Ways of coming to knowing through embodied methodologies

Brenda Downing

This paper emerges from my doctoral research: *Feeling the fleshed body: The aftermath of childhood rape*. The most crucial understanding to emerge from my research is that sexual trauma begins, in the first instance, not at a psychological level, as much of the literature asserts, but rather, at the level of the body. This paper, written in two parts, elucidates the contribution a body-focused combined methodological approach made to my rape trauma research by examining two of the three modes of embodied inquiry undertaken for the project: writing-as-inquiry and performance-making-as-inquiry. To help illustrate these methodologies, the paper samples some of my poetic, journal, and performance reflection writing.

Within contemporary rape trauma scholarship, there is a tendency for the long term bodily ramifications of unresolved childhood sexual violence to be given less attention than the more readily acknowledged psychological impacts. My feminist materialist research focuses specifically on the trauma of childhood rape as it is expressed and understood in the adult female body. The project is primarily autoethnographic, although it also carries the strong narrative presence of other women who have experienced childhood sexual violence.

My raped and traumatised body and the explorations I undertook as a major form of embodied investigation lie at the centre of the research method I call ‘autoethnographic somatic inquiry’. Across a three and a half year period, I accessed the multiple micro and macro somatic expressions of my rape history through an immersion in two body-focused practices, Body-Mind Centering® (Bainbridge Cohen, 2008) and Authentic Movement, under the guidance of Alice Cummins, a Body-Mind Centering® practitioner and dance artist. My immersion in this embodied form of inquiry enabled a therapeutic and rigorous engagement with the unresolved bodily memory of my childhood rape experience. It offered a fecund space for the emergence of poetic and embodied writing and formed the basis for the development of the largely non-verbal performance piece, *aperture*. 
Writing and performance were the two modes I used to communicate my knowledge-making. By embedding my research within a creative paradigm, I challenged more traditional forms of social science knowledge production and dissemination whilst also honouring the ontological, epistemological, and transformational potentialities of subjective, embodied, and performative research. Coming to knowing in autoethnographic rape trauma research through embodied modes of inquiry necessarily involved a movement into the feeling states of my cellular body. The methods revealed in this paper supported the facilitation of this movement. By adopting these methods, it was possible to dwell deeply in the feeling space of the personal whilst also engaging reflexively with the broader social, cultural, and historical representations of sexual trauma.

Although the autoethnographic somatic inquiry process formed a significant methodological component of my research, in this article I explore writing-as-inquiry and performance-making-as-inquiry. Part One: Writing-as-inquiry discusses the practice of writing as an embodied and creative form of autoethnographic inquiry. To illustrate the integrity of writing as a form of ontologically relevant inquiry and its potential to support knowledge-making practices, I draw on the work of women writers such as Virginia Woolf, Helene Cixous, and Lorri Neilsen. I introduce examples from my own embodied writing practice to amplify the effectiveness of this type of inquiry method to rape trauma research. Part Two: Performance-making-as-inquiry presents a post-performance reflection as an alternative means of conveying the performance-making-as-inquiry method and the findings from the research. In this section of the paper, the writing presents as a series of fragments. This is a mimetic strategy intended to mirror the temporal disjunction of trauma memory. It is also intended to mirror the quality of the partial though connected states of knowing that emerged throughout the project as well as during the creative development phases of aperture, out of which the key experiential understandings of the research grew.

Part One: Writing-as-inquiry

Although I’ve spent a lifetime writing my way into knowing, I have only recently, through my doctoral project, come to name it an experiential, embodied and poetic process. In the past, during times when I’ve been in differing and intense states of feeling and when I’ve needed clarity, I’ve turned to writing poetry and journaling to explore these states in order to feel and hear myself in creative ways. May Sarton, writer and journal-
keeper, says she wrote novels to discover what she ‘thought about something’ and poetry to discover what she ‘felt about something’ [author’s own emphasis] (1973, p. 41). The imaginative and intimate space poetry and journal writing opened for me during my research project made both thinking and feeling more accessible. These modes of writing exploration enabled me to creatively tease apart the powerfully solid and complex presence of feeling states in my body that were not always straightforward nor easily brought to language through more traditional academic forms of inquiry.

