

the aftermath of childhood rape

Feeling  
the  
Fleshed  
Body

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## Introduction

The moment when a feeling enters the body is political.

This touch is political.

— ADRIENNE RICH

In the summer and spring of my final year of primary school, I was twice raped.

I was on the cusp of adolescence.

It was 1971, the year I turned twelve.

These rapes both took place at night at the home of a school friend. The first time it happened I thought I was going to die. The perpetrator's suffocating hand covered my nose and mouth. The terror I was experiencing made breathing almost impossible and prevented me from making any sound. My school friend slept on in another bed in the same room. The rapist was her older brother. Of course, given my age and the era, I did not have a framework of sexual violence in which to locate what was happening to me, but I knew it was a terrible thing and something she must not witness. I never spoke to her about the rapes, and as far as I know, she remains unaware of what took place in her bedroom on those nights. I lost touch with her after we left primary school.

I have written about these experiences of rape in great detail elsewhere: here it is enough to say that for many reasons I also kept this trauma from my family and chose instead to unburden my secret to a different school friend. While the intervening years have smudged my memory of the thought processes I must have undergone in order to choose this particular girl, I have reflected on this many times since and can make certain presumptions. I know that she wasn't a particularly close friend; I barely spent any time outside school hours in her company. My closest friend at

that time, someone I have maintained a friendship with to this day, only became aware of my story in 2010 when we sat together on a hot West Australian summer's day, the deep shade of a Moreton Bay fig tree offering shelter from the sun as well as a sense of privacy and enclosure. We were reminiscing about our school years and the time seemed right. I quietly unfolded my story to her.

Perhaps it was a need to preserve this closest of friendships that drove me to choose to tell the other girl. It may be that my instinct for survival at that time prompted the need for schoolgirl normality. Perhaps I assumed that my story, if disclosed, would damage what I needed most. I do recall that the girl I disclosed to seemed somehow older and worldlier than the other girls in my class. Perhaps I thought she would understand what had happened to me because of this. Whatever the reasons, my judgement was poor and my intentions misguided. My disclosure was dismissed as a lie, and despite my protestations of truth, she refused to take me seriously. It had taken me weeks to build up the courage to tell this girl my secret. Her unanticipated dismissal crushed my schoolgirl hope.

I felt helpless and abandoned.

Not willing to risk such rejection a second time, out of a desperate need for self-protection and increasing feelings of shame, I took my secret and my traumatic memories, folded them carefully, wrapped them tightly in a pact of silence, and forced them firmly into the deepest recesses of my young body. I could not risk speaking of these rapes again.

For nearly thirty years I maintained my silence, apart from a fleeting and inadequate disclosure to someone I loved and trusted when I was twenty. During these years, I developed a difficult, tiring and tenuous relationship with my corporeal self. My mind and my body became embroiled in a battle of attrition, my mind an uncompromising and sadistic leader, my body a reluctant and rebellious custodian of my memories, an undisciplined, subversive, irrepressible, and noisy traitor.

For almost four decades I felt no compassion towards my body, merely a loathing that had its genesis in a darkened room in 1971, a loathing fuelled by a grief that remained unacknowledged yet ran deep and was ever present.

The point of propulsion for this book is my raped and censured body with its somatic aftermath narrative. The major focus of this book is my engagement with and reflection on the somatic manifestations of trauma I experienced in the aftermath of my childhood rape experience. The autoethnographic explorations I undertook as part of the research for this book spanned several years and involved a process I call somatic inquiry. During this period of embodied exploration, I immersed myself in the body-based therapeutic and experiential practice of Body-Mind Centering<sup>®1</sup> as a private client, workshop participant, and residential program participant. I was guided during this process by Alice Cummins, Body-Mind Centering practitioner, somatic movement educator, and dance artist. The somatic inquiry helped facilitate the identification and interpretation of the multiplicity of ways my body articulated my silenced and unresolved childhood trauma experience, and the ways in which sexual trauma shaped my life as a result. In addition, it helped facilitate a therapeutic engagement with my traumatised material self that led to the beginnings of a restored bodymind relationship and the cultivation of a deep appreciation for the intelligence present throughout my integrated self.

