

Connection, dehumanization, the arts and Jewish identity: A visual relational Autoethnography

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Abstract

Throughout centuries, art and images have helped individuals express what remains beyond words and verbal communication. This relational autoethnographic study uses the creative process of painting artistic images to dialogue with four chosen Holocaust survivor artists to explore the Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma theory, as a western Jewish millennial woman living during times of alt right wing resurgence in the Western hemisphere. The study uses painting, drawing and creative writing to explore layers of cultural experience of historical trauma through self-observation, while linking introspective content to wider social psychology theories.

Keywords: Autoethnography, image dialogue, creative process, contemporary Jewish identity, Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma, Holocaust artists

Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma and Contemporary Jewish Identity

As neo-Nazi groups in the United States at the Charlottesville riot in August yell, “Jews will not replace us” and “blood and soil,” phrases drawn from Nazi ideology, I fear the resurfacing normalization of discrimination, racism, sexism and antisemitism in our society (Green, 2017). The rise of new nationalist populism and bigotry seems to be occurring across many Western nations, including European, the United Kingdom with Brexit, and North America (de la Fuente, 2017; Gusterson, 2017). Before this wave, as a Jewish woman, I often heard anti-Semitic remarks being disguised as jokes or as a failed attempt to connect with me. I did not take them as seriously as I do now, with this feeling of trepidation and vulnerability. I wonder if this unease has always been present in me, perhaps waiting to surface during more uncertain and volatile times. This artistic visual and relational autoethnography hopes to explore past traumas that can inform current experiences.

Similar to Kalmanowitz and Lloyd (1999), I believe that it is our responsibility as caring citizens to witness the past to mitigate the potential of future trauma. When treating Holocaust survivors, psychotherapist Yolanda Gampel found that the same trauma symptoms that stemmed from social violence in Holocaust survivors (which was at that time called *Kozenstrationslager*- concentration camp syndrome) were experienced by their children and called the term “radioactive identification” of the victims (Gampel, 1996; Knobler, Abramowitz & Lindert, 2018). This term informed what is now known as the Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma. The Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma describes the hereditary passage of the felt experience of trauma from one generation to the next (Pfeiffer, Mutesa & Uddin, 2018; Kellerman, 2009; 2013). Epigenetics studies have indicated that chemical codings on inherited genes may indicate that specific Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or anxiety traits, such as hypervigilance, can be inherited by offspring and subsequent generations. This may even affect the surprising successful ageing process and longevity of offspring (Shrira, Ayalon, Bensimon, Bodner, Rosenbloom, & Yadid, 2017). Accordingly, the Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma is situated in Darwin’s Theory of Evolution and is based on helping offspring further survive in hostile environments, such as war zones and may profoundly influence their psychological experiences (American Psychiatric

Association, 2013; Pfeiffer, et al., 2018; Yehuda & Bierer, 2009). Beginning in studies of terror nightmares and anxiety traits in Holocaust survivors, research has extended to children and grandchildren of war veterans, survivors of sexual abuse, torture, refugees, and other populations experiencing trauma (Danieli, 1998; Dekel & Goldblatt, 2008). Nonetheless, not all literature supports this theory or links epigenetics to the inheritance of human traits (Heard & Martienssen, 2014). There are many other factors that can influence the Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma beyond biology, such as secondary or vicarious trauma, learning and modeling in the family, parenting styles and systemic influences, and psychodynamic factors (Cohn & Morrison, 2017; Knobler et al., 2018; Lehrner & Yehuda, 2018). Therefore biology is almost never the sole predictor of behaviours and experiences and findings on mental health effects in offspring remains inconsistent.

Stemming from the evolution of pathology-based to strengths-based approaches to psychiatry, symptoms of PTSD are now seen as natural psychosomatic responses that can help people survive in harsh environments through physical avoidance of and perceptual attunement to threatening stimuli (Yehuda, Koenen, Galea, & Flory, 2011; Yehuda et al., 2016). Therefore, these inheritances and experiences may have both positive and negative effects on offspring. Hypervigilance is a symptom of chronic anxiety and is described as the amplification of sensory-perceptual experiences regarding external threats to ensure preparedness. Consequently, hypervigilant anxious people have heightened bias and reactions towards supposed external or internal threats (Cisler & Koster, 2010). Research on epigenetic transmission of trauma may find that subsequent generations inherit genetic traits of anxiety and hypervigilance, despite being born into safe environments (Kellerman, 2009; 2013). An example is when refugees from war-torn countries move to a new home with a stable socioeconomic and political climate, such as Canada. Luckily, qualitative research indicates that resilience-building activities and psychotherapy with parents can mitigate genetic and interrelational transmission to offspring (Braga, Mello & Fiks, 2012). Thus, the traits of hyperactivity, nervousness, anxiety, and neuroticism are still alive in the body and can be genetically inherited through DNA to subsequent generations.

