
Autoethnographic Aesthetics as Feminist Arts-Based Trauma Work

ABSTRACT The framework I invoke in this essay involves the intervention and integration of aesthetic discourses through arts-based inquiry practice and my own critical autoethnographic praxis. Through this intermodal dialogue including visual art, poetry, and poetic and theoretical prose, the essay is an inquiry into feminist arts-based trauma theory and qualitative research methods. I advocate for a need to support, cultivate, and center non-linear and non-speculative discourses as meaningful in and of themselves.

KEYWORDS Arts-based research; Trauma; Qualitative research; Healing

AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC PRELUDE

My skin smells like the sweet musty warmth of bergamot. I learned to wear it to soothe my soul. To protect my being from the flashes that come when I least expect them.

Some days I coat my entire body in bergamot. The smell of the essential oil floating past my nose brings the slightest of stings to my eyes and marks me with presence. A reminder that I do not need to be taken by the waves of memory into their expansive depths. A reminder that I can stay here, in creative presence, with you.

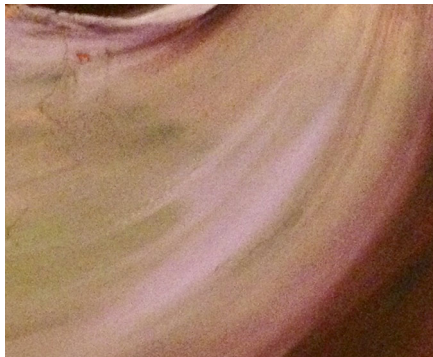


FIGURE 1. *Bergamot Layers*, oil on canvas

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I was in my late 20s when waves of childhood memories began to crash upon my psyche. The word “wave” here sounds like a metaphor and on some level it is, but it is an embodied metaphor and that is much more than a traditional literary figure. I assure you, there is nothing allegorical about living with flashbacks of childhood sexual abuse.¹ They literally were body-based waves of implicit and explicit memory that rushed from all directions with what felt like the full force of the ocean. At times, it seemed as if the waves had one purpose and one purpose alone: to drown my psyche-heart in memories whose textures cut with emotional, physical, and psychological pain. It took me years to realize that, in my case, this ocean that I thought was raging at me with a want to destroy was in actuality my body-psyche welcoming me home to myself.

I do not intend to counter the common conception that flashbacks and memories of trauma carry with them a destructive and at times psyche-splitting reality—they do. What I seek to suggest is that the very framework with which we have been accustomed to interpreting traumatic imprints, and by extension ourselves, can limit our ability to relate to these deep and wounded parts of ourselves in integrative, transformative, creative, empowering, and socially enhancing ways. For, with time, I learned to listen to my body and my memories rather than to fear them or attempt to cognitively control them. I learned that the destructive force I felt (and sometimes still do feel) was not out to destroy “me” but the ways in which social and familial conditionings of silencing taught me to repress so much of myself. Now, a decade after I began to reshape the way I relate to my trauma, which itself is an ever-evolving process, I do not distinguish between waves of memory and the oceanic presence of my psyche’s embodiment. I sit inside Thich Nhat Hanh’s claim that “enlightenment for a wave in the ocean is the moment the wave [she] realizes it [she] is water.”² Breathing in the traces of bergamot oil on my skin, I do my best to acknowledge the absolute beauty of the crests of my waves rising and falling in a rhythm that is simultaneously inherent to my individuality and, as the imagery of the ocean suggests, part of an interconnectedness with life that exceeds the finality of my being and conscious awareness.

INTRODUCTION

I begin this article by telling you about my waves and that I am a survivor of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) as an entry point into this autoethnographic

and aesthetic encounter with trauma theory.³ My aim in this piece, however, is not to describe the experience of living with traumatic memory, which I have done elsewhere,⁴ but to demonstrate a framework of healing that involves moving toward what I view as a generally more inclusive cultural consciousness of trauma than that offered by traditional models. As Latina feminist Clelia O. Rodríguez and so many others show, the basis of meaning-making and research in Western culture is cognitive-based understanding that arises from matching explicit memory and/or information to speculative language.⁵ This is also the basis of most scholarship on trauma and therefore the foundation of professional trainings.⁶ A significant failure of such reliance on the explicit and the categorical as pertains to trauma work, I suggest, is that these structures of meaning-making rarely account for and/or successfully represent the embodied and psychologically experienced nuances of surviving and healing with trauma, let alone creatively thriving with it.⁷

Textures, movements, colors, smells, gasps of breath, an overwhelming surge in one's stomach that marks a flood of rage, joy, forgiveness, and/or grief in addition to dreams, intuitive insights, and ancestral heritages—these dimensions of meaning exceed the ordinary standards of knowledge-making established by explicit thought and cognitive determinism. Such embodied experiences can, especially when working with trauma, I argue, be integrated into systems and structures of meaning-making to produce more holistically integrated and survivor-centered paradigms for healing. Moreover, the embodiment accessed through and/or represented by aesthetic inquiry occupies a way of knowing that Indigenous scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Latina feminist Aurora Levins Morales show we can and do reclaim from a complex and centuries-old systematic disembodiment of selfhood rooted in patriarchal, white supremacist, and colonial traditions of normalized and pervasive structures of cognitive imperialism.⁸ Reshaping paradigms of trauma work is thus also a means of contributing to the ongoing and ever-shifting work of building liberatory praxes.⁹

