

# Something worth saying.

A photo essay about the  
representation of women's trauma



Created by Katie DeBerry







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trauma



**For all of you.**



A



“I talk to myself in the mirror when I feel too much so that I can pretend I have the perfect listener. Also it is nice to see my face when I feel too much so that I know I’m real.”











“Alcoholism runs in my family!”





“hating what I make of myself and I like to hurt it.”







































L











E





“Yeah I’m scared. All the time. Especially at night. I always think he’s in my closet. But I don’t want to check. If I give into it, I’ll have bad nightmares. So I don’t check. Odds are it’s empty. I feel lucky to have a small enough room that there’s not too many places to be. Sometimes I just have to check though. Just in case. ‘Paranoia’, they say.”





“I look like a softboi’s wet dream here. I really do look hot and I don’t mind the blood. I like how blood looks on me. Like- finally! Someone else can see too! I do claw my shoulders. Have for at least 4 years. I can’t remember starting. I don’t intend to stop. Shoulders don’t actually bleed this easy. What if they did... ‘Anxiety’, they say.”





“Yeah, once my longtime male friend asked to buy nudes from me. ‘I’ve always been curious’ he messaged me online. Must have never heard of *Pornhub*. Or respect. He only offered \$250 too. I hope that I don’t need to explain to you how any of these factors are an issue. Women are all objects in the male gaze, I suppose. I must cost \$250.”





"HAHA. I look upset here but when I actually lay down in lingerie with my metaphorical bat, there's nothing but a grin on my face. See how I want them to think I'm beautiful? But keep them at arm's length? Bat's length maybe. Could be the same, depending on the length of the arm. Or the bat.

There's not a man alive I trust. Maybe Obama."





“Yeah, I never do it. They say that makes me strong but I feel like it makes me weak. Lookin’ pretty! Feelin’ like jumping!”





“Antipsychotics or vitamins? Only difference is I don’t need vitamins. Nothing makes me happier than a good pill or 10. Prescribed. ‘Bipolar Disorder’, they say.”





“It doesn’t matter how my brain is. I’ve got to keep up appearances. It’s all a show, baby!”







K



“Several of my closest friends have been raped. A few of them have been molested, sometimes more than once. We all have daddy issues, which means we usually have mommy issues too. You can’t really blame them; it’s hard to raise a kid on your own, especially when you’re always looking over your shoulder. Many of us have addiction in our families, some leading to imprisonment, abandonment, overdose, what have you. I’m not sure why so many of us suffer, but we do. I used to pray when I was younger, because I thought that whatever being made us would have to listen to a little girl who was scared to go to sleep at night. I made so many promises: I’ll stop masturbating, I never complain, I’ll be a perfect kid. Eventually, it became clear that I had done something irredeemable, that we all had somehow. I was twenty-one years old the first time someone held me while I cried. I still think it might have been a bad idea.”







“Are you starving yourself now? What, are you going to slit your wrists? I wish I could drag my ass on the carpet all day like a dog. Were you even out with her? Were you off with some boy? Why are you so mean to me? If your brain really hurts that bad, maybe we should go get a CATscan. Do we need to go to the doctor? Stop being so negative. Yes, your childhood was *so* bad. You’ll never get far enough away from me.”







“Mom picked me up from school like usual, but this time she told me that he was back. I guess the police were there and he was more scary than usual. He might have done some coke before coming. She gave me a list of numbers to call in case something happened to her, and she dropped me off at the neighbors’. I don’t remember what happened that night. I was 11 years old.”







“I just wanted him to like me, but I wasn’t sure if I wanted to do that. He didn’t ask. I didn’t trust him, but I wanted to believe he was a nice person. We were friends; I figured he respected me. He didn’t ask if he could do that, and we both know I hate confrontation. So I went along with it. He’s everywhere, and I know everyone will take his side. I’m still not sure if it was my fault. I swear that he’s haunting me. I wish I was strong enough to become a ghost myself.”







"You always know how to make me feel small. I'm not sure what I did wrong, but I'll always apologize. You tell our friends I'm not intelligent enough, but I hold you and please you anyway. I tell you I'm here for you. I'm always scared you'll leave. Bile and tears fill me to the brim when you say I'm just a body to you. I still promise I'll go off of my medication."







“I pissed the bed until I was 12. Nothing feels more shameful than waking up every morning in a puddle of your own piss knowing you’ve done something wrong, except maybe waking up next to someone 6 years later thinking the same thing.”







“I’m in my twenties now, and I thought the relapses would end, but I’m in another time zone and he’s still calling. I’m not sure about the ambulance or rehab, but I feel a tight, suffocating rage in my chest when he says, ‘she’s the daughter I never had.’ I guess I wouldn’t know how to be wanted if I tried.”







“I still don’t know how to say no. Not when it really matters. They probably would have stopped if I’d just been strong enough to ask. I’m scared I’ll never be strong enough. Once I even remember thinking that maybe if I passed out, that would make them stop. I could have just said no. It’s all my fault, I think. I don’t know how to trust myself. I wish you understood that’s why I can’t trust you either.”