The experience of Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma can inform the popular stereotypes of modern Jewish North American identity. Following World War II, characteristic film, television, comedy, and literature in popular culture portrayed Jewish identity as “Woody Allen” or “Seinfeld” neurotic and anxiety-ridden caricatures (Madison, 2014; Steed, 2005). Novelist Philip Roth (1959) is known for deconstructing the assimilated identity of twenty-first century Jewish North Americans in his literary works. He explores the family systems with “overbearing parents [and a dichotomy between safe and threatened], paranoia about being Jewish and anti-Semitism” (Steed, 2005, p. 159). Whereas previous European Jewish generations focused on self-preservation in overt anti-Semitic environments, scholars speculate that post World War II North American Jewish collective consciousness focuses on navigating past discriminations, while simultaneously attempting to integrate into the majority culture (Silverstein, 2015). Steed described the current tensions of secularized Jews in America as intercultural, between generations, interreligious, and as either embracing or rejecting the “collective Jewish identity” (p. 146). Identity is characterized by both belonging and not-belonging. With a new emergence and prevalent coverage of Neo-Nazism in North America, the tensions may shift once again towards self-preservation.

With the recent resurgence of racism, antisemitism, xenophobia, and homophobia in the Western hemisphere, I feel a deep, pervasive fear in my heart and body as someone living here. This feeling propelled me to explore one of the most painful eras in my community: The Holocaust. My identification with Judaism is similar to many of my contemporaries: as more ethnic and cultural than religious. Sometimes people ask me where I am from with an assumption that I must not be Canadian, likely due to my Semitic features of a long nose and curly/frizzy hair (straightening my hair seems like an

unnecessary regime). I am not sure how to answer that these features come from my Jewishness and my nationality is separate from that identity. It comes with the baggage of Judaism being a mix of ethnicity, a culture, and a religion (Chervyakov, Gitelman & Shapiro, 1997; Rosner, Gardner & Hong, 2011; Sharot, 1998). It also comes with the weightier baggage of stereotypes and assumed political perspectives. It leaves me in a space of potential vulnerability if people hold strong negative political, stereotypical, and religious perspectives. If I choose not to practice, I still have the physical features that symbolize my inheritance. This is the way my identity is interwoven with my body, and how my culture is embodied through interactions and being questioned as *Other*.

While acknowledging the ongoing discussion on epigenetics, the focus of this paper is to explore the Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma through using art image responses, to contemplate how the felt experience of Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma can surface in contemporary times, when nationalist populism and bigotry re-emerges. Holocaust survivor Jerry Rawiki stated, "...Understanding of human beings, one to one, may prevent tragedies like the Holocaust from happening again" (in Ellis & Rawiki, 2013, p. 366). With the palpating heart and cold-sweat-style fear of resurfacing societal hate being mixed within the political discourse, I feel like it is time for me, as a millennial female Ashkenazi Jewish woman, an artist, art therapist (who worked with trauma survivors), and academic, to create a dialogue with my fears, communal history, and precarious identity. The intermixing of artist, woman, and academic situate me in a space to use all of these forms of knowledge to contemplate this experience. The artwork is not as a replacement, but an extension of my words.

As I begin this autoethnographic research, I do not want to exclude other intersectional inequalities of those around me and note that Jewish people in North America are viewed as a privileged nonvisible minority. They are frequently excluded from multicultural discourse as people who are fully assimilated into American culture (Langman, 1995). Yet, antisemitism still prevails and is commonly linked to medieval European conspiracy theories of media control and money, or even poisoning water supplies in city wells (Green, 2017; Langman, 1995). In addition, other populations and minority groups were targeted in the Holocaust for their ethnicity, sexual orientation, wealth, and political beliefs. This research paper does not want to discount other groups' experience of the Holocaust either.

Relational Autoethnography: Methodology

Autoethnography positions the author at the center of self-analysis to describe and further comprehend a multilayered cultural experience in research (Ellis & Rawiki, 2013). It connects individual experience ("auto") to describe ("graphy") wider sociocultural ("ethno") insights (Adams & Jones, 2017). It is "ethnographical in its methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretive orientation, and autobiographical in its content orientation" (Chang, 2007, p. 2017). Autoethnography is a suitable methodology for this study because it explores layers of cultural experience of historical trauma through self-observation and links personal experience to wider social psychology theories.

Famed philosophical, theoretical, and historical autobiographical literature on Holocaust experience has influenced existential, psychological, ethical, and societal discourse (Berger, 2010; Eliach, 1982; Frankl, 1984; Weisel, 1958). Evocative personal literature ranges from Anne Frank's diary (1993) to Art Spiegelman's (1986) graphic novel, "Maus." Limited Holocaust works have coined themselves as autoethnographic research, with the exception of the collaborative autoethnographies of Ellis and Rawiki (2013, 2014) and Patti and Wainberg (Ellis & Patti, 2014; Patti, 2012, 2013). The relational research is based on Jerry Rawiki's and Sol Wainberg's survivorship stories and explores compassionate storytelling. Similar to Ellis and Rawiki's work, my study focused on relational experiences that link the

past and present cultural identity understandings. However, my relational autoethnographic research also connects to historical Holocaust artists through artmaking and art artifacts (Pitard, 2016; Van Manen, 2014).

The use of visual arts in my relational autoethnography helped me understand the lived experience of the artists during the Holocaust and enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of my own identity. Art informs autoethnography because it links personal multilayered experience to wider theory (Eisner, 1995). Art therapist, Lynn Kapitan (2010), stated, “Through visual detail and context, arts based inquiry shows why and how a study of one person can resonate with the lives of many” (p. 165).

