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Archiving the Trauma Diaspora: Affective Artifacts in the Higher Education Arts Classroom

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Background

Art education provides a forum for creating cultural meaning through the construction of cultural artifacts and art objects, and for disseminating meaning via those cultural artifacts. In so doing, art education provides individuals with the agency and tools to create objects and experiences of cultural and personal significance, as well as with tools to interpret and make sense of these objects and experiences. In my dissertation research, I conducted an extended case study that included arts based auto-ethnography of trauma narratives in a higher education new-media arts classroom, elucidating how trauma narrativity as both personal and social experience emerges in art practices, the arts classroom, and arts objects (Burawoy, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Stake, 1995). This paper provides the background to my research project, and includes a single descriptive case from the larger study. In my research, I use contemporary and critical trauma theory, as well as clinical concepts of trauma to frame the ideas in a narrative video arts classroom, narrative video art objects, and narrative video arts practices using descriptive procedures offered in qualitative research. I build

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on the history of scholarship that includes feminist standpoint epistemology (Harding, 2006), feminist pedagogical concepts (hooks, 1994; Noddings & Shore, 1984), and queer theory (Ahmed, 2014; Cvetkovich, 2003; R. Muñoz, Mrazek, & Haggerty, 1996) to investigate the conditions of marginalized populations as evidenced by cultural artifacts created in a higher education new media arts classroom, and consider the social and political consequences of archiving these artifacts.

The ideas of affect in the archives are just beginning to emerge as an important aspect of archival studies (Buerkle, 2008; Caswell, 2014; Cvetkovich, 2003; Gilliland & McKemish, 2014). This research is also informed by the scholarship of diasporic studies, archival studies, and trauma studies. However, I do not build directly upon diaspora studies in using the concept of diaspora, but instead contribute to the conceptualization of a diasporic culture. I use the concept of archives as it is employed in broader cultural discourse studies, informed by a recent investigation into the way meaning is constructed through informal documentation. My use of the terms affect and emotion is framed by queer feminist scholarship.

Trauma theory

Trauma is elusive and broad ranging. It is disruptive of subjectivity/identity and cultural stability in the immediate sense and over time (Herman, 1997), making the topic difficult to study critically (Caruth, 1996). Trauma constitutes both the traumatic event itself and the subsequent consequences of that event. These events cause a metaphoric tear in the psyche of the individual, leaving a psychosocial wound that can repeatedly return (Caruth, 1996; Dutro, 2011; Freud, 1920). Trauma leaves marks of shame and silence that limit whose stories are told and heard. To describe an experience as traumatic is to denote that it has come to an end; that it is just an experience, not the nature of one's existence. However, in the case of traumatic return the trauma does not end, but rather it continues (Alexander, Eyerman, Giesen, Smelser, & Sztompka, 2004; Caruth, 1996; Freud, 1920). For those with complex trauma backgrounds who have suffered a multiplicity of adverse childhood experiences, the trauma leaves marks that are not merely metaphorical, but lead to actual changes in the shape of the brain and in mental and emotional functioning (Herman, 1997). Hence, the trauma narrative is one that has no apparent beginning or end; it is not a traumatic experience, but rather a traumatized existence.

Although the individual nature of trauma in a clinical sense informs my investigation, I consider trauma from a cultural position (Alexander, 2004; Caruth, 1996; Cvetkovich, 2003) as evidenced by the emergence of affect and emotion ((Dutro & Bien, 2014) as part of political and social relations (Ahmed, 2004; Cvetkovich, 2012) that is made legible through its archived artifacts. For the purpose of my study, I incorporate the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual—V definition of trauma to establish the phenomenon together with cultural theories of trauma as “unclaimed experience” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Caruth, 1996). In my case study, I examine both symptomatic and asymptomatic non-clinical populations. In considering the nature of trauma in the classroom, I frame the presence of the traumatic return through affect theory as a “discontinuity of the subject’s conscious experience with non-intentionality of emotion and affect” (Clough, 2010, p. 207).

This study utilizes discourses from both clinical and cultural trauma studies to understand the specific social, physical, and psychological experiences of trauma subjects. I define trauma as one of multiple constitutive dimensions of social identity, which intersects with race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, ability, etc. to inform an individual’s or community’s opportunities and privileges within systems of power and hierarchy. The ongoing cultural and personal effects of trauma are elusive and broad because they are disruptive of subjectivity/identity and cultural stability in both the immediate sense as well as over time, making trauma difficult to study critically. While trauma is the wound that recurs—comprising not only the original traumatic event itself but also any subsequent consequences from that event—a key aspect of this experience is that the wound itself is not visible to (and thus not immediately recognizable for) others who may have had a similar experience. In this way, the trauma that arises from personal or systemic social elements (such as racism, sexism, homophobia, poverty, stigmatization, and Othering in general) becomes acutely alienating and isolating.