The framework I use to invoke such a praxis here involves the intervention and integration of aesthetic discourses through what I consider a feminist arts-based inquiry practice demonstrated through my own critical autoethnographic praxis (introduced in the Prelude). Through this intermodal dialogue¹⁰ including visual art, poetry, and poetic and theoretical prose, this essay is a general inquiry into trauma theory and qualitative research

methods.¹¹ As such, I advocate for a need to establish and normalize cultural paradigms that support, cultivate, and center non-normative, non-linear, and non-speculative discourses as meaningful in and of themselves. Within this general consideration of trauma studies, however, I also maintain a specific focus throughout this piece by speaking to the still-silenced trauma-identity of CSA survivors in particular.¹² I do this because it is my own autoethnographic praxis and also because doing so is the means by which, as Elizabeth Ettore suggests, autoethnography in and of itself becomes a political act contributing to collective efforts of unsilencing.¹³ I proceed by, first, situating my work within the theoretical and methodological frameworks of feminist trauma theory and arts-based inquiry practices, showing why my own practice in community and for my own healing has been an integration of these two fields. I then demonstrate an autoethnographic aesthetics in dialogue with this theory. A third section focuses on aesthetic inquiry as a practice working toward shifting and integrating one's overall consciousness rather than producing "art" in a normative profit and consumer-driven framework. My conclusion offers an aesthetic and theoretical reflection on this work as it relates to trauma, healing, and CSA.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL GROUNDING: TOWARD FEMINIST ARTS-BASED TRAUMA WORK

The psychologically and emotionally supportive paradigm of trauma I seek to metanarratively represent with my autoethnographic aesthetics roots trauma work in survivors' experiences of healing rather than in objectified and categorical theorizations of identity. This approach by its very nature pushes back against any pathologizing of survivors, a move made by practitioners of feminist trauma theory, a broad framework within which my work falls.¹⁴ As Bonnie Burstow's feminist praxis shows, as does the work of Colleen McMillan and Helen Eaton Ramirez whose use of autoethnography radically pushes back against any therapeutic practice that isolates trauma victims-survivors from visibility in community,¹⁵ pathologizing stems from a medical model that seeks to "fix" trauma. This fixing or curative paradigm views trauma as if it were a physical break to the bone rather than a wounding in a complex matrix of social, interpersonal, and individual fissures, knots, layers, and threads of the psyche and body compounded through histories of socialization and violence. Moreover, Lucy Bond and Stef Craps write in their recent

work how “some groups of women are at even higher risk of being psychiatrized, including elderly women, girls, racialized women, disabled women, women in prison, trans women, and women living in poverty.”¹⁶ Emma Tseris’s study of trauma recovery for women similarly applies a lens of intersectionality and puts forth that there is no “master narrative” for trauma recovery. She argues that any attempt to inscribe survivors into a pre-established narrative of trauma and/or recovery further marginalizes and wounds, because each survivor’s personal experiences and social identities impact how and/or if she will respond to a traumatic experience.¹⁷ My trauma scholarship comes out of this feminist praxis; however, my focus in this essay is not to identify practices of pathologizing. Through an arts-based intervention into feminist trauma theory, demonstrated by my autoethnographic aesthetics, I seek to reconsider the very basis by which we tend to view the parts of our identities touched by trauma as somehow deficient or deviating from “normal,” that is, non-traumatic lives.

This framework of aesthetic intervention in healing that I advocate for, which is centered as an individual’s explorations through aesthetic inquiry either on one’s own or in companionship with a therapist, a community arts program, or in higher education, is never to exclude the societal work of eradicating oppressions like racism, sexism, and classism, which, as Taiwo Afuape shows, always intersect our traumas.¹⁸ Savneet Talwar’s work shows that a feminist arts-based research and trauma work seeks to acknowledge these very real social roots of trauma while focusing on our personal and collective healing journeys.¹⁹ Doing so allows us to consider how learning to enter aesthetic modes of discourse by dialoguing with and making art can itself be a means of breaking down the very real barriers that society and traditional trauma theory establish for survivors. As Bond and Craps argue, trauma as a concept and as a lived experience is “elastic.”²⁰ Static and categorically pre-defined approaches to healing and identity rarely fit within the domains of non-linearity and impermanence that traumatic memory and identity occupies.²¹ Accordingly, Tseris reaches the above-mentioned conclusion that any master narrative of trauma will fail. A master narrative fails, feminist trauma theory argues, because of intersecting differences and experiences of identity within social power structures. Race impacts one’s experience of gender compounded by class status, sexuality, religion, and family structure, and so on. The “master narrative” also fails, less argued by traditional feminist theory and the focus of my work, because of a human inability

to, at times, integrate or translate traumatic experiences into linear and cognitively explicit “neat” narratives of meaning-making.²² Here, I think it is so important to emphasize that “traumatic” experiences of identity and memories are not “other” than what we consider normal structures of knowledge and how those structures and constructs impact our explicitly conceived and performed identities. This is perhaps the biggest paradigm shift needed in clinical and popular approaches to trauma, because of the degree to which explicit language is normalized into our culture’s expectations of research, meaning-making, and identity expression.

Yoking together feminist theoretical approaches to trauma with an aesthetic and affective dimension of meaning-making is one means by which we can explore alternative paradigms to trauma work that resist inscribing survivors back into praxes of deficiency. For instance, Avery Gordon, working with traditional trauma theory, writes:

Trauma not only misaligns our perception of time, it is, one could say, itself a misalignment of the temporality of experience since trauma is characteristically experienced belatedly. . . . Trauma thus binds you to what can’t be forgotten or forgiven. It binds you not to the repetition of a memory of a terrible, horrible, shocking event or experience but binds you to the repression of it.²³

This perspective demonstrates the inherent paradigm of traditional trauma theory that my work, in line with Burstow’s and Tseris’s, seeks to transform. To view traumatic experience as a “misalignment” of normal experience, especially to claim that one is somehow doomed to be forever bound to such misalignment of identity, memory, and/or history, is to work from within a basis and bias of normative experience and identity. The theoretical construct of this paradigm by its very nature excludes and/or others the survivor’s experiences, reality, cultural heritage, embodiments, and/or empowered sense of self. Moreover, such a paradigm of exclusion is one based in a privileging of explicit memory and cognitive thought. Explicit memory is remembered and integrated differently than implicit memory—the domain of traumatic experiences, yes—but it is also the domain of deeply intimate, spiritual, and sensorial-based experiences whose often ineffable nature resists categorical and explicit memory.²⁴ Human beings by our very nature occupy both domains of experience, yet our cultural reliance on the explicit and the cognitive has collectively reduced our ability to trust and integrate implicitly

accessed depths of meaning-making.²⁵ These depths, however, are the embodied reality of the survivor, and she deserves a cultural praxis that honors and supports her journeying through them rather than one that marks her as deficient, casting her even further into cycles of shame. How, we can ask, might reshaping paradigms of trauma theory to creatively integrate the implicit and the explicit domains of experience and meaning-making bring us forward into embodiment of the equity building that feminist and queer research methods and theory invite? I seek to use my own autoethnographic praxis that integrates aesthetic discourse, what for me is the language of trauma, to explore responses to this answer in the following sections.

