

these words don't belong to me

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Abstract

This thesis, and its companion exhibition, uses my writing as the primary source in its written and visual iterations with a focus on memory and trauma. I examine the “auto-” as it relates to the self while adopting my lived experience as the main subject matter. The goal of this thesis is to expand the idea of the “auto-” beyond the singular *I* and to include the impact that other people and extenuating, situational circumstances leading to/after trauma impart on the self. Through my firsthand account of trauma, I question what it means to heal using visual arts as well as what it means to exhibit artwork embedded in pain to the public. Taking an autotheoretical approach combined with trauma and narrative studies, this paper intends to shed light on my own experience navigating trauma during a pandemic.

Dedication

To my family whose constant support knew no limits – even as I wrote on our walls and windows.

To my friends whose presence, feedback, and gentle guidance allowed me to grow as an artist and person.

To my partner who endured this journey with me – throughout all the highs and lows I faced when the trauma became too much.

Finally, to my past self.

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I wish to thank and show my appreciation for my committee whose feedback challenged me to research more and push my practice further: Nina Levitt, Holly Ward, and Delany McKenzie Allen.

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I wish to thank David Poolman for accepting my writing in lieu of artwork during the final year of my bachelor's degree and suggesting edits to what would later become the writing practice this thesis emerges from.

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I was 15, I think, when I found you sitting on that black, half-broken computer chair. It squeaked with every breath you took as you slouched forward, feet planted firmly on the ground with your head facing down; your disheveled black hair grazing the top of your knees. You were in mourning, as you had been for the last 30 years since you came to this country — since you left your home. I didn't know as much about you as I do now; I didn't understand your bitterness or your despair. I still don't know.

I don't think you intended for me to remember what you said or how you said it:

"When I die, all you'll have left of me are these memories and my words."

It came out so passively, so quietly, as your gaze failed to meet mine. Your eyes were shut closed, but the damage was done. Your proverb hid within me as it waited for the day for me to unearth it, for me to realize that I would soon have something to mourn about too.

1. Introduction

I watched the way your sorrow burrowed, coming out sporadically with shame, and your mourning concealed just as quickly. Growing up with you, I questioned why you never talked about it and why you said things so codified. At 23, I think I understand your *need* to mask the shame; to suffocate it and *hope* it dies. However, in expressing the shame from these memories with my words, I have found solace. I hope you will find yours too.

The focus of my artistic practice and this thesis exhibition revolves around my use of text and letters. Each piece is doused in language and represents an aspect of my memories and the trauma embedded in my lived experience.

This paper accompanies my MFA thesis exhibition, *these words don't belong to me*, as presented in the Special Projects Gallery at York University. My artwork directly reflects my own written text and journaling, and this paper takes an autotheoretical approach that defines my artwork through the lens of trauma, harm, and the home. It is crucial to mention that this thesis and my MFA takes place in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, which altered my approach at

the beginning of my master's program. From learning new tools and skills like automated tufting and working with home dye cutting, to dealing with both new and old mental health struggles brought about by provincially enforced isolations, I hope my paper sheds some light onto the feelings and thoughts I experienced in this shift. As I am sure there is still much to be authored and uncovered from this pandemic, this thesis observes the changes in my own self-perception, my connection to the outside world, and my growing understanding of the term 'home.'

This exhibition orbits around three main artworks, all stemming from the same place: my journals and the back-and-forth conversations I have with myself through text messaging. For the past 4 years, I have used journals and texts as a place to express my emotions and unsettling interactions when dealing with various stressors or trauma-induced breakdowns. These personal messages have become a place where I feel safe. I have control over my words and find security in the fact that my journals are written on a password protected Word document and my text messages can be easily deleted. Therefore, the evidence of my emotions and the detailed descriptions of these unsettling interactions have the potential of being fleeting. My initial need for this delete-ability stems from the recurring theme of trauma and harm that has become apparent in my writing and became the focal point of this thesis in both its visual and written iterations. As seen in the artwork itself (Figure 1), much of the work displays my writing in fragments, like the way memory works for someone who has experienced trauma: “the traumatic memories [are] disorganized”¹ or as a “deferred experience” where it is “not grasped as it occurs, returning later to haunt [its] survivor repeatedly.”²

¹ Bessel A. Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Viking, 2014), 195.

² Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2016), 117.

This thesis begins with “Auto-,” a section that explores what it means to be writing about myself in an academic setting. Here, I question what the “auto” is within autotheory and memoir, how that applies to my practice, and how artists Tracey Emin and Felix Gonzalez-Torres have dealt with autobiography in their work. The method of using my trauma-embedded writing aligns with my experience in the pandemic where I learned to be self-reliant, as it will be detailed in section three, “Homeward Bound.” Based on my preoccupation with being self-sufficient and making artwork at home, this section details and confronts the struggle I face as an artist whose past trauma is largely situated within her home. Section four, “Trauma,” will focus on my growing understanding of trauma and my own pathway to healing through the creation of these works. Lastly, I question the ethics of what it means to take my artwork that features these fragmented ruminations and to put it in the “public arena.”³

³ Imogen Racz, *Art and the Home: Comfort, Alienation and the Everyday*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 10.



Figure 1: Jasmine Canaviri, *nothing could've prepared u for what happened next and nothing could've prevented the memories when they resurfaced* series, 2021-22. Special Project's Gallery, Installation View.

1.1. The Gallery - An Extension of Myself

U flipped up ur skirt with that defiant look in ur half-lidded eyes that spoke more than your painted red lips ever could: I wanna cause u harm cuz I know u'll like it. Ur perverse and I see it.

I hate myself because I could spend all of my thesis writing u in exact detail, noting ur every move down to the stretch of ur midnight dress across ur body. I hate myself more because I've committed u to memory.

Sometimes I think I'll always be left defined and undefined by ur actions that day.

My introduction to this exhibition is the above text installed on the large, rectangular window of the Special Project's Gallery (Figure 2). This is the only unfragmented and unmediated excerpt from my writing used in this exhibition. As this interaction draws you into the gallery, the assault of pastel and vibrant colours ranging from hot pinks and blues to purples and sunset yellows begins with a series of miniature carpets (Figure 3) and square cardstock wall-hangings (Figure 4). The size of each carpet and cardstock paper is about 12 inches by 12 inches and both use fragments of my journals and texts in two different mediums.

nothing could've prepared u for what happened next, my miniature carpet series, is intended to be touched, reordered, or moved by viewers — quite literally playing with the words to create new sentences with these fragments. The focus of this piece is for community intervention; community as a catalyst to incite healing or produce harm through my mediated words. The gallery, as an extension of myself, then becomes disrupted by potential perpetrators — enacting the same harm I reference in this exhibition.

Accompanying this floor piece is my hand-embroidered pillows, *why can't i sleep why can't i* (Figure 4), which features this title repeated on one pillow as the other one marks the times I woke up and feel asleep.

nothing could've prevented the memories when they resurfaced, my cardstock wall-hangings, also uses fractured phrases and reveals more of this harm and their interactions. These are hung at eye-level, using half-inch nails at the top corners of the cardstock. This lifts the paper away from the wall so that the words of an interaction are revealed in thick, black paint. For example, written behind *i was 17* (Figure 5) is:

i was 17 when u got stabbed outside our family home.

i try not to remember much about that day or the following months. in fact, i try to forget that i was the only one home. i still try to forget the way u looked in that hospital bed, on a vent, body swollen as u crashed again.

and i pray to any god that the memory of her falling to her knees and sobbing by ur bedside — and the way her hand held onto urs so tightly, begging and pleading with u — that exact sound of her desperate and hoarse voice — will no longer be etched behind my eyelids, reverberating in my eardrums, as i try to move on from an event that happened years ago.

The cardstock covers and contains this text; however, the cut-out letters of this fragmented phrase allow the viewer a glimpse of the interaction. As with the carpets, the cardstock is meant to be interacted with to reveal hidden elements — to reveal the trauma; to uncover the memory.

