicit memory was the root of the passage cited above by Bond and Craps regarding trauma as a “belated response to an overwhelming event too shattering to be processed.”⁷⁰ The mechanism at work is that as a means of surviving the experience/s that are too much of a shock for the mind to process, the individual, be it a child or adult, dissociates into what is commonly conceptualized as a mind-body split, what survivor-researcher Sidorchuk calls a “life-preserving” split.⁷¹ This split is a dissociative mechanism by which the nervous system literally freezes or numbs itself out

⁶⁹ For a description of PTSD as clinically described in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* see: “Diagnostic Criteria for PTSD,” *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, accessed December 16, 2023, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207191/box/part1_ch3.box16/. For the *DSM*, which is the standard text used for psychiatric diagnostics by the American Psychiatric Association, see: “The DSM”, *Psychiatry.org*, accessed 16 December 2023, <https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/practice/dsm>.

⁷⁰ Bond and Craps, *Trauma*, 4.

⁷¹ Anna L. Sidorchuk, *Childhood Trauma and the Feminine Principle: Healing through Myth, Ritual, Dreamwork and Embodiment*, (Pacifica Graduate Institute, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2018), 3.

of cognitive and explicit awareness.⁷² It is a primal and instinctual response. As practical theologian and psycho-spiritual counsellor Philip Browning Helsel shows in his work on healing embodied trauma: “just as animals freeze to fool their prey by their near-coma state and by so doing seem to preserve energy they may need later in order to resist or flee, the freezing response in humans seems to encourage animal attackers to move on.”⁷³ As a result of this freezing, ordinary explicit memory often does not cognitively recall the traumatic incident or incidents.⁷⁴

This dissociative mechanism is highly effective in that it prevents cognitive awareness of a situation that is too emotionally, psychologically, physically, and/or spiritually overwhelming for the psyche. It can also lead to the experience of living with what above I referred to as a cognitive black hole. The black hole can emerge when we attempt to cognitively remember traumatic experiences or the details of childhood surrounding such experiences.⁷⁵ A kind of black hole emerges, because the explicit memory is repressed

⁷² Peter A. Levine, *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma: The Innate Capacity to Transform Overwhelming Experiences* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1997), 3.

⁷³ Philip Browning Helsel, “Witnessing the Body’s Response to Trauma: Resistance, Ritual, and Nervous System Activation,” *Pastoral Psychology* 64, no. 5 (2015): 686.

⁷⁴ For more on traumatic memory see: Peter Levine, *Waking the Tiger*, 1997; Talwar, “Beyond Multiculturalism,” 3–16.

⁷⁵ Iris J. Gildea, “Speaking from the Black Hole: Representing the Experiences of Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse (CSA) in Cultural Pedagogies of Meaning-Making,” *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 6 (August, 2021): 992–1009.

into cognitive silence and frozen numbness described above by Browning Helsel.

It is extremely important to keep in mind that no two survivors respond to their trauma in the same way. A spectrum of experiences exists regarding the repression and return of implicit and explicit memory.⁷⁶ Often though, as Judith Herman's research shows, with childhood experiences that include years of abuse, violence, and/or neglect, survivors normalize dissociative mechanisms into our everyday lives, sense of self and worldview.⁷⁷ As a result, survivors may only become aware of cognitive black holes at a point in life, often decades after the traumatizing childhood event/s, when a combination of implicit sensory, body-based memories and/or explicit memories that had been repressed return. The process of this return is often a combination of implicit and explicit memories, usually in the form of flashbacks. Flashbacks can result in the classic interpretation of trauma cited above by Bond and Craps: "unbidden, to consciousness, the sudden collision of past and present."⁷⁸ Often this is a sensory-based collision of past and present as implicit memories rise to the surface, triggered by a sound, sight, circumstance,

⁷⁶ Ellen Bass and Laura Davis's *The Courage to Heal* offers a comprehensive survivor-centred discussion with various examples of such a spectrum. See: Bass, Ellen, and Laura Davis. *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* (New York: William Morrow Paperbacks), 1988.

⁷⁷ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, (New York: Basic Books, 2015).

⁷⁸ Bond and Craps, *Trauma*, 4.

conversation or feeling that reminds the body-psyche of the original traumatizing event.

Living with black holes of cognitive memory can cause what is very commonly referred to in trauma theory as a fragmentation of self and/or time. When one has a triggering event in the present that summons up the implicit memory, what often surfaces is affective memory of emotions such as fear and shame that accompanied the original event. For some survivors, implicit memories arise without knowledge of facts such as who, when, where or even what. When these types of mixed flashbacks occur, especially for the uninitiated survivor who has not yet learned to navigate the complex ecosystem of implicit and explicit meaning making that the human body is a home to, (and for the friends and family of that survivor), they can be extremely confusing. Past emotions are experienced in the present of one's adult self and therefore what emerges is a phenomenological conflation of a lifetime's embodiment of these complex emotions, memories, experiences, and relationships. This disjointed conflation of past and present, according to clinical psychology and psychiatry, is the basis of PTSD diagnoses, and it accounts for the common description of living with complex trauma as living in a fragmented sense of self. Survivors with such flashbacks, are disordered, because the "normal" and ordinary concept of life as a linearity of past, present and future, a basis of life, temporality, and identity that comes from not embodying such complex trauma, is compromised. Moreover, one can live their entire life with these "symptoms" of trauma but have no explicit recall of the traumatizing event/s, a reality which by its very nature

complicates our use of the language of survivors and non-survivors. From this perspective, many individuals are survivors of childhood trauma without explicit knowledge of what they have survived. Trauma theorist Yocharia Ataria explains:

A patient suffering from fragmentation of memory is unable to link memories with certain times or places...one must distinguish between a failure in encoding during the traumatic event and the encoding of peripheral details rather than the central experience...The subject remembers the sensory and emotional elements of the traumatic experience yet lacks linguistic/contextual factors.⁷⁹

I note that the use of the word “failure” in the above passage is interesting in terms of the distinction between explicit encoding of central and peripheral events. I find it interesting because from the perspective of the body and the psyche, there is no failure. There is, in fact, total success. The body-psyche of this person, in the context of complex childhood violence, survived a situation that otherwise could have been too emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, and/or physically overwhelming to survive.



⁷⁹ Ataria, “Traumatic Memories as Black Holes,” 123–124.

I know this discussion contains a lot of theoretical language. As I said in the introduction, this is the chapter of building a theoretical foundation that poetic inquiry will break open as I move into the non-linear waters of the language of the wound. After all, the Salish Sea is here, a steadying rhythm of waves crashing and receding to keep the beat as now, having just clearly described the traditional interpretations of implicit and explicit memory within traditional trauma theory and its view of flashbacks, I will begin to tell you why I view this entire interpretive framework as a failure to support my embodied experience as a survivor of the complex trauma and the unspeakable events these theories seek to formalize, describe, and help me “recover” from. I will tell you why, aside from some very useful techniques for grounding and meeting anxiety, traditional trauma theory did not offer me a path to healing but a disempowering feedback loop constructed by colonial patriarchal paradigms that distorted my own body-psyche’s inherent language of survival and belonging. For what I have learned is that these deep traumatic wounds within myself are far from unspeakable. They and I do not lack the linguistic coding mentioned above. Nor does my body lack the conscious awareness to support my mind from distinguishing between past from present. My wounds, my body-psyche, and I simply require our own language, the language of the wound.

To move toward more integrated praxes, we can invite feminist phenomenology to *work with* trauma theory. This is not an easy feat, because to do so restructures interpretive frameworks of meaning making from the inside out. The

body becomes not an object to be controlled by the mind, but a living complex system of enfolded communications entangled with the ecosystems of which it and we are always a part. An example of such a reworking of interpretive frameworks was cited above by Boon, Butler, and Jefferies bringing their own embodiments and the ocean's relationship and reflection of those embodied histories into the very structures of their feminist process of theory making.⁸⁰ In their entwining of body, gender, and ocean, linear time collapses in on itself. The body speaks as a sense of taste or smell transforms into enfolded reality. Sounds and sights become portals to different ways of knowing. While this expansive practice of meaning making does occur in feminist theory, Indigenous ways of knowing, and arts-based research, of which Levins Morales and Neimanis and other authors I cite often are examples; these embodied perspectives are rarely integrated and/or centred within Western frameworks of trauma theory and the psy-fields.

When I enter trauma theory from a phenomenologically embodied reality, my interpretive praxis changes. From within this restructuring of perspective, I do not believe that survivors “forget” our traumatizing events, rather, we simply remember them differently. We do not even “recover” our memories. We unlearn the mechanisms of silencing perpetrated by mainstream culture that keep us separated from ourselves, caught in the dualistic mind-body split that dominates Western culture and is aligned with the power structures of colonialism. Our implicit memories have

⁸⁰ Boon, Butler, and Jefferies, *Autoethnography and Feminist Theory*, 62.

always been present, speaking to us through our implicit ways of knowing. Levins Morales writes,

Our stories are not just personal compasses. They are navigation for the world. What does your body have to teach us about architecture and language, time, and flexibility, and the act of breath? How would we have to shape our society for nothing about you to be disabling? Where does your body want to lead us, and how would the world be different if it did?⁸¹

Most of us do not live in societies that teach us to trust or develop this kind of implicit remembering and knowing, but paradigms can change. As Levins Morales suggests, for this to happen we have to allow our bodies to lead us into different shapes of society. Yet many of us have to remember how to listen to our bodies that have been silenced by personal survival at the interactions of societal structures of harm. On top of this trauma-informed lens, we have to unlearn the often all-consuming and also trauma-inducing lessons we absorb through the mainstream media's complete and utter objectification of the body through hetero-patriarchal, ableist, classist, and racist structures of capitalist colonialism.⁸²

⁸¹ Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories*, 50.

⁸² See: Sonya Renee Taylor, *The Body Is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love*, (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2021).

A journey to unlearning and reclaiming is non-linear, and these layers of societal harm and personal trauma always intersect. Can I ever fully disentangle the wounds of my girlhood's body as a personal story of rape and survival from the confusion and distortion taught to me about the female body through mainstream media culture's objectification and sexualization of the female body? The journey of self-discovery takes on its own embodied journey of self-discovery for different bodies, races, genders, sexualities, abilities, etc. However, only an explicit, linear, and rational system of meaning making would suggest such disentanglement is necessary or even possible. From my embodied survivor-centred position as a feminist phenomenologist, the rhythm of my thighs speaking through burning heat as they rub together as I walk communicate with me and through me in a manner I do not need to translate into explicit structures that were never designed to honour the weight or heat of my thighs in the first place. Bringing in lenses of critical disability studies, there is no master narrative of embodiment and/or the body just as there is never one master narrative of trauma.⁸³ This embracing of diverse entanglements of experiences, responses, self-concepts, emotions, social locations, etc., however, is part of the framework of embodiment and feminist phenomenology itself in which the body is not an

⁸³ Critical Disability Studies scholar Dan Goodley maintains, "Disability studies take as their bread and butter an oppositional stance to the ubiquitous individualisation of disability within the solitary individual." See: Dan Goodley, *Dis/Ability Studies: Theorising Disablism and Ableism*, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 4.

object but a dimension of consciousness most of us have been taught to silence.

To conclude this section on memory, I must add it is so unfortunate that in trauma theory but also in mainstream Western culture at large, there is, for the most part, only discussion of implicit memory in terms of violent and terrifying experiences. Yes, the body implicitly stores violent memories that overwhelm the psyche's cognitive functions, but we implicitly store so many other types of experiences, including mystical and spiritual encounters with the divine, breathless moments of immense beauty and sexual pleasure, deep knowledge of nature and its seasonal cycles and/or our inherent belonging to those cycles as one of many species living on this planet.⁸⁴ Yet, the traditional association of memory and violence as the strongest example of implicit memory in the human psyche dominates most studies of trauma and memory. For instance, not two pages into Bond and Craps' Introduction to the history of trauma we read, "the memories that exert the deepest pull on our emotions are often those connected to violent histories."⁸⁵ Never in their discussion of trauma and memory is there consideration of the other types of experiences that defy cognitive recall and explicit description that, I would argue, equally pull on our emotions. The narrative of trauma and memory is, in traditional trauma theory, encased in a stone-set binary, one

⁸⁴ For more discussion of trauma, memory and spiritual remembering see my article: Iris J. Gildea, "The Poetry of Forgiveness: Poetic Inquiry, Forgiveness and Autoethnography in the Context of Childhood Sexual Abuse (CSA) Recovery," *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health* 23, no. 1 (2021): 77-97.

⁸⁵ Bond and Craps, *Trauma*, 2.

that completely disregards embodied memory and embodied consciousness along with the intangible human experiences of a full spectrum of emotions - ecstatic joy, mystical union, orgasmic climax, etc. The body is always present and therefore implicit memory is also always present.

My own journey taught me that when I reclaim my implicitly communicated language and wisdom of my body, I reclaim not only a language of the wound and of my trauma, but a way of knowing that includes and far exceeds the limits of explicit memory and meaning making. To this day, from within this embodied way of knowing, the parameters of what a wound and trauma are for me continue to change and evolve. Both are constantly re-defined from within my own implicit and innate connections of affective understanding and relationship with my environments. These ways of knowing burst traditional trauma theory open at its seams and doing so, reveal a much deeper way of being rooted in my body and in nourishing relationships with humans and with the ecosystems of which I am a part. I articulate such an approach that explores, from the inside out, this richly embodied and integrative dimension of implicit memory as a yoking together of trauma theory and feminist phenomenology.

Toward Integrative Praxes

I remember once many years ago, it was my first time attending a group specifically for sexual violence survivors rather than general healing or trauma groups. When it was my turn to speak, I described living with flashbacks as a type of

time travel. So many of the participants agreed with this phrase. Yet, when myself and others in the group spoke about time travel through sensorial perception and memory, we were not describing it as “bad.” Confusing perhaps, but now I view that confusion as a type of initiation into reclaiming my own sense of empowerment. I would not have arrived at this embodiment of empowerment if I had remained within the strong deficiency praxis that maintains a clear binary between implicit and explicit memory.

We are so often taught to normalize the language of “overcoming” our trauma. As discussed above, implied in this language and approach is that the body is something to reject and/or seek to control cognitively. The explicitly rational mind is separated and prioritized and can therefore control the implicit and so-called irrational body. This is especially true in somatic approaches enclosed within colonial patriarchal frameworks where the body is referred to as the place where our trauma is “stuck.” While there is certainly metaphorical and neurological validity in these approaches, (though in reality it would more appropriately be articulated as our mind being “stuck” in its attachment to the mind-body split reinforced by colonial patriarchal paradigms that prevent intellectual cognition from integrating into embodied and implicit memory), there is an inherent mind-body dualism implied if the ultimate goal of “recovery” is to cognitively take ownership over one’s body. This idea of ownership reinforces an inherently colonial framework. In reality, the body most likely needs what it has not received enough of: nurturing, compassion, and love. Why can we not orient our reclaiming and healing approaches to begin from embodied presence

oriented toward an integrative praxis of compassion and acceptance? The answer is simple- because our mainstream interpretive frameworks remain colonial and patriarchal. As such, they begin with a gaze that views that survivor as deficient.

What if instead of blaming and conquering the body we approached it as a holder of innate wisdom? When it comes to childhood trauma, we know this wisdom is present, because it is what allows us to survive in the first place. I was not a two-year or thirteen-year-old girl or twenty-five-year-old woman thinking to myself, “now it is time to cognitively dissociate.” Especially in childhood, I was a terrified girl whose mind and body, working as the perfectly integrated mechanism that they are, did what Nature, Source, God or Goddess, whichever language we prefer, designed the body-mind to do: protect itself.

If I begin my journey of reclaiming by acknowledging and honoring an innate wisdom within myself, I can turn inward and make contact with that wisdom. I can breathe with it, feel how it lives in different parts of my body-psyche. I can hold my entire being with compassion and self-love and invite myself to connect with this wisdom and feel a wholeness that includes in its scope the numbness and the black holes and the fragments and the embodied memory of pain and violence. In this approach, wholeness is nothing other than embodied presence. Presence with what is, even if that includes cognitive black holes, deep emotions of hate, confusion, a twinge of self-love and/or the desire for self-harm. Learning to be present with our oceanic depths of embodiment as a way of being rooted in ourselves and in this

world, this is cultivating a sense of embodied healing. For myself, to arrive at this type of presence, I had to let my body speak. I had to let the black holes speak. I had to let all that is in me speak. Writing with my wound for days, weeks, years, I came to embody an orientation of presence and self-knowledge that otherwise I would not have encountered or even come to know existed in my interrelational being.

This orientation of healing is very different from focusing on “remembering” traumatic experience as a cognitively driven act. Rather than digging through the mind, I let the body lead and learn to speak my inherent languages of trauma and embodiment rather than the language of explicit colonial knowledge making. My story is still told and reclaiming still occurs. A narrative of myself as an entanglement of various selves still emerges,⁸⁶ but through a different paradigm of what it means to heal, because with this model I do not aspire to become “normal.” Unless normal includes in its defining scope the experiences and innate wisdom of incest survivors, children of addicts, survivors of war and diaspora, refugees, and all the other lineages of the oceanic depths nestled in the psyches, bodies, and spirits of so many people and survivors of complex childhood trauma.

Yet, I am so aware that my ability to say and, in the next few chapters show, why I know the necessity of

⁸⁶ For a discussion of how one’s own self embodies many selves, see Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992). I often refer to myself/selves by alluding to Estés’ Jungian consideration of all the archetypes of identity we embody within the body-psyche, such as an innocent child and a wise old crone, and to a lens that includes my entwined identities of survivor-author-artist-educator-queer-woman etc.

integrative approaches that view our embodiments of complex trauma as gateways to transformative living rather than a sign of deficiency is because I have made and continue to make the journey/s through implicit waters of selfhood and memory. I have lived through years of childhood sexual violence which the body-psyche survives by numbing itself to explicit recall. I have spent my youth and young adulthood devoted to emotional, physical, and psychological numbing of implicit and explicit memory. I devoted myself to cultivating a sense of identity constructed for me by a societal and familial inheritance of colonial patriarchy that strove only to perfect societal standards and expectations of functionality and success, which caused so much damage to my own physical, mental, emotional and spiritual being. I have lived exiled from a rootedness of selfhood and I have done the exhausting and at times psyche splitting, heart breaking and soul enriching liberatory work of deconstructing those walls of illusory colonial perfection that required me to exile my deepest most vulnerable and authentic self – my survivor heart and psyche and body and non-linear story of that embodied survival – from my everyday consciousness.

Rather than approaching explicit and implicit flashbacks with fear or distrust or any praxis of deficiency, I, with the help of my poetic inquiry practice and the ocean, taught myself to appreciate and befriend them. I rejected the embodied implication of a diagnostic model of PTSD and the standard praxis of deficiency it is modeled after. In doing so, I allowed myself to do the body-psyche's innate work of reintegrating by feeling and listening to the numbed parts of myself. This numbing came both from the violence I survived

and from the cultural mechanisms of silencing that are the basis of normative culture in the West. These silencing forces cannot necessarily be separated from one another. They are entwined. Yet I learned that I can emerge from that numbness and come into an ever-evolving integrated construct of selfhood which for me has been an incredible journey of meeting and re-meeting my womanhood. Throughout these decades of embodied work, I learned to actively surrender my PhD-trained intellect that learned to categorize as a route into understanding so that I could learn with and from my body's wisdom. As a species of this earth, my embodied wisdom is inherently rooted into the ecosystems of land and water and air to which I belong.

Given that I mentioned it in the previous paragraph, I will say here that my relationship with PTSD is complicated. On the one hand, I strongly reject it as a diagnostic and identity marker that puts any deficiency on me or survivors for surviving incredible violence where we are then expected to perform in a culture that systematically silences survivors and supports perpetrators through the established colonial-patriarchal systems. Moreover, through the various cultural norms that silence rape culture, our society collectively gaslights survivors and I view PTSD, psychiatry, and their alignment to a deficiency praxis as part of that silencing matrix. I also reject its attachment to a biomedical model that refutes embodied wisdom. Accordingly, I altogether reject the traditional curative model to which PTSD is aligned. All of that said, on a macro level and cultural scale that also impacts my micro level daily life, I recognize that given my own embodiments of trauma, my life, especially when it comes to

performing in professional spaces, requires more emotional, intellectual, spiritual and physical labor than many others may have to exert in, for instance, the workplace. To show up in certain spaces for me requires energy that those who do not live with over a decade of gendered violence in their flesh and psyche simply do not have to expend. In this respect, disability policies and structures can support me *if* I am willing take on what Human Geography professor Toni Alexander aptly explains as the stigma that comes with, especially in academia, declaring an invisible disability such as PTSD or depression.⁸⁶ Where this stigma then adds more emotional, psychological, and physical labor for me to negotiate and may negate the support such disability policies are intended to offer.

My truest healing comes from honoring rather than rejecting what I have lived through and for me, my decision has, for the most part, been not to align myself with the diagnostic and psychiatry history of pathology that PTSD comes from. For me, to do so feels like I am ideologically aligning myself with an institutionalized history of silencing survivors of gendered violence. I'd prefer to establish a new paradigm, and in my own personal sphere of healing, that is what I did for myself. It remains true that I do not know how someone with the responsibility and power of creating healing paradigms at institutional levels can ever honour the beauty of survival that so many of us bear, visibly and invisibly, in our bodies-psyches if they have not made the journey themselves. For me, this beauty is a gold that shimmers across the dark crimsoned violet depths of my body-psyche's wound. What those educated by a paradigm that is not survivor-centred will never understand, is that this gold shimmer originates in the

same place that my dark depths do. Not in the violence I survived but in my reclaimed love for myself. That this shimmer of self-love springs forth from my dark depths, this is an embodied truth that, in my experience, cannot be cognitively learned or diagnostically evaluated.

Before moving on to explore the language of the wound through poetic discourse, which is how I came to my own embodied truths, there is another piece of the affective self, related to implicit memory, that is important to present in this theoretical overview of reconsidering trauma theory from more integrated and survivor-centred praxes. Namely, the place of shame in the healing of trauma. Shame is often inseparable from the contours of our childhood woundings. It is culturally bred into the depths of self-mistrust that so often accompanies us as we mature and grow in complex relationship with our wounds. Yet, as I learned to separate my embodied wounding from what I survived, when I claimed my trauma and embodiments of it as the parts of myself that need and deserve to be listened to rather than overcome, fixed or reworked but simply allowed to be, I learned that shame can dissolve and light can radiate through the centre of my deepest wounds and through the centre of myself.

Releasing Shame

Before entering this discussion of shame, in which I will lean into my survivor self and share my own embodied understanding of how shame and trauma were entwined, I close my eyes and check in with how the Salish Sea is supporting this chapter's exploration of trauma.

She is still soft. Still gentle. Her rhythm has not shifted much. Water rolls onto shore. Washes back out to sea. I am pulled to pair a visual image with this sound so I rise from my little writing desk and walk to the open window. I am met by such expansive blues. So many shades. Liquid blue that rolls from dark to darker but then there is the vastness of the sky's light blue mixing with those depths and for a moment I feel myself inside all of these layers of blue. As if my arms first and then my whole body extends into weightless blue companionship. Breathing into this sensation, it does not matter if I am liquid like the ocean or air like the sky. I simply am.

Sitting back down, I take a moment and reflect on what this embodied conversation with the Salish Sea teaches me about shame and I see so clearly that the shame I carried for years was never mine to begin with. That I have always been this person that simply is, a person to whom so much violence was done. Yet, I do not regret carrying shame with me for so long, because I also know that for me and my earliest teachings of embodiment, shame was a condition of love. Unravelling these two states of being from each other, while difficult and the work of many years of soft surrender to my embodied realities, taught me so much about the beauty and textures of love that I do not think I would have experienced otherwise. I will explore these textures more in the chapter on Belonging.

When it comes to childhood trauma, I have learned for myself and those I've sat in circle within various healing spaces that shame takes up residence in the body-psyche in multiple, complex, and interrelated ways. Some of these ways

include but are not limited to the shame that emerges because a child is being forced into behaviors, relationships, and/or environments that are manipulative, violent, and/or abusive. Or as Burstow shows, children often absorb the misplaced shame of their perpetrators and that this appropriated shame can also turn into self-blame as we hold ourselves responsible for the traumatizing situations we survive.⁸⁷ Or we develop layers of shame for not having a home life or childhood that matches the “perfect” homes depicted in media or described by children at school. In childhood these layers of shame instill themselves in the body-psyche. Such shame becomes rooted, consciously and/or unconsciously, in our adult sense of self and outlook toward relationships and the world. Ongoing social inequities survivors endure such as racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, classism, etc., only add to the weight of our shame. Needless to say, the entanglements of shame embodied by an individual and often shared by communities and families and in some case entire cultures are extremely complex.⁸⁸

When I reflect on my own experience of shame, I am aware that while the word “shame” did not come into my conscious sense of self until my late twenties or early thirties, for me shame was a condition of life, much like breathing. It was present with me every moment of every day. Its presence was intricately entwined in the development of all my early

⁸⁷ Burstow, “Toward a Radical Understanding,” 1298–1299.

⁸⁸ See: D. G. Dutton, C. van Ginkel, and A. Starzomski. “The Role of Shame and Guilt in the Intergenerational Transmission of Abusiveness.” *Violence and Victims* 10, no. 2 (1995): 121–131.

and later childhood relationships. Shame was a boundary-setter by which I lived my entire life. Though, I had no idea this was the case until I was in my late twenties and living alone for the first time in my life. With no family or partner, I finally had an opportunity to begin to meet myself. This meeting happened, not because I knew I should or because I wanted to “heal” or do “shadow work,” but because my body and psyche held me down with physical overuse injuries from long distance running that I still live with chronic pain from. Given the damage I did to my body, I cannot run any longer, but back then it was a coping mechanism that, since I was sixteen years old, had kept me literally running my stress and shame away from conscious awareness. My body-psyche eventually rejected my drive of denial fueled by an abusive and addicted athleticism and it stopped me from running away. But oh! I had not yet learned to listen to the subtle and not so subtle cues of my body. In fact, I refused to listen to my physical pain, and emotional pain eventually overtook me in the form of flashbacks until I could not but begin to awaken to the presence of shame in my life. As this occurred, I began to see that the shame I had carried my entire life was not mine to carry. It was my perpetrators’, my family’s, my teachers’, my ancestors’, society’s, but it was not mine. How could a child who wanted nothing but to love, to make art, and to play with her animals be responsible for that much shame?

Where has my shame gone now? I pause to sit with that question, and I hear the ocean again. I listen to the water receding out to sea and I know that it is true what the ocean and my body are telling me: so much of my shame has been carried out into vast bodies of water. This first began when I

moved close to Lake Ontario in Toronto. The healing that emerged as I saw that lake daily! I then began to live between Toronto and Cortes Island, B.C. When on Cortes, my daily walks by the ocean, another side of this same Salish Sea a few hundred kilometers away, brought me into new embodiments of being. In the rhythmic dance of water here and now, I hear so clearly how my relationship with bodies of water dissolved and transmuted my shame with a force greater than it or me.

This does not mean I live without fear or that moments of complete insecurity do not take me away from myself. It does not mean that shame does not resurface, transmuted out of those depths of fear. They do and it does. But the boundaries of my life and relationships are no longer set for me by shame as they once were. The ocean has taken and continues to take my shame, not because I now fit into society but because I fit within myself. Because I know in my bones and in the feeling of the weight of the flesh of my thighs, a weight I love and do not seek to slim, because matching myself to distorted beauty standards would erase the anchoring force of my womanhood that feeling my own thighs' flesh and weight is for me—I know, from the inside out, that I am not what was done to me.

I do not separate the Salish Sea or Lake Ontario from my own watery depths. I live in an intimate embodied connection with both and I know that this connectivity is responsible for dissolving my shame. The ocean is not a literary figure detached from my own fluidity; I flow into it and it flows into me. Just as the landscape of my temples and the flesh of my thighs runs into and through the valleys and peaks of the coastal mountains surrounding this small island I

am on. These interrelational ways of being, just like the moment of expanding into the layers of blue that I began this section with, are real.

There is a rhythm of our implicit embodiments that, as I will show in the next chapters, is a rhythm and power that crashes through cognitive consciousness, be it in dreams, flashbacks, sudden revelations, mystical encounters, or a swelling and locking of the chest during an anxiety attack. This rhythm is the body speaking, sometimes demanding, to be heard and expressed. By suggesting that we must embrace and lean into the rhythm of our chests locking or our flashbacks bursting forth, I realize that I am contradicting ‘normal’ understandings of mental illness in which rather than leaning into anxiety we are often taught to suppress it with pharmaceuticals and/or to cognitively establish boundaries that lead to functionality through traditional talk therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy.⁸⁹ However, I am not suggesting we lean into our black holes and ask them to engulf us and erase our cognitive sense of self as we surrender to undifferentiated experience. Far from it. I am speaking to an altogether different paradigm of healing and identity-making.

Here I come to what is the most important piece of this section: the implicit parts of myself rarely speak in the

⁸⁹ I do not mean to suggest a binary that pharmaceutical intervention is harmful. I believe that pharmaceutical intervention can be lifesaving and incredibly valuable. I would however critique the deficiency praxis’ integration into a pharmaceutical and biomedical model of trauma and recovery which can altogether silence the body. For extensive discussion of diverse views regarding these issues in Canadian contexts see: LeFrançois, Menzies and Reaume, *Mad Matters*.

language of everyday explicitness. The language of the wound is the language of the body and my body speaks through a language of affect and nature. Textures, movements, colours, smells, gasps of breath, an overwhelming surge in one's stomach that marks a flood of rage, joy, forgiveness and/or grief, dreams, intuitive insights, and ancestral heritages — these dimensions of meaning exceed the ordinary confines of knowledge-making established by explicit thought and cognitive determinism. Moreover, these discourses of affect connect me directly back to the earth. They reforge a conscious relationship with earth and through that relationship, I come to witness myself in the shifting tides, the setting or rising sun, the partial eclipse that turns the moon a burning red, the new shoot of life that grows out of the logged tree stump. So many images of life, survival and resilience speak through nature in every moment. These messages can help survivors reconnect with the parts of ourselves we are taught to fear and help us remember diverse ways of knowing and meaning making. We can use modalities and practices that teach us to simultaneously make contact with and express these parts of ourselves and in doing so, learn to witness ourselves in ways that are creative and empowering, speaking from our own wounds' languages rather than those created by individuals who do not know how to speak the languages that connect us to the oceanic depths of our own being. To return to a statement I made a few paragraphs above, I am not suggesting that we lean into our anxiety and stay in a place of panic or fear, which can be retraumatizing. I am suggesting that we learn to listen to what our anxiety, as a language of the body, is telling us.

Learning to Listen

Aligned with the above discussion of implicit and explicit memory, survivor-researcher, Sidorchuck, writes in her study of healing CSA and complex trauma,

Consequently, to heal the trauma, talk therapy and changing the person's thoughts is not enough; it is important to go back into the implicit procedural memory and work with the sensations and feelings found there.⁹⁰

Her survivor-authored study, like Linder, shows that our (*our* here specifically referring to survivors who author trauma-theory) integrative healing does not, for the most part, occur through talk therapy or techniques of cognitive behavioral therapy. As expressed above, literal and linear re-narration of traumatic events is itself often re-traumatizing, yet it is the basis of traditional psychiatry. Indeed, traditional approaches have often assumed that recovery *is* reclaiming the explicit memory and putting together a cohesive linear narrative to replace the black holes of cognitive memory.

In my experience, the black hole does not need anyone or anything to fill it. If applying a literal meaning of this figurative expression, such filling would be impossible. Black holes in our psyches speak with a power and force that is a constant source of creative energy. Their creative drive can rise and fall through various renditions of expression, much like

⁹⁰ Sidorchuk, *Childhood Trauma and the Feminine Principle*, 3.

the ocean. However, they speak not with the language of linearity, but with the language of the wound. This is the language of the implicit, the affective, the sensory and the non-linear entanglements of our rich resources of meaning making. Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth's work was certainly groundbreaking in bringing the affective and aesthetic dimensions of expression into trauma theory. Her work with Holocaust survivors shows that explicit and linear cognitively driven retelling is not that which heals, but rather, Caruth claims, it is aesthetically mediated narratives that are able to represent our histories and traumas for us and for the world.⁹¹

I take Caruth's work even further by questioning the structures of the narrative being shaped and shared by the survivor. While Caruth invites the affective and the aesthetic, her work and many other theorists and practitioners that bring narrative interventions into healing still aim to produce linear narratives. What if there is another orientation of language to serve as a healing intervention, one aligned to less explicit constructs of meaning? By this I mean, what if, instead of directing the wound toward a preconstructed understanding of meaning organized by past, present and future, we allowed the non-linear and affective to lead the way? This approach to healing creates a practice that shifts consciousness over time rather than directing healing into the explicit and projected orientation of knowledge that is rooted in patriarchal and colonial models of understanding.

⁹¹ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2010).