It is important to note that by integrating my own aesthetic discourses and modes of inquiry into theory within this essay's scope, my goal is not to interpret their meanings for the reader or in any way to essentialize or even define the breadth of experiences that comprise trauma or CSA histories 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, and many other experiences and identities that overlap with, reflect, and differ from the experiences of other CSA survivors. As Natalie Wigg-Stevenson writes of autoethnography: "Autoethnographers unfold narratives intended to compel the reader to a transformative response, not commit the reader to a point of view. The

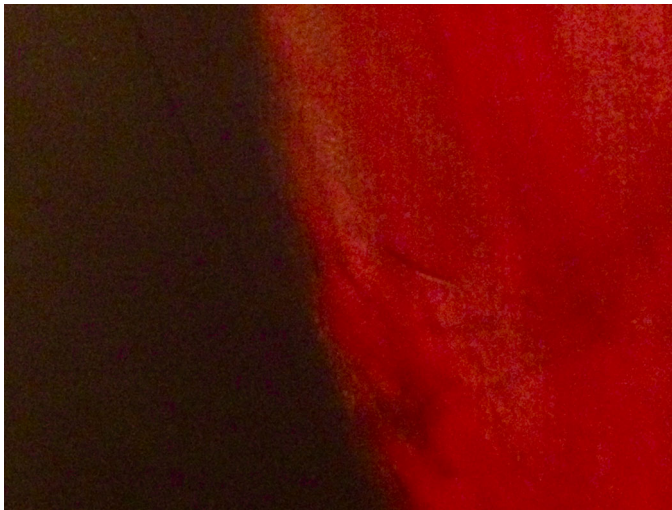


FIGURE 2. Oil on canvas

reader's agency thus plays a vital role in this desired process of social transformation."²⁶ From the perspective of what I am here referring to as an autoethnographic aesthetics, which combines arts-based research methods with critical autoethnography, this social transformation through the reader's agency co-creates a gestalt beyond the reach of ordinary language, applied generally to the process and practice of qualitative research and specifically to this essay's scope of trauma theory. For instance:

Her title is: *Edge of Mars (or of her breast) and beyond*
yet I wonder
what changes
when You entitle her
softly
(or not
so softly)
on or..... off
this page?

AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC AESTHETICS AS FEMINIST TRAUMA PRAXIS

Years ago, I used to lie alone on my bed at night trying to make sense of my life. I yearned to sort out the "why" from the "who" from the "how." Unable to do so, night after night my hands would cling to my worn copy of Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry*. I read her words over and over again:

The cherry grew, and we have sexed it, and it is female.²⁷

Winterson's books offered a guiding voice as I entered my adult recovery from a childhood and adolescence full of sexual violence. Her fictions' words became a multidimensional rope that pulled me through non-linear narratives. Her stories modeled to me a type of aesthetically mediated consciousness that would become a lifeline through my own waves and experiences of deep embodied knowing. For instance, on those quiet nights when I was alone sifting through the fragments of my former self churned up from my psyche's oceanic depths, when I was trying to find some route into glimpsing the ever-shifting mosaic of beauty of selfhood that I knew to exist yet did not yet have my own internal access to, Winterson would ask me again and again:



“How could she
carry in her body
the trace-winds of
the past?”²⁸

I did not know
then that the trace
winds are the body.

The body bears
witness to:
everything.

The body
remembers:
everything.

FIGURE 3. *Windswept Grace*, chalk pastel on paper

The body does remember, yet it is a remembering that is often not aligned with the traditional or mainstream understandings of knowledge, meaning, or explicit memory that dominate Western culture.²⁹ I have learned that such remembering is at times a visceral presence of personhood that, like implicit memories of trauma, often requires aesthetic and non-normative modes of expression for integration and understanding. I'm most curious about what happens when we suspend critical judgements, interpretation, and categorical thinking and allow ourselves to inquire and communicate across modalities and experiences. When I do this, I enter an almost-sacred presence of connectivity whose depths reach beneath me into the soils of the British Columbia land I live on, territories of the We Wai Kai, Kwiakah, Homalco, and Klahoose First Nations Peoples of the Salish Sea. I feel the wind, soft yet fierce, brush across my face and in that feeling of embodiment, I experience a healing that theoretical language can point toward but always fails to represent by the necessity of its participation in a categorical reduction of experience. Yet how do we communicate to each other in and from that place of embodiment connected to earth and woven through the deepest layers of



FIGURE 4. *Dream Heavy*, house paint on wall

the psyche? How do we let that communication inform our research and also teach well-meaning individuals who seek to support survivors but have not themselves encountered such traumatic depths or yet learned how to navigate them? We must do so if we seek to prevent such future caregivers, often in positions of power, from using frameworks that reinscribe survivors into praxes of deficiency.³⁰ I suggest that we reach out and learn through the non-normative discourses that invite embodiment to be present. For instance, in the image in figure 4, what does my breath in color say to your own memories of a taste of love that fell short of the indescribable presence that nourishes a child to dream of a safety known so intimately that she, he, or they will not spend years caught in an echo chamber of self-neglect disguised as perfectionism?

I do not know.

