Unlearning an Uninvited Sensory Language

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Abstract

Unlearning an Uninvited Sensory Language is a healing journey where I unlearn my trauma memories, by revisiting them and undoing them. Like an uninvited guest, trauma made itself home in my body, except I learned to live with this guest. When trauma happens, we emphasize the damage because we despise it but what we forget to acknowledge is how our bodies learn to bloom in all that gloom. And eventually, I learned to grow with it. Words and language lack the capacity to describe the heaviness and intensity of my trauma. As I draw upon my lived memories and transfer them into masks and paper dolls, I translate the sensory language of trauma and unlearn this uninvited sensory language. This research and making encompass the parameters of what it is to heal as a survivor and victim of sexualized violence and experiencing the death of loved ones. Unlearning an uninvited sensory language is an exhibition, and master's research paper, that is shaped by auto-ethnographic praxis, arts-based research, and performative art.

Acknowledgments

I want to acknowledge the land that makes me stronger on my healing journey, is the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

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"How does a woman choose a form to write in? Is there a connection between the form she chooses and the circumstances of her life?" (Scott, 1989)

Let me introduce myself. I am Vridhhi. I am a shy and reluctant storyteller sharing tales I never imagined myself sharing. In this document, and in my exhibition – Fragments of an inner child, I'm going to tell you parts of my trauma story. You, I, and my inner child, will all be moving together on this tangled journey through the telling tales of an uninvited language. We'll be traveling companions along these memory fragments. As I dissect the memories that pull me down, I unlearn a language that was imposed on me, an uninvited sensory language.

These are the different voices in the paper:

"The sensory fragments of memory intrude into the present, where they are literally relived. As long as the trauma is not resolved, the stress hormones the body secretes to protect itself keep circulating, and the defensive movements and emotional responses keep getting played out." (Van der Kolk, 2014, p. 66)

Author Judith Kitchen uses narrative fragments in her essays. She states that narratives generate their meaning by asking their readers to make leaps, to make a kind of narrative sense of the random and the chance encounter. It eschews content for method and then lets method become its content (Kitchen, 2014). I use narrative fragments (Wallace, 1991) and stitch my narratives together. My narratives don't have an end or a beginning. They are abrupt flashbacks. Trauma is not stored as a narrative with an orderly beginning, middle, and end. It is stored in the small details like the song I was listening to, the cake I was eating, the t-shirt I was wearing, or the bench I was sitting on. These tales are incohesive and unorganized, focusing more on sensations than the flow of events. Throughout this paper, and the exhibition, I will be sharing flashbacks that contain fragments of the experience, isolated images, sounds, and body sensations that initially have no context other than fear and panic.

I will be sharing tales that made me deny my reality. I am careful as I craft these fragments. Pulling together pieces, blurbs, and still images to find ways to express what is often understood as the forbidden and disowned. These are forbidden tales that I was never allowed to talk about.

Personal tales and secretes

As an artist, I look towards autoethnography as a method for researching these complex emotional experiences. Poulos (2006) suggested that autoethnography involves a researcher writing deeply about a theme of great personal relevance (e.g., family secrets), situating their experiences within the social context. It requires me to deeply re-look my complex emotions and memories and situate them in a social context. This written document is built around nonlinear narratives because the body has sexual violence experiences, flashbacks

that are out of order.

Strikethrough text appears throughout the body of this essay because it makes it easier for the reader to distinguish between the academic and personal tones. These are the tales I was never allowed to tell anyone. It is my secretive tone, keeping the tales under covers. Autoethnographic tales may defy the social rules of verbal tellability, failing to reveal personal insights or offer moral lessons. Tellability is the quality for which a story is told and examined as remarkable with its constructed merit. Ochs and Capps (2009) examine tellability as the reason a narrative is told. But they do convey my truths, my emotions, and my memories. Strikethrough's text also adds to the idea of undoing the trauma narratives that I will be talking about in chapter two, and throughout the paper and my exhibition.

My MFA research, and artistic production, are full of intention. I remember shards, still images, obscure smells, smutty sounds, foul tastes, deviant thoughts, irksome textures, crude words, and this unknown uninvited sensory language. This written form of fragments parallels the ways in that I am able to encounter and wrestle with the return of memories. It is my mind that stores these memories, and my body that reexperiences them each time the mind recalls these memories. The still images that are stored in the mind are connected to the sensations stored in the body. They are stored under my skin. An uninvited sensory language is my way to articulate the ways my body was forced to learn these memories. I will be using this phrase throughout my paper as a way to make a space for this sensory language that my body did not choose to learn. Like a slow device almost full on storage, this sensory language slows my mind and makes my body malfunction. It is rather infuriating to work with a slow device, a slow body.

For the reader, it is important to know that these narratives will reveal me. This requires my respect for the artistic process that is unravelling itself here on these pages and through my making. My temptation is to confine art, to rein it in. Translating dreams into artworks comes very naturally to me, however, translating trauma into art has been intimidating. But looking back, translation of trauma has been subconsciously visible throughout my making. I want to create something that not only speaks to me but also to the people who will experience and witness my work. Through this telling story, and grounded in my relationship with art making, I ask: Will this expressive relationship take my trauma out of my body towards a place of healing or bury it deeper into my mind? When I was five, I'd try to make my words rhyme. I liked the sound of similar words together; it'd often make me laugh. I'd apologize to people with sorry notes in rhyme.

Inner child's voice:

I talk in rhymes Of my hard times

let's not fight the sun is bright

mother, please don't scold lunch is getting cold

I imagine my inner child to be five. They make use of rhymes to convey their pain and emotions. This inner child's voice appears throughout my paper to honour the experiences of my inner child. It is carefully scattered like the fragments (Wallace, 1991) and talks about things that have scared me for years. Through this voice, I try to talk about the abuse and trauma without being too obvious.

unmindful bystanders' voices

Breaking down Wallace's idea of narrative fragments, I choose to side-line the common phrases and questions by unmindful voices to the right side, I also choose to make their voices smaller in the body of the text that follows. These are voices I hear frequently by the ones around me who are supposed to care for me. Some of these voices are a witness to the traumas I experienced, and some who just choose to believe the perpetrators. These voices want to deny me my truth, perhaps it's their way of caring. They are important to me because I care about them regardless of their inadvertence. As I kept hearing more of these voices, I realized how important it is for me to not listen to these voices.

As a survivor of sexualized violence, I have had to listen a lot of unwanted advice and comments that will resonate with other survivors and victims. I know that I'm not the only one who has had this experience. This unmindful voice comes from the ones that are dear to me, who surround me. I respond to these voices in theoretical frameworks and methodologies I have used in my artmaking process. Something about hearing them made me feel violated and abused but through words. I never responded to these comments and question because I want to be mindful in responding to them for myself. Mindful responses through my text in this paper contribute to my healing because I get to share my truth without listening to those phrases. I am healing myself through my mindful responses.

Research Outline

This research, and making, aims to decode an uninvited sensory language that was forced onto the surface of my skin, and inside my body when I experienced trauma in childhood. This research and unlearning this uninvited sensory language turns its focus towards articulating the potential transformation(s) that happens in the body during the body's healing.

This decoding of the body's trauma is an offering to the collective experience of trauma. The visual component of this research gives a voice to these trauma narratives through a collection of paper mâché shadow masks and paper dolls. This making looks towards ways traumatic experiences affect the body and how the body can move its own way out of those experiences of trauma and sexualized violence. According to one research study, the two most common reasons given for not telling anyone about being assaulted were internal blame, (shame and guilt) and external blame and/or fear of humiliation. (Mitchell, Caron 2021) The goal of this research is to develop channels for healing that can be accessed by anyone dealing with similar experiences.

Society has a tendency to paint the victim into a corner where we, the collective bodies that experienced these harms, are compelled to blame ourselves for what happened to us. It is the victim that is a witness to the unmindful voices, repeatedly asked to be forgetful and forgiving. Forgetfulness and forgiveness aren't easy nor necessary for any body and for any healing. This outlook makes it very difficult for victims to speak up about their abuse, even in the #MeToo (Burke, 2006) era. Activist Tarana Burke originated the concept and phrase of "Me Too" in 2006 as a way for survivors and victims of sexual abuse to come forward and share their stories and connect with one another.