The final work in the exhibition is devoid of vibrant, pastel colours and is installed corner to corner across the larger section of the gallery. *so, it's not all on me* (Figure 6) features letters cut from dark blue cardstock and hung on a clothesline. The letters spell out the title of the exhibition, *these words don't belong to me*, with the same words cut in smaller blue, flocked vinyl, and adhered to both sides of each letter. This title implies that other people, or “you,” are involved in the creation of these experiences and its resultant work. My use of “you” replaces the names of the people who these fractured phrases and interactions are about. Furthermore, as the

writer, artist, and the person who lived through these interactions, it is a form of control I use to re-insert myself back into my own narrative while re-evaluating how others have shaped it.⁴

⁴ Fiona Bradley, Katrina M. Brown, and Andrew Nairne, *Trauma*, (London: Hayward Gallery Publishing, 2001), 6 and Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 207.

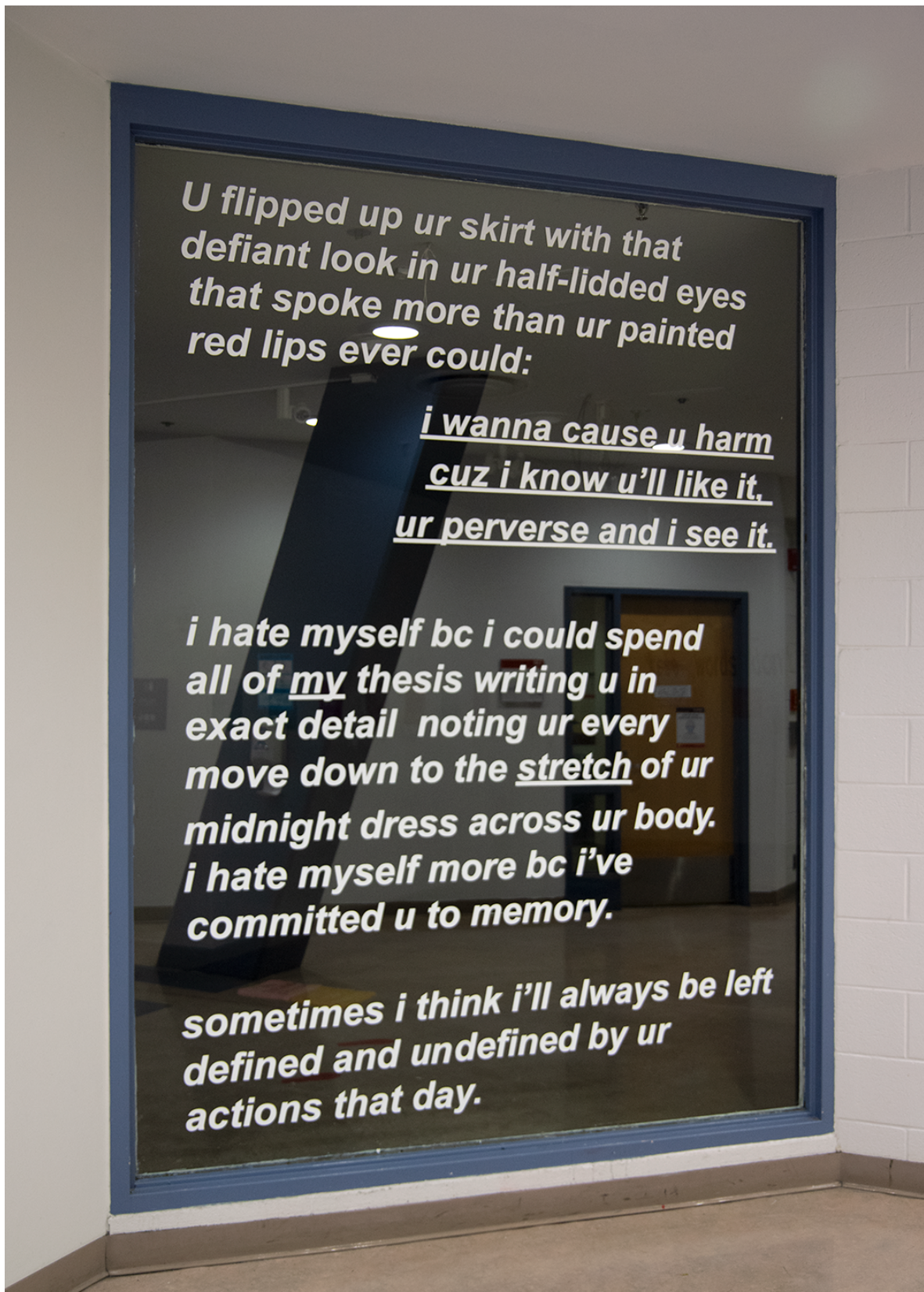


Figure 2: Jasmine Canaviri, *ur perverse and i see it*, 2022. Special Project's Gallery, Installation View.



Figure 3: Jasmine Canaviri, *nothing could've prepared u for what happened next* series, 2021-22. Special Project's Gallery, Installation View: Wednesday, April 6th, mid-day viewer participation arrangement.



Figure 4: Jasmine Canaviri, *why can't i sleep why can't i*, 2021. Special Project's Gallery, Detail View.



Figure 5: Jasmine Canaviri, i was 17 in nothing could've prevented the memories when they resurfaced series, 2021-22. Detail View, wall cardstock 29 of 52.



Figure 6: Jasmine Canaviri, *so, it's not all on me*, 2022. Special Project's Gallery, Installation View.

1.2. Textisms

It is important to acknowledge my use of texting language in this section. Additionally, my use of “you” in replacement of names often manifests in the form of “u,” “yous,” and “ur” as my writing practice is informal.

In *The Pragmatics of Text Messaging: Making Meaning in Messages*, Michelle A.

McSweeney defines textisms or txt-based language as a:

“Linguistic feature that... has a social pragmatic, or discourse function: they clarify meaning, do interpersonal work, and set the tone. [It is a] type of visual play [related and comparable to] ...social and conversation[al] language. In spoken conversations, speakers make meaning through modulating their voices, changing the frequency, volume, and speed with which they speak.”⁵

This can be done using abbreviations, punctuations, emojis, repetition, and misspelling.

Additionally, txt uses “phatic communic[ation which] is language we use to create relationships and to build trust” — while this “tells us nothing about the world [it tells us] very much about each other.”⁶ It indicates to others an aspect of our identity.⁷

My implementation of this vernacular language comes from my writing itself. As mentioned, I text myself when I begin to feel overwhelmed by my past experiences and I am in a situation where I do not have access to the journal on my computer. This results in a very informal use of language as my focus during these times is to try and process my feelings as quickly as possible as I may be in a setting where my attention is expected – for example, during class or at a family event. My goal is not to evaluate what I am writing but simply to write. I have adapted to using abbreviations and shorthand based on previous necessity: to sustain relationships among friends through social media and during undergraduate lectures.

⁵ Michelle A. McSweeney, *The Pragmatics of Text Messaging: Making Meaning in Messages*, (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 3 – 6.

⁶ McSweeney, *The Pragmatics of Text Messaging*, 172-173.

⁷ Ibid, 171.

My artwork and the selected writing for this paper are carefully chosen and I continue to use textisms due to its ability to convey an exact tone and meaning to the viewer. For example, if

I write:

u dont wanna...

versus,

You don't want to.

The lack of capitalization and punctuation makes the writer appear unsure to the recipient in the first sentence, which is my intention. Instantly, the second sentence seems more assertive and aggressive; I am blaming "You;" you are at fault. I can deliberately set the tone and imply meaning for my readers — with the first sentence, it can be read as light, teasing, unsure and/or questioning whereas the second can be read as defiant, serious and/or somber.

For my thesis exhibition, I chose to use writing similar to the first sentence as it reflects the uncertainty I feel about myself and lacks a fixed opinion or the contention that the second sentence indicates to my audience. In my case, a "u" versus "You" makes all the difference in the exactness and clarity I wish to impart to my viewers. In the case of this paper which bounces between textism and formal writing, the use of both will be read differently as intended.

