

FOLLOWING THE AESTHETIC IMPULSE: A COMPARATIVE APPROACH TO A POETICS OF TRAUMA

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298 Where are the intersections of poetry, trauma, and healing? How does reading and writing poetry open a space for the imagination to transform embodied memories too real and horrific to be recounted in ordinary language into images that rest softly, or not so softly, on the page? How does writing become part of a process of cultivating self-trust when the world has taught you that you were wrong to believe your body ever belonged to you in the first place? Can a community-engaged practice of poetry-making cultivate collective healing for a society fractured and torn apart by systems of colonization and patriarchy?

These are questions I continuously ask myself—as a poet, as a trauma survivor, as an educator, and as an expressive arts practitioner developing a community practice with survivors of trauma.¹ These are the questions that guide me personally and professionally, and they make up the focus of this article, which intersects many disciplines: literary theory and hermeneutics, psychology, feminist trauma theory, and expressive arts theory and practice. I situate this interdisciplinary work within Comparative Literature, because my ongoing and developing practice in working with trauma survivors is rooted, fundamentally, in viewing survivors as readers of their own histories and producers of poetry that transforms those histories. I follow in the tradition of Paul Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutics by focusing on poetry as a medium of creating effective individual and social change specifically because poetry, as a linguistic medium, is able to hold the complicated, intersecting and often contradicting narratives that trauma creates for the survivor's sense of self. Such narratives often overwhelm the structures of traditional discursive language because they overwhelm the boundaries and expectations of 'normal' experience. As trauma theorist Cathy Caruth expresses in her work *Unclaimed Experience*, the expression of trauma must be "spoken in a language that is always somehow literary:

a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding” (5).

The discussion that follows integrates poetic excerpts from authors often associated with trauma literature, such as Audre Lorde, Virginia Woolf, Jeanette Winterson, and Canadian Indigenous author Beckylane. My use of literature serves to model *how* poetry becomes a site of change and transformation for survivors as both readers and writers. Discussing how this transformation occurs requires philosophical grounding in understanding of the mimetic reference of the poetically creative and imaginative act, which I take from Ricoeur’s phenomenological hermeneutics. A brief discussion of Ricoeur’s theory of the living metaphor is included as a means of locating poetry as an aesthetically mediating imaginative *and* imitative act in the process of healing. My own expressive arts practice with survivors is mentioned only briefly, as the purpose of this article is to further develop and share the theoretical foundations with which I currently work, namely, a poetics of trauma framed within a practice that is feminist and anti-oppressive. As Kali Tal states in *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*: “When a survivor testifies, she both purges herself of an internal ‘evil’ and bears witness to a social or political injustice” (200). I agree with Tal that the political dimension of survivors’ poetic transformations of traumatic experience is always present and always part of individual and collective healing.

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A POETICS OF TRAUMA

In *Poetry is Not a Luxury*, Audre Lorde, whose work and life often demonstrated a relationship between trauma, poetry, and an individual and communal healing empowerment, makes direct reference to the empowering effects of writing poetry by claiming that through writing we enter deep reserves of our selfhood and creativity:

As we learn to bear the intimacy of scrutiny, and to flourish within it, as we learn to use the products of that scrutiny for power within our living, those fears which rule our lives and form our silences begin to lose their control over us.

For each of us as women, there is a dark place within where hidden and growing our true spirit rises, ‘Beautiful and tough as chestnut/stanchions against our nightmare of weakness’ and of impotence.

These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through darkness. Within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling. The woman’s place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep. (36)

I begin with this reference to Lorde’s *Poetry is Not a Luxury* because the deepness to which she refers as a reservoir of creativity and strength is a site from which a poetics of trauma emerges. These depths, which, from Lorde’s feminist perspective, are roots that connect women, especially women of colour, to an ancient wisdom from which

they gain creative protection from “white fathers” (36), are also a description of the depths in which all of our traumas live.² From a trauma theory perspective, these depths comprise the realms of survivors’ banished selves that hold the shame, anger, and regret we so often try to pretend do not exist, and yet they do. These depths hold the stories and imprints of personal and cultural pasts that often carry too much weight for the daily consciousness to acknowledge. Lorde’s depths resonate with Freud’s work on the unconscious and what Jung refers to as our shadow. In these places of shadow, the boundaries between our own pain and our culture’s pain are not always clear, and thus healing our personal traumas can reciprocate social transformation (Richo 13); and, as Lorde’s conclusion to the passage cited above makes clear, poetry is a means of writing these banished selves into awareness: “For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action” (36).