This work isn't easy, or quick, especially when I am repeatedly being shamed and gaslighted by my loved ones who are trying, or were supposed, to protect me. I constantly have had to remind myself that just because as a child, I was at the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong people, I am not remade wrong. I was wronged. In the book *Beloved*, Morrison makes a distinction between "rememory" and memory. Memory is a constant knowledge of the moments we readily recall. While "Rememory" addresses the remembrance of things that one has forgotten and, as Freud puts it, repressed. (Morrison, 1987) Trauma is a cycle of rememory (Morrison, 1987), reconnect, reconstruct, reform, reclaim and release. It's a repetitive process that my mind and body are attempting to resolve.

This research is guided by the following research questions:

1. To experience trauma is to learn an uninvited sensory language. How can this uninvited sensory language be translated into a pathway for healing? – PTG, Self-Healing work.

2. When I build trauma narratives for people to experience in a gallery space, how will these narratives make room for viewers?

a) How does experiencing a performance exhibit help people cope with their trauma and create a pathway for healing while also being mindful about how the performance affects them?

3. Does making connections through learning an uninvited sensory language make us more empathetic towards trauma narratives?

a) How are the viewers affected by my narratives? Can triggers be avoided when working with trauma narratives?

4. Do I want my own trauma narratives to be forgotten or to be remembered? (By myself or by viewers)? My visual and written thesis will be composed of three main elements: Redoing (writing), Undoing (making), and Resolving (performing/exhibiting). Writings will be a collection of personal narratives and poetry. My making process incorporates paper mâché masks and paper dolls. These objects will be a part of my performance and exhibit, *Fragments of an inner child* at 205 Richmond from 1st to 4th of April.

For *Redoing* (writing), I draw from personal narratives, guided by an autoethnographic lens that uses abject (Kristeva, 1980) and affect theory (Ahmed, 2011) As I revisit my trauma memories, I know that I am redoing the experience on the surface of my body. I will be sharing how the memories affect my body and how I use abject to move out of these memories. The narratives will be composed and shaped using poetry, guided by metaphors and analogies, that describe the aftereffects of my trauma body.

Undoing (making) focuses on the art-making, methodologies, and practice. This research is shaped by paper mâché masks & paper dolls and is informed by object-oriented ontology (Harman 1997) with a goal of/to express and heal. I still find myself hiding in my shadow, hiding parts of myself under my invisible masks. My invisible masks protect me from being vulnerable in social settings and make me feel stronger in front of my perpetrators. The making for this MFA, this act of translating my trauma into an object, paper mâché masks, and paper dolls, guides me towards undoing the resultant trauma and unlearning the uninvited sensory language.

In *Resolving* (performing) I will be talking about my performance and exhibit, *Fragments of an inner child.* This section shows how I've unlearned and let go of the uninvited sensory language. In my performance, I will be cutting fragments from concentric red circles that I painted on A1 sized paper, specifically for the purpose of making paper dolls.

Through the course of the exhibit, I will invite people in to make their paper dolls from these cut fragments.

These paper dolls will be hung in the space to acknowledge our shadows as survivors. As I perform and share this with the viewers, I hope to reconnect with my inner child.

Uninvited Sensory language

Do you remember the details of exactly what happened?

To experience trauma is to learn an uninvited sensory language. It is placed inside of your body, and on the surface of your skin. This is a fragmented telling in a fractured world seized by trauma memories. A fractured world that is unwilling to bear witness to this uninvited sensory language. Language connects us to a world of others while at the same time reframing our experience in a language that others can understand. I offer only fragments because I can't tell the whole story, the complete story, all the story. Pieces, portions, parts, remnants, cuttings, piled up steadily around me. Fragments come to me because as a survivor of sexualized violence and childhood trauma of losing loved ones, physical abuse, and neglect, these things don't come as whole.

I am a quick learner. I started talking when I was ten months old. I was able to recognize voices over the phone by my eleventh month. This leaning language was a natural and seamless experience. I witnessed an event I don't wish to speak of, I will try to be descriptive in how I felt looking back to the event. At the age of two, a child starts to show genuine empathy, understanding how other people feel even when they don't feel the same way themselves. (Roth-Hanania, 2011; Bischof-Köhler, 2012). I lacked a language to describe this experience because my linguistic skills were still developing.

My body learned to store this experience. I carry the emotions and pain attached to the memory of this experience. As a child, you know something is wrong, that something is bad even though you don't know what it is. Things were louder than usual, people were exaggerated, air seemed denser and my tiny body was captured in flux. In looking back I remember feeling the pain of the people involved in this memory. and I cried with them. I remember trying to stop them and soothe them. But it did not help. This was my beginning to learning a language I did not wish to learn. In that witnessing of this experience, a sensory language crept under my skin.

Trauma is not a unique semantic or neurological event. (Calford, 2017) It is an invasion of experience that cannot find an easy narrative form. When it happens, it creates a gap between what we feel and what we can express. And often, the language we speak in does not have the words to accurately describe the trauma. For folks who have experienced these types of trauma, it may be said that learning a language (for the first time) is a way to externalize our collective experience of trauma. Like an uninvited guest, trauma makes itself home in my body that I learned to live with this guest daily. This trauma teaches me its language. It is a sensory language that I did not choose to learn. As I draw upon my lived memories and transfers them into masks and paper dolls for the purposes of this research, I've chosen to unlearn this uninvited sensory language. When trauma happens, we are trained to emphasize the damage because we despise it. What we forget to acknowledge is how our bodies learn to bloom in all that gloom. Unlearning an uninvited sensory *language* is a healing journey where I unlearn my trauma memories, by purposefully and carefully revisiting them and undoing them. This work is an act of translation, it is also a translation of a language that is often unspeakable and undefinable.

"Emotions aren't something I or we have. Rather it is though emotions, or how we respond to objects and others." (Sara Ahmed, The Cultural Politics of Emotions, 2011)

Autoethnography

Why do you keep brooding over it? Just forget about it.

To provide a deep and intimate experience, I look to autoethnography to provide the language necessary to provide a grounding for this thesis. Our collective experiences of suffering can, and should be, a source of growth and learning. It is the nature of my affective response to my trauma memories that I find this method essential. The visceral reactions and the triggered memories allow me to confront how I recognize and understand my trauma as the uninvited guest who forces me to learn an uninvited sensory language. Trauma is personal. The accounts require accountability. These memories come with many questions that I wish to answer through the theoretical lens of abject (Kristeva, 1980) and affect (Ahmed, 2011) theory that I am using in my project. Reflexivity plays a critical role in autoethnography because it allows me to examine my experience with trauma. It allows me a chance to be affected by this trauma and not overcome by it. I hope to be able to spark a conversation as to how these representations of trauma provide an avenue or a means for individuals seeking help as survivors and victims. My research and practice offer pathway(s) for healing for anyone who is fighting through their own experience(s) of violence and trauma.

Autoethnography requires deep reflection on both one's unique experiences and the universal within oneself. One of the characteristics of autoethnography is the possibility of moments for healing as I've mentioned; moments of reconnecting with my inner child, moments of reconstructing pieces of my inner child, and moments of being able to reclaim my inner child, my body, a newfound self. While ethnography maps the sensory motions of people in a space, it tends to be understood as a qualitative method in the social sciences that describes human social phenomena based on fieldwork. (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011) Autoethnography maps the insides of a body, where the writers are themselves the primary participant/subject of the research in the process of writing personal stories and narratives. The process of creating an autoethnography allows me to be reflective on what makes me, who am I, and how I came to be and also helps me to look at the larger context in which I situate myself.

Collective and Intergenerational Trauma

Why are you sharing this the world.

Just keep it to yourself.

Just get over it.

