

Mending

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ABSTRACT

Mending is a body of artwork created in response to ancestral trauma inherited between women. This paper discusses the exhibition of work, which consists of media installation, sculpture, and photography. *Mending* confronts Walter Benjamin's patriarchal argument that one must intellectually excavate deep memory. Rather, the processes used to create the body of work engage a sensorial approach, and attempt to both reconstruct embodied memory and reconcile trauma. The act of mending is an historically feminine gesture appropriate for resolving the transgenerational trauma of the female body's experience. Additionally, the media serves as witness, and has the potential to act as an impartial observer in the process of unraveling embodied trauma, allowing for reflexive self-witness. Overall, *Mending* rejects the thought-centric process of excavation, instead centering sensory-based spiritual practices in contemporary art related to nature immersion, meditative ritual, and collaboration between women working to heal handed-down victimization.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

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My ancestors in the soil

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Introduction

Mending is an exhibition of recent sculpture, media installation, and photography works that call attention to a two-part process of reconciling the embodied trauma memory inherited between women—the sensorial reconstruction of embodied memory and its ritual reconciliation. The body of work in this thesis challenges Walter Benjamin’s idea that “[h]e who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging” (576) by instead embracing an ethos of mending and reclaiming the significance of excavation. While Benjamin seems to disregard the sensorial experience of embodied memory for a more cerebral one, asserting one must “plan excavations methodically” (576), the work within this thesis addresses the complex somatic structures of trauma memory through spiritual healing practices in contemporary art. Rather than digging and excavating for potential answers to complicated histories, *Mending* creates space for works developed through methodologies of sensing and feeling embodied memory using sensorial ritual and nature immersion.

Studies across the globe show women are more susceptible to Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) than their male counterparts, which could be linked to the built in, survival-based neurobiology of being a woman (Naparstek 54-57). Considering that women have historically been mistreated as chattel for time immemorial, transgenerational trauma theories might help explain an ancestral, gender-oriented vulnerability to PTSD. To mend, or restore through putting back together, is often considered a feminine gesture, historically women’s work, and largely associated with repairing articles of torn fabric or ruptured knitting. But, nature mends as well. Seen within the body of work in this exhibition, the mother spider, whom artist Louise Bourgeois memorialized as an important protector symbol against patriarchal traumas, meticulously mends the latticework of her web to ensure the safe propagation of future offspring. In the case of *Mending*, the spider stands in for the victimized mother who is paralyzed by her own embodied traumatic memories. The body of work described in this thesis

embraces the feminine act of meditative mending, the transformative power of natural elements, and the celebration of ritual to aid in the reconciliation of ancestral trauma memory.

The Female Inheritance

The primary focus of the exhibition *Mending* addresses alleviating cycles of abuse perpetuated through the embodied memory of women's transgenerational trauma.

Transgenerational trauma is an area of study within psychology that has found symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can be handed down through both "psychological and biological factors" (Yahyavi, et al 89). PTSD creates a complex neurological response system that generates "disruptive physical reactions" (Van der Kolk 206) and takes a multi-faceted effort to reprogram.

Developmental trauma occurs during the formative phases of childhood into adolescence and can contribute to PTSD. Trauma expert Bessel Van Der Kolk believes developmental trauma is an invisible epidemic (159) that often delineates a life filled with somatic reliving of experiential terror. Within this framework, the nervous system is taken under siege and the trauma survivor becomes subject to a continual series of irrational cellular reactivity. The artwork in *Mending* is made with an understanding that children of mothers who experienced childhood abuse or developmental trauma are more susceptible to maternal depression and anxiety. Being witness to these symptoms is harmful to the child's sense of safety and belonging (Fusco et al.) and creates a higher likelihood of future PTSD.

Recent studies in epigenetics are also trying to understand how trauma and PTSD symptoms might be retained genetically and encoded within our DNA (Nagy et al). Epigenetics looks at "biological changes that occur due to different chemical marks that alter the expression of our genes" (Kirkpatrick, 2017). Put rather simply, epigenetics refers to the factors that



Figure 1. Ruth Humpton. O². 1983. Photograph collaged with transparency print.

determine the relationship between the gene's coding and how it is expressed. A 2014 review of evidence study found that "vulnerability to PTSD may be transmitted across generations through maternal epigenetic programming during pregnancy" (Yahyavi, et al 91). A more recent 2019 review of epigenetic studies in the field of transgenerational trauma found that "there seems to be accumulating evidence to suggest the transgenerational transmission of DNA methylation changes from parents to children" (Nagy et al. 6).