300 As trauma theorists such as Caruth, Tal, and Herman have shown, poetry serves as a means of survival and restoration. By entering the banished pain that often produces a split sense of self and allowing it to transform through the aesthetic act, an integrative self-empowerment and healing can arise.³

My approach to a poetics of trauma moves from the claim that by entering the memories of our traumas and banished selves through poetic mediation,⁴ healing occurs and we gain access to a more fully integrated sense of self. Allowing our individual and cultural depths of experience to speak authentically through the act of poetry making, however, is not a simple task. As Jeanette Winterson queries in *Lighthouse Keeping*, “How could she carry in her body, the trace winds of the past?” (47). The pasts of our individual lives and cultural inheritances live in us, felt at times consciously and other times unconsciously, like trace winds of memories we push aside because we do not want to feel the pain attached to them or grieve the losses of which they remind us. These memories, contemporary psychology demonstrates, are stored in the body as well as the mind, and thus, when entering the realm of traumatic memory, it is the body that must be allowed to speak its memories, however we conceptualize or imagine this speaking to occur (van der Wiel 16).⁵ The difficulty of accessing and expressing traumas held in the body-mind complex is specifically what calls for a poetics of trauma, which I define as a progressive process of re-imagining the self⁶ in relation to the world through creative acts of poesis that intend not to explain or “cure” trauma but to heal it through poetic transformation.⁷ Literary works of trauma survivors show that access to these memories is often complicated and expression of them is rarely linear, straightforward, and not always in our control (Caruth 5). In *Where the Rivers Join*, a poetic memoir of ritual abuse, Canadian Indigenous author Beckylane writes of recovering memory from her childhood. The experience of memories releasing themselves from her body and mind is a confusing struggle that tears at her very sense of self-identity, a struggle that perhaps only poetry can begin to reflect in language. Poetry’s ability to create meaning from broken forms

of linguistic and existential meaning allows the aesthetic discourse to represent and make manifest the broken hearts and spirits of survivors:

I feel so terrible.
 how can I fit the kinds of abuse I'm remembering into some
 kind of me
 it's so much and it's so broad and it's so utterly
 fantastical. I must be making it up
 remember make up
 re member cover up
 find hide
 am I finding or am I hiding?
 Both. I'm hiding from what I've found. (14)

Similarly, writing of the inability to discuss traumatic events and memories in everyday discursive language, Patricia Moran explains in *Virginia Woolf, Jean Rhys, and the Aesthetics of Trauma*:

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Existing meaning schemes may be entirely unable to accommodate frightening experiences, which causes the memory of those experiences to be stored differently and not available under ordinary conditions; it becomes dissociated from conscious awareness and voluntary control [...] Traumatic events persist as preverbal 'body memories' that resist narration [...] These memories remain 'wordless and static' (Herman). Indeed the trauma story is prenarrative. (5)

Beckylane and Moran both illustrate the difficulty of expressing traumatic memory in language; and yet, a paradox exists in that, despite the inaccessibility and "pre-narrative" nature of such memories, we have a genre of 'trauma literature' wherein individuals such as Woolf or Toni Morrison use poetry and experimental narrative as means of expressing and representing the very experiences that "resist narration." As such, many literary theorists characterize the experimental forms of modern and postmodern literature as perfect for the task of describing and narrating events that do not exist in purely linear forms of narrative memory: "The trauma aesthetic is uncompromisingly avant-garde: experimental, fragmented, refusing the consolations of beautiful form and suspicious of familiar representation and narrative conventions" (van der Wiel 16). When this function of literature is offered and taught to the community within a pedagogically therapeutic framework such as expressive arts, I argue, we develop methods of allowing trauma consciousness to be transformed and healing to occur through the mediation of a poetics of trauma. Trauma, however, never occurs in isolation. We and our wounds are always situated within a cultural matrix of power and privilege. Acknowledging and working with the cultural influences of trauma is thus an important aspect of working with trauma survivors that is often missed by practitioners and scholars who tend to work from a place of theoretical isolation (Afuape 11). Acknowledging and accounting for a politics of trauma is thus necessarily part of developing a poetics of trauma in which writing mediates and transforms personal and cultural wounds. As Patricia Moran shows, and

as was suggested earlier by Tal, aesthetic expressions and formalizations of trauma in literature become political acts that link literary theory's explorations of trauma to feminism: "Their insistence on memory as integral to that agency recalls Sidonie Smith's and Julia Watson's claim that by 'citing new, formerly unspeakable stories, narrators become cultural witnesses insisting on memory as agency in its power to intervene in imposed systems of meaning'" (Moran 3).

Survivors becoming cultural witnesses through the act of writing and expressing their own memories is important, because this process identifies how personal healing facilitates collective and social change. Beckylane's poetic memoir echoes Moran's suggestion that the written testimony of survivors transforms them into cultural witnesses which then impacts our cultural heritages. Beckylane integrates Elie Wiesel's testimony into her own in the following passage:

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elie wiesel survived the nazi holocaust. He says, rejected
by [human]kind, the condemned do not go so far as to reject
it in return. their faith in history remains unshaken,
and one can well wonder why. they do not despair.
the proof: they persist in surviving—not
only to survive, but to testify. the
victims elect to become witnesses. (217)

In the experience of remembering and expressing trauma, the personal is political. Memories that we exile from our own consciousness often mirror the cultural taboos that society exiles from mainstream culture. For example, I work with women who have experienced childhood sexual abuse, and the experience of watching a woman share her story, be it the first time or the fiftieth time, is often like watching someone speak through lips that have been locked shut. Beckylane's poetry clearly describes this experience:

the incested wounded me is quiet unable to speak choked
silenced humiliated. humiliated. humiliated before anyone
everyone even me the woman me. Unable to believe the visual
unable to believe wanting to believe wanting to be able to
speak freely. what if the humiliated frightened child whose
tongue's been chopped sliced out were to speak. freely. openly
what would she say?
help. she would ask for help. (7)

