

Healing Trauma with Art and the Affective Turn

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ABSTRACT

Trauma lives in the body and is passed on unless it is confronted, creating an opportunity for the body to heal. Art in education spaces can provide opportunities for such healing because of the body's spontaneous response to art. If we can learn to sit in the pain, shame, fear, and deeply personal responses that trouble the body, the body becomes a tool for listening, learning, healing, and growing. By applying affect theory to art, we are able to access difficult content and open up discourse around self-love, community building, and restitution. This pivot point, the affective turn, is the moment when healing emerges.

KEYWORDS: Affective turn, systemic racism, difficult knowledge, healing

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Educators deal with trauma every day. Students bring trauma from home, from communities, and from everyday pervasive systemic inequities into the classroom. Active-shooter drills in schools are the norm, and mass shootings in schools are no longer thought in terms of if but when. Students and teachers must handle these occurrences subjectively, tasking teachers with the responsibility of pushing through embodied traumas in order to educate. Education systems look to state standards and standardized tests to measure students' learning acuity as a means to quantify success, further suppressing and compounding students' lived experiences. I propose a means of addressing trauma, both in students' lives and in what and how they are learning, and disrupting trauma's inevitable cyclical patterns by implementing arts-based curriculum taught through the lens of affect theory. Building on the notion that trauma lives in the body and is passed on to others through the body, listening to how the body responds may provide key moments of learning and opportunities to absorb information, which can generate possibilities for new ways of understanding and learning. Pedagogy that confronts historical trauma by acknowledging and accepting it provides opportunities for healing, growth, and learning. Art provides a means to access challenging topics, such as systemic racial injustices (Lee, 2013). A person's reaction to art can be visceral and spontaneous, but the viewer does not always understand to what s/he is responding.

Teaching difficult knowledges through art helps students move into and beyond these uncomfortable moments. In Lee's work confronting racial biases through art education, she shows how engaging with art helps slow down discourse, absorb pain, and allow for process, making space for the trauma reactions to disperse from within the body into productive, external expression. This paper explores ways an arts-based pedagogy, centering embodied experiences can facilitate learning about, understanding, and healing from race-based traumas (Hickey-Moody, 2013; Zembylas, 2014).

Affect Theory and Difficult Knowledges

Affect is the reaction to material representation (Zembylas, 2014). The interior response can be a subtle flicker of memory, but it can also be a triggered response that brings the past into the present (Sharpe, 2016). Zembylas (2014) considers affect within the context of curriculum as a tool educators might use to open up space for different epistemologies. When teaching and learning painful histories, what Zembylas refers to as difficult knowledges, affective responses can feel overwhelming. He states, "difficult knowledge is difficult not only because of the traumatic content of knowledge, but also because the learner's encounter with the content is deeply unsettling" (p. 393). If we understand and accept how the body receives and processes these knowledges, approaching historical traumas through the affective lens can be a pedagogical tool. Arts-based pedagogy is the vehicle through which difficult knowledges can be taught because, whether making art or discussing it, art elicits affective responses (Hickey-Moody, 2013).

Difficult Knowledges of Systemic Racism

On August 9, 2014, in Ferguson, Missouri, police officer Darren Wilson shot a Black teenager named Michael Brown six times. After the killing, Brown's body was left in the middle of the road in the summer sun for four and a half hours (Lowery, 2016). Lowery called attention to this fact as further traumatizing the majority Black population of Ferguson, harkening back to the days of lynchings, when dead bodies would be left to rot as a reminder to Black citizens that they were not free. Eyewitness accounts claimed that Brown put his hands in the air, showing that he was unarmed and did not pose a threat. The rallying cry against police violence became "*Hands up, don't shoot!*" (p. 28). The shooting and disregard for Michael Brown's body unearthed long-simmering tensions of Ferguson citizens, who felt the police continually harassed and abused them. Though perspectives differ on what, why, and how events unfolded, for four days protesters and police clashed in the streets of Ferguson, the police using military force to quell the rage fueled by centuries of violence and injustice against Black bodies.

The body is the vessel that contains these patterns, the vehicle through which trauma cycles pass. Michael Brown was killed and his body left on display. Prior to being shot, he put his hands up to submit his body. “The disaster of Black subjection was and is planned; terror is disaster and ‘terror has a history’” (Youngquist as cited in Sharpe, p. 5). When Brown’s body was left in the streets, Lowery (2016) referenced lynchings in his writings, the form of racial terrorism that attempted to control Black bodies for close to a century after the period of Reconstruction ended. This deeply symbolic, historical act by Ferguson police fanned the flames of unrest in the city streets, and for four days militarized police tried to regain control over the pain wrought by the senseless death of a teenaged boy. Watching this unrest unfold marked a turning point for me. It was the first time I realized the protesters’ rage was a manifestation of ongoing systemic racial trauma, a pain that had been embodied for four-hundred years was thrashing at the center of this unrest.