Despite extended periods in my life post-rape when I have felt distanced from my body, writing has, for the most part, been an integrated practice. In the multidimensional, somatic and cognitive “doing” of writing, in the mulling, in the literal and metaphorical movement of feeling responses, ideas, thoughts, and images through my body and mind, I am able to ‘make the world make sense’ (Mairs, 1994, p. 36). When my writing attempts are not firmly anchored in embodiment, I have a sense of these things drifting around me. On these occasions, the process of hauling words onto the page to make meaning can be painful. By contrast, when I write from an immersion in my body and mind, when the words emerge from my feeling, cognitive, and intuitive states, they often feel effortless. When I let them roll out, the understandings that develop arrive in me as though they’ve been there all along.

**Poetic writing**

Much of my writing is grounded in, and emerges from an aesthetic and poetic sensibility. I have been generous in the use of metaphor throughout my research. I find poetic writing and metaphor provides a way of entering and unfolding my somatic knowing and experience while illuminating and amplifying my experiential understandings through viscerally evocative language. Additionally, poetic writing becomes a pedagogical aid for the transmission of my somatic knowing to others. In her novel *Sorry*, Gail Jones (2007, p. 199) writes of the new ‘dimension of communication’ her protagonist, Perdita, discovers when she is introduced to the embodied vocabulary of sign language: ‘There were meanings that could exist only in sign, connotations for which only the inventive body and a gestural repertoire sufficed.’ Somatically-held trauma memory and intangible bodily responses to it are often extraordinarily difficult to articulate. Autoethnographically, poetic writing acted as ‘a device of memory’ (Cook, 2000, p. 18) to animate my trauma memory through the use of a creative
vocabulary more connected to my body than more conventional forms of academic language. Metaphor served as a form of *gestural repertoire* and provided me with a means of transmitting my knowing through what Lekkie Hopkins (2010) calls a sideways manoeuvre, expressing what I could not articulate directly by approaching it from an angle. Sophie Tamas (2009, p. 23) says she keeps writing about trauma ‘because words are my least dangerous ways of speaking. But what I need is a language that both shows and tells […] I need to speak from within that which I purport to describe’. I argue that by writing my way into knowing through language that engages deeply with the poetics of the integrated body and mind to reach new meaning subjectively and tangentially, I am honouring the embodied process that supports this kind of arrival at understanding. I am honouring too the potential of such language to evoke empathy by offering readers visceral and aesthetic ways of connecting with rape trauma. Poetic writing has been a liberating tool for me to use throughout my life/research and a powerful form of expression to communicate my self-discoveries.

The following poem emerged subsequent to a private Body-Mind Centering® session with Alice Cummins in January, 2011. To contextualise the poem, one of the pernicious long term ramifications of my childhood rape experience, present when I began my somatic inquiry in 2010, was a pervasive sense of detachment from my body, particularly from my lower body. A specific manifestation of this, identified by Alice early in our therapeutic work, was an uneven weight distribution between the left and right sides of my lower body. During this private session, and under Alice’s guidance, I had been working towards re-patterning this weight imbalance by locating my centre of gravity. The purpose of this re-patterning was to find greater strength and connection through my pelvis, legs and feet. As an aid to help me not only feel, but also see the quality of the changes I was attempting, Alice had held a large mirror in front of me. The mirror danced in her hands as she talked, fracturing my reflection into a series of elusive and incomplete images. The effect perfectly captured the persistent, fragmented, and disconnected states I had carried since my childhood rape experience. The images I took away from the session that day helped craft the poem but it was the embodied recognition of the states of knowing that these images evoked, which allowed the words to emerge with an urgency that could not be resisted.

*Fragmented Woman*
She slides into view
Fleeting presence
Picasso image
Exposed foot
Angled knee
Timid fingers

She swings out of view
Escapes to nowhere
Land of absence
Island of denial
Empty sky space
Cloud of dreams

She pieces herself together
Shards of self
Fragile fragments
Sharp edged armour
Blocking out
And locking in

(2011)