Aligned with traditional trauma theory, Rachel Spear, who works on connections between writing and trauma, writes of traumatic memory:

Therefore, memories are stored beyond an individual's consciousness, and in fragments, and the act of trauma itself is often, if not always, associated with silencing, resulting in a lack of language and even a lack of narrative structure. All of these factors complicate the trauma narrative—as they affect the purposes and processes related to creating the texts.⁹²

Rooted in this understanding of a poetics of trauma or what Van der Weil terms an “aesthetics of trauma,” I strongly argue against the “lack of language” so often associated with traditional renderings of complex trauma.⁹³ As suggested in the previous section on memory, the body does remember and it does speak, yet it is a remembering that is most often unaligned with the traditional or mainstream understandings of knowledge. I have learned that such remembering is at times a visceral presence of personhood that, like implicit memories of trauma, requires aesthetic and non-normative modes of expression for integration and understanding. What would happen if those of us in research, education, and

⁹² Rachel N. Spear, "Let Me Tell You a Story: On Teaching Trauma Narratives, Writing, and Healing," *Pedagogy* 14, no. 1 (2013): 62.

⁹³ Reina Van der Wiel, *Literary Aesthetics of Trauma Virginia Woolf and Jeanette Winterson* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014).

healing communities suspended critical judgements and linear, categorical thinking and allowed ourselves to inquire and communicate across various modalities and experiences that embrace liminality and implicit ways of knowing rather than erasing them with cognitive imperialism?

When I do this alone with my creative practices or in groups with others, I immediately enter a sacred presence of connectivity. I can tap into that state here while I write and that connectivity moves me from my own depths into the soils of the shoreline and extends outward into the depths of the Salish Sea. Again, in this moment, I hear the sea's steady rhythm, this time in my bones, as if their marrow itself moves intuitively with grace and purpose through my body. In this feeling of embodiment, I experience a healing of presence that theoretical language can point toward but always fails to capture. Yet how do we communicate to each other in and from a place of embodiment connected to earth and woven through the deepest layers of the psyche? How do we let that communication inform our research? We must do so if we seek to prevent future caregivers, often in positions of power, from using frameworks that reinscribe survivors into praxes of deficiency. We must reach out and learn through the non-normative discourses that invite embodiment to be present. Without a doubt, all aesthetic interventions offer access to the wound's language. I focus here on poetic discourse because it brings an aesthetic impulse into the linguistic register, thereby offering common ground with theory and discursive language while simultaneously enhancing, challenging and/or transcending the confines of explicitly discursive language.

Van der Wiel nicely summarizes nonlinearity in trauma narratives in her study of the “trauma aesthetic” which she writes “is uncompromisingly avant-garde: experimental, fragmented, refusing the consolations of beautiful form and suspicious of familiar representation and narrative conventions.”⁹⁴ If we shift our perspective of what it means to remember and, more importantly, what it means to be in creative relationship with healing and with our full selves, we can come into working with memory, trauma and selfhood differently. Indeed, perhaps we will, as Van der Wiel hopes, become “suspicious of familiar representation and narrative conventions,” because from an embodied perspective we know they are not necessarily narratives modeled in authentic communication with and/or representation of the realities we embody.

When cultural paradigms invite poetic discourse rather than explicit language or even “cohesive” narrative into valid meaning making structures, we survivors, and those supporting us, can begin to experience the reality that trauma speaks readily. From here, we can experience that there is no “lack of language” or deficiency of personhood present. From this perspective, the ability of poetic discourse to transcend the rules of grammar and conventional narrative promotes an aesthetic mediation that linguistically accommodates the disjointed characteristics of the survivor’s implicit and explicit memories. Such an aligning of language and experience is clearly demonstrated in the poetic memoir, *Where the Rivers Join*, by Indigenous survivor-poet-activist Becky Lane. Lane writes:

⁹⁴ Van der Wiel, *Literary Aesthetics*, 16.

I feel so terrible.

how can I fit the kinds of abuse I'm remembering into

some

kind of me

it's so much and it's so broad and it's so utterly

fantastical. I must be making it up

remember make up

remember cover up

find hide

am I finding or am I hiding?

Both. I'm hiding from what I've found.⁹⁵

Radical grammar, inclusion of visual space on the page, space that represents the tensional embodied reality between real and imagined, self and other, memory and forgetting, hiding and presence – only poetic discourse can linguistically support

⁹⁵ Lane, *Where the Rivers Join*, 14.

Lane's ongoing process of embodied discovery of her own history as a survivor of ritual abuse and CSA.

If we acknowledge that trauma itself has a language and an aesthetics, we require mediums capable of representing and expressing the implicit nature of our body-psyche's implicit memories and wounds. We also need that language to be integrated into systems of meaning making and research that do not seek to reduce experiences and expressed truths into ordinary prose centred around a beginning, a middle and an end. Tensional space is an essential part of Lane's expression and her self-linguaging cited above. So often in healing programs that incorporate the arts, I find an attitude along the lines of: "Ok, we'll do our art here and we'll get out what we need to get out. Then we can translate that art to explicit cognitive meaning structures and then...we'll be healed." A primary message of this book is that aesthetic expression and mediums are valid in and of themselves. We do not need to perform a literary criticism of our own self-linguaging in poetic discourse to validate our expressions. By fully integrating aesthetic expression and meaning into dominant forms of meaning making, in educational, research, and therapeutic spaces, we create more opportunity for the language of the wound to be explored, expressed, and integrated with explicit meaning.

And yet! Despite advocating for implicit affective interventions of language through poetic discourse, most of my language has thus far been in explicit, theoretical prose. This is intentional. I am consciously building a theoretical foundation in this chapter and the next before inviting you into less traditional structures (and waters) of meaning

making through my mixed methods of poetics weaving in and out of theory. Like autoethnographer Stacy Holman Jones, I believe that theory is an artform of creative and transformative communication.⁹⁶ Working with theory and explicit language is essential for creating and changing paradigms, because it is the dominant medium through which Western culture creates meaning and conducts research. However, theoretical language is not enough, and my considerations of trauma theory now bring me to the edge of the theoretical prose I have been working with in this chapter by asking how we can incorporate and expand articulations of the intersections of power, language, history, gender, sexuality, body, etc., beyond intellectual and theoretical constructs and articulations. How do we include the textures, shapes, feelings, images and oceanic depths that speak to psychologically embodied realities that do not fit into the boundaries and structures of explicit and linear language? How do we fully create affective spaces and discourses that nurture the complexities of emotional health and attend to our wounds while simultaneously enacting liberatory praxes that affect paradigm changes of meaning making? If the pathways forward in trauma work are not the clear linear projections of colonial, patriarchal and ableist paradigms, what are they?

⁹⁶ Indeed, I apply Stacy Holman Jones's view that "theorizing is an ongoing, movement-driven process that links the concrete and abstract, thinking and acting, aesthetics and criticism" through my scholarly work by fusing theory and aesthetics into one integrated medium. See: Stacy Holman Jones, "Living Bodies of Thought: The 'Critical' in Critical Autoethnography," *Qualitative Inquiry* 22, no. 4 (2016): 229.

Enfleshed spirit mixed with imagination.

Embodiments of voice that flicker in the eye.

*Silence and breath exposed in shifting colours of
language.*

*Water and marrow mixed in a wave of deep inner
knowing.*

*A place I dreamt of and remembered when she told
me she too once tucked herself away in a place where
the darkened heartbeat of the Mother's womb is all
she could hear.*



Artwork 2: Mother's Womb, mixed media

A rectangle image with a dark left side that gradually becomes brighter through the centre and to the right. The middle is yellow streaked with black, between a blue horizontal marking on the top and a reddish horizontal marking on the bottom right corner.

Chapter 2: The Language of the Wound

Today, seagulls add layers to the ocean's soundscape that accompanies my writing. Their high-pitched squawks stream through waves rolling across the shore. Both reach my ears in an entanglement of life in sound. When I pause here, once again I hear and feel my body interact with this ecosystem. My consciousness enters a phenomenological commingling of being and meaning making.

I listen in. I join.

Such listening leads to affective ways of knowing and a presence of interconnection that integrates itself into my own being and healing. This process-oriented and embodied entanglement is the theory making I am here to engage with. Writing this book *is* a practice of feminist phenomenology. Accordingly, I write my commingling and entanglement with this ecosystem of the Salish Sea into my theory making. While there are various methodological routes available to reflect upon this integrative process, this book focuses on one in particular: poetic inquiry as a practice of learning to speak the language of the wound.

Psychologist and poetic-inquiry researcher, Helen Owton, writes of poetic inquiry: "Between lines of prose and poetry the reader may gain knowing beyond the actual words used because of the connections made when the experience is

kept whole.”⁹⁷ Keeping the experience whole, poetic inquiry, which I formulate as a practice of feminist phenomenology, does not rest on static or predetermined understandings of meaning, form, expression, or identity. Like the shifting and visceral textures of implicit memory and of these soundscapes of the Salish Sea interlaced with the seagulls’ caws, this practice invites meaning and awareness to shift with and through our embodiments and the ecosystems those embodiments are a part of. When this practice is applied to trauma praxes, it allows survivors’ concepts and embodiments of identity, wellness and healing to shift and change as well. As we write for weeks or months or years from within this phenomenological orientation, cognitive awareness opens to embodied awareness and vice versa. A new consciousness emerges, a *poetic consciousness*.

My goal in this chapter is to present what poetic inquiry looks like when applied to a context of healing and why it is a practice that can teach one how to creatively and phenomenologically encounter a language of the wound. In this chapter, I continue with the last chapter’s emphasis on theoretical ground making so that I can show the established research methods through which I build my autoethnographic praxis. In the second part of this book, I move into demonstrating this praxis by jumping more fully into the waters of poetic inquiry. If you want to skip the theory-making and move directly to swimming in poetic waters of belonging, you are of course welcome to do so.

⁹⁷ Helen Owton, *Doing Poetic Inquiry*, (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2017) 227.

As its title suggests, the ultimate goal of this book is to show how a practice of poetic inquiry within a feminist phenomenological framework can more fully reveal a sense of belonging for survivors of complex childhood trauma. This sense of belonging is embodied and not based on the tenants of acquiring power over other beings and/or our environments as so many of us are taught through colonial capitalism. When it comes to adults healing with childhood trauma, I will show through my own experience and language of the wound, that this felt sense of belonging can open as we re-enter the gates of childhood trauma. As Jane Rowan's memoir, *The River of Forgetting* shows, many of us spend an incredible amount of energy repressing, denying, and running from these gates.⁹⁸ I know from my own experience and in talking and working with survivors that there is great wisdom in such repression and/or redirection of our energy and awareness. It is an unsafe environment and/or situation that leads to repression in the first place. It may take years or decades to build a safe-enough environment or community for ourselves, physically, emotionally, psychologically and/or spiritually, in which we can begin the journey of reclaiming in a way that intentionally redirects a nurturing gaze to our wound.

I literally and metaphorically ran from acknowledging my trauma and my wounded relationship with myself. I ran because the so-called "healing" paradigms I tried taught me that the only way to approach my own wound was from the stance of a deficiency praxis centred around cognitively recalling horrific experiences of my life in a closed off room

⁹⁸ Rowan, *The River of Forgetting*.

with a person in power. I strongly believe that some of us survivors resist therapy and deficiency-praxis models not because we are afraid or too damaged or whatever other common stereotypes are applied to us, but because our wise intuitive selves know that such a path is not always a safe entryway. There are other ways to enter the gates of our wounds as adults on our paths of life-making discovery, ways that do not take the pain away but teach us how to simultaneously heal and transform without re-traumatizing ourselves through paradigms rooted in colonial patriarchy. There are ways that tap into the inherently creative spark of the human body and psyche that come from our vast interconnection with all that is. A connection I am reminded of by the sounds of the Salish Sea that co-create this book with me.

I seek to show that when we learn to listen and speak our own the language of the wound, we can access such radical embodied creativity. I also believe doing so within our own embodied realms opens us to the sensitivity needed to sit with and listen to the language of others' wounds. These varied soundscapes of our own embodied realms may take time to listen into. We may have to relearn to feel them out within the liminal space that is our interconnectivity. Yet over time, with supportive tools and frameworks the language of the wound awakens, through psychopoetic and embodied realms, a somewhat instinctual and intuitive way of being rooted and connected into the social and environmental ecosystems we are a part of. I discovered that as this connection awakens, the pain of working with childhood trauma emerges in a different light, one that has with it a

glimmer of gold along the wound's edge. I pause after writing that line and I feel that gold glimmer deep in my womb, in my throat and in the slight feel of chills that come over my body as the sound of the waves and the seagulls' caws wash over me.

A practice of poetic inquiry emerges over time through the re-forging of relationship between an individual and her disowned, abandoned, hidden, confused and/or othered parts of herself. As Gabor Maté's recent book, the *Myth of Normal*, shows, as members of a contemporary Western society that teaches us to ignore, repress, and/or disown our most vulnerable selves, we are all of us othered from parts of ourselves and, Maté suggests, we live with trauma as a result.⁹⁹ I agree with Maté and those from the field of ecopsychology who in the 1970s wrote of similar collective traumas caused by the severing of ourselves from the natural ecosystems we are a part of, a line of reasoning that also runs through much Indigenous wisdom sharing.¹⁰⁰ Poetic inquiry as a praxis of coming into an awakened consciousness of embodiment through the language of the wound can certainly be applied to healing in this more general embodiment of trauma and I've offered poetic inquiry groups for such contexts. In this chapter however, I am writing with particular focus on healing for survivors of complex childhood

⁹⁹ Gabor Maté and Daniel Maté, *The Myth of Normal : Trauma, Illness, and Healing in a Toxic Culture* (New York: Avery, 2022).

¹⁰⁰ For an introduction to ecopsychology see: Douglas A. Vakoch and Fernando Castrillón, eds. *Ecopsychology, Phenomenology, and the Environment: The Experience of Nature* (New York: Springer, 2014). For an Indigenous perspective, see: Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013).

trauma with a focus on how affective and implicit embodiments become languaged through poetic inquiry. This languaging forms a bridge between co-creative self-awareness and expression.

Anzaldúa articulates how this co-creative reality challenges any pathology of pre-determined identity cast upon survivors. She writes:

Writing is a process of discovery and perception that produces knowledge and *conocimiento* (insight). I am often driven by the impulse to write something down, by the desire and urgency to communicate, to make meaning, to make sense of things, to create myself through this knowledge-producing act. I call this impulse the “Coyolxauhqui imperative”: a struggle to reconstruct oneself and heal the *sustos* resulting from woundings, traumas, racism, and other acts of violation *que hechan pedazos nuestras almas*, split us, scatter our energies, and haunt us.¹⁰¹

Her attention to creating oneself through the “knowledge-producing act” nicely emphasizes the phenomenological nature of writing-based inquiry practice. Through this practice, bridges emerge between how we language ourselves in the here and now and our past and futures selves. These bridges take on many forms that appear on and off the page: a

¹⁰¹ Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark*, 2.

dazzling tango with explicit language; dreamlike states of lyricism; jarring or staccato rhythms of rage seeping out of our psyche and onto the page; sitting with an abuser, forgiving him, standing, and walking out, never to see him again; or looking out into the ever-listening void and speaking (or writing) the most elegant “fuck you” ever spoken. It has been my experience that a practice of poetic inquiry for a survivor of complex childhood trauma leads to an entanglement of all these experiences and more.

It remains that poetic inquiry is always a process-oriented practice. Moreover, these poetically mediated bridges point to a dialectical reality. In this reality, the survivor-author is in relationship with the multilayered environments of which she is a part, even if it takes us weeks, months, years, or decades to come to feel that sense of connection and belonging from the inside-out. Most likely this feeling of connection will, like water’s waves, ebb and flow, rise and fall through conscious and unconscious embodied awareness.

Embodied consciousness that speaks in an integrated awareness with cognition often needs to be relearned as a way of knowing because felt and acknowledged interbeing is not normalized by the systems of power upon which Western society has been constructed. To feel in our bodies the layering of how we interact and are connected with ourselves, each other, and our ecosystems, is a principle that by its very nature goes against the individualist and capitalist imperative to exploit and profit off of human beings, land, ocean, animals, and the collective ecosystems of which we are a part. This is especially true when “feeling into” includes inviting and accepting the patches and layers of numbness,

depression, and disability that an ableist and sanist paradigm would teach us to disown, feel shame for and/or to cognitively control or erase. An imperative of productivity and exploitation, built into the foundation of Western culture and into our normative understandings of “success” and “wellness” cannot but impact structures of meaning making on macro and micro levels which in turn impact our self-perceptions as survivors of childhood trauma.

I proceed in this chapter using a feminist lens that situates experiences of complex childhood trauma within the influencing factors of poverty, racism, sexism, etc. My feminist lens is a framework that adds a necessary layer to every survivor’s embodied and socially located story. As such, I frame poetic inquiry as a feminist and decolonizing practice capable of centering survivors in our healing while also enhancing cultural paradigms of meaning making. In this chapter I invite a complex layering of interconnection of implicit and explicit realities, of inner depths of embodiment, and their interaction with the influence of external forces of power that grab hold of us from within those depths. As a feminist phenomenologist, I prioritize entering this practice with a founding principle of rejecting the systems of meaning making that continually silence the implicit histories stored in the textures, sounds and co-creative affective qualities of experience. Today I invite the sounds of the gulls and waves as a rhythm to explore this reclaiming with me, not knowing entirely where it will take me, but trusting in it as a starting point, because it is the embodiment in which I find myself situated, here and now. To disregard its relevance to my body-psyche’s drive to write would be to disconnect myself from

the present moment. I spent the first several decades of my life in active disconnection from such presence as a necessary means of survival. I do not need to do that anymore. As Ani DiFranco sings in her song *Swan Dive* that blends queer identity with reclaiming, “I’ve got better things to do than survive.”¹⁰²

Theoretical Groundwork

What is Poetic Inquiry and Where Does it Come From?

According to Owton, poetic inquiry refers to the practice of inquiring into meaning making through poetry and/or poetic discourse.¹⁰³ When I teach poetic inquiry in the context of healing and reclaiming, I approach it as a stream of consciousness practice that is not focused on academic or commercial viability as “good” writing. In fact, the focus of the practice as I teach it and use it, is to let go of attachment to any projected understanding of a good “poem.” As poet and activist Adrienne Rich shows, doing so allows us to unlearn the constructs and ideologies of power-over entwined within our learned use of language.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Ani DiFranco, “Swan Dive,” *Little Plastic Castle*, Righteous Babe, 1998.

¹⁰³ Owton, *Doing Poetic Inquiry*, 9.

¹⁰⁴ Adrienne Rich, *The Burning of Paper Instead of Children*, Swarthmore, accessed May 19, 2019, <https://www.sccs.swarthmore.edu/users/99/jrieffel/poetry/rich/children.html>.

What constitutes poetry or poetic discourse in this context is left to the writer to discover. My use of the word poetic here denotes a kind of freedom to write with language however one desires, be that with rich metaphors, broken or subversive grammar, poetic prose, scientific prose, or a blend of these and many more literary devices, styles and/or voices. As Owton writes:

Poems are part of my ongoing engagement with living in the world and the poems are attempts to capture multiple moments, intensities and layers of struggle. Despite the risk of producing messy texts, Gilbourne (2010, 2011) emphasised the need for acceptance of these types of ‘unsettling truths’ because they can invoke new perspectives and invite fresh interpretations.¹⁰⁵

As a survivor becoming the author of my own embodied expressions, if and when I write with my body’s wounds, hopes, feelings and testaments to surviving violence, I become a type of inquirer into my own psyche’s enfleshment. Making this journey, from the outset, I give myself permission to be messy and to encounter “multiple truths.” The reality is that with a practice like this *I am unattached to any idea of what poetry is*. I do not know what is going to emerge on the page. Whether I am working with a group of self-identified survivors or a group of researchers learning about poetic inquiry, we come into a practice of holding space for surprise

¹⁰⁵ Owton, *Doing Poetic Inquiry*, 7.

without attachment to labels of good or bad. When we do this, however much we succeed or fail at non-attachment, we are *doing* poetic inquiry.

When we integrate this type of poetic inquiry into our research and inquiry models and practices, we shift the boundaries of the explicit, rational, and cognitively-determined parameters of meaning. We create space on the page, within ourselves, and in our concepts of research and knowledge production to form new paradigms of meaning making that normalize messy texts (and the messy identities those texts are based upon). We allow experience and meaning to speak with and through “multiple truths” at once. When this practice extends into trauma work, trauma practitioners and survivors shift the parameters of healing and we allow ourselves to learn, over time, to speak from and with our own language of the wound by quite literally allowing the body to speak. In this respect poetic inquiry is a practice of creating linguistic, aesthetic, and conceptual space in research and in healing paradigms for embodiment and other ways of knowing.

My own formulation of this poetic inquiry praxis comes from yoking together two fields in which poetic inquiry emerged as a method and approach to meaning making: arts-based research (ABR) in qualitative research methods and feminist practices of autoethnographic writing and poetry.¹⁰⁶ Below I present background to these contexts

¹⁰⁶ There is a strong psychotherapeutic and clinical tradition of a formal field of poetry therapy. While my work with poetic inquiry at times overlaps with poetry therapy, this tradition is focused on using poetry as a medium for arriving at wellness in a framework that, in a clinical practice,

and practices in order to demonstrate how yoking them together forges a language and pedagogy for trauma work within survivor-centred approaches on micro and macro levels. I also present the conceptual groundwork for bringing these practices together rather than chronicling the history of each tradition. Given that my work with poetic inquiry is always situated in the context of developing survivor-centred praxes, my approach differs (sometimes slightly and sometimes considerably) from established theories and practices of poetic inquiry.

Arts-Based Qualitative Research

Firstly, as a formal discipline in qualitative research, poetic inquiry is a subset of arts-based research (ABR) which recognizes the potential of all aesthetic mediums and

adheres to a diagnostic model of pathology. I appreciate this field and having trained in Expressive Arts Therapy, and once thought I would work within this framework; however, I have greatly departed from the model of clinical work in favor of a cultural studies approach to healing through feminist phenomenology and embodiment as a survivor-centred lens contributing to cultural pedagogies of healing in grass roots community circles without entering into clinical modalities. As such, my work here is not influenced very much by Poetry Therapy and therefore I do not include it in this chapter's background information on poetic inquiry. It should be noted, however, there are many techniques in poetry therapy that overlap with research methods used in feminist practices of poetic inquiry in terms of how we come into writing. What differs between the two approaches is one is doing psychotherapy, while poetic inquiry as I present it here, is not. Work with poetic inquiry can absolutely be integrated into the act of psychotherapy. For more on poetry therapy see: Nicholas Mazza, *Poetry Therapy: Theory and Practice. Third edition*, (New York: Routledge, 2022).

discourses to contribute to research and knowledge making. When it comes to the arts-infused tradition of qualitative research, Shawn McNiff's work in the field of creative inquiry centres how art functions as a method and mode of research and meaning making. McNiff, an Expressive Arts therapist, professor, and academic researcher, writes, "research is a process committed to the creation of new knowledge, but yet we have been reluctant to expand the methods of inquiry needed to enlarge our intellectual and therapeutic assumptions."¹⁰⁷ McNiff's body of work, which is concerned with methods of research and therapeutic outcomes of such research, shows that the expansion about which he writes includes integrating the arts into dominant meaning making methods. Just as I suggested in the Introduction, that rather than writing about the body, we must write *with the body*, McNiff's work shows that rather than writing about the arts, we must *make meaning through the arts* by embedding arts-based practices into our research methods. Doing so has the potential to change the ways we think and the ways we make meaning about ourselves and the world.

Narrowing ABR to poetic inquiry and picking up the distinction between poetry and poetic inquiry, Owton writes: "Whilst poetry is a craft allowing us to experiment with language, rhythm and rhyme, Poetic Inquiry is a methodological approach that seeks to reveal and communicate multiple truths via intuitive contemplation and creative expression."¹⁰⁸ I agree with this distinction between poetic inquiry and poetry. I would also qualify Owton's

¹⁰⁷ Shaun McNiff, *Art-Based Research* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 1998), 13.

¹⁰⁸ Owton, *Doing Poetic Inquiry*, 9.

definition by adding that there are many different methods that fall under the scope of poetic inquiry. Accordingly, methods employed vary depending upon the researcher's intentions and goals.

Methods vary considerably from, for example, found poetry used in qualitative research methods, to autoethnographic poetry to map poems, to the stream of consciousness writing I employ in community healing and poetry groups.¹⁰⁹ In terms of what poetic inquiry looks like in practice within the scope of qualitative research methods applied in various academic fields, an excerpt from poetic inquirer and researcher Monica Prendergast's *29 Ways of Looking at Poetic Inquiry* is very informative:

XI

Poetic inquiry is sometimes presented or published as a single poem or suite, context free.

XII

Poetic inquiry is sometimes presented as a prose-based essay that includes poetry woven throughout.

XIII

Poetic inquiry is sometimes presented and/or published with visual images or art or photography that interplay with each other.

¹⁰⁹ For an introduction to poetic inquiry and qualitative research see: Sandra Faulkner, *Poetic Inquiry: Craft, Method and Practice*, (New York: Routledge, 2019).

XIV

Poetic inquiry is most often found in autobiographical, autoethnographical or self-study investigations.

XV

Poetic inquiry is also commonly seen as poetic transcription and representation of participant data.

XVI

Poetic inquiry is occasionally seen as a way to artistically present the work of theorists and/or practitioners using the technique of found poetry.¹¹⁰

This small excerpt from *29 Ways* affirms that the form poetic inquiry takes varies depending upon the researcher-inquirer, the subject matter, and the goal of one's writing and/or research practice. What does not shift, however, is that poetic discourse is a practice of exploration and meaning making that functions in ways that are sometimes complimentary, sometimes contrary, and sometimes altogether transcendent to ordinary discourse.

Despite the method employed, poetic inquiry offers inquirers access to a process of revealing the multiple truths referenced above by Owton. This multiplicity of meaning signals a framework capable of complicating the singularly explicit expectation of "knowledge" characteristic of

¹¹⁰ Monica Prendergast, "Poem Is What? Poetic Inquiry in Qualitative Social Science Research" in *International Review of Qualitative Research* 1, no. 4 (2009): 563.

traditional research and an application of language aligned with explicit and cognitively-driven objectification. Or as innovator-researcher, Laurel Richardson, who brought found poetry into her qualitative research methods writes:

By settling words together in new configurations, the relations created through each repetition, rhythm, rhyme let us see and hear the world in a new dimension. Poetry is thus a practical and powerful means for reconstitution of worlds. It suggests a way out of the numbing and deadening, disaffective, disembodied...sensibilities characteristic of phallogocentric social science.¹¹¹

Richardson's framing of poetry as a way out of the "numbing and deadening, disaffective, disembodied" certainly speaks to the way this project has aligned itself with poetic inquiry. It also speaks to this chapter's scope by including the dimension of relational embodiment signaled by the soundscape and imagery of the seagulls and waves.

There is no "right" way to do poetic inquiry. I view poetic inquiry as a practice whereby one can learn to enter into relationship with one's own inner and embodied self/ves as they interact with poetic expression that contributes to shaping the "new worlds" that Richardson writes of. What

¹¹¹ Laurel Richardson, "Poetics, Dramatics, and Transgressive Validity: The Case of the Skipped Line," *Sociological Quarterly*, 34, no. 4 (1993), 695.

one does with one's poetry is entirely up to the poet-inquirer-survivor. For example, they may decide to review and/or re-interpret words written during different points of their journey to gain reflective insight. This technique is often used in critical autoethnography where journal entries and poems written at various points in one's life, often when struggling with loss, trauma and/or a series of events/mental states, are interpreted as data by the autoethnographer through the research and writing process. I will use this method in the next two chapters to demonstrate a process of how I *wrote with the wound* and, reflecting upon those poetic inquiries, expand beyond a limited self-reflexive idea of wounding into a phenomenological sense of belonging.

Beyond this inclusion of poetic inquiry data into a critical or reflective research practice, often referred to as critical autoethnography, one's practice may emerge as a momentary self-expression in words that produces a text never to be explored again.¹¹² I have worked with many women that write a poem and then burn it, tear it up or bury it as an embodied ritual in their healing journey. These rituals are powerful and can arise spontaneously or be planned. Alternatively, a poem may be returned to, shaped, reshaped, and eventually shared in community. Combining several of these approaches into an autoethnographic methodology, I could write about the experience of writing and burning my poem, reflecting on the embodied journey it opened for me.

¹¹² For a discussion of critical autoethnography see: Stacy Holman Jones, "Living Bodies of Thought: The 'Critical' in Critical Autoethnography" *Qualitative Inquiry*, 22, no.4 (2016), 228–237.

This practice invites embodied creativity as a phenomenological process of meaning making. There are no predetermined markers of “correct” production and/or processes because what happens with the texts and words produced is not the focus. Rather, the focus is on the various ways the practice allows the researcher to come into a poetically mediated relationship with her own experiences. In my world, the “researcher” is a trauma survivor seeking to inquire into her own body-psyche, be this someone who also happens to be working in academia and/or a woman writing spontaneous poem-text messages to herself on her bed at night, exhausted after work and putting her children to bed.

In order to signal how poetic inquiry can help us learn to listen to and communicate embodiments of identity and belonging, critical literacy educator and poetic inquirer, Lorri Nielsen writes:

Poetry and inquiry ask us to listen deeply. We must put ourselves in the context; we must feel, taste, hear what someone is saying. Sometimes we must learn to listen under the words, to hear what is not being said. We must be empathetic, aware, non-judgemental, and cautious. We owe our participants and ourselves nothing less.¹¹³

For Nielsen, poetic inquiry involves crafting a very intentional practice on the part of the researcher-inquirer. While Nielsen

¹¹³ Lorri Nielsen, “Learning to Listen: Data as Poetry: Poetry as Data,” *Journal of Critical Inquiry into Curriculum and Instruction* 5, no. 2 (2004), 42.

writes about conducting ethnographic research more broadly rather than working specifically in the context of trauma, her words show how such a practice aligns with trauma work. The concept of “listening under the words of hearing “what is not being said” is to enter implicit ways of knowing that living with complex trauma, at some point or another, demands of us. I consider such listening under the words as a type of deep listening that poetic inquiry can invite us into.¹¹⁴ While working and practicing with poetic inquiry we can unlearn some of the hindrances of objective and explicit language and discover new dimensions of truth-telling. As poetic inquiry integrates with healing and feminist phenomenology, the question becomes, what happens when we become deep listeners of our own embodied histories? What happens when that act of listening entwines with the imagination, the body’s implicit ways of knowing, the ecosystems speaking with and through our bodies, and the transformative nature of poetic inquiry itself? The rest of this book argues that what happens is embodied healing.

¹¹⁴ Similarly, but of a different tradition, Indigenous scholars Ann McGrath, Laura Rademaker, and Ben Silverstein write “by engaging in deep listening, western historicities will be better able to respond to the challenge of Indigenous knowledges of the deep past, confronting and transforming the discipline and providing a path towards a more inclusive practice of deep history-writing.” From this perspective, deep listening is also a practice of unlearning “the ways that all historical knowledge has been shaped – in different but related ways – by the transformations wrought by imperialism, colonialism, and the modern world system.” See: Ann McGrath, Laura Rademaker, and Ben Silverstein, “Deep History and Deep Listening: Indigenous Knowledges and the Narration of Deep Pasts” in *Rethinking History* 25, no. 3 (July 3, 2021): par. 5.



I invite affective dimensions of experience to interact meaningfully with the imagination, memory, and our established theoretical constructs by incorporating poetic inquiry into a cultural trauma praxis as a method for self-inquiry. In addition, poetic inquiry can be used to generate multiple truths in the field of trauma studies itself. In doing so, a dance is created between trauma theory, feminist phenomenology and poetic inquiry, a dance which is so important for wound tending. As I've demonstrated by writing this book with the Salish Sea, I also invite the earth, body, and breath to become part of the expressive dimension and qualitative process of research and meaning making. To recall the piece cited above in Boon, Butler, and Jefferies' return route into affective understanding through the embodiment of the ocean's fluidity: "For a long time, water did not flood my thoughts, my dreams, my bodily being."¹¹⁵ Much like the ways in which the flooding of dreams, thoughts and bodily being expresses how relationship with the Atlantic Ocean mediates their own autoethnographic and feminist inquiry process, poetic inquiry has proven to be the only linguistic structure capable of speaking adequately from the depths of my childhood trauma. Despite being a critical theorist and someone who genuinely loves the conceptual art of theory making, when it comes to healing the trauma of surviving sexual violence in my own life, explicit language and theoretical constructs on their own have never been a salve to

¹¹⁵ Boon, Butler, and Jefferies, *At the Water's Edge*, 10.

my deepest wounds. Poetic inquiry is a method of entering the liminal space between objectivity and subjectivity, between memory and imagination, between truth and fiction, between the micro and the macro. This space is a dialectical interplay, an entanglement that when embodied is simultaneously a dance of survival and of living hope. We survivors already inhabit these blended fields of consciousness. Poetic inquiry is simply a process of allowing ourselves to voice them in ways that align with our own embodied belonging, giving languaged form to what otherwise might remain formless to linguistic representation.

Such an embodied and phenomenologically oriented practice (whether we call it a dance or a research method) can open dialectical and expansive routes into meaning making. For instance:

I can point toward

her-their-my: (in)ability

to speak

[beautiful

///black hole\\]

woman's courage

crimson-soaked pain

of recognition. Body's breath becomes life

temples pounding

screeching

love.

