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Article 1

Trauma and Memory: Healing Through Art

Shirley Hayes, PhD*

Buffalo State, Art Education, 1300 Elmwood Ave, Upton Hall 403, Buffalo, NY, 14222

Abstract. Life's traumas, whether major or simple traumas, create traces in the mind. These trauma traces, as physiological imprints or memories of past experiences, often dictate how we think, feel, and cope with life. Artists, including performance artists, often scrutinize memory and trauma as a means to psychologically deal with those experiences in their art and life. Their works are often cathartic, as in the accompanying script for a performative action monologue. With this text I hope to stir personal memories and provide a fertile playground for ideas that lead to creating rich works of art, hopefully with some catharsis for the creator.

Keywords: psychology, healing and art, simple trauma: memory, performance art, visual art, art education



*Correspondence regarding this article should be directed to hayess@buffalostate.edu

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Introduction

Death, loss, stress, and grief can create trauma. The fine arts are commonly used as a means of therapy for trauma. This article focuses on excerpting theorists who study trauma, my creating performance art as a way to deal with simple trauma, and supporting art as a means for healing. I discuss representative visual artists whose works have served as healing agents for trauma, whether their own or the trauma of a nation. The hope is that interpretation of works of art that deal in some way with life's traumas might be a catalyst for one's own reflection, artmaking, and healing.

From the late 1800s with Freud (Freud, Strahey, Breuer, & Richards, 2001) to other recent contemporaries, such as van der Kolk, McFarlane, and Waisaeth (1996/2007), theorists have been studying major and simple trauma. They identified treatments for various types of major traumatic events, like wars and natural disasters, to simple traumas, such as death and stress in everyday life. Trauma creates habits of the mind that require change in order for healing to take place. Cognitive psychologist Borkovec (1996), whom I paraphrase here, noted that change stems from an awareness of our unawareness; nonetheless, habit precludes choice. Trauma imprints the mind, and healing requires a willingness and vulnerability to challenge and change engrained habits that occupy this terrain of memories. As the adaptations informing habit become habitual, that rigidity can become problematic to continued growth and freedom. Habit moves from conscious awareness to a *stuckness* in unawareness and is very difficult to change. In therapy, as learned truths are challenged, doubt turns to self-agency; then, through interventions that change experience, one comes to self-awareness and consciousness. The journey can be arduous. This synopsis of the effects of traumatic encounters is as relevant to

trauma theories today as in 1996 when I first heard Borkovec speak. His words have influenced much of my writing, art, and reflection on life experiences—including the forthcoming performance monologue.

In the following performance, I record personal recollections of death, loss, and grief that began as a means to explore my own stuckness—my unconscious habits of mind. I do not attempt to interpret the monologue for the reader; I merely offer events and happenings as a means for the reader to form personal conclusions and connections based on the various narratives in the monologue. The initial staged performance used personal images of family projected in the background and simple props such as a straight-backed chair and black leather jacket. My work, based on a type of performance art by Spalding Grey in the film *Swimming to Cambodia*, crosses boundaries of some definitions of performance art, about which I hope to encourage dialogue. Additionally, I hope to challenge the reader to think how the meaning of a work of art becomes a pathway for healing when one can identify with the conceptual content of the work and reflect on personal circumstances—in this case, through lenses largely found in trauma theories from psychology, such as those by Borkovec (1996) and others listed throughout this paper.

In psychology, while clinical processes of working toward *unstuckness* can be varied, artmaking can provide an avenue for exploring stress, memory, and trauma in schooling as well. Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) Beth Watson (2014) argued that “programs that focus on nonverbal expression—a description that includes art, music, movement, and theatre programs as well as sports—are vital adjuncts to any community healing efforts and should be funded, not eliminated, in the schools” (Understanding trauma, para. 12). She means that the arts can play a central role in community healing, serving as a “bridge across the black hole of

trauma” as Bloom noted (1999, Remembering under stress, para. 10). In-depth study of artworks includes intently looking at a work, dialoguing about/with the work, and investigating the context of that work to allow opportunity for the artwork to *speak* in meaningful and complex ways (Hayes-Yokley, 1999; Hayes-Yokley, 2001). Digging into works, such as those by Errol Morris, Frida Kahlo, Louise Bourgeois, William Kentridge, Guillermo Gomez-Pena, or Spalding Gray—among others—can help us better understand the effects of memory and trauma that reach from personal to global levels.

