here:there

An Autoethnographic Exploration of Virtual and Physical Embodiment

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A thesis exhibition presented to OCAD University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Digital Futures

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here:there is an autoethnographic exploration of how I use social media as a tool for reclamation and self-representation as a survivor of sexual assault. It uses posthuman and feminist theory to unpack the expectations of survivors and the affordances of virtuality to explore new pathways to healing after trauma. This thesis document examines my process as a contemporary feminist artist, and aims to contribute to a growing body of work that moves towards expressionist autoethnography to create critical, transparent, and nuanced representations of the self.

Keywords: sexual assault culture, installation art, feminism, posthuman theory, #metoo, social media, Instagram

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I would like to thank my advisors, Martha Ladly and Ala Roushan, for their wisdom and feedback throughout this process. Thank you to my parents, who have never once suggested that I am not pursuing the right thing. Your constant support gives me the confidence I need to keep going. Jason, I couldn't have asked for a better partner throughout this process, you are good.

Table of Contents

Figure List

All Images Quinn Rockliff, unless otherwise attributed.

Content Warning

Before I begin, I would like to add a content warning on this thesis document. I know the impact that reading and hearing about sexual assault can have on individuals, and while this work does not have graphic or specific details of sexual violence there is varied discussion of my experience as a survivor and the impact of the trauma. Please consider this before you read, take your time, and be kind to yourself, this document will be waiting when and if you are ready.

Introduction

        here:there examines how I turn to social media to talk about my experience as a survivor of sexual assault. The installation, which consists of acrylic self-portraits and their shadows, highlights the precarity and blurriness between the boundaries of physical and virtual embodiment that occur when I seek justice online through self-representation and reflection. *here:there* tackles my embodied experiences and the burden placed on myself as a survivor to recount and recall my narrative in order to be believed. The exhibition itself is an installation that documents an ongoing performance of self-portraiture. This constant act of self representation works to understand my changing relationship to my body and access to healing. My work uses abstraction in order to reject the expectation for survivors to expose their trauma in detail to gain access to validation. I do so by prioritizing nuances over truths, emotional vulnerability over strength, and difference over essentialism. I situate my thesis work within contemporary feminist art practices, work that moves towards expressionist autoethnography to create critical, transparent, and nuanced representations of the self.

        I was sexually assaulted when I was seventeen. After my assault, I was required to recount and relive my trauma in order to be believed. When I participated in conversations about my assault I was met with doubts and systemic barriers to justice -- both in the traditional sense of legal systems, and also in the ability to speak about my trauma without the feeling that I was not being believed.

        Since the day I was assaulted, the world has told me in many ways that it does not believe me. It started with the police officers, then with the rumors at school, and then with rape jokes on TV. Soon after that I learned that most of my friends had experiences of sexual assault and never

told anyone in fear of being called a liar or that they were asking for it because they were drunk. I was reminded once again when Brock Turner was released three months into his prison sentence, just one of many abusers whose futures have been deemed more important than the trauma of the survivor. I saw a man who boasted about sexually assaulting women become the president of the United States. I saw an online movement that promised united action against abusers exclude the voices of women who did not fit the bill of the 'perfect survivor'. With all of these reminders in my day to day life, I found myself searching for new ways to discuss my experience as a survivor without the fear of retraumatization that came as a result of not being believed. I turned to social media to speak about my assault. The platform can continue to share my thoughts and opinions when I am unable to, as my posts reiterate and recount my experiences every time someone reads them. This transference of my emotional labour to a virtual embodiment of myself on social media platforms has allowed me to reclaim the way in which I represent myself and my body. Rather than reiterate my frustrations in day to day interactions, I can rely on my virtual self to speak confidently about my experiences without fear of in-person retraumatization. This reclamation takes form on Instagram through the sharing of my art, captions, pictures of myself, and stories. Through this act of placing my body and work online, I am able to intervene in the feedback loop of information and be seen and heard. In this way, I found a new approach to justice that uses virtual social space as a means to heal, reflect, and reclaim the representation of myself.
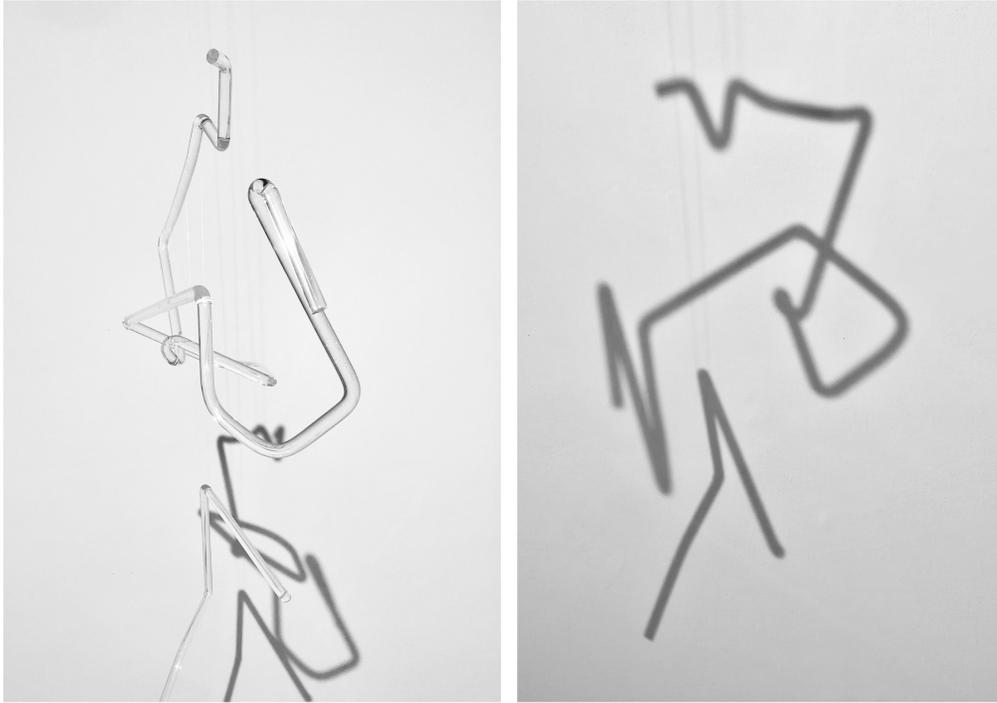
Figure 1 Sculpture and Shadow

This reflection has caused my practice to slow down. My process begins with a self portrait done on paper tracing the contours of my body. I then move to sculpture. Slowly, I manipulate acrylic rods to reflect my image back. Through shifting between mediums, I consider how I shift through virtual and physical spaces. Finally, I place these self portraits into my installation, a documentation of the reflection done throughout my process. The shadows on the wall nod to a representation of self that is beyond physicality and touch (Figure 1). While one moves around the sculptures and shadows they will be situated in a space I found myself in throughout my process: somewhere in between, somewhere here and there.

This thesis supporting document will contextualize *here:there* within theory, methodology, creative practices, and my process. This text also assists me in working through some of the more nuanced, emotional, and theoretical pieces of my work. As will become evident throughout this paper, my thesis work required me to shift my coping mechanism into a

space of reflection and investigation. By moving towards this space of reflection, I had to reevaluate my practice on and offline in a way that made me feel precarious and unsettled. This unsettled feeling comes from the way in which I have been speaking about my assault for the last six years, or more importantly, where I speak. Ultimately, I wish I did not have to use social media to talk about my experience. I wish that after I was assaulted I had felt completely supported and believed and that I was not consistently reminded that the lives of those who assault women are more valuable than those who are assaulted. Yet, that is not what I heard or continue to hear. I am constantly reminded of the way in which sexual assault culture demands shame and silence from survivors. This work challenges that, my thesis work is an autoethnographic reflection on my process of working through shame and silence, into contemplation, and forward to statements. I take an inside out approach in my work and writing in order to provide commentary on my individual experience as a survivor within a larger system of sexual assault culture. While this work is highly personal and specific to my own lived experience as a survivor of sexual assault, I hope that my work can contribute to the existing body of work created by survivors to expose the realities of access to justice and representation.

Literature Review

I turn to posthuman and feminist theory to consider my research intentions. I use Katherine Hayles and Donna Haraway to explore concepts of virtual embodiment and its boundaries, reflexivity, and feedback loops, essentialism, and abstraction.

Virtual Embodiment and its Boundaries

A discussion of virtual embodiment has been at the forefront of posthuman theory since long before the advent of social media. For my practice, I apply posthuman theory to my social media use to consider how virtual embodiment through social media can negotiate the boundaries between my multiplicities of the presentation of self. I turn to theorists Donna Haraway and Katherine Hayles to consider the affordances of virtuality and the potential for agency in this space. In Donna Haraway's text *Cyborg Manifesto*, she theorizes about the extension of the body into the machine. Haraway repeatedly returns to the imprecise boundary between physical and non-physical embodiment for the cyborg (Haraway 153).

Neither Hayles nor Haraway wish to do away with the body; rather, they consider how technology and machines can provide new possibilities for agency and political change. This aspect of their work is essential to my reflexive practice, as my creative work relies on my physical body while acknowledging that its virtual embodiment holds new potential for safety and healing as a survivor of sexual assault. Hayles considers this desire to remain close to the body in the chapter "Towards Virtual Embodiment" in *How We Became Posthuman:*

> ...I do not mourn the passing of a concept so deeply intertwined with projects of domination and oppression. rather, I view the present moment as a critical juncture when interventions might be made to keep disembodiment from being rewritten, once again, into prevailing concepts of subjectivity. (Hayles 5)

I see my claiming of a virtual space as an intervention into the way I faced disembodiment after assault. Disembodiment was experienced when my body no longer felt as if it was mine to control what happened to it, and after the fact, that I was not in charge of the narrative of what truly happened to it. This, in combination with self-portraiture, allows for grounding in both the physical and virtual space beyond my body.