In this brief turn to poetic inquiry, I demonstrate an integrative discourse and inquiry method. This chapter's thus far theoretical consideration of poetic inquiry interacts with the previous chapter's discussion of trauma theory, signalled by calling forth the image of a black hole and its connection to the discussion of traumatic memory. I also integrate my own experience as a survivor and like that we have entered the integrative dance of meaning making. From here, there are numerous ways we could continue opening layers of meaning and interpretation. For example, I could provide a line-by-line close reading and theoretical analysis of the poetic language. I could go beyond the close reading by engaging an analysis of the poetic discourse's methodological function that interrupted the previous flow of prose with verse. I could expand upon theoretical analysis by exploring how this act of poetic inquiry enacted a therapeutic praxis by taking a self-reflexive turn that probes into my own body-psyche's history of memory and expression, discovering how and if writing the above poem changed my sense of self or my relationship with my wound. I could bring in a feminist and/or Mad Studies lens to consider how my disclosure of emotion and identity enacts a politics of unsilencing. I could move beyond textual, disciplinary and/or self-analysis and ask you as my reader to

inquire poetically by writing with one line of my poem as a prompt to initiate your own poetic inquiry practice, extending your participatory act from reading to writing. We could then take that inquiry process even further by establishing an online forum in which we collaboratively share our poems and engage in dialectical discourse, inviting theory and poetry to interact openly and fluidly as we build community.

These various examples demonstrate the type of expansive praxis called for by McNiff and practitioners of ABR. They also show how integrating poetic inquiry into traditional qualitative research methods offers a transformation of the explicitly objective language-based approach that dominates western paradigms of research and knowledge. In terms of healing complex trauma, they also illustrate how survivors are invited to share our own language of the wound with each other as we envision how the act of expressing and sharing *is* a form of inquiry that contributes to trauma-informed research and community building. These examples also demonstrate the rich yet diverse methods and intentions behind how and why poetic inquiry is employed as a creative intervention in research and meaning making.

Embodiment and Feminist Approaches to Poetic Inquiry

Poet and critical education researcher Carl Leggo writes of poetic inquiry,

I am concerned that some researchers put poetry on a pedestal as an object for awe-inspiring reverence. I like to stress that

poetry is earthy, rooted in everyday experience, connected integrally to the flow of blood in our bodies, expressed constantly in the rhythms of our speech and embodied movement.¹¹⁶

Connected to the “flow of blood in our bodies” and detached from the Western pedestal-making tradition of poetry, poetic inquiry can become a practice of languaging our own embodiments. By languaging embodiment, poet-researchers-survivors can avoid writing about the body as an object which can prevent us from acknowledging or inquiring into the body’s ways of knowing.

Positioning poetic inquiry as an act of inquiring into how my body speaks in language expresses how the body simultaneously becomes that which is researching and that which is being researched. This simultaneity is an incredible gift of poetic discourse as methodological inquiry process. A seemingly oppositional tension between the subject and the object transforms into a dialectically generative relationship in the experientially based and linguistically mediated process of inquiry, highlighting the phenomenological orientation of the practice itself.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Carl Leggo, “Astonishing Silence: Knowing in Poetry” in *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples, and Issues*, ed. J. G. Knowles and A. L. Cole (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008), 170.

¹¹⁷ For more on this discussion of this dialectical tension see: Iris J. Gildea, “Ricoeur’s Theory of Metaphor as Trauma Praxis,” *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies* 7, no. 2 (2018): 21–43.

Such attention to the body's central place in meaning making through poetic inquiry brings me to the emergence of poetic inquiry in feminist qualitative research methods, especially through autoethnography. As Sandra Faulkner writes in *Crank up the Feminism: Poetic Inquiry as Feminist Methodology*, "Embodiment is an important concept in feminist theory, research, and praxis. Feminist poetry offers a means of doing, showing, and teaching embodied inquiry."¹¹⁸ Expressing and inviting the body into a languaging presence becomes a feminist act, especially when that body bears internal and/or external scars that speak of violation on individual and collective levels of

His (their) power
over
me (us).

Or, as Faulkner writes, "I present my story to show how poetry can be a means of demonstrating embodiment and reflexivity...a form of feminist ethnography, and a catalyst for social agitation and change."¹¹⁹Faulkner's perspective works within a scope and community of academic and scholarly researchers. In the vein of research-activism, she offers an approach similar to feminist autoethnographer Elizabeth Ettore who positions narrative autoethnography as a feminist act. Ettore writes, "narrative methods generate useful ways of creating knowledge about individuals, collective agency and the interior language of emotional vulnerability and at times, wounding, which to me is at the heart of good

¹¹⁸ Faulkner, *Crank up the Feminism*, 85.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

autoethnography.”¹²⁰ For Ettore, Faulkner, and many other feminist autoethnographers, the ability to construct and transform agency through affective language that invites the body to be present in poetics or in more traditional narrative forms challenges the dominant “Cartesian paradigm of rationality at the heart of modern social sciences.”¹²¹ From this feminist tradition’s application of poetic inquiry, a view of language, the body and meaning making emerges that aligns with the trauma praxis I advocated for in Chapter I.

Similar to intersectional feminist and Expressive Arts Therapist, Savneet Talwar’s approach, I believe this feminist lens needs to be applied to the ABR methods from which poetic inquiry emerged.¹²² Doing so draws attention to the colonial roots of Western culture’s primary research models which marginalize (if not erase) the body’s ways of knowing in addition to ways of being and knowing that are non-white, non-male and non-European. As poet-activist-theorist Audre Lorde writes in her essay *Poetry is Not a Luxury*, “Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action.”¹²³ Lorde aligns this reclamation of the power of poetry to experiences of Black women, women of colour, and marginalized peoples who find themselves silenced by the inherent connection

¹²⁰ Ettore, *Autoethnography as Feminist Method*, 1.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Talwar, *Beyond Multiculturalism*.

¹²³ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches. Revised Edition* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007).

between explicit discourse, knowledge production, and colonial, white supremacist, heteronormative, patriarchal power. This marginalization is lived and present in the very structures of meaning making that manifest in Western culture. There is a vast difference between what Lorde calls the poetry of the “white fathers” and the embodied poetry she advocates for.¹²⁴

Indigenous author Alicia Elliot links her experience of depression to colonization and reflections on colonial ways of knowing in her book, *A Mind Spread Out on the Ground*. Elliot maintains that writing allows her to explore and inquire into the embodied experience of her womanhood and Indigenous ancestry:

Both depression and colonialism have stolen my language in different ways. I know this. I feel it inside me even as I struggle to explain it. But that does not mean I have to accept it. I struggle against colonialism the same way I struggle against depression—by telling myself that I’m not worthless, that I’m not a failure, that things will get better.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ For a discussion of Lorde’s work in relationship to contemporary issues of racism, gender, class, and sexuality see: Marci Blackman, bell hooks, Shola Lynch, and Janet Mock, “Are You Still a Slave? Liberating the Black Female Body,” YouTube, accessed 22 December 2023.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJk0hNROvzs&t=3313s&ab_channel=TheNewSchool.

¹²⁵ Alicia Elliot, *A Mind Spread Out on the Ground*, (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2019) 12.

Lorde and Elliot's poetry, when applied to considerations of ABR practices, demonstrate how feminist and decolonizing practices acknowledge the ways systems and histories of oppression impact language and our bodies. Similarly, educator and researcher Qiana Cutts' work with poetic inquiry as a Black queer woman explicitly and poetically yokes together feminist and ABR research methods.¹²⁶ Cutts frames poetic inquiry as a spiritual practice, perhaps echoing the notion of deep listening mentioned above, in order to show how the inquiry process allows her to bring her embodiment as a Black queer woman into language and into the space of research. She writes that poetic discourse allows her to "embrace memory, community, nature, and interconnectedness (West, 2011) as I explore and make sense of the world, in general, and my experiences as a BlackQueerWoman in/of the South, specifically."¹²⁷

Poetic inquiry for Cutts is a practice of engaging, discovering, and expressing her identity fully, which includes her spiritual self and her embodiments as Black, queer, and female.¹²⁸ Through the exploratory process of inquiry, she discusses how she makes space for her own self-discovery process both internally and externally in social and political spaces through the sharing of her writing through publishing. Her emphasis on memory, community, nature and interconnectedness resonates strongly with the themes of

¹²⁶ Qiana M. Cutts, "More Than Craft and Criteria: The Necessity of Ars Spirituality in (Black Women's) Poetic Inquiry and Research Poetry" in *Qualitative Inquiry* 26, no. 7 (2020): 908–919.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 910.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 908.

survivor-centred healing through embodiment. Cutts' reflection also centres how research can become an act of embodied reclaiming. For her, this reclaiming, while deeply personal and rooted in her spiritual self-awareness, is simultaneously a collective act as her method of research and meaning making pushes back against systems and cultures of white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, adding a political impetus to the function and process of doing activist-research.

While she does not take an explicitly phenomenological approach, Cutts' example of poetic inquiry and autoethnographic reflection suggests why and how poetic inquiry invites the phenomenological into the process of meaning making. She alludes to the body as a site of meaning making and consciousness. In order to bring a more formal practice of feminist phenomenology into this framework of embodied consciousness, consider what Olkowski says below. Olkowski, works with Edmund Husserl's phenomenological approach to meaning making, where Husserl was the Austrian-German philosopher and founder of phenomenology. She writes of the necessity to slow down our interpretive and meaning making gaze of intellect if we are to adequately and safely approach embodied experience. She writes:

'phenomenology slows down the stream of consciousness,' and without this slowdown, we lose our focus on the fullness, the depth and the complexity of things, and also on the fullness of events in the world. This

brings us to ask what it means to slow consciousness down and how this method, this slowdown alters the naïve experience of embodiment. But taking our cue from Husserl, we may not be able to carry out the slowdown of consciousness by looking directly at embodiment. It may be that looking directly is like looking at the sun—we burn our eyes.¹²⁹

This slowing down is akin to the deep listening mentioned above, to Owen's space opening up between words, and to Cutts' discovery of interconnectedness through inquiry into her own experience of her body, sexuality, Blackness and womanhood. Indeed, this slowing down is the practice that emerges as we write with our embodiments for a few months, a year, five years, a decade or longer. In this approach, we take as a starting point that there is no final and objective meaning of embodiment, because embodiment is always in the here and now. Embodiment itself is a process of consciousness.

The ultimate goal of a research method that includes embodiment in its praxis, therefore, is not to completely understand, objectify, or control meaning. The goal is to *inquire*. When applied to trauma contexts and integrated into healing paradigms, this may mean that healing will never be completed. After we abandon the need for a “cure” for healing with trauma, the goal becomes simply to inquire into my body-mind-soul's being in the here and now. In my own experience, learning with and from the language of my

¹²⁹ Olkowski, *Using Our Intuition*, 5.

wound and my own embodiment led me to stop fearing and feeling shame for my body's history of violation altogether. This, however, was not a "goal" or a timeline for healing I set for myself. Instead, it was the outcome of entering into an increasingly more authentic relationship with myself and my wound through my languaging of them both.

Poetic inquiry from a feminist phenomenological lens thus offers a method and orientation through which embodiment can speak using implicit and affective language, creating the structures and opportunity for a language of the wound. Connecting back to Olkowski's quote, poetic discourse/inquiry becomes the mediating structure of expression and mind-body consciousness that prevents us from looking too directly at embodiment. Applying a trauma context to Olkowski's description above, just as we might burn our eyes while looking directly at the sun, we might also lose ourselves if/when we look directly at our black holes. Fortunately, poetic inquiry can bridge that chasm. It can create a container for the embodied experience of the black hole and/or sun, creating a type of transformative, creative structure within which I witness my own expressions of selfhood however they speak at any given moment. While explicit language often seeks the most direct path of meaning making, poetic discourse is comfortable with a non-linear path. Over time, a practice of poetic inquiry can thus develop a consciousness comfortable with non-linearity, what I referred to earlier as a poetic consciousness.

Owton's writes that her practice of poetic inquiry "attempts to capture multiple moments, intensities and layers of struggle despite the risk of producing messy

texts.”¹³⁰ Owton’s emphasizing that a process-oriented approach is what allows “multiple moments and, by extension, multiple meanings to emerge connects to what McNiff identifies as an inherently creative nature of poetic inquiry and ABR in general. Indeed, McNiff points out that this creative nature is so generative, it can present what he terms a “challenge” of working with and integrating ABR into traditional research methods. He writes:

The greatest challenge presented by art-based research is the boundless possibilities. It is much easier to approach the design of a research project through a sequence of standard steps. In keeping with the nature of creative experience, art-based research may sometimes encourage immersion in the uncertainties of experience, ‘finding’ a personally fulfilling path of inquiry, and the emergence of understanding through an often unpredictable process of exploration. These values are quite different from the teaching of research through the planned implementation of a set of principles established in advance. Art-based inquiry, like art itself, may often include carefully evaluated studies but the truly distinguishing feature of creative discovery is the embrace of the unknown.¹³¹

¹³⁰ Owton, *Doing Poetic Inquiry*, 7.

¹³¹ McNiff, *Arts-Based Research*, 30.

When I read this passage from McNiff, I'm reminded as he so clearly states, any "emergence of understanding" through "unpredictable processes of exploration" is what poetic inquiry offers not just those performing traditional research in various disciplines but also to approaches of collective and individual paradigms for healing with our traumas. To come into a creative inquiry practice that is process-oriented means that we do not know what the path we take or outcomes we experience will look like. That said, I do not share McNiff's framing of "boundless possibilities" as a challenge. Or if it is a challenge, the challenge occurs for a mind (and body) conditioned by a Western reliance on a belief that meaning necessarily emerges from a "sequence of standard steps." While the rational and scientific method-based approach to research is valuable and at times necessary, it is not the only approach to knowledge production.¹³² Accordingly, I do not view an inherently unbound nature of creativity as a challenge, because I move from a position that is always embodied.

Embodiment structures consciousness. It phenomenologically contains and communicates experience with the mind. Similarly, poetic discourse can linguistically represent and contain experiences that exceed the rational limits and binaries of explicit thinking. Yet both embodiment

¹³² For a discussion of how our contemporary research methods grew out of the scientific method and its influence on the social sciences and the humanities, see: Paul Ricoeur, "The Task of Hermeneutics" in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 3–22.

and poetic inquiry produce meaning in ways that are not pre-established and/or pre-constructed by intellectual and speculative traditions. Whereas on its own, we may think of creative inquiry as directing us toward unbound potentiality, that is an intellectual abstraction. When the inquiry comes from within an embodied and alchemizing practice, boundaries and limits exist.

As I engage with creative inquiry more and more from an embodied place, my body speaks to me of boundaries and limits that my mind alone could not have had enough knowledge of or breadth of experience with to know how to respect, engage and/or enact. For example, what does intimacy mean when one's most deeply embodied and oldest roots of intimacy were entwined with violence? As an adult on a healing path, one might cognitively construct boundaries to enforce logical rules about engagement in intimacy with others. In therapy, one could discuss these rules and boundaries intellectually. With a somatic therapist, one might even explore them in movement, which may or may not be interpreted within a deficiency praxis. In an embodied poetic inquiry practice, the discovery of one's relationship with boundaries and intimacy can unfold in a different way. For instance, I can remember, express, witness, and transform my relationships with intimacy in a less linear and more liminal way. I can feel into and express an intimacy of fluidity that held me in my mother's womb. I can inquire into the textures of her voice singing and vibrating through me and amniotic fluids.

Indeed, my poetic inquiry practice took me into this very womb of embodied intimacy. When I surrendered to the aesthetic impulse, as I wrote I witnessed this fluid and liminal imagining of the remembered womb organically merge with the sounds of humpback whales in the Salish Sea that I have been gifted with hearing on various occasions. In poetic inquiry, time unfolds itself in the present phenomenological mingling of memory, the body, nature, imagination, and

a pulse of life returns

to a child's wounded

if not broken

heart.

It is in poetic inquiry that an intimacy of belonging and creative expansion morphs into a salve for my wound. I remember that I know so many more intimate experiences than violence. Though the violence too may speak with those whales. When this happens, again I am shown that I am not what was done to me. By beginning with embodiment rather than speculative objectification of the body or of trauma, I remember that my body knows how to heal. When the language of my wound speaks, it does not seek to objectify me into someone else's idea of healing, of survivor, or of woman. Instead, it breaks through a deficiency praxis and it carries me further into myself. Moreover, when I inquire from an

awareness of embodied interconnectivity to social and environmental ecosystems, I do not move along this path of discovery alone. And when it comes to facing a reality of unbounded discovery, I can think of no stronger co-investigator than the ocean or its whales singing their ancient songs, handed down for generations, of how to safely navigate the ocean's depths.

By integrating poetic inquiry into healing frameworks of self-inquiry, I am never suggesting survivors jump headfirst into unboundaried experience. Nor do I suggest that we risk completely losing ourselves in an undifferentiated lacuna of selfhood and/or trauma. Yet, this is exactly what, in my own experience, cognitively driven approaches ask survivors to do. Severed from embodiment, from our ecosystems, and from the language of the wound, we are asked to intellectually and explicitly summon up the depths of overwhelming experiences in order to "recover." We are asked not to learn to trust our bodies and our embodied ways of knowing but the person in front of us, trained by traditional and explicit understandings of trauma. A person that may have no idea what it is like to live for years in a void of silenced hope pierced only by the shards of a child's broken heart. Following their guidance, placing our trust in a well-meaning "expert," we may risk further severing the body-psyche connection. We may risk potentially retraumatizing ourselves by following a directive to look directly at the black hole of our wound.

Instead of looking directly at the wounds of our traumas through cognitive lenses, we can learn to follow the lead of the body-psyche into and through liminal realms of healing. We can learn to follow the body-psyche's own

directives. In fact, the body-psyche's directives may very well be directives related to the environments, ecosystems, and seasonal cycles one lives within if such interconnected and interrelational being has become an active part of one's reclaimed embodied awareness. In this way, an earth-based spirituality combined with feminist phenomenology offers such innovative and healing approaches to healing. Yet the directives of the body-psyche interconnected with the earth are most likely liminal, implicit, and non-linear. Accordingly, we may need to learn to remember this language of the body-psyche and earth even though it is our own language. This learning to remember may take months or years. It may be a lifelong journey. It may happen slowly and/or in rapid bursts of reclaiming; but through it all, the body speaks. In terms of inquiring into my own embodied history of survival and reclaiming, my body's cues show me when and where to explore, when and where to let be, when and where to tell my conscious mind conditioned to explicitly understand that it is time to rest or to go for a walk rather than trying to look at what does not need or want to be looked at. It also tells me when it is time to look. Following this embodied rhythm, I look when it is safe to do so, because I look with the language of the wound.

The truth is that to be human is to be in a boundless experience of feeling and emotion. Whether we survive violence in childhood or not, this remains the case. As Ann Carson writes, "What is it that stops us from drowning in the moments that rise and cover the heart?"¹³³ Perhaps as Carson shows, being human simply makes us vulnerable to the rise of

¹³³ Ann Carson, *Plainwater* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 134.

water, within and without. We are vulnerable to its endless depths and lack of boundaries. All the more reason for us to learn to traverse boundless possibilities with tools and methods that integrate into that phenomenological and watery nature of human experience, working with our embodied rhythms rather than attempting to cognitively control and potentially distort or erase them.

Another reason I do not find the creative potential of healing with poetic inquiry a challenge is that this practice does not begin within the explicit. It begins within the poetic. I will briefly clarify with the following example regarding writing prompts that are so often integrated into therapeutic healing. When we are encouraged to write, we often receive prompts such as, “I am sad when...”; “I feel alone when...”; “I am angry that...” Such cognitive and explicit uses of language are helpful to intellectually perceive our embodied reactions. Sometimes they are necessary, but these prompts do not enable us to access the language of the wound. They are not inviting us into the language of the body.

In poetic inquiry as I teach it and practice it, we begin linguistically creating structures to creatively and phenomenologically carry us through and navigate unbound experience. For instance, I might turn the three above prompts to: “The sky weeps and I...”; “An ancient drum beat in the earth steadies my heart and...”; “Reclaimed rage speaks of a flame that wants to teach me...”. When I begin within an orientation of inquiry and embodied belonging, I invoke an aesthetic impulse to unfold the language of the wound on its and my terms. Beginning this way asks us to creatively inquire. Such inquiry is an active surrender of a learned drive

to cognitively control which often includes predicting an outcome of meaning, be it through our own writing or research or application of diagnostic models. I do not think such predictive assumptions are even possible in poetic inquiry. After all, it would be quite presumptuous of me to claim that I know what the ocean is going to communicate to or with me. I hold the same reverence for my own body as I do for the ocean. Both are co-inquirers and co-creators of meaning. My autoethnographic examples in Part 2 and the Appendix will serve to show how this is the case and the difference it makes in terms of how we approach trauma work.

Whether the prompt to write/inquire comes from a teacher, counsellor, book, or a survivor herself, the intention here is that language brings structure to create a boundary for experience and a path out of the depths of unbounded emotion and/or trauma. As the practice develops, this language, which may seem messy at first when compared to explicit language's structures of order, can become a support that forges a new trajectory of healing.¹³⁴ While I personally

¹³⁴ One can see how poetry therapy as a psychotherapeutic and clinical approach to healing works with the concept of poetry as a tool for making contact with the implicit parts of oneself that require expression to integrate into one's evolving and healing sense of self. Poetry therapist, Daneshwar Sharma nicely summarizes the tradition of poetic intervention within psychotherapy and trauma recovery. She writes: "Soter (2016) says that poetry gives voice to 'whatever is too large, too incomprehensible to express in any other way.' Numerous researchers have documented that writing poems can bring healing effects on a troubled mind (Baker & Mazza, 2004; Carroll, 2005; Collins, Furman, & Langer, 2006; Coulehan & Clary, 2007; Fox, 1997; Tegner, Fox, Phillip, & Thorne, 2009). . . . Wolff, Knauss, and Braütigam (1985) stated that the main purpose of the

do not find the unbound possibility that McNiff refers to above as a challenge, I do recognize this orientation of meaning making can be a challenge for someone who has never been taught how to listen to the language of the wound. I also know from running poetic inquiry workshops for over a decade that we can remember instantly when given the chance and space to speak with our wound, and that we intuitively know how to communicate with it and the ecosystems we are a part of. Recognizing and writing with our wound is usually not a struggle for workshop participants. The challenge comes from unlearning ideas of “good” writing and “bad” writing, from an inner critic making endless comparisons between our own writing (and identity) and others. The challenge comes from unlearning all the reasons we have been told we are not good enough.

For a few years, I offered a workshop in community called, “The Poetry of Forgiveness.” Many participants usually came in with complicated relationships with that word. They also expressed fear and/or anxiety because they expected they would have to, in the span of our two-hour workshop, confront and conquer past trauma, violence, unwanted behaviors, etc., that are so often attached to forgiveness. Within minutes of us beginning, the tension always vanished. The anxiety melted into prose, image and/or breath as the textures of forgiveness sang of waterfalls running through

psychotherapy is to support distressed people facing a crisis by empathic and nonjudgmental listening. What can be more empathic and nonjudgmental than a self-listening to self through autobiographical poetry writing?” See: Daneshwar Sharma, “Being Alive with Poetry: Sustaining the Self by Writing Poetry” in *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, 32, no.1 (2019) 22.

embodied landscapes. As the smells of forgiveness spoke of ancient lineages unraveling from the depths of a broken heart reforged in the space between the inhale and the exhale. The anxiety dissolved as folks saw that we were not here to confront or conquer but to *allow* our own embodied wisdom to speak. We do not have to begin with what we fear. We can begin with what we know, the embodiment of liminality and affectivity, because to be an embodied being is to know these watery realms and depths. We simply do not get taught that we know how communicate in and with them.

I share this example of the “poetry of forgiveness,” to emphasize that I do not have to be afraid when I meet experiences and/or words that colonial-patriarchy has taught all of us very specific things about, like forgiveness.¹³⁵ This is why I began this book by redefining trauma and wound in terms of my embodied and feminist phenomenological approach. Of course, living with trauma is and can be overwhelming. Yet, I truly believe there are other routes into creatively encountering and healing with our experiences that support us in ways that traditional trauma theory and the psychiatry, psychology, and psychotherapeutic institutions built around it do not accomplish. It also remains that if every one of these institutions is regulated by governmental policies developed by historically colonial and patriarchal traditions, their very roots have to be excavated and exposed so that we

¹³⁵ For more on approaching complicated experiences of forgiveness within a survivor-centred context, see my article: Iris J. Gildea, “The Poetry of Forgiveness: Poetic Inquiry, Forgiveness and Autoethnography in the Context of Childhood Sexual Abuse (CSA) Recovery,” *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health* 23, no. 1 (2021): 77–97.

can see where the boundaries between healing and power-over paradigms of identity and culture first blurred and distorted what constitutes healing within these paradigms. I admire the folks who enter the psy-fields with an intention of doing this unearthing of violent histories and the transformative work that such excavation is. I am called by a different route. I am called by the route of poetry and the ocean because salt crusted flesh and the scent of rose it causes to unfurl from my psyche, that is an embodiment of empowered forgiveness and belonging I have never found in human growth models of psychiatry. But it remains the model that most strongly resonates with my own experiences of growth through survival, healing, and love.

Autoethnographer Cora E. Masson maintains that the poetry we write itself becomes a container for our experiences and prevents us from being entirely unbound. Reflecting on her own abuse history, she shows how poetic inquiry is a tool for self-discovery and healing, capable of revealing hidden truths. She writes, “hidden layers of meaning subconsciously embedded into the poem may reveal themselves over time, uncasing emotions the writer was not even aware they were experiencing.”¹³⁶ This idea of an uncasing of hidden or repressed emotions comes into focused context when applied to Masson’s own autoethnographic and poetic journey of healing with her trauma from surviving domestic abuse. She writes, “Once the story is released, the body can finally be

¹³⁶ Cora E. Masson, “Writing and Healing: Poetry as a Tool in Leaving and Recovering from Abusive Relationships,” *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, 33, no.1 (2020): 3.

relieved of the exhausting task of repression.”¹³⁷ I have learned over the years that more energy returns to fuel my daily life as the exhausting work of my body-mind’s repression of certain experiences releases through the on-going acts of creative expression. Clinical approaches to traumatic memory have so much to learn from survivors doing this creative discovery our way. The very language used to describe repression is faulty in that it often presupposes an implied binary structure: we repress something or we do not. As shown in the previous chapter, this binary is constructed around a cognitive and explicit approach to meaning making, memory, and to identity itself. If memories are hidden to our conscious and cognitive mind, it does not mean these memories are hidden to our body. This is why the language of the wound is also the language of the body. It is why when we come into allowing our embodiment to speak on its terms, terms that may include the ways our bodies are always speaking with the social and environmental ecosystems to which we are connected, we can come into a language of presence, belonging, and healing that breaks open the reductionist view memory and language in a cognitively determined paradigm.

When we write about the parts of ourselves that are systemically silenced by cognitively driven paradigms which a feminist praxis links to colonial patriarchy, we may, inevitably, produce messy texts. Importantly though, something is only messy in comparison to a preconceived idea of order. The assumption that our art, language, meaning, and lives are not supposed to be messy is part of a complex

¹³⁷ Ibid., 3.

mechanism of sanitizing and neutralizing identity through social norms that perpetuates cycles of violence. It has been my experience that poetic inquiry can break our own internalizations of those norms open as we allow our messes to be languaged on the page. I know that for myself, there has at times been nothing more satisfying and healing than allowing my own mess to externalize itself.

To enact a phenomenology of healing for ourselves, we may begin by reading the creative and messy poetic discourses of other survivors, a technique often used in poetry therapy.¹³⁸ Reading the words of others, independently and in community, is important. We read of those who have come before us and courageously allowed their messes to pour out on the page in ways that inspire us and teach us that such a languaging of self is possible. Such reading can simultaneously be an act of resistance and become an important part of our own healing and on-going cultivation of agency and community.¹³⁹ Reading, however, is not enough. We also must allow ourselves to speak and language ourselves and our bodies in our own expressions and processes of discovery. Then if we choose to share our self-languaging, even with just one person, we begin to let all these survivor words and breaths and streaks of rage and courage alive on the page interact with one another. Doing so, we build new praxes of communion and reclaiming. We build new praxes of healing.

¹³⁸ See: Mazza, *Poetry Therapy*.

¹³⁹ See Appendix for integrating inspiring authors into our poetic inquiry practices.



Survivor-psychologist Linder makes an interesting connection between our standard use of language in Western culture's approach to trauma theory and what she considers a broader sanitization of cultural violence. She writes:

As a trauma psychologist, researcher and csa survivor, I see in clinical literature an unfortunate tendency to sanitize the horror of sexual abuse. Cold diagnostic labels such as posttraumatic stress disorder (ptsd), dissociation and depression in no way capture the magnitude of harm experienced by many survivors.¹⁴⁰

Linder shows that Western culture conditions us to replace direct references to surviving violence with labels like "PTSD" and/or "trauma." She argues that on a cultural level, such labels are a disservice to ending cycles of violence because they erase or cover over the naming of widespread occurrences of sexual violence and child abuse. She also discusses how these blanket terms prevent the outside world from understanding the extent to which such violent experiences impact survivors for the rest of our lives. She writes of her own experience of CSA: "Perhaps the most unspeakable aspect of my first sexual assault was not that it was painful but that it ruptured my access to everyday normalcy. As I lay in the dark staring up at

¹⁴⁰ Linder, *Through the Looking Glass*, 63.

my mother's clothing, I entered the world of the upside down and, quite possibly, have never returned."¹⁴¹

Linder's attention to language on a macro and cultural level is so important. For instance, in terms of Linder's context, we rarely hear someone say, "I survived a violent homelife full of sexual abuse." Rather, such survivors might say, "I have PTSD." Linder critiques this phenomenon on a macro level, claiming that it sanitizes the realities of violence responsible for causing one's PTSD in the first place, which also prevents society at large from fully acknowledging the prevalence of wide-spread abuse such as CSA.¹⁴² These macro level implications then feed into the micro level by maintaining a praxis of deficiency. Talwar writes of this implied deficiency within the survivor in her own context of working as an intersectional feminist in art therapy:

Identity and difference have generally been ignored in favor of universalizing psychological theories that lean on medical models (Gorski & Goodman, 2015). When assessing treatment and prognosis, the models have located psychic distress in the individual, in the belief that individuals have control over their lives and their environment. A social constructionist's perspective encourages deeper inquiry, recognizing that in order to ameliorate the psychological effects of oppressive cultural

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

practices on a client's life, art therapists need to understand how childhood abuse, trauma, and psychological disorders are systemic issues.¹⁴³

Linder's argument is that until we embrace a cultural praxis of naming the violences that occur in so many homes, we will not break through a collective cultural sanitizing that keeps the psychic distress located entirely within the individual. Through Linder's lens, the language of diagnoses like PTSD can create a sanitized container that hides the societal causes of violence: systemic racism, poverty, sexism, transphobia, etc., and how these violences manifest in individual lives.

Linder's argument has many complexities to consider. Especially when shifting from the macro level of a cultural praxis of silencing and sanitizing to the micro level of what is best for individual survivors of various childhood violence that could cause one to live with PTSD. A linguistic container such as PTSD or speaking very generally with the word trauma may be extremely attractive to survivors. Most notably, we currently live in a culture where it is most often not safe for survivors to disclose. From threats of legal suits to physical violence to social stigma that transfer into emotional and physical burdens for the survivor, there are many real repercussions that survivors face upon disclosure in explicit language. Many of these threats also relate directly to ideologies of power such as patriarchy, colonialism, white supremacy, classism, ableism, etc., as they are woven through

¹⁴³ Talwar, *Beyond Multiculturalism*, 3.

our institutional ways of life such as legal systems, medical systems, school systems, etc.

Linder's argument suggests that for survivors to know how we truly want to language our experiences in public and personal spaces, macro level discourses need to name the violences we survive for what they are. I agree with this, and yet, I do not think we can ever fully disentangle macro level theories, agendas, and visions from micro level embodied experiences. Coming to the micro level experience of embodied trauma and the act of languaging it and ourselves, brings me to the question this book has been posing: how can we adequately speak with our wounds in ways that are inherently supportive and not constructed by power-over paradigms?

Given how far the West's mainstream cultural practices are from inviting embodiment into everyday consciousness, be it in clinical approaches to trauma, in school system and educational models, or in pop culture's continued objectification and sexualization of bodies for profit, there is an urgent need for practices that teach us about embodiment from the inside out. Aesthetic practices are essential because they speak the language of the implicit and liminal. Such practices enable me to make contact with my embodied realities in creative and honest ways and offer safety that leads to dissolving my own fear of my wound and of myself. My fear dissolves as I recognize my wound as part of my fluid self, because I am never what I survived. Indeed, I am the ongoing mosaic of an embodied self-discovering and making meaning with each breath, each word, each moment spent in the black holes of embodiment I journey with and through, becoming

more amazed at the gravitational forces of my own living universe speaking across time and space with yours.



