

The Aesthetics of Healing
Representations of Sexual Trauma in Gita Hashemi's *Grounding: States of Gender*

Lauren Howard

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Institute of Feminist & Gender Studies
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Ottawa

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Abstract

The following thesis explores the complexities of visual representation in relation to women's experiences of sexual trauma, focusing on Gita Hashemi's durational performance, *Grounding: States of Gender* (2017). Specifically, I look at the prolonged psychic pain that stems from the infinite negotiating of traumatic memory and the simultaneous struggle to have these experiences be seen, heard, and validated. With reference to theorizations of mourning (Butler, 2004; Fitzpatrick, 2013) and feminist approaches to psychotherapy (Herman, 1992; Magnet, 2017) my study of *Grounding* responds to a contemporary turn towards embodied and autobiographical feminist research methods. Using critical methodologies of visual analysis and narrative inquiry, I seek to explore the therapeutic value of the aesthetic or, what I refer to as an aesthetic of healing. Acknowledging how subjectivity functions as both a site of knowledge and as a record of lived experience, I ask how Hashemi's forms of narrative embodiment work strategically, revealing traumatic realities while simultaneously orienting the viewer towards a position of reflexive engagement within broader sociocultural contexts.

Keywords: Contemporary art, aesthetics, trauma, feminist theory, healing

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“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.”

- *Maya Angelou*

Introduction

In recent years, strides have been made in fields of psychology and in larger sociocultural contexts to address gender-based violence, sexual assault, and rape culture. In part aided by the popularization of the #MeToo movement amidst the 2017 Harvey Weinstein scandal, these strides have largely been preventative: what measures can be put in place so as to end assault on college campuses? How can we teach boys the fundamentals of consent? Or – at worst – what should girls and women be wearing in order to minimize their chances of being targeted by a perpetrator? While the magnitude of allegations brought forth undoubtedly indicate a degree of need for preventative action, this precautionary, “safety first” approach has resulted in a universalizing dialogue of sexual violence that does not adequately tend to the durational pain of experiences of trauma that have happened in the past. As a feminist art historian, I am interested in understanding how feminist philosophic, psychotherapeutic, and contemporary art historical theories may mutually inform one another so as to contribute to a reconceptualization of contemporary understandings of possible processes of healing from sexual trauma.

In February of 2017, I had an encounter with an artwork that would forever change the way I think about contemporary visual art. The multimedia installation work of Toronto-based Iranian – Canadian artist Gita Hashemi (b. 1961) entitled *Grounding: States of Gender* (2017), was first exhibited at the Carleton University Art Gallery (CUAG), a non-commercial gallery space in Ottawa, Ontario and curated by Dr. Anna Khimasia, an independent researcher and curator. The work itself consisted of floor-length paper scrolls stretched across the gallery floors with Hashemi standing over them, executing

an intricate process of transcribing Zahra's major life events in meticulous, Persian calligraphic script



Figure 1: Gita Hashemi, *Grounding: States of Gender*, 2017. Installation View, Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa ON.

[Fig 1]. After each scroll had been filled completely with the intricately aestheticized text, it was removed from its place on the floor and hung against the gallery walls. The sheer size and length of the scrolls meant

that they were long enough to trail from the ceiling all the way to the floor. As a durational performance unfolding little by little over a period of ten days, the act of completing a scroll, removing it from the floor, and then fastening it against the wall from floor to ceiling was repeated over the course of ten days. By the tenth day, the traditional white-cube gallery space was covered from top to bottom in the massive scrolls of text, enveloping the viewer completely [Fig 2]. Largely a text-based work, *Grounding* stems from a series of conversations between Hashemi and her friend Zahra. The conversations reveal in great detail Zahra's experiences growing up as a young girl in Iran. Through an amalgamation of language and aesthetics, Hashemi transcribes the many instances of emotional and sexual abuse Zahra endured as a child and the ways in which the memories and impacts have continued to haunt her throughout adult life.

As a Canadian scholar with no comprehension of the Persian language, I was initially able to look at Hashemi's work and see only the complex intricacies of dexterity and the painstaking, repetitive, and time-consuming efforts that

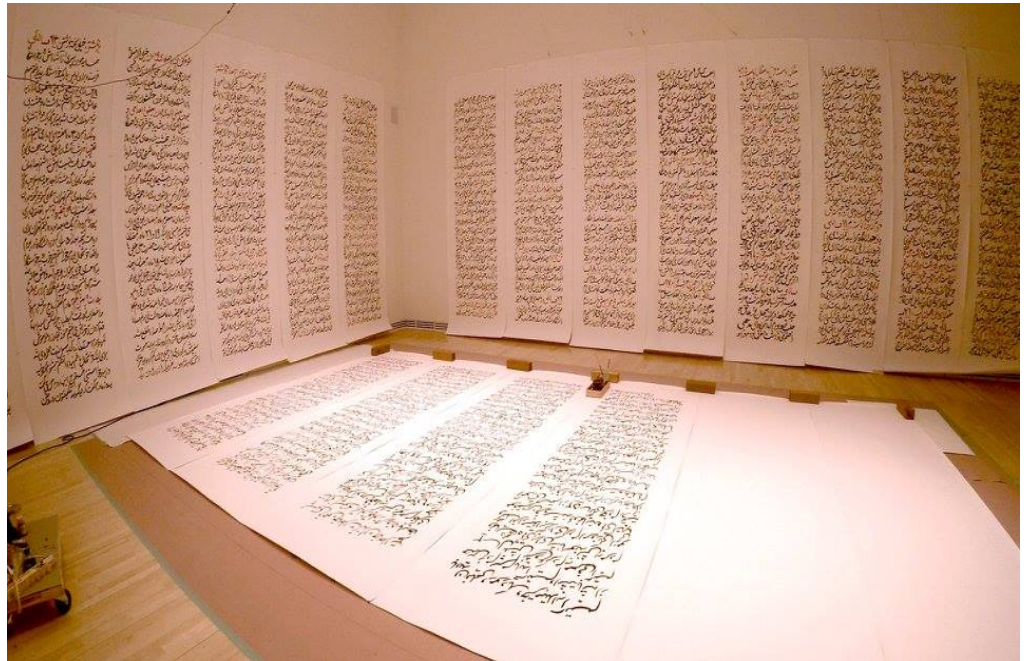


Figure 2: Gita Hashemi, *Grounding: States of Gender*, 2017. Installation View, Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa ON. Image courtesy of the artist.

were necessary in order for *Grounding* to take its shape. Simply look, and *Grounding* remains an abstract, evocative experience. Take a step further, to seek out its meaning – the message that lies beyond the unfamiliar alphabet – and suddenly, you are forcefully thrust into a position visceral contemplation. Taking that extra step allowed the subject matter of Zahra's narrative to infiltrate my viewing experience at the realm of the senses, and I have never been able to look at *Grounding* – and all of its perfunctory evocativeness – in the same way again.

As part of the work, Hashemi has included an English translation of Zahra's narrative so that all viewers may have the opportunity to fully understand the meaning behind each unfamiliar letter. This translation, however, must be sought out. Found on a small tea table located in the corner of the gallery, the seemingly subsidiary placement of the translation is intentional, functioning as part of a larger subversive strategy that works to obstruct the accessing of the viewer's immediate understanding. It is only with the linguistic understanding that the details of Zahra's trauma are made present to the English-

speaking viewer. In explicit detail, Zahra recounts the sexual abuse she endured as a little girl. How, as a five-year-old, she was sexually assaulted by an older cousin whom she thought she could trust, and how she has had to carry that burden of shame and secrecy with her – alone – for decades. Hashemi manipulates tensions of language, aesthetics, and absence in order to create a compelling platform through which the viewer is encouraged to confront their learned, ambivalent positions in the face of graphic representations of violence. In doing so, Hashemi turns an otherwise aesthetically remarkable artwork into one that is, initially, quite painful to see.

Tensions of representation continue to be explored at length within the global contemporary artworld. In her influential work *Art/Trauma/Representation* (2009), Griselda Pollock explicitly maintains that art's purpose in attempting to engage with trauma is different from the purposes of representation. In attempting to navigate the complexity of trauma within their work, Pollock argues that the artist holds the capacity to critically engage with said trauma, through an embodied negotiation of time, space, and looking. Rather than depicting trauma on a representational level, how can an aesthetic be implemented in order to negotiate, mediate, and reconcile unhealed traumas? Moreover, in her studies of aesthetics relating specifically to the sociocultural impacts of trauma, Jill Bennett maintains that, while media imagery seemingly assumes the role of the omnipresent witness or documenter, art has the capacity to explore the nature of the event's perception or impression and thus, "participate in its social and political configuration," (2012, p. 6).

What does this mean for art within our ever-changing contemporary society? What does this say about conventional modes of representation? Can there be ethical practices for visually articulating trauma? Or rather, can there be ethical practices for visually articulating trauma that attends to both the testimony and integrity of the event itself while also accounting for complexities of survivorship that necessitate a degree of safety and protection? In her foundational work, *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith

Herman highlights the human tendency to banish atrocities from consciousness: “certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud,” (1992, p. 1). This, however, lies in direct opposition to the foundational principle of remembering and truth telling as prerequisites “both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims,” (1992, p. 1). Traumatic experiences are rendered unspeakable because we lack the adequate language to do so. Banished, but not buried, the ghosts of our past traumas continue to haunt us, refusing to rest in their graves until their stories are told.

Following Herman’s foundational therapeutic insights, I look to *Grounding* as an artwork that Hashemi (and, by proxy, Zahra) use to reconcile with unprocessed trauma. I approach my study of “healing” not as the complete resolution of the initial traumatic events, nor a finite end in the experiencing of post-traumatic affects. Instead, my aim is to contribute to a way of thinking about healing as more of a “coming-to-terms-with” the unhealed events of our past: a durational process for learning to live comfortably in the present without being overwhelmed by thoughts and memories from the past (Herman, 1992). Guided by Zahra’s narrative, and Hashemi’s artful transcription of it, I wish to address how fundamental tenets of feminist theory can be implemented within the realm of contemporary visual art in order to begin reconceptualizing trauma/healing as a collective and transactive relationship. I look specifically at the implications of unhealed and unprocessed experiences of sexual trauma, negotiating tensions of memory and mourning in order to contend with the shameful “ghosts” of our past (Herman, 1992). Further, I seek to understand how this particular aesthetic operates as an interventional strategy. Coupled with Hashemi’s undertaking of the role of the mediator, I ask how trauma-based artworks lend themselves to a conceptual framework for healing, rooted specifically in the survivor’s temporal and embodied negotiation of their own individual, post-traumatic experience. Shifting the mode of inquiry from “*why* should we visualize this pain?” toward “*how* can we visualize this pain?” will demonstrate the profound value of a healing aesthetic within transnational contemporary

art spaces. By calling for a reconceptualization of trauma – not as an event that can be located simply in time and space – but rather, one that exists in perpetuity, I look to *Grounding* as a reparative space where the pain of traumatic memory can be tended to, where inherent feelings of shame can be interrupted, where new connections can be made and, ultimately, where traumas can be grieved and actualized in ways that deconstruct painful connotations.

Scope

In the last decade a growing body of literature has emerged that combines narrative and ethnographic methods within clinical frameworks of psychology in order to theorize a cohesive understanding of the impacts and effects of experiences of trauma (Sorsoli, 2004). Regardless, issues of gender-based violence remain matters of critical importance, due in part to the lack of space that continues to exist within contemporary society for experiences of sexual trauma to be acknowledged, validated, and grieved. This lack is exacerbated by societal tendencies to shame and blame victims of abuse rather than directing that blame and responsibility toward the abuser. These tendencies work to stigmatize and, ultimately, to silence; a silencing that is intensified when we take into account the fact that most instances of abuse occur in secrecy, with no other bodies available to give testimony and to bear witness.

At times, pain can be so complex, experiences are so horrifying, that it becomes impossible to discern whether or not there exists an appropriate means of expressing such unnameable realities. Is it possible for an image to represent atrocity without visually reproducing it? In researching the ethics and politics of photography in the context of photojournalistic images from the Balkan War, Wendy Kozol asks a critical question: “without the body, how do we witness? In losing the spectacle, we lose the voyeuristic privilege of the gaze, but do we also fail to acknowledge the trauma itself?” (2004, p. 29). That is to say, the omission of the spectacle of violence subsequently omits the possibility for acknowledgement of the trauma as a lived reality. News headlines from the last decade continue to

demonstrate the prominence of global atrocity and massive psychic trauma, and yet these cases represent only a small fraction of the atrocities occurring throughout the world. For those of us who have the privilege of approaching these stories from a position of distance, violence is presented to us only in the form of news highlights, disjointed pieces of text in magazine articles, or photographic images, keeping ourselves alienated from the violent realities that constitute the lived experiences of so many.

While it is widely considered unacceptable to look at the pain of others with curiosity, the West continues to wield this position of alienation in order to perpetuate its own voyeuristic gaze. These issues are evident when looking at war photography and photojournalistic images of violence, which work to distance the viewer from the bodies of suffering and leave little room for critical reflection. In cases such as these, the idea of representation is measured by shock value: who's image can make the most powerful statement? In writing about art that deals with conflict, Susanne Slavick has highlighted the concern that "if violence becomes appealing, it is unwittingly redeemed and ultimately erased," (2011, p. 17). The aestheticization of a lived tragedy also risks creating a precarious viewing experience, encouraging passive and curious spectators to derive pleasure from the work being viewed. Examples of this can be found by looking at photorealistic artworks that seek to optically reproduce events and impacts of torture, abuse, and violence absent of critical contextualization.

Issues of traumatic lens-based art and the politics of representation have been explored at length by feminist art historian Andrea Fitzpatrick, whose study of mourning, allegory, and representation in the specific context of contemporary art from the Middle East has been one of the most influential contributions in my understanding of the communicative potential of a subversive aesthetic (2013; 2017). With regard to an aesthetic derived from – and informed by – sociopolitical encounters, strategies such as allegory and abstraction continue to be a recurrent motif implemented by women artists of the Middle East in an effort to subversively convey the layered meanings of the female voice – "above and

beyond that of audible information,” (Fitzpatrick, 2017). In the context of *Grounding*, I ask how this critical feminist repossession of formal, compositional, and aesthetic devices function seditiously; honouring the “efforts and identities of a diverse group of women...all the while withholding enough information to function within and communicate across various national borders,” (Fitzpatrick, 2017, p. 27).

Following Fitzpatrick’s theorizations on the communicative powers of text within Iranian photographic art, I consider the possibilities for text and language to serve similar subversive functions outside the realm of lens-based art. Through my exploration and analysis of *Grounding*, I ask in what ways multimedia and performance artworks might also obscure conventional understandings of representation, where language and aestheticization become strategies through which the viewer is encouraged to surrender the distance between themselves and the act violence being depicted. In doing so, I propose a way of thinking about the aesthetic that demands a confrontation with another’s trauma at the realm of the senses. Bearing in mind the inherent necessity of having traumatic experiences be shared and heard in order to heal from them (Herman, 1992), I seek to begin contemplating ways in which to grapple with an ethic of sharing stories of sexual trauma in contemporary visual art, using the profound powers of the aesthetic in order to simultaneously honour the agency and autonomy of the survivor who gives testimony. Thus, I use the following chapters of this study as preliminary opportunities for exploring how Hashemi’s aesthetic intervention in *Grounding* becomes a tool for renegotiating conventional practices of sharing traumatic lived realities.

Within clinical and psychological frameworks of trauma treatment, the idea of retelling the story or performing one’s own trauma narrative remains a foundational component of coming to terms with unhealed pasts (Herman, 1992; Caruth, 1995; Sorsoli, 2004). I draw connections between the narrative basis of psychotherapy and the narrative basis of artworks such as *Grounding*, in order to grapple with

the complex task of ascribing language to otherwise unspeakable experiences. As researchers, accounting for both the clinical and social perspectives on trauma is integral to the development of a method for thinking about healing that attends to the complexity of subjective experience while also honouring the magnitude of possible cultural and political imbrications.

My analysis of “healing” as it pertains to representations of trauma and visual art locates Zahra’s rape at five-years-old as the catalyst for the profound feelings of grief, disembodiment, and shame that she has been obligated to grapple with ever since. Derived from foundational psychological insights regarding the inlocatability of traumatic memory (Herman, 1992; Caruth, 1995; Van der Kolk, 2014; Ataria, 2018) I look at the prolonged psychic pain that stems from the infinite negotiating of traumatic memory and the simultaneous struggle involved in having individual traumatic experiences be seen and validated. Addressing the interconnectedness of trauma studies, feminist theory, and contemporary art history is necessary in order to fully comprehend the reparative power that lies in the aesthetics of trauma-based artwork (Bennett, 2005; 2012; Best, 2017).

Methodology

Western culture has a history of privileging “objective” forms of knowledge derived from the mind: a one-dimensional frame of thought that precludes knowledges derived from embodied and subjective experience. A large majority of feminist theorists maintain that this hierarchization of mind and body is inherently gendered, a reflection of the rationality associated with masculinity versus the intensely emotional that is traditionally ascribed to femininity and womanhood (Boler, 1999). I approach my exploration of trauma and healing from a feminist epistemological research standpoint that rejects traditional, binaristic ways of thinking about knowledge production. I borrow from what Donna Haraway has offered as “situated knowledges” as the basis of my methodological framework: where all knowledge is understood as socioculturally formed, and where ideas and practices arise from social

interaction and diverse social contexts (1988). My study of *Grounding* and the aesthetics of healing works in response to this contemporary turn towards embodied and autobiographical feminist research methods where subjectivity functions as both a site of knowledge and as a record of lived experience.

To adhere to the constraints of time allotted for this thesis, my study functions primarily in response to Herman's theoretical findings on trauma recovery. This narrowed approach is strategic, in order to ensure the fleshing out a comprehensive study that does justice to the layered complexities of experiences of trauma. With that in mind, I also acknowledge the importance of not solely relying on west-centric approaches for thinking about trauma and healing. To begin addressing these matters I have found it helpful to engage with "*Being Lovingly, Knowingly Ignorant*" by Mariana Ortega in order to establish a stance of "loving perception" that prioritizes listening, checking, and questioning (2020, p. 61). Eve Tuck's article entitled "*Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities*" further draws attention to the concept of damage-centred research and – subsequently – a desire-based research framework as the antidote to this.

In discussing psychological categories like trauma and healing something that is so inherent is to psychologize, to see the individual and to try and find the solution. In this way, Ortega and Tuck's texts are helpful in thinking about *Grounding* within the context of complexity, contradiction, and self-determination. In her critique of damage-centred research frameworks, Tuck mentions how a desire-based framework can "yield analyses that upend commonly held assumptions of responsibility and ignorance" within marginalized communities (2009, p. 417). I argue that this way of thinking lends itself well to a study of *Grounding* that is depathologizing and that sees Zahra as more than "broken or conquered" or a distorted object of perception (Tuck, 2009, p. 416). Ortega's assertions are also particularly helpful here, in establishing a way of "perceiving lovingly" that involves the continuous

being vigilant of the ways in which I – as a white researcher – come to know the world and how this can lend itself to distorting knowledge of the world (Ortega, 2020, p. 60).