A definition of virtuality is worked through in Hayles' text. She explains that virtuality is a cultural perception and "the feedback loops that run between technologies and perceptions, artifacts and ideas, have important implications for how historical change occurs." (Hayles, 14). The cultural perception of virtuality is that "material objects are interpenetrated by information patterns" (Hayles 14). This mixing and meeting of material objects and information patterns is explored in my research through my physical body and systems of social media. When my body is situated within these systems, my physical material embodiment shifts to one that is virtual.

Both Hayles and Haraway challenge the idea that embodiment ends in the flesh. Haraway highlights this, noting, "our bodies, ourselves; bodies are maps of power and identity. Cyborgs are no exception" (Haraway 180). While cyborg is a title that comes after many things in my identity – woman, artist, survivor – I believe that my virtual embodiment and my physical embodiment are one and the same, one allowing me to exist while the other performs emotional labour. My body is situated in all of these spaces all at once; its representation shifts from flesh

to pixels, charcoal to acrylic, and back again, all contributing to the reclamation of my agency and the expression of moments of fragmentation, in whatever space it may occur.

Reflexivity and Feedback Loops

The idea of reflexivity helps me to understand how I situate my virtual self within the physical world through my created work. Reflexivity is a way to look backward and forwards to my virtual embodiment, allowing me not to erase my physicality but rather push its limits and understand its affordances. I use Katherine Hayles' exploration of the movement toward posthuman embodiment to articulate both the potentiality and reflexivity of a virtual embodiment for myself on social media. Hayles does not desire disembodied immortality for a posthuman future. Instead, she dreams of a future "that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being, and that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend on for our continued survival" (Hayles 5). This situatedness in the material world while acknowledging the affordances of technology to extend oneself is what drew me to Katherine Hayles' work.

Initially, reflexivity was used in cybernetic research to acknowledge the shifting boundaries between the observer and the system. Hayles writes, "reflexivity is the movement whereby that which has been used to generate a system is made, through a changed perspective, to become a part of the system it generates" (Hayles 8). In a note made in my independent study conducted this summer, I wrote emphatically in all caps: *I think this is really at the crux of my investigation. Reflexivity can be both a negative and positive thing, but it is essential to contributing to the feedback loop, queering the feedback loop, being close, but not close enough, taking up space to pry open the loop just long enough to insert oneself and hopefully make space*

for others. Here, I can see myself beginning to understand that posthuman theory is a way into working through the way in which I use communication technology not to replace my body, but to extend it. By extending myself into an online space, I shift the responsibility away from my immediate physical self and make space for contemplation. I use reflexivity in this space in order to consider how my escape through virtual embodiment only contributes to furthering the need for virtual embodiment. Not only am I able to be reflexive in this moment about my own embodiment but the contributing structures in place that fostered the potential for virtuality in the first place. I consider the inherent value in my body, how I have been taught this value, and how my value differs from others. I use my art practice to then challenge how as a young woman and artist, virtual social spaces have been one of the few spaces I have felt I am in control of the value of my body and its representation.

Pushing and complicating boundaries is something that I draw from in both Hayles' and Haraway's work to inform both the transference of emotional labour online and the creation of my thesis work. Just as my line figures loop back around each other, I understand that as I shift from a physical embodiment to virtual and back again, this relationship is not linear but feeds back into itself in order to complete the loop.

Essentialism

I use critiques of essentialism to situate myself within the contemporary political climate. As a part of my reflexive ethnographic practice, I consider how I benefit from what I call #metoo feminism and I negotiate its flaws. I use Donna Haraway's critique of second-wave feminism to propose that #metoo feminism echoes the harmful narrative of Catherine Mackinnon's feminism and the erasure that has resulted from it. When I began to use social media as a means to transfer my emotional labour and speak about my assault, the #metoo we know today did not yet exist. I

look to Haraway to understand both the potential of a movement like this and its repercussions through the way in which she critiques essentialism and naturalism.

Donna Haraway writes: "with the hard-won recognition of their social and historical constitution, gender, race, and class cannot provide the basis for belief in 'essential' unity. There is nothing about being "female" that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as "being" female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices" (Haraway 155). Haraway's discussion of essentialism in feminism is what lead me to my methodological frameworks. She notes the tendency for "movements" or "conversations" in feminist conversations to appear as if they are the ethos of the entire group (Haraway 156). We can see this tendency again today with #metoo feminism as we take nuanced, complex, and highly traumatic accounts of individuals who experience sexual assault and bind them by a five-letter hashtag. This is often done with no intersectional consideration of how race, gender identity, class or ability affects access to justice or attention once shared. While my thesis is not about #metoo, I allocate a chapter, *#metoo and Me, Too,* to consider the way in which essentialism occurs on social media platforms and how I have shifted the way in which I talk online, and even approach this thesis, in order to move away from this harmful rhetoric.

Abstraction

My self-portraits have always been abstract. Much like the way in which I move online to speak about my assault to create space between myself and trauma, I abstract my art to create space for contemplation. The representation of my body is abstracted between the physical, virtual, and material. Haraway says of abstraction in reference to sexual objectification, "but sexual objectification, not alienation, is the consequence of the structure of sex/gender. In the

realm of knowledge, the result of sexual objectification is illusion and abstraction" (Haraway 160). I agree with Haraway that sexual objectification leads to this, as I have been led to my practice as a result of sexual objectification . Yet, I also want to turn towards abstraction as a tool and not away from it, as it has served me well, and continues to create space to entangle myself in, and consider boundaries. While my art practice has always been a reclamation of my body through self-portraiture, I have struggled with the translation of my more complex thoughts on virtual embodiment into physical works. I am not scared of being misunderstood, as for me, the act of creating sculpture is part of a much larger feedback loop of reclamation and space making. Yet, like mentioned above there are reasons I have turned to abstraction in art, and I suggest it is a similar reason it is done in theory. Hayles writes, "abstraction is, of course, an essential component in all theorizing, for no theory can account for the infinite multiplicity of our interactions with the real" (Hayles 11). This here is where the comfort lies: the abstraction is yet another way for me to be *close enough*. I abstract my body into virtuality as the flesh is too real, I shift lines into places they may not go, because I am trying to find new ways to put myself back together again. As long as I continue to abstract myself through both my created works and online embodiment, I try to create some distance between myself and the real. I am still dealing with the real, but much like one would use an oven mitt to take a hot dish out of the oven, I refrain from scalding myself through the acts of abstraction and reflexivity.

I am indebted to the work of Katherine Hayles and Donna Haraway. Their theories inform my ideas of virtual embodiment and its boundaries, reflexivity and feedback loops, essentialism, and abstraction.

Methodology

My thesis methodology draws from a variety of branches of academia, literature, popular feminism, and artistic practices. This joining of forces provides me with a support network behind my process and research that feeds the validation I search for as a survivor. As I progressed in my practice, my methodology grew and shifted with my understanding of self: autoethnography became expressionist autoethnography, and eventually, expressionist autoethnography that ruins things. These progressions in my methodology reflect the profound development and understanding autoethnography has given me. Expressionist Autoethnography structures an analysis of self that opens up an often inward practice while prioritizing creation, reflexivity, and emotion (Adams et al. 82). Ruining things, taken from Sara Ahmed's notion of a feminist killjoy, speaks to the precarious and fragile position I find myself in while I create and share my work, and how different embodied realities allow me to ruin things in safer ways (Ahmed). These methodologies: Expressionist Autoethnographies and Ruining Things kept me afloat and guided me through my sometimes rocky research process.

Feminist Reflexivity through Expressionist Autoethnography

I first discovered the term autoethnography when I began to consider what methodologies would best describe my research approach, yet I quickly realized I have been practicing autoethnography since I began conceiving works. Naturally, as an artist who works within self-portraiture, my research has always been focused on myself. Beyond that, my critical investigation of the self in order to make sense of how I am seen as a survivor within sexual assault culture has been an approach that has always provided me with a pathway to work

through my discomfort. I highlight this importance of reflexivity within posthuman feminist theory in my literature review. Theorists such as Katherine Hayles and Donna Haraway have dedicated portions of their writing to the importance of transparent subjectivity by researchers in academic research in order to dismantle harmful historical approaches.

In *Autoethnography as Feminist Self-Interview*, Sara Crawley discusses the contribution of feminism in academics and the role of autoethnography as a feminist tool for research:

> Feminist theory is most recognized for reclaiming women from exclusion in history and the academy. This is a vital pursuit but, in my opinion, not the most important contribution of feminism. Feminism's greatest contribution is an epistemological shift away from androcentric, boundary-specific methods that enforce traditional binaries - rational over emotional, authoritative voices over voices of the oppressed, public over private, transcendental truths over every day experiences - toward refusing binaries - though as rational and emotional, multiple views and truths, everyday private and public worlds. (Crawley 2)

Crawley highlights what Donna Haraway calls "the god trick" which implies that knowledge simply exists and is handed down by "god"-like figures as truths. Within academic research this trick can prevent a critical investigation into the power dynamic we foster within our research practices and how that power can influence the way lived experiences are presented. As a survivor, the reclaiming of power dynamics and storytelling is fundamental to both my safety as a researcher and continuing the work paved by past feminist research.

Autoethnography has been employed by feminist researchers to acknowledge rigid binaries within research, especially those between the researcher and their subjects. By recognizing one's contribution to the field of research from a place of personal introspection,

feminist researchers can contribute to valuable insights on larger cultural issues while challenging detrimental tricks and binaries.

