

Resisting Indifference Through the Brooch of Bergen Belsen

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Abstract

In this extract from, and commentary on, my master's thesis, "The Brooch of Bergen Belsen: A Journey of Historiographic Poiesis" (winning York University Department of Education Best Major Research Paper 2010), I explore a single aesthetic experience, an encounter with a small hand-made floral cloth brooch donated to the Holocaust Memorial Museum. At the start of my inquiry, I had only the object—the brooch itself—my emotional reaction to it, and the few lines of text on a curated museum card. I wondered, how do we create "spaces for remembrance" (Simon 2005) and what are the implications for teaching, learning and living in a just society? How are we accountable to Simon's (2004) demand for "non-indifference?" Arts-based research methodologies such as historiographic poiesis have allowed me to merge the scholar and artist, to engage in research as an iterative process where deeper questions engender more complex and embodied responses, and to create an aesthetic intervention: an open, dialogic text and artworks that provoke new understandings of narratives previously overlooked.

Keywords: historiographic poiesis; arts and education; aesthetic inquiry; arts and social justice; historical consciousness; remembrance

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Kate's master's thesis "The Brooch of Bergen Belsen" which included original artwork and creative writing, won the Graduate Education Major Research Prize at York. After exhibition at the Holocaust Resource Centre, Manhattan College, her artwork was donated to the Director of the Survivors' Speakers Bureau for educational purposes.

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Aesthetic inquiry allows researchers to combine intellectual investigation with emotional connection, resulting in a more holistic and integrative approach to knowledge seeking, where academic inquiry co-exists with lived experience. The arts are themselves a vehicle for complexity, ambiguity, and expressing the inexpressible. In them, recipients engage in a dialectic that allows for the courage to take action on social justice issues that, presented solely through traditional methods, can render an audience paralyzed or unmoved. The task of the arts is always to humanize the abstract, or, conversely, expand upon the so-called quantifiable and knowable, in order to open up possibilities for discussion, revelation, and awareness. Aesthetic inquiry moves us from our heads to our hearts and back. It disallows passive engagement; instead, it calls us to rise from our indifference and to dispel with merely theoretical examinations. As a researcher, I have used aesthetic inquiry, specifically historiographic poesis and art-making as inquiry, as research methodologies in both my masters and doctoral work in education. My master's thesis, sparked by an encounter with a small art object, brought to light an individual story of the Holocaust, demonstrating the power of art to not only deliver hope in times of darkness, but also in acts of historiographic poesis, as a means to try to comprehend an incomprehensible event and its implications for myself and my students in the present. I began my project unexpectedly, caught unawares in the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, on a school trip.

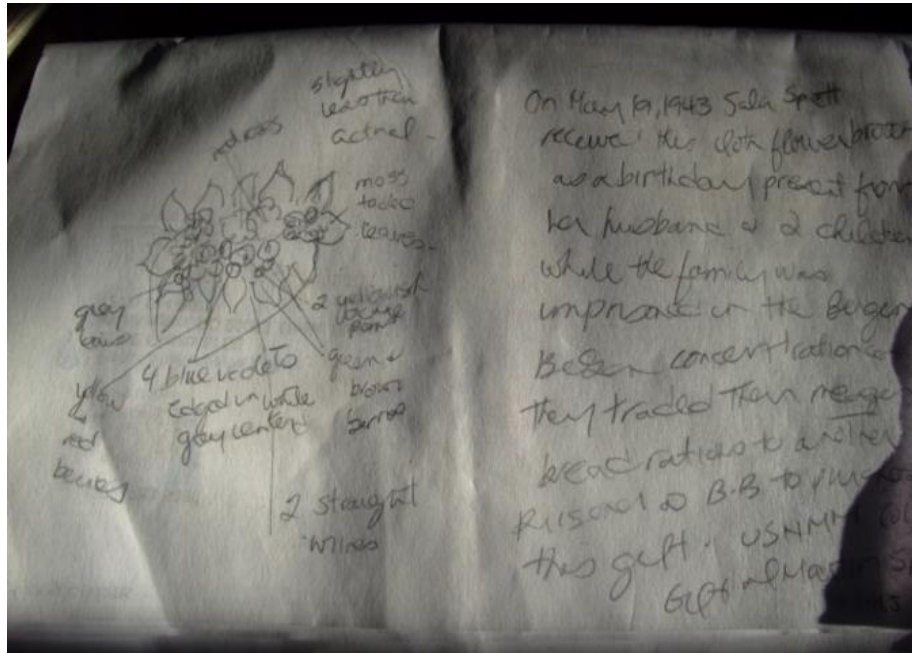
Encountering the Brooch

I lead approximately one hundred Canadian grade 11 students from Toronto along the Mall in Washington, walking in autumn sunshine that verges on the heat of summer. We are in the Holocaust Memorial Museum, an institute I have waited for, a stop I feel will be important for my research into remembrance and historical consciousness. A rather officious curator issues instructions and remonstrations. The students are respectful and only slightly restless at the lengthy preliminary instructions before being allowed to enter the site. They are, nonetheless, rambunctious teens with the energy and unpredictability of this age, with sound-bite shortened attention spans and a remarkable capacity for self-indulgence. As the educational preface drags on, they begin to push back at the edges, withdraw from their interiority or connect to their cliques in surreptitious mutterings.