Much of trauma and psychological literature continues to emphasize the importance of speaking and telling about unprocessed traumas at a conscious and verbal level (Sorsoli, 2004; Davies, 1997; Herman, 1992). A 1995 study by James Pennebaker on emotion, disclosure, and health highlights the increasingly clear relationship between disclosure and recovery; with the development and delivery of one's own narrative of the trauma experienced a necessary requisite for coming to terms with the unmetabolized psychic pain of the past. With careful consideration of the critical necessity of cognitive processing and narrative structuring in relation to trauma/healing (Wigren, 1994; Sorsoli, 2001; 2004; Brown, 2005), I borrow from the broader principle of narrative inquiry as a method for measuring the subjective dimensions of human experience over time; a method that takes into account relationships between individual experience and cultural context (Clandinin et. Al., 2000). I draw a methodological connection between Clandinin et. Al.'s narrative analysis and Corina Caduff's offering of lived experience as a methodological tool for interpreting contemporary art discourse (2008). In exploring autobiography in relation to contemporary visual art, Caduff emphasizes the immense potential of autobiographical methods in serving as "an object and instrument for expressing certain perceptions, interpretations and reflections," (2008, p. 48).

In discussing the potential for viewers' own interpretations and reflections, one must also address the potential for, whether inadvertent or not, using an artwork to re-center the viewer's own experience. This is especially concerning in the context of *Grounding*, which takes as its focal point the lived experience of a woman of colour, located within the domain of gender-based violence where the large majority of scholarship has focused on the white, Western woman's experience. In doing so, such

narrative and autobiographical methods run the risk of failing to account for the politics of racial, cultural, and political difference that complicate Zahra's trajectory of healing as a racialized woman. To wrestle with these intricacies, I focus my mode of inquiry specifically on Hashemi's relational and participatory approach to the renunciation of spatiotemporal distance, using her own body as a cipher to preserve and protect Zahra's autonomy as a survivor. *Grounding* may function autobiographically in nature, but the telling of its story is carefully encoded through Hashemi's surrogate body.

Guided by the formal principles of contemporary performance art where audience participation extends beyond a one-to-one relationship (Jagodzinski, 2013), I will explore the temporal and autobiographical dimensions of *Grounding* and how they function in a highly subversive way: revealing Zahra's trauma while simultaneously keeping it concealed. This act of revealing and concealing is reflective of a broader post-traumatic phenomenon where tension exists between the desire to have one's trauma be seen, but to also have it stay hidden (Sorsoli, 2004). The therapeutic capacities of narrative processing functioning in dialogue with the qualitative principles of narrative analysis will lend themselves to a more holistic modality for exploring Hashemi's role – not just as an artist – but as a mediator: sharing Zahra's trauma with viewers in a way that accounts for personhood and lived experience while also challenging traditional (Eurocentric) views of truth and knowledge.

Building upon this growing body of research that combines narrative methods with the effects of trauma, I implement art historical strategies of visual analysis in order to evaluate the ways in which the aesthetic may function beyond representation, facilitating an interdependent and transactional way of seeing that privileges the viewer's lived experience and personal history as a means of knowledge-making. I ask how Hashemi's forms of narrative embodiment work strategically, to tell the story of Zahra's trauma while simultaneously orienting the viewer towards a position of personal contemplation and reflexive engagement with broader social, cultural, and historical representations of trauma

(Downing, 2015). Sitting at the juncture of visual art and social sciences, I propose this unified methodological tool lends itself to a new way of thinking about trauma and healing: one that unburdens the victim from having to re-expose her own body in order for her experiences to be heard, understood, and properly grieved.

In order to fulfill the requirements of this thesis within the time constraints available to me, the following study serves only as a preliminary contribution towards a critical feminist reconceptualization of a healing aesthetic. With qualitative findings arising primarily from modes of narrative and content analysis, I seek to provide a conceptual framework for the development of an interdisciplinary therapeutic tool that facilitates a sharing of affective labour and emotional accountability. Following feminist psychotherapeutic insights, I argue that this shared dimension is necessary in order for healing to take place: extracting individual narrative threads from an overarching paradigm of sexual trauma that extends cross culturally and across borders.

Theoretical Framework

The nature of traumatic memory implies a certain degree of unwillingness to revisit the initial painful experience. This understanding is grounded in a simplified Freudian context “that sees repression as an unconscious psychic defense mechanism shielding victims from knowledge of traumatic events,” (Ballinger, 1998, p. 102). Cathy Caruth has expanded upon this, highlighting how “the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it” (1994, p. 419). Further clinical psychological research shows that atrocities refuse to be buried and, instead, demand to be seen and reckoned with (Herman, 1992, 2019; Caruth, 1994; Van der Kolk, 2014). A landmark within the discipline of psychology and trauma treatment is Herman’s proposed three-pronged framework for moving through the healing process with “establishing safety” as the first phase, followed by “retelling the story” and, finally, reconnecting with others and ways of being in the world (1992). Perhaps most

importantly, Herman stresses the criticality of recovery taking place “only in the context of relationships. It cannot occur in isolation,” (1992, p. 133). Grounded in existing literature regarding the transformative powers of disclosure (Sorsoli, 2004; Cvetkovich 2003), I argue that a certain “sharing” or “shared” dimension of one’s trauma is essential in order to truly reconcile with it. Echoing the fundamental notion of the powers of connection and community as foundational feminist tools (hooks, 2003), I look to the stylistic and curatorial approaches that underpin *Grounding* and how they work to establish an intimate setting that is capable of tolerating the shame and vulnerability inextricable from unhealed experiences of sexual trauma. Viewed through this unified theoretical lens, we can begin to explore the possibilities – and limitations of – a cross-cultural dialogue of healing from sexual trauma that is rooted specifically in a temporal and embodied negotiation of individual post-traumatic experiences.

The idea of a communicative exchange between artist and audience was first popularized in post-modern art discourse by Nicolas Bourriaud who defined a “relational aesthetic” as one that is characterized “by a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space,” (2002, p. 113). More recently, feminist art historian Susan Best has coined the idea of a “reparative aesthetic” within the realm of contemporary art photography through which to grapple with shameful histories (2016). According to Best, a reparative aesthetic signifies an approach for mitigating profound feelings of shame while also offering a critical platform for addressing difficult and disturbing issues (2016, p. iii). In Best’s research, this notion of a reparative aesthetic has mainly been applied in the context of artworks dealing with cultural, historical, and collective traumas such as war and violence. Principal qualities of a reparative aesthetic seek not to simply “undo” or “reverse” the damage of violence but rather, signals the capacity to alleviate, incorporate, and assimilate the psychological

impacts of violence in place of reorienting oneself towards the positive (Best, 2016). Predicated upon this notion of “alleviating” psychic wounding, I feel there is potential within a reparative aesthetic to be applied in the context of trauma-based artworks that deal with interpersonal traumas such as sexual assault, rape, and abuse. While *Grounding* falls outside the perimeter of lens-based art in which Best’s theorizations are situated, Best’s offering of a reparative aesthetic contributes to the theoretical foundation of my own pursuit of a “coming-to-terms” with past trauma in its capacity for providing a collective space for mitigating and contending with post-traumatic memories and affects.

In writing about contemporary Iranian art, Andrea Fitzpatrick highlights how artistic strategies continue to be implemented as a means of expressing the magnitude of a generation’s losses, including those deceased who cannot be (or have not been) publicly named and/or grieved (2013). Judith Butler has similarly noted how mourning and vulnerability are inextricable from politics, drawing attention to how the West has established a general consensus for allocating grief that often excludes the experience of the Other (2004). Further, Veena Das has explored the politics of traumatic loss and transactions of pain as they pertain to mourning rituals conducted by women in India and defines these unwitnessed and improperly mourned experiences of trauma as a “bad death,” (1996, p. 78). Butler, Fitzpatrick, and Das’s insights, in combination with Herman’s framework of trauma recovery, functions as a strong theoretical apparatus through which to begin considering how mourning the loss of an individual might correlate with mourning the loss of one’s sense of self; through the profound feelings of alienation and disembodiment that result from non-consensual sexual acts. Due in part to the societal predisposition of directing shame and blame towards the victim, instances of rape, assault, and abuse work to render the traumatized individual voiceless – a silencing compounded by the fact that most instances of abuse occur in secrecy, with no other bodies available to bear witness (Herman, 1992). From her clinical findings, Herman maintains that a crucial phase of healing involves the individuals explicit mourning of

the losses they have had to endure as a result of the trauma; this process can only occur through the establishment of a space where individual grief can be seen and actualized (1992). Locating these aforementioned assertions within Herman's broader framework of trauma recovery will work to determine how vulnerability functions as a relational experience; grief and/or loss are part of the post-traumatic experience regardless of any predetermined demographic hierarchy.

In discussing the fraught politics of mourning and violence, Butler writes how "when we mourn, something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us," (Butler, 2004, p. 22). Here, I would like to highlight Butler's equation of a mourning process to a binding process, with traditional understandings of "bonds" and "ties" implying a sort of object or fixture that adheres, fastens, or holds together multiple entities. Guided by this frame of thought, the sociocultural powers of mourning lie, quite simply, in their capacity to establish connection. Feminist professors and educators Laurie Fuller and Ann Russo speak further to the importance of connection in their research on community accountability and collective engagement. Fuller and Russo highlight how treatment modalities which classify healing as an individual pursuit only work to increase the survivor's already prevalent feelings isolation and alienation (2016). In turn, this further precludes survivors of sexual trauma from reestablishing connection, safety, and trust – all of which are critical components of a holistic healing process (Herman, 1992). Thus, a collective and communal framework for thinking about trauma becomes both a radical and necessary departure from conventional schemas of healing that tie the post-traumatic experience to feelings of profound loneliness and an inherent solitary burden. These powers of community and connection lay the foundation for my analysis of *Grounding*, and a way of thinking about contemporary visual artwork as offering a contribution to preexisting processes of healing. Through a series of affective transactions between subject – artist – viewer, *Grounding* is able to combat

isolation, relieve shame, and repair feelings of belonging. Following Herman's more recent clinical insights, Hashemi demonstrates how the aesthetic and embodied qualities of contemporary art can work to "rebuild the relational capacities shattered by traumatic experience," (2019, p. ii).

I situate *Grounding* within these existing psychotherapeutic frameworks with reference to the work of key feminist art historians (Pollock, 2009; Bishop, 2012; Fitzpatrick, 2017), in order to obtain a cohesive understanding of the therapeutic value of an aesthetic of healing. Contextualizing sexual trauma within the contemporary social climate, I evaluate the ways in which rape, abuse, and assault are perpetrated against the female body and how these issues of gender-based violence are perceived globally. In attempting to theorize experiences of sexual trauma cross-culturally and across borders, it is essential to highlight how the stories of white women's experiences of sexual violence are precisely the stories that continue to remain at the center of scholarship and literature regarding violence against women. This runs the risk of flattening and co-opting aspects of race and difference in order to re-center the white, Western woman's experience.

With this in mind, it is critical for me to acknowledge the importance of not solely relying on west-centric approaches for thinking about trauma and healing. Central to a cohesive analysis of *Grounding* is an engagement with Iranian culture and society and how this is interplayed within Zahra's experiences and narrative. While a comprehensive overview of Iran's rich history falls outside the scope of this masters thesis, I wish to highlight certain structural traditions that inform our understanding of Zahra's life events and lived experiences. By tradition, Iran is a patriarchal society wherein boys and girls are conditioned into assuming traditional gender roles from early childhood (Ghazizadeh et al., 2018). Not unlike North America, this kind of early childhood gender socialization "teaches boys to be the head of the family, to be active aggressive, competitive and independent, and teaches girls to be kind, peacekeeping, and obedient," (Naghavi et al., 2019). Within patriarchal societal frameworks, male

violence and dominance becomes normalized. A study from 2016 on intimate partner violence in Iran found that when women attempt to protest against violence, “they are excluded from society, often even by their female counterparts,” (Danesh et al., 2016).

Contemporary Iranian society is currently situated at a juncture: on the one hand, these patriarchal rules and forms of governance are still fighting to stay alive (Naghavi et al., 2019). On the other hand there is a third voice that is fighting to be heard. That voice, Hashemi maintains, is feminism (2010). Further, Iranian human rights lawyer Arzoo Osanloo asserts that “the language of women’s rights in Iran has, for well over a century, been an important measure of modernization both inside and outside the country,” (2009, p. 40). Iranian feminists and activists have propelled the fight for social and political equality into a position of prominence and traditional discourses are no longer the dominant ones. Further, “with wider access to social media, the influence of global values such as human rights and the growing women’s movement, Iranian women started to have a voice against violence,” (Naghavi, 2019, p. 3). Guided by these empirical findings from Naghavi et al. and Ghazizadeh et al., I seek to explore how *Grounding* is demonstrative of yet another avenue of this radical sociopolitical shift in Iran, where community ties and social networks work to cultivate empowerment, both in the courage to speak out against perpetrators and in seeking help from others (2019, 2018).

Based on the frequency and prevalence to which we see stories of sexual abuse and sexual assault circulating throughout mainstream media, it is unsurprising that this overarching pattern of violence is often flattened into a universal issue. In light of this, I situate my exploration of trauma, healing, and the politics of representation within Daniel O’Hara and Alan Singer’s theoretical reimagining of the aesthetic: drawing upon synthesized contributions of philosophy, contemporary art history, and critical theory in order to analyze art discourse within a larger, contemporary global context (1998, p. 4). I use this framework in order to better position myself and my approach for exploring the

complexities of trauma/healing through a shared and, at times, transnational lens. While no one experience of trauma will ever be entirely the same, I wish to acknowledge how *Grounding* presents viewers with a dialogue based on a broader thematic experience that is shared worldwide. With a focus on the aftermath or, the aforementioned process of “coming-to-terms-with” that follows an experience of rape/abuse/assault, I explore the inherent necessity of sharedness and exchange in order to heal while also remaining cognizant – and critical – of potential universalist perspectives.

In exploring race and representation, bell hooks highlights how ethnicity and “otherness” are frequently commodified and appropriated as resources for pleasure, where members of dominating races can then simultaneously reaffirm their power in relation to the body of the Other (1992, p. 367). Situating issues of Otherness within practices of representation and visual art, where images of the Other have, traditionally, been readily on display for consumption by the Western viewer, adds an additional layer of complexity. Focusing on Zahra’s experiences and thus, the experiences of a woman of colour, will highlight the lack of space that exists in contemporary Western culture for the lived experience of the Other to be appropriately and effectively mourned. Therefore, in questioning the lack of space that exists for grieving a loss incurred by the experiencing sexual trauma, I seek to also account for the ways in which these issues of silencing and erasure are further compounded by cultural, racial, and religious difference.

Clinicians and trauma theorists continue to maintain that to speak and to share our experiences of trauma is to heal. However, speaking and sharing is not always possible or safe. This is a reality that is especially true in the context of interpersonal trauma and gender-based violence and further becomes compounded when aspects of class, race, and religion are taken into consideration. Thus, the question remains as to how healing can begin to take place when conventional modes of speaking or sharing are not available.

Chapter 1: Representations of Trauma and the Politics of Healing

1.1 Grounding: States of Gender

In discussing feminist performance art,

Jane Blocker reiterates how

performance work, installation, video,

and body art have, for decades,

contributed toward the active

redefinition of spaces in which art is

viewed and to “integrate the audience

into the process of artistic production,”

(1999, p. 5). In *Grounding: States of*

Gender, Hashemi seeks to disrupt her

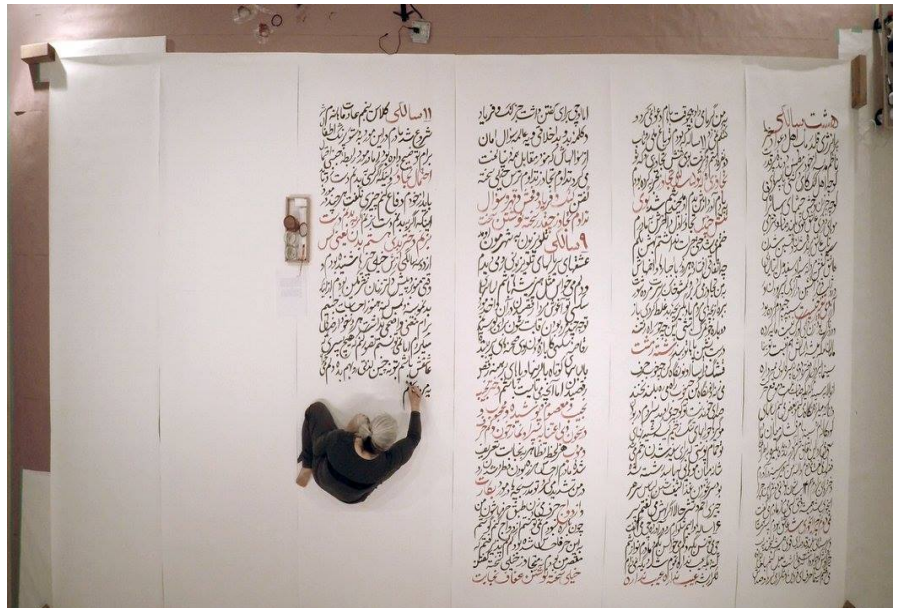


Figure 3: Gita Hashemi, *Grounding: States of Gender*, 2017. Installation View, Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa ON. Image courtesy of the artist.

authority as the artist, simultaneously calling into question the traditional understandings of the art

object. Growing up in Iran and having lived and worked there for many years, Hashemi’s extensive

training as a calligrapher contributes to this disruption, serving as the basis of an intricate aesthetic

framework that works to simultaneously veil and reveal. Composed of elements of performance,

installation, and text-based strategies, Hashemi manipulates tensions of the aesthetic, time and space in

order to piece together a multifaceted platform for ascribing language to the unspeakable [Fig. 3]. The

text centers around the lived experiences of Hashemi’s friend, who goes by the pseudonym of Zahra.

With the fragmented unravelling of the emotional and sexual abuse Zahra endured as a child serving as

the basis of this exploration, I seek to uncover how Hashemi’s feminist aesthetic intervention functions

both subversively and therapeutically, to eliminate the art object altogether (Blocker, 1999).

I take as my point of departure for this exploration Susan Best’s offering of the reparative powers of the aesthetic and how notions of the “visible” and the “sayable” are inextricably embedded in this

(2016, p. 160). For Best, the foundational principle of a “reparative aesthetic” seeks to include the “noise’ of the unrepresented, the excluded, the alternative, the subaltern,” (2016, p. 161). At once relational, affective and transactive, *Grounding* is emblematic of Best’s offering of a reparative space in its potential capacity for tending to the pain of traumatic memory, interrupting inherent feelings of shame, cultivating new connections and, ultimately, providing a space where traumatic experiences can be grieved and validated in a way that deconstructs painful connotations.

With an explicit focus on sexual trauma and gender-based violence, *Grounding* stems from a series of conversations between the artist and the subject, Zahra. The multimedia performance work unfolded durationally, from January 31st, 2017 until February 11th. Over the course of ten days, audiences had the opportunity to join Hashemi in person at the gallery or virtually, through a synchronized livestream of the artist’s process that was made accessible online. Blank paper scrolls were stretched across the entire width of the gallery floors. Formally trained in traditional art of Persian calligraphy, Hashemi would move across the parchment covered floors, executing the intricate process of transcribing – in Farsi – the experiences of abuse and trauma Zahra had been subjected to endure from the time she was a little girl. Years of rigorous training and expertise as a skilled calligrapher undoubtedly contributes to an ability to turn ordinary letters and words into highly aestheticized symbolic elements. These traditional, gestural, and aestheticized forms of transcription have been used by artists of the Middle East for centuries, as a way of conveying “the artist’s understanding of the literal and implied meaning of the text,” (Bayani, 2015, p. 602).