As a white woman, I had leaned on my privilege, never truly considering the sustained emotional impact of racism and racial exclusion. Spillane (2015) refers to white positioning as the point of power around which all other racial categories are constructed. This positioning must be exposed in order for all of us to heal and grow. Michael Brown’s death moved my thinking away from passive knowledge towards critical examination and a new understanding: the past is constantly influencing the present, the present constantly bound to the past. Sharpe (2016) refers to this phenomenon as the wake, which she describes as the continued consequences of “chattel slavery” (p. 2). The wake is the water churned behind a ship at sea. Sharpe is referencing the ships moving across the Middle Passage, a name given to the route of ships transporting enslaved Africans from West African Coast to North America (Cohn & Jensen, 1982). The wake is the lingering evidence of a ship’s passing. Once the ship is gone, the wake continues to expand outwards. Even though the past is gone, it still informs the present. Sharpe observes that the democratic land on which we walk is covered with legally sanctioned deaths of Black and Brown bodies. How does one exist in space with that difficult knowledge? Instead of denying, ignoring, or tiptoeing around them, how can we step into these histories that belong to all of us?

It is impossible to see trauma patterns if there is no context through which to ground them. For six years I worked as an educator and teaching artist at the New-York Historical Society, where I was exposed to topics and programs like Slavery in New York and the Chinese Exclusion Act. Prior to working there, I had not known of slavery in New York or Chinese exclusion. Being able to introduce these painful periods to school groups through artwork made it

easier to teach and learn these histories. The material I was absorbing during my time at the museum began to synthesize and become a new epistemology. Zembylas (2014) suggests the artifact itself, in this context an art piece, cannot perfectly represent the difficult knowledge. Pedagogy can be enacted when the body responds to the artifact. We may find ourselves wishing to turn away or towards the artwork, to step in or step back. Do we feel compassion for our response or for how others respond? As a museum educator, I was starting to understand that when we use art to center a pedagogical discourse, the art becomes the focus, absorbing some of these unsettling feelings. While working at the museum, I had opportunities to sit with multi-media artworks and to continually examine them through the eyes of visiting students. Together we were in conversation around difficult knowledges, learning stories that were rarely told in classrooms with the hope that students would begin to embody an understanding of this country's painful legacies.

Reclaiming the Body through Art as an Act of Love

In her chapter on Eros in *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks (1994) writes about the revelation of internalized self-love that can occur when addressing difficult knowledges of race and racism in academic settings. For hooks eros is removed from its sexualized connotations, becoming an energy of excitement that can ignite passions for knowing and actualizing new epistemologies. When one of her students, who is so deeply moved by the course work around Black women writers, goes through a sea change, coming to love her Blackness and confessing this new-found self-love to her classmates, hooks is initially uncomfortable. She brings herself to critically examine her discomfort, and, in time, understands the affect of the student's transformation. The student had moved into a "critical consciousness that empowers" (p. 196), but hooks was stuck in the "disembodied [spirit]" world of academia. She states, "I witnessed the way education for critical consciousness can fundamentally alter our perceptions of reality and our actions" (p. 195). She sees the power in this student's actions, the defiant act of embodied love. Hooks was able to reckon with her discomfort and learn from it. Discourse around art that creates discomfort through how it challenges dominant narratives can bring us into the process of becoming (Hickey-Moody, 2013).

When developing critical consciousness as an awakening, I immediately think of Nona Faustine's ongoing "White Shoes" photography series as an example of affective growth. The artist uses her nude body as an historical marker on sites in New York City that were impacted by slavery. In the photograph *From Her Body Sprang the Greatest Wealth* (Figure 1), Faustine connects her enslaved ancestry with her present home city, wearing the genetic and topographical

pain of these histories in her body.



