

# Blue

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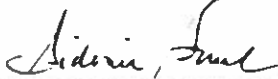
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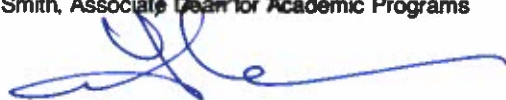
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UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN



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Laura Magnusson

Candidate, MFA  
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Spring 2019





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My 2018-2019 MFA cohort! From left to right: Masimba Hwati, Rowan Renee, Laura Magnusson, Mayela Rodriguez, and Bridget Quinn (2018).



## Abstract

*Blue* is a video that locates the artist, Laura Magnusson, on a seafloor, arduously moving, exhaling, and burrowing through the afterlife of sexual violence. The medium of water, with its destructive potential and capacity to heal, in addition to the weight of an air tank, with its promise of survival and threat of impending emptiness, hold the fullness of traumatic experience. In this silent, psychic landscape, Magnusson bears witness to the complex nature of trauma and the ongoing process of healing.

This work is positioned as visual testimony. It is the impact statement that the artist was not permitted to give before the law. Research and creation have been guided by two interconnected questions: (1) *How can visual art be used to testify to the experience of trauma, which is often understood in terms of its unspeakability?*; and (2) *How might visual testimony expand our collective understanding of the impacts of trauma on survivors?*

## Keywords

*Art; Trauma; Testimony; Witnessing; Sexual Violence; Rape; Survival; Recovery; Healing; Blue; Water; Ocean; Seafloor; Underwater; Fieldwork; Autobiography, Autoethnography; Somatic Expression; Moving Image Art; Video; Film; Cozumel, Mexico; Churchill, Manitoba; Iceland; Hafrún; Bivalve; Clam*

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# INTRODUCTION

Trauma silences. It cuts us off from the world.

Living with trauma becomes bearable when survivors can share their experiences and have them be witnessed. Psychiatrist Judith Herman asserts that “sharing the traumatic experience with others is a precondition for the restitution of a sense of a meaningful world.”<sup>1</sup> Yet trauma is difficult to express. According to psychiatrist Bessel van der

<sup>1</sup>Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 70.

Kolk, “trauma by nature drives us to the edge of comprehension, cutting us off from language based on common experience or an imaginable past.”<sup>2</sup> Social, emotional, physiological, and psychological barriers make it nearly impossible to communicate the depth of traumatic experience to another.

I was 28 years old when I was raped, beaten, confined, and nearly killed by a stranger. It happened in the early hours of July 16, 2013 at the Iceberg Inn, a small lodge in the tundra community of Churchill, Manitoba, located at the mouth of Hudson Bay in northern Canada. I was working on a collaborative art project alongside the region’s beluga whale population, seeking connection through musical improvisation and dance-like movement on the water.

Ironically, I was raped while fleeing another incident of gender-based violence. Two days prior, my then collaborator had sexually assaulted me. Again. Over our three-year collaboration, I was repeatedly abused by this man, a person who I had regarded as a dear friend.

Neither perpetrator was held accountable for his actions. The stranger was acquitted of all four charges: sexual assault, aggravated assault, forcible confinement, and choking to overcome. My former collaborator was supported by our community. In my absence after the rape, he claimed our shared work as his own. I became immobilized by a despair that cannot be translated into words. It pervaded all dimensions of my life. I felt as though I had lost everything-- my trust in co-workers, my community, my vocation as an artist, my very sense of self. My world became an endless, timeless expanse over which I wandered alone. Today, nearly six years later, I am still transported to this site, where, for given periods, I traverse what feels like the bottom of the ocean.

<sup>2</sup>Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), 43.



Figure 1. The author transmits vocalizations into the Churchill River alongside a pod of beluga whales (2012).

My visual thesis, entitled *Blue*, is a video that locates me on a seafloor, arduously moving, exhaling, and burrowing through the afterlife of sexual violence. The medium of water, with its destructive potential and capacity to heal, in addition to the weight of an air tank, with its promise of survival and threat of impending emptiness, hold the fullness of traumatic experience. In this silent, psychic landscape, I bear witness to the complex nature of trauma and the ongoing process of healing.



*Blue* is a visual testimony. It is the impact statement that I was not permitted to give before the law. It is a reclamation of agency over the representation of my lived experience. It is a portrayal of trauma that resists simplistic narratives of victimization and recovery produced by Western institutions of justice and medicine. There is an assumption that justice will follow violence, and that in turn, recovery will follow justice, as though justice is a given and recovery a discernible thing with a discrete form and definitive endpoint. This has not been true for me. I have not seen justice served. Healing has been a fluid and ongoing project, one that is certainly not linear.

My research and creation have been guided by two interconnected questions: (1) *How can visual art be used to testify to the experience of trauma, which is often understood in terms of its unspeakability?*; and (2) *How might visual testimony expand our collective understanding of the impacts of trauma on survivors?*

In the pages that follow, I contextualize my inquiry by examining the relationship between trauma and testimony. After providing an overview, I discuss barriers to bearing witness to trauma. Next, I consider artistic practice in terms of alternative testimony, exploring areas that are pertinent to *Blue*: (A) moving image art; (B) somatic expression; (C) the use of water – both physically and metaphorically – as a medium through which traumatic memory may be worked through and emotional truth conveyed; and (D) key historical and mythological figures: Hafrún, the drowned women of Drekkingarhylur, and Sedna. In turn, I outline my methodology: (A) personal experience as primary research; (B) embodied experience as primary research; and (C) underwater fieldwork and video production. Finally, my research questions are addressed through a description and analysis of my creative work, concluding with some further thoughts.



Figure 2. Video still from *Blue*.



An underwater photograph showing a diver lying on their back on a sandy seabed. The diver is wearing a white wetsuit and has a scuba tank and regulator attached. Bubbles are rising from the diver's regulator. The water is a deep blue color.

## CONTEXTUAL DISCUSSION

This chapter is comprised of three sections. One – *The Relationship between Trauma and Testimony* – defines my terms and frames my research. Two – *Barriers to Bearing Witness to Trauma* – examines the reasons why trauma is difficult to communicate, including social, emotional, physiological, and psychological factors. Three – *Visual Art as Alternative Testimony* – considers the unique features of visual art that enable certain dimensions of traumatic experience to be conveyed.

I cover areas that are pertinent to *Blue*: (A) moving image art; (B) somatic expression; (C) the use of water – both physically and metaphorically – as a medium through which traumatic memory may be worked through and emotional truth conveyed; and (D) key historical and mythological figures: Hafrún, the drowned women of Drekkingsarhylur, and Sedna.

# I. The Relationship between Trauma and Testimony

*“Traumatic experience ... is silenced pain that demands a voicing-- and a hearing.”<sup>3</sup>*

Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw

## A. Overview of Trauma

Psychological trauma, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as it is often referred to in the West, results from experiencing terrifying events – war, genocide, serious injury, sexual violence – and typically involves exposure to actual or threatened death.<sup>4</sup> Core symptoms include distressing memories, flashbacks, nightmares, absence of recall of the traumatic event, emotional numbing, as well as feelings of helplessness and isolation.<sup>5</sup> Those affected by PTSD may include, but are not limited to, survivors of atrocities, war veterans, and survivors of sexual violence. Witnesses to such events may also develop symptoms of PTSD.<sup>6</sup>

Western understandings of psychological trauma can be traced through the presenting symptoms of female hysterics in the late nineteenth century, Holocaust survivors, war veterans throughout the twentieth century, and present-day survivors of sexual violence. First, I offer a

<sup>3</sup>Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw, “Introduction,” in *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community*, eds. Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 14.

<sup>4</sup>Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Arlington: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013), <https://doi-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596.dsm07>.

<sup>5</sup>Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence— From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 34.

<sup>6</sup>Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

brief history of trauma in the West. Next, I outline physiological and psychological dimensions of trauma, discussing symptoms and effects. I then consider the nature of traumatic memory and theories of trauma recovery.

## A Brief History of Trauma in the West

Western conceptions of psychological trauma emerged from the late nineteenth century work of Sigmund Freud and Pierre Janet on hysteria, a once common and now obsolete mental disorder that was long attributed to women.<sup>7</sup> Freud, in his landmark paper, “The Aetiology of Hysteria,” first presented in 1896, linked the symptoms of hysteria – including anxiety and emotional outbursts – to premature sexual experiences in childhood, or childhood sexual abuse, positing that hysteria is caused by psychological trauma.<sup>8</sup> Janet, the French psychiatrist whose study of hysteria paralleled that of Freud, introduced the term “dissociation” to describe hysteria’s psychological elements.<sup>9</sup> Today, dissociation is recognized as a defining feature of trauma, which involves the persistent re-experiencing of physical sensations and memory fragments related to the traumatic event.<sup>10</sup>

Trauma theory in its current discourse follows from efforts to understand the psychic afterlife of survivors of war and genocide, in particular, the Holocaust. The psychological consequences of prolonged confinement in Nazi death camps did not resolve upon liberation, but rather went on to haunt survivors for the remainder of their lives. Holocaust survivor Primo Levi testifies to the experience of unresolved trauma in *The Drowned and the Saved*, written in 1986, one year before his death.<sup>11</sup> He

<sup>7</sup>Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 12.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>9</sup>Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), 182.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>11</sup>Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, (New York: Routledge, 2008), 69.

writes: “The memory of a trauma suffered or inflicted is itself traumatic because recalling it is painful or disturbing: a person who was wounded tends to block out the memory so as not to renew the pain... The injury cannot be healed: it extends through time.”<sup>12</sup> Levi died on April 11, 1987 after falling from the third-floor landing of his apartment in Turin, Italy. Following the coroner’s ruling, it is generally assumed that he died by suicide, although this claim has been contested.<sup>13</sup> Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel connected Levi’s death to post-traumatic suffering when he proclaimed: “Primo Levi died at Auschwitz forty years later.”<sup>14</sup>

Western trauma theory has also been informed by the psychological impacts of war on veterans throughout the twentieth century. During the First World War, the term “shell-shock” was developed to describe the traumatic impacts of bombardment.<sup>15</sup> In 1941, during the Second World War, psychiatrist Abram Kardiner published *Traumatic Neuroses of War*, a seminal work on the psychological effects of combat, which anticipated contemporary research on PTSD.<sup>16</sup> Throughout the late 1970s, in the wake of the Vietnam War, the traumatic impacts of combat continued to be experienced and reported by veterans returning home to the United States. At this time, a group of Vietnam veterans and anti-Vietnam War psychiatrists lobbied the American Psychiatric Association to recognize the pervasive post-traumatic symptoms of many veterans by means of a new diagnosis: post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>17</sup>

During the 1970s, the American women’s movement worked to raise public awareness of sexual violence and its traumatic impacts on women

<sup>12</sup>Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. R. Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 1989), 12.

<sup>13</sup>Frederic D. Homer, *Primo Levi and the Politics of Survival* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 256.

<sup>14</sup>Woods, James, “The Art of Witness: How Primo Levi Survived,” *The New Yorker*, September 21, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/09/28/the-art-of-witness>.

<sup>15</sup>Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 50-51.

<sup>16</sup>*ibid.*, 57.

<sup>17</sup>Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 19.

and girls, igniting an explosion of research on this previously neglected issue. The term “rape trauma syndrome” was given to the cluster of psychological symptoms that many women experienced in the aftermath of rape: insomnia, startle responses, nightmares, dissociation, and emotional numbing. A connection was drawn between the post-traumatic experiences of war veterans and those of survivors of sexual violence.<sup>18</sup>

In 1980, in part due to the lobbying efforts of Vietnam veterans and the consciousness-raising of feminists speaking out over the psychological effects of rape, post-traumatic stress disorder entered official diagnostics with its inclusion in the American Psychiatric Association’s third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III). The post-traumatic experiences of varied groups – Holocaust survivors, war veterans, and survivors of sexual violence – became united under one conceptual framework. According to trauma theorist Roger Luckhurst, “when PTSD entered official diagnostics in 1980, it gave a coherent disease-entity to diverse political programmes and ensured the wide diffusion of the trauma paradigm.”<sup>19</sup>

### **Trauma and the Brain, Mind, and Body**

When people are exposed to terrifying events, why is it that some develop symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder while others do not? How are traumatic reactions produced by and stored within the body? Bessel van der Kolk maps the interconnected physiological and psychological mechanisms of trauma in *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (2014): “Trauma affects the entire human organism-- body, mind, and brain.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup>Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 30-31.

<sup>19</sup>Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 59.

<sup>20</sup>Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 53.



The “fight or flight” response is an adaptation to perceived or actual danger, activated by the brain, that equips an individual to take effective action – fighting or fleeing – through the release of stress hormones. Under normal circumstances, if an individual is able to take effective action against a threat, then the body’s stress hormones will return to equilibrium when the threat is no longer present. However, when an individual is prevented from taking action – such as in the case of injury or confinement – then these stress hormones do not return to equilibrium. Instead, they continue to defend against the instigating threat long after it has passed. In PTSD, a person’s fight or flight response is continuously reactivated during traumatic recall as though the traumatic event were occurring in the present, resulting in constantly elevated stress hormones.<sup>21</sup>

A range of physiological reactions are produced by the body’s constant hyperarousal, including a dramatic rise in blood pressure, heart rate, oxygen intake, and muscle tension in the affected areas. Furthermore, PTSD can lead to actual physiological changes: the recalibration of the brain’s alarm system, the alteration of its memory centers,<sup>22</sup> and the reconditioning of the body’s nervous system.<sup>23</sup> Collectively, these impacts of trauma may result in long term health issues, such as autoimmune disorders and skeletal or muscular problems.<sup>24</sup>

### **Symptoms of Trauma**

Trauma affects a person’s whole being. Its impacts have physiological, psychological, social, and emotional dimensions, which are interconnected and inextricable from one another.

