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Stepping Out of Trauma: Reflections On What It Means to Be a Survivor of Sexual Assault

Alba, Razieh

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Stepping Out of Trauma:
Reflections On What It Means to Be a Survivor of Sexual Assault

by

Razieh Alba

A THESIS

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Abstract

This research creation project explored the use of installation art and mixed media to create a reflective space for audiences to address their own beliefs and understanding related to survivorship from sexual assault. An important component in the work was the desire to step back from typical shock tactics used in contemporary art to address sexual assault and take a softer approach to the issue of trauma and survivorship. A combination of projection mapping, sculptural, and natural audio elements from a flowing stream were used to create a space that guides audiences to reflect on the themes related to moving past trauma related to sexual assault: Healing, Rebirth, and Regrowth, while spilling the knowledge from survivors into the greater society as a means of shifting the social narrative further away from the idea that survivors are victims who are defined by the act of sexual assault.

Using Moustakas's Heuristic Model of Inquiry, I explored the research question through artistic practice and reflected not only on my own experience with low-intensity sexual assault, but the shared themes collected from other survivors. Data was collected from survivors through an interview process that focused on healing and personal experiences related to social stigmas. The end result was an installation exhibition that sought to guide audiences through a reflection of trauma as a means of reducing social stigmas related to survivorship of sexual assault. The metaphor of water was layered throughout all aspects of the project, showing the importance of change, empowerment, and reflection.

Declaration

This art exhibition thesis and written thesis support paper is the original, unpublished, and independent work of Razieh Alba. The following research and artistic creation project have been developed throughout the course of the Master of Fine Arts program, and the work has not been submitted in part or in full for any other artistic project or academic program. This research creation project included the use of human subjects through an interview process, which required approval from the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB) and the research was approved by the University of Calgary. Interviews with participants were covered under the Ethics Certificate number REB20-1920, which was issued by the University of Calgary's CFREB for the project titled, "Empowering Survivors of Sexual Assault: Giving Testimony to Trauma", which was issued on March 31, 2021.

Razieh Alba

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Traditional Territorial Acknowledgement

The University of Calgary is situated on the traditional territories of the people of the Treaty 7 region in Southern Alberta, which includes the Niitsitapi (including the Siksika, Kainai and Piikani First Nations), the Tsuut'ina First Nation, and the Stoney Nakoda (including the Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Wesley First Nations). The City of Calgary is also home to the Métis Nation of Alberta, Region III.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The subject of this research creation project is trauma and healing among survivors of sexual assault. Within contemporary art, artists have often tackled the subject of sexual assault using shock tactics, in which the artists seek to shock the audience into awareness of sexual assault in ways that do not consider how those portrayals may affect survivors. After my own experience with low-intensity sexual assault, I turned toward the arts—within my own work and within my exploration of the work of others. For me, the arts have always provided a means of making sense of my own experiences. Not only have I worked to process my own thoughts and feelings through artistic creation, but I examine the work of others to gain new insights and perspectives to improve my understanding of what others have gone through. When it came to the subject of sexual assault what I found within contemporary art was a fixation on the act of assault itself. If not, the focus was on raising awareness of the challenges associated with getting justice due to social, cultural, and political issues existing within society. Both are important to understanding what it means to be a survivor, but it left much to be desired when it came to gaining an understanding of how survivors overcome trauma and personal tragedy. There was not a space within contemporary art in which I felt I could reflect on my own experiences in a way that left me empowered and proud of my own journey through the healing process. This research creation project sought to address this gap and take a softer approach to the subject matter. Through the use of metaphor and abstract art, this project set out to create a reflective space that would serve to educate viewers in what it means to heal from sexual assault. At the same

time, the final exhibition would also create a safe space for survivors among the audience to reflect on their own healing journey in an empowering way.

This project was designed to understand my own experiences with low-intensity sexual assault and to examine the strengths of other survivors. Survivors who step forward to share the testimony of their experiences with others are often subject to harsh social stigmas and victim blaming. Unlike other forms of violence, survivors of sexual assault are often blamed and/or shamed for being the target of a non-consensual sexual experience.¹ Compounding the survivors' difficulties are the complex cultural, social, and political issues that often leave survivors without support as they set out to heal from trauma.² While sexual assault has taken a more prominent role in public awareness, the supports in place for survivors of sexual assault remain limited in scope. This project not only provided me with a means of understanding myself but in identifying how survivors journey through the themes of healing, rebirth, and regrowth, and in spilling the knowledge that they have gained related to survivorship into the greater society to enact social change.

The Research Creation Process

The goal of the research creation project was to create a space for reflection where audience members could explore their own understanding of what it means to be a survivor of sexual assault. When developing the project, one of the core concerns was in creating a space that would be cognizant that members of the audience would also

¹ Gravelin et al. "Blaming the Victim of Acquaintance Rape."

² Gravelin, Claire R., Monica Biernat, & Caroline E. Butcher. "Blaming the Victim of Acquaintance Rape: Individual, Situational, and Sociocultural Factors." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 9 (2018) pp. 1-22

have experienced sexual assault themselves. The research question guiding the project was, “How can the artist step between survivors and audience members and create a safe, reflective space for viewers to understand the healing process that survivors experience following sexual assault?”

One of the primary motivations for taking this project on at this specific time was the impact of the #MeToo Movement and the current discourse around sexual assault in society. The movement became a viral hashtag, #MeToo, that began in late 2017 where survivors publicly took part in declaring on social media platforms that they had experienced some form of sexual assault. In some cases, the hashtag was combined with stories of assault, while other survivors chose to simply post #MeToo on their preferred social media pages as a way to show how pervasive the issue was in society. The movement also sought to shift the narratives surrounding sexual assault away from victim blaming.³ The rise of the #MeToo Movement brought about a greater interest in addressing sexual assault within social, cultural, and political spheres. The gap, however, was in taking the increased awareness of the issue and turning that awareness into actionable change that benefitted survivors and provided greater social, cultural, and political support. The movement has not yet reached its full potential when it comes to addressing the needs of survivors or dealing with the trauma associated with sexual assault.⁴

³ Lee, Bun-Hee. “#Me Too Movement; It Is Time That We All Act and Participate in Transformation.” *Psychiatry Investigation*, Vol. 15, no. 5 (2018), p. 433.

⁴ Mendes, Kaitlynn, and Jessica Ringrose. “Chapter 3: Digital Feminist Activism: #Metoo and the Everyday Experiences of Challenging Rape Culture.” In Bianca Fileborn & Rachel Loney-Howes (eds), *#Me Too and the Politics of Social Change*. Pallgrave MacMillan (2019), pp. 37-52.

The focus of the research creation project was on the experiences of survivors on their path towards healing following sexual assault. To accomplish this, I applied the heuristic model of inquiry, a methodology that allows the researcher to investigate a closely connected phenomenon.⁵ In combination with the heuristic model, I also applied the methodology of a/r/tography, which provided me with a structure for balancing the roles of artist, researcher, and teacher throughout my project.⁶ As an artist, I explored my own understanding of survivorship and healing through the artistic creation process. As a researcher, I gathered information from a range of disciplines to support the evolution of my work throughout the MFA project. As a teacher/educator, I sought to take my artistic and research processes and turn them into a tool to educate others on what it means to be a survivor.

Using the heuristic model of inquiry to guide my artistic creation process, I set out to create a reflective space for audience members that would allow them to consider the healing process survivors must go through, often on their own and without any support. The artistic creation project explored themes related to survivorship, drawn from my personal experiences and the use of participant interviews with other survivors. Through a mix of projection mapping, sculpture, and water features within the final installation project, I sought to explore the themes related to survivorship and the healing process, giving the audience members the ability to choose how deeply they wanted to delve into

⁵ Kenny, Gerard. "An Introduction to Moustaka's Heuristic Method." *Nurse Researcher*, 19, no. 3 (2012), pp. 6-11

⁶ LeBlanc, Natalie, Sara Florence Davidson, Jee Yeon Ryu, & Rita L. Irwin. "Becoming Through A/R/Tography, Autobiography, and Stories in Motion." *International Journal of Education through Art*, vol. 11, no. 3 (2015).

the topic, and potentially, how deeply they wanted to reflect on their own path toward healing if they themselves were a survivor of sexual assault.

The end product was an installation environment that featured a full running streambed and a gallery floor filled with sand to track the footprints of those who had walked through the gallery before. Three spotlights were used to identify the themes of Healing, Rebirth, and Regrowth, with digitally animated footprints moving from the flowing streambed through each theme/spotlight. The vessel mounted on the gallery wall over the top of the stream was representative of the knowledge of survivors spilling over into greater society, with the flowing water joining the stream to show the collective nature of knowledge that overflows from one person to the next, pushing new ideas and understanding forward as a means of bringing about social change.

The overarching theme of Spilling Knowledge into Greater Society appears in every aspect of the gallery exhibition: From the vessel mounted on the wall that “spilled” water into the streambed using projection mapping of overflowing water, to the projection mapping of footsteps walking through the streambed and onto the gallery floor, to the drips of water spilling off the footprints as they moved through the healing process. The spotlights where each of the footsteps were displayed throughout the gallery space also highlight the survivors who step forward to share their stories with us so that we can learn and grow as a society. By creating an installation environment that used different textures, natural sounds of running water, and specific lighting elements, I wanted to create a safe space that would allow audience members to explore their own beliefs

related to survivorship and trauma. I also wanted to provide a space in which viewers could confront harmful social stigmas related to victimization which have negative impacts on survivors while they work to make sense of their experiences.

Throughout the artistic and research creation process, there was a need to consistently reassess how the evolution of the project would impact survivors of sexual assault who were taking part in the project as participants or as audience members. The ethical responsibilities that I took on with this project had the most significant impact on the project's final outcome. By conducting my own exploration of survivorship through the heuristic model of inquiry and the use of a/r/tography to ground myself in the separate roles of artist, researcher, and teacher, I was able to keep the needs of participants and audience members in mind throughout each iteration of the research creation process. The application of feminist and trauma theories also provided me with theoretical foundations that allowed me to focus on reducing the risk of revictimization and re-traumatization, while focusing on empowering survivors of sexual assault within my work.

Another large consideration within the design of the final project was providing a means for audience members to actively consent to participate within the gallery space. Given the significance of 'consent' within the subject matter of sexual assault, it became important that audience members made a conscious choice to 'consent' to engaging with the artwork. There are many arguments that could be made for the use of shock tactics to push audiences out of their comfort zones as a means of sparking a deep

emotional response when viewers are confronted with emotionally charged works of art. When shock tactics are used to explore sexual assault or sexual violence, however, they do not ask for the viewer's consent, or consider the impact of that emotional shock on viewers who have survived sexual assault. In some cases, viewers who were previously unaware of early or repressed memories of sexual violence or assault may trigger a negative emotional response when confronted by visual stimuli representative of the repressed trauma.⁷ In an effort to reduce the risk of re-traumatization among viewers, it became important to strip away negative visual stimuli that would shock viewers into associating the work with sexual violence and assault and instead create a space dedicated to slowing down and reflecting inwardly on the topic in a safe space. By doing so, the viewer could actively choose how far they were willing to explore their views of survivorship and social stigmas while still maintaining a serene environment that left the viewers at ease and with a sense of control. Given that the working definition of sexual assault in this thesis project was "non-consensual sexual interactions," I wanted each layer of this project to be mindful of the need for consent and to empower viewers by leaving them in control of their own experience within the gallery space.

Research Questions

The research question guiding the project was, "How can the artist step between survivors and audience members and create a safe, reflective space for viewers to understand the healing process that survivors experience following sexual assault?"

⁷ Fryd, Vivian Green. "Visual Stimuli for Traumatic Memories: An Academic and Personal Memoir." *Traumatology*, Vol. 15, no. 4 (2009): 5-14.

Moreover, the project aimed to address the following sub-questions:

1. What are the common themes in the healing process experienced among survivors of sexual assault?
2. How can the artist develop a space for reflection in an installation exhibition?

Key Terms

Sexual Assault. For the purposes of this paper, “sexual assault” will be defined as any form of non-consensual sexual interaction.⁸ I elected to use a blanket term for sexual assault, rather than defining different forms of sexual assault that range in intensity to show that any non-consensual sexual interactions can have negative effects on the individual. Throughout my experiences creating this project and reviewing my own ethical obligations to participants in my study, and the gallery audience, I also wanted to avoid focusing on any one type of sexual assault to reduce potential negative triggers for participants and viewers. For this reason, the thesis support paper avoids specific mention of any one type of sexual assault.

Trauma. The term “trauma” will also be referenced repeatedly throughout the thesis support paper and requires a clear definition prior to the following sections. Within this research creation project, “trauma” refers to any negative emotional or psychological impacts stemming from an incident related to non-consensual sexual interactions. Survivors experience effects of sexual assault in a wide variety of ways, and not all

⁸ Fernandez, Pablo A. “Sexual Assault: An Overview and Implications for Counselling Support.” *Australasian Medical Journal*, Vol. 4, no. 11 (2011), pp. 596-602

survivors will have the same challenges as others.⁹ To define trauma more specifically, may discount or minimize the experiences of survivors whose reactions to sexual assault differ from the set definitions of trauma or post-traumatic stress. More information on these choices can be found in Chapter Three, in the sub-section titled *Ethical Responsibilities of the Researcher*, which provides insights into the stringent ethics board review undertaken to gain approval for this final thesis project.

Survivor vs. Victim. It is also important to define the term “survivor” in regard to sexual assault. The terms “survivor” and “victim” are often used interchangeably. Not all individuals who have experienced sexual assault will have the same preference when it comes to describing their experiences, or in labelling themselves as ‘victim’ or ‘survivor’. Some, like author Kate Harding, prefer the term “victim” based on her personal experiences of rape and do not associate negative connotations with being a victim of an assault. Other individuals who have experienced sexual assault may choose to avoid a label together or use their own preferred term of “survivor”. The term survivor was adopted by the anti-rape movement to promote the idea that sexual assault was not the fault of the survivor, but the term does not appeal to everyone.¹⁰ In terms of my own exploration of my low-intensity sexual assault experiences, I often use the terms “survivor” and “victim” interchangeably. I specifically chose to use the term “survivor” because it aligned with my research into feminist and trauma theories, which seek to

⁹ Dorkin, Emily R., Suvama V. Menon, Johnathan Bystrynski, & Nicole E. Allen. “Sexual Assault Victimization and Psychopathology: A Review and Meta-Analysis.” *Clinical Psychology Review*, Vol. 56 (2018), pp. 65-81.