For instance, Nunn (2004) discussed the documentary film work of Errol Morris (see *A Thin Blue Line*), who uses disruption to record recollections and confessionals of real, traumatic, past events often, traumatic, past events. Concentrating on individual memories, Nunn found that Morris accentuates the highly repetitive and ritualistic aspects of human behavior while disrupting reality by revealing heretofore hidden truths.

Frida Kahlo’s paintings on self-image evoke disruptive portrayals of “personal agony... in unnerving images of physical and psychological trauma” (Salmon, 2000, pp. 21-23). Kahlo sets up a dialogue with the viewer about personal trauma, suggesting that we may subconsciously seek out another’s pain in order to understand our own. For instance, in *The Wounded Deer*, c. 1946, the viewer sees Kahlo’s human face attached to the body of a little deer that is pierced with numerous arrows, indicating her physical and emotional suffering and her inability to counter the fate of death. The popularity of Kahlo’s work shows how people empathize and identify with her circumstances.

Sculptor Louise Bourgeois’ work teeters on an ever-present cultural/personal edge as she summons repressed memory, even trauma, to conceive of the content of her art (Pollock, 1999, pp. 97-100). Pollock noted that within feminist psychological theory, Bourgeois’ spider series

evokes readings of memory and mourning for the loss of her mother, as well as her own aging process. Bourgeois seemed to seek healing through her artmaking. Who is to say that the making of art and/or the interpretation of that art cannot be an agent of healing our own wounds? Finding meaning through making or interpreting artworks may enable connections to personal experience with reflection on important concepts or ideas about art and healing.

William Kentridge meticulously “photographs his charcoal drawings and paper collages over time, recording scenes as they evolve” (Art21: William Kentridge, 2009, About section, para. 1). Some of his animation may be thought of simplistically as photographing a flip-book of drawings or other media. His method of working allows the idea to emerge as he is physically engaged with the materials (Art21: William Kentridge, 2008, Meaning short, para. 1). He uses film, drawing, sculpture, animation, and performance to “transmute sobering political events into powerful poetic allegories” (para. 1). I believe that in having experienced apartheid as a resident of South Africa, his birthplace, he uses art to challenge the power structures and to reveal deep-seated emotions involved in that struggle and its aftermath.

Another tool enabling visual artists to communicate ideas is performance art. Performance artist, scholar, and writer Guillermo Gomez-Pena (2003) discussed performance art as “conceptual territory that tolerates, even encourages contradiction, ambiguity, and paradox,” all the while, “relying on the human body as the site for creation.” (The Sanctuary section, para. 1). Green (1999) noted that performance art is “influenced by such diverse forms as tribal ritual, cabaret, puppetry, circus events, even medieval plays,” with current conceptions of performance art dating back to artistic explorations included with movements such as Futurism, Constructivism, Dada, and Surrealism (p. 7). Performance art is a continual process of “change and constant readjustment” of what are often obscure “performative actions” (Kartofel, 2005, pp.

171-172). Performance art can be collaborative or individual; can fuse several art techniques or forms (i.e. painting, music, video, poetry, dance, drama, or technology) or use only one; but always includes the human body as the technical instrument of execution. Performance art delights in pushing the boundaries of the arts; finds a home in the margins; and leaves room for alterations, adjustments and redefinitions as it frees the artist to feel legitimized in overlays of choices and changes.