We can map the psychological effects of trauma on to the cultures that undergo colonization adding to the notion of collective trauma. The years of unacknowledged trauma passed on from my ancestors has manifested as emotional and physical abuse. Many reading this may be familiar with the partition of India and Pakistan in the year 1947, following the end the 200-year British Rule. Many may not be as familiar with the devastation and tragedy which impacted the people of India, leading up to India's Independence on the 15th of August, 1947. (Dalrymple, 2015) The partition affected millions of people and thousands of families. We are a collectively traumatised society that has not and is still not able to fully process the horrendous infliction of brutality from one human being to another during this partition. What we inherit is the numbness, the prejudice, and the bias that sears underneath towards those that we believe caused the harm. This is in our DNA; thanks to epigenetic inheritance.

Without analyzing our struggles within a socio-political context, we cannot confront the roots of our trauma and our ability to unmake our personal experiences of violence will be slow to start. Culturally, cis-heteropatriarchy dictates women to be held to a standard of perfection and subservience. (Morril, Arvin, Tuck, 2013) Together, these systems enable the hardships that South Asian women must endure, generation after generation. In our society, a failure to uphold the construct of a dignified, dutiful Brown woman is a failure to perform womanhood. We suffer in silence. We 'must' suffer in silence. My mother and grandmother internalized these beliefs and moved forward accordingly. Consequently, I inherited their collective pain, and I am compelled to reconcile with a history and culture I did not choose, along with no real strategies for unmaking those histories. The trauma that the women in my family and I carry is representative of the broader issue of intergenerational trauma in the South Asian community. Our mental health is intrinsically tied to oppressive systems. I can heal through understanding the trauma, processing the emotions and the pain for women of my family, my grandparents and my Ancestors. I can put a stop to the trauma continuing and reduce its impact on the future generations by healing myself psychologically, emotionally, physically and spiritually (Morril, Arvin, Tuck, 2013).

Individuals who carry childhood trauma are often encouraged to confront their experiences by talking or writing about them. These outlets help us in releasing parts of them out of our minds and bodies, making us feel lighter and heard. Although these survivors might find it especially difficult to process abuse experiences (J Lang, 2017). Sometimes the survivor wishes to speak, but the wider community is unwilling or unable to bear witness to their story, so the survivor is forced into silence. (Jain, 2019)

I hope to make a room for viewers to be able to reflect on their journeys as victims and survivors. The core objective of my MFA thesis research is focused on decoding the uninvited sensory language that my body learnt through a series of traumatic experiences. This uninvited sensory language leaves me static. It's a feeling I struggle to escape. The secondary objective of my MFA research and making is to create a pathway for healing for anyone who is fighting through their own experience(s) of violence and trauma. Our collective experiences of pain can often be a source of learning and growth. The losses and downfalls are and can be rendered as illustrative anecdotes or authentic stories. My moments of reconnecting with my inner child, my moments of reconstructing pieces of my inner child, and my moments of being able to reclaim my inner child, my body, a newfound self, make for authentic fragmented tales.



Introduction

This starts with a memory:

I was nowhere close to being happy. A five year old, clueless about the abuse that her mind and body were witnessing was getting

abused. That previous night I was out shopping with my family, my parents decided to leave me in the car with my transgressor. We did not talk, we did not play but when he saw my parents return, he

covered me with his hands. My father furiously pulled me out of the car. I did not do anything, I did not do anything, I DID NOT DO ANYTHING! It wasn't my fault, it wasn't my fault, IT WAS NOT MY FAULT. I stood on the side of the road, shapped my face. My mother stood there and watched the show. I cried and begged for his forgiveness. I was just made to believe that it was my fault. I was made to believe that I was the culprit and not the victim. My only fault is forginal I In that moment, I so desperately wished to be a boy, thinking I'd have it easier.

According to Huell (2012), trauma was originally intended to define a physical wound. As years came, however, the use of trauma began to be used to define emotional turmoil (King, 2012). As a result, trauma began to also describe how a wound is inflicted upon the mind. My red cheeks may have been traumatized temporarily but my mind still carries the pain of those cheeks. Altogether, these definitions begin to construct how trauma is both of the mind and of the body discussing the various ways in which the discourse of trauma encompasses all aspects of the human experience.

Trauma continues to entangle the individual in a myriad of ways. According to Grey, trauma is weaved through an individual's narrative psychologically, culturally, physically, through relationships, and history. What is most important to understand is the moment trauma is articulated it can be constructed. Trauma can then be framed as the impact of events, experiences, or circumstances that rupture "social cohesion and threaten the stability of these cultural narratives" (Grey, 2007).

When I look back at my five year old self, I find it hard to imagine what it must

be like to mask
-my parents
I guess it was my fault because I was small. I guess it was my fault because I
was gullible. I guess it was my fault because I am a girl. Learning to believe
that it was my fault made me feel weak. So weak that I couldn't fight
my truth. How did my
five year old learn to live with this weakness and silence? It is a language I
learned, a masked language of silence and fear. I chose to learn this
silent language: it was my body adapting to a new language.

Trauma is a wound leaving a story on the survivor. (Ganzeevort, 2008) The scar remains on the body of the survivor and how this scar is retold constructs the survivor's identity around the trauma. Ganzeevort uses the metaphor of stigmata as a means of understanding how trauma impacts the identity of the survivor. The wound behaves as a moment of trauma that contributes to the identity of the survivor. It is important to recognize how this metaphor aptly describes the ways trauma impacts the body. It impacts the body, yet it creates a disconnect from the body, from the self. Loss of connection which is often hard to recognize because it doesn't happen all at once. It is fragmented, over time. And our bodies learn to adapt to these changes .

Patricia Clough defines Trauma as the engulfment of the ego in memory. (Clough, 2007) But memory might be better understood not as unconscious memory but much as memory without consciousness and therefore, incorporated, body memory, or cellular memory. Freud said in 1895 "I think this man is suffering from memories." How true those words ring today. People who experience trauma relieve that traumatic event or events over and over. Their mind, body, and soul are affected long after the initial event. They are, indeed, suffering from memories. According to Freud, the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind.

Inner child's voice:

Is it over? I cannot go out and play Stuck under a bedcover

it is a match of cricket overs never get over

it is just a game, he says I wish he don't sleepover

My mind often wanders back to my earliest memory of being determined abused. This is trauma doing its thing by constantly repeating and replaying memories and slowly engraving itself onto the brain, determined invisible does on the mind yet to heal. I am suffering from memories. It created a ripple effect, leading to a series of sexual abuse I experienced at different stages in my life. I could have saved myself the excessiveness of trauma had my father not denied my truth.

Twenty years later, it is a memory that my brain is still processing. I am trying to make meaning of this memory. I am trying to understand how this has altered my brain. I am trying to understand myself through this memory, a self I wouldn't be otherwise. I am trying to unlearn this trauma. We often assume and expect that we will be able to recollect major events in our lives with clear and unwavering accuracy and that this determines the truth of what happened. However, traumatic events such as sexual assaults, are encoded differently than more routine, everyday experiences in life. It is well known within the scientific and psychological communities that human memory and recall do not function like a tape recorder, faithfully recording events later to be recalled on command. (Westera, Zydervelt, Kaladelfos, & Zajac, 2017) Our memories are fallible and have gaps and inconsistencies. As a result, we recall and narrate traumatic events differently than routine events. Psychological researcher, Richard McNally makes some strong arguments based on this research on repressed traumatic memories. Memories of trauma, as McNally claims, cannot be dissociated or repressed; on the contrary, the more violent the trauma, the more it is to be remembered or never forgotten. (McNally, 2003)

Some of the other critical theorists, authors, books who I will be referring to for my research are Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers, The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* by Bessel van der Kolk, *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma* and *Healing trauma* by Peter A. Levine, Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter,* Augusto Boal's *The Theatre of the Oppressed*, Brian Massumi, Carl Jung's *The Undiscovered Self,* Cathy Malchiodi's *Handbook of Art Therapy,* along with the works of bell hooks and Sigmund Freud. These voices and ideas have collectively influenced the form I have chosen to give to my voice and language.