I recently discovered the photograph in Figure 1. This image was made by my great aunt, and shared with me at her memorial service. I barely knew my grandmother's sister, but I am the child in the photograph on my mother's lap, sitting next to my paternal grandmother. Finding this image, I began to wonder if my grandmother's sister had been asking some of the same questions that I am now exploring in this thesis. If we consider the premise of

transgenerational trauma and apply that to the treatment of women through known time, it is not hard to find a thread. The female body has been controlled, manipulated, raped, tortured, and mistreated as chattel in many cultures for as long as recorded time. The inherited trauma of severe sexual abuse was examined in a recent study on the daughters of World War II Korean sex slavery survivors, or “comfort women” (Lee et al. 249). It was found that five of six female offspring of “comfort women” presented with mental health problems including “major depressive disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, adjustment disorder, insomnia disorder, somatic symptom disorder, and alcohol use disorder” (Lee et al. 252). While it is not certain exactly how trauma transmission occurs, factors likely include “inadequate psychological parenting by the traumatized mother, the biological vulnerability inherited by the mother; and the secondary-traumatization” (Lee et al. 252).

The process of healing from PTSD when there is developmental trauma is life-long and fraught. When intertwined with a transgenerational predisposition for trauma symptoms, overcoming PTSD can seem an insurmountable task. The work created in *Mending* wrestles with the weight of this complexity through allusive imagery, metaphorical objects, and a spiritual and ritualistic creative process.

The Past is in the Present

My path as an artist follows the thread of trauma. Early childhood through adolescence was wrought with poverty, addiction, mental illness and abuse—the effects of latent ancestral trauma in the family. The desire to be seen was often overcome by the fear of being seen and the unwanted attention that might bring. As a young disaffected youth, adolescence was spent dissociated and checked out. Mercifully, my paternal grandmother was an artist. From infancy, most weekends were spent engaged with modern and contemporary art in her studio or in galleries and museums.

As an undergraduate art student, my work was primarily figurative painting sourced from old family photographs, a means to tussle with unseemly childhood influence and adolescent debauchery. These documents became a way to archive, and systematically handle early trauma experiences that were fundamental to both my character development and suffering. Personal history easily became personal politics and ultimately these intimate gestures aimed to convene an understanding of, and tolerance for, difficult sensorial sensibilities through trauma experience narratives.

A post-Hurricane Katrina trip to Biloxi, Mississippi in 2005 strengthened a burgeoning desire in me to work with others suffering at the hands of loss and trauma. After volunteering for



Figure 2. Biloxi, 2005. Photograph.

two weeks in a distribution center and documenting the ignored destruction, I returned to Virginia to become a counselor in a residential behavioral healthcare center for youth. The job eventually evolved into my own classroom and a K-12 teaching certification in art. The students at this center had

experienced grave abuses and mistreatment and I shared with them the transformative power of creative practice. The positive impact of this work led to me co-founding a non-profit for creative education and cultural experiences in underserved demographics, which in turn led to the Glasgow School of Art for a Master of Research in Creative Practices degree.

Simultaneous to a socially engaged course of action, a personal journey of consciousness healing emerged. Through the combination of community and healing work, I began to understand that cycles of abuse and trauma are more than a coincidental part of my life, but rather genetic factors. In a mending fashion, I have learned that sensorial forms of healing are most effective. I embarked on a ten-day silent Vipassana meditation retreat, a two-hundred-hour yoga teaching certification, intensive trauma therapy work, shamanic energy healing, regular forest immersion practices, and seasonal rituals. All of the above methods and

modalities have had a profound impact on my work as an artist, the work of this thesis, and a desire to address ancestral trauma through consciousness studies within contemporary art practice. Through the combination of individual and community healing work, I have personally experienced a transformation in PTSD symptoms that enabled me to recognize and transcend the entrapment of inherited developmental trauma.

Visualizing Memory and Impermanence

A strong kinship to video art, and subsequently performance art, developed throughout



Figure 3. What Is Will Be Was, 2018. Digital video.

this MFA tenure at Virginia Tech. The moving image is used throughout the thesis and provides a particularly powerful means by which to evoke sensorial experience and explore the presence of embodied memory. *What Is Will Be Was*, is a single-channel vertically-oriented video art piece, and a study on memory, time and Anicca, the Pali word for and Buddhist law of impermanence (Ahern 244). The work explores the idea that time is a measure of impermanence, and its memory persists. *What is Will Be Was* conveys the dialogue between the fast-paced movement of time and the distance of memory. The work is layered in imagery and muted in tone with specific moments of vibrance. There is an effort of

walking throughout the piece that is felt even when the camera is still and finally culminates upon the body of one lifeless skunk and the decomposing flesh and bones of another. The

vertically-formatted bone reliquary is a memento mori to the reality of mortality and the ever-changing state of matter, the most unvarying threads of humanity.