"From Her Body Sprang Their Greatest Wealth" 2013

Figure 1. *From Her Body Sprang the Greatest Wealth* 2013, by Nona Faustine

By choosing to pose nude at the site of one of New York City's former slave markets, she is inverting the original intention of slavers, who forced the people they were selling to stand naked and display their physical prowess. The pain of the past is felt in Faustine's expression, but her stance is a declaration of her existence. The choices she makes feel like profound acts of self-love and push critical discourse onto the stories held by the land on which we stand. The vulnerability in her countenance and stance as she lays bare her body to communicate the truths of New York City's past is an unparalleled act of bravery. "To call attention to the body is to betray the legacy of repression and denial that has been handed down to us by our professorial elders, who have usually been white and male" (hooks, p. 191). The provocative choice to pose nude serves a pedagogical purpose, generating new ways of being in the self and claiming spaces, metaphorically and historically. Faustine's artistic choices confront difficult knowledges around racism and force the actualization of traumas buried in the land. The objectification and subjugation of Black women's bodies continues to be a part of this country's traumatic landscape. Faustine's body, poised on an auction block with hands bound by shackles, speaks of White rape, commerce, industry,

and fertility, all of the ways Black women's bodies have been used for white profit. New York City's slave market was located at this site, but only a small plaque recognizes this fact. The viewer's affective response to Faustine's body posed in front of tall buildings and a moving yellow cab resituates history by bringing the past into the present. Sharpe (2016) makes a claim similar to hooks's "disembodied [spirit]" (p. 196). To teach Black history in academia is to contort pain into a dispassionate rendering. To directly confront history, "We must become undisciplined. The work we do requires new modes and methods of research and teaching" (p. 13). Faustine creates impassioned opportunities to learn and embody the truth. We are able to heal from the shame and pain when we step into these truths.

Acknowledging Past Traumas to Heal Communities

Part of the resistance to confronting trauma is not knowing what is on the other side of the pain. According to Berg (2018), the past is not in the past; historical trauma exists in the present and will become a part of the future. She states, "Part of the challenge is . . . collectively taking responsibility for the way things are and of imagining how they might become" (p. 7). The uncertainty of the future creates a longing for the past, rooting traumas deeper into the landscape. After World War I, lynchings and white mob violence spurred the Great Migration of Black Americans from the South to the North. They had to physically move their bodies to protect themselves from racial terrorism. Bryan Stevenson and the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) have forced conversation about this chapter of United States history through EJI's Community Remembrance Project (2019).

EJI leads a national campaign to honor victims of racial lynchings. With the support of EJI, community outreach projects are leading soil collection ceremonies and placing historical markers at lynching sites, including family and descendants of the victims in the ceremonies. The EJI offices in Montgomery, Alabama, have a wall dedicated to these jars of soil, over 300 jars of trauma. In December 2016, when I visited the office, a staff member led me to the room where the commemorative soil was on display (Figure 2). I anticipated being moved and upset, but I did not expect the sense of awe that swept over me when I saw the containers of soil, a beautiful display of reds, greens, greys, browns, and deep black marking almost a century of racial terrorism. The room creates the time and space to feel, but it is the opportunity that is presented beyond that room that allows for healing from the weight of truth when connecting the jars of soil to the lives they represent.



Figure 2. *Soil Collected for the EJI Community Remembrance Project*
Photograph taken by the author

If one is interested in participating in soil collection, EJI has a form on their website. One question asks if you would like to be contacted by other community members in your region who are also interested in honoring lynching victims. I filled out the form for Leon County, Florida, and within a few days, was put in touch with a woman who is part of the Tallahassee Community Remembrance Project. Through my correspondence with her, I learned of several other participants who have been trying to get historical markers placed at the site of the former Leon County Jail, from where two of the victims had been taken by a mob and lynched. Together we can work on establishing memorial sites for the descendants of the men and acknowledge the trauma, making room for healing and growth. The affective state, in this case, is the feeling-thinking state of knowing that the past is with you in the present and will, inevitably, impact the future. Through citing Barad, Berg (2018) considers affect in relationship to time as “it is not that the future and past are not ‘there’ and never sit still, but that the present is not simply here-now. . . Past, present, and future’ are not linearly laid out ‘but threaded through one another’” (as cited in Berg, 2018, p. 8). Soil from topographies laced with terror bring the past into the present, forcing conversations about the future.

If We Embrace Affective Dissonance

A direct confrontation of historical trauma will result in affective dissonance, a reaction Zembylas (2014) defines as “negative emotions” (p. 394). In this sense, affective dissonance is the feeling-state of letting go of what seemed true and reckoning with the pain

of new knowledge that cannot be ignored. Arts-based inquiry and art making can help the body process these difficult knowledges. As these truths pass through the body, the affect is acknowledgement, and with acknowledgement comes responsibility. A performance by Shaun Leonardo is based on the dying words of a Black man named Eric Garner, killed by police officer Daniel Pantaleo who used an illegal chokehold. The piece engages in an affective dissonance time-continuum or “wake work” (Sharpe, 2016).