The Visual Creative Process

Art making is an act of remembrance- remembering that soul is our place, remembering about starting fires, combustion, cooking and throwing everything into the cauldron and stirring it up, transforming the raw into the sweet. (Allen, 1997, p.17)

Acknowledging that this historical trauma feels too vast and difficult for me to describe in only words, my autoethnographic research relates to artists experiencing the Holocaust through their artwork as cultural artifacts (Boylorn, 2008). Artmaking is my tool for knowing myself and processing the world around me in conscious and subconscious ways, extending beyond verbal capacity and linear thinking. Colours, forms, lines, texture, and composition enable me to express experiences that have no words for the emotions and sensory experiences. Thus, I am relating to the artists in the language that I know best: through visual imagery in art. All of the artists in the study were marked by the horrors of Nazi nationalism and attended concentration camps. Some of the artists did not survive the Holocaust camps and their artwork remains to tell their stories.

Artistic relating bases its premise on theories proposing that visual artworks invite the viewer to empathetically see the world through the artist’s lens and a single image can express multilayered complex meanings (Weber, 2008). Images carry embodied knowledge that bypass purely intellectual experience (Weber, 2008). Through artmaking, I engage in *visual thinking*, which uses thought and action to give form to a creative product (Sullivan, 2005). Thus, artmaking helps me process my world and is essential to memory expression, particularly when the memory or expression feels murky (Badenhorst, 2012). It helps me reflect as I create and develop visual symbolic representations that focus on felt sensations to reach beyond words and hopefully resonate with others. The five steps of autoethnographic data collection included: (1) choosing an image artifact by researching academic and online websites, (2) researching the context in which the artwork was made, (3) choosing materials, (4) creating artwork as a response to the image, (5) journaling during and after the art creation.

I chose five steps for data collection based on my knowledge of image processing and with my experience as an art therapist who has worked with people who have faced trauma. In open studio art therapy, creating an intuitive artwork and *witnessing* art through journaling is frequently used because it involves different areas of the brain linked to cognitive processing and emotional memories (Allen, 2005). Witness writing includes stream of consciousness and open dialogue with the image that focuses on descriptions, observations, and responses (Allen, 2005). Similar to witness writing, *image dialogue* has been developed by McNiff (1992, 2004) and is linked to Jungian psychoanalysis. This process focuses on what the image reveals and allows the art to “speak” and respond to the person who contemplates it (Zarczynski, 2017, p. 125). McNiff (1992) stated, “Image dialogue is based on acceptance of the

autonomous life of pictures within the world of interactions and multiple perspectives... It is unending dialogue” (p.105).

I limited the art materials to pen, pencil, and watercolour on paper to match the scarcity and inaccessibility of materials for the artists creating the artifact artworks (Leclerc, 2011).

Portraits During the Holocaust

I chose portrait artwork created by Jewish artists during the Holocaust within and outside of concentration camps. Portraits connect the viewer to an individual identity, which has been used by Holocaust artists to subvert anonymous categorization and dehumanization used strategically by the Nazis to oppress prisoners (Laqueur & Baumel, 2001; Leclerc, 2011.) Portraits carry political statements of identity and individual stories. Milton (1981) stated:

Portraits had a magical meaning in the setting of concentration camps... They gave the subject a sense of permanent presence among the living, extremely important when temporal physical presence was so fragile and tenuous. (p. 30)

Portraits enable the viewer to empathize with the subject’s humanity and adopt the artist’s gaze, while connecting past and present worlds (Blatter & Milton, 1981; Weber, 2008). Thus, portraiture is a valuable artistic theme to explore Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma and connect with the lived experience of the artists.

Ethical Considerations

Autoethnographies require special consideration concerning the ethics of participation, as ethnographies are intersubjective (Tillman, 2015). In this autoethnography, I avoided mentioning intimate or identifying information of personal relations. I focused on working with my own internal processes related to researchable and scholarly data to ensure ethical integrity. Since Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma involves biological inheritance, family connections are explored within the research. However, descriptions of close relationships and sensitive family history are minimized.

The art artifacts from the Holocaust artists (i.e. reference images) are referred to and cited in the reference section. No images of the other artists’ work are reproduced in this text to protect intellectual property rights (American Psychological Association, 2009).

Finally, ethics may also include researcher self-care, to avoid vicarious trauma in emotionally engaging research (Campbell, 2002). I chose to relate to artwork in a systematic manner, to create a healthy distance from a painful emotional introspective experience of contemplating the Holocaust. Psychodynamic theories and counselling practices refer to the process of developing emotional safety through creating healthy boundaries as *containment* (Brown & Stobart, 2008). Accordingly, I created ways to personally contain my emotions, such as intentionally making art in the daytime because the theme was too distressing before I fell asleep. In addition, the artwork hopes to speak the words that I do not feel comfortable saying. The artwork is not as a replacement, but an extension of my words.

Image Dialogue with Holocaust artists

I present the images in sequential order from the first to final day. This highlights a progression of thought during the emerging artmaking and journaling process. Each section begins with a title generated from the creative process theme that emerged spontaneously. The title is presented first, followed by the responsive artwork and journal excerpts. The artwork hopes to represent my personal voice and is a fundamental part of the autoethnographic research. Finally, analytic text weaves the theme, excerpts and image to wider theories, historical accounts, and epiphanies; linking contemporary to historical, internal to external, and personal to wider societal contexts (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995).