# Something worth saying.

Trauma lives in all of us. It permeates our communities, our environment, and our culture. It is not only an event or a tragedy; it is also something through which we live and grow and alongside with we change. For the past year I have been contemplating the ways in which trauma may be represented in a tangible form, specifically through the form of photography and other media, but I have been contemplating trauma itself for as long as I can remember. I have been working on this thesis for months, watching it take many shapes, and what I have produced is not complete, and in many ways, I find it unsatisfying. However, what this process has helped me learn is that trauma, too, takes many shapes. Even when we face it head on with all intention of pulling it from the shadows and transcribing it into something coherent, it often resists this effort and leaves us unsatisfied and seemingly more confused than we were before. In dealing with the topic of trauma and its representation, there is so much to be said. Because of this I often feel that what I can say will never do justice to the topic or those impacted by trauma. However, I have come to realize that this may be the nature of the thing itself. Trauma often leaves its inhabitants feeling voiceless and invalid, incapable of identifying what is always shifting, evading being named, and affecting everything with which it comes into contact. This is why I believe it is important to share what I have completed with this work, to demonstrate the process of exploring trauma alongside those who were gracious and brave enough to do so with me. I can still share my voice and my story, as well as those of the women whom I photographed, and that is not without value- not by a long shot.



When I began working on my thesis in the fall of the academic year, I was interested in exploring the “unspeakable” or “unrepresentable” nature of trauma, as many researchers have described. I was concerned not only with the use of the photograph in representing trauma, but also with the ways in which the photograph may be supplemented with personal written testimony and oral history. The representation of trauma has been explored fairly extensively in each of these forms independently, but this is often done so on a collective or cultural level, specifically as it pertains to a particular shared tragic event. What I found often went unexplored is how these three ways of representing trauma can function at the level of the individual. Not investigated is the purpose of representing one’s personal experiences with trauma and the effect of living with said trauma on a daily basis, and what this treatment of representation at the individual level may accomplish. I believe this is crucial to expound upon for many reasons, but primarily it is important because the individual living with trauma is quite regularly reduced to a statistic, an event, or a part of history. They may find themselves silenced by larger removed and impersonal narratives which instruct how trauma should be perceived and consequently how it should be represented. That said, this way of processing and representing can create very rigid ideas regarding the complexity of trauma and how it interacts with and manifests inside individuals. The dominance of these larger narratives perpetuates the idea that trauma is only validated when it can be conveyed clearly and linearly- much like a story- through the use of written or spoken language.

Though I wasn’t able to finish my thesis for reasons I will elaborate upon later, my goal was to explore the question, “how do portraiture, written testimony, and oral history function together to represent the experiences of women living with trauma?” I intended to create an installation that would feature each of these components in order to create not necessarily narratives or cohesive vignettes of a traumatic occurrence but rather an exhibition of the experiences and emotions expressed by these women as they endure the ongoing battle of living with trauma on a daily basis.



Initially, I was only going to be working with three women to create this installation: two of my closest friends and myself. I made this choice primarily because I have been constantly concerned with the intensity and vulnerability that come with sharing one's story. Even when we are given the space and acceptance to share personal experiences with trauma, that doesn't mean that it is easy. Part of what I wanted to demonstrate with this thesis is that trauma is not always cohesive, chronological, or clear in the mind of those whom endure it. That said, I chose these participants because I believed that our relationships had already established the comfort, trust, and respect necessary to engage in this kind of work. Additionally, I hoped that these conditions for working with one another would aid in helping each participant in being creative and thoughtful about the various ways in which they may express their experiences through writing, speaking, or photography.

In terms of the process, I first spoke with each of the women about my intentions for the thesis and what their involvement would be throughout. I was fortunate enough to be met with great enthusiasm and willingness to participate, and we discussed more in detail what the photos may look like, what kind of questions I would be asking in the oral history, how the texts may be written, and so on. I attempted to complete the oral histories with each woman before beginning the photographing process, so as to gain more insight into their lives, their experiences living with trauma, and to encourage them to be mindful of how they see trauma being expressed in their lives. The questions for the oral history were fairly vague and open ended for the purpose of allowing each woman to be flexible in the range and depth with which they responded. After the oral history was completed, the next step in the process was making the photographs. The photographing sometimes occurred all at once over the course of a few hours and other times occurred over multiple sessions.



To elaborate, for one woman the photographs were all taken in one session, primarily because she wished to limit the number of times during which she was revisiting her feelings and experiences with trauma. This is something that I was fully prepared to encounter and more than willing to accommodate. The differences between her photographs and those made with other women over various sessions are quite apparent and I feel are relevant and interesting to consider in this work. Usually after I had edited the photographs, I would send them to the participant for their feedback, and I would ask them to write texts to accompany the photographs in any way that they saw fit. This meant that the texts varied in length, content, style, tone, and literality. Some texts bare the quality of a confessional, while others are a bit more coded and reserved, for example. This theme was present for the photographs too, as can be observed in this work, which is why I allowed the written texts to be so flexible.

While I continued to work with these women, I also researched topics associated with the thesis. I explored literature regarding trauma theory, oral history, photo-voice studies, trauma representation in media, personal trauma narratives, the relationship between photographs and text, and other relevant areas of study. I engaged with these texts in order to discern which areas of research felt the most relevant to my work and seemed valuable to pursue further. I also used this research to determine the style in which I wanted to write about this process and the methodology with which I wanted to conduct my work. Issues of ethics and power dynamics invoked in trauma-related research and artistic projects were also incredibly valuable to seek out within this literature. This information simultaneously helped answer questions of ethics that I had already considered and provided new questions of ethics that I had not previously considered. While it has not been the primary focus of my thesis, I believe that the research I have done throughout this process played a formative role in how I have actualized this work and how I delineate this process in the completed thesis. As my work with these women continued, I began to feel overwhelmed with both imposter syndrome and the feeling that the work I had completed up to this point was not “cohesive or unified enough” to function as a thesis. The photographs, texts, and oral histories varied greatly from person to person, which I believed to be necessary in their creation. However, I still felt an enormous pressure to somehow join our three experiences into something that would appear complete and legible to the viewer.