The tongues of survivors of sexual assault are locked or "sliced" by their abusers and the systematic shaming techniques of gendered and violent abuse, but they are also silenced by a patriarchal society that offers little room to acknowledge their stories of survival (Lewis 12). Tal discusses this phenomenon of silencing as a cultural practice of "disappearance": "a refusal to admit to the existence of a particular kind of trauma" (6) where, in the words of bell hooks, we as a North American culture are socialized to collude with this practice of disappearance by conforming ourselves to the social norms that uphold white supremacist imperialist capitalist patriarchy

(hooks 23). Entering and voicing our own exiled memories can thus interrupt the dominant culture's imposed systems of meaning as victims become artists and witnesses that create space for more expansive perceptions of 'normal' experiences. When we allow a more fully integrated self to emerge, we can also allow a more fully integrated culture to emerge (Afuafe 68). In doing so, we develop a community whose collective consciousness is more comfortable traveling into the depths of which Lorde wrote, and are able to freely access modes of thinking and expressing other than the linear, colonial, and patriarchal models of rationalization, suggesting social transformations may occur through a liberating empowerment mediated through the poetic expression of self.

Allowing the body to speak from these places where so much trauma lives, be it one's childhood memory or cultural shaming based on gender, sexuality, race or religion, is a difficult and sometimes seemingly impossible task. As Virginia Woolf wrote in *Professions for Women*: "The adventure of telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved. I doubt that any woman has solved it yet" (qtd. in Moran 1); Woolf's body also had stories of childhood sexual abuse to tell (Moran 70). Our bodies, like our psyches, are our lived experiences. They bear the marks and scars of pain, which, when it comes to traumatic experience, is a pain often invisible to the outside or untrained eye. Moreover, our bodies house our histories in very different ways from our intellects, which are so well conditioned to abstracting or dissociating from pain, and at times forgetting it, especially when doing so is a means of survival (Herman 43). If we are to heal as fully integrated beings and a fully integrated society in which imposed systems of power are disrupted and marginalized experiences are able to integrate with those at the centre, then these banished selves must be allowed to surface and express themselves. A poetics of trauma becomes a means of establishing such a practice in a community model of healing that blends education with therapy.⁸ Yet, the word 'trauma' itself needs to be more clearly flushed out. Before discussing the transformative process of poetics through phenomenological hermeneutics and expressive arts therapy and practice, it is important to define "trauma", which is not an easy task.

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DEFINING TRAUMA

Trauma is a difficult term to work with, especially because for so long it has been defined not by those who have experienced it or lived it, but by those in power, educated in systems of medicine and psychiatry with the privilege to decide for others what constitutes neurosis and what constitutes "normal" (Linklater 29). The problem with this has been that it constructs a paradigm that often re-inscribes survivors into the very power imbalances responsible for the socio-economic-political roots of situations that frayed their identity in the first place. According to the feminist scholars and psychotherapists at Wesley College's Stone Centre: "When 'personality traits'

are attributed to a subordinate group and pathologized, psychological theories help to justify and preserve the culture's power stratifications" (Jordan 4). Practices of pathologizing based on cultural power stratifications as a means of diagnosis parallel and intersect contexts of power imbalance within which abuse occurs and reoccurs. For instance, Taiwo Afuape's work in *Power, Resistance and Liberation in Therapy with Survivors of Trauma* shows how power stratifications among race, class, and gender create a political matrix responsible for the oppression and prejudice which foster abuse in society (30). Similarly, Bonnie Burstow's work at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in Toronto directly confronts political structures and institutionalized systemic oppression as they relate to defining trauma and established systems of diagnosis, systems that she claims re-traumatize survivors through the very practices intended to "cure" them (1294).

304 In her 2003 article, "Toward a Radical Understanding of Trauma and Trauma Work," Burstow expresses that a new approach for working with and talking about trauma is urgently needed in North American culture, one that has yet to be widely implemented. For her, our world

is a world, in which women, the working class, Natives, people of color, Jews, lesbians and gays, and the disabled are routinely violated both in overt physical ways and in other ways inherent in systemic oppression and where the psychological effects of this violation are often passed down from generation to generation. (1302)

Burstow continues to define trauma without re-inscribing privileged positions with words such as *neuroses* or *pathology*, a definition I adapt in my own community approach:

Trauma is not a disorder but a reaction to a kind of wound. It is a reaction to profoundly injurious events and situations in the real world and, indeed, to a world in which people are routinely wounded. Although traditionally applied to individuals, [...] it can apply to communities, nations, and the world itself. (1302)

Caruth uses similar language when defining the traumatic experience as "the enigma of the otherness of a human voice that cries out from the wound" (3). Trauma becomes, not a burden that forever prevents one from identifying as "normal," but a wound that is part of one's identity and being in this world that needs to be expressed, witnessed, and integrated, individually and collectively. From this perspective, in order to create healing practices on a societal level, it is society, and not the survivor, that needs to change its understanding of what is accepted as 'normal.' Society so often 'disappears' and silences the wounded voice of the survivor, forcing her, him, or them to other themselves. As Vanessa Oliver explains in her work with the trauma of Toronto homeless youth: "What is often easily brushed aside as a disorder can, and often should be understood as a rational response to irrational or pathological social environments" (143). Behaviour that becomes categorized as pathological by professionals is often due not to deficiency of the individual but to her surroundings and experiences and the society that perpetuates them.