Day 1: Need for Connection



Figure 1. Toll, H. Drawing created as a response to Esther Lurie's (1944) "[Portrait of a Young Woman](#)" at Stutthof Camp created from pencil on paper.

I am like you and yet not at all. We do not share the same lives and yet we are connected...From different countries. Speak different languages. We share a common history. We are linked by culture, ancestry, tragedy, history, DNA. We are linked. We are connected. There is an intangible

understanding that I have found with no one else. Is it just me? Am I really only alone? (Author's reflexive writing, September 21, 2017)

You look like my mother, the way your shirt and collar falls on your shoulder. You look like me. Disheveled hair. Bright eyes...Your look of challenge. Chutzpah [Yiddish term describing brazenness]. Provocative. Evocative. You are me and I am you. Somehow. (Author's reflexive writing, September 21, 2017)

Esther Lurie's (1944) "[Portrait of a Young Woman](#)" was created in the Stutthof Nazi German Concentration Camp. I was attracted to the monochromatic drawing's depiction of the sitter's direct and candid gaze. The work I created (Figure 1) focuses on the eyes and mimics my own eyes. A tree and its roots merge with the face, hair, and colourful background of blood and sky. The portrait becomes fragmented on an illustrated paper corner, and yet is also connected to the branches and roots of the tree. In Jewish symbolism, the Tree of Life represents family, eternal youth, and immortality (Ameisenowa, 1939). The Tree of Life reminds me of attending my maternal grandfather's synagogue in Montreal, where stood an Art Nouveau style copper tree sculpted into the foyer wall. Each metallic leaf held a plaque with the name of a person who had died. Tiny light bulbs behind each inscription were lit on the anniversary of the person's death, in a ritual called *Yahrzeit*, to remind us of their life. My grandfather's name was soon added to that wall. This connection to the tree contains multiple meanings that weave life with death, connection, and family memories. These interconnected themes of mortality and family connection are reminiscent of Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma.

I created the watercolour painting the day after celebrating the Jewish new year (*Rosh Hashanah*) with a Chabad group. This group hosts people from diverse Jewish backgrounds on the holidays. I had recently moved to Newfoundland and only knew one person. The *connection* theme was influenced by my longing to seek community and define my identity in a new environment. This may have been compounded because the new semester coincided with a major holiday that is celebrated with a ritualized family dinner. When attending the Rosh Hashanah dinner with strangers from Newfoundland, the strangers were not strange at all and I felt connected to people I did not know. I was no longer a stranger and the sense of created community felt safe and familiar. After the mass exodus from the middle East, Jewish diaspora often used traditional practices to reaffirm identity and community historically in Europe and likely in other countries, such as Morocco and Iran (Boyarin & Boyarin, 2002; Vásquez, 2010). With a history of marginalization and disenfranchisement that precedes the Holocaust, the focus on ritual to reaffirm identity was emphasized. Jewish rituals were subtly and subconsciously stressed by my family, as a way to counter the attempts to exterminate my culture. Rituals are a way to re-affirm, habitually, our existence and community.

Day 2: The Sexualized Female Experience of the Holocaust



Figure 2. Toll, H. Painting and drawing created as a response to Charlotte Buresova's (1943) sketch painting of "[Catherina van den Berg modeling as a flamenco dancer](#)" in watercolour on paper.

To look at and think about the beauty during strife. Avoidance, but still so important to celebrate the female body and sexuality. Deviant. I am amazed that these types of works can be produced in a time of despair-defiance, sexuality, strength, fortitude, multiculturalism- culture in general. The little voice saying that everything will be alright. (Author's reflexive writing, September 22, 2017)

She is dancing in blood and passion. My blood, the blood of all women. The stance- so strong, so feminine with her hands in fists, looking over her shoulder with a knowing smile. So quickly drawn and so full of movement and presence. She is reaching up towards the sky. Is she dying? Is she dead? Is this her last vision before she passes into the other world? She looks so strong, relaxed, determined. She has wisdom to tell the world: poise, grace, elegance. (Author's reflexive writing, September 22, 2017)

Charlotte Buresova's (1943) sketch of, "[Catherina van den Berg modeling as a flamenco dancer](#)" portrays a woman with a flower in her hair who is looking away. She holds a strong posture and brazenly flaunts a beautiful flamenco dress. The image is painted with strong splashes of opaque watercolour and charcoal. Looking at the image, a viewer would not know that this painting was created in the Terezin concentration camp in 1943 (Rosenberg, 2001). I was attracted to this piece because of the overt feminist stance and as a lover of dance, I had registered to take flamenco classes the following week.

When creating Figure 2, I was surprised that I did not paint the woman with hair. This may be influenced by my research on how women were treated during the Holocaust as an intersectional mix of antisemitism and sexism through acts of dehumanization and objectification (Baer & Goldenber, 2003; Hedgepeth & Saidel, 2010). Objectifying prisoners "was and continues to be a sadly effective strategy for extermination common to every totalitarian regime and every form of violence" (Leclerc, 2011, p. 83). Ringelheim's (1985) interview with twenty female Holocaust survivors included stories of sexual vulnerability. Participants told stories of sexual humiliation, rape, pregnancy, abortion, sexual exchange, and feeling vulnerable through their children. Almost all of the women interviewed discussed their humiliating feelings related to being shaven and naked when entering the concentration camp. Degradation included the confiscation of identity through shaving their heads (for those not destined for death), seizing the prisoners' clothing, removing personal items, and separating families without the chance to say goodbye (Baer & Goldenber, 2003). Dehumanizing treatment was further enforced through sexual humiliation and objectification on an ongoing basis. For example, survivors reported being forced to sit in a sexual stance by straddling two stools while their bodies were shaven and being observed by officers during these vulnerable moments (Hedgepeth & Saidel, 2010; Ringelheim, 1985).