I soon realized that the vast differences between the experiences and information being conveyed and the ways in which they were being conveyed were not an obstacle but rather a testament to the issues with representing personal trauma. Not only that, but I came to understand that the pressure I was feeling to mesh these individual testimonies was also an issue that arises with trying to represent trauma, pressure that is felt both externally as a result of expectations of how trauma should be told and internally as someone who often strives and fails to make sense out of my own trauma.

At the beginning of the second semester during which I was working on this project, I made the decision to accept these concerns as part of the nature of this work and embrace the disjointedness as something relevant and productive for the process. That said, I chose to focus my thesis on the process of trying to represent trauma through portraiture, oral history, and written testimony. It seemed to me to be beneficial to also open up the thesis to more women than I originally intended, so as to invite more experiences and ways of expressing trauma into the work. Additionally, I had been concerned throughout the process about representing only white women in this work, as women of minority backgrounds are often subjected to racialized or other traumas at a higher rate than white women. Women of color also more often have their voices silenced or their narratives misconstrued, especially when it comes to expressing experiences with trauma, which I believe is important to acknowledge. Therefore, I reached out to women that I knew may be willing to participate in this work, and I contacted various groups of which I am a part, inviting women to reach out to me if they were interested in learning more about the process and possibly willing to share their experiences with me to be represented in the thesis. Again, I was blown away and honored by the number of women interested in participating and sharing their stories with me. I am truly broken-hearted that I was unable to meet with all of the women who reached out, due to conditions that became increasingly difficult soon after many of them volunteered. Yet, I am still honored and grateful to have even spoken with these women in light of their interest in the project. I was able to record the oral history of two additional participants and photograph one of them before Emory University shut down in response to the growing COVID-19 pandemic, which continues to send billions across in the world into lockdown.



Along with the University's shutdown came conditions which most of us have not experienced until the emergence of this pandemic. We are faced with a massive disruption to our lives. We are confined to our living quarters with others or in isolation, most of us are unable to continue work or school in a normal capacity if at all, and we must live in a constant state of uncertainty and fear, wondering how much worse this will get and how many lives will be lost. During this time, I have found it incredibly difficult to further progress on my thesis. Like many others, I have been confined to my apartment on a deserted college campus, isolated and incessantly worrying about the state of the world. In addition to this, and not uniquely, I also struggle greatly with mental illness, which has unsurprisingly been heightened by the current conditions. Many people, including myself, find solace in school and work and in socializing with others, of which we are especially deprived during this time. Throughout my life these blessings have served as an escape from the typically unstable and unhealthy life that awaited me at home and from the mental and emotional battles that I face on a daily basis as a young woman in college. Naturally, being isolated and only able to work remotely has made it increasingly difficult to escape these battles. This isolation, in many ways, breeds trauma. Not only is this pandemic a cultural trauma in itself that will be branded in our history, but it is also likely to negatively affect those who already struggle with personal trauma. Children who depend on schools and after school programs to provide most of their meals are having to face the effects of financial and food insecurity. Many people are trapped in their homes with abusers or otherwise unsafe living conditions and may not be aware of or confident in the resources available to help ensure their safety. Individuals experiencing homelessness, low-socioeconomic status, unemployment, mental and physical health conditions, and discrimination in the healthcare system are only some of those who will be majorly afflicted by these conditions, let alone afflicted by the virus itself. Those of us who are otherwise safe and secure may still suffer from increased depression, suicidal thoughts, and immense anxiety, which is in many ways more difficult than ever to cope with. Needless to say, so many are riddled with trauma at this point in time, and the conditions that we currently face can make it all the more challenging to confront and express the trauma in our lives.



I don't pretend to assert these situations as otherwise unapparent or as though these issues are somehow new and only now being exacerbated. I simply want to reiterate that these times are understandably challenging for innumerable reasons, and that I am obviously also facing my own challenges in coping with the changes and difficulties accompanying the pandemic. To be frank, it has felt nearly impossible to continue my research and work with this thesis. Most of my time is spent alone and inside of my apartment. I find that I am always fighting off the feeling of impending doom and the belief that little matters in this world and that all of my efforts are futile. I do my best to take my medication, eat a few meals each day, attend therapy sessions via zoom, and call my loved ones to stay sane. I drove twelve hours to my home in Missouri to be with my family and avoid falling into addiction, as I have little motivation to do much more these days than drink, smoke, and sleep. I cry more than I'd like to admit. I watch old Saturday Night Live reruns and take my dog for walks to avoid the annoying voice in my brain that constantly raves about how much better the world would be without me. Trauma is all I think about- my own trauma, the trauma of the women who have been a part of this process, the trauma of my loved ones, the trauma of all those I previously described- the list goes on.

This is all to say that I became convinced that there was no reason to complete my thesis, that I had nothing to say that could be of value. However, in speaking with professors and loved ones who have consistently supported me throughout this process, I have come to believe that this thesis is something worth finishing, especially in the middle of such madness. The experiences and voices of the women involved in this project deserve to be shared, there is no doubt about it. My experience and voice deserve to be shared, too. Even though this work did not come to fruition in the way I might have previously intended, the work that I have done in trying to engage with the representation of trauma amidst the conditions of trauma itself is incredibly important.