Upon entering the first darkened corridor of the museum installation, however, I marvel at the change that sweeps over them. The group is uncharacteristically quiet; no, more than that: silent. They do not speak; they read, scan pictures, absorb video images. They let go of their characteristic bunchings, cliques dissolving into pairs or singles as they take their own pace. I see two girls sit quietly, gingerly, holding a printed transcript and listening to the voices of survivors tell their experience in the camps. A few others meet my eyes, shake their heads in helpless gestures, and look to me for some context but knowing none will be forthcoming, sidle away again hesitantly, eyes downwards. One or two point out something they feel I should not miss, or ask if I have seen. Some will be late for the rendezvous, and must be searched out; some writhing knots of adolescence will have already collected earlier, sprinting through horrors, unprepared to face them or willingly blind. No admonition will be given to any.

As teacher supervision is not truly needed, I drift to my own beat. It is numbing to walk through a transport car, smelling of musty wood and echoing with remembered fear, to see a clinically white scale model with step-by-step instructions on the gassing and cremation of thousands of bodies, or to look at small mounds of personal artefacts removed before the showers. But it is not the scale—I am somewhat prepared for that. It is not the numbers, the small mountains of objects,

the relentless escalation of the targets and body counts. For me, it is a small object tucked under a large black and white mural, and its small typed explanatory card, that makes me weep. I break down, tears flowing silently, with an immensity of feeling I cannot name. No cameras are allowed, so I scribble with a soft leaded pencil on a folded piece of the only paper in my purse, my School Voyageurs itinerary, trying to preserve this memory with words, and a rough sketch, and the force of my will:



Initial Sketch 2007

I have seen the most beautiful object in a place of unfathomable sadness.

It is not made of precious metal or jewels. It was not crafted by a renowned artist or discovered as a rare archaeological or anthropological finding. It is not an object of transformation. This is not a fairy tale.

It is small and easily overlooked, tucked under a huge photo mural of figures, and I almost do not notice it. It's simple to be overwhelmed in this place, to be awestruck at sheer numbers, methods, madness. At the evil that humanity can and does perpetrate on others. And it is easy to be numb. And yet...

I bend over and peer into the glass. I see four blue violets, grey centred, edged in white, that sing of spring, perched lightly in harmony with two soft crimson roses and moss-tousled leaves of summer's promise. Delicate yellow and red berries, ripe like the autumn harvest, lead to ochre mums. All wrought from soft cloth with such care. A token. A gift.

And a tiny card: "On May 19, 1943, Sala Spett received this cloth flower brooch as a birthday present from her husband and two children while the family was imprisoned in Bergen Belsen concentration camp. They traded their meagre bread rations to another prisoner to purchase this gift."

In such a place, at such a time, such a gift.

Framing a Response

And thus, my quest began, my non-indifference. My aesthetic experience, an encounter with an object, exceeded the finiteness of this object, in very profound ways. I made an immediate, strong, subjective connection of some kind, despite knowing that I could never truly identify with those who underwent this hell. Historians Sam Wineburg and Chris Lorenz (2004) locate historical understanding “between the poles of familiarity and strangeness” (p. 29), and it is this thin line that I walk. I wonder how people can connect to traumatic events of history through which they have no direct experience. And yet, somehow this is what I have been doing since the moment of seeing and perceiving this brooch. Despite my initial inarticulate emotional response, my imagination, intellect, and spirit were all engaged. As educators, we ask students to make creative investments in learning, where they must negotiate this same dichotomy. They must invest the self in the other, not subsuming one or judging the past through the lens of the present, and yet seeing the connections and implications of the past for the present and the future. How do we develop these investments in knowledge, how do we all find a glimpse of understanding in the strange yet familiar, and why is that important, both for my students and for myself?

I knew that by recording the physical details of the brooch, I was beginning a journey of investigation into memory and remembrance that would be layered in many ways. I am, in Roger Simon’s (2005) terms, “touched” by the testament of another,

a synonym for those occasions when one is ‘moved,’ when one begins to feel a range of possible psychic states in response to another's story: sorrow, shock, elation, rage. There is obviously some form of human connection...an empathic response to stories and images of other's plight, [and] this is clearly one trajectory through which an archive of narrative and images might be redeemed from its hellish construction as a set of disconnected fragments. (p. 136)

While Simon suggests that there are also other less affect-laden possibilities in dealing with the fragments of difficult history, this type of identification is one way I found myself drawn into this story, a point of connection.

