

VULNERABILITY AS STRENGTH: CREATING SPACE FOR WOMEN'S MENTAL WELLBEING

By

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disclaimer: the following thesis contains sensitive content which some people may find offensive or disturbing.

but it's also the truth.

abstract

In this thesis, I demonstrate how I map out my autobiographical experiences within my art practice to bring attention to the powerful capitalist and patriarchal structures that keep feminism, mental illness, and pain hidden. By using autotheory, I reflect on my life experiences and relate them to historical context and contemporary conditions to create a space that sheds light on the gendered body, trauma, and their stigmas.

We currently live in a world that is going through a care crisis—a crisis of compassion—where having a powerful status is prioritized over empathy and love. I have situated my art practice as a way to explore, reflect, and share my own lived experiences under power’s carelessness. Documenting my personal, physical, and emotional experiences to gather this data are essential to my studio practice and research.

As a woman who has been diagnosed with anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation, I know first-hand, what this patriarchal and capitalist society thinks of mental illness. As a woman who has experienced trauma and pain, I know first-hand, how this patriarchal and capitalist society hides pain. As a woman, I know first-hand what this patriarchal and capitalist society thinks and expects of me. In short, this thesis is about my experiences, my journey, and my beliefs of the importance of talking about the things that are usually kept hidden from view.

This project aims to create a space for care and for self-care.

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This thesis is dedicated to anyone who is both in ruins and still under construction.¹

To anyone who is interested in whatever mobilizes and rescues the body.²

To those who cry at nothing and cry most of the time.³

To those who have learned to take harassment as a part of life.⁴

To those who are a little afraid of John.⁵

¹ Lisa Robertson, *R's Boat*

² Lisa Robertson, *R's Boat*

³ Charlotte Perkins, *The Yellow Wallpaper*

⁴ Rebecca Solnit, *Whose Story Is This?*

⁵ Charlotte Perkins, *The Yellow Wallpaper*

“The relief I feel from being able to tell people—or even from not having to hide how I’m doing or make up alternative reasons for psychiatric appointments or drugs or impossible mornings—draws me almost as powerfully as the self-destructive fear that disclosure will mean recrimination, will shaft opportunity or connection or prompt polite insidious shunning at best. It’s painful. I live in fear I’ll regret it. But, often, it’s too important not to.”

Anna Mehler Paperny, *Hello I Want to Die Please Fix Me*

“I am someone whose job it is to hear and to tell the stories of the powerless.”

Rebecca Solnit, *Whose Story Is This?*

a

anxieties of care⁶ (and my introduction):

Dear My Love,

I don't even know where to begin.

Throughout the past couple of years, you have been collecting data from your past, from your body, from your life. You have been researching the ways in which trauma, feminism, and mental illness are all trapped under John⁷ who seems to nurture the capitalism⁸ and patriarchy⁹ that turns a blind eye on the mental wellbeing of women. All your life you have created art as way to let out your clustered thoughts. Now, you create empathetical spaces for you and all the *hysterical* women before you.

So, how are feminism, mental illness, and trauma all controlled by capitalist and patriarchal structures? Why is it important to share stories of pain? And what does it mean to be able to tell those stories?

Did you know that to become a butterfly, a caterpillar first needs to digest itself? It needs to take in every flaw, imperfection, and absorb in itself entirely. Otherwise, it can't become the butterfly.

⁶ Did you know that the world is currently in a crisis of care? Carelessness is ruling the world as governments have been accepting the position of neoliberal capitalism that profit-making is the most important principle of life. This has resulted in the prioritising of financial capital, while ruthlessly destroying welfare states and democratic systems. This pandemic is a perfect example: many hospitals do not have the most basic of personal protective equipment for their employees (The Care Collective 3). Imagine what could happen if we put care as the most important principle of life.

⁷ John refers to power. i.e. John = Power. Power = John. The name John comes from Charlotte Perkins' *The Yellow Wallpaper*, as she names the characters of her husband and doctor, John. In Charlotte's story, John becomes a symbol for the patriarchal structure of marriage and the medical field.

⁸ Capitalism is defined as: "an economic system characterized by private or corporate ownership of capital goods, by investments that are determined by private decision, and by prices, production, and the distribution of goods that are determined mainly by competition in a free market" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

⁹ Patriarchy is defined as: "alliances between men, which have low morality, and, through hierarchical standards, establish and create solidarity among men that allows them to dominate women" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

Maybe that is what it means to grow. To become the butterfly, you must drink in all that you are: love yourself so much that you are unwilling to part with any piece of you. No matter how difficult it may be.

Throughout this dissertation, you have three voices: the body, which shows factual descriptions of your work and process; the margins, which includes your reflective writing and is typically the sidenotes that you wouldn't normally say out loud; and the footnotes which includes your data. These three voices have allowed you to reflect on the tension between hiding and being visible, which is also part of the struggle of mental illness. Some of these voices may be louder or more prominent than the others. Some of them may be slight whispers. This does not mean that one is more important than the others. Silence is not to be mistaken for weakness.

... Does anyone even read footnotes?

“The fretty chatter that makes us so nervous and unsettled and unable to grasp the ‘present moment’ at the end of yoga classes when the instructor talks about it as though it’s something you can buy off the shelf” (Wilson 2).

I have never heard truer words.

My love, I have seen you wrestle with panic attacks as your anxiety takes over and fills you with horrifying ideas. A dance between your mind and your soul. Your soul just needs to learn to lead.

But you are not alone. We will get there together. We will be by your side fighting with you. Janet, Virginia, Charlotte, Zelda, Marilyn, Anna, Lisa, Sarah, Elinor, Elizabeth, Marie, Joanne, Sylvia, Susanna, Siri, Maggie, Bernardine, Judy, Tara (to name a few) are all standing by you.

Your thesis is written in the form of a glossary; very much inspired by Eve Tuck and C. Ree’s “A Glossary of Haunting”. “The Glossary appears without its host—perhaps because it has gone missing, or it has been buried alive, or because it is still being written. Maybe I ate it” (Tuck and Ree 640). A glossary lingers and, in this case, haunts, as its host is not here—kind of like one’s soul; forever continuing even once its body is no longer there.

... Each artwork I make is a piece of my soul.

John seems to have forgotten that you don’t want to sell your soul. In John’s eyes you are vulnerable: this makes it easy for him to prey on your mind. The problem with this, is that John also knows how vulnerable you are when you try to love yourself. You suddenly become aware of all the

flaws, and you begin to think back to all the times someone said something awful about you.

“You’re weird and annoying when you talk too loud.”

So, you stopped talking all together.

“You’re boring.”

So, you drank until you weren’t.

“I think you could look as hot as her if you followed this diet plan.”

So, you starved yourself.

These people didn’t even realize the effect that their words would have on you; still have on you. But every time you talk, every time you drink, every time you eat, you remember their words and suddenly want to disappear.

Anxiety doesn’t allow you to forget those things. And that is the hardest part about loving yourself; standing up for yourself; telling yourself that those people are wrong during the times when you believe they are right.

I can’t wait for you to experience a day when you can stand up and proudly say “I am incredible inside and out.” And mean it completely.

I can’t wait for the day you no longer have sleepless nights thinking about all the mistakes you made that day. The day when you can look in the mirror and sigh with a smile as the weight on your shoulders has been lifted. The day when you have broken free from John.

I can’t wait for you to become the butterfly.

Yours truly,

Your Secret Admirer

are you here charlotte?¹⁰ (and my positionality):

I am not a physician. I am not a psychiatrist. I am not a scientist. I am a woman, with a woman's body, that has been poked at by men and examined by men, for far too long. Let me show you the real reason why I'm anxious.

This thesis aims to create a space for care and for self-care.

This space is for me.

I am constantly losing myself; thinking I have found my space, just to realize it's wrong. Maybe I have no space. Maybe I need to create one.¹¹

This space is for you.

This thesis aims to create a space for care and for self-care.

This space is for anyone who feels like they don't belong anywhere.

According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy¹², Power is defined as:

This space is theoretical and hopeful.