So, what has become of this work? Ultimately, I decided to let the thesis be what it is in its fragmented, incomplete, and imperfect form, with which I believe I am finally content. I chose to compile the photographs and texts into a photo book, because I felt that the format of the book would provide a sense of unity among the various elements of the thesis. This personal essay and the following literature review that I completed during the fall semester are also included in this book to provide context for the research and process that has gone into this work. I was unable to include the oral history into the completed thesis, but I consider the oral histories to have been crucial throughout this process. The oral histories served to largely inform the ways in which each woman's story is represented. Being able to genuinely inquire about the women's experiences in a comfortable yet somewhat structured environment enabled me to engage with each woman's narrative in a way that allowed them to be as honest and vulnerable as they wished. Therefore, while not presented in the work, these oral histories are very much present in all aspects of this thesis. That said, I hope to continue this work in the future in some capacity. Trauma will not cease to be relevant any time soon. The honest representation of women's experiences will still be crucial long after I have defended and submitted this thesis. Going forward, I intend to further explore the ways in which we may use artistic expression and multimedia to proliferate the narratives of those whose voices often go unheard. I hope that this thesis helps encourage others to engage in conversations surrounding trauma and be both open-minded and critical regarding its representation. More than anything, I am thankful that I was given the opportunity to hear the stories of several incredible women, and I am honored to have been able to voice their stories through artistic expression. I hope that I was able to validate their experiences, and in doing so, I hope that this work encourages the validation of others' experiences. That is something worth saying.







# Literature Review

There is a great body of work regarding trauma theory, feminism, representation, and photography, so one might pose the question- what else is there? That said, in my thesis I aim to answer the question, “how do oral history, portraits, and written testimonies function together to represent the otherwise repressed or unspeakable experiences of women survivors of trauma?”. Ultimately, I will be creating an installation in which these elements will be displayed along with tangible objects- as witnesses to trauma- in order to portray not trauma itself but rather the experiences and emotions of trauma survivors. In this literature review I delve into issues of photovoice, trauma theory, the ethics of representing trauma, and oral history.



# 1. Photo-voice and digital storytelling

The text “Portraits of Well-Being: Photography as a Mental Health Support for Women With HIV” details a study that was conducted for the purpose of assessing the potential benefits of photography and photo-sharing for 30 WL-HIV/AIDS (women living with HIV/AIDS), specifically as it affects their mental health. These women were instructed to take photographs that they felt captured their experience living with HIV/AIDS, and then they shared and discussed their photos in a large-group setting. The women also were interviewed individually with guiding questions to delve deeper into what they learned about themselves and about living with HIV/AIDS. The researchers implemented an emerging, yet little studied practice called photovoice in this project, which they called Picturing New Possibilities. Photovoice, as defined in the study, is “a public health strategy in which underserved individuals use photography and narratives to identify, record, and share their personal and community health experiences,” (Teti et al. 49). The results of the study found that this project helped improve the women’s mental health in four ways: by helping them express their emotions, providing them with a sense of empowerment, giving them tools for addressing mental distress, and by offering them a space to process past traumas (Teti et al. 51). In terms of empowerment, many women felt as though the project gave them a way to assert control over their HIV/AIDS and over their lives. They were able to locate this control visually, such as through self-portraits. One participant, Alysha, stated that the project allowed her to focus on those things that she is able to do, rather than, ““running into a brick wall all the time. It let me focus and gave me courage,”” (Teti et al. 52). When it came to expressing emotions through the project, many participants felt that photography helped them not only express their emotions but also recognize that their emotions mattered. One participant, Toni, said that, “[Taking pictures] was less inhibiting than talking because it’s taking the picture of the way you feel at that particular time. Photography is another way to talk,”” (Teti et al. 53).



The project helped women address distress in a few ways. For one, photography itself served as a way for many participants to blow off steam; it was a fun new hobby with which to engage. Some women photographed things that made them feel happy or good about themselves to serve as reminders of happiness and positive self-image in the future. Additionally, some women photographed things that made them feel supported and positive about things that they had control over, rather than focusing on the things they did not have control over. Photography, in this case, served as a coping strategy for women to deal with mental stressors. Lastly, this project helped its participants process trauma by allowing them to work through grief and loss, as well as reflecting on past abuse or other trauma in order to move on or “let go of ‘bitterness’,” as one participant said (Teti et al. 55). The researchers point out that women living with HIV/AIDS have often had numerous traumatic events throughout their lives with which they are not granted the space, tools, or understanding to process themselves. In other words, women were granted another way to express and process trauma that may otherwise be difficult to speak about for one reason or another. As the text says, “pictures and discussions allowed women to recreate and release past traumas and grow,” (Teti et al. 56).

This text makes me think about many aspects of my thesis regarding the ways in which this work may function for myself and the other participants and also regarding my methodology for the project itself. This project makes me consider a few approaches to my thesis that I hadn't previously considered. The participants in this study were not instructed specifically to take photographs of trauma or with the purpose of expressing their story as WL-HIV/AIDS. That said, many of them photographed aspects of their lives that made them feel happy, reminded them of their worth, or that made them feel empowered and in control. While the researchers acknowledge that this could have been a limitation of the study, I believe that it might be beneficial for myself and for the other women participating in my thesis to also attempt to photograph other valuable aspects of our lives over which we have control and that make us feel happy or positively about our self-esteem, despite living with trauma. As I intend to bring to fruition experiences and emotions that surround trauma, I think it would be a limitation to neglect those positive aspects in our lives that help us get through the day.