Both clinical and critical trauma study discourses utilize concepts of testimony and witness. These concepts depend upon the ability to speak of individual or collective experiences. However, since trauma disrupts memory, identity, language, and temporality the capacity for verbal recall is compromised. Thus, the creation of trauma sensitive artifacts through material and artistic practices can serve as proxy for speech, making legible the unspoken or unwritten aspects of cultural trauma in ways that allow public reception and political engagement. The organization of these artifacts into a meaningful

collection constructs an affective archive that highlights otherwise invisible systems of oppression and affording social change. As such, conceptualizing a trauma diaspora enables socially transformative action that can negate social inequalities.

Trauma Diaspora

Diaspora studies, informed by critical postcolonial studies, overlaps with the field of cultural trauma studies in looking at subjectivity, cultural memory, collective narrative and issues of silence and omission. A diaspora in a literal sense is a population that has been dispersed from their homeland, from a national or geographical location. The word diaspora comes from the Greek word *διασπορά*, which means dispersion or scattering. The conception of diaspora as members of a dispersed culture, not in the traditional sense of nationality or ethnicity, but instead in the sense of group identification and shared culture based on shared characteristics, is important in this study and I frame trauma as diasporic in this sense. Although trauma interferes with language and memory, records of its occurrence may be fragmented or incomplete, and we do not know each other's individual or cultural traumas directly, it can provide a diasporic sense of group identity and shared cultural characteristics.

It is often very difficult for trauma survivors to recognize and communicate their trauma because in the West it is typically treated in a clinical, and therefore necessarily private, manner. However, members of trauma cultures may become known to each other through affect and emotion, behavioral changes, and through cultural artifacts that offer insight into personal trauma narratives. Members of particular cultures or communities, including those as imagined (Anderson, 1991), may also know of each other's shared social oppressions which contribute to individual and collective trauma. The production of these cultural artifacts may be consequential to the maker of the artifact in terms of its testimony, and may be consequential to the observers of the artifact as offering witness (Caruth, 1996; Dutro, 2011). The organization of these artifacts into an affective archive (Cvetkovich, 2003) creates a new legibility of the individual narratives as a cohesive social discourse.

In considering the higher education new media narratives arts classroom as the location of public discourse, I contend that students' art works, writings, photographs, and videos are cultural artifacts. These are the material evidence

and documentation of their experiences as authors and artists and are produced from their specific positions. These artifacts, when placed in relation to one another, develop a different kind of legibility. Artistic meaning making may include the making of the art object, the abstraction of experience or emotion into the object, and the interpretation of the object by the audience. In the case of the classroom in my study, these art objects were first collected and curated into individual archives that the students constructed as WordPress sites, that were then posted publicly on the Internet through video sharing sites. These video projects reveal emotion and affect as well as a shared experience, a collective understanding of narratives that are otherwise difficult to tell or hear. J. E. Muñoz (1996) notes that an archive of ephemera constructed by those without access to the systems of organization leads to a legibility and legitimacy that occurs automatically for a dominant culture.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to review the arguments for how an individual's personal trauma may be healed through art practices or public presentations. In my teaching and in my research, I neither solicited trauma narratives from my students, nor did I present works that expressly depicted violence. Instead, I write about the ways that personal narratives emerge as part of the process of the artistic practice. In the following section, I provide a close reading of a single student's process of formulating concepts of gendered violence through the consumption and production of media presented in the public domain. I seek to show rather than to tell; thus there is a stylistic change in the writing from explaining concepts delineated in earlier sections to elucidating the ideas contained within them.

Trauma Narrativity

As a doctoral candidate in art education at the University of Illinois, I taught a single undergraduate course in the School of Art and Design for five consecutive years. The course addressed ideas of contemporary literacy, writing, new media and documentary video production. Each semester I showed a brief video blog by a thirteen-year-old girl in which she addresses an issue of gender-based violence in her school, the problem of slut shaming (MacLeod, 2012). The author conducts excellent research that I hoped my undergraduate students would imitate. In the work, she expresses why the topic is of interest to her, notes the problem, cites her sources and offers a critical analysis, all as a video blog in front of her computer camera.