Journal writing

My research journal was my close companion for the duration of my doctoral project. Writing was my ‘aesthetic/epistemic praxis’ (Spry, 2009, p. 605) and my way of coming to knowing through ‘embodied theorizing’ (Spry, 2009, p. 604). I turned to my journal to record the practical details of my life as a doctoral researcher: submission dates for academic progress reports, risk assessments, ethical clearance documentation; supervision times. For the most part though, I turned to it to write responses to texts and journal articles I was interacting with, for exploring kernels of ideas, developing slender thoughts, delving into intuitive hunches and feeling states, experimenting with creativity through poetry, and wrestling with difficulty. I used it to jot down single words that sang to me, quotes from favourite books, lines from poetry, images that had stayed with me from performances I had attended, references to paintings that resonated. It held my most memorable dreams, my biggest irritations, my delight in the research process, the paradoxes, my fears, my vulnerabilities. My journal provided a reliable, safe and intimate place of return, a haven from the
eyes of others, a place of seclusion and privacy where I could berate myself, shout at the world, give in to grief, rejoice in pleasure, rest, gather myself, stretch, yawn, re-energise. It was a place where I re-shaped my self-perception, re-visioned my place in the world, developed ‘a feel for my own work’ (Mairs, 1994, p. 33), and found my voice as an embodied researcher and writer. All of the writing in my journal, every word, helped me negotiate my way through the personal, sociocultural, political and historical landscapes and complexities of my sexual trauma research.

Virginia Woolf (1953), who kept a diary/journal from 1915 until four days before her death in 1941, wrote the following in January, 1919:

I have just re-read my year’s diary and am much struck by the rapid haphazard gallop at which it swings along, sometimes indeed jerking, almost intolerably over cobbles. Still, if it were not written rather faster than the fastest type-writing, if I stopped and took thought, it would never be written at all; and the advantage of the method is that it sweeps up accidentally several stray matters which I should exclude if I hesitated, but which are the diamonds of the dustheap. (p. 7)

When Woolf talks of writing faster than the fastest type-writing, and when she reasons, if I stopped and took thought, it would never get written at all, it suggests to me that what she was experiencing were occasions when her writing emerged from a place of deep embodied intelligence. I am reminded here of Hélène Cixous (1991), another journal keeper who writes from a place of embodied intelligence. Cixous notes: ‘There comes the time of immanence. A desire to write rises in my body and comes to occupy my heart. Everything beats faster. The entire body readies itself’ (1998, p. 192). Cixous (1991), reads the outpouring of her writing as a gift from the subconscious. Susan Sontag (Rieff, 2012), also kept journals throughout her life, and, like Cixous, acknowledges the writing as a gift. In 1964 she wrote: ‘I experience the writing as given to me – sometimes, almost, as dictated. I let it come, try not to interfere with it. I respect it, because it’s me and yet more than me. It’s personal and transpersonal, both’ (Rieff, 2012, p. 38). I argue that what these writer’s words are suggesting is an affirmation of the corporeally and cognitively constituted origins of writing and coming to knowing. Trinh T. Minh-ha (1999, p. 258) captures this explicitly, observing, ‘It wrote itself through me. [...] We write – think and feel – (with) our entire bodies rather than (with) our minds or hearts’. Lorri Neilsen (2008) suggests the use of the term “lyric” to describe such forms
of writing that ‘make connections among intellect, emotion, spirit, and the body’ (p. 99), those that create an aesthetic engagement with the inquiry process itself as well as produce work that resounds with rich, sensorial language. This type of engagement, she argues, aligns itself with the sort of transgressive writing typical of l’écriture féminine, ‘writing that springs from the body’ (p. 99) and which Cixous and Clement (1986) urge women to adopt in order to subvert masculinist and rationalist forms of dominant writing practices.

During my research, like Woolf, when I allowed my words to gallop, I too was conscious of sweeping up diamonds. I imaginatively held those diamonds, and moved into, around, and through them to begin to make connections between these new states of knowing and my already established cultural, historical and political understandings. These were moments of transformation when, as Annie Dillard (1989, p. 3) notes, ‘The writing has changed, in your hands, and in a twinkling, from an expression of your notions to an epistemological tool’.

The most intensively pleasurable feature of using writing specifically as a form of inquiry was, and remains, this transformative quality. The most frustrating quality is its unpredictability; I could never take the process of writing for granted, only revel in the mystery of the moments of jouissance when my hand could barely keep up with the outpourings from my body. Often I sat down to write with nothing but a wisp of a feeling, with no idea where the writing would take me. And then I would be swept along. The writing became the navigator to my travelling inquiring self. Questions would always emerge; some were telescopic, sprouting linearly from other questions; others were obscurely, tangentially and slimly interconnected. Leaps of intuition fired me off in different inquiry directions, exposed me to new sights, and insights, new tastes, smells, new ways of moving through my research that were ontological and epistemological, both. The pace was often thrilling and the spontaneity immensely satisfying.