But I do know that it says something. The textures of my body-psyche's movement in color on the page take a reader somewhere beyond the edges of my theoretical constructs. This is not a place I seek to define with explicit language or thought. I have learned, taught by my waves, the very real and very painful repercussions of trying to speculatively define what by its very essence defies such artificial categorization. I have learned that there is a dimension of meaning that resides in the interaction and entanglements

of my own creative and aesthetic impulses whose roots are the implicit and explicit stories of my bones, psyche, and ancestral inheritances of a multilayered life. Others have their own entanglements, and I am somewhat enraptured by the beauty that emerges when we allow our intangible dimensions of meaning to converge and diverge. This is a plane of embodiment that can speak with, through, and alongside traditional prose and theory. It can also defy it altogether. For me, as regards my own trauma but also, I think, the nature of deep embodiment and psychological insight, when I surrender the “need to know” or to “understand” in the ways that traditional scholarship would drive me to pursue them, I come into being with what is already present. I arrive inside the soft, citrusy smell of bergamot on my skin described at the beginning of the essay and I learn to stop trying to neatly make sense of the complex layers of my embodied wounding. From this place of active surrender, I become the mosaic of beauty I used to seek, because the categories of thought that would limit awareness and belief in my inherent interconnectedness through the entanglements of emotion and selfhood that traditional trauma theory is not equipped to value, dissolve.

Winterson’s literary art and other aesthetic companions such as Jackson Pollock’s visual abstractions and bell hooks’s weaving of poetry and theory in her *Wounds of Passion* were all lifelines that I wrapped around my psyche for a very long time—raw beauty to keep me from drowning when the waves of memory rushed at me.³¹ It was within those waves, however, and by engaging first with others’ art and then with my own aesthetic impulses that I began to discover the artist within myself. I learned that she was my true lifeline through the non-linear and non-normative histories of the sexual wounding that bridge my own girlhood and womanhood. Discovering my artist-self was not a linear path and the roots of this ever-evolving process included many overlapping, progressive, and disjointed stages such as leaving an abusive husband, joining and eventually leading community Survivor groups, acquiring debt to enter private therapy in addition to graduate school, severing ties with family members, giving up alcohol, finding secure employment, and developing a daily meditation and multimodal journaling practice that over a decade later I continue. What I learned throughout all of this as I watched my artist-self emerge was that she was entwined within my childhood trauma. For that is where my deepest emotions and creativity took root. I could not access one without the other and it was a long, difficult, and immensely satisfying journey to emerge no longer afraid of my own enflashed histories that necessarily entwined violence and love, the primal nature of the incestual

wound. I could not have done this, however, if my own consciousness did not learn to surrender its reliance on explicit and categorical understanding.

When we enter the depths of trauma from arts-based inquiry, we can experience the ways that purely cognitive-driven models, though useful and surely part of integrative practices, can silence those whose experiences have always been or at some point became unable to meet society's reliance and normalization of explicit categorical thought, language, and demarcations of identity. Feminist theory addresses this reality, most often through theoretical constructs rooted in that speculative discourse. Such discourse is essential for creating equity amid intersecting oppressions. For instance, Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins leading through their work in Black feminism have clearly shown that no single axis of social identities exists.³² Moreover, the evolution of Crenshaw's original legal positioning of the double marginalization of Black women into the contemporary praxis and interpretation of intersectionality that Jennifer Christine Nash views as central to most women's studies and gender studies curricula reveals that to understand the social locations and determinations of identity and to build paradigms of equity we cannot separate gender from race from socioeconomic class from religion and so on.³³ As 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 entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities."³⁴

Social power and its dominating privileges and marginalizing inequities contribute to the intergenerational and systemically rooted nature of embodied trauma. Accordingly, as Black feminists' work with intersectionality continues to show, our cognitive-based systems of social organization and power must account for and contribute to dismantling the historical legacies and contemporary manifestations of oppression and marginalization that always impact lived identity.³⁵ In this project of working with feminist theory to support embodied and restorative trauma work that embraces the affective plane of meaning-making as a primary location of emotional contact with self-reflective presence and healing, I am left wondering how we can incorporate and expand articulations of the intersections of power, language, history, gender, sexuality, body, and so on, beyond intellectual and theoretical construct and articulations. By this I mean how do we include the textures, shapes, feelings, images, and oceanic depths that speak to the psychologically embodied realities that do not fit into the boundaries and structures of

explicit language so often used to define the parameters of social location, power, and identity?³⁶ How do we fully create affective spaces and discourses that nurture the complexities of emotional health while simultaneously enacting liberatory praxes that effect paradigm changes of meaning-making?

For example, I cannot for a moment consider my sexuality without intersecting my identity as a survivor of extensive CSA, and words cannot begin to talk across, through, inside, or alongside the chasm of selfhood I encounter when I try to weave my own connective tissues of sexuality into a discursive language of categorically demarcated meaning. For me, to take such a route into naming my sexuality, which I tried to do for a long time, was a sure way to summon up waves of sensory-based flashbacks from the depths of my being as my psyche-body made contact with the societal silencing that exists in our culture for histories of CSA. It took years to relinquish the indoctrinated belief that labeling myself in explicit language was the only way to identify myself as a co-participant in the various communities I intersect. To fully take up space in this body, I must express myself in a discourse that is capable of simultaneously holding and transforming the reality of what my life has been. For me, only art, nature, or the intimacy of touch can do that, and since I cannot take you on a walk down the British Columbia coastline with me or reach out and touch my hand to your cheek, I will have to speak my sexuality in a language that matches my heartbeat (figure 5).

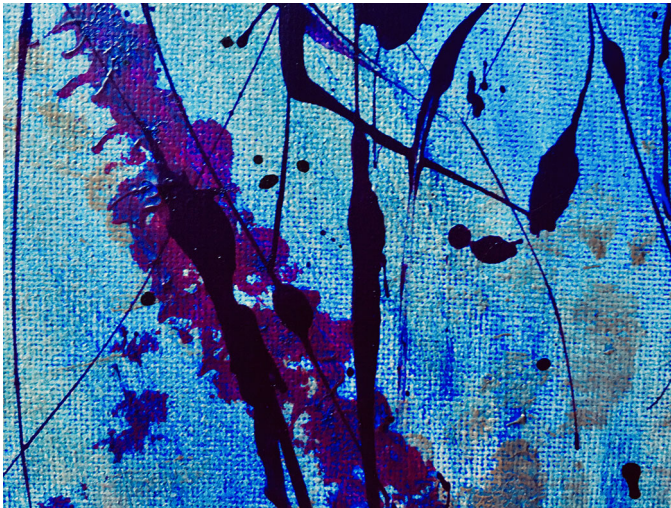


FIGURE 5. *Sex & Love: My Strength & Wound*, acrylic on canvas

Without this image, language folds in on itself and I find my reality cast back into dissociative shadow that even well-meaning theorists and facilitators who do not understand how their assumptions about “safe” language and identity press the button of dissociation the moment I am asked to intellectually differentiate sex from abuse from love from girlhood from queerness from:

(his is their)
power
over
little girl
woman
body
soul
cast
aside.