Burstow's article continues to emphasize the complexities and problems of traditional trauma models, including feminist, by critiquing any approach that begins from a preconceived notion of normalized behaviour or identity. To do so, she argues, aligning herself with the view of the Stone Centre scholars, signals an injustice to survivors and/or communities, as is certainly demonstrated in Canada's pathologizing of indigenous trauma without, until very recently, recognizing the highly illogical environment that colonization forced upon an entire people. When the experiences of the marginalized are measured against those who "have not had the ground come out from under them and can walk around with a certain cloak of invulnerability," an innate imbalance is imbedded within our system of diagnosis:

What happens to a person who is badly traumatized is that the person loses that cloak of invulnerability. When a woman is raped, for instance, she loses the capacity to 'edit out.' She knows that life can get at her. This being so, a case could be made that the highly traumatized person actually sees the world more accurately than the less traumatized. [...] [Thus a] decent trauma praxis simply cannot rest on a deficiency model. (Burstow 1298)

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Similarly, Indigenous scholars and therapists have challenged the very ways in which white colonizers "hear" stories and accounts of trauma. They claim that what bell hooks terms the "colonized mind" (4) of the privileged is so conditioned to applying and making judgements from the deficiency models Burstow describes, that they compromise their ability to genuinely hear accounts of trauma from marginalized peoples without distorting them through unconscious bias. In her 2015 article, for instance, Vicki Saunders discusses how the very notions of narrative and time for Australian indigenous peoples are different from the dominant culture and therefore necessary to understand indigenous mental health (4). She asks that the dominant culture move to a practice of radical listening rather than relying on an indoctrinated viewpoint that would pre-judge those living in poverty and addiction as less than a normalized standard crafted by a white privilege paradigm. These efforts by social activists, therapists, and scholars seeking to right the wrongs done to trauma survivors through traditional diagnosis models ask that survivors be heard through a lens of what I call empathetic allyship rather than deficiency, a paradigm shift that puts the individual or community's experience at the centre of any relationship or healing model and asks those in power to investigate their own biases and shadows *before* reaching any interpretation of survivors' stories.

FOLLOWING THE AESTHETIC IMPULSE

A community practice built on an anti-oppressive framework that allows poetic expressions to offer a mediating and transformative space to the survivors' traumatic experiences is a politically responsible shift that accommodates Burstow's call to radicalize our approach to trauma and Saunders's call to change the way we listen (or we might say "read") and relate. Part of the complexity of healing from trauma, to

return to the discussion suggested by Lorde's and Woolf's poetic expressions, is that these traumatic experiences, be they the intergenerational traumas inherited from indigenous marginalization and racism, the traumas of war veterans living in the throes of PTSD, or the traumas of adult survivors of childhood abuse, are stored in the body and psyche's depths, which are not accessible to everyday consciousness.⁹ The guiding question thus becomes how we can access those depths in a manner that is transformative rather than repressive or at risk of producing more harm. The goal is not to enter pain in order to relive it without resolution, but to transform it so that the self may evolve into a body that carries less weight and learns to break the cycles of trauma that are handed down from one generation to the next. Following expressive arts practices and my training in comparative literature, I suggest we allow an aesthetic impulse to guide us there, integrating the works of poets and artists that could not but follow this impulse, and allow that impulse to influence our community work and our teaching. For instance, in *In the Body of the World*, Eve Ensler, social activist and author of the *Vagina Monologues*, writes a memoir in poetic prose that literally and figuratively transforms her experience of embodied trauma. While discussing her adult journey through cancer and its effects on her body, she describes how she was called to enter her body and remember her childhood trauma of sexual abuse, memories she had pushed away and numbed herself to: "My body that I had been forced to evacuate when my father invaded and then violated me. And so I lived as a breathless, rapacious machine programmed for striving and accomplishment" (3). Her body's present disease opens Ensler's old wounds and allows them to heal, a process that includes the creative act of writing about those wounds, naming them, and in doing so, becoming a witness that interrupts the structures of power that silenced her. She concludes her book with a call to trauma survivors in solidarity for transformation: "We are the people of the second wind. We, who have been undermined, reduced and minimalized, we know who we are. Let us be taken. Let us turn our pain to power, our victimhood to fire, our self-hatred to action, our self-obsession to service, to fire, to wind. Wind. Wind" (216). Wind becomes a metaphor of transformation in which writing (and living and working in community) is the route that allows Ensler to achieve this transformation for herself and the communities with which she works. Writing becomes a therapeutic form of healing from trauma that, when put into community, can transform collective victimhood into empowered communion. The questions thus become *how* poetry becomes a site for acknowledging and transforming pain so that the traumatic experiences imprinted on the body, and often not able to be verbalized in discursive language, can heal and become Ensler's winds of this world without re-inscribing systems of privilege and domination; and how this process becomes available to underprivileged people who are not necessarily the Virginia Woolfs, Audre Lordes, or Eve Ensler's of this world. Expressive arts therapy and pedagogy is an approach that brings the literary aesthetic of trauma into a practice of community healing; however, I come to this practice by way of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics and theory of metaphor. I turn briefly to that

theory now in order to provide theoretical grounding to the praxis of a politically motivated poetics of trauma in expressive arts.