Artwork 3: Across Time, mixed media

A rectangular image with raised textures. Hues of gold, pink and purple on the top and bottom. A middle of teal and indigo.

Poet and artist Rupi Kaur writes of working with trauma and pain:

the world

gives you

so much pain

and here you are

making gold out of it.¹⁴⁴

What if poetic inquiry is a means of transforming our pain and coming to see its weight and beauty, which is our weight and beauty, in gold as Kaur suggests? If our trauma is not rooted in the violence we survive but is part of the complexity of being in relationship with ourselves, then this gold springs from our own depths. We may have our own emotional and psychological triggers to learn about, accept, and heal with because of what we survive, but approaching these realities from an embodiment of acceptance rather than judgement and deficiency can fully reorient what it means to heal. Yet to arrive at this reorientation, we need modalities to support our shifting consciousness and discoveries of embodiment. The language of the wound is one such modality.

Our wounds can become gateways into feeling and knowing embodiment as something that is already whole

¹⁴⁴ Rupi Kaur, *Milk & Honey* (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2014), 185.

from one moment to the next. Poetic inquiry offers a framework to nurture and grow this knowing into what McNiff terms “artistic knowing.”¹⁴⁵ I name this a type of “poetic knowing” that roots us into the liminality of a more expansive poetic consciousness. Poetic inquiry, from this perspective, is a process of opening and entering our wounds’ embodied and semantic fields by writing with them. By doing so we invite the language/s of the wound to speak in, with, and through the existential mess that is life as an embodied being. As Jeanette Winterson writes, “You cannot disown what is yours. Flung out, there is always the return, the reckoning, the revenge, perhaps the reconciliation. There is always the return. And the wound will take you there. It is a blood trail.”¹⁴⁶

Winterson’s use of the word “revenge” jumps out at me. That word does not resonate with me now, sitting here, listening to the ocean, writing to you. I also remember a younger version of myself, a version that was very new to living with vivid memories, memories that flooded my days and nights with a rushing of waves so unlike the gentle rhythm I hear out my window right now. That version of myself sat one day in a coffee shop in Toronto’s west end and wrote a poem called “X’s necktie.” That necktie was strung together by letters of a poem pulled tightly across their Adam’s apple. But here, in this moment, held by the sounds of the Salish Sea, it is as if I can see that twenty-something Iris,

¹⁴⁵ Shaun McNiff, “Artistic Expressions as Primary Modes of Inquiry” in *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 39, no. 5 (2011): 385.

¹⁴⁶ Jeanette Winterson, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal* (London: Random House, 2011), 71.

driven by an embodied and aesthetic impulse to pour herself onto the page in a process of discovery. I can also see the me of my present, forty-two-year-old Iris, walk into that coffee shop and sit down beside her. I see myself rest a gentle hand on her back. At the feel of such gentle holding, a type of female touch that was completely unknown to me, I feel that younger version of myself break into sudden sobs of release and tender acceptance of my unconditional love for her (me). Her tears fall on that page of her open journal. The words of her poem smudge, turning into wordless grey streaks. Here and now in this moment as I write and again as my words come alive when you read them, revenge turns to redemption.

We are not what was done to us, but we are the complex layers of selfhood, the emotional scar tissue and all the beautiful parts of ourselves tied to the experiences we repress. As I listen to waves rise and land back upon themselves, as I hear the high-pitched squawks of the gulls interlaced through that rising and falling, I hear a rhythm echoed in my veins and the weight of my thighs, a meatiness of earth-born qualities mixing with the fluidity of myself. Having spent so much of my life in the numbness of repression that lives in the controlled separation of body and psyche, I would rather be an ocean capable of rising with thrashing peaks than a silenced void. When poetic inquiry is the structure of freeing those peaks, I find that there is a safety and form to my embodied rhythms that prevents the violence I survived from wreaking havoc in my own psyche, life, and relationships.

If the desire for poetically mediated revenge of my violated self can transform to redemption and self-love on the

page and in my body-psyche, surely that is a practice worth exploring. It was so important that I allowed the younger version of myself to sit in that coffee shop and explore and give form to her desires in her own language and imaginal way. No one taught me how to do this. They did not have to, because my body already knew what it wanted to say. I just needed to let myself listen.



Before moving on to describe the language of the wound more formally, there is one aspect of poetic inquiry practice in qualitative research traditions that is very important to mention. Namely, the often externally lauded and self-directed goal of producing a ‘good’ poem. As mentioned briefly above, this is a topic that often arises when discussing poetic inquiry as a qualitative research method. I would like to explore it here with a little more focused engagement, because doing so clarifies and distinguishes how I am positioning this practice as an embodied, phenomenological, and affective process of expression and healing related to but also separate from traditional research methods.

To explore this idea of ‘good’ writing via poetic inquiry, Faulkner’s work in autoethnography and poetic inquiry stands out as an interesting interlocutor. I appreciate much of her feminist poetics despite the fact that my perspective and practice of poetic inquiry also deviates, at points quite strongly, from hers. This in and of itself is not surprising. As Ettore writes, “not all feminisms are the same

and not all feminists respond similarly.”¹⁴⁷ I should hope this claim of Ettore’s is widely accepted. Our disparate experiences and identities at the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, religion, family home life, religion, trauma, etc., shape every individual’s body-psyche. Sometimes we cannot but come to our embodied beliefs differently even when we align through macro level politics and world views.

In her article, “Research/Poetry: Exploring Poet’s Conceptualizations of Craft, Practice, and Good and Effective Poetry,” Faulkner writes,

some poetry published as academic research seems sloppy, ill conceived, and unconsidered. Just because this poetry is published in academic journals, read at academic conferences or labeled academic, does this mean there should not be a concomitant interest in poetic craft?”¹⁴⁸

While I appreciate attention to craft, there are many points to raise here as one begins to discern what constitutes “good” craft, let alone “good” poetry. Firstly, in suggesting this,

¹⁴⁷ Ettore, *Autoethnography as Feminist Method*, 74.

¹⁴⁸ Sandra Faulkner, “Research/Poetry: Exploring Poet’s Conceptualizations of Craft, Practice, and Good and Effective Poetry” in *Educational Insights*, 13, no.3 (2009) par. 1, accessed January 25, 2024, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sandra-Faulkner/publication/253675848_ResearchPoetry_Exploring_Poet%27s_Conceptualizations_of_Craft_Practice_and_Good_and_Effective_Poetry/links/5729d28e08ae057b0a06d9e2/Research-Poetry-Exploring-Poets-Conceptualizations-of-Craft-Practice-and-Good-and-Effective-Poetry.pdf.

Faulkner seems to undermine the process of peer-review in academic research. Peer-review exists to ensure that researchers' work engages in critical discourse and practice. Far from perfect, the system does seek to prevent opinion or cathartic outpour from blurring the lines of critically reflective scholarship. We can assume that academically published poems have gone through this process and therefore we might reconsider how our interpretation of "good" poetry as a reader is subjective. I have read lots of traditional research that I do not find "good"! I find it biased and colonial and ableist. That said, disagreeing with research at large is how we create more scholarship and creative insight out of our diverging ideas and viewpoints. Secondly and more importantly, one could easily ask whose "craft" is privileged as "good" or "bad"? One culture and demographic's understanding of poetry and craft differs greatly from another's.¹⁴⁹ Most importantly, however, to enter into the textures and feelings, imagery and at times black-hole like voids of affective life housed in the body-psyche is to inquire into dimensions of experience that altogether transcend and/or break down such simplistic binaries of good and bad.

In my view, regardless of a trauma context or not, our job as poetic inquirers working with embodiment is not to judge a finished product or to divert the body's language toward the mind's preconceived notions of good or bad.

¹⁴⁹ For an example, see Treva B. Lindsey's integration of hip-hop as pedagogical praxis and culturally attuned practice for embodying aesthetic intervention and integrative knowledge production. Treva B. Lindsey, "Let Me Blow Your Mind: Hip Hop Feminist Futures in Theory and Praxis," *Urban Education*, 50 no. 1 (2015): 52.

Instead, our job is to practice surrendering to the aesthetic impulse while learning to feel and reflect upon what that impulse teaches us about the intersections of embodied life and knowledge production. As I present this survivor-centred practice, the goal of the practice is to develop a poetic consciousness, an embodied and poetic way of knowing. This way of being speaks with the body and does not need to translate the language of the wound into categorical demarcations of meaning that rarely succeed at capturing the feeling of breath rising and falling or seagulls' squawking under waves receding through my mind's memory of pain. If what I produce appears as sloppy gibberish and I wish to produce "good" research from this gibberish, I always have the option to lean into the hermeneutic act of interpretation by weaving my sloppiness into theoretical interpretations and reflections, perhaps creating an altogether new language and perspective in the process of doing so.

Most importantly, by allowing ourselves to be freed from the expectation of writing "good" poetry, we allow ourselves to write poems that we do not like. I have written poems that I do not like at all, poems that I have not wanted to write, poems that were indeed extremely messy and sloppy and yet, they were poems that needed to be written. They were poems that needed to spill their mess upon the page and altogether disrupt my mind's learned need to categorize experience and words and meaning into "good" and "bad." For how many centuries have humans, especially women, been taught to cover over the messy parts of our lives and disguise the truths we survive and endure by making ourselves look "pretty?" How might letting ourselves give voice to the

messy, sloppy, so-called ugly parts of our bodies-psyches-lives be exactly what we need to do to reclaim embodied consciousness from the silenced voids that patriarchal-colonial traditions buries it within? By challenging my own learned expectation that I should like my poetry or write “good” poetry, my writing helped my body-psyche to speak and give form to realities of my reclaiming. They spoke of embodied survival that could not be spoken of any other way and in my experience, embodied survival is not pretty, proper or polite, but it is effective, real, and voluptuously courageous. If I had been attached to crafting good poetry, I know for a fact that I never would have let myself write the poems that changed my life.

For me, the craft is not in how we write, but in how we listen. To conceive of writing as connected to listening transforms writing from a cognitively determined act into embodied and process-oriented integrative creativity. From this state of engagement, I learn to listen to my body and beyond my body. I learn to listen to the relational ways and ecosystems my embodiment roots me within and, listening, I come to express what I hear. What each of us chooses to do with what we hear is up to us, but it is in learning to listen that the poetic consciousness is born. I would also return to my earlier comment that, if the poetic inquirer chooses to publish their poetry as qualitative research, we should be inquiring into how its framing and expression is useful, rather than limiting it to the reductive categories of good or bad. As expressive art therapists and arts-based researchers Herbert and Sally Atkins show in their book, *Presence and Process in Expressive Arts Work*, when inquirers and educators move past

such reductive categories of good and bad, we come into a more nuanced and exploratory process of meaning making, research, and life itself.¹⁵⁰

Pendergast echoes Faulkner's concerns, though with less dichotomous terms, when she writes that poetic inquiry is, "along with all arts-based inquiry approaches, deeply concerned with aesthetic issues around quality, qualifications, preparedness, elitism and expertise."¹⁵¹ On the one hand, having emerged in a traditional discipline of the social sciences that rests on empirical objectivism, poetic inquiry has struggled to validate itself, which sheds light on why researchers need argue for its validity. On the other hand, I do not agree with any sense of necessary qualifications or aesthetic preparedness in one's choice to turn to poetic or creative inquiry. For years, I have witnessed groups of women, many of whom sit down at the start of our two hours together and vehemently proclaim they are "not poets" and are "not creative" go on to write the most exquisite poetry in its depth and flow and imagery in response to short prompts with no editing at all. After years of doing this work in community, I know the poetry emerges not because of elitist skill, but because our body-psyches are expressing what has laid dormant, waiting for opportunity in the right environment to allow that embodied and poetic truth to spring to the surface. In these groups, we cultivate a space and practice in which we can share and inquire, actively resisting our learned desire to

¹⁵⁰ Herbert Eberhart and Sally Atkins, *Presence and Process in Expressive Arts Work: At the Edge of Wonder* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2014), 33.

¹⁵¹ Pendergast, "Poem Is What?" 563.

produce “good” poetry in favor of listening in and expressing what we hear. Moreover, for those whose early survival depended upon learning and mastering the rules of “good behavior” in violent and abusive homes and/or racist, homophobic, ableist, sanist schools, it might be very healing to allow embodied languages to break the rules of what we were taught our language should sound like and bring enfleshed truths up to the surface in whatever form they take. In my view, these enfleshed truths deserve to take up space in journals, classrooms, and at academic conferences as much as if not more than privileged, classist, and racist ideas of what has traditionally constituted “good” writing in the West.

A last piece it is important to clarify: poetic inquiry as a praxis that integrates my wounding into my adult consciousness does not seek to intentionally summon up explicit images of pain or abuse. This practice of writing with the wound does not write *into* the wound unless the survivor-poet desires to set that framework for herself on a given day. Formulating my praxis as feminist and phenomenological allows our wounds to be present with us and unfold organically through the writing/self-witnessing/self-creating process. I use “organic” to imply that we do not impose pre-established meaning onto the wound. This is the biggest difference between a practice of poetic inquiry for healing and some writing approaches that serve as therapeutic interventions directed toward predetermined psychotherapeutic outcomes.¹⁵² If we have a preconceived

¹⁵² Iris J. Gildea, “Grief Tending through the Wilderness: Toward a Poetic Consciousness for Adult Survivors of Childhood Trauma.” *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling* 49, no. 6 (November 2, 2021): 832–844.

notion of what the “healed” narrative looks like – especially if this narrative is being imposed on the survivor by the teacher, guide, or therapist – then the creative impulse is conditioned and shaped toward that outcome before the wound has even been invited to speak. The same can be true if we have a preconceived notion of what good writing or craft is supposed to entail.

The Language of the Wound

Love. Denial. Abuse. Grace.

Race. Class. Gender. Sexuality.

Dreams. Flashbacks. Disability.

The Smell of Spring.

Girls Jumping Rope.

A Favorite Stuffed Animal.

Heartbreak. Redemption.

Black Holes.

Divine Mystery.



Anzaldúa writes:

With the imperative to ‘speak’ esta herida abierta (this open wound) before it drowns out all voices, the feelings I’d buried begin unfurling. Vulnerable once more, I’m clawed by the talons of grief. I take my sorrow for a walk along the bay near my home in Santa Cruz. With the surf pounding in my ears and the wind’s forlorn howl, it feels like even the sea is grieving. I struggle to talk from the wound’s gash, make sense of the deaths and destruction, and pull the pieces of my life back together.¹⁵³

In this raw recounting, Anzaldúa speaks with her open wound. She shows her readers, herself, and the ocean her deep grief. In doing so, she reveals that the language of the wound is like the language of the ocean, full and deep and sometimes dangerous. It goes without saying that this type of path making through our embodied wounds as is modelled by Anzaldúa is not easy. How could it be? The life of a survivor of extensive violence is not an easy life. Just as swimming in the ocean requires practice and strength, a balance of effort and active surrender to the currents and flow of the water we move through, developing our own practices of writing with the wound requires us to participate in the difficult art of balancing both effort and surrender.

¹⁵³ Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark*, 10.

In terms of how we make this journey and whom we make it with, this is up to each of us, and it will probably change many times throughout our lives. There are no prescriptions present in this theory-making I am doing. We survivors may write ourselves through the wilderness of our grief and woundings alone or journey with trusted companions such as therapists, family members, friends, partners, animal companions, community groups, etc.¹⁵⁴ It also can occur, as Anzaldúa's example and my own framing of this book show, in relationship with nature. The prompts I will offer in the Appendix show how the very orientations with which we come into writing begin to shape the consciousness that forms as, over time, we journey with our wounds through the phenomenologically forged path of poetic inquiry. By entering these paths, we come to recognize we are never alone. We already belong, even if it is to a grieving sea or a dark moon whose light does not reach us at certain times of the month. We still belong.

With this inhale, this word, this wave rising up, I belong.

With this exhale, this word, this wave receding back down, I belong.

By beginning with or at least integrating the creative act into one's trajectory of healing, and by abandoning

¹⁵⁴ I use Tim Van Duivendyk's description of grief as a wilderness. See: Tim Van Duivendyk, *The Unwanted Gift of Grief: A Ministry Approach*, (Oxfordshire UK: Taylor and Francis, 2014). For my own work on CSA and grief see: Gildea, "Grief Tending."

attachment to the curative model's goal of "fixing" one's deviance from "normal" identity, poetic inquiry invites exploration of the loss, pain, shame, and grief entwined within one's trauma identity without explicitly or implicitly situating the survivor in a praxis of deficiency. To demonstrate an example of the creative act supporting creative self-inquiry without imposing a deficiency praxis, I include the following excerpt from a piece I once wrote on poetic inquiry and grief, trauma and healing:

One moment more
and I may have
slit
razor's blade
of hate
through flesh
and pain encoated shame
but guilt rose not
that day.
Love breaks through
& crimson
is not

the colour of survivor blood
ripening grief
turned
against myself.

It is the colour
of this fierce self-

mothering instinct
embracing the daughter
I always knew
I could become.¹⁵⁵

In the form of poetic and autoethnographic discourse, suicidal images entwine with my reality of being a survivor. Grief, both for the life I lived and the life I did not get to live, is the connective tissue of embodied emotional and psychological complexity. In explicit and/or ordinary discourse which does not invite embodied liminality into its representative and expressive functions, this embodied entwinement is not fully supported or capable of being adequately represented. A binary of “is” or “is not” casts one into the category of, for instance, suicidal or not suicidal. That dualistic reality, however, is not the emotional or embodied veracity being expressed in the language and consciousness opened up by my practice of poetic inquiry. In the piece above, I simultaneously embody both.

Poetic inquiry opens up what in other work I have called a tensional dialectic between an *is and is not*. Working with French philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s phenomenological hermeneutic philosophy, the space between the is and is not is what Ricoeur terms “metaphorical truth.”¹⁵⁶ It is an experience of consciousness that cannot be expressed in ordinary explicit language or in categories of *either-or*, because only poetic or metaphorical language can represent the tensional interplay that simultaneously is and is-not. In this

¹⁵⁵ Gildea, *Grief Tending*, 2021, 841.

¹⁵⁶ As cited in, Gildea, “Ricoeur’s Theory,” 21.

case, is and is not suicidal. Allowing and expressing my wound's embodiment of this liminality yielded, for me, an empowered and embodied voice exposed in this poetic inquiry piece that completely rejects any pathology one might apply to me. This is an empowering act, a rejection of pathology that, through writing I was able to witness within myself while simultaneously transforming and externalizing the embodied experience through the creative act that writing is.

Reflecting further on this poetic space that does not conform to the binary standards of either/or, I see how I was able to express victimhood in the same space of survival, empowerment, self-love, and transformation. All of these experiences are intricately linked with one another. In the moment I sat to write the poem, I opened to a rhythm of selfhood unfolding on the page. This unfolding becomes a path into reclaiming and healing and it is actualized through the language of the wound. This path of self-witnessing through writing is what taught me to value myself enough that I do not judge what metaphorical truths my wounds want to share with me. I do not cower from them and I absolutely do not hold shame for them. When I am allowed to exist in this tensional play between the *is* and the *is not*, this is when shame dissolves. Pressure releases itself from my shoulders and my guts. A constriction around my throat evaporates. I can simply be and witness myself being.

I would like to close this chapter with a practice of poetic inquiry that invites my survivor-self to tango with my theorist self and to let my words embody the praxis I'm advocating for more fully. The truth is that I have no idea

what I am going to write, because I am going to take a moment, close my eyes, listen to a few cycles of the Salish Sea's waves, open my eyes and enter my own embodied stream of consciousness pouring itself onto the page. I promise I will not edit what emerges other than to fix spelling and grammar typos. My goal is to see myself and to let you see me. Whether what I write is "good" has no bearing on the phenomenological act of inviting my wound to dialogue in its own language. This language will be freed from the theoretical constructs I have, for the most part, been containing my writing within in order to produce these chapters whose task is to construct a theoretical foundation for the language of the wound. While helpful and important, theoretical language is not the language of my body.

As I describe this practice now and as my mind connects to the fact that I am putting myself on the spot, I realize there is indeed an act of faith involved in poetic inquiry. I trust that something will emerge because even if no words emerged, I would witness myself in that space of silence and then I would write, reflecting and talking with you across the chasm of my wound's rich silence. I also realize that the trust I have in this practice is deeply embodied. I know my body's consciousness speaks with and through my wound, because I have over a decade-long practice of inquiring in such ways. Beyond the question of my own inquiry process, I also trust in the co-participatory and evolving nature of meaning making. By addressing you, my reader, I actively invite you into making meaning with me and, by reading, you agreed to

participate.¹⁵⁷ In doing so, your embodied self and the ecosystems commingling with your own embodiment phenomenologically weave themselves into this narrative.

So, I close my eyes. I hear the waves. I notice the seagulls have stopped their squawking. I open my eyes and I write:

I really don't like therapy.

I have been in so much therapy. For years I attended 1-1 therapy with a gifted therapist. In fact, all of the therapists I have worked with have been loving, gifted, compassionate artists of grief workers. My distaste for therapy, however, is because

To be a woman discovering her body's scars of victimization scars still bleeding

underneath the smoothed over surface of perfection the world demands we contort ourselves into

¹⁵⁷ For the reader's phenomenological role in reading see: Paul Ricoeur, "What is a Text? Explanation and Understanding" in *Hermeneutics and the Human Science: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 107–126.

scars

drawn deep through

her psyche

so deep that words cannot extend the root onto the page

nor can colour fully mark its life on canvas

is to be a woman carrying so much power

so much love in self-sacrifice

sacrifice that is the demand of survival

and "therapy" in a westernized socialized normalization

of hiding behind closed doors

because that is the only space to be

"safe"

(trust me, it's still not

"safe")

feels wrong.

I want to expose my being on the page even though I go in knowing that the page cannot hold me.

I want to cover myself in paint and drag my body across the canvas.

Stand and squawk the sound of that seagull I heard this morning.

Art heals me.

Nature heals me.

Writing to you heals me because maybe, just maybe, this conversation will help one more survivor be encouraged to commit to the beautiful gut wrenching work that healing is.

It is not "pretty" but fuck is it beautiful.

As I write that line I feel a glimmer of gold shine across my wound. Primal wound. Archetypal wound I must carry with me through the mundanity of professionalism. Perhaps that is why I swim naked in the ocean? To feel fully held, as we are meant to be held?

I do not know.

But I do know

poetry is the language of my fractured selves

becoming whole

in this breath

that rides up onto the shore

and then this one

that rides

back out to her depths.

Reflection

I had no intention of writing about therapy as I invited myself into the inquiry practice for this closing section. I allowed the first line to emerge from my body-psyche in sync with an exhale, and that is what spilled out on the page. From there I let the rhythm of the aesthetic and embodied impulse pull me along. For me, after over a decade of near-daily poetic inquiry process, it feels like I am following a thread that pulls words out of me.

In the spirit of authentic inquiry and disclosure, I admit that after I wrote the above piece, I fully contemplated deleting or redoing this experiment! The first line felt quite

strong and I did not want to offend all the therapists I value so deeply, but I promised you I would be authentic. As I reflect now, I also recall Tisawii'ashii Manning's *Murmuration of Birds* and her take on phenomenological inquiry:

This sudden rushing in of what is most mine baffles and defies my reflective veracity. This troubling contour challenges me in subtle ways that I cannot ignore. Just the same, this receding 'I' manages to rationalize banal excuses for doing so. Yet I discover here that to arrive at my ownmost requires a break with my reflective concentration, and not of my own volition.¹⁵⁸

Tisawii'ashii Manning's insights relate to the quality and textures of resistance that can emerge in these types of practices, especially when we have been trained to value as, she says above, "reflective veracity" more than whatever is our "ownmost." Rather than rationalize away what is "most mine" I will claim it as the truth my body-psyche sought to speak, because I know embodied truth is exactly what emerged. Yet as I continue to sit with these lines that I wrote, I still feel the resistance to sharing them that I expressed with you. That resistance is a scratch in my throat and a slight clenching in my jaw and womb. I breathe gently into that clenching jaw and a chill runs up the left side of my body. I feel that chill end in my shoulder under a sudden release of tension. With

¹⁵⁸ Tisawii'ashii Manning, *The Murmuration of Birds*, 222.

that embodied release, I see my resistance in a new light. In one phenomenological moment my resistance vanishes.

I tried for years to wrap myself around the idea of being a “therapist.” Friends, partners, and therapists would tell me, “You lived through what you lived through so that you can help people. Become a therapist.” I tried that narrative on for so long, perhaps feeling that it somehow created a reason that could make sense of or even justify my childhood trauma. I allowed their excitement to become mine and enrolled in therapist trainings and programs and yet every time, something felt off from the moment I stepped into a class.

While the basis of this book on survivor-centred praxes argues that survivors should lead the way in healing paradigms and of course I hold passionately to that, a few years ago I realized my calling was not to become a therapist. Many people choose to change the system from within, but this is not my path. I have learned that I have little desire to change the system from within when the very roots of that system, here the systems of our psy-professions, are that which establish the deficiency praxis of the medical model that dominates Western trauma theory.

More importantly, discovering, experiencing, and witnessing the awakening of my embodied ways of knowing and creative hunger for life fully led me to accept that I do not believe in a Western institution and tradition of therapy, because I believe in such a radically more earth-based, art-based, and spiritually integrated approach to life, healing, identity, and community. I believe in my beautiful mess of embodied womanhood that at this point in my life refuses to be kept isolated behind closed doors or silenced by talking in

circles around experiences that want only to transform through a raven's caw calling out to me in the thick blanket of night. A caw that unravels my body-psyche in dreams and liminalities that cannot be reduced to attachment theory's literal recounting of pain. I also realized that the truest and most valuable moments I experienced in therapy were not due to any training or model of healing. They were when the woman in front of me offered herself, vulnerable and raw, in dialogue with me. In those moments, for me, she was not a therapist but a teacher. I use this framing of therapist as teacher now, if and when my embodied trauma surges and I desire to be witnessed moving alongside it. I reach out to a trusted therapist-teacher I have found and we meet for an hour and share space and story together. I am so grateful to this woman I encountered who herself lives in a liminal realm of eco-spiritual embodiment and oh! I believe in teaching. Be it one-on-one, in small community groups, informal moments of sharing, or in formal institutions of education. I believe in pedagogies that integrate self-inquiry, embodiment, and emotional awareness into knowledge making thereby creating an altogether radically different paradigm of healing and learning. In this vein, cultural paradigms of change making and activism manifest in these pedagogies and in grass roots economies that combine integrative practices of self-inquiry woven through with cultural theory, arts, ecology, literature, spirituality, and whatever other dimensions of meaning making support our imaginations and bodies along paths of empowered healing, learning, and social organization.

I also see now, so clearly, that of course it never felt right to put myself into those training models. To align with

government regulations of psychotherapy or psychology, these programs have as their structural core a deficiency praxis built around pathology, given that the medical model is so deeply intertwined with them. Not to mention how many of these programs qualify individuals to “fix” the psyches of others without requiring would-be-therapists to undergo those journeys within themselves. This establishes a practice whereby our experts may themselves have never journeyed through the oceanic depths of trauma they are certified to take others through, others who may have entirely different experiences and social locations of race, class, gender, ability, sexuality, etc. In my own embodied context, not one of the learning institutions I’ve attended in my life, including those dedicated to healing, despite their inclusive rhetoric,¹⁵⁹ welcomed my survivor-self and all she has endured. This simultaneously enraged me and silenced me. Over and over, I witnessed how would-be-therapists were taught to fear survivors of CSA, a fear born out of a deficiency praxis that teaches practitioners about all that is wrong with survivors before they have even met us. About all the things they or we will need to *fix*. Even in Expressive Arts Therapy, which is based on practices of aesthetic inquiry, its methodological orientation to an overall system of meaning making that connects functionality and wellness, ultimately, to a medical model of normative behaviour which requires a deficiency

¹⁵⁹ This inclusive rhetoric was almost always limited to race and gender, rarely mentioning disability, sexuality, neurodivergence and/or the surviving childhood violence, which Linder’s research claims needs to be included in our social locations that impact our sense of self and identity and creating safety in public spaces. Linder, *Through the Looking Glass*, 75.

praxis to establish its pathological system, never aligned itself to reach so gently into the scars in my psyche that wrapped themselves in tight layers around my thighs and pelvis, up along my torso, over my breasts and around my throat.

I pause for a moment and at this particular angle of embodied reflection and I see:

such beautiful light shines through those scars which weave themselves in intricate layers over my open wound.

It pulses

A sacred pulse

of a daughter once lost, now found.

Normalized systems of deficiency praxes silence and dampen this light from shining because ultimately, the goal of healing in traditional models *is* to align ourselves to normative functionalities which defy, by their very nature, my open wounds that express themselves only in the liminalities of aesthetic discourse. The expressions of my wound are not therapy but an active reclaiming of my own embodiment and a rippling out of my own oceanic waves into society at large. These waves, however big, however small, for myself and for all survivors who express the language of our wounds, ripple outwards, transforming ourselves, each other, and our communities. They dance with our ecosystems, and they let us embody poetry.

I turn now to focus more fully on how these transformative acts of reclaiming enact a process-oriented

phenomenology of healing, what I call writing with the wound. In the next part of this book, I include more autoethnographic poetics and narrative to demonstrate how the language of the wound is not a realm of meaning making to be feared.

Feeling myself now so fully on the other side of the deficiency praxis despite it being the cultural norm of trauma paradigms in the many social realms I move through on the day to day, I run open arms into the language of my wound. The practice of writing with my wound has delivered me home to myself and to all that I belong. A phenomenology of healing offers a felt sense of belonging. It works with what is already present, our ever-shifting messy self/ves, our connections to the ecosystems we are part of, and the often under acknowledged paradigm-breaking courage through which we all survive whatever we survive in the first place. That courage of survival does not go away, but deficiency praxes can and do silence it.

If I had one wish, it would be that therapists and counselors working with survivors of CSA would begin by acknowledging how incredibly brave survivors are. If you are a survivor reading this, please know that we absolutely do not have to wait for such external validation to find us. Hand to our own hearts, we can whisper, “I am brave. I am courageous. I am creative. I am whole.” We can whisper it over and over and over again. Even if, perhaps especially if, we don’t believe it. And then one day, we don’t have to believe it, because we will know it is true.

Part II

Chapter 3: Writing with the Wound: A Feminist Phenomenology of Healing

*It glistens—the wound that lacks hope when doubt has been
replaced with knowing.*

Journal, 6.1.16

Even before I go to look out at the water today, I know there is a storm. I hear the swirling of wind and water. As I listen in, the sound brings a constant rush to my body-psyche. Immediately, I notice a tightness in my throat and across my shoulders. My body speaks of an apprehension present in me as I prepare to go to the window and take in the visual story of what's happening out there. On the way to the window, I catch myself imagining a scene that threatens destruction to boats attempting to cross the channel, but then I am looking at the surface of the water being blown this way and that as waves rush the shore. While white caps rise a steady windblown rhythm across the sea's surface, almost instantly, my imagined scene of destruction dissolves. As sight and sound integrate, I perceive neither threat nor danger. I feel my shoulders and throat release. Instead of destruction, I take in an intricate network of communication amidst this ecosystem. Much like the previous chapter's interweaving of

seagulls and ocean, today I am most struck by wind interacting with the water in a manner that shifts the character of both.

Sitting now to write with this salty and windswept nature infused invocation, I become curious about what insights this shifting rhythm has to offer the scope of this chapter's focus on embodying a poetic consciousness and a survivor-centred phenomenology of healing. The first insight that arrives as I sit back down at my desk and begin to write with the soundscape of white caps rising is that, as I mentioned in the beginning of Chapter 1, our wounds shift depending upon so many perspectives. One day I may sit to write with my wound and anger may be the strongest voice present. Another day, as has happened many nights to me over the years, I may wake in the middle of the night, unable to sleep, and reach for my journal to express the embodiment of some feeling I cannot name. On these nights, as soon as pen touches page, a voice of gentle guidance streams through me, most often around 4:00 am. Words, emotions and insights unravel themselves. Then as I feel the writing coming to a close, the tiredness I could not summon for the life of me as I lay tossing and turning before I surrendered to the need to write, washes over my entire body. I feel the last word leave me and I shut my journal, turn off the light and fall into the sleep I could not enter so long as the tension-filled embodiment waited to speak. Yet on another day that flowing rhythm might be replaced by a staccato-like jumble of words that do not seem to express any one emotion or state of selfhood. On these days, I accept that this is the version of me that speaks. My relationship to my wound and

myself changes during these times because both are in a state of constant flux.

White caps of emotions rise on the surface of my being,
play into the gentle spread of water pushed by the
winds of my psyche and the social and land-based
environments I am part of.

I become the experience of internal rhythms
meeting external realities,
expressing and transforming
me
on the page.



Feminist phenomenology emphasizes that our bodies are always negotiating internal and external realms. Internally, we swim through our own oceanic depths as we perceive and experience our emotional, physical, and psychological states. Yet these depths are always relationally influenced and connected to external influences that intersect through social,

environmental, familial, historical, and biological realities. In this chapter and the next, I enter the entanglements of these intersecting realities through my own practices of poetic and autoethnographic inquiry. Whereas the first two chapters laid a theoretical foundation for a phenomenology of healing, here I engage in a dialectical encounter, one which Anzaldúa describes as the negotiation between internal and external realms of our wounding:

For both la chamana [shaman] and the artist, this inner journey is one of turmoil and distress. By recounting intense psychic details through transpersonal language, the psyche organizes itself and gives significance and direction to human suffering. Through creative expression, the human experience is mythologized and collectively understood.