The presentation style of Spalding Gray's classic performance monologue *Swimming to Cambodia* tells his story of experiences as an actor in the film *The Killing Fields*, especially recounting the history of the 1969 bombing of Cambodia during the Vietnam War (Dika, 1988; Demastes, 1989). Gray calls into question the truth of film and personalizes the effects of war in ways that counter entertainment as truth. He explores the archeology of the souls of nations, specifically Vietnam, Cambodia, and the US, in this reconstruction of historical memory that points out the convoluted role of the United States in that tragedy. Gray insists that we listen to the story; in listening we imagine, and as we imagine, what we have known as truth is challenged. The artist paints the intangible image with words; the language, poetry, and drama of the artist become the paintbrush in communicating those ideas through his performance monologue. He is challenging historical memories as political and cultural constructs, whether on a personal or national level. In traversing this liminal space of history, these images lead us to question reality—perhaps even re-construct a different consciousness.

Whether in the classroom or in personal life, if we make art that questions reality or truth as we know it, we may find some habitual ways of knowing that can be challenged—or perhaps reconstructed. Questioning certain ideas may lead to conversations about history, life's traumas or memories, and may uncover a more complete narrative than previously imagined. The intent

of the following monologue is to provoke that questioning. We can ask: How is my culture or my reaction socially constructed? How might our ingrained habits, beliefs, or norms be based on misinformation? How do we come to know what we know? In reflection, one can examine events or happenings and ask *why*. Those memories, personal or historical, allow one to visualize images in the mind that may lead to disruptions or reconstructions of those memories or reality, and can become powerful ideas or concepts for personal works of art.

Working through what I term trauma traces—those everyday circumstances that leave traumatic imprints or memories in our minds—I share, in the following italic script, a performative action monologue delivered in Southern dialect. From my personal observations and experiences, I attempt to show how psychological, economic, and social conditions, even the seemingly innocent violence of childhood humiliations, can traumatize in ways that impact future relationships, love, trust, sexual activity, family, home, and joy of living. The situations are everyday life experiences that question identity, culture, family, age, sexuality, relationships, commitment, infidelity, abuse, and devotion, among others. I inserted quotes from therapists and theorists into the script in order to build greater insight for how particular kinds of trauma can impact the human brain. Silence and pauses in the actual performance, indicated here with elipses, are intended to accent those therapeutic analyses and add to the emotional impact. The purpose of this monologue is to challenge the reader to critically examine and question the construction and reconstruction of physiological imprints on the brain—those trauma traces that define a person’s daily reality. The hope is the reader will make connections among events in the monologue to their personal (or historical) memories and experiences, and begin to think about how simple traumas can impact one’s health and well-being. In addition, the reader is challenged to personalize related ideas to create artwork in a preferred media. The

direction/motivation is left to the reader/artist, possibly in dialogue with others or in dialogue with their art. The monologue begins.

Traces in the Mind

There are all kinds of traces in the mind—those seemingly tiny physiological imprints that become embedded in the brain and literally control how we think about the world. Indeed, these traces control our lives a lot more than what we'd like to think.

When I was visiting my brother in Tennessee a while back, I drove by the farm where we lived until I was 12 years old. Daddy likely turned over in his grave a long time ago from the look of the size of those scraggly old cedar trees all over the place. He hated those things—said they took all the nourishment right out of the ground. The front porch at the house was piled high with all kinds of rubble that looked as if the last two families had simply moved on and left all their belongings there to weather. I don't know who owns the farm now, but that's not the way that house used to be when it was my home!

Daddy always kept the farm trimmed and mown. Even the big maple trees in the front yard were whitewashed about two feet up every spring, the house was painted every so often, and Mama kept it all clean. We had about 10 cows that Mama milked by hand—yup, just like Green Acres. And our two big ole' plow horses, Barney and Tony, used to hang out in the field beside the creek. Daddy occasionally let me ride as he led them back to the barn when he finished plowing. Though, I know they didn't have to work so hard after Daddy bought that big John Deere tractor.

My Mama and Daddy worked as tenant farmers after they were married in 1922. Daddy told me stories of clearing "new ground" for 50 cents a day—that's where you cut the trees and

pull out the stumps so you can plant crops. After about 15 years, they finally saved up enough money to put a down payment on our house and 40 acre farm. Uncle Fred helped add on the kitchen, but there was no inside toilet. I used to take a bath in the kitchen sink right beside that big red hand pump. And Mama washed all our clothes with a scrub board in a big metal tub. We didn't have a lot of money, but I don't remember feeling that way. I do remember how much they loved each other. They surely did love me.