Survivors recounted using their sexuality and sexual favours as a commodity to exchange for food and goods with German officers and male Jewish concentration camp captives. "That was how you survived as a woman- through the male... Because in that society, that was the only way you could survive" (Ringelheim, 1985, p. 744). Other survivors hid their beauty and sexuality because some SS officers would shoot their victims immediately after raping them. Thus, the painted image in Figure 2 exposes a naked torso. This captures the balance between sexual celebration and overt objectification through dehumanizing acts. The red dress recalls both passion and death through blood drops. Her elegant stance and face turned towards the sky makes me think of her entering another world. This may be through psychological dissociation (which often occurs as a psychological survival mechanism to mentally escape during sexual abuse and traumatic events), or perhaps symbolizes entering the freedom of death (APA, 2013; Feeny, Zoellner, Fitzgibbons, & Foa, 2000).

Day 3: Social Norms that Permit Prejudice and Dehumanization

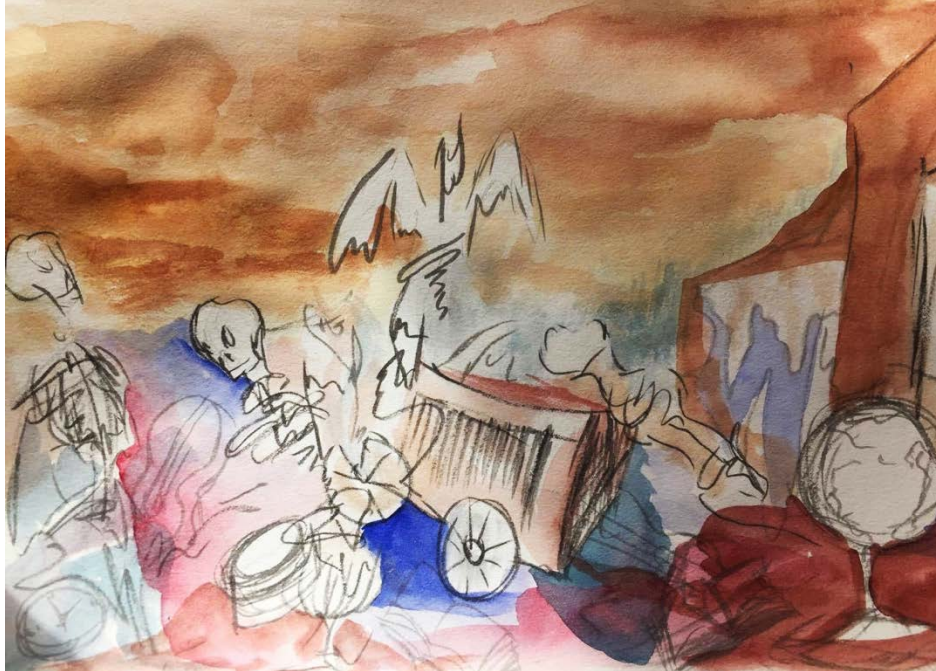


Figure 3. Toll, H. Watercolour painting created as a response to [Felix Nussbaum's \(1944\) "Death Triumphant \[The Dance of the Skeletons\]"](#) made from oil on canvas.

I am sick to my stomach. I am scared in the here and now. I see their faces and may know that they were living people- not numbers, not the 'other.' I empathize with them. I live their pain. (Author's reflexive writing, September 23, 2017)

When I see these images, I keep thinking that, "this is not the world we live in." But it is. It is all real. It is present and looming. Hate is real, dehumanization is real. The image depicts chaos, loss of identity, culture. Piles of nothingness, or deeply held lives, families, homes, musical instruments, precious piece of identity demolished to nothingness. (Author's reflexive writing, September 23, 2017)

This work is based on Felix Nussbaum's (1944) painting, "[Death Triumphant \[The Dance of the Skeletons\]](#)." This large oil on canvas painting was completed scarcely before Nussbaum was captured by the Nazis in Brussels, after hiding for many years. The macabre painting held an eerie premonition because Nussbaum died soon after (Felstiner, 2000). It portrays chaotic piles of demolished cultural, scholarly, literary, and artistic objects, along with skeletal figures in ratty clothing playing instruments. Menacing anthropomorphic kites grimace from the skies. Nussbaum's art attracted me because I admire his expressive capacity through his technical mastery of painting. Along with his other canvases, the emblematic images candidly communicate his emotive and psychological experience as a German Jewish man. When creating an artistic response (Figure 3), I could not help but emulate the chaos and emphasize personally significant objects in Nussbaum's painting, like the globe.

When I painted this piece, I kept thinking about conversations with other non-Jewish individuals that referred to the Holocaust in dehumanizing ways. I remembered speaking with people who told me about their pride in their Nazi ancestors. I remembered instances of people, including close partners, telling me Holocaust jokes when they learned I was Jewish. When creating the image, I re-experienced

the hurt that I felt as a reaction to these conversations. I wish I could say that I emotionally have moved on from these experiences, but they seem to accumulate within an open wound. I hoped that analyzing the pain would put it to rest.