Repressed Emotions and Trauma

Be strong, be bold, be brave!

I eagerly looked forward to summer vacation. I'd go swimming with my mother, work on summer projects with my father, and have endless nights of board games with my younger brother and my parents. Some nights we all would sleep under a sky full of stars and I'd dream about being an astronaut. I'd tell my father how I wanted to go way high up in the sky and be a star.

Just like any other summer night, my family and I played rounds of monopoly and I lost them all. The spirit was great nevertheless, we laughed, we snuggled, and we took pictures. A night I will cherish until the twelfth of never. I heard a voice inside of me, asking me to hold on tight to that moment for it may not last too long. A blanket of fear and gloom took over me and I insisted on sleeping with my parents that night.

Next morning my mother woke me up in panic. Had my fears come true? I woke up to the most horrifying sight—my father was being rushed to the hospital. My brain couldn't fathom the magnitude of the situation I had been thrown into overnight. A tragic series of events landed my mother into a coma and father, farther than I could ever reach. A morning I will dread undyingly. I was left with a four year old brother to take care of, surrounded by family and relatives I hadn't seen in years. Family and relatives who constantly urged that I don't mourn for the take of the situation of the situation of the why. They asked me brave and strong, but I felt they were all wrong. So wrong. Suppressing my emotions to put on a face that did not belong.

Trauma in literature

People will think you're weak!

Rituparna Chaterjee meticulously illustrated the horrors of childhood and translated them into whimsical words in her book *The Water Phoenix: A memoir of childhood abuse, healing, and forgiveness.* She has dedicated her book to the victims and survivors of child sexual abuse, to give them a sense of belonging. Children do not realize what is happening to their bodies at the time of abuse. It takes many years to process all the events and only as an adult are they able to make meaning of the events. For Chaterjee, books gave her a portal to escape to an alternate reality and an understanding of the world around her. (Chaterjee, 2020)



Fig 1: The Water Phoenix by Rituparna Chatterjee

Picture Courtesy: Cynthia Cheng

The Water Phoenix is a memoir and narrates a very particular story of child sexual abuse and its effects. It's not an uncommon story. According to the data released by the National Crime Record Bureau, a total of 109 children were abused every day in India in 2018, which showed a 22 percent jump in cases from the previous year. (Press Trust of India, 2020) Chatterjee doesn't just draw from childhood sexual abuse but also from other unbearable times as a child; a combination of abuse, neglect, bullying, lack of a close confidante, and her socialization as a "good-natured" girl are some of the things that pushed her into the depths of hopelessness. (Chaterjee, 2020) She masterfully narrates the consequences of learning discipline before one learns how to articulate pain. Chatterjee words echo with me because as an Indian girl, her story is my story too, it is also the story of millions of other girls in India and all over. Abuse is common, and most of the time, the family members are aware of it but prefer to keep it under cover. They avoid confronting abusers to avoid conflicts. It is probably the reason why my mother often asks me to just 'forget about it'.

Everyone seems to agree that a traumatic event "overwhelms the ordinary adaptations to life" as Herman puts it. "Unlike commonplace misfortunes," she writes "traumatic events generally involve threats to life and bodily integrity, or a close encounter with violence and death" (Herman, 1992). Emotional trauma can hit even the most grounded among us with incredible power. When emotions are denied or repressed or downplayed, our body starts to store the trauma and brood over it, the mind may however wander but the body holds on to it. Emotional trauma isn't simply "in your mind". It leaves an actual engraving on the body, shaking the memory stockpiling measures and altering the mind. When awful mishaps happen, it can take a lot of effort to get over the recollections, the feelings, and the sensation of simply not having the option to have a sense of security.

I stand in front of the mirror, I look at myself in the mirror, I look sad, and I know that is not my face. It is a face I do not recognize, a face I am unable to relate to, yet it feels so familiar. It is the face of complex emotions that is trying to mask many emotions but failing to do so. I think when you mask your pain for so many years, it slowly starts to uncloak itself because it wants to be seen, it wants to be heard, it wants to be acknowledged. I don't want people to think want them to know about my for I don't want them to take advantage of But why is sadness frowned upon? Why do we take sadness as a weak emotion? Why are we expected to not stay true to our emotions?

Affect

The purpose of utilizing affect is to gain an understanding of how I translate the trauma experienced by my body into something transformative and healing. Affect is a mental state. A state of unawareness where the body acts on itself, with emotion on one end and stressors on the other. For some affect is something separate from this broader set of events/sensations without feelings. Affect is intensities coming together, transforming, and translating under or beyond meaning, beyond semantic or simply fixed systems, or perceptions, even emotions. (Massumi, 2002) Affect is recognized when I am acknowledging the trauma but unable to articulate the emotions I manifest. In practice, affect theory has nothing to do with affect–that is, feeling and emotion. According to Ruth Leys affect is a pre-subjective force that operates independently of consciousness. (Leys, 2012) It is the capacity to affect and be affected by a body or an object.

"If we feel another hurts us, then that feeling may convert quickly into a reading of the other, such that it becomes hurtful, or is read as the impression of the negative. In other words, the 'it hurts' becomes, 'you hurt me', which might become, 'you are hurtful', or even 'you are bad'. These affective responses are readings that not only create the borders between selves and others, but also 'give' others meaning and value in the very act of apparent separation, a giving that temporarily fixes an other, through the movement engendered by the affective response itself. Such responses are clearly mediated: materialisation takes place through the 'mediation' of affect, which may function in this way as readings of the bodies of others." (Ahmed, 2011)

In Cultural Politics of Emotion, Ahmed begins by setting out terms specific to her project that guide her analysis of emotions as cultural and social mediators. She writes that feelings take the shape of the connection we have with objects we interact with, and this gives us the formulation of the "press of impression":

"I have an impression of others, they also leave an impression, and both impress me and upon me." (Ahmed, 2011) As we see objects, we experience them by how they impact and impress us. The move toward impression allows Ahmed to avoid making logical contrasts between bodily sensation, emotion and thought - that you might find elsewhere in cultural analysis. For Ahmed, these are not distinct states of human experience. Emotions are not psychological states, but social and cultural practices of the relationality found between the contact surfaces of objects and the boundaries that are formed between the 'I,' the 'Other', the 'We' and the 'Others'. Every event creates the new, even when it repeats or destroys. Affects are always in response to the body - one's own or that of another and the world. Massumi means something quite specific when he refers to both sensations and emotions - discrete in each case from affect. "Sensation is the mode in which potential is present in the perceiving body." (Massumi, 2002) While emotions are what result from bodily learning from the playing and replaying of experience, affect is complicated by cognition. It is then safe to say that affect is the new trauma.

After a long day at work, I got a call from my uncle. December is the wedding season in India. And Indian weddings are easily a weeklong affair reuniting with extended families with endless ceremonies and drunken late nights. I love Indian weddings but the ones in my family give me nightmares. I'd do anything to miss a wedding in my family. I didn't feel like talking to him at the time, yet I answered. "Congratulations! Your brother is getting married next month! Book your tickets soon." Ew! He is not my brother, he is not even my cousin, I said to myself in my head. I was suddenly reminded of all the things he'd make me watch and the games he'd play with me when I was eleven. How he'd blackmail me and

of disgust ran through my body. "Are you still there?" My uncle asked me. In just a minute my mind wandered off and threw back all those memories and my body was able to feel them as if it were happening in the present. "Oh! Great news! I'll try my best to be there, tauji. Although I do have an exam on the same date, but I will see what I can do" and I quickly hung up. I rushed to shower to get the disgust off my body. My body felt sticky thinking about all the **Sector**. I lied to him. I did not have an exam, but I did have a music festival to attend on the same dates. The hot water gave me a sense of relief as I wasn't going to be there at his wedding.

Abject

You are always in a foul mood; you look so grumpy all the time.