160

I appreciate Anzaldúa's attention to the transpersonal aspect of creative expression. Art as a conduit to the transpersonal is a tenet of Expressive Arts facilitation models, in which the art we produce is not "ours."¹⁶¹ We may create it, we may express it, but once it has an externalized form, it exists outside of its creator and takes on a life beyond our own conscious and unconscious intentions.¹⁶² As an artist-inquirer, I can then

¹⁶⁰ Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark*, 10

¹⁶¹ Shawn McNiff, "Foreword," in *Expressive Therapies*, ed. Cathy A. Malchiodi (New York: Guilford Press, 2005), 10–14.

¹⁶² This approach, it should be noted, can prevent against pathologizing an artist based on their creative production, regardless of medium. The

engage with this art's life, reflect on it and learn about myself by engaging in a dialogical encounter with it. I have been demonstrating this type of dialogical encounter by reflecting and engaging with my own poetic inquiry experiments and I will do much more of this throughout the remainder of this book. I can also view art making, be it writing poetry, visual art, or any other aesthetic intervention, as the alchemizing act that it is. In the spirit of alchemy, through a practice of poetic inquiry, I myself, perhaps some part of my wound, has transmuted into something else through the creative act.

This transmutation is how I explain those sleepless nights – I am unable to sleep because an embodied knot inside me is ready to leave. For this transmutation to occur, I have to be willing to act by responding to the embodied call. I need to turn my light on and write with what is present. In coming to write, I also have to be willing to release some of my wound. This transformative release of my wounded self through the alchemical act of writing can be much more complex than it might sound, especially to someone who has not lived intimately with a decades-long (or in the case of intergenerational lineages of violence and trauma, centuries-long) wound. Our wounds can become our companions. To follow the body's call to release some of that wound means releasing a part of the self that journeyed through and survived hell.

creative product is not something that can be reduced to literal symptoms manifesting in creative form, as does occur in some art therapy, even Jungian approaches to creative work. When the creative product is allowed to come from but also transcend the survivor-artist-poet's identity, we more fully enter a phenomenological approach to meaning and creation.

I am a survivor writing both from the inside out and outside in. My goal, above all else in my own healing and in my auto-theorizing, is to rest in the space between the inside and the outside, the subjective and the objective, the *is and is not*, the inhale and the exhale, waves washing onto shore and back out to sea. This liminal realm of the in between is the essence of embodied knowing. While I do not believe it can be translated into explicit or categorical language, I know it can be felt, understood, integrated, and communicated. As Tisawii'ashi Manning writes: "In slackening my hold of the cognitive-linguistic region, I awaken, in some oblique way, to my immersive entanglement with another dimension of myself."¹⁶³

As explored in the last chapter, poetic inquiry teaches this slackening of a cognitive-linguistic hold, as it invites and allows for an act to language the implicit realms of experience and knowing. For me, communicating from this place means writing with my wound in a manner that is inclusive, transformative, and redemptive to my own entangled and embodied sends of self. The explicit meets the implicit as the cognitive meets the affective and embodied.

I consider this process redemptive because it is inclusive of all my states of being. My poetic inquiry practice is one of the few places where not one part of me must pretend to be some projected embodiment of colonial patriarchal ableist perfection. While consciousness shifts, and the amount of contorting my body-psyche into norms of white colonial heteronormative ableist and classist expectation has lessened incredibly over the years, the West is still an

¹⁶³ Tisawii'ashii Manning, *The Murmuration of Birds*, 220.

ablest and colonial capitalist society. Liminality and affective ways of being, which demand sensitivity and vulnerability, are not yet authentically welcome in most social, public, and professional spaces. This is the paradox I watch rising around me in my social and professional arena of academia. As our spaces begin to require trauma-informed and equity-inclusivity trainings, rarely is the affective and implicit mentioned let alone creatively brought into awareness. These programs remain entirely cognitively driven and I have witnessed many so-called trauma informed models be entirely situated within a deficiency praxis. Such paradigms, while certainly raising cognitive awareness and part of on-going equity, diversity, and inclusion movements, are not integrative or radical because they do not create “safe” spaces for those of us who actively embody and allow our sensitive, intuitive, implicit selves to be present. This, however, is a vicious circle in action. Structures of cognitive and colonial-patriarchal knowledge making continue to replicate themselves even when they make use of the language of inclusivity.

Radical embodiment breaks this cycle, and writing with the wound is a practice and process that encourages embodiment through process-oriented methods. When writing with the wound, I learn to let a version of myself sit still one moment in the space between the inhale and exhale and rise the next moment like a white cap raging in my own psyche-body’s windstorm. I learn to be with my implicit self who is simultaneously inquiring and witnessing. With this freedom to express what is, there is also, as mentioned above, a transformation of my wound. Its edges may recede a little, or a lot, over time. They also may expand or the centre may radiate

a tender pulsing throb that manifests in my temple; yet, I have learned the body can pulse pain as the edges recede as well. When we are talking about decades of pain and love and grief entwined in the body-psyche, there is no simple categorical marker for healing. Because this process is nonlinear and non-curative, I have no time limit on or expectation of healing. Instead, I surrender to the phenomenological process that healing is and over time this practice of writing constructs my poetic consciousness which is also always an embodied consciousness. I view this type of consciousness as living within if not originating in the body and its relationships with land, water, air, and the ecosystems, social and environmental, the body interacts with.¹⁶⁴

This non-linear and non-curative approach to healing was alluded to in the quote from my journal at the beginning of this chapter: “It glistens—the wound that lacks hope when doubt has been replaced with knowing.” In my poetic process of inquiry, this glistening speaks of redemption and joy as gold gleams from within the open wound.¹⁶⁵ It points to my

¹⁶⁴ Ecopsychologist Theodore Roszak connects this type of embodied consciousness to what he terms the “ecological unconscious” which, as an ecopsychologist, he sees as a more primary and healing orientation to view the human psyche - connecting us implicitly to the environments humans are part of- than traditional Western psychology models which he emphasizes are all speculative and perhaps should never have been integrated into cultural frameworks as factual, which, is the basis of pathologizing practices. See: Theodore Roszak, “Where Psyche Meets Gaia” in *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*, ed., Theodore Roszak, Mary E. Gomes, and Allen D. Kanner (Berkeley: Counterpoint Publishing, 1995), 14.

¹⁶⁵ I want to emphasize that I am not suggesting my trauma or wound is a “gift,” which would in turn suggest the violence I survived is a gift. No.

discovering that there is so much creative energy and potential of self-discovery when I invite my wounding to be present and move through this life with me rather than repressing it out of fear or social conditioning. I found my creative energy began to flourish as I stopped repressing my wound which is an integral part of myself. I lived the first part of my life filled with so much insecurity. That insecurity was directly linked to shame. As I described in the first chapter, as I released myself from an internalized deficiency praxis and stopped working with those that would insert me into one, my shame receded, carried out into the ocean. As my shame disappeared, that is when I stopped fearing my wound and when I began to see the shimmers of gold that glisten inside my psyche. That gold speaks to me of a life worth living. I know so fully that *I am not what was done to me*. The artist-survivor-theorist-poet-

Such a patriarchal-colonial lens was deconstructed and discarded by the feminist lens applied Chapter 1. As I also discussed in that chapter, I disentangle my trauma and wound from the violence I survived. In doing this, I embrace my wound because it is part of myself and for me, loving myself also means loving my wound. I can say this, because I know that my wound shifts and transforms. I do not myself believe this wound will ever fully close. I think when survivors know the types of intimate violence that I have known and knew for so long in the formative years of my life, our wounds are with us for life. But this does not mean I am or ever was damaged or broken. If my wound is part of myself, it means that I have an opening to endless creativity because I cannot imagine ever reaching the bottom of the depths of my oceanic self. I am ok with this, because I enjoy the rapture of aesthetic intervention transforming my wound and making me conscious of myself and my connections to all that I am a part of a little bit more nearly every time I write. I am also ok with it, because I am an intersectional feminist and I hold abusers and systems of marginalization and oppression accountable for the harm they cause, and I refuse to take an ounce of my perpetrators' shame upon myself.

educator-scholar-queer woman that I am is and always was so much more than anything traditional trauma theory has to say about what it means to be a survivor of CSA. I allow a healthy rage and redemption to move through all of my identities and doing so I become myself more and more each day in a phenomenological dance of identity. My wound sings a joyful song through my body and while some days that song may include emotional and/or physical pain, I am ok with that. The beauty of glistening gold makes me ok with that.

Before enacting this phenomenological dance here in this chapter by working directly with my poetry, the trained hermeneutics scholar and literary theorist in me feels compelled to emphasize that when I move to my own poetic inquiry practice, my goal of writing with the wound is distinct from that which we find in mainstream trauma memoirs. The commercial publishing industry of trauma memoir often puts experiences of violence into literal, linear, and easily consumable narratives, many of which end with a “happy” ending of the empowered, often financially profitable, survivor after such a harrowing start to life.¹⁶⁶ This form of the memoir genre is understandable, we are conditioned to believe in neat, tidy, and linear narratives. Pop culture abounds with trauma narratives, in the literary and film industries, that repeatedly produce neat and entertaining chronicles of horrific events that lead up toward the final

¹⁶⁶ Maureen Donohue-Smith, “Telling the Whole Story: A Conceptual Model for Analysing the Mental Illness Memoir,” *Mental Health Review Journal* 16, no. 3 (September 16, 2011): 138–146.

chapter's happy conclusion of the empowered survivor grateful for her "gifts."

In my experience, truly embodied life bursts through any illusory or cognitive construct of such a straightforward linear narrative. Of course, a survivor may choose to tell her story in this expected and profitable way. Through explicit chronicling, she may find release, validation, and acceptance. My approach to writing with the wound, however, seeks to invite the liminal, the poetic and the embodied. In my experience, especially from writing alongside survivor-poets, an altogether different life path opens when we abandon attachment to the linear constructs of narrative we are conditioned to organize our own lives into.¹⁶⁷ I include my poetry to demonstrate one person's experience of that different path. In what follows, I interact with my former self, expressed in her poetics, from an integrative and reflective perspective that does not seek to categorize or psychoanalyse, but to critically engage from an embodied and survivor-centred praxis. This process of engagement itself is poetic inquiry and it unfolds into a phenomenology of healing that also contributes to building survivor-centred cultural theory.

Cass and My Cave of Reclaimed Dreams

As a way of entering this chapter's autoethnographic encounters, I begin with a dream I had in 2011. Much like

¹⁶⁷ Again, for a fuller discussion of this at the intersections of trauma theory and narrative theory, see my article on Ricoeur and trauma: Gildea, *Ricoeur's Theory*.

Jungian depth analysis, I view dreams as part of the implicit self and as therefore able to contribute to embodiments of meaning making and poetic awareness. Depth psychologist Gregory Bogart articulates dreams and the symbolic meanings they open us to as “transformative encounters with the numinous.”¹⁶⁸ I connect his depth psychology approach with Anzaldúa’s feminist and poetic approach. Anzaldúa links dreams with the imaginal realms we enter when we write ourselves in a “language that expresses previously inexpressible psychic states and enables the reader to undergo in an ordered and intelligible form real experiences that would otherwise be chaotic and inexpressible.”¹⁶⁹ When combined with poetic inquiry practices, dreams offer so much creative material for writing with the wound. Anzaldúa writes more specifically of dreams:

I use the word ‘ensueño’ in several guises: as illusion and fantasy; as un sueño que se hace realidad, a dream that becomes a reality; as a way to bridge the reality of the dream with the reality of the nondream; and as a type of lucid dreaming where one is in full awareness (or perhaps even control) of the dreaming process. In the vernacular, it’s a compliment to say, ‘Eres un ensueño, that is, una persona mágica.’ ‘Es un ensueño’ may be also said of viajes or lugares maraviosos. A

¹⁶⁸ Gregory C. Bogart, *Dreamwork in Holistic Psychotherapy of Depression: an Underground Stream that Guides and Heals* (Boca Raton: Routledge, 2018) 2.

¹⁶⁹ Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark*, 35.

type of creative fantasy, ensueños are simply another reality. The reasoning mind's reality is not higher than the imagination's. I am interested in the place/space (*nepantla*) where realities interact and imaginative shifts happen. Some images stimulate changes; certain images change the images that live within a person's psyche, altering the stories that live within rather than trying to 'fix' the person that 'houses' these images.¹⁷⁰

I will take you into my own *nepantla*:

She stands alone, hair loose, unkempt. Shadows from the fires that give this cave light, dance all around. Touching her finger into black charcoal, she pauses a moment to lift her hand to her nose. Inhaling, the scent of an unformed dream fills her. She stares at the textured wall before her, sees latent life moving in its sunken dips and raised plates. A rhythm begins to beat itself inside her chest and then her fingers, moving slowly, touch the wall. She begins to paint. Twenty-thirty-forty minutes of her body dancing with this solid living canvas of earth, her chest beating the rhythm of the horses, the lions, deer and cattle that move through layers of textured stone. The animals form a circle and in its center is a child crouched down low, hiding. The woman's body moves in graceful concert with the animals she paints around this child. The scene unfolds a ritual of protection in a song of redemption.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

And then she stops.

Stepping back, her eyes gaze at the walls whose life and story she has been a part of creating. Serene and calm, her body absorbs the echo of water dripping from some distant crevice of the cave, falling drop by drop into darkness. Her muscles, tense, glisten with a mix of her own sweat and the cave's moisture. Then she turns and walks out into cold sunlight.

~Journal, 13 August 2011

It is hard to believe I had this dream over a decade ago! At that point in my life, I had a daily journaling/poetic inquiry practice. I did not write with any intention of publishing or “using” my writing for anything beyond the phenomenological inquiry practice that it was. I wrote with whatever thoughts, emotions, and/or images emerged as I learned to surrender to the flow of my wound’s language that most days spilled out of me. Then, at this point in my early thirties, my dreams began to speak to me with more vivid imagery. I began to write with them. Or perhaps more accurately, I began to listen to them.

Until this point, I had not worked consciously with dreams and I had absolutely not listened to them. In fact, given the confusing images and replays of violence I so often saw in my dreams, I avoided them. Also, having had therapists psychoanalyze my dreams through a trauma lens in ways that did not fully resonate with me added to my hesitancy to fully enter my dreamscapes with an open curiosity. I see now, my dreams were always speaking to me. Not of the violence I had

endured, but of my own internal and embodied realms. They were always releasing meaningful images, rhythms, and textures of life for me to inquire into with a multi-dimensional gaze that sees far beyond any literal or reductionist interpretation of dreams. I simply did not yet know how to enter such a language of my wound and body and psyche. I had not yet learned that we can separate our traumas from the events we survive and that there is so much meaning beyond literal interpretation and explicit memory.

Concerning dreams Anzaldúa writes:

Do we make dreams, or does something outside us originate and orchestrate them? Is imagination's non ordinary reality real? Does it matter whether the journey comes from a waking dream, the unconscious in symbolic representation, or a non ordinary parallel world? Who cares, as long as the information (whether metaphorical or literal) gained from a shamanic journey makes positive changes in a person's life. We must avoid the snares of literalism.¹⁷¹

Much like my own approach to dreams and poetic meaning in general, Anzaldúa views dreams as material we can encounter in non-categorical and non-linear modes of expression, modes that were altogether missing from the books on trauma that I'd turned to in hopes of "healing." Bogart echoes Anzaldúa's spirit of symbolic liminality. He believes that dreams create in

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 37.

between realms that invite shifts in our conscious awareness. Yet, for these shifts to occur we may have some responsibility to take up the dream's invitation to actively engage with those realms in our waking and conscious lives.¹⁷² Bogart maintains,

A dream is a natural projective image inviting us to paint canvases of our inner worlds evoked by the elusive, mystifying characters and narratives. Dreamwork takes us to a place where we discover emotional and existential truths.¹⁷³

Interestingly, all that comes in the next two chapters could be considered “dream work,” because I would not be writing this book if I had not dreamt the dream I recounted above. This dream was one of the first times in my conscious life when I, highly trained in literary criticism with a PhD in philosophies of phenomenological hermeneutics and poetics, did not for one moment attempt to enter what Anzaldúa would call my academic “snares of literalism.”¹⁷⁴ I did not attempt to

¹⁷² I say “may,” because as of late, I have stopped believing we need to “work” to come to growth of awareness, a condition of the psychotherapeutic framework. Sometimes I am aware I’ve had a powerful dream, but I am not called to bring it into my formal poetic inquiry practice. I like to let the images stew inside my body-psyche, resurface at moments throughout the day, linger in that resurfacing and trust that something is shifting within. Other times, if a dream is especially vivid or if I feel troubled by a dream, or if its imagery will not stop returning to me, I bring it into my formal inquiry practice.

¹⁷³ Bogart, *Dreamwork*, 4.

¹⁷⁴ Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark*, 37.

theorize or reduce the richness of this liminal realm into rational explanation. Instead, I woke in the middle of the night from this dream and immediately knew that something was different. I sat up in the dark, aware that this woman I'd seen in the cave was real, that I knew her, that her artist soul was part of me. There on my bed breathing into the dark, I felt as if I were both she and the child she had painted on the cave's wall, the animals a protective army able to shield me from the inner world of my past. I fell back asleep peacefully, my hand resting on the soft fur of my sixteen-year-old cat, Ginger, curled into a ball next to me.¹⁷⁵

This was the first time I intuitively turned to write with my dreams, as I had not yet encountered the concept of a dream journal. In doing so, I discovered the “emotional and existential truths” described above by Bogart. My route into such discovery was to follow an intuitive pull to invite my dreamscape into my journaling practice. Something profound began to happen then. As I sat and wrote with the woman that appeared in that cave, I developed a relationship with her, in the liminal space opened by poetic inquiry. As our relationship progressed, I came to call this woman Cass. In the months and years that followed, I journeyed with Cass through creative explorations of self-inquiry on and off the

¹⁷⁵ Ginger lived to be nineteen years old. I have not mentioned animal companions much in this book yet. Perhaps because I could write an entire book on the healing companionship that animals offer survivors, both during childhood and through adulthood. Ginger came into my life when I was nineteen and just discovering a whole new world. I am so incredibly grateful to that sweet fluffball of a cat, who also killed snakes when we lived in rural Washington state and taught me so much about love and the right to protect ourselves.

page, in dreaming and waking life. Simply put, Cass changed my life.



Now for some messy context that unravels more layers of the creative embodied process. The dream above did not emerge randomly or in isolation from my ongoing healing, which at that time was directed by traditional trauma praxes. At that point, I had been in therapy for six to eight months. Once a week, without fail, I climbed the narrow staircase near the Toronto neighborhood I lived in to sit and work with Emily, my Gestalt therapist.¹⁷⁶ My sessions with Emily often involved classic Gestalt “chair work” — me physically standing to shift back and forth between sitting as an imagined version of my child self and as the adult woman sitting across from her, asking the young girl to tell me what she wanted and needed to feel protected and loved.¹⁷⁷ One evening, after a particularly deep session of looking and being with my childhood wounding, Emily and I sat sipping our rosehip tea, a ritual with which we would sometimes end my evening journeys of discovery. She said to me, “I saw a film

¹⁷⁶ My therapist’s name has been changed to honour her privacy and to protect her anonymity.

¹⁷⁷ For the Gestalt chair technique, a classic technique in the Gestalt approach to psychotherapeutic healing that works to surface deep, often subconscious emotions and self-concepts regardless of one’s trauma, see: “Gestalt Therapy: The Empty Chair Technique,” Mentalhealth.net, accessed December 7, 2023, <https://www.mentalhelp.net/blogs/gestalt-therapy-the-empty-chair-technique/>.

and I thought of you. It's a documentary, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*."¹⁷⁸

I went home and watched *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* that night on my computer. I journeyed into ancient caves of lost memories, memories forgotten thirty-thousand years to our collective human consciousness. The deep honey-like texture of Werner Herzog's voice, the film's director and narrator, wrapped me up and carried me into that French cave as ancient images of lions and deer danced through shadow and entwined with my waking consciousness. Later that night, three months into living with nearly daily flashbacks, I dreamt of Cass.

My therapeutic relationship with Emily clearly played an important role in allowing this dream to emerge. My time in Gestalt therapy provided me with useful insights and techniques to approach self-discovery. Yet in the last chapter I expressed such a strong dislike of therapy. The individual therapists I've encountered and entered into therapeutic alliance with are not living embodiments of the colonialism, patriarchy and ableism in which that psychology is rooted.¹⁷⁹ The relationships we form with our therapists can be real and embodied, and when they are, such profound relationships have the power to change both client and therapist.

¹⁷⁸ Werner Herzog, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (Toronto: Kinosmith, 2011).

¹⁷⁹ I have found that therapists consciously and unconsciously align with and resist these ideologies in many ways, this is part of why it can take some time to find the right fit in therapy, a process complicated by one's economic class in that the more financial freedom one has the more opportunity and access one usually has to individualized and progressive forms of therapy.

That being said, it was not until I stopped seeing Emily that I had space to gain perspective of the damage and ongoing silencing that occurred despite the strong feelings of authentic care she offered me. It takes incredible vulnerability to share buried truths you have never shared with any other human being before. I look back now and see how much I wanted to be accepted and validated in that position of vulnerability. Many times, I felt Emily guide me, my body and/or my inner world, toward an interpretation of my emotional realms that did not sit right with me, and I ignored the body-based resistance I felt most often manifesting as a churning in my stomach or a feeling of constriction in my throat. I silenced my body and I followed her interpretive frameworks and guidance. I was starved to feel seen by an older woman and, at that time, silencing myself seemed a small price to pay. This process and relationship was further complicated, because as a somatic therapist, she would also interpret my body in response to clinically explicit renderings of the body, which, I can tell you now, sometimes absolutely did not align with my own body's language. My desire to be genuinely accepted combined with my habituated survival mechanism programmed at such a young age of molding myself to the desires of a person in power caused my therapeutic healing to take routes that were not authentic to my identity or to my own desires for wellness.

I have had to unlearn so many of the non-survivor-centred interpretations of emotion, embodiment, and identity that I appropriated into my own self-concept during therapy with Emily and many other therapists I've worked with. My own experience and my work with other survivors in

community art groups who have shared similar views with me, leads me to know without doubt that there are paradigms of healing and therapeutic alliances we can form without implementing deficiency praxes. While I respect individuals that want to work within the formal structures of psychotherapy and change it from within, I am simply not one of those people.

But all of this has been the messy path

of my own psyche

splitting, shattering

merging

with my body

discovering authenticity

rejecting inauthenticity

again and again and again.

And through this journey of being in therapy, trying various types of therapy, training in various types of therapy and eventually choosing to happily claim my position and label of feminist phenomenologist that orients herself to an altogether embodied and oceanic framework of meaning making and healing, one thing did not change: my poetic inquiry practice. I came to poetic inquiry practice years before I encountered Expressive Arts Therapy and discovered poetry therapy was

indeed “a thing.” What emerged on the pages of my journals was a beautiful process of discovery through the languaging of my wound and body. Through this process, I met Cass and she journeyed with me for years. She journeys with me still, but I do not invoke her on the page or actively look for her guidance as I did during those first years after that dream. It was in those years, by writing with my wound rather than learning about my wound from those who have never lived through what I have lived, that I came to feel from the inside out that *I am never what was done to me. I am an entanglement of earth and water, a body whose scarred psyche seeps through its own golden edges.* The more I learn to embody this poetic consciousness, the more I embody Cass in the very way I enter into relationship with myself and with the world around me.¹⁸⁰

¹⁸⁰ Poetic Inquiry shifts how we view belonging and life, because the implicit and liminal realms that connect us to more than our own experiences of life, pain, joy, imagined success open through felt embodiment. I do not believe therapy is the best and/or “safest” place for this work to happen. Community centres, educational institutions, creative uses of social media and media narratives are all part of cultural paradigms of meaning making and education that we can bring survivor-centred practices and non-normative narratives into. By languaging ourselves for ourselves and with others, we can claim so much power. Therapy may be part of the journey, as it certainly was for me, but there is so much potential for cultural healing praxes outside of psychotherapy and indeed, the binary between “healing” spaces and “professional spaces,” a binary evident of colonial patriarchal histories of western social organization, perpetuates stigma and shame of so many experiences of disability and neurodivergence that may overlap with embodiment of our childhood traumas.

When we, people working with poetic inquiry whether we identify as survivors or not, come to our own language of the wound, its transformative and creative power shifts how we view ourselves and others. To recall Owton’s description of poetic inquiry from Chapter 2:

poems are part of my ongoing engagement with living in the world and the poems are attempts to capture multiple moments, intensities and layers of struggle. Despite the risk of producing messy texts, Gilbourne (2010, 2011) emphasised the need for acceptance of these types of ‘unsettling truths’ because they can invoke new perspectives and invite fresh interpretations.¹⁸¹

Accepting new truths can shift so much, including how we view belonging, relationship, and life. On macro and micro levels, I do not believe therapy is the best and/or “safest” place for this work of shifting consciousness to happen. We must bring survivor-centred practices and non-normative narratives into community centres, educational institutions, creative uses of social media and media narratives. All of these spaces, in person and digital, are all part of cultural paradigms of meaning making and education. By languaging ourselves for ourselves and with others day by day, we claim paradigm-changing power. Therapy may be part of the journey, as it certainly was for me. It may be part of building safety within

¹⁸¹ Owton, *Doing Poetic Inquiry*, 7.

the self, but we need our social structures of meaning making to change if we truly want cycles of violence to end. There is so much potential for cultural healing praxes outside of psychotherapy and indeed, the binary between ‘healing’ spaces and “professional” spaces, a binary evident of colonial patriarchal histories of western social organization, perpetuates stigma and shame of so many experiences of disability and neurodivergence that may overlap with embodiments of our childhood traumas.

Just like the images on the wall of the Chauvet Cave, the stories of our past selves, whether they may come from our childhoods, our ancestral heritages, our deeply rooted connection with earth’s ecosystems and/or any other number of complicated embodiments of selfhood and relationship, these stories are never truly lost or forgotten. Simultaneously, they also may never be fully remembered *if* memory is restricted to an intellectual and explicit representation and expression of the past. Feminist phenomenology embraces such a radical truth of memory that shatters the reductive binary between explicit and implicit memory that meaning making institutions like psychiatry are built on. It shatters that binary because the dialectical engagements between ocean and body, remembering and expressing, imagining, and dreaming, love and fear, open us to an entirely more integrative way of being human being in relationship with yes, other humans, but also with nature, our own bodies, seasonal cycles, our collective pasts and our collective futures yet to be written. The traditional reductionist and binary lens is shattered when different angles of perspective and feeling and relationship emerge in our conscious awareness. From this perspective,

embracing and inviting a shifting mosaic of embodiment and reality is the domain of, not just my healing, but my decolonizing engagement with the world.

I began this section of autoethnographic encounters with this dream, because Cass appears in the vignettes that follow, and I wanted to introduce you to her as I came to meet her. I also start with this dream because I know so fully that I would not write to you today if I had not met Cass. I do not think it matters if our process of inquiry emerges through therapy, our own writing and art making, our dreams, meditations, a creative writing class, forest bathing, or any other combination of inquiry practices that introduce us to the aesthetic and implicit parts of ourselves. We are all different, with different threads of social locations and diverse needs, therefore, our healing paths cannot look the same. What does matter is that we normalize meeting these implicit parts of ourselves. It matters that we normalize allowing them to interact freely with the explicit and cognitively driven identities we are taught to prioritize and centre within ourselves. Writing with the wound is a process that supports, without fail, my own discovery. I have also dreamt with the wound, danced with the wound, painted with the wound, and wept with the wound. This practice is about embodiment which means I am always in relationship with my wound. The wisdom I have learned is that at some point writing with the wound was not an entry point to pain and suffering but to beauty and belonging, even if pain was or is still present in that beauty. When I write with the wound, all that is and is not can be present. This radical experience of embodiment is the basis of a phenomenology of healing.

It would be easy for a traditional psychology lens to reduce Cass to an externalized object projected by my wounded ego. I could take time here to perform such a reductionist and categorical interpretation. While I do not discount that such a psy-based exercise could provide interesting intellectual insights or different angles of perception, I am not going to do this to Cass or to myself. I am not going to perform such an exercise, because I am not writing as a trauma theorist but as a survivor-theorist. The survivor comes first and though I silenced her for decades, I listen to her now. Her body-psyche will not allow the theorist in me to reduce Cass to psychoanalytical structures of abstractions based on disembodied constructs of survival written by “experts” who have never had to dissociate as a condition of their daily life for years. To detach Cass from my embodied and poetic consciousness is to disrespect my own healing process and the aesthetic impulse that drives me to write this book. Most importantly it would be to disrespect the incredibly imaginative and courageous little Iris J. I once was and who appeared in that dream of my own earth-born caves. The simple truth is that Cass cannot be reduced to theory. She came from my body-psyche’s depths which are deeply personal and always extending beyond my personal or individual sense of self. This extension is dramatized by the way Herzog’s film, recommended by someone I was in therapeutic alliance with, worked its way into my body-psyche’s creative and imaginative vision of healing. It is a vision rooted, literally and imaginably, in the caverns of the earth.

Poetic consciousness emerges because this poetic or embodied awareness of my interconnectivity *is* remembered, reclaimed, re-created and integrated into my cognitive interpretations of daily life through my ongoing practice of writing with the wound. As I forge my own ways of speaking from the body-psyche and its own caves of forgotten dreams, I can witness myself evolving through so many different experiences of selfhood. I wrote for years with Cass, and every time I witnessed various parts of myself, my past, my beliefs, and my longings for an imagined future emerge in new images, words, and rhythms. In poetic inquiry as I am presenting it, we seek to become our own witnesses as we learn to trust the images and metaphors that emerge from our oceanic depths and earth held caves. Our relationship to meaning will necessarily shift as we journey and follow our aesthetic impulses wherever they may lead us on and off the page. Our perceptions of ourself/ves will shift because our sense of self is, from this perspective, co-created as we interact with the creative process. I cite my journal, written around the same time as my Cass dream to address this point:

9.3.2011

I am awakening to a new level of reclaiming myself. I name the woman from my dream Cass and I realize that amidst the waves I am birthing myself in Cass' arms. I am aware that I am beginning to heal, yet I keep expecting to look at my body and find scars from cuts I made with my own hand all those years ago. I keep expecting people to stop me as I am walking down the street and say, "Excuse

me Miss, but you need to go to a hospital. Those scars are open and they are bleeding all over the street."

But the cuts

were on the inside

weren't they?

The scars

inside

aren't they?

And it wasn't

my hand

that made

all those

awful cuts

was it?

From somewhere deep inside me a voice began to answer the questions I posed in my journal. As I work with this poetic

glimpse of my past self, I can hear that voice answer “No, My Love, it was not your hand.”

Her voice is a raspy husk that soothes my being and coats my flesh with moist salt of the Salish Sea whose waves rise and fall outside my window.



I would love to see Western cultural paradigms shift so that survivors are taught to value the parts of ourselves that abusers and society teach us to hide. Yes, we “forget” as a mechanism of survival but perhaps that is because the institutions we go into as children mimic the practices of cultural silencing. At home and at school, so many of us are taught not to cry, to hold our pain inside. We are taught not to scribble outside the lines. We are taught to sanitize our messes at such a young age and do everything we can to appear “normal” and tidy. I imagine schools teaching the value of aesthetic meaning making not as a recreational “art” class, for which funding is continuously cut, but as a viable form of meaning making. I imagine education expanding to include the non-normative embodiments of those of us whose truest selves grow in the silenced margins. I imagine a culture that does not require me to pay money and sit behind closed doors to explore myself, a task that is often only available to those with the financial means to do so, but one in which I am invited to walk as an ever-shifting kaleidoscope of a woman

down the street without labels that sanitize the truth of the different forms of violence that go on in so many children's lives.

When I learned to create space in my own life to encounter my wound without needing to contort my wound and myself to the wants and/or ideologies of others, I felt so supported. As a young survivor in my early twenties, I had never imagined such stabilizing support could emerge as I nourished my own evolving perceptions of meaning making and embodiment. What was most important for my healing was that I created this space for myself on my own terms, terms extracted from a deficiency praxis. This allowed me to feel safe to be whomever I was in one particular moment. I followed the embodied rhythms that began to unfold through me as I gave myself over to at least an hour of stream of consciousness writing every day. This shift was the natural call of my psyche, a call that I followed and organized my day around as I would my basic needs to eat, drink water, and sleep. As I developed a stronger relationship with myself, I began to experience the most beautiful of intimacies as I learned from the inside out that I am never alone.