I rarely planned these travels. When I did, more often than not I failed to reach any destination and instead became immobilised in a state of inquiry paralysis, the pain of the failure and the concomitant loss of voice a reminder to return, with patience, to my intuitive, organic, unrestrained, and deeply integrated embodied writing practice. Setting writing goals risked eroding and undermining this practice. It threatened to usurp the deep trust I had in my body’s capacity to invite understanding to the surface of my consciousness. In 1932, Gertrude Stein (1990, pp. 112-113) wrote,
'when you write a thing it is perfectly clear and then you begin to be doubtful about it but then you read it again and lose yourself in it as when you wrote it’. A materialist reading of Stein’s process suggests to me fluid and integrated corporeal and cognitive states of knowing are at play, intertwined states or, as Karen Barad (2007, 2013) might term them, entangled states. Such a reading enables the passage of insight to be illuminated as it snakes from the body-to-intellect-to-body in a continual and integrated process of meaning-making. My interpretation of Stein’s process situates her sense of feeling perfectly clear in her authentic, intuitive, and integrated body and mind; the doubt that enters lies in the shift to the dis-embodied intellectual analysis of the writing, almost as if a fracture occurs between the somatic and the cognitive and uncertainty sprouts from the liminal space created between. When Stein re-immerses and loses herself again in the work, I read this as the moment when meaning returns in response to a reversion back to a more corporeally and cognitively co-constituted state. Of course my reading springs from an immersion in my own writing practice and from moments when I’ve paused in the writing and viscerally felt the interruption of the embodied process as an imbalance occurs and my intellect “takes over”. In the momentary but temporal delay this creates, it is enough to interrupt the intuitive flow and I sometimes feel a strange uncertainty about what it is I’m trying to say. When I allow myself to re-enter my integrated embodied state, the meaning returns and I continue.

By their own admission, Woolf (1953), Sarton (1973), and Sontag (Rieff, 2012), to name but a few women writers, engaged in journal and notebook writing to help bring clarity to complex and sometimes elusive thoughts. Cixous (1991) remains a committed and prolific journal and notebook keeper. Reading these women’s writing, it is clear that journaling is used not only to find clarity but also: to explore feeling; as a means of critically reflecting on their own writing practice as well as those of others; to critique art and literature; and to plant the seeds of words and phrases of interest for use in future poetry, novels or essays. My life-long journal writing practice has always taken me into places of self-reflection and self-discovery, the intimacy of its form offering the spaciousness necessary for candid, creative expression and transformation. Stephanie Dowrick (2007, p. 3) argues ‘It is virtually impossible to write a journal and not discover more about yourself’. Writing, says Laurel Richardson (2000, p. 923), is ‘a way of “knowing” – a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are not separable’.
Intrinsic to my writing praxis has been my moving body. I have long known that moving my body through space helps bring clarity to my thinking but have had only a limited understanding as to why this should be. I now have an experiential and embodied vocabulary with which to articulate this. After my immersion in the material states of my body through the body-focused practices already mentioned, I have come to understand that moving my body shifts things around not only at a cognitive level but crucially, also at a cellular level. It is, as Cummins notes, this active and entangled material-cognitive process that helps ‘integrate and embody material as it emerges’ (A. Cummins, personal communication, December 13, 2010). During my doctoral work, moving, when preceding or punctuating periods of journal or thesis writing, undoubtedly helped facilitate an embodied self-reflexivity. When I needed to work my way through ideas before writing, or when I was stuck at a writing crossroad, or worse still, a writing dead-end, moving through space always helped shuffle things around, breathing life into stagnant corners, and functioning as a sort of moving prelude, an active pre-writing writing in the materiality of my body.

I offer now a series of extracts from my research journal as illustrations of writing as a form of embodied inquiry. The extracts plot the evolution of my thinking over time in relation to one theme. They support my argument that an embodied writing methodology holds the potential to offer opportunities for experiential meaning-making within rape trauma research.

5 June, 2010
(My first Body-Mind Centering workshop, ‘Navel Radiation’)

Alice talked about a baby’s rooting reflex and how the baby will always turn away from the nipple before returning to attach. There was much discussion about this. I was troubled and didn’t contribute but instead sat quietly imagining and feeling in my body what Alice was talking about, rotating my head slightly back and forth, thinking and feeling that in order to turn away from the nipple, the baby must first surely acknowledge the presence of it. What I felt was that if viewed in this way, the nipple (or any other object for that matter) becomes located in consciousness, it’s acknowledged and considered rather than given no thought and turned away from, or rejected.