The themes of impermanence, interconnection, and death have been consistent thrusts in my practice. An additional video art work *Out, Spot* became a pivotal moment when the integration of metaphysical experiences grew into an instrument for talking about personal trauma. *Out, Spot* is a single-channel video art work that uses poetic interpretation of the ecology of shame and addresses traumatic childhood experiences through a ritualistic



Figure 4. *Out, Spot*, 2018. Digital video.

interchange with nature. The imagery transposes between exterior scenes of painting the body in mud and a domestic interior of cleaning droplets of splattered blood from the floor. The use of real blood exposes the viscous, chalky flavor of embodied trauma memory and its systemic gripping. The interchanging of mud and blood convey a repetitious loop of suffering and restoration. In the work, blood befits subconscious memory, ever-present like the vital fluid itself. Wet earth becomes the cleansing tool, an immersion in nature and connection to life force. Finally, water, the ultimate purifier and baptismal transformer, cleanses the viewer and the subject from the toil of both blood-stained memory and rolling in the mud.

Trauma is invisible within the body of work presented in the exhibition *Mending*, just as embodied traumatic memory is stored in the body and often relieved through psychic, emotional and somatic manifestations (Van der Kolk 206). In Spring 2018 while making a series of four video haikus, I realized that trauma would be imperceptible in the thesis works.



Figure 5. Haiku I, 2019. Digital video.

The first video in the series was an interpretation of creative text I had written, “Empty, aware, yet bearing ancestral gashes. I am, You are too” and portrayed a reenactment of an early traumatic memory. In this work, images of a nude body lying in the grass are juxtaposed with scenes of glistening, trembling, pink and red meat, both raw and cooked. The work was difficult to make and made me aware of the fact that including imagery evocative of a traumatic event could be damaging and retraumatizing, both to myself and the viewer.

With a new understanding for self-care came the realization of how to use trauma in the thesis. The work in *Mending* would use a structure of nonviolent reconciliation instead of reenactment to ultimately advance healing. The three haiku videos that followed explored symptoms of PTSD as an exercise in visualizing sensorial experience. Rather than excavating or digging for the memories (576), as Benjamin suggests, the final three haikus reject a thought-

centric approach in exchange for a meditative, visual representation of sensations that are the consequence of inherited trauma and traumatic experiences.

Thesis Works

The body of work in the exhibition *Mending* is broken into two parts. Movement One is comprised of two sculptural media installation art works, *Daybed* and *The Gift*. These two works explore the sensorial experience of embodied memory through video projection onto domestic architectural reconstructions and are positioned into dialogue with one another. The second movement consists of *The Ecology of Shame*, an installation of still and moving images that document trauma reconciliation through meditative ritual processes, and the final culminating video installation titled *Lustration*. The two parts are intrinsically linked, both to one another and to current theories of trauma transmission and consciousness healing processes. The progression of work asks the viewer to be present in their bodies as they are led through the complex web of ancestral trauma between women, into the healing practices of ritual reconciliation and nature interconnection.

Much of the visual language used in *Mending* is related to the transcendent power of elemental transformation. Understanding life as matter or energy in motion helps to detach from the sometimes-torturous looping of complex personal narrative. The images of fire, water, air, and earth in *Mending* are both symbolic and literal. Nature is a change agent in healing processes. Air holds the chemical element oxygen, life gas, and moves matter from one place to another in constant transformation. Water turns to air, comprises our cell tissue, can break down and reshape stone, and is the primary element of life. Fire, in its burning heat, is the most immediately transformative of the natural elements, leaving only ash and atomic elements to be reconfigured in another manner at some undetermined moment in time. Earth's biological ecosystems decompose organic substances to prepare them for future iterations of life. The matter of all things is constantly moving and will ultimately transform.

Reconstructing Memory

Daybed and *The Gift* represent an implied narrative of childhood trauma through



Figure 6. *Daybed*, 2019. Media Installation.

architectural reconstruction paired with evocative video art. *Daybed* alludes to a place where one sleeps. The room is reminiscent of an eight by ten-foot unfinished bedroom. The exposed studs of the walls face inward with video blanketing all four on either side. While the sketchiness of the unfinished room is implied, the interior and exterior spaces are also indicative of what one sees and what remains hidden. This could apply equally to secret, unspoken traumatic experiences and the faces we put on to show to the world who we want to be in spite of silent pain and suppressed emotion.

The practice of Vipassana meditation has informed the media installation couplet in *Mending*, which is visually representative of energetic sensation and interconnection. Vipassana is one of the earliest known forms of Buddhist meditation. The person sitting in meditation experiences the movement of sensations as they arise in the body through a series of sweeping awareness and connection to the space within the body. The ultimate goal of this practice is to achieve dissolution, where the meditator becomes intrinsically intertwined with the matter all around them, losing any sense of attachment to a personal physical experience, instead sensing the energetic swell of the fabric of oneness and interconnection.