HERMENEUTICS

Ricoeur's book on "the living metaphor," *La Métaphore Vive*, translated as *The Rule of Metaphor*, is a dense and philosophically rich work that explores what he terms the "ontological vehemence" of poetic discourse (245). In it, he presents a relationship between poetry and the (re)discovery of our being-in-the-world, and as such, it is a work that could easily take the entire length of this article to discuss. What follows is a brief glimpse of the core theoretical concept at work in *La Métaphore Vive*—a relationship between mimesis and poesis—as it relates to my conception of community practice that enacts a poetics of trauma.¹⁰ The tensional status Ricoeur opens between the mimetic and poetic aspects of metaphor are essential to a poetics of trauma because this philosophical grounding is the explanation of *why* and *how* poetry allows us to transform trauma, and thus it must be mentioned, even if only briefly.¹¹

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In *La Métaphore Vive*, Ricoeur writes of a mimetic poesis as the essential paradox of poetic discourse in that the world depicted by the poetic text, a text operating on an existentially metaphorical level, is always both imagined *and* real. Its mimetic quality brings an imitative function that resembles a 'true' reference, true in the sense that the linguistic reference makes sense enough for our literal reasoning to grasp it, and imaginative in that the reference is also fictional or figurative (190). Ricoeur's innovation and contribution to the long-standing debate and analysis of metaphor is that he concludes that both meanings, the literal and the figurative, exist symbiotically such that poetic meaning is *always* dialectically held: it is always true *and* is always not true (248).¹² Ricoeur articulates this tensional and paradoxical status of metaphor: "the creative dimension is inseparable from this referential movement. *Mimesis* is *poiesis*, and *poiesis* is *mimesis*" (190). For Ricoeur, the paradox of metaphor, that mimesis is poesis and poesis is mimesis, is the conceptual basis of literature itself.¹³ Poetics comes to include any form of discourse that simultaneously represents and creates. The world depicted in a narrative's 'plot' is not a fictionally isolated world, but a 'living world' in which we actively discover and appropriate into our ourselves new dimensions of understanding and self expression. New self-understanding can arrive from reading and writing the poetic text specifically because the text's meaning can exist in a dimension that refuses to be isolated in a binary as either fictional or literal. It is both, and Ricoeur suggests that our own embodied experiences, much like the survivor's traumatic memories and experiences, can be both. The core argument in *LMV* stems from Ricoeur's interpretation of Aristotle:

the concept of *mimêsis* [...] reminds us that no discourse ever suspends our belonging to a world. All *mimêsis*, even creative,—nay, especially creative—*mimêsis*, takes place within

the horizons of a being-in-the-world [...] The truth of imagination, poetry's power to make contact with being as such, this is what I personally see in Aristotle's *mimêsis*. [...] to serve as an index for that dimension of reality that does not receive due account in the simple description of that-thing-over-there. (43)

Literal and discursive language that identify "that thing over there" are not enough to represent the human being's contact with 'being as such,' or we might say, with the dark depths of Lorde's poetic dimensions of being. This inherent dialectical relationship between *mimesis* and *poiesis* that Ricoeur identifies as necessary to establish any "existential import" for poetic language is essential to my work with survivors, because it expresses why the acts and processes of reading and writing poetry are able to transform the trauma survivor's very sense of self. The emotions, memories, insights, and experiences being depicted poetically are those that, like metaphor for Ricoeur, may not be able to be translated into discursive language. When Jeanette Winterson writes of the female character in *Lighthouse Keeping*, "How could she carry in her body the trace winds of the past," this is much different than analytically discussing neglect and childhood pain. The winds are and are not real, and this tensional status, according to Ricoeur, allows the poetic meaning to resonate more deeply with the reader than purely speculative language. Ricoeur goes so far as to claim that philosophical discourse can never reveal us unto ourselves in the ways that poetry can, specifically because the tensional status of poetry between a literal dimension of meaning and the imagined has the ability to transgress the boundaries and limits of philosophical language, which is bound to the literal (313). Like the survivor's experience of memory, which often seems both real and not real, especially during periods of intense flashbacks,¹⁴ poetry's poetic *mimesis* opens a space from which to explore oneself and one's belonging to the world without the limited categories to which philosophical, or we might say psychiatric, language and diagnosis, are bound. The significance of poetry when working with survivors is not *if* memories surfacing and being transformed into poetry are true or imagined, but *how* metaphorical language allows an inner state of selfhood that transcends categorization to be given life in externalized form as it is unearthed from the realms in which it may have been buried. Accordingly, application of the concept of poetic *mimesis* as a mode of creative production that reveals tensional states of our own beings to ourselves in and through aesthetic discourse becomes a site of potential healing for the trauma survivor.

Reading and entering into the creative imitations of reality that authors depict for readers is an excellent introduction to survivors as a means of understanding how writing their own stories, whatever genre or format they choose, may help them to gain new access and understanding to the parts of themselves they have banished from everyday consciousness. I begin many of my poetry therapy groups with reading a poem by a widely-known author as a means of warmup and introduction to self-exploration through the art, specifically because it attunes participants to the emotional waters that Ricoeur's philosophy describes as ontologically vehement. It

is because the poetic world both is and is not real that it is flexible enough to sustain traumatic memory, which, depending upon a survivor's own experiences and level of acceptance, as seen in Becklyane's testimony above, may feel similarly real and not real, believable and entirely fantastical. It is particularly this tensional status of being both, I would argue, that allows the psyche to survive and remember events that do in deed seem too horrific to account in every day language and yet are very, very real. As Burstow suggested above, the trauma survivor is one who has lost the cloak of invulnerability and in a society that clings tightly to that cloak in its everyday relations and power stratifications, poetry becomes a tool for finding modes and spaces of expression, contact, and understanding.