Part of my task would clearly be to work with this narrative fragment and endeavour to piece together not only the story of other lives during a historically horrific event, but also to consider how to respond to the information gathered. “Much depends upon the structure of our mode of attention, on how we audience the stories and images that come before us. For the onlooker does not simply encounter testaments that speak for themselves” (Simon, 2005, p. 138). How will I be able to construct meaning out of mere splinters of record, places, times, events, and customs that are foreign to my experience? As the Irish poet, Eavan Boland (1995) writes, “the way to the past is never smooth...Every step towards an origin is also an advance towards a silence” (p. 254). The voices of ghosts of the past and those living in the present call out for remembrance. What might I pay attention to or disregard due to my historical consciousness?

The brooch would convey the story of a series of people with names and identities and thus help humanize an event where the sheer numbers of mass murders threaten to dull the senses. The brooch is a way to rescue the humanity of one family, and to make this heinous historical event a narrative of people rather than statistics, to create a painful, tangible link between the spectator and the participants in the remembrance of historical trauma. Many such “object survivors” were “donated to the [Washington Holocaust Memorial] museum. These were not only to be evidence of Nazi crimes or American responses but would illustrate “‘armed and spiritual resistance’ ...rescue... [and] re-establishing life anew” (Linenthal, 1995, p. 321). The brooch is one

of these object survivors, and this subsequent exploration is not the evocation of collective cultural memory or dominant historical narrative. As Sam Wineburg (2001) suggests in *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, “attempts to arrive at a conception of collective memory that bypasses the individual, a collective memory curiously held by no one in particular, will run aground on the banks of reductionism and essentialism” (p. 250). I was motivated by the individual story. I then needed to consider how to respond, how to commit an act of remembrance, “a mature form of public memory” (Simon et al., 2002, Endnote 4), but one that is also individual, artistic, and adds to the range of possibilities of academic and aesthetic research. Yet I felt paralyzed by an inability to grasp or process even the miniscule shards of knowledge I had been given, emotionally or intellectually.

Britzman (1998) terms difficult knowledge as knowledge of traumatic history, one that disrupts the learner’s sense of self, continuity, and predictability, where “we are given too little and too much, too early and too late” (p. 134). Handling difficult knowledge demands engaging with death and loss, pain and suffering, and a sense of helplessness in the face of horrific events that have already happened. Britzman suggests, “perhaps this time of belatedness, when learning is made from loss, makes learning from difficult knowledge so difficult” (p. 118). She posits, “if teachers and students are to commit themselves to the interminable work of social justice and ethical understanding, it is still necessary to explore how the learner comes to identify and dis-identify with difficult knowledge” (p. 119). This identification and dis-identification with exploration of affect and intellect, of acceptance and denial, of trying to frame a coherent narrative where none is to be found, to find an explanation that will never be forthcoming, is a daunting task. “What am I supposed to do with the stories of others, in particular stories of widespread suffering and trauma? How and why would it matter if accounts of systemic violence and its legacies were part of my memorial landscape?” (Simon, 2000, p. 17). For Britzman (2000), the effect of trauma is “the incapacity to respond adequately to a terrible and shattering event, the incapacity to think an afterward, and to make meaning from the ruins of experience” (p. 33). I have to frame a response of some kind but traditional forms — the linear essay, the five-chapter thesis — seem limited and disconnected.

Aesthetic Interventions: Historiographical Poiesis and Art-Making

My solution became the use of aesthetic intervention. I knew that I wanted to generate art of some kind, that not just words would suffice to contain my response. In Rishma Dunlop’s (2005) terms, “historiographic poiesis” (p. 112), art-making in response to history, began to take a visible hold on me. It is through this lens that I could see my way to the beginning, using it to frame a response, to guide my way forward in this investigation, and in my investment in the people I longed to connect to, whose story moved me immeasurably, and whose fate I wished I knew. In spite of my ignorance, I felt compelled to honour them in some small way. I wanted to create. I could in no way claim to find a universal response, but I did try to both honour and expand the way I represented this artefact and shared this story. Included in this paper are images of four works of art using glass as a medium and a metaphor, invoking by turns shattering, breaking, and obscuring, balanced with delicacy, transparency and connection. “The Brooch” involved recreating the brooch itself, the colours and shapes coalescing into the beauty of the object itself without commentary or political statement. “Matching Necklace” was meant to investigate the interplay between beauty and horror, the brooch evoked through the floral medallion and leaves,

juxtaposed with barbed wire and triangles consistent with those worn by camp inmates. “The Brooch II” is collaged from sections of Sala Spett’s son Martin’s (Monius) Holocaust paintings. Traces of Holocaust imagery creep into this version of the brooch in subtle ways that demand a more extended view. The final and most complex piece, “Lines of Force,” evokes *Kristallnacht*, erasure, tears, and rivers of blood. However, the red line finishes in drops that are created with flower petals. These very small, perhaps to be unnoticed petals, are an allusion to the brooch and its gifting, a small act of hope and beauty in an otherwise colourless and brutal world. Two singular words in the corners ask us to “remember...a gift.”