As a survivor and artist in academia, I felt an obligation to conduct research that would come to conclusions about the state of sexual assault culture today. Beyond conclusions, I felt an immense pressure to propose a solution. For a long time, I assumed that for my research to be meaningful it had to involve comprehensive surveys and more solutions than questions. I believe these assumptions about research run parallel to myths I was told about what assault was, and how it was meant to be dealt with. I felt that if I were to talk about my experience, there had to be a definite conclusion in the form of justice. Ultimately, I felt that I was once again being asked to solve a problem I did not cause or ask for. The hypocrisy and omnipresent nature of sexual assault culture is articulately explained in Roxane Gay's book *Not That Bad: Dispatches from Rape Culture*. Gay articulates the "Not That Bad" phenomenon: the feeling that what happened to you was not as bad as what happened to someone else and therefore is not worth talking about. She explains:

> As I got older, I met countless women who had endured all manner of violence,
>
> harassment, sexual assault, and rape. I heard their painful stories and started to think. What
>
> I went through was bad, but it was not that bad. Most of my scars have faded. I have
>
> learned to live with my trauma. Those boys killed the girls I was, but they did not kill all of
>
> me. They did not hold a gun to my head or a blade to my throat and threaten my life. I
>
> survived. I taught myself to be grateful I survived even if survival did not look like much.
>
> (Gay x)

This mentality, one that I still experience and hear echoed throughout conversations with survivors often, paralyzes me. I do understand that what happened to me was indeed *that bad*,

but the narratives of victimhood and protection of abusers cause me to constantly return to this phenomenon. The temporary paralysis caused by the idea that this topic is not worthy of my research and creation further reinforces my desire to confront it. Gay explores the definition of rape culture - or what I call sexual assault culture - with a question: "What is it like to live in a culture where it often seems like it is a question of when, not if, a woman will encounter some kind of sexual violence?" (Gay xi). This question in tandem with the "Not That Bad" phenomenon creates urgency in my work to be transparent about my access to healing within sexual assault culture.

The desire to confront is also met with an understanding of the harmful erasure that can occur when a woman with privilege such as my own speaks as if their experience is a universal experience. One small example of this is using the terminology survivor_s when speaking about my singular experience. Through doing so, I fail to acknowledge the intersections of race, class, ability, and many more factors that contribute to my experience being vastly different from someone else's. Erasure caused by essentialism is perpetuated largely on social media. The next section, *#metoo and Me, Too*, will discuss this further. My two main concerns: negotiating the "Not That Bad" phenomenon, and resisting the creation of an essentialized narrative of sexual assault are addressed through the use of expressionist autoethnography.

Expressionist autoethnography is a methodology that fosters a creative and reflexive approach while highlighting the importance of an inside-out technique to cultural research. This inside-out approach allows me to look at my experience while directly acknowledging the way in which I am doing so, avoiding essentializing tendencies and solution driven approaches to survivor centric sexual assault research. Tony Adams et al discusses

expressionist autoethnography in their book *Autoethnography*. They write: "Expressionist autoethnographies focus on expressing a researcher's internal feelings and emotions, presenting personal/cultural experiences from a thoroughly subjective perspective. Rather than document a physical or empirical reality, expressionist autoethnographies seek to engage readers emotionally and explore the meanings of a storytellers identities, challenges, joys, and epiphanies" (Adams et al. 87). This "thoroughly subjective perspective" is demonstrated through my self-portraiture process. Using a variety of methods such as video logging, journaling, self-portraiture, and sculpture, I turn to evocation and emotions rather than turning away from them. The story, my story, is used as a mechanism for interpretation and analysis (Adams et al. 87). Using the terminology "story" was something that deeply unsettled me at first. I struggle with how others can so easily influence my perception of time and memory. The acceptance that my narrative is a story with nuance like any other has allowed me to understand that validity and truth are issues I no longer wish to reinforce. As a methodology, expressionist autoethnography has not been easy. It has forced me to confront myself in ways I have avoided doing by using social media. It has helped me understand how and why I do this, and the structures at play far beyond my control. In *Autoethnography*, Adams is clear about the impact autoethnographic research can have on an individual: "Some autoethnographic projects might prompt us to revisit traumatic events or, and we might find ourselves unsettled again, unable to cope or adequately manage our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors when we are revisiting these experiences" (Adams et al. 63). In researching my art practice, my means of coping, I have made it a space of reflection and no longer a space of coping. This shifting of roles between practice and research and online and offline mirrors my contemplation of boundaries and feedback loops found in my created work, and for this, I see great value in the discomfort.

Expressionist Autoethnography fosters the investigation of my research interests while encouraging the subjective analysis of my own experience in order to understand larger systems at play, with the final objective not being an answer to questions posed but an expression of what was found, culminating in installation art that can be viewed from the outside-in. This final product of the research, a documentation of my process that mediates the boundaries not only between online and offline, but inside and outside perspectives, will encourage contemplation on these boundaries and my safety within, outside of, and in between them.

Ruining Things

The adoption of the term feminist killjoy in mainstream feminist culture demonstrates a shift in consciousness which acknowledges that in order to point out a problem to someone who does not want to see it, you have to ruin things for them. The term was coined by Sarah Ahmed and has been used by many academics, artists, and feminists of all ages to explain the situations of discomfort they find themselves in when they arrive at feminism. Sara Ahmed elaborates on the feminist killjoy in her text *Living a Feminist Life*. She so simply puts it: "We become a problem when we describe a problem" (Ahmed 39). Using personal anecdotes from her upbringing and life in academics Ahmed explains that to be feminist you must arrive at a realization that things are not how they should be; many feel they must make others aware of this as well. This means ruining things.

 I have never been someone who likes to get in the way or be loud, but when I arrived at feminism and understood the effects that a bad joke, comment, or myth could have on individuals, I got louder. I started ruining things. I ruined the rape jokes my classmates made, I ruined movies where the power dynamics in a sexual relationship were not acknowledged or

consensual, slut shaming, songs with lyrics about blurred lines, and for all of that, I made situations uncomfortable. Being that feminist friend made some people not want to be around me. Initially, this appeared to be a success; it appeared as if ruining things persistently around me made sexism slow down. It was later revealed that the sexism was not stopping, it just knew to hide around me and bite its tongue. Statements like "I told them you were a feminist before you came over so they didn't say anything sexist" were said to me often.

Before I was sexually assaulted, I was much better at confrontation. After I experienced assault and went through the standard procedure of doctors, lawyers, police, and peers challenging my experience -- I could no longer handle being the feminist killjoy in the room. Confrontation feels exhausting in person. Since being a killjoy is so similar to the aftermath of assault in that you repeatedly try to prove that something happened to you, it brought me back to a place I was not and still am not ready to be. I no longer like confrontation, but I still like ruining things. I turned to online discussions of feminism and sexual assault culture so that I could speak without my experience being challenged in person. Ruining things as a feminist killjoy has become as a methodology for myself and continues to be in my research. It now manifests in creative ways in order to protect myself. As Sarah Ahmed explains:

> The experience of being a feminist is often an experience of being out of tune with others. The note heard as out of tune is not only the note that is heard most sharply but the note that ruins the whole tune. Of course, it sounds negative: to ruin something...we need to ruin what ruins. We could think of ruining not only as an activity that leads to something collapsing or falling down but as how we learn about things when we dismantle things, or by dismantling things. (Ahmed 40)

The intention of ruining things is not to make a situation awkward or uncomfortable. Yet, it is an inevitable repercussion of the process. I ruin things online because I feel safer than in person. I call out my peers that are protecting Toronto private school 'bro' culture over the victims of sexual assault, I challenge racist parties put on at Queens University, and I do these things because I realized that in order to describe the problem you must also understand that you will become the problem.

In online spaces, this means hateful messages, unfollows, or blocking. In physical spaces it can mean verbal confrontation and physical violence. In my art practice, I ruin materials in order to put myself into them and take up space. I shift ruining things into the material through the manipulation of acrylic into forms of my body. In an act of reclamation and putting myself back together again I take materials that do not have give and shift them into shapes that I see myself in. This seemingly sturdy material becomes fragile in this process, much like a killjoy makes themselves precarious in moments when they ruin things. This is a physical and laborious process that takes patience, and while I sit with myself and this process, I think about things I try not to think about too much, each sculpture acting as both a process of ruining and creating new space for contemplation: a meditation on taking up space as a survivor.

Expressionist Autoethnography has served as my main methodology for my thesis research. This methodology provides me with a framework which I can critically examine my relationship to sexual assault culture from an inside-out approach. This methodology allows me to feel supported as a survivor as well as be critical of the way in which essentialized narratives of survivorship has been prioritized in the past. I look to Sara Ahmed's feminist killjoy act of ruining things to articulate how my process is a precarious act that has to ruin things in order to become something. This notion of ruining things will be explored in more depth in my

documentation and reflection as I dive deeper into my sculpture process. Expressionist

autoethnography through a feminist lens allows for in-depth self-reflection while remaining

deeply reflexive on my relationship with outside structures that shape my practice.

Context Review

I am indebted to the feminist artists that have come before me. Not only have they influenced and inspired my work, but they paved the way for my existence. This context review not a survey of feminist artworks, but rather an acknowledgment of the artists whose work assisted in shaping this thesis project. I have divided this review into three sections: embodiment and representation for survivors, feminist autoethnography, and abstraction.

Embodiment and Representation for Survivors

For three weeks in 1977, Suzanne Lacy created a performance that exposed the extent of reported rapes in her piece "Three Weeks in May." This work used data collected on the previous day's police reports and maps to document the amount of reported and estimated unreported assaults that took place. This piece was profoundly clear and impactful in its approach to raising awareness.