14 January, 2013
(Body-Mind Centering Intensive Program: ‘Perceptions’)

Evening reflection: In the context of developmental movement patterns, we talked of the rooting reflex in a baby (the turning away of the head before the return to the nipple). I’ve always been perplexed by this at previous workshops. I’m puzzled as to what evolutionary purpose is served by a behaviour that requires us to turn from the source of nurturance and sustenance before returning to it. I expressed my concerns about this to the group ... I spoke of how, in the turning away, in the suspended interval between turn and return, a space of vulnerability opens up. My anxiety about this rests in the possibility of something occurring in the space or interval during the return phase that could interrupt and hamper the return to the food source. What if something were to occur? What if the process was interrupted? What then? In human terms, this would surely mean the potential decline of the species. Alice asked me to personalise the question and try to see what this question would mean in relation to my own life. I couldn’t do this. I couldn’t relate this to myself and my own experiences. Not in that moment. I was completely inside the possibility of species destruction. My mind went blank in relation to my own life; I threw up a barrier, a wall that made it impossible for me to be self-reflexive. I lost my train of thought. My brain stopped and refused to go on. I knew I needed to move and looked forward to the discussion ending so I could go back into the studio.’

15 January, 2013
(Body-Mind Centering Intensive Program: ‘Perceptions’)

Early morning reflection: I’m sitting in the kitchen at 8am; people are off preparing for the day’s work. This morning I went for another long walk up the hill, quite early, 6:30 or so. I wanted to reflect on the concerns I had yesterday about the possibility of interruption in the rooting reflex. I tried to relate this concern to my own life. I wanted to find some answers by walking through Alice’s question so as not to carry my nagging irritation into the day. I didn’t want my confusion to get in the way of the absorption of the day’s material. I was looking for some clarity where none had opened out to me yesterday. This is what came to me as I walked in the silence of the forest and I explore more fully here: When I chose to sleep at my childhood friend’s house on those two occasions, a fracture in my life occurred. The sleepovers represent the points of suspension when I turned away, the rapes the moments of interruption. I was unable to return. I wasn’t able to return to the source of nurturance (family, friends) in quite the same way. I had to become self-sufficient from that moment on. To support this I became silent and cautious. So, my options/choices were severely limited by my experience of interruption. I had to remain self-
sufficient or suffer further. The self-sufficiency however, while allowing me to survive, came at a cost and that cost was a body that bore the burden of my story of sexual trauma, a hyper-vigilant sensory system, a severely restricted geographical space of occupation, and a body that had no boundaries and yet had imposed and rigid boundaries. Yes, I survived the interruption but the cost was high and complex and the ramifications still felt. This is why the possibility of interruption distresses me so much and sits in me with such persistence.

23 January, 2013
(Body-Mind Centering Intensive Program: ‘The Fluids’)
Reflection: Although I had actively pursued detachment from my body for decades in order to avoid the trauma I had experienced, it is clear to me now that I must indeed have been paying very close attention during those years. After all, in order for me to disregard something, for example an object, an irritation, a thought, or even in this instance, my own body, it fits that it first surely required a certain amount of my attention to be directed towards that object, or thought, or body. If my attention or regard was not directed towards that something then how was it possible for me to dis-regard it and turn away? This insight has been critical to the evolution of my thinking and the shifting relationship I now have with my body. The realisation of this insight might not have taken place if I had not been able to cultivate a sense of presence to my own experience through the BMC work and the hands-on with Alice. By developing the capacity to hold myself in experience and then explore this reflexively through moving and writing, I’ve been able to find greater clarity and give birth to new meaning.

Part two: Performance-making-as-inquiry

Within the social sciences, where my research locates itself, creative and performative methodologies remain the exception (Neilsen, 2008). A highly innovative component of my research process, then, was the creation and performance of aperture. Although not for examination, this solo movement theatre piece was documented using video recording, photographic stills and personal reflection, and sits alongside the written work as a companion to the thesis. aperture undoubtedly added another aesthetic layer to my research. Crucially, though, the making of aperture served as a dynamic, multidimensional, and embodied methodological process of investigation.