¹⁰ Harding, Kate. “I’ve Been Told I’m a Survivor, Not a Victim. But What’s Wrong with Being a Victim?” *TIME* (27 February 2020). <https://time.com/5789032/victim-survivor-sexual-assault/>

empower the individual. It was equally important in my work to reduce the potential for unconscious bias related to the term “victim” which often manifests as victim blaming or perceived weakness on the part of the survivor.¹¹ For me personally, the term survivor showcases the strength that an individual has to overcome challenges associated with experiencing sexual assault while also actively moving down the path toward healing.

¹¹ Moor, Avigail. “From Victim to Empowered Survivor: Feminist Therapy with Survivors of Rape and Sexual Assault.” In Paludi, M. (ed.) *Feminism and Women’s Rights Worldwide*. Prager (2009), pp. 139-155).

Chapter 2: Understanding Trauma

This chapter, *Understanding Trauma*, is broken into subsections that identify the theoretical frameworks, methodology, and recent historical context that has supported the research creation project. The first subsection introduces the historical background of the issue. The second subsection addresses the theoretical frameworks for the current project, feminist theory and trauma theory, which were both used to guide the project throughout all stages of its evolution during the MFA program. The third subsection provides an overview of the use of narrative testimony and its role in artistic practice as a means of processing my own experiences with trauma following sexual assault.

Historical Background

Situating the Current Project in Contemporary Art and Social Movements

Social views regarding sexual assault have seen only an incremental change in recent decades. The changes that have occurred have largely due to the feminist movement's efforts over the past century.¹² While sexual violence can be rooted in a number of different motivators, there is the ongoing perception of rape and/or other forms of sexual violence as an inescapable aspect of society. It wasn't until the mid-to late 1900s that sexual assault began to be seen as a crime rather than a natural part of life that came with densely populated urban areas.¹³ The colloquial term "boys will be boys," for example, provides good insight into how the actions of men are viewed in society. It wasn't until the end of the first wave of feminism at the beginning of the 1900s and the

¹² Crawford, Allison. "If 'The Body Keeps the Score.'"

¹³ Bourke, Joanna. "Sexual Violence, Bodily Pain, and Trauma: A History." *Theory, Culture, Society*, vol. 29, no. 3 (2012), pp. 25-31.

second wave of the feminist movement starting in the 1960s that society began to understand how pervasive the issue of sexual assault was. Despite understanding that sexual assault occurred far more frequently than it was reported, the feminist movement was not successful in shifting social perspectives related to the stigmas and victim blaming survivors experienced.¹⁴

Sexual assault, which is a far broader term than rape or even sexual violence, has not made much progress in sociocultural or political agendas until recently, due to the perception that sexual 'assault' is a lesser crime, if a crime at all, compared to the more emotionally charged descriptions of 'rape' or 'violence.' There were also no legal protections in place for survivors of sexual assault until 1983, when the *Criminal Code* was updated regarding sexual assault due to the feminist movement starting in the 1970s.¹⁵ Even following the updated *Criminal Code* and legal protections for survivors who stepped forward with their accounts of assault, social stigmas continued to negatively impact the treatment of survivors and the success of their cases. Survivors who came forward with allegations of harassment, assault, or even rape, routinely were subject to their personal characters being questioned. Female survivors were predominantly considered non-credible sources, particularly if those survivors were from minority groups. Social stigmas led to a perception that female victims were making up stories to incriminate the men they accused of sexual assault, or they were lying about having been victimized because they were mentally unstable.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Backhouse, Constance. *Carnal Crimes: Sexual Assault Law in Canada, 1900-1975*. Iwrin Law (2008).

¹⁶ Ibid

Despite ongoing work by feminist activists since the 1970s, these social stigmas have been maintained throughout society. This may have been partially the fault of the feminist movements themselves, given that there was rarely a clear plan in place to create long-term change. Each of the movements focused on sexual assault or sexual violence had to navigate and compete against differing social and political interests and agendas. While there may have been an increase in awareness or social interest at the start of a movement or following a particular case, that interest was lost by the general public without long-term change having been enacted.¹⁷ There have also been the repeated issues of movements having no clearly defined goals, or if there have been goals, they were not shared by everyone involved in the movement.¹⁸

During the second wave of feminism in the 1970s there was significant disagreement regarding how the feminist movement should address sexual violence and rape. More radical feminist groups wanted to dismantle the patriarchy, as they believed that was the only way to end rape. Liberal feminist groups, on the other hand, sought to create incremental change over time by addressing sexual violence and rape in existing social hierarchies.¹⁹ In part because of the disagreements between different branches of the first wave feminism movement, feminist activists did not have a clear plan in place. They also did not have the ability to keep society's attention on the issue long enough to

¹⁷ Anderson, Sarah Wood. *Readings of Trauma, Madness, and the Body*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012

¹⁸ McPhail, Beverly A. "Feminist Framework Plus: Knitting Feminist Theories of Rape Etiology into a Comprehensive Model." *Trauma, Violence, and Abuse*, pp. 1-16 (2015).

¹⁹ Ibid

create substantial social change.²⁰ An additional problem that has become apparent in recent years with these movements was the limited scope in which sexual assault and violence have been addressed. While the focus is on raising awareness of sexual assault and changing social views and political policies, movements have not expanded to focus on the long-term trauma that survivors must overcome following incidents of sexual assault.²¹ These patterns have been repeated with each new attempt to raise awareness and facilitate social change, and the #MeToo movement has not been an exception to this.

The Impact of the #MeToo Movement

The #MeToo Movement which began in 2017, has been the most notable in terms of global traction thanks to the viral nature of the Internet hashtag and celebrity stories to raise awareness.²² One of the major reasons for the lack of social change during the earlier waves of the feminist movement was the inability that movements had to maintain focus on the issues related to sexual violence and assault. The #MeToo movement began at a pivotal time in the United States, fueled partially due to the ongoing political issues surrounding the election of President Donald Trump. This was an important component of the #MeToo movement, as it kept the issue at the forefront of the media due to President Trump ongoing political issues.²³ Unlike previous sexual violence movements, the #MeToo movement was also supported by the viral nature of social media and amplified by celebrity power. Survivors suddenly had a public platform

²⁰ Gibson, et al. "Understanding the 2017 "Me Too" Movement's Timing."

²¹ McPhail, Beverly A. "Feminist Framework Plus."

²² Szekeres, Hanna, Eric Shuman, & Tamar Saguy. "Views of Sexual Assault Following #MeToo: The Role of Gender and Individual Differences." *Personality and Individual Differences*, vol. 166, no. 1 (2020).

²³ Gibson, et al. "Understanding the 2017 "Me Too" Movement's Timing."

to come forward and share their stories, or simply share that they, too, had experienced sexual assault. The primary goal of the movement was to show just how widespread sexual violence was in society and that everyone knew at least one person who had been victim of sexual assault.²⁴

The impact of the online hashtag made it clear that the social stigmas surrounding sexual violence often kept survivors from speaking out, thereby masking the true extent of the problem on a larger social level. While individuals may have gained a deeper sense of the problem and began to consider the toxic social stigmas generally associated with victims of sexual assault, there has not been a shift in focus on how society supports survivors or helps them to process their trauma in positive ways.²⁵

While, at the very least, #MeToo has created individualized change within certain subsets of society, the predominant stigmas toward survivors remains.²⁶ This is due to the #MeToo movement and the sharing of stories among survivors in an online setting predominantly impacting people on an individual level, but without any clear plan for how to take those individual shifts in thinking and apply them to wider society.²⁷ There has also not been a focus on providing a means of individual reflection on the social stigmas and unconscious bias toward survivors.

²⁴ Szekeres et al. 2020

²⁵ Kende, Anna, Nyul Boglarka, Nora Anna Lantos, Marton Hadarics, Diana Petlitski, Judith Kehl, & Nurit Schabel. "A Needs-Based Support for #MeToo: Power and Morality Needs Shape Women and Men's Support of the Campaign." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 11, no. 593 (2020).

²⁶ Gibson, et al. "Understanding the 2017 "Me Too" Movement's Timing."

²⁷ Ibid

The sharing of stories in public settings, in this case through the use of social media, provides a clear picture of how pervasive the issue is; but seeing a #MeToo social media post and then continuing to scroll through social media feeds does not facilitate a sense of reflection on what it means to be a survivor. By combining feminist and trauma theories to guide the project, I sought to create that space for reflection missing in the #MeToo movement. Not only would this project allow me to explore how social stigmas unconscious bias affected my self-views toward my own experiences, but I would be able to use the principles of each theory to create a safe space for other survivors to reflect on their journeys toward healing.

Theoretical Background: Feminist Theory and Trauma Theory

Within the current project, feminist theory and trauma theory were used to inform the heuristic model of inquiry and the artistic creation process. By applying these two theories, the artistic creation process was able to not only focus on the individual survivor through the healing process but the impact of intersectionality of larger sociocultural issues and political policies that directly impact how survivors are treated.²⁸ On the individual level, the two theoretical frameworks provided a means of empowering survivors, including myself, through the work by recognizing the strength it takes to overcome such personal trauma. At the same time, being cognizant of intersectionality and its impacts on survivors led me to be mindful of the external impacts of sociocultural beliefs, the negative effects of patriarchal power on survivors and social stigmas while

²⁸ Hill Collins, Patricia, and Sirma Bilge. *Intersectionality*. Polity Press (2016).

being aware of how political policies related to sexual assault served to maintain negative beliefs over time.²⁹

Feminist Theory

In terms of how feminist theory applies to sexual assault, the theory provides a framework for understanding violence based on gender within society. While the current project has focused on sexual assault on all individuals, regardless of gender, race, or ethnicity, women are victims of sexual assault and sexual violence at far higher rates than their male counterparts.³⁰ Feminist theory does often focus on the experiences of women, but at the same time it provides a framework for understanding how patriarchal power affects individuals of all genders. The perspective of the feminist theory takes into account patriarchal attitudes, which lead to social inequality. In terms of sexual assault, feminist theory provides a means for understanding how the dispersal of power within a society has a direct impact on the predominant views of sexual assault and how survivors are treated by others.³¹ The application of feminist theory provided the ability to make connections to sexual violence and the social contexts that sexual violence exists within as a means of understanding how and why the narrative around survivorship must change.

The predominant narratives surrounding sexual assault and survivorship are heavily focused on victim blaming and questioning the motivations of the survivor for stepping

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Rennison, Callie Marie. "Feminist Theory in the Context of Sexual Violence." In Gerben Bruinsma and David Weisburd (Eds.) *Encyclopedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice*. Springer (2014).

³¹ Fairbairn, Jordan. "Before #MeToo: Violence against Women, Social Media Work, ...".

forward to report an incident of assault. Social stigmas play a large role in how society views survivors of sexual assault and provides insight into how patriarchal power and sexual violence against individuals who experience social inequality continue to affect survivors over the long-term. The predominant belief in society is that survivors put themselves in the position to be sexually assaulted. Other negative views are that survivors behaved in a manner that was 'asking' to be assaulted or raped; that the survivor sharing their testimony of assault is lying about the incident for attention or to avoid acknowledging that they behaved in a promiscuously or consented to sex and are now trying to protect their image.³²

Survivors who do not come forward immediately to report sexual assault have their stories questioned, while those who do come forward right away to report an incident are met with disdain and victim blaming.³³ On a social level, these narratives that place the blame on the survivor and seek to question the integrity of survivors cause lasting damage. This damage not only affects the survivor who has stepped forward to share their stories, but for other survivors then decide to remain silent about their experiences with assault. By keeping survivors silent, however, the perceptions of sexual assault within society remain unchallenged and unchanged.

On an individual level, feminist theory also provides survivors with the ability to understand how they are affected by trauma. When working to heal from trauma,

³² Haskell, Lori and Melanie Randall. "The Impact of Trauma on Adult Sexual Assault Victims." *Department of Justice Canada* (2019). https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/jr/trauma/trauma_eng.pdf

³³ Ibid

survivors must grapple with internal and external sources of distress—and in many cases survivors are not equipped to determine where stressors are coming from. By being able to recognize when a stressor is internal, and when a stressor is coming from an external source (i.e., friends, family, or others in society), survivors are much better equipped to address the effects of that stressor in a positive manner.³⁴ When examining my own internal and external stressors throughout my healing process, there was a deep sense of control that was regained when I was able to recognize where a stressor was stemming from. By first understanding how the dispersal of power in society contributed to the social stigmas and victim blaming surrounding sexual assault, I was able to better understand how and why stigmas were maintained in society. Looking inward at my own reactions to trauma and being able to identify internal and external stressors provided me with a way to identify how I responded to those stressors in a way that allowed me to heal.

Trauma Theory

While feminist theory provides a means of exploring how survivors are impacted on both individual and wider social levels, trauma theory focuses solely on the individual. The application of trauma theory provided me with a deeper understanding of how trauma surfaced in survivors in different ways and allowed me to reinforce the idea of empowerment among survivors. Trauma affects individuals in a variety of different ways, especially among survivors of sexual assault. Due to the differences in emotional and physical responses, any general assumptions about how trauma affects the

³⁴ Richmond, Kate, Elizabeth Geiger, and Carly Reed. "The Personal Is Political: A Feminist and Trauma-Informed Therapeutic Approach to Working with a Survivor of Sexual Assault." *Clinical Case Studies* vol. 12, no. 6 (December 2013): 443–56.

individual can negatively impact survivors. This has led not only to misunderstandings about survivors in general, but has resulted in a lack of services, support, and legal protection for survivors because it is believed that all survivors should respond to trauma in a certain way.³⁵

Trauma theory provides a theoretical framework for understanding the nature of trauma and the various ways that trauma emerges among survivors of sexual assault. The theory provides a better understanding of how trauma surfaces in the survivor, both emotionally and physically, as well as the benefits of sharing aspects of that trauma with others to facilitate the healing process.³⁶ By sharing their testimony with others, survivors are able to claim their experiences for themselves, telling their stories in the way that they want them told.³⁷ This sharing of testimony helps to directly counter the predominant social beliefs related to survivors of sexual assault. As more survivors share their narratives with others, the dominant views that are shared can spill over into the rest of society to create lasting change.

Feminist theory and trauma theory provide a stronger framework for examining the role of trauma in the lives of survivors and in treating trauma among survivors of sexual assault. Combined, both trauma and feminist theories take a person-centered approach, and trauma theory inherently draws on feminist tenets.³⁸ Feminist theory and trauma

³⁵ Haskell, Lori and Melanie Randall. "The Impact of Trauma on Adult Sexual Assault Victims."

³⁶ Johnston, Emily. "Trauma Theory as Activist Pedagogy: Engaging Students as Reader-Witnesses of Colonial Trauma in Once Were Warriors." *Antipodes* 28, no. 1 (2014): 5-17,256.

