Editorial: Magdalena Talks Back: contemporary feminist research methodologies

Lekkie Hopkins and Julie Robson

We’re delighted to present this collection of papers exploring contemporary feminist research methodologies. All contributors to this collection have been members of the Magdalena Talks Back feminist discussion group at Edith Cowan University. The group, (named in relation to an international network of women in contemporary theatre called The Magdalena Project), was started in 2007 by the two of us editing this collection, Julie Robson and Lekkie Hopkins, in response to our desire to create a forum where we could bring together academic staff and postgraduate researchers in the spirit of intense and respectful feminist inquiry, to meet, talk, love, create something together (Irigaray, 1991).

The first encounter between Robson and Hopkins was a serendipitous, life-changing event. Someone who had heard one of us speak at a seminar insisted that we meet. We are a generation apart but we immediately felt inspired by our similarities as much as our differences. Julie Robson was a young contemporary performance scholar; Lekkie Hopkins had been heading up the women’s studies programme for almost two decades and was fascinated by ways to bring feminist poststructuralist understandings of subjectivity and power into the everyday working lives of graduating students. We were both interested in disciplinary boundary-crossing, in the fecund conjunction of unlikely encounters, in embodied thought. Robson, fresh from completing her own PhD (2005), was adamant about the potential of embodied thinking and the practice-led inquiry of artists to transform research in the academy (Mercer and Robson, 2011, Robson, 2013); Hopkins (2009, 2006, 2003) was interested in lifewriting, and in the power of narrative to uncover the also-stories to provide richly nuanced texts not routinely available through qualitative research in the social sciences. But we both knew how easy it was, in the academic arena, to get swallowed by administrative processes and distracted by political battles, and we were both in need of ongoing academic nourishment. At that first
encounter we decided to start a feminist discussion and reading group, co-supervise postgraduate students and do research together. Almost eight years later we find we have done all those things. Some of the fruits of that original encounter can be found in the courageous adopting of innovative research methodologies by members of the Magdalena Talks Back group to explore uncomfortable topics with rigor and acuity.

The papers you find here are from a range of disciplines: the visual arts, the social sciences, creative writing, contemporary performance, and law. What they have in common is a feminist sensibility that informs their explorations of a wide range of issues: the practice of infanticide in colonial Western Australia; the bodily impact of the aftermath of childhood rape; women’s experiences of healing post-abortion; living with the chronic pain of vulvodynia; the pre-verbal trauma of being a late-discovery adoptee; the dangers and pleasures of uncovering family histories and secrets; woman’s capacity to be philosophically, divinely present to herself; re-reading women’s responses to family violence; and the influence of feminist thinking on the ways judges deal with women and children in the law courts. What these diverse papers share is a desire to present intricate understandings of the topics they investigate, through the use of innovative and original research methodologies. For this collection, each author has discussed the crucial and dynamic elements of how they undertook their inquiry.

The collection begins with Dawn Albinger’s account of the conversations – between herself and a text, between her creative and critical selves, between herself and the pool of theorists in which she swims, and between herself and her peers – that occurred as an implicit and easily-overlooked dimension of her practice-led research into what the concept of the diva might mean for a contemporary feminist theatre praxis. Miriam Rose Brooker’s paper outlines the focusing and art therapy processes she used to gather rich data for her PhD thesis, titled *Lilith’s Daughters: distilling the healing wisdom of women post-abortion*. Kim Coull’s exploration of the bodily impact of discovering, as an adult, that one has been adopted, provides an astonishing account of the efficacy of writing as enquiry: “My body knew... [It] is not an idiot, a bastard, or a second to the privileged intelligences of the mind”. Brenda Downing’s paper, *Ways of coming to knowing through embodied methodologies*, offers readers visceral and aesthetic ways of connecting with rape trauma, and outlines her uses of writing-as-inquiry and performance-making-as-inquiry to amplify the experiential, embodied and poetic processes she adopted to conduct her autoethnographic somatic research. Amanda Gardiner’s paper outlines the
arts-based research practices she has used in her doctoral thesis to explore the lived experience of Mary Summerland, a 20-year-old unmarried woman, who, in 1832, was accused of murdering her newborn child at the port town of Fremantle, Western Australia. Ann-Claire Larsen’s paper takes us into the contemporary Australian law courts to discover how feminist legal methods affect the sentencing of women who offend. Marilyn Metta’s paper uses lifewriting to explore how the concept of métis, as an embodied intelligence, illuminates a shadowy tangle of body-values, body-denials, and body-power in explorations of women’s resistances to domestic violence. Josephine Taylor, in her paper called A Conversation with the Enemy, outlines her engagement with writing-as-inquiry to articulate her experience of living with that most debilitating of conditions, vulvodynia. And visual artist Brooke Zeligman writes of the practice-led research methods embedded in her explorations of glass as a medium to make works that “murmur” family secrets and evoke the complexities of the material feminine. Finally, Kylie Stevenson’s poem, ‘The Women’s Stone Circle’, poignantly reminds us of the circles within circles to be found in these articulations of feminist research methodologies.

References


Author biographies

Lekkie Hopkins holds an adjunct position at Edith Cowan University. She is particularly interested in the history of social protest and in writing the lives of activist women. Her PhD students have used memoir, poetry, performance-making, fiction writing, bodywork, historically informed imagination and art therapy to undertake feminist explorations of childhood rape, abortion, infanticide, workplace discriminations and the performance of contemporary femininities.

Email: l.hopkins@ecu.edu.au

Julie Robson is an adjunct Senior Lecturer at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts, Edith Cowan University, with research foci in female vocality, creative learning and arts-led research. She is also co-director of *Ladyfinger*, a performance, production and publishing company focused on the work of contemporary female artists.

Email: j.robson@ecu.edu.au