EXPRESSIVE ARTS THERAPY

I make my final turn to discuss the greater frame within which my work is situated, expressive arts therapy and pedagogy. This is a field in which I have trained, in which comparative literature, hermeneutics, and feminist approaches to trauma are integrated in a client- or community-led relational practice that has at its core an aesthetic, or, to use Ricoeur's terms, a 'poetic' transformation of self. Given that this article occurs in the context of a comparative literature journal, the question is also posed of how entering the poetic space of healing can potentially make us better readers of our own personal and cultural stories.

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Shaun McNiff, a pioneer in the field of Expressive Arts Therapy, explains that the expressive arts practices have features that "distinguish them from what has been called 'the talking cure'" (ix). They have a "primary commitment to expressive action that engages emotions in a direct and physical way; an ability to generate creative energy as a healing force for mind, body and spirit; and a belief that creative imagination can find its way through our most perplexing and complex problems and conflicts" (ix). Talk therapy, here referred to as "the talking cure," is not the most ideal or successful route to healing in an Expressive Arts approach, specifically because it remains in the boundaries and limitations of everyday language. While it is certainly helpful, talking about emotion will not necessarily take one into the depths referenced by Lorde or into contact with being, as Ricoeur claims can occur with poetic discourse. To enter these depths, aesthetic mediation is helpful specifically because of the tensional status of its mimetically creative discourse.¹⁵ In my experience, both working with art in my own memory recovery of childhood abuse and working with other survivors, the poetic exploration is inviting while the analytical is, at times, threatening. The former makes room for and encourages the vast depths of confusion and fear that entering the wound brings to the surface in the survivor, as discussed above in reference to Caruth's work or the avant-garde forms of trauma literature seen in Becklyane's writings, while the latter restricts access with often rigid and predetermined boundaries, potentially re-inscribing the politically

motivated biases of diagnosis discussed by Burstow.

Expressive arts is thus modeled around a transformative aesthetics and involves a “de-centering of self” (Knill 76), a stepping out of discursive rational thought and into a liminal space of creativity, a practice that allows for new versions of selfhood to emerge from the depths of a banished or unknown self. Moreover, the goal of the expressive arts practice is not raw cathartic release, but a containing and reshaping of the experience in the space of, in this case, the poem:

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Most therapists using expressive therapies in their work capitalize on the ability of art... to contain self-expression rather than to encourage cathartic communication of raw emotions or mere repetition of troubling memories. [...] self-expression is used as a container for feelings and perceptions that may deepen into greater self-understanding or may be transformed resulting in emotional reparation, resolution of conflicts, and a sense of well-being. [...] Expressive therapists generally do not seek to interpret individuals' drawings, movement, poems or play, but instead try to facilitate their clients' discovery of personal meaning and understanding. [...] expressive therapies are used to tap the senses as a source of stories and memories. Because thoughts and feelings are not strictly verbal and are not limited to storage as verbal language in the brain, expressive modalities are particularly useful in helping people communicate aspects of memories and stories that may not be readily available through conversation. (Malchiodi 9)

As discussed above and explained here by Malchiodi, traumatic memories are not stored like “normal” or less invasive memories. They are fragmented and body-based, and their process of surfacing closely reflects the non-linear forms of narrative taught to us by modern literature. Thus, an expressive arts practice that applies a phenomenological hermeneutics of the self to what is broken, fragmented, and buried within oneself has the opportunity to emerge and be reshaped into a whole such that the survivor, or community, can see it from new perspectives that may eventually allow survivors to approach difficult experiences with less fear and shame. Through the transformative nature of the work, they may even come to see a beauty that arrives when pain is transformed into something new, as we see in the works of Virginia Woolf, Toni Morrison, Jeanette Winterson, Maya Angelou, and James Baldwin, to name a few. Expressive arts practice in community by no means claims to produce poems as shaped and polished as these authors' works, though in my experience, such a high sensitivity is present that beautiful poetry almost always results. It is, rather, the transformative process that is the focus of the poetic experience. The making of poetry and art in the therapy session, group meeting, or classroom are embodied processes that yield healing and relationship. To seek only to interpret the finished piece rather than the survivor's relationship to it would fall victim to re-inscribing the survivor's art, and by extension, his/her/their self, into those judgements and standards of excellence that are often rooted in the privileges of patriarchy, whiteness, and colonization. As mentioned earlier in the context of Burstow's article, this does sometimes occur in art therapies and psychiatric practices. Accordingly, the expressive arts practitioner or educator is trained to guide the client, whether the survivor or the student, if teaching from an integrative and trauma-informed peda-