I grew up idolizing my two big brothers, Bill and Kenny. They used to ride Harleys; they called them Hogs, but I was never quite sure why. I remember when I was about five years old, I always wanted a ride the Hogs, but was too shy to ask most of the time. My big brother Bill (his full name was William Albert Hayes, and he was 22 when I was born) would sometimes ask me if I wanted to go for a ride. I must have smiled from there into next week. We would go so fast, or so I thought! At first, I remember he put me in front of him on the big black leather seat of that Harley; then, when I was a bit older, he let me sit behind and told me to hold him real tight around his waist. And I did! Lots of times, he wore a beautiful black leather jacket and a leather cap with silver buttons. He wore that jacket a lot, I think, because he liked his motorcycle so much, and maybe the reason he liked it so much was because he had been sick a lot and couldn't always go places the way he wanted. He looked so handsome, and was so strong to hold up that big motorcycle. When I rode with him, I couldn't stop smiling, and, he always smiled at me too. I knew he loved me. You know, to this day I have a secret desire to own a Harley!...

My recently former second husband wore a black leather jacket when I first met him. He stood in my doorway with that luscious smile on his face and his sleek black hair. He stood the way my big brother Bill used to stand with his legs crossed, leaning nonchalantly to one side as

if he and whatever he was leaning against were one. But first seductions can be deceiving. He wasn't anything like my big brother Bill, I discovered...

Some neuro-psychologists say that, "Traumatic events impact the multiple areas of the brain that respond to threat. Use-dependent changes in these areas create altered neural systems that influence future functioning. In order to heal (i.e. alter or modify trauma), therapeutic interventions must activate those portions of the brain that have been altered by the trauma" (Perry, 2000, Implications section, para.1)...

My brother Kenny, who was 17 when I was born, had a Harley too. I remember how gloriously beautiful both my brothers were in their leathers. Oh, how I wanted to just grow big enough to ride with them—to go on road trips. Sometimes they went overnight; and, sometimes they rode all the way to Daytona Beach, Florida, just to see the motorcycle races.

It took a lot of nerve for me to ask my brother Kenny for rides, but he would usually say, "Not now, too busy." He had this cold look in his eyes sometimes, and I spent lots of time wondering whether I was doing something bad that he didn't like, or whether there was something wrong with me because he never seemed to smile at me—at least not the way my big brother Bill did. Sometimes if I tried to play with him, to get his attention, he would squeeze my wrists so hard I would have to leave right away so I wouldn't have to cry in front of him. He quit school in the eighth grade, and he told me not too long ago how he used to have to wear hand-me-downs to school that were way too big and how other kids used to make fun of him. I don't guess he ever told Mama...

Paul Ricoeur stated that "healing begins with memory and progresses through forgetfulness....One can be haunted by the remembrance of humiliations one has experienced" (as cited in Hirigoyen, 2005, p. 190)...

When I met my would-be second husband, I didn't like him much at first. He always seemed so remote and aloof. But he was really a smart guy and knew so much about things like electricity and techie stuff that I didn't know. We worked together for about a year, and well, I guess he won me over because one day, he just showed up at my door. There he was, I told you, leaning on the doorsill in that black leather jacket with that big smile on his face. He stayed for a good while. We talked and talked, I don't know how long—him sitting there telling his stories. He listened to my stories too. He told me about running away from home at age 16, his first marriage to a woman he hated just like he hated his mother, a daughter that he never seemed to manage to see because of the bitchy "X," and a recent break up with an unfaithful girlfriend. Oh, this Sweet Man. (I used to call him that.) Turn the emergency lights on and let's go rescue this guy!...

Did you know that sometimes there are people who seek out a person to theoretically extinguish in order to hold on to their dominant position, which of course is their only safe space? Hirigoyen (2005) noted, "the narcissistic abuser introduces the element of control to paralyze the partner by putting them in a situation of flux and uncertainty....Often the aggression is so subtle that it leaves 'no tangible traces'" (p. 13). No tangible traces?... I guess while you're in the middle of uncertainty, you just can't see straight! And you can't tell anybody because you don't really understand yourself...

