While art is considered useful for its therapeutic value to trauma survivors, rarely is the art that survivors produce, whether within the context of art therapy or outside of it, taken seriously. Art produced by trauma survivors is only seen as having value insofar as making the art is healing for the survivor. Legal, medical and psychiatric discourses act as authorities, dominating cultural understandings of trauma. The ‘truth’ of trauma is produced through police intervention, guilty verdicts, medical exams and diagnoses. Yet these methods are insufficient for expressing the complexities of the lived, embodied experience of trauma. They also frequently fail and endanger survivors. Art, which does not adhere to the limited constructs of these dominant discourses, has the potential to be conducive to the expression of trauma. Art produced by trauma survivors offers an alternate means through which to ‘know’ trauma and therefore new ways to address trauma and violence. This art speaks back to and against the dominant discourses of trauma creating new visions of what being a trauma survivor can mean. It is knowledge production, art and culture. If taken seriously, this art has the power to create change.

Legal narrations of trauma are shaped by a search for the legitimacy of the accusation(s). Whether or not the accused is ‘guilty’ is of more importance than the survivor’s embodied and affective knowledge of the event(s). In their article “Transforming Past Agency and Action

Making Space for Complexity: The Arts and Counter-Narratives of Trauma
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in the Present,” Paula Reavey and Steven D. Brown (2006) explain that the narration of trauma within the context of legal discourse “acquire[s] a discrete and determinate character” and in other contexts “the same past experience might be configured and extracted in a less determinate form” (p. 190). The context of the courtroom produces a particular kind of telling. Ambiguities are glossed over. Complexities are left out. In order to make a strong case for a guilty verdict the survivor is asked to tell their story in a way which leaves no room for doubt. Yet the experience of trauma often includes doubt.

Within psychiatric and medical discourses trauma takes the shape of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other diagnoses. This locates trauma within the survivor, leaving no space for systemic understandings of the production and experience of trauma. In Mad Science: Psychiatric Coercion, Diagnosis and Drugs Stuart A. Kirk, Tomi Gomory and David Cohen (2013) state that “the validity of psychiatric diagnoses refers to whether the definition and meaning of mental illness can be objectively shown to refer to something that is factually true.” (p. 122). In “A Mad Fight: Psychiatry and Disability Activism” Bradley Lewis (2013) writes “The emphasis on ‘objective’ data has created a preference for neuroscience and genetics at the expense of an array of cultural and humanistic styles of inquiry” (p. 122). The search for objective truth existing within the survivor as a biomedical reality reduces the lived complexity of trauma to an observable medical fact. Medical and psychiatric approaches obscure the social and political sources of trauma.

Legal, medical and psychiatric discourses fall short of expressing the full complexity of trauma. For many survivors they are also accompanied by consequences such as criminalization, deportation, non-consensual psychiatrization, incarceration, re-victimization and invalidation. The prison industrial complex, the legal system and the psychiatric pharmaceutical industrial complex are frequently dangerous for survivors. In particular they are dangerous for trans
survivors, survivors who are Black, Indigenous and people of colour, survivors who are undocumented, survivors who are criminalized and disabled survivors. Yet legal, medical and psychiatric discourses of trauma pervade Western cultural understandings of trauma whether we as survivors engage with or consent to these systems or not. Legal, medical and psychiatric discourses and systems are treated as the authorities on trauma, deciding which trauma counts and how trauma should look.

In her essay “Poetry is Not a Luxury” Audre Lorde (1984) argues that “Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought” (p. 37). Lorde (1984) explains that she is speaking of “a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word poetry to mean” (p. 37). Poetry can be a decolonizing space in which white supremacist, patriarchal ways of ‘knowing’ can be replaced with affective, embodied ways of knowing. For Lorde (1984) poetry is “what we need to dream, to move our spirits most deeply and directly toward and through promise” (p. 39). It is a means of translating embodied knowing into expression and action. Lorde’s ideas about poetry can be applied to other art forms as well. For survivors who are forced into clinical and chronological narration of trauma, art can be a space in which to express embodied knowing, ambiguity and complexity which do not fit neatly into the narrow confines of medical, psychiatric or legal discourse. Art, like poetry, offers the possibility of accessing the nameless and giving it a name. It has the potential to reveal new ways of ‘knowing’ trauma.