Historiographic poesis became the methodology and aesthetic intervention that manifested naturally for me and drove the rest of my work. Historiographic poesis begins with an encounter with a wounding event in history. This encounter may be superficially known by the receiver, with some understanding of the historical location and magnitude, such as the knowledge of what is variously labelled the Holocaust or the Shoah. The genesis may be a tiny fragment, or in my case, an object, that spurs a need to comprehend the enveloping story, and a desire to recognize the individuals swept up into the incomprehensible forces of history. There is a feeling of being called to, a desire to humanize an unknowable event in order to try to grasp it, a feeling of responsibility to those whose stories yearn to be heard. And then, in the poesis, there is a kind of artistic or aesthetic response, whether in the form of writing poetry, devising a play or creating music or art. These acts of creation in some way try to neutralize the acts of destruction encountered, and strive to offer a kind of salvific counterforce. The art-making provides a commentary and a challenge to those who witness it, because these stories of the past are the legacy of our collective choices, how we, as a people, have received, witnessed and participated in such aspects of history, and how these patterns carry forward in our lives. In my work with students, I try to provide an environment where they will make connections to moments of history that will inspire their artistic and empathetic responses. And so, I embarked upon this ongoing journey on my own.

In Marla Morris’ book *Curriculum and the Holocaust* (2001), she warns that:

doing interpretative work around the Holocaust is not just about acquiring knowledge. Rather it is about understanding the event while standing at the limits of understanding...it is to understand that we cannot understand. Still we stand at the limits of our own situatedness, at the limits of our own horizon. (p. 6)

My encounter with this event is tangential. It is only my visceral experience in the Holocaust museum and my aesthetic encounter with an object that led me in my own journey from a detached observer who tried to understand and know about this event, to one who felt driven to invest myself in the journey of remembrance. I might empathize, but I can never truly know. I can only try to invest in a narrative told from a perspective that is not my own and “understand the structure of narrative is to comprehend the limits and potentials of historical understanding” (Gergen, 2005, p. 115). I realize that I cannot tell the truth of this event; however, I can try to be attentive to the implications of my attempts as an act of remembrance and non-indifference. By calling upon history, layered through art objects, I am creating work that engages the intellect, the emotion, the spirit, and the creative impulse, each layer enhancing the other, inviting the viewer to engage with the material, and bring something of their own imagination and experience to their understanding. It is with this type of approach that we hope to engage our students, with the emotional and affective, and therefore, it is worthy of developing in our own pedagogical practice.

In Freudian terms, as noted by Britzman (1998), this is the difference between “learning about” and “learning from”:

Whereas learning about an event or experience focuses upon the acquisition of qualities, attributes and facts, so that it presupposes a distance (or, one might even say, a detachment) between the learner and what is to be learned, learning from an event or experience is of a different order, that of insight... Learning from demands both a patience with the incommensurability of understanding and an interest in tolerating the way meaning becomes, for the learner, fractured, broken, and lost, exceeding the affirmations of rationality, consciousness and consolation. (p. 118)

To “learn from” we must try to come to grips with the uncertainty of knowledge, abandoning the quest for clarity, and instead embracing incompleteness and the fragmentary. We must also be ready to be implicated in the learning, to work through resistance to what can be difficult knowledge, especially in dealing with narratives of oppression and trauma, to consider what might be being asked of us as recipients. Britzman suggests that to idealize, to use hope, or to attach a higher lesson to narratives of people who endured the Shoah, so that their suffering can somehow be comprehended and honoured as a noble act, is dangerous. What, then, are our obligations? Is there an appropriate response?

Roger Simon et al. (2002) call for historiographic poetics as a practice of creative ethical remembrance, a form of learning from. This involves a doing: a re-telling of stories and an openness to reflective reception and contradictory voices. I expand this concept from *poetics* to *poiesis*, from *doing or telling* to *making*, in innovative practices of remembrance, “in the witnessing and enabling of stories staged across fluid margins—an aesthetic frame in which both fact and fiction illuminate truth, each in their different forms” (Zatzman, 2005, p. 97). I can only respond to the art object left behind in a museum, as an individual in all of her contextual placements that limit and illuminate perspective. Simon (2000) argues that “on such terms remembrance enacts possibilities for an ethical learning that impels us into a confrontation and reckoning not only with stories of the past but also with ourselves as we *are* (historically, existentially, socially) in the present” (p. 8). He warns of the difficulties of remembrance pedagogy in the face of incomprehensible human events. Simon does not suggest we ignore loss; nonetheless, he calls the practice of remembrance hopeful. I entered into engagement with Holocaust testimony with hope, trying to reduce the space between the strangeness of the event and time, and attempting to make this experience more immediate, a sense that it surrounds one rather than remaining separate, and that it has continued implications for our present and our future. But what does it mean to employ hope? And whose hope are we speaking of: those who have experienced wounding events, those who choose to retell those experiences, those who actively study such traumatic stories, or those who performs acts of witness? I want to honour this story, this family and this object, and its significance—but not just for them. I have a desire to travel through “paths of memory, retracing and recovering the sparks of life, until the worlds that were, and are no more, come into view” (Linenthal, 2001, p. 321).