- possession of control, authority, or influence over others
- hierarchal control when *men* act together
- knowledge and capacity

This space is created as a shelter against anti-feminist forms of psychiatry.

This thesis aims to create a space for care and for self-care.

This space is for care and for self-care in a patriarchal and capitalist world where care is lacking, and power is like gold.

Through an autoethnographic lens, I have made it my *due diligence* to create a space that brings attention to the body and the gendered body, the pain and the trauma, the mental illness and the stigmas.

¹⁰ Charlotte Perkins (b.1860) was an American feminist, lecturer, writer, theorist, and publisher. In 1892, Perkins first published *The Yellow Wallpaper*, a fictional story based on her non-fictional experience of undergoing the rest cure, invented by Dr. S. Weir Mitchell. The rest cure was supposed to heal *women's* hysteria and depression. In reality, it was even more traumatizing, as women were unable to work, particularly to engage in intellectual activities and literally strapped to their beds for months on end. To me, she is 'Charlotte' as it now feels like I know her; as if she were a long, lost friend. Charlotte committed suicide on August 17th, 1935.

¹¹ The reader will find this paper includes a space of marginalia throughout the structure. This space is for care and for self-care.

¹² This definition can be found at Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Please see works cited for further details and note the year as these definitions may change over time.

This thesis aims to create a space for care and for self-care.

By mapping¹³ my autobiographical experiences, I aim to create space for feminism, mental illness, and pain, while shedding a light on the powerful capitalist and patriarchal structures that keep them hidden.

¹³ I learned the term 'mapping' from "Images and Mental Maps" by human and cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan. I use mapping as a form of collecting data by repeating a certain motion throughout a specific duration of time.

auto-haunting the margins:

“The physical act of scribbling in the margins comes to stand for the simultaneity of rigor and reflection.”

Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*, p. 140.

The writings of indigenous, critical race and educational scholar Eve Tuck and artist scholar C. Ree have helped me feel this way. I hope this stays true a year from now: remembering that I am not alone has really motivated my art practice, reminding me why I do what I do.

A Glossary of Haunting” is what each of my pieces come from, where each idea is strung from. There is a Glossary of Haunting within each of us. Or at least the selfish side of me hopes there is. Because that would mean I’m not alone.

... dark water.

Tuck and Ree’s, “A Glossary of Haunting”, has compelled me to think of new ways to share my writing; especially emotional, private writings. Their glossary-style text has inspired me to present this thesis paper in a similar format.¹⁴

“I care about you understanding, but I care more about concealing parts of myself from you [...] I am using my arm to determine the length of the gaze” (Tuck and Ree 640). When Tuck and Ree explain why they are using a glossary to tell a story, they say it is because they don’t trust their readers. The glossary format is a way for the two writers to tell the readers what they need to know, while still hiding parts of themselves.

Creating work based on yourself is empowering but knowing what not to share is also empowering.

Lauren Fournier is a Canadian writer and curator who wrote the book *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*. Within this book, Fournier defines Autotheory as “using the body’s experience to develop knowledge” (Fournier 25). When I tell people

¹⁴ Tuck and Ree’s glossary explains haunting as a decolonial response to the violence of colonialism as the glossary format helps readers take time with the subject of justice and haunting, allowing for separate view of each concept.

that I use autoethnography to make my work, they have no idea what I'm talking about. I used to explain autoethnography as the study of self-reflection, but I think Fournier's definition of autotheory is more accurate.¹⁵

Using the body's experience to develop knowledge. The body's experience is greater than just self-reflection. It includes the physicality of the body, the mentality of the body, things the body does, things that happen to the body. Autotheory and autoethnography then take these experiences to give the body knowledge.

...it's the circle of experience.

As stated in my introduction, within this dissertation, there are three voices:

A voice in the body.

A voice in the margins.

A voice in the footnotes.

Within Fournier's book she describes voices in the margins as an act of self-citation, an act of self-care and an act of self-respect:

In the margins, [Gloria] Anzaldua cites herself [...] in an act of self-citation that becomes [...] an act of self-determination and self-respect. Anzaldua takes space in her book to recognize her work as work and her poetry as poetry—a move that brings to mind 'self-care', in [Audre] Lorde's sense according to which is 'an act of political warfare' for the marginalized—willful survival and self-assertion in spaces that have been hostile to them. (Fournier 148)

Fournier's description reminds me that the margins allow space for the things that would otherwise not be heard, even though they may be just as important.

... and sometimes even more important.

As Fournier continues, she then addresses the significant position of footnotes and endnotes.

In English, and in Euro-American publications generally, one reads from left to right, top to bottom, and so the eye is drawn

¹⁵ Is there a difference between autotheory and autoethnography? Although they are very similar in the sense that they both involve centering the self as the main point of research, they are different in ways they use the gathered research. Typically, autotheory uses the self's data to guide theories and philosophies, while autoethnography uses the self's data for wider cultural and social areas.

to the citation in the margin as part of the experience of the reading. This is in contrast to endnotes, and even footnotes, which a reader may choose whether or not to read—something that only the most attentive and studious readers might do. (Fournier 139).

As you, the reader, continue along this thesis you will come across many ways of writing and many names of people. Each form of writing represents a different voice, while each name represents a theme. This may be confusing at first, but if you slow down and are *attentive* to all the voices and all the names, you will be able follow along and reflect on this tension between hiding and being visible: which is a part of the struggle of mental illness and for me, a part of the struggle of being a woman.

At the beginning of this dissertation there are two quotes by writers Paperny and Solnitt, who each use autoethnography and autotheory as part of their research.

... These two quotes take the words of reasoning for my work right out of my mouth.

Anna Mehler Paperny is an award-winning reporter and writer who wrote a memoir entitled, *Hello, I Want to Die Please Fix Me*. Paperny's writing combines an auto-ethnographic approach with data-based research, but specifically reveals her lived experience of mental illness, suicidal ideation, and treatment within Canada's psychiatric care system. "The relief I feel from being able to tell people" (Paperny 302). It's difficult to tell people about your pain, but it's overbearing not to. And honestly, that is what drives me towards autotheory and this glossary: it gives me a way to tell people on my own terms, and "to tell the stories of the powerless" (Solnitt 29).

h

hysteria and feminism:

"Woman is, as people say, the weaker sex, and that anxiety belongs to her more than to man."

Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, p. 57.



Figure 1. Kaitlyn Roberts

right: *Period. (264g of sugar, silk, the artist's menstrual cycle, hysteria)*

image of artist's menstrual cycle printed on silk, after data track consuming 264g of sugar

left: *Period. (0g of sugar, silk, the artist's menstrual cycle, hysteria)*
image of artist's menstrual cycle printed on silk, after data track consuming 264g of sugar

© Kaitlyn Roberts.

Period. presents two photographs, digitally printed on silk (see fig. 1). The one on the left is a photograph of my menstrual cycle on a menstrual pad when there were 0 grams of sugar in my body. The one on the right is the image of my menstrual cycle on an average sugar-filled day; this day was specifically 264 grams of sugar.

First, We Make the Beast Beautiful, written by journalist, Sarah Wilson, is an example of an autoethnographic approach that involves

Wilson investigating her own anxiety while looking at the different triggers, treatments, and symptoms. Wilson also discusses the correlation between anxiety and diet, specifically sugar addiction, as sufferers of anxiety tend to also have an addiction to sugar.

Wilson describes this addiction in the following testimony:

I'd been told I should quit my seductively gnarly habit by several doctors and naturopaths. Seductively gnarly? I was one of those types who ate 'healthy sugar'—honey in my chai tea, dates and banana on my maple frosted granola, gluten-free muffins, and so on. I convinced myself, and everyone around me, that I didn't have a problem. I was, in fact, eating almost 30 teaspoons a day. It's never surprised me that sugar addiction goes hand in hand with anxiety, and that anxious folk hide the vice so protectively. We're dopamine junkies, and we don't like people removing our 'fix'. (Wilson 50)

Wilson is very persuasive by telling her readers that quitting sugar really helped her *control* her anxiety. Wilson goes on by telling us about the many doctors, physicians, psychiatrists that have told her that 'by quitting sugar, you will quit your anxiety.' Although Wilson does not believe this statement to be true, she said that by cleansing her body of sugar, she was able to have a clearer mind and to better think during her moments of downward spiral.