³⁷ Jolly, Rosemary. "Witnessing Embodiment: Trauma, Narrative and Theory at the Limit in Field Research and in the Classroom." *Australian Feminist Studies* 26, no. 69 (2011), 297-317.

³⁸ Richmond, Kate, Elizabeth Geiger, and Carly Reed. "The Personal Is Political."

theory both play significant roles in identifying and addressing the needs of survivors of sexual assault.

Narrative Testimony Through Visual Artistic Processes in the Current Study

In the context of the current project, I used visual arts to explore my own relationship with survivorship to understand my experiences on a personal level and to convey those experiences through abstract art and metaphor with audiences. From the earliest iterations of the research creation project, narrative testimonies related to trauma and healing have remained a core component of the work. As the project evolved, the use of narrative testimonies on an individual level connected to the more prominent theme of spilling knowledge to others as a means of shifting the social narratives surrounding survivorship. As the project progressed it became important to also incorporate the experiences of others in the processing of my own trauma. By including participant interviews, I was able to identify common themes within the healing process. Hearing how other survivors made sense of their experiences allowed me to reflect on the similarities and differences within my own journey toward healing, rebirth, and regrowth.

Narrative Therapy

The idea of giving testimony is rooted in narrative therapy practice. In its simplest form, narrative therapy is the method of sharing personal experiences through a chosen medium—whether that medium is oral storytelling, writing, or artistic creation. Narrative approaches can communicate the effects of trauma in a way that encourages social discourse on the broader subject of sexual violence while providing the survivor with the

ability to empower themselves through the act of retelling.³⁹ When applied in an artistic creation project, narrative therapy can provide visual artists with a method for making sense of their own experiences and a means of sharing those experiences with others.

The narrative therapy approach uses feminist and trauma theories to address the effects of trauma in the individual. Since individuals will experience and process trauma in unique ways the path toward healing from trauma can be deeply personal. Trauma is often experienced through anxiety or other distressing emotions which can lead to long-term, severe consequences for some survivors unless the survivor confronts the trauma and identifies how an experience with trauma affects them.⁴⁰ The use of narrative therapy, whether by verbal, written, or artistic retellings of personal experiences, has become increasingly widespread when working with trauma survivors.⁴¹ When survivors express themselves through their selected medium, they are given the opportunity to tell their story from their perspective. Narrative therapy works by shifting perspectives by addressing the way memories, particularly traumatic memories, are processed. Trauma is closely linked with memory systems: When a traumatic event occurs, the survivor may find themselves struggling to integrate events into their existing memory. This can lead to the brain disassociating the traumatic memories from the rest of the survivor's consciousness. The traumatic memories are instead stored separately as visual images

³⁹ Jolly, Rosemary. "Witnessing Embodiment: Trauma, Narrative and Theory."

⁴⁰ Wardecker, Britney M., Robin S. Edelstein, Jodi A. Quas, Ingrid M. Cordon, and Gail S. Goodman. "Emotion Language in Trauma Narratives is Associated with Better Psychological Adjustment of Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse," *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 36, no. 6 (December 2017): 628-653.

⁴¹ Hutyrova, Miluse. "Utilization of Narrative Approaches in Art Therapy in Children with Behavioral Problems." *Review of Artistic Education*, no. 11-12 (2016), 284-289.

or sensations which are much more instinctual or reflexive.⁴² This helps to explain why individuals who have post-traumatic stress disorder may have a knee-jerk reaction to a specific stimulus associated with a traumatic memory.

Connecting those traumatic memories back to the conscious mind can often be a daunting task, particularly when the individual experiences more visceral memories of the event that keep them from exploring their feelings. When confronted with a memory that causes an instinctual response, it can be difficult, or even overwhelming, to sit with that memory or sensation to explore its root cause.⁴³ This may explain why it is easier for some survivors to choose visual art over written or verbal storytelling, as visual art can assist survivors in expressing their emotions when words prove difficult.⁴⁴

Regardless of the medium, the application of a narrative approach to processing trauma can provide survivors with the ability to resolve the disassociation between the traumatic memories and the rest of their conscious minds.⁴⁵

Narrative storytelling can help to process trauma, even years later, because in the retelling of the story the survivor looks back at the memories as a witness to their own experiences.⁴⁶ By allowing the survivor to explore the traumatic events through narrative, the disrupted memories may become less fragmented and more coherent,

⁴² Crawford, Allison. "If 'The Body Keeps the Score': Mapping the Dissociated Body in Trauma Narrative, Intervention, and Theory." *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 79, no. 2 (2010): 702-719.

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Hutyrova, Miluse. "Utilization of Narrative Approaches in Art Therapy in Children."

⁴⁵ Crawford, Allison. "If 'The Body Keeps the Score.'"

⁴⁶ Cheddie, Janice. "Listening to Trauma in the Art of Everlyn Nicodemus." *Third Text*, 21, no. 1 (January 2007), 79–89.

giving the individual more control over their own autobiographical memory.⁴⁷ Retelling their stories in their own way provides survivors with a sense of control and empowerment which aligns with feminist and trauma theories. The survivor can gain a deeper understanding of themselves and how their total life experiences have helped shape them into who they have become following trauma, which contributes to the healing process.⁴⁸ Survivors can also use narrative therapy practice to share their testimony with others, if they so choose, which can allow them to feel heard and accepted by others when that testimony is received in a positive way.

Given the intensely personal nature of trauma and existing social stigmas surrounding the issue, sharing testimony with others may not always lead to positive outcomes.⁴⁹ For this reason, the application of narrative therapy was not employed with participants in the current research creation project in any way. Interviews with survivors of sexual assault focused on the healing process and on identifying common themes of healing shared among the participants. As an artist, not a psychologist, I do not possess the qualifications to guide anyone through the practice of narrative therapy and remained very cognizant of the line between collecting data on the process of healing and in the potential risks that were associated with inadvertently asking participants to share their testimony with me.

⁴⁷ Crawford, Allison. "If 'The Body Keeps the Score.'"

⁴⁸ Jaeger, Jeff, Katie M. Lindblom, Kelly Parker-Guilbert, & Lori A. Zoellner. "Trauma Narratives: It's What You Say, Not How You Say It." *Psychology of Trauma*, vol. 6, no. 5 (2014), pp. 473-481.

⁴⁹ Hutyrova, Miluse. "Utilization of Narrative Approaches in Art Therapy in Children"

Within my own exploration through the heuristic model of inquiry, however, I applied the use of narrative testimony/narrative therapy through visual artistic creation to my personal experiences. I believe that doing so was an essential component in addressing my own experience with trauma. I was not guided in a professional capacity outside of the research I had conducted on narrative and art therapy approaches within current psychology and trauma theory literature. Through personal exploration, I was able to make sense of what had happened to me; but more than that, to make peace with what had occurred. I recognized that the traumatic events in no way defined me as a person, nor did those experiences hold me back from becoming a stronger person because of it.

By telling my story to myself through art over countless iterations within the MFA program, I thereby witnessed my own testimony. The culmination of the final research creation project allowed me to share my testimony with others. By collecting data from other survivors about their own path to healing, I recognized similar strengths in myself which made me feel connected to others who had gone through similar experiences. The final MFA project, *Stepping Out of Trauma*, was a way for me to create a space where the knowledge I gained could be shared with others as a means of education. This project builds on the work that began with the feminist movement in the 1970s, to the current #MeToo movement, in which survivors step forward to share their stories to change the narratives associated with sexual assault.

Chapter Three: Confronting Trauma

Chapter Three: Confronting Trauma will review the evolution of the current project throughout the duration of the MFA program. The chapter will begin with a review of the ethical considerations undertaken throughout the research creation project to show how and why the project evolved throughout the MFA program. The second section of this chapter addresses the methodology applied to the project, which include the heuristic model of inquiry and a/r/tography. Also included in this section is a description of how each phase of the heuristic model and the application of a/r/tography directed the evolution of the research project. The final section will include a description of the work within contemporary art. Significant artistic influences on the project will be provided to better understand where feminist artists since the 1970s have progressed in addressing the topic of sexual assault and where this project is situated within contemporary art.

Ethical Considerations of the Artist

By applying the principles of a/r/tography to narrative therapy and arts-based practice for the role of teacher and researcher, Jolly's work provides insights into the ethical role and the obligations that the artist has to the subjects and audience members as an artist, a researcher, and a teacher when addressing trauma.⁵⁰ Not only does the a/r/tographer need to explore how to learn, create, and inquire across different situations and spaces, but the a/r/tographer must push themselves to consider how teaching, research, and practice connect across the spaces in different ways.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Jolly, Rosemary. "Witnessing Embodiment: Trauma, Narrative and Theory."

⁵¹ Irwin, Rita L., Ruth Beer, Stephanie Springgay, Kit Grauer, & Gu Xiong. "The Rhizomatic Relations of A/r/tography." *Studies in Art Education*, 48, no. 1 (2006), 70-88.

The artist must ask themselves throughout each step of the research, teaching, practice-based process is what group the artist is most responsible for when creating their work. In this case, the subjects during the research phase—the individual(s) sharing their personal narratives of trauma—are due more responsibility and consideration from me within the development of my project. Not only did I need to create a safe space for the study subjects to share their personal narratives, but I had to also consider the responsibilities that they have toward the subject throughout the audience phases of the project.⁵²The second group I am most responsible for are survivors who may be in the audience. Ultimately, the ethical responsibilities toward participants and survivors in the audience led me to determine that a softer approach to addressing trauma was required to handle the research question. By focusing on the healing process and empowering survivors by showcasing their strengths and resiliency, I was able to uphold my ethical obligations and significantly reduce any risk of re-traumatizing or re-victimizing survivors of sexual assault among the participants and audience members.

Throughout this project, the primary consideration was the well-being of survivors who took part in this study or who viewed the exhibition as audience members. The risk of re-victimization or triggering survivors was a high priority, and I made every attempt at minimizing that risk in the development of the final project. Strict protocols were put in place to include human participants in the interview process. These protocols required that I understand my legal and ethical obligations, seek out advice from the University of

⁵² Jolly, Rosemary. "Witnessing Embodiment: Trauma, Narrative and Theory."

Calgary's Sexual Violence and Support Advocate, and make significant changes to the initial plans for the study based on the feedback received from the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB).

In the earliest conceptualization of the project, the plan was to examine the effects of trauma from sexual assault the impacts of social stigmas and victim-blaming. As my research and own heuristic inquiry continued, it became clear that there was no universal way that trauma is processed. Traumatic triggers also could come in any form. To best protect survivors, I shifted my focus to the positive aspects of the healing process. I removed any visual or audio elements in my work, even abstractly, that could potentially re-victimize survivors among the audience members.

The Role of the Artist as Witness

Early in the project, I connected with the concept of providing narrative testimony as a means of educating others and processing my own experiences. Within narrative therapy practices, the survivor is encouraged to share their experiences with others. The "others" in this case may be the psychologist or therapist they are working with, other survivors if the practice takes place in a group setting, or with friends, family, or community members. Receiving testimony has been referred to as bearing witness, which became a significant component in my work.⁵³ Rather than share the testimony of survivors participating in the research study, I gave testimony to my own experiences and created a space where audience members could bear witness as an aspect of the healing process. Even with explicit permission from participants, I felt it was unethical

⁵³ Fryd, V. G. "Visual Stimuli for Traumatic Memories: An Academic and Personal Memoir." .

for me to make assumptions within my art that told the stories of each survivor for public consumption.

Art can provide a sense of ritual to witnessing testimony of trauma survivors, and if handled correctly, can aid in the recovery of the survivor.⁵⁴ There have been arguments made regarding how the testimony of subjects should be used by the artist, which are crucial when undertaking a project related to trauma from sexual assault trauma.

According to Jill Bennet, in her book *Empathetic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*, trauma itself is considered to be difficult to tackle through the use of language or even through artistic representation. The artist must also consider that undertaking an artistic work based off another person's experiences means that the artist themselves is claiming a sense of ownership to the subject's experience, which in turn would lead to the disempowerment of the subject.⁵⁵

Inviting an audience into a subject's personal trauma and narrative often runs the risk of the artist colonizing the subject's experience, without regard to how the use of that experience will affect the subject.⁵⁶ This risk is one that I was highly conscious of within my own work, throughout each iteration of the MFA project. To address this, I focused on the benefits of the survivor telling their own story in their own way, using the underlying concepts within narrative therapy. One way that artists have circumvented this has been to integrate personal emotions or experiences of the artist into the work

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Bennett, Jill. *Empathetic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art*. Stanford: Stanford University Press (2005).

⁵⁶ Jolly, Rosemary. "Witnessing Embodiment: Trauma, Narrative and Theory."

itself, as a form of witnessing.⁵⁷ Not only did I use art to tell my own story, but I was highly cognizant of the need to empower participants by letting them tell their stories of their healing process in their own terms. Narrative therapy aims to empower survivors and facilitate the rebuilding of their own memory and experiences from a more beneficial perspective.

Artists such as Tracey Emin and Becky Thera have also used narrative therapy concepts in their art, while Hana Shafi (also known as “Frizz Kid”) goes further and structures her work to directly reach viewers on their own journey towards healing. Emin’s explores her own personal experiences of loss, rape, and trauma by re-telling her stories within her visceral artwork.⁵⁸ Emin focuses on the female body within her abstract paintings, sculpture, and installation art which serve to provide audiences with a glimpse into how trauma has affected her. Thera takes an interdisciplinary approach to art, using performance art, photography, video, drawing, and embroidery, situating her body of work “between poetry and activism”.⁵⁹ Thera’s work draws on her personal experiences and those of the women in her family, exploring generational trauma through artistic practice. In her MFA project, *Lacuna* (2018), Thera explored the feelings of uncleanliness and shame that survivors can experience.⁶⁰ Drawing from personal

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ Emin, Tracey. “White Cube.” *Tracey Emin* (2021). Retrieved from https://whitecube.com/artists/artist/tracey_emin

⁵⁹ Thera, Becky. “About.” *Becky Thera*. Retrieved from <https://beckythera.com/>

⁶⁰ Thera, Becky. “*lacuna*: MFA Graduating Exhibition.” *Becky Thera*. Retrieved from <https://beckythera.com/workandexhibitions#/lacuna>

experience, Emin and Thera showcase the emotional journeys that survivors may experience on the path towards healing.^{61,62}

Based on the parameters of creating a safe space for survivors, however, the focus on negative emotional imagery was an aspect that I wanted to strip from my own final exhibition, to create the most minimal amount of risk for survivors among the audience and participant groups. My own work may be more similar to Shafi, who set out to document and share her own lived experiences with a wider audience in the hope that it may have a positive impact on the viewer's sense of self. As a writer and illustrator, Shafi's work includes drawings paired with written affirmations, usually a sentence or two, about Shafi's lived experiences related to racism, identity, self-reflection, and feminism.⁶³ Shafi's work focuses on empowering individuals who have experienced a wide variety of traumas and social injustices. Her work is not specifically geared towards sexual assault, though the work can be beneficial to survivors of sexual assault.⁶⁴ Examples of the affirmation phrases within Shafi's work include, "You don't always have to be your best self. You can be whatever you need to get through today", "Healing is not linear", and "Your vulnerability is a radical gift."⁶⁵ Shafi's focus on making her art accessible and providing uplifting quotes is part of sharing her journey with others. Within my own work, I sought to empower my viewers by allowing them to reflect inwardly on their own strengths, using abstract art and metaphor as a guide, where

⁶¹ Emin, Tracey. "White Cube."