I see a connection to my artistic impulse to create as a response to difficult history and discussions of the salvific force of art. Through art, creators and receivers may choose to witness, and even perhaps to heal. The abstract, the inexpressible, begins to coalesce into something more concrete. Such is the observation of Louise DeSalvo in *Writing as a Way of Healing* (1999), who talks of the custom of Native American sand painting. She reports that in these cultures sand painting is a way of healing:

When you feel sick at heart, sick in the soul, you do sand paintings. Or you make a basket. The thing is that you are focused on creating something. And while you're doing that there is a kind of spiritual alchemy that happens...It's all because you are intensely creating something that is beautiful. And in Native American cultures, by the time you have finished the sand painting, you're well. The point is to heal you. (p. 154)

The handmade brooch created for Sala Spett while in the Bergen Belsen concentration camp by a young girl from Warsaw, whose name is now unknown, can be another example of this healing through creative acts. The artist, the family—husband Arthur, son Monius and daughter Rozia Spett, who “bought” the brooch for Sala as a birthday present on May 19, 1943, with their daily ration of a precious slice of bread—and Sala herself, all may have been spiritually revived, if only momentarily, by this incongruous object of beauty. Sala was able to keep the brooch with her during their incarceration, and there is a photographic portrait of her wearing the brooch that was taken in Belgium in 1946 after liberation. Sala cherished the brooch for the rest of her life, taking it out on special occasions; after her death, it was donated by her son to the Holocaust museum in 1990. Yet, it seems to me that the object is secondary to the subject; the brooch is representative *of* the woman but cannot be substituted *for* the woman. She is being served by the object, and although it is the object that remains for us to view, it is the woman's story that resonates. From earliest times, art objects have held the stories of those who came before, traces that those in the present may never uncover. An object may be full of stories, but also, sadly, full of silences.

I begin to think again about my aesthetic response to this encounter with the object. I want to think it could also be a thing of beauty, just as that brooch must have been to Sala, and as it struck me in the museum. Perhaps this is a defensive mechanism against difficult knowledge. In order to create an art object that signifies what the brooch represents in context, I must invest in the study and representation of historical trauma in very concrete ways. Yet I was engaged by beauty and the impossibility of that beauty, the incongruity of finding something like the brooch in a concentration camp. That very incongruity stopped me and forced me to look, to think and to consider its meanings. Roger Simon (2000) notes this point of connection by suggesting that “the more concrete and specific this connection, the more likely the memories of another will be drawn to one's attention” (p. 12). The beauty of the brooch is not exclusive to its context and surroundings; rather its intensity is amplified by the very fact of what lies outside its physical boundaries, and what is contained within its creation.

I live in a milieu of privilege, a country of stability and peace. And yet, as news broadcasts make it clear, the erosion of peace and humanity is only a border or election away. The loss of the sanctity of human life is not a historical past; it is an ever-present threat. Emily Grosholz (2008) notes, “disaster often causes a retreat into intense aestheticism, domesticity, and the miniature (and therefore manageable)” (p. 88). Perhaps the brooch encapsulates this hypothesis. The creator of the brooch may have felt the need to make an object of beauty to counteract the ugliness of her circumstances; so too, the givers and the recipient. Its creation and its giving are small but concrete acts. The making of the brooch is an act—an action. It is the opposite of nihilism, of doing nothing. In that choice, lies hope. Similarly, the Spett family also deliberately acted. They chose to engage this artist. They chose to sacrifice the materials of basic survival for the creation of an object that would serve no practical purpose other than bringing pleasure and beauty, both transitive things, to their mother/wife. Such acts, no matter how small, may have provided a kind of spiritual sustenance. Creating an art object, wearing something aesthetically pleasing, or rituals of gift giving and celebration, are small but profound acts of resistance. As an artist, I understand the

power of the act of creating, and I know that the brooch's significance for me is also partially because it is the manifestation of a creative act.

Through the creation of beauty, something of terror is diminished.



"The Brooch" (2008)
Stained Glass

Hope and "Object Survivors"

Most incredible in the creation story of the Washington Holocaust Memorial Museum to me was the debate over how, or even whether, to exhibit some of the "object survivors" collected. Many poignant artefacts were never displayed in the museum, and the focus of the design team on hard material rather than the individual human story within the grand narrative is another example of the primacy of ontology over epistemology—the intellect over the emotional. Ultimately, only three small personal artefacts were included in the final display: the brooch, a cigarette box, and a small pair of shoes, all overwhelmed by a large photomontage of Auschwitz. The glass insert beneath it containing the brooch would be easy to overlook. Yet, I believe the tiny light in darkness in this one specific case also holds universality, and that this event and my art-making have greater implications. I can in no way claim to find a universal response, but I can try to both honour and expand the way I represent this artefact and share this story.