1.3. Holzer (and Artistic Influence)

I am selecting Jenny Holzer to situate my practice for two reasons: she inspired my approach until the first few months into my graduate studies, and she is still an active, contemporary artist.⁸ Known for her truisms, projections, and most recently, works like *IS IT GUNS* (2018) and *YOU VOTE* (2020), Holzer's work is provocative, making important social and political statements to entice action and education. In an interview with Carly Levine, Holzer said,

“I've always tried to make my voice identifiable...because I found out when things are categorized, they tend to be dismissed. I find it better to have no particular associations attached to the 'voice' in order for it to be perceived as 'true'.”⁹

Her 'voice' often takes on a universality using first and second-person pronouns, appearing to be personal in works like her plaques *Mother and Child* (1990, Venice Biennale), and ink on skin writings in *Lustmord* (1993-4, in collaboration with Tibor Kaiman). With her plaques, benches, and signs, her aim was to “intensify the potency of their texts...[to] amplify meaning rather than dissolve it.”¹⁰

The original goal for my MFA was to convey this exactly — to work with the voice as an authority figure and to use a universal tone to amplify and make my work “true.” The focus was to create socio-political works as well: my 2020 video piece, *@PEELREGION DO SOMETHING* (Figure 7),¹¹ consolidated data on the number of stabbings that happened in Peel Region, counting down until March 28, 2016 — which was the most recent stabbing *after a*

⁸ Contemporary as being defined as “A person living in, or thing existing in, the same era or period as another or others.” As found on: "contemporary, adj. and n." . OED Online. March 2022. Oxford University Press. <https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/view/Entry/40115?redirectedFrom=contemporary> (accessed March 10, 2022).

⁹ Jenny Holzer, *Jenny Holzer: Retro*, (New York: Skarstedt Gallery, 2011), 4.

¹⁰ Holzer, *Jenny Holzer: Retro*, 6.

¹¹ The full video of this work can be watched at the following link: Jasmine Canaviri, “Jasmine Canaviri, @PEELREGION DO SOMETHING (2020) | V.2 | 9:03 Min,” YouTube video, September 14, 2020, <https://youtu.be/jdIWAI31Pqs>.

family member of mine was assaulted in Peel in late 2015. As seen below in Figure 7, the date and time is written with all upper-case letters as it cycles through the data. This is directly in response to Holzer's work: employing her use of capitals not only asserted these dates as facts but also concealed my personal connection to the work. As will be detailed in section three, "Homeward Bound," my time in this program would directly shift my practice away from Holzer's universal voice to my personal voice.

I now see the work in this exhibition in opposition to Holzer's artwork in several ways. Her use of an authoritative, universal voice contrasts my personal and somewhat uncertain voice. Our written language is different as well — her you is "YOU," mine is "u;" her words are crisp and legible, mine are messy (Figure 8). Even our subjectivity is different: Holzer values the socio-political in American culture. For example, *YOU VOTE* responds to the 2020 Presidential Election and voter suppression.¹² My subjectivity is my personal, lived experience. Holzer's work uses media to inform her practice and affect its reception; I use social media to *infect* my approach. For example, shorthand abbreviations (textisms) along with a focus on personal information that is exploited in online interactions directly influences my artistic practice.¹³ In a society that places value in the online world to circulate information and explore identity, my work uses analog techniques to reclaim the fast speed with which we consume these virtual

¹² Edward Lempien, "Stacking the deck: How the GOP works to suppress minority voting," UC Berkeley News, last modified September 29, 2020, <https://news.berkeley.edu/2020/09/29/stacking-the-deck-how-the-gop-works-to-suppress-minority-voting/>.

¹³ I am specifically referring to content found on Reddit such as r/confession or r/AmItheAsshole in addition to quick and short confessions littered across TikTok, screen grabbed, and shared on Instagram. #Cancel culture in reference to giant personas and companies along #MeToo and other seminal online movements helped me navigate this first and second-person narration. See the following for reference: Reddit, "r/Confession," and "r/AmItheAsshole," Reddit Forum, <https://www.reddit.com/r/confession/>, <https://www.reddit.com/r/AmItheAsshole/>. Adrienne Maree Brown, *We Will not Cancel Us and Other Dreams of Transformative Justice*, (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2020). TikTok trend example: M Sett (@mse.tt), "Me in 6th grade randomly getting bad pain in my upper leg/hip," TikTok video, July 7, 2021, <https://www.tiktok.com/@mse.tt/video/698781830776843802>.

spaces. The exhibition of this work seeks to freeze time and to place value on my lived experience; Holzer's work uses the fast pace of the internet to help circulate her message.

This change in my artistic approach is no longer about making a statement as Holzer does but making *my statement in my voice in my time*. I am prioritizing myself in the creation of this work and recognize that the personal can be just as political and crucial in today's culture and contemporary art scene.¹⁴

¹⁴ There needs to be an expansion of what qualifies as contemporary art in today's social media scene; specifically, *who* qualifies as an artist. The line between craft and art is convoluted. For example, @id.knit.that, creates and sells knitted tops that feature texts like "I DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT MYSELF," "OH WOW OKAY," and "I WANT TO BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY." This treads the line of craftsperson and artist, provoking questions like: is this artist using a craft like knitting as a medium? Or is this crafter employing subjectivity like an artist? This is not the focus of this paper, however, in my use of cardstock paper and self-made carpets, I am interested in the liminal space between artist and maker. Kendall Jade Ross (@id.knit.that), "one of a kind & hand-knit in Oklahoma City," Instagram page, accessed March 12, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/id.knit.that/>.

OCTOBER 21 2019 6:06 AM

Figure 7: Jasmine Canaviri, *@PEELREGION DO SOMETHING*, video still at 1:28 minute. 9:03, looped.

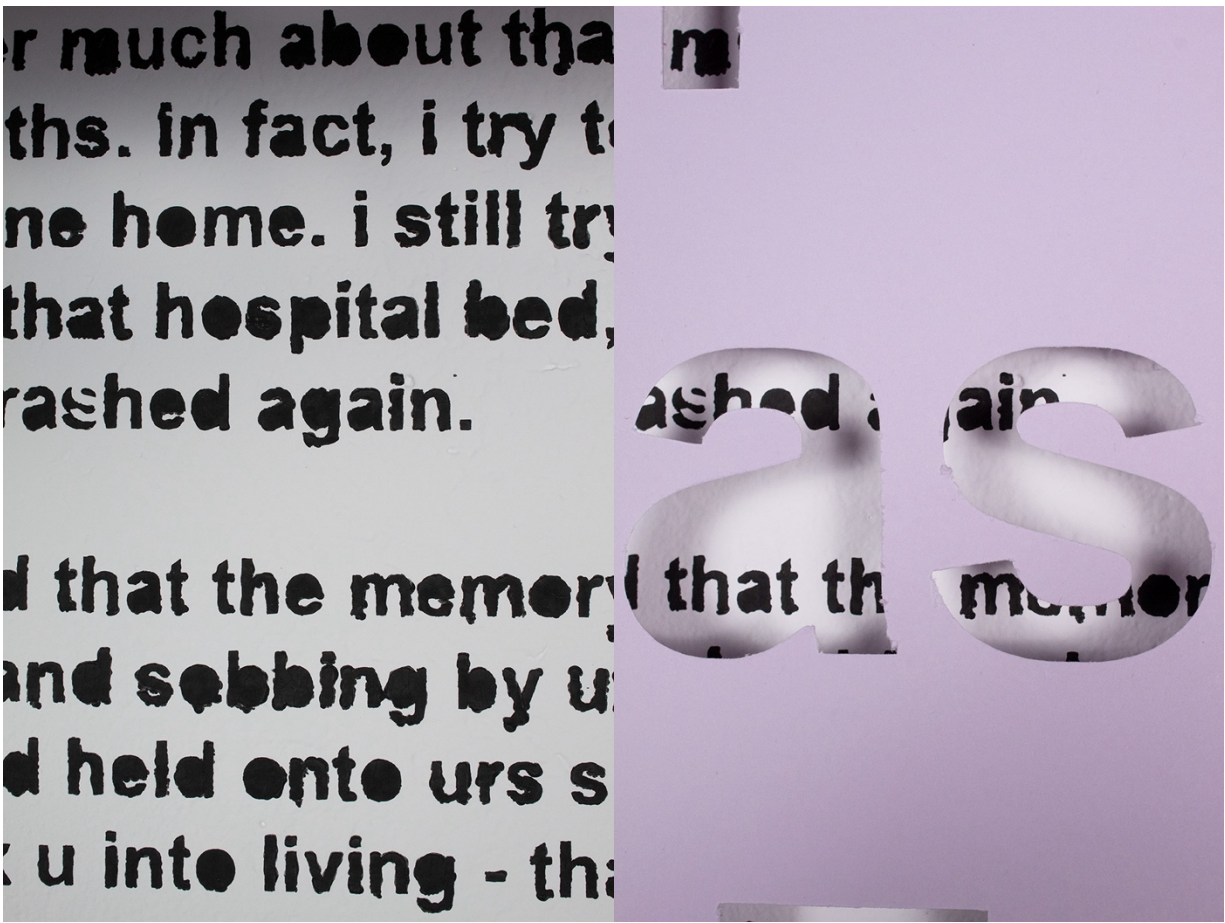


Figure 8: Jasmine Canaviri, *nothing could've prevented the memories when they resurfaced* series, 2021-22. Detail View of *i was 17*, wall cardstock 1 of 52, black block printing ink with stencil.