Guided by her extensive formal training, Hashemi began each day by standing at the top of one of the scrolls, the point of departure for the painstaking process of calligraphic transcription to follow.

Every day for ten days, Hashemi would spend hours crouched carefully over the sheets of parchment, scrupulously painting – by hand – the details of Zahra’s narrative in the complicated calligraphic script. Once the piece of parchment was completely covered in the elaborate gestural



Figure 4: Gita Hashemi, *Grounding: States of Gender*, 2017. Installation View, Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa ON. Image by Anna Khimasia.

motif, it was removed from its position on the floor and hung from the ceiling, as if coating the otherwise empty walls under layers of ornate wallpaper. One by one, scrolls filled with the intricate text were hung from the ceiling, gradually working to outline the perimeter of the gallery space. By the tenth and final day, the usually stark white walls of the gallery had been completely covered by the cascading scrolls of text, so much so that if a viewer were to enter the gallery, they would no longer be entering a traditional, white cube gallery setting [fig. 4]. Rather, the viewer enters into a coded atmosphere, fraught with tension between the highly aestheticized work and the traumatic reality it portrays.

With regard to the sociopolitical efficacy of contemporary art, professor of art and curator Susanne Slavick highlights the concern that, when violence is made to be appealing it risks being inadvertently redeemed and ultimately erased (2011). Jill Bennet’s theorizations on contemporary art in relation to representations of violence echo a similar concern, highlighting how “the instantaneous,

affective response, triggered by an image, viewed under controlled conditions, may mimic the sudden impact of trauma, or the quality of a post-traumatic memory, characterized by the involuntary repetition of an experience that the mind fails to process in the normal way,” (2005, p. 11). In light of Slavick and Bennett’s assertions, what can be said about artwork that represents violence without visually reproducing it? Can an artist accurately conceptualize pain and the ensuing impacts of trauma? If a viewer is susceptible to trauma through an affective engagement with the trauma-related image, questions concerning viewing conditions and ethical responsibility must also be addressed. Thus, the following chapter serves as a small piece of a broader exploration for fully understanding the therapeutic value of the aesthetic and what this frame of thought might offer to the existing discipline of contemporary art history.

As Cathy Caruth has outlined, the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it, (1991). If trauma is not recognizable as such to the individual who experiences it, what does that mean for Hashemi, who seeks to represent someone else’s traumatic lived experience? In exploring trauma as a discourse, one might question the need for any optical and/or linguistic representation of violence at all, as the reliving of adverse experiences brings with it an intense degree of emotional discomfort and risks re-traumatization. This, as scholarship in trauma studies has continued to demonstrate, is the ordinary response to atrocity. Banished, not only from consciousness, but from mainstream public discourse; “certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud. Atrocities, however, refuse to be buried,” (Herman, 1992, p. 1). Nevertheless, it must be taken into consideration how responses to trauma-based imagery are highly subjective – so much so that it is virtually impossible to discern how these responses may arise on an individual level. As such, I use the following chapter to embark on an exploration of the capacity for text-based artworks to convey

traumatic realities and lived atrocities using an aesthetic intervention to mitigate the potential for psychic re-wounding.

By encountering Zahra's story, audiences have the opportunity to bear witness to someone else's trauma, a reality that brings with it a multitude of concerns that necessitate thorough examination. Significant arguments in social, cultural, and feminist research indicate the dangers of interpreting individual stories by way of a flattening of subjectivity and the cooptation of lived experience (Gannon, Buyers & Rajiva, 2014). Art and cultural theorist Ingrid Sischy has commented on how this flattening of individual experience is further compounded when situated within the realm of visual culture, where the added element of aestheticization risks the viewer's subsequent anesthetization (1991). Of course, this brings up issues voyeurism and spectatorship that must also be accounted for in such a discussion, particularly when the suffering of a person of colour is at risk of becoming an object of palatable consumption for Western audiences. Issues of representation and the voyeuristic gaze can be discussed at length – in fact, there are enough examples to constitute an additional study entirely. I wish to steer away, slightly, from this well-established concern in order to consider how an audience's proximity to *Grounding* might instead impact the viewing experience in a critical and self-reflexive manner, based on shared histories of trauma that align with Zahra's experiences of sexual abuse as told in *Grounding*.

In her research on trauma and the politics of memory, Jill Bennet highlights how a certain proximity to another's lived experience can be used to critically examine one's own subject position in relation to that of the narrator's – an act that works to facilitate a rethinking and rewriting of personal narratives/experiences as engaged and intertwined with those around them (2003). Exhibiting *Grounding* in a Canadian institution, Hashemi obstructs the normative and habitually accepted rhetoric of political violence that is frequently used to alienate East from West. By taking the lived experience of a racialized woman and sharing it with North American audiences, Hashemi is able to establish

contemporary connections between Iran and North America through a framework of sexual violence and psychological trauma. Following Elaine Scarry's foundational feminist insights on the body and transactions of pain (1985), Bennet maintains that "pain effectively becomes visible through the structuring of proximal relationships between bodies within a designated space," (2003, p. 184). With the Carleton University Art Gallery serving as such a "designated space," how might the viewer's engagement with *Grounding* translate to a re-experiencing of past trauma and post-traumatic memories of their own? Or, following Bennett's frame of thought, how can the artist maintain a distinction between "the absolute condition of visibility and a capacity to produce affect?" (2003, p.184).

1.2 Languages of Trauma

Until recently, the majority of scholarship on trauma and memory studies has taken place primarily within the domain of literary theory and less in the field of visual art (Bennet & Kennedy, 2003). Looking at Hashemi's approach to the representation of sexual trauma within *Grounding*, I wish to contemplate the ways in which aesthetic and non-aesthetic texts can inform one another, and why such a dual exchange is necessary in order to give rise to new methods and approaches for understanding how to contend with post-traumatic affects. Seeking to extend discourses of trauma studies beyond the more traditional literary or modernist representations of trauma, theorists Jill Bennet and Rosanne Kennedy pursue an aesthetic exploration of trauma through a frame of thinking they refer to as "languages of trauma" (2003). This overarching concept works to encompass "both aesthetic and vernacular representational practices," with the term 'language' comprising of "both verbal and non-verbal, and literary and non-literary expressions of trauma," (Bennett & Kennedy, 2003, p. 11). Guided by this way of thinking about "languages" of trauma, I look to *Grounding* in order to better understand how notions of the optical/verbal/narrative come into play and work interdependently with each other in order to extend the meaning of the text beyond a single image while simultaneously embedding visuality

into the written word. Together, I suggest that elements of performance, temporality, and text can all be understood as requisite tools for ascribing a language to the unspeakable.

Theorist and art critic Jan Jagodzinski defines participatory art as an expansive field of post-studio practices, where audience participation extends beyond a one-to-one relationship (2013). “By utilizing forms of online social media, artists are able to reach and interact with an audience that is not bound by a geographical location of the studio, gallery, or museum,” (2013, p. 1). I argue that this is precisely the kind of encounter that occurs within *Grounding*, where distinctions between inside – outside and public – private are ruptured. Hashemi achieves this rupturing of the public – private through the implementation of a coinciding livestream of the performance. This act of virtual streaming ensures that Zahra’s memoirs are extended even further beyond the walls of the gallery so that viewers, irrespective of geographic proximity, have the opportunity to engage with the traumatic reality being relayed. Thus, Hashemi is able to cultivate an environment of the private within an otherwise public gallery space while simultaneously using the livestream to bring what is public into the private home of the otherwise corporeally distanced viewer.

Rather than simply producing an art object, a participatory artwork is engaged in producing situations – collaborative encounters between the artist – viewer that are not predetermined in shape and/or durationality (Jagodzinski, 2013). In *Grounding*, the combination of space, scale, aesthetics, and language work together to engage with viewers individually as well as collectively, through the larger social process of healing. Distance is negotiated in such a way where room is made to critically reflect while also preserving a degree of protection that accounts for the complexities of survivorship. Because of this, *Grounding* is able to tend, not only to concerns of ethics and viewing conditions, but also to the complex politics of bearing witness to the suffering of the Other in a way that transcends the objectifying powers of the gaze and resists co-optation by the viewer.

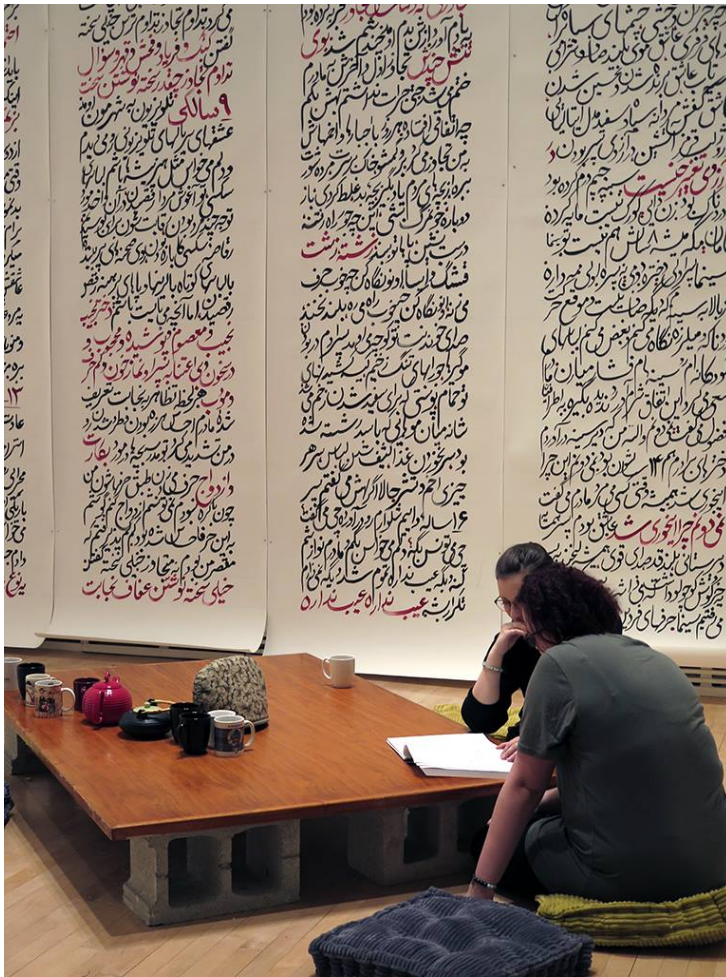


Figure 5: Gita Hashemi, *Grounding: States of Gender*, 2017. Installation View, Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa ON. Image by Anna Khimasia.

To begin an exploration into the therapeutic intricacies of *Grounding*, and how they lend themselves to a larger, psychotherapeutic framework for thinking about contemporary art, it is important to first ascertain an understanding of the spatiotemporal politics of healing and how this might be achieved in a non-traditional therapeutic space – specifically, the institutional gallery setting in which *Grounding* is located. Understanding *Grounding* as an artwork built from elements of installation, multimedia technologies, participatory action and performance strategies, it can be argued that the aesthetic and spatiotemporal dimensions of the work

mutually inform one another. Through this negotiation of temporal connections, Hashemi is able to juxtapose the past and present, sustaining real (and lived) occurrences so that they exist in perpetuity [Fig. 5].

The disruption of temporality can also be applied in a psychological context, interwoven in the realities of the traumatic experience that *Grounding* so skillfully conveys. In her explorations on post-traumatic memory, Caruth notes how “the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time,” (1995, p.

9). I propose that a manifestation of Caruth's assertion can be found within Zahra's narrative and Hashemi's subsequent relaying of it – both in the words being articulated as well as through the erratic, non-linear recovering of various fragments of memory:

11 Years Old

He took my hands while we were on a swing in the National Park. His body odor reminded me of the rape I had suffered when I was 5 years old and I suddenly hated him.

Then, back a few years:

5 Years Old

I can't remember anything after that. I don't know how I got out of that closet. I don't know when my mother came back or when I came home that night. I felt injured. I was burning and weak.

Before abruptly catapulting forward to adulthood:

18 Years Old

I agreed to have sex with him. When I first saw his naked body, I almost fainted. He ejaculated with the first touch. I pushed him away with fear as soon as I felt the sliding of the warm liquid on my skin. The memory of the rape at age 5 distressed me. I would be terrorized.

This juxtaposition of Zahra's past memories with her present-day insights, coupled with tensions of public and private, work to complicate the viewer's perception of Zahra's trauma. In doing so, *Grounding* embodies the complex nature of the traumatic experience as a series of events that "assume their force precisely in their temporal delay," (Caruth, 1995, p. 9). Caruth's insights work to reinforce my assertion that the durational and repetitious components of *Grounding* indirectly testify to the lingering impacts of trauma. It is precisely due to these lingering impacts of trauma that I argue for a "coming-to-terms-with" our traumatic pasts in place of the illusive pursuit of finite "healing."

The impacts of trauma on an individual's psyche and cognitive state are acute, "crushing her beliefs and tearing apart her picture of the world. These are the twin sides of surviving sexual violence: a shattered self and a shattered worldview," (Freedman, 2006, p. 108). While it may be possible to put one's shattered sense of self back together again, I argue that it is impossible for one to return to exactly

the same person they were before the abuse. I say this while believing fully that no individual is irreparably damaged after the experiencing of trauma. Rather, I would argue for the exact opposite: through the insurgent act of surviving, we learn to accept that our traumas happened at a time when we were vulnerable, trusting, and open. After accepting this reality, healing becomes a matter of learning new ways to be vulnerable, trusting and open again, and integrating this learning into how we go on to exist in the world. This is a necessary truth to comprehend for individuals who have experienced sexual trauma yet remains an uncomfortable and precarious reality that resists being undertaken. In *Grounding*, I posit that Hashemi perhaps clears a path of reflection through which to begin contemplating these learnings. She relays Zahra's story candidly, in all of its fragmented pieces, materializing how the durational impacts of trauma exist in a state of uncertainty, unstably occupying their places within time and space. This brief digression only scratches the surface of a vastly complicated grieving process – a detailed and multifaceted exploration that I embark on in the following chapters of this study.

In attempting to theorize the principles of a “participatory” genre of art, Claire Bishop emphasizes the necessity of establishing new ways of analyzing art that lie beyond visibility (2012). Aesthetically, the visual elements of *Grounding* are indeed fundamental to experiencing and encountering the work – and its intended meaning – as a whole. Bishop attests to this, highlighting how visibility remains “a crucial vessel for communicating meaning,” (2012, p. 7). Understanding and accepting this assertion simultaneously acknowledges the shortcomings of visual analysis as a unitary modality when confronted with “the documentary material through which we are given to understand these practices,” (Bishop, 2012, p. 5). With this in mind, I wish to pay particular attention to the English translation of Zahra's narrative that Hashemi has chosen to include. As I mentioned briefly in the introductory pages of my study, this small, one-page translation is not readily on display; it must be sought after by the viewer. Located on a small tea table in the corner of the gallery, the inaccessibility of

the translation establishes a semiotic barrier that disrupts the accessing of the viewer's immediate affective response. Only upon access of the translated document is the non-Farsi-speaking viewer able to negotiate their encounter with the intimate details of Zahra's trauma at the realm of the senses. These barriers otherwise obstruct the total linguistic comprehension of the artwork, at once serving as both an analytical and protective lens.

It is widely understood that the human experience of suffering must be handled with care – a reality that is often compromised when it comes to racial or class privilege and in the face of unequal distributions of power. As a white, Anglo-speaking researcher studying at a Canadian institution, I approach Zahra's story from a position of fundamental privilege and, whether intended or not, risk assuming the position of voyeur to the spectacle of suffering of the Other. Standing in a North American gallery space with no linguistic comprehension of Farsi, audiences are able to look upon Zahra's story from a privileged position of distance. Feelings of distance are perhaps further intensified for viewers who have chosen to tune in to Hashemi's performance by way of the virtual livestreaming channel. This virtual dimension becomes yet another complex layer of a larger visual paradox, enticing audiences to seek out more while simultaneously serving as an obstacle that keeps them from getting closer. A viewer who stands before *Grounding* in the gallery space may be able to maintain a sense of psychological distance dependent upon linguistic ability and issues of translation. On the other hand, participating virtually provides an opportunity for psychological distance in addition to a degree of proximal distance, predicated on the basis of the viewer being physically removed from the site of the work. At the same time, it can be argued that the virtual component has the ability also to narrow the schism of distance between Zahra and viewers, through the capacity for virtual media to transgress geopolitical borders. Either way, an individual's attempt to simply observe is interrupted by Hashemi's manipulation of formal elements such as scale and language which obligate the viewer to become an active participant in

the decoding of Zahra's lived experience. This forces us out of our comfortable positions as passive and curious spectators to someone else's pain. It is only with linguistic understanding of her narrative through the translation provided that Zahra's most intimate vulnerabilities are made present to the viewer, extending the temporality of sexual trauma cross-culturally and across borders. In doing so, Hashemi necessitates for us to give our time in order for Zahra's story to have time.

As clinicians and trauma theorists have maintained, to speak and to share our experiences of trauma is to heal (Herman, 1992). However, there are many circumstances that render such a speaking or sharing impracticable, unsafe, and impossible. For Zahra, this silencing has come in many forms: silencing as a five-year-old girl due to the sociocultural ramifications of naming oneself as a rape victim but also, due to the mere fact that at five-years-old, one lacks the adequate language to articulate such an experience – both to others as well as oneself. Zahra's inability to speak her trauma continued – and

perhaps even intensified – as she grew up as a woman in contemporary Iranian society, compounded by fear of incessant shaming, alienation, and increased disaffection. Hashemi's paradoxical and, in some cases, cryptic retelling of Zahra's memoirs

necessitates the viewer's

participation in the reconstruction and/or decoding of a meaningful narrative. By actively seeking out

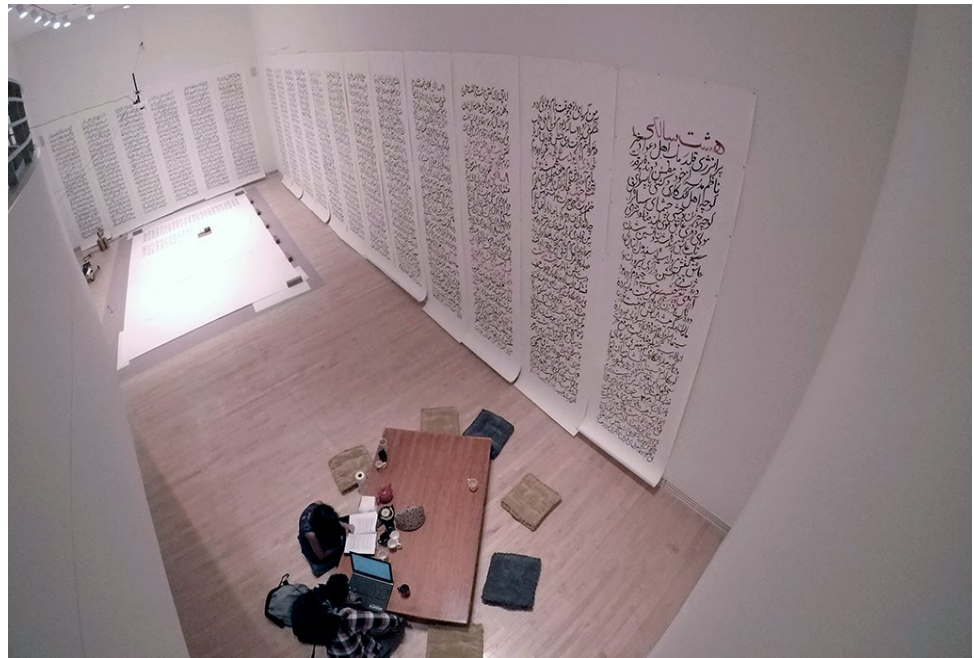


Figure 6: Gita Hashemi, *Grounding: States of Gender*, 2017. Installation View, Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa ON. Image courtesy of the artist.

the meaning behind Zahra's words, Hashemi encourages an exchange of affective labour and emotional accountability between Zahra, the audience, and Hashemi herself as the artist. Doing so precisely disrupts the aforementioned, one-dimensional artist – object relationship, implicating the viewer and extending a multidimensional relational experience (Bishop, 2012). This participatory approach establishes a platform through which Zahra is finally able to speak and share the most vulnerable parts of her past.