⁶² Thera, Becky. "*lacuna*: MFA Graduating Exhibition."

⁶³ Shafi, Hana. "About." *Frizz Kid Art*. Retrieved from <https://frizzkidart.com/pages/about>

⁶⁴ *Ibid*

⁶⁵ Shafi, Hana. "Collections." *Frizz Kid Art*. Retrieved from <https://frizzkidart.com/collections/all>

Shafi uses short affirmative quotations in her work. All three of these artists show the sense of empowerment and sense-making that can come from the use of narrative therapy approaches in art-based practice. Each of these artists has examined their own experiences and emotional responses within their work, and used that artwork to create a platform for viewers to explore their own relationships with trauma.

When using the narrative therapy approach in my own work, I have also only claimed ownership for my own experiences and sharing those directly with audience members using the installation project based on the themes identified throughout the research process. Instead of creating artistic, abstract representations of the experiences of individual survivors, I set out to explore my own experiences with healing and collect data from other survivors to reinforce my personal findings within my work. This still allowed me to step between survivors and audience members to explore the research question of the study. At the same time, it allowed me to ethically create a safe space for reflecting on survivorship while developing overarching universal themes toward healing from trauma based on my journey.

This approach also provided me with a framework for maintaining the role of an active witness when receiving the testimonies of participants. When receiving testimony, it is easy to slip into a passive listening role. Passive listening can be incredibly damaging for survivors sharing their stories because it leads to increased vulnerability. When experiences are received passively, the storyteller may become hyperconscious of what

they are saying and how that information is received.⁶⁶ One way to uphold the role of active witness is through the heuristic model of research.⁶⁷ By undertaking my role as a witness to survivors' experiences throughout the healing process within the confines of the heuristic model, I ensured that I was maintaining an active role by focusing on the details of the survivor's experience in the healing process and asking relevant questions to expand on the themes related to healing. In asking questions, providing encouragement and support, and working to understand individual strengths I could gain a better understanding of how survivors heal from trauma in different ways. By focusing on my own experiences and using the interviews with participants to understand my own relationship with trauma and healing, I reduce the risk for re-victimizing other survivors who have participated in the project.

The Role of Discomfort in Research-Based Practice

When working with difficult and emotional subject matter, the artist must consider the role that discomfort plays for both the participants and audience member. Addressing discomfort is a significant aspect of witnessing the testimony of survivors, as it requires the witness/participant to delve into uncomfortable emotions and experiences.⁶⁸ From personal experience, the exploration of trauma can often feel like picking at a wound and uncovering raw emotions or psychological responses that you were unaware existed. Society has begun to turn away from discomforting feelings, whether in the classroom or within the art world, as discomfort has become a negative emotion that

⁶⁶ Ibid

⁶⁷ Kenny, Gerard. "An Introduction to Moustaka's Heuristic Method."

⁶⁸ Bennett, Jill. *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art*. Stanford: Stanford University Press (2005).

can lead to backlash, loss of funding, or harsh criticisms toward artists or institutions.⁶⁹⁷⁰

In Jolly's essay, she explored the negative impact that 'safe spaces' had in the classroom. Jolly found that students were being sheltered from any negative emotion and therefore not allowed to explore their own responses to topics that made them feel uncomfortable.⁷¹ This idea of avoiding discomfort is found not just in higher education settings but also in the art world, as audiences and critics seek to avoid feelings of discomfort entirely. This evasion of discomfort has led to institutions choosing to avoid controversial work or work that elicits discomfort in the audience in favor of art that invokes more pleasurable emotions.⁷²

Discomfort is a human emotion that allows individuals to explore their own responses to the world around them. It challenges people to step outside of their comfort zones and often forces them to consider other people's perspectives and lived experiences. When we protect ourselves and others from discomfort, we can become cut off from the feelings and experiences of others.⁷³ We may lose feelings of empathy for people in situations different than our own. What discomfort does—for students, as well as for members of society—is provide a means for change.⁷⁴ Assumptions are challenged directly when people experience discomfort, especially if the individual is forced to work through their feelings on the subject to discover where the discomfort stems from.^{75,76}

⁶⁹ Ibid

⁷⁰ Doyle, Jennifer. "Chapter 1: introducing Difficulty." In *Hold It against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art*. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press (2013), pp. 1-25.

⁷¹ Jolly, Rosemary. "Witnessing Embodiment: Trauma, Narrative and Theory."

⁷² Doyle, Jennifer. "Chapter 1: introducing Difficulty."

⁷³ Jolly, Rosemary. "Witnessing Embodiment: Trauma, Narrative and Theory."

⁷⁴ Doyle, Jennifer. "Chapter 1: introducing Difficulty."

⁷⁵ Jolly, Rosemary. "Witnessing Embodiment: Trauma, Narrative and Theory."

⁷⁶ Doyle, Jennifer. "Chapter 1: introducing Difficulty."

Jolly's essay provided a better framework for considering who needs to be protected and what they should be protected from. According to the author, educators could take steps to mitigate risks associated with the re-traumatization of subjects or audiences. She makes it clear, however, mitigating that risk should not include overprotecting individuals from any experience of discomfort. In the case of sexual trauma in particular, Jolly argued that students and audiences should be protected from being re-triggered whenever possible.⁷⁷ However, it is not necessarily up to the teacher or researcher—or artist for that matter—to remove all discomfort for others. It is not the role of the artist to assume that they know what the audience needs, but instead to consider the experiences of others as being meaningful to ourselves and others.⁷⁸

These considerations were all key components within the current installation project. Rather than focus on the act that led to trauma, I instead focused on healing as a way to reduce risk for viewers. For example, removing imagery that conjured emotional responses within the final project was a specific choice I made for the final exhibition. This was done to uphold my ethical responsibilities and protect survivors who may have been in a vulnerable, emotional space and might have been re-victimized by specific imagery. I specifically did not want to trigger survivors with my work, as other artists have done in the past, or put survivors at risk for re-victimization or re-traumatization while they worked to step away from their own experiences with trauma. At the same time, I did not want to remove all potential discomfort surrounding the topic. Viewers

⁷⁷ Jolly, Rosemary. "Witnessing Embodiment: Trauma, Narrative and Theory."

⁷⁸ Ibid

who were emotionally equipped to reflect on survivorship and trauma related to sexual assault had the space to do so. Minimal guidance in exploring the topic was provided through the use of abstract metaphors of healing, rebirth, regrowth, and the spilling of knowledge into society.

Methodology

The Heuristic Model of Inquiry

The Heuristic model of research was developed by Clark Moustakas in 1990, which was focused on using personal experience to explore a personal, lived experience related to a specific phenomenon.⁷⁹ One of the benefits of the research process is that the personal connection to the phenomenon allows the researcher to have higher levels of sensitivity regarding the subject. This leads them to care about the needs of others within the study as well. Due to the sensitive nature of sexual assault and trauma, I believe that the heuristic model of inquiry provided me with additional layers of empathy and consideration when working with vulnerable groups.⁸⁰ By exploring the topic from his personal experiences, Moustakas was able to connect to the experiences shared by others in similar situations. Under the Heuristic model of inquiry, personal experience on the part of the researcher functions as a catalyst to not only delve into the research question from numerous perspectives, but ultimately allows for the change to occur. Change takes place within the researcher's own work and personal understanding of the research question.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Ibid

⁸⁰ Ibid

⁸¹ Ibid

Phases of the Heuristic Model of Inquiry

In the first phase of research, the researcher begins the initial engagement with the subject under investigation. This phase is followed by the second phase where the researcher immerses his or herself into the research question each day to explore the feelings and/or sensations that the researcher encounters.⁸² In the third phase, incubation, the researcher steps back and begins to develop the conditions that would be necessary to answer the research question. The fourth phase, illumination, is when the researcher reaches a breakthrough in the process which can be facilitated through feedback from others. The fifth phase, explication, begins when the researcher explores the different themes associated with the phenomenon based on the previous phases. Finally, the sixth phase occurs when the researcher moves into creative synthesis. Creative synthesis is accomplished by integrating the themes and their various meanings into the work to illustrate the researcher's overall experiences throughout the process.⁸³

Heuristic Model of Inquiry in the Current Project

Phase One. In the context of the current project, the application of Moustaka's Heuristic Model of Inquiry provided me with a framework for exploring the question of healing from the trauma associated with sexual assault. In the first phase of the heuristic model, I began to document my primary emotional responses through initial sketches and digital animations. During this time, I started my research into narrative and art therapy approaches, trauma theory, and studies on the effects of trauma among survivors of

⁸² Bird, Drew. "Heuristic Methodology in Arts-Based Inquiry of Autobiographical Therapeutic Performance." In Pendzik, S., Emunah, R. and Read Johnson, D. (eds.) *The Self in Performance: Autobiographical, Self-Revelatory, and Autoethnographic Forms of Therapeutic Theatre* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 1-14.

⁸³ Ibid

sexual assault. My reactions to these readings were recorded using sketches and digital animations.

Phase Two. The second phase of the project involved exploring current literature related to surviving sexual assault and the healing process after experiencing trauma. To immerse myself in the topic, I set out to create a series of 100 digital artworks reflecting what I had learned through my research while also exploring what I had learned through research in the context of my own experiences. Each of these digital artworks helped to push me toward a deeper understanding of the sensations that were emerging as I sought to understand my own experiences and allowed me to consistently work to reframe my experiences in a way that left me feeling empowered and in control.

Phase Three. During the third phase of the heuristic model, Incubation, I stepped back and began to examine what would allow me to answer the research question. I realized that focusing solely on my experiences and trying to convey those experiences to audience members would narrow the scope of what the project could accomplish. Including interviews with other survivors would allow me to identify common themes related to the healing process. This decision was inspired after reviewing other notable contemporary artistic projects, where the focus of the artists' efforts was generally on the experiences of just the artist themselves. In other projects, there was a focus on collective experiences, which led to a deeper sense of awareness about the pervasiveness of the issue and further pushed the need for social change. By seeking

out the stories of healing from other survivors, I would be able to identify common themes that I could use to guide the audience through the reflective process. The inclusion of themes would also provide me with a better ability to explicate themes from the phenomenon in the fifth phase of the heuristic model.

Phase Four. The fourth phase, illumination, took place later in the development of the MFA project. The Incubation phase had provided me with time to reflect on the evolution of the project so far and allowed me to gain clarity over what areas of the project needing further development. I received feedback from peers, supervisors, and community members about the strengths and weaknesses of the project up to that point. I had initially planned for the installation project to take place on a much smaller scale. On a smaller scale, I did not feel that I had created a truly reflective environment that would benefit audience members. I decided to add a full running river through the gallery space and reconsider my audio and visual projection mapping elements that would be used to guide the audience.

Phase Five. During the fifth phase, explication, I began to collect the interviews from participants who had also survived sexual assault in various stages of the healing process. I also was able to identify the primary themes that had emerged throughout the heuristic process related to my own experiences and determine how those experiences compared or fit with other survivors within my community in Calgary.

Phase Six: The sixth phase, Creative Synthesis, occurred in the final months of the project. In this phase, the themes were integrated into the work to show my experiences with healing throughout the artistic creation process. I also made the final choices for the gallery exhibition, which included the removal of the digital artwork from the final project to further reduce risk to viewers. The number of projections were re-evaluated as well. Originally, there had been four but for the purposes of the space and the themes within the project I reduced the number of projections to three as a means of identifying the three sub-themes (Healing, Rebirth, Regrowth). I encompassed the overarching theme of Spilling Knowledge Into Greater Society into every aspect of the installation.

A/R/Tography

A/R/Tography is a methodology used in the arts and education to promote living inquiry into a specific phenomenon. With a/r/tography, the (a) artist also takes on the role of the (r) researcher and the (t) teacher. This creates a form of inquiry that is both reflective and rigorous.⁸⁴ The methodology not only allows the artist to create work within their studio practice, but to be mindful of their role as a researcher and teacher throughout the artistic creation process. The intention of the current project is to shift my own perspective and better understand trauma and the healing process, and in turn to share my findings with others through educational teaching in an artistic setting.

⁸⁴ LeBlanc et al. "Becoming Through A/R/Tography, Autobiography, and Stories in Motion."

Throughout different stages of the MFA project, I worked toward becoming the artist, the researcher, and the teacher to improve my own understanding of sexual assault, and my abilities to convey my findings to others. Applying a/r/tography as a methodology in this project also became a critical component of the current project. Within the heuristic model of inquiry, the focus was on self-exploration into a topic. With my research question focused on conveying knowledge to others and creating a space for others, the addition of a second methodology ensured I was not only acting as an artist, but also as a researcher and an educator. Through the combination of both methodologies I was able to reflect deeply on the issue from personal experience and integrate my work as an artist, researcher, and ultimately, as an educator. I was able to create a space for viewers where they could reflect on and identify their own beliefs and views what it means to be a survivor, while upholding my ethical responsibilities in my roles as an artist, researcher, and teacher.

The heuristic model of research is highly adaptable to arts-based research and supports the a/r/tography approach within research-based practice. Like a/r/tography, the researcher seeks to capitalize on the multiple roles of the artist throughout the research and creation process. The heuristic model and a/r/tography also seek to engage in ongoing, active participation with the work to provide a deeper understanding of a subject or phenomenon.⁸⁵ Throughout the six phases of the Heuristic model, the researcher/artist can move away from examining the experiences of others and instead examine their own responses to the data as it relates to the research question.⁸⁶ The

⁸⁵ Ibid

⁸⁶ Ibid

application of a/r/tography provided me with a framework for moving fluidly throughout the different roles I was taking on within the project, which supported my research question and research goals within the project as a whole. A/r/tography also provides an ethical framework and the obligations required for the artist/researcher/teacher when exploring trauma as the subject matter.⁸⁷

Situating the Research Creation Project in Contemporary Art

The role of artists in facilitating social change is significant. Art has the ability to challenge dominant ways of thinking and encourages audience members to explore their own values and beliefs related to a subject. The inclusion of narrative accounts within artworks related to a widescale social problem have the ability to inspire individuals and make the information easily accessible to audiences. In terms of art's ability to facilitate change on community levels, art can increase awareness for issues that have gone overlooked or unaddressed.⁸⁸ The use of active participation among audience members can also shift the audience's view that they are simply observing the art, to actively participating in the art itself.⁸⁹ That sense of active participation has been an important component in my final project, as I wanted viewers to *consent* to actively participate in the work and move past the role of being a passive witness.