<sup>21</sup>Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 30, 54.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup>Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 36.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 46.

Judith Herman groups the many symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder into three primary categories: (1) hyperarousal, (2) intrusion, and (3) constriction.<sup>25</sup> Hyperarousal results from constantly elevated stress hormones, as outlined in the previous section. Symptoms include emotional dysregulation, exaggerated startle response, and hypervigilance. The latter two categories exist in opposition to one another, with intrusion relating to persistent re-experiencing of the trauma (distressing memories, intrusive flashbacks, and recurring nightmares) and constriction relating to persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma (emotional numbing and absence of recall of the traumatic event).<sup>26</sup>

Traumatic events also damage an individual’s emotional and relational life. People dealing with PTSD often feel disconnected from others.<sup>27</sup> Herman speaks to the post-traumatic experience of isolation:

Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and divine systems of care and protection that sustain life. Thereafter, a sense of alienation, of disconnection, pervades every relationship, from the most intimate familial bonds to most abstract affiliations of community and religion. When trust is lost, traumatized people feel that they belong more to the dead than to the living.<sup>28</sup>

In PTSD, the persistent and extensive symptoms of trauma restrict people’s lives, ensuring that they remain stuck in the past as the traumatic moment is constantly re-experienced.<sup>29</sup> For traumatized

<sup>25</sup>Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 35.

<sup>26</sup>Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 1.

<sup>27</sup>Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 133.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 39, 46.

people, who often have difficulty bridging the gap between past and present, time and space collapse.<sup>30</sup> This phenomenon, characterized by psychological or physical detachment, is called dissociation. According to Van der Kolk, “dissociation is the essence of trauma.”<sup>31</sup>

### **Traumatic Memory**

Traumatic memory differs from ordinary memory in how it is registered in the brain and body. While ordinary memories are organized into linear narratives with beginnings, middles, and ends, traumatic memories, on the other hand, remain unintegrated; they do not get properly assembled into a story that can be put into words.<sup>32</sup> Rather, traumatic memories are wordless and static, described by Herman as a series of still snapshots or a silent movie.<sup>33</sup> In this sense, they are inherently visual, encoded as isolated images that later return as nightmares and flashbacks.<sup>34</sup> Traumatic memories are also registered as other fragmented sensory imprints: sounds, smells, and bodily sensations.<sup>35</sup>

### **Trauma Recovery**

Herman outlines three fundamental stages of trauma recovery: (1) establishing safety; (2) reconstructing the trauma story; and (3) restoring connection between survivors and their community.<sup>36</sup> While Herman’s sequential categorization suggests a linearity of trauma recovery, she acknowledges that the process is never, in actuality, linear. Instead, “the course of recovery does not follow a simple progression but often detours and doubles back.”<sup>37</sup> As a circular process, trauma recovery does not

have a clearly defined endpoint. According to Herman, “resolution of the trauma is never final; recovery is never complete. The impact of a traumatic event continues to reverberate throughout the survivor’s lifecycle.”<sup>38</sup>

I am particularly interested in Herman’s second and third stages of trauma recovery as these phases directly engage my research questions. My first question – *How can visual art be used to testify to the experience of trauma, which is often understood in terms of its unspeakability?* – is concerned with the reconstruction of the trauma story. My second question – *How might visual testimony expand our collective understanding of the impacts of trauma on survivors?* – calls for the trauma story to be shared. A potential outcome of sharing the traumatic experience with others is the restoration of connections between survivor and community.

The second stage of trauma recovery is centered on producing testimony. The survivor works to form a comprehensive account of the trauma, including facts as well as personal and community responses.<sup>39</sup> This reconstructive phase, as Herman observes, “has a timeless quality that is frightening. The reconstruction of the trauma requires immersion in a past experience of frozen time; the descent into mourning feels like a surrender to tears that are endless.”<sup>40</sup> In forming the trauma story, the survivor may find it difficult to use words. In such cases, nonverbal modes of communication, such as drawing or painting, are often used.<sup>41</sup>

In the third stage of trauma recovery, the survivor works toward reconnection with herself, her community, and broader society. One way that this process may be initiated is through sharing testimony. On a

<sup>30</sup>Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 18.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>33</sup>Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 175.

<sup>34</sup>Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 44.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>36</sup>Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 3.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>38</sup>Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 211.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 177.

personal level, Herman maintains that “sharing the traumatic experience with others is a precondition for the restitution of a sense of a meaningful world.”<sup>42</sup> On an interpersonal level, psychiatrist Dori Laub claims that “testimonies attempt to bridge the gap between suffering individuals and ultimately communities of listeners, whose empathic response can be palliative, if not curative.”<sup>43</sup> This third stage is about survivor empowerment through testifying to the traumatic event, and in turn, being heard.

## B. Overview of Testimony

The word testimony conjures images of courtrooms, witness stands, and truth-telling. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Law*, testimony is defined as “the evidence of a witness in court, usually on oath, offered as evidence of the truth of what is stated.”<sup>44</sup> Testimony, in this context, is concerned with objective justice. Outside of the legal context, however, testimony may extend beyond the limited scope of establishing factual truth to encompass the subjective and emotional truth of the witness.

The value of emotional expression in testimony features prominently in trauma studies. Judith Herman holds that “the recitation of facts without the accompanying emotions is a sterile exercise, without therapeutic effect... At each point in the narrative, therefore, the patient must reconstruct not only what happened but also what she felt.”<sup>45</sup> Shoshana Felman maintains that “to testify ... is more than simply to report a fact or an event or to relate what has been lived, recorded and

remembered. Memory is conjured here essentially in order to address another, to impress upon a listener, to appeal to a community.”

The literary genre of testimonio is a valuable example of testimonial practice that privileges the subjective experience of the narrator. Testimonio refers to autobiographical accounts of survivors of oppression in Latin American countries-- a means of conveying individual struggle and collective hardship.<sup>46</sup> Genocide scholar Nora Strejilevich explains testimonio’s personal and broader social scope:

Like every story based on life experience, testimonio deals with affect, with the memory of physical wounds that are an internal echo of the historical circumstances that produced them. It can be said, in this sense, that testimonio is a means for working through traumatic memories, not only for the speaker or writer but also for society as a whole – a must for the ethical recovery of a community.<sup>47</sup>

An important example of testimonio is *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* by activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú Tum, first published in 1984. This work details Menchú’s survival of atrocities waged against Indigenous communities during the Guatemalan Civil War. It became the subject of controversy in 1999 when anthropologist David Stoll contested the factuality of Menchú’s account.<sup>48</sup> In his book *Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, he argues that many details claimed by Menchú as her own did not, in fact, happen to her, but rather to others. Other scholars and critics of

<sup>42</sup>Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 70.

<sup>43</sup>Miller and Tougaw, *Extremities*, 11.

<sup>44</sup>Jonathan Law, “Testimony,” in *A Dictionary of Law*, ed. Jonathan Law (Oxford University Press, 2018), <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198802525.001.0001/acref-9780198802525-e-3964>.

<sup>45</sup>Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 177.

<sup>46</sup>Dolores Delgado Bernal et al., “Chicana/Latina Testimonios : Mapping the Methodological, Pedagogical, and Political,” in *Equity & Excellence in Education* 45:3 (2012): 363.

<sup>47</sup>Nora Strejilevich, “Genres of the Real: Testimonio, Autobiography, and the Subjective Turn,” in *The Cambridge History of Latin American Women’s Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 434.

<sup>48</sup>The Nobel Peace Prize, “The Nobel Peace Prize 1992: Rigoberta Menchú Tum Biographical,” NobelPrize.org, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1992/tum/biographical/>.

Latin American culture and politics contested Stoll's critique of Menchú, arguing in effect that, while Menchú may have taken certain factual liberties, she has produced a testimony that speaks to the collective truth and experiences of her Indigenous community overall. Leigh Gilmore, in "Limit-Cases: Trauma, Self-Representation, and the Jurisdictions of Identity," asserts that "Menchú often achieves a larger symbolic truth through her condensation of several events into one, her substitution of herself as eyewitness for events at which she was not present, and her depiction of the murder of someone else as her brother's murder."<sup>49</sup>

Unlike legal testimony, testimonio is not limited by the strictures of the courtroom and can therefore speak to a broader scope of traumatic experience. As Delgado Bernal writes in "Chicana/Latina Testimonios: Mapping the Methodological, Pedagogical, and Political," testimonio is concerned with "... giving voice to silences, representing the other, reclaiming authority to narrate, and disentangling questions surrounding legitimate truth."<sup>50</sup>

In acts of witnessing to violence and radical injury and harm, there are different kinds of truth and different frameworks for considering truth. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Chairperson of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, recognizes four notions of truth, as outlined in the "Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report": (1) factual or forensic truth; (2) personal or narrative truth; (3) social or "dialogue" truth; and (4) healing or restorative truth.<sup>51</sup> Factual truth is the truth of objective justice, addressed above. Personal truth, on the other hand, is concerned with the healing potential of telling stories. The Report states that "[the Commission] sought to contribute

to the process of reconciliation by ensuring that the truth about the past included the validation of the individual subjective experiences of people who had previously been silenced or voiceless."<sup>52</sup> Social truth places importance on the process of reaching truth itself through discussion and debate.<sup>53</sup> Finally, healing truth is centered on public acknowledgement of facts. The Report states that "acknowledgement is an affirmation that a person's pain is real and worthy of attention. It is thus central to the restoration of the dignity of victims."<sup>54</sup>

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's four-part framework of truth and the Latin American genre of testimonio are two examples of how the thoughtful redefinition and expansion of notions of testimony can give it greater personal and social power, and in the case of testimonio, also exist as an art form.

The goal of testimony need not be to generate resolution. Testimony, in its fullest sense, is a way for survivors to speak and to be heard--to be witnessed. However, barriers exist that make it difficult for many survivors to testify to their lived experience of trauma, and in turn, to initiate recovery and share their knowledge.

<sup>49</sup>Leigh Gilmore, "Limit-Cases: Trauma, Self-Representation, and the Jurisdictions of Identity," in *Biography* 24:1 (2001): 129.

<sup>50</sup>Delgado Bernal et al., "Chicana/Latina Testimonios..." 365.

<sup>51</sup>Desmond Tutu, "Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report," in *Choice Reviews Online* 37:03 (1999): 110.

<sup>52</sup>Tutu, "TRC Report," 112.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 114.



## II. Barriers to Bearing Witness to Trauma

*“What the trauma survivor cannot articulate for herself is ironically set against the compulsion to tell, to capture the experience in thought, memory, and speech in order to make sense of the nonsensical, of an experience that defies reason or logic, and one that results in the shutting down of the self.”<sup>55</sup>*

C. Christina Lam

Survivors of sexual violence carry important knowledge about the nature and implications of traumatic experience. Their testimonies are valuable to diverse stakeholders (including law enforcement, court personnel, legislators, scholars, other survivors, and the general public). However, customary avenues for giving testimony, such as issuing a police statement or testifying in court, often present barriers that make it difficult for many survivors to fully articulate their experiences. While these barriers are interconnected, for the purposes of this document, I group together (A) social and emotional barriers, and (B) physiological and psychological barriers.

### A. Social and Emotional Barriers

One in three women worldwide have experienced some form of sexual violence.<sup>56</sup> Despite this prevalence, survivors continue to face stigma.

<sup>55</sup>Christina C. Lam, “Trauma and Testimony: Embodied Memory in Loida Maritza Pérez’s Geographies of Home,” in *Rocky Mountain Review* 69:1 (2015): 1.

<sup>56</sup>World Health Organization, “Violence against Women,” November 29, 2017, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>.

Fear of being disbelieved, blamed, ostracized, or dismissed can deter many from coming forward. Author and survivor Anne K. Ream asserts:

*When we encounter these crimes, we experience a sort of blindness. The violence that is before us should not be difficult to discern – its symptoms and signs are often quite visible – but because it is easier for our psyche and conscience, we choose, and it is often a choice, not to see.<sup>57</sup>*

The failure of people, entire cultures, to acknowledge the suffering of victims – and in some cases, even the very fact of traumatic events – has a long history. The denial of the Holocaust is an especially vivid example. Another is the continued denial of ongoing colonial violence against Indigenous Peoples in Canada. The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls released its final report in June 2019, declaring a Canadian genocide against Indigenous Peoples:

*The truths shared in these National Inquiry hearings tell the story – or, more accurately, thousands of stories – of acts of genocide against First Nations, Inuit and Métis women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people. This violence amounts to a race-based genocide of Indigenous Peoples, including First Nations, Inuit, and Métis, which especially targets women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people. This genocide has been empowered by colonial structures, evidenced notably by the Indian Act, the Sixties Scoop, residential schools, and breaches of human and Inuit, Métis and First Nations rights, leading directly to the current increased rates of violence, death, and suicide in Indigenous populations.<sup>58</sup>*

<sup>57</sup>Anne K. Ream, *Lived through This: Listening to the Stories of Sexual Violence Survivors* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), xiii - xiv.

<sup>58</sup>The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, “Power and Place: Executive Summary of the Final Report” (Ottawa: Privy Council Office, 2019), 1-2.