This intimacy was between me and the various parts of myself I encountered, and it was mediated by the birthing of my own embodied awareness that I am an interconnected being, always co-creating with the ecosystems I am part of. As this sacred belonging began to unfold itself between those pages of my journal and my own enfleshed womanhood, the shame I carried in my breasts and in the weight of my thighs and across my abdomen began to recede out into the ocean. There were two oceans: the physical ocean that I began to visit

on my own, and the psychospiritual-poetic ocean that connected the waters of my body and psyche with the waters of the Salish Sea. This embodied intimacy became my truest source of healing. At that point in my life, no longer distracted by proving myself in graduate school and living on my own for the first time in my life, despite financial and emotional struggles, I had the space and sense of safety necessary to hear a call to write with my wound and with Cass. The truth is of course Cass' voice is my voice. The woman and the girl in the cave were both me. The rise of the white caps on the Salish Sea are also a reflection of my own oceanic depths of rage and pain that have potential to harm and a potential to, also like me, turn so gentle as they wash across the shore. It may seem counterintuitive to invite this potentially destructive force within to the surface of myself and onto the page. Survivors are often taught to repress anything that rises out of our control, especially when it is in our own psyche.

When it comes to this potentially destructive force, there may be a threat of harming another person or ourselves and at different times in our lives we may need or want support to reestablish balance in the body-psyche. Western society has also normalized and promotes a way of life that harms beyond repair the ecosystems we are a part of, as well as many peoples living within those ecosystems. We have a medical system that silences implicit memory and a legal system that harms survivors and favors perpetrators. Our so-called "normal" ways society operates prioritizes the success of certain individuals over others, and silences and rejects indigenous, non-white, and non-patriarchal ways of knowing,

leading to harm on micro and macro levels. Developing a practice of embodied awareness by writing with the wound is a practice of developing a poetic consciousness that, from the inside out, rejects such harmful paradigms. Instead, it cultivates a consciousness that values its own heritages and embodied and interconnected ways of being in this world, even if we are forever in a process of re-discovering those heritages and embodied ways of being.

As I reflect on this period of my life when so much creative self-discovery occurred, I now realize I did not once question what I wrote while I was alone in my apartment or during mornings at one of my local coffee shops. It was as if a part of me, the part I came to name Cass, knew how to heal herself and I trusted this part of myself implicitly. Indeed, even as I sat crying alone on the floor of my apartment, revisiting my memories in more conscious and embodied ways than I had ever done before, a part of me welcomed that pain because it was welcoming my whole self to be present. In the next section I turn to an exploration of the connection between the call of the wound and the shift of consciousness that I experienced by writing with the wound.

Autoethnographic Poetics

Anzaldúa thoughtfully describes a feminist politics and impulse of autoethnography *in Light in the Dark*:

In these autoethnographies I am both observer and participant — I simultaneously look at myself as subject and object. In the blink of an eye, I blur subject/object, class,

gender, and other boundaries. My methodological stances emerge in the writing process, as do the theories. I treat all work, including these chapters, like fiction or poetry.¹⁸²

Here she identifies the myriad ways entanglements of subject and object, observer and participant fold in and out of intersecting identities and realities. The blur that she describes is the experience of what occurs when theory meets embodiment. The theoretical constructs of categorical thought merge into a kaleidoscopic imaging of the lives we live, the various timelines we embody, and the relational aspects of selfhood that are always present.

While my approach to autoethnographic poetics is similar to Anzaldúa's, it is also slightly different because I separate poetry and fiction from one another. Given established rules of genre, fiction requires that a binary exist between fiction and non-fiction. Poetry, especially embodied poetry produced through the process-oriented practice of poetic inquiry, is simply an expression of what is, here and now. In the space that poetic inquiry opens the inquirer and the reader to, a type of affective blurring between real and fiction, true and not true, memory and forgetting appears. With this blurring in mind, in what follows, I quite literally write with my wound to enact a phenomenology of healing. I offer short vignettes from my journal, from the Cass year I introduced above, and dialogue with them to open insights

¹⁸² Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark*, 3–4.

into an autoethnographic poetics of healing. In using these vignettes, we (you, my reader, and I, Iris the author of this book), glimpse the past practice of a woman-survivor-theorist-poet inquiring into the reality of her embodied being. Those past meanings also transform as I, (Iris the current woman-survivor-theorist-poet), dialogue with them.

These vignettes are brief glimpses into my body-psyche's language of the wound. They reveal the rhythm of selfhood that began to unfold from and within me as I taught myself to write with the wound and discover the glistening I mention above. The methodological objective I employ now by dialoguing with my earlier writing/self is to cultivate honest embodiment here on the page. By honest, I mean that I do not come into this process with any preconceived notions of what 'healing' or meaning making should look like. My approach blends present reflection with the practice of poetic inquiry itself. I create a metanarrative and hybrid model of aesthetic discourse seeking, based on the theory and research methods presented in Part 1, to establish a phenomenological feminist praxis.

I find autoethnographer and counselor Reineeke Lengelle's description of her own autoethnographic process helpful to bring into the conversation. Concerning her book *Writing the Self in Bereavement* she writes:

This book is not prescriptive. Rather, it shows how I have been writing my own medicine. The process of meaning making through language is not only what I teach, write about, and study in my professional

life; it is also my own grounding practice. Recently, in describing what my work entails, I explained that *I facilitate a process where people can return to themselves*. We can be good company for ourselves when we get attuned and can articulate what is unfolding within; when we are honest about the range of feelings, we may have about any given experience.¹⁸³

Lengelle expresses a tenet that situates itself in the overlap of autoethnography and writing with the wound: by discovering our own authentically oriented processes of inquiry we embody a praxis of survivor-centred work. Writing becomes her own medicine. I term this medicine a phenomenology of healing and I seek to demonstrate it now.

In terms of how I have gone about choosing and presenting these vignettes—the excerpts are represented chronologically from my journal, from 2015–2016, and they are titled only with their dates. They are not edited except for grammatical and spelling typos. I wrote by hand and I have done my best to replicate the form on the page in transcribing them. I chose excerpts that called to me and tried not to put too much thought into them so that I could then engage through a process of poetic inquiry rooted in the intention of this book. I also selected excerpts from this time period to capture the expansiveness of self that emerged when I allowed myself to embody a poetic consciousness in my day-to-day life.

¹⁸³ Reinekke Lengell, *Writing the Self in Bereavement* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 6.

At this point in my writing practice, I had been writing nearly daily for four years. Again, I did not set out to write with any intention other than to let emerge on the page what emerged, and to follow the embodied rhythms and the truths that came to light. This practice was how I grew to know Cass intimately, from the inside out.

The period of time ranging from 2015–2016 feels right for this book. More than any methodological reason, I chose this section of my journal because of these feelings of simply being “right.” I have previously published several articles with poetry written during earlier years, spanning 2011–2013. Were this a book focused specifically on flashbacks and how poetic inquiry is an excellent practice for living and healing with flashbacks, I would probably have chosen those years, because they are when I was learning to claim and embody my identity as a survivor.¹⁸⁴ That said, I do not think the writing is much different between the two sections. In both time periods, the images are similar as are references to my body and to nature. What is different perhaps is that in my later writing my focus shifted more and more to my relationship with myself – to my own wounding – rather than focusing on the people who hurt me or failed to protect me. This focus, I realize now, was entirely conditioned by traditional attachment theory in the trauma theory books I read and in my therapists’ use of it through repetitive focus on family. This focus was not intuitive to me or the best route for my embodied healing

¹⁸⁴ For my own approach to healing with flashbacks through poetic inquiry see: Iris. J. Gildea, “The Emergency Stage: Flashbacks and Poetry: An Autoethnographic Approach” in *Journal of Poetry Therapy* 33, no. 2 (2020): 110–122.

which requires feminist phenomenology and a rejection of the deficiency praxis which attachment theory is, without doubt, routed within.

I choose to work with the journals that focus on developing intimacy with myself through writing with the wound, because if I had been taught by therapists and trauma theory that this would become central to my healing, I believe I would have saved myself from many years of struggle that preceded this point in time. Therapy constructed a feedback loop, and I struggled within that loop. The struggle came because I *always* felt my embodied interconnectivity. I *always* felt a liminality of communication that arose from that interconnectivity, but I had never been taught (or allowed) to inquire into those implicit realms. From early childhood on I was taught by traditional schooling and cultural and familial norms to ignore and/or silence these types of connections that began to come so strongly into my adult awareness during this period. Be it connection to the ocean, earth, a glowing moon in the sky, Cass and all she represents, authentic friendships, strangers I pass on the street or share a moment of synchronistic connection with and/or the animals that I live with or that appear as guides on my path, I never encountered a trauma praxis that included such embodied connection within its scope of healing. Every praxis I encountered was rooted in the deficiency praxis and traditional attachment theory. Thus, it was only when I stopped regular therapy that I fully claimed the space, internally and externally, to witness my own embodiment and hear more fully what my wound had to say to me. Hearing my own wound's depths of awareness and communication, the cognitively derived

feedback loop traditional trauma theory wove me into broke. Survivor-authored theory was not as common even a decade ago as it is today and this is what drives me to write this book and why the Press I am publishing with exists.

In terms of process and method for engaging with these vignettes, I cite Anzaldúa again, from *Light in the Dark*. She writes:

There's a difference between talking with images/stories and talking about them. In this text I attempt to talk with images/stories, to engage with creative and spiritual processes and their ritualistic aspects...enacting the relationship between certain images and concepts and my own experience and psyche, I fuse personal narrative with theoretical discourse, autobiographical vignettes with theoretical prose.¹⁸⁵

As I engage with my chosen vignettes below, just like Anzaldúa, I seek to talk *with* my poetic images of selfhood and not *about* them. I go into this process not knowing what will occur. I seek to embody an open curiosity unattached to the outcome as I move forward. This is the spirit and method of a phenomenology of healing that will emerge as I write with the wound.

¹⁸⁵ Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark*, 6.

Dialoguing with Myself (and Cass)

3.2. 15

**Am I anything other than a work of art
endlessly becoming?**

Fold over. Expose who you are.

*Slowly child. So, So Slowly.*¹⁸⁶

To come to view our own lives and states of selfhood as creative projects endlessly becoming and to embody this as a gentle acceptance, this has been what healing is to me. I find it interesting that I wrote this when I did, four years into what was a conscious turn into my own healing. This turn involved moving away from traditional trauma theory/therapy, and it also came as a result of cutting ties with my family for several years to cultivate a type of womb within which to meet myself anew, free from all the stories that had wrapped themselves around my psyche to cover over the wounds and scars of that psyche. In this womb I found a sanctuary of selfhood.

Yet this sanctuary for me was, in the beginning, a total wilderness of internal and external realities I had to learn how to navigate. I was in my late twenties and had no family, no partner, very few friends, and no promise of steady income save \$5,000 in my savings account. I had recently left a partner

¹⁸⁶ Italics in these vignettes denote Cass' voice speaking.

that I had been with since I was nineteen years old and, despite the emotionally abusive dynamics of our relationship, I had grown to depend on him in complicated ways. Yet there I was, twenty-eight years old and free of violence in my life for the first time. I had just finished my PhD and started working odd jobs. I worked as a nanny, at several cafes, I tried bartending, and slowly I found my way back into the university. Eventually administrative work led to sessional work which led to permanent status as a professor. This professional trajectory often felt like it was a parallel life to my “real” life. In the world underneath the external self that I showed to others, I was folding in and out of myself and discovering who I really was.

Alone, writing, I would move through layer upon layer, page upon page and eventually the italicized voice you see above began to emerge more and more in my writing. Her timbre is the perfect embodiment of a golden husk. Writing in my journal, she would simply emerge from inside the poetic inquiry practice to guide me through so many non-normative twists and turns, internally and externally. She taught me to ride the waves of my body-psyche as they emerged in flashbacks, sudden panic attacks, or overwhelming joy at realizing I was free, not of a person or persons, but of the cage my body-psyche had grown within. I had become trapped by the confines of living as the people pleaser, the silent daughter, the straight A student, the perfect heteronormative female partner. I began to see myself as the living artwork of a woman that could simultaneously be messy, edgy, graceful, angry. I began to surrender to the person I realized I was always becoming. Through that active

surrender, I began to remember what I had hidden in my own psyche's cave. I discovered these were not memories of abuse, but memories of belonging.

I remembered the little girl who used to pretend she was a forest ranger in the woods by the house I grew up in. Inkle, my cat and companion trailing behind would travel with me through those woods on one adventure after another. I remembered that on those adventures, I was always held by nature. Always safe. Always witnessed. A seamless flow of internal and external connection. Alone in Toronto, free to move in and out of my body-psyche for the first time, I reclaimed these memories of myself in nature. This reclaiming occurred firstly as images that emerged in my writing and then somewhat phenomenologically as trips to urban parks and ravines would superimpose embodied memory upon my hike as I felt myself remembering being a child playing in the woods. In this process, I began to feel through my body into its primary attachments to life, nurturing companionship, and safety. I felt my way through the failures of traditional attachment theory by realizing our earliest attachments include more than familial bonds.¹⁸⁷ These attachments are to earth and flesh and for me they integrate into a voice whose golden husk manifests in my psychopoetic consciousness. They are what guided me to encounter myself, over and over and over again. They are and were Cass.

This intuited embodiment is also what taught me to reject all the deficiency-laden trauma theory I encountered. It felt so utterly wrong. A sliver of a much bigger story. I wondered, how can those in charge of creating trauma theory

¹⁸⁷ Roszak, *Where Psyche Meets Gaia*, 14.

and praxis include the type of journey I am describing if they do not know such journeys can exist? How can survivors know we have depths of endless artworks within ourselves if our body-psyches are conditioned by a deficiency praxis embodied by those in positions of power we turn to for healing and guidance? Why was I blessed with a body-psyche that refused to listen to such praxes? Why did I not for one moment interpret being alone, without family, support, or money as an injustice but the greatest freedom of my life? I often wonder if some of the people writing about privilege know what a gift it is to grow up without a hand silencing your mouth as your innocence is systemically stripped away from you year after year by the very people that are supposed to teach us how to trust and how to love.

8.2.15

**It's burning - I'm burning.
Sweet hot sticky life-affirming burn of my
womanhood.**

Much of my writing during these years involved elemental images of fire and burning. In this vignette, my womanhood was burning. Indeed, six years later, my womanhood is still burning. It was burning long before I began to write with my wound and aesthetically witness this elemental state of embodied fire in myself.

We tend to think of fire as destructive but here I sense only the life-affirming qualities I found in my own

burning. This image begins to touch on what expressive art therapists Paolo J. Knill, Helen Nienhause Barba, and Margo N. Fuchs call the “destructuring” process and power of aesthetic inquiry.¹⁸⁸ They discuss how by bringing destructive powers into creative form, we channel what could be destructive into productive and transformative energy. Or, as I learned from reflecting on my own responses to the storm of white caps in the Salish Sea this morning, we can learn that our interpretive frameworks that seek to categorize and explain through a single narrative are altogether faulty.¹⁸⁹ I know now, so intimately, that an elemental surge of fire within the body-psyche may be a power to destroy but it is also a power to create.

Fire, which I do associate with anger and rage, something I have learned to befriend as my body holds an infinite channel into rage given the years of sexual violation I survived, was something I only thought of as destructive until I learned to become aware of its primal drive within myself. This awareness emerged by writing with my wound. As I wrote without attachment to “good” or “publishable” writing and allowed the rhythm and flow of words to guide me, the imagery of fire came forth. As I began to let that imagery guide me, an aesthetic thread pulling the words out of me rather than my cognitive mind directing my writing into a

¹⁸⁸ Paolo J. Knill, Helen Nienhause Barba, and Margo N. Fuchs, *Minstrels of Soul: Intermodal Expressive Therapies*, (Toronto: EGS Press, 2004), 76.

¹⁸⁹ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: The Danger of a Single Story | TED Talk.” Accessed January 25, 2024, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.

form I'd been taught was best, the anger within me reclaimed its rightful surge to burn. I was taught so young to smother the fire of a primal embodied intelligence that tells us our boundaries have been crossed. Add to this the ways that young girls, especially in my childhood environment, New England during the 1980s and 1990s, are taught to be "nice" and "pretty" – and absolutely not angry – I didn't know I was allowed to feel anger let alone express it. As this fire began to burn through the images that unraveled themselves on the page, that burn was and continues to be so life-affirming. My embodiment of fire teaches me so much about my own embodiments of womanhood.

More than anything else, I have found such grace in my rage. As I learned to listen deeply to my fire, to write with it, to follow the images, the energy itself transformed. It spoke to me in poetic image after image that poured out of me. Through this process, I came to separate my rage toward others from my rage toward myself. This distilling process took time. That process was and is not linear or simple, yet allowing a survivor to feel into the contours of where rage toward oneself and another begins, ends, merges and becomes disentangled is, in my view, an essential component of healing that traditional trauma theory rarely mentions. Rage toward ourselves is something so few of us talk about. Beyond the abusers that silence us, rage emerges in and from a society that teaches us we are deficient. This rage emerges in our child self, trying to make sense out of what does not make sense. I know that buried underneath the motivation of so many later adult choices was the original root of my own embodiment of a praxis of deficiency and a rage turned inward. Unconsciously,

I was trying to make sense of my life with a simple explanation of cause and effect:

If I had been different, he would not have...

If I had been better, she could have...

This faulty logic was the seed of so much cognitively unconscious yet deeply embodied self-hatred and self-blame. And yet, over the years, directly through the release of my elemental rage on the page that my own patriarchal, colonial, and Christian upbringing taught me to silence and disown, is the embodied reality that those burning flames are my route into self-forgiveness. For me, this forgiveness cannot be defined as something external to my breath and flesh. The same is true of my rage.¹⁹⁰

7.10.15

There is a point in pain that reflects

**only light. Medusa's gaze takes us
there.**

¹⁹⁰ My own entrance into forgiveness is feminist, survivor-centred, phenomenological, embodied and altogether detached from the majority of traditional patriarchal-religious teachings on forgiveness, which, in my scholarly and embodied view, are incredibly problematic as concerns survivors of childhood violence in the home and CSA. For my own work on this topic see: Gildea, *The Poetry of Forgiveness*.

We are taught to fear Medusa.

Mythologies are built on this directive

of fear and societies are built on those

mythologies. My body's wounds are

the product of these societies. But

fearing Medusa--all this truly means is

that we are taught to fear the woman

who becomes what she becomes when

man (a god) rapes her and a woman

who internalizes patriarchy (a god)

punishes her.¹⁹¹

¹⁹¹ This refers to the first time I learned the history behind the myth of Medusa, the gorgon monster with snakes for hair I grew up learning about in popular culture in movies and books. In reality, Medusa was a young beautiful maiden, raped by the god, Poseidon. Then, another god, Athena, angry that Poseidon raped Medusa in a temple dedicated to Athena, punished, not Poseidon, but the innocent victimized woman by turning her into a gorgon. Medusa then went to live with two gorgon sisters until Perseus, a Greek hero, came to claim Medusa's head as one of his tasks,

I reclaim Medusa every time I look in

the mirror and choose not to be

afraid.

When I first began to do work in trauma theory, I envisioned a book of survivors' stories entitled *Reclaiming Medusa*. Then of course, I discovered this title already existed. Oh, the feeling that comes when we discover our perfect title is someone else's perfect title! Medusa serves as the perfect manifestation of what Western societies organized around male power have done to the female psyche-body. Medusa's story is simple: she was a beautiful and innocent young woman raped by a male god and punished by a female god. Her death (murder) and story of victimhood became the glory of a human man. The man is remembered as a hero. Medusa is remembered as a monster.

How are we supposed to reclaim our bodies and psyches when the myths that bind Western culture together, those origins of patriarchal ideology, are woven through the fabric of cultural meaning making and we are taught to internalize that fabric into the gaze through which we view ourselves and the world? My focus here is not on macro levels of internalized patriarchal ideology. My focus is on my own

thus casting the story into the stone within Western consciousness for thousands of years: Perseus is a hero and Medusa is a monster. Learning she was a woman raped and turned into a monster through the patriarchal culture this myth grew within had a profound impact on me. For a contemporary feminist retelling of her story see: Natalie Haynes, *Stone Blind*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2023).

embodied experience of reclaiming. I want to lean into what Medusa has taught me about healing by expressing my wound's deep truth:

I

was

so

so

afraid

of myself.

It took me years to touch in and express this truth to myself. I also know that the fear I named in the above poetic discourse has not gone away completely. It shifts, recedes, tunnels under me, and rises back up like the white caps outside my window, then it settles back down, quiet for a while, even comforting in its gentle lull. Unlike my shame, which has been taken by the ocean, a fear of myself, while lessened and always transforming, remains.

This fear is not attached to rage or to the fires I explored above. In popular culture Medusa is so often reduced to an image of female rage. Her rage is rightfully owed to her, and I do think the emergence of Medusa in my psychopoetic realm, as this vignette shows, was part of getting in touch with

my self-reclaiming burn. Medusa represents so much more to me than the stereotype of an angry and vengeful woman. She represents a primal kind of power. Despite the often-untold story of Poseidon's raping her, which is how she became a gorgon, a being with snakes for hair with the ability to turn anyone to stone by looking at them, she remains incredibly powerful. With one glance, she can turn people and gods to stone. By writing with Medusa, I embrace within myself the entwinement of my self-fear and my own inherent power.

I have found the primal power I associate with Medusa exists in the act of disclosure. In fact, I have encountered no other force as strong as when my voice, written or spoken, discloses itself through the language of my wound that speaks my body-psyche's embodiments of truth. In mainstream culture the word disclosure usually suggests explicit descriptions of events of violence and the perpetrators that commit them. Using this word here, I point much more toward the poetic expressions of disclosure that capture my embodied realities of being a survivor, like the vignettes I share from my journal. Beyond writing such disclosures through the mediation of poetic discourse and witnessing them myself through years of journaling, nature also often serves as my witness. I have stood numerous times at many different points in my life with my feet sinking into the shore of the Salish Sea, and on occasion the Atlantic Ocean, as the waves wash over my ankles, and spoken in a stream of conscious flow of my body-psyche, one with the ocean's rhythm. I have sat on mountainsides in California, British Columbia, Italy and in other lands and whispered my truths to the earth and to myself. I have also screamed raw vibrating

wordless screams under water in the ocean, which is so incredibly satisfying. I highly recommend it. The mix of salt with the primal urge of reclaiming is an intoxicating mix.

Often fear journeys alongside me as I explore and experience this power of disclosure. I'm aware that it is here right now, manifesting itself as a type of catching in my throat. And just now as I was writing about my throat and I brought my awareness more into my body, I became aware that I was holding my breath! Another sure sign that fear is present. Perhaps fear's companion is courage, as it takes bravery to disclose the raw emotions of victimization, because the act of disclosure allows me to reach deeply into the truth that I am not the violence that was done to me. I reach further yet into truth and I know so fully that I do not need anyone to "fix" me or "heal" me. As I lay myself bare in acceptance of who I am, I find so much light. In some ways, I am this multilayered reality through which fear and light, power and reclaiming, and the history of my body's intimate knowledge of violence, like Medusa's, all entwine. Indeed, the perfect expression of this entwining is my voice sounding out within the ocean's vastness of salt water as that body of water holds my body and carries my scream's vibrations through its fluidity. I have had to learn to let myself communicate alongside my fear of this raw power sounding out through me.

I cannot imagine the Iris of my early twenties, a reserved and quiet student in graduate school studying the complex philosophical tradition of phenomenological hermeneutics, stripping down naked on a remote beach and swimming out into the ocean to give voice to her wound, held

and witnessed by nature. That version of me studied poetry, but she did not write it or live it. Indeed, I came to poetic inquiry because my body-psyche began to speak to me. As has already been expressed several times throughout this book, it was first and foremost to myself that I had to express this inner world and so I began to journal intuitively. I followed the path of the language of the wound unbinding me from my bondage to secrecy as the images of my body's knowledge, wisdom, and history expressed what I had learned to keep silent. For when I was a child and

*they told me they would kill me
and
my family would no longer love me
and
it is all my fault
and
this is what God wants
and
it is just a fun game of Simon Says.
and
I had to play it "right"
and
be a "good girl"*

Yes, I learned to stay quiet. Especially when teachers and other people in power do not want to hear the stories you try to tell them, you learn to stay quiet. At least, I did. I learned to stare at myself in the mirror and turn the part of my body-psyche that wanted to speak to stone. I was simultaneously Medusa and the woman she looked upon.

We cannot change the past but we can work to make sure that over time cycles of violence cease to repeat

themselves in our own body-psyches. I really believe that when we do this work for ourselves we are also doing it for others. In my experience, that work began by allowing myself to witness my inner Medusa, by befriending my own gaze and learning to hold it without turning myself to stone. As I write that, I hear feminists telling me, “No! It was not you turning yourself to stone! It was the histories of patriarchy and sexism and colonialism and classism!” While I appreciate those macro levels of interpretation and absolutely agree that ideologies of harm become embodied into our self-perceptions and that Western culture needs to reshape paradigms of power, I also know that to altogether remove my agency from my pain and wound is to disempower my creative ability to survive. It is to prevent me from healing with my trauma – my wound – because I am not equating myself with violence done to me, rather, I am equating myself with the part of me that survived by becoming Medusa. As my consciousness melts into the softening gaze of stone and turns into self-love, I allow myself to recognize the embodied beauty of reclaiming and of survival.

I did and continue to do this reclaiming work by writing with my wound and witnessing on the page a gaze that, in reality, was a little girl’s gaze, one full of curiosity, joy, love, incredible fear, confusion, and pain. This little girl’s gaze is never separate from the woman that I am at every moment of my life. There is such a mystery of beauty for me in the intermingling of vulnerability and innocence with an adult survivor’s primal power. We survivors need to acknowledge this. Our stories vary, but the rage, pain, and power — they are here in our bodies for all of us to claim in ways that heal.

And yet, I began this reflection by saying that the fear is not gone, though my relationship to fear has transformed. There are occasions, even if just for a moment, when I hold Medusa's gaze in the mirror or on the page and feel as if a charge releases itself from deep in my womb, runs up through my solar plexus, throat, and releases itself into a smile. I smile so fully at her, at all she represents, at all she sees. And each time I smile, I fear myself a little less.

8.11.16

*Slowly, a new self will begin to emerge.
Slowly, you will miss your old self less
and less.*

*And then, one day, you will look in the
mirror and looking back at you will be a
child you have not seen in a very long
time.*

Smile at her.

She has been waiting for you.

And your heart will become very full.

*When you meet her, when you see her,
that is when your healing really begins.
That is when you start putting yourself
back together.*

It will still hurt. But not as much.

As I engage with this piece from my journal, first I am soothed because I hear in these words the amber golden husk of Cass' voice. Feeling and hearing a timbre that drips like honey over my body and sticks to me in pleasure and connection soothes me deeply. Then, reflecting a little more upon these words, I admit that I am surprised. I am surprised, because she was right and yet I do not know how she (I) knew this would happen.

Sitting inside the phenomenological reality of embodied wisdom, the crossing of the past with the present, reminds me of why I presented the anecdote of time travel in connection with trauma in Chapter One. It is possible. Survivors do it all the time. It is the nature of flashbacks and painful memories, but it is also the nature of healing. No, I cannot travel back in time and stop ancestors and histories of war from planting the seeds that would sprout into my intergenerational inheritance of pain. I can, however, travel back and meet the part of myself that survival required me to abandon. This I can do over and over again. These parts of myself are wise and playful and she, the child-woman who does this imaginal, liminal meaning making work, knows so much. She speaks to me through poetry, but she also speaks to me in the waves I hear outside my window. In their rising and crashing. In the stillness before they rise and crash. In the sudden calmness as the winds shift. The more I give myself over to the consciousness that emerges through poetic inquiry, the more I come to see, feel, and experience the interconnectedness of all beings that the late Thich Nhat Hahn spoke of so often. Thich Nhat Hanh wrote that "if the wave bends down and touches her true nature she will realize

that she is water. Then her fear and complexes will disappear.”¹⁹² I believe there is a part of the survivor psyche that can and does remain untouched by the violence we survive. In the vignette above, this untouched part of me emerged as a psychopoetical rendition of the little girl I was. Yet, this little girl is always emerging from within my adult female psyche and body. The more I surrender to the flow of embodied rhythms on the page, the more intimate I become with her and with myself. Both emerged in that dream I shared with you. Both are Cass.

Whether I name the author of this vignette Cass or Younger Iris, she was right. Along this journey that has no discernable or planned final destination, I did meet a part of myself I had not seen in a very long time. I meet her often in poetic inquiry, when I walk through the woods with my dogs, and in dreams. I meet her in gentle moments of communion and, especially years ago, in moments of fear emerging in a panicked loss of breath. I do not seek to qualify these textures of intimacy in phrases like “good” or “bad” experiences. The caverns of loss and the heights of joy all entwine in my body. I do not know what else to call this embodiment but beautiful.

I know that this manifestation of healing and reclaiming is real because I have experienced it myself. I also experience it every time I gather with a group of women to share in poetic inquiry. The beauty I speak of is not separate from the slight edge of a tremble in a woman’s voice as she reads what emerged from our prompt, a tremble that almost always shifts to a rich flow of empowerment as she realizes her

¹⁹² Thich Nhat Hanh, *No Death, No Fear: Comforting Wisdom For Life*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 2002), 131.

truth is welcomed in the space we create with and for each other. Nor is this beauty separate from the tears I've shed alone in my room looking at all the pieces of my trauma spilling out of me over the years. It is not separate from our joy or our pain because both of these emotions touch our wounds. This is why writing with the wound is not, in my practice, writing *into* the wound or *from* the wound. It is simply writing *with* the wound, allowing our whole self to be present, to co-mingle and create something new. It is not about what is created or how publishable it is by commercial or academic standards, where both are entrenched in patriarchal-colonial-capitalist roots. It is about creating and being present.

2.1.16

Birthing Rain.

I am standing in a field and the sky is ripping open—blood and rain are pouring down on me. I feel myself covered in the ripe placenta of the universe. As I reach my fingers over my eyes to clear away the ripeness that's obscuring my sight—I feel my lungs release and for the first time in my life, I can breathe.

*Put your hands in the dirt and dig.
Dig down until your body is falling in the*

ground and you are becoming one with the earth and then, then let yourself try to make sense of it and experience the delight of knowing you don't have to.

My only response to this piece is that this is absolutely true. I did stand in a field under a sky ripping open and I did find myself covered in the universe's ripe placenta. I still remember the feeling of taking what felt like my first real breath after thirty years of living on this earth. I am much more curious about what this image speaks to you than what it speaks to me. This is the nature of poetic inquiry. When we give each other the gifts of our affective and implicit experiences, truths, imaginings, impressions, and feelings, we invite each other into the vulnerability of being and healing in liminal realms. This liminality is always a dance between subjectivity and objectivity and in my experience, this is the embodied realm of the survivor of childhood trauma. What a world it would be if we could honour, nourish and work with these embodiments rather than reducing them, and by extension survivors, to pathologies of cognitive imperialism whose very interpretive framework is not equipped to empirically measure the weight of the universe's placenta, let alone represent the incredible feeling that comes when wiping it from your eyes.

15.1.16

**And she opened her eyes and
the sound of thunder filled their**

**hearts, shuddered through their knees
and sent them crying to the ground.
For when Forgiveness appears before
you, incarnated in the form of a
woman leaning into the smell of
breath on flame—it is difficult to
resist the urge to bend.**

**And yet there is so much more
to come. For a man sits at home,
alone, drawing irises for a small child
who never knew the feel of their
petals brushing their soft velvet grace
across her cheek.**

When I read this, it took me a while to place the last line. Then I suddenly remembered it was referencing a night when I came home and my partner had drawn a picture of irises for me. The next day in my writing practice, my poetic consciousness showed me how present my wound was in that gift, reaching deep into my body-psyche's memory of pain and redemption, and yes, as this vignette says, forgiveness. For the past decade or so, forgiveness has and continues to emerge for me in so many ways. In the above vignette, it emerged in flame.

Also as is expressed above, and still to this day, when I experience a phenomenological encounter with forgiveness, it is difficult to resist the urge to bend. Would it surprise you to hear that bending with the flames of forgiveness is how I learned about embodiment? It is true. I did not learn from academic and/or theoretical constructs written about the

body. All of that came later, after my own body-psyche and poetic inquiry practice showed me what it is to be an embodied being. I learn so much when the salt of my tears mixes with the earth of my flesh and the fire in my soul. This mixing of body and soul, of earth, flame, and salt has happened many times in my life and every time I am so grateful for the experience. It is a phenomenological opening and when I find myself inside that opening the presence of forgiveness is so all-consuming that my body bends more as tears of joy and release bring me closer to earth.

This embodiment of forgiveness in communion with earth is not an experience I have ever sought to theorize, defend, or taint with feminist theory and/or debate as to why survivors should or shouldn't forgive. There are some experiences and dimensions of embodied survivor wisdom that precede and transcend theoretical constructs. Forgiveness and my body's connections to earth, water, and flame entwined with the wisdom that Cass shares with me, is one such experience.

20.1.16

*Bring your pen to my page and
ink yourself in flesh. Reveal your
secrets unto my tongue and let
me speak through the layers of
your pain. The fires will continue
to surge—their flames molding
themselves to my intentions of
love and incarnation. The*

*question is not when, My Love.
The question is not if. No. The
question is one of fuchsia and
gold. And how your eyes hold my
gaze, when faced with so much
love.*

My body speaks through colour and texture and this play of fuchsia and gold surfaces again and again in my writing. In the movement of colour weaving through words, I feel a nourishing presence of acceptance, expression, witnessing, and transformation.