Art's Role in Raising Awareness, Facilitating Reflection, and Creating Change

Art also challenges viewers to examine their own thoughts, which can be used as a way to get audiences to reflect on their internal beliefs and values. The concept of

⁸⁷ Jolly, Rosemary. "Witnessing Embodiment: Trauma, Narrative and Theory."

⁸⁸ Murray, Michael. "Art, Social Action and Social Change" in *Community Psychology and the Economics of Mental Health: Global Perspectives*, Palgrave (2012), pp. 253-265.

⁸⁹ Ibid

'artivism'—art plus activism—has been used by feminist groups to allow marginalized groups to tell their own stories.⁹⁰ Artivism recognizes the importance of *who* is telling the stories, so that the experiences of marginalized groups who do not often have a voice in society have the ability to be heard.⁹¹ Art can directly influence social change by allowing audiences to explore the feelings related to a situation or person, allowing them to step into the feelings of another person and walk away with a greater understanding of that person's experiences.⁹²

The use of art to speak out about sexual violence is especially important, given that rape culture works to silence and disempower survivors. Art-based approaches to the topic of sexual assault allows survivors the option to tell their stories in their own way.⁹³

Cultivating a sense of agency among survivors in how their stories are told through visual art can provide a sense of empowerment to survivors. At the same time, the artwork functions as a vehicle for the act of witnessing when others view the work.⁹⁴

Contemporary artists have taken different approaches when it comes to raising awareness among audiences on the topic of sexual assault. While there has been a rise in contemporary artists who use their own experiences to draw attention to the issue, it has often led to social backlash and re-victimization for the artist.⁹⁵ There have also been artworks that have sought to force audience members to confront potentially

⁹⁰ Serra, Vanina, Monica Enriquez Enriquez, & Ruby Johnson. "Envisioning Change Through Art: Funding Feminist Activists for Social Change." *Development*, vol 60 (2017), pp. 108-113.

⁹¹ Ibid

⁹² Lamb, Pamela. "Affective Possibilities for Addressing Sexual Violence Through Art." In *Disrupting Shameful Legacies*. Leiden (2018). doi:10.1163/9789004377714_010

⁹³ Ibid

⁹⁴ Crawford, Allison. "If 'The Body Keeps the Score'."

⁹⁵ Long Chu, Andrea. "Study in Blue: Trauma, Affect, Event." *Women & Performance* 27, no. 3 (November 2017): 301–15.

triggering content through the use of shock tactics. Shock tactics can lead to negative emotional responses in audience members and potentially force survivors to experience re-victimization.⁹⁶ The use of shock tactics have been highly successful in some cases when it comes to propelling the general public into action, but it loses its effectiveness over time. Creating emotional responses among viewers may lead to increased activism, but that same emotional response diminishes as the audience becomes numb to the imagery when it has been overused.⁹⁷ With the history of movements related to sexual assault, it is also important to consider whether the potential benefits outweigh the immediate risks to survivors who become triggered or re-victimized.

With the #MeToo movement, and movements that came before, sexual assault has already been recognized as a wide-spread social issue. This was a point that I had to seriously consider within my development of the research creation project. The gap was in the understanding of what it meant to be a survivor and to work to overcome the effects of trauma. The focus on outcomes for survivors following sexual assault has reduced the need to shock audiences into awareness with my work. I also had to decide whether to put myself or the participants in my research study in a position where they risk re-victimization on a public level. Given my ethical responsibilities, this was not an option I was willing to consider.

⁹⁶ Michael, Olga. "The other narratives of sexual violence in Pheobe Gloeckner's *A Child's Life and Other Stories*." *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, vol. 9, no. 3 (2018), pp. 229-250.

⁹⁷ Mendes & Ringrose. "#Metoo and the Everyday Experiences of Challenging Rape Culture."

Instead, I wanted to address the gap that hinders long-term social and cultural change when it comes to how society views survivors, and the shortage of policies and services that are in place to help them deal with the effects of trauma. With the #MeToo movement being devoid of any clear, long-term goals, I sought to position my work between where the movement left off and what its potential long-term implications could be if clearer plans of action were put into place.⁹⁸ I also found within my researcher that there has been little cohesive forward movement among contemporary artists when it comes to pushing past the act of sexual assault and what it means to be a survivor. While not all artists have focused on the use of shock tactics, the often vivid and explicit depictions of the acts of sexual assault put other survivors at risk of triggering negative emotional responses to the work.

Shock art also loses its effectiveness over time, which serves only to numb viewers to an issue. Repetitive shocks across similar subjects serve to reduce the overall impact of the messages that artists are sending. Shock art only works if the audience can continue to be emotionally impacted in some way by the work. If audiences begin to feel numb toward the subject, escalating the shock value will only further desensitize them to the underlying social issues the artist is attempting to address.⁹⁹ Within my work, I want to step backwards from the use of shocking images or text, and create a space where the viewer decides how they will reflect on survivorship and trauma, given what they already know about the issue. There has been a distinct shift in how we view and

⁹⁸ Fileborn Bianca & Rachel Loney-Howes (eds), *#Me Too and the Politics of Social Change*. Palgrave MacMillan. (2019).

⁹⁹ Dačić, Anica. "How Has Shock Art Become an Obsolete Term in the 21st Century?" *Widewalls* (26 September 2015). <https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/shock-art-21-century>

address sexual assault on a societal level in recent years, largely due to the #MeToo movement.¹⁰⁰ The #MeToo movement has done a wonderful job of raising awareness of what survivors have gone through in terms of trauma and seeking justice. With the movement having taken place in an online setting, where #MeToo hashtags are cushioned between other attention-grabbing social media posts, viewers may not have given themselves the space or permission to reflect on their own beliefs and understanding of survivorship. That space, and the ability for viewers to give themselves permission to reflect, is one of the primary motivations for the design of my final thesis exhibition.

Enacting Social Change and the Current Project

While feminist movement, and later the #MeToo movement, have made the issue highly visible within society, the next step is to create the space for social change to take place.¹⁰¹ For social change to take place, three things must occur: First, awareness of the issue must be raised, which leads to ongoing discussion related to the issue. Second, there must be a shift in how the narrative related to the issue is viewed. In the case of sexual assault, for example, we must shift away from victim blaming, and focus instead on the larger political, social, and cultural aspects of our society that maintain the view that victims are to blame for sexual assault and violence. The third aspect of social change is to leverage high-profile cases related to the issue as a means of creating new ways of addressing the issue. An example would be to use the new narratives when reporting on, discussing, and prosecuting a high-profile case involving

¹⁰⁰ Gibson, Camille, Shannon Davenport, Tina Fowler, Colette B Harris, Melanie Prudhomme, Serita Whiting, and Sherri Simmons-Horton. "Understanding the 2017 "Me Too" Movement's Timing." *Humanity & Society* 43, no. 2 (2019): 217-24.

¹⁰¹ Fileborn Bianca & Rachel Loney-Howes (eds), *#Me Too and the Politics of Social Change*.

sexual assault as a means of normalizing the new social and cultural responses to the issue.¹⁰² The current project is situated in the second step of creating social change, which seeks to shift the narrative surrounding an issue. By focusing on empowering survivors and identifying themes related to surviving sexual assault, the goal of the project is to make survivorship, regrowth, and healing the primary narrative, rather than leaning back onto harmful social stigmas that blame the victim for putting themselves in a position where they were sexually assaulted by another person.

Notable Contemporary Artists Addressing Sexual Violence

Suzanne Lacy and Emma Sulkowicz

One of the first contemporary pioneers in activism whose body of work focused on sexual violence was Suzanne Lacy. A feminist artist in the 1970s, Lacy attempted to shift how society viewed sexual assault among women and the prevalence of sexual assault in the urban areas of Los Angeles, California.¹⁰³ Lacy's pivotal work, *Three Weeks in May*, used shock tactics as a means of getting the audience's attention. The aim of the project was to show how widespread and unreported rapes were in the city of Los Angeles. A large map of the city, placed in a public shopping mall, was updated daily with the locations of the previous day's rapes. The artist also added, in lighter ink, the number of estimated unreported rapes within the city to symbolize the statistic that for every reported rape another nine went unreported.¹⁰⁴ While Lacy's work opened up new avenues for feminist artists addressing the topic of sexual violence, she focused

¹⁰² Fairbairn, Jordan. "Before #MeToo: Violence Against Women. Social Media Work, Bystander Intervention, and Social Change." *Societies*, vol. 10, no. 3 (2020), pp. 51-72.

¹⁰³ Lacy, Suzanne. "About." *Suzanne Lacy*. (n.d.). <https://www.suzannelacy.com/about>

¹⁰⁴ Ibid

her efforts on the acts of violence, and not on the survivors or the trauma they experienced.

In direct contrast, a more contemporary artist, Emma Sulkowicz, took on an artistic project called *Carry That Weight* (2014-2015). Far removed from Lacy's work, Emma shouldered her own burdens literally and figuratively, carrying the mattress she was raped on around her college campus until she could get justice for the crimes against her.¹⁰⁵ Her aim was to show the psychological 'weight' of sexual violence and the lack of social support for survivors seeking justice for the crimes against them. Sulkowicz faced public backlash, which inspired a later project, *Ceci N'est Pas Un Voil*, in which, she examined the hostility she experienced as a survivor sharing her story with others in such a public space. Sulkowicz publicly showed the lack of support survivors receive when they try to advocate for themselves in her follow up work to *Carry That Weight* (2014-2015), for which she received significant backlash and experienced re-victimization from the general public as *Carry That Weight* (2014-2015) gained significant media attention.¹⁰⁶ This may have been partially due to the nature of how society views sexual violence and victimization, the lack of people wanting to address conflicting emotions, and a desire to ignore the problem because it caused uncomfortable feelings for the individual.¹⁰⁷ At the same time, however, it showcased the social tendency to victim blame survivors for their traumatic experiences with sexual assault.

¹⁰⁵ Long Chu, Andrea. "Study in Blue: Trauma, Affect, Event."

¹⁰⁶ Ibid

¹⁰⁷ Ibid

Unlike Lacy, Sulkowicz took on the responsibility of publicly advocating for herself and put herself in a very vulnerable position, which not all survivors are capable of. Both artists pushed the envelope and used shock tactics to force audiences to pay attention at the time their projects took place. In each case, however, the focus was on the act of violence and not on the lingering effects of trauma that survivors are left to deal with in the aftermath. Lacy's pivotal performance art pieces in the 1970s and contemporary artists like Sulkowicz show the value of shock art to force audiences to acknowledge widespread social issues. What both Lacy and Sulkowicz overlooked in their sensational works, however, was the internal effects of trauma on survivors and the ongoing process of overcoming social stigmas and shame in the healing process.¹⁰⁸ While Lacy sought to show the sheer numbers of sexual assault victims¹⁰⁹ and Sulkowicz's performance piece sought to visibly show the weight that survivors carry¹¹⁰, the healing process for survivors of sexual assault to address the symptoms of trauma requires a safe space without fear of revictimization.¹¹¹

Lacy and Sulkowicz's work have both been pivotal to addressing specific aspects of how sexual assault is viewed within societies and institutions. I respect and admire the work of both Lacy and Sulkowicz and believe their bodies of work have had a significant impact on raising awareness about sexual assault among the general public. Neither

¹⁰⁸ Subramanian, Srikala. "The General Approach and Management of the Patient Who Discloses a Sexual Assault." *Missouri Medicine*, 112, no. 3 (May-June 2015), 211-217.

¹⁰⁹ Cook, A. "Suzanne Lacy, A Founding Mother of Feminist Art, to Speak in Cambridge." *The ARTery* (01 December 2014). <https://www.wbur.org/artery/2014/12/01/suzanne-lacy>

¹¹⁰ Long Chu, Andrea. "Study in Blue: Trauma, Affect, Event."

¹¹¹ Subramanian, Srikala. "The General Approach and Management of the Patient Who Discloses a Sexual Assault."

artist specifically focused on empowering other survivors to step forward, however, or on recognizing the strengths survivors have within themselves. This is an area within my own work that I wanted to address. I also wanted to create a space where viewers could reflect inwardly and challenge their unconscious bias and assumptions without pushing the viewer to defend the beliefs related to victim blaming that they were raised with.

Elana Mann

By integrating trauma theory and the trauma-informed care approach, the aim of my work was to provide that safe space where survivors and audiences can intellectually grapple with the intense emotions associated with sexual assault and the social stigmas surrounding it. My work shares similarities to that of Elana Mann, who relies on conversation and systems of exchange between the audience and the sculptures, installations, videos, or objects she has selected within an exhibition.¹¹² Mann relies more heavily on sculpture in her most recent works, and less on technology. I aimed to incorporate both sculpture and digital projection mapping to create a stronger sense of intimacy among audience members, while Mann relied on direct interaction with installations, as she did with her interactive audio installation, *The Assonant Armory*.¹¹³ In this interactive installation, Mann relies on the audience to directly participate with the sculptures by speaking into the sculpted hands which amplify the sound like a megaphone.¹¹⁴ Audience participation was also something I sought to include in my

¹¹² Mann, Elana. "About." *Elana Mann*. <https://www.elanamann.com/about>

¹¹³ Mann, Elana. "The Assonant Armory." *Elana Mann*. <https://www.elanamann.com/project/assonant-armory>

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

final exhibition as a means of engaging audience members. Instead of having works that the audience could physically pick up, hold, and manipulate with sound, I opted to fill the gallery space with sand. In this way, viewers could leave their own mark on the exhibition which would in turn become representative of other survivors who had made the journey through the healing process.