2. “Auto-”

Dear Jasmine,

You don't know how old you were, but you were never old enough. Nothing could have prepared you for what happened next, nothing could've prevented the memories when they resurfaced.

So put it all on me — every single dream, every memory, every interaction. Put it on me. Understand that no is a complete sentence, and it should've worked. It always should've worked. You should never have lost your power.

I'll take the burden, trust me, I've learned I can handle it.

Let me take the pain away. I'll carry you if I must.

Please, I insist.

*Yours,
Jasmine*

My writing is the primary source in all aspects of this thesis, and I view myself as the main subject matter in my practice. This focus on the I and on interiority lends itself to the rich history of the “auto-” prefix, where an understanding of auto- is synonymous with the introduction of the self.¹⁵ Hence, terms like autotheory and autobiography become self-theory or self-biography. Even a term like memoir implies a biography or autobiography and therefore implies a focus on the self.¹⁶ However, the definition of “auto” “originat[es] within or acting on the body or organism in question; self-produced; self-induced.”¹⁷ While this particular definition stems from a “chemical, biological, or organic process,”¹⁸ I find it compelling as well as

¹⁵ "auto-, comb. form1," OED Online, (Oxford University Press: December 2021), <https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/view/Entry/13367?rskey=gR4IDb&result=1&isAdvanced=true> (accessed December 17, 2021).

¹⁶ Verbatim: “A biography or autobiography; a biographical notice.” Or “In *plural*. Autobiographical observations; reminiscences. Frequently modified by a possessive.” This idea of a possessive or an *ownership* is of interest in implying fault/blame. "memoir, n." OED Online. March 2022. Oxford University Press. <https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/view/Entry/116334?redirectedFrom=memoir+writing> (accessed March 10, 2022).

¹⁷ "auto-," OED Online.

¹⁸ "auto-," OED Online.

challenging to consider any aspect of my research-creation as self-produced or self-induced. As an artist my work is self-produced: *I* create the artwork and *I* create its meaning. Furthermore, as a maker who prides herself on crafts and experimentation, it is important to have my hand in the work whether that is directing the tufting gun or creating the Illustrator file to be cut. Yet, as an artist who constructs from an experience of trauma, the implication of anything being self-produced or self-induced conjures up the image that my-*self* is the only contributor to the trauma and its resultant work. While I can logically understand that this definition denotes a “chemical, biological, or organic process”¹⁹ pertaining to organisms outside of myself, the part of me that is “stuck in the past”²⁰ reads this as: *I* am to blame for what happened to me; I am the root cause of my trauma; I am at fault.

Simultaneously, I contest this notion through my healing process. As I move forward from these traumatic experiences, I can acknowledge that I am not to blame for what happened to me. *Other people are involved in these experiences and memories; without them, it would not have happened.* Furthermore, the conditions that led to those exact situations, even the socio-economic and environmental factors I faced then, and now, have all contributed to my understanding and sense of self. Therefore, to assume something is only self-induced or self-produced as “auto-” inherently suggests, neglects other key and influential factors. My “auto” must be expanded to include these outside factors.

2.1. Autotheory and Memoir: Resisting the Auto

In resisting the idea of the “auto” as just referring to the self, where does that leave me in the discussion of autotheory and memoir? As mentioned previously, this thesis takes an

¹⁹ “auto-,” OED Online.

²⁰ Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 53.

autotheoretical approach. But what does that mean to me as researcher and creator? To better understand my approach, I would like to offer up an understanding of these key terms, their differences, and what I am appropriating to better understand a theoretical component of my practice.

Autotheory, as a methodology, is typically viewed through an arts and humanities lens²¹ while memoir, as used in autoethnography, is a practice in the social sciences to both evaluate a specific presentation of the self in conjunction with an evaluation of the other.²² In *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (2021), Lauren Fournier defines the term as:

“refer[ring] to the integration of theory and philosophy with autobiography, the body, and other so-called personal and explicitly subjective modes. It is a term that describes a self-conscious way of engaging with theory — as a discourse, frame, or mode of thinking and practice — alongside lived experience and subjective embodiment ... especially in feminist, queer, and BIPOC — Black, Indigenous, and people of colour — spaces that live on the edge of art and academia.”²³

Fournier refers to autotheory as the “integration of the *auto* or ‘self’ with philosophy or theory, often in ways that are direct, performative, or self-aware” and that have the potential to “resist, bypass and refashion” previously “durable structures” integrated throughout history that has often been written about and from one perspective.²⁴ This combination of the “autobiographical and self-reflective,” is my goal.²⁵ To create artworks that reflect my experiences as I remember them, as encapsulated in my writing at the most painful moments, and to then engage with various strains of theory — from trauma studies to narrative studies to autotheory itself — is to

²¹ Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021), 3.

²² Anna Denejkina, “Writing Trauma: The Other Into the Story of the Self,” in *Still Here: Memoirs of Trauma, Illness and Loss*, ed. Bunty Avieson, Fiona Giles, & Sue Joseph (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429201707>, 67.

²³ Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice*, 4.

²⁴ Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice*, 6, 132.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 263.

situate myself within academia. This approach forces me outside of my head to consider why I do what I do. Why do I remember things in fragments and why is that important to my artwork? Why can I recall the exact look of my violator, but I am unable to recall the date or time the violation occurred? Books such as Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015) and Julietta Singh's *No Archive Will Restore You* (2018) have helped me understand aspects of theory that I also viscerally relate to.

A different approach known as memoir is:

“Not uniquely the author’s story; it is three things: the author’s autobiography, the biography of the other and the autobiography of the other. [Extending into] autoethnography, [it] is defined as ‘an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno).’”²⁶

In conjunction with the social science discipline, it is used in:

“Autoethnographical qualitative research [that] includes personal narrative, researching the researcher, storytelling, autobiography, performance, and memoir writing, using carefully focused language and inquiry with the intention of finding meaning in the experience of being human.”²⁷

It examines memoir writing from a heuristic and hermeneutic standpoint and is largely concerned with how writing our “personal narrative” means “we also write about others.”²⁸ The cultural and community elements, *the others involved in the fabric of our personal narratives*, are essential to the understanding of self and vice versa. Therefore, the other is *implicated* in the sharing of our (or specifically, in this paper and exhibition: *my*) stories or memoir. I question what it means to implicate someone in this manner: What does it mean for me to create artworks from trauma where there are other people involved either in the act of *creating* the initial harm or

²⁶ Denejkina, “Writing Trauma.” 67-68.

²⁷ Danielle Wise, “A Memoir on Writing Memoir: Navigating the Past Find Voices in the Present,” in *Still Here: Memoirs of Trauma, Illness and Loss*, ed. Bunty Avieson, Fiona Giles, & Sue Joseph (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429201707>, 49-50.

²⁸ Wise, “A Memoir on Writing Memoir,” 50, 54.

in the reception of the work? What does it mean for me to give my community *permission* to play with my truth?

From an ethical standpoint, I am concerned with representation, for example, as Anna Denejkina explores in “Writing Trauma: The Other Into the Story of the Self,” in order to tell a compelling story, events or history become collapsed or embellished.²⁹ Am I perpetuating this through my fragmentation and community intervention? I will explore Denejkina and Wise’s ideas of ethics in trauma and narrative studies more in section five, “Ethics.”

2.2. Tracey Emin and Felix Gonzalez-Torres.

I wish to acknowledge artists like Tracey Emin and Felix Gonzalez-Torres whose work can be classified in the “auto-” with an inherent reading of underlying trauma or melancholy. Both artists serve as precursors to the field of autotheory and whose body of work fits into the ideas outlined in memoir writing.