Powers of Horror by Julia Kristeva, is based on a psychoanalytical theory of the subject, grounded in a primary loss through the separation from the mother to enter the society. Kristeva's conception of the subject, the object, and the abject are used to explore how women experience oppression in the society. According to Kristeva abject refers to the human reaction (horror, disgust) to a threatened breakdown that is caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object. A key example for what causes such a reaction is the corpse (which traumatically reminds us of our own materiality). Things like an open wound, sewage, even the skin that forms on the surface of warm milk, can bring out the same reaction. Abject plays a key role in naming my memories. The purpose of abject here is concerned with understanding how trauma is not recognized until it is named. With each of these fragments, I have relived those memories and felt what my body may have but not recognized and named. I am concerned with, and I am transformed by my reactions to each event.

To indicate what Kristeva means by the concept of the abject I will focus on the first chapter of Powers where she gives a first "phenomenological" description of it. Kristeva starts by describing the abject as something which is neither subject nor object, but an intolerable threat against a not-yet formed subject. It is not a definable object, but something violently expelled, abjected. In her own words: "What is abject … is radically excluded and draws me towards the place where meaning collapses.... On the edge of non-existence and hallucination..." (Kristeva, 1980). The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite." (Kristeva, 1980)

Kristeva underlines the importance of this ambiguous aspect of the abject: "We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it... Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectual relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body to be..." (Kristeva, 1980)

The wedding season hadn't ended just yet. I may have skipped one wedding but there was another that I couldn't escape. I don't get along too well with my cousins; in fact, we barely talk. The perpetrators have manged to paint an image of me that makes them all dislike me and themselves lovable. Right after the music festival ended, I had another cousin who was getting married. Sadly, there was no way out of this one. Not that I have anything against this cousin, I was just anxious to see the other perpetrator cousins.

I was eating lunch with my best friend while waiting for my car to come to pick me up and take me to the hotel. Suddenly I couldn't eat; I felt a drop in . I started sweating and was unable

to breathe. At that moment I just started weeping. This was my first panic attack. The anticipation of being around them made my body filled I felt like I was all alone in this, and I was. There was no voice in my head telling me that it was going to be fine. The car was here, and I somehow managed to a hold of myself. Usually, I'd expect a commute like to take hours, mostly because of how anticipation stretches time but this time it felt like time was racing. I got into an empty elevator hoping I don't bump into anyone but one of my uncles got in at the same time as me. I greeted him and tried to make small talk. "Why do you look so filled all the time? It's like you carry the world's weight on your face." My uncle asked me, very genuinely. Why don't you ask your son? I said to myself in my head. I wanted to cry but I remained quiet. Before I could say anything, the elevator had reached my floor. Kristeva also discusses what she calls "the abjection of self," when the subject finds "the impossible within": "The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural loss that laid the foundations of its own being. There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded." (Kristeva, 1980)



Introduction

This uninvited sensory language leaves me static daily. It's a feeling I struggle to escape. Undoing uncovers the ways in which I undo my trauma memories that I deeply felt during my process of Redoing (writing). It is an act of transference and release. The making aims to translate this uninvited sensory language into objects for other survivors to explore who they are in their trauma story. These objects hold my trauma spirit. This act of translating my trauma into objects will guide me releasing and specifically moving towards undoing the trauma. I hope to reconcile and find a space for the return of my power.

Object-oriented ontology

You need to stop holding on to it.

Trauma feels like a circle. Each time I paint a full circle, it brings a sense of calm and serenity. I am able to pace myself with the painting making sure I don't intersect the lines. But then I wonder, why do I not want these lines to touch? All trauma stories are interconnected. I think of these concentric circles as a ripple effect that trauma has in our lives, on our bodies. One incident leads to a series of events and the wound just gets bigger. The repetitive nature of trauma reflects well in the repetitive circles. Trauma takes one on an emotional rollercoaster each time. Except the rollercoaster ride is different each time but the emotions remain the same. Eventually, the body learns to adjust to these emotional upheavals. Here affect is a means of interrogating the emotional stimuli one experiences. It provides a means of navigating an emotional rollercoaster, to which I am unfamiliar. Through the transference of emotions onto objects, I am able to articulate the unspoken language of my trauma and in-process unlearn the uninvited sensory language. Objectoriented ontology (Harman, 1997), enables me to pour my emotions attached to my trauma into these artworks.
I was sent to an all girls boarding school when I was eleven. I remember being excited about this new life, a new chapter, new friends, a fresh start. I'd dream about this life every day before going to bed. I was scheduled to leave in March, and I had begun packing in December, filling up my life in a trunk that belonged to my mother. She would come around to help me when I'd be packing and ask me to not talk about to anyone at school. She'd then rehearse conversations around parents with me. I didn't question her because I just assumed she was doing it for a reason. But what was the reason? The time came to leave home and I didn't want to leave anymore. I felt woeful leaving my grandmother, mother, and brother behind as I started this new journey. Everyone had their eyes filled with tears. I felt heavy as guilt took over me. I'd be living a different reality than them which felt unfair. I hugged my grandmother tight and asked her to take care of my mother and brother. My mother didn't come to drop me off because she wasn't allowed to travel just yet. It had only been a year since her Mv uncles took it on themselves and decided to take me and settle me down in my new life. With heavy hearts and sobby eyes, I said my goodbyes and sat in the car for an eight hour journey ahead. Just eight hours by car, I could visit my family anytime. I tried to console myself with that thought.

Childhood trauma is devasting and it can affect a child's self-esteem, sense of safety in the world, relationships, and trust. No matter how hard one tries to forget their trauma, the secrets will haunt them every single day. Keeping secrets can cause psychological symptoms and problems. (Cohen, 2019) And being asked to keep secrets is unnerving, and the feelings can be overwhelming. Especially when there is no one there to help one or understand the feelings they may have. These secrets exist in our symptoms, eating us away. And because they are secrets, we feel worse about ourselves because we think there's shame in telling.

A dorm full of sixteen girls surrounded me and I was bombarded with questions. The one that stood out were obviously "where are your parents? Why didn't your parents come to drop you?". It was showtime! My mother's words echoing in my head "don't talk about papa to anyone. What will you say when anyone asks about your father? You will say that he works overseas". The more I said it, the more I started to believe in it. Maybe it was a reality for a parallel self. But who was I hurting in this process of building this false reality? Myself, my body and my mind, these were bandaids that were digging deeper into my A year later, I decided to give up the act and told everyone. No one understood the logic. Neither did I. But I guess it was my mother's way of protecting me. Protecting me from being Or protecting herself from the reality she is stuck in with me. Maybe she wanted to live that reality through me.

When these traumatic thoughts and memories remain unspeakable or unthinkable for too long, they often impede our brain's natural process of recovery after trauma. They become rooted points that restrict the mental reintegration that is needed for healing to occur. After trauma, the mind works differently, and the body has been altered to the extent that an entirely new understanding of it must be negotiated. It is not just "*in my head*". It leaves a real, physical imprint on my body, jarring my memory storage processes and changing my brain.

Child sexual abuse is horrific and what is truly alarming is the perpetrators are mostly known to the children abused. It is extremely difficult to discuss child sexual abuse particularly in a society like India where any conversation remotely linked to sex is considered moral taboo. I look to my art-making to express the emotions I carry in my body; this is part of the weight of the uninvited sensory language. I illustrated a children's picture book for an IAMD class assignment in 2020. The picture book is about invisible monsters who loom over the innocence of childhood. The book is called *There's a Monster – not in my head*. Invisible monsters, who are mostly spotted in safe and known environments. I was proud of myself for being able to share the horrors of childhood in a form of a picture book with a sincere intention to help children to speak up about their horrors.

Each experience is unique to everyone, which is why it is important for us to share these experiences not just for ourselves but also for people around us. I wanted to share the book with my mother to seek her approval, validation, some appreciation. I have always looked to my mother for validation but never got any. She wasn't amused, she was rather disgusted at me for sharing my truth. For attempting to release my trauma. "It never happened to me when I was a child", she said to me, "I had cousins too".

She said to me, "I had cousins too". Well, mother, good for you!