We need speculative thought and language and categories of meaning-making. We need them to change policy, build equity-making legislation, to educate and to self-reflect. We also need to recognize how limiting and silencing these categorizes and privileged structures of thought and language are for those whose experiences do not deviate from but transcend them with a richness that has so much to offer this world. Billy-Ray Belcourt’s Indigenous poetry so beautifully articulates the ability of art, here poetry, to express in aesthetically mediated language what cannot be expressed in ordinary prose. I cite one of his “Six Theses on Why Native People Die”: “He couldn’t make language out of the gravel-like noise stuck in his throat.”³⁷ In the space opened up by poetry, a new language, embodiment, and reclaiming emerge in an active and creative production of meaning. The power that comes through in his work also rejects by its very nature any projection of “deficiency” or pathologizing that could and so often is applied, Renee Linklater shows, by an external and objective application of traditional trauma theory to the intersections of indigeneity, sexuality, gender, class, and trauma.³⁸

AESTHETIC INQUIRY AS A PROCESS OF MEANING-MAKING

*Sweat streaks my face & mud is
all over my neck
my breasts*



FIGURE 6. *Placenta in Light*, mixed media

The goal of aesthetic inquiry as I work with it myself and as I teach it is not to produce traditionally evaluated art pieces or poems that in a commercial and consumer-driven sphere of meaning-making fall into a binary of good or bad, profitable or nonprofitable. Such art pieces produced during aesthetic inquiry practices may indeed become part of a show or collection or be brought into the public eye. In fact, Rosemary Barnes and Susan Schellenberg, in their work that chronicles Schellenberg's recovery from the psychiatrization of her illness and trauma through art-making, show how bringing such art into the public eye is central to changing paradigms of healing, and our very understanding of mental wellness.³⁹ By centering the art-making as a process-oriented and inquiry-driven approach to meaning-making, an individual's creativity is reclaimed from the dominant consumer and capitalistic outcome-based paradigm that tends to engulf the arts and identity itself. The individual is herself centered within a holistically oriented process of discovery able to be entered at any stage in one's life. Often I have found when teaching or working in community, that folks adamantly claim they are "not creative," "not artists," "not poets," and/or "cannot write." We assume that a person needs to have developed skills and techniques for one's entire life or needs to have been "called" to the art form at a young age in order to accept a label such as "artist," "poet," and so on.

While, of course, one can spend one's life in relationship to one's craft and its techniques, these are not the defining markers of creativity. In fact, these common narratives of "I am not creative" can greatly limit a person's engagement with creative and aesthetic discourses as exploratory practices of meaning-making, and, more importantly, they can silence the aesthetic impulses of selfhood that are so often essential to identity formation, to identity integration, and to healing trauma.

For instance, I love painting. I consider it one of my primary forms of expression and self-reflection; however, I did not begin painting until I was 30 years old. One morning, I was sitting in my therapist's office and I told her that I'd woken up with an image of a yellow band in my mind and that I couldn't stop thinking about it. "You could paint it," she responded, so casually. I sat back into the red armchair, somewhat in awe. The idea of externalizing that image-feeling in color had not occurred to me. Perfectionist that I was, especially in school, when my middle-school art teacher gave me a C for my rendition of Lassie, because it was not drawn to proper dog proportions, I that day accepted my institutional designation as a failed artist. For most of my life, I would not engage in visual art-making unless forced, that is, until that day in therapy. Afterward on my walk home, I stopped in at the local hardware store when the canisters of house paint in the window caught my eye. I asked the clerk if he had any samples of paint. "Downstairs," he said, "help yourself." Here is an excerpt from my journal, written a few days later when I reflected on that day:

I walked downstairs and seeing the walls lined with small jars of color my eyes opened wide and I experienced what it is to be a child whose innocence has not been completely ripped out of her. I picked the colors that spoke to me the most. Dark blues, light blues, turquoise, rose, soft yellow and violet. So many shades of black and grey. Standing there in the hardware store's basement I wanted to strip down naked and smother myself in all of this color. Something was happening inside of me, my creativity, which had only known poetry, was expanding its breadth. The energy needed to construct the walls that maintained the family lies, that is where most of my creative energy went. Those walls were crumbling now and my artist-self emerged out of their rubble to stand there with me in that dusty basement, helping me to choose the colors to paint the images of my exiled girlhood.

(Journal, 2011)

I learned quickly that I did not like the feel of a paintbrush in my hand. The satisfaction of painting with my bare hands and shards of glass and nails or the stones and pieces of wood that I found on my walks through the nearby park was unparalleled. I learned that abstract painting without anyone telling me “yes” or “no,” “right” or “wrong,” was nothing like my grade-school experiences of art class. Alone in my apartment, the sounds of Ani DiFranco’s distorted guitar playing loudly to accompany me, my cats watching with curiosity-filled eyes, occasionally getting their paws in my paint and tracking it across the floor, there: My stories soared, my truths emerged and I integrated more and more of myself in a natural flow of non-linear and non-discursive expression that felt safe and enjoyable and did not shake my body to its core with fear as was the case when I first lived with flashbacks throughout my late 20s or when well-meaning and entirely ill-equipped therapists and community facilitators attempted to “free” my story by pulling, often forcing, it out of me in traditional linear narratives. Painting redirected and freed all of that stored energy of fear into a medium capable of expressing the non-linear, non-performative, and soul-gripping truths that comprised my experience of being a survivor of CSA.