I attempted to explore why I was so upset when I heard these jokes through researching social psychology theories. I found that the answer lies in how humour can create spaces for overt prejudiced behaviour. The majority of disparaging humour research explores misogyny and found that people are more likely to respond favourably to sexist humour when they hold sexist attitudes (Ford, Wentzel, and Lorion, 2001; LaFrance & Woodzicka, 1998; Monteith, Deneen, & Tooman, 1996; Wittenbrink & Henly, 1996). Additionally, humour with aggressive connotations is linked to intolerance and dominance-oriented people (Hodson, MacInnis & Rush, 2010).

Individuals use humour for various reasons; it can build connections, diffuse tense situations, create a space for catharsis, and establish dominance in social hierarchies (Frecknall, 1994; Hodson, Rush, & MacInnis, 2010). It can be a coping mechanism. For example, many Jewish populations have used a particular type of dry humor to cope with antisemitism for centuries (Lederhendler & Finder, 2016; Morreal, 2001; Saper, 1991). Disparaging humour about others can establish dominance and reinforce oppression by chastising minority out-groups in the *Group Dominance-Model* (Ford, Boxer, Armstrong & Edel, 2008; Hodson et al., 2010). In addition, the *Justification Suppression Model* discusses how prejudiced people say intolerant statements under the veil of humour because it creates an enabling interpersonal space that surpasses regular social norms (Crandall and Eshleman, 2003). The guise of humour changes social conventions because it indicates that the usual social understandings of logic and rationality do not apply, and events should be taken as a joke (Bill & Naus, 1992; Ford et al., 2008). For example, men participants with misogynist attitudes were more likely to engage in sexist decisions, such as cutting funding to women's programs when exposed to misogynist humour (Ford et al., 2008). Other participants rated sexist incidents as harmless and acceptable when incidents were described in a humorous manner (Ford, Wentzel, & Lorion, 2001). Thus, humour creates a space of permissiveness that can be harmful for marginalized populations, depending on the political perspectives and personalities of the jokers and recipients.

The normalization of violence and linking brutality to fun can play a role in rationalizing ethnic or religious cleansing behaviours (Pass & Templer, 2013; Saper, 1991). Verkaaik (2003) described how ludic jokes created permissiveness of violent acts against other ethnic groups in his anthropological study of Muhajir Quami Movement in Pakistan. Of course, not all humour is disparaging, nor does it always lead to violence towards others. I did not know why I was so sensitive about disparaging humour about minority groups until I engaged in this research. I may be over-attentive and hypervigilant to threatening cues in my environment, fearful that it is truly a socially acceptable expression of over discrimination and hate (Yehuda, Koenen, Galea, & Flory, 2011; Yehuda et al., 2016). It intertwines how the Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma can impact how attentive and wary I am towards aggressive humor that belittles marginalized populations and makes fun of others' suffering. Thus, the information helps situate my emotions within empirical theory and provide closure to my over-sensitive behaviour.

Day 3 (continued): Despair and Helplessness



Figure 4. Toll, H. Image inspired by Felix Nussbaum's (1939) "[The Refugee](#)," created from oil on canvas.

What makes a grown man cry? We cannot hide from the world; hate and discrimination is everywhere. We cannot hide. (Author's reflexive writing, September 23, 2017)

The creation of Figure 3 left me with unresolved macabre and chaotic feelings. I created a second image that day because I needed to reach resolution and express the grief and horror that I felt. I found Nussbaum's (1939) painting called "[The Refugee](#)" emulated this feeling of helplessness through the figure's body. The painting was created in 1939, which was the beginning of the Second World War. Some scholars believe the painting represented Nussbaum's feelings of vulnerability because he no longer felt like he had a place of refuge while hiding across Europe during the Second World War (Felstiner, 2000). This was unfortunately true, as Nussbaum was eventually captured in Brussels and deported to the Auschwitz concentration camp, where he was killed. In the image, his self-portrait hangs his head in his hands in a posture of despair.

I emulated Nussbaum's body posture in my painting above and added to the sense of vulnerability through omitting clothing, colour or details. The man represents every man, perhaps my inner man. His shadow is emphasized and the painterly textured white moon rests behind his head. The white circle looms, oppressively representing the dissolution to nothingness in death and chaos. My journaling contained a tragic answer to what felt like an unanswerable question, "What makes a grown man[woman] cry?" My journal entry was limited to the short text shown above because I lost the heart to write further. I hope that the artwork speaks beyond the textual writing to portray what remains unsaid.

Guerin & Hallas (2007) stated, “The historical trauma event such as the Holocaust simultaneously demands urgent representation but shatters all potential frames of comprehension and reference” (p.3). Laqueur (2001) critiqued the historiography of the Holocaust as a ‘business as usual’ approach, where historical accounts focused so much on the “how” and failed to confront the breakdown of morality behind the morbid events and intense personal terror. He further stated that research and documentation seemed to lack the humanness in the methodical execution of people and the subsequent scholarship felt devoid of deeper understanding. Perhaps the “unfathomable abstraction” of the systematic extermination of millions is too overwhelming for full comprehension, as people can experience deep grief from even a single life lost (Roth, 2004, p. 213).