In response, Canadian Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer made the following statement:

The ramifications of the term ‘genocide’ are very profound. That word and term carries a lot of meaning. I think the tragedy involved with missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls is its own thing, it is its own tragedy, and does not fall into that category of genocide.<sup>59</sup>

Scheer’s crass and dangerous dismissal of the NIMMIWG’s findings – in effect, the collective testimony of thousands of Indigenous women and girls across Canada – exemplifies why so many survivors of sexual violence often remain silent. If one of the most powerful men in a nation can so easily reject the findings of his own country’s federal inquiry into the victimization of women and girls, then how are individual survivors of sexual violence to feel safe enough to come forward and trust that their lived experience will be acknowledged and believed?

When survivors do testify and name their perpetrators, they risk inciting hostile responses from their abusers and communities. Dr. Christine Blasey Ford testified in 2018 to the Senate Judiciary Committee regarding her sexual assault by Brett Kavanaugh in 1982. Dr. Blasey Ford’s testimony did not disrupt Kavanaugh’s path to the Supreme Court. Beyond that, she received death threats.<sup>60</sup> Dr. Blasey Ford’s experience is a contemporary example of the hardship, even danger, inherent in making public one’s experience of sexual violence. According to Judith Herman, “those who do muster the courage to report must

<sup>59</sup>The Canadian Press, “Andrew Scheer: ‘Genocide’ isn’t right word to describe what’s been done to Indigenous women and girls,” *The National Post*, June 10, 2019, <https://nationalpost.com/news/national/canadas-treatment-of-indigenous-women-not-a-genocide-andrew-scheer>.

<sup>60</sup>Tim Mak, “Kavanaugh Accuser Christine Blasey Ford Continues Receiving Threats, Lawyers Say,” *NPR*, November 8, 2018, accessed May 6, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/08/665407589/kavanaugh-accuser-christine-blasey-ford-continues-receiving-threats-lawyers-say>.

then withstand the adversarial procedures of civil and criminal law, often described as a ‘second rape.’”<sup>61</sup>

Why is it so difficult for people to believe victims and acknowledge atrocities? A partial answer may be found in the specific obstacles around comprehending the pain of others. In *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1987), Elaine Scarry describes that the pain of others can be difficult to acknowledge because pain has no external referent.<sup>62</sup>

When one hears about another person’s physical pain, the events happening within the interior of that person’s body may seem to have the remote character of some deep subterranean fact, belonging to an invisible geography that, however portentous, has no reality because it has not yet manifested itself on the visible surface on the earth.<sup>63</sup>

Given the virtual impossibility of communicating one’s own pain, and the fact that attempts to do so often lead to victim blaming, even new threats, testifying to the impacts of trauma in general, and sexual violence in particular, is inherently difficult.

## B. Physiological and Psychological Barriers

Dominant forms of testimony, through which survivor knowledge may be transmitted, are often word-based, written and oral, and typically require linear narrative sequencing. This can be problematic for trauma survivors. Trauma impedes left-brain functioning, which is necessary for the translation of thoughts and feelings into words, and also for

<sup>61</sup>Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 265.

<sup>62</sup>Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 5.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.

organizing them into a coherent account. According to Bessel van der Kolk, “traumatized people have enormous difficulty telling other people what happened to them. Their bodies re-experience terror, rage, and helplessness, ... but these feelings are almost impossible to articulate.”<sup>64</sup>

Elaine Scarry also acknowledges the challenge of verbalizing intense, internal experience: “Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.”<sup>65</sup>

Beyond impacting the ability of survivors to translate their experience into language, trauma also impacts the very ability to recall the traumatic event and integrate it into a linear narrative with a beginning, middle, and end. The traumatic event is seldom inscribed in memory as it occurs. Rather, it only becomes registered after the fact, from a removed vantage point, in a different time and place.<sup>66</sup> Psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche refers to this phenomenon as “afterwardsness,” which Roger Luckhurst describes as “a deliberately awkward word that foregrounds the odd temporality of an event not understood as traumatic until its return.” Luckhurst goes on to describe the difficulty of recounting the trauma story in a chronological manner, asserting that “no narrative of trauma can be told in a linear way: it has a time signature that must fracture conventional causality.”<sup>67</sup>

Overall, these barriers surrounding the communication of traumatic experience impede our collective understanding of physiological, psychological, emotional, and social impacts on survivors and shed light on a need to conceptualize new, expanded methods for giving testimony.

<sup>64</sup>Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 43.

<sup>65</sup>Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 4.

<sup>66</sup>Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 4.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 8-9.

### III. Visual Art as Alternative Testimony

*“Visual images, the art historian Jill Bennett has argued, do more than to represent scenes and experiences of the past: they can communicate an emotional or bodily experience to us by evoking our own emotional and bodily memories. They produce affect in the viewer, speaking from the body’s sensations, rather than speaking of, or representing the past.”<sup>68</sup>*

Marianne Hirsch

This section considers how visual art can open up possibilities for testimonial practice. I discuss precedents that are pertinent to *Blue*, organized into the following categories: (A) moving image art; (B) somatic expression; (C) the use of water – both physically and metaphorically – as a medium through which traumatic memory may be worked through and emotional truth conveyed; and (D) key historical and mythological figures: Hafrún, the drowned women of Drekkingarhylur, and Sedna.

#### A. Moving Image Art

Moving image art has a history of overlap with trauma theory. Janet Walker employs the term “trauma cinema” in reference to a group of films that contend with world shattering events “in a non-realist mode characterized by disturbance and fragmentation of the films’ narrative

<sup>68</sup>Marianne Hirsch, “Marked by Memory: Feminist Reflections on Trauma and Transmission,” in *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community*, eds. Nancy K. Miller and Jason Daniel Tougaw (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 72.



and stylistic regimes.”<sup>69</sup> In *The Performance of Trauma in Moving Image Art* (2014), Dirk de Bruyn argues that defining features of experimental cinema – such as flashbacks, fragmentation, and nonlinearity – explicate trauma and its symptoms.

Two films in particular from the history of experimental cinema relate to *Blue*. The first is *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc* by Carl Theodor Dreyer from 1928. Like *Blue*, it is a silent film. Renée Jeanne Falconetti’s facial expressions become her testimony as Joan of Arc. Scenes in *Blue*, such as the close up shot of me screaming, make reference to this potential of facial expression to convey intense emotion, perhaps more effectively than word-based language.



Figure 3. Film still from *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc* by Carl Theodor Dreyer (1928).

*At Land*, the 1944 experimental film by Maya Deren, is connected to *Blue* through motifs of water and wandering, as well as its disjunctive sequencing. In this film, Deren, featured as herself, appears to have washed up on a seashore. She proceeds to wander through various scenes, which cut abruptly from one to the next, without any specific goal or conclusion, as I do in *Blue*.



Figures 4, 5. Film stills from *At Land* by Maya Deren (1944).

<sup>69</sup>Janet Walker, *Trauma Cinema: Documenting Incest and the Holocaust* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 19.

Ana Mendieta is an important artist to consider in relation to *Blue*-- she uses her body to investigate violence in its many forms. *Creek* and *Ocean Bird Washup* – videos that were shot in Mexico in 1974, in close proximity to where *Blue* was shot in 2018 – are especially compelling as they archive the movement of Mendieta's body in water. In *Creek*, Mendieta records herself lying in a stream, engaging with the water and its currents as they wash over her body. In *Ocean Bird Washup*, the artist's body, covered in feathers, rolls in the breaking waves of a seashore. Again, Mendieta engages with currents in shallow water. The feathers on her body, a reference to a dead or dying ocean bird, both protect against and draw attention to Mendieta's vulnerability. In *Blue*, my clamshell-like parka, which simultaneously keeps my body warm while weighing me down, serves a similar function.

## B. Somatic Expression

Traumatic memory is stored in the body. Can somatic expression, or body movement, offer a more direct means of communicating traumatic memory? Canadian artist Sarah Anne Johnson conveys psychophysiological impacts of trauma through somatic expression in her 2016 work *Hospital Hallway*, wherein she takes on the persona of her grandmother. Johnson's grandmother entered a Montreal mental hospital in the 1950's seeking help for postpartum depression. Instead, she was subjected to drugging and abuse as a part of a CIA program.<sup>70</sup> In this multimodal work, viewers climb a set of stairs to look down on the artist moving about a circular hallway. As she slumps across the floor, throws herself against the walls, and contorts in unexpected ways, Johnson appears to channel her grandmother's traumatic distress.

<sup>70</sup>Anna Kovler, "Sarah Anne Johnson," *Border Crossings* 35:3 (2016): 120.



Figure 6. Video still from *Creek* by Ana Mendieta (1974).



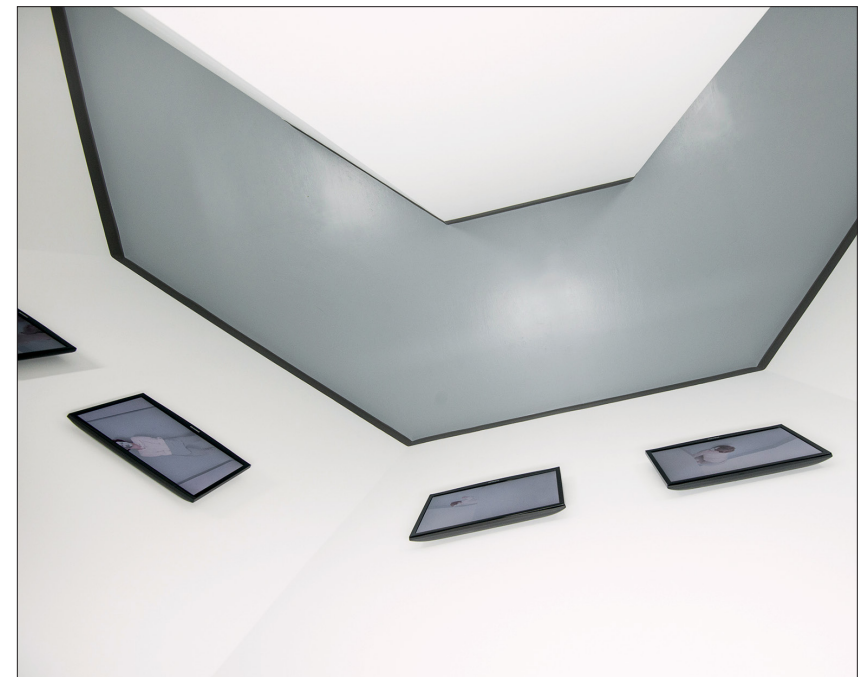
Figure 7. Video still from *Ocean Bird Washup* by Ana Mendieta (1974).



When Johnson is not present, looped videos of her performance play across multiple screens that are mounted throughout the hallway, evoking a network of surveillance monitors. Viewers are permitted to enter the hallway, where they become implicated in this account of confinement, abuse, and trauma as they surveil Johnson's recorded actions and ultimately stand in for the bodies of Johnson and her grandmother. The work's repeated use of looping evokes trauma's ongoing impacts, which may persist across a person's entire lifetime, even into subsequent generations. In *Blue*, repetition and looping are also used to explicate impacts of traumatic experience.



Figure 8. Performance still from *Hospital Hallway* by Sarah Anne Johnson (2016).



Figures 9, 10. Installation shots of *Hospital Hallway* by Sarah Anne Johnson (2016).

### C. The Medium of Water

Water is a substance with both destructive and restorative capacities. Art critic Lars Grambye addresses this tension in relation to artist Jun Nguyen-Hatsushima's trilogy of underwater video works – *Memorial Project* – produced between 2001 and 2004. His characterization of water reflects how I conceive of the ocean in *Blue*:

Water is in itself a strong metaphor. It both unites and separates. It can be gentle and lingering, but it also holds horribly destructive forces ... It quenches, it nurtures, and it purifies. But it can also drown, starve, putrefy. Always in motion, always on the way from one state to another, from one place to the next-- perpetually being led away from itself, and about to find its way home.<sup>71</sup>

Nguyen-Hatsushiba, a Japanese-Vietnamese artist who has lived the majority of his life in the United States, uses the seafloor as a site to grapple with lasting impacts of the Vietnam War, such as intergenerational trauma and grief. In the first video of the *Memorial Project* trilogy (*Memorial Project Nha Trang, Vietnam – Towards the Complex-- For the Courageous, the Curious and the Cowards*), a group of civilians work tirelessly to push cyclos (bicycle-taxis) across the ocean bottom, with no obvious aim. This work has been described by curator Dan Cameron as a “procession of the dead”: “For the entire time that the divers strain to hold their breath long enough to propel their vehicles a few feet farther, a dramatic tension holds sway between graceful movement and precarious mortality.”<sup>72</sup>



Figure 11. Video still from *Memorial Project Nha Trang, Vietnam – Towards the Complex-- For the Courageous, the Curious and the Cowards* by Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba (2001).

<sup>71</sup>Lars Grambye and Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, *Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba* (Malmö: Malmö Konsthall, 2005), 6.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*, 17.



British artist Sue Austin also makes work underwater. *Creating the Spectacle!* is a series of live art and filmed performances that feature Austin navigating the depths of the ocean in a wheelchair that she has adapted for water. Austin describes the project as a response to negative social assumptions about wheelchair use, stemming from her own experience using one. In a 2012 TEDxWomen event, she states: “[People] seemed to see me in terms of their assumptions of what it must be like to be in a wheelchair. When I asked people their associations with the wheelchair, they used words like ‘limitation,’ ‘fear,’ ‘pity,’ and ‘restriction.’”<sup>73</sup> Austin’s adapted wheelchair, which affords her 360-degree movement underwater, presents an empowering framework for thinking about difference, mobility, and access, with the ocean as a backdrop or stage.



Figure 12. Performance still from *Creating the Spectacle!* by Sue Austin (2012).