There is no human presence in the video work of *Daybed*, but there are traces of physical acts and childlike vulnerability. The video is captured from a low angle, suggesting a child's view of the world. Scenes of the natural world include the tall, decomposing skeletons of



Figure 7. *Daybed*, 2019. Video content from media installation.

grasses and goldenrod, and luminous backlit clouds that move steadily across the walls in multiple directions. A disquiet swells as vaguely recognizable shapes of sullied baby doll parts emerge from the larger than life footage of leaves. A doll graveyard becomes loosely legible with only certain recognizable features framed. A line of fire moves at a simultaneously leisurely and frenetic pace and makes its way across the walls from one corner to the opposite side of the room.

The Gift is a reconstruction of a domestic washing space that incorporates video projection. Again, both the interior and exterior of an architectural segment are visible. The



Figure 8. *The Gift*, 2019. Detail of media installation.

exterior wall and an accompanying elevated sink that face the viewer are constructed of soiled and rusted found materials that gesture at history, a time long past, and innocence lost. Dainty floral wallpaper frames an old medicine cabinet with oxidized glass and a crystal handle at the center of the wall. Inside the cabinet hangs a small doll's dress, handmade from one of my mother's pillowcases and covered in lace trim. The fragility of innocence is emphasized when juxtaposed with the doll graveyard imagery in *Daybed*. The dress glows from the light of the video projector, implying an energetic and spiritual transcendence. Hide-able

and easily locked shamefully away in the cabinet, the dress illuminates as an act of defiance against violation and invisibility. Projected video content is drawn from nature, both layered and collaged. Flowers overlay grasses and clovers. An expeditious garden spider moves gracefully over the surface of the fabric. The mother spider here protects the innocent form, vigilantly safeguarding her future offspring and mending the frayed edges of home.

A repurposed construction of thick and rusted galvanized pipe physically and psychically supports the backside of the structure. The nine-foot-tall pipe runs from the floor to the ceiling



Figure 9. *The Gift*, 2019. Side view of media installation.

and also juts out in five additional sections. Each of these connections is symbolic of the seven energy centers, or chakras, that run along the primary energy line found in the center of the body's spine. These metaphysical energy currents are believed to be the channels for our interconnection with universal knowledge or unlimited experience (Patañjali and Recorded Books). When these currents become blocked due to suppressed emotions and unreconciled trauma, we become dis-eased and our life energy cannot flow properly through the

body conduit. The galvanized pipes behind the wall of *The Gift* represent the opportunity to meet suffering where it lies and transform pain and embodied memory into transcendent experience.

The specificity of narrative in *Daybed* and *The Gift* becomes a point of discourse. Louise



Figure 10. *Daybed* and *The Gift*, 2019.
View of the two works installed together.

Bourgeois' work often explores the experience and residue of difficult early memory through suggestion of specific places in time where, "these spaces are all domestic and all associated with trauma" (Colomina 29). Memory is ephemeral and traumatic childhood events in particular can form memories that are nonlinear. While there seems to be some story taking place between the works in *Mending*, it is not important that the viewer have access to it or connect with details because the memories being conveyed are more experiential than

narratively defined. An undefined, implied narrative brings the viewer to an inexplicit space for experiencing their own sensorial, emotional, or narrative readings of the work.

Ritual Reconciliation

I recently had a conversation with indigenous scholar, designer, and vocalist Leah Shenandoah from the Oneida Nation of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. There is a lineage within my family who come from Oneida County, New York. Leah and I talked about this synchronicity, our familial experiences, and discussed ritual as a means to transcend somatic trauma. I described the self-designed rituals discussed in the following section. She had heard of hair-related rituals from two different indigenous cultures, one where hair is cut and kept and one where hair is cut and burned. The irony of these opposing gestures is that some cultures believe that possession of hair allows an enemy to enact ill intentions, so keeping hair would be a dangerous act (Shenandoah). Leah surmised from this how little we know about ancestral traditions, imparting we must create our own rituals to meet the healing needs of ourselves and our ancestors (Shenandoah).

There is a spiritual belief in the Haudenosaunee Great Law of Peace doctrine that each of us holds the somatic memory of the ancestors that came seven generations before and after our time on this earth (Gibson 43). In the second half of the exhibition, ritual is used to process the physicality of somatic ancestral trauma through a series of acts designed to harness elemental power and reconcile memory. These works articulate a process by which familial cycles of abuse might be broken. The rituals gesture at an ambition to commemorate and heal an entire lineage of mistreated and traumatized women from my ancestry.