The subtleties and complexities of my material and sociocultural reality post-rape were uncovered through the multiple inquiry methods I engaged
in during the course of my research. As already mentioned, these processes included my extensive autoethnographic somatic inquiry work via the practices of Body-Mind Centering® and Authentic Movement under the guidance of Cummins, as well as through my creative collaboration with her during the making of aperture. The creative development phases of aperture threaded together the many elements of my post-rape reality. Many of these elements, uncovered during the autoethnographic somatic inquiry work, revealed new insights when brought together creatively in the studio. My presence as a raped woman-researcher-performer in the performance space offered a visceral and dynamic interface with the audience, giving flesh to, and illuminating my story in ways not possible in the written work. Spry (2011, p. 170) argues that ‘Words can construct, but cannot hold the weight of the body’. The words of my thesis construct the somatic aftermath reality of childhood rape but the performance of aperture held the weight of my flesh in the embodied articulation of this reality. My present and moving body also drew the audience into an immediate and visceral dialogical engagement in what Spry (2011, p. 126) calls a process of ‘collaborative meaning-making’.

I performed aperture to an invited audience at The Chapel Space in Perth, Western Australia, on 14 September, 2012. What follows is my post-performance reflection written as a series of fragments to mirror the often partial and dis-integrated, though ultimately connected, states of knowing which emerged during the research and from which the research findings grew.

***

Waiting in the green room

The sound of the audience gathering beyond the doors: women’s voices, conversation, occasional laughter, a palpable air of expectation

Humming to myself, moving my body, a dance of constant motion, steadying my nerves, keeping warm, calming myself, gathering my resources

Looking into the huge mirror opposite, grinning at the improbability of what I was about to do, the realization of a long-held vision, a sense of surrealism in the anticipation

Alice coming to check on me at regular intervals ... 15 minutes ... 10 minutes ... 5 minutes ...
Rising up and down on my toes, feeling the muscles of my calves expanding and contracting, holding my position on “stiletto heels”, feeling the weight of my story on the balls of my feet.

Allowing the choreographic score to sit in my body quietly, letting my mind drift but remaining connected to the present, allowing trust to filter throughout my body, firmly grounded in the rehearsal preparation, the storying and embodiment of the deeply known.

2 minutes … my belly fizzing … this is it, almost time, after a year of time, after a lifetime.

A last look in the mirror, seeing clearly the face of the 1971 school girl. Whispering: *This is for you*

Alice coming to get me: *It’s all yours.* A look. A smile.

Ready.

I’m ready.

Standing outside the performance space, waiting, the audience settling, Anouar Brahem music and stage lighting slowly fading, my heart pounding.

The plunge into an abyss of silence and darkness.

A shift from inner to outer, from the sensory experience of the rape of me, to the aftermath, to the storying of the rape of me, to the performance of the story of me, to the stories of raped women everywhere, from the personal to the political.

Pumping bass noise. One minute of throbbing, relentless sound, increasing in volume and intensity, filling ears, vibrations of sound shuddering up through the floor, working their way up my body, cacophonous noise disturbing, energising, wanting it to stop, wanting it to continue.

Sudden deafening silence.

The tiny pen light guiding into the darkness … one … two … three steps … pause. Wanting to suspend time, hold this moment forever, a thrilling and
terrifying moment, the beginning of something after the end of something else, past, present and future conflating in those first steps

Silhouettes of seated women waiting. Feeling the collective. Feeling the individual. Watching, open, expectant

The pen light a curious creature illuminating, moving slowly through the space, examining, familiar structural elements now strange, unknown; cloth, metal, brick, wood, seeing them for the first time

Finding the crumpled blanket at the foot of the pole, resting inanimate in the corner. Approaching, draping the blanket over upper body, covering head and face, turning slowly, sliding body down the pole to squatting, yellow beam of stage light stroking the floor, body caught in its surveillance

Fragment: Power struggle
Sharp intake of breath, arms flailing for support, pressing into the floor with legs, trying to rise, the hand of patriarchy, cultural silencing pushing down, down, struggling against it, rising, down, rising, down, down, down, body horizontal on the floor, legs splayed, head propped awkwardly against the pole, yellow beam of light spilling over legs, pubis, torso, vulnerability on display, exposed, an unavoidable image