<sup>73</sup>Sue Austin, “Deep Sea Diving ... in a Wheelchair,” filmed 2012, TEDxWomen video, 9:23, [https://www.ted.com/talks/sue\\_austin\\_deep\\_sea\\_diving\\_in\\_a\\_wheelchair](https://www.ted.com/talks/sue_austin_deep_sea_diving_in_a_wheelchair).

While Austin and I both situate our work underwater and feature ourselves as protagonists, *Creating the Spectacle!* differs from *Blue* in Austin’s framing of the piece as performance. She performs for the camera and for live audiences, using spectacle as a strategy to draw attention to her subject matter. In *Blue*, my aim is not to perform for the camera or create spectacles. First and foremost, I see the camera as a window onto a private, often painful process of coming to know and feel myself again after the violation of my bodily integrity.

In *Blue*, water becomes a medium through which to process my traumatic experience. I see my activities on the seafloor in relation to Carl Jung’s “night sea journey,” a metaphor for the process of individuation. In depth psychology, individuation is the integration of an individual’s various life experiences into a well-functioning whole. According to psychologist Stephen Cope:

The night sea journey is the journey into the parts of ourselves that are split off, disavowed, unknown, unwanted, cast out, and exiled to the various subterranean worlds of consciousness... The goal of this journey is to reunite us with ourselves. Such a homecoming can be surprisingly painful, even brutal. In order to undertake it, we must first agree to exile nothing.<sup>74</sup>

The night sea journey is a journey into the depths of one’s own psyche, guided by personal symbols.

<sup>74</sup>Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 125.

## D. Hafrún, the Drowned Women of Drekkingsrhyllur, and Sedna

Throughout my own night sea journey of healing from trauma, I have been guided by a personal symbol: the clam.

The violence perpetrated against me occurred near water. I was wearing golden clamshell earrings. The stranger ripped out the left valve. Several hours later, the police took the remaining one. My rape left me exposed, vulnerable, not unlike a shapeless mass of wet meat scraped from a shell.

Afterward, I began to see shells everywhere. They would surface in embossed patterns on napkins. They would show up as small soaps in hotel washrooms. I would find them on coffee mugs, in conversations, and at the side of the road, far from water. At first, they seemed like siren song, luring me toward some bad place. With time, however, as I searched for meaning in senseless circumstances, they became amulets.

I happened upon Hafrún, a common clam of the species *Arctica islandica*, in my research. She was dredged from the waters of North Iceland in June 2006, along with hundreds of her kind, and frozen aboard the research vessel Bjarni Saemundsson (Cruise No. B05-2006) in preparation for dissection. These clams, which fit snugly in the palm of a hand, are of interest to scientists as recorders of past climates. Information pertaining to environmental conditions are preserved in the growth rings of their shells. In this way, the bodies of bivalves hold histories. Their growth lines recall stacked pages. Their hinged valves form book covers. In the laboratory, Hafrún's birthdate was revealed: 1499. At 507 years old, this particular common clam became the world's longest-lived recorded animal.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>75</sup>Paul G. Butler et al., "Variability of Marine Climate on the North Icelandic Shelf in a 1357-Year Proxy Archive Based on Growth Increments in the Bivalve *Arctica Islandica*," in *Palaeogeography, Palaeoclimatology, Palaeoecology* 373 (2013): 143.



Figure 13. The author happens upon shards of *Arctica islandica* clamshells in Ólafsfjörður, North Iceland (2017).



Figure 14. The author holds a live *Arctica islandica* clam while preparing for a dive excursion off the coast of North Iceland (2017).



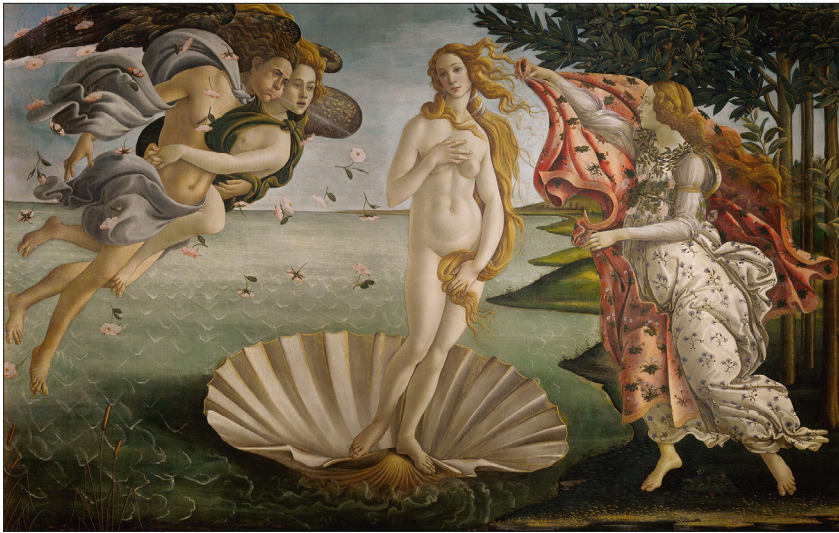


Figure 15. *The Birth of Venus* by Sandro Botticelli (1485-1486).

Hafrún – whose name means “mystery of the ocean” – exudes the stuff of myth. She came into the world shortly after Botticelli painted *The Birth of Venus*, which depicts the Roman goddess of fertility, born of sea foam, arriving to the island of Cyprus on a giant shell. Venus’ Greek counterpart Aphrodite is also known by her surname, Cyprine, which is connected to a commonly used name for Hafrún’s species: the Icelandic Cyprine. Here, where mythology meets etymology, Hafrún, a common clam, emerges as a goddess.

What do we know of this near-mythic creature, archived as WGO61294R? Accompanying the only photograph of Hafrún’s valves, taken before they were cut into sections, is a specimen label, offering a thin contour of the circumstances surrounding her death. Some fields are left blank, and the label itself, about as detailed as a headstone, falls out of the frame. This data, though incomplete, tells one story. I wonder about the ineffable dimensions of her sprawling life.



Figure 16. Hafrún’s valves.



In Hafrún, I find a potent allegory for sexual violence. I, too, have been dredged. I, too, have had my valves pried open, my insides invaded, my being reduced to parts.

In Hafrún, I also find a connection to the Icelandic women who, between 1618 and 1749, were executed by the national governing body at Þingvellir for convictions of adultery. Many of these women had likely been raped. They were drowned in Drekkingsárhylur, the “Drowning Pool”.<sup>76</sup> I imagine them – the 18 whose murders were recorded, the countless unnamed others – resting in sediment, like clams, at the bottom of this deep, glacial pond. They have been there now for centuries.

Icelandic artist Rúi commemorates these women in *Dedication*, a performance that took place at Drekkingsárhylur on September 5, 2006. Divers, submerged in the Drowning Pool, surface with body bags containing women’s clothing, which are then placed on stretchers in the grass, evoking grave plots.<sup>77</sup>



Figure 17. Performance still of *Dedication* by Ruri (2006).

<sup>76</sup>Már Jónsson, “How many women were drowned in Drekkingsárhylur and for what?,” *Vísindavefurinn*, June 29, 2016, <http://visindavefur.is/svar.php?id=72129>.

<sup>77</sup>Steven Leyden Cochrane, “Surviving the decade,” *Winnipeg Free Press*, July 14, 2016.



Figure 18. Drekkingsárhylur circa 1900.

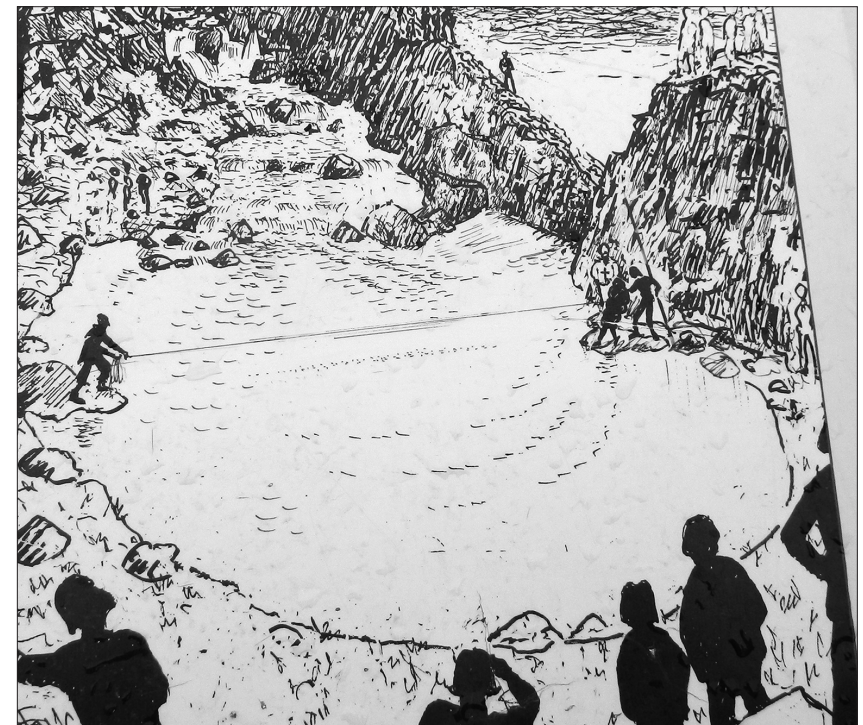


Figure 19. An information board, located near the edge of Drekkingsárhylur, illustrates the execution process. A cotton bag is placed on the victim’s head, and a thick rope tied to her waist. The first executioner yanks the rope, pulling her into the water. The second pushes a long stick into the small of her back, pinning her under until she has died and begins to sink to the bottom of the pond.



Konur sem drekkt var á Þingvöllum / Women who were drowned at Thingvellir:	
1618	Þórdís Halldórsdóttir úr Skagafirði
1618	Guðbjörg Jónsdóttir að austan
1647	Björg Jónsdóttir úr Húnaþingi
1650	Sigríður Einarsdóttir
1678	Margrét Símonardóttir úr Árnessýslu
1684	Helga Gunnarsdóttir úr Strandasýslu
1684	Guðrún Jónsdóttir úr Gullbringusýslu
1687	Borgný Brynjólfsdóttir úr Ísafjarðarsýslu
1695	Þuríður Bjarnadóttir úr Ísafjarðarsýslu
1697	Jóreiður Þorgeirsdóttir úr Árnessýslu
1703	Katrín Þorvarðsdóttir af Akranesi
1705	Kolfinna Ásbjörnsdóttir úr Kjósarsýslu
1705	Ólöf Jónsdóttir úr Snæfellssýslu
1705	Ragnhildur Tómasdóttir úr Strandasýslu
1708	Hallfríður Magnúsdóttir úr Múlaþingi
1709	Helga Magnúsdóttir úr Skaftafellsþingi
1738	Kona úr Ísafjarðarsýslu
1749	Guðríður Vigfúsdóttir úr Snæfellssýslu

Figure 20. List of women executed by drowning in Drekkjarhylur between 1618 and 1749.



Figure 21. Vantage of the author from the surface of Silfra – a freshwater fissure between the Eurasian and North American tectonic plates, located in Þingvallavatn Lake, Þingvellir, Iceland – captured while scuba diving. This diving site is located 450 meters from Drekkjarhylur (2017).

I see myself in these women. My Icelandic heritage can be traced to the region of Southwest Iceland where they were drowned. It can also be traced to North Iceland, within miles of where Hafrún lived her long life at the bottom of the sea. My ancestors were fishermen. Day in and day out, they entered Hafrún's waters, fishing for clams. If my ancestors were nourished by Hafrún's offspring, or even by her distant relations, could it be that some of her is now in me?

In addition to Hafrún and the drowned women of Drekkjarhylur, I also looked to Sedna in shaping *Blue*. In Inuit worldview, Sedna is a nonhuman being who resides at the bottom of the ocean. She is the keeper of all marine mammals, who are born of her fingers. This generative quality is contrasted by the violence surrounding her descent to the seafloor. As a young girl, Sedna was cast into the ocean by her father. Michel Kupaaq, Iglulik elder, describes this event in an audio recording from 1996:

The old man threw his daughter into the water. Naturally, his daughter grabbed hold of his qajaq. He hit her with his paddle, and (when that didn't work) he chopped off her fingers. As the parts that were chopped off fell into the water, they became sea-mammals. There were seals, and then square-flippers, and then beluga. When the woman sank, she became a dweller of the sea floor.<sup>78</sup>

Sedna, who is known by many names, including Taleelayu, is received by the ocean after she is attacked. Sedna's story encompasses the complexity of traumatic experience; violence, loss, and transformation are all evidenced by the continual birth of sea mammals from her mutilated hands. In Sedna's ocean, in Sedna's body, traumatic memory and regeneration exist together, neither glorified nor erased.

<sup>78</sup> Frédéric Laugrand and J. G. Oosten, *The Sea Woman: Sedna in Inuit Shamanism and Art in the Eastern Arctic* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2008), 37.



Figure 22. Taleelayu and Family by Ananaisee/Thomasee Alikatuktuk (Pangnirtung, 1976).



Figure 24. Sedna by Adam Alorut (Iqaluit, 2016).



Figure 23. Sea Goddess Feeding Young, Artist Unknown (Cape Dorset, 1961).

In the stories of Sedna, the drowned women of Drekingarhylur, and Hafrún, I see elements of myself and my own traumatic experience. Their connections to water, in addition to their allusions to gender-based violence, have informed *Blue*.





# METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I trace the development of my visual thesis from research through creation, identifying key decision points and providing rationale for my choices. My methodology employs three core methods:

- I. Personal Experience as Primary Research
- II. Embodied Experience as Primary Research
- III. Underwater Fieldwork and Video Production



# I. Personal Experience as Primary Research

My own survival of sexual violence has served as primary research in the creation of *Blue*. Major decisions – such as using my own body, situating the work underwater, working with non-linear narrative, incorporating particular objects and imagery, and omitting sound – were made in relation to circumstances surrounding my rape and resulting post-traumatic stress. I am my own subject. I have drawn from my experience, memory, and personal archive of documentary materials: (A) journal excerpts written during the weeks following my rape; (B) photos and videos collected in Churchill, Manitoba, two years after the violence; and (C) visual testimony precedents created through the legal process.

*Blue* aims to elucidate my felt experience of trauma. Communicating the primacy of the traumatic moment, and its sustained reverberations through time, is critical to the efficacy of this visual testimony. However, it is nearly impossible to engage my creative practice when I am experiencing flashbacks, dissociation, emotional dysregulation, or profound grief. For this reason, the personal archive surrounding my trauma, which I've amassed since the violence of July 2013, becomes a means to engage the traumatic moment and draw closer to its active core, but from a removed, accessible vantage.

## A. Journal Excerpts

In the weeks following the violence, I kept a detailed journal, which now serves as a vital record of my shifting psychological and emotional states at that time. The following are two excerpts.

### Journal Excerpt One

August 26, 2013

*I feel depressed. I went to bed on Saturday at 2:30 am after having a lovely time drinking wine with my mom on the foggy, warm beach. It is now Monday at 11:11 am, and I still have yet to get up. I have been laying here for nearly 40 hours. My body aches from not moving. I feel heavy, bruised, lethargic, unmotivated, sad, numb, exhausted. The only activities that I've been able to do while laying here are: ruminate about why certain friends and family no longer seem to care for me, write, play online backgammon against computer opponents to excess, check my email impulsively every 15 or so minutes (often in shorter increments), and collect imagery of injured and dying foxes to serve as source material for a three-dimensional drawing that I wish to create but will likely never bring form to for lack of motivation and capacity to navigate challenging art questions.*



Figure 25. Churchill, Manitoba at the mouth of Hudson Bay (2015).



## Journal Excerpt Two

September 11, 2013

*My emotional self is constantly changing states-- I am water, I am ice, I am gas. I am morphing at such rapid rates that I barely have time to recognize what I've become before I become something else. I am irritable. I am sad. I am helpless. I am angry. I am hurt. I am content. I am anxious. I am disappointed. I am horrified. I am inspired. I am livid. I am hopeless. I am scared. I am doomed. There are triggers-- sharp daggers, mini guillotines, little packets of poison. When one hits, there is little chance of me navigating any social situation. It's as though I'm fumbling through a smoky hallway on my hands and knees, with vision impaired and other senses compromised, trying to escape from a fire. I suck at it. I know why I suck at it, but that recognition doesn't change the facts. My brain is head cheese. My heart is a washed-up jellyfish.*

The process of reading over these excerpts, which were written within weeks of the violence, has informed certain dimensions of *Blue*. For example, in "Journal Excerpt One," I describe my depressive, lethargic state in the wake of my rape. Immobility becomes a central theme throughout the work, visualized in a number of scenes, including a shot of me burrowed into the seafloor like a clam.

Similarly, in "Journal Excerpt Two," I discuss the challenge of negotiating rapid emotional fluctuations between feelings of sadness, helplessness, contentedness, and fear. This flux can be seen in *Blue's* disjunctive sequencing, which positions contrasting scenes back to back. For example, a night scene of me thrashing my arms while attempting to run, played in reverse time, abruptly cuts to a scene of me splayed on the seafloor, appearing lifeless.

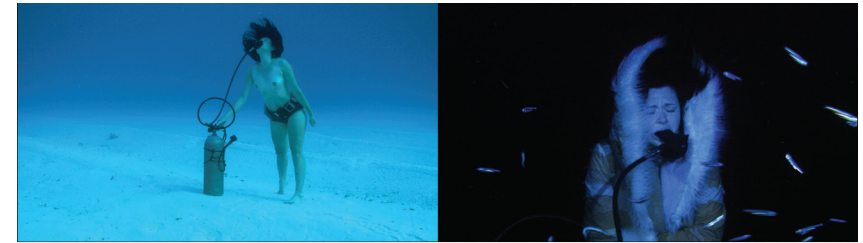


Figure 26. Video stills from *Blue*: Transition between scenes 20 and 21.

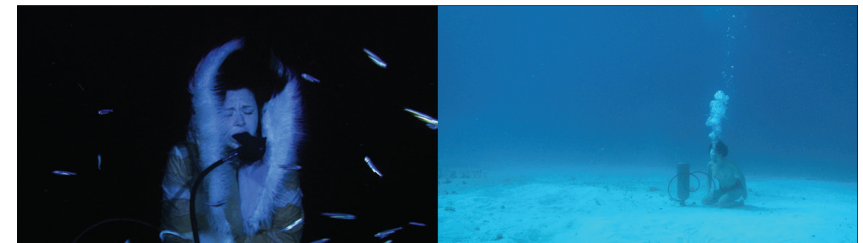


Figure 27: Video stills from *Blue*: Transition between scenes 21 and 22.



Figure 28: Video stills from *Blue*: Transition between scenes 25 and 26.

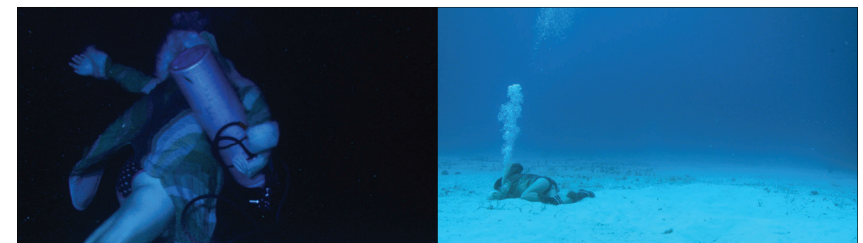


Figure 29: Video stills from *Blue*: Transition between scenes 26 and 27.



## B. Photos and Videos

Photos and videos of Churchill, Manitoba, the site of my rape, in addition to the journeying undertaken to collect them, have informed *Blue*.

In July 2015, on the two-year anniversary of the violence, I returned to Churchill for a period of one month. I needed to confront this place in all of its complexity. Day in and day out, I wandered the town and surrounding areas, revisiting sites associated with my trauma. I recorded this journey through shooting photos and videos. At each location, I spent time being still, reflecting, and simply feeling. I was often triggered. In these moments of proximity to the traumatic event, I experienced a strange ebb and flow of time-- the past washed over the present.

For many years, prior to my rape, Churchill had been a site of creative nourishment. Between 2011 and 2013, I had spent my summers in this remote town in northern Canada, located at the juncture of marine and tundra biomes. I was working with a small team of artists toward performative interaction with the region's beluga whale population through singing, instrumentation, and dance-like canoe movement on the water. We were stationed at the edge of the Churchill River estuary in an intertidal zone known as the Flats. This liminal space between water and land looks like an ocean bottom. For 12 hours per day, on the cycle of the tides, we paddled our canoe throughout the estuary alongside the whales.

My rape occurred at night, after one such day.



Figure 30. The author walks across the Flats in Churchill, Manitoba (2012).



On August 2, 2015, I returned to the site of the crime, the Iceberg Inn.

**Journal Excerpt Three**

August 2, 2015

*I arrived at the Iceberg Inn on an exhale. It seemed like a broken animal, crouched on its knees as rain beat down overhead. As I moved around it, taking pictures and videos, it seemed to be wary of me. It watched me watching it. I was not overwhelmed. I was not triggered. I simply was. However, the building eventually inhaled, and I was drawn inward. Suddenly, I was back in the hallway, running naked after my own life. The lobby. A woman with pink plaid shoes. Her repeated utterance: "Things like this can't happen here."*



Figure 31. The Iceberg Inn, documented by the author on August 2, 2015.

On July 27, 2015, I returned to the Flats, the site where we had docked our canoe for three summers. I felt triggered and overcome by grief. Seeking to record the visceral response of my body, I pulled the video camera onto my chest and pressed the record button. The uneven rise and fall of my chest caused the camera to sway in relation to my breath. My body's traumatic response was captured in the formal properties of the resulting video. This first experience of actively making work with my own body encouraged my interest in giving testimony through somatic expression.

This process of wandering throughout Churchill, collecting and reflecting on photos and videos, became a research method that would come to frame *Blue*. I came to understand the very act of wandering as a metaphor for the ongoing and circuitous experience of trauma recovery.



Figure 32. Still from a video recorded by the author during an episode of traumatic recall at the Flats in Churchill, Manitoba on July 27, 2015.





*Figure 33. The author leans over the stern of the canoe while singing a song to a surfacing beluga whale. This excursion on the Churchill River took place in early July, 2013, days before the violence.*

### C. Visual Testimony Precedents

My personal experiences with the law in the afterlife of sexual violence – from my initial encounters with the police following my rape to the eventual trial of my rapist years later – have given me direct insight into the difficulty of operating within conventional systems of testimony as a trauma survivor. At the police station and in court, I found it difficult to articulate the factual details that the legal system required of me. In drawing and mark-making, I found surprising means to convey my story visually.

Less than 12 hours after I was raped, I was transported from the hospital to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police detachment to issue my statement. In my traumatized state, I could not access words. I reached for a pen and paper to record my statement visually, composing a stickman perpetrator, approximated time stamps, and loose, overlapping floor plans of the Iceberg Inn.

This document communicates on multiple levels. It testifies to the factual truth of the violence while also speaking to the internal experience of being traumatized. On paper, time and space collapse. Events that occurred across several hours and in different locales float to the surface of the page and wash over one another. In this way, my visual statement holds the disjuncture of trauma itself.

As my first visual testimony, this document has served as a map of the visual possibilities for communicating traumatic experience. I experimented with using an enlarged print as a navigational tool on the seafloor. This scene, however, is not included in the final iteration of *Blue*.

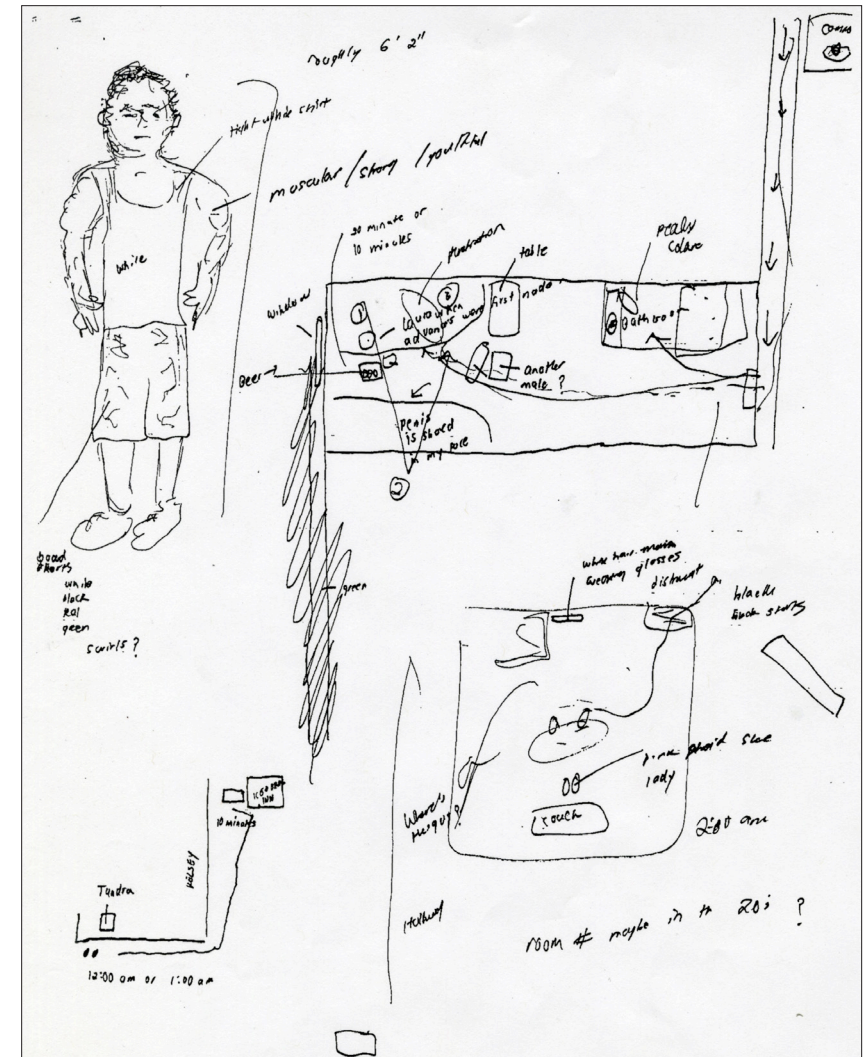
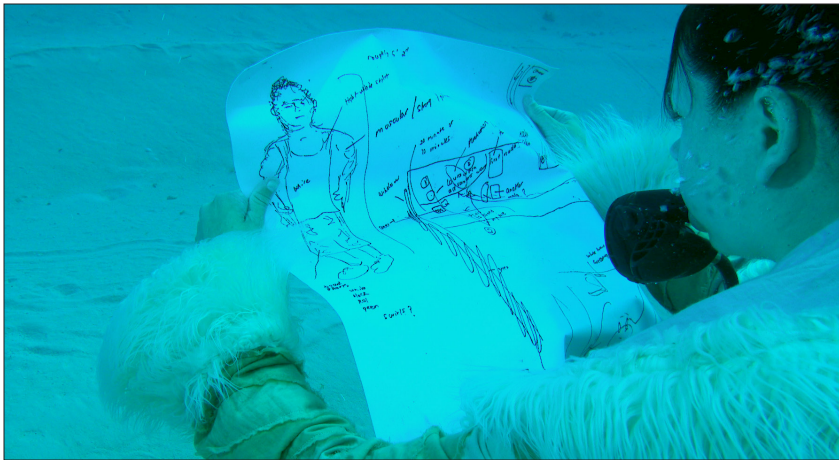


Figure 34. Visual statement drawn by the author at the Royal Canadian Mounted Police detachment in Churchill, Manitoba on July 16, 2013.