I also turned to other victims of sexual violence as part of my research process. The extracts from their stories appear in text boxes and often towards the margins of the page to remind the reader of the sociocultural and political containment of raped women's voices and of their marginal location within Western culture. Their inclusion adds greater depth to the book and creates a space of reverberation that not only resounds with my autoethnographic voice but also the voices of others raped in childhood. Our stories sit alongside one another to echo within the 'gaps and fissures' (Modjeska 1995, 31) in the existing sexual trauma discourses within the literature on childhood rape. Their inclusion will also: give these women a voice and presence in a book that focuses specifically on the somatic aftermath of childhood rape; serve to disrupt conventional discursive constructions of rape trauma; resist the erasure of the body and subjective experience

1 For reasons of aesthetics, the registered trademark for Body-Mind Centering will only appear on this page.

from universal and institutionally determined definitions of rape; reverberate against and amplify the material conditions of my autoethnographic aftermath story; reveal areas of experiential similarity and difference; and amplify the wider cultural experience of rape in childhood. The embodied voices of nine women join my own voice in the struggle to speak and be heard, and unite to bring the feminine language of our bodies into existence.

An additional, crucial, and highly innovative (within the social sciences) outcome of the original doctoral project was the performance work, *aperture*. Made in 2012 in collaboration with Alice Cummins, this creative piece emerged from my autoethnographic research to sit alongside the body of the thesis. *aperture* was a solo work performed in Perth, Western Australia. During the performance I used my body creatively as a site of intelligence, memory, and articulation to provide insight into the body's capacity to communicate the complex, fragmentary, and multi-layered nature of unresolved sexual trauma memory. Images included in several chapters are from the performance.

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This book, with its feminist and materialist perspective, weaves together corporeal and discursive understandings of the long-term bodily response to the experience of childhood rape. As I gathered research, my conscious attention to the embodied impact and expression of rape trauma did not preclude me from exploring the literature surrounding discursive understandings of rape trauma. Indeed, to ignore these investigations would have meant denying myself access to a large and valuable body of scholarship. Maintaining my embodied focus however, consistently required me to dive beneath strong discursive currents to seek other, more multidimensional embodied ways of knowing and coming to knowing.

Two key insights emerged from my autoethnographic somatic inquiry in particular: that the trauma of rape begins with the body; and that the body in the aftermath of rape is not passive and inert. These insights are the central premise of this book. A crucial outcome of the project as a whole is the finding that responses to the experience of rape in childhood manifest at the level of the body irrespective of whether discourse exists to appropriately frame or 'explain' those responses, and irrespective of

whether women, or treating healthcare professionals, make connections between rape experience and aftermath bodily symptoms. With or without discourse, as Vicki Kirby (1997) suggests, ‘the pressing facts of bodily existence still endure.’

My autoethnographic inquiry additionally revealed that despite experiencing a sense of detachment from my body for several decades, the re-integration of my unresolved trauma memory into my personal narrative and the re-establishment of my body-mind relationship post-rape were possible. My extensive engagement in the therapeutic and educative practice of Body-Mind Centering was a profound and healing experience. Through touch, movement, experiential anatomy, and guided imagination, this practice encouraged deep exploration of my unresolved trauma memories at a micro cellular level, liberating them from the frozen and murky shadowlands of my body. The therapeutic effect of attending to these somatic memories with professional support and with conscious awareness helped re-pattern my habitual behaviours, re-integrate my memories into my personal narrative, and alleviate my somatic symptoms. The work simultaneously acknowledged and affirmed feeling responses to, and experiential understandings of everyday life and their relevance to the development of embodied consciousness. In combination, the multiple aspects of my somatic inquiry led to the formation of a more integrated body and mind relationship and, as a consequence, a greater sense of cohesion.

3 June, 2011

*I have a body now, Alice.*

It is on this basis that I argue for the multidimensional, complex, irrepressible, and often intangible somatic expressions of rape trauma to be given equal status to those that emerge as empirically supported psychological disturbance in order to encourage wider opportunities for integrative healing that embrace the mind *and* the body. As neuroscientist, Candace Pert (1999, 274) argues, ‘the body and the mind are not separate, and we cannot treat one without the other.’