Mann has collaborated on projects related to sexual assault and trauma in the past, working with Audrey Chan to expand the views of sexual assault past the female body, and look at how sexual assault and violence can affect victims of any gender or race.¹¹⁵ Similarly, I also seek to focus on how sexual assault and trauma can affect individuals regardless of gender or race, rather than to focus solely on sexual violence against women. On the surface, Mann focused her efforts on community engagement and raising awareness among her audiences.¹¹⁶ Underlying this, Mann's body of work has been highly political, leaning heavily on feminist theory and political issues, while also remaining deeply personal and focused on her own struggles to understand the highly politicized world around her.¹¹⁷ In my own work, I also sought to explore my own experiences in the context of ongoing social issues, and through doing so hope to provide others with a platform to challenge their own biases and assumptions about the world around them.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Mann, Elana. "3 Solo Projects: Audrey Chan, Elana Mann, and Chan & Mann." *Elana Mann*. <https://www.elanamann.com/news/3-solo-projects-audrey-chan-elana-mann-and-chan-mann>

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

The Miami Herald Project

One notable project that emerged during the #MeToo movement was created by the *Miami Herald* newspaper, in which a women's group wrote poems or narratives about their experiences with trauma and international artists were selected to create works that reflected those narratives.¹¹⁸ The project was not only successful in assisting the survivors to retell their experiences in their own narratives, but it also provided insights for readers and viewers of the artwork to gain more insight into what the survivors were experiencing in the aftermath of their assaults. The goal of the project was to pair narrative therapy with the interpretations of local artists as a way to share the testimonies of survivors with a larger audience.

The project showed me just how powerful it could be when survivors trusted artists to produce imagery of their experiences. While the *Miami Herald* project sought to pair one image with one poem written by the survivor, the aim of my project is to build an installation environment that reflects the experiences of each survivor testimony received from the participants in my research study. By layering additional elements, including the use of projection mapping, sculpture, running water, and sand, I want to push the boundaries further and create a physical space for audience members to explore. Doing so would not only allow the survivors participating in the project to feel as though their experiences have been shared with others but would also provide

¹¹⁸ Medina, Brenda. "#MeToo: These Women Have Deep Pain. They're Turning to Art to Help Them Heal." *Miami Herald*, (2018) <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/miami-dade/article204250389.html>

audiences with a multi-sensory experience that will allow them to reflect on survivorship and trauma.

Creating Space for Reflection within Contemporary Installation Art

Yayoi Kusama

Creating a space for reflection using installation art is not a new concept. The most successful installation artists have sought to create environments specifically focused on immersing the audience in the subject matter and providing audiences with the opportunity to reflect without feeling rushed. Yayoi Kusama's *Infinity Mirrored Room—Aftermath of Obliteration of Eternity* (2009) is a prime example of how a large-scale installation project can transport viewers into a space where they want to take their time and immerse themselves into the total experience provided by the artist. Using mirrors to create a sense of a larger space, Kusama replicated Buddhist lantern festival practices within the gallery, complete with a reflecting pool on the floor below. Kusama has used her art as a form of therapy throughout her career, while creating immersive installation exhibitions to allow viewers a chance to reflect on their own understanding of the world.¹¹⁹ Kusama's work shows how the space can be redefined and manipulated to step the viewer out of reality and into a space that creates new ways of considering the world and the viewer's place in it.

Given the size of the gallery space where the final exhibition was held, I worked to create an installation experience that would transport viewers out of their immediate

¹¹⁹ Kusama, Yayoi. *Infinity Mirrored Room—Aftermath of Obliteration of Eternity* (2009). <https://kusama.site.seattleartmuseum.org/>

location. Rather than encounter a traditional gallery space, filling the floor with sand, hiding the projectors in the ceiling, and using spotlights as a way to play with light all were efforts to challenge the expectations of the audience members. The full running stream, which was edged in stones, functioned as not only a space to reflect but as a way of providing ambient, natural sounds that helped to set the tone of reflection.

Kara Walker

Kara Walker also has focused on creating installation exhibitions to allow audiences to reflect on their knowledge and beliefs related to the Antebellum South and slavery in the United States. Walker's ongoing projects incorporate silhouettes cut from black paper and fashioned into large installation pieces that tell the narratives of African American slaves in the Antebellum South, including the experiences of sexual assault faced by female slaves.¹²⁰ Walker took the narratives of others and wove them into a story that the audience had to piece together on their own. By going in with little to no preconceptions, Walker provided her audience with the opportunity to recognize the social inequality faced by African Americans in the United States and challenged her audience to reconstruct their own social views of inequality within American society.¹²¹

Similar to Walker's work, my aim is to allow the audience members to construct their own narratives and challenge any personal assumptions or unconscious biases that arise as they tackle the concept of sexual violence and trauma through the shared testimony of survivors. In my personal struggles with healing from trauma and feeling

¹²⁰ "Kara Walker: *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred b'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart* (1994)." MOMA. (n.d.). <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/110565>

¹²¹ Ibid.

the setbacks of social stigmas, I have recognized the importance of having a safe space where I can lower my defenses. Creating a safe space allows me the time and mental focus to identify negative thoughts and unconscious biases related to victimization, and to reframe those thoughts and feelings to change the way I view my own healing process. I wanted to create that same safe space for viewers, rather than try to shock them into thinking a certain way. By giving viewers a space to explore their emotions, beliefs, and values related to sexual assault and trauma, I hoped to connect them to their own paths toward change.

The Current Project within Contemporary Art

The key to creating a reflective space within installation work is to create a relaxed environment where the viewer feels as though they have time to explore at their own pace, without feeling rushed.¹²² This became a core concept I wanted to introduce within my project, in which I created a space that invited the viewer to pause and reflect, and to feel *comfortable* pausing and reflecting. So much of modern society is focused on instant gratification and immediate stimuli, that I wanted the space to represent a place where one slows down and takes the time to reflect inwardly. By stripping down the distractions within the space, I sought to create an experience for viewers that relied on their own desire to engage with themselves. The use of projection mapping provides a guide for the viewers through the self-reflection on their beliefs associated with survivorship. The inclusion of the running stream throughout the gallery and adding sand to the gallery floor create a space that invites viewers to walk through the gallery,

¹²² Nunes, Nuno Jardim, Valentina Nisi, Clinton Luis Jorge, & Julian Hanna. "Madeira Story Generator: Prospecting Serendipitous Storytelling in Public Spaces." *Entertainment Computing*, vol. 16 (2016).

or sit at the side of the stream, and reflect on their own understanding of what it means to be a survivor.

While my work shares similarities with each of these artists and projects, I also believe that the differences in my overall goals set my work apart. I do not believe that shock tactics would provide a meaningful avenue for changing how individuals think about the long-term effects of trauma on the individual, as it requires cognitive reflection on biases and stigmas that are present in the way individuals throughout society have been taught to view victims. While I do believe that perpetrators of sexual assault and violence should be held accountable for their actions, I also have seen the division that this has created within society and the additional burden this has placed on survivors who seek to address their own trauma in a variety of different ways. My work is to provide a safe space where preconceived notions and social stigmas can be set aside, so that survivors and audiences can take a step back and listen to their own internal desires, beliefs, and biases surrounding sexual assault and violence.

I also aimed to provide a space for healing and empathy, which I do not believe will be accomplished by forcing others to abandon or reinforce the biases and stigmas that society that has ingrained in them. Instead, my goal was to provide a space for development, in which audiences actively participate in confronting their own thoughts and getting to the root of their feelings and beliefs. We've seen through the increasing polarization of political parties and political views that asserting our opinions without engaging in meaningful exchanges of information only serves to turn people further

against change. From personal experience, I have learned that rather than seek to address unconscious bias, people will cling to their beliefs and stereotypes because they feel as though they themselves are being directly challenged, when in fact the challenge is focused on the beliefs that audience members were unconsciously raised with. Ultimately, my goal is to create an environment where each party can be reflective. The survivor, in this case myself, can reflect on their own trauma and the healing process, while audiences can explore how they perceive stigmas associated with sexual assault and violence without feeling as though they need to defend themselves or others throughout the experience.

Evolution of the Current Project

The initial idea for the project came after I had begun sharing my experiences with others. To my surprise, my sharing with others created a space where friends and family members felt comfortable opening up about their own experiences with sexual assault. I learned that people had the desire to tell their stories, but also the desire to protect themselves from stigmas and backlash. I have a high amount of respect for Sulkowicz and her ability to put her experiences so forcefully into the public eye while bearing the hostility of others. However, I also understand and empathize with those who do not have the courage it would take to bare themselves to publicly to strangers, or even to those they are close to. Due to the difficulties survivors often have sharing their experiences with others, I wanted to focus on the idea of giving testimony to the healing process and sharing that knowledge with others.

Throughout my research over the past two years, I have explored trauma and feminist theory and focused my attention on the benefits of art and narrative therapy. In my first MFA project, I created a series of panels that projected abstract digital animations related to themes of sexual assault. For my second project, I began exploring water as a metaphor for healing from sexual assault. I did this by integrating a basin of flowing water in the center of the gallery space while projection mapping onto the water's surface. The metaphor of water was based not only on my personal views of water as a means of healing, reflection, cleansing, and rebirth but on the sense of community that water created.

My own experiences as a survivor of low-intensity sexual assault have provided me with a deeper understanding of just how important it is to the healing process to feel heard by others. When sharing my experiences with people closest to me, I was unprepared for the amount of victim blaming that took place among people that I trusted. I have also seen firsthand how other close friends have been shamed, blamed, and ostracized from their friend groups after sexual assault, and how quickly gossip can spread even when survivors only tell the people they believe will keep the information confidential. What was always the most alarming to me was the way that other survivors or self-proclaimed feminists would also perpetuate victim blaming. Even more alarming was the fact that they were not conscious of their immediate reactions when hearing about a case of sexual assault or violence. The need to make sense of acts of assault and violence and assign blame on the victim is a knee-jerk reaction that must be repeatedly identified and addressed if it is ever going to change.

The subject of the current project is not focused solely on my own experience with low-intensity sexual assault, nor of my experiences watching friends or family members also struggle to be heard and understood following their own experiences. The experiences that I have had personally, and those I have witnessed, however, are a large component in how I approached the artistic creation process. Throughout my research into trauma informed care and treating trauma related to sexual assault, I was able to better understand my own experiences, and the experiences of people around me. After gathering data from participants related to their own healing process from sexual assault, I was also able to better understand my own path to healing and identify the common themes that survivors experienced as they stepped out of trauma.

There were difficult decisions that had to be made within the current project. On the one hand, I wanted to challenge audience members to take on the experiences and emotions of survivors. On the other hand, there is a concern that causing direct discomfort to audiences may negatively trigger audience members who have, themselves, been victims of sexual assault and violence and who may not be ready to confront their own trauma. While the initial idea of the project was to incorporate the testimonies of survivors as audio elements within the space using directional speakers that the audience had to actually engage with, I had ethical responsibilities toward survivors that had to be considered within the work. I could not risk re-traumatization of survivors, and possibly risk exploiting the narratives and experiences of survivors, as a means of educating audiences. I also could not risk re-victimizing audience members

who were not prepared to hear narratives from survivors that might re-trigger their own trauma and experiences with sexual assault. As someone who is naturally drawn to protecting others, I struggled to balance the goals of the project with my responsibilities toward others. This struggle directly led to the creation of my research questions and how to grapple with the desire to cause discomfort as a means to enact social change, and what my ethical responsibilities were to survivors and audience members as an artist dealing with such an emotionally charged subject matter.

I had to draw on research from multiple disciplines, drawing on current research in trauma informed care, the use of narrative testimony and its application by artists, researchers, and teachers, and the work conducted by other artists who had successfully used immersive installation projects as a means of allowing the audience members to reflect on the topic and begin to shift their own processes of thinking. The problem I focused on was how to create a space in which survivors can share their stories, while simultaneously creating a space that audiences could reflect within—and as an artist, what would my role be between the two? One of the key issues, which was recognized in Sulkowicz’s *Ceci N’est Pas Un Voil*, was the hostility that audiences felt toward the survivor when confronted with the effects of sexual violence.¹²³ That same sense of hostility was one that I myself encountered when sharing my experiences with others before I undertook this project. It created a deep sense of shame that I had to work to overcome. It was a challenge to open up about my experiences to others, as the

¹²³ Long Chu, Andrea. “Study in Blue: Trauma, Affect, Event.”

quick responses I received showed me just how damaging social beliefs related to sexual assault were on survivors who tried to share their experiences with others.

The research creation project can be broken into four significant parts:

- To explore my own relationship with trauma and the healing process through the application of the heuristic model of inquiry
- To provide survivors with the opportunity to tell their own stories of their healing process and to identify shared themes related to addressing and overcoming trauma.
- To use those themes to better understand my own experience with stepping out of trauma, and to share those experiences with viewers.
- To develop a space of reflection where audiences can explore their own unconscious bias and/or stigmas that they may have toward survivors, and their own views on sexual violence and assault in society.

By creating a space for reflection, my hope for the project is that it provides audiences with the sense of emotional and cognitive space to really reflect on their own beliefs of what it means to be a victim of sexual assault, and in turn what it means to be a *survivor* of sexual assault. While the #MeToo movement has shown us how pervasive the issue of sexual assault is within our society, the next step is to guide individuals through thoughtful self-reflection and to identify the unconscious biases and stigmas that they may have toward people who have experienced sexual assault. At the same time, I believe that it is important to highlight the internal battles that survivors have with

trauma related to sexual assault. It is not enough to understand that sexual violence is a serious issue in society. We have to also be able to understand what survivors go through and what changes we need to make as a community to empower survivors to heal from their experiences.

Chapter Four: Addressing Trauma and the Metaphors of Water

In *Chapter Four: Addressing Trauma and the Metaphors of Water*, the current project will be explained, along with the use of layered metaphors of water that are present in each element of the installation project. The aim of the final project was to not only understand the healing process on a personal level, but to identify themes shared among survivors of sexual assault and take a softer approach to sharing those experiences with others, compared to other contemporary artists who have used shock tactics as a means of garnering attention to the issue. The end result of the MFA project was to create a multi-layered installation exhibition that incorporated sculptural elements, projection mapping, and an environment for audience members to enter a space of reflection, and to examine their own views and beliefs related to what it means to be a survivor of sexual assault.

The Artist Process Using the Heuristic Model of Inquiry

Throughout the artistic process, I routinely found myself focusing on the theme of flowing water within my work. In the first sets of digital animations during Phase 1 of the heuristic model of inquiry, I explored the emotional aspects of trauma using abstract digital animations. The first project of the research creation process included digital

abstract images that were synched to move with short audio recordings that were paired to each artwork. The initial themes focused on the early aspects of the healing process included drowning, feeling unheard, and struggling to make sense of traumatic experiences.