For me, fuchsia and gold have been an intricate part of learning to know and accept myself. The colours emerge in my consciousness, rising up from my body, and they communicate deep belonging and understanding to me. For someone else, the language and image will be different. What beauty emerges, though, when we allow all our differing experiences to interact, dialogue, conjoin, and rage with and against each other. What beauty emerges when we allow these differing experiences to make consensual love with us in the waves and then lie on the shore afterwards, catching our breath as salt dries on our skin.



Artwork 4: Consensual Love, mixed media

A rectangular image, mostly pink, splattered with orange, red and peach colours

31.5.16

How do I meet myself in the
four directions?
Stand at their intersection and
feel the wind on my face, the
blood trail drying behind me.
My feet pressing down into
moist earth—her vulva opening
and glistening as the air
touches her ripe past and
begins to heal the wound that
has driven me for so long.

I lay my head on the stone bed
of your current, your chest, and
I begin to hear my heartbeat
underneath your breath. How
wholly delicious—the
unveiling of this moment. The
tastes of renunciation—
showering down upon my
groins so newly dressed in love
and faith of a universal
marriage between myself and
the sky. Violet streaks dance
amidst a blazing sun. I feel
myself twirling now. Being
welcomed beyond that which I
knew existed, except in the

**silent moments when I climbed
inside myself and prepared for
this day of reckoning, spirits
dancing in the wind.**

All I want to say with this final vignette is that I am so incredibly grateful. Grateful to myself, to the versions of myself I have sloughed off over the years, to that little girl I once was who would close her eyes and sing songs in her head, waiting for the abuse to stop. I am grateful for the breath I take as the seasons shift and I feel the birthing of Spring in the core of my body.

I am grateful to the part of my psyche that rejected a deficiency praxis and embraced entering a poetic consciousness even though there was no teacher to tell me, “Yes, Iris, this is the right way.” Others will have their own experiences but for me, journeying through liminality has been a journey made for the most part by myself but never alone. Going there is how I met Her.

Here I begin to move beyond Cass and into the psychospiritual realms of belonging after which this book is named. She encapsulates Cass, yes, but also so much more. She is all that is. She is grace and the divine and nature. She exceeds all categories of good and bad and some may call Her - God, Divine Mystery, the Universe or any other myriad of names, but for me, it is simply Her and I came to know Her in a conscious way by writing with the wound. But this was not the first time I met Her. I met Her in my mother’s womb. In the memories that surface when I sit in deep meditation and am suddenly transported into the liminality in which there is

darkness and warmth and I hear my mother singing and playing the piano. I hear my mother communicating to me, before I had even left her body, in the only language that ever felt truly safe to her – music. In there, in that liminal realm that is embodied and real, I also hear Her and know Her. I remember Her.

She rises in the sound of the waves outside my window right now and in the screams I described earlier that I've expressed in that same Salish Sea. She flows through my veins and She rises in the sun every morning. She is the moon that pulls the tides of this earth into her with one breath and releases them with another.

She is everything.

Reflection

As I reflect upon these vignettes and the experience of dialoguing with them I notice that my poetic inquiry examples do not include explicit descriptions of violence. This is not because I chose to leave examples of more graphic language from my journal out. It is because my own poetic inquiry writing rarely includes explicit words describing what was done to me. The lack of their inclusion in my poetry is not because I fear them or because I have survivor's guilt or any other misconception that someone applying a deficiency praxis might assume. It is because those are not the words I language myself within and they do not help me to heal by speaking them unless they emerge organically. For me, it is the flame, the fuchsia and gold, the image of the drawings of irises and Medusa's smile that speak to me, through me, and with me. This is a language that carries me forward because it

is the language of my wound, my body-psyche's interconnectivity with that which includes and exceeds me. The goal of sharing my poetic vignettes is not to assume that my language speaks for or with another survivor's wound. It may and it may not. I share to show how we can write with our wound and, by engaging reflectively in a survivor-centred praxis, allow poetic inquiry to open up our approaches and understandings of trauma, healing and identity in ways that explicit and ordinary language may be unable to. It is also to show those interested in learning how to support survivors of complex trauma some examples of how a poetic consciousness differs from a cognitively conditioned consciousness seeking to control within a curative paradigm of recovery rather than a phenomenology of healing.

Beyond the language that emerged in the vignettes, my dialoguing with them has introduced you to a different voice than the "theorist" voice that guided the first two chapters. I have invited the ocean's storm and wind to demonstrate layers of poetic inquiry interacting with the topic of healing childhood trauma. I have shown you with just a few examples from literally hundreds of pages of inquiry how writing with the wound has been a route into reclaiming my implicit, aesthetic, and poetically embodied self. She is not static. She is not simple. She is complex and multi-layered, and she is more than willing to engage with the theoretical. Such a theoretical engagement, however, requires an integration of the embodied and affective planes of experience, intuition, and learning.

The beauty of gold glistening across my wound. Gold is not excluded from that wound's depths or pain. It is not a

romanticization or silver lining interpretation of trauma. It does not exclude the reality of the black holes of memory that traditional trauma theory says we need to convert to the domain of cognitive control by explicitly describing and/or confronting our childhood. Such a cognitive approach, I strongly believe, teaches us to ignore the implicit self whose body pulses with a story ready to be expressed if and when the language of the wound is allowed to rise on the crest of embodied consciousness.

The phenomenology of healing I demonstrated in this chapter does not repress or prescribe. It invites an unfolding here and now, in this moment and then the next. It is a non-linear entanglement. Unlike explicit language, poetic discourse includes rather than excludes the messy and implicit embodiments of meaning making we all inhabit as human beings. By writing with the wound, I have sought to show through my own journey, how an altogether newly embodied consciousness can emerge over time. In the final chapter of this book, I consider how the enactment of a poetic consciousness is an integral part of cultivating a deep sense of belonging.

Chapter 4: The Poetry of Belonging

Today as I sit to write this last chapter, it is cold. With the cold comes wind, sun, and crystal-clear skies. When I look out the window, I see deep ocean blue and a near constant rhythm of waves. These waves do not rise and crash but appear like one vast body of steady uniform movement. As I look out, the horizon merges into different shades of blues. Sea speaks with sky. White threads itself through this palate of blues as caps of waves rise upward and clouds drift overhead. The waves wash onto shore with power and confidence.

Before coming to write, I stood with this scene in front of me and closed my eyes a few moments just to hear that power. I watched as my breathing slowed itself as if to join in with the outside rhythm. A constant pulse of wind and water absorbed me and for a moment or two it felt as if I had dissolved into the waves, no longer a separate entity about to summon language to explore this final chapter's consideration of belonging through embodiment. For those moments, I simply existed in the sound of air and wind and breath. For those moments, I simply belonged.

Nature is a conduit to presence. As that child tramping through New England woods, I experienced it instinctively. To this day, the moment I am surrounded by branches or dirt, bodies of water or vast skies, a sense of belonging overtakes me. I remember the first time I went kayaking in the Salish Sea years ago. I felt as if after decades of searching I had finally found my church, a sacred community in which to feel authentic and unconditional belonging. Realizing then, as

seals popped their heads up to stare playfully at me, that I had always had this sense of embodied belonging. Ever since I was a child. It was simply not the type of belonging I was taught to value or believe in.

As the title of this book suggests, I refer to embodied belonging as a poetry of belonging. Poetry here refers to an embodied language that speaks the body's implicit knowing, a knowing that, while inclusive of our wounds, also includes an inherent interconnectedness through, with, prior to, and beyond those wounds. In this chapter I seek to share, again with poetic vignettes, my own pulse of belonging as it became conscious through a phenomenology of healing, raw and vulnerable on the page. I also include some general approaches to poetic inquiry practices that intend to blend the healing of complex trauma with this notion that while trauma can be a gateway into memory, it need not only be a gateway into memories of violence. It can also be a gateway into memories of implicit belonging.

This practice is profoundly different from clinical psychology as it is infused with earth and water. It originates in my own womb of becoming which simultaneously connects me to my body's earliest memories in my mother's womb and to the moments of healing I receive when I awaken to realize this sanctuary of embodied life is another type of womb, that of the Earth Mother. Dream entwines with ocean entwines with a little Iris holding her breath, eyes glued shut, waiting for it to be over. Redemption streaks through me as ocean salt coats my flesh and I lose myself in a horizon of shades of blue, only to emerge again, somehow different than

I was before. Tisawii’ashii Manning’s phenomenology of Anishinaabe wisdom speaks to this praxis of healing:

This way of being is conveyed in Ojibwe/Potawatomi as Nii kina ganaa (“All my relations/All my relatives”; also implied is “My all/My everything”). interrelational gravity. The ownership is one of responsibility. The “mineness” inheres and indwells with an everything that is beyond finite comprehension but to which I am indebted. It is capitalized to acknowledge the profound significance of this coexistent autonomous/oneness structure.¹⁹³

Perhaps all healing occurs as, from the inside out, we come into more and more awareness of this interrelational gravity that Tisawii’ashii Manning writes about. In some ways all humans live with the complex trauma caused by interrelational gravity being systematically silenced and numbed through industrialization, colonialism, and cognitive imperialism. Yet, for the survivor of complex childhood trauma, I believe that when we dissociate, a part of us actually goes into the vastness that is this interrelational gravity. It is safe there. Quiet there. How on earth could someone that never had to tuck their body-psyche into that vastness, for years, know there is a route toward integration that our body-psyche already knows how to language when it is given the freedom and gentle support to do so? How on earth could a

¹⁹³ Tisawii’ashii Manning, *The Murmuration of Birds*, 157.

survivor educated by explicit colonial-patriarchal frameworks of healing, the body, and identity know she has a right to language herself into realms of the body, healing, and identity that burst through those frameworks?

The overlap between trauma, belonging, healing, and a word I will incorporate tangentially in this chapter – because it is the only word that truly describes my own embodied poetry of belonging – *spirituality*, is always non-linear, non-explicit, and beautifully entangled. In a state of active surrender with this entanglement, I embody “gravitational interrelationality.”¹⁹⁴

I situate this embodied awareness as inherent belonging. What do we belong to? We may all answer this question differently. For some it is God or Allah, for others it is Spirit or community or the land, and for others it is systems theory and particles of energy. When I ask what I belong to, Cass answers as she always does, with a husk in her voice that soothes my being and brings the musty smell of bergamot into a warmth that flows through my body. It is the smell of my cave of forgotten dreams; sweat glistens on the woman drawing on the cave wall, as a child sings, safe, by her side.

Waves rise.

Waves fall.

I know

I am home.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

A Year in Vignettes

I now turn to autoethnography to show how healing occurs in phenomenological bursts of insight that wrap me back around myself and spiral me forward through myself. Life becomes a rhythmic interplay of self-discovery, yearning, and alienation, where the coming together of all of it is the type of phenomenological belonging I seek to show. So, in the spirit of survivor-centred autoethnography, I turn now to my own poetics and personal journey of inquiry.

Below is a year in vignettes. I do not reflect on the vignettes individually as I did in the previous chapter, nor do I turn them into reflective auto-theory. I simply offer them as a linear narrative of a non-linear psychopoetic and embodied journey of reclaiming. I have made edits only regarding grammar, and through my judgment calls on how best to represent the hand-written form in type. Afterward, I offer a reflective narrative on how this year in vignettes speaks to an embodiment of belonging in a phenomenology of healing.

I have chosen vignettes from the year 2018. Doing so allows for some growth from the last chapter's examples, which ended in 2016. Showing this evolution of my poetic consciousness and embodied journey is important because growth as a process that relates to cultivating a poetic inquiry practice is part of my survivor-centred paradigm. Despite what the rising social media trends of pop psychology related to trauma tell us, healing decades of embodied relational entanglements from childhood trauma and violence does not happen in a weekend course.

When it comes to complex childhood wounding, my healing is a life-long journey. When I accepted this reality, I

found solace. The solace came when I accepted that healing does not mean becoming “normal.” Life does not begin once I am “healed,” and healing is not a reorganization of my cognition to align with the conditions of identity that those who have not themselves experienced my depths would place upon me. If anything, healing is an embrace of neurodivergence and a raw primal pulsing of selfhood. It is a shifting of orientation, relational insights, and reflections that clear away pockets of entangled grief and shame. Yes, weekend workshops can help to clear away those grief pockets and they can teach us useful techniques and perspectives, but the healing I am talking about is a lifelong journey. It is constantly reorienting me within an evolving love affair with myself and the earth to which I belong. While self-love is not part of the mandate of feminist phenomenology, it is, in a survivor-centred praxis, where a phenomenology of healing can lead.

In my own autoethnographic journey, the love I have of the ocean, its salty brine and gorgeous blues, are the same love I have for myself. Poetic inquiry is a path of cultivating this love through the development and embrace of the poetic consciousness that, from the inside out, teaches me I am not the violence I survived. I think in my own story, this love began to rise more consciously in 2018 as this was the year I moved out west and actively began restoring and *restoring* my relationship with nature. This, in turn, restored and *restored* my relationship with my body. This is the year that nature began to teach me what the trauma books never could: that I already belong.

In “Gathering our Sages, Mentors, and Healers: Postcolonial Women writers and Narratives of Healing,” Anh Hua, writes:

The girl child, with her smooth sheltered skin, did not yet know of suffering, her own and others. By the turquoise ocean, she spends many days building sandcastles, or so the adults think. Upon closer view, they were not castles really, but constructions of other possible worlds. They were sand sculptures that resemble sea-horses more than humans, ambiguously gendered and sexed, bellies ballooned with pregnant virility. They were sculptures of mother and child, of sandstone mother, half goddess and half-human, cradling her unborn. Her creativity was unseen, for the ocean came and lapped the sand mother-child away. All was lost, ephemeral and fleeting, like a rainbow, it came and was gone. Only the memory of the image, of the rainbow, remained, and the afterglow of such pleasures. The girl child learns then that out of sand and time, out of rocks, moss, and water, creation is possible and other worlds can be imagined.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁵ Anh Hua, “Gathering Our Sages, Mentors, and Healers: Postcolonial Women Writers and Narratives of Healing,” *Feminist Formations*, 26, no.3 (Winter 2014), 56.

We contain primary memories of belonging within us, especially of our belonging with and through nature. These memories are accessed instinctually and given creative form in childhood. The above passage cannot but remind me of the child in my dream of Cass. That dream was perhaps my first conscious glimpse of belonging, one that spoke of earthy caves and creativity, as water dripped down the cave's walls and formed into droplets of sweat on the woman's flesh. In allowing ourselves to reclaim the aesthetic impulse rooted in our bodies and in images and experiences of nature, self-love can blossom in the actual embodiment of breath and flesh, in the feel of my bare feet pressing into the sandy shore, my imprints in the earth creating worlds like those described by the little girl in Hua's own creative world. And yes, the ocean can and will come and wash away those worlds. Their lasting impression and one's attachment to what happens after is not the focus or even of importance. What is important is the moment of connection and creation. That is where healing happens. I turn to my own year in vignettes now, to see how I wielded momentary worlds in words and how the tides of time came and washed them away.

A Poetry of Belonging in Vignettes

25.1.18

XIII: The Death Card

The version of myself that is afraid
and does not believe in Love, I let
her die.

With so much love
I let her take
her last breath in my flesh.

From her ashes
may I birth
the woman that I am.

26.1.18

Who am I? It is not a question I am in the habit of asking but I am asking it now. Down on my knees, no longer folding over myself in surrender to pain. No—that phase of supplication has passed. Now I fold in a state of awe, confusion, wonder, gratitude and openness. Folding, I discover who I am.

3.2.18

The textures of my pain are
healing now into solid golden
curves of light. A transformation
quite unexpected, yet also, the
only form that progress could
take.

Because there comes a point
when standing on the edge—we
choose.

Finally
I choose myself
over him.

6.5.18

Holy water
sprinkled
across
my wound
and flesh
my Id's eye.

Follow the thread
beyond
into the edge
of broken fragments
of the child's
lost hope.
Her broken spirit
hangs
in my loose
grip.
'Hold! Hold on to her!
Hold!
I hear you cry
up above
standing on the rocks.

The smell of ocean
filling my nose
I remember
her name

this child in my hands
I call out to her—
'Iris!
Iris!
you must climb
to me
I cannot
climb
to you.'
"I can't" she
screams
broken
pieces
of
spirit
dangling,
fall
into the abyss.

I open my mouth
I scream
I wake

I am alone
in bed
safe
child of
my former
self
wrapped

inside
my mind.
Smell
of holy water
taste
of salt
fresh
in my nose,
my mouth,
my heart.

30.6.18

Revelations.

Her hands grip through the fog.
Her voice ruptures through the
membranes of my dream.

“Remember,” she says,
“Remember.”

Her voice a drum beat on my
tongue, my temples throb in
synch with her rhythms as her
juices run down my cheeks,
throat and breasts.

I wake, sweating in the night.

11.7.18

There is no difference between
the sound of these waves, their
constant rolling onto shore and
me. No separation. No division.
The wind too— so gentle on my
face. I am the wind, the waves,
the raking shoreline. I am all of it
and none of it.

13.7.18

On the Cortes Ferry with St.
Teresa of Ávila

Her lips part mine and I speak
with her tongue on mine, feel
with her hands in mine, our
bodies one, our voices aligned—
perfect timbre of heart and mind.
My soul releases its grip on the
past, wrinkles of skin, scales of
past memories—all become an
effervescent tone of golden
memories speaking on the sea.

22.7.18

home alone today in wild vistas.
unpruned emotions. eagles
cawing. a lost child crying in the
rain. the way home —forgotten.

The way home is forgotten, isn't
it?

How to see through the layers of
trauma?

close eyes.
feel heartbeat.
her beat is the earth's
pulse.
my pulse is your blood
rushing through veins she, the
girl I once was, longed to cut
in the bath.

26.7.18

Her side, my side
her love, my breath
your gaze, my tender hold
 on life
in our palms
the broken
fragments
of memories we once clung to.
Bury them in the earth. Water
them with hope
mixed with despair
and sit back
lie in each other's arms
let love become us.
Let love become us and
give ourselves over
to the new life
surging in our veins.

28.7.18

her vagina, my heart, the whale's
tongue. my breasts exposing my
heart's call to dive deep through
the layers of this world's veil into
divine ecstasy, eternal light.
forever knowing I will never be
separated from you again.

--

The petals of the rose— soft
layers of her vulva open to expose
the whale's tongue consuming
me.
Dream or awake?
Open.
I open my thigh's tight clasp
to release
her scream in ecstasy
groan in guttural
delight.

29.7.18

The wound of the mother opens
me beyond my believed tolerance
of pain. birth is no match for the
opening that forgiveness
demands.

2.8.18

My womb is ripped open –
ripped by the lunar eclipse a few
days ago. My breasts ache her
pain – the earth’s pain. I feel it
throbbing in my breasts. I bleed
and the pain stops. I stop
bleeding and the throbbing
resumes.

Am I sick? My mind wonders.
Am I pregnant?
Neither—my heart answers.
You are becoming her
as you vowed
as you begged
that night
alone
on your knees.

I did vow.
And I did beg.

I am here to forgive them.

Here to forgive them all, once
and for all, and move on. Move
into a rich and fertile life.

I lost my soul
but I am finding it
here and now
breasts throbbing
I take it back
breasts throbbing
I forgive them
breasts throbbing
I forgive myself
breasts throbbing
I forgive you.

3.8.18

I want to remain forever in this
wilderness. Such open &
unapologetic wilderness.

18.8.18

Roses over bones.

My breath in your palm.

I can finally speak:

“Help me, Mother,
Help me please
to see beyond this barricade
of illusion
they wove
into my breasts
and groins.
Remove this shame
and let me see
with pride
and hope
and so much love.”

Petals fall from the sky
covering the bones of the woman-
child I once was.

I weep in gratitude.
and in pain.

20.8.18

In the showering of blessings I
cannot see my fate. The hazy
thicket of her love burning in
rage is too much. The mountains-
ocean-rock and trees. I feel their
sorrow in my breasts. My throat
locks in silence. All that I am—I
am nothing before the great
mystery— this power that offers
me love and joy whilst she burns
in flames. Her roots to ash, my
spirit joins yours and suddenly: I
understand. Raven soars
overhead. My heart thumps. I see
so clearly despite her haze.
Rebirth is not supposed to be
clear or easy, after all.

29.8.18

This reorientation of self is whole. It is a root canal of my entire being, invited by a little girl holding a kitten in her hand, offering me a chance at a new life on a day I went to get a cup of coffee. And then another little girl- offering a puppy. And I accept both. I know the drumbeat is steady and I know

I am waking up from the longest of sleeps filled with the most horrible of dreams.

29.8.18

Roses again, falling from the sky
downward through her womb.
My mother's dragon, family
heirloom. I've finally found her,
tucked safely away all these years.
What a treat to discover she
breathes roses instead of fire.
What a treat to discover flame
was not my birthright. To
discover my birthright is this
mighty force— regenerating
scent of rose in this soft plush of
flesh and bone and lungs.

1.9.18

My breasts throb.

3.9.18

Because back that way there is
nothing but ash. Yes, there is
blood on my hands and my vagina
smells of sap. But the blood is my
own – from a cut I needed to
make in order to let her sweet
cedar sap, divine nectar, flow out
from my womb.

13.9.18

I hear her on the waves. In the
rush of Raven's wings. In the sun,
swarming through the trees.

Yesterday—a rainbow on the
mountains, in the ocean. And
then two humpback whales
blowing mists across my face.
What else could this be but the
experience of grace?

25.9.18

Understanding of the sky,
beneath her broken wings: Poetry
is a way of life, not a profit-
making venture. Not something
to make a name with. It is a way
of seeing the world. It is a way of
reclaiming my womanhood.

20.11.18

Flowers on her grave. Put there
by the mother who births us all.
Not what I expected— to be
dancing alone in celebration of
my death— bending to smell the
flowers on my grave. Yet here I
am. Dancing in pure joy.

23.11.18

hope incarnates.

24.12.18

Crystal hinges on my heart, falls
into the void and shatters into
nothing.

My voice. Your touch. I
remember the sound of waves
crashing against my psyche as a
black and red snake slithered
across your breastbone.

I remember the tenderness of
mountains and the dark nights
that covered them as I fell deeper
into dream.

I remember the pounding of
drums and the stampeding of
horses into her earth as it lay
across my flesh.

I remember a life so other than
this one, a world so far apart from
the glimmer of hope in your eye
catching the afternoon light.

28.12.18

Ashes fell in her palms.

I grieved so greatly
so deeply
for years.

Now I see
through different eyes.

I hear
with different ears.

Now I know who I am
with a different heart.

Come, My Child.

Come.

Reflection

I chose these vignettes much like I chose in the last chapter. I skimmed through my journals and took what stood out to me, trying not to “think” my way into it but to feel through the images and textures. When deciding, I did not read them so much as let them choose to be inserted. Now when I read through them, much like you just have, I am struck by many things.

Firstly, I am struck by what I can only call a somewhat rapturous spirituality awakening in my being’s embodied belonging to earth. This awakening was certainly supported by living out west, for part of the year, in British Columbia. That said, these vignettes cannot be taken literally. At times, I wrote of whales when I was living in downtown Toronto and other times, when I saw whales from the shore. The images of earth and body entwine in my consciousness and my poetic inquiry practice is not a literal but a transformative rendering of self and belonging. I am also struck at how many references there are to eliding my pain with the earth’s. This surprises me because at this point in my life I had not discovered Buddhist teacher, author, and ecologist Joanna Macy and her decades worth of work which addresses this kind of embodied relationship to grief.¹⁹⁶ I had not yet read much ecofeminism. These expressions were the communicating spirit of my embodied realities. They emerged from within my own evolving consciousness as I wrote and as I surrendered more to

¹⁹⁶ See: Joanna Macy, *World as Lover, World as Self*, (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2007).

the pull of words revealing, untangling, and re-entangling my embodied self, a self that as these vignettes show, went through several deaths and rebirths and continues to yield to that transformative cycle of becoming, belonging, and grieving.

I cried as I read one vignette in particular:

29.8.18

This reorientation of self is all consuming. It is a root canal of my entire being, invited by a little girl holding a kitten in her hand, offering me a chance at a new life on a day I went to get a cup of coffee. And then another little girl – offering a puppy. And I accept both. And I know the drumbeat is steady and I know

I am waking up from the longest of sleeps filled with the most horrible of dreams.

I cried when I read this because of how true this last line has felt to my life and to the rising of my adult and female consciousness. And yet— they were not dreams. They were very, very real experiences. While my own language of the

wound and of belonging tends toward expressive images that do not enter the literal confines of explicit description, in the interest of establishing cultural trauma praxes that unsilence the rampant instances of childhood sexual abuse in all socio-economic spheres, I want to highlight that surviving CSA is horrific and survivors deserve so much more than our cultural dialogues and celebrity-centric movements of mental health give us. I want to highlight that it is not the survivors' job to create spaces for us to be heard, especially when we are exhausted from the work of surviving.

I cried when reading this, because despite how real those experiences were, there is also a truth showing in that last line. To this day, there are moments when I catch myself in a sudden realization that it is over – that horrid prison-like existence – is over. In these moments, I feel a type of grace envelop me and I feel as if I have awoken from the most horrid of dreams.

My awakening signals healing alongside the wild beauty of dissociation. Often, dissociation is centred and understood as part of our deficiency rather than the natural life-saving mechanism of the body-mind system that some of us rely on more heavily than others. It is a wild adventure that I can wake, again and again, to the beauty of interconnected life. This has to be the case. The psyche can only process so much at once. As I write this, as if he knew he would weave himself into this narrative, Gus, the puppy mentioned in the vignette above, emits a half whimper-growl as his legs move back and forth. His now one hundred pounds worth of grown dog lies asleep on my feet. No doubt he is in his own dreamscape chasing the kitten turned cat also mentioned

above. He and that cat, Charlotte, both came into my life as unexpected gifts. With them and other human and animal companions, my life is so gentle now. My life is so sacred now. I realize again and again that to be born into lives of emotional, physical, spiritual, psychological and/or sexual violence is a journey so many of us bear in silence. Creating the space to value and honour oneself in these journeys is possible, because, once again, our trauma is not the violence we survive or the ongoing systemic violence our personal experiences are connected to.

I was struck by many other images in these vignettes, for instance, the appearance of rose petals. I did not write about rose petals or rose scent (there is a bottle of rose oil behind me as I'm writing this) until 2018. For some reason, the emergence of that scent was part of my embodied trajectory of healing. Something happens when I see wild roses or when I apply the oil to my skin. My insides simultaneously melt and blossom. (I paused after I wrote that to put the oil on my skin, the image was too strong an invitation to ignore!). In the scent of rose, I feel at home. Strikingly, 2018 is the year that I came to own and truly inhabit my first "home," a small cabin on Cortes Island, B.C. that I purchased and moved to midyear for my sabbatical. I remember at one point in my life, I thought I would never live in a house. The narrow corridors and rooms were simply too triggering for me. But then I stumbled upon my Cortes cabin, which is far from a traditional home and that was that. Months after these roses emerged in my writing, I was on the property one day and discovered that hidden behind some bushes, was a wild rose bush. Perhaps the roses emerging in

my poetic inquiry practice were my body-psyche's way of expressing this homecoming.

In reading the above vignettes, I am also struck by how much I dialogue with Her. As I expressed in the last chapter, She is Cass and more than Cass. She took on more of a spiritual presence for me, especially once I was living out of the city and closer to the west coast's rugged landscapes. I never set out to intentionally invoke her in my writing. She emerged organically. She emerged in and through the movement between myself and Cass, between Cass and the ocean, between my child self and my adult self, between waking and dreaming life. All of this movement that emerged in my writing is the rhythm of selfhood that I can right now, Gus asleep on my feet, see in the ocean's play of blues and white, water and air responding with one another in different refractions of light.

I do not know when She also became referred to as "Mother." This language was not present in 2016. I skimmed through my journals from 2017 after noticing it here in these vignettes and I did not see much of it there either. Perhaps the blooming roses in my poetic consciousness are a symbol of feeling more at home in my body and psyche, and this feeling also signaled my body-psyche's active reclamation of the mothering impulse in me as well. When I read these vignettes, I know, in a visceral embodied way of knowing rather than through cognitive intellectual knowing, that the Mother I am referring to is my spiritual belonging to my earth-based Mother. She emerges in the many images of earth as well and I cannot separate her nurturing presence from the belonging that I began to consciously embody during 2018. It is

interesting to me that as I cultivated a sense of embodied belonging that spoke through the wilderness of my wound and womanhood and the throbbing of my breasts, I instinctively began creatively and aesthetically inviting and exploring mother imagery.

As I reflect on this embodiment of spirituality and begin to address it in more explicit language, I notice that my shoulders tighten a little and my throat clenches in. I know why I am having this embodied response. I am writing in explicit language about something I do not often bring into my theoretical prose: my spirituality. As a condition of working in academia, I have learned to avoid invoking spiritual language that is so deeply intimate, feminine, embodied, and personal, for fear of being cornered into theological debate. Especially in the world of academic theologians, I learned to hide my pulsing, raw, and sensual embodiment of the divine. Without question, even with feminist colleagues, a rational lens and a language that remains tied to patriarchal and colonial reductions of spiritual being cast into categorical understanding has been continuously inserted onto my embodied and earth-based spirituality. When this happens, the most vulnerable and richly sacred parts of myself contract. In my body, I feel as if I cannot breathe. As a result, I learned to keep this poetry of belonging to myself in most academic and theory making spaces.

However, like a shoot of new growth on a plant, I find my voice and body will not be silenced anymore. I have learned that spirituality and trauma can never be separated from one another. They meet in my embodiments, and I met

them both through the language of my wound. For the most part, I have never felt a call to engage in academic or theoretical debate around what spirituality is or isn't. Something in me resists it quite strongly and after years of learning how to listen to my body speak, I honour my body's resistance to entering such debate, be it in spoken or in written language. I have been willing to do it with traditional trauma theory, where I do feel called to contribute to the debate-like nature of knowledge production that tends to consume academic research and writing, but there is something in me that just will not do it when it comes to my spirituality. Perhaps because, conjoined with a poetry of belonging, my spirituality wants to be "shown not told" as creative writing teachers are so fond of instructing their students. Perhaps because this embodiment for me *is* the sacred and a healing grace that is, ultimately, why I survived, mind and heart intact, over a decade of ongoing violence that could have set me on course for a life of intense drug addiction, given that drugs are sometimes the only release from pain that survivors such as myself can find in this life. Most likely, though, it is because for me to talk about Her in any language that does not include my pulsing vulva wet with ocean salt and brine, well, it simply is not real.

I find it is interesting how much the body surfaced in my writing as I read my year in vignettes. It is empowering to realize that in my earlier writing and inquiry practice, I did not directly reference words such as "rape," nor did I write descriptively of my violated body. In my earlier writing, I wrote with language that was authentic to my own journey of reclaiming and it was only as my spiritual womanhood began

birthing herself that I began to write with imagery and descriptive language of my breasts and vulva. This embodiment matched the presence of nature in my life and the She whom so much of my writing began to include – be that Cass, Mother Nature, a spiritual version of myself or some entwined and embodied essence of all of that is. As I wrote with my wound a phenomenological healing emerged, and I reclaimed my body from the void it was taken into before I could fully construct sentences. Indeed, I did birth myself anew through the womb of the sacred mother that exists, so tangibly, in the space between what is and is not real, in my poetry of belonging.

Crying Wolf

About six years ago, around the same time I wrote the poetry I shared in the last chapter, I took a solo trip to Vancouver Island as a retreat for myself during our February reading week break at my college. I have always been called to nature. In nature, I belonged. And while I always loved nature, turning to the life of academia greatly distanced me from that sense of belonging. It only returned as I began to heal in my late twenties, and I found myself scraping money together to travel to the ocean whenever I could. Such was the occasion of this trip I would like to tell you about to demonstrate the liminality that is part of my psychospiritual and psychopoetic embodiment of interrelated being and belonging.

I did not plan anything on this trip other than to fly from Toronto to Victoria in British Columbia and have one week to myself. I spent my first night in the hotel Rialto and I

remember thinking the surprise complimentary cheese plate with the jacuzzi bathtub in the room was a sign that taking this time for myself, especially spending money on myself, something I have always struggled to do, was surely the right decision. The next day, I wandered down to the Budget car rental. I'd looked at a map that morning and Tofino had jumped out at me. I had been there once before, with my now ex-husband, right after I defended my PhD. I remember as he slowly pulled into the Long Beach parking lot, I jumped out of the still moving car and ran to the ocean, stripping down to my underwear on the beach and jumping into four-foot waves. When I came out, dripping wet, he looked at me and said, "you've changed." We separated a few weeks later. I moved back to Toronto on my own and with that space and time to myself, for the first time in my life, I was able to consciously begin to meet the realities of my trauma.