Fragment: Peering out from rape
Uncovering my face, looking out, inert pelvis, lifeless legs, lower body immobilised, defended, defeated, powerless, dragging fragmented presence, hauling body to sitting with arms, staccato breath, whimpering voice, choking throat full of experience

Fragment: The descent into shame
Foetal curl of body on floor, flesh rising to sitting in its shroud, turned face to the corner, loss of face, hidden shame, blanketed voice. Full weight of body/memory in hands, gripping the pole, pulling to upright, restoring respectability, leaving memory behind, survival, deep breath, deeper breath, turning body downstage, here I am, almost, but not quite, not quite whole, me, not quite me, something familiar, something strange, changed, not the same, same path, different rules

Fragment: The bed
Make your bed, lie in it. Under the cloth, another kind of shroud, escape, safety, veiling history. Humming, train whistle blowing up from early
childhood, stroking the cloth, hands, elbows, knees, feet, playing, creating shapes, lost in reverie, temporal and spatial starlit sky, place of dreams

Fragment: *The altar of female sacrifice*
Body contorts, assumes Kath Kollwitz “Rape” position, right arm detaches itself, emerges from blanket, hand clamps down hard on mouth, wild struggle, thrashing head, legs flailing, body arching, left arm tugging, suffocating darkness, choking fear, long silent scream, recurrent nightmare, nocturnal companion

Fragment: *The hovering perpetrator*
Suspended above face, large, terrifying, powerful, threatening, body small, vulnerability huge, gripping the memory/threat, rolling, rolling, rolling downstage, surge of energy/fear/anger propelling body, coming to rest, belly flat to the floor, legs splayed behind, lungs exploding

Fragment: *The lover*
Softening body, muscles of jaw, quietened breath, lowering face, parting lips, moment of passion … Scrape of memory, body retracts, detaches, recoils, disgust swamping mouth, violently pushing lover away

Fragment: *New life*
Scrubbing legs, frantic, trying to erase disgust, trying to rid flesh of memory, tumbling the blanket between thighs, knees, spiralling the baby up from between legs, into arms, maternal love flooding body, expanding heart, the miracle of birth, new life, innocence … rasp of memory, temporal distortion, despair, hopelessness, helplessness, a child attempting to care for a child, dragging presence of trauma pulling, weakening, confusing, pressing further into the past

Fragment: *Where have I gone?*
Lost to myself, here but not here. What will I find if I go looking? Visceral attraction, magnetising, I can’t resist, gingerly lifting the edges of myself, trepidation at what lurks in folds of memory, the inevitability of the known,
the terror of the ignored. Too much to endure, not ready for it yet. The desire to regain control swells, gathers strength, scrubbing where memories erupted, erasing, wiping away so no trace remains, keeping it un-seen. The control, the strength, the empowerment of domination brings me to standing, trapping memory under determined feet.

Fragment: *Tucking myself away*
Madness bleeding into life, bruised words, incoherent, coherent, reminding body/life/memory of who’s in command, strong feet keeping waywardness at bay, the mind assaulting, fearful, the body passive victim, another violation, another kind of assault, food withdrawal, deprivation of love, starvation.

Fragment: *Fuck you!*
No voice, silent mouth, lips sealed, cells fighting to speak, anger oozing from pores, the unspoken choking, twisting nerve fibres, cramping viscera. My eyes shouting: Fuck you, betraying body! You got me into this! Fuck you, rapists! Don’t destroy, turn away, stride off without a backward glance holding innocence in your sweaty hand! Fuck you, *all* who turn their backs! Don’t silence raped women with your closed eyes, your deaf ears!

Fragment: *The mirror*
Turning to gaze, curiosity ignited, body softened. Who do I see? What do I feel as I cast my eyes over the image before me? Who is this woman in the mirror who still feels a child? How do I reconcile what I feel with what I see? How do I make room for myself in this woman’s body? Why does this child refuse to leave? How do I reclaim missing years? How do I reconcile loss? How can I renegotiate a path to maturity? Fetid madness rots and decays, attempts to find answers exhausts, creates vertigo states.