Art, especially art created through art therapy, does not exist in a vacuum and must be considered alongside the context in which it is produced. Art created by trauma survivors will necessarily be influenced by the larger discourses which shape cultural understandings of trauma. Art created through art therapy will be influenced by the structure of that therapy. However, art, like poetry as described by
Lorde, is conducive to the expression of affective, embodied knowledge. In her article “Whose Disability Culture? Why we need an artist-led critical disability arts network” Rachel Gorman (2007) writes “Disability culture is in part a response to, and exists within, segregated institutional spaces, but it comes from the artist[s]... not the institutions” (p. 46). Trauma survivors who create art negotiate with larger discourses of trauma and, in some cases, the therapeutic spaces which enable the creation of their work. This art is in conversation and negotiation with larger discourses but ultimately produces meaning of its own. While it is important to acknowledge the influence of context on the creation of art, it is also important to recognize the agency of the artists in producing meaning. Art is expansive and flexible, offering space for complexity and ambiguity in ways that courtroom testimony and diagnosis do not.

Art produced by trauma survivors is dismissed as being simply therapeutic. It is not valued for its knowledge production or its artistic merit. Trauma survivors are viewed as being overcome by trauma and therefore unable to express trauma in a meaningful way. This failure to recognize the agency of survivors in producing meaningful artist work is a disservice to art. In his essay “Disability Aesthetics” Tobin Siebers (2006) writes “disability operates both as a critical framework for questioning aesthetic presuppositions in the history of art and as a value in its own right important to future conceptions of what art is” (p. 71). “Disability aesthetics” Siebers (2006) writes “prizes physical and mental difference as a significant value in itself” (p. 71). Trauma can enrich art. It can introduce difference which disrupts the hegemony of mainstream art. Dismissing the art created by trauma survivors as purely therapeutic is a refusal to bring that art into conversation with art history and art as a category. Taking this art seriously will not only force a shift in understandings of trauma but also a shift in understandings of art. Art produced by trauma survivors has the potential to both enrich and challenge mainstream conceptions of art.
It offers new ways of ‘knowing’ trauma and new ways of conceptualizing art.

The Gardiner Expressive Arts Group is a collaborative project between the Gardiner Museum and the Barbara Schlifer Clinic in Toronto, Ontario. The Gardiner Museum is a ceramics art gallery and the Barbara Schlifer Clinic is an organization which addresses violence against women. The Gardiner Expressive Arts group is a ten week group in which women survivors of violence create ceramic sculptures. The Barbra Schlifer Clinic’s website explains that “Each participant [of the Gardiner Expressive Arts Group] … make[s] a ceramic sculpture under the guidance of art therapist Suzanne Thomson and award-winning Canadian artist Susan Low-Beer.” At the end of the group there is a public event at which the finished sculptures are displayed and the artists have the opportunity to speak about their work. The sculptures are then on display at the Gardiner Museum for a week. This group provides women survivors of violence with the opportunity to produce sculptures. Space, clay, glaze, use of a kiln and instruction on the basics of sculpture are provided. Guidance and support are available throughout the group. The survivors work independently to produce art. At the end of the group the sculptures produced by trauma survivors take up space at an important and prestigious art gallery.

The Gardiner Expressive Arts group has a facebook page which displays images of the sculptures made over the years, along with the artist statements which accompany the sculptures. A piece by Carol L. (2013) entitled Abyss shows what, at first glance, appears to be a bouquet of flowers sitting by a stream of water. Closer inspection reveals that they may not be flowers, as they also look like flesh and blood. Drops of red surround the ‘bouquet’ giving the impression that they are bleeding. The accompanying artist statement includes a quote from Nietzsche’s Beyond Good and Evil. It reads “Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a
monster. And when you look long into an abyss, the abyss looks into you.” The artist statement continues by saying “My work ... reveals a portion of what I witnessed in the depths of my subconscious mind during my divine tragedy. There are no monsters more frightening than the ones we become.” Abyss reveals an aspect of trauma which does not fit neatly within dominant discourses of trauma.

The sense that experiencing violence can turn one into a ‘monster’ does not match the image of ‘innocent victim’ which courtrooms demand of survivors. Legal discourses which erase complexity do not allow for ambivalent feelings about the self. Yet trauma can include the feeling of becoming a monster. It can also include behaving in ways which are harmful to others. Can the violence a survivor experienced still be seen and validated if the survivor too has acted violently? Can a survivor still be understood as a victim of violence if they feel that they have become a monster? Mainstream discourses of trauma do not make space for this complexity. Rather, they encourage survivors to bury it. The artist statement reads “I created a cage for safekeeping. It is here that I hid my darkest secrets. I then buried my burdens below the sea.” The artist statement closes with “there is no salvation from our demons until we look into the mirror.” Mainstream discourses of trauma demand the burying of ambivalence and complexity. Healing demands that these things be faced. This piece of art creates the space to face these aspects of trauma, for the artist and also for the audience.