While seemingly secondary, the tea table upon which the translated text can be found is an integral component of the work as a whole. Located in the front right corner of the gallery, a handful of small cushions are distributed on the floor and surround the small table. One or two of the cushions are occupied, stray viewers pausing to learn, contemplate, and reflect. Perhaps they are English speaking viewers like me, stopping at the tea table in an attempt to ascertain the meaning behind the unfamiliar language that enshrouds the walls [Fig. 6]. With Canada's richly diverse population, in combination with a significant Iranian community already studying and/or working at the Carleton University institution, it is reasonable to take into account that a great portion of viewers in attendance may already possess a linguistic understanding of Farsi and, subsequently already have the ability to derive meaning from Hashemi's calligraphic script. In this case, the tea table extends its invitation in a slightly different way, providing an intimate seat of reprieve for digesting the complex subject matter and traumatic realities being portrayed. On a curatorial level, the tea table is intended to facilitate the establishing of a social space in which to encounter the work and to reflect upon it. Moreover, the tea table setting works to invoke familiar motifs of domesticity and refuge; a small sanctuary of intimate exchange (Afshar, 1996). Paired with Hashemi's specific request of removing one's shoes before entering the gallery, these culturally specific traditions encourage reflections of home and belonging, further opening up private

domestic spaces and extending an invitation for viewers (Iranian and non-Iranian) to feel at ease (Fitzpatrick, 2017).

In sum, the location, its positioning, its height, and the placement of the seemingly haphazard cushions are all small details which have been carefully thought out and deliberately designed. This tea table setting, a shared space within a larger, public setting profoundly impacts the audience's encounter with Zahra's trauma. At the same time, the tea table offers an invitation to sit and stay that works to have Zahra's experiences be recognized and grieved by a collection of other bodies (bodies who were not there to bear witness and/or intervene at the time of her initial assault). Moreover, locating this social



Figure 7: Gita Hashemi, *Grounding: States of Gender*, 2017. Installation View, Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa ON. Image by Anna Khimasia.

space within the perimeter of the gallery, already covered in intensely personal text, functions as a deliberate rupturing of the public/private binary [Fig. 7]. Rather than remaining a static, unchanging product of consumption for the

distanced viewer, Hashemi opens up a transactive space of exchange (Bennett, 2005).

I situate my use of *Grounding* as a “transactional” space in Bennett’s theorizations on transactive rather than communicative expression through trauma-related art. Bennett characterizes transactive

space due to the way in which “it often touches us, but does not necessarily communicate the “secret” of personal experience,” (2005, p. 7). Built upon a set of binary oppositions speaking in response to each other (i.e. public/domestic), transactive spaces encourage the viewer’s critical and self-reflexive alignment with the subjective position of another. In this way, conventionally “alienating” and “distancing” experiences/memories of sexual trauma can be negotiated “through affective connections between bodies,” (Bennett, 2002, p. 337). In the context of *Grounding*, this transactive approach facilitates a channel for healing that attends both to the complexity of subjective experience while honouring the magnitude of possible cultural and political imbrications. By implicating the privatizing, silencing dimensions of trauma with the shared and social dimensions of the tea table setting, Hashemi is able to call into question the lack of space that exists in contemporary society for experiences of sexual trauma to be seen, validated and grieved – a lack that is exacerbated by societal tendencies of shaming, blaming, and stigmatizing. Simultaneously, the rupturing of the private/shared duality deliberately challenges the presumption that healing from one’s “shameful” past needs to be a private and solitary process.

Of course, the tea table is only a small portion of what makes *Grounding* a place of sharing and – ultimately – a place for healing. On a physical level, the viewer experiences the work through a constellation of multisensory engagements. As discussed, there is the obvious act of viewing the work: looking at the language, the colours, and the patterns that are optically present. The very nature of “the visual” implies a sort of spectacle, something to be seen, observed, and/or looked at. According to art and cultural theorist Sophie Anne Oliver, the spectator almost always occupies a position of power in relation to the powerlessness of the subject of the violence being depicted (2010, p. 121). This results in the spectator’s subsequent ability to look at, look away from, and/or look beyond the suffering being presented before them. In *Grounding* the “spectacle” of suffering depicted is not overtly corporeal – the

work is devoid of explicit and optical representations of violence altogether. This calls upon the viewer to do more than just look.

The sheer scale of the work, physically and virtually, demands the viewer presence and participation in the unfolding of Zahra's story. While the scrolls are on the floor and Hashemi stands overtop of them, engaging in a process of meticulous calligraphic transcription, viewers have the opportunity to walk around the gallery space, observing Hashemi's process from a variety of different angles but always from the outer perimeters. When the scrolls are complete and hung from the ceiling, the viewer is at once enveloped by Zahra's memoirs, and now must move and make meaning within them. Audiences come to know Zahra's trauma in disjointed fragments. This occurs out of the sustained and durational nature of the work; Hashemi divides the narrative in sections, each scroll inscribed one at a time, suspended from the ceiling to line the perimeter of the gallery walls in order of completion. Even with access to the translated text, Zahra's memoirs are presented to us in jagged pieces: from early childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, to her experiences as a student at the University of Tehran, and then suddenly spiraling back into the body of her five-year-old self and how, after being violated, that body never felt like hers again. On one hand, this anachronistic delineation of the events of Zahra's life mirror the psychological process of piecing together the narratives of our past through a "reckoning with its repression in the present," (Gordon, 2008, p. 183). Thus, the experiencing of trauma and one's subsequent attempt to come to terms with it cannot be reduced to conventional chronologies of consciousness.

While I wait until the second chapter of my study to deal directly with repression, traumatic memory, and the narrative basis of psychotherapy, I wish to pause here for a moment, to reflect upon Hashemi's use of language and discourse within *Grounding* and to think about how we might begin to measure the transformative power of documentation in relation to unhealed experiences of trauma.

Turning once again to the critical aesthetic qualities of the work, the narrative of Zahra's life events serves as the basis of *Grounding* as a whole. Here, I wish to emphasize the critical role that text and language play in the retelling of Zahra's memoirs. In discussing text-based artwork, theorist and art critic Kim Dhillon asks, "how does visuality of written language interact with the artist's concept, and with the context within which the work is shown?" (2011, p. 17). In *Grounding*, the visuality of the written word holds the capacity to engage the viewer by way of affective encounters built upon personal subjectivities and processes of interpretation and introspection. Dhillon expands upon her previous assertion, highlighting how "language and text-based art offers the potential to point us at an idea, and then move beyond that specificity to a potential defined by each reader," (2011, p. 23). I find Dhillon's theorizations of text-based artwork particularly interesting in the context of *Grounding*, where issues of translation and translatability can complicate the viewer's capacity to engage with the text.

In discussing images of text in Iranian photographic art, Andrea Fitzpatrick notes how "the dissemination of knowledge is founded upon the West-centric privilege of freedom speech and the assumption that the communication of information is not only desirably, but also possible," (2011, p. 144). Here, I draw a connection between the privilege of freedom of speech in relation to the dissemination of sociopolitical rhetoric and how this is reflective of Herman's insistence upon a sharing of one's traumatic experiences in order to heal. As we have already discussed, the speaking or sharing of one's trauma is not always possible and/or safe. In the context of freedom of expression within the Middle East, Fitzpatrick goes on to highlight how artists from Iran have long turned to abstract calligraphic motifs as a way of expressing controversial statements and thoughts (2011). This notion of writing "under erasure," predicated upon continual acts of obscuring and showing, should thus be seen as an act of radical resistance – "of making visible the event of destruction," (Fitzpatrick, 2011, p. 144). Following Fitzpatrick's theorizations, I posit that Hashemi employs similar strategies within *Grounding*

– where contrasting codes of representation work to “cross things out” while simultaneously functioning productively “to convey certain realities of the Iranian context,” (2011, p. 144). Perhaps not erasure in its traditional semantic context, Hashemi nevertheless demonstrates a similar approach to the obscuring of violent realities while still “making visible the event of destruction.” In effect, *Grounding* at once represents, but does not re-present. At once present and absent, coded and decoded, veiled and exposed; viewers are confronted with Zahra’s trauma in its simultaneous “possibility of representation and an iconoclastic demand for its denial,” (Fitzpatrick, 2011, p.145).

Standing in a relatively small Canadian gallery space, there is an equal possibility that a vast majority of audience members may very well lack a comprehensive understanding of Farsi. Hashemi’s exclusive use of Farsi in an otherwise anglo or franco-speaking setting intentionally challenges the assumption of English as the

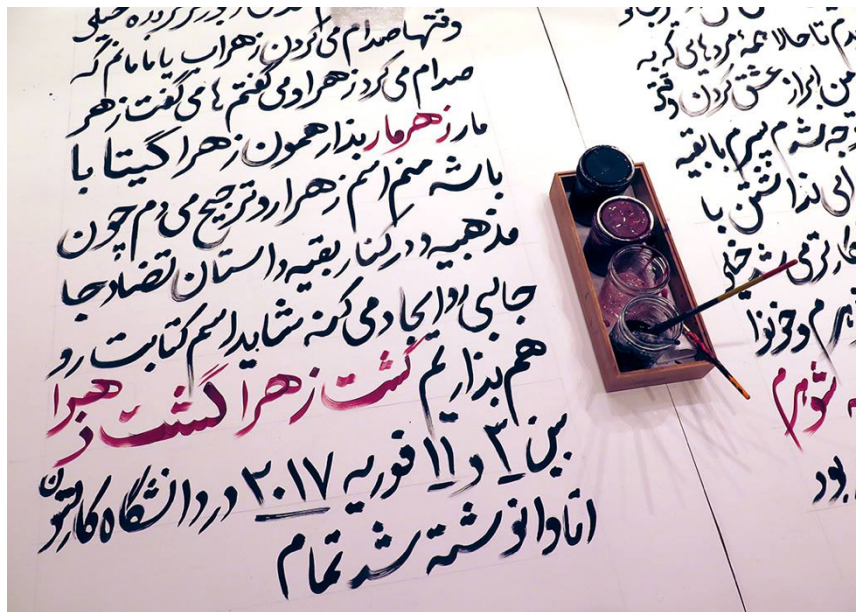


Figure 8: Gita Hashemi, *Grounding: States of Gender*, 2017. Installation View, Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa ON.

dominant language form [Fig. 8]. Nonetheless, observing *Grounding* on a purely visual level can still be an evocative experience, in spite of the lack in meaning and linguistic understanding. For some, this omission of familiar language could be perceived negatively or with resentment: Hashemi’s deliberate withholding of information paired without a translation readily available. On a representational level, these complexities of translatability serve both a subversive and protective function: yet another layer the viewer must peel back in order to fully gain access to the meaning that lies behind the unfamiliar

text. Fitzpatrick highlights how instances of transgression in art from Iran take subtle and abstract form.... “gestures of erasure build up meaning. Symbolic or expressive lines are often enough to convey what explicit phrases cannot (2011, p. 143). I posit that such a buildup of meaning is precisely what Hashemi has intended for in *Grounding*, where her implementation of expressive lines and intricate calligraphic script do in fact convey a literal narrative – explicit phrases that would undoubtedly be impermissible for exhibition in the Middle East where the Farsi would be easily decoded. Presented before a large majority of Western audiences and beyond the confines of Iran’s highly politicized and gender-specific doctrines, the cryptic message remains concealed.

1.3 Discourses of Trauma

In order to situate my discussion of trauma within a contemporary global context, I wish to first consider how trauma is characterized as a discourse: how it is defined and how it is understood. Collectively, trauma is recognized by theorists across disciplines of art, philosophy, sociology, and psychology as the witnessing and/or experiencing of horrible – “unspeakable” – events (Herman, 1992). Today, the word ‘trauma’ has become a part of everyday language, with news headlines continuously recounting tales of atrocities across the globe: mass killings in Myanmar, hundreds of reported incidents of Boko Haram rape, sexual slavery, and forced marriages upon young girls in Northeast Nigeria; extreme starvation in Yemen; and unarmed Palestinian protesters repeatedly being tear gassed by the Israeli occupation along West Bank. The psychological harm that stems from traumatic experiences can be charted across a far-reaching spectrum, from having to grapple with the effects of a single overwhelming event “to the more complicated effects of prolonged and repeated abuse,” (Herman, 1992). Regardless, traumatic experiences extend across a broad cluster of severe circumstances including, but not limited to: child abuse, domestic violence, natural disasters, and sexual abuse. Although this essay focuses specifically on the sexual abuse that Zahra endured as a child, each of these

aforementioned iterations of trauma involve a unified core experience grounded in disempowerment and disconnection (Herman, 1992).

In contemporary culture, we have seen a shift towards a practice of naming instances of sexual violence, calling them out as wrong and demanding change. The rise of the feminist post-modern art movement in the 1970s brought with it a distinctive shift in the politics of representing violence, stemming largely out of resistance to and protest over issues of gender inequality, sexual violence, systemic racism, and queerphobia. Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta's (1948-1985) *Fetish* series (1977) speaks to this shift, which deals with the female body and themes of death along with abject connotations of blood and womb-like cavities (Blocker, 1999) [Fig. 9].

Self-described “earth/body” works, Mendieta's *Fetish* series is comprised of a series of



Figure 9: Ana Mendieta, *Untitled* (From the *Fetish* Series), 1977. Image by the Estate of Ana Mendieta.

confrontations between her naked body and elements of nature. Carried out both in private and for the camera, Mendieta would cover her body in flowers, dirt, and grasses before proceeding to draw the outline of her body into the earth and subjecting it to the elements. Images from the *Fetish* series can be seen at once as an explicit attempt to reconnect her body to her surroundings...to quite literally become one with the earth. Mendieta has described how the idea for the series is largely rooted in the trauma of dislocation and displacement, states of being of which she has grappled with since being abruptly torn from her homeland of Cuba as an adolescent (Moure, 1996, p. 51).

Further examples of this shift toward representations of trauma in feminist artwork can be seen in the photographic work of Hannah Wilke (1940-1993). Wilke's work functions as an important art historical precedent to be considered when discussing themes of trauma and healing in relation to visual representation, specifically with regard to tensions of silence, violence, and the female body. For example, her *Starification Object Series* (1974-82) presents the viewer with tensions of the femininity, the object, and the unsightly by way of wads of masticated gum, folded in labial forms and stuck back onto the artist's topless body [Fig. 10]. Following this, Wilke has her body photographed in a series of different poses that resemble

tabloid images seen in the world of high fashion advertising. Through the process of mastication and the remnants of carnage that litter Wilke's skin, issues of violence and assault against women's bodies become central to the work as a

whole. Although these connotations of trauma

differ in comparison to Mendieta's, both artists rely upon the key implementation of their own body in order to strategically, yet subtly, communicate profound pain.

From a similar photographic standpoint, Nan Goldin's (b. 1953) later series entitled *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1986), documents instances of emotional and physical violence endured by the



Figure 10: Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S – Starification Object Series* (1974-82). Photo by the Hannah Wilke Collection and Archive, Los Angeles.

artist and those closest to her. In *Nan One Month After Being Battered* [Fig. 11], the viewer is presented with a photographic image of the artist with a black eye, an explicit demonstration of the physical impacts of domestic violence. Much like Hashemi bridges personal/private dimensions with the shared, Goldin and Wilke's photographic works seek to narrow the schism between seen and unseen, public and private, by using the body to make visible on the outside what are typically invisible processes. For Goldin, this comes in the form of an explicit depiction of violence and abuse.

Otherwise “private,” personal experiences, she obligates the public viewer to confront what is actually a far-reaching systemic issue. Wilke, on the other hand, inscribes internal markers of femininity onto the outside of her body, an act of self-objectification paired with subversive and manufactured distance (Johnson, 2013).



Figure 11: Nan Goldin, *Nan One Month After Being Battered* (1984), part of *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* series (1986). Image copyright: Nan Goldin.

1.4 Contemporary Art of the Middle East

My reasoning for mentioning these early art historical examples of women artists dealing with traumatic imagery is to highlight the recurring tensions between the visible/invisible and the public/private. However, these are dualities that have been long been implemented by female artists worldwide and, even more specifically, by women artists in the Middle East, where issues of censorship and free speech have always been matters of great contention. In Iran, for example, subversive teachings of feminism have been foundational components of a radical feminist praxis, wherein explicit and overt

feminist teachings remain impermissible. In discussing issues of the female voice in contemporary Iranian art, Fitzpatrick specifically highlights the usefulness of the photographic medium and its ability “to remain soundless while ‘speaking’ about important issues,” (2017, p. 27). Negotiations of “speaking



Figure 12: Shirin Neshat, *Rebellious Silence* from the *Women of Allah* series (1994). Photo by Border Crossings Magazine.

the unspeakable” or, one’s desire to express themselves versus the danger of actually doing so, has always been at the foundation of artistic practice within Iran (Fitzpatrick, 2017). Here, self-censorship and abstraction become necessary (and, paradoxically, inaudible) tools for conveying the layered meanings of the female voice and to express what is socioculturally prohibited from being written or spoken (Issa, 2008). These efforts function in direct opposition to Western mainstream media’s continued desire to reinforce an orientalist perception of the Muslim woman as veiled, subservient and silenced.

A foundational example of this kind of subversive aesthetic functioning within feminist artworks can be found in Shirin Neshat’s *Women of Allah* series from 1994, where formal and compositional devices become tools for manipulating codes of revolutionary documentary and propaganda imagery [Fig. 12]. In doing so, Neshat is able to negotiate the agency and subjectivity of the veiled Iranian woman. Alterity, eroticism, violence, and poetry. On one hand, the explicit iconography of the chador-clad woman, armed with a rifle and adorned in Persian calligraphy could be seen as a self-exotifying perpetuation of Western conceptualizations of radical Islam (Ebrahimi, 2019). Attempts to derive prejudiced and stereotyped conclusions, however, become obstructed by Neshat’s aesthetic intervention and the construction of images that demand the viewer’s

reorientation toward new ways of reading learned visual codes. This allegorical superimposing of iconographic layers serves a critical protective function: allowing artists “to speak about issues in ways that allow more safety but equally poetic, multifaceted and far reaching results,” (Fitzpatrick, 2013, p. 158).