One particular semester, I noted that only the male students responded to the video during the class discussion, while their female colleagues remained silent. The men who spoke up did so critically, defensively. I facilitated the conversation to the best of my ability, encouraging an open dialogue around both the content and the craft of the video. I was forlorn that the classroom consensus was that women were not as oppressed as men and that this video just seemed to be a complaint and accusation. I must admit, I felt that I had failed in my practice of feminist pedagogy and teaching critical media analysis.

However, at the very end of class one of the students asked to speak to me. She looked around anxiously said very quietly, “Are you a feminist?” Yes, I answered, I am a feminist, surprised that she asked since I had mentioned it repeatedly during that particular class session. The word seemed to frighten her. She continued to whisper, confirming my response, “So are you a feminist?” “Yes. Yes, I am a feminist,” I replied “Because I need to talk with you about something,” she continued.

In our meeting she showed me videos from the Chinese social media site Weibo, in which women experienced public harassment and gendered oppression. We worked through the content of it together, during continued meetings both in person and in email exchanges. She worked to clarify her ideas about gendered violence and how the word ‘feminist’ was connected to these ideas. She cried when we spoke and was confused when struggling through her own work. She was looking to name what she did not yet know.

The philosopher Catherine Malabou (2012) notes that political trauma has personal consequences. “The work of contemporary neurologists helped me to discover the impossibility of separating the effects of political trauma from the effects of organic trauma. . . . Even in the absence of any patent wound, we know today that any shock, any especially strong psychological stress, or any acute anxiety, always impacts the affective brain, this unrecognized part of the psyche” (p. xviii). In the case of my student discussing feminism, the trauma she experiences is a political trauma in that it exists in the public realm. It is not her direct experience, but the observations of others’ experiences leading to strong psychological stress. In the initial discussion of feminism she was silent, possibly because the discussion existed within the political context she was seeking to understand.

Political Action Through Public Discourse

To participate in public discourse is to engage in political action. According to the political theorist Hannah Arendt (1970), acts of speech, to speak and to be spoken to, is to be part of the polity. That which is not spoken in public is private, and the private domain is not political. To articulate the personal, to make public the private, has political consequence.

To say that the personal is political has an historical context. The feminist practice of consciousness raising sought to bring to light the political context of personal experiences. “The idea was to take our own feelings and experiences more seriously than any theories which did not satisfactorily clarify them, and to devise new theories which did reflect the actual experience and feelings and necessities of women” (Sarachild, 1970 p. 148). This text has very specific material consequences since viewing feelings as more important than theories gives them agency and voice, and directs action. “The only ‘methods’ of consciousness-raising are essentially principles. They are the basic radical political principles of going to the original sources, both historic and personal, going to the people — women themselves, and going to experience for theory and strategy” (ibid, p. 202).

Ideas and experiences have real correlates in the material world. As Marx and Engels (1932) wrote in *The German Ideology*, “The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises” (p. 47). By revealing the ‘phantoms formed in the human brain’ or their feelings, they understand the material premises or conditions that create these phantoms in their brains and they can then act to change these conditions, which leads to a change in their experience.

Arendt stated that politics is whenever two people are talking. Political participation is participation through speech and presence, to be in public, to be heard, to speak and to be spoken to. Arendt describes the human condition as intersubjective; human nature is unknowable, and the essential nature of what it means to be a human being cannot be individually known because it is co-constituted. But we can know what makes humans distinct and this includes *action*. “It is the function...of all action...to interrupt what otherwise would have proceeded automatically and therefore predictably” (Arendt, 1970, pp. 30-31)—this is in contrast with *work*, which makes the predictable occur. So, to

speak in public is to be part of political participation, and to take action is to cause disruption.

However, what if we are unable to verbalize our lived experience in the public discourse? What if our action is the gesture of art making, and our art and its affect are the transformation, the disruption?

Witness, Testimony, and Trauma

When discussing trauma in either clinical or critical terms, the terms testimony and witness are commonly used. In clinical terms, testimony is the therapeutic process of telling one's story to the witness; in psychology, this witness is the therapist, in the context of the talking cure that Freud spoke of that leads ideally to synthesis of 'unclaimed experiences' (Caruth, 1996). In critical terms, testimony and witness speak to the articulation of a collective cultural experience. The concepts depend upon the capacity to articulate, to narrate, and to make speech or documentation of either individual or collective experiences. However, trauma itself is disruptive of memory, identity, language, and temporality.