From years of my own practices of aesthetic inquiry and from years of facilitating community art groups for women, I have learned that as we stop performing through language and art, performing here referring to playing the roles of the people we are taught we are supposed to be, and start allowing the mess of who we are to emerge as a process of discovery, a type of rhythm begins to emerge as well. Regardless of the art through which we express, the rhythm is embodied, and it is a movement between the internal and the external, the objective and the subjective, the known and the unknown, the painful and the joyful. Ordinary language and traditional approaches to meaning and to trauma theory would presuppose that we must define, categorize, and explain this rhythm. What if, however, the rhythm is not meant to be explained but to be intimately known and explored through co-creative practices, again and again? What if the meaning of this rhythm is supposed to change every time we feel it, see it, hear it, touch it, and speak it? What if this inconsistent and uncontrollable nature of experience and identity is also one of life’s deepest beauties and our normative and conventional structures of meaning actually teach us to repress, fear, and altogether miss that beauty because we cannot recognize it in ourselves let alone in each other?

Always.
Always was this
promise
here
surfacing
 torrents
misplaced
lulls.

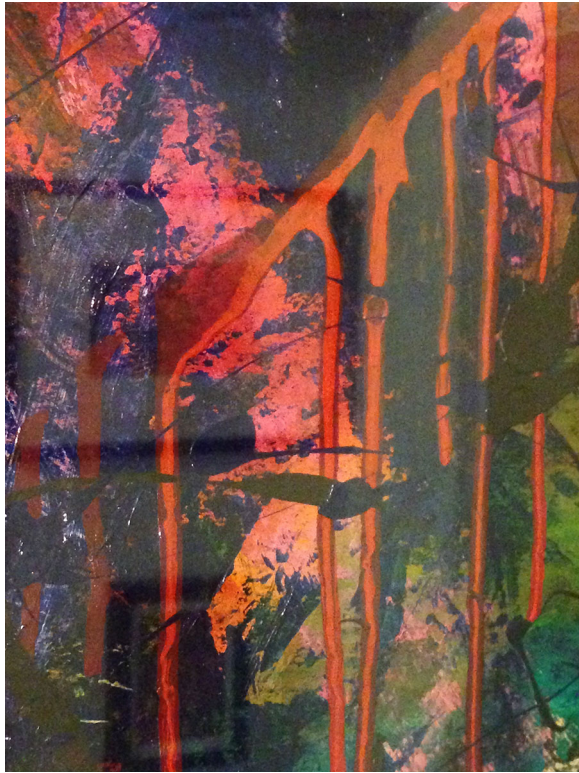


FIGURE 7. *See Through Me*, acrylic & digital

Waves crashing on this body's shores. Love becomes the only route into safety:

Forgiveness speaks to me in the brilliant light I see refracted on my skin.
Reds and blues sing inside a deep and vibrantly gripping morning sun.
Finally, the iris blooms.

For me, trained as an academic since I was 18 years old, the most challenging part of aesthetic inquiry has been to resist the urge, at once a learned need, to translate the image or poem into ordinary explanation. I know now that, for me, this act of intellectualizing was an urge to flee the rhythm and process of an ever-shifting convergence and divergence of selfhood rooted in my body and my wounding. This tendency to flee is both a product of a culture that privileges cognitive meaning-making and it is a result of surviving trauma. For myself, intellectualizing became a coping mechanism to

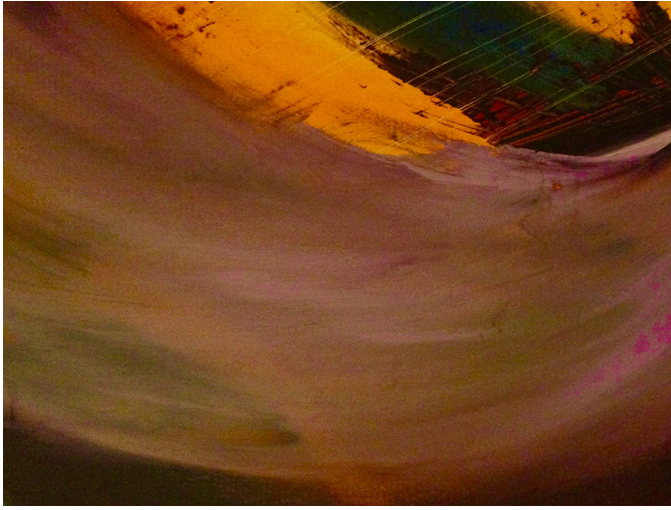


FIGURE 8. *Remember Me*, mixed media

retreat into the habit of categorizing experience into pre-established units of illusory control disguised as knowledge that perpetuated a bifurcation of body and mind. As I learned to actively surrender to the process of meeting myself daily, moment by moment, in the art that emerged on my apartment walls, in the piles of journals stacked under my desk, and in the breaths I watch rise and fall in my abdomen as I take my seat with myself on my meditation cushion, the crashing and destructive force of my waves of memories receded. I learned that what I truly feared were not the memories of my abuse or even the implications of that abuse. I feared myself. Yes, my healing required cutting ties with people from my life, but, more pointedly, it involved cutting ties with the normative belief structures of my psyche that taught me to fear my true self. She is real and she is messy. She prefers bare feet to the suffocation of shoes, likes knots in her long locks, is prone to shaving those locks down to the smoothest of brush cuts when the mood strikes, is as comfortable discussing phenomenological hermeneutics as she is a healthy critique of pop culture in *Bridgerton*, and she no longer attempts to pretend her abuse did not happen.