Based on the outcomes of both my autoethnographic somatic inquiry and the somatic inquiry of the other participants in the project, my research challenges and attempts to destabilise dominant discursive understandings of rape trauma that persistently position the psychological impact of sexual

violence in hierarchical relationship to impacts that manifest in, and are expressed through the body. This hierarchical and binary positioning has, I believe, the effect of sustaining the already culturally entrenched and artificial Cartesian separation of mind and body. It is my argument, based on the findings of my research, that this separation has the additional effect of perpetuating the profound sense of bodily detachment that girls and women often experience as a response to the violence of rape. Within a therapeutic context, the tendency to diminish or refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy of somatic disturbances as multiple, multidimensional, and unresolved expressions of rape trauma positions these bodily responses as ‘medically unexplained’ and reduces them to the realm of the psychosomatic.<sup>2</sup> In doing so it frames these responses as by-products of mental instability, as ‘imagined’ and therefore ‘not real’. Within feminist scholarship, the allegiance to poststructuralist discursive and linguistic modes of understanding has failed to support women who consistently experience somatic symptoms in the aftermath of rape. I argue that, whether within the therapeutic domain, or within the academy, the tendency to attenuate bodily responses and the practice of positioning the body as without agency, as inert, and as ‘passive, plastic matter’ (Alaimo 2008, 237), inflicts further damage on already traumatised girls and women.

These findings have implications for feminist theorising, for rape trauma research and pedagogy, and for professionals working in the area of women’s health.

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The book is organised into twelve chapters. My use of journal extracts throughout many of the chapters is a purposeful strategy designed to weave together the ontological and the epistemological. In this way, I amplify the interconnectedness of ways of knowing and ways of coming to knowing

2 My use of the term ‘psychosomatic’ is based on the following definition: ‘of, relating to, concerned with bodily symptoms caused by mental or emotional disturbance.’ This definition is found at: <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/psychosomatic>>.

in embodied and autoethnographic rape trauma research. Chapter One, *Philomela and me*, sweeps through time, moving between ancient myth and the contemporary storying of rape. In this chapter, to underpin the somatic focus of the book, I give a brief account of the biological changes a human body undergoes when experiencing trauma. I provide some personal context to locate myself as both researcher and researched. And finally, I introduce the body-based practice of Body-Mind Centering and the first of many journal extracts to illuminate the somatic inquiry process undertaken as a major methodological component of the research. Chapter Two, *The language and prevalence of sexual violence*, introduces the multiple definitions used in rape trauma research and provides the rationale behind my own choice of language in this book. Chapter Three, *What is somatics?* foregrounds the body-based focus of the book and provides an *entrée* into my early interest in somatics and trauma memory. I give a comprehensive outline of the history of somatics and the various fields of study within somatics. Chapter Four, *Correspondences*, examines the literature surrounding disclosure, shame, and trauma memory. Chapter Five, *Somatic narratives: participant somatic inquiry*, is the first of two chapters focusing specifically on the nine research participants. It examines the ethics and rationale behind the choice of participant information gathering methods. Chapter Six, *Somatic narratives and meaning-making*, brings together and examines the findings from the participant somatic inquiry phase of the research and the understandings that emerged as a result. These two chapters provide the broad-brush macro somatic context for the micro, cellular somatic investigation that occurs in the embodied autoethnographic chapters to follow. Chapter Seven, *Speaking of and with and through the raped body*, is the first of five chapters to focus on the autoethnographic inquiry. This chapter outlines the dual difficulties I faced as a woman and as an autoethnographic rape trauma and somatic researcher. Drawing on the work of Virginia Woolf, Drusilla Modjeska, Hélène Cixous, Anne Michaels and other women writers, I reveal the struggles I faced in the attempt to shape experience into words when bound by the limitations of masculinist language. Chapter Eight, *Ways of coming to knowing: a methodology of embodiment*, gives an overview of the experiential and embodied focus that underpinned the methodological framework



of the research and introduces the multiple and complementary methods of inquiry that supported the research. Chapter Nine, *Coming to knowing through embodied autoethnography*, is a substantial chapter to reflect the primary autoethnographic component of the research. The chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, I establish the feminist ethics behind my research, and discuss the ways autoethnography contributes to knowledge-making practices. The second section focuses on the process of my embodied research during the somatic inquiry phase of the research. In the third section, I examine the findings from the material gathered for this phase. Chapter Ten, *Coming to knowing through writing-as-inquiry*, uses the first of two arts-based methods of inquiry to examine the potential of this method for meaning-making. Chapter Eleven, *Coming to knowing through performance-making-as-inquiry*, focuses on the second of the two arts-based methods of inquiry and the rationale behind the choice of performance-making as a method. The chapter includes understandings gained from the performance-making as well as a creative reflection on the performance itself. Chapter Twelve, *Weaving the warp and the weft of the aftermath of childhood rape*, closes the book by bringing together the findings and implications of my research.