So, for the first time since that trip to Tofino with my ex, about five years after I left him, Tofino called and I answered. I rented a car and drove there. I drove up to the same beach, but I did not go into the ocean this time. I walked up to the shoreline and stared at the giant crashing waves. The power with which they suddenly surged upwards and crashed onto the shore – they were so much like the flashbacks I had begun to write with. In that moment, I felt afraid of them. As I write about this moment now, however, I see the fear and hesitation I felt back then with more clarity. In seeing their power so visibly before me, I realized my waves were and always are part of me, something I learned from Thich Nhat Hahn.¹⁹⁷ The memories are part of me. Their revelatory

¹⁹⁷ Thich Nhat Hanh, *No Death*.

power, their ability to destroy narratives I was taught to believe, it is all part of me and my embodied life. I know that I sensed this standing there staring at those waves. I felt the waves in my body, and I wanted to be in their waters. I wanted to experience their power but in a way I could feel balanced and secure. So the next day I decided to take a whale watch trip and be carried into the ocean and those waves safely by a professional.

It was a clear sunny day, and we were out in those wild west coastal waters. Our guide, a woman in her thirties who had grown up near Tofino, told us how eagles mate in free fall which sounded like the most exhilarating love story I could imagine. Suddenly, without warning, my breath caught in my throat, and I felt total panic come over me. While I was not shaking on the outside, I was shaking on the inside. There on that boat with ten strangers, I was suddenly caught in wave of terror. It felt as if sitting next to me, in the empty space between me and a companion whale watcher, was an abuser from childhood. Next to the abuser was the little girl version of myself, and she was so scared. As if in one moment, they had manifested together from my imaginal, poetic, embodied, and liminal realm, co-created with the ocean's vast and wild waves.

Sitting there, sensing her primal fear, I knew that this imagined version of a person wanted to harm this little girl. I knew it so strongly. With this knowledge, my own sudden panic dissolved and sitting there, not the least bit confused between the whale watching reality and this liminal realm opening before me, I knew what I wanted. I wanted to protect her. So there, sitting perfectly still, looking perfectly calm to

those strangers while adventuring through my imaginal realms, I saw myself throw this person off the boat. I imagined them left there, alone to drown as the boat continued on its course.

A moment after, I looked down to where that sweet little Iris J. sat, and she was beaming up at me with a smile of absolute, pure joy. My body relaxed as the same warm joy flowed through me and then, less than a minute later, my liminal realm merged with our collective temporality as the guide stopped the boat dead in the water. “Shhhh” she said. We all looked at each other in confusion, then looking to her for guidance, our eyes followed in the direction of her finger as it pointed toward the shore of an island not too far off in the distance. “Look,” she said, while putting down her binoculars, “it’s a wolf.”

We all looked and sure enough, a few hundred meters away, we could just make out the outline of a wolf on the shore. “That’s the matriarch of the pack,” she said. “This kind of sighting is incredibly rare,” she explained. And then, the wolf began to howl. After a short pause, we heard another howl and down the beach we saw he wolf pup, howling back to its mother. We sat there a while, all of us in awe, listening to the incredible sacred sounds of the mother wolf and her pup howling back and forth to one another. Our guide then started up the engine and began bringing us back toward the shore. During the journey back, a humpback whale breached right in front of us, emerging from the depths of that wild ocean.



At this point in my life, I have no desire to argue with a few hundred years of Western psychotherapy and psychology. Nor do I seek to argue with the basis of attachment theory that does not consider in its diagnostic structure how human relationship to the ecosystems our species is a part of might contribute to a balanced mind and body. Instead, I seek to revel in the joy of the mysteries of connection that emerge for me as I live with a poetic consciousness that has helped me to rest so deeply in the palm of a great mother who took form that day for me as the matriarch calling to her wolf pup. Perhaps it is as Anzaldúa suggests when she writes of the *chamana* (shaman) who journeys through different realms of knowing:

When a *chamana* ‘journeys,’ does she move outward in her body around the Earth, or does she move inward into an altered state of consciousness where she experiences realities outside normal perception? Such questions keep cropping up, but their framework is too narrow. To explore them, we must redefine the imagination not as a marginal nonreality nor as an altered state but, rather, as another type of reality.¹⁹⁸

In agreement with Anzaldúa, I embrace these psychopoetical and psychospiritual dimensions as real. In so doing, I encounter redemptive and spiritually fulfilling experiences of healing on and off the page that create a liminal realm. By definition, this liminality is between the real and the

¹⁹⁸ Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark*, 36.

imagined, but it is still embodied. Such is the beauty of psychopoetic and psychospiritual embodiment. We can occupy liminal spaces of reality that do not get restricted, obscured, or erased by explicit and literal understandings of meaning making. We can exist, participate, grow, and heal within embodied experiences that grasp the real, raw, and entangled natures of desire, emotion, dream, survival, and grace. These experiences emerge phenomenologically and by doing so, they help me become aware of my own embodied sense of belonging.

How then, do we not get carried away and forget about “reality?” This is what the poetic inquiry practice teaches us: how to live an integrative life in which body-psyche generate meaning through interrelated being. What that mother wolf howling to her pup symbolized and continues to symbolize to me, is that when I turn inward towards my wound, I do not experience isolation or get stuck in memories of violence. I only experience that when I am forgetting that I am not what was done to me, when I am falling back into social norms shaped around deficiency praxes. When I remember that my wound or trauma is simply part of me and I am allowed to be all that I am and all that I survived, I experience beauty and grace. This beauty may have all sorts of darkness flung across the page and/or my psyche, but that, in my experience, is part of what makes it so damn beautiful.

I shared my experience of witnessing those tender moments between the mother wolf and her cub because it was very significant in the trajectory of my own healing journey. It awakened memories of belonging. That mother wolf spoke to me in a way that I cannot translate into ordinary language.

From my current vantage point, I see many intersecting planes of meaning emerging in that moment: I see myself as an embodiment of the mothering archetype; I see earth; I see desire; I see nature; I see hope and possibility; and I see my wound. Allowing all these layers to co-exist is an ongoing journey of healing for me. Allowing them all to coexist is also how I reconnect with myself and how I reconnect with my inherent belonging to nature and my ever-ripening earth-based spirituality. By shifting my consciousness to recognize that such primary attachments and belonging are always already here, I am no longer searching for anything. Not for healing or for belonging. I am simply cultivating deeper and deeper awareness of connections and allowing them to emerge in an embodied poetry of belonging that sets a rhythm to my days, to my relationships, and to my life.

Anzaldúa speaks to this interpretive framework:

Spirit and mind, soul and body, are one, and together they perceive a reality greater than the vision experienced in the ordinary world. I know that the universe is conscious and that spirit and soul communicate by sending subtle signals to those who pay attention to our surroundings, to animals, to natural forces, and to other people. We receive information from ancestors inhabiting other worlds. We assess that information and learn how to trust that knowing. The mind does not make things up; it just imagines what

exists and tells the soul to remember. The soul forgets and must be reminded again and again by signals from nature whose spirits exist in fields, forests, rivers, and other places, and from *arreatamientos* (traumatic events). ‘The imagination conversely illumines us, speaks with us, sings with us,’ writes Joy Harjo.¹⁹⁹

Tisawii’ashii Manning also beautifully describes these entwined realities in terms of her Indigenous system of knowledge:

Entangled exploding microcosms (each aspect retaining a sense of an isness and an autonomous mineness) collapse time and space into this silent call. We converge as simultaneity. My human consciousness is aroused to this always already unending body to which I am infused. The breach, opened by the call, provides tenuous access to a larger sense of self as *mnidoo* indwelling. Amid this partially veiled and tremulous experience we pre-reflectively communicate with a *mnidoo*-world-self as *Nii kina ganaa* (All my relatives/All my relations/My all/ My everything). One’s

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

ownmost (mnidoo-self) likewise stands out
as a flickering.²⁰⁰

Even without the context of healing complex childhood trauma, all humans trying to make sense of these complicated human experiences could be pulled along by Tisawii'ashii Manning's words. She speaks to the existential question: how do we reclaim the understanding that "we converge as simultaneity" in our relational way of being rooted in this world? For the survivor in particular, – those of us who have been shown through intimate violence and through various replications of that violence from a society that socializes us into so many praxes of deficiencies – we deserve not just to *ask* about this converging simultaneity, but to *feel* it deeply in our bones, psyches, and relational ways of being. That day on the Pacific Ocean, I felt this belonging, to and with myself as my reclaimed embodiment of womanhood protected an innocence and joy that no parent or adult was ever able to protect for me. I felt belonging to that ocean, which co-created this liminal and imaginal plane in which to journey with myself/ves. I felt belonging to a group of strangers, who simply by being there, especially the guide as she held us with stories of nature and animals, held space for me to be there as well. And I felt belonging with that mother wolf and pup, speaking to me of a primal wilderness and love that I can witness, embody, and access as well.

²⁰⁰ Tisawii'ashii Manning, *The Murmuration of Birds*, 172.

To the End

I would like to end with a passage from Paul Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutics that I encountered in my early twenties. This passage was part of what sent me off to study all that I studied in graduate school. When I encountered Ricoeur's philosophy in my undergraduate degree, something came into alignment within my psyche. I was hooked and I worked in relationship with his philosophy of the human condition daily for almost a decade. At the time, I had very little conscious awareness of embodiment, which is partly why I was drawn to Ricoeur's incredibly dense philosophical and intellectual language.²⁰¹ In my twenties, I viewed my body as a limitation to my desires to think more, to run more, to drink more. Though I did live with a connection to my intuition, my body and mind were disconnected. I had not yet learned of the depths of wisdom, self-love, and belonging that my body offered me access to. And yet, I think all my years of intellectual inquiry during my PhD journey can be summed up in the following passage that did scatter within my body-psyche breadcrumbs of insight to

²⁰¹ Despite Ricoeur being part of the phenomenology tradition, which recognizes subjective perception rooted in the body as essential to integrated meaning making, like many male practitioners and philosophers, the body was not nuanced in his work with any intersectional feminist understanding nor was the type of embodied consciousness I've worked with in this book acknowledged beyond the body as a locus of emotions needing to be understood if not overcome by the mind. For expansions of Ricoeur's work into feminist directions see: Annemie Halsema and Fernanda Henriques, eds. *Feminist Explorations of Paul Ricoeur's Philosophy* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016).

follow along a healing journey over the next two decades. Ricoeur writes:

I must recover something which has first been lost; I make proper to me what has ceased being mine. I make mine what I am separated from by space or time, by distraction or diversion, or because of some culpable forgetfulness...I am lost, led astray among objects and separated from the center of my existence, just as I am separated from others as an enemy is separated from all men.²⁰²

What Ricoeur intuitively is so beautiful: the unconscious directive of the body-psyche. In saying that, I do not for one moment romanticize this journey of survivors reclaiming ourselves. Sometimes these adult paths of discovery are still filled with violence, addiction and/or self-harm. Sometimes they exhaust us. Sometimes we crumble to our knees. But if and when we extract ourselves out of the deficiency praxis which extends so far beyond this book's focus on trauma into the very basis of identity and society structured around a colonial-patriarchal idea of power, then all our days spent journeying and wandering are not directionless. We are not "outcasts" or "late bloomers." We are following directives aligned to soul work and soul time and there are no boxes to check off in these liminal realms. Soul work does not measure success based on

²⁰² Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. D. Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 378–379.

how much money we have in our bank account or by attaining a socially constructed status of validation. When the body-psyche directs us, we are oriented to a different rhythm of belonging, even if our mind has not yet remembered how to speak the language of our own heart-wound-body-psyche.

As I wrote the above paragraph, I realize that I have used versions of that phrase, “crumble to our/my knees” several times throughout this book and each time it is as if the waves outside surge a little stronger in my chest. This is most likely because of the strong memory I have that wants to be languaged here as well. So, I will end with an image-story of crumbling to my knees in the mess of beauty I have described as my own journey of discovering what healing and belonging mean for me.

This story takes place before any of the poetry I shared. It was in 2012. It was just a few years after I finished my PhD. I was living alone in Toronto, working temp jobs to support myself. I was a few months into living with flashbacks. I was living in what I affectionately referred to as a “flop house” in Toronto’s west end. During that time, I stayed for two weeks alone in an apartment owned by two female musician friends who were out on tour. It was in that bright coloured bohemianesque apartment on Dundas Street West that I had one of these experiences of falling to my knees.

I remember that evening so clearly. I’d had a very vivid flashback. Later that evening, a moment of deep grief consumed me and I fell to the ground crying, sobbing. In that embodied grief, I saw so clearly the toxic and psyche splitting lessons my mind, spirit, and body had been taught about love. Under the weight of that realization, I could barely move, yet I

looked at the bed across the room from where I lie on the floor, and I literally dragged myself over to it. I held onto the side of the bed and there, on my knees, in that safe apartment that represented independence, female friendship, and creativity, my sobbing turned to womb-deep laughter. Oh that golden and delicious embodied moment where a bottomless sob of grief alchemizes itself and bursts forth as the deepest, body-shaking laughter that is possible! I know it well. It is one of the most gorgeous experiences of phenomenological embodied healing there is. In that turn from sobbing to laughing, in that space between the inhale and the exhale, between the is and the is not, in that space is the essence of my embodied belonging and I would not trade getting to know that space as intimately as I have throughout my life for anything.

That night, I surrendered so fully to the reality of what my life had been and it brought me to my knees. But I also surrendered every single time I came to the page and wrote with myself, inquiring a little more into who I was and who I was becoming at any given moment on any given day. In my own rhythms, in my own acts and agency of languaging, I wrote with my embodiments for years. I surrendered for years, and I am still surrendering every day of my life. Though the poetic images change, and it is only rarely that I write from within a black hole of grief, I still write with the embodiments of my wound. The black hole is and always will be part of my body-psyche's matrix of interrelational gravity. I have simply come to love it and with that love, neither fear nor shame are the driving forces of my life, body, or psyche.

I hope you can see by now, that for me, there is

nothing negative about the word “wound.” It is a gold infused gateway to belonging and selfhood. By writing with my wound, I did everything the above quote from Ricoeur, that at twenty-one-years-old set me on a path of intellectual inquiry, described. And, to my delight, my own discoveries are surely quite a bit different, much messier, and much more embodied than Ricoeur or twenty-one-year-old Iris would have imagined to be possible.

I recovered what was lost: my body, my breasts and thighs and belly and the wrinkles across my face concretely abstracting flesh and love and pain, and my right to belong to all of it.

I made proper to me what had ceased being mine: my body, my rage, my innocence, my vulva dripping wet with ocean salt.

I became what I was separated from by space and time: Love.

As a result, I am no longer lost or led astray.

I am no longer separated from the centre of my existence or others.

I am no longer an enemy to myself.

To say these things does not mean I am “healed.” I still have moments of grief that rise. They cover my heart and send a lightning strike of splitting emotional and/or physical pain as my body-psyche’s memory of what once was surges through the surface of my day. Nor does not mean that my life has a

singular direction or meaning or that there is any linear timeline against which I measure any sense of my success.

What it does mean is that I no longer deny myself the stories of my life and body. I no longer hold myself down under the weight of shame for not being what society says a woman or a writer or a trauma survivor should or shouldn't be. I simply accept that I belong. I accept that I belonged long before by body was first looked at with violent hunger. In this embodiment and liminality of belonging, I am not lost or broken. I just am.

There was a period in my thirties, when I became angry at myself for pursuing a life in academia. At this time, I came to fully realize and remember that I had a body and that it was deliciously full of wisdom, creativity, and implicit knowing. I criticized myself for what to some degree was a coping mechanism of dissociation disguised as a pursuit of intellectualism in an institution that thrives on disembodiment and cognitive determinism within colonial patriarchal paradigms and histories. This anger was my initial reaction to the grief of having been separated from my body for so long.

Now, years later, I see it was my body that led me to university. The burning passion I felt when I encountered philosophy and literature at nineteen years old. The humming melodies that Ricoeur, Dante, St. Augustine, bell hooks, and Virginia Woolf spun in my psyche. It was simply the path that unfolded for me. Yes, that intellectual study was a continued method to dissociate from the realities of my past and of my wounded psyche. We in academia need to acknowledge that a

mind-body split is part of the colonial paradigm of academia and that it needs to change.

At the same time, however, that fierce intellectual drive was also lifesaving for me. My psyche-body was not yet ready to make the implicit explicit. In my twenties, I was not yet ready to embody the poetic consciousness that remained confined to intellectual abstractions and a love of nature accessed only through athleticism. This journey took time – decades – and this is why I highlight that poetic inquiry as a phenomenology of healing is a nonlinear practice of becoming and reclaiming that unfolds over time.

On that note, if there is one thing I am grateful for to this day, it is the body-psyche's wisdom of dissociation. I will never align myself to a praxis of deficiency that pathologizes or in any way frames as negative my survivor spirit's life-preserving mechanism of raw instinct mixed with grace. For this is what dissociation is for me. Without it, I would not be here writing to you. Without it, my mind would have collapsed under the blinding truth and the intolerable weight of what humans do. Without it, my body-psyche would still crumble under that blinding truth which I know so intimately in my body's remembrance of violation and pain.

It is also because of dissociation that the complex dance of implicit and explicit memory in my childhood and every day since, is alive in my body-psyche. It is why I wake again and again to the beauty of this life, to the moment between the inhale and the exhale, between that sob of grief and the laughter of reclaiming. These liminal realms of our human journeys are what allow me to instantly access my embodied memory of a matriarch of wolves calling to her young pup. It

is what aligns that memory with my own sense of an internal mother calling out to the parts of myself that are like disproportionate young pups full of gangly limbs falling over themselves as excitement streaming through their limbs causes missteps here and there.

I am okay with my missteps. I am okay with an impassioned burst of self-love calling bullshit on traditional trauma theory or patriarchal-colonial academic practices here and there. I am ok with my rough edges. And I am ok with the bottomless source of rage that, for me, burns into an indestructible force of phenomenological forgiveness that consumes my entire being from the inside out and outside in. I do not separate any one of these states from the other. They are all Iris. I meet her every day in my poetic inquiry practice and I do not believe I will ever fully know her, until, perhaps, my last breath in this body. And even then, that mother wolf in me, who is also Cass, she knows that last breath is just the beginning of another journey of discovery I do not have to fear, because even death cannot separate me from this poetry of belonging I have learned to embody, with this breath and the next.

This poetry is not about words or beauty or even pain. It is about the breath of life. Of all that is. And if trauma is a wound, a marker of **loss & separation & forgetfulness** then embodying this poetry of belonging is my **return journey** from the trauma, not of childhood, but of what precedes and includes it – the human condition itself which we are all of us born into. This is what my nineteen-year-old self latched onto with mind, body, and soul in that quote from Ricoeur: the knowledge and wisdom that there is something more,

something that simultaneously includes and transcends these body-psyches despite all the social locations, geographical and cultural histories, and experiences that would separate and divide us. A part of me believed, before the years of formal study I entered to intellectually encounter and understand that belief, that there is a liminality of belonging that, in Ricoeur's words, by some existential decree of this human condition, we forget. Complex childhood trauma or not, maybe it is a part of the human journey that over and over again we forget and over and over again we remember that we always:

already

belong,

salt dripping

from my wound

gold edges

shimmering

in my love

Of Her.

Conclusion

Today when I look out my window, I see deep grey fog, tall cedars and I can barely make out the watery form of Hague Lake on Cortes Island in British Columbia. Though I cannot see it, I know that in the distance behind the cedars on the other side of the lake, some 200 kilometers north, sits the shores of Sointula where the Salish Sea is washing up onto its shores. I do not know if that washing is gentle and quiet like a steady heartbeat or raging with force propelled by swirling winds. I cannot see it, but I know it is there. I can feel it, the incessant pulse that carried me throughout the writing of this book.

I am back home with Gus in my small cabin on Cortes Island. Surely that must mean something. That I can feel the ocean but not see it. This is true of my wound some days, most days, in fact. I can feel it, but I cannot see it. It is the nature of being an adult living with childhood trauma. We are masters at seeing in the dark because learning to see in the darkened void was, in so many ways, a condition of our survival.

It is so dark there, in those cocoons we hide ourselves away in. It is dark and it is cold. I know this is true. However, there is a point, and it is subtle, it is so subtle that it takes years of learning how to feel our way into that point, where the cold, dark place suddenly shifts into warmth that radiates from a type of golden incandescence. The moment I first felt this golden shimmering place, I suddenly remembered, “this has always been here.” This light, this warmth, it has always been here. Then, if you are like me, after you have

remembered it, you forget again! Completely forget, until, days or weeks or months or years later, you suddenly feel your way back into it. And at some point, we stop forgetting so readily. At some point, we learn that both exist, the cold and the dark, the warm and the golden. These descriptions, I know, sound so cliché. But clichés exist for a reason. They are real. There is so much life in these cold dark places of soul and psyche and body. And there is so much life in the golden ocean of the soul-body-psyche as well.

My trauma, my wound, is a path to both those cold dark places and the golden ocean dusted with the scent of rose. Both states of being are conditional of my path, because they are conditional of me, and all my body-psyche has survived. Coming into a poetic consciousness was to realize I am already whole. In all my whirling fragments of the mosaic that is me, in a cold void or warm glistening ocean of a wound, I am whole.

I now conclude where I began. Trauma is not an indicator of my lack of worthiness or a sign that I am destined to suffer. It is a gateway. Entering that gateway may be scary, it may be unknown. The fear can exist as part of our embodied rhythms. Those rhythms will shift and transform. We will shift and transform. By listening and feeling into those rhythms, we discover a language. That language of the wound is a bridge that connects us back to the parts of ourselves, of our heritages, and of our interconnected belonging we may have forgotten to remember. However we do it, however we remember that language, be it on our own or with human and/or non-human companions, whether we stop and start a thousand times, whether we cry when we don't think we're

supposed to cry, scream when we don't think we're supposed to scream, whether we do it in waking life or in visceral dreamscapes, in silence or with words – reclaiming the language of the wound is survivor-centred work. And I genuinely believe that survivor-centred paradigms are a path to such redemptive experiences, fleeting though they may be.

But Oh! May it be.

My dearest, Cass,

May it be.

Oceans of gold

embodied

with this breath

and the next

for her

for him

for them

for me

and for you,

dear reader,

especially for you.

Postscript

I am writing this postscript in Toronto. Landlocked in my apartment, there is no ocean to walk to. No rhythms of waves to hear, except for my own. Here, my editor/publisher Amy has tasked me with responding to the question, *what has changed since I first set out writing this book?*

I sat with this question awhile. I journaled with it. I dreamt with it. I danced with it. And yes, I wept with it.

So much has changed. I learned so much by writing this book. I cannot put a time span on this project from start to finish. Did it begin when I first sat to write its drafts on Malcolm Island or when I first began using my journals to publish articles on healing trauma and poetic inquiry? Did it begin when I first began journaling, when I began living with flashbacks, or when my little girl's body was first touched? It doesn't much matter when I began writing this book, because with the help of the Salish Sea and Mad & Crip Theology Press, I wrote it. So what has changed?

Something in me healed that I did not expect to heal from writing and publishing this book. By publishing I do just not mean putting it on the shelves, be they in local bookstores or on digital shelves, for others to read and interact with. I mean the process of working with the incredible human beings at Mad & Crip, Amy Panton & Shauna Kubossek. Being held and honoured by them to share my story and truths in the ways that felt authentic to me, ways that have nothing to do with what will sell or trend or make one's mark on the colonial-capitalist world, there is nothing like it. In being held and seen that way, oh yes, something changed. I

entered another dimension of embodied healing that ricocheted love and confidence outward and inward. I also realized, so concretely, that as long as we in Western cultures are conditioned to want to succeed and ‘make it’ by any standards structured after colonial and patriarchal and capitalist embodiments of power, nothing will change. Internally and externally cycles of power and violence will continue.

We must be willing to break paradigms in our own everyday lives. Not looking to celebrities or to those in power to do it for us. We must do it on our own embodied and everyday paths.

What has changed is that I realize now more than ever that I want nothing but to live my life in as authentically paradigm breaking ways as possible. Because when we are truly willing to do this, everything changes. For ourselves and for those we enter into relationship and communion with. From there such changemaking ripples journey out into communities at large. This is what Amy did by starting this press and it is what I got to do by writing this book and working with her.

Something else changed as well. The weekend before I returned to Toronto, where I knew I would finish editing this book, I took one last trip to Tofino, with my partner, Nur, and our dogs, Gus and Finnegan. While there, I went to stare out at the open ocean in which all those years ago, I took a whale watch and met the matriarch of the wolves’ pack as she howled back and forth on that small island with her pup.

As I stood alone on the shore this time, my toes dipping into the ice-cold January water, I realized why it had

felt so important to come to this shoreline before I returned to Toronto. There in that moment, I realized and accepted the embodied reality that had been building over the final month or two of finishing this book: I had come here to witness the most sacred of burial rites, an ancient rite between me and Her, mediated by the wild waters and the vastness of open ocean. Standing there, I saw a version of myself being carried out to sea. It was a version of myself that was nothing but skin and bones. A child self. A version that over the past several decades became less and less present in my body-psyche until, finally, literally a few weeks ago, there was nothing left of her, and she was ready to return to the vastness from which we all come. To which we will all return.

That child self endured so much. That version of little Iris J., she earned her eternal rest. No more suffering. No more holding in truth with every ounce of physical, emotional, and spiritual strength she had. No more pretending. Just peace. And rest. And perhaps the truest communion there is.

To her, I end this postscript and book with the truest of love notes I can write.

Dear Little Iris J.,

For all you did for me, I am eternally grateful. I am eternally honoured to have lived alongside your journey through hell. I am eternally grateful as well, to have lived alongside your journey through such inner and liminal realms of beauty and redemption.

You taught yourself to tuck yourself inside your psyche and sing silently and bravely all the years the abuse occurred. You taught yourself to survive through love and grace and creativity.

You never stopped loving. I do not know how you did it, loved them all so fiercely throughout everything they did to you. Except, I do know how you did it. Because you taught me how to love the same damn way.

Wherever you are. Wherever your spirit rests, in the silent melodies of sunrise and sunset. In the lullabies of waves washing onto shore and back out to sea. In the rise and fall of my own breath and the pound of my heart in rhythm with the earth's heartbeat, I thank you.

I thank you with everything I am for sacrificing yourself so that I, Iris J., the woman that I am, could thrive and dance this beautifully intoxicating dance with the liminal realms that make this life worth living.

Until we meet again,

yours in the place

where the winds of karma

rest

in the grace of forever stillness,

Iris J.

January 20, 2024

Toronto

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Appendix

This appendix introduces some basic guidelines for poetic inquiry practices that can be adapted for individual and/or group writing practices. I offer them as a means of cultivating your own and/or your community's journey of writing with the wound, the body, and cultivating poetics of belonging. Whether you are a trauma survivor wanting to come into or deepen your own writing practice, a therapist working creatively with client/s, a teacher, or a community arts facilitator, these prompts can be used to gently and creatively come into expressive writing.

Poetic Inquiry Guidelines

Remember, guidelines are not rules! Make the practice yours.

- There is no “right” way to respond to a prompt.
- If you want to change part of a prompt, change it! Change "she" to "I" or take it in a different direction altogether. The point is to be inspired to write.
- Do your best to simply write and tell the inner critic to "Hush!"
- If you are writing by hand, get a special journal for yourself! If you prefer to write on loose sheets of paper, create a special folder. If you are typing or texting, create a digital folder for yourself.
- At the beginning of each writing session, begin by writing an intention for yourself. Simply open to a new page and write whatever intention comes to you. Or you can do this silently by closing your eyes, taking a few conscious breaths, and taking a few moments to set your intention.

- You can use these prompts with ANY medium. Visual art, writing, music, clay, movement, etc. You can combine mediums as well. Allow yourself to explore.
- You can write with the same prompt again and again. On the same day or on a different day.
- If at any point the writing feels like too much, then stop! Or write yourself into a different direction. The point of this is to begin feeling a connection between embodiment and your expressive and creative impulses.
- If you feel called to work with something you wrote by shaping it further, allow yourself to! At some point you may want to share it with friends, a group you are part of, a therapist, and/or a publication of some sort. Or you may just want to develop a relationship with a piece of writing for the sake of the relationship. We are **never** wasting time by writing with ourselves.

Below are prompts to support writing with different aspects of the body-psyche and belonging. As we deepen our own poetic inquiry practice, *anything* can become a prompt. A dream. A feeling of tension or stuckness in the body. The sounds in the room. As you become more comfortable with your own poetic inquiry practice, explore your own way of creating prompts. The most important thing with prompts in this approach, is that they invite the poetic from the very start.

Poetic Inquiry Prompts

Prompts for Writing with Nature

The ocean's tides wax and wane. They teach me

The rise of the ocean's wave encourages me to...

The sliver of light in the night's sky shows me...

In a field so green and full of life, I remember...

The lake reflects my lost...

The moon's glow reminds me that...

The flower's bud will bloom and its bloom will wilt and die. Again and again. May this cycle show me...

My hands in rich, dark soil, I begin...

Prompts for Meeting the Body

With this breath, I release...

With this breath, I receive...

If the tension in my neck were colours, they would...

This headache is asking me...

My stomach churns a dream of...

My body is a mountain and in its strength I know...

This pain speaks of....

Prompts for Encountering Forgiveness

The colours of forgiveness are...

Forgiveness speak to me of...

These textures of forgiveness...

Prompts for Writing with Rage

This fire in my body knows...

These depths of rage become...

Rage pours itself across my mind. I realize...

The wisdom of rage roots me like a tree, in those roots
I know...

Prompts for Writing with Exhaustion

My body yearns for...

In dreams I find...

I welcome sleep to...

If only...

Rest is sacred, with it I...

Prompts for Writing with Grief

She holds me in her arms and whispers, "..."

In the space between what was and what is, the sun
shines its light and I...

Depth. Darkness. Love. I say to you...

In warmth and tender becoming, I release...

I cannot see the new moon, but I know it is there, just

like....

Her wordless ache summons to the surface...

Prompts for Reclaiming Joy

This sun shines and so can I. Together we can...

The feeling of laughter in her throat...

In the depths of a chasm of joy, I remember...

Prompts for Rejecting the Deficiency Praxis

I am already whole. Knowing this, I ...

I release all I was taught to believe about myself that I do not want to carry any longer. Releasing, I become...

My body's wisdom teaches me...

I say, "No more." Smiling, I turn and...

Prompts for Writing with a Poetry of Belonging

Her spirit fills me and tells me...

In the rhythm of our belonging, I remember...

In the ancient melody of drums beating in rhythm with the earth, I reclaim...

With her beside me, I take my place at the table of
wisdom keepers and...

Love lost becomes a joyful child telling me...

Prompts for Writing with the Wound

In these depths, I know...

In her reckoning of love and hate, I smell an ancient
wisdom becoming...

Snake sheds its skin and I become...

The wound guides me into light. I remember that I...

Gold and purple dusted fuchsia sparks a fire of...

This shifting mosaic of my soul sings...

Practices for Working with Inspiring Quotes

Choose a favorite line and use it as a prompt to write
with for 5 minutes.

For one minute, circle all the words that stand out to
you from your favorite quote and/or passage. Use those

words to inspire a poem (yes, you can add in more words!)

Write a letter to your former self, telling her/him/them why you want to share this quote with her/him/them.

Rituals to Accompany Poetic Inquiry & Writing with the Wound

Burning

Write a poem, or a letter, or work with a prompt that calls to you. If you feel called to work with fire energy to transform the words or intention or embodied history tied to what you wrote, create a special place and time to safely burn the piece of paper. You can then do with the ashes/burnt paper what you like: plant them in a garden or indoor plant, turn them into an art piece, throw them away or flush them down the toilet.

Do this as often as the impulse strikes.

Burying

Similar to the above process, write a poem, letter, or work with a prompt and choose a place you want to bury what you write. Perhaps place it in something you want to bury it in or fold it in a special way and tuck a flower in with your words. Create a special time and place to bury it. See if you want to do it alone or with someone. Say a few words after you've buried it. Speak from the heart.

Writing with Earth Cycles

Begin a practice of writing with the full moon or new moon every two weeks.

Begin a practice of writing near a lake, river, stream, ocean, or any body of water near where you live.

Sit in front of a favorite tree (or plant) and write with and/or to that tree (plant). You can dialogue with the tree in your own creative writing practice.

Write at sunrise or sunset.

If you wake often in the stillness of the dark night, write.

If you are fearful of thunderstorms or if you love thunderstorms, write with them. Let them become your prompt.

Letter Writing

By writing letters to our former selves, we can enter a liminal reality and offer healing advice and/or witness events in our emotional, physical and/or spiritual lives that we may have been or felt alone during. We can

trust our expressive and intuitive voice to flow in a caring dialogue with ourselves.

We can do this as often as we like. We can write to the same version of ourselves or to versions of ourselves at different past or future ages.

We can keep the letters in our journal, in a digital file, or put them in a safe space or on an altar we set up to honour the special moments in our life.

We can write letters to abusers or to people and situations that have wounded us, without any intention of sending them. Simply allowing ourselves to express our feeling and emotions in a free flow form can allow us to witness our wants and needs.

Do something to honour your letter. Transform it by painting with it to turn it into visual or mixed media art. Put it on an altar. Seal it in an envelope with a dried flower and let it sit somewhere safe, perhaps in a favorite book. Trust your own imagination and intuition to turn your letter writing into a ritual.

