

*The aftermath of rape: Innovative approaches to understanding sexual  
violence against Australian women and children*

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**Abstract:** More than 50 years after American feminist Susan Brownmiller (1976, p. 15, original italics) controversially claimed that rape is “nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all* men keep *all* women in a state of fear,” Australian girls and women continue to be raped, continue to suffer the consequences of rape in the aftermath, and continue to fear the possibility of being raped. In order to reimagine an Australia where the rape of women and children is socially and culturally unacceptable, we need to understand more fully the long-term and multiple impacts of violence of this nature. This paper reports on Australian research that uses innovative arts-based methodologies to shift the emphasis from the primacy of the psychological impact of childhood rape to the enduring, though less understood, multiple and embodied impact of childhood rape. The research holds important insights for women’s and children’s health professionals, for women who have experienced, and continue to experience the trauma of childhood rape, and for the discursive construction of a country where acts of sexual violence are unthinkable.

**Keywords:** rape trauma; somatic symptoms; arts-based methodologies.

## **Introduction**

In Australia, we’re proud of our endless blue skies and crystal clear oceans, our white sandy beaches, our sweeping bays, our clean rivers, the tall forests, the bushland and the red dust deserts, the oxygen-laden air we breathe. We’re proud of our modern glossy cities, our neat suburbs, our large, air-conditioned homes, our fast freeways, and our glinting four-wheel drive cars. We’re proud of our sporting heroes and our internationally recognised artists. We tell our daughters and sons to dream big and

wide—because anything’s possible. We have vast horizons in Australia. The sun shines on us. We all feel its warmth on our upturned faces.

And yet.

I’m tired of the superficiality and complacency of this idealised facade of comfort and opportunity. And I find the endless sunshine deeply unsettling because beneath the surface, Australia is not all it seems: Australia harbours a dark and toxic secret obscured and muted by its projected image of pride, comfort and opportunity, a shameful and festering secret, a secret it should not be proud of. This paper reveals that shameful secret and discusses its profound implications because I’m tired of the facade and secrets are no longer secrets if they’re shared.

### **The great Australian ‘secret’**

Australia has grown to become a country with one of the highest rates of reported sexual assault in the world (ABS, 2015). In 2015 alone there were 21,380 reported incidents of sexual assault with four out of five of those incidents committed by male perpetrators against girls or women. The figure represents a 3 per cent increase on the previous year (ABS, 2015) and a staggering 51 per cent increase since 1995 (AIC, 2007).

The number of people directly impacted by sexual assault in Australia in 2015 would fill the Sydney Opera House Concert Hall to capacity—three and a half times over. While this number is alarming, it is crucial to understand that the figure is a highly conservative one, given that the *majority* of sexual assaults in Australia go unreported to police (AIC, 2007).

In the 1970s, American feminist Susan Brownmiller (1976, p. 15, original italics) controversially claimed that rape is “nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all* men keep *all* women in a state of fear.” Whether you agree with this statement or not, almost 50 years on, in Australia the fear remains: girls and women continue to be raped, continue to suffer the consequences of rape in the aftermath, and continue to fear the possibility of being raped (O’Donovan, Devilly, & Rapee, 2007). There can be no doubt that the spectre and reality of rape limits women’s lives and shapes our movement through the world. As rape victim and feminist philosopher Susan Brison (2002, p. 18) states: “the fact that all women’s lives are restricted by sexual violence is indisputable.” This is the shameful and toxic secret that quietly pollutes our oceans, rivers and harbours, stains our cities and suburbs, and poisons the air we breathe.

In 2002, Brison (p. 97) wrote: “Rape has, all too often and for all too long, been considered a private, personal matter, and thus not worthy of public, political concern.” This position on rape violence continues in contemporary Australia. If we are to begin to reimagine Australia as a country where the rape of girls and women is *truly* unthinkable, a country where rape is *truly* socially and culturally unacceptable, a country where boys and men value and respect girls and women, where girls and women can trust and respect boys and men, we need to open up a conversation about

the reality of gendered sexual violence. We need to appreciate that rape, and the profound and long-term associated consequences, *is* worthy of *public, political concern*.