In "Three Weeks in May," Lacy left markings on the sidewalk where sexual assaults had occurred; these markings shifted the meaning of the space for passers-by (Figure 2). I too aim to shift the viewers perception of social/public, personal/private space through my work. My online presence can act as a reminder for one to consider the way in which a survivor may interpret an experience. I struggle with the effectiveness of this piece, however: as a survivor, I am triggered by the documentation of this piece. Increasingly in online spaces today there is an emphasis on content warnings (also known as trigger warnings). These textual clues warn survivors of the content ahead to avoid retraumatization. I know that if I were to see Lacy's work on the

sidewalk, I would be swept away into traumatic thoughts and memories and a potential panic

attack. I also know that statistics on sexual violence tell me that one in three women who see the

 piece will also be reminded of the experience they had (StatsCan). While all survivors cope

differently with content surrounding sexual assault, it is important to me to make work that sends

a message without the potential for retraumatization. That being said, my work does not take on

the activist's role in the same way Lacy's does. My use of abstraction to highlight sexual assault

culture will be emphasized in the last section of my context review.
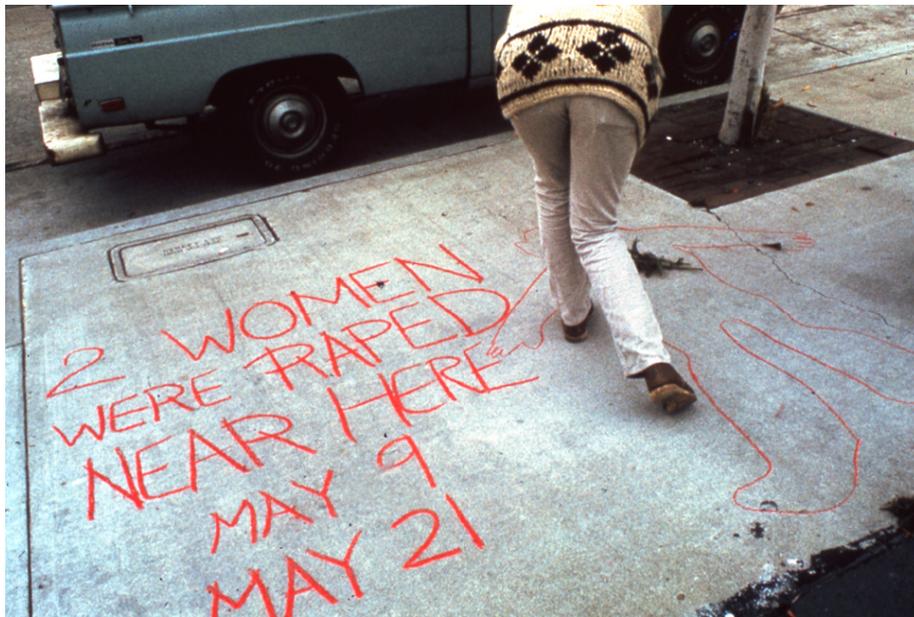
Figure 2 Suzanne Lacy, Three Weeks in May, 1997, Performance, Source:
http://www.suzannelacy.com/three-weeks-in-may/

Sexual assault culture makes it very difficult for survivors to become public about their

assault safely. Consistently we see those who experience assault become the targets of ridicule

and blame, especially when they destabilize their abuser's power by outing them. When Emma

Sulkowicz's art piece "Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)" gained media attention, they

became the target of online trolling and harassment. "Carry That Weight" was a work of

endurance performance art Columbia University. The mattress was to be carried with Sulkowicz

everywhere they went until their rapist was expelled. Sulkowicz's work shamelessly addressed the impact of sexual assault and drew attention to the role of the public in perpetuating rape culture through the way in which they interact with a survivor's narrative.

Figure 3 Emma Sulkowicz, Self Portrait, 2016, Performance, Source: Sharon Mizota
https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/culture/la-et-cm-emma-sulkowicz-los-angeles-coagula-emmatron-20160228-
story.html

Their work "Self Portrait" was created in response to their experience of the public's response to "Carry That Weight." The piece took place in a gallery; on one side stood a reproduction of Emma, and on the other hand Emma themselves. This piece encouraged the viewer to approach Emma the artist and ask them anything, but when viewers began to ask questions about their performance or sexual assault, they were directed towards Emmatron (Figure 3). Through the use of an iPad, Emmatron could answer a series of questions Emma was repeatedly asked. This piece has been the most influential in my created works. It tackles the embodied experience of being a survivor as well as the emotional labour that is required to repeat one's trauma. "Self Portrait"

does so by creating two versions of themselves in order to highlight the fracturing of identity that occurs with the expectations of survivors, especially those who have been public about their assault, to constantly be available for public scrutiny and discussion. Emmatron suggests that technology can assist in the transference of emotional labour to cope with the scrutiny survivors deal with, and Emma Sulkowicz's work demonstrates the power in performance and public vulnerability.

Emma Sulkowicz's and Suzanne Lacy's works examine the spatial embodiment of survivors through the use of performance. Emma Sulkowicz takes an autoethonographic approach and relies on metaphor to convey the scrutiny and subjectivity of the gaze of the other. Suzanne Lacy's work collects real-time data to make the viewer aware of the everyday impact of sexual assault culture in Los Angeles. While both of these works effectively engage the other in the politics of their work, I am drawn to the use of abstraction and metaphor to avoid retraumatization for myself and others.

Feminist Autoethnography

The feminist autoethnographies I have cited provide insightful commentary on the diverse lived experiences of feminists and can assist in dismantling essentialized narratives. They also trace out a useful method for reflecting on one's own lived experience and using these reflections to inductively engage with broader discourses and questions on gender and feminism.

Tracey Emin's evocative and personal works such as "My Bed" and "Psyco Slut" use an autoethnographic approach to confessional art. "My Bed" by Tracey Emin is an installation of her bed and bedroom objects in an abject state.
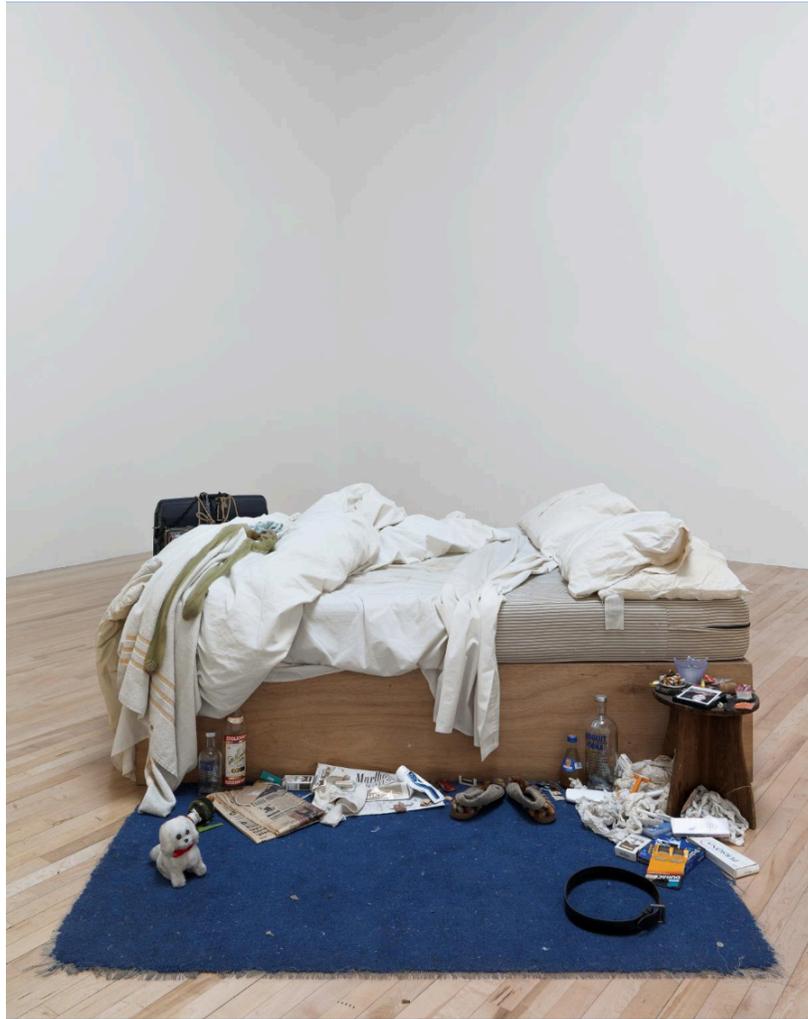
Figure 4 Tracey Emin, My Bed, Box frame, mattress, linens, pillows and various objects, 1998, © Tracey Emin, Source: Tate

https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/emin-my-bed-l03662

The piece includes objects such as cigarettes, underwear, and dirty sheets left as a result of a

depressive episode in Emin's home (Figure 4). Emin's work is often criticized for being vulgar

and too crude for the institution, and by one critic "like unprocessed sewage" (Dorment 1999).

This critique of autoethnographic work by feminists demonstrates the resistance of transparent

representations of the lived experiences of these artists. I am drawn to the way in which "My

Bed" is the remnants of a lived experience, this is echoed in my piece as it culminates the act of

self-portraiture over 6 months. This act, one of coping and reflection is placed into the gallery space and recontextualized, as "My Bed" is. The piece "Psyco Slut" The way that her confessional work considers what it means to be vulnerable while empowered influenced my process significantly (Figure 5). I use text in my self-portraits; they appear in the margins and captions of my work and in the form of confessions. While I usually remove them before the work is completed, they often become the title of the piece and allow me to communicate what my body meant to me during the time that portrait was made. I am drawn to the controversy surrounding Emin's work as well as its confessional nature. I believe her work exposes the hypocrisy in the expectations of women to be vulnerable but not self-obsessed. This double-edged sword leaves Emin's work constantly teetering on the edge of scandal to expose authentic representations of what her lived experience looks like.
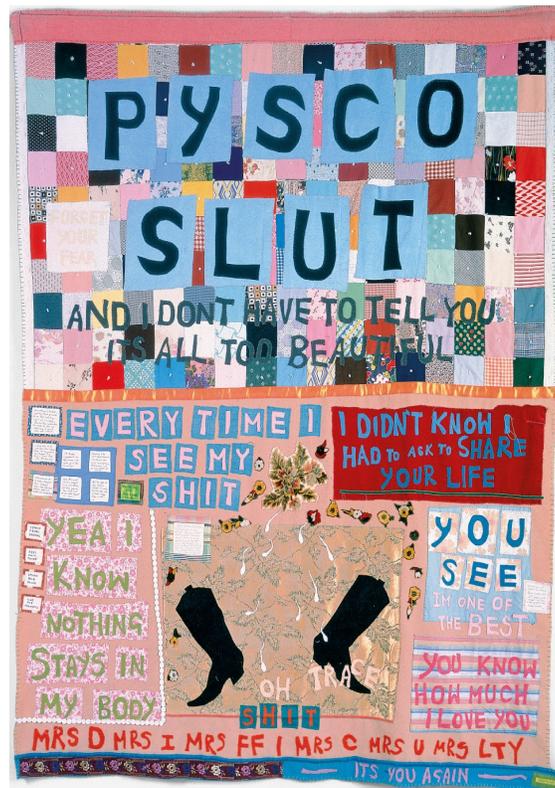
Figure 5 Tracey Emin, Psyco Slut, 1999, Appliqué on blanket, © Tracey Emin, Source: SFMoMA

https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/99.490/

Vivek Shraya is an interdisciplinary artist and writer and the author of the 2017 book *I'm Afraid of Men*. This book uses autoethnography to explore her relationship to trauma, racism, transphobia, and violence. While her experience is different from my own, as a transgender woman of colour, her interdisciplinary approach to autoethnographic storytelling articulates trauma and fear in ways I strive to. Her writing is approachable and honest while highlighting the nuances of lived experiences. Shraya's unapologetic writing is reflexive in its ability to be critical of the self while acknowledging the structures that prevent women, especially transgender women of colour, from living freely. Her writing style, along with the writing approaches of Roxane Gay and Sara Ahmed, encourage me to articulate my thesis in a way that I feel will have the most impact: transparently, vulnerably, and approachably.