Fig 2: There's a monster not in my head, 2020

Picture Courtesy: Vridhhi



Fig 3: Book pages from There's a monster not in my head

Picture Courtesy: Vridhhi

Words lack the intensity of how shattering it was for me to hear those words come out of her mouth. The experience broke me, how was she not broken too? I started seeking sympathy because she had no empathy. She has dealt with her fair share of trauma, which in result has made her colder to the world that surrounds her. However, in that moment, something powerful happened. Something about her reaction made me realize that I do not need her validation. I collected all my shattered pieces and stitched them back together, this time for myself. Being aware of how this is reality for many others, I reminded myself I am doing it for myself and for all the survivors and victims. When we think of trauma, we emphasize the damage it done to us and our bodies because we hate it so much. But what we forget to acknowledge is how our bodies find ways to grow with all that damage. A part of being a survivor is being cognizant of the growth.

Red Lines: Visual language

Similar to healing, art-based research isn't linear, rather it is a wave of ideas, emotions, processes. From the very beginning 1 held the desire to craft a self-reflexive and meaningful text (Cole and Knowles, 2000) I wanted to create a rich representation of the experience of bringing, through artistic form, stories of childhood sexual abuse out of the shadows into the public realm. The inquiry is a deliberation on telling and an actual telling. This telling becomes a form of visual representation without telling. It is self-reflexive in that it is always asking questions, of itself, of me and of the reader. Throughout the paper I am a reluctant storyteller in process, carefully considering the questions; *Why I tell? How to tell? What is it like to tell?* And most importantly, *how to tell without telling?* Through the execution of this work, I intend to step into a practice of healing, and move closer towards a practice of building a therapeutic space. This work will enable me to work closely with trauma survivors and children suffering from abuse and trauma. In addition to artmaking, I'm learning to witness, listen, and hold space for vulnerability.



Fig 4: Pencil color on paper; Fig 5: Watercolor on paper

Picture Courtesy: Vridhhi



Fig 6: Mindmap, 2020; Fig 7: Work in progress, 2022

Picture Courtesy: Vridhhi

Red has been a prominent color in my practice since I started the Interdisciplinary Master's in Art Media and Design (IAMD) program in 2020. It wasn't a conscious choice of color but something that happened very naturally and resonated with what I have been feeling. Visual language in my art, red concentric circles, are a translation of the uninvited sensory language, that speaks to the collective and individual stories of survivors and victims. Each circle is unique how each story is unique, yet it is familiar to every survivor. The red circles symbolize the growth in my pain, and how my body has learnt to grow with so much weight on it and how my mind is cognizant of the growth. It is a way of expressing how this weight has grown on the body over the years. The repetition of these lines emphasizes the repeated nature of trauma as well as the weight of trauma. I use the paper as a metaphor for my body in the ways I have utilized paper in my art making. Paper can be torn, and the pieces can be stuck back. It can be soaked in water and crushed, and it takes a whole new form. It can be stained with ink, but it can also be painted over. The light paper used for these heavy lines is a witness to how trauma repeats itself on a frail body. I use this paper with red lines to create the fragmented paper dolls. And I use paper to created paper mâché for my masks. Painting masks is therapeutic but creating the pulp for the paper mâché is cathartic. Here the transformative journey of paper speaks to me as I transform myself through my healing journey.



Fig 8: Paper Pulp, 2022; Fig 9: Paper pulp mask, 2021

Picture Courtesy: Vridhhi

Inner child's voice: Wonder Doll I do not like my body So, I break my doll

Things I want to tell Who can I call?

Will this all ever end? I cry behind a big wall



Fig 10: Red Concentric Circles & Paper doll, 2022

Picture Courtesy: Vridhhi

Paper dolls: Object Language

I have always been intrigued by puppets and dolls for as long as I can remember. As a child I like most children I broke some dolls, but I also took care of many. They were all close to me like extensions of me. I would try to reassemble the broken dolls by joining different parts of different dolls and create a new doll. My mother often scolded me for doing that. Reassembling those fragmented dolls was fun but perhaps it was also a way to express myself. I was expressing myself through play. I was expressing what was happening to me by breaking and reassembling my dolls.

It was Christmas, which also happens to be my parents' anniversary, a special occasion for the family to celebrate indeed. I was seven. I believed in the existence of Santa because my parents made me believe so. I went to bed early wishing for a doll. I loved dolls, especially barbies. I would take pride in my collection and dress them up every day before going to school. That night I felt the wrapped box next to my pillow but waited until the morning to unwrap it. When I woke up the next morning, the box was missing. I couldn't have imagined it because I touched it and felt it. So where did it go? I went to my parents asking them if they had seen my present. Very casually they asked me to go back to sleep while they made their calls to Santa. It's hard to go back to sleep when you're anticipating arrival of the much talked Santa. So, I pretended to sleep. I could hear my parents outside my room hushing and whispering to each other. Was Santa here? Was I going to catch him red handed? I had to go see it for myself and ask him why he took my present away. I tip toped my way to the door and saw my father dressing my mother up as Santa. And boom came crashing all my Santa beliefs. I was seven when I realized Santa was not real and we all had a great laugh. And the present was one that I will remember for a lifetime.

It wasn't a doll but parts of a doll that I had to assemble myself. My parents and I spent the rest of the day creating our own doll, knees for arms and thighs for palms. I didn't have to break dolls anymore.

Puppets and paper dolls are a way to externalize a problem, emotion, or experience and can help one identify and relate to a trauma because as one plays, the puppets become an extension of oneself. The repetitive lines convey the intensities and the weight of traumatic memories my body carries with itself. The somatic experience of touching and holding the paper doll helps me confront my trauma because it is a person of its own. I do not hate my trauma, I do not hate the uninvited guest, I do not diss the sensory language. But I have managed to love the person this trauma has made me. The lines speak to me as they speak to my trauma self.

Through my paper dolls, I am giving a form and language to the trauma that revisits my body. The trauma that haunts and drains my body. The trauma that has made itself home in my body, an uninvited sensory guest. It has made itself home somewhere between my skin flesh. The red lines symbolize the flesh, almost identical to the lines that run on our muscles. That is where exactly where I feel my trauma, where I locate my trauma. It is constantly poking me and causing strange sensations while the mind replays the memories on repeat.



Fig 11: Paper fragments, 2021

Picture Courtesy: Vridhhi

With these paper dolls, I do not experience affect, affect experiences me, and my body just goes along for the ride. As echoed by Erikson (1995), the power of traumatic memory, or the memory of trauma, involves how 'our memory repeats to us what we haven't yet come to terms with, what still haunts us. I replay these memories, that return to me and as I paint each circle, I release these fragments. Each circle represents a fragment. Fragments of emotions, fragments of memories, fragments of an uninvited guest, fragments of a sensory language.

This process of cutting out fragments from the painted sheets has given me an understanding of how my paper dolls store my trauma. I am cutting up something that I spent days painting. Similarly, trauma breaks the body that has spent years constructing. The fragmented paper dolls store the red lines that hold the trauma.

Paper mâché masks

I picked on the art of paper mâché after I saw some masks my friend had made in 2018. It urged me to create my own masks. What started out as an experiment turned into an obsession. Summer was the best time to create the pulp because it dried up fast. During the summer semester, I created the first prototype of the masks in my exhibition as an assignment for my Thinking Through Making class. I experimented with various natural ingredients to make the pulp smooth and soft as opposed to using glue. Finally, it was a mix of fenugreek powder, baking soda, vinegar, salt, corn starch, and flour that helped me make the pulp more resistant and stickier. I named these masks The Confession Masks; the idea was to speak things through these masks that we wouldn't say otherwise. Having a physical mask on makes it easier to say things that we withhold within ourselves.



Fig 12: Confession Masks, 2021

Picture Courtesy: Vridhhi

Masks help me in protecting myself from how I want to be perceived by the people around me. Seeing through the mask is an important aspect for me because I want to see and be seen and the same for the people who will be interacting with these masks at the exhibit.