gogy such as Felman's, to listen to the story that emerges from the piece she creates and actively learn from it. Whether the piece is seemingly autobiographical, fictional, or both, all open the mimetic and poetic space within which self-understanding and critical reflection occurs. Finally, it is important to mention that in this practice, the aesthetic process occurs in relationship, allowing the survivor's poetics to be actively witnessed and responded to. This is an essential component of the healing process and a reason why writing or art making in and of itself is not necessarily enough to heal, as we see in so many of the tragic suicides and overdoses of highly creative poets and artists. Artists and writers do become cultural witnesses through the act of creating from their own marginalized experiences, but in being witnessed in a trusting relationship in the act of creating and opening to oneself, be it in a group or one-on-one situation, a second level of witnessing occurs that is infinitely more intimate than having one's finished work anonymously viewed or read (DeSalvo 211). When in relationship, the survivor gains confirmation that it is okay to enter the hidden depths of herself for which society has so long shunned her, creating an opportunity to release shame. Creating from her own internalized pain, which may also be the shared pain of her gender, race, ethnicity, culture, or planet, she becomes empowered and transforms herself. Through the reciprocity that is relationship, she also transforms those witnessing her.

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CONCLUSION

In conclusion, a poetics of trauma enlivened through the expressive arts practice allows the survivor, as a self with an embodied history, to be present in the aesthetic work through its mimetically referential aspects. At the same time, someone who is other than this known self emerges in the creative act of poesis. It is this tensional state of selfhood, which for Ricoeur mirrors the tensional state of the metaphorical text, that allows freedom from past experiences to be created through the writing and reading of poetry. Thus, in the tradition of Ricoeur and also Paolo Freire, I suggest that this practice of self-exploration and expression makes us better readers and writers of ourselves and of the world (Freire 50). Through a series of exercises and meditations that bring survivors into an embodied presence, the work of the expressive arts practitioner-educator is to guide the client into an aesthetic space that allows access to the dark depths of which Lorde wrote. These depths connect us both to the personal traumas we learn to repress from consciousness and to the collective wounds that social practices can and do instill on non-dominant identities. Once in this region, we have the ability to heal by following the aesthetic impulses that arrive there. With no certainty of where they will take us, we follow them, and in doing so give voice to the body's silenced pain.

Starhawk describes this transitional passage out of hidden depths in the language of her healing practices based in feminist spirituality:

Without negating the light, we reclaim the dark: the fertile earth where the hidden seed lies unfolding, the unseen power that rises within us, the dark of sacred human flesh, the depths of the ocean, the night—when our senses quicken: we reclaim all the lost parts of ourselves we have shoved down into the dark. Instead of *enlightenment*, we begin to speak of *deepening*, of *getting down* as well as *getting high*. We remember that in the old myths, the entrance to the realm of spirit was through the fairy mound, the café, the crack, the fissure in the earth, the gate, the doorway, the vaginal passage. We call it the *underworld*, and we go within from our visions. (26)

312 For Starhawk, metaphor becomes a mode of describing the survivor's journey through healing as she connects with her own banished underworld and, perhaps, from a more traditional psychoanalytic perspective, the mythic underworld that is present in Jung's psychology of archetypes.¹⁶ Either way, transformation becomes possible specifically because the survivor, having contacted her inner world in a manner other than talk therapy, namely discursive language bound to categories of "true" and "false", is able to paint an image in words, in color, or in music that gives life to that which has been repressed. The process is witnessed and then harvested through discussion with her companion or learning group, and the survivor gains an opportunity to be transformed, however much or little, by this process. The artwork produced becomes its own living metaphor able to interact with other readers and observers and potentially inspire change in them. Thus, poetry, when put into practice with community, becomes a site for actual change and a means of rejecting a traditional practice of colonizing diagnosis that refuses to hear stories of trauma and teaches individuals to banish their own pain from consciousness and cause further suffering, individually and collectively.

Refusing to be silenced and teaching survivors they need not be silenced is a political act that the reading and writing of poetry has to offer a society in much need of healing. As Lee Maracle shows in her poem, *Blind Justice*, when through writing she names the traumas that face Canada's Indigenous peoples—addiction, suicide, abduction, loss of ceremonial song and connection to ancestry and land—one can reclaim a space for the self from which to refuse labels of tragedy, or to pick up Burstow's politics, to refuse identities of deficiency:

Still, I am not tragic
 Not even in my addicted moments
 A needle hanging from the vein of my creased arm
 I was not tragic
 Even as I jump from a boat in a vain attempt to join my ancestors
 I am not tragic
 Even in my disconnection from song, from dance,
 I am not tragic
 Even in seeing you as privileged,
 As an occupier of my homeland in my homeless state
 Even as men abduct as I hitchhike along these new highways
 To disappear along this lonely colonial road

I refuse to be tragic. (135)

When one's very sense of self is taken, be it through acts rooted in colonization, patriarchy, racism, sexism, classism, religious persecution, or any of the many other injustices that lead to domestic abuse and hate crimes in our societies, poetry becomes a place in which to transform wounds and, in doing so, transform our selves. When done in community, the transformations ripple outwards and contribute to the greater healing of consciousness wounded by systems such as patriarchy and colonization. This integrative work is the goal of a poetics of trauma in community practice. Poetic expression and creation becomes a medium of communicating and integrating trauma, not to erase the pain, but to transform it into self and community empowerment. Through this process, intersectionality is acknowledged and stands as a site for the community's aesthetic creations and political transformations. Thus, to Woolf's statement quoted above, "The adventure of telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved. I doubt that any woman has solved it yet," I would reply: what if the journey of letting the body speak is not an adventure to be solved, but created and recreated, again and again, through the integrative and evolutionary act that is poetry making as we follow the aesthetic impulses out of our own depths? Following this journey and entering the worlds poetic expression creates for us is an adventure in itself, that, as an enlivened discourse, can rewrite the past, figuratively and literally.