Abstraction

The above artists all approach issues of survivorship, trauma, and feminist autoethnographic powerfully. Yet, as I highlighted in my reflections on Lacy's work, I am committed to creating work about being a survivor that does not result in retraumatization or the commodification of trauma. I do this through abstraction. The abstraction of my body into drawing and sculpture allows me to candidly discuss issues of embodiment and reclamation without using literal signifiers for assault and trauma. In order to do so I look to artists such as Jenny Holzer, whose work looks for "new ways to make narrative or commentary an implicit part of visual objects" (TATE 2019). While one could argue that language and text is concrete and literal, her use of nuanced language and repetition challenge assumptions of meaning making and present new possibilities for interpretation.

Jenny Holzer's use of light and language creates impactful and thought-provoking artworks. It is hard for me to highlight one piece of Holzer's that directly influences my research as she has been a creative inspiration for me from such a young age. Her playful and straightforward use of language highlights the politics in words and how they are presented. As a survivor, I struggle with stating my experience as factual, partly because I do not believe in objective truths, but also due to the questioning and scrutiny my trauma has undergone. The repetition and boldness of the statements Holzer crafts speak to the power in aesthetics and representation, most notably seen in her "Inflammatory Essays" (1979-1982). While my work does not involve text, iterations of it have. One version of my thesis included the phrase, "and after that [my sexual assault] , I knew for sure, everything that had been whispered to me should have been screamed." In this sentence I expressed a certain dissonance I felt: prior to my assault I had an idea of sexual assault culture and the capacity for institutions to fail to believe and protect survivors, but after I was assaulted, I wished I had been told more clearly the state of our society. I envisioned the words repeating in the installation, as a Holzer piece does, so that I wouldn't have to.

The use of technology to disseminate thoughts and ideas parallels my use of social media for a transference of emotional labour. The technology continues when I am unable. The text aspect of my piece was removed as I felt that the sculptures themselves reiterated themselves as their shadows changed. Much like Holzer's projection installations on buildings, the use of light and shadow urges the audience to consider the space in a new way (Figure 6). The ubiquitous distribution of her work, through posters, condoms, and merchandise explores where art and messaging are received. Through my posting online, I hope that the feedback loop of content online can be disrupted temporarily by my presence and allow my messaging to claim space for

brief moments in time and space. Holzer's work placed in spaces beyond the gallery speaks to my concept of hanging out and ruining things as her work shifts the meaning of physical spaces through the presence of light.
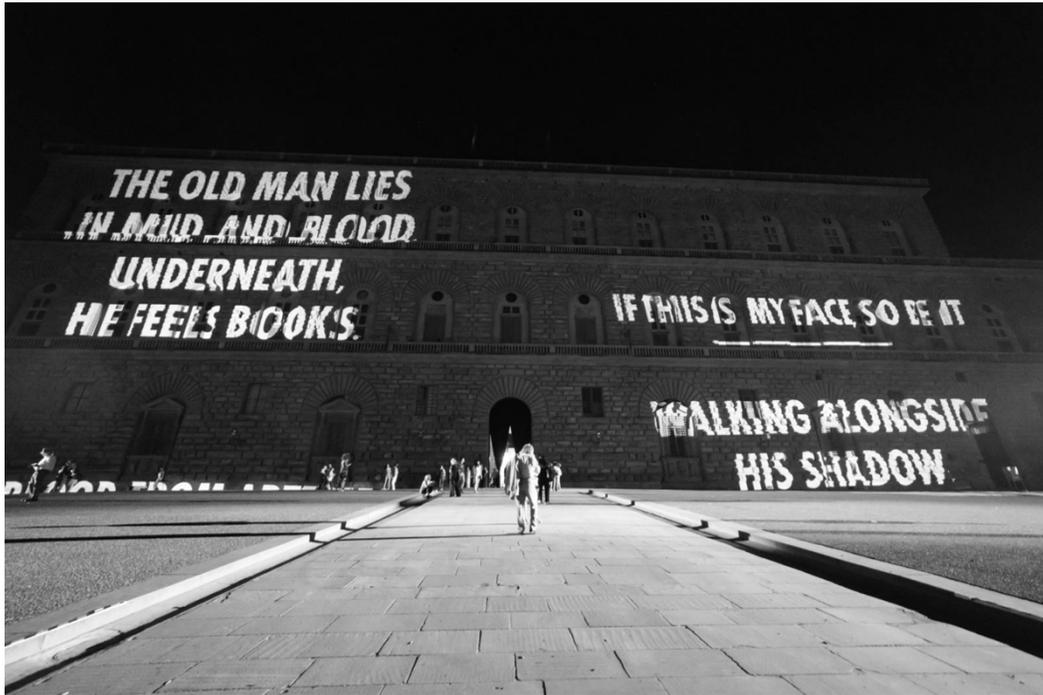
Whether it is light projected in the shapes of repeated phrases, or inflammatory essays plastered across New York City, Holzer emphasizes the power in the presence of the impermanent and the impact of ephemerality. My decision to do installation work was influenced by this power, as I wish to mirror the effect being present online can have temporarily on a space, and what this says about the way we embody spaces and interact with objects once new realities are illuminated.

The exploration of embodiment, light, trauma, and self-representation by these five artists assists me in situating myself within feminist art. Although aesthetically my work does not align with any one artist, their brave and nuanced approach to complex problems is deeply resonant with my own work.

#MeToo and Me, Too

To write a thesis about how I use social media as a survivor of sexual assault and not address #metoo would feel like a missed opportunity. Since the proliferation of the hashtag, my practice in the eyes of others has shifted. Perhaps it has become more relevant or more topical – as if the online movement has uncovered an issue we were not already aware of. I believe that #metoo as a tool demonstrates many of the concepts I explore in my thesis, including technology as a tool for the transference of emotional labour, virtual embodiment, and essentialism. Pulling from Donna Haraway's critique of essentialism in feminism, in this section I explore both the historical tendency and future repercussions of conflating action with activism and the potential for harmful erasure within feminist discourse. The term "#metoo feminism" will be used to describe the essentialized narrative of feminism assumed when discussing the #metoo movement. While the individual actions of those who participated in #metoo are brave and fundamental to opening up the discourse surrounding sexual assault, #metoo feminism perpetuates the erasure of marginalized and diverse narratives online. #metoo feminism has shifted the way I approach my practice and methodology. For a long time, talking about sexual assault appeared to be a rebellious act in the face of silencing and doubt, after #metoo, it felt required to participate. Seeing what feminism looks like in our virtual political economy drove me to autoethnography in a response to the essentialism in #metoo.

In October 2017, the use of the hashtag #metoo was popularized by actress Alyssa Milano, who encouraged women to tweet in order "to give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem" of sexual assault and harassment (@alyssa_milano, Twitter).

Figure 7 @Alyssa_Milano, Twitter. October 15, 2017.

Since that call to action (Figure 7), Facebook estimates that the hashtag was used in more

than 12 million posts, comments and reactions in less than 24 hours (CNN). The proliferation of

the hashtag is now referred to as a movement in mainstream media and online discourses. The

framing of #metoo as a movement fails to foster critical engagement with the very precarious

and layered issue of sexual assault culture today. The assumption that every use, engagement and

repurposing of this hashtag reflects the ideals of one united feminist ethos results in an

essentialist rhetoric of survivorship.

Online feminist action on social media has long received critique for this very

essentialism, as the voices amplified often create an echo chamber of white feminism that fails to

recognize its own privilege (Pelligrini 2). While #metoo on an individual level may include

immensely brave moments of feminist action, all 12 million and counting instances of #metoo do

not neatly package up into one single feminist identity, and the assumption that it does results in the erasure of marginalized voices.