If our cultural understanding of meaning and memory continues to be limited by explicit and categorical knowledge based on linear developments of thought and identity, then we continue to treat survivors as somehow deficient rather than seeing them as the leaders that they are in creative embodiments of survival and identity. Moreover, if we do not center survivors

through the approaches we develop as structures of support, then we will continue to teach them to exile their own creativity and, sadly, cycles of violence will continue. For instance, we often leave out of the story of gendered violence that the male perpetrators of violence are themselves often survivors of childhood trauma.⁴⁰ In a culture that has very limited room for what it means to be male, the space to heal through vulnerability is rarely available to men across racial, ethnic, and class divides. This fact alone is a wake-up call that in order for cycles of gendered violence to end, we need to expand our structures of meaning-making and healing into the hybrid and aesthetic forms that invite the raw, the vulnerable, and the taboo into the safe-enough externalizations that, in survivors' own rhythms and manners, we can interpret and respond to as we choose. Aesthetic inquiry is one such opportunity to expand discourses of self-identity and meaning-making wherein the act of making art is simultaneously a transformative and reclaiming process of communicating beyond the limits of rational thought and explicit memory.

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, I return to the Prelude to ask, Who is the “you” I referenced as a companion in my creative presence? Is it you, Reader, who in Paul Ricoeur’s theory of phenomenological hermeneutics gives my words and this piece a life of its own as you interact with them?⁴¹ Is it a version of myself that I externalize in prose as a psychological counter to the child I once was, an adult self capable of protecting her as she was never protected? Is it my own feminist psycho-spiritual rendition of a god//dess that I access through the liminal space that is aesthetic discourse and art-making? Is it every survivor of CSA whose story and history may look so different than mine? Different and yet, as survivors in the groups I participate in and facilitate so often say, there is something in our eyes that lets us recognize each other before words are spoken. In that shared look that precedes any telling of story and connects us across our differences, we lock eyes and hearts and for just a moment revel in an embodied and intuited knowledge that one more person has come through the hell that is childhood sexual abuse. This shared testament to survival, I find, lets the earth spin a little more smoothly on its axis.

I think the answer is that the “you” is necessarily and always all these forces of connectivity that intercept my own rendition of healing. For me, it is existing and communicating within the liminality of meaning that is the most real experience I can access, specifically, because it is free from the illusion of

journey to this point, I know that when it comes to embodied moments of healing that all the theory, be it psychotherapeutic or feminist, fails in comparison to the experience of sitting and sharing space with one individual capable of suspending all judgment and theoretical lenses in order to accept, fully and honestly before her, me and the complexity of my history of love. I love my father deeply. He is a man who hurt me deeply. Language falls short of capturing the complexity that I bear every moment of every day on a cellular level in my body and psyche and heart. Art can express this space of being and it allows me, in the act of making it, to witness myself externalizing the stories and memories and imaginings in a beautiful dance of reclaiming and authentic meaning-making. We have the ability to enter that liminal space with each other, and, in my experience, journeying there together is even more validating than the art-making itself. Sharing in communion in that space becomes its own relational and phenomenologically based way of knowing. It is also a very rare experience because it requires such deep and raw honesty of presence. Given that the cognitive imperialism most of us grow up in doesn't make room for integrating the non-linear and affective experiences that trouble the explicitness of categorical thought, many of us need to relearn how to be in relationship with our own rawness in order to sit in presence with the rawness of others. Even in the service of "helping" or "doing feminism," we can obscure the person sitting in front of us asking to be seen not for what theory or society or our own experience tells us they are, but for who and what they themselves feel themselves to be. Trauma has no master narrative, but it has so many beautifully and painfully intersecting stories, and when we shift our perspective, what seems fragmented and incomplete is so often the missing piece of an ever-shifting and ever-evolving mosaic of deeply nourishing non-normative beauty. ■

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NOTES

1. Iris J. Gildea, "The Emergency Stage: Flashbacks and Poetry: An Autoethnographic Approach," *Journal of Poetry Therapy* 33, no. 2 (2020): 110–22.
2. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, 10th Anniversary ed. (New York: Penguin, 2007), 138.

3. It is important to clarify from the outset that my use of the word “trauma” in this essay and in my work in general refers to the word’s literal translation as a “wounding.” As a feminist practitioner and theorist, I believe strongly that victims-survivors define for themselves the scopes and depths of their emotional and psychological trauma-woundings. I also acknowledge that most if not all of our traumas either in their cause or in the ways we come to embody them are tied to social systems and histories of oppression, marginalization, and silencing. As theories of intersectionality show us, we are ourselves at the intersections of various personal and collective matrixes of meaning and identity and trauma is always part of our intersectional makeup. It is also important to note that while I do work with a relatively open interpretation of the word “trauma,” the majority of my scholarship has focused on sexual violence and, as a result, many of my examples are rooted in this context as it is also my own experience and the ground of my autoethnographic examples.

4. 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 (2020) 1–18.

5. Clelia O. Rodríguez, *Decolonizing Academia: Poverty, Oppression and Pain* (Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing, 2018). See also bell hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985); Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Revised edition) (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007); Y. Ataria, “Traumatic Memories as Black Holes: A Qualitative-Phenomenological Approach,” *Qualitative Psychology* 1, no. 2 (2014): 123–40.

6. Even trainings that include creative modalities such as narrative therapies and depth psychology still tend to apply a very traditional-based understanding of trauma experience as deviant from ordinary memory/identity. For an alternative to traditional narrative approaches to trauma through the arts, see 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.

7. My work in the theorizing and conceptualizing relationships between aesthetic and speculative discourse is rooted in a phenomenological approach to self-reflexive understanding in the tradition of Paul Ricoeur’s phenomenological hermeneutics and study of metaphor which crosses with the phenomenology of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger. Such discussion of phenomenology is beyond the scope of this article, but for more engagement with trauma and a phenomenology of identity and expression see Iris J. Gildea, “A Poetics of the Self: Ricoeur’s Philosophy of the Will and Living Metaphor as Creative Praxis,” *Ricoeur Studies* 9, no. 2 (2019): 90–103.