Lack of colour and simplicity in my response captures my incapability of portraying the massive grief and pain with words, while wishing that I could. It portrays the empty space of nothingness, of numbness. I may, myself, have felt dissociated and numb as a self-preservation mechanism (Feeny, Zoellner, Fitzgibbons, & Foa, 2000). I wonder if this permeable emotional resonance and helplessness through overidentification with the artist’s experience is indicative of Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma. This fear and paranoia can filter across generations and can inform how ethnic genocide extensively affects targeted societies generations later.

Day 4: Networks of Maintenance and Gender in Survivorship



Figure 5. Toll, H. Image inspired by Jeannette L’Herminier’s work (n.d.) called, “Andrée- Anne-Marie,” (no link available) created with pencil on cardboard.

I want to give them faces, personalities, names, and a relationship. I want to know more from the expressions on your face. I do not want anyone to be a number (numbers tattooed on Holocaust victims and survivors' arms,) a dehumanized carcass. I remember how people distance themselves from pain. It is sometimes just not fair. It is not fair and so sad. (Author's reflexive writing, September 23, 2017)

Finally, Figure 5 marked the end of this reflective and creative process, partly because it felt too painful to continue further. My writing became increasingly disjointed and sparse. The images created began to lose colour and vividness, telling me that it was time to stop.

I discovered the final artist while reading a previous professor's psychoanalytic work (Leclerc, 2011). Jeannette L'Herminier was a French Resistance fighter who was brought to Ravensbrück after being captured (L'Herminier & Tillon, 2011). Researching L'Herminier's life story changed my perspective about her artwork and gaze because her experience in the concentration camp was related to her French political resistance actions, as opposed to her ethnic identity. Her deeds portray her courage and fortitude as a resistance fighter.

L'Herminier's pencil on cardboard piece depicts faceless women, often elegantly posed in their prisoner's clothing. I was attached to her piece called, "Andrée- Anne-Marie," because the image portrays intimacy between two women who are holding one another. As a response in Figure 5, I created distinct and expressive Semitic features and portrayed the same intimate connection between the two women. The focus of my artistic response was on rendering the faces, as opposed to focusing on the clothing or body positioning, in contrast to L'Herminier's drawings. My reflective writing centered around loss of features and dehumanization. This played with my fear of dehumanizing and objectifying others. The portrait on the right of Figure 5 reminded me of an image of my mother taken on her sweet sixteenth birthday. People often tell me I am the spitting image of my mother.

During Ringelheim's (1985) interviews with female Holocaust survivors, participants described how their relational bonds and support played a large part in their survival. "It was the reciprocity that kept you alive," stated one participant, when she described how she was helped by a group of women from her neighborhood in Berlin when she caught typhus in the Auschwitz concentration camp (Ringelheim, 1985). She described incidents where a group of women from her village physically, spiritually, and emotionally helped her stand during roll calls in the morning, so that she would not be shot. Other participants shared similar stories of non-biological familial bonds being vital for their survival. Interviewee survivors discussed how their sense of humanity was sustained through engaging in intimate conversations, feeling mothered or mothering others, cuddling for warmth at night, being nursed through sickness, and being helped by other women (Ringelheim, 1985). Some theories posit that the networks of maintenance accounted for more women surviving concentration camps than men, although there is no way of knowing the actual data (Milton, 1983; Ringelheim, 1985). Ringelheim counters that these resiliency-building stories may not describe the full situation and can act as a cover for horrific unspoken experiences. Nonetheless, stories of endurance and survivorship generated from nurturance and bonds creates a positive resolution to personal, historical, and cultural explorations. For myself, and possibly the storyteller survivors in Ringelheim's study, it is a conscious choice to end this autoethnographic narrative in a positive light.

Creating Meaning from the Process

How Art Images Created by Jews Living in the Holocaust Inform my Experience as a Canadian Ashkenazi Jewess (Jewish Woman) and Artist

Relating to artwork created by artists during the Holocaust through empathetic creative responses helped surface diverse experiences related to my Jewish identity. Themes of connections, community, dehumanization, and despair emerged from the process. They enabled me to look into another's symbolic life and inform my lived experience through imagery. I was able to connect these images to historical narrative accounts of survivorship, sociology, and social psychology theories. They helped me learn more about how I experience my life today and how the traumas of others can echo through my lived experiences and consciousness.

The process inflicted a lot of personal pain that I needed to work through, indicating my personal and emotional limits. Through this pain, I began to know myself better and meditate on the junctures of personal/creative/historical/traumatic/biological lived experiences. Yet, it ultimately felt healthier to stop the process after creating five artworks. I was merely ready to touch the surface of the dark experiences, and knowing myself, I mediated how much I could immerse myself in what felt like the morbid and helpless space of the Holocaust artists' worlds. Perhaps if I continued to create more images and stuck with the pain, I could feel a form of resolution. The art media and systematic process shaped this introspective work. The use of more colourful, sensory, and sculptural art media may have led to different outcomes.

I found that dehumanization and cold reactions felt like the cruelest features and still live in my body as remnants of communal trauma. I reflected on my felt experience of Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma and have come to experience that genocide does not die with previous generations. Trauma lives in the multilayered cultural bodies and psyches of following generations.