Eric Garner uttered “I can’t breathe” eleven times as he was being choked to death. He was killed in 2014, just a couple of weeks before Michael Brown would be shot, and his dying words “I can’t breathe” defined a people being suffocated by oppression. Artist Shaun Leonardo took that phrase and turned it into a performance piece (Figure 3).



Figure 3. *I Can't Breathe* by Shaun Leonardo (center) at Smack Mellon Gallery

I Can't Breathe (2015) looks like a self-defense workshop with the objective of protecting the body. Leonardo leads some partnered participants through a series of defensive techniques designed to keep the defending body safe while doing little damage to the offending body. The techniques culminate in a defense against the three-point chokehold, the same technique Pantaleo used on Eric Garner. Berg (2018), who wrote about *I Can't Breathe*, describes the workshop as an “embodied reflection on protection and survival” (p. 10). It is rehearsed collaboratively, allowing the participants to let go of an anticipated outcome. Leonardo forces participants and viewers into moments of profound vulnerability, where one person’s safety is in the hands of another. Zembylas (2014) says, “pedagogical encounters

with trauma can offer hope and reparation rather than being stuck in despair and the work of memorializing loss” (p. 394). With this in mind Leonardo’s performance piece is essential as a reclaiming of power, choice, and identity.

Participants, as if in a dance, are shown how to protect their bodies and their lives. They have the space to hold the injustice of Garner’s death through the subversive act of self-defense and to allow those feelings of powerlessness and fear transition into something new, something strong. Leonardo (2015) led the performance to demonstrate new ways of processing the embodied dissonance that comes with the pain of watching police murder an unarmed Black man. Participants experience the affective discomfort of moving through the past—when Garner’s death played on repeat in the news, serving as a reminder of those who came before him—to reconnect with the present again and to feel their vitality and value.

Leonardo teaches the participants movements that allow the trauma to pass through the body, to acknowledge the wake that continues to unfold and to introduce productive ways to acknowledge, name, and use fear. When addressing these traumas, Leonardo uses the shock of affective dissonance to shift thinking towards a productive, optimistic pedagogical turn.

Engaging the Affective Turn through Art

Witcomb (2013) visited an art exhibition that explores the genocide of Australia’s Indigenous peoples and finds herself standing in representations of difficult knowledges. Like Zembylas, she engages in this work to see if affective experiences of the body can influence critical thought. The exhibition, titled *Identity: Yours, mine, ours*, is rooted in the past that has influenced the present and creates wonder of an unknown future. By placing the visitor into a specific place and time within the exhibition, a tension arises around the history being told. Witcomb describes a room in the gallery with a map that must be stepped on in order to be viewed. By doing this she understood herself as a part of the narrative. The map creates a connection to place and past because locations of the region have two names: one indigenous and the other a result of British colonialism. These shocks helped her connect the interactive experience with the violence of the history being referenced, the affective dissonance transforming into critical thought. “The use of my own body . . . forced me to ask questions about my own position in relation to the dominant narrative . . . Suddenly the whiteness of the room only emphasized my own position as a member of the ‘settler’ and ‘migrant’ groups” (p. 260). I had a similar reaction as a participant for a performance art piece held in connection to an exhibition I co-curated around the topic of school segregation.

My past experience of teaching in a segregated school will stay with me as one of my biggest failures. At the same time, my inability to be effective led me to the path I am on now, so I will always be grateful to those students for exposing my complicity in a system I had never really been forced to question. Ten years later, when I had an opportunity to curate an exhibition at a well-known gallery in Brooklyn, I chose the topic of de-facto school segregation post *Brown V. Board of Education*. Eighteen artists participated in *Still Separate – Still Unequal*, which toured the Northeast from June 2017 – July 2019. Most of the artists were teachers, creating an authenticity we, as curators, could not have anticipated. One artist, Dominique Duroseau, presented a performance titled *A Rap on Race with Rice* (2017), an ode to a famous recorded conversation from 1971 between James Baldwin and Margaret Mead. For Duroseau’s iteration, participants discussed racism and school segregation while separating grains of white rice from grains of black rice that had been piled on the table in front of each person’s seat. Duroseau’s interpretive piece, which has since been re-created with different topics and participants, provides space for participants and viewers to experience the affective turn while engaged in the dual activities of talking and separating. For her piece, the artist gathered participants around two tables and led us in a conversation about school segregation. Participants were hand selected and wore identifier hats that, for the most part, read “Negro Quota”. My hat had the word “Default” printed across it. An audience looked on and witnessed the unpredictable conversation that would unfold.