In fact, #metoo did not begin on October 2017 as widely accepted by the mainstream rhetoric surrounding the hashtag. It was started in 2006 by Tarana Burke, an African-American civil rights activist, in order to raise awareness of the pervasiveness of sexual abuse and assault in society (NYTimes). Her actions almost one decade earlier never received support from the masses. It never went viral because of the very issues #metoo feminism fails to acknowledge to this day: diverse lived experiences by women situated in different socio-economic and political existences. The erasure of Tarana Burke's activism in #metoo is at the crux of the way in which #metoo feminism assumes an essentialist rhetoric, and why I, an artist who speaks about sexual assault online, struggle to identify with the hashtag. Tarana Burke has been outspoken about the the need for white people to use their privilege to centre the conversation around people of colour, in the article "#MeToo was started for black and brown women and girls. They're still being ignored." Burke states:

> What history has shown us time and again is that if marginalized voices — those of people of color, queer people, disabled people, poor people — aren't centered in our movements then they tend to become no more than a footnote. I often say that sexual violence knows no race, class or gender, but the response to it does. "Me too." is a response to the spectrum of gender-based sexual violence that comes directly from survivors — all survivors. We can't afford a racialized, gendered or classist response. Ending sexual violence will require every voice from every corner of the world and it will require those whose voices are most often heard to find ways to amplify those voices that often go unheard. (Burke 2017)

Donna Haraway in her text *Cyborg Manifesto* highlights the struggle for a definition of feminism and feminist action that does not result in essentialist rhetoric. She explains:

> It has become difficult to name one's feminism by a single adjective — or even to insist in every circumstance upon the noun. Consciousness of exclusion through naming is acute. Identities seem contradictory partial and strategic. With the hard won recognition of their social and historical constitution, gender, race, and class cannot provide the basis for belief in 'essential' unity. (Haraway 156)

#metoo feminism, or the assumption that all of those who engage with #metoo are united in their experiences, politics, or intersectionality, is a reflection of the current struggle to define feminism in digital environments. The instant amplification of one voice and pervasiveness of millions of messages united by one hashtag, reinforces the notion that women are naturally bound by one single united experience . #metoo feminism does not recognize the experience of survivors of sexual assault as a highly complex category. Additionally, it amplifies the narratives of those whose experiences are understood and accepted as correct and true , and erases those that are not. #metoo points towards one essential feminist rhetoric that amplifies the voices of white feminists as seen through the success of celebrity endorsed activism after the Harvey Weinstein exposure.

Angela Onwuachi-Willig in her text *What About #UsToo?: The Invisibility of Race in the #MeToo Movement* highlights the difference in responses women of colour have experienced in speaking up about harassment in comparison to white women. Consistently the experiences of women of colour, such as Leslie Jones and Anita Hill are met with silence and further ridicule,

while white women such as Rose McGowan and Alyssa Milano receive widespread support and solidarity in their experiences.

> In all, the failure to recognize the harassment of Jones and Hill as gendered reveals how the unique form of racialized sexism that women of color face routinely gets marked as outside of the female experience. These examples demonstrate that the realities of white women's lives, as opposed to the distinctive harassment employed against black women and other women of color, still define the female experience. Thus, moving to a reasonable woman standard alone is unlikely to be inclusive of the experiences of women of color. (Onwuachi-Willig 14)

This insight highlights the repercussions of failing to acknowledge the intersections of race and gender which often occurs with #metoo feminism.

By placing the responsibility to "give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem" (@alyssa_milano, *Twitter)* on the very people who experience the trauma, #metoo feminism shifts the burden of the issue onto those who are most affected by it. As someone who has had a #metoo experience, but never shared the hashtag, I felt conflicted during the weeks following October when the sharing was most prolific. Many of my friends who have experienced assault had to take a full social media blackout in order to ensure their emotional safety as a survivor. As a white, able-bodied, cisgender woman who has online social clout, the risk associated with me sharing the hashtag was low. In a sense, I was already participating in some form of a #metoo performativity online in order to receive validation surrounding my assault. The word validation has negative connotations, especially in our virtual digital economy that simultaneously promotes self-admiration while punishing vanity. This contradiction is at play within #metoo as it is with selfie culture, as we encourage those to share in order to contribute to a discourse in

assault and often fail to provide them with the support system that is required to disclose trauma. To share, but not too much or be vulnerable, without expecting a support system after the fact, can make online collective action feel very alone. The value of the individual, the *me* in the #metoo is often overlooked. These totalizing tendencies and sacrifices in the name of politics can often cause more erasure than exposure. Haraway articulates this concern through her critique of Catherine Mackinnon:

> Catherine Mackinnon's (1982, 1987) version of radical feminism is itself a caricature of the appropriating, incorporating, totalizing tendencies of western theories of identity grounding action. It is factually and politically wrong to assimilate all of the diverse "moments' or 'conversations' in recent women's politics named radical feminism to MacKinnon's version. But the teleological logic of her theory shows how an epistemology and ontology - including their negations - erase or police difference.
> (Haraway 297)

My decision to do autoethnographic research is outlined in my methodology section but is highly influenced by this critique which I extend to #metoo feminism. Ultimately, #metoo feminism was fostered by a virtual political economy that, while providing tools to challenge existing structures of oppression, still exists within them. I believe that by critically engaging with these movements we can begin to unpack the complex nature of sexual assault culture and what is truly needed for an intersectional survivor-centric approach to healing.

The tool of social media in our virtualized cultural and political economies allow for both the perpetuation and interruption of feedback loops. These loops, while seemingly impenetrable, can allow for chasms in thought patterns and echo-chambers that can create space for voices otherwise left unheard. It is through understanding the way in which these tools function

and tend towards the amplification of privileged voices that one can shift gears in their engagement with the tools in order to create change, as highlighted in an interview with Burke she says, "And this work can't grow unless it's intersectional. We can't do it alone and they can't do it alone. Sexual violence knows no race, class or gender, but the response to sexual violence absolutely does. Until we change that, any advancement that we make in addressing this issue is going to be scarred by the fact that it wasn't across the board." (Burke, TIME).

Donna Haraway in her text highlights the potential for technology to challenge our current approach: "Furthermore, communications sciences and modern biologies are constructed by a common move — the translation of the world into a problem of coding, a search for a common language in which all resistance to instrumental control disappears and all heterogeneity can be submitted to disassembly, reassembly, investment and exchange." This "disassembly, reassembly, investment and exchange" is now in the hands of users of social media more than ever before. The potential for opening up spaces and challenging heterogeneity can only be done when the myths or tools we have assumed as fact have been challenged. In order to incite a disassembly of expectations there must be a critical analysis of said expectations of survivors as digital citizens engaging in often-unrecognized labour online. The understanding of the potential for the amplification of voices that have long been silenced is integral to intersectional feminist action both beyond and within #metoo. I do not wish to approach this topic with too much cynicism, as I have seen evidence of this widespread discussion of sexual assault culture on the behaviour of my peers. Yet, I believe that #metoo echoes so much of what survivors are trying to fight against: the expectation to solve a problem you did not ask for or create. #metoo highlights the need for an important and relevant analysis of the way in which I talk about my assault online and the shift in embodiment for survivor as I gain visibility in the public discourse.

Process

In this section, I consider the research process of this thesis in the context of my ever-changing relationship to my embodiment(s) as a survivor of sexual assault. I struggle to scope the conversation surrounding my process. The nature of my autoethnographic practice means my process and research are not confined to moments of testing and writing. Instead, my work is always occurring and being affected by online and offline interactions. The content of my work deals with a present day, ever-changing relationship to a sexual assault that happened when I was seventeen. The relationship will not be over after this paper is done being written and the installation is taken down. When this project began, I struggled to bridge the connection between my created works and my research. While abstraction has always been an intentional decision to approach the unapproachable through a lens of difference, academic research required me to examine this choice in a way I had not considered before. I faced early critique that I spoke of posthuman theory and virtual embodiment yet showed minimalist sculpture in physical spaces. I respond to that critique and also outline how my theory, methodology, and context inform my autoethnographic research process.

As I position myself as a feminist artist, I hope that my art can speak to the journey to self-representation and empowerment as a survivor of sexual assault. While this work is about being a survivor and the many forms of embodiments I employ to feel safe, this work does not seek to provide a solution to sexual assault culture today. As previously mentioned, but worthy of repeating: the responsibility to name and solve the problem is far too often placed on survivors. My process reflects a complicated journey of learning how to remain reflexive while having a highly introspective practice. Expressionist autoethnography was not linear nor easy but provided me with a deeper understanding of why and how I use social media for transference of

my emotional labour, and what this says about where I feel safe as I survivor. Through my process of self portraiture, and reflection through video journaling I broke down the binary of virtual and physical embodiments, their blurring boundaries, and highlighted my vulnerability in between it all.

Getting to Here and There

Since my assault, I have used art and social media as a means to transfer my emotional labour onto something, or someone else. That someone else is still me - me at a different time, different place, floating somewhere between here and there. Social media has always made this floating feel easy. I joined Facebook when I was in grade 8. There has never been a time in my life as a young woman when my identity was not a combination of Facebook posts, Snapchats, and Instagram captions. Adults around me repeatedly warned me - be careful what you post, the Internet is forever. While to many, social media feels like the closest we have ever been to instantly reflect our realities through media, I felt, and still do, that social media challenges the boundaries of reality in a way that presents new opportunities for self-representation and curation of identity. Social media allowed me to stretch and shift time and place to curate a self that was not reflective of my current reality, and while this may sound deceptive, it later became a mechanism for empowerment and resilience I could never have anticipated.

I was sexually assaulted in grade 12. I told the police, and they told me there was nothing they could do. I went to the hospital, and they told me it didn't look like I had been raped. I told my peers, and they wanted to know if I was drunk. Every time I spoke about my assault in person, I was met with questions I did not want to answer or anxiety I did not want to face. So I

stopped talking about it. Other people around me did not. Of course, they did not speak to me

about my experience because I did not share it with them, but in the sexual assault culture we

live in, the conversation surrounding sexual assault is rampant and often harmful. These

conversations were not critical of this culture; they were whispers of known abusers in my

residence at university, of rape jokes, and frat parties with sexist names and predatory behavior.

This conversation was all around me, continually requiring me to once again confront the anxiety

I experienced when I initially disclosed my assault even as I avoided it. My anxiety and

depression had gotten so bad surrounding nightlife and drinking (the circumstances of my

assault), that most of my frosh week was spent in a panic attack, and shortly afterward I was put

on antidepressants and anxiety medication.

this is not another neknom   👍 Like   💬 Comment   ↪ Share ⋯

Quinn Rockliff   👍❤️ 356   34 Comments   203 Shares

Figure 8 Still from Facebook Post. 2014.