Eisner (1995) stated, "Artistically crafted work creates a paradox, revealing what is universal by examining in detail what is particular" (p. 3). The artworks created during the Holocaust are still relevant for contemporary contemplation from both Jewish and non-Jewish people. They create an opening into the artists' lives and tell their stories that remain beyond words. As cultural artifacts, ambiguity in images allows for people living in the following decades to project their experiences onto them and find personal and philosophical meaning. Powerful images are recognized and used for their capacity to instantly captivate viewers on profound levels and influence their thinking. This knowledge has been used by diverse professional disciplines, such as media strategists, psychologists, marketers, and in various capacities to influence others. I wonder how it could be used more to develop softer spaces of empathy and compassion for others.

How Art in Relational Autoethnography Informs Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma Research

Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma research has provided biological and physiological evidence for psychosomatic and familial responses in generations of cultures following a prolonged trauma and mass genocide (Yehuda & Bierer, 2009). As someone who works with trauma survivors and knows this theory in-depth, I engaged with the theory through artistic relational responses to the Holocaust artists. I cannot disentangle the intentional use of the theory from the emergent epiphanies. In addition, theories can be refuted when new evidence emerges, which may occur with the Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma. For example, some meta-analytic findings have found that there was no psychopathology inherited in subsequent generations and that survivors embodied post-traumatic growth and resilience that informed theories, such as Antonovsky's salutogenic theory (Knobler,

Abramowitz, & Lindbert, 2018). Nonetheless, this theory can be helpful when working from a strengths-based and intercultural perspective with individuals and cultures that have experienced historical trauma, because it does not gloss over collective pain. It is important to not discount a culture's historical trauma, regardless of how uncomfortable it is to face for those who did not experience it. In addition, mental health disorders, symptoms, and experiences are continuously emerging and adapting, based on neurobiology technology evidence and social norms and values (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

However, despite the terminology, the emotions and experiences can be felt as real and profoundly affects communities (Cohn & Morrison, 2017). Thus, I believe that using visual artmaking and subconscious processes can bring new understandings to Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma theory, that works with the inheritance of traumatic responsive symptoms, such as nightmares (which also engage subconscious processing) (Allen, 1994; Kellerman, 2013; McNiff, 2004). Images and artmaking reflect the many layers of the lived experience. This research hopes to expand upon the empirical epigenetic and Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma evidence and theories to further understand felt and embodied experiences in a creative manner, similar to new narrative and memory projects (Kliger, 2017). I hope that it provides more texture, color, and depth to the growing body of knowledge.

Conclusion

The series of five artworks portray imaginal conversations with Holocaust artists who are no longer alive, linking past and present lives, in a relational autoethnography. After creating the five images, I could not continue creating because an intense despair took over me. These feelings of sadness were deepened by current news about the genocide and persecution of the Rohingya people in Myanmar and the United States leader's response to the *Black Lives Matter* movement (de la Fuente, 2017; King, 2017; Ponniah, 2017). While creating response art, I was surprised that I often addressed the artists and human subjects directly in my creative writing (Weber, 2008). It was as if I wrote a letter to them through image dialogue and witnessing (McNiff, 1992; 2004). Themes, such as: the need for connection, sexuality and the feminine experience, social norms that permit prejudice and dehumanization, despair and helplessness, and support in survival emerged and are represented in the titles. The themes materialized from the image dialogue artwork, witness journaling, and contextualizing the data within social psychology and Holocaust literature. The themes that emerged naturally from the creative process can give texture to the lived experience of the Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma.

The outcomes of the research focused on exploring identity through my culture's past experience of genocide. This artistic relational autoethnography provided the opportunity to contemplate my cultural self and connections to familial lineage through trauma theories and art processes. It brings me one step further to understanding the concept of an assimilated minority identity or of belonging/not belong. Biale (1998) stated:

The indeterminacy of contemporary Jewish identity is often the cause of much communal hand-wringing. But instead of bemoaning these multiple identities, Jews need to begin to analyze what it means to negotiate them and, by so doing, perhaps even learn to embrace them. Reconceiving of Jewish identity along post ethnic lines would require a sea of change in Jewish self-consciousness, since Jews often continue to define themselves according to the old fixed categories...the task for those concerned with the place of Jews in America is not to condemn or condone but rather to respond creatively to what is now an inevitable social process. (p. 31–32)

To widen this perspective, I hope for other cultures to contemplate historical and current experiences that inform their identities or non-identity. Creativity generates an opportunity to introspectively know oneself and understand the world around us better, while the Holocaust artists created imagery that reminds viewers of the horrific acts that occurred in history with a personal and intimate voice (Allen, 1994). Through engaging empathy, they can awaken individuals and societies to reflect on how terrifying things can become. The deeply personal/emotional and captivating windows generated by non-verbal artworks remind us of our shared humanity and what it feels like to suffer. This reminder can generate movement to counter inhumane actions.

Artmaking is my tool for knowing myself, but that may not be the case for others. I hope that the artwork created expands beyond the words and transcends them. Creativity is not limited to visual art and each individual's creative process is intimately personal. Artistic processing is one of many ways to counter feelings of helplessness, while generating hope and empowerment. I hope that this study will contribute to more thoughtful, profound, and creative reflections on the past that can illuminate biological, quantitative, and qualitative empirical arts-based research, such as with the Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma theory. I hope that it can, in some way, contribute to collective compassion within our communities.

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