The artist guided us through questions that defined societal and school segregation and how we interpreted these words as experiences, all while we separated grains of white rice from grains of black rice. I could feel discomfort rising in my core throughout this early process. I was physically segregating rice while in discourse about a system deeply enmeshed with segregated practices against children. The affect I was experiencing infuriated me. But as the conversation continued and the participants offered their perspectives, the sensation of powerlessness passed. I found myself speaking up about my embodied experience at the segregated school where I had taught. Zembylas (2014) writes, “learning is inextricably linked to the uncertainty and complexity that organize our affective responses to difficult knowledge” (p. 396). In this moment of having the space to be in my body and to hear from others around this issue, something in me opened up.

When I was in the classroom, I recall feeling a deep sense of shame in front of my students at the segregated Brooklyn school because they resented what my skin and privilege communicated to them, yet I had no idea how to help them move through that resentment.

Years later, in this gallery, surrounded by artworks that recognized and articulated the problem of school segregation, wearing a hat that read “Default” and segregating strands of rice, I felt grounded. I understood that my body, standing in that school in front of Brown and Black teenagers, had been reinforcing the dominant narrative. During Duroseau’s performance, I asked the participants why I had never created an opportunity for students to tell me everything they despised about my white race. I could have distributed strips of paper and pencils and had a student collect them, so that the comments remained totally anonymous. I could have read their responses and turned what they wrote into constructive curriculum. The students could have written about their everyday experiences, the depths of the racism they were confronted with every day, and what it feels like to walk through metal detectors to go to school. Participatory art and affect (Hickey-Moody, 2013) were helping me face past failures which were threading their way through this process of segregating rice. Being able to focus on the act of separating/segregating the rice absorbed the pain of the act, allowing for space to think and learn critically. Zembylas (2014) refers to “affective communities” to describe this moment of collective emotion that can move us towards shaping change. Being engaged with the art grounds the participants, keeping the focus on the rice on the table in front of us and not on each other’s embodied responses. The act of separating became a means of catharsis, as indicated in Figure 4.



Figure 4. From *A Rap on Race with Rice*, 2017, a performance by Dominique Duroseau Photographs taken by the author



Figure 5. From *A Rap on Race with Rice*, 2017, a performance by Dominique Duroseau Photographs taken by the author

To support this idea, Zembylas says, “we are enabled to theorize affects and emotions – and thus difficult knowledge – as intersections of language, desire, power, bodies, social structures, subjectivity, materiality, and trauma” (p. 399). *A Rap on Race with Rice* generates affect through a simple process of gathering strangers together to share experiences, interpretations, and ideas on school segregation. Being a part of this performance further shaped what I was learning about the power of art to move us through difficult knowledges. But affect theory can do more than move us through difficult knowledges by allowing for uncertain futures and inspiring action.

Berg (2018) asks if affective inspiration can happen in classrooms, such that students become agents of change. Whether they are participating in a performance piece or talking through an art piece that reframes historical traumas as an opportunity to embody self-love, collaborating and becoming a part of their desired futures would empower them. “To stay in the tension between ‘what is’ and ‘what is not’ is . . . a matter of being responsible for the present” (Berg, p. 14). From a pedagogical perspective, the meaning is being comfortable staying in the uncertainty of that tension, creating opportunities for change. Students use art to reflect on then the past from their present

perspectives so they may understand how to move through and past the embodied challenges of both. Within these affective communities, a true sense of agency could emerge.

Conclusion

Arts-based pedagogy applied through an affective lens can help students move through difficult knowledges. The uncomfortable embodied feelings that may occur with affect become a profound tool for teaching about historical traumas. Seigworth and Gregg (2010) note how affect may help students synthesize what they do know as their bodies begin to accept what they are coming to know. Moving through the discomfort creates possibilities for previously unimagined futures. As I grow more comfortable with discomfort, I find my curiosity about what comes next is activated. More often than not the moment of affect reveals a positive lesson, and then I am inspired to act. Zembylas (2014) articulates this as, “explorations of difficult knowledge in curriculum and pedagogy [becoming] strategic sites of ethical and political transformation that pay attention to both nonverbally articulated and embodied elements and cultural norms that are perceived corporeally” (p. 399). Art and artists provide an essential lens on individual, lived experiences through which we can learn. Art attracts its audience through looking, interpreting, seeing, participating, becoming, and each of these actions has the possibility for growth beyond affect. The place from which I apply this is through the logos that art has a job, and that job is to make us feel. Affect can guide us through that feeling response into action.

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