Figures 35, 36. Blue production stills. The author takes an enlarged print of her visual statement to the seafloor of Cozumel, Mexico, employing it as a map.

I produced another visual testimony in late March 2016 at the trial of my rapist. As he took the stand, my trauma symptoms became activated. In the shaking of my right arm, I saw an opportunity to record my traumatic response visually. I sat in the gallery, meters from the perpetrator, with a stack of paper and a black pen. My hand, clutching the pen, became a seismometer, recording the visceral reactions of my body on a new sheet of paper every minute. His testimony was 74 minutes long. The resulting series of drawings is called *My Body Speaks as He Testifies*.



Figure 37. Composite of drawings 60 through 65 (from top left to bottom right) of *My Body Speaks as He Testifies* (2016).

At a time when I was not permitted to speak, my body had something to say. On the stand, the constraints of verbal language were used to discredit me. Afterward, sitting in the gallery, I used mark-making as a way to archive my felt experience of trauma. This process recognized my body as a holder of traumatic knowledge and somatic expression as a language to convey traumatic experience.

## II. Embodied Experience as Primary

### Research

I locate my first testimony in the stifled screams that were never permitted to exit my mouth. This first testimony can also be found in the desperate, unintelligible cries to my mother, 1000 kilometers away, when I could finally remember her phone number. It is in the thumb-shaped welts. In the strewn tampon. In the visual statement.

These initial instances of testimony are all viscerally rooted in my body: in my voice, in my skin, in the traces of my hand. It was my body that testified. It is my body that continues to testify.

In witnessing to my felt experience of trauma in *Blue*, it was critical that my body be centralized. My decision to work in video allowed for my body to be archived in the work.

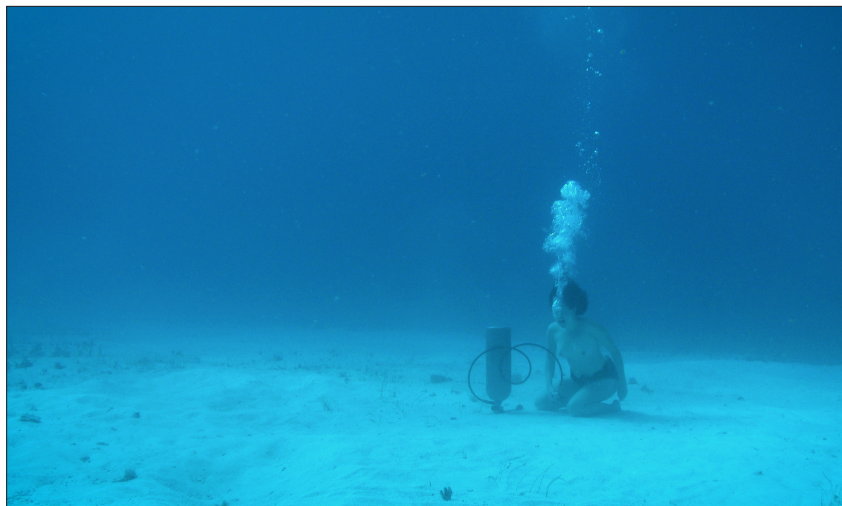


Figure 38. Video still from *Blue*.

## III. Underwater Fieldwork and Video

### Production

The production of *Blue* involved underwater fieldwork and video production in (A) Iceland and (B) Cozumel, Mexico. This research and creation took place across four separate trips – one to Iceland and three to Cozumel – between June 2017 and December 2018.

#### A. Iceland

Although the ocean of *Blue* is a fictional one, it is inspired by the frigid, otherworldly depths of northern waters. Hafrún, the drowned women of Drekkingarhylur, and Sedna have all informed *Blue*. For this reason, I traveled to Iceland in August 2017 to experience their waters firsthand.



Figure 39. The author collects shards of *Arctica islandica* clamshells in Ólafsfjörður, North Iceland (2017).



Ólafsfjörður, North Iceland, my base for the month, is a small fishing community that was once populated by my ancestors. It marks one of the nearest sites on land to where Hafrún carried out her long life at the bottom of the ocean. To scuba dive in Iceland, where glacial ponds and coastal waters are approximately two degrees Celsius, I had to obtain my dry suit certification. I might have shot *Blue* in Iceland, but for a number of logistical reasons, including cold temperatures and poor visibility, underwater video production was not feasible.



Figure 40. The author in a dry suit before diving in North Iceland (2017).



Figure 41. Ólafsfjörður, North Iceland.



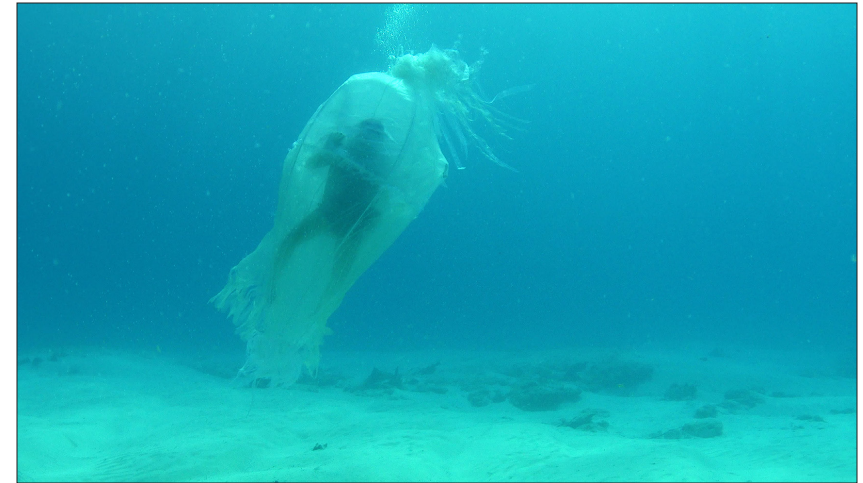
Figure 42. The author records cod decimating and devouring live *Arctica islandica* clams off the coast of North Iceland (2017).

## B. Cozumel, Mexico

The island of Cozumel, Mexico is home to Ixchel, the Mayan goddess of fertility and healing, who is signified by seashells. My first trip to Cozumel, where *Blue* was eventually shot, took place across five weeks in June and July 2017. During this first trip, I produced a separate but related project, *Gelata*, which investigates embodied and disembodied dimensions of trauma through my performative interactions with a womb-like sculptural enclosure under the sea. This enclosure, made of sheer fabric and tent poles, measuring roughly eight feet high by five feet wide by five feet deep, is outfitted with an opening for entry and exit underwater.



Figure 43. Video still from *Gelata*.



Figures 44, 45. Video stills from *Gelata*.

Figures 46, 47. Video stills from *Gelata*.

While *Gelata* explores certain facets of traumatic experience, it was not created in the context of testimony, and therefore not integrated into *Blue*. However, creating this initial work in the ocean contributed to the production of *Blue* by equipping me with requisite knowledge and experience to make work underwater.

On my second and third trips to Cozumel, which took place in July 2018 and December 2018, I researched and shot *Blue*. Each trip lasted approximately two weeks. In total, I spent roughly 20 hours on the seafloor across 15 dives and recorded nearly ten hours of footage.





Figure 48. The author and underwater filmmaker Guy Chaumette plan for an upcoming shoot (2018).



Figure 49. Divemaster Fernando carries the Iceberg Inn sculpture and other facets of *Blue*, including winter gear, into the ocean for a test dive (2018).

Cozumel's warm, clear waters made for ideal underwater work conditions. Underwater filmmaker Guy Chaumette of Liquid Motion Film operated the camera. Local dive operation Pelagic Ventures Scuba transported us to our remote underwater production site and monitored our safety. Together, we adapted existing scuba technology for my unique purposes, developing means to safely transport equipment, sculptures, and winter clothing to the bottom of the ocean. In turn, through multiple shore and boat dives, we learned to work with these components underwater, weighted for neutral buoyancy.

The underwater production of *Blue* raised a number of challenges, especially in terms of communication. In order to carry out production on the seafloor in a safe, efficient manner, we had to develop non-verbal strategies and map out plans on land.

In *Blue*, I do not wear goggles-- on the seafloor, during production, I was not able to see. My lack of vision, in addition to my inability to speak or hear underwater, made communication difficult and put me in a vulnerable position. At 70 feet beneath the surface, if my breathing apparatus were to have malfunctioned, it would have been difficult for me to address the situation independently. The other two divers, however, were often too far away from me to have provided assistance.

While safety precautions were taken, a certain degree of risk was inherent, which ended up serving a useful purpose. On the bottom of the ocean, without voice, hearing, or sight, I truly lost sense of my place in the world. With little understanding of my orientation, I retreated inward, becoming acutely aware of my body. Given that trauma survivors are often disconnected from their bodies, feeling present in my body, and thus anchored in the present, put me in a favorable position to testify to my experience of trauma through embodied means.



Figure 50. Blue production still.



Movement underwater is different than on land. In order to remain on the seafloor and not float up to the surface, I had to be heavily weighted. My clamshell-like parka and winter boots further restricted my movement. Additionally, I was tasked with carting around my oxygen tank, and at times, a sculpture of the Iceberg Inn. When the current was strong, it was especially difficult to move. My efforts at negotiating these conditions were accentuated by the medium of water, which moved through my hair, as well as the fabric and fur of my clamshell-like parka.

It is important to note that my somatic expression underwater was not predetermined. I did not make and execute a shot list. Rather, possibilities for movement and action were researched and developed on site, guided by my body under the weight and force of water. Over time, motifs developed, such as digging, resting, and wandering, which, in some cases, were refined. It wasn't until I was back in Ann Arbor and commenced the post-production process of video editing that my somatic expression was analyzed and sequenced to form *Blue*.

While the final video suggests that I am alone on the seafloor – appearing isolated and vulnerable at times, self-sufficient and strong at others – In actuality, I was always underwater with two other people. Divemaster Fernando and underwater filmmaker Guy supported *Blue's* production and bore witness to my testimony. What were the dynamics of this co-production of witnessing?

First of all, it was not an option to carry out the production of *Blue* independently. The work's creation necessitated the involvement of others. To safely navigate the remote underwater production location, I required the assistance of a seasoned dive master. To capture the nuances of my embodied testimony in high quality video, especially given the challenges of working on the seafloor, I required the expertise and specialized equipment of a professional underwater filmmaker.



Figure 51. *Blue* production still.

While the participation of others necessarily mediated the testimonial process, at least to a degree, it also provided a supportive, communal environment for the telling of my trauma story. Testimony of trauma involves revisiting the traumatic event, which can often be triggering. For the process to be beneficial for the trauma survivor, it is important that she feels safe – in her body and in her environment – and also assured that her testimony will be witnessed with respect. In working with Fernando and Guy, I felt safe and respected.

Having another person record my testimony, rather than managing the camera equipment myself, resulted in my actions being framed by somebody else. While efforts were made to ensure that my testimony was captured in accordance with my vision (I gave specific instruction on shot details such as duration, camera angle, and degree of proximity to my body), inevitably, to take full advantage of our limited time underwater, Guy had to make certain impromptu decisions while recording. The need to accomplish our work expediently (each shoot lasted no more than one hour and required a great deal of resources), and the reality that underwater, Guy and I were not able to communicate verbally, made it difficult to discuss changes or troubleshoot complications on site. Permitting Guy to oversee the camerawork allowed for me to be present in my body and fully immersed in my physical expression.

On the seafloor, there were also gender dynamics at work: both Guy and Fernando are men. In the context of testimony pertaining to sexual violence – a crime that is largely perpetrated by men against women and involves asymmetrical power dynamics – what is the effect, if any, of having two men frame and supervise the telling of my story, especially given my vulnerable position on the seafloor, where I was often nearly nude? As I contended with difficult subject matter, did my awareness of being closely watched and recorded by these men inhibit my expression? Do these circumstances of production complicate my testimony? Perhaps. I was certainly mindful of these questions throughout the shooting process. At the same time, I was also aware that without Guy and Fernando's generous support and commitment to seeing my vision realized, my testimony could not have been expressed at such depths at all. That I felt safe with and respected by my team contributed to an overall positive experience of giving testimony, which ultimately serves to counter the many revictimizations that I had previously experienced in court, testifying before the law.





## CREATIVE WORK

In this chapter, through a description and analysis of *Blue*, I address my two research questions: (1) *How can visual art be used to testify to the experience of trauma, which is often understood in terms of its unspeakability?*; and (2) *How might visual testimony expand our collective understanding of the impacts of trauma on survivors?*

The first section – *Description of Blue* – will introduce my work. The second section – *The Medium of Video* – will discuss why I have used

video in particular to produce my visual testimony. The third section – *Communicating the Experience of Trauma in Blue* – will outline the primary artistic strategies employed to testify to my experience of trauma: (A) metaphor and (B) somatic expression. The fourth section – *Understanding the Impacts of Trauma through Blue* – will discuss how *Blue*, as visual testimony, may serve to expand our collective understanding of the impacts of trauma on survivors.