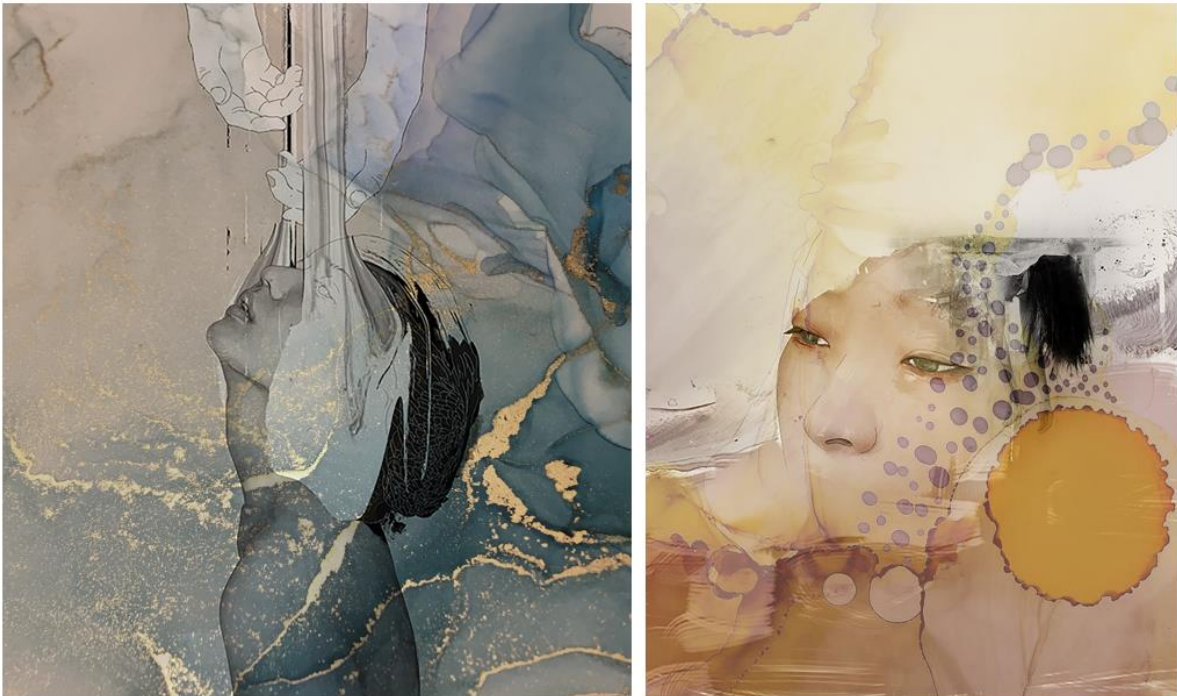


Figure 1: Initial Abstract Digital Animations

Abstract watercolor paintings, charcoal, and ink drawings of the personified feelings were created around the human form. In this case, the imagery was primarily focused on generic human faces that did not represent any one person. The inclusion of the human face was an important component in the earlier work, as it was relatable to viewers and connected the audio narratives to the human experience. The universal feelings that were explored within the first iteration of the MFA project focused on the face, the gaze, or the hands of an individual. This represented the disjointed feelings of survivors as they worked to process their traumatic memories.



Figure 2: Initial Abstract Digital Animations (cont.)

At the start of my exploration into the research question, the focus was on the feeling of drowning. Within each of the abstract images, I focused on the contradiction that existed between trauma and the beauty of survivors through the healing process. The inner strength of survivors, in particular, was an aspect that I sought to capture within my early artwork. This was represented in physical form, while using abstract imagery to reflect the deeper emotional experiences that the survivor was subject to throughout the initial phases of healing, while focusing on the strength they gained as they continued to work through their traumatic experiences.

Digital photography of alcohol inks marbling together were developed and added to the digital animations, based on the vibrations of the audio narratives collected from the case study interviews. Additionally, I collected various texture assets through digital photography, colored pencil drawings, and photoshop and collaged each of these

different elements to create one digital image. Once that was complete, I used Adobe Premiere to animate the initial digital images into moving animations.

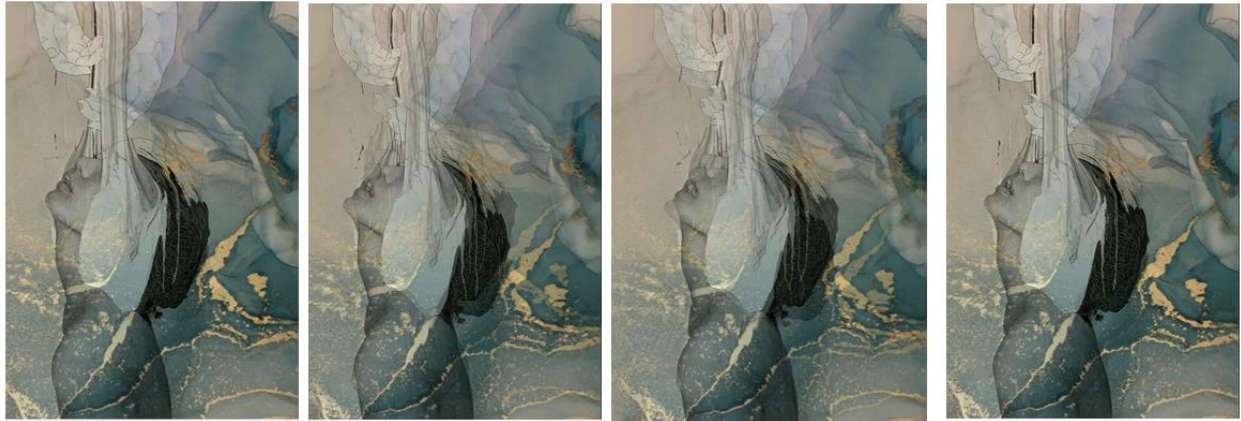


Figure 3: Stills from Abstract Moving Animations

The artistic process is one in constant motion, evolving from one medium to the next just like the movement and constant motion, similar to the constant motion of water when it is able to flow freely. Guided by the heuristic model of inquiry, I routinely found myself focusing on the theme of flowing water within my work. It became an important component within the work itself, as water continued to appear within each phase of the heuristic model. I found that the more I explored the topic within my artwork and research, the more I sought out the various ways that water functioned as a metaphor throughout the process of healing. In the first step of the healing process, there is the feeling of being overwhelmed, of drowning, of not being able to breathe. As the healing process moved forward, there was a sense of emerging from the depths and being able to understand that water is in constant motion, pushing forward and allowing for growth.

The next development in the project was to create a means of projection mapping flowing water onto a stationary form. To accomplish this, I used Lightform technologies.

My goal was to collage a series of different repeated movements together to create flowing water, and then project those images onto irregular shapes.



Figure 4: Projection Mapping onto The Vessel

I created a mounted vessel, designed to look like a fountain that one would find in a serene garden where people would gather to reflect. The vessel was created using styrene and sculpture making techniques and was a metaphor for the human containment and how emotions related to the effects of trauma spill over and become real issues within society. The vessel represented the individual survivor and the overflow of emotions they experienced throughout the process of dealing with the effects of trauma. The projection mapping onto the vessel consisted of seven different animated representations of water movements, which were compiled together to create one video depicting continuous movement. The video was then projected onto the surface of the vessel. I had to digitally map out the projection to create an accurate illusion of moving water overflowing from the chalice of the vessel and down the sides.

This introduction to animated imagery triggered a new desire to animate my own simulations and collage them together for the final show on a larger scale.

In the next iteration of the project, I created a large basin/infinity pool in the center of the gallery space. The basin was sealed and filled with water, which moved through the installed pumps underneath the upper platform. I projection mapped a ring of water which let out droplets that spilled over the edge of the infinity pool to show a continuous flow of water. This was a metaphor for how drops of knowledge are shared among individuals, which then ripple out into society to create larger change. The physical ripples of water within the basin/infinity pool were created by the jets within the base of structure, and I counted them in when designing the animations in order to make the ripples look more realistic. The exhibition did not include any audio other than the flowing water within the basin to create a sense of reflection.

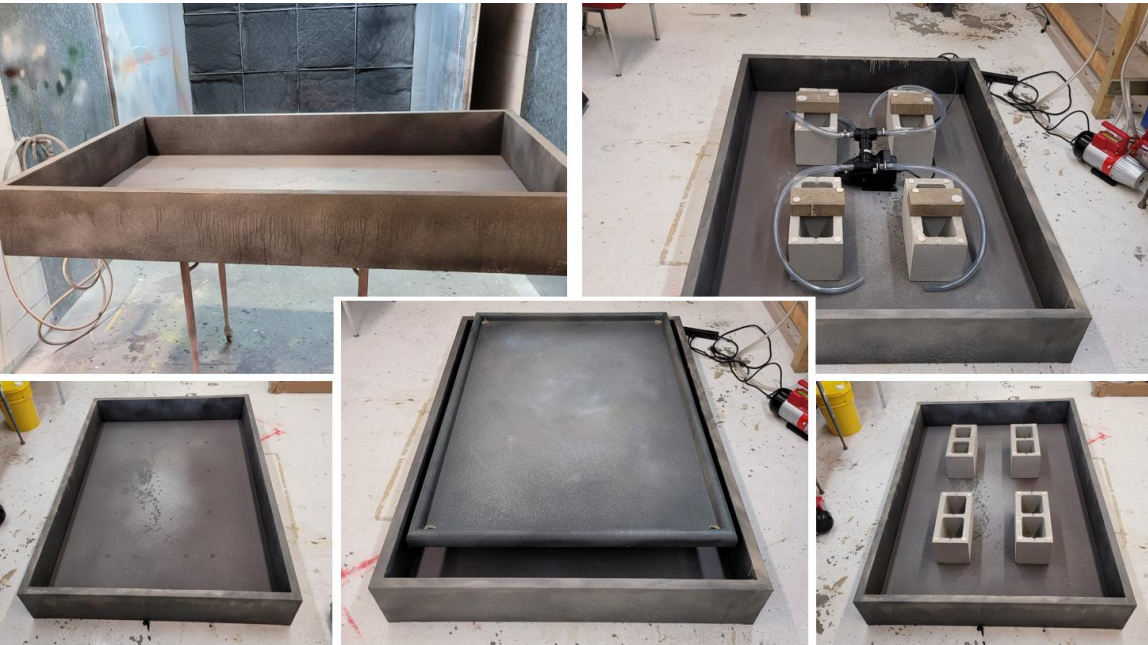


Figure 5: Construction of the Basin



Figure 6: Gallery Layout of the Basin and Digital Artworks

The gallery exhibition in Winter 2020 included digital artworks that had been created using Adobe Photoshop. I cast frames for each of the images and applied a mixture of wax and hot glue to each of the prints to have the colors in the images physically bleeding out of the artwork and dripping onto the gallery floor. I chose to design ornate frames as a way of showing the beauty and strength of survivors. Throughout the fifth and six phases of the heuristic model of inquiry, I decided that the inclusion of digital artworks from the earlier phases of the heuristic inquiry created a greater risk of triggering survivors among the audience. The digital artworks that had been created up to this point served as part of the process for understanding the healing process and did not have to be shown to viewers to understand the themes selected for the final project.



Figure 7: Digital Artworks with Dripping Wax

Throughout the phase of creative synthesis, I came to the realization that a reflection pool did not fully produce the installation environment that I was aiming for. This led to the creation of a full, running stream within the next evolution of the project. The stream was built into the gallery space, while I expanded the projection mapping to include the use of digital footprints walking through the running stream, emerging onto the gallery floor. The footsteps represented the emotional journey of survivors through the healing process, pushing themselves out of the negative emotions associated with trauma which can often be an overwhelming force. At the same time, the footsteps provided visual representation of the path viewers would take through the final exhibition. The steps illuminated the path between the themes that were identified through participant

interviews with other survivors, as well as my own heuristic inquiry and self-guided narrative therapy practices.



Figure 8: Installation of the Running Stream and Testing Projection Mapping

The vessel, mounted at the top of the stream, represented the overflow of emotions of the survivor following the experience with trauma related to sexual assault, symbolically filling the river. The journey of the survivor to overcome these emotions was represented in projection mapped footprints walked through the running stream, down the sides of the streambed, and into the gallery space as they continued on their path toward healing.

The projection mapping of the footprints was created using four projectors and a series of footstep animations lasting roughly seven to twelve seconds each, alternating between left and right feet. The animations began in the running stream, stepping down the embankment, and walking throughout the gallery floor. As the footsteps got further from the stream, they began to 'dry' and evaporate. An audio recording was included in

the second to last exhibition, which I had recorded as a means of guiding the audience through the reflective experience on the healing process. After receiving feedback and assessing my project before beginning the final installation exhibition, I determined that I wanted to encompass more of the space within the gallery that viewers could interact with and reflect on.

Interviews with Participants

During the completion of second to last exhibition, I received CFREB approval and began to select participants to interview in the study. A total of five individuals volunteered to share their experiences with healing from sexual assault. The inclusion of five participants is a limited sample size, which in no way represents the experiences of all survivors. The interviews were meant to function as a way to review and reflect on my own experiences in stepping out of trauma, and to find similarities among individuals who had also gone through their own journeys of self-reflection and healing.

The interviews lasted from 15-25 minutes, and each participant required very little prompting to open up and share their experiences. Rather than record the interview sessions, I asked participants if they would be comfortable with me making quick sketches of my emotional responses to their stories. This approach was chosen rather than physical recordings of the interviews, due to the sensitive nature of the topic and potential legal considerations that had to be made if the participant planned to, or wanted to, seek legal justice for against those who harmed them. The use of sketches also allowed me to focus less on the specific stories of each participant, but on the overarching emotional themes that I identified, which were reviewed following the conclusion of all five interviews.

While the participants avoided details of their own experiences with trauma, each of the experiences with sexual assault were vastly different from the previous interview. What remained the same, however, were very specific milestones that each had achieved in their path toward healing. What I found most interesting was that while I had been thinking of the healing *process*, each of the participants looked at healing as an overall step toward “becoming okay” with what had happened to them. Healing took place incrementally throughout the path toward healing, but each of the participants noted that there was a distinct moment where they recognized that they were “okay” with what had happened. The weight of the trauma no longer weighed on them as heavily as it had before. It still had an impact on who the survivor was as a person, but it was viewed as a steppingstone toward a deeper sense of empowerment and self-realization.

Other themes that appeared were disassociation from the trauma itself. It was seen as something that had happened to make the survivor who they were, but they were rarely triggered by things that reminded them of the trauma. I also encountered residual blame within the interviews toward friends and family who turned away from the survivor or took part in victim blaming. The participants shared how social stigmas had negatively affected their healing process, but how it was still possible to feel a sense of rebirth or regrowth as the survivor stepped back from those who blamed them for their experiences and focused instead on their own mental and physical health. The universal themes from the interviews that aligned with my own experiences of healing emerged as healing, rebirth, and regrowth. Each one of the survivors also touched on the importance of being heard by those they loved when they shared their stories, which was represented in the final chosen theme of spilling knowledge into the greater society.