When Marla Morris (2001) invokes Deborah Britzman's claim that to suggest that there was hope in the camps is to rob these places of the difficult knowledge otherwise contained therein, I have to disagree. The giving of a gift is a hopeful act. In the face of such terrible atrocity, there must be room for hope and beauty. These are humanity's tools of resistance, our secret treasure trove of psychic nourishment. Ultimately it is the intangibles we fight to keep—love, respect, and connection. If these are lost, then humanity is lost. I think this is what resonated so strongly for

me. It is this small act as representative of caring, family, and love, trying to bring joy to someone against all the odds, that is profound. The brooch, in this case, is not simply an object, decoration, adornment or vanity. It has a real purpose. It is a vessel of hope, a small act of resistance.



"Matching Necklace" (2009)
Stained Glass and Barbed Wire

Even the idea of resistance in this context appears to be problematic for many, and this was another branch of the debate on including "object survivors" in the Washington museum, some fearing this could easily lead to "an epic Holocaust narrative in which heroic resistance gained equal time with the narrative of destruction" (Linenthal, 1995, p. 321). Although the caution against a romanticized recounting and memorialization is reasonable, this narrative is also the story of individuals not necessarily defined by the global experience now labelled the Holocaust; within it, is also evidence of a particular story not necessarily categorized by total destruction. And even for those who succumbed to the evil, how can we not rescue a part of who and what they were, by refusing to leave them only as part of a unified, global, faceless experience? "Overturning the anonymity that is often the fate of victims of historical trauma, testimony is treasured to the extent that it saves the shards of catastrophic experience from oblivion" (Simon & Eppert, 1997, p. 51). By finding out the names and circumstances of this family, by sharing in their small act of resistance, this moment is rescued from oblivion, and, as Martin Spett may have hoped, the brooch became the transmitter of their story to me, and through my work, to others.

Also, I am reticent to disavow the power of hope contained in the creation, giving, preservation, and donation of the brooch, which are also acts of aesthetic intervention. Even if the fate of the Spetts had not been uncovered, the act of researching and the creation of art in response to historical consciousness are also hopeful acts. I hope they will keep this story alive, and that they will inspire others to consider more deeply ways in which we need to renew our efforts to live justly with one another. Darkness remains in our lives; it will only defeat us if we refuse to acknowledge it, ignore those who are experiencing it, and deny that it can be changed. Hope is not a panacea: it is a weapon.

Acts of Remembrance

I keep returning to my central question: the question of the responsibility of the viewer/ reader upon encountering stories of historical trauma. How am I accountable for the story I have received? What is an appropriate act of remembrance? How would this translate into teaching practice when dealing with similar stories of trauma as starting points for artistic works?

Audre Lorde in her poem, "There are No Honest Poems About Dead Women" (2005) asks:

What do we want from each other
after we have told our stories
do we want
to be healed
do we want
mossy quiet stealing over our scars
do we want
the powerful unfrightening sister
who will make the pain go away. (p. 216)

Is there a kind of healing that can happen through the giving and receiving of such stories? The past cannot be rewritten or altered or even truly exposed. Pain, torture, starvation, or despair cannot be diminished despite platitudes about the softening effects of time.

Eavan Boland (1995) warns,
if [an artist] does not tell the truth about time, his or her work will not survive it. Past or present, there is a human dimension to time, human voices within it and human griefs ordained by it. Our present will become the past of other men and women. We depend on them to remember it with the complexity with which it was suffered. As others, once, depended on us. (p. 254)

What then are my rights and responsibilities with this information? How do I ensure that I have listened attentively? How do I collapse the distance of the past, so that time becomes a unifying force rather than a distancing one? Roger Simon (2004) also notes that,

acts of memory must become transitive, actions that 'pass over' and take effect on another person or persons...[They] enact a claim—providing accounts of the past that may wound, or better haunt—that may interrupt one's self-sufficiency, demanding an attentiveness to others that cannot be reduced to a version of our own stories. (p. 190)

I am haunted. This act of remembrance has taken such a hold over me. I hope I am able to do it justice.