... Can anyone really *control* their anxiety?

Sugar addiction is correlated with anxiety. This, I completely agree with. *Anxious folk tend to hide the addiction.* This, I also completely agree with. With shame, I admit that there are many times a week, I find a convenience store to buy bags of candy just to eat all of it within the span of an hour. With even more shame, I will admit that even my partner, the person I live with, does not know of this. How? Different work schedules become very helpful in this regard. And I never put the garbage in the bin at home: That would be too obvious.

... Please don't tell him.

By quitting sugar, you quit your anxiety. This, I am not so sure I agree with. So, I decided to see if the theory was true, and I quit the *white death*¹⁶ for a month.¹⁷ All sugar: fruits, dairy, pasta, bread, processed foods, etc.

Lauren Berlant is a scholar, author, and theorist who wrote the book *Cruel Optimism*, which discusses their theory that society's desire to achieve the 'fantasy of the good life' is actually an obstacle to it succeeding. In this text, Berlant states that it is so ironic that food is needed for survival, and yet it is also an addictive comfort that we use to numb ourselves, growing our bodies until we are further away from the idealization of a thin body. Berlant also states that although numbing our bodies with food can ruin our mental health, food is "one of the few spaces of controllable, reliable pleasure people have" (Berlant 115).

I was thinking about this a lot when I was getting ready for my sugarless month. Here I was about to take away one of the only controllable, reliable pleasures I had.

Through video, photography, and mapping, I documented the entire experience and watched as my body changed. The most extreme changes happened to the physical aspects of my body: My skin cleared, I lost eight pounds, but what I was most intrigued by was how it affected my menstrual cycle.¹⁸

¹⁶ Did you know that sugar's nickname is *The White Death*? Apparently, a lot of people consider it to be poison for the human body. The research behind this is quite fascinating; sugar can cause your heart to stop by changing the heart's muscle protein. But on top of that, it can also destroy your immune system and increase your chances of getting cancer. These fun facts were pulled from Google's search page when you type in, 'the white death'.

¹⁷ I would like to make note of the barbaric history between sugar cultivation/production and its dependence on enslaved African labour. I would like to acknowledge this profound history, but to also declare that this is beyond the scope of my thesis.

¹⁸ This also reflects on the many 'regimens' that women undertake for weight loss, health and beauty, fitness, etc., that relates to the patriarchal control within a capitalist economy which disciplines women's bodies.

Period. is a body of work produced from this experiment. Whilst there were zero grams of sugar in my body, I photographed the results of my menstrual cycle on a pad; every day for seven days. Once the sugarless month was over and I was back to my unhealthy habit of sneaking sweets into my body, I photographed the results again; my menstrual cycle on a pad, every day for seven days.

I would like to make three statements before I continue:

1. I would like to recognize that every body is different, and I would like to acknowledge that in present day, the female body is not the only one that bleeds.
2. I would like to disclaim that although there were many *physical* changes that happened to my body throughout this experiment, there were not too many *mental* ones. My anxiety had lessened, but I wouldn't say I could *control* it. And my depression was even worse. But I could breathe easier, and that to me was worth the struggle of the sugarless month.
3. I would also like to declare that the purpose of this body of work is not to state that one is good, and one is bad. It is simply a method of enquiry; to share my experience and to create space for the conversation about women's mental wellbeing.

... I think breathing became easier as my anxiety lessened. And maybe also as my stomach became less bloated. It's easier to breathe when nothing is crushing your lungs.

My menstrual cycle has never been *ideal*. By this I mean that I have had many doctors concerned about it. But when I saw it during my sugarless month, I was in awe. It was finally what all the concerned

doctors were looking for. It was pure red. It flowed. I had never had a period like this before. I wanted to enlarge it and show it to the world. And so, I decided to do just that.

A menstrual cycle has been considered a “periodic illness requiring rest and seclusion” (Ehrenreich and English xiv). Not only that, but mental illness was originally considered a ‘women’s disease’ caused by ‘hysteria’ (i.e., originating in the uterus). Therefore, each photograph has *hysteria* written as the title’s medium list: They were both made with my uterus, as ‘hysteria’ comes from the Greek word for uterus.

As Western European patriarchy was taking over the role of doctors within the late nineteenth century, they were establishing amongst themselves that women are sick, and that this sickness is inborn as it comes from simply possessing a uterus and ovaries (Ehrenreich and English 147). The illness was considered a disease of the uterus, and therefore the name of the disease became *hysteria* (Ehrenreich and English 152).¹⁹

A women’s menstrual cycle is something that is usually hidden from society. It is something that is considered a secret, often causing embarrassment when discussed in public. The image of it is completely excluded from the public sphere. Hence, these photographs needed to be large-scale to create an evident signification of this thing that is usually hidden from view and in doing so, breaking away from the patriarchal power that keeps it in the shadows.

Women were the ‘doctors’ way before men decided that the medical field was a male profession. And not only that, but it was women from all cultures, all backgrounds, all ethnicities, all skin colours. They were the midwives, the family caregivers, the therapists, the medicine cultivators, the one to stitch you back up, the one to put your broken bone back into place. The difference? They were empathetic, they were considered witches, and they had uteruses.

... They really just had it all figured out, didn’t they?

As an artist who uses their own lived experiences—their own body, their own mind—as a part of their research, and as an artist who is in possession of a uterus, wouldn’t that mean that there are going to be times when my uterus—or hysteria—becomes one of my mediums? My menstrual blood comes from my uterus, but in this experiment, it also comes from my mood change as the sugar exited my body. Therefore, these photographs were created using my hysteria.

¹⁹ The term hysteria was known as the first mental illness, coined by Hippocrates in the 5th Century BC. Many doctors looked up to him as a role model in this regard (Ehrenreich and English 101).

By enlarging these images, I am not only able to make a statement, but I am able to create relatability through ambiguity. The photographs become distorted in a way, making it difficult to process the content of the images. This allows for the viewer's imagination to run wild as their minds begin to make inferences for what they are seeing, based on their own lived experiences.

People are usually discouraged from touching photographs in exhibitions, but I wanted them to touch this image. I wanted people to have to walk through these images and feel the wind as the photos flow along with their movements. I was able to achieve this by printing the photographs on silk, rather than a static surface, (photo paper, canvas stretchers, etc.). The transparency and lightweight quality of the silk, shifts the work's dimensionality. Another factor to ensuring that the work moved with its viewers, was installing it away from the wall, staggered, in the middle of the hallway. This literally forced my viewers to acknowledge the work's existence, as they needed to decide whether to walk through the banners or walk around them.

The use of silk contrasts with the menstrual cycle. It pays homage to all women before me who were perceived as delicate but were hiding their strength. Silk is a seemingly weightless fabric. It is considered a luxurious material, used only for the finest of things. The silk was chosen as it is the complete opposite of a menstrual pad and tampon. It is non-absorbent and it is something that is not thrown out very often. It is delicate and thin; everything the patriarchal and capitalist society says a woman should be. The silk

By observing how people moved through the silk banners, I was able to watch their reactions shift and change as they first had looks of wonder as they seemed to try and figure out what the images represented. They would touch the fabric as they moved by, stop to look at the title card, and either laugh or cringe once realizing what the images portray. It felt very much like a social experiment, investigating how the community reacts to bodily truths.

... This work is about intimacy. It is about the body, and what it means to call someone 'hysterical.' It is about engaging with what is normally hidden. And it is about refusing to look from a distance.

also represents the transparency of what I am doing within my art practice; revealing myself.

m

mapping (and methodology):

Carol Hendrickson is a professor of anthropology at Marlboro College who uses her visual arts background as a way to keep field notes; drawing and sketching their research. In her article “Drawing in the Dark: Seeing, Not Seeing, and Anthropological Insight”, Hendrickson explores the classic drawing exercise of a timed sketch. “My favorites are always the shorter sketches when speed is the essence, thinking is minimalized, and my hand—or my whole body—takes over” (Hendrickson 201).