In contrast to the linear experience of Benjamin's excavation, Ruby Gibson's Somatic Archeology provides a process for mending that is holistically experiential. While practicing Somatic Archeology, one sits or lies in stillness and brings attention to a specific ailing area of the body. This practice is a form of meditation with very intuitive processing. Rather than dissolving or effortlessly releasing thoughts as in many forms of mindful meditation, in Somatic Archeology one allows the sensation or pain to inform them from a space of deep ancestral knowledge. Gibson's technique is meant to address our somatic inheritance directly through communication with lineage. She believes that "just as the Earth contains the historical library of life in its ruins, graves, trees, rocks and oceans, our bodies inherit the archives of our ancestors in their cells, muscles, blood and bones" (Gibson 4).

The Ecology of Shame is an ongoing ritual performance series. The work began as an exploration of the trauma-healing process and the often-unbridled subconscious shame of unresolved childhood abuse. The work is designed around three seasonal rituals that intend to guide one in elemental immersion and the transformative properties of air, fire, earth and water. The first iteration of these rituals took place between 2018-19 and was documented through a series of digital photographs.

In the fall of 2018 I created *Letter Ritual*. I wrote a letter to one of my childhood abusers. The letter was also directed towards my mother's abusers, people I had never known and only knew existed through my aunt's confidence. The text simultaneously detailed my anger, disgust,

and attempted forgiveness for these people whose presence has lingered in my family's somatic memories for generations. I kept the letter folded and tucked away for over a month before



Figure 11. Letter Ritual, 2019. Documentary Photography.

descending with it into the woods on a dark autumn evening, also carrying a beeswax candle, a lighter, and a camera. I came upon a large beckoning tree and knew it was strong enough to hold our historically secret shame. With a stick I dug a small hole and swept aside the drying leaves to create a round space of lusciously fragrant humus. I lit the candle and began to burn a corner of the letter as a drizzle started to fall from the sky. The paper fell apart, charred on the edges, largely gone, but some pieces were too damp to burn. I buried these fragments at the base of the tree.

Over the winter I ruminated deeply about somatic trauma, the shame it inflicts, and what it induces us to enact on others. In response to the cycles of abuse that I have been victim of and have perpetuated, I developed *Bone Ritual* in compassion for myself and those I have

harmed. In previous years, my partner and I raised and harvested pigs on pasture land we share with my father. As we were consuming the rib meat of the last of our animals, I was overcome by a deep kinship with her and sadness that triggered a trauma memory. I kept the bones to contemplate our shared impermanence and the ways in which our lives had been connected. After honoring the animal's bones for some time, I strung them together and burned them in a ceremonial full moon fire. This act signified the symbolic release of the residues of trauma, transforming the physical body into matter to release held karma in a bond of reconciliation.

The following spring I performed *Mud Ritual*. On a cold morning in late March, I hiked down to a creek at the bottom of a nearby ravine to submerge myself in the cleansing earth. The creek was biting, and the sun just edging above the tree line. Rocks glistened under the water

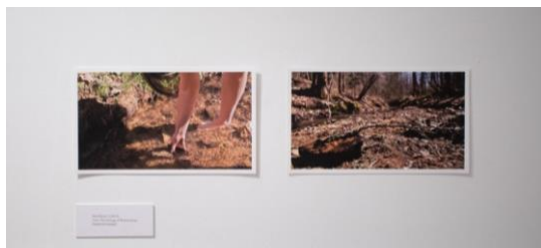


Figure 12. *Mud Ritual*, 2019. Documentary photography.

and the dappled light. I sunk my bare feet into the water and searched with goose bumps for the appropriate palette for the ritual act. The ritual objects are an archiving of the gesture, similar to the objects used within the media installation

reconstructions, and they require time and contemplation. Finally, I saw a small plate-shaped stone that would serve as container to the creek mud as I wrote a love letter onto myself. This act is reminder that all is intertwined, the memories that belong to us and our ancestors, and elements that give rise to life and death.