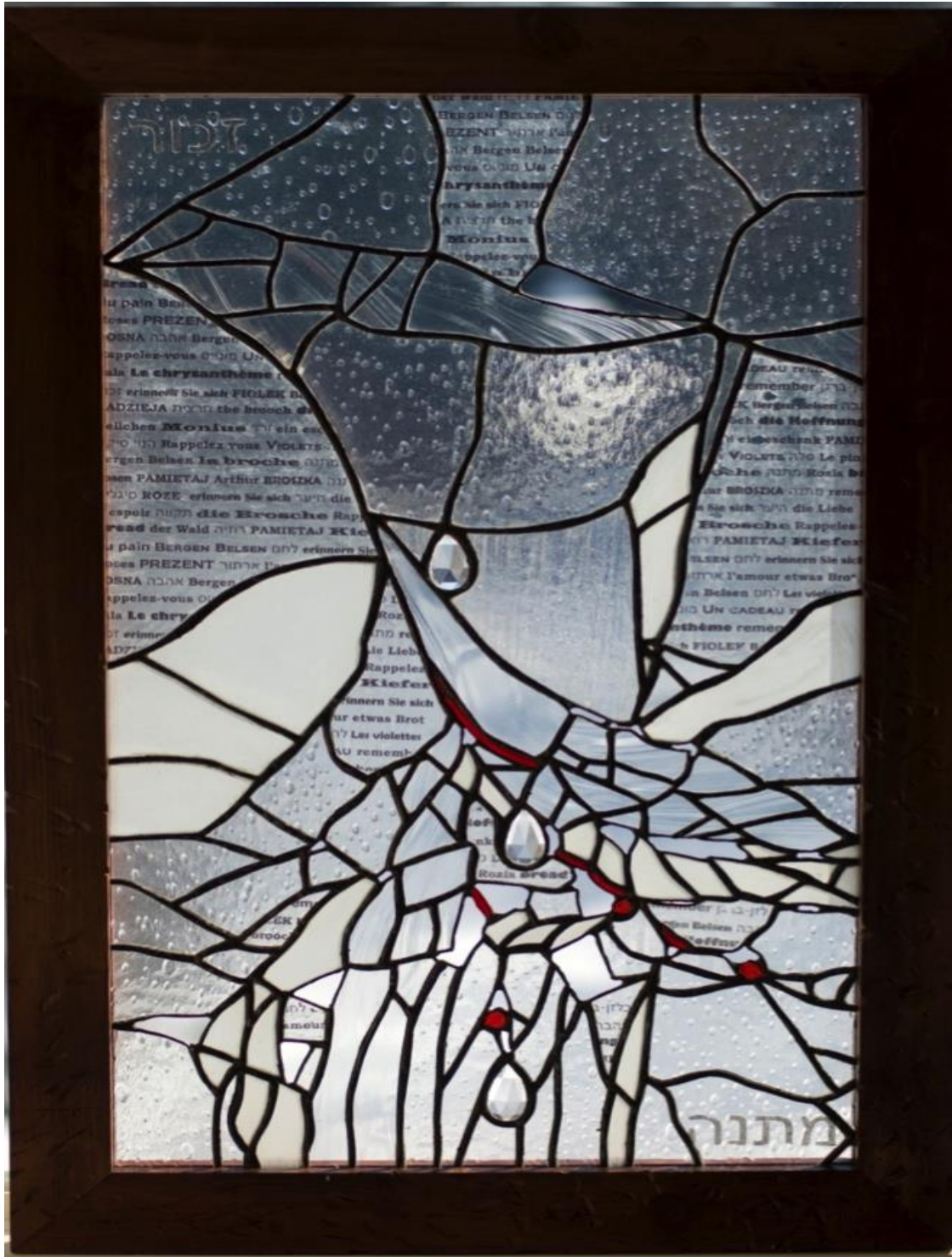


“The Brooch II” (2009)
Paper on Glass

Something of significance has happened to both my students and to their teacher. We have considered Simon’s admonition of our “responsibility to attend to the concerns of those who arrive facing us demanding not just apology, memorialization, and reparation but something of our time, energy and thought” (2004, p. 199). This is part of the power of art and is why I believe in its importance. I, and my students, have thought deeply about the difficult knowledge encountered and struggled with our own gaps of perception and reception.

Remembrance and Pedagogy in a Canadian Context

Britzman (2000) argues that “to learn from disclaimed history requires a willingness to confront one’s own discomfort, one’s own inadequacy, and the conditions and actions that coalesce to foreclose the possibilities of self and other as ethical subjects” (p. 39). I am disquieted; I think that, as a result of my encounter with the brooch, I will remain so. My thinking has been complicated, and my self-sufficiency interrupted. These are good things, for they reinforce my interconnectedness and responsibility to others. And this does not stop with a story that is focussed on suffering in other countries, at other times. We need only look to Canada’s own history to apply the same insights, and similar responses to our own “difficult knowledge” of social justice issues.