8. Leanne Betasmosake Simpson and E. Manitowabi, “Theorizing Resurgence from within Nishnaabeg Thought,” in *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies*, ed. J. Doerfler, N.J. Sinclair, and H.K. Stark (East Lansing, University of Michigan State University Press; Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2013), 279–93, <https://doi.org/10.14321/j.ctt7ztcbn.24>; Aurora Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories: Essays for Radicals* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

9. bell hooks, *Theory as Liberatory Practice* (New Haven, CT: Yale Law School, 1991).
10. Intermodal, adapted from expressive arts pedagogy, refers to the interaction of and exchange between two or more mediums, that is, poetry and prose; visual art and poetry; theory, visual art, and poetry; and so on. Shawn McNiff, "Foreword," in *Expressive Therapies*, ed. Cathy A. Malchiodi (New York: Guilford Press, 2005), 10–14.
11. I very much agree with and 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" ("Living Bodies of Thought: The 'Critical' in Critical Autoethnography," *Qualitative Inquiry* 22, no. 4 [2016]: 229). For this reason, I include theory and traditional academic prose as one of the mediums that poetry, visual art, and poetic prose interact with in the scope of this piece.
12. See A. Willis, S. Canavan, and S. Prior, "Searching for Safe Space: The Absent Presence of Childhood Sexual Abuse in Human Geography," *Gender, Place & Culture* 22, no. 10 (2015): 1481–92.
13. Elizabeth Ertorre, *Autoethnography as Feminist Method: Sensitizing the Feminist "I,"* (London: Routledge, 2017).
14. It is important to note that just as discourses of feminist theory intersect, overlap, and diverge, there is no "essentialist" approach to feminist trauma theory as feminist schools exist within separate therapeutic models, that is, feminist cognitive behavioral therapy or feminist Jungian studies, which at times are aligned in methodology and ideology and other times not aligned, though always generally aligned to a political commitment to end sexist and gender-based domination. I work with Bonnie Burstow's tradition of radical feminist theory; yet I also seek to enhance this theory with the intervention of arts-based research and meaning making. On radical feminist trauma theory versus other practices, see Bonnie Burstow, "Toward a Radical Understanding of Trauma and Trauma Work," *Women Against Violence* 9, no. 11 (2013): 1293–1317.
15. Bonnie Burstow, *Psychiatry and the Business of Madness: An Ethical and Epistemological Accounting* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Colleen McMillan and Helen Eaton Ramirez, "Autoethnography as Therapy for Trauma," in *Women & Therapy* 39, no. 3–4 (2016): 432–58.
16. Lucy Bond and Stef Craps, *Trauma* (London: Routledge, 2020), 6.
17. Emma Tseris, *Trauma, Women's Health and Social Justice: Pitfalls and Possibilities* (Abingdon, UK: Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2019), 43.
18. Taiwo Afuape, *Power, Resistance and Liberation in Therapy with Survivors of Trauma: To Have Our Hearts Broken* (New York: Routledge: 2011).
19. Savneet Talwar, "Beyond Multiculturalism and Cultural Competence," in *Art Therapy for Social Justice: Radical Intersections*, ed. Savneet Talwar (New York: Routledge, 2019), 3–16.
20. Lucy Bond, "Trauma," in *Trauma*, ed. Lucy Bond and Stef Craps (New York: Routledge, 2020), 2.
21. Afuape, *Power, Resistance and Liberation in Therapy with Survivors of Trauma*.

22. Audre Lorde's work stands out as a blend of theory and poetry that offers insights into how poetry can access parts of ourselves that ordinary language cannot. Her Black feminism can be in rich discourse with trauma theory. See Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 36–39.

23. Avery F. Gordon, "Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity," *Borderlands* 10, no. 2 (2011), https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A276187005/CIC?u=utoronto_main&sid=bookmark-CIC&xid=5cc192dc.

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

25. For an in-depth study of the loss of spiritual knowing that comes from Christianity's privileging of the explicit and cognitive over the implicit, see Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985).

26. 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, 186.

27. Jeanette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry* (London: Vintage Books, 1996), 142.

28. Jeanette Winterson, *Lighthousekeeping* (London: Fourth Estate, 2004), 42.

29. A. Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories: Essays for Radicals* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 55–68.

30. An example is Serene Jones's *Trauma & Grace* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019). Jones's work is fueled by a dedicated feminist project to promote inclusivity and support survivors on their journeys of recovery at the intersection of faith development. Jones's work, however, is rooted in research and application of very traditional trauma theory. Almost every chapter begins with a standard deficiency praxis model of the theorist, and here, minister, positioned on the outside looking in at the objectified, albeit with empathy, survivor in need of being "fixed." Controversially, also implied in this work that bridges trauma theory and theology is that the survivor also needs her relationship to God fixed. Jones brings a depth of feminist critique to traditional Christian models of patriarchy, but as often happens, the same critique is not carried over into the application of trauma theory to consider the marginalizing and patriarchal roots of the psychotherapeutic traditions one applies.

31. bell hooks, *Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997).

32. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "3. 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, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073014-112142>. See also Talwar, "Beyond Multiculturalism and Cultural Competence," 6.

33. Jennifer Christine Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 5.

34. Collins, "Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas," 2.

35. See Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*; Allison Upshaw, “My Body Knows Things,” in *Doing Ethnography*, ed. S.L. Pensoneau-Conway, T.E. Adams, and D.M. Bolen (Rotterdam: SensePublishers, 2017), 55–65; Patricia Hill Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,” *Social Problems* 33, no. 6 (2008): S14–S32.

36. Of course, artists do this all the time with their work. I am interested, however, in an integrative praxis of methodology in qualitative research that does not separate the aesthetic or the affective from the theoretical, especially as regards traditional approaches to trauma, that is, a feminist arts-based intervention in trauma theory.

37. Billy-Ray Belcourt, *This Wound Is a World* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 10.

38. Renee Linklater, *Decolonizing Trauma Work: Indigenous Stories and Strategies* (Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing, 2014).

39. Rosemary Barnes and Susan Schellenberg, “Chapter 12: Take It Public: Use Art to Make Healing a Public Narrative,” in *Psychiatry Disrupted: Theorizing Resistance and Crafting the Revolution*, ed. Bonnie Burstow (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014), 177–93.

40. Terrence Real, *I Don’t Want to Talk About It: Overcoming the Secret Legacy of Male Depression* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 22.

41. Iris J. Gildea, “Ricoeur’s Theory of Metaphor as Trauma Praxis,” *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies* 7, no. 2 (2018): 21–42.