Hendrickson is of great interest to me as she brings up a concept of ‘dancing with pen and paper’ (Hendrickson 201). The beautifully poetic phrase demonstrates to me the importance of process and reminds me of the lightness and joy of artmaking that mitigates against spaces of anxiety. It is a process of transformation as I begin to completely lose myself in my work; all my focus moves towards each mark I make.

bell hooks is a social activist and writer on race, feminism and class. Similar to Hendrickson, hooks believes in the power of writing and the beautiful process of doing it:

Then [poetry] came into my life at Booker T. Washington grade school where I learned that poetry was no silent subject. That moment of learning was pure enchantment, for we learned by listening and reciting that words put together

For me, a new body of work is almost always birthed from some sort of documentation and personal archive; from journaling; from walking; from mapping and tracking. Through photography, videography, audio recordings, writings, and sketching, I document myself going through many motions of my life. Once I have collected my ‘data’, I look back and ask myself the ‘whys’: Why are most of my photographs of my feet? Why am I fascinated by the way my body language shrinks and grows? Why does this sound speak to me? Why am I drawn to this moment in particular?

There are times when I never find the answers to these questions. However, the answers I do find, often become my subject matter. My enquiry is focused on process and body-oriented knowledge production, rather than the discovery of particular answers.

audio recordings:

For when the silence is too loud.

drawing and writing:

I was taught to describe the things I see, as lines and shades instead of words: A curved, 2 inch, 55-degree line instead of an elbow.

All of a sudden, figures were moving and dancing.

I could zone out and forget about everything else around me.

In the third year of my Undergraduate Degree, my drawing professor gave me an assignment. I was given a window in a building, a sharpie marker, and thirty minutes. I was told to write down everything I saw out of the window, onto the glass windowpane.

When I was done, I was told to step back and look at my “drawing”. This day changed everything about my artwork. I began to write.

just so, said just so, could have the same impact on our psyches as song, could lift and exalt our spirits, enabling us to feel tremendous joy, or carrying us down into that most immediate and violent sense of loss and grief. (hooks 10)

Carrie Perreault is an installation and performance artist, who uses material investigation to reframe childhood trauma into a state of inquiry. By surveying her work through a feminist, autotheoretical approach, Perreault suspends her doubt from the childhood stories she has told herself and instead, articulates these stories by creating objects and installations that reflect her experiences. Perreault's practice involves process art that uses repetition as a reflective tool, to provide a space to relay these traumatic experiences.

I had the pleasure of meeting Perreault through a studio visit while I was in the fourth year of my Undergraduate studies. Perreault has had a strong influence on my ideas surrounding the use and play of different materials. She has helped inspire me to present my autobiographical work in a way that can be relatable to others, while still only giving what is necessary to do so.

Perreault's piece entitled; *Ephemeral Sculptures* (2012) is a collection of used tissues displayed inside of a glass case (see fig. 2). The case holds the tissues that Perreault used every time she cried throughout a specific timeframe. The work is minimal, but still gives the viewer's all they need to know. It is personal and yet, relatable. This work has been a vast inspiration for how I wish to present my work to my viewers: metaphorical but not cliché, private but significant, minimal but substantial.

Just like drawing, I used to hate writing. Writing for me, was a reminder of my horrible grades in high school English classes.

But then I was taught that writing is power. I was shown that writing could also be freedom. With writing, I could say everything I needed to say that I couldn't say out loud.

... I still enjoy doing this when I get artist block. It's refreshing to "dance with your pen" as Carol Hendrickson would say.

I began to write for my therapist instead of going to sessions.

I began to write for myself instead of staying captive to my mind.

Without the freedom of movement and words that drawing brings, I think I would still be locked in there.

photo journaling:

Dear Diary,

Sometimes I take photos instead of writing down my thoughts. My camera is my journal, and my photos are my words.

reading:

I read so that I know that I am not alone.

So that I remember that I am not alone.

So that I remember this is important.

So that I remember that I am important.

searching:

Searching for the right medium to use with each of my works is also a part of my methodology. This involves a lot of trial and error. This can also take months at a time.

self-management:

The female body is the site of endless scientific investigation, regulation, and control.



Figure 2. Carrie Perreault, *Ephemeral Sculptures*, 2012, used tissues, dimensions variable. © Carrie Perreault.

The repetitive, data-collective nature of this work maps out, and traps Perreault's emotions, making them tangible. The glass case gives them value, as if Perreault is proudly displaying them as important monuments. Perreault also plays with the idea of covering the uncovered throughout many of her other bodies of work. She puts her deepest emotions, fears, and experiences out in her drawings and paintings, but then covers them, making them indecipherable. These methodologies of working are approaches and procedures that I also explore within my own work.

For example, within my body of work entitled, *Period.*, I took Perreault's strategy of mapping as a form of data collection to collect my menstrual cycle through photographic evidence. By repetitively collecting the same thing for a specific amount of time, I am able to obtain the vision and research needed to create my autobiographical artwork.

Since the beginning of time, we have been examined, judged, and controlled physically and mentally. Self-management is something that women have no shortage of experience in.

There are many times when self-management is used as part of my own research... not eating sugar for example. Although the diet I followed was created and promoted by a woman, a part of me has wondered whether I would have tried it as easily had it been a man.

I guess the best part of self-management is that you get to do it yourself. You are both the investigator and the subject, both the doctor and the patient. It's true

freedom of the body; mentally, physically, spiritually, emotionally...

tracking:

For me, tracking and mapping are the same thing. When I use mapping to create my work, I am tracking something; whether it's a collection of diary entries at the same time of day, a collection of body hair that has fallen out, or a collection of photographs of my menstrual cycle on a pad over a specific amount of time.

videography and performance:

A video is for when something can be paused. A performance is when something should never be paused.

walking:

Wilson really influenced this:

When I'm anxious or 'thyroid' (aka inflamed), I remember to walk. Not far. Not fast. Not fancy. I breathe in for three steps – left, right, left – and out for four steps, like my deep belly breathing... To do this you have to walk really slowly. Which is the point. Because all focus is shifted to the 'breathing-and-staying-upright' part of your brain; the anxiety takes a back seat. (Wilson 87)

mental illness and suicidal ideation:

“the disease [depression] is now too expensive.”

Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 109.

In 2018, I was enrolled in a program called Bounce Back Canada²⁰, as my doctor declared me to be “passive suicidal”.²¹ *The patient, named above* is a project that I have been working on to share and reflect on this experience.

The Bounce Back program involved six phone calls with my assigned *coach* that had to be completed within the span of six months. In short, my coach would call me every two to three weeks to make sure I didn’t have a plan to kill myself (i.e., gone from passive suicidal to active). I noticed I would lie to my coach. Not because I wanted to but because I didn’t know how to tell her the truth.

... Why six phone calls in six months? I have no idea, but it doesn’t seem like a lot of time to even gain trust from your coach, let alone, gain the courage to tell them you hope to not wake up in the morning.

Your family doctor is supposed to be the first point of contact for depression, so it’s important that they know how to diagnose and treat mental illness. Except there’s no financial incentive for them, as they are paid on a ‘pay-per-see’ basis: the more patients they see, the more money they get. They’d rather deal with a runny nose than attempt psychotherapy (Paperny 189). But let’s give the physicians the benefit of the doubt, for the ones out there that actually do

²⁰ Bounce Back is described as a free skill-building program managed by the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA). According to their website, Bounce Back is designed to help adults and youth 15+ manage low mood, mild to moderate depression and anxiety, stress or worry. Delivered over the phone with a coach and through online videos, patients are provided with access to tools that are intended to support them on their path to mental wellness.

²¹ This is the day I learned that there are two different kinds of suicidal ideation: active and passive. My doctor explained the difference to me as: Active means you have a plan. Passive means you don’t have a plan and you are not planning on coming up with a plan, but if you got hit by a bus and died on your way home, you wouldn’t mind.

empathize: physicians aren't even set up to provide the specific treatment needed to help you. Psychotherapy is just not a part of their training (Paperny 189).