“Lines of Force” (2009)
Stained Glass, Findings, Phototransfer, Distressed Pine

Religious schools designed to assimilate Indigenous children into Canadian culture, or those whose wives, sisters, and daughters have been lost, abused and murdered, are only now being recognized by our country. Indeed, scientists even realize that trauma can have genetic effects across generations, through epigenetics, “the study of how environmental factors and experience can alter how genes are expressed” (CBC Radio, 2015). Linking the research on the long-term effects of the Holocaust to the cumulative effects of generations who passed through the residential school system, it has been discovered that psychological distress is possible not just for the experiencer of the trauma, but subsequent generations. Thus, it is even more imperative that we listen to these untold stories, and find some appropriate ways to respond. Instead of some commissions’ emphases on fault-finding, as noted by legal scholar Theresa Godwin Phelps (as cited in James, 2010, p. 49), “more narrative-inspired concern with victim voices and experiences” could be our focus, one that looks ahead to our future as a nation for all peoples, finding new ways to acknowledge the effect of past events through attention to testimony. Phelps reminds us that “gross injustices tend to deny social voice to victims by systematically smothering their aspirations and perspectives” (as cited in James, 2010, p. 50). Senator Murray Sinclair (2017) speaks eloquently about the need for embracing and understanding the need for remembrance during his time spent on the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, as he responded to frequent suggestions that survivors and the community should simply move on:

My answer has always been, “Why can’t you always remember this? Because this is about memorializing people who have been victims of a great wrong...It’s because it’s important for us to remember. We learn from it. And until people show that they have learned from this, we will never forget. And we should never forget even once they have learned from it because this is a part of who we are. It’s not just a part of who we are as survivors and children of survivors but as part of who we are as a nation. And this nation must never forget its most vulnerable people. (“Senator Murray Sinclair responds,” para. 16-17)

It is the capacity of art “not just to witness, but to take the witness stand” (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 206) that makes it a tool against indifference, against the impulse to just move on. The calls to action by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC—2015) specifically include artistic interventions and acts of historical consciousness, part of the methodology of this paper, such as call 79, which asks for revising the “practises of the National Program of Historical Commemoration to integrate Indigenous history, heritage values, and memory practices into Canada’s national heritage and history” (p. 340). Also, call 83 demands “funding priority for a strategy for Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists to undertake collaborative projects and produce works that contribute to the reconciliation process” (p. 341).

However, teachers, students, and citizens cannot wait for our government to do the work alone. Individuals might take up the challenge, through careful attention, and the transformation of difficult knowledge into creative action. Recently departed artist and musician Gord Downie’s *Secret Path* project of an album, musical concert, and an animated film based on the graphic novel by Jeff Lemire, for example, brought to light the story of one residential school victim, Chenie Wenjack, who died in 1966 while trying to make the long walk back to his home, 400 miles away. As Downie (2016) said, “His story is Canada’s story...We are not the country we thought we were. History will be re-written. We are all accountable” (“Statement,” para. 3). Perhaps through aesthetic intervention, we can work alongside our fellow Canadians, implicating ourselves in order to redress injustice, but also engendering understanding and healing: our own Canadian sand painting.

Whether it is Holocaust survivors, or closer to our own shores, Indigenous peoples in residential schools, missing and murdered Indigenous women, the enslaved and their descendants, interned Japanese-Canadians, the diaspora scattered from homelands, exploited migrant workers, or refugees, to name just a few more, all groups have stories of individuals who have been traumatized, silenced, or overlooked. In a multidisciplinary arts-based approach to find new ways of representing such wounding experiences, we might begin to redress these injuries and omissions. We might encourage empathy and critical reflection, unlock a greater cultural understanding, and ultimately, enact appropriate acts of remembrance.

I reflect on my own research processes of art-making as inquiry and historiographic poesis, that I embarked upon by chance, and how much they have come to haunt me. I do not have any certain conclusions. I can only try to be open. I can try to leave those spaces for remembrance Roger Simon speaks of in whatever form they might take. Writing this paper and creating art objects in stained glass are themselves forms of remembrance. I can learn about others whose lives and experience are so very different from mine, from the fragments and traces left to me. I can try to expose my students to ways of honouring and remembering their histories, and the accounts of others, and hopefully finding something that stimulates them into investigating and rethinking a part of themselves and their world with energy.

Historical consciousness can contribute to a kind of citizenship education, as students reflect on the precariousness of their own freedom and basic rights. But this goes beyond mere historical study. Historiographic poesis is a participatory form of exploring history: the impulse to create artistically in response to history has not only cognitive but an immediate emotional force that resonates because it includes and demands something of both the creator and the viewer. It begins to spawn a community, as multiple perspectives, understandings, and approaches are taken to create inclusive narratives of the past. The past is therefore no longer remote, separate or objectified, merely an accumulation of knowledge. It can be studied collectively and creatively, generating new ways of learning.

Marlene Kadar (2005) admonishes that “there is a need to question the restrictions we have used to exclude the voices of the deeply wounded, the refugee, and the survivor” (p. 99-100), whether it is in our historical past or the collective present that rests upon the choices made in the past. It is a lesson I take to heart. I have learned that the power of a subjective encounter cannot be underestimated in personal or pedagogical contexts. I once again learn how important it is to engage more than the intellect in responding to the fragments and traces of history we encounter, in the past or continuing into the present, at home and abroad. I learn the demands of moral education, and the attentiveness necessary to the creative possibilities in responding and honouring the stories of those who are not like us, and yet are part of us—And I learn, with sadness, that the name Sala comes from a Hebrew word for “peace.”

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