Around one year after my assault, a viral Facebook video trend came out called a "neknomination," in which college students filmed themselves drinking as much as they could in creative or unconventional ways and posted the results on Facebook. In that same week I heard several of my friends make jokes about sexual assault, and while I said nothing to them in the moment, I decided to say something online. I posted a three minute-long video that day called "not another neknom," in reference to the viral video trend, in which I explained why making rape jokes is not okay (Figure 8).

Additionally, I disclosed in this video that I had experienced assault. While I was unable to confront my peers when they made rape jokes in person, on Facebook I was able to project as a confident survivor calling people out. It was this moment, and the events that followed, that led me to my research today. Very quickly my video's views began to grow. I had young men I went to high school with apologize for their behavior. Young women from schools across the country posted, saying that they wished they had the bravery to speak up like I did. As discussed in my methodology section, I arrived at feminism at a young age and was a feminist killjoy from a young age. After my assault, my desire to speak about things and "ruin things" in person was jeopardized by anxiety and retraumatization. Now, through social media, I was able to feed my desire to speak loudly and confidently about feminist issues, specifically my own experience with sexual assault, without the fear of being challenged on my reality in person. I was able to be the feminist killjoy I always was, just in a virtual social space rather than a physical one.

Social media allows me to create a virtual embodiment of self which can discuss assault online without the retraumatization of not being believed. This is not to say that everyone who interacts with my online profile believes me. Some do not, and some go out of their way to tell me so. However, posting online shields me from the face to face potential of doubt.

Some people may suggest that by placing my body online, often naked, I am opening myself up to more doubt and scrutiny. I think this mentality simplifies the potential for individual agency on social media platforms. In online spaces, I can insert myself into multiplicities of time and space no human could ever achieve through face to face interactions. My virtual embodiment of myself is highly curated, controlled, and captioned by me. Yes, I am undoubtedly influenced by the aesthetics and ideals of those around me both on and offline, but I have more control than with physical interactions. After my assault, my narrative was scrutinized and challenged. It was written down, read back to me, and continually referenced to search for truths and deceptions. This scrutiny shaped my perception of reality forever. Self-doubt permeates every aspect of my being some days.

Virtual embodiment allows me to challenge this doubt. It is curated and presented as truth. I put it there, and it stays there. I type a caption and it posts. It may be scrutinized, but it is recorded and documented. Just as the adults warned me when I was younger, it will be there forever. For someone whose body was not theirs for some time, however, this feels like a reclamation: it becomes mine, under my handle, inside my grid, under my filters. While individuals can look and objectify or scrutinize from behind their screens, they cannot touch; they cannot erase or deny it. This brings me to why I create art. I create art because I see value in discussing this shift of embodiment from virtual to physical. I see value because although I may speak with certainty about the reclamation Instagram has provided me with, I wish it were not the case. I wish that my existence did not have to balance between boundaries of virtual and physical. I wish that healing wasn't escaping. I wish that after I was hurt, I was heard, and after I was heard, I was told, "I believe you".

<u>Material Realities</u>

The act of self-portraiture has been an act of translation. I turn towards myself in moments of uncertainty and depict what I know to be true. I trace the contours of my body to validate its existence and undoubtedly declare its presence in a space. Some days I draw my body hundreds of times. After assault, my body sometimes does not feel like my own, and drawing my body is how I slowly reclaim it so it can become mine again. This process works for me -- just like my social media use, I transfer my presence away from my body to be sure it was there.

Figure 9 Line Drawing Process

When deciding what form my thesis work would take I considered many options. While drawing and painting has always been my medium, the materiality of the paint and paper fell short when articulating my exploration of the boundaries of my embodiment as a survivor online. Acrylic

rods, on the other hand, articulated my methodology and theory through their materiality, process, and installation. Acrylic rods at the thickness I use are quite strong when I initially receive them. Each rod stands six feet tall. After I draw my self-portrait (Figure 9), I begin to plan how I will manipulate the material to reflect the portrait (Figure 10). There are limitations to this process. I cannot create the smooth contours and curves afforded by the charcoal. I must move slowly, as every bend in the acrylic requires 5 minutes of constant, unwavering heat applied to the location to render it malleable (Figure 11). Even then, the material is never as strong as it once was: after applying pressure and heat to the acrylic I forever compromise the integrity of the material.

Figure 10 Marking Acrylic Rod

Where pressure was applied, it is fragile and most expressive. The six feet, a length once awkward to maneuver, is soon bent and manipulated into a shape representing different segments

of my form (Figure 12, 13). The limitations of this material and its fragility are reflective of the precarity of the boundaries of online and offline embodiment.

The shadows created on the walls in the installation contemplate where I am situated when I represent myself and whether my body can exist in two places in once. This idea of being here and there is highlighted by the ephemeral quality of the material. Its transparency is highlighted by light. The presence of other people in the space influences the movement of the material. The body heat and air flow created naturally when people move through space influence both the sculpture and the shadows on the wall, speaking to the role of the viewer in my representation of self. The viewer emphasizes and shifts the material, changing the way it is perceived through its shadows.

Figure 11 Heating Acrylic
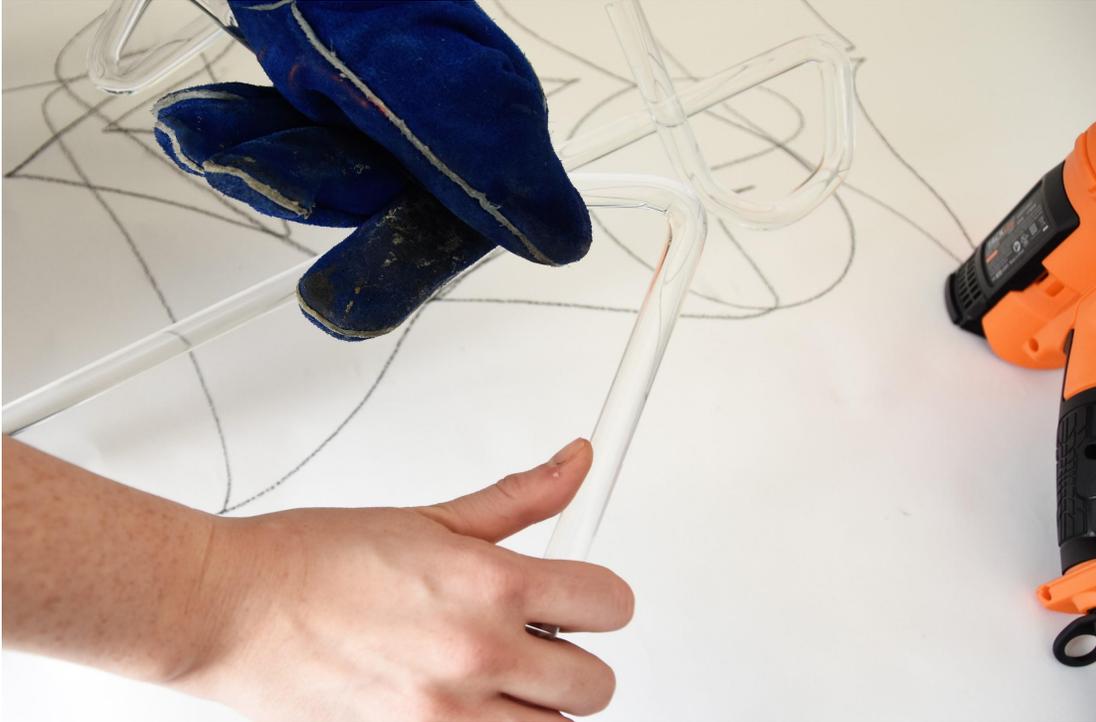
Figure 12 Bending Acrylic

The chicken or egg of research art practices, especially those which are autoethnographic, make it difficult for me to establish a linear timeline of concepts and creations. As I continued to do the work, install it, and refine it, I began to understand it more. The thesis work has always been about the transference of my emotional labor as a survivor of sexual assault, but the way in which my created work conveys that has become increasingly clear the more I contemplate it. This is reflective of expressionist autoethnography, as the immersive nature of the research and inability to step away from the subject, the self means constant reevaluation and rebirth. For example, I initially selected acrylic rods for their ephemeral quality, perceived strength and malleability. After I had made sculptures for 20 hours, though, I began to realize that not only do acrylic rods reflect the way in which I manipulate my embodiment to be seen online, they also become incredibly fragile. Where the stress points sit so do the weaknesses, a property of the material I did not anticipate but has since became a key aspect of the work. This demonstrates

the cyclical nature of my process. Contemplation inspires the work, and the work inspires contemplation, speaking to my interest in feedback loops and their impact on an individual's perception of the system of which they are a part. By situating self-portraiture as a method of research, I place my creation at the centre of my research. While it may be assumed that the intention or goal of the research was the final installation, it is the process of transferring my body between materials in order to understand my physical and virtual embodiment that is the output. The intention does not lie in the final sculptural form but the reflection found in the process of getting there.

Figure 13 Acrylic and Line Drawing

<u>Feminist reflexivity through Expressionist Autoethnography</u>

As outlined in my methodology, expressionist autoethnography is an approach to research that prioritizes expressing the researcher's internal feelings. This methodology leverages the thoroughly subjective position of the researcher to contemplate identity, joy, and broader cultural structures. This methodology is most clearly demonstrated through my methods of research.

Since my work is autoethnographic, establishing the limits of my investigation of self was complex. At times I wondered if my every decision and conversation were up for analysis in my work. This was quickly revealed to be unrealistic and unhealthy, so I established three methods of reflection on my social media use: writing, video journaling, and self-portraiture.

I use Instagram to speak about issues of sexual assault from my own lived experience. It feels as if there is always something to speak about. Instagram's more recent feature of archiving users' past stories provides me with a history of images and texts I have shared. Sexual assault culture is not all I talk about; as a curated representation of self, my Instagram page is a puzzle of artist, student, survivor, friend, and stranger. It provides me with a platform to talk about a lot of things, but as with the time after my initial Facebook video discussing rape jokes on campus, once you talk about something enough, an expectation emerges that you will continue to talk about it.