When we mask ourselves, we inherit a power that is lesser-known to us and the act of unmasking ourselves makes us vulnerable. As a survivor, I feel powerful and vulnerable at the same time. My masks help me in channeling these strong emotions and evolve them into compassion and empathy. Narratives spoken through masks may help evoke a sense of empathy and compassion in the viewers, compassion for themselves. The masks I am making for my exhibit will help the viewers to reflect on their experiences from a new perspective(s) to open channel(s) for healing.



Fig 13: Stills from a performance with Confession Masks, 2021

Picture Courtesy: Vridhhi



Survivorhood

Don't hold on to it

"If the elements of the trauma are replayed again and again, the accompanying stress hormones engrave those memories even more deeply into the mind. Ordinary, day-to-day events become less and less compelling. Not being able to deeply take in what is going on around [us] makes it impossible to feel fully alive. It becomes harder to feel the joys and aggravations of ordinary life, harder to concentrate on the tasks at hand. Not being fully alive in the present keeps [us] more firmly imprisoned in the past." (Van der Kolk, 2014)

In this chapter, I will talk about the approaches I take to resolve my trauma memories. In relationships, we can't be truly healed unless we offer up all the fragments. The exhibition combines the narratives and objects together to create a performance art piece. As I perform and share it with the viewers, I hope to reconnect with my inner child and resolve the trauma my body holds. I want to share this sense of autonomy that happens within performance art with victims and survivors to help them reclaim their narratives. I understand there will be people who have not experienced trauma, for them, it is a window into a survivor's life to know why survivors are the way they are.

As I think about my journey as a survivor to break the cycle, I am also thinking about victims who don't break the cycle and learn how to cope with their trauma. We are all products of our environments, but it is on us how or what we choose to become of it. Perhaps perpetrators find solace in repeating what happened to them as an outlet or even to regain the power they lost. It is a survival method lesser talked about because of how society paints these acts. Through my exhibit I want people to reflect on their acts and consider breaking the cycle. Inner child's voice: Growing & Glowing My name is Vridhhi It means to grow

Standing in a garden Dull and full of snow

Waiting for the bright sun Wondering when I will glow

Post-Traumatic Growth

Don't let it overpower you

As a survivor, I am focusing on the healing, growth and progression in my mind, body, and soul; to feel more empowered and strengthened. Surviving conveys that the person is still fighting to gain awareness for their cause or to learn to live after experiencing an assault. Survivor identity is a part of posttraumatic growth. Judith Herman's Trauma and Recovery (1992), Peter A. Levine's Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma (1997) and Bessel van der Kolk's the Body Keeps the Score (2014) have helped me understand the healing journey of my mind and body and how to melt these frozen emotions inside my body. There have been times where revisiting my trauma sent me in a dark hole. It is very natural to feel this way but revisiting these texts in those times helped me ground myself. Through this process I found ways to take care of myself. I started journaling every day to keep a tab on my emotions. I became more cognizant and aware of how people around me were dealing with their traumas. In response to that I started a peer support healing group, *Blooming* Umbra, to bring survivors and victims' together. A space to freely talk about traumas and healing journeys and support one another. It's the wider community that shares similar experiences of coming out of an experience of sexualized violence that can help in remaking the world.

Translation of sensory language

Translation is beyond language, as defined by Sontag, to translate is to transfer, or move from one state of being to another (Sontag, 1997). In terms of trauma, a true work of translation is in the sense of moving from one state to another. However, the movement of the traumatic object from one point to another cannot alone remove the weight of the trauma, unless it transits an intermediary space. The uninvited sensory language is an act of translation. When trauma happens, the distance between what we feel and what we can communicate becomes a gulf. The narratives that people ordinarily use to explain trauma lie or fail, as the "lived past and the narrated past are very discrepant." Often this is because the linguistic resources of the culture are insufficient to explain overwhelming experiences, particularly the way they can linger long after the traumatic event (be it a roadside bomb or a childhood) is past.

Scholar and researcher Kate Douglas states that we need to be aware of the shifting contexts affecting the production, circulation, and reception of trauma texts. (Douglas, 2007). I am going to unravel how I remember accounts of trauma, and how I transmit them forward. This is not a simple act of translation. When I am transferring trauma back into the physical act of remaking (*undoing*), I am opening myself up to the possibility of retraumatizing both myself and the person who might encounter my work. This requires a lot of patience, resilience, and self-love and care. These are some of the considerations one requires when they replay their trauma narratives without harming themselves in the process.

Hands as trauma transmitters and translators

My hands are the transmitters, they are the communicators. They are the makers. They are the unmakers. They are the outlet that transfers my trauma out of my body into words, materials, objects, performance, and offerings. I feel the heaviness in the fingertips as I engage myself in these acts of writing, making, and performing. This sensation was rather prominent while making the paper mâché and the masks. Binding together ingredients and material that don't belong together to create a material that helps me express. To me healing feels similar where I mix old with the new, good with the bad, that don't belong together to create something new. It is almost like making dough but watery, leaving my fingers pruney due to osmosis. The wrinkles on my tips started to look like the red concentric circles that I paint in my making process.



Fig 14: Making masks; Fig 15: Painting red circles

Picture Courtesy: Vridhhi

Fragments of an inner child

Just forgive and forget



Fig 16: A picture of me when I was 5, 2000

Picture Courtesy: Toshi Chaudhry

My inner child's pronouns are they/them. When I was five, I spoke like a boy. Verbs are genderized in Hindi language and for some reason I felt more comfortable talking and behaving like a boy. People made fun of me for talking like a boy and would often ask me whether I was a boy or a girl or an 'it'? I didn't associate with either of the two genders, but I felt like I belonged somewhere in the middle. Why do I have to be a boy or a girl to talk like one? Why can't I be both or none? Society didn't have room for people in the middle. Thinking about how I wanted to address my inner child brought back these memories of being referred to as 'it'. It feels liberating to think that society has a space for them today's time. It feels like the first step towards reforming my inner child.

My performance artwork for the exhibition is a part of my effort to reform my inner child and reconnect with my inner child. I will begin the performance by painting the corner behind me with red concentric circles. The red circles are familiar to me and help me ground myself. It is important I situate myself in a corner that protects me while I make myself vulnerable. Once I finish painting the circles, I will sit on a circular red rug and wear three masks one by one. The act of wearing the masks speaks to how I would wear masks in front of my perpetrators to feel brave and powerful.

I will then move on to cutting put pieces from the papers I painted red concentric circles on with a pair of red scissors. Each sheet has at least four hundred circles painted; I find it painful to imagine cutting up these sheets I spent days painting. These fragments bear witness to the memories of trauma I redid and undid. Rememories (Morrison, 1987) that lie in each of the red circles painted. It is what trauma did to my body, it disrupted my growth. It left my body in fragments and I had to reconstruct and regrow again and again and again.

As I finish one sheet, I will remove a mask and continue cutting and will continue this process till I finish cutting up all the sheets. I will make myself vulnerable by unmasking myself in front of my viewers and find strength in this vulnerability. I am hoping that this vulnerability will evoke people in the room to reflect on their inner child. After cutting all the sheets and unmasking myself, I will collect all the pieces and put them in a glass bowl. This is my offering to the viewers in the room and to people who will experience my exhibit.



Fig 17: Paper mask, 2021

Picture Courtesy: Vridhhi

Nicolas Bourriaud defines relational aesthetics as a "set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space". (Bourriaud, 1998) In simpler words, relational aesthetics is used to describe all those artistic practices that tend to erase the line which separates spectators from the work of art. Much like Boltanski, I don't want the viewers to look at my exhibit as an artwork but work of emotions. I then become the catalyst who is attempting to replicate an existing social issue for the viewers to participate in.

I will invite the viewers to reconstruct their inner child, their trauma self with the fragments I offer them. I will leave it up to the viewers as to how they want to create their paper doll. While they create these dolls, I want them to transfer a part of their trauma into the dolls. I am imagining many paper dolls hanging and projecting shadows. These paper dolls become living fragments of trauma. Living fragments (Wallace, 1991) of resilience. I imagine the paper dolls reflecting on their trauma in their shadows. The dolls also speak to the collectiveness and community in trauma.