Fragment: *Lipstick and stilettos*
Another construction of respectability. Finding strength in the trappings of normality, strength in the mask of coping, a red slick of colour for courage, a pair of heels to elevate self-esteem, borderline parody, the tragedy of the superficial, the resilience found there, paradoxical, the performance of what’s expected suppressing inner turmoil, the performance of this expectation impossible to resist, even harder to negotiate, suffocating memory under an oily veneer of red.
Fragment: *The fall*
Difficult to balance, exhausted body, the fulcrum shifted, struggle unsupported, the performance of coping, teetering, brittle, a precarious fragile existence, finding strength, regrouping, endlessly, all the while edging towards the precipice, the fall - inevitable, the landing - brutal

Fragment: *Catharsis*
Gathering strength with dispassionate eyes at what lies before me. A surge of bitterness meets exhaustion, knowing and understanding arrive simultaneously, grappling with the life-history-trauma memory, throwing, retrieving, conflict stabbing my heart, the desire to be rid of it, the desire to hold it close. Resenting how it’s shaped identity, fearful of what will remain if it goes. Could the letting go facilitate the moment of implosion? Create further fragmentation? Greater dis-integration? Twin desires competing, to hold/to purge, to keep/to liberate, duelling and bloody binaries fraught with fear, uncertainty, the unknown, the unknowable. Throw, gather back, throw, gather back then ... NO! Voice escaping my distraught body, forcing its way into my mouth. NO MORE! The air punctuated by resistance, sound escaping in the physicality of the moment, the power of the life-history-memory diminished by every collision with the floor until, finally, it lies a discarded defeated heap, its hold released.

Fragment: *The realisation*
Spent, emptied out by the effort, the struggle, exhausted from the turbulent confrontations between the mind and the body, from carrying the weight of the life-history-memory, sinking to the floor to join it, to put it alongside, the noise of breath and pumping heart in the space between, a new understanding developing: acknowledgement of abandonment, of harsh unjustified treatment, of the need to find stillness, to make peace, to sit in love, knowing these memories exist, will always exist, but will no longer destroy and undermine, co-existent consciousness is possible.
Fragment: *Sitting with trauma*
I reclaim my whole self in the coming together at this moment. I reclaim my agency. I re-shape my identity. I no longer need to define myself by the terms of my rape history. I am so much more than a child who was raped. I move into myself as a woman with agency, with self-respect, with compassion, with love softening memory.

Fragment: *The walk back to the present*
My life passes before me, behind me, writ large for all to see. My woman’s body casts a silhouette beside the nine year old image, the child yet to suffer the pain and burden of rape trauma. The 1971 image appears, the school girl with her cracked and blistered lips, tired eyes, strained smile. My silhouette passes across her, I halt when she appears again, want to send her a signal to say: I’m here now. I hear you. It’s alright.

Fragment: *Masking-un-masking*
A diagonal walk downstage into the pool of light, masked, confident, sure-footed, my body filled to its edges at last with story, with newly-found trust, trust in the self, trust in others to hold my story with respect, trust in the process of re-integration, and the power of love to achieve it.
This is me
All of me
Observe
Feel
Imagine

I want you to see
all of me
Observe
Feel
Imagine
Ask me

Fragment: *Leaving the story behind*
A turn away. A diagonal walk back to leave the space. Silence around me, deep profound silence, not a sound.

This is what the silence held for me:

I felt my body had told its story. My body felt acknowledged and replete. It vibrated with affirmation.

I sensed my story had been seen, heard, felt and imagined.

I experienced myself as complete.

And as I registered this in the silence I asked myself: *Is this an end or merely a beginning?*

***

In conclusion

This paper discussed the capacity for an integrated embodied methodological process to hold potential for multidimensional, dynamic, and creative ways of coming to knowing in rape trauma research. I have positioned writing and performance-making as two forms of inquiry which supported my immersion in the feeling states of my raped and traumatised body. The integrated material-cognitive foundation of these methods was
critical for the exploration of those feeling states and necessary for meaning-making. The paper highlights the epistemic contribution this type of inquiry can make to rape trauma scholarship, while the embodied processes outlined honour the raped female body as a rich and intelligent site of knowing and coming to knowing.

References


Nb: *aperture* Images by Deb Robertson

**Author biography**

Brenda Downing is a feminist researcher with specific interests in sexual trauma, embodied memory, autoethnography, and embodied forms of arts-based inquiry. Her PhD thesis, 'Feeling the Fleshed Body: the aftermath of childhood rape', for which she won the Faculty Research Medal and the Magdalena Prize in Feminist Research 2014, focuses on the multiple articulations of embodied trauma memory in the aftermath of childhood rape.

Email: brendadowning747@gmail.com