Emin and Gonzalez-Torres focus on the self to varying capacities while hinting at or overtly implying other people involved in the fabric of their narratives. I wish to examine Emin’s implication of others in her *My Bed* (1998) and *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1962-1995* (1995) as well as Ross Laycock’s presence within the practice of Gonzalez-Torres. My goal is to provide examples of how trauma has manifested in visual arts and to consider people as outside factors contributing to the understanding of the self.

²⁹ Denejkina, “Writing Trauma,” 76-77.

Emin's work is often regarded as a confessional,³⁰ first-person narrative.³¹ In her 1999 Turner Prize exhibition, the public reception of *My Bed* was controversial and shocking as the British public viewed Emin's used condoms, stained sheets, and empty vodka bottles as a sign of the artist's promiscuity and her work was deemed as a "waste of time."³² *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1962-1995* is also assumed to have a sexual nature, despite the artist's literal take on the phrase, the inclusion of her parents, and 'WITH MYSELF, ALWAYS MYSELF, NEVER FORGETTING.'³³

Everyone I Have Ever Slept With is transparent in its inclusion of how other people, such as her family or fellow artists like Sarah Lucas, contributed to Emin's sense of self. The tent acts as a self-portrait of the artist as the names listed on the interior walls are indicative of an experience Emin's had sleeping next to that person. The use of "foetusi" also points out her traumatic experiences with abortion that would later inform *How it Feels* (1996), a work that was cathartic to the artist.³⁴ *My Bed* is less transparent in its inclusion of other people, however, items such as the condoms and morning after pill signify the presence of others within the work. These items in conjunction with the haphazardly staged bed and empty vodka bottles can be read as the impact that others had on Emin's lived experience, influencing her treatment of herself. The overall staging of *My Bed* feels melancholic and pensive, as through a frozen state of depression.

³⁰ "Confessional" as in a mode, device or "a type of writing which is written in first person that is often represented through a series of diaries, letters, distinguished by revelations of a person's deeper or darker motivations." The focus is often on the *I* or *self*. K.S. Ahima, "Catharsis of Confessional Writing: A Comparative Study of Sylvia Plath's *Bell Jar* and Kamala Das's *My Story*," in *Language In India* 21, no. 10 (2021), 79. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A681748943/AONE?u=yorku_main&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=f1107a5e.

³¹ Christine Fanthome, "Articulating Authenticity through Artifice: The Contemporary Relevance of Tracey Emin's Confessional Art," *Social Semiotics* 18, no. 2 (June 1, 2008), 223-224.

³² As Merck explains: *The Independent on Sunday* (24.10.1999) asked "Would you show your bed to the public?" and received responses from the British public such as "putting your bed on display for "art's sake" is a waste of time and money. Art should evoke emotion or thought." Mandy Merck, "Bedtime," in *The Art of Tracey Emin*, ed. by Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend, (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 119-121.

³³ Neal, Brown and Tracey Emin, *Tracey Emin*, (London: Tate, 2006), 83.

³⁴ "Tracey Emin on 'How it Feels,'" White Cube, accessed February 17, 2022, https://whitecube.com/channel/channel/tracey_emin_on_how_it_feels#.

My Bed and Everyone I Have Ever Slept With is not simply self-induced as the conditions that led up to the creation of these works speak just as much of other people as it does about the artist.

This notion of other people as contributing factors to the understanding of the self is also present in Gonzalez-Torres' 1991 work such as "*Untitled*" (*Perfect Lovers*) and "*Untitled*" (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*). Both works represent the artist's late partner, Ross Laycock, as well as the artist himself. *Perfect Lovers*, two standardized clocks that are "set to the same time...[and] will eventually fall out of sync...[but] can be reset,"³⁵ is the result of Laycock's AIDS diagnosis and Gonzalez-Torres fixation with time.³⁶ *Portrait of Ross in L.A.* consisted of individually wrapped candies in a pile that was the same weight as Ross and as the audience consumed these treats, the deterioration of the pile can be read as the gradual grief and loss to the disease — a disease which Gonzalez-Torres would suffer from himself.³⁷

Laycock's presence extends beyond these works and becomes part of Gonzalez-Torres' practice as a whole. When asked the question "Who is your public?" the artist responded with "I say honestly, without skipping a beat, 'Ross.' The Public was Ross."³⁸ At the end of an interview with Robert Nickas who "wonder[s] where things might go" in Gonzalez-Torres' career, the artist states he is unsure as "now it's a little more difficult, to tell you the truth, because not having a dialogue with Ross is a real handicap. Now the dialogue is just one person."³⁹ Despite Laycock's absence in the last few years of the artist's life, the impact of his relationship with Gonzalez-Torres is evident in the way the artist directs his practice, including these interviews

³⁵ "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: "*Untitled*" (*Perfect Lovers*)" MoMA, accessed February 18, 2022, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81074>.

³⁶ Julie Ault, ed., *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, (Göttingen: Steidl, 2006), 45.

³⁷ Ault, ed., *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 112, 376.

³⁸ Ault, ed., *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 233.

³⁹ Ault, ed., *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 51.

after Laycock's passing. If we were to focus solely on the artist and his work as being self-produced, as "auto-" suggests, or even as being influenced by just the AIDS movement that Gonzalez-Torres was associated with, we would be ignoring Laycock's influence. To consider Laycock as a personal component in the viewership of Gonzalez-Torres' work, allows his audience to understand his own self-perception that was situated around Laycock.

2.3. "Auto-tune"

In resisting the idea of the "auto-" as just representative of the self, I have offered up the idea that the "auto-" is reflective of what surrounds and becomes lodged in the self. For Emin, this was the inclusion of names in her tent and the hidden references to other people in her bed – both of which deals with the familial, romantic, or platonic relationships with others. For Gonzalez-Torres' this was his long-term partner, Ross Laycock. For me, this includes my perpetrators, my family, my relationships, and my fragmented memory.

As will be demonstrated in the following section, "Homeward Bound," my current living situation during this pandemic as I completed my master's has greatly influenced my practice and its direction along with my self-perception. Furthermore, in the remainder of this thesis, I am using a combination of autotheory and memoir to situate myself. Whereas Fournier is concerned with the "I" and its ability to take an active role in its integration with theory and philosophy,⁴⁰ Wise's concern includes contributing factors such as 'writing about others,' and the ethics of writing from the self.⁴¹ I am attempting to "tune" the intervention of outside factors in the examination of the self for my own approach in both my artistic and academic practice.

⁴⁰ Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice*, 6.

⁴¹ Wise, "A Memoir on Writing Memoir," 54, 56.

3. Homeward Bound

Is it because my home was destroyed and ransacked on multiple occasions (in more ways than one) that I hate it here? My body take hostage without my consent, a gun pointed at my face, forced to leave, and then forced to stay – all within the confines of my fucking house. I fucking hate it here. I can't fucking stand it here. I can't escape anything here.

So yeah.

Maybe it makes sense that my focus in this pandemic became unilateral as absolutely nothing happened — as I learned that just because everything slowed down, didn't mean trauma couldn't occur. That it couldn't come back.

I began the master's program at the start of a pandemic where the fear of the deadly and highly infectious virus left a lot of uncertainty in its wake. I vividly remember the way the world set itself ablaze, one flame igniting another: from the need and push for education on systematic racism⁴² to the calling out of well-known companies who treated staff poorly⁴³ to the urgency of government financial aid.⁴⁴ For myself in the context of this program, my university was left unsure with how to navigate the needs of their students and staff.⁴⁵ By the time I received permission to be on campus, access to York's facilities were limited.

I pivoted away from the dreams I had of using their facilities and did the one thing I could; I re-examined what I could do in my home. It was time to explore new options.

⁴² Laurin-Whitney Gottbrath, "In 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement shook the world," *Al Jazeera*, December 31, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/12/31/2020-the-year-black-lives-matter-shook-the-world>.

⁴³ Margot Harris, Palmer Haasch, and Rachel E. Greenspan, "A new podcast is exploring the reckoning that happened at Bon Appétit. Here's how the publication ended up in hot water," *Insider*, February 9, 2021, <https://www.insider.com/bon-apptit-timeline-allegations-drama-culture-race-andy-alex-sohla-2020-6>.