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NOTES

1. My practice and research primarily focus on women who have experienced violence, especially childhood sexual abuse; however, in this article, I work with a more general category of trauma as any experience(s) and/or conditioning(s) that interrupt one's developmental life and/or well-being, as will be discussed later in the article.
2. Beginning with Lorde's reference to depths of feminine wisdom in no way genders this article's discussion of healing, though such a discussion of gendered violence is certainly warranted. From a feminist perspective, men as well as women benefit and heal from the surfacing of banished cultural memories and personal wounds. For a discussion of men's banished selves in contemporary society, see Real.
3. Regardless of the circumstances that bring trauma to the psyche, the effects of traumatic experience are that they 'other' one's identity, creating the split self that characterizes the effects of abuse and oppression. See Herman 12 and Friere 167-71.
4. Poetic mediation here refers to *both* the acts of reading and writing poetry, though in the context of this article I am most often referring to the act of writing poetry. For reading as a phenomenological process that by its very nature facilitates change in the reader, which can be extended to the impact on self and cultural transformation discussed above, see Brooke-Sunkenberg ch. 2.
5. This body-integrated approach to healing and writing complicates a more traditional view, such as Freud's, that trauma is the 'wound of the mind,' a view taken by Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience*: "But what seems to be suggested by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is that the wound of the mind—the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound

of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that [...] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (4). The Freudian tradition explained here splits the body-mind complex into an isolated either-or relationship rather than a more holistically integrated and complex approach to body-mind consciousness, which in the traditions of somatic, Gestalt, and Expressive Arts psychotherapies, is the one I use in my approach. See Hartley.

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6. The use of the word "self" implies a fluid and ever-changing sense of identity rather than a static or idealized vision of selfhood.
7. Poetics, from the Greek *poiesis*, need not refer specifically to literary expressions and transformations of trauma, but to any aesthetically mediated practice, as is the philosophy behind expressive arts therapy. My own work focuses on poetry as a vehicle for transformation, and thus it is my focus; however, similar arguments are made for poetic transformations through music, visual art, dance, and movement. For more on poiesis, see Levine.
8. It seems important to mention that the context of this article is community-centered education, but these ideas can (and perhaps need to) be applied to post-secondary pedagogy in the classroom as well. Situating poetic mediation in a community-based healing group allows us to teach critical thinking skills by facilitating writing and reading exercises, thus establishing a community model of education *and* healing which, if applied to the more traditional classroom, would make institutionalized education a site for healing *and* learning as well. Shoshana Felman's "Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching" (1995) demonstrates such trauma-informed pedagogy in practice in higher education.
9. One might here ask: why, then, do such memories need to be entered? First, though they may not be accessible to everyday consciousness, unresolved traumatic memories often present themselves as bodily pain, such as migraines or ulcers, or are the cause of seemingly mysterious behaviours, such as impulsive habits, rage, or addiction (Maté 191). Second, just as tensions under the surface may erupt in social situations, tensions stored away in the body-mind complex tend to erupt as well. Third, as mentioned earlier, entering these personal depths may give access to much richer cultural depths of wisdom and tradition, as Lorde's poetry suggests.
10. My use of *La Métaphore Vive* here builds upon extensive discussion of it in my earlier work (Brooke-Sunkenberg ch. 3).
11. Other trauma theorists connect traditions of continental philosophy to trauma studies. Steve Levine makes a related argument for the use of poiesis in working with trauma. His work is focused on an analysis of Greek trauma in relation to the philosophy of Heidegger and Nietzsche (Levine 50). Caruth discusses Kant and others in *Unclaimed Experience*. Neither discusses Ricoeur, nor do they bring a specific focus and connection to phenomenological hermeneutics, which, I argue, helps to situate the linguistic mediation of the aesthetic impulse.
12. For Ricoeur's discussion of this debate, see ch. 7.
13. As such, the "living metaphor" represents the existential import of aesthetic discourse and could be extended to visual art, music, movement, etc. It is not restricted to "poetry" as such, but rather refers to the work and function of "poetic discourse." Though *LMV* focuses on the linguistic dimensions of the "living metaphor," it is not limited to them, just as an expressive arts practice is in no way limited to poetry, but poetry is the medium on which I focus here.
14. One could consult a number of survivor testimonies for descriptions of memory (see e.g. Rowan; Beckylane; Lewis).
15. It is for this reason that the metaphor is "living" in Ricoeur's theory, whereas a "dead" metaphor loses its phenomenological status and is much like everyday discursive language. A living metaphor, conversely, can call the reader into the discourse as if an actual world were opening in the tensionally held status (Ricoeur 295).

16. Jung's archetypes of the unconscious parallel the individual shadow as reciprocating the collective shadow; however, from a feminist perspective, his work remains conditioned by traditional sex roles, and thus limited to and part of a tradition of patriarchy (see Starhawk 8).

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