For change to occur, we must educate ourselves and others. We cannot do that without sharing and receiving knowledge from those who understand what it means to be a survivor.

Final Thesis Exhibition

The final thesis exhibition included three projectors, rather than the four in the previous version. I also filled the gallery floor with sand to create paths left by the viewers as they came and went through the gallery space. I sought to create a physical trace of those who had come and gone, and in doing so, contributed to the art piece in their own way. The final exhibition included a full running stream, sand, projections of footprints moving throughout the gallery space, and three spotlights to represent the themes of Healing, Rebirth, and Regrowth. Following the interviews, I revisited my own exploration into the healing process and further expanded on each of the metaphors based on my personal experiences and research into trauma and healing from sexual assault.

Metaphor of Water

The various metaphors of water were identified not only through research into what water has represented throughout art history, but on what water meant to me personally. Through each stage of the MFA program, I continued to explore the element of water within my work. At times, I viewed water as something that caused disease when it grew stagnate, which for me represented how negative emotions could fester in the survivor if the negative emotions were repressed. At other times in the research creation project, water came to represent life and rebirth, as I considered what it meant to be baptized and born again. Water's reflection was one of the primary themes that continued throughout each stage of the project. The image of sitting by the side of a

river, pond, or stream, and staring into one's own reflection was what led to the creation of a running streambed within the gallery space. The river or stream also functioned as a metaphor for community: A space where people settled near a water source and gathered as a community to make a society flourish.

By layering different metaphors for water throughout my work, I created a space where the viewer could decide for themselves what water represented to them personally.

Ultimately, the spilling of water from the vessel into the flowing streambed tied into the theme of spilling knowledge from one person to the greater collective. Each visitor to the exhibition will have a different perspective for how the metaphor of water applies to the subject of survivorship, allowing the viewers to determine for themselves what it means to be a survivor and step out of trauma.

Theme of Healing

The theme of healing focuses on that sense of permission survivors must give themselves to make the most of the healing process. One of the greatest struggles I faced was telling myself it was okay to take part in the healing process. In the interviews with survivors, this sense of permission was an important component in the healing process that had to be repeated over time. There is something about trauma—and the social stigmas attached to sexual assault—that lead survivors to believe that once they have become a victim, they will remain a victim. That sense of permission to take part in the healing process can be a quiet self-acknowledgement of the journey that the survivor is undertaking. At other times, it may be a forceful demand that the survivor makes of themselves—that they *will* heal from this and that they *will* move forward into rebirth and regrowth following an experience with sexual assault.

Theme of Rebirth

The second identified theme was the idea of rebirth throughout the healing process after suffering trauma from sexual assault. In my personal experience, rebirth was a pivotal moment in moving past the raw, emotional aspects of trauma and beginning to identify who I was as a person following my experiences. The theme of rebirth is closely tied to the metaphor of water. One can cleanse themselves in the river or be baptized within the river and experience a spiritual rebirth. In the interviews with other survivors regarding their own healing process, a similar theme occurred: The individuals emerged from their trauma as someone new. There was a recognition that they had been fundamentally changed by their experience with assault. At the same time, there was a sense of empowerment and self-reliance that they gained throughout their healing process.

Theme of Regrowth

The third identified theme in my own reflections on the healing process, and the interviews with participants, surrounded the idea of regrowth. While personal growth was an aspect of the healing process, it was regrowth that interested me the most: Learning to trust others, taking the time to nurture the self, allowing the self to regrow following an experience with trauma all tie into the metaphor of water and the river. Being able to move through the healing process unblocks difficult emotions and allows the survivor to explore the depths of their trauma. At the same time, the survivor going through the healing process adopts coping mechanisms that allow them to regrow the parts of themselves they may have believed were lost.

Theme of Spilling of Knowledge into Greater Society

The sense of spilling was another core theme that emerged within my own research and exploration into the subject of healing from trauma related to sexual assault. It became important to explore the idea of 'spilling' as a means of tying together each element of the final exhibition. The emotions of the survivor "spill" over the sides of the vessel and into the stream. The footsteps move through the river and out onto the dry gallery floor, "spilling" water as they move through the path toward healing, toward rebirth, toward regrowth. This theme of spilling is one that directly relates to how we enact social change: We spill knowledge from one person to another. We share our experiences, we invite others to understand the deep emotional impacts of trauma, and we use that knowledge to help others who have gone through similar experiences in their own lives. By sharing our experiences with others, we are able to slowly shift the narrative regarding how society views sexual assault, trauma, and survivorship.¹²⁴

The heuristic methodology guided the evolution of the project across all six phases of inquiry, culminated in the final exhibition. By creating an installation exhibition focused on reflection for the audience members—reinforced through the metaphor of water—and identifying the themes of healing, rebirth, and regrowth, the project sought to encapsulate the spilling of knowledge through the dripping water as survivors shared their experiences and their knowledge of the healing process. The environment specifically set out to create a space where the viewer could take their time to consider their own beliefs and understanding of what it means to be a survivor, in an effort to shift

¹²⁴ Fileborn Bianca & Rachel Loney-Howes (eds), *#Me Too and the Politics of Social Change*.

the narrative on the individual level and have that narrative spill over into the larger collective society.

Along with projection mapped footprints to act as a guide for viewers, the ambient sounds of running water assist in creating a space where the viewer can pause and take stock of their own views toward the subject of sexual assault, trauma, and survivorship in a way that does not risk revictimization of survivors.



Figure 9: *Stepping Out of Trauma*, Final Exhibition

The space invites viewers to actively participate in, and walk away from, their reflections at any time. The aim of the final project was to not only understand the healing process on a personal level, but to identify themes shared among survivors of sexual assault and take a softer approach to sharing those experiences with others, compared to other

contemporary artists who have used shock tactics as a means of garnering attention to the issue.

Rather than use shock tactics or causing immediate emotional responses as a way to grab the viewer's attention, the final installation project instead recognizes the human ability to be empathetic to the experiences of others, if they take the opportunity to listen. The end result of the final MFA project was to create a multi-layered installation exhibition that incorporated sculptural elements, projection mapping, and natural audio experiences for viewers to enter a space of reflection and examine their own beliefs of survivorship.

A photo essay, located in Appendix A, documents the final exhibition of *Stepping Out of Trauma*.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The research creation project, *Stepping Out of Trauma*, outlined in the previous chapters was focused on creating a safe, reflective space for viewers to explore their own understanding and potential biases toward survivors of sexual assault. The research question that guided the project was, “How can the artist step between survivors and audience members, and create a safe, reflective space for viewers to understand the healing process following sexual assault?” The focus of the project was on shifting away from shock tactics to garner attention among audience members, and instead create an atmosphere that allowed viewers to explore the identified themes of healing, rebirth, regrowth that were identified in my own heuristic model of inquiry and my interviews with participants who had taken part in the healing process following trauma related to sexual assault. The overarching theme of water as a metaphor to share the spilling of emotions in the individual survivor and their spilling of knowledge into the community also focused as a means of grounding the project in a reflective atmosphere that could be explored at the viewer’s own pace.

By reframing the narrative of survivorship into one of learning, growing, and sharing knowledge with others, the project sought to shift the social narrative and remove the label of “victim” from survivors of sexual assault. Throughout each evolution of my work throughout the MFA program, I sought to engage viewers in contemplation about what it means to survive, to heal, to be reborn, to regrow, and ultimately to be strong enough to share those experiences with others. In shifting the narrative surrounding trauma related to sexual assault from “victim” to “survivor”, I also sought to further the efforts of the

#MeToo movement by focusing not on the often-sensationalized aspect of assault itself, but on the overall process of healing from sexual assault.

I made the specific decision to remove direct imagery related to sexual assault from the final exhibition, to allow viewers the ability to reflect on their own personal journeys and not risk being confronted with potentially retriggering imagery related to sexual assault. The use of the experientialist model of metaphor, developed by Mark Johnson and Glenn Erickson in 1980, provides artists with a model of accepting the different experiences that viewers will have when confronted by metaphor within an artistic project or gallery space.¹²⁵ Within my own work, I've worked to create a participatory environment where the viewer can explore their own personal journeys and reflect on the journeys of others who have experienced sexual assault. Based on the experientialist model, I have sought to use universal metaphors of water within my work and to create a space for viewers to reflect within an environment that was designed specifically for contemplation.

Ideally, that exploration of the installation exhibition would align with my own research and findings that have been reflected in each of the selected metaphors within the body of work. Viewers had the option to read the artist and curatorial statements to understand the subject being explored within the abstract installation exhibition, or to experience the work in their own way. As an artist, I have limited control over how a

¹²⁵ Stone, Lynden. "Metaphors for Abstract Concepts: Visual Art and Quantum Mechanics." *Studio Research*, no. 2. (7 October, 2014). Retrieved from <http://studioresearch.com.au/wp/?m=201410>

viewer will engage with the metaphors being presented.¹²⁶ Each viewer will have their own sets of personal lived experiences that inform their view of the metaphors within the work.¹²⁷ In this way, viewers who want to experience the exhibition without the guidance of the artist and curatorial statements are welcome to do so, using the space to reflect on their own journeys.

In the future, I would like to expand this project further and more firmly tie the element of Place to the exhibition where survivors of sexual assault have a higher likelihood of accessing the space and reflecting on their own journeys. I would like to continue to explore the creation of installation spaces that facilitate inner examination among viewers, particularly as it relates to trauma from sexual assault. Placing the exhibition near areas where the survivor has access to them — whether near a counselling center, Planned Parenthood location, or near rehabilitation centres, would provide a higher degree of access to survivors who are at different stages within their healing journeys.

The final exhibition took place in the Arnatt Gallery at the University of Calgary, which informed the evolution of the final project and how the space would be used to create an installation exhibition which audience members could engage with. The physical location of the space was an important one in my own exploration of the healing process. This is due to my own experiences with sexual assault, and the experiences many people that I know personally, which have occurred on or around the UCalgary campus. It became important to incorporate the total space as a means of recognizing

¹²⁶ Ibid

¹²⁷ Ibid

this, which was accomplished by creating an installation space for viewers to step into and interact with.

One significant element that I would like to address in the future is the spatial limitations within the Arnatt Gallery, which placed significant constraints on the project. The final exhibition itself is about regrowth and stepping out of trauma. However, due to the limitations of the physical space, timeline for completing the project, and financial restraints, I had to include significant repetition and looping within the flowing river and the projection mapped footprints throughout the sand. In the next iteration of this project, water would be continuously flowing and recycled out of sight through the pump system, rather than within such a short length of space. This would require me to at least double the size of the river, rather than have the river abruptly end as it did in the final exhibition. Adding more projectors to allow the footsteps to fully exit the gallery space, including a wider variety of footprints that identify different people stepping out of trauma, and expanding the length of time between the loop of projected footprints will reduce the feeling of repetition.

I specifically set out to use the space in non-traditional ways as a means of breaking the viewers out of a typical gallery exhibition experience. This would allow for the viewer to approach the exhibition without preconceived notions of what to expect and provide them with a sense of direct engagement in exploring the themes being presented in the work. The incorporation of real water into the exhibition was also critical to the work, as the water provides layers of metaphors for viewers to consider, such as the ability to

hold memories, to cleanse, or to heal—and above all, to bring people together and create deeper sense of community. In the future, I hope to continue building on the research and artistic practice that I began throughout the course of this MFA program and expand on the knowledge I have gained in the process of completing the final exhibition.

Stepping Out of Trauma: Artist and Curatorial Statements

Artist Statement

As a visual and conceptual artist, I have been drawn toward exploring the impacts of trauma related to sexual assault and the healing process on an individual and social level. The installation project, *Stepping Out of Trauma: Reflections on What it Means to Be a Survivor of Sexual Assault*, is my final MFA project. The aim of the project was to explore themes related to the healing process following sexual assault and to create a space that would allow the viewer to decide for themselves how deeply they want to dive into their reflections on what it means to be a survivor—whether the viewer is reflecting on their own experiences, or the experiences of someone they are close to. The materials used in the current exhibition include high impact styrene, which were vacuum formed, filled with polyurethane foam, and painted for the creation of the chalice and the river, which also features real flowing water. Projection mapping was used to create digital animations of footsteps, which step out of the water and through the gallery to represent the liberation of individuals who have made the choice to begin the journey toward healing. Each spotlight is representative of the themes of Healing, Rebirth, and Regrowth, which highlight the survivor moving past their traumatic experience.

The conceptual themes that underpin this work are rooted in trauma and the path to healing. Through participant interviews with other survivors related to the healing process, four overarching themes of the healing process were identified: Healing, Rebirth, Regrowth, and Spilling Knowledge into Greater Society. Each of these themes was encapsulated within the metaphor of flowing water within the gallery space. The

digital footsteps moving through the gallery represent the survivor on their individual path toward healing, while viewers are encouraged to consider the footprints in the sand within the space as showing others who have also taken steps toward understanding healing and have contributed to the space.

Curatorial Statement

Stepping Out of Trauma is an installation exhibition focused on healing from trauma related to sexual assault. Whether the viewer has experienced sexual assault themselves, or knows someone who has experienced sexual assault, the exhibition is an invitation to reflect on the strength of survivors. Feminist and trauma theory informed the exhibition by grounding the artistic creation process in an empowerment approach. Given the sensitive nature of the subject, the installation project remained purposefully abstract and driven by metaphor. Viewers may choose how deeply they want to engage with the topic but are encouraged to reflect on their own beliefs related to victim blaming and the stigmas that are attached to those who have been sexually assaulted. Viewers who are themselves survivors can take comfort in knowing that they are not walking alone, which is evident in the footprints left in the sand from those who have come before them.

The curatorial choices were important to the exhibition, not only in protecting viewers from triggering subject matter by remaining abstract and metaphorical, but in creating a space that invokes a sense of calm reflection. The location of the exhibition on the UCalgary campus was important to the artist, as it represented her own experiences, and the sexual assault experiences of others on or around the university campus.

Incorporating the total space within the gallery was a means of recognizing place, along with creating a dynamic environment using sand that allowed each visitor to choose their own path through the exhibition. This represented the idea that no two paths toward healing are the same. The incorporation of real water through the flowing stream was also critical to the work, as it created an atmosphere that represented healing, rebirth, and regrowth, while the vessel on the wall represented spilling the knowledge of survivors into greater society to enact change on a personal, social, and cultural level.

Appendix A

Photo Essay: *Stepping Out of Trauma*



















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