Performance self

Don't make such a big deal out of it

Writing these personal fragments has been therapeutic because I write to make sense of myself and my experiences, purge my burdens and question these stories. I seek to improve and better understand my relationshipspromote cultural change and give people a voice.

This is my reflective voice, my present voice, asking questions and making meaning of my fragmented memories. This is my healing self who is making meaning of the trauma and learning to let go of it. This voice has given me the courage to revisit my trauma, understand it and be able to talk about it. As I reconnect with my inner self, I begin to ask questions that I never could.



Fig 18: Self Portraits with paper masks, 2022

Picture Courtesy: Vridhhi

As I reconnect with my inner self, I begin to ask questions that I never could. In this document, this voice appears with a red highlight to mirror the red lines of the other works on paper that I've made for my exhibition.

I wonder what my nine-year-old body felt when it experienced loss of my father, abuse by my cousin. Did she feel anger? Did she feel lonely? Did she feel helpless and hopeless? Or did she feel brave and strong, knowing that she'd overcome it all? I know she would wait to go to bed, wait for the lights to go off, wait for everyone to sleep, and replay the last night she laughed and giggled while weeping to herself softly. Why do we ask children to stop crying when they are in pain? Why do we forbid them from expressing the pain? Why do we forbid ourselves from expressing our pain? Why was I shamed for wanting to express my emotions? Why was I denied my experience? Why is sadness frowned upon? How are these repressed emotions affecting my mind and body? How am I processing these emotions? If there's one thing I have learned through this process, it is never hide your tears, it doesn't make us weak. In fact we must commend ourselves for being able to express our vulnerabilities and emotions.



Fig 19: Finished paper masks 9 out of 21, 2022

Picture Courtesy: Vridhhi

My family keeps commenting on my facial expressions. They think I choose to be sad and depressed. Why do they ask me to keep smiling, be happy or try to be happy no matter what? With all this weight of trauma and sadness, I felt the need to be happy. I want to feel happy but how can I feel that happiness if the weight of trauma is so overbearing? I think masking those emotions that trauma brought with itself made me forget about the trauma momentarily. While it exists and lives under my skin, the masks help me not acknowledge yet they make their presence feel.

As a child I felt that I didn't have the space to talk or express what was happening to me, what was happening with me, what was happening to my body, what was happening with my body. I share this reality with many children who are probably going through the exact same things at this very moment. But it doesn't have to be this way. I never understood the grievance of these events, no one taught me how to deal with pain, no one asked me to express myself. That being so, it made me uncomfortable to talk about *'these things.'* I didn't know how to talk about my trauma. I have now learned how to talk about my trauma with care and when I do so, people in the room feel moved to share their stories. Stories that they have held close to their hearts and felt reluctant to share. Through this act of sharing our trauma stories, unknowingly we form strong connections and communities that help us in our healing journeys.

As I reflect on my healing journey, I can't help but wonder what the perpetrators went through in their childhood to have treated me the way they did. Maybe a part of their coping was to repeat the abuse they experienced. Does that make them not wrong? Why am I questioning this? Why am I empathizing with these perpetrators? Perhaps there are two ways to survival, you break the cycle or continue the cycle. I believe a part of breaking the cycle is being cognizant of the people who are continuing the cycle and thinking about why they are continuing the cycle.

There is a very fine line between affective witnessing and traumatic transference—between the recipient feeling empathy and becoming vicariously traumatized by the traumatic life narrative they consume (Kaplan 2012). It is important to understand the risk of appropriation that attends this work of translation and recognize the ethical dilemmas that one may face while reading traumatic narratives (Kaplan, 2012). While working with trauma narratives, one must be mindful of the readers.

Hence it is critical to be aware of the ethics in trauma, for instance by using an empathetic tone. As a writer my hands become the translator of the trauma as well as a vicarious witness to the trauma. As a maker my hands become the transmitters of the trauma. As a performance artist my hands become the subject of the transference of trauma.



Fig 20: Poster for the exhibit

Picture Courtesy: Vridhhi



"What I try to do with my work is to ask questions, talk about philosophical things, not through stories with words, but stories through visual images. I talk about actually very simple things, common to all. I don't talk about complicated things. What I'm trying to do is to remind people to forget that it's art and think about it as life." Christian Boltanski

Shadows

My understanding of shadows and paper dolls in this project has been informed by the works of Kara Walker and Christian Boltanski. Drawing inspiration from Christian Boltanski's Les Ombres, The Shadows from 1984. Bolatanski's works with memory and loss. He personifies shadows using skeletons, hanged figures, skulls, fallen angels and a man with a scythe. And a ventilator to ensure that the figures move gently, and five projectors illuminate the work and cause a play of light and shade on the walls of the dark space.

In my own work I explore and extend the interrelationships between shadows, ontology, and trauma through the process of projection which brings together created objected and their shadows that resonate with the experience of trauma healing. As a part of my healing process, I used Shadow Work (Jung, 1959) to get clarity and understanding of the narratives I have shared throughout the paper. It is a process of exploring the deep corners of the unconscious mind. Through this work I was able to forgive and empathize with myself. I was able to pull out a lot of dark fragments and embrace the brighter parts of myself. While I am cognizant of the fact that trauma cannot be erased entirely, I have however learned to control my trauma flashbacks. I am still healing, and I will continue the shadow work as I go deeper into my healing journey.

Our pain, our shadows, the parts of us that have not been recognized and consequently have gone unprocessed, need a witness. These parts were not witnessed and never felt safe to be expressed. Our grief turned into shame, and we abandoned our physical bodies to live in our mental bodies. Through the act of making paper dolls, I am inviting people to make a connection to themselves. Reconnecting to the inner self that is hidden and buried. The paper dolls then act as a witness to the pain and shame, and the shadows they project on the wall in front gives form to the repressed parts of ourselves. Having the dolls face their shadows acknowledges the demons we hide in our shadows. When we don't face our demons, they resurface in disruptive ways. I want people to be able to confront and acknowledge the parts of themselves that they have repressed. The parts they are hiding from, parts they are hiding in their shadows. People won't heal overnight but this will give them a peek into what healing can look like. It is a beginning to a path that they may want to consider.





Fig 21 & 22: Shadow plaay with paper mask and paper doll

Picture Courtesy: Vridhhi

Students and scholars especially those who are artist researchers and critical readers play a crucial role in witnessing trauma narratives. It gives them the freedom to respond to the narrative in their own work, transmit the trauma and add another aspect to the interpretation of the narrative. In these instances, scholars can "translate" trauma (Kaplan 2012), to make meaning out of catastrophic events, and to make the experiences and narratives of these events more widely accessible and communally owned. For Kaplan, art is one of the most significant means for translating trauma. (Kaplan 2012)

Through the execution of this work, I intend to step into a practice of healing, and move closer towards a practice of building a therapeutic space. This work enables me to work closely with trauma survivors and children suffering from abuse and trauma. In addition to artmaking, I'm learning to witness, listen, and hold space for vulnerability. Society gives women little permission either to withdraw or to express their feelings (Herman, 1992). As an Indian woman, I have witnessed the stigma around mental health in my family, community, country.

This stigma can deter members of the community to seek help. Through my thesis, I am re-establishing my sense of autonomy as a survivor by sharing it and talking about it. Like other survivors who are moving through their personal histories of trauma, I want to share this sense of autonomy with victims and survivors to help them reclaim their narratives.

Together as a community, we can help one another reclaim our experiences of coming out of an experience of sexualized violence. Together as a community, we can regain our sense of a meaningful world. Together as a community, we can contribute to remaking the world around us. Together as a community, we make new languages for healing.

Appendix



Link to my performance 'Fragments of an inner child': https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLZ5PnZ7frwB6GJNgyxcDIXht3lFQUil6I

Link to mu spotify playlist 'unlearning': https://open.spotify.com/playlist/1puC4cle205ja4D6vyh1jm?si=c856d5fedd16466b

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