Another piece displayed on the Gardiner Expressive Arts Group facebook page is entitled Just When You Thought That My Voice Was Successfully Erased by Peta-Gaye Ebanks (2013). It shows a canoe floating on a swirling river. At the top of the river there appears to be a fetus whose umbilical cord is connected to the shore. The back of the sculpture shows a birch tree. Above is a yellow and orange sun. Beside the large sculpture is a smaller one which shows a chained hand, a turtle and a snake. The artist statement reads “There were
times when I mourned for my life not lived as I discovered how many chains were shackled upon me and passed down to me.” The shackled hand represents chains that have been ‘passed down’. This expresses an aspect of trauma which is not considered within legal and psychiatric discourses of trauma. Trauma is usually not an isolated, individual event, as legal and psychiatric discourses present it, but a part of larger, generational traumas such as colonialism, racism, state violence and generations of familial abuse.

Additionally, Just When You Thought That My Voice Was Successfully Erased explores another aspect of surviving trauma which is usually left out of mainstream discourses of trauma. Ebanks considers the role of spirituality in recovery. The artist statement reads “We are all connected and supported and nourished by the Great Spirit, Mother Earth, the sun and all of creation. We are all born with a canoe. My spirit, my canoe, is sacred.” Medical and psychiatric discourses construct PTSD as an individual biomedical condition which requires medical, psychiatric and often pharmaceutical treatment. Rarely is spirituality considered as an option for addressing trauma. This sculpture creates space for spirituality an alternative way to address trauma. It also makes a link between spirituality as a means of addressing trauma and the generational aspect of trauma that medical, psychiatric and legal discourses also frequently ignore. The artist statement ends by saying “Over time, I found that in the existence of my suffering and those before me, my spirit and my ancestors were, are, and will always remain …. FREE.” In the face of personal and generational trauma this piece expresses a spiritual freedom which cannot be shackled down by violence and oppression.

A third piece displayed on the Gardiner Expressive Arts Group facebook page entitled Life Giving was created by me (2013). It is an abstract sculpture. A centre piece of reds and oranges has extensions coming out of it like the branches of a tree or like tentacles. In the centre is a black hole which tunnels through to the other side of the
sculpture. Surrounding this main piece is a circular blue piece which slopes irregularly and has various shapes cut out of it, showing the inside piece. My artist statement reads “There are unsayable things, an unspeakable hollow, a tunnel I dare not enter, which I know I must pass through. There is a rising of thwarted power, an inversion of life finally permitted freedom, finally given the space to take shape.” The red branches or tentacles in this piece represent ‘thwarted power’. Survivors do possess power and agency. Legal discourse does not allow survivors to express power and agency because these expressions can be used as evidence that the survivor was not really victimized. In order to be seen as a ‘real’ victim within legal discourse a survivor must renounce all power and agency. Part of recovery can be about finding the ways we used our power and agency to survive. These revelations are thwarted by a simplistic legal discourse.

The tunnel in this piece represents the ‘unspeakable’ aspect of trauma. While medical, psychiatric and legal discourses demand that trauma be put into words and explained in a clear, linear fashion, this sculpture expresses the ways that trauma cannot always be verbalized. It also alludes to the idea that these ‘unspeakable’ aspects of trauma need to be attended to, the tunnel must be ‘passed through’. Like the piece Abyss which expresses the need to face the complex aspects of trauma, Life Giving also insists on making space for complexity. Art is one way that the nonverbal aspect of trauma can be given voice. My artist statement goes on to say “Rape is what they ask you about in the courtroom, in the little room in the police station, on camera, in front of a jury, but rape is something that cannot be said.” My sculpture offers an opportunity to express the embodied experience of rape and trauma in ways that mainstream discourses of trauma do not allow.

Art created by trauma survivors is usually dismissed as being therapeutic only. It is rarely taken seriously for what it can teach about the embodied experience of trauma, the sources of trauma and possible ways to address trauma. Legal, medical and psychiatric discourses act
as authorities, dominating discussions on trauma. These discourses are insufficient for expressing the complexities of trauma. Legal discourses demand simplistic chronological narrations free from ambivalence or doubt. Medical and psychiatric discourses reduce trauma to a biomedical fact residing within the survivor, divorcing trauma from its political and societal origins. The legal, medical and psychiatric systems are also frequently dangerous and inaccessible for survivors. Art offers an alternate means of ‘knowing’ trauma. Through art, the complexities of trauma can be given voice. If art produced by trauma survivors is taken seriously as art, culture and knowledge production it has the potential to create change.

References


AUTHOR BIO

Clementine Morrigan is a queer femme traumatized sober-addict witch, writer and artist. They are a white settler living on colonized land known as Toronto, Turtle Island. Clementine’s work spans genres and mediums, including essays, poetry, creative non-fiction, zines, illustration, short film, self-portraiture and sculpture. Their first collection of poetry and creative non-fiction, Rupture, was published in 2012. A second book of poetry has been accepted for publication and will be available in 2017. All of their work aims to undermine hierarchies of knowledge production by blurring distinctions between art, academia and DIY culture making. For more information please see clementinemorrigan.com.