⁴⁴ Stuart Thomson, "Here's how to apply for government help during the coronavirus pandemic," *The National Post*, March 27, 2020, <https://nationalpost.com/news/politics/heres-how-to-apply-for-government-help-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic>.

⁴⁵ "Students," "Faculty, Instructors & Researchers," and "Staff," Better Together, York University, accessed January 2022, <https://www.yorku.ca/bettertogether/>.

3.1. The Home, the Pandemic, and the First Year.

“The home both contains us and is within us,”⁴⁶ Imogen Racz states in *Art and the Home: Comfort, Alienation and the Everyday* (2015). A singular sentence has never bothered me more.

Racz established this idea in the “Introduction” of her comprehensive text that attempts to recount the history of the home and domesticity in visual arts. Racz explains that our choice of “objects and decorations,” or rather our personalization of our space, “reflects the way we feel about ourselves... [which] is important for the materialization of memory and feelings of continuity and stability.”⁴⁷ She notes that this feeling of ‘continuity and stability’ has much to do with the ways in which western society upholds the home as “precious” and “intimate” whereas the “public arena” outside of the home is a place “where the rules and threats are beyond our control.”⁴⁸ This as a place of seclusion for the self and family as they relax in a space that is associated with a sense of freedom and familiarity – to be surrounded by the objects that reflect them.

When I had to adapt my practice to being in my house, I didn’t analyze it. It was done out of convenience and safety. As a result, my bedroom became a place where I slept, studied, and created. My bedroom became a space where all three of my main identities (daughter, student, artist) converged.

During the first year of my MFA, I made artwork on the exterior surfaces of my home. My house became a “liminal zone... [that] mark[s] the boundaries between the outside public world and the interior private space... suggest[ing] the permeability between the interior mind

⁴⁶ Racz, *Art and the Home*, 2.

⁴⁷ Racz, *Art and the Home*, 2.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 9-10.

and [the] external.”⁴⁹ My internal, intimate thoughts were broadcast on the various windows of my house, ranging from reflections of the pandemic (Figure 9) to reflections about myself (Figure 10). My goal was to facilitate communication with myself and my neighbours as I wanted to connect with people during a time where everything felt so disconnected.

As the pandemic continued with lockdown after lockdown, my work turned inwards. Much of my writing turned to self-critique and as a result, my window work became about a relationship with myself. I was unhappy with myself, unhappy with where I was living, unhappy that despite being safe at home and safe from the virus, I *felt* alarmingly unsafe. Neighbours were looking at my vinyl window texts, reading, and watching. Every few weeks, I would catch one of them looking and I wondered what they thought: did they see me for what I truly thought about myself? Did they see some version of themselves? When they saw me in the window staring back, is that why they averted their gaze? Or was it because the stark white lettering against the dark windowpanes was harsh and unfriendly at a time when a mental health walk became an absolute necessity to avoid thoughts like mine? Was it unsettling to see my mental health decline as weeks went by until I was dissolved into nothing more than a self-critique on a window in the middle of suburbia — until the only way I had left to describe myself was to issue a trigger warning? (Figure 11)

⁴⁹ Racz, *Art and the Home*, 31.



Figure 9: Jasmine Canaviri, *are you still thankful for frontline workers?*, 2020, Home Installation View.



Figure 10: Jasmine Canaviri, *yo, you up?* in *Bedroom Windows Talk* series, 2021. Home Installation View.



Figure 11: Jasmine Canaviri, *TRIGGER WARNING TRIGGER*, 2021. Home Installation View.

At the end of the second semester, I was more than happy to peel the vinyl from the windows and clean off the residue. It would take some time to realize why the removal of this work left me feeling so relieved.

3.2. New Inspirations, Old Feelings; Summer of 2021

Summer came in a flourish of bright pink masks and dinosaur-green shirts and shoes. Kids with these big ideas and even bigger capabilities that never screamed no like the ache in my body would after a long day with them. They didn't think — they just did. They created with the brightest colors and heavy marks digging into printer paper that we used as substitute for the expensive mixed media paper we learned to ration. They were perfectly unabashed and unafraid — and all I thought was: “Why can't I be like that? Why can't I be them?”

And just as suddenly, u came trotting towards me; invading my work; invading my piece of mind; invading my space. Ur appearance of being lost fooled me; I should've trusted the look in ur eyes (“eyes are the gateway to the soul” one of my past baroque history professor lectured on once; I should've trusted that). And with a flip of ur dress my innocence was gone again.

I tried to laugh it off bc that's what I do when I'm uncomfortable, when I don't know how to react. I remember telling my coworker about it bc she had a gut feeling you were no good. She urged me to tell our boss. I resisted.

And yet I still memorized every detail of you. I remember ur auburn curly hair and the blue dress you wore. It was the one with large white flower dancing across the surface and the fabric settled mid-thigh. You'd return with that exact same dress, your hair done the exact same way, your giant truck parked next to my 2008 silver Mazda.

You'd return again when the kids came back, and you'd utter vulgarities to us; to them. And these kids (in my chagrin) deserved more protection; they deserved for their colours to be as bright and enormous for as long as possible. Immediately we were into action — protecting our kids, alerting our boss, and calling the cops. You were escorted off the land the gallery was settled on, but the damage was done.

“I'm sorry you were harassed.” My boss's boss would tell me a few times before the cops took my statement. As if I wasn't moments away from breaking down as the impact of that statement hit me. As if I didn't already have a justified fear of law enforcement.

I could hear the undertone of “liar” being branded on my person again as they took notes while I longed for those bright colours and dinosaur-printed shirts to take over my life once more. I wanted my innocence back. I wanted those big, all-consuming ideas and capabilities back. I fought for it. I still am.

3.3. What Home Means to Me

The summer of 2021 brought clarity to the surface. When the incident at work happened, it reminded me of other traumatic events I had endured in my life; much of which revolved around my home: the initial physical assault and an aggravated assault on my brother. The latter was more publicized and memorable. I was inside my home sleeping and was suddenly awakened with a police officer's gun pointed directly at my face. I got up to find remnants of my brother's attack on our driveway and street without being told what had happened as neighbours watched. I was taken into the back of a cruiser with my sister, and I then endured a prolonged period of isolation sitting in a room at the station waiting to be questioned. As the questioning finally happened, the police kept insisting that I said "this" and not "that." When I was finally released, we were unable to go home until the investigation was over. We came back to a house in shambles. By the time the anniversary of my brother's assault came up, we had moved. I came to realize that the unease and feelings of being unsafe in my home as my neighbours viewed my artwork, was the direct result of unacknowledged trauma. Unknowingly, I was triggering myself.

Racz's idea of the home instilling "continuity and stability" through the "materialization of memory and feelings" falls short, as the memories and feelings that I associate with home bring a loss of continuity.⁵⁰ When we returned home after the assault of my brother, nothing was the same. There was no continuity as none of us could move on from the event that happened and instead, we were in a loop where we prioritized vigilance and safety at any cost. The home was no longer a place to feel good in as something as simple as a car driving down our street was a reminder of the outside "public arena"⁵¹ and would set my family off into ensuring all the

⁵⁰ Racz, *Art and the Home*, 2-3.

⁵¹ Racz, *Art and the Home*, 9-10.

windows and doors were locked countless times. We collective lost our sense of self in that house.

However, Racz acknowledges in the 1970s feminist visual arts movement and their “resistance to the idea of the home as natural and comforting,” that “the uncanny home is the setting that suggests the destabilized self.”⁵² I feel aversion towards the notion my home and all the objects it contains as reflecting my identity because Racz’s sentiment holds true for me. In transforming my home using vinyl decals, the evolving window installations reflected the instability I felt within myself (Figure 12).

⁵² Racz, *Art and the Home*, 94.



Figure 12: Jasmine Canaviri, *stop bouncing*. in *Bedroom Windows Talk* series, 2021. Home Installation View.

4. Trauma

Part of me wants to prove that trauma happens – that it’s not just something someone experiences and then it’s over. It lasts, embeds, grows even.

Perhaps, I’m accounting for being triggered?

I think I want to argue that I’ve changed and remained the same.

I want to argue that trauma is a viable thing in art. I want to argue that sometimes there is no escape and maybe there is numbing. I want to say hi and bye to it.