Another fundamental part of this study is the researchers' inclusion of a group discussion with all of the participants during which they were able to share and discuss their photos and the process of meaning-making through the project. I hadn't really considered having a group discussion like the one facilitated in the study, but based on this research I think it may be useful for each of the participants' understanding of one another's photos, as well as of our own photos, and regarding the work that my thesis will be doing. It was in these discussions that the words 'empowerment' and 'trauma' were used by the participants themselves, and I believe that letting my participants speak for their own experiences- both in the photo-making process and as they are depicted in the photos, texts, and oral histories- is incredibly crucial and beneficial for both the installation and my written discussion and analysis of the thesis.

This text also helps me consider some of the limitations that my project may have. Although my thesis isn't really intended to focus on the therapeutic aspects of representation and expression through photographs or photovoice, I do think that it is important to acknowledge in my written work that this thesis, much like the study conducted in this text, relies on the willingness and comfort of the women in sharing their experiences living with trauma. This comfort and willingness have and will definitely influence the work that we are producing, and that shouldn't go without saying, as the thesis would turn out considerably differently if I didn't have the relationships with the women that I have or if the women were less comfortable having their identities or experiences shared.

Lastly, I want to point out some important ways in which this text further reinforces my thesis. The text states the four ways in which the mental health of WL-HIV/AIDS benefited from this project namely through enabling and encouraging empowerment, distress tolerance, emotion expression, and trauma processing. These are all conclusions that I believe may be found in my work with my participants, though our conclusions will vary somewhat due to the differences in methodology and focus. Additionally, this text points out the importance of accessibility for the women participating, as many women in the study "may have been able to reflect, think critically, and communicate more effectively with pictures than they would have through words alone," (Teti et al. 57). Accessibility is something to which I've given a lot of thought as my thesis takes shape, as I believe that photography may serve as a medium which enables women to express certain aspects of experiences which are often unspeakable or repressed under other circumstances.



Lynne Duffy's article entitled "'Step-by-Step We are Stronger': Women's Empowerment Through Photovoice" details the method, experiences, and outcomes of using photovoice in PAR (participatory action research), specifically for a small group of women who are lone mothers of lower socioeconomic status. The article discusses the research method, various definitions of empowerment, and the statements of the women from the study, as their words indicate their experiences and notions of empowerment (Duffy 105). This text overlaps a great deal with another source I am using entitled "Portraits of Well-Being: Photography as a Mental Health Support for Women With HIV", which also involves the use of photovoice to explore the benefits of empowerment through this participatory method for the health of marginalized women. That said, Duffy delves deeper into a brief history of photovoice and the key elements of and ideals behind the method, specifically with reference to health and women. She also highlights the importance in understanding the complicated notion of empowerment and the importance of the term being defined and understood by the participants/coresearchers. That said, this text serves to help me further understand photovoice and how photography may be used for the empowerment of women, which is fundamental for my own work.

While my thesis is not specifically focused on photovoice, I am learning a great deal about the methodology and ideology behind this research method, as I believe it has and will continue to be instructive and enlightening for my own methodology and understanding of the context within which my own work functions. Duffy emphasizes participation as being crucial for photovoice and empowerment. She refers to the participants in the research as participant/coresearchers and refers to herself as researcher/facilitator. While this may seem like a small detail, this way of naming the participants as coresearchers reiterates the importance of the women in making this work possible and in enabling themselves to experience and define empowerment, as well as name other issues they face and work to change these issues. I intend to use similar terminology in my own work, as the other participants are certainly coresearchers and will be participating in creating the content of the photographs, text, and oral history, as well as making photos for their own narratives and for the narratives of one another.



Duffy also draws on other sources to assert her point that complicated notions such as empowerment need to be brought up and defined by the coresearchers. She explains that while definitions vary according to whether empowerment is a process or an outcome, whether empowerment is defined by this or that key factor, etc., the common theme among researchers and scholarship in this field is that empowerment should come about through the active participation of the participants/coresearchers. Our job as facilitators and researchers is not to enable women but rather to facilitate a supportive and education environment in which women may enable themselves. In my work- as in the work Duffy describes- I want to ensure that I am helping my coresearchers utilize an artistic and alternative outlet for naming their own experiences relative to trauma and illustrate those experiences in the features of the installation. This text has further encouraged me to narrow down and define certain words as terminology in my work in a group discussion with the other women coresearchers. I think that this will make the work more genuine to each of our individual experiences as well as to our collective experience, while also acknowledging that my thesis is simply a case study that refers to a small group of women and is not to represent all experiences of women as they relate to trauma.

Duffy states that photovoice is rooted in feminist theory, Paulo Freire's principles for critical education, and documentary photography (Duffy 106). Though these areas of study vary in many critical ways, they each influence key principles in photovoice, which she names "(a) the recognition of powerlessness of marginalized peoples that can result from lack of participation; (b) the questioning of accepted sources of expertise and knowledge; and the (c) importance of diverse perspectives for effective social change," (Duffy 106). These elements are crucial in informing my research and methodology in that I am required to constantly be thinking about the power dynamics between myself and the other participants/coresearchers, as well as the power dynamics that exist within our immediate and broad social context as I am engaging in this work. It is also clear that in photovoice, an ultimate goal is to promote direct personal, social, and community change in the lives of the women. This makes me ponder whether it may be valuable for me to incorporate community engagement with the other coresearchers into my thesis, or at least continue this kind of work and community engagement after I have defended my thesis. It is this kind of public engagement that Duffy illustrates through women's quotes regarding their experiences that truly made a long-lasting difference in their feelings of empowerment and self-esteem.