In discussing the fraught politics of representation and the colonial gaze within lens-based work, Ella Shohat has noted how the camera is “not unlike the microscope in its detailing of the Other,” (1992, p. 67). This is a recurrent topic of contention within the field of art history, where acts of viewing and looking have long-been critiqued for their problematizing powers of objectification (Best, 2007). Issues of objectification and voyeurism are especially concerning with regard to experiences of the Other and, even more specifically, representations of violence and trauma being enacted in foreign geographies and on the bodies of non-white individuals. Although not an explicit reproduction of violent acts, Neshat’s highly aestheticized photographs have been critiqued for their self-exotifying, neo-oriental composition. Indeed, optical representation of the female body or, more specifically, optical representation of the racialized female body in contemporary photography carries with it the risk of encouraging a colonial gaze, (Ebrahimi, 2019).

If we are to move beyond the realm of photography, what other methods might be available in order to convey the layered meanings of the female voice? (Fitzpatrick, 2017). Parastou Forouhar addresses the complexity of a subversive aesthetic in her multimedia installation work *I Surrender* [Fig. 13]. Like Hashemi, Forouhar’s work is comprised of large-scale installation elements. Specifically, a large collection of white helium balloons over which she illustrates intricate digital drawings. The drawings, reminiscent of traditional calligraphic script, are rooted in violent scenes of torture, derived from the trauma Forouhar incurred after the brutal murder of her parents by the Iranian Secret Police – a recurring aesthetic strategy that echoes Fitzpatrick’s earlier highlighting of the transgressive capacities

of calligraphic gestures in Iranian and Middle Eastern art (2011). *I Surrender* was first exhibited in 2007 at in Berlin. The balloons float upwards toward the ceiling, their loose black strings dangle from the ends, creating an intricate maze through which the viewer is encouraged to wade through. From a distance, the balloons exude a sense of whimsicality – the kind of celebration typically associated with a birthday or festive event. Upon closer look, the viewer is met with digitally drawn scenes of torture: “faceless female bodies being tortured by way of beating, stoning, strangling, and hanging,” (Becker, 2010, p. 18). Each balloon in the installation presents the viewer with kaleidoscopic images of tension between the horrific scenes of violence being represented and the intricate beauty and playfulness of the installation as a whole (Fitzpatrick, 2013). This representation of violent realities, complicated by conflicting visualities, strategically orients the viewer towards a position in which they are obligated to confront violent subject matter. In doing so, the installation becomes a platform through which Forouhar is able to express what would otherwise be impermissible.

My reasoning for discussing Neshat and Forouhar’s work within my otherwise exclusive study of *Grounding* is to contextualize the vast potential for visual and aesthetic information to convey the layered meanings of the female voice, beyond “the enormous-and-continuously-tested gray zone of what is permissible in Iran,” (Fitzpatrick, 2017, p. 25). Like the aforementioned artists, Hashemi uses her artistic platform as an avenue for renegotiating and calling



Figure 13: Parastou Forouhar, *I Surrender* (2006). Installation view, Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin. Image courtesy of the artist’s website.

into question traditional conventions of representation. Similar to Forouhar's *I Surrender*, Hashemi incorporates a highly aestheticized and deeply intricate calligraphic motif as a way of obscuring a violent reality. Incorporated within the large-scale and participatory nature of the work, the viewer's engagement with *Grounding* becomes a profound encounter of contemplation, demanding critical inquiry into what lies behind an image's surface. Further, the location of *Grounding* within a public place subsequently propels Zahra's personal lived experiences into the realm of the perceptible. By way of an examination of the aesthetic and formal qualities of *Grounding*, this preliminary chapter has served as an important first step in what is a larger attempt to theorize the interdisciplinary and therapeutic value of healing in contemporary trauma-based art.

Ultimately, through a preliminary examination of the interconnectedness of trauma discourses, feminist theory, and contemporary art history, I have attempted to lay the groundwork for a cohesive way of looking at all of the multidimensional components of *Grounding*. Going forward, I will use the ensuing chapters of this study to explore – in greater detail – the extensive ramifications that arise from the experiencing of sexual trauma. In doing so, I ask how contemporary art theory, in combination with pre-existing psychotherapeutic frameworks, might hold the potential to speak in dialogue with each other in order to offer new ways of thinking about the post-traumatic experience, survivorship, and what it truly means to heal.

Chapter 2: Narrative Reprocessing & Negotiations of Memory in Contemporary Visual Art

2.1 Trauma and Memory

In this chapter, I focus on the implications of being subjected to trauma in early childhood, or what I have been referring to as post-trauma. In pursuit of a healing aesthetic within the discipline of contemporary art, I wish to first highlight nuances between my use of the “post-traumatic experience” versus the clinical diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder. Post-traumatic stress disorder was first coined as a diagnostic category in the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in the 1980s and is characterized by the continuous and uncontrolled reliving of the initial traumatic event in the form of intrusive memories and persistent feelings of danger. As a result, individuals with PTSD habituate themselves to avoid places, situations, and entire mental states that may evoke such memories or sensations (Shalev, 2009). In researching the possessiveness of traumatic memory, Cathy Caruth has noted how the post-traumatic diagnosis has begun to extend “beyond the bounds of a marginal pathology,” with the pervasive possessiveness of trauma memories becoming “a central characteristic of the survivor experience of our time,” (1995, p. 151).

While there is no explicit moment in Zahra’s narrative in which she specifically discloses a diagnosis of PTSD, I argue that this “post-traumatic” lens remains relevant based off of *Grounding’s* propensity for disclosing the implications and consequences that have continued to persistently haunt Zahra after the initial event of her rape at five-years-old. Moreover, the use of the post-traumatic lens in the context of Zahra’s life events challenges the privileged and largely Westcentric assumption that everyone is equally able to access a clinical diagnosis and ensuing treatment and/or therapy. A 2001 study conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found racialized populations have less access to mental health services and are less likely to receive needed care. Further,

predominant concerns in Iran highlight specific consequences of psychiatric diagnoses (i.e. stigma, shame) as a potent source of distress for both individuals and families. This can lead to evasion or refusal of care altogether due to cultural rules, religious beliefs, and/or family cohesion (Navab, Negarandeh, & Peyrovi, 2012). That a clinical diagnosis is necessary in order to validate one's experience of suffering is inherently classist and discriminatory, essentially erasing categories of intersections that impact accessibility and feasibility of care.

With that being said, I will begin by paying particular attention to the complexities of traumatic memory. I seek to understand how traumatic memories function, how they resist traditional narrative chronologies, and how this complicates trajectories of healing. Second, I turn to clinical research on narrative therapy in order to ascertain a conceptual lens through which to view how Zahra's retelling and reconstruction of her own traumatic experiences, in combination with artist-calligrapher Gita Hashemi's corporeal involvement in this retelling, mirrors the therapeutic value of narrative reconstruction in healing from past trauma. Finally, I draw upon critical feminist theorizations regarding the politics of mourning and traumatic loss in order to contend with intricacies of bearing witness to grief that speak directly to the sense of sharedness/collectivity that I argue is necessary if healing is to begin to take place.

In discussing trauma treatment, feminist psychiatrist and researcher Judith Herman highlights two major core experiences: disempowerment and disconnection (1992). Thus, to heal necessarily involves prioritizing empowerment and building new connections. Herman furthers this, explaining how, in order to diminish helplessness and restore power within the survivor, they must become the author and arbiter of their own story and, ultimately, their own recovery (1992). Through Hashemi's corporeal involvement in the retelling of her story, Zahra is able to access a platform through which she can begin reconstructing the narrative architecture of the events of her life. While I remain cognizant of

the fact that I am, in the end, dealing with an artwork rather than a primarily clinical tool of psychotherapy, I suggest that this therapeutic encounter between artist and survivor could be thought of as a lens through which Zahra is able to renegotiate her narrative identity and “reauthor” her experiences. In this way, *Grounding* can be seen as functioning as a channel for Zahra’s uncovering of traumatic memories while also providing an adequate context for integration (Herman, 1992).

Embedded in the aforementioned core experience of disconnection is the trauma survivor’s sense of loss of belonging to their body as a response to violation and non-consensual sexual acts (Herman, 1992; Ataria, 2018). My reason for situating this phenomenon within my study pertains to its inextricability from the broader conversation regarding negotiations of memory that I seek to attend to in the following pages. Clinically defined as body-disownership, this sense of detachment arises based on the premise that traumatic memories are located in the body and work to threaten the survivor, leading one to identify their body as the enemy (Ataria, 2018). This disownership and the willful forgetting or avoidance of the fragments of memory of one’s traumatic experience are further complicated by the experiencing of psychological triggers. The term trigger refers to something that subconsciously and involuntarily elicits memories and recollections of one’s experience of being traumatized, thus evoking in the survivor powerful and overwhelming distress responses (Rae, 2016). Taking the shape of an object, a word, a smell, or a sound, triggers are intensely limitless and vary greatly from person to person. Paradoxically, the potential for this phenomenon to occur is intensified if and when the survivor attempts to avoid their bodily traumatic memories (Ataria, 2018). As discussed in the preceding chapter, the jagged, non-sequential retelling of the events of Zahra’s life within *Grounding* reflect the seemingly erratic process by which traumatic memories are triggered, and how they can be metabolized in order for narrative restructuring to cultivate an intense reliving experience within the

context of a safe and therapeutic relationship (Herman, 1992). Through pieces of her narrative, Zahra reveals instances in which she experienced the phenomenon of being triggered:

When I was eleven years old, he took my hands while we were on a swing in the National Park. His body odor reminded me of the rape I had suffered when I was five years old and suddenly, I hated him. I became disgusted.

In this small sampling of text, the mechanics of a trigger are made present for the viewer. Zahra is angry.

She is repulsed, paralyzed and overwhelmed by a cascade of distressing affects. Discussing artworks that deal with sexual violence, as the researcher it is then necessary to also consider how a viewer may

respond to the trauma being depicted in the work, should they also be susceptible to the overwhelming affects that arise from being subjected to triggering stimuli. If such is the case, then the mere act of viewing raises important questions concerning appropriate viewing conditions and ethical responsibility (Bennet, 2005). In a way, *Grounding* impedes these concerns through

Hashemi's manipulation of language and visual code [Fig. 14]. As has already been



Figure 14: Gita Hashemi, *Grounding: States of Gender*, 2017. Installation View, Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa ON.

addressed, for a viewer who stands before Hashemi's panels of parchment and, who already possesses a linguistic comprehension of Farsi, then the act of viewing indeed holds the potential to activate immediate feelings of distress and/or re-traumatization in the viewer. Alternatively, for viewers who are not able to immediately decode the intricate and gestural strokes of the calligraphic script, these

affective responses are delayed until the moment a linguistic understanding of the narrative is ascertained. Both the act of viewing and the act of comprehending are required components in order for the viewer to affectively engage with Zahra's trauma.

There is no shortage of debate surrounding triggers and subsequent "trigger warnings" in today's society. In the media, this is evident in the protective guidelines and warnings designed to precede television and film broadcasting. Within the academic institution, there are many scholars, teachers, and researchers who argue for trigger warnings as part of a larger pedagogical practice (Rae, 2016). At the same time, there are equal parts those who maintain that trigger warnings are simply ineffective or impractical (Gay, 2012). The uncomfortable reality is that everything could be a trigger for someone; once you start where do you stop? It's impossible to anticipate the histories of others (Gay, 2012). My aim in mentioning the significance of triggers and trigger warnings is neither to advocate for them or reject them altogether, as such an argument extends far beyond the scope of this research project and merits a thesis of its own. Rather, my aim is to acknowledge the possibility of being triggered as one of the many day-to-day implications faced by survivors of trauma, the reprocessing of individual trauma narratives, and how visual representation and the act of looking further complicate processes of remembering and sense-making.

Sense-making is defined by Greenhoot et al., as the processing, reflecting and evaluating of the survivor's thoughts and feelings related to the initial traumatic event as they arise (2013). Thus, the formation of an exploratory narrative assists the survivor in being able to reframe the event in a new light, identify impacts and insights, and forming new connections. These are all tools of trauma treatment that restore power and autonomy in the survivor, interrupting feelings of shame and self-blame and redirecting them in ways that facilitate a reclamation of the self – both psychologically and corporeally (Herman, 1992). At this stage of my research, I am not able to offer a cohesive answer to the

complex question of what kind of therapeutic viewing experience (or not) trauma-based artworks like *Grounding* might offer the viewer. Rather, I look to *Grounding* as the planting of a proverbial seed; for viewers who may well also have survived sexual abuse, how can trauma-based artworks provide a radical environment for engaging in an individual grieving process that is also grounded in mutual interconnectedness and shared transactions of pain.

2.2 Problematizing Narrative Memory

A great deal of recent scholarship in psychology and psychopathology has revolved around a renewed desire to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the role of traumatic experiences in relation to memory, how these memories are stored in the mind and body, and how they unabatingly affect day to day perceptions (Van de Kolk & Van der Hart, 1991). Quite simply, trauma changes the ways in which the brain works. Survivors of trauma retrieve images and memories of their initial traumatic experience that are entirely accurate and precise while, at the same time, remaining “largely inaccessible to conscious recall and control,” (Caruth, 1995, p. 151). Caruth has further noted how a striking feature of traumatic recollection lies in the very fact that it is not a simple memory, somehow existing in our minds in a state of intangibility – both far away while also being right in front of our eyes (1995).

From a scientific standpoint, when an individual experiences trauma, the frontal lobe and thalamus shut down (Van der Kolk, 2014). These are the parts of our brains that work to give our feelings words and map our sense of being in time and place. As a result, the limbic area of the brain assumes full responsibility but, without a coefficient balance between brain areas, we are unable to store new memories (Van der Kolk, 2014). In essence, for the traumatized individual, memory loss and forgetting become survival tools to protect against unmetabolized psychic pain.

With the inability to form and maintain narrative memories of the trauma functioning as a defence mechanism, the individual is protected from the reality of their abuse. “Breakdown of the

thalamus,” continues Van der Kolk, “explains why trauma is primarily remembered not as a story, a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end, but as isolated sensory imprints: images, sounds, and physical sensations that are accompanied by intense emotions, usually terror and helplessness,” (2014, p. 160). I posit that this retrieval of “isolated sensory imprints” is precisely what occurs for Zahra within *Grounding*, where Zahra’s memoirs are recounted in a fragmented order that resists the classification of a continuous chronology. For instance, the text begins with Zahra thinking back to herself at eight years old. She writes:

8 Years Old

Full of energy, confrontational, daughter of vice principle, self-assured Challenging, physically fighting with the street boys, cheating. The most powerful and fastest runner of the neighborhood.

This exploration of the events surrounding the actual assault provides greater context within which specific meanings of the trauma itself can then be understood (Herman, 1992). For a while, Zahra is able to continue in this order, detailing bits and pieces of her experiences at nine and then eleven, twelve, and thirteen before being abruptly brought back to a memory of herself at five years old:

My uncle’s house, wintertime. My mother, my uncle, my uncle’s wife, and their eldest daughter were all in black outfits and went to a funeral. I stayed with my uncle’s sons, aged 5, 9, 12, 14, and 16. We were playing different games inside. Then my oldest cousin became a doctor. The second oldest became his assistant and sent us in turn into the doctor’s office which was in the room’s closet.

My turn came.

He pulled up my shirt and examined my chest. Then he said he had to measure my body temperature. He first put his finger into my anus and then a spoon handle. I felt his body’s heat on my back. His penis was between my legs. He told me to be quiet.

These narrative fragments are inarguably integral to the larger functioning of the artwork as a whole. Although Hashemi presents us with a story, the artwork goes on to exist within the gallery space and beyond: at once an installation, a performance, and an avenue for telling and sharing that is further fortified through virtual dimensions in order to skillfully transcend traditional chronologies and

geographic borders. Thus, the way in which the viewer reads, uncovers, and digests the meaning of these pieces of narrative necessarily involves a degree of participation and engagement. For some, a confrontation with the intimate details of Zahra's lived experiences will only be achieved through their accessing of the translation provided. For other viewers in attendance who may already possess an understanding of written Farsi, their encounter with Zahra's explicit yet fragmented pieces of memory has the potential to be immediate. Even still, one's capacity to connect these strands of narrative together remains dependent upon the rate at which Hashemi is able to execute her complex calligraphic process, one scroll of parchment at a time.

In discussing the potential for healing from past experiences of violence, Herman argues that the story of one's trauma must be "brought into the room," to be spoken and heard like a recitation of fact (1992). In reconstructing the story, it is necessary to account not only for the traumatic events themselves, but Zahra's responses to it them, the responses (or lack thereof) of those around her (Herman, 1992). Through Zahra's words, we are clearly able to discern how mental images and reminders of her assault have been embedded into her mind and body from the time she was five years old. As such, I suggest that the non-linear telling of Zahra's memoirs in *Grounding* mirrors the disorganized and erratic process by which one recovers memories of their traumatic childhoods so as to begin piecing together a coherent narrative of the experience.

Studies of the brain before and after experiencing trauma consistently indicate that a primary ramification of being traumatized are intense disruptions to the individual's capacity to retrieve memories of the initial event of traumatization (Van de Kolk et. al., 1991; Herman, 1992; Caruth, 1995; Van der Kolk, 2014). On a similar note, Caruth has identified how "the impact of the traumatic event," Caruth continues, "lies precisely in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time," (1995, p. 9). I propose that we can connect Caruth's assertions

to *Grounding*, in how it unfolds durationally for both Zahra and viewers. As I have already touched upon briefly, manifestations of this unfolding can be seen in how the viewer encounters the work – whether it be in through small increments of reading the untranslated text, or all at once with access to the translation. No matter the way in which the encounter is accessed, the impacts of Zahra’s traumas are never “simply located” and never once assume a fixed position in a “single place or time” (Caruth, 1995). This phenomenon is further evidenced by *Grounding*’s added livestreaming component. In incorporating this virtual element within the work, Hashemi is able to further obscure the location of Zahra’s trauma and its subsequent appearance within boundaries of place and time. This is predicated upon the very basis of video technology and virtuality, which gives audiences the opportunity to pause and rewind as necessary and as many times as desired. This act of pausing and rewinding, to halt the telling of Zahra’s narrative mid-sentence, at will, and without warning, and then to revisit it at a later time speaks to the aforementioned theorizations regarding the inlocatability of traumatic memory.

In his early work on negotiations of memory, Pierre Janet distinguishes narrative memory as a collection of mental constructs which people then use to make sense of their experiences (1904). Building from this, Van der Kolk and Van der Hart explain how, while familiar experiences are automatically integrated into our existing narrative fabrics, traumatic (“novel”) experiences are not able to assimilate as smoothly, are not easily retrievable, and sometimes refuse integration altogether (1991). This resistance to chronological structuring complicates feminist philosophic and psychotherapeutic assertions that argue for the healing capacities of the construction of a coherent narrative, and the sharing of this narrative with an empathetic audience as an essential part of the recovery process (Kelland, 2006).