So, if you can't send someone who is suffering from mental illness to a doctor, you should be able to at least send them to the hospital right? Nope. All hospitals can do is ask the patient "are you suicidal?" and if they say no, and there's no sign, then they let them go. Patients just lie to the doctors, and because of this, there have been so many reports of people committing suicide, not even more than 24 hours after they've been released from the hospital—at least three alone just in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia in 2015: Brian David Geisheimer, Sarah Louise Charles, and Sebastian Pavit Abdi (Paperny 220).

But on top of all of this, there's also the issue of trust. As Paperny notes in her memoir:

You can have an awful doctor in any sphere and it can fuck with your trust for life. Surgery sucks. Intubation is awful. Chemotherapy is harrowing. But why is mental illness the only sphere of medicine characterized by a deep mistrust of caregivers and caregivers' profession? Cancer foundations are multi-billion-dollar industries yet it's depression—the world's leading cause of years lost to disability, which boasts no ice-bucket-challenge or money-making marathons, which gets fewer public dollars, and whose practitioners make less than the average medical specialist—that's derided as a marketing-driven capitalist fiction. (Paperny 284)

Why are the people who deal with the most vulnerable, the least trustworthy? (Paperny 290). And why does Bounce Back Canada only give people six months to trust their coaches? I mean, even with all my medication, it can still take me years to trust someone, and I'm expected to tell a stranger that I want to die right when I first meet them? On a phone call that's being recorded?

... I know I'm writing all of this in a thesis that strangers are probably going to read, but for some reason this feels different. I don't feel like I am being examined. I feel like I'm telling my story. On my own terms.

The patient, named above was a difficult project to work on, not because of the subject matter, but because I was working with such personal material as my medium, and it was difficult at times to

separate myself from the work. I needed to keep reminding myself of why I wanted to create this project.

The project began with vapour barrier as plastic is considered to be one of the hardest and strongest materials out there (Davis 351). I began to create my own shield, by turning sheets of vapour barrier into letters and diary entries (see fig. 3).

But then I received my Bounce Back medical records and decided it was time to put the program on view, rather than myself.

This project was something that I definitely struggled with, as I knew exactly what feeling I wanted the work to give off and I knew how much I wanted to say and I knew why it was important to me. But I did not know how to get there.

I started by simply displaying the medical records on the wall; but it wasn't ambiguous enough. Then I tried printing on different materials; but they weren't interesting enough. Then I tried



Figure 3. Kaitlyn Roberts, *the patient, named above* – in progress as vapour barrier, 2021, ink on vapour barrier. © Kaitlyn Roberts.

photography and video; but they oppressed me too much. Then I tried painting; but the message got lost in the material.

Then my advisor introduced me to performance and installation artist Ann Hamilton, and I was heavily influenced. With this inspiration in mind, my advisor and I came up with a plan to join together my medical records, my past 'unfinished' works, and my previous materials.



Figure 4. Kaitlyn Roberts, *the patient, named above*, 2021, thread on silk.
© Kaitlyn Roberts.

The page amongst my medical records that struck me the most, was the one that states, 'Kaitlyn did not endorse suicidality.' Reading my medical records made me angry at first, and then frustrated. My medical records were not *mine*. They were not written for me. They were written the way one would write a scientific report after doing an

... I had major high school chemistry flashbacks.

experiment. This one specific sentence hit me hard, with its lack of empathy and academic language. This page needed to be the central piece of this project, and so, I went back to printing it on silk.

... I'm not sure what I was expecting, but after telling a person your deepest feelings and fears, you expect a little more humanity.

Once the document was printed on silk, I then began the redaction process, using sewing thread, to hide everything on the document except for the sentence, 'Kaitlyn did not endorse suicidality' (see fig. 4). To do this, I embroidered back and forth with black thread to slowly and methodically, cover the text.

Although the words, 'Kaitlyn did not endorse suicidality,' are not covered by the thread, I have crossed out 'Kaitlyn' by stitching it with thread, and replaced it with the word, 'I'. By changing 'Kaitlyn' to 'I', I am taking back my records, making them mine.

Paperny ends her memoir with this beautifully written, hopeful statement for the future of psychiatric medicine: "For a society that's gone so far in so many civil and scientific arenas, there are some things we still do astonishingly badly. Treating the most debilitating chronic illness out there is one of them. So let's fix this goddammit, and move on to bitching about something else" (Paperny 307).

So, what would a medical document sound like if they were actually made for the patient?

This question led me back to one of my 'failed' medium attempts; the photographs that oppressed me too much.

Dear Euodia is a photographic installation. The photographs were taken from frames of a video where I read my medical records to my camera.

Mental illnesses are diseases of the mind: emotional and thought-based diseases. So why are my medical records so emotionless? Why is there no empathy? Why do they hold so much power?



Figure 5. Kaitlyn Roberts, *Dear Euodia* – in progress, 2021, thread on photographs. © Kaitlyn Roberts.

The photographs have been burnt so that part of each image is no longer there. The burnt edges of the photographs are stitched up; like a bandage from an amputation... or suturing of a wound. Although it is not important for the viewers to know I am reading my Bounce Back medical records, it is important to have the human connection that these photographs allow for.

At first, I believed the photographs oppressed me through the containment of the photographic borders and burnt edges, but once I began to stitch them up, the images began to give hope. This hope ties the conversation points for each of my artworks and recaps why this work is important.

Each photograph was originally 13"x19", which is larger than your typical 'photo-album' style photograph (see fig. 5). They are printed on photo paper, rather than cheap copy paper. These elements reveal that they were valuable. Then they were burnt. Then they were bandaged. And now they are scarred, but healing.

Once the photographs and the silk medical record were hung together in the gallery space, I decided they needed more distance from one another.

There was something missing within each of them, but what was missing, was not each other.



Figure 6. Kaitlyn Roberts, *The patient, named above*, 2021, silk, thread, sugar, the artist's medical records from Bounce Back Canada. © Kaitlyn Roberts.

I separated them into two different works and grew the silk medical record into a pool of hope and sugar. I then removed the *Dear Euodia* photographs from this piece and tied it together with another.

The patient, named above is an installation and textile-based work (see fig. 6). The final piece involves the silk banner hanging over a bed of sugar. The amount of sugar corresponds with the weight of the artist's body, the weight of my body, just as the height of the silk

banner corresponds with the height of the artist's body, the height of my body. These specifically chosen units bring back the documents to their person; bring back my documents to me.

The inclusion of sugar was inspired from my *Period.* work and it is used here to represent both the body and the mental illness that

weighs it down. Amongst the bed of sugar, swims another silk medical record; same height, size, material, and colour as the one hanging from above it. This record is also redacted using embroidery thread, except for the phrase: 'patient, named above'. This sentence was another one that came up throughout my medical records that made me frustrated. This language and vocabulary made it seem as though these records were already made, these sentences and words already formed, ready for someone to fill in my numbers. It is as if psychiatric medical records are like cookie cutters, forming and placing all of their patients under the same mold.

Have you ever tried to contain sugar in a mold or a cookie cutter? It spills out, leaking everywhere. The sugar in *The patient, named above* is no exception. Even as I clean up the installation and pack away the sugar, some of it will be left behind. It cannot be contained, it cannot fit into any mold, just like a mental illness.

... I know for a fact that there is quite a bit of it hiding behind the furniture in my studio.

The medical record that weaves through the sugar on the floor, acts as a reflection to the hanging banner. It sits in a way that the viewer can either perceive that the hanging banner is melting into the sugar pile below, or that the hanging banner has risen from the grave or bed-like sugar heap. This push and pull was important to include, because although I wanted the piece to give off a little sense of hope, I did not want there to be one answer, one pathway, one story.

Although my own experience with suicidal ideation involves me persisting as I 'did not endorse in suicidality', many others have experienced a different story. This piece uses my experience to showcase that although I am lucky enough to have risen from the sugar, many others have melted into it.

... still battling but winning so far.

morning bed sheets:

I aim to create work that embodies the viewer through particular choices in material and placement of my work—*The patient, named above* being an excellent example of this. Trial and error, play, and looking at what other artists do, are all things that help me find the right choices in material, placement, installation techniques, titling, and methodology. Ann Hamilton is an artist who has inspired and influenced me in my material and installation choices.