Núñez-Janes and Franco detail in their chapter “IamWe: Digital Storytelling, Personal Journeys, and Praxis” from the book entitled *Deep Stories* a program called IamWe that involves the incorporation of digital storytelling into the curriculum for high school youth. While there are multiple outcomes noted by the researchers with regard to this program, this particular chapter details the impact of digital storytelling on personal growth for the youth participants of IamWe. The digital storytelling in this program refers to the foundation and sharing of “a series of activities that helped youth construct meaning and facilitate multiple border crossings or “personal journeys” that encouraged trust and empathy among the youth,” (Núñez-Janes and Franco 99). The authors found that digital storytelling fostered personal growth by promoting trust, encouraging students to be less judgmental, and by fostering personal journeys through dialogic encounters.

I chose this text for my research, because I am interested in the larger contexts within which photographic narratives may exist, one of which is digital storytelling. Though this text refers to a program that focuses heavily on digital storytelling in an educational setting, I still find the function of this program to be very enlightening for my own work with young women and trauma. Digital storytelling will likely not be one of my key terms for my thesis, but I know that as a possible avenue for digital storytelling photography can be used as a tool to accomplish similar feats as in the IamWe program. It will be interesting to compare the outcomes of my work to those delineated in this text.

That said, this text has also further narrowed down the areas within which I want to research. This work, while informative regarding the possible functionality of digital storytelling, has very little description of how the youth’s stories were told through the media. Additionally, many of the youth seem to be impacted more by the process of sharing their stories with one another in trust-exercises and in the ‘share-circle’ prior to creating their digital stories than by the digital stories themselves. However, the author’s do mention that for many of the students, counter-narratives were supported for marginalized communities where their stories would otherwise not be prioritized or heard at all. Therefore, this chapter has been helpful not only in that it illustrates a piece of the larger context of digital storytelling but also in that it helped me to realize that I would like my work to have a much different trajectory than that of this text.



## 2. Trauma Theory

“Trauma and Other Historians: An Introduction”, an article written Yoav Di-Capua, addresses the emergence of Trauma Studies as a field, as well as various problems with the field’s approach and application to traumatic events. Di-Capua defines trauma as “a chronic inability to access and process catastrophic events, that is, as a systematic and haunting blockage of memory formation and reclamation of past experiences,” (Di-Capua 1). He uses that definition to focus his analysis on the Trauma Studies’ emphasis on memory and representation. One ethical concern the author attributes to Trauma Studies is the potential for transference, in which the trauma is simply made to be reenacted by the narrator, rather than worked through- working through being the ultimate goal of endeavors within the field (Di-Capua 4-5). That said, the major critique of Trauma Studies is that the “psychoanalytic origins of Trauma Studies are essentially European and as such are structurally inapplicable to non-Western societies,” (Di-Capua 7). He suggests that instead Trauma Studies should operate through a lens that views the relation of the past as one of survival rather than therapeutic. Di-Capua expounds upon this with numerous examples of how trauma has shown itself in tragic events around the world throughout history. In his conclusion, he states that Trauma Studies should focus on the idea that trauma and history are necessarily connected, rather than the idea that Trauma Studies can be applied to this history.

This text provides an important account regarding the field of Trauma Studies, which is vital to my understanding of what has been done in this body of work and what has yet to be accomplished. Additionally, the criticisms brought about in the analysis add to the various ethical concerns I need to be aware of in my research and creative work. Di-Capua delineates several examples of the ways in which trauma may be represented and historicized, which I believe will be helpful as I engage with the narratives I will be creating and representing within a particular context. This text does not provide much insight into the function of trauma at the level of individuals, which was likely not the author’s aim. However, this is something that I wish to investigate, as I believe that the principles Di-Capua presents regarding trauma and Trauma Studies can be applied at the level of the individual.



One source I discovered in my research entitled “Social theory and trauma” written by Ron Eyerman delves into the personal and collective trauma reflected in three texts: Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*, Bauman’s *Modernity and the Holocaust*, and Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Eyerman highlights not only the personal and collective trauma expressed by these social theorists but also the cultural trauma indicative into their work. Eyerman ultimately defines cultural trauma as “an emotionally charged meaning struggle over the foundations of collective identity in which perpetrators and victims are names and the past as collective memory is re-narrated as it is worked through,” (Eyerman 48). He reiterates throughout his analysis of the texts that cultural trauma is notably different from personal and collective trauma in that it involves the undermining of taken for-granted belief systems and structures that govern a culture’s ordinary way of life. This text contributes some valuable insight into trauma theory that is beneficial for my thesis, but it also serves as an example of writing from which I will likely stray away in my work, which I will explain.

While Eyerman’s discussion of trauma is captivating and helpful in my understanding of how trauma may show itself in many ways through creative personal or collective works, I do not wish to emulate the focus on this text in my thesis. While I will obviously be theorizing about trauma itself and how it manifests in the creative work by myself and the other women, I will not be speculating about the trauma experienced and expressed by myself or my coresearches/participants, as Eyerman does with the authors he references. I feel that this would be ineffective in supporting my thesis, which centers around the representation of trauma more so than the traumas themselves. Additionally, because I am taking a more participatory approach to my creative and written work, I will be relying not solely on my own understanding of how others’ trauma might be represented but also on how the women themselves understand their experiences surrounding trauma to be represented.