While useful for determining the scale of reported sexual assaults, the statistics I have provided above can only take us so far in our imagining. Indeed, Karyn L. Freedman (2006, p. 113) offers the following: “If the occurrence of rape were audible, its decibel level equal to its frequency, it would overpower our days and nights ... an insistent jack hammer ... we would demand an end to it ... we would refuse to live under such conditions.” In order to render the statistics *audible* and to bring about real change in attitudes, I suggest that in Australia, we have an ethical and social responsibility to collectively open our senses and imaginations further.

To do this, we need to be exposed to the *jack hammer* noise of rape; to the myriad ways trauma’s dense shadow darkens futures and colonises the bodies of countless numbers of Australian girls and women. In short, we need to acknowledge and understand the ramifications of both the prevalence rates *and* the lived and daily reality of the long-term impacts of rape if we are to begin to comprehend how it is to live with the consequences of rape trauma and reimagine a different future.

## **Contextualising my interest in sexual trauma research**

I write not only from a position as a feminist materialist researcher with a specific interest in the embodied impact of sexual trauma, but also from a position of experiential ‘knowing’: I endured the terror of rape violence on two separate occasions in 1971 and have lived with the evolving and multiple consequences ever since.

Following the rapes, the shame and self-blame I felt was immediate, and because of this, I didn’t, or couldn’t tell my family. I chose instead to disclose to a school friend. She insisted I was lying. I insisted I was telling the truth. She won. I lost. I then resolved never to risk disclosure again, and the events of that year transformed into a shameful, yet grief-laden secret. I kept that secret tucked inside my body for almost 30 years, until its weight and the strain of years of self-censoring left me distraught, curled me into an immobilised foetal position on my kitchen floor.

## **Personal consequences of rape**

Based on my experiential understandings, I know that rape, especially in childhood, has both immediate and profoundly complex lifelong consequences.

In the immediate aftermath, I was left with a shattered sense of self, fragile self-esteem, a lack of personal boundaries, chronic hypervigilance, and a sense of deep mistrust of the world around me. As time went on, the list grew longer: terrifying nightmares; acute insomnia; paralysing and socially isolating anxiety; an exaggerated startle reflex; a sense of bodily dissonance; and a profound loathing of, and sense of detachment from, my body. I overfed my body in my teens and starved my body through my 20s. I developed physical illnesses in my early 30s and severe clinical depression in my late

30s. The latter diagnosis saw me swallowing anti-depressants for three years and attending weekly cognitive behavioural therapy sessions for five years. At the end of my therapy, my mental health was improved; however, the bodily dissonance, the nebulous physical complaints and the punitive relationship I had with my body remained unchanged.

It was the experience of rape in 1971 and its catastrophic consequences that propelled me to undertake Honours research in 2007. Viewed through a broad sociocultural lens and set within a feminist framework of understanding, the arts-based and reflexive autoethnographic project examined the multiple ramifications of childhood rape.

The trauma literature I immersed myself in during the project was abundant, interesting and to some extent affirming. However, I increasingly became concerned that the research gave precedence to psychological expressions of post-rape trauma—very little attention appeared to be given to the somatic or body-based manifestations I had experienced in my youth and continued to experience as a mature-aged woman. At the end of the project, my interests in the long-term somatic aftermath of childhood rape, the material states of the human body under stress and the uniqueness of embodied memory were sharpened. These interests came together with my lifelong interest in creative writing and performance and in 2009, I began an arts-based doctoral project at Edith Cowan University in Western Australia. The paper will now shift its focus to this project to discuss the innovative arts-based methodology I employed as well as the insights and outcomes that emerged from the research.

### **“Feeling the fleshed body” (PhD 2009-2014)**

My doctoral research examined the trauma of childhood rape as it specifically manifests in and is expressed through the adult female body. The work was primarily autoethnographic although it also included significant data gathered from other Australian women also raped in childhood. As previously stated, the work chiefly grew out of earlier research that had refined my interests in body-based trauma. But it was also a response to my feeling inadequately attended to by a range of healthcare professionals across a number of decades, some of whom specialised in women’s health, who never questioned me about a possible history of rape trauma. The doctoral project, then, was initiated by my experiential understandings of the somatic aftermath of childhood rape and my feeling of being ‘let down’ by healthcare professionals, and was propelled by the following research questions: Do women who have endured childhood rape make links between their body and the experience? How do women who have endured childhood rape read their own body-based responses? How might these responses be similar or different to my own? Where and how does the trauma of rape reside in the body? What are our cultural understandings of body-based post-rape trauma? What broader understandings of rape trauma might healthcare professionals need to know in order to adequately respond to female patients who may be unable to articulate their rape history?