During my research process, I became highly aware of the way in which I used social media as a tool to extend my embodiment to avoid retraumatization. This became increasingly clear when I began to write about it. Even now, as I write this paragraph, I wonder, who will read this and who will challenge me on it? If they do not see the validity in what I am saying, did I not

say anything? I do not have these doubts when I post online or reflect on my online posts. The act of writing has exposed how far I am from being able to confidently discuss trauma offline. I analyzed my use of social media in tandem with my creation of these works. This was done through reflections in video journal, which will be elaborated on in the next section.

While this is the most reflexive portion of my thesis, writing the literature, methodology and context review did not provide me with the same anxiety. The strength of other individuals' words and works reinforced the thoughts I have and validated my experience.

Video Journals

I was initially reluctant to use video journaling as a method, but in the end, it produced the richest reflections and analysis. When I began reflecting on what methods would be most effective within my methodological framework, I realized that because my practice was already autoethnographic, I had an extensive database of continually growing content to look at. I made the decision to keep a video journal during my process in order to reflect on the impact of the research on myself. As previously mentioned, autoethnographic research often requires the researcher to relive and contemplate traumatic experiences. Furthermore, the structure of critiques and editing parallels the real interactions I use social media to avoid. Video journaling allows me to further reflect on the impact and effectiveness of my research and critically approach the demands of academia and art creation as a survivor.

When I began recording these journals I did not know if they would be included in the final document or installation. I thought that they could evoke affect in the viewer by seeing the impact research and self-doubt in physical embodiment has on me. While I still think this would

be effective, I have ultimately decided that sharing these video journals would only speak to the expectation I feel to prove the impact of my trauma. This is something I have intentionally resisted through abstraction in my practice and will continue to do in my install. That being said, these video journals provided evidence to the unclear boundaries of virtual and physical embodiment and the precarity I feel when I experience retraumatization offline. This research endeavor has required me to confront the unsettling emotional response I have when confronting my embodiment offline, and the video journals urged me to acknowledge that impact rather than continue to move away from it into an online space. I have selected a few stills from these videos and quotes for consideration.

Figure 14 Video Journal Still. January 26, 2019.

This image is a still taken from January 26th. I had just finished writing the first section of process and documentation where I speak directly about my assault and aftermath. I don't talk about my assault often, and even though I avoided specifics, it sent me spiraling into self-doubt. Am I sure this happened? Did they say that? Am I overreacting? I turned on my laptop webcam,

which was an odd thing to do in this moment of distress, but I wanted to remember how writing about this made me feel. I reflect on how I knew this would be hard, but it is harder than I anticipated. I discuss how it is my instinct to stop crying and write an Instagram story, a quick post about the pressures on survivors to remember their assault in perfect detail even though trauma and shock demand the opposite from you. Submissions like this informed my understanding of the safety virtual embodiment provides me with. Virtual embodiment shields me from confronting the reality of the impact of the trauma and allows me to move on. I am still talking about my assault; I am just doing so in a way with maximum distribution of my thoughts and minimum time spent sitting with them. This experience was directly challenged through the writing and process of my thesis work. The duration of the project required me to sit with these concepts for an extended period.

Much of my video journals involve a moment when my on and offline worlds collided. In moments where the protection from retraumatization I expect from social media was challenged. DM's from predatory men, people approaching me in public because they follow me on Instagram to discuss sexual assault culture, and post critique panic attacks all exposed the in between I embody as a survivor. I used these journals to unpack what it means to seek access to healing and safety into a virtual space, and how that space is not as contained as I thought it was.

Figure 15 is from a series of video journals I recorded while sculpting. These videos are quite long, and not a lot of dialogue happens unless something pops into my head and I think to say it out loud. Here you can see me placing the in-progress sculpture against my body to see how it lined up.

Figure 15 Video Journal Still. November 18, 2018

Since the process is to draw a self-portrait on paper to my size and then translate it into acrylic, I consider how the pieces reflect my body shape throughout the process. The limitations of the material mean that I often need to contort my body to reflect the pose taken on by the sculpture. This mimics the way in which I contort by back and waist when taking nude photographs to exaggerate the curvature of my body. The video journaling of my process informs my research in two ways. First, I can see how the act of self-portraiture makes me feel. Does it retraumatize me or empower me? Is it an escape or a meditation? Secondly, it is an interesting representation of my multiple embodiments and the way in which I fracture my body as a means to reclaim it. In one video you see a digital image of my material body, translated into a charcoal self-portrait, translated to an acrylic self-portrait, held up against my material body. It is a rare example of a completed process of self-representation without social media. Here, assumptions are made about my body as a I synthesize it into a line drawing, it is then simplified again to become sculpture. When the sculpture is held up against my body, it is evident that the

sculpture is not a replica of my form. It holds strength and power in its confidence; it is sure and solid much like my social media representation of self. Seeing this process from the perspective of my computer webcam assisted my understanding of the posthuman potential of my works, as Hayles and Haraway suggest, we do not need to do away with the flesh of the human, but rather extend our bodies using technology. While the pieces created are not technology driven, they articulate precisely that, the means in which I can extend myself and my multiple embodiments created through transference. I situate my work in the physical rather than the virtual, as shifting my body through different spaces of representation allows for reflection. While the work is contextualized in a gallery space, the iterations of my body in that space are representative of the reclamation that occurs when I am in a virtual space. The shadows on the way speak of bodies that are unable to be touched, and are protected by the ethereal nature of their presence. With every piece that is made I am shifting my body through different materialities: flesh, paper, acrylic, pixel, in order to consider the affordances and safety in each. I place the exhibition in the physical as I feel the tension between my research of virtuality as a place of safety and immediacy of a physical gallery space provides a perspective on self representation outside of the virtual.

Who For? What Now?

This work is a result of the autoethnographic research I conducted on how I use social media as a survivor of sexual assault. I conceptualized an installation piece and sculptural practice through the process of reading posthuman and feminist theory, studying past works of feminist artists, and analyzing my own experiences and coping mechanisms. The outcome of

expressionist autoethnography is the articulation of feelings and emotions from a highly

subjective standpoint. Like all autoethnography, expressionist autoethnography intends to use the

analysis of one's own experience to understand broader cultural systems and structures at play,

and perhaps to provide insight about the experiences of others. In *Autoethnography,* Adams et

al., explain that ethnographic writing is composed of two stories: one story about culture and one

story about you, noting that "as writers, we must try to balance these stories or decide whether

one of the stories takes precedence over the other." (Adams et al. 82). I have approached this

research project in the same way I approach the way in which I talk about sexual assault online.

My experience is only my own. I cannot speak to the experiences of all survivors. Unfortunately,

the statistics demonstrate that in Canada, one in three women and one in six men experience

sexual violence in their lifetime (StatsCan). This tells me that even if my work speaks from my

highly subjective standpoint of my own experience, almost everyone who sees my work is or

knows a survivor of sexual assault. I learned early on after my first online disclosure the impact

of speaking about sexual assault online. I learned that through speaking shamelessly about the

realities of non-linear healing, triggers, successes and setbacks, I directly challenged the

expectation of survivorship that had been placed upon me. I am not suggesting that my own

work is about triumph and healing, because that is not the reality of my experience. Yet, the

triumph is found in me speaking about it at all, in being transparent about the ways in which I

transform and remake myself in order to feel strong, and how often I still feel weak. It does not

present a solution or a how-to guide for survivors on how to avoid your current reality. It

presents my negotiation of my existence within sexual assault culture that constantly reinforces

notions of shame and self-doubt. As individuals move through the space and learn more about

my process, I hope that they contemplate the way in which their presence in virtual and physical

social spaces can impact others. Most importantly, I hope this work is seen as a transparent

demonstration of the nuance of healing and precarious existence I feel I must embody in order to

feel safe as a survivor today.

Conclusion

I thought I was getting better at speaking about my sexual assault until I wrote this thesis. I thought that because I type out long reflections of the burden I feel and anxiety I experience on my Instagram account that I had reached a level of comfort with the subject. I do not think this anymore. I wish I had more time to explore the parallels of academic rigor and defence processes with the expectation to defend and recount what I experienced as a survivor after my assault. Writing this thesis uncovered the realization that years of using of social media to reclaim space and speak confidently about my assault has not resulted in a full shift in my experience within my physical embodiment. Just last week at dinner, with my family who support and believe me, I broke down due to their questions about my thesis work, returning to the familiar feeling that once again I will not be believed. To do this work has not been easy, but it has resulted in a document and installation that exposes the precarity of embodying the in between. Somewhere in between healed and broken, sure and doubtful, virtual and physical: somewhere in between here and there.

I hope this document has assisted in the understanding of my theory, methodology, context, process, and practice. I have highlighted Haraway and Hayles, the key theorists and writers who have guided my examination of my virtual embodiment. I articulated how ruining things as a feminist killjoy and expressionist autoethnography shape my approach to my process. I situated my work within the worst of feminist artists such as Emma Sulkowicz and Tracy Emin who use autoethnography to discuss issues of gender representation, privacy, and survivorship. My examination of #metoo provided a brief commentary on how I situate myself within (and without) the movement and the essentializing tendencies of uniting all survivors under one

totalizing hashtag. My explanation of my process, methods, and motivation articulated the link between the above topics and created works.

here:there contributes to the growing body of work by survivors of sexual assault who combat the pressures to remain silent in shame through autoethnography and radical acts of self-representation. This self-representation acts in direct opposition to the pressure I felt and continue to feel to hide my body and reality in order to uphold the expectations of sexual assault culture that encourages survivors to prioritize the comfort of others over their access to justice. *here:there*'s self-portraits reflect the negotiation of my embodiment as a survivor in a continuous and ever-evolving journey to finding new pathways to justice and representing them through my practice. I hope that this work can inspire contemplation in others on the ways in which they hinder or create space for survivors of sexual assault to explore issues of self-representation, embodiment, and pathways to justice.

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