I was listening to a report recently that revealed how adolescent brains around age 13 are in a delicate transitional state. Anyway, the effect on the mind at this age can create both good and bad traces that remain embedded in the psyche (American Psychological Association, 1995). Some of these traces can be highly traumatic! I still wonder how trauma traces carry over to other parts of life, to the choices we make and why....

Did I tell you that my brother Bill died from a heart condition at age 33? (That's what they called it back then.) It was 1957, and we planned a special picnic with family friends my age that I had not seen in a long while. I was 12 at the time and we all stayed overnight at my brother's house. I could barely close my eyes because I was so excited. Suddenly, my brother became ill in the middle of the night! Maude, my sister-in-law who was in some ways my second mother much to the chagrin of Mama, called out, "Shirley, call an ambulance!" But, I couldn't find the number in the phone book! I searched and searched, then finally!... My fingers shook so badly I could hardly dial the phone... They came to take my brother to the hospital after what seemed to be hours. We lived about 30 minutes from town... I know this is silly, but I still wonder if I had been able to find the phone number a bit quicker, then the ambulance could have gotten there just a little sooner, and my brother might have... Well, he died on the way to the hospital... One of his buddies bought his Harley. He keeps it in pristine condition I'm told—still. His buddies called him "Thor." I don't know what happened to his beautiful black leather jacket...

"Grief is a person's response or reaction to loss, which encompasses physical, psychological, social, and spiritual components. How one copes with other life events and adapts to one's present and future is also part of the grieving process" (Wolfe, 2003, p. 389). Nader (2011) said that the "interplay of grief and trauma may intensify symptoms common to both" (p. 171)... I have a theory about these grief traces: One incident can be traumatizing, but the accumulation of several incidents leaves scars from which one may never fully recover...

Did I tell you I was married at age 19 right after my first year of college? And, that we had three beautiful girls by the time I was 23?... We divorced after 25 years. The easiest and kindest thing to say is that "we grew apart." Have you ever heard of such a thing? My mother

hadn't. She and my father were married for over 40 years and when you got married, that was it for life... Daddy died of complications from a stroke when I was 21... Kim, my second born, was only a few months old then. (Kim died at age 20 just after beginning her freshman year at college... I can't talk about Kim right now, but, she died from a type of lymphoma—immunoblastic sarcoma of the B cells, they said.)... Somehow a part of me died then too...

That day, I remember walking into the bedroom to find Mama. She was right in front of me and I didn't even know her. She looked like a different person. Her hair was even a different color, I'd swear! Daddy was only 66 at the time... At Daddy's funeral before they closed the coffin to take him away, she leaned over and kissed him goodbye, then turned with tears streaming down her cheeks and said softly, "I loved him so good!"... Mama died at age 93, after four years of discontent in a nursing home...

So you can see how Mama would never have understood how people grow apart. I couldn't tell her all the story, including those bouts of temper tantrums and that horrid feeling of always walking on eggshells trying not to irritate. Mama would never have understood how sometimes people feel so bad about themselves they can't do anything else but pull away, even from the people they love.

I thought my heart would break...you know, just split right down the middle... That's what it felt like...

They do say that death (and I would assume that other losses or accumulation of losses) also exposes the afflicted person to a "higher risk for several types of psychiatric disorders. These include major depressions, panic disorders, generalized anxiety disorders, post-traumatic

stress disorders, and increased alcohol use and abuse” (Jacobs, Mazure, and Prigerson, 2000, p. 185). The brain seems to get used to this program and reverts back whenever similar situations arise, so they say... I think these trauma traces leave such a big black hole inside you that almost nothing can ever fill up that space...