## I. Description of Blue

*Blue* is a silent, looped video that runs at 14 minutes. At the Stamps Gallery in Ann Arbor, Michigan – where the work was installed for my thesis exhibition in March 2019 – it was projected from floor to ceiling onto the gallery wall, often presenting my body on the scale of viewers, and sometimes larger than life. The projection environment was a blacked-out room, measuring roughly 24 feet by 30 feet. Three benches were provided, positioned around the screen. A notable detail is the video reflection on the gallery floor, which expanded the space and created a more immersive environment. The economy of the installation was intended to privilege the contents of the video.

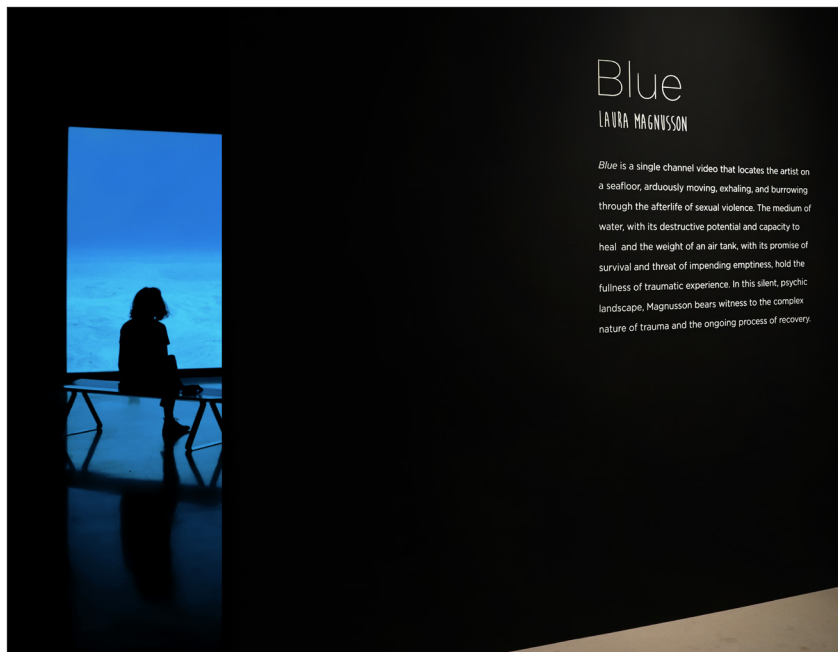
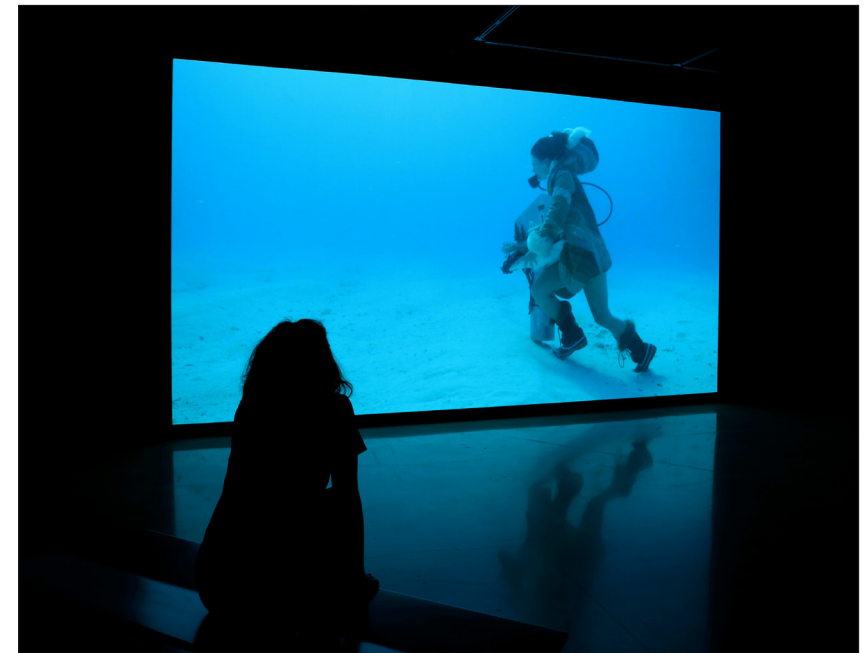


Figure 52. Installation shot of *Blue* at Stamps Gallery in Ann Arbor, Michigan (March 2019).

Figures 53, 54. Installation shots of *Blue* at Stamps Gallery in Ann Arbor, Michigan (March 2019).





Figure 55. Composite of 29 video stills from *Blue*, each representative of one of the work's 29 scenes, presented in sequence from opening to closing of the loop (top left to bottom right).

The video itself, shot underwater, takes place on a seafloor. As the work's title indicates, the color palette is comprised of shades of blue, particularly cooler hues that suggest a cold, northern environment. I am the lone figure, isolated on an endless ocean "tundra," with the only other signs of life being the occasional scuttling crab and small schools of fish. On the bottom of the sea, I exercise various, often banal, actions, such as wandering, digging, jumping, resting, and more. As I partake of these activities, I typically wear a clamshell-like parka and winter boots. In a few scenes, I am nearly naked, wearing only a pair of polka-dot underwear. Importantly, I carry an air tank, which allows for me to persist in this remote aquatic realm, that is, of course, providing it doesn't run out. At times, I engage with a small replica of the Iceberg Inn, which features a 1/24 scale 3D printed figurine of myself, fixed in the doorway.

The loop is comprised of 29 scenes – ranging in length from under ten seconds to nearly three minutes – sequenced in a nonlinear, disjunctive manner. Time functions differently in this underwater world-- the lighting is almost always the same, creating a sense of timelessness, wherein day doesn't pass into night. Just as the seafloor stretches into the deep blue expanse beyond the horizon, time stretches into infinity. However, there are four night scenes that punctuate the endless day, indicating that the passage of time might indeed be possible. Whether or not these abrupt ruptures represent progression through time or serve as flashbacks to the traumatic moment, they jar the viewer, momentarily, out of the otherwise unchanging climate of *Blue*.

## II. The Medium of Video

Video is the ideal visual medium to convey traumatic experience in *Blue* for a number of reasons: (A) the time-based nature of video can address the disjunctive temporality of trauma; (B) video enables me to bring the seafloor to the gallery; (C) video allows for my body to be present and archived in the work; (D) video can hold and convey a tension between embodiment and disembodiment, which is characteristic of trauma; and (E) video can serve as a repository for other forms of expression through the recording of body movement and sculptural elements.

There are many visual modes, so why did I select video in particular to visually testify to my experience of trauma? The time-based nature of video plays a crucial role in answering this question. A characteristic feature of trauma is its disjunctive temporality, as can be seen in symptoms such as flashbacks or dissociation. During traumatic recall, survivors may be pulled backward through time or projected elsewhere psychologically while their bodies remain fixed in the present. As opposed to a still image, video deals with movement over time and space. It allows for me to compress and expand time through editing strategies, including time reversal, alterations of speed, and nonlinear sequencing.

Video enables me to transport the seafloor to viewers in the gallery via the screen. Within video, disparate sites can also be layered and placed in relation to one another: the seafloor, the frozen tundra, the psychic landscape of trauma. This layering not only elucidates the psychological complexity of traumatic experience – the rupturing of time and space – it also highlights the bodily risk and vulnerability associated with



being underwater: oxygen supply, buoyancy control, water conditions, and even sea life all need to be monitored. This negotiation of basic needs and the allusion to psychological distress through the layering of environments underscore the psychophysiological realities of trauma.

The medium of video allows for my body to be present in the work. In my visual testimony, the movement of my body becomes my voice. Video archives such motion, from sweeping gestures of arms and legs to the nuances of air bubbles escaping my mouth. While other embodied forms, such as performance, may offer greater immediacy, the creation of the work on the seafloor precludes a live audience.

Video mirrors and compounds tensions between embodiment and disembodiment, which is a defining feature of trauma. The process of shooting *Blue* was a highly embodied, immediate experience, involving dozens of excursions to the seafloor and the recording of roughly ten hours of underwater video footage. However, working with this material in post-production, within a digital space, felt disembodied. With the work residing in screen space, and me in front of the screen, I became an outsider looking in. The consumption of the video in the gallery setting is also disembodied. Viewers peer into the underwater world of *Blue* by way of a screen, which serves as a barrier as much as it does a window. This fluctuation between embodiment and disembodiment expresses a core experience of trauma.

Lastly, video can serve as a repository for other forms of expression through the recording of body movement and sculptural elements. In *Blue*, my testimony is multimodal-- a synthesis of multiple artistic strategies, including editing decisions, physical gestures, and the sculptural components of the clamshell-like parka and Iceberg Inn. Video enables each of these elements to feature prominently.

### III. Communicating the Experience of Trauma in Blue

Having discussed the importance of the medium of video, I will now detail how *Blue* addresses my first research question: *How can visual art be used to testify to the experience of trauma, which is often understood in terms of its unspeakability?* *Blue* testifies to trauma through (A) metaphor and (B) somatic expression.

#### A. Metaphor

*Blue* is comprised of a number of core motifs that serve as visual metaphors: (A) the ocean and seafloor; (B) the air tank; (C) the clamshell-like parka; (D) the Iceberg Inn; and (E) the night.

#### The Ocean and Seafloor



Figure 56. Video still from *Blue*.

The ocean can be harrowing and dangerous, but it is also associated with healing. This speaks to a paradox of trauma: reliable binaries such as danger and safety become confused or inverted; perception is skewed.

Traversing the seafloor becomes a metaphor for navigating a particular period of trauma recovery – a period of in-betweenness – which unfolds after the violence and prior to the attainment of baseline functioning. During this loosely defined phase, which has been referred to as “afterwardsness” by psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche, the past is obliterated by the traumatic event, and the future feels impossibly distant. This is a space of timelessness, and can feel like a slow death. Alone on the vast ocean bottom, I appear alienated, isolated, and at times, unsure of who I am or where I belong.

The flat, expansive seafloor also evokes the tundra, recalling the northern site of my rape. At the same time, this aquatic realm signifies the psyche, associated with water, as well as the body, comprised of water.

### The Air Tank

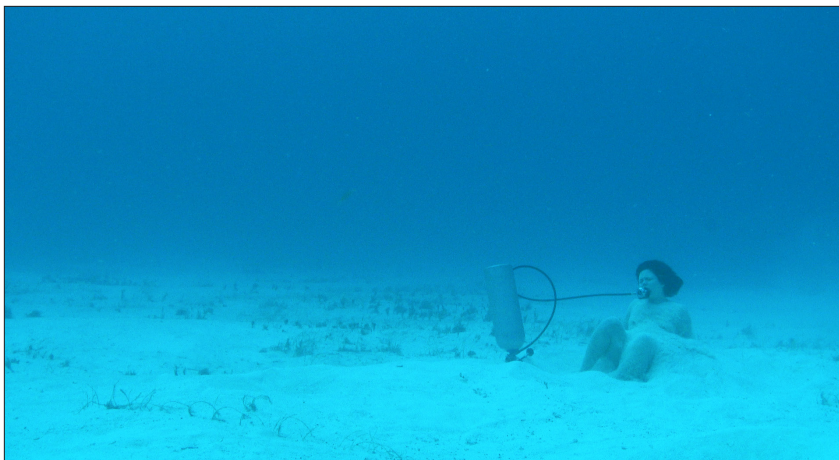


Figure 57. Video still from *Blue*.

The air tank, first and foremost, serves a pragmatic function. I cannot be on the seafloor without access to oxygen. However, this source of air, which is featured prominently in the video instead of being concealed, also holds conceptual value. It becomes a device to draw attention to both my displacement underwater and the precariousness of my position on the seafloor. As a piece of equipment that is often associated with respiratory difficulty or hospitalization, it evokes my vulnerability, pointing to the fundamental needs of my body. While time and space seem never ending in this underwater world, the contents of my air tank are finite. It is clear, in my futile attempts at jumping to the surface or digging my way out, that I cannot escape the seafloor. What will happen when my air supply runs out? In this way, the air tank is like a ticking time bomb, imbuing the work with a sense of urgency.

### The Clamshell-like Parka



Figure 58. The growth rings of Hafrún's valves determined the pattern for the clamshell-like parka.





Figures 59, 60, 61. Video stills from *Blue*.



Figure 62. The clamshell-like parka is comprised of over 200 pieces of fabric, layered on top of one another, suggesting the accretion of growth rings. At each "umbo," the oldest part of the shell, the fabric layers are thickest.

The clamshell-like parka that I wear in *Blue* is designed after Hafrún, whose dredge and dissection become an allegory for sexual violence. The clamshell is a protective entity, encasing the vulnerable parts of the clam. My parka, too, serves to protect my body, which is otherwise exposed in this underwater setting. At the same time, this jacket, heavy with water, is restrictive. A clothed body underwater is unusual and could imply death by drowning. Here, the Icelandic women who were executed in Drekkjarhylur, the "Drowning Pool," are invoked.

At one critical moment in *Blue*, the clamshell-like parka is seen floating by itself, eventually landing on the seafloor, where it spreads open in the current. The absence of my body raises the question of what has happened to me. At the same time, the open jacket also appears as a molt, suggesting the possibility of a release from the weight of trauma.



While this jacket serves symbolic purposes, it also has the pragmatic function of keeping me warm. Like a wetsuit, it traps a thin layer of water between the fabric and my body, which is then warmed by my body heat. In combination with the winter boots, the parka alludes to clothing worn in colder climates. The northern site of my rape is again recalled, contributing to the metaphor of the seafloor as tundra. Like in trauma, I can be here, there, and nowhere, all at once.