Hamilton is a visual artist who is internationally recognized for her large-scale installations, public projects, and performance collaborations. Hamilton works with recurring objects: textiles, texts both spoken and written, animals, and bodies in motion, creating atmospheres that are both individual and communal, silent and spoken.

Conceptually, Hamilton's work responds to the architectural presence and social history of their sites. Although themes of social histories and the architecture of spaces are not necessarily aligned with the primary conceptual nature of my own work, I am drawn and inspired to several other aspects of Hamilton's work: how the movement of the viewer in time and space are central figures within her work, the inclusion and thought for every little detail in her exhibitions, her admiration for words, and the little hints of her autobiographical experiences that she includes (*Simon, An Inventory of Objects 3*).



Figure 7. Ann Hamilton, *bounden*, 1997, hand stitched organza (silk), wood embroidery frames, chairs, wall tearing water. © Ann Hamilton.

For example, when speaking about the inspiration for *bounden* (see fig. 7), Hamilton states, that the idea came from making the bed with her son when he would hide between the sheets (Enright 28).

Although the concept behind *bounden* makes reference to the Lyon's luxury-goods industry and its involvement in the silk trade—and does not even suggest the autoethnographic inspiration—it still demonstrates the importance of autoethnographic work and the research that is sprung from it.

Within *bounden*, selections of text were hand-embroidered in a looping script on white silk panels that descended from the ceiling to cover each of the nine, 16.5-foot-tall windows. Although the content of the text is not important to the work, text is included within several of Hamilton's pieces and are a reflection on her love of words (Simon, *An Inventory of Objects* 3). Within this piece, the text includes excerpts from some of Hamilton's readings: examples

include Susan Stewart's *Lamentations* and Rebecca Cox Jackson's *A Dream of Slaughter*.

Hamilton's silk cloth was presented in Lyon and made implicit reference to the city's luxury-goods industry as well as its history of contribution in the silk trade (Simon, *Art in America* 78). The white, translucent curtains in the windows served as a physical skin between the museum's inside and outside, while both revealing and concealing the city beyond, just as it does the text it embodies.

I've always seen art as a form of communication; a communal language. Although my grade-school English marks were never any good, I have also always loved words. For me, words and text were always the same as art: you take away one letter or add in some punctuation and you have a whole new meaning. With art, you take away one line, or add in another and you also have a whole new meaning.

For me, text is a way to both reveal and conceal things, depending on how the text is presented. When presented in greater quantities, words can begin to hide themselves as most viewers will choose not to read all of the writing. It becomes a form of redaction that allows the individual viewer to pick and choose what words they will see and which ones they won't. Text at this quantity begins to arrange itself into a drawing-like formation. Within my work, *The patient, named above*, text is printed on silk and redacted using embroidery, turning corporate language into domestic tangibles. Hamilton has influenced my own work as she allows the lines of each letter to become palpable objects rather than thoughts.

... She makes you want to touch each letter.
She makes you think about how the light hits it.
She makes you see each line, and forget about
the sentences, the word, the letter that is
there.

The nine curtains in *bounden* change course once they meet the floor, as they shift and begin to continue upwards on an angle to the middle of the room. There, each are tied to a wooden prie-dieu which is a piece of furniture used to kneel and pray on. The row of nine prie-dieu, turns the room into a makeshift chapel. It is a renovation of what is normally regarded as women's work; seen as repetitive and unhonoured, into an activity that assumes significance of ritual (Enright 20).

Hamilton also recognizes that senses are compensatory; when one doesn't give us what we need, another one will act in its place to give us enough information to understand what we are absorbing (Enright 20). This sensory importance of the viewer's experience is something that I am continuously trying to think of when I display my installations. When using redaction as a form of methodology within my medical records; being able to contemplate which senses are needed to understand the story has become quite significant within my own work. This process of redaction also raises the potential of creating space for the viewer's ingenuities. Hamilton's works, especially her installations, have been very influential to me when thinking of ways to install my research.

my shoes (and my mediums):

“You can’t choose your medium until you’ve mastered them all.”

Murray Kropf, Professor, Brock University.

... This has been my philosophy throughout my art studies ever since Murray told this to me. I imagine myself to be a sponge that needs to soak in all it can absorb.

According to Carole Gray and Julian Malins in their article *Visualizing Research: A Guide to the Research Process in Art and Design*, engagement through metaphor helps to develop ‘deep’ learning, which is a “meaningful learning of intrinsic value” (Gray and Malins 2). But I think I use it more as a bridge between myself and my viewer—allowing them to *put on my shoes* for a little while.

I used to think I had to choose just one medium. When you tell someone you’re an artist, the first question they usually ask is: “what do you do?” “What’s your material?” “Do you paint or draw?”

... I think maybe I’m more of an *emotional artist* or an *auto-artist*, but then I would have to explain more, so I don’t usually say that.

I tell them I’m a conceptual artist or an installation artist, but this confuses many people.

examples:

dark water:

But I don’t just use one medium. There are many mediums that I use more than others, but I wouldn’t say they’re important enough to define my art practice. Nonetheless, my mediums, materials, and techniques become metaphors for my subject matter, (i.e. the medium follows the message. Without it, the message couldn’t be heard).

Dark Water is a throat clenching. It’s that weird gross ball of build-up that won’t go away no matter how many times you swallow.

Dark Water is one. two. three. four. five. six.

Dark Water is waking up in the morning and still not being able to see what you’re doing. But you’re moving anyway. It’s going to three different jobs in one day and then coming home to do more work and not remembering doing any of it. It’s moving so fast that you don’t have time to think.

Siri Hustvedt is a writer and author of the book *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women*. This book brings together a collection of

... Dark Water has been borrowed from Tuck and Ree’s *A Glossary of Haunting*.

silk:

Hustvedt's essays which observes specific artworks to examine human perception, especially on how we judge the world. Within this text, Hustvedt comments on the importance of metaphor by quoting George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's book titled *Metaphors We Live By*:

Metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish—a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language. Moreover, metaphor is typically viewed as characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought or action. For this reason, most people think they can get along perfectly well without metaphor. We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. (qtd. in Hustvedt 304)

A metaphor can enhance ones understanding through imagination (Gray and Malins 2). Metaphors allow room for relatability, as viewers can engage using their imaginations to visualize themselves as the focus of the subject matter. For me, a metaphor is an ambiguous relatability.

Silk investigates vulnerability and vulnerability as strength. It is a symbol of beauty and fragility. It is everything a patriarchal society wants of a woman. Except it is also valuable.

the photograph:

There is a huge quantity of photo editing software out there and yet we still believe a photograph. There is something about a photograph that makes us think that there is at least some truth to it.

... Brock University Professor, Amy Friend explained this to me in the first semester of my visual arts degree. It has stuck with me ever since.

vapour barrier:

Vapour Barrier slows down the migration process of moisture retreating into a structure. Slows it. Does not stop it.

Working with plastic, specifically vapour barrier, gives me an opportunity to use the object as an indirect self-portrait. The purpose of vapour barrier is to protect something from the outside environment, becoming a shield.

Heather Davis is a writer and researcher of using feminist and queer theory to examine the environment and contemporary art. In her essay, "Life and Death in the Anthropocene: A Short History of Plastic", Davis discusses the role of plastic in capitalism and the art world.

Davis also suggests that plastic is one of the strongest materials out there because, although its pieces may get smaller over time, they do not disappear. "[Plastic] is perhaps the hardest material there is. It is hard, because it refuses its environment, creating a sealant or barrier that remains impermeable to what surrounds it. It influences its environment while remaining mute to that environment's influence" (Davis 351).

I feel understood by this object, this material. I feel as though I carry around my own vapour barrier whenever I leave my room. Although vapour barrier does not let 'debris' in, by default, it also doesn't allow 'debris' out.

... My heart is a construction site.

p

pain and painful memories:

"He knows there is no *reason* to suffer and that satisfies him."

Charlotte Perkins, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, p. 10.