*Right now, I’m not sure whether I fell in love with him, my recently former husband that is, or whether it was that beautiful black leather jacket that embodied that little girl’s yearning for “home,” or maybe both... We lived psychologically and literally distanced, apart/together, apart/together for eight years and in the same space for two years before I was able to gradually begin to see how to leave. Of course I had help off and on—Prozac, psychologists, Lexapro, exercise, support groups, and then another psychologist! I read a lot too, things like, *If You Can’t Live Without Me, Why Aren’t You Dead Yet? (Really!)*, and, every book written on passive-aggressive personality traits, narcissistic personalities, codependency, dysfunctional families, “blame the victim,” and, of course, dear Oedipus. I spent most of my time trying to find out about him, probably so I could save any remnants of the two people that I felt so at home with in their beautiful black leather jackets...*

When does one come to own another’s unknowable self-loathing?...

My brother Kenny is 77 years old now and has cancer. A few years back, they removed about three feet of his colon. Now, they are giving him radiation and chemotherapy, just to buy some time. He knows that! The cancer is in the bone in his right leg, the adrenal gland, the lungs, and who knows where. He fell the other day and had to be hospitalized. I’m going home once more over Thanksgiving.

You know how I always tried to make him smile at me the way my brother Bill did, and he just couldn't? Well, he does now. We even cry together! Funny how those traces won't leave your brain—the ones where you just know somebody believes in you and loves you, but they just can't let it out!...

That's how I always felt about my recently former husband too. But, I've come to realize, after the past 10 years of uncertainty and flux, and all the reading and psychologists and yearning—oh, the yearning—I realized that some traces in the mind won't ever go away. Finally, I realized that I could never love him enough; that he could never believe in me no matter how hard I tried; that he could never, never love me the way I needed to be loved; and that home was a thing he would never understand, at least not with me...

I thought my heart would break, ...you know, ... just split right down the middle... That's what it felt like... After a while, I just left... Actually, I left long before then.

Epilogue

In conclusion, one could say that everyone has simple traumas that affect daily life; however, we often may not realize the unconscious sway these traumas have on our lives, nor their cumulative impact. To determine the effects of trauma in a person's life and in the art that artists create, I researched theories in psychology, particularly trauma theory. I learned that many artists use trauma theory, whether named or not, to communicate their ideas to the public. I sought connections to relevant artworks involving death, loss, stress, grief, humiliation, or other threats to a person's well-being, and even those that involve the trauma of nations as in the

artworks of Spalding Grey and William Kentridge. Those artists embraced the risks involved in opening old or irritating new wounds and took a step forward.

When I decided to present this work as a performance art piece at a conference on art and healing, somehow I began the reflective and generative process of *healing* instead of merely *dealing* with the traumatic events in my life. Bringing the personal to the political proved liberating and was impetus for the in-depth reflection and research needed to begin deeper healing. Certain narratives I knew were too emotional to deliver in public, such as the loss of my 20 year old daughter to cancer, and another daughter's debilitating strokes due to an autoimmune disease that took her 10 years to recover. By presenting personal trauma narratives in the performance monologue in an aesthetic/ therapeutic venue, I could more clearly dig into the pain and grief that accompanied more recent traumas. Readers can relate to the circumstances and events in these narratives as they make connections to their own life stories. Information for those suffering from loss, grief, or trauma can be found online at The International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (n.d.). Each person must decide the risks and, yes, pain in seeking to make the unconscious conscious. Digging into the soul to "know thyself," as Plato suggested, is indeed the slow process of reflective critical thinking that continues over a lifetime. Each step forward is a step toward healing.

By the way, on a recent trip to Italy, I bought a black leather jacket, my first. I love the smell, the soft shiny blackness, and the feeling of freedom when I wear it. My youngest daughter reminded me recently that I forbade her getting a black leather jacket in high school for fear of the negative connotations. I would never do that again!

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Shirley Hayes holds a PhD from The Pennsylvania State University. Her teaching and professional experience include 20 years in higher education, 6 years as Art Consultant with the Tennessee Department of Education, and 11 years as an art specialist in grades KA 12 in East Tennessee public schools. Dr. Hayes' professional interests include curriculum planning and instructional approaches in contemporary art education for elementary and secondary preservice teacher education. Specific interests include critical and social theory in art education and semiotic interpretation of works of art. Her refereed publications and presentations can be found at international, national, and regional levels.