Echoing Van der Kolk et. al’s insights on traumatic memory’s refusal to fully integrate, Herman further describes traumatic memory as “a series of still snapshots or a silent movie” with the role of

therapy “to provide the music and the words,” (1992, p. 175). Herman attends to this necessary reconstruction in the second stage of her three-pronged framework for trauma recovery, where the survivor must tell the story of their trauma completely, in depth and detail. Such a process of reconstruction works to transform fragmented trauma memories, fulfilling the seemingly elusive act of integration necessary for recovery as indicated above. In *Grounding*, Zahra provides the “still snapshots” through the verbal and erratic uncovering of fragments of memory in her conversations with Hashemi. Subsequently, Hashemi provides the “music and the words,” by way of performance and aesthetic language. For instance, she uses her own body to intervene in the telling of traumatic realities. This serves a protective function while helping Zahra move back and forth in time “so that she can simultaneously reexperience the feelings in all their intensity while holding on to the sense of safe connection that was destroyed in the traumatic moment,” (Herman, 1992, p. 178). Additionally, the gestural and aestheticized incorporation of language within *Grounding* functions as the “music and words” – sometimes literally – in its capacity to adhere Zahra’s fragmented bits and pieces back together again, at once demonstrating how broken or missing pieces can be made whole again in unexpected ways (Ballinger, 1998). The therapeutic value of the rebuilding of such a narrative is further evidenced through Zahra’s progressive ability to consolidate and understand the ways in which these memories and sensations have haunted her, permeating the unfolding of her lived experiences and psychological cognitions.

56 Years Old

Since the age of 52 I have been getting counseling to pull myself out of the influence of memories that without my awareness condition my behavior in unwanted directions. This is a painful challenge that continues to today.

2.3 Confronting Grief, Interrupting Shame & Self-Blame After Trauma

In order to better situate my discussion of the reparative power of community and the collective dimensions of mourning, I suggest pausing here in order to return to Judith Butler's aforementioned theorizations on the inherent social powers of mourning and vulnerability in relation to the interconnectedness of the human condition. While Butler speaks primarily to experiences of cultural trauma, loss and sociopolitical violence (2004), I strongly believed that her insights have laid the theoretical groundwork necessary in order for me to discuss the possibility of grief and vulnerability as tools for binding communities closer together. In her study, Butler argues that an interconnectedness exists despite the current societal misconception of vulnerability as weak and negative social circumstances. For Butler, the foundational process of mourning holds the capacity to reflect who we are, as a society, at our very core (2004). Collectively then, mourning and vulnerability should be seen as the basis for forming and reimagining communities. From a more explicitly psychological standpoint, Herman stresses how recovery can take place "only in the context of relationships," (1992, p. 133). In one sense a defense mechanism and in other ways a coping strategy, individuals who have survived trauma often feel as though their entire worth and sense of self depends upon feeling connection with others. "Trauma isolates; the group re-creates a sense of belonging. Trauma shames and stigmatizes; the group bears witness and affirms. Trauma degrades the victim; the group exalts her" (Herman, 1992, 214). These powerful statements speak in dialogue with Butler's aforementioned theorizations on the weaponization of vulnerability and the importance of repudiating this way of thinking. Along similar lines, feminist theorist bell hooks maintains that healing should not be thought of as a solitary pursuit. Rather, hooks designates the concept of a "community of care" as a place wherein shame and vulnerability can be tended to, safe from suspicion and/or blame (2003). Grounded in hooks's argument

of community as a foundational feminist tool for healing, I maintain Herman's assertion that healing from experiences of sexual trauma cannot occur in isolation.

The reality of today's current global state is remarkably contradictory to Butler's conceptualization. We repeatedly see mourning being weaponized and vulnerability being manipulated to the point where communities are being destroyed rather than fortified. Focusing her investigation on the fraught sociopolitical climate of post-9/11 America, Butler brings forth the normalization of Islamophobia and racial profiling in every day discourse as an example of the West's strategic method of hierarchizing immense loss, often resulting in the omission of entire bodies/experiences from discursive practices of mourning altogether – simply based on deviations from normative Western demographics. An understanding of individual identities as “socially constituted bodies” (Butler, 2004, p. 20) reveals how vulnerability is an inherent human experience and is not a condition predetermined by race, class, religious, belief or ethnicity. Grounded in Butler's logic, vulnerability is a collective encounter, something that should be seen as a tool for fostering productive social relationships, compassionate witnesses, and a therapeutic gaze.

The West's propagandistic dehumanization of the Other is seen time and time again in the news and across social media where we are disproportionately bombarded with images of deceased and/or wounded people of colour. One of the most notable examples of this can be seen in the infamous photographs released in 2004 from the Abu Ghraib prison, depicting extreme torture and the dehumanization of Iraqi prisoners of war at the hands of US military (Eisenman, 2007). In 2018, photographs of the shockingly emaciated and malnourished bodies of children in Yemen were printed in the New York Times. And, most recently, videos of the widespread police brutality that is being enacted on black bodies; George Floyd and Breonna Taylor are just a few of the most recent examples of what is truly a greater systemic issue. While it is widely considered unacceptable to look at the pain of others

with curiosity, it is clear that the West has a tendency of wielding this position of alienation in order to perpetuate our own voyeuristic gaze (Sontag, 2003).

The answer to the question of when life is or is not grievable is then largely predicated upon a hierarchical criterion that preferentially favours Western lives, resulting in the subsequent erasure of racialized bodies from discursive practices of mourning (Butler, 2004; 2016). Anthropologist Veena Das makes similar assertions regarding traumatic loss and mourning in the context of women in India who have experienced violence. Specifically, she asks how one can begin to re-inhabit a world from which they have been alienated by way of the dislocating experience of trauma; the only way to possibly do so being through a deliberate mourning for what was lost (1996, p. 67). Underpinned by Nadia Seremetakis's earlier research on women, death, and violence within the Mani Peninsula region of Greece (1991) Das goes on to maintain that when experiences of violence go unwitnessed and are subsequently improperly mourned, these experiences undergo a "bad death," (1996, p. 78).

Frustratingly, to speak publicly about one's experience of sexual trauma is to invite the stigma that attaches itself to its victims (Herman, 1992). The continued weaponization of vulnerability as a personal flaw and/or deficit is to fortify and nurture shame, efforts that work to eternalize said sociocultural stigmas. I am aware and must acknowledge how Zahra's identity as an Iranian woman compounds her experience of trauma, and her capacity to grieve and to heal based on the intense cultural shaming of sexually assaulted women in the Middle East. When ideologies of purity and honour underpin everyday cultural and religious discourse, in some areas the moment you are sexually abused, you are no longer considered to be a decent person. Exacerbated by sociopolitical norms, there are families who would sooner will their daughters to die for family honor "than live with bodies that have been violated by other men," (Das, 1996, p. 77). Das expands upon this assertion in the context of Muslim women in Southeast Asia who have experienced rape, highlighting the archetypal motif of the

young girl returning home after having been subjected to a violent assault, and “having her family ask her ‘why are you here? It would have been better if you were dead,’” (1996, p. 77). Building from Butler and Das’ theorizations on the precarious grievability of the body of the Other, I infer that a similar argument can be made microcosmically, through North American society’s continued silencing and refusal to validate women’s experiences of rape and assault. This refusal is exacerbated and maintained through societal tendencies of shaming, blaming, and stigmatizing victims of sexual violence. These are all tendencies which work to render the traumatized individual voiceless – a silencing that is intensified when we consider how the majority of instances of sexual abuse occur in secrecy, with no other bodies available to bear witness.

This tangled web of secrecy, shame, and blame is precisely what occurs in *Grounding*, where Zahra reveals in explicit detail how her ordeal was shrouded in silence: first as a child and then persisting for decades, until she finally had an opportunity to speak about her experiences of which she was indoctrinated to believe were unspeakable.

11 years old.

I was in 5th grade when my monthly period started. On the instruction of the pediatric doctor, my mother had explained menstruation to me. But she never told me about sex, sexual abuse, rape or how to defend myself if someone molested me or touched me. She had however warned me again and again since I was two or three that if I touched myself down there I would be a very bad girl.

Let’s return for a moment to Das and the concept of a “bad death,” the antithesis of which is – naturally – a “good death.” Das defines a “good death” by having another witness to one’s experience of trauma, so that grief “can move between the body and speech that can be publicly articulated,” (1996, p. 81). Zahra had no other body available to her to bear witness to her assault and, as a result, spent years internalizing the grief and shame. According to feminist philosopher and theorist Lindsay Kelland, this act of internalization causes the survivor to experience narrative disruptions and lack the adequate

language through which to express what she was subjected to endure (Kelland, 2006, p. 734). Alette Willis and Siobhan Canavan further Kelland's assertions in context specific to experiences of childhood sexual abuse highlight how, "through the traumatic experience of violation, children are constantly frightened, shamed, and silenced; they lose a voice for the overwhelming experiences they are suffering and their silence can persist into adult life (2015, p. 1482). This is evidenced in Zahra's memoirs, where she describes her profound loneliness of being left alone to deal with the grief that comes with a shattered sense of self and a shattered worldview. These feelings of loneliness and alienation were further exacerbated throughout the years she spent grappling with the profound sadness that comes from no longer being able to trust those around you. In Zahra's case, she specifically grieved the loss of a relationship with her mother.

*I blame my mother for this, for it was she who left me at my uncle's house.
My mother, to whom I didn't dare disclose what had happened to me.*

*I wanted to tell my mother, wanted her to caress me and tell me that it was ok, it was over with,
and she would never let this happen to me again.*

*But what did she have to offer me except beating me up, screaming....insulting me, sulking for a
few hours and then drowning me in questions. Oh, save me from her questions that would strip
me naked and shame me in front of the whole world. Continued fear. Continued rape.
So hard to talk about these things.*

By taking the lived experience of a woman of colour and exhibiting it in a North American gallery space, Hashemi at once obligates the viewer to become an active participant in Zahra's mourning process (effectively bearing witness to the losses of the Other). Further, it encourages a partial confrontation with the realities of sexual trauma and gender-based violence – realities which, as we have previously established, are frequently muted and dismissed within the North American public sphere.

Hashemi's involvement in the telling of Zahra's trauma encourages the viewer to assume a degree of involvement within it as well. Due to the multidimensional nature of the work, this involvement can take place in different ways. For example, the incorporation of the tea table setting as a

shared space within a larger, public setting offers the viewer an opportunity to sit, reflect, and share.

Some of these bodies (viewers) may share experiences of trauma similar to Zahra's, in which case the

encounter between their own

traumatic memories and

those of Zahra's story may

result in intense affects,

reversion and feelings of

destabilization. In this case,

the tea table holds the

potential to function as space

of rest or reprieve from

intense emotions, due to its

ability to invoke familiar feelings of domesticity and refuge. Moreover, this facilitates the process of

having Zahra's experiences be acknowledged and grieved by a collection of other bodies while also

encouraging the survivor-viewer to grieve and reflect upon their own pasts.

At the same time, there are also viewers who do not share these similar traumatic experiences. In

this instance, I consider *Grounding*'s size and scale as being requisite components for materializing a

viewing experience that reflects the pervasive haunting and preoccupation brought on by memories of

past trauma – a phenomenon of which individuals who have not experienced abuse or assault would be

unfamiliar with. In standing in the gallery, the sheer scale of the panels of calligraphic script work to

physically surround the viewer [Fig. 15].

I see this as a figurative response to psychology and trauma discourses that speak to a survivor's

preoccupation with distressing memories of their past – whether or not that preoccupation is intentional



Figure 15: Gita Hashemi, *Grounding: States of Gender*, 2017. Installation View, Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa ON. Image by Anna Khimasia.

(Van der Kolk & Van der Hart, 1991; Caruth, 1995). The size of *Grounding*, and the way in the panels of text work to surround the gallery eventually works to encircle the viewer within Zahra's trauma. I see these aspects of size and scale as a figurative testament to seismic degree of psychological preoccupation that results from the experiencing of sexual trauma. Encouraging such a confrontation with traumatic realities could then be seen as response to combatting post-traumatic tendencies of resentment and repression as tools for mitigating the felt impacts of painful memories. In *Grounding*, perceptibly 'alienating' or 'distancing' experiences and memories of sexual trauma can be negotiated "through affective connections between bodies" irrespective of the viewer's subject-position (Bennett, 2002, p. 337).

In discussing affective encounters with trauma-based artworks, Bennet maintains that when trauma enters the representational arena, is "is always vulnerable to appropriation, to reduction, and to mimicry," (Bennet, 2005, p. 6). From an ethical standpoint, this is particularly concerning in the context of an aestheticized representations of violence that belong to people of colour. Bennett notes in her discussion of trauma in relation to contemporary art, the inherent necessity of considering the ways in which a secondary witness (by extension, a spectator) is positioned in relation to the trauma being depicted (2005). In attempting to negotiate a way of looking that is both ethical and therapeutic, I find myself returning time and time again to Kozol's earlier musings regarding visual representations of the "spectacle" of violence in relation to photojournalistic images from the Balkan War (2004). With the absence of optical representation in *Grounding*, Hashemi omits the voyeuristic privilege of the gaze. In doing so however, are we also losing the ability to acknowledge the trauma as a lived reality? This matter of contention speaks in dialogue with concerns brought forth by artist and curator Susanne Slavick regarding the dangers of aestheticizing violence: if it made to be appealing, is it also made to be redeemed and erased? (2011). These concerns are reminiscent of the aforementioned concept of a "bad

death.” Without adequate representation, these experiences of sexual violence easily go unwitnessed and are improperly mourned, thus necessarily undergoing a “bad death.”

It goes without saying that Zahra’s memoirs, the explicit telling of her trauma narrative, is highly and expertly aestheticized. The sheer scale of *Grounding* coupled with Hashemi’s intricate and elaborate process of recounting the events in complex calligraphic script. Largely text-based, the high degree of aestheticization renders the script into an elaborate and ornate visual image. At once text and image/image and text, aesthetics and language work together to form a viewing experience that is profound both in visuality and psychological complexity. The fundamentally textual and linguistic basis of *Grounding* complicates the idea that the viewer must necessarily become a voyeur to the spectacle of suffering of the Other – predicated upon the basis that not all viewers will enter the gallery with the same level of linguistic comprehension. The multimedia and multidimensional components, coupled with Hashemi’s corporeal involvement, becomes a subversive tool for obligating the viewer to surrender the distance between themselves and the violence being depicted. Hashemi’s efforts to disrupt and complicate the viewing experience simultaneously challenges the idea of viewing as a one-way act by forcing the viewer beyond their passive role of the traditional observer into one that necessitates connection, responsibility, and the sharing of affective labour and emotional accountability. Hashemi calls for a “seeing” of Zahra’s experience to take place without providing the explicit visual imagery traditionally necessary for seeing. In doing so, Hashemi is able to attend to potential risks of objectification, for Zahra’s identity as a woman of colour, and for her autonomy and vulnerability as a someone who has survived a traumatic sexual experience.

The temporal aspects of the narrative, in combination with careful aestheticization, work to have Zahra’s silenced, unwitnessed, and improperly mourned experiences of abuse seen and actualized, becoming in a way, an act of therapeutic testimony. In working with refugee survivors of violence, Inger

Agger and Soren Jensen note that the act of testifying serves both the private (confessional) aspect as well as the public (political) dimension (1996). Zahra's testimony of her trauma then, binds the public and private together in a way where they mutually inform one another, giving a larger dimension to Zahra's individual experience that facilitates a process of reconnecting with others and ways of being in the world (Herman, 1992). *Grounding* attends to the private, confessional aspect of Zahra's narrative through a series of aesthetic interventions, veiling explicit understandings in language. At the same time, Hashemi tends to the public aspect of testimony by extending Zahra's story cross-culturally and across borders. This act of extending is achieved both in the exhibition of *Grounding* in a North American gallery space while also incorporating livestreaming elements that extend the unravelling of the performance beyond the limitations of conventional geographies. Further, this allows Hashemi to establish connections between Iran and North America through a framework of gender-based violence. Subsequently, this interconnectedness obstructs the normatively accepted rhetoric of political violence that the West habitually uses to alienate itself from the Middle East.

While no one experience of trauma will ever be entirely the same, *Grounding* presents viewers with a dialogue based on a broader thematic experience, at once highlighting concerns regarding universalist perspectives on sexual trauma while also theorizing the inherent necessity of sharedness in order to heal (Herman, 1992). Through this relational, protective platform, Zahra is able to bring the story of her trauma "into the room" as Herman so adamantly maintains is necessary. Hashemi has established a communal space wherein Zahra can publicly grieve her losses – finally have them seen and validated by a compassionate witness – all while protecting her most intimate vulnerabilities and maintaining dimensions of privacy in order to preserve agentic autonomy.

Chapter 3: Building Communities of Healing & a Feminist Therapeutic Alliance

3.1 The Artist as Mediator

The preliminary chapters of this study have provided a foundation for exploring the therapeutic value of a subversive aesthetic through an analysis of the politics of healing and representations of violence in contemporary visual art. Although briefly discussed in the second chapter, I wish to now embark on a detailed exploration of the mediating role of the artist through the implementation of aesthetic obstacles. I ask how Hashemi's corporeal involvement in Zahra's trauma narrative functions critically as both an analytical and protective tool. In assuming the role of the scribe to Zahra's most private, painful, and unprocessed memories, Hashemi is able to unburden Zahra from having to expose her own identity in order for her to have these experiences be validated, understood, and properly grieved. Building off of discussions from the preceding chapters, I ask how the aesthetic, temporal, and embodied components of *Grounding* mutually inform one another so as to facilitate a critical feminist repossession of the aesthetic that transcends a one-dimensional, unitary branch of knowledge.

As previously discussed, traditional psychotherapeutic frameworks have often reduced the process of healing to a linear act, built upon a set of prescriptive rules that can quickly work to pathologize survivors of trauma by pointing out flaws in the individual rather than making room to address the social systems that create these flaws (Burstow, 1992; LaMarre, Smoliack, & Cool et al., 2018). In a critique of traditional client-therapist relationship structures, professor and theorist Shoshana Magnet highlights how the role of the feminist psychotherapist should then be firmly grounded in a "client-centered approach" that seeks to redistribute unilateral power dynamics toward one which positions the client as the expert of her own life (2017). While long-term individual psychotherapy remains the primary treatment choice for working through interpersonal traumas, it is critical to also

acknowledge the limitations that come with it. Thus, how might the relational and participatory components of contemporary visual artworks contribute to a more holistic transference of unprocessed psychic wounding?

In her discussion of trauma “cultures,” Ann Cvetkovich argues that performance art works to generate affective experiences, and that these affective experiences can be used to give rise to different ways of thinking about trauma “as connected to the textures of everyday experience,” (2003, pp. 3-4). I believe that Cvetkovich’s way of thinking about performance-based strategies aligns with Hashemi’s embodied actions that take place in *Grounding*, in its ability to bring together “live bodies in space” while consequentially transforming the experience into one that is not solely about what or who is being represented but also “about who’s in the audience creating community,” (2003, p. 9). Guided by Cvetkovich, I propose that an analysis of *Grounding* clearly elucidates the role of the artist as a mediator: by apprehending the delicate paradox that exists between the perceived beauty of an image versus its underlying meaning, the Hashemi’s involvement in the processes of sharing and witnessing of another’s most vulnerable core experiences can be critically extrapolated and implemented in a way that facilitates an unburdening of the psychological aftermath of trauma. In doing so, Hashemi’s embodied acts set the groundwork for a critical feminist repossession of trauma discourse beyond pathologizing medical analyses, forging instead, creative responses to the dialectic of trauma “that far outstrip even the most utopian of therapeutic and political solutions,” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 3). Moreover, critically examining *Grounding* further establishes an argument for an aesthetic that contributes to both the theorization, mourning and, ultimately, the healing of unmetabolized traumatic pain. Considering the ways in which *Grounding* implicates itself within acts of memory and mourning subsequently demonstrates how contemporary visual artworks can open the door for relational and

reparative mediation – between the Zahra and the artist, Zahra and the viewer and, potentially, the viewer and Hashemi.