I want to talk about me. About my home being a traumatizing place for me — about understanding that in a pandemic with my mind flooded with social media posts — this idea contributing to this cycle of traumatization and constant triggering.

It’s inescapable; perhaps it’s inexcusable.

4.1. To Hurt

In this paper, I have mentioned the word “trauma” quite often and I have even detailed incidents in my life that were traumatizing and haunting. In preparation for this thesis, and to help me better understand why I create the artwork I do, I want to discuss what trauma is, how it appears, and how I am learning to reconcile with my past.

In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Cathy Caruth details the meaning of trauma as a “wound,” inflicted on a body.⁵³ In the later usage of Freud’s text, *trauma* is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind.”⁵⁴

“The word rips through the English language much as the situation it describes rips through the lives of those it affects. Trauma indicates caesura, necessitates a pause — it arises from a moment of rupture, of radical disjunction.... It is used to denote a psychological state resulting from a particular event, with the event itself subsequently indicated by the use of the same word.... The word

⁵³ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 3.

⁵⁴ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 3.

registers an emotional shock resulting from a significant physical or psychological dislocation often unexpected and always unpleasant, over which the subject has no control. It describes an event and its impact or rather an event in terms of its impact.”⁵⁵

My moment of rupture was the harassment I faced last summer. After talking with the police about my assailant, I left work moments away from breaking down. I remember calling my partner on my way home but was unable to complete the call as the need to breathe and think became overwhelming and unbearable. The harassment, the way it was handled by my workplace, and being questioned by the police for the second time in my life, brought up both mine and my brother’s assault. Everything that I was denying, such as the initial wave of feeling unsafe during my window decals, came to the forefront. Suddenly, everything was a trigger, as if I were “superimpos[ing] the trauma on everything around [me].”⁵⁶

“While we all want to move beyond trauma, the part of our brain that is devoted to ensuring our survival (deep below our rational brain) is not very good at denial. Long after traumatic experiences are over, it may be reactivated at the slightest hint of danger and mobilize disturbed brain circuits and secrete massive amounts of stress hormones.”⁵⁷

Dr. Bessel van der Kolk’s *The Body Keeps Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* was the first book I read on the topic. While it is insightful, it is not a self-help book. Instead, it explains what and how trauma works, based on van der Kolk’s years as a psychiatrist. Trauma is processed in the brain’s emotional center first.⁵⁸ In the moments I felt distressed, my body was reacting before I knew what it was reacting to.⁵⁹ My inability to escape being affected by these memories in my everyday life, meant I was “contaminat[ing]”⁶⁰ my past with the

⁵⁵ Bradley, Brown, and Nairne, *Trauma*, 6.

⁵⁶ Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 16.

⁵⁷ Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 2.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 60-61.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 60-61.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 53.

“ongoing narrative of [my] life.”⁶¹ In doing so, I was not allowing myself to grow or to consider the possibility of moving on by reassembling the fragments of my story to make it whole and establish a sense of linearity or distance from the incidents.⁶² While this book’s intent was not teaching me how to heal, it reminded me of an important tool in my toolbelt: writing.

4.2. To Heal

*I changed without realizing I had.
I became someone else,
someone different,
someone who wasn't necessarily forced to look inwards but had
and now,
in hindsight,
I don't think I am who I was.
and I'm not saying this me is better
or healthier
or anything else,
this me is just something else
and I think it might be okay to like her.
She's grown,
she's growing.
I like who she's becoming.*

Dr. Van der Kolk’s reminder that writing can be an effective source in airing and processing grievances,⁶³ encouraged me to write and moreover, to read certain pieces of my writing I have been afraid of reviewing; writing filled with anger, hate, uncertainty, and shame. The subject matter varied depending on how frequently a particular incident came up. It also included the sense of isolation I felt during the pandemic and my need to connect with the outside world, which is what led me to my first work (Figure 13). During these revisions, I allowed myself to cry and get upset again as if I were writing it for the first time. I identified who

⁶¹ Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 182-183.

⁶² Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 206, 234.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 240.

I was truly angry at and began to realize that *it was not my fault*. With this realization, I began the main projects of my thesis: my carpets, *nothing could've prepared u for what happened next*, and my wall pieces, *nothing could've prevented the memories when they resurfaced*. The process of creating these artworks became a therapeutic act and a terrifying one.

As I mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, I liked the delete-ability of my writing as a safety measure. In some way, I have always associated the delete-ability of working on a computer or on a phone as a way to conceal shame. If the file is gone completely, it is as if the trauma never happened, which was a constant comfort. Despite this, I never deleted anything I wrote. In fact, I have drafts upon drafts of a single piece of writing being explored and rewritten on a massive word document that would build to its current iteration.

I took the most interesting, and often most hurtful words, to embed on paper or make into a carpet. I use key phrases that act like a prompt or had a companion sentence. Phrases such as “porous streets absorb,” “it’s 3:39am now and i,” “i don’t wanna,” and “ignite my skin,” signify that there is something more going on; it is not the end of the story, nor the beginning, but it acknowledges *something*. For me, that something is recognizing my pain without giving away the full story. Part of the “imprint” of trauma that was initially left on my “mind, brain, and body,”⁶⁴ was transferred out of myself and into the work. I began my healing process as I saw the words manifest into a physical form that allowed me to reevaluate my experiences again – these dark memories contrasting with my choice of vibrant, pastel colours. In working with these words, I was able to pause and sit with them. There were moments they were hard to look at.

⁶⁴ Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 21, 201.

Yet, seeing something painful become something unabashedly bright and beautiful was an enriching experience. This transformation felt like my first big steps away from the past.



Figure 13: Jasmine Canaviri, *r u ok?*, 2020. Home Installation View.

5. Ethics

I've struggled with the idea of comparison:

*Does my pain and trauma measure up to that of yours? Does my pain matter?
Does it deserve to be monumentalized?*

I have mentioned earlier in section two, “Auto-,” that by detailing my own experiences, I am inherently including other contributing factors such as my socio-economic status and my upbringing. Because of the sharing of these experiences, through memories written here and in my artwork, I am indirectly including the other individuals involved. From an ethical standpoint, another concern is that by exhibiting this work, I might harm or trigger someone.

Until this point, I have used the term ethics quite loosely in relation to my own morality. Ethics and morality are often used interchangeably in everyday conversations.⁶⁵ However, in “Everybody Lies: The Ethics of Social Practice,” Mark Hutchinson defines morality as “maintaining the social fabric: behaving well towards others and adhering to the communally accepted standards of social behaviors.”⁶⁶ In this case, morality is concerned with how the self functions around the other. In defining ethics, Hutchinson views the term as operating “in a different framework than morality” and as being “about a kind of truth to oneself.”⁶⁷ Whereas morality is largely concerned with the other as a societal practice, ethics is concerned about a person’s “fidelity to a truth.”⁶⁸ Furthermore, the author defines the “truth in art” or rather the ethics of art, as being “the process of keeping going rather than the production of finished goods.”⁶⁹ Hutchinson goes on to question what it means to try and maintain this distinction in a

⁶⁵ Mark Hutchinson, “Everybody Lies: The Ethics of Social Practice,” in *Art & the Public Sphere* 4, no. 1-2 (2015): 53.

⁶⁶ Hutchinson, “Everybody Lies,” 54.

⁶⁷ Hutchinson, “Everybody Lies, 53.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 55.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 57.

social practice — social processes that “partake of the obscure world of rituals, tact, opinions and unwritten expectations — [where it creates a] short circuit between artist and audience (or others) [that] can ensnare the artist in questions of morality.”⁷⁰

My concern now that my artworks are ‘finished goods,’ is questioning what it means in a social context. What does it mean for my artwork to be exhibited in the public realm and to be indirectly discussing others? As Hutcherson put it, I am presently “ensnare[d]...in questions of morality” and it is this that I intend to explore next.⁷¹

5.1. Ethics: Concern and Misuse of Storytelling Practices Regarding Others

*By focusing on just myself, am I leaving you out? Am I excluding your stories?
Should I be including you?*

Is it my responsibility to?

Danielle Wise states that, “memoir as research” is “not for seeking revenge” and instead, it should be a tool for self-understanding.⁷² This idea is key to me as I consider the experience of others as a growing part of “auto-” and my practice. Furthermore, as a visual artist, how can I mediate my personal practice to maintain being ethical and moral?