The chapter entitled “The Photographic Message” in Barthes’ *Image, Music, Text* details the denoted and connoted messages that exist, or rather are attributed, to the photograph, specifically the press photograph. Barthes describes how the photograph differs from other art forms in that the photograph itself supposedly replicates reality at its simplest level of meaning- in denotative form. The photograph also then has many ways in which its meaning can be connoted, namely through the altering or structuring of reality which the photo replicates or through the altering of the photograph post-photographing of the subject. In addition to illustrating these connotative procedures, Barthes also delves into the relationship between image and text with regard to photography. He states that the text acts as a parasite to the image, either adding something to the meaning which does not exist within the image or contradicting the meaning conveyed by the image alone. In his conclusion of the chapter, Barthes discusses that the only instance in which a photograph can be purely denotative is “at the level of absolutely traumatic images” (Barthes 30). He states, “the trauma is the suspension of language, a blocking of meaning,” (Barthes 30). In capturing trauma, photography is in this way ‘insignificant’, in that it does not signify trauma that cannot be put into language.

This chapter is incredibly valuable for my thesis work, in that it provides me with the language to describe the specific terms relevant in my project, and it brings to light a new framework for thinking about the kind of work I am doing with the pairing of photography, text, and oral history. Barthes’ understanding of how a message is formed in photography influences how I think about meaning-making in my own work. Barthes writes that messages are formed by three aspects: a source of emission, a channel of transmission, and a point of reception. In my work, the source of emission would be the people taking the photographs, speaking, or writing. The channel of transmission would be the work that I produce, namely the installation in which the photos, texts, and recordings will be displayed. Lastly, the point of reception would refer to those who consume my work as it is on display in the installation. It is important for me to understand how this message is produced at these levels in my work, because it allows me to think more deeply about how meaning is being created or attributed to the work at each of these levels. This information also begs the question that I have been struggling the most with: which of these three points at which meaning may be made do I want to cater to? Should I be thinking about how to make the work most genuine to the message expressed at the source of emission? Or should I focus more specifically on portraying my work in a way that is most likely to evoke a message in the point of reference that is most similar to the message expressed at the source of emission?



Further, understanding Barthes' notions of denotative and connotative meaning complicate these three sites of meaning making for my work, especially in the context of this chapter with regard to the photos themselves. Barthes initially states that the photograph takes the denotative form, which we learn only truly can be applied to the trauma photograph. This denotative form would represent reality as it is. It is the connotative messages that are then applied to this reality in the photograph or to the photograph itself to add or change the photo's meaning(s). The first three connotative procedures- those which alter the reality depicted in the photo- are trick effects, pose, and objects. The other three connotative procedures refer to those alterations or additions to the photograph itself, and they are photogenia, aestheticism, and syntax. Barthes explains how each of these procedures may affect the connoted meaning of a photograph, and I believe that this information will help guide me to understand how certain choices in style and content of the photographs I make will influence the messages that are being conveyed- both from the standpoint of the subjects and my own intention and from the viewpoint of the viewer of the work.

As I stated before, Barthes explains the relationship between text and photograph as a parasitic one. This parasitic relationship is interesting for me to ponder in furthering my work, as I have struggled with how I would like the text and images to interact with one another. Barthes seems to state that the text is necessarily used to explain the photograph, specifically with reference to titles and captions. In this case, the image is often treated as neutral and objective. That said, Barthes points out that when an image is paired with an article, the article seems to acquire a sort of distance from the text. The photograph, as something that is believed to be factual, "innocents" the text, as Barthes says (Barthes 26). I want to challenge these ideas in my work, as I play with text length, positioning, sequencing, and style in relationships to the photographs I display simultaneously.

I would also like to play with Barthes' notion that pure denotative meaning can only be found in the traumatic photograph. When Barthes says a photograph is traumatic, he seems to be referring to the content of the photograph itself as the trauma. He states that "the more direct the trauma, the more difficult is connotation" (Barthes 31). But what does direct trauma look like? How does this direct trauma stand in the way of language in ways that other photographs do not? I intend to research more about Barthes' understanding of trauma and traumatic images, but until then I will propose this question in light of his ideology: if trauma is depicted in photographs, texts, and oral storytelling, so that each of these messages may stand alone while also interacting with one another, can the traumatic content permeate barriers of the unspeakable nature of trauma to transmit a message that is genuine to the subject's experience and transmittable to the viewer?



# 3. Ethics of Representation

In the chapter entitled “Forms of Ordering: Trauma, Narrative and Ethics”, which appears in *Storytelling and Ethics*, author Eaglestone fosters a critical lens for pondering the question of ethical storytelling in trauma theory. Eaglestone mainly focuses his analysis on the question of ordering in storytelling and how this ordering has been appealed to for the validation or invalidation of a traumatic narratives’ ethical status. He argues that while order has a multitude of meanings and implications, it still serves as the governing force for our understanding of what makes a story. That said, he notes that there are often two schools of thought for understanding the order of life’s stories: one that emphasizes the completeness and roundness of a story and one that emphasizes the jagged and incompleteness of a story (Eaglestone 61-2). Stories of trauma, he argues, exist, in some capacity, as jagged and incomplete by nature. The ethical matter in this situation then refers to the issue of identification with the characters in the story. Eaglestone explains that we should in fact be concerned with these jagged stories with which we cannot identify; these are the stories that will tell us something vital about the ethics of trauma theory and retelling (Eaglestone 64-5).