To fully understand a relational and reparative approach to mediating post-traumatic experiences, we first necessitate a reconceptualization of our current understanding of healing. Normopathic discourses of healing are often misinterpreted as and misaligned with notions of complete freedom from post-traumatic affects (Cvetkovich, 2003; Collins & Buchanan, 2014; Bollas, 2018). Instead, what I have been arguing for throughout this study is what I have begun to refer to as feminist aesthetic of healing. Guided by Judith Herman’s insights on trauma recovery, I propose that a feminist aesthetic of healing is grounded in an understanding of “coming-to-terms-with” with our unhealed pasts. While not necessarily a fixed state of being, perhaps healing can be found in the durational capacity of the survivor to learn how to live comfortably in the present without being overwhelmed by thoughts and memories of traumatic pasts (Herman, 1992). Derived from this way of thinking, I see healing a processual act: a cumulative nurturing of one’s sense of self and one’s way of being in the world without adhering to fixed conclusions or prescribed ways of feeling. Herman testifies to this assertion highlighting how the impacts of a traumatic event continue “to reverberate throughout the survivor’s lifecycle,” (1992, p. 211). By shifting our ways of thinking about healing from a finite state of being toward a continual practice of visceral integration, the therapeutic value of trauma-based artworks can be found in their capacity to help us carry the weight of our pasts and hold that pain in the present.

In *Grounding*, Hashemi is able to use her role as the artist to manipulate tensions of positionality, and durationality. These tensions become evident through acts of embodied negotiation, deliberate issues of translatability, and virtual technology that disrupts conventional notions of proximity and distance. In cooperation with one another, these actions facilitate a conceptual working through of unmetabolized traumatic pains that are rooted in an open-ended process of recognition, mourning, and

differentiation. In addition to Hashemi, viewers are also encouraged to participate as external witnesses to Zahra's trauma, by giving their time and attention in order to ascertain meaning from it. This idea of 'being with' Zahra as she re-narrativizes her memoirs parallels the common therapeutic understanding of the transformative powers that lie in having someone bear witness to our trauma/pain/grief simply by being there with us – to listen and validate without trying to change or solve our current reality. This kind of collaborative "patient – therapist" working relationship, confirms Herman, is built upon a framework of ideas rather than force "and mutuality rather than authoritarian control," (1992, p. 136). Simply put, the participatory dimensions of *Grounding* open the door for relational ways of approaching and being with another person's trauma. Together, this unified artist/viewer presence works to offer support and assistance without attempting to "cure" or "solve" – interventions which would otherwise risk becoming unilateral action, upholding voicelessness in the survivor rather than working to embolden her (Herman, 1992). In this way, *Grounding* calls for a critical feminist approach for contending with one's post-traumatic experience through its transformation of healing into a participatory and collaborative encounter not only for Zahra, but for Hashemi and audiences as well.

In earlier chapters, I engaged in a brief discussion of art theorist Jan Jagodzinski's research on contemporary participatory art (2013). In this study, Jagodzinski highlights how the major goal of participatory artworks is the establishing of "a politics of collectivity that reaches beyond collectivism and identity politics," (2013, p.1). While theoretically secondary to my broader pursuit of a feminist aesthetic of healing, Jagodzinski's understanding of collective encounters within participatory artworks speaks in dialogue with my overarching hypothesis of healing as a multiplicity of moments and intervals located between subject and object. Further, I maintain that Jagodzinski's philosophic theorizations align with Herman's more clinical insights, where resolution of the trauma should never be seen as final and the recovery process never completed. In saying this, I feel it is necessary to reiterate that this perpetual

irresolution of the initial traumatic experience should not be mistaken as something negative, where the traumatized individual is indelibly ruined. Instead, calling upon the audience to participate in the uncovering of Zahra's narrative creates a possibility for extending a trusting therapeutic alliance beyond a one-to-one relationship. Reconstructing and reaffirming the therapeutic alliance subsequently contributes to the unlearning of beliefs regarding trust/safety/shame that were shattered by the traumatic experience (Herman, 1992, p. 136). Within the context of contemporary visual artwork, this triadic alliance could then be understood as a tool to help metabolize the unprocessed pains of past traumatic experiences.

3.2 Surrogate Voices

In studies on collective biography as a feminist research methodology within the context of studies on memory and girlhood, theorists Susanne Gannon, Michele Buyers, and Mythili Rajiva highlight how memory stories are shared, written, read, and listened to for the very purpose of allowing other listeners to approach someone else's lived experience from a critical, coherent, and knowledgeable position (2014). Derived from this frame of thought, I argue that this is precisely what occurs within *Grounding*. Embodied acts of seeking out, sharing over tea, and reading Zahra's words – in combination with internal processes of reflection and contemplation – encourage a degree of multisensory engagement with someone else's lived experience. Quite simply, viewers are encouraged to engage with Zahra's memoirs at the realm of the senses all while being kept at a degree of relative distance. Gannon et. al. continue, proposing a way of thinking about the body as a “mobile-affective site of writing and remembering” which can subsequently be used to open up individual stories so they can move relationally between tellers and listeners without the risk of trying to lock down an original truth, meaning, or owner (2014, p. 62). With tensions of memory and truth telling inherently embedded within the post-traumatic experience (Herman, 1992), I argue that this conceptual tool for telling and sharing could then

be seen as a critical lens through which to better communicate, share, and heal from individual experiences of trauma. In *Grounding*, Hashemi's implementation of her own body as a surrogate for Zahra's works to disrupt conventional subject – object relations (Gannon et. al., 2014). Jointly, Hashemi's manipulation of narrative and aesthetics strategically de-center Zahra's experiences, offering the viewer an opportunity to come as close as possible to the immediacy, intensity, and intimacy of Zahra's traumatic past.

As one of the foremost physicians working in the field of trauma, Bessel Van der Kolk highlights the criticality in understanding how the very nature of trauma signifies the living under specific sociocultural circumstances where terrible things are allowed to happen, and where the truth about these terrible things cannot be told (2014). Undergirded by this precautionary assertion, I argue that accounting for these sociopolitical discrepancies in our dealings with trauma should be understood as non-negotiable. I have already touched upon this issue, with a brief discussion regarding the ways in which access to therapy is often fraught with barriers. The assumption that all survivors have equal accessibility to a therapeutic relationship is thus inherently biased, problematic, and inequitable. Within these circumstances, it becomes impossible to talk about a dialectic of trauma/healing that does not also identify – and seek to dismantle – the ongoing systems of oppression that foster, maintain, and profit from the weaponization of vulnerability and the violence of disconnection. Cvetkovich further maintains this argument, highlighting the specific criticality of reconceptualizing sexual trauma as an experience that generates collective responses (2003). As a longtime proponent of community as a foundational feminist tool, bell hooks speaks in dialogue with this argument, highlighting how “one of the most vital ways we sustain ourselves is by building communities of resistance, places where we know we are not alone,” (2015, p. 227). For this reason, it is imperative to continue refuting individualist approaches of traditional clinical psychological and psychiatric methods. Although formally and conceptually

different, I suggest that *Grounding* parallels Cvetkovich's and hooks's concerns, with the gallery serving as the place "where we know we are not alone" and Hashemi's mediation and the audiences requisite participation serve as the critical tools for "building communities of resistance," (hooks, 2015, p. 227).

In her most recent clinical research, Judith Herman has suggested that a group treatment framework may be better able to provide an opportunity for counteracting "the experience of subordination by joining with peers on a plane of equality to combat isolation and fear, to relieve shame, to cultivate a sense of belonging....and to rebuild the relational capacities shattered by traumatic experience," (2019, p. 2). Located at the juncture of both the clinical and social perspectives of trauma, I am cognizant of the ways in which Hashemi attends to acts of "joining" and "rebuilding" in *Grounding*. Through a melding of aesthetics, language, time, and space, Hashemi is able to begin cultivating "a sense of belonging" that extends beyond the confines of conventional (and often inaccessible) clinical healing frameworks. Moreover, the livestreaming component of the installation contributes substantially to the cultivation of a shared sense of belonging, by building and joining communities beyond the traditional limits of geographic proximity.

As an artist but, more so, a mediator, Hashemi provides a lens through which to think about the aforementioned notion of a feminist psychotherapeutic alliance, using her body as a surrogate for Zahra's. This substitution of her own body, of situating herself as a shield between Zahra and the viewer, functions protectively, ensuring that Zahra's voice remains the expert and arbiter of her own story. In this way, Hashemi's embodied actions serve a therapeutic function for Zahra, by facilitating the use of language, naming, and a sharing of "the emotional burden of the trauma" all while maintaining "the dignity and value of the survivor," (Herman, 1992, p. 179). In turn, this keeps Zahra's memories, words, and experiences at the center of the story being told. Guided by Herman's insights, I believe that the relational dimensions of *Grounding* – the ways in which the viewer is encouraged to actively

participate in the working through and the uncovering of meaning in Zahra's story – demonstrate the inherent importance of sharedness, transactions, and relationships in upholding the foundational architecture necessary for coming to terms with our unhealed pasts. At the same time, the integrity of this sense of sharedness is maintained by Hashemi's incorporation of subtle obstacles intended to complicate the uncovering of meaning: issues of translatability for viewers who cannot immediately read the panels of text, requiring the translation to be sought out, and extending the unfolding of the narrative over a series of days so that the viewer's experience is as much an act of labour as is Hashemi's intricate calligraphic process and Zahra's burden of vulnerability in disclosure.

Exploring the stages of trauma recovery in careful detail, Herman has highlighted how the most effective way for a therapist to fulfill her responsibility to the client is “by faithfully bearing witness to her story, not by infantilizing her or granting her special favours. Though the survivor is not responsible for the injury that was done to her, she is responsible for her recovery. Acceptance of this apparent injustice is the beginning of empowerment,” (1992, p. 192). Thus, following Magnet and Herman's therapeutic insights, I suggest that Hashemi demonstrates in *Grounding*, a way in which traditional therapeutic dynamics may be carried forward beyond a determinate clinical setting. Situated within a space of community, care, and critical reflection, *Grounding* is able to serve a therapeutic function for Zahra, helping her to develop the sense of closure, empathy, and forgiveness that she has been unable to access for decades. Additionally, I feel it is worth highlighting the possibility for *Grounding* to provide a similar therapeutic function for viewers who share similar experiences to Zahra, through the cultivation of a shared space. In *Grounding*, community and connection work to deflect the internalized feelings of isolation, alienation and loneliness that lie at the core of the survivor experience. This kind of transactive therapeutic relationship is a radical departure from the aforementioned pathologizing schemas that tie posttraumatic experiences to feelings of isolation, alienation, and an inherent solitary burden. Using her

own body as a cipher can subsequently be seen as Hashemi's effort to account for the complexities of subjective experience, protecting Zahra's identity as a survivor and as a woman of colour, while understanding the critical necessity of having her experiences be shared and heard. This corporeal involvement also works to mitigate risks associated with cultural, religious, and sociopolitical difference – all of which are frequently seen as perpetuating a voyeuristic gaze when it comes to the visual representation of suffering. This ultimately allows for a sharing of Zahra's pain – not as a problem that needs solving – but an inconclusive struggle to that requires witnessing and acknowledgement.

While the majority of my analysis has centered around an exploration of the ways in which the relational capacities of *Grounding* function therapeutically for Zahra, it is important to also consider how these capacities might function similarly for viewers. Specifically, I am thinking of the possible ways in which viewers who share a similar experience to Zahra might respond or engage with the “triggering” contents of the work. Much like how Zahra recounts instances where she was brought back to the events of her initial assault, it is worth noting how the explicit re-narrativization of these memories might bring the viewer back to the events of their initial psychic wounding should they too be a survivor of sexual violence. Constructed by way of a series of self-reflections, *Grounding* at once demands the viewer's participation in the meaning-making of Zahra's narrative.

Whether it is in the seemingly simple task of reading through a translation, sitting around the tea table and taking the time to grieve or to empathize, seeking out access to the performance virtually, or walking around the gallery floors and engaging in conversation with Hashemi, viewers are required to put in a certain degree of work or effort in order to derive meaning from it. These relational and participatory components of *Grounding* are effective. Simultaneously, this results in the possibility for the same relational and participatory components to become deeply *affective*. In discussing representations of trauma in relation to contemporary visual art, Bennett highlights how a sharing of

affective labour and emotional accountability are necessary instruments for engaging with trauma-based artworks as well as for engaging the viewer in a self-reflexive process for better understanding the self (Bennett, 2005). In *Grounding*, these affective transactions arise from the Hashemi's efforts to encourage a confrontation with the reality of Zahra's trauma. The explicit retelling of Zahra's lived experiences within the "community of care" provided in *Grounding* opens up an avenue for the viewer to not only to engage with Zahra's pain but – potentially – their own. This self-reflexive process of engagement is born out of Hashemi's embodied approach to re-narrativization: necessitating us as audience members, to give our time in order for Zahra's story to have time and extending the processes of telling and sharing over a series of days.

Rape, abuse, and assault are innately invisible and silent experiences, almost always confined to the private sphere. Moreover, the aftermath of sexual trauma rarely produces dead bodies or even damaged ones (Cvetkovich, 2003). This persistent exclusion from the public sphere is a clear indicator that the ensuing healing process necessitates a profoundly different approach, "one that can recognize trauma's specificities and variations," (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 3). Ultimately, I argue that this refusal to conform with traditional trauma discourses is precisely what lies at the heart of my conceptual offering of a healing aesthetic: a "formation of a public culture of trauma that doesn't involve medical diagnoses or victims," (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 1).

In a study of affect and relational viewing in contemporary art photography, Matthew Ryan Smith highlights the concern that "if the audience is susceptible to trauma through affective engagement with trauma-related art, then the mere act of viewing raises important questions concerning appropriate viewing conditions, lived experiences, and ethical responsibility (2014, p. 20). In a way, *Grounding* complicates this assertion through a veiling of language: if the viewer who stands before the panels of parchment has a linguistic understanding of Farsi, then indeed "the mere act of viewing" is capable of

triggering distress responses in the viewer. On the other hand, for viewers who lack this immediate linguistic understanding, the triggering of distress responses becomes delayed until the moment the translated text is sought out. Rather than simply viewing, a simultaneous degree of understanding becomes a necessary prerequisite for the viewer's affective engagement at this most intimate level. In once again mentioning the complexities of language and translatability, I feel it is necessary to return briefly to chapter two's discussion surrounding the implementation of trigger warnings and/or content warnings. Based on *Grounding's* capacity (whether intentional or not) to become a catalyst for memory of past traumatic experiences, many theorists and educators would argue that *Grounding* is an example of precisely why content warnings should be required as part of pedagogical practice. This argument is predicated upon the fact that re-activating harmful memories and distressing sensations ultimately work to disrupt the traumatized individual's healing process. Situating traumatic subject matter within an educational setting subsequently runs the risk of disrupting the traumatized individual's learning process. This brings forth a secondary argument, with some people arguing that disruptions to the learning process are precisely what justify the necessity of trigger/content warnings (Rae, 2016). At the same time, there are those who may ask whether educators should care or feel responsible for caring about an individual's healing and/or learning.

In *Grounding*, I propose that Hashemi offers us a powerful alternative for rethinking the concept of a trigger and how it functions: perhaps trigger warnings are simply mechanism for allowing individuals to avoid learning how to shoulder the pain that comes from being triggered. To a certain extent, safety will always be an illusion – it is impossible to predict or judge what someone else might feel the need to be protected from just as much as it is impossible for any caveat before a text or announcement before a presentation to “staunch the bleeding” or “harden the scabs” over unhealed psychic wounds (Gay, 2012). And still, in *Grounding*, Hashemi suggests to us that there is perhaps value

in confronting these painful recollections, that there might be a possibility for uncovering methods for learning and responding to triggers in ways that allow us to counterpoise them, to confront them, and reckon with them so that our painful pasts no longer hold power over us and our ability to live comfortably in the present (Herman, 1992). It is undeniable that inviting audiences into Zahra's life, to re-experience her traumas with her, holds the very real possibility of inciting varying levels of distress in the viewer. At the same time, I believe that Hashemi has gone about this knowingly, guided by the belief that a certain level of distress is necessary in order to give rise the other foundational attributes of the healing process such as grieving, sharing, reconstructing a sense of self, and one's sense of being in the world (Herman, 1992). Situated within a discussion of contemporary visual art, the very nature of an art installation signifies the artist's intention to reach the widest possible audience. While I have begun an exploration into the possible viewing experience for viewers who might also share similar traumatic experiences, at this stage of my research I am only able to hypothesize whether or not *Grounding* indeed holds the potential to offer a similar therapeutic value to the viewer. Nonetheless, I am cautiously optimistic and firmly believe that it remains a critical avenue for future thought.

3.3 Global Dialogues for Healing

Feminist art historian Whitney Chadwick writes about art and gender, discussing how they, in combination with each other, "provide one lens through which to view the increasingly powerful relationship between local, individual and subjective experience," (2012, p. 474). Based on the frequency and prevalence to which we see stories of sexual abuse and sexual assault circulating throughout mainstream media, it is unsurprising that this overarching pattern of violence is often flattened into a "universal" issue. While I have already acknowledged the inherent necessity of the sharing and sharedness of our traumatic pasts in order to heal, it is worth reminding ourselves how universal perspectives of gender-based violence carry with it many risks – especially with regard to

dominant literature surrounding violence against women where the voice of the Other is frequently co-opted in order to re-centre white, western women's experiences of violence. Thus, I feel it is imperative to re-situate my pursuit of a healing aesthetic within an understanding of universality that accounts for the complex politics of racial, social, and/or political difference. As one of the earlier researchers in the then-emergent field of psychotherapy, Irvin Yalom coined the idea of therapeutic universality in order to differentiate between the sharedness of traumatic experiences versus an understanding of universality as necessarily meaning sameness (1985). This therapeutic impact of universality is classified by a profound feeling of comfort and safety between two or more individuals who have felt isolated by shameful secrets (Yalom, 1985). Herman's more recent insights on the potential for commonality in relation to a shared experience of trauma further speaks to Yalom's idea, highlighting the many instances in which patients have repeatedly described a sense of solace in "simply being present with others who have endured similar ordeals," (1992, p. 215).