All of these research questions honoured the materiality and reality of embodied experience. The feminist, arts-based and multi-modal methodology I designed to support these questions was a reflection of my desire to uphold the integrity of my

living, breathing, fleshed and raped body. As such, the methodology also acknowledged the central role experiential understandings play in knowledge making practices. The paper will now move to the background behind the methodological design of the project and discuss the insights and outcomes.

### **Arts-based embodied methodology**

I have been a creative writer since I could grasp a pencil, and my interest in performing and performance has been life-long. Engaging writing and performance making as forms of embodied inquiry, then, was as natural as breathing. But I also wanted to engage my body in other ways. More specifically, I wanted to engage methods of inquiry that would help me understand why I continued to hold a profound sense of detachment from my body, despite five years of weekly psychotherapy in my late 30s and early 40s. I wanted to understand why I still felt that the trauma of my experience haunted my body because surely *five* years of talk-based therapy should have laid this to rest. Shouldn't it?

The final methodological framework grew organically from these questions. Described by examiners as “pioneering,” “methodologically provocative” and “innovative,” it was multidimensional in nature, experimental and, as a result, full of risk. The four methods of inquiry I engaged were: autoethnography; somatic inquiry; writing-as-inquiry; and performance-making-as-inquiry. The paper will now discuss each of these methods.

### **Autoethnography**

The primary focus of the research was my own experience of childhood rape. The role I took up then, was dual: I occupied the autoethnographic position of both researcher and research participant. As an autoethnographer, the method facilitated the development of an intimate space within which the particularity of my experience could resonate. The critical reflection and reflexivity that is a feature of autoethnographic research (Spry, 2011), however, enabled “a dance with different partners” (Downing, 2016, p. 186) as I moved within the inquiry space, back and forth, across and between not only my own story, but “the stories of other women, and the broader sociocultural storying of sexual violence” (Downing, 2016, p. 186). To have simply given an account of my aftermath story alone would have given the reader only one view or perspective, as any autobiographical writing or memoir does. The beauty and strength of autoethnography, however, lies in its complexity and dynamism: the method allows a range of narratives to be drawn together and reflexively interrogated, while inviting an exchange with different conceptual and theoretical frameworks. Norman Denzin (1997) understands the potency of autoethnography to be its ability to facilitate introspection and self-reflectivity while simultaneously enabling space for the uniqueness of personal context to move within broader sociocultural narratives. Stacy Holman Jones (2008, p. 207) concurs, noting that “[a]utoethnography works to hold self and culture together.” My choice of autoethnography as a starting point for the organic development of my methodological framework enabled the eventual production of a rich, multilayered and multidimensional reading of the topic.

## Somatic inquiry

At the time of writing, I remain unable to locate other studies in the field of sexual trauma research that have engaged a corporeal, experiential and autoethnographic method of inquiry. Consequently, while I was in the midst of this component of my research, I had no precedent to guide me. This inevitably led to the method evolving organically as the research went along (Downing, 2016). I knew from the outset though that if I were to immerse myself in the deeply held cellular states of my trauma experience, I would need to engage a research method that fully supported this exploration.

Across a period of four and a half years in both Perth and Melbourne, I immersed myself in the experiential body-based practice of Body-Mind Centering. I worked closely with Alice Cummins, a Body-Mind Centering practitioner and dance artist, as a workshop participant, private client and intensive program participant to forensically examine my trauma story at a cellular level. Body-Mind Centering is a body-based experiential approach to “movement and learning” (Bainbridge Cohen, 2008, p. 2) that begins from the premise that body and mind are not separate but are each part of a whole and integrated entity. The approach is grounded in a philosophy that honours the intelligence of the cellular body-mind, and is an “integrated and embodied approach to movement, the body and consciousness” (BMC, 2012). The approach engages techniques such as hands-on (touch), movement, embodied imagination, and experiential anatomy to promote self-awareness and help facilitate change (Bainbridge Cohen, 2008).

While immersed in this phase of the research, I drew heavily on the work of H  l  ne Cixous (Cixous, 1976, 1990, 1991a, 1991b, 1993, 1997, 1998). I was, and remain, enchanted by her sense of presence, her eye for detail, and her insistence on the connections between the body, writing and feeling: “I do not write to keep. I write to feel. I write to touch the body of the instant with the tips of the words” (Cixous