This text provides me with an interesting theoretical perspective through which to view trauma studies and storytelling, particularly as it pertains to ethics. I am concerned with the ethical aspects of my thesis, and I believe that work such as this will help me narrow down certain questions to keep in mind regarding the ethics in my work. The notion that the ethical status of a particular work revolves around identification with the subjects is particularly interesting to me. To what degree should I and the other participants/coresearchers be concerned with facilitating a kind of identification for the viewer with the various texts presented? This is just one question that this text makes me consider. That in mind, because this text is so theoretical, it does not really provide me with many practical ethical concerns for traumatic storytelling, so I will need to look elsewhere for this information. It is also fairly reliant on other theoretical sources and requires the reader to have a foundational knowledge of trauma theory, which I would like to avoid in my writing.



The final chapter “Conclusion” of Schönfelder’s book entitled *Wounds and Words: Childhood and Family Trauma in Romantic and Postmodern Fiction* demonstrates the differences between Romantic and postmodern representations of trauma in literature. Each of the texts the author draws from concern trauma that occurs in childhood, particularly as it deals with the family and the home. Most notable of the differences between these two periods of literature are the changes in representing narrative and memory, as well as the manifestation of trauma in the body. Ultimately, Schönfelder writes that Romantic literature emphasizes the pathology of trauma, and often represents the survivor as being traumatized past the point of healing. On the other hand, she describes postmodern literature as having more of an emphasis on the survivor and the potential for self-saving and ‘working through’ trauma, rather than focusing its energy on the trauma itself. This text also discusses some of the ethical concerns with representing trauma in literary text, as trauma necessitates innumerable contradictions that make it incredibly difficult to represent effectively and ethically.

This chapter presents captivating information regarding the representation of trauma in literature. This content is beneficial for both my work in representing trauma through creative work, specifically in the context of written texts by trauma survivors. Many of the ethical concerns and contradictions pointed out by the author, such as ensuring that one is not appropriating or instrumentalizing another’s pain, are extremely relevant to my thesis and will be very challenging as I try to combine the elements of my project. I would have liked this text to speak more to the experience of the reader in viewing these texts and relating to trauma, which the author touches on briefly, as I think that this is vital to determining the effectiveness of the text in representing trauma ethically. However, I plan to focus on the intended experience of the viewer as well as the subjects, of course, to glean a further understanding of this relationship and the issue of representation through creative works.



# 4. Oral History

The article entitled “Oral History” found in *The Journal of Library History* (1966-1972) briefly describes oral history as a research method in Great Britain and the United States in order to then delineate the function and definition of the term with reference to its application in a study on the United Steelworkers of America. This text defines oral history via the Oral History Association as “a method of gathering a body of historical information in oral form usually on tape,” (Fry and Hoffman 285). The authors write that oral history functions as a primary source that may provide insight into the experiences, knowledge, and opinions of those ordinary people who possess a valuable viewpoint on certain historical matters, which written primary sources, for example, may not accomplish. The appendix at the end of this source contains a list of guidelines for the interviewer, interviewee, and sponsoring institutions for oral histories. This in itself is incredibly useful to have access to, as I will be engaging in oral history for my thesis.

This text is helpful in informing me a bit about why and how oral history began to be used for research. The authors do not go very in-depth on this matter, but they are informative enough to help me gain a foundation for the practice. Additionally, this text goes into more detail regarding the methodology for oral history and the reasoning behind this methodology, which is very valuable in my understanding and incorporation of the practice in my own work. That said, this is an older text, and I will need to do a bit more research into how oral history practices have changed throughout its application and across various areas of study. This text also focuses more on oral history as it can be used for the purposes of gaining a better understanding of a particular historical context; however, it does not focus on what these oral histories may accomplish for the participants themselves in sharing their personal histories. I will have to tailor my research on oral history to issues of trauma and narrative to see how it may be structured for work more in line with my own.



Author Sloan's article entitled "Oral History and Hurricane Katrina: Reflections on Shouts and Silences" illustrates a study done by the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage at the University of Southern Mississippi (USM) using oral history to document the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in southern Mississippi. This article highlights both the importance of and concerns with conducting oral history shortly after a traumatic event. Sloan describes how there was a tremendous amount of media coverage about the storm and its effects, yet there was little opportunity provided for individuals to share and reflect upon their own experiences with the tragedy- hence the importance of conducting oral history. Through oral history, the emphasis is on the ordinary individual who has been through a traumatic event, and conducting this oral history soon after the event can help an individual process what they have been through. That said, the author acknowledges that in conducting an oral history so soon after the event has occurred, one risks 'discounting loss and compounding grief', which is crucial to take into account (Sloan 178). Additionally, the memories and understanding of events are still being constructed in the minds of the individuals, and the emotions are incredibly raw. However, this also means that these emotions and experiences may be conveyed and validated before any all-encompassing narrative regarding the event becomes solidified.

Ultimately, this text provides me with great insight into what oral history can accomplish in the face of trauma, especially as it pertains to providing the survivor a place to share their voice. As Sloan states, "Oral history and recovery can connect, offering those impacted, who have had stories told about them, to tell their experience in their own words," (Sloan 184), and I think that this is incredibly relevant in my own work in the recording and sharing of the stories of women survivors of trauma. This article not only provides me with evidence that oral history may be a crucial component in processing trauma and allowing for repressed narratives to shine through, but it also provides me with more insight into the ethical concerns with conducting oral history, which is very helpful. That said, this article quotes very few accounts of survivors and does not really address how survivors felt that oral history affected their experiences and memory. This is likely due to the closeness to the event within which these interviews were conducted, whereas my interviews will likely have more historical distance from the events discussed. I will also be focusing less on how oral history is crucial to the larger historical narrative and more on how the individuals' accounts are valid and important in themselves and that these experiences and emotions alone have value in being represented and remembered.



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