Figure 8. Kaitlyn Roberts, *Friends*, 2020, still from performance video. © Kaitlyn Roberts.

At the beginning of my MFA program, I told a story through my performance entitled, *Friends* (see fig. 8 and appendix A).

The performance is approximately ten minutes long and involved me being dressed in "feminine office" attire; something one would wear to a job interview. I was wearing a dark blindfold and pink lipstick, and I sat in a chair and told the story of how I was assaulted in my first year of university.

I had never done a performance before and the thought of doing one terrified me, but a simple studio visit with artist, M.E. Sparks, changed my mind: "If you're going to fail anywhere, your MFA critiques are the best places to fail," was the advice she had given me. And so, I decided to go for it.

... I don't know if she remembers me, but these words really changed my life.

The performance is simple and minimal, with the slightest of movements as I sometimes grip my hands, tighten my thighs, or clench my jaw. It needed to be minimal to contrast the power of the content. I needed to engage my viewers, suck them in, get them to trust me, before I unload on them.

Rebecca Solnit is a writer, researcher, and activist who studies feminism, power, social change, politics, and art. Within her book entitled *Whose Story is This?* Solnit discusses the strategies which women use to be safe around men, while for men, these strategies seem to be optional. “There’s a college classroom exercise of asking all students what they do to try to avoid rape, which generally causes women to recite long lists of cautions and avoidances, and men to look blank” (Solnit 25).



Figure 9. Kaitlyn Roberts, *Burnt candles*, 2021, ash, jars, photographs, shadows, a story, various dimensions. © Kaitlyn Roberts.

Following the performance, I began to work on an accompanying installation, entitled *Burnt candles* (see fig. 9).

The installation involved suspending jars, hanging from the ceiling, with one fallen and broken on the ground.

The work envelopes the viewers as they try to look closer to see what the jars

hold. However, the broken jar on the floor gives off the idea

that if one jar fell and broke, then more can fall and break. This enforces the viewers to not get too close to the work and plays with their body dispositions and *physical* emotions.

The shadows on the wall reflected on ghostly figures, hinting that there are more; was more; will be more.

... Or “sensory compulsions” as Ann Hamilton would call it.

The photographs within the jars are taken from a photo journaling process, where I told my camera my story of sexual violence. The photographs are then placed into glass jars and burned, creating ash.

Ash becomes a great metaphor in this body of work as burning is seen as ceremonial, cleansing, and cremation. However, ash never disappears. It is always there. It can be swept away but it will still float in the air, attaching itself to whatever it can. It lives forever, but hides among the dirt, dust, and dead skin cells.

... very similar to sugar.

This photo journaling process was what inspired my work *Dear Euodia*, as I wasn't completely satisfied with *Burnt candles*, I had decided to try it again with my medical records. Remember when I said I had separated *Dear Euodia* from *The patient, named above?* *Burnt candles* is the work that I had tied *Dear Euodia* together with (see fig. 10).

As each of the projects were created using journaling, photographs, and memoirs, when placed together, the two works bring out the theme of memories and traumatic recalls.

Once I had decided to place the two works together, I began to grow them in quantity so that there seemed to be an overpowering number of jars and photographs that would overwhelm the viewer.

The jars sit in stacks, as they seem to be climbing upon one another. Thinking of the many ways for installing these jars



Figure 10. Kaitlyn Roberts, *Dear Euodia and burnt candles*, 2021, thread on photographs, ash, jars, memories. © Kaitlyn Roberts.

became a challenge for me. What does it mean to pile something up? What does it mean to put something on a shelf? What does it mean to suspend something? What does it mean to stack something up? These were the questions rolling around my mind as I tried to find the answer that would translate what I wanted these jars to represent.

Eventually, I was able to determine that stacking the jars into piles brings to attention the meaning of increasing something continuously, in a way that appears intimidating and overwhelming, just as the memory of my pain is intimidating and overwhelming. It also makes me think of the possibility of turning this project into a community collaboration; allowing the viewers to add their own burnt memories to the stack.

... This is an idea for another time...

The jars are all made of glass. Not only is this for sake of efficiency to burn each photograph in its own jar, but it also gives the feeling of anxiety as there is a possibility of the jars falling and breaking while they are stacked on one another.

... Maybe this will release the memory, one moment at a time.

There are burnt, and stitched photographs *placed* on the wall above the jars, which begin to become less in number as they move further away from the jars.

Photographing my memories to make them tangible; burning my memories to try and release me from them; containing the ashes as I don't want to forget them completely; stacking the memories as they wait to fall and break free... maybe these are the steps of therapy.

Did you notice I italicized the word 'placed'?

The burnt photographs were placed on the wall. Not pinned, not hung, not trapped. I carefully placed the photographs on the wall in a grid-like formation and carefully made sure each one was level.

As stated previously in chapter; "Mental Illness and Suicidal Ideation" of this dissertation, these photographs were taken from frames of a video where I read my medical records to my camera.

Printed larger than your typical 'photo-album' style photograph and on photo paper, these photographs appear as though they are valuable. They show that they were harmed, but they also show that they have been bandaged up, as if they are now healing.

It is important that the photographs are placed carefully on the wall, just as it is important that the jars are stacked up, collecting dust as they wait for more to join them.

This work is about the traumatic memories and painful memories that have been trapped within me. It's about sharing these stories and knowing I am not alone. It's about not forgetting, and overall, it's about healing.

t

trauma bodies:

When I decided to take a chance on doing a performance piece, I began to look at other artists who also use their body to share their autobiographical experiences-with trauma.

Irene Loughlin is a multimedia artist who uses visual imagery and performance to confront the social construction of mental illness.

Within *“Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects”* by Lisa Steele 1976, Loughlin revisits each of her traumatic events throughout this body of work and this is something I do as well. This piece has also inspired me to use my own body as part of my research and methodology.

Loughlin’s art embodies feminism and health activism to comment on contemporary emotional dialogues. All of Loughlin’s works are created from her personal and/or witnessed experiences throughout her lifetime.

In 2008, Loughlin created an appropriated video piece of Lisa Steele’s *Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects* (1976) and called it *“Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects”* by Lisa Steele 1976 (2008) (see fig. 11).

The original Lisa Steele piece involved Steele recording a video on her 27th birthday. At the beginning of the video, Steele states:

“September 22nd, 1947, to September 22nd, 1974. In honour of my

I believe that the body remembers pain and trauma more clearly than the mind. It makes sense, especially when the mind tends to blank out these events so that it doesn’t need to relive the memory, but I can still feel the memory in my body when a man assaults me on the bus.

birthday, I'm going to show you my birthday suit with scars and defects." Steele then proceeds to reveal her naked body while stating each of the physical scars she has gotten throughout her life, in chronological order.

For example: *"1947. Surgery at birth to remove goitre. 1947.*



Figure 11. Irene Loughlin, *"Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects"* by Lisa Steele 1976, 2008, video still. © Irene Loughlin.

Transfusion because of a serious illness. Three months old. "1950. Fell on bleach bottle while riding tricycle in basement."

Loughlin uses Steele's work to produce her own interpretation of the original video, by drawing attention to her own scars and defects. While Steele focuses on the physicality of her body, Loughlin takes an emotional approach, while reading as though it was a witness testimony:

“1974. Sexual abuse. Head positioned to hit headboard of bed repeatedly with the intent to create audible sound. Perpetrator places hands between head and headboard to muffle sound. Seven years old. 1985. Severe depressive episodes, hopelessness and disassociation accompanied by the desire to no longer live. 18 years old.”

Throughout the duration of the video, Loughlin mimics the body language of Steele, but trades Steele’s external and physical scars for internal and mental ones. Time becomes an interesting factor as Loughlin appropriates Steele’s work thirty-two years later.²²

This piece specifically, had a great deal of impact on my *Friends* performance presented at the beginning of my MFA research. Loughlin’s work influenced me to reveal everything and to be completely vulnerable in front of my viewers, by telling one of my own stories of sexual assault. Although Loughlin’s performance is done through video, the screen is her way of protecting herself, rather than performing live. While I perform mine live, the blindfold I wear protects me.