Untitled I, II, and III were made during post-ritual photography shoots to mark the transformation of each experience. Each piece was reflectively constructed in a studio from the documentation of the ritual processes. Originally the *Untitled* works were printed as life-size digital photographs, but after months of experimenting, I chose the cyanotype photographic process. The physicality of the cyanotype process allowed a directness with the medium that is important to the human act of ritual. The hand is seen and a painterly approach given to the

images that matches the poetic motion of these works. In *Untitled I*, I strung the charred and burnt bones from the *Bone Ritual* across my bare back. *Untitled II* presents a nude figure in a

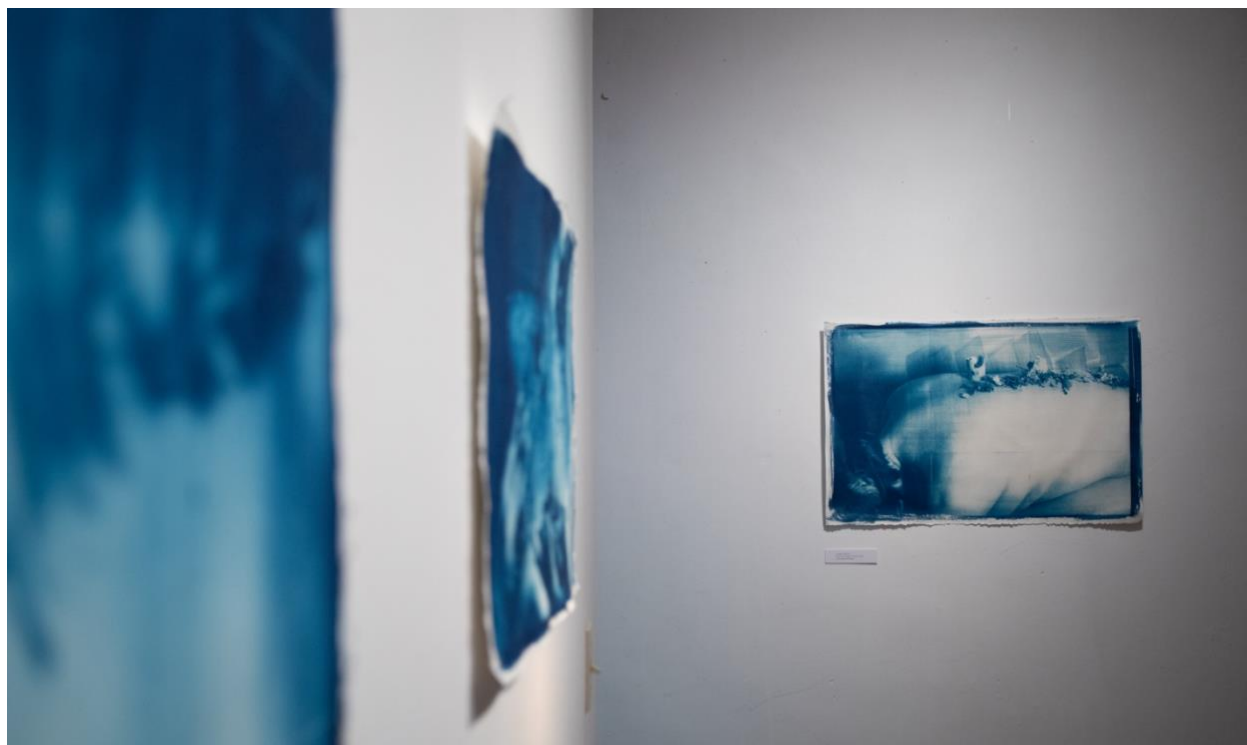


Figure 13. *Untitled I, II and III*, 2019. Cyanotype photographs.

child's pose position with leaf litter and remnants of *Letter Ritual* strewn along the spine next to the lit beeswax candle. Mud and chamomile flowers are thickly plastered over the bare chest in *Untitled III*, an impasto earthen smudging to culminate *Mud Ritual*. In these images, the ritual objects and materials are symbolically integrated with the body to signify cohesion with nature and personal acts of ancestral reconciliation.

The final piece within the *Ecology of Shame* series is a biological artwork called *Burn and Bury This*. I returned to the *Letter Ritual* tree in the spring of the following year to exhume the decomposing letter remnants. Intending to preserve the ritual experience, I added these along with soil, motherwort herb, and



Figure 14. *Burn and Bury This*, 2018. Glass, letter remnants, soil, motherwort.

pieces of the burnt letter to a glass terrarium box. The constructed box is engraved with four instructive haiku poems representative of the undertaken ritual processes. Through the enclosure we can watch the visible decomposition and regeneration of matter, signifying



Figure 15. *Lustration*, 2019. Digital video.

impermanence and healing. Insects and fungi are hard at work breaking down organic particles in the soil. The living materials and the ritual objects are displayed as an index of the consciousness healing practices in *The Ecology of Shame*.

Lustration, the culminating work of this thesis, portrays the shared ritual of a daughter washing her mother's hair juxtaposed with immediate grief processing through movement. How and how not to be touched is learned by the daughter from the mother. When the mother has not learned herself the powerful security that maternal touch can provide, but rather has been victimized by it, intrinsic fear prevents her from knowing and sharing this knowledge with her daughter (Carlson 38). To illustrate

vertically-formatted ritual performance video

reframe touch between mother and daughter to acknowledge suffering and make space for forgiveness and release. *Lustration* presents a collaborative, silent acknowledgment between a mother and daughter who share trauma. Collaboration is required to fulfill the task of reconciling a deeply ingrained embodied memory of violence.