Testimony and witness also assumes that there is an author and an audience, a writer and reader, and the text in between. Whereas the individual needs testimony, the text needs legibility. That legibility is elusive when speech is severed from memory—or rendered silenced in the public domain, when speaking is precluded. Is part of Spivak's famous question "Can the subaltern speak" to include, "May the subaltern please be allowed to speak?"

The somatic marking of trauma on the body, and the continuing consequences in individuals and cultures, are materially consequential. The trauma is not only the event, but also the event's return. A trauma is known not from its singularity, but from its plurality. The traumatic incidence occurs, the wound is made in the psyche, and that wound returns again and again. The wound speaks, but it is aphasic; somatic, not linguistic.

In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry (1985) notes that pain is experience without object. Pain precludes language, rendering the suffering individual beyond the scope of speech, left only with pre-lingual utterances and cries. To Scarry, pain can neither be described nor believed. To be in pain is to be disbelieved; for the body in pain, there is nothing but the pain. For someone who is witness to the body in pain, there is disbelief. "To have pain is to have

certainty” (p. 7), Scarry writes. “To hear about pain is to have doubt” (p. 7); the interiority of the experience is so specific that it exists in the realm of the private and, because it is without speech, it is removed from the domain of the public. Psychic trauma, like physical pain, leads to disbelief by others.

In the case of my classroom, this relates to the class session in which not one of the women spoke up. Not a single one. In effect, they were abstaining from political participation until they could find a way to speak. Yet, I know that these women have not lived without encountering gender-based violence. We are steeped in it. Some experiences we are able to name; others we have yet to find the language to describe. My students may know in their bodies, in the social fibers of their interactions, what those words are and what it means to encounter or encourage implicit, explicit, verbal or physical violence. Statistically, it is nearly impossible to have not experienced gender-based violence through observation, participation, or victimization.

The 2006 UN World Report on Violence Against Children (Pineiro, 2006) identified violence against children—including in school settings—as a global phenomenon. Yet more than a decade later, we still do not know the full scale and impact of gender-based violence in schools. Much research on violence against children in schools has neglected to explore the role of gender, yet most forms of school violence are deeply rooted in unequal gender relations, gendered social norms, and discriminatory practices. We cannot question what we cannot formulate; we cannot name what we cannot see. On 16 April 2015, during UNESCO’s Executive Board meeting, the historic resolution *Learning Without Fear* was passed that condemned gender-based violence in and around schools. The Resolution, signed by 58 countries, recognized that:

Violence against children and school-related gender-based violence, in particular, have a devastating effect on the dignity of children and on the enjoyment of human rights, and constitute a major obstacle to the equal enjoyment of the right to education for all, gender equality at all levels of education and inclusive, transformational and sustainable development (UNESCO, 2015a, p. 2).

During the classroom discussion I cited above, the consensus by the dominant discourse of male voices in a mostly female classroom was that women are not oppressed, that for a 13-year-old to comment on sexual politics is inappropriate, and that she was complaining and biased, despite citing

sources. This “consensus” is in direct contradiction with the lived experience of all of the students, both female and male alike.

Hannah Arendt tells us that any public speech is in fact political participation. However, sometimes we cannot know how to name something; it may be as of yet unknowable to us. We do not know that we are experiencing or observing gendered violence in the case of traumatic events, which may be subsequent (directly or indirectly) to such violence itself. Both language and memory may be interrupted, and we cannot speak or write in the public to organize around change. Trauma constitutes both the event and its return. While trauma disrupts language, memory identity and social inclusion and leads to alienation from self and others, this disruption (as interruption) is an action, not work, in Arendt’s terms. This reveals traumatic recurrence as itself already political and personal.

Public Witness to the Diaspora of Trauma through Affect

I met several times with the student who meekly asked me if I am a feminist, in fact we met as often as she wanted. She struggled to sort through these ideas in her work, and at first she resisted including them in her work. Instead, she wanted to discuss the gendered violence we had watched together on Weibo. During our meetings she often cried, evidence that we are intersubjective beings who are wounded by the wounds of others. We remained in a continuing dialogue about the videos we had watched. She would write me emails while working through her thoughts on the matter, and would also post her thoughts on her WordPress website. In her emails to me she wrote in both Mandarin and English, although I do not understand Mandarin. She wrote to work through her thoughts; I was simply witness to them. I would engage with her about what she wrote. As we worked through these ideas together, she began to clarify the subject of her final video work for the class, a short video about women’s experiences in China. In her post-production writings, she reflected on her initial feelings about the events we viewed on Weibo: ‘depressed, melancholy, and suffering when I thought deeper.’ She initially thought she could not make a video about feminism. She found a relationship between ‘foot binding and mind binding’, the historical context of gendered oppression and contemporary gendered violence through writing, discussion, and art practices. In her final work, she synthesized these ideas, creating a counter narrative to those images that had been created and curated for her about her identity. In presenting the