With regard to contemporary Iranian art involving calligraphic writing and subversion, Fitzpatrick has noted how shifts in temporality are often interpreted as the eliciting a loss of authorial control of one's experience by becoming subjected to "a claim of unforeseen associations that extend temporality," (2011, p. 143). In the context of *Grounding*, I propose that Hashemi's role in the transcription of Zahra's memoirs is not an act of assuming authorial control so much as it is the assuming of a responsibility to negotiate conventions of representation in order to reproduce traumatic memories in a way that enables the survivor to relocate it "as part of the narrative of the subject," (Pollock, 2009, p. 43). As such, Hashemi's participatory approach to the renunciation of spatiotemporal distance functions in a highly political way. If it were not for the translation provided, Zahra's traumas would remain incomprehensible to a great majority of audience members. Not only does this implicate a largely white audience in a process of looking that extradites them from the safety of their privileged

and alienated positions, the disavowal of temporal distance using language and translatability becomes a testament to the alternative ways in which survivors can work to reclaim a sense of connection in the wake of sexual trauma – even across a broader global spectrum. I believe, however, that Hashemi’s involvement in the mediation of explicit traumatic events – in combination with the textual and aesthetic components – indicate an even greater possibility for a feminist aesthetic of healing to function within a larger psychotherapeutic modality for coming to terms with experiences of trauma that have gone underacknowledged, unseen, and discounted.

3.4 Toward a Feminist Aesthetic of Healing

At the most fundamental level, the core objective of an art exhibition is always for the work to be seen by others and to engage the widest audience possible. Predicated upon the basic principle of subjectivity, audience members will always bring with them into the gallery space their own individual narratives and preconceived lived experiences. This inevitably opens up the precarious door of viewer interpretation, with the ensuing risk of re-centering the self and personal lived experience in the midst of someone else’s story. While “seeing” is inextricably embedded within the discipline of visual art, the process itself is underpinned by a host of associated risks and concerns. At the same time, this paper has already discussed at length how art and aesthetic strategies are also capable of leading us to a profound understanding of thinking and being in the world. In *Grounding*, Hashemi demonstrates this by manipulating tensions of language and the body in order to mediate intercultural dialogues of healing that attend to the complex magnitude of possible social, cultural and political discongruities. At the same time, Hashemi has also demonstrated to us how a degree of prior distress is inherently embedded within processes of healing. Thus, *Grounding* makes evident how an aesthetic of healing might function as a strategy for alleviating and contending with this distress. Moving forward, the question at hand then becomes how to magnify these new ways of understanding and engaging with subjectivity and the

spaces we inhabit while mitigating the potential for the flattening, coopting, and/or the objectifying of another's experience.

In discussing feminist approaches to psychotherapy, Magnet defines the therapeutic relationship as a place where one is able speak openly about vulnerable or shaming thoughts and feelings, followed by a transformative sense of having them lift off as a result of the experience being witnessed within the context of a therapeutic connection (2017). In other words, viewed through a feminist psychotherapeutic lens, the act of having one's most painful experiences be heard and validated is paramount in order to heal from the emotional wounds of our past. As briefly touched upon earlier, there are many reasons that can result in avoidance or resistance when it comes to the seemingly impossible task of confronting the shameful ghosts of our past. From parents who refuse to acknowledge the ways in which their actions have inflicted lasting pain on their children to the societal stigma associated with mental illness, and then to social, cultural, and financial barriers, the experiencing of trauma continues to be curtailed to an innately private, individual, and solitary burden. These are all barriers that inhibit the accessing of the profound benefits of the therapeutic connection – issues of which Zahra was persistently faced with in the wake of her initial assault as a five-year-old girl. As the intermediary between Zahra herself and Zahra's traumatic pain, Hashemi establishes a therapeutic relationship between herself as the artist and Zahra as the subject. This act aligns with Herman's aforementioned assertion of the role of the therapist to aid in constructing a new interpretation of the traumatic experience, reassembling an organized and verbal account of the trauma that "affirms the dignity and value of the survivor," (1992, p. 179).

Establishing a reciprocal channel of awareness, Hashemi involvement in the mediation of *Grounding* parallels the powers of a therapeutic relationship while also demonstrating how a therapeutic connection can be formed and maintained outside of traditional (clinical) settings where healing is "supposed" to take place. The therapeutic value of such a relational approach lies in its capacity to

facilitate processes of looking and seeing wherein one's individual traumatic experiences are recognized as significant, as having had a detrimental impact, but that the sufferer alone is not the one responsible for her own abuses (Herman, 1992). Moreover, the uniquely textual basis of *Grounding* works to further complicate traditional acts of seeing by obligating us, as viewers, to *give* our time in order for Zahra's story to have time. This subversive practice ultimately works to extend the opportunity for healing beyond the periphery of conventional – and biased – codes of treatment.

Inextricable from the overarching process of healing is also the survivor's attempt to resolve her ruptured sense of belonging within the shared belief systems she grew up in. In *Grounding*, this pertains to Zahra's perpetual quest to try and make sense of her experiences within the context of the beliefs of those around her. At several points throughout her narrative, Zahra asks questions like "why did this happen" or, more specifically, "why did this happen to me?" Herman ascertains that this moral questioning of guilt and responsibility is an excruciating yet essential part of reconstructing a "system of belief that makes sense of undeserved suffering," (1992, p. 178). The difficulty here, lies in the reality that attempting to resolve these questions will inevitably bring the survivor into conflict with those closest to her. This struggle is made evident in *Grounding*, at the various points in which Zahra attempts to resolve and atone for her differences in relation to the most important people in her life.

9 Years Old

Every moment that I had to display the chastity and nicety as my mother had defined made me feel more like a cheap slut. In school, girls would talk about virginity and marriage. All these would throw me into despair. According to them, I wasn't a virgin and therefore couldn't marry. I had become sensitive to these words and little by little I came to the conclusion that I, not the rapist, was the guilty one. From then on, I started having a strange feeling about being a "good innocent girl."

It is very difficult to talk about this.

Zahra's inability to have her pain be seen and validated by those closest to her further complicates the task of healing: not only must the survivor restore her own sense of worth and

belonging, “she must also be prepared to sustain it in the face of the critical judgements of others,” (Herman, 1992, p.178). At the same time, I remain cognizant of Herman’s prior theorization regarding the fundamental principle that healing cannot occur in isolation. If such is the case, what does it mean for Zahra, whose worth and belonging were unsustainable in the face of the intense judgement and shaming she received in perpetuity from her mother?

21 Years Old

The psychiatrist asked me to let him tell my mother about when I was raped at age 5. The scolding in my mother’s gaze when she looked at me was harder than being in hell. I still feel her looking down at me from the other world and blaming me. You are a bad girl. Shameless. Dirty. You went into the closet on the 40th day of your father’s passing. From age 5, actually from the day you were born, you were nothing but trouble. What sin did I commit to be stuck with you?

Because it was never safe for Zahra to express her feelings of shame and disgust outwardly to her family, she had no choice but to inflict them within and toward herself. In an effort to attend *Grounding’s* capacity to offer a shared space for healing that simultaneously defies the harmful realities of the survivor’s proximal social circles, I argue that Hashemi extends the phenomenon of healing to a triadic artist – subject – viewer relationship. Opening the door for the viewer to become a third party or, the third witness to Zahra’s experience, works to fill the voids that exist between herself, her friends, her family, and her community (Herman, 1992). With Hashemi’s corporeal involvement in the narration of these intimate details of her past, Zahra finally has a protected outlet through which to verbalize the unnameable feelings and affects she has been experiencing from the time she was a little girl. This triadic, relational, and suspended process ensures a therapeutic sharing of her most intimate thoughts and feelings: having them be heard and understood by a compassionate witness all while protecting her autonomy as a survivor. In this way, *Grounding* at once authenticates how the presence of a therapeutic connection can contribute to a rewiring of even the most deep-rooted feelings and core beliefs. After spending so much of her life internalizing intense feelings of shame, blame and guilt, the transactions of

emotional accountability that occur within (and beyond) *Grounding* appears to become a transformative experience for Zahra, likely providing her with a lens of compassion for naming and validating her traumatic childhood experiences – the lens of which she was denied for the majority of her life.

11 Years Old, Revisited

I still long for a home where I do not get bombarded with why-did-you-do-this, where I am not in fear of being put on trial as soon as I enter. I still long to be able to ask for guidance when I am weak and inadequate without being judged and told It's your own fault.

It's so difficult to talk.

Returning to bell hooks's aforementioned offering of a community of care as a space that facilitates the strengthening of non-judgmental relationships, reciprocal support, and reclamation of individual and collective agency (2003), I wish to re-emphasize the profound value of considering how Hashemi has materialized these collective feminist qualities within the installation and performance of *Grounding* in order to open a dialogue of healing that extends across borders. Speaking in dialogue with hooks's aforementioned theorizations, feminist educators Laurie Fuller and Ann Russo discuss a process of "communal healing" in relation to critical pedagogy and community accountability (2016). Fuller and Russo define this process of healing as one that rejects the individualistic and hyper-autonomous frameworks that serve as the basis for traditional pathologizing and anti-feminist frameworks (2016). These perspectives on the healing capacities of a feminist pedagogy, in combination with Herman's critical and informed approaches to trauma care demonstrate how *Grounding* functions as a healing space, where grief and vulnerability are transformed into powerful mechanisms that promote deinstitutionalized, collective, and reparative spaces. Guided by Hashemi's synthesized role as the artist/therapist/mediator, the contemporary art theory and psychotherapeutic frameworks mutually inform one another. Ultimately, I argue that this interdisciplinary theoretical apparatus functions subversively, creating an open space through which survivors of sexual trauma are invited to connect the

abstractions they have encountered through their individual experiences to the preconceived structural realities of the world in which we currently find ourselves situated. This departure from binaristic ways of thinking about knowledge production further implies that the healing powers of a therapeutic connection must not necessarily occur within closed, private, and/or conventional therapeutic spaces. Does healing have a fixed endpoint? If it does, how do we know when we are there? How can we get definitive confirmation of when we have finally healed? Over the last several decades, a great deal of mainstream literature has ambiguously alluded to an idea that once the healing has finished taking place, there will be some sort of pinnacular moment, a paradigm shift wherein the survivor is able to return to who they were before the trauma ever happened – almost as if absolving it completely from mental and bodily memory. However, research and lived experience continue to demonstrate a reality of healing that is far more irresolute (Herman, 1992; Cvetkovich 2003). In my pursuit of a feminist aesthetic of healing I posit that it is perhaps time to re-center ourselves in relation to what it truly means to heal. That is, a reorienting towards healing in its verbal connotation: a progressional experience that is extended at length across an indefinite temporal continuum. Cvetkovich has explored this shift in thinking as a feminist discourse of trauma that carries as its goal the forging of a path between “debilitating descent into pain and the denial of it,” (2003, p. 6). “To heal” might then be better understood as a continuous process of renegotiation and recommitment, in which case one’s identity as a “survivor” is better understood as someone who is *surviving*.

Conclusion

As researchers, we continue to reflect upon the question of whether or not it is morally and ethically appropriate to represent pain, violence and trauma. It appears however, that the question we should be asking is not *why* should we, but rather, *how can we* go about visually representing this pain? Throughout the course of this study, I have returned frequently to the concept of speaking the

unspeakable. As has been established, a foundational therapeutic principal of healing from trauma entails a degree of speaking and/or sharing of our experiences in order to have them acknowledged, grieved, and validated. Due in part to certain sociocultural, political, and religious beliefs and, in combination with societal tendencies to place shame and blame upon the victims, this speaking and sharing is not always possible, accessible, or safe. When pain is so complex, experiences are so horrifying, and violence is shrouded in secrecy, this already paradoxical question becomes a matter of problematizing how healing can begin to take place when conventional modes of speaking or sharing are not available to us. How do we give voice and agency back to those who have been conditioned to believe they no longer have – or are deserving of having – voice and agency?

In discussing the aesthetics of trauma within the context of European films that deal with wartime rape, feminist and cultural theorists Mythili Rajiva and Agatha Schwartz have argued that an understanding of trauma necessarily requires us to venture into the realm of what is not explicitly observational to find an adequate vocabulary for attending to experiences which might not be empirically verifiable (2018). Guided by this way of thinking, my thesis has aimed to serve as a modest contribution toward a preliminary avenue for thinking about the intersections of feminist psychotherapy within the realm of contemporary art theory in order to ascribe a visual language to experiences of sexual trauma and the ensuing process of healing. Gita Hashemi's durational performance *Grounding: States of Gender*, has served as the basis for this pursuit, demonstrating how an integration of aesthetic, feminist, and clinical interventions might have the potential to serve as a more holistic and cohesive avenue for coming to terms with our unhealed pasts. In *Grounding*, the participatory dimensions of the work become central tenets of a larger pursuit for an aesthetic of healing. This is evidenced through Hashemi's ability to disrupt conventional distinctions between inside – outside and public – private,

with the livestreaming component of the installation extending Zahra's memoirs even further beyond the limits of the gallery space.

To contextualize my exploration of how memories function post-trauma, I have drawn from clinical research on the narrative basis of psychotherapy in order to ascertain an understanding of their resistance to adhere to traditional narrative chronologies and how this complicates trajectories of healing. In doing so, I have sought to demonstrate the ways in which Zahra's retelling and reconstruction of her own traumatic experiences, in combination with artist-calligrapher Gita Hashemi's corporeal involvement in this retelling, works to mirror the therapeutic value of narrative reconstruction in healing from past trauma. As discussed, the jagged, non-sequential retelling of the events of Zahra's life within *Grounding* reflect the seemingly erratic process by which traumatic memories are triggered, and how these triggers can be metabolized in order to nurture a reliving of memory within the context of a safe and therapeutic relationship (Herman, 1992). It is this intense processing of fragments of memory within a safe and therapeutic space that subsequently allow for the integration of one's traumatic past. Ultimately, the formation of an exploratory narrative can assist survivors in reframing the traumatic event in a new light, identifying alternative impacts and insights, and forming new connections.

bell hooks has emphasized how the role of the teacher should never become synonymous with the role of the therapist (2003). In the context of healing and my analysis of *Grounding*, I would argue that a similar assertion stands true. Therefore, am not proposing that Hashemi's role as the artist – mediator should become synonymous with the role of a therapist. Rather, I have aimed to acknowledge the importance of continued psychotherapeutic work within a broader paradigm of feminist and art historical approaches to negotiating memory, healing, and the post-traumatic experience. Using *Grounding* as a basis for this exploration has simultaneously allowed for a clearer understanding of the role of the artist as a mediator: Hashemi is able to use her own body to tell the story of Zahra's traumatic

past. This negotiation becomes a necessary aesthetic obstacle for preserving violent realities without jeopardizing Zahra's vulnerability, agency, and agentic autonomy. Derived from a multitude of cross-disciplinary theorizations, I have turned to *Grounding* as the basis of my pursuit of a feminist aesthetic of healing: to begin a process of contemplating the ways in which fundamental psychotherapeutic principles can be leveraged within the discipline of contemporary art history so as to extend the opportunity for healing beyond the confines of current conventional, individualistic and, largely inaccessible healing frameworks. Hashemi's incorporation of aesthetic obstacles within *Grounding* works to complicate the uncovering of meaning behind the narrative in order to protect Zahra's autonomy and vulnerability – both as a survivor of sexual trauma and a woman of colour. The aestheticization of language, issues of translatability, and Hashemi's own embodied actions in the reconstruction of Zahra's narrative demonstrates how a therapeutic dynamic may be extended beyond determinate clinical settings.

This thesis was born out of an intense desire to try and better understand the potential for a therapeutic value of the aesthetic in relation to healing from past experiences of sexual trauma that continue to haunt in the present. As a student, an artist, and a feminist, I have always been aware of – and intrigued by – the profound therapeutic value that has been said to lie in arts-based approaches for healing. In 2017, I was a student among a larger group of audience members who stood in the Carleton University Art Gallery, watching Hashemi's intricate performance of calligraphic transcription and, subsequently, watching the explicit narrative of Zahra's trauma unfold. As a researcher, but also as a viewer and as a human being, I am not exempt from having an affective encounter with *Grounding*, informed by my own cognitions, memories, and lived experiences. Researching visual artworks that deal with experiences of sexual trauma, theorizing the ways in which these experiences continue to haunt us, and then trying to ascertain a conceptual framework for coming to terms with these unhealed traumatic

experiences can quickly become arduous, complicated, and tormenting. At certain points throughout analyzing Zahra's narrative, my connection to the memories and experiences she was uncovering elicited profound feelings of familiarity and closeness, coupled with a conflicting desire to keep myself as distanced from it as possible.

Subsequent years of studying art history and feminist theory has provided me with continued opportunities for considering how contemporary art historical theories might inform pre-existing feminist psychotherapeutic frameworks, and how this interconnectedness might contribute to new ways of thinking about the seemingly illusory process of healing from sexual trauma. Overtime, I began to realize that I was using these frameworks of feminist theory and trauma studies to make sense of events that have occurred in my own life. In effect, a working through of my own experiences seemed to be reflected in my working through of *Grounding*. It is important to note, however, that this comparative approach becomes complicated in the context of visual representations of the lived experiences of people of colour. Complications arise due in part to the continued re-centering of white women's experiences of sexual violence at the forefront of scholarship regarding gender-based violence. As a researcher approaching such an analysis from critical and theoretically informed perspective, I would also argue that such a comparative approach should not be discounted from the overarching discussion of a feminist aesthetic of healing, as it elucidates the profound therapeutic powers of research and analysis as survival strategies. Much like how Herman has reported the many instances in which patients have described finding a sense of solace in "simply being present with others who have endured similar ordeals," (1992, p. 215), providing researchers with a sense of solace in theoretical concepts can then be used to situate their own experiences within a larger context (Cvetkovich, 2003). A healing aesthetic then, could then be seen at once as being capable of attending to the subject-survivor experience, the viewer-survivor experience, and the researcher-survivor experience.

While I have begun an exploration into the possible viewing experiences and affective encounters for viewers who may also be survivors of trauma, at this early stage of my research I am unable to offer an answer to more complex questions regarding whether or not trauma-based artworks hold the potential to offer similar therapeutic effects for the viewer. Thus, rather than offering firm conclusions regarding what kind of therapeutic viewing experience (or not) trauma-based artworks might offer the viewer, I have looked to *Grounding* as a conceptual lens for understanding how trauma-based artworks might provide alternative environments for engaging in an individual grieving processes while also remaining grounded in mutual interconnectedness, shared transactions of pain, and emotional accountability.

Ultimately, the core objective of an art exhibition will always be for it to be seen and to reach the widest possible audience. As a result, it is virtually impossible to control who views the work, how the viewer interprets the work, and what the viewer does with that interpretation. At the same time, I am aware of critical issues regarding intersections of identity and difference and thus feel compelled to also consider the ways in which this core objective of exhibiting a work of art might simultaneously be seen as perpetuating voyeuristic opportunities for looking at and upon the suffering of the Other. As such, what I have tried to demonstrate in my analysis of *Grounding*, are the ways in which Hashemi's corporeal involvement – in combination with language and a subversive aesthetic – allow for the mediation of someone else's trauma-narrative. Hashemi's aesthetic and embodied interventions sustain a platform to have Zahra's childhood experiences of trauma be acknowledged, her voice be heard, and her identity as both a survivor – and a woman of colour – protected. Resisting, obstructing, and hindering the potential for the mishandling her traumatic past, *Grounding* is able to remain inherently productive and therapeutic for Zahra. This in itself, I believe, is demonstrative of the powers of a healing aesthetic.

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