²² Discourses around trauma had changed greatly throughout this thirty-two-year time period. Although trauma was first introduced in the late 19th century, it was only seen as a symptom of hysteria and personality disorders. This didn’t change until posttraumatic stress disorder was re-introduced in the 1980’s by the Women’s Liberation Movement (Appignanesi). When Steele first created this work in 1976, trauma was still considered to be fault of the victim. Although this was a major shift in understanding trauma, there is still much work to be done in acknowledging and correcting the traumatic events placed on women from their treatments for their initial traumatic sufferings.

V

vulnerability as strength (and my conclusion):

Dear My Love,

It is time for you to become the butterfly.

You've been sleeping in your cocoon, taking more care of the shield around you than of yourself. You need to break out of it. Otherwise, you can't become the butterfly.

You have grown so much. You just need to finish that last sip, to drink in all that you are.

There is so much relief in being able to tell people. There is so much freedom in not having to hide the struggle. It is often painful. It is often tearful. But the relief you feel afterwards is addicting. You couldn't keep all that hurt inside of you. You would have burst at your seams. These works of art give you an escape from that for a little while.

Throughout the past couple of years, you have been collecting, researching, and creating.

When you create your work, a release comes out of you. It's like taking a deep breath. You used to be so afraid of him, afraid of John. Your feminine mind, trapped to his higher status; following you wherever you go.

Learning that vulnerability is strength has been a difficult part of this journey. Learning when to face my trauma (or learning when I'm ready to face it) has also been difficult.

My love, I have seen you wrestle with panic attacks as John takes over and fills you with horrifying ideas. A dance between John and you. You just need to take the lead.

You are a beautiful gesture as you dance your way through life.

John is just stronger right now.

But you are not alone. We will get there together. We will be by your side fighting with you.

You need to become aware of all your incredibleness and begin to think back to all the times someone said something beautiful about you.

“Your voice sounds like that of an angel’s.”

So, you began to use it.

“You’re eyes sparkle in the sunlight.”

So, you shined brighter.

“I think your smile is the most beautiful thing in the world.”

So, you beamed bigger.

Today, you can experience the day when you can stand up and proudly say “I am beautiful inside and out.” And mean it completely.

Throughout the past couple of years, you have been collecting data from your past, from your body, from your life. You have been researching the ways in which pain, feminism, and mental illness are all trapped under John who seems to nurture the capitalism and patriarchy that turns a blind eye on the mental wellbeing of women. All your life you have created art as way to let out your clustered thoughts. Now, you create empathetical spaces for you and all the *hysterical* women before you.

You have now become the butterfly.

Yours truly,

Your Secret Admirer

a highly suggested reading list

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You can start with these.

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appendix a

the story behind the performance:

I should have known from the beginning, but I enjoyed the attention.

Why do we get a high when a friend of our ex sends us a message?

I mean, I definitely wasn't interested, but he didn't seem to mind. "Just want to be friends," he said.

"Friends."

Why not? We would be starting school together in the Fall. Besides, it would be nice to know someone other than the guy who broke my heart just a week earlier. Plus, the two of them would be living together. Maybe then I can show him that I am definitely not boring.

I still remember the feeling when he said that. The man I loved thought I was boring. My tied-together self-esteem shattered completely. There was no way I could put it back together this time.

I cringe when I think back to that night. I was already drunk even though I was only halfway through my second drink; those light-weight high school days. I was in the washroom changing from shorts to pants, getting ready for the bonfire, when he walked in. I remember laughing, thinking he was trying to get a glimpse of my body, but he just sat on the toilet seat and started crying.

"We can be friends."

I remember begging him not to leave, but he did and all I could do was hug the toilet and wait for my friends to find me.

What an asshole.

I went home that night, drunk and shattered. Looking back, I don't know if I was more upset that he dumped me or that he thought I was boring.

Those words followed me into the Fall. New school, new friends, new freedom, and all I could worry about was not being boring. So, I drank until I wasn't. I was that girl who knew where every party was, every night of the week. And I made sure he knew about it.

His roommate and I became friends. Yes, the one who slid into my DMs during the summer. We were in the same class, we liked the same tv show, and I enjoyed having a direct resource that could let my ex know exactly how fun I was. Besides, it was the first year of university;

everybody just wanted to be friends with everybody else. Or at least everybody was just trying to be more popular than everybody else.

I guess so was I.

I still remember when I got his text. It was nearing two in the morning. I was laying in my tiny cardboard-like residence bed waiting for the booze to guide me into a deep sleep.

He wanted to come over and hang out.

I told him no. I was too tired, and I wanted to be alone.

He came anyway.

I heard the knocking on the lounge floor door and the last thing I needed was him to wake up my roommates. So, I let him in, told him we could hang out for a little bit, but then he had to leave.

I turned on our favourite tv show. We weren't even five minutes into the show when he leaned over and tried to kiss me.

I shoved him away.

He tried to persuade me at first. Pretended to be hurt that I didn't feel the same way about him.

That's when he reached for the waist band of my pyjama pants.

All I remember is that I kept saying the word, "no."

Over and over again, that's all I could say. I remember squeezing my legs together, hoping that my thighs would save me.

I blacked out.

I woke up on the floor, hugging my trembling body, trying not to scream. I tried to remember what happened, but my mind refused to look back. I was confused. I know I wasn't drugged because I didn't drink anything. A quick Google search explained that our minds can go into something that sounds to me like a 'self-defence mode'. The mind blocks out the trauma, refusing to put your body through that pain again.

It was terrifying that I didn't know what had happened to me. All I knew was that I didn't want anyone to know.

I was ashamed.

I was ashamed because it felt like I just let him. I could have screamed but my body was frozen. I kept asking myself, why did I let him beat me?

Anytime I had heard a story about this happening to another, it was always “if you’re careful, you’ll be safe,” “if you stay away from scary places, you’ll be safe,” “if you cover your body, you’ll be safe.” No one ever mentioned, “be careful, a friend might take advantage of you in your own house.”

I just want to go back and protect 18-year-old me.

An entire year passed before I told anyone.

A friend of mine was a photographer and needed a model to grow his portfolio for his graphic design aspirations. It was in the midst of the shoot when he came walking through the apartment door. My entire body froze. I don’t remember breathing. That photographer was the first person I told. The only reason I had told him was because I needed to get out of there.

Something released.

That’s what I felt when I finally got the words out. Near the beginning, the words I kept choosing were, ‘sexually assaulted’. I wasn’t ready to say what it really was out loud. The word ‘rape’ made it feel like I was victimizing myself and the last thing I wanted was to have people make a big deal out of it. I didn’t want to talk about it; still don’t.

“I’m sorry that happened to you.” It’s whatever.

I later found out that most sexual assault and rape cases go untold, because the victim feels embarrassed by the event. When I first found this out, I felt relieved that I wasn’t the only one. Then I was angry.

Why the fuck are we so afraid to stand up for ourselves when someone else hurts us.

Maybe this bullshit goes back to kindergarten when you got in trouble for being a ‘tattle tale’. We have been accustomed to letting bad people get away with bad things, because we don’t want to be that ‘tattle tale’.

Or maybe we’re afraid that if we tell someone, they will shun us for ‘not being careful enough,’ for ‘hanging out with the wrong crowd,’ for ‘not watching our drinks closely enough.’

The second time I told anyone was to my group of coworkers at a restaurant. There were only four of us who worked in the coffee shop, so we had grown to be quite close.

The one’s reaction was exactly as I had always feared: “Why didn’t you do anything about it?”

Another one shut her down so fast, I didn't have time to feel bad about myself: "No one knows what their bodies will do when they're in shock, until it happens." I had never been so grateful for anyone in my life up until that point.

I understood her question though.

"Why didn't you do anything about it?"

I, myself, have thought those very words when reading about other people who have been raped.

I had asked myself that same question so many times. I felt like I was just giving myself excuses.

For three years I kept telling myself that maybe he just didn't hear me when I told him no.

For three years I kept telling myself that a friend wouldn't do that on purpose, it must have been an accident.

It took me three years to convince myself otherwise.

...When I was 18, I was raped by someone I thought was my friend.