works in the public space of the classroom she was able to use the video as resistance. Her work was well received by the class. The class had transformed over the semester; each of the students had found either a stronger voice or a larger perspective. Her fellow students' comments were supportive and engaging. She commented on her website that she had never expected to receive so much appreciation from her fellow students, or that she would have found the courage to cover the topic. Finally, she remarked that she imagined her work could have a broader audience, and although her specific topic was women's oppression in China, that gendered violence was a world-wide phenomenon. Her process of working through these ideas in both private conversation and public arts presentations changed her understanding as well as the public discourse. While silent in the initial discussion of feminism, she had now produced a work that served to make arguments for when she could not make them in person. She began to discuss feminism with me in private, and concluded by presenting her ideas through her work in the public domain. The work served as proxy for speech, providing the presentation of her ideas through artistic authorship.

Upon naming it, again and again, acts of art practices puts feeling and affect into the public discourse. I posit that artistic artifacts produce affect, informed by our experiences (the ones we cannot yet speak), which may serve as proxies of our public speech and begin the arc of an increased understanding. It is there, in such actions as art, that we begin to formulate the language, while naming the objects external to us that (or when) we cannot speak directly. These works, when put in relation to one another, help facilitate an increased discourse. They allow us to make legible those stories that may otherwise be illegible to us, and offer witness to experiences that would otherwise be elusive. Moraga and Anzaldúa (1981) note "the political writer then is the ultimate optimist, believing people are capable of change and using words as one way to try and penetrate the privatism of our lives. A privatism, which keeps us back and away from each other which renders us politically useless" (p. 257).

From the resistance of privatism through political speech we can organize, and through organizing, we can resist. This is why the personal is still political, even now. Because the collecting of these experiences, these moments and objects, that are sometimes disparate, disrupted, unspoken, but affective and somatic—through inscriptions, art practices, or sometimes, in the case of this semester in particular, quiet whispered conversations—when held up against the others like it, help build a lexicon. This begins to comprise the dialect in which

we tell the personal stories in public, as political discourse meant to change the public, the polity, and our own private lives.

For Scarry (1985) the feeling of pain cannot be believed unless the wounds or the weapons are visible, and sometimes not even then. For Freud (1920), trauma leaves a wound that is not visible. The making of the object may serve as a proxy for speech, speaking when the individual cannot (or is not allowed to), or can only respond in disrupted, non-sequential narratives of experiences of that-which-we-cannot-yet-name. The object, once seen in relation to other objects, accumulates affect and meaning, and the transformation of affect comes from its distribution in relation to others, not in isolation.

Thus, I argue that to make cultural artifacts in the higher education arts classroom is to participate in political discourse. In the case of traumatic events—where they may be shaped by structural violence, institutional sexism, racism, poverty, or any number of these events, including the large-scale epidemiological studies of adverse childhood experiences through gender-based violence in schools studied by the UN—these phantoms of the human brain, this trauma from structural violence, necessarily have sublimates in material life. Out of the events that led to the violence and trauma, are long-term consequences to the individual follow, including early death and disease, withdrawal from school, and poverty.

These students may not be able to name what they know in their bodies, but they can come to understand that what they make as artists and authors is resistance and counter-narrative. The creation of both the affective object, and the subsequent curation of the ephemeral archive, offers an assemblage of moments and memory that potentially counter-wounds, unwounds. The suffering body, like the subaltern, cannot speak. It can be spoken for. To not be able to speak is to be removed from political participation. To speak and to be spoken to in the public is to participate in political discourse. Private pain precludes political discourse.

Trauma, like pain, disrupts memory and identity. Trauma is both the event as described originally by Freud, the shock that jars the individual, that threatens death but does not leave a mark or accurate memory, and the subsequent return of this memory, the speaking wound that emerges through somatic manifestations, and interpersonal affect. To not be able to speak of either pain of the body, or trauma-pain without the body, is to fail to integrate or synthesize the individual experiences. When we cannot speak in public, the art object may serve as proxy for speech.

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