Much of the work in *Mending* uses rigid containers and right-angled boxes that are bursting with organic substance. We see this in *Daybed*, a rectangular room illuminated with video projections of plant life and human residue. *The Gift's* linear structure reveals a glowing dress of dancing spiders and wild florals. *Burn and Bury This* is a literal vessel for the natural world's processes. *Lustration* is framed within a rectangular container, as a majority of video work is. The exterior boxes of these works symbolize the persistence of oppression and patriarchal systems. In juxtaposition, the material found inside the boxes is filled with life and energy. The former is intellectual and requires excavation, while the latter is intuitive and sensorial.

The works in *Mending* acknowledge the loop of female trauma cycles. In response, it embraces the elemental processes of nature, the law of impermanence, somatic sensations and ritual as primary tools for healing the transgenerational trauma between women, in particular that which is held between mothers and daughters. In this way we acknowledge our pain and return to the earth's womb to heal through disintegration and renewal.

The Media Witness

In many healing modalities there is a witness present, whether this is a therapist or a shaman, or some other being that holds space for the person undergoing transformation. In trauma expert Bessel Van der Kolk's current research, he suggests that therapists should verbalize they are a witness to a client's complex emotions, by stating something like "a witness can now see how worried you are that..." (303). Neuroimaging has shown that this technique of playing "the role of an accepting, nonjudgmental observer who joins the protagonist" actually causes areas of the brain typically dormant in PTSD survivors to light up (Van Der Kolk 303). The presence of the witness is meant to hold space during the difficult journey that one might encounter while experiencing suppressed sensations and emotions related to past experience.

The conceptual framework for the body of work presented in *Mending* asks if media can play the role of a witness to the reconciliation of embodied trauma. While the lifelong process of healing trauma involves a series of important relationships with outside experts, there is no relationship in the healing process stronger or more important than with oneself. In my thesis work, media has the potential to provide space for reflexive self-witness in the healing process. This is not about the technology used to capture the image, but rather the media produced. In the case of the three rituals, the images of documentation allowed me to act as an impartial observer to the process. In this way, media can provide witness to the reconciliation of the invisible trauma experience in the body.

Although the rituals and studio projects were physically and emotionally demanding to perform at times, this work is personally therapeutic. More importantly, the work has two primary functions; to act as a prototype to inspire healing in others, and to stand as a proxy for breaking the silence of countless girls and women, and boys and men, grappling with the repercussions of stolen innocence, loss of physical and emotional autonomy, and sense of safety.

Canonical Influences

The work in *Mending* is primarily influenced by the genres of feminist and conceptual art. New York Times art critic Holland Cotter declared in his review of the 2007 exhibition W.A.C.K. that feminist art is the most influential genre since the 1960s and without it “identity-based art, craft-derived art, and performance art would not exist in the form it does, if it existed at all” (Cotter). Of particular resonance with the work in *Mending*, Ana Mendieta quietly confronted the patriarchal systems that still prevail in the art world today. Her work is at once visceral and spiritual in ways that transcend the human experience into spiritual presence. Her aesthetic ideology examines the strife



Figure 16. Ana Mendieta. *Arbol de la Vida*, from the *Siluetas* series, 1976. Photograph of performance. (Mendieta, et al. 111).

of women and our unnatural disconnection from the intuitive, metaphysical balance between life and death. In the series *Siluetas*, Mendieta immersed her physical body into the elemental world, leaving traces of her form imprinted upon organic earth substances like sand and dirt to “ascend the ancestral sap” (Mendieta, et al. 24). Ana Mendieta etched the ancient goddess symbol into the contemporary art world’s consciousness, challenging the predominant Western Individualist ethos and suggesting instead our interconnection with the natural world.

Another influential artist and philosopher, Adrian Piper transforms raw emotion into complex visual analysis. Piper’s work defies categorization and is experimental in both aesthetic and subject. Her work is conceptual and often suggestive of personal experience and spiritual process. In *Food for the Spirit*, Piper spent the summer of 1971 locked away in her apartment, reading, re-reading, dissecting Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, a treatise on metaphysics. Piper later explained that her performance allowed her to transcend her physical body (Cherix 16). In order to keep from losing herself and her mind completely, she took a series of nude and partially-clothed self portraits from a mirror in her bedroom. These photographs confront the viewer and force us into her personal, meditative process, while also asking us to be present for her vulnerability (Cherix). The series of photographs ultimately act as a mirror for the viewer’s experiences and beliefs about the cosmos and questions of meaning in this sometimes vapid world.