### The Iceberg Inn

The violence perpetrated against me occurred at the Iceberg Inn in the remote northern community of Churchill, Manitoba. A 1/24 scale replica of this building, produced from personal documentation collected in 2015, two years after my rape, appears throughout *Blue*. While the Iceberg Inn serves to concretize certain facts pertaining to what happened to me, it aims to do more than allude to the specifics of my own story. As I hold this replica in my arms, or engage with the 3D printed figurine of myself, fixed in the doorway, the Iceberg Inn becomes a kind of dollhouse, an entity for dealing with trauma through play. In this way, it suggests a reversion to a childlike state.



Figure 63. Video still from *Blue*.



Figure 64. Photograph of the Iceberg Inn, located in Churchill, Manitoba, taken by the author on August 2, 2015, when she returned to the scene of the crime.

While I was being raped, I felt small, as though I had been swallowed by the Iceberg Inn, unable to escape the confines of its walls. In *Blue*, in relation to the replica, my present self is larger and safely on the outside. From a removed vantage, the enormity of this site, and all that it represents, can almost be grasped. I am better positioned to attend to my former self, who remains trapped in the doorway, a liminal space between inside and outside, then and now, there and here. In one scene, I pry my double from the doorframe and cup her in my hands.



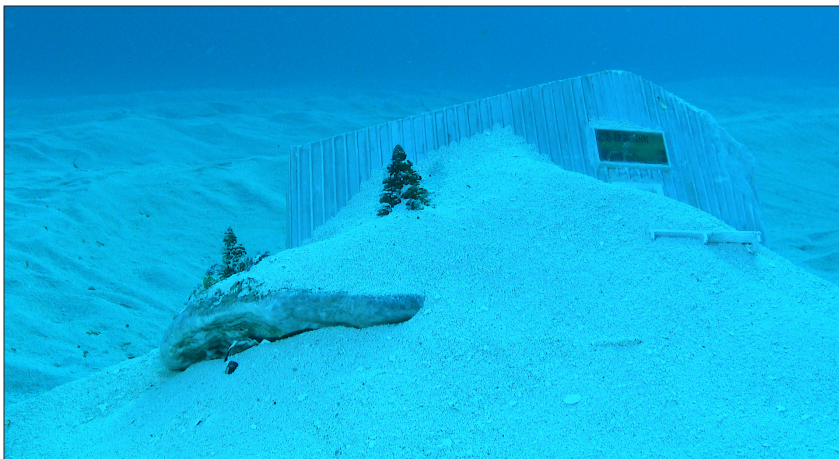


Figure 65. *Blue* production still of the back of the Iceberg Inn.  
Figures 66, 67. Video stills from *Blue*.

The back of the Iceberg Inn, never seen in its entirety in *Blue*, is gutted and swathed in white paint, void of particular detail like traumatic memory itself. The inn assumes its name and becomes an iceberg. When viewed from this angle, my former self appears frozen, immobilized, beyond reach.

When I try to bury the Iceberg Inn, part of it remains exposed, signifying that trauma can never be fully buried.

### The Night



Figures 68, 69. Video stills from *Blue*.

Four night scenes punctuate the overarching timelessness of *Blue*, suggesting that the progression of time might be possible after all. However, they also serve as flashbacks. In one night scene, I am pictured thrashing in the darkness, attempting to run through water. Together, these night scenes allude to Carl Jung's 'night sea journey,' a metaphor for the process of individuation, or perhaps, trauma recovery.

In the darkness of the loop's closing scene, my body is not present at all; a school of electric blue fish populate the screen. Their frenetic movement in and out of the frame suggests a certain vitality, while also speaking of chaos, anxiety, and restlessness. In keeping with the nonlinearity of trauma recovery, no resolution is offered as a momentary fade to black opens up, once more, to the vast blue seafloor.

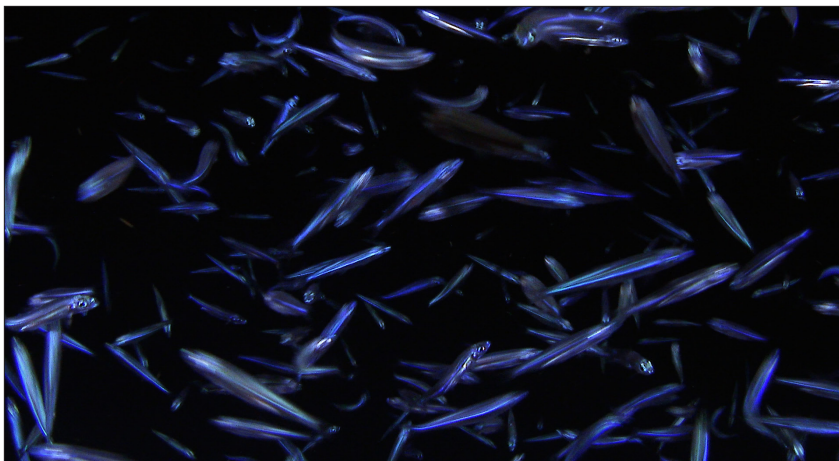


Figure 70. Video still from *Blue*.

## B. Somatic Expression

My somatic expression in *Blue* comprises my testimony. Many of my movements are repetitive and banal, pointing to trauma's persistence-- the quiet, private routines of living with traumatic memory. I will now consider the primary categories of movement undertaken in *Blue*: (A) wandering; (B) screaming; (C) jumping; (D) standing still; (E) digging; and (F) burrowing and resting.

### Wandering

The act of wandering characterizes my ongoing movement through trauma. Wandering, as a nonlinear exercise that does not require a goal or destination, evokes recovery from trauma. Wandering is an ambiguous activity. Done intentionally, it can serve as a sense-making process. However, it can also suggest that the wanderer is lost or detached.



Figure 71. Video still from *Blue*.



## Screaming



Figure 72. Video still from *Blue*.

Testimony is typically voiced or written. On the seafloor, neither is possible, and sound doesn't travel as it does on land. In *Blue*, I scream but cannot be heard. My desperate cries, instead of being carried by sound, are visualized in the form of air bubbles escaping my mouth, which has the effect of amplifying my silence. Because trauma both precedes and destroys language, the silent scream is a fitting element of my visual testimony.

In one instance, my scream is rejected and forced back inside of me by means of reversed video.

Underwater, the act of screaming is charged with risk. In order to make sounds or attempt speech, I need to take the breathing apparatus out of my mouth. Each time I do so, I risk water entering my lungs, or the loss of access to my air supply, which is not tethered to my body. This quality of danger underscores the variety of risks associated with giving testimony.

## Jumping



Figure 73. Video still from *Blue*.

Underwater, the act of jumping is dramatized. Supported by water, I am lifted high off of the seafloor, almost appearing to take flight. In one sense, this energetic moment – a temporary freedom from constraint – feels climatic, like the crescendo of a song. However, the levity does not last-- I am continuously pulled back to the seafloor. The surface, if that's what I am striving for, remains well beyond my reach. The emotional fluctuations characteristic of traumatic experience – in this case, between elation and desperation – are held in the act of jumping.

## Standing Still

Many scenes of *Blue* may be characterized by stillness. However, in one particular scene – where I stand upright, nearly naked, without my clamshell-like parka – this stillness is especially pronounced. Here, with my chest and neck exposed, vulnerable to threat, I appear immobilized, statuesque, like a deer caught in headlights. In the context of sexual violence, my stasis could represent a freeze response to acute stress, rather than other responses, such as fight or flight.



Figures 74, 75, 76. Video stills from *Blue*.

### Digging

The act of digging, which occurs throughout *Blue* in various scenes, often appears purposeless, as though I am simply passing time. Yet certain events of other scenes, such as the burial of the Iceberg Inn, as well as my own burrowing into the seabed, suggest that my digging is at times purposeful. I dig to lay things to rest. I dig in search of a way out. Overall, however, my digging is futile. I don't find a way out. I am unable to fully burrow into the seabed. The Iceberg Inn, set in a shallow grave, does not get sufficiently buried. The lifelong process of trauma recovery, which often involves setbacks and re-traumatization, can feel like an endless pursuit.

### Burrowing and Resting

On the seafloor, when walking upright, I am vulnerable, subject to the forces of water. In *Blue*, the acts of burrowing and resting represent instincts to curl up or withdraw – protection mechanisms – in the wake of a traumatic event, especially one that threatens bodily integrity. From this perspective, they suggest immobilization, perhaps even death. At the same time, there is something inherently peaceful about these acts of burrowing and resting, which evoke processes of rejuvenation and healing.



## IV. Understanding the Impacts of

### Trauma through Blue

Having discussed the ways in which *Blue* produces testimony, I will now consider my second research question: *How might visual testimony expand our collective understanding of the impacts of trauma on survivors?* This question centers on the delivery of testimony and its reception by the public.

In *Blue*, my testimony is produced by and housed within video. Visual metaphor and somatic expression become my voice. The screen becomes a proxy for me and my body. The viewing environment becomes a site for my testimony to be delivered and publicly witnessed. In presenting *Blue*, I am asking for viewers to sit with me, be present, and receive my story.

While such witnessing can, and did, to a degree, serve a healing function, this was not my objective in creating *Blue*. Rather, I was driven to get at a fuller, more encompassing picture of my traumatic experience, which might then help others to better understand the impacts of trauma on survivors of sexual violence. Two viewer responses in particular suggest that *Blue* succeeded in this aim.

After my thesis exhibition opened, the chair of my committee, Phoebe Gloeckner, told me about her friend's response to my work, who experienced *Blue* without pre-existing knowledge of its subject matter. Phoebe's friend described feeling physically impacted by the work. Although she did not discern the particular details of my distress – that it resulted from sexual violence, for example – she did sense turmoil. As

she watched me traverse the endless seafloor, with the weight of the ocean on my back, she felt a degree of pressure and anxiety in her own body. At times, she felt unable to move, and consequently remained fixed in her seat for two to three cycles of the loop.

A fellow graduate student, Mayela Rodriguez, felt similarly when she experienced *Blue*:

When watching your project, I was struck by how I could physically feel the pressure and weight of the water. The silence of the video made watching you walk the seafloor feel heavy and uncomfortable. I could easily imagine myself inhabiting your position in the depths, feeling frustrated, blind, gasping for air and voice. The overall effect kept me stuck in my seat, mesmerized.

*Blue* communicates through affect. That both Mayela and Phoebe's friend felt my testimony in their bodies may mean that communicating traumatic experience through visual, affective forms could, in some cases, make the dismissal of testimony more difficult.

Elaine Scarry argues that the pain of others is difficult to acknowledge because pain has no external referent. She asserts that "in order to express pain one must both objectify its felt-characteristics and hold steadily visible the referent for those characteristics."<sup>79</sup> I believe that visual art is able to do this, at least to an extent. In *Blue*, my trauma – my pain – is expressed by objectifying certain felt-characteristics, such as alienation or despair, through (A) visual metaphors (the seafloor, the Iceberg Inn, etc.) and (B) somatic expression (wandering, screaming, etc.). In turn, these referents are held steadily visible through the medium of video, which allows for them to be witnessed by others.

<sup>79</sup>Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 17.



# CONCLUSION

To open these concluding thoughts, I will return to Sedna. Sedna, if considered in the context of trauma, embodies the complexity of traumatic experience. Brutality and regeneration are not quarantined from one another at opposite ends of a spectrum, but rather, are allowed to coexist. Her mutilated hands are the wombs of sea mammals.



I don't mean to suggest that violence gives rise to goodness. What I am getting at is that Sedna's story offers a refreshing way to conceptualize the afterlife of trauma that stands in contrast to dominant expectations of linear recovery.

This photograph was taken within days of the violence. It archives one of the dearest memories I have of my mother. When she arrived in Churchill to take me home, I wasn't ready to leave. One day, after I had remained in bed for nearly a week, she agreed to let me take her out on the canoe to meet the whales, despite her fear of water. She knew that I needed this. The time that followed my rape was a devastating period for our entire family, yet from this place on the water, graced by the awesome presence of belugas, my mother proclaimed: "Shit, shit! This is the best day of my life!"



Figure 77. The author with her mother, Jean Merrell, on the Churchill River, canoeing alongside beluga whales, days after the violence of July 2013.

When we create a binary, with the traumatic event on one end, and "full recovery" on the other, the nuanced gradient that comprises the day-to-day experience of living with trauma gets erased.

In *Blue*, I do not rise from the depths. The loop ensures that I stay on the seafloor. My visual testimony neither depicts the violence of the traumatic event nor the glory of full recovery, as though such a thing is even possible. Rather, what I attest to in *Blue* are the more quiet and private dimensions of trauma, which may persist across a person's entire lifetime. In presenting this non-going-away-ness of trauma, perhaps others might see themselves reflected in my experience.

I remember that when I testified at the trial of my rapist, I was shamed by both the judge and the defense attorney when I provided a description of how a particular violation felt in body: "I don't know why you're telling us that. It's not relevant. Answer the question." What they were looking for was Desmond Tutu's first articulation of truth. Factual truth. But for me, the facts that they were looking for could not be separated from how they were experienced in my body, and in turn, what they did to my whole being. The court, in a sense, was asking for me to be cut up and fragmented all over again, to compartmentalize and erase the fullness of my experience.

Visual art does not require us to operate in a single modality. *Blue*, through its integration of a variety of media, including water, video, and my own body, offers a fuller, more truthful impact statement of my survival of trauma and ongoing recovery. Visual testimony has enabled me to express dimensions of traumatic experience that have failed communication through words alone.

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