To combat this issue, Wise offers phenomenological bracketing which is the idea of “bracketing out [the] pain” by writing down the memory and the associated emotions.⁷³ The goal of this method is to “find a new point of view” and to remove the “need to be vindicated” from the writing; essentially to minimize harm that could surface in the discussion of the other within the memoir.⁷⁴ Denejkina offers the exo-autoethnographic approach to memoir writing: shedding

⁷⁰ Hutchinson, “Everybody Lies,” 58-60.

⁷¹ Hutchinson, “Everybody Lies,” 60.

⁷² Wise, “A Memoir on Writing Memoir,” 52.

⁷³ Wise, “A Memoir on Writing Memoir,” 54.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 54

light “on a history that impacted the self (researcher or author) by proxy,” as opposed to focusing on “events experienced directly by the self.”⁷⁵ This method is primarily advised for Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma (TTT) with a focus on the inclusion of intergenerational history and others surrounding the self to help inform our understanding of the self.⁷⁶

While Denejkina and Wise propose valid methods to control biases, in creating auto-centered artwork or engaging in auto-centered writing, I do not believe everything can be completely ethical and moral. The artwork in this exhibition is rooted in pain and is in my voice. Expressing this pain vehemently is essential to the reading and understanding of this work and I inherently create avenues of biases as I reference my identity and the identity of my perpetrators. While I wish to consider others in the viewership of this work, I am unable to consider the lives of the perpetrators and what led them to our interactions. I am not ready to “bracket out the pain” but I do not wish to “seek revenge.”⁷⁷ I argue that it is up to the artist or writer to create their own parameters of navigating potential misuse of storytelling and to determine how much they want to concede being ethical and moral. For myself currently, omitting specific names and pronouns in favour of “you” meets my criteria for this in my writing. Therefore, I am being faithful to my truth within my comfort level and am endeavoring to be ethical in my approach.

⁷⁵ Denejkina, “Writing Trauma,” 70.

⁷⁶ Denejkina, “Writing Trauma,” 71.

⁷⁷ Wise, “A Memoir on Writing Memoir,” 52, 54.

5.2. Ethics: Whose Responsibility is it to Care for Others?

Should I be more aware that what I'm creating can cause more harm than healing for you?

Is my potential to harm you worth the sake of my own healing?

Perhaps it's inescapable; it's definitely inexcusable.

Thinking it might be of interest, my partner, sent me a video of artist Thoraya Maronsey's "Secret Voicemail" project on Instagram. In this video, @thor.aya, "gave [her] phone number out to strangers...and asked them to leave [her] a voicemail sharing their deepest secret."⁷⁸ These strangers are provided up to 3 minutes for their anonymous confession; this confession written in white font over red text bars that play in sync as the person speaks.⁷⁹ There is no spoken trigger warning introducing the content and the caption of the video is hidden by default. In listening to the video, and without realizing it, I was triggered as some of the secrets in the video were similar to the harm and trauma I experienced. As a result,

I absorbed each story,

each one digging deeper than the last,

even when I no longer related to it.

⁷⁸ Thoraya Maronsey (@thor.aya), "Thoraya's Secret Voicemail (episode 1)," Instagram video, April 19, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/tv/CN3eMyejWML/?utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet

⁷⁹ Maronsey, "Thoraya's Secret Voicemail (episode 1)."

And I cried uncontrollably as old feelings resurfaced.

(These stories played visually in my head as the life of the anonymous confessor morphed into mine and my perpetrators. What was therapeutic and cathartic for one person, was triggering for me. Furthermore, the person I loved the most unknowingly caused me pain.)

This is what I fear could happen to the viewers of my exhibition.

While my exhibition is not online where posts like Maronesy's can go viral and receive 1.1 million views,⁸⁰ the gallery is still in a public space. Thus, my considerations for @thor.aya's "Secret Voicemail" project extends into my understanding of this exhibition.

I view Maronesy's video as a form of auto-harm: harm as defined by adrienne maree brown in *We Will Not Cancel Us and Other Dreams of Transformative Justice* as,

"the suffering, loss, pain, and impact that can occur both in conflict and instances of abuse, as well as in misunderstanding steeped in differences of life experiences, opinions, or needs."⁸¹

This is where the audience becomes *implicit* in my experience and memories without consenting to the possibility of being harmed and by potentially harming others. For example, in the rearrangement of my fragmented carpets, the audience could create or allude to an experience I never had. This misinterpretation could lead to a vicious cycle of harm and by proxy, the "auto-" now includes this audience as part of its consideration for others. Therefore, auto-harm occurs.

I am then left to ask myself, whose responsibility is it to care for the well-being of others? How can I navigate and minimize auto-harm and exhibit interactive artwork based on my lived experience? In the reflection of this completed series of artworks, perhaps there is more concern that needs to be paid to the audience and not just the creator. From an autotheoretical standpoint, where this field is vastly growing, perhaps it is time to lean on memoir and autoethnography in our consideration of the other when we consider ourselves.

⁸⁰ Maronesy, "Thoraya's Secret Voicemail (episode 1)."

⁸¹ Adrienne Maree Brown, *We Will not Cancel Us and Other Dreams of Transformative Justice*, (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2020), 28.

6. Final Thoughts.

i am 23 as i write this now; 8 years from your proverb; 6 years from your assault; 14 years from mine; and less than 7 years until i'm 30.

i'm unsure of where i'll be or

what else will happen by that time;

what artwork i'll end up making.

will it still be this? will it still be focused on me? on the self?

will i still become lost in my navigation of the past?

*(should I anticipate struggling more?
i never expected to struggle this much.)*

will it continue to heal me?

i still catch a glimpse of the residue from the window and I'm thankful that period is over. Seeing reflections of myself in the carpets or cardstocks is equally as hard to deal with (~~most times~~ *sometimes worse at times*) but sitting with *it*, touching *it*, and pruning *it* puts me at ease.

In creating an entire thesis about the memory of trauma, I advocate for myself. I acknowledge that while I am a by-product of my circumstances and other people leading up to and involved in my experiences, I am not to blame. I choose to grow; I choose to move forward; I choose to live. This thesis is the direct result of my want and need to no longer be stuck in the past.

this work lets me breathe

It would be unrealistic, and perhaps too idealistic, for my history to *remain* history. I know how trauma functions and its ability to seemingly come out of nowhere. The research for this thesis has identified why and how it functions like this. However, the effect of creating a show based on trauma has been an overwhelmingly positive experience for me. Encountering the journals and reviewing my texts for the first time was hard – it was an impossible task to get through all of them without breaking down. In fact, I did break down multiple times over many phrases as I felt the weight of my words.

Narrowing down my writing into carefully selected phrases designed to then be transferred onto cardstock or carpets was another challenging task. At this point, I came to terms with my experiences as I read each piece of writing aloud, letting it resonate and reverberate around my room knowing the entire story never had to leave this place. That thought provided me solace as my own assault is not something I am fully ready to release into this world.

and think

With my expansion of “auto-” to *always* include and consider others just as much as the self, the compromise of how much I should give to my audience and questioning if it is too

much, is a large consideration in this exhibition. Will I ever fully know the reception of this work? Will I ever fully realize its impact?

and i'm hopeful that

This focus on the personal and the personal as political is an avenue I see contemporary art moving towards as it relates to text. In this digital age where information is shared within seconds, it is hard to avoid the impact of the internet culture, media, writers, and other creators. Therefore, how someone like me writes, the shrtnd abbreviations, CAPITALIZATIONS, and use of slang, will imply an aspect of my identity even when the text is not intended to be self-reflective. In some capacity, all text work will be in reference to *someone*, or *something* already depicted online.

the next 7 years will continue to afford me that.

I consider this thesis to be a positive experience. I have grown and changed as a result of my time in this program. I have a better understanding of myself and my needs as a person and an artist. I can acknowledge past experiences and create something beautiful and engaging from it. I have re-established lines of communication with myself after a long period of time where I tried to pretend that I was okay when I was not. The creation of this thesis exhibition from its conception down to its installation and strike was a whirlwind of time passing, but its ability to let me slow down and breathe is something I will continue to cherish.

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