Mending also draws inspiration from artist Linda Montano, who’s performance *Death in the Art and Life of Linda Montano* intertwined performance, dialogue, and ritual to address the complexity of death and aging through experimental consciousness studies. The work is an interdisciplinary staging, presented as a lecture, the healing modality of massage, and direct and honest discourse about impermanence and the body. Montano’s “sensory experiments” (Miller, 270) engage audiences of participants through processes meant to ignite awareness of and reconcile our deepest fears and anxieties.

Contemporary Art and Trauma

As contemporary culture grapples with reconciling historical traumas, artists have become more deliberate in their material and content to do the same. Although I chose not to reenact trauma in my thesis exhibition works, there are some instances where this form of imagery is warranted and possibly even necessary. Doreen Garner's work is powerfully confrontational in an equally alluring and repulsive way.



Figure 17. Doreen Garner, *Rack of Those Ravaged and Unconsenting*, (detail), 2017. Silicone, foam, glass, beads, fiberglass, insulation, steel meat hooks, steel pins, pearls. (Thill).

Her sculptural installations and performances include intricately woven gestures of hair, glass beads, and crystals combined in sculptural objects that reflect ravaged flesh. Her recent work *Rack of Those Ravaged and Unconsenting* (Figure 16) recreates the trauma of torture on black women's bodies for Western medical advancements (Thill). Garner has said that she wants the viewer to be traumatized and uncomfortable (Doreen Garner *Sculpts*), which is an appropriate response to the atrocities white men have inflicted on the black body. While Garner's work justifiably creates a sense of unease and is meant to confront the offender, the work in *Mending* is intended as a salve for the survivor. While Garner aims to right the wrongs of ancestral trauma inflicted by white hands on the female black body, *Mending* aspires to soothe the souls of defiled women.

The 2019 exhibition *Yes, And the Body Has Memory* at Macalester College's Law Warschaw Gallery in St. Paul, Minnesota explored ancestral trauma through contemporary photography. In particular, the work of Leah Edelman-Brier suggests a lineage of familial inheritance where the heir shares and passes on the predecessors' experiences. These



Figure 18. Leah Edelman-Brier, *Kin*. 2016. From *Hyperallergic*, 25 Jan. 2019, <https://hyperallergic.com/480716/photographs-of-women-that-capture-ancestral-trauma/>.

strikingly authentic figure photographs display representations of partially clothed and nude bodies of the artist, her mother and female family members. The photographs make visible the law of impermanence and the passage of time where “the genetic similarities are clear, as well as the implied wear and tear of life and illness the

elder family member has experienced” (Regan). The imagery is a powerful example of the closeness between women when trauma has left its mark on the body and spirit.

Future Works

Walter Benjamin’s archeological method of memory excavation would have us believe that we must dig for our past when in fact we carry the sensorial experiences of our lives with us all the time. The patriarchal implications in Benjamin’s *Excavation and Memory* text are deeper than his era-driven use of the dominant masculine pronoun. While the metaphor of turning and scattering earth holds relevance to *Mending’s* ceremonial gestures, Benjamin’s excavation is colonialist appropriation, juxtaposing “torsos in a collector’s gallery” (576) to the obscured past and suggesting we must pillage to find our secret cache. The archaic view of dug-up stories and memories is as outdated as misogyny and oppression. As in many forms of meditation, the story is less important than sensorial processing.

Deservedly, the second decade of the 21st century has ushered in a new era of opposition to the status quo. It is time to burn down the heroes that have shackled our bodies and souls to make space for the heroines who liberate and invite us to notice and sense our bodies, the external world and our inner landscapes of memory and trauma. The idea that memory lives as a visual image, as Benjamin suggests (576), is counterintuitive to the Eastern philosophies and consciousness practices that drive the work in *Mending*. What is significant and intentional in the work of trauma reconciliation is sensation, whether that is perceived through visceral, emotional, or contemplative means is determined by one's life experiences, perceptivity, and level of awareness. *Mending* demonstrates through contemporary art practice that we can attend to the sensorial knowledge of embodied memory in order to reconcile our past experiences.

In retort to Benjamin's memory excavation, *Mending* attempts to reclaim the premise of archeology through the feminine structure of meditative mending. In reconciling trauma, the narrative does not need to be re-lived or expressed. The next steps for this work are to continue exploring the use of consciousness in contemporary art. I intend to build this body of work for further exhibition, as well as follow this thread back into the development of collective social practice performances and workshops. The research from this thesis will develop further works and a curriculum of practice around trauma, embodied memory, and feminine research methods in contemporary art. With this I aspire to teach media art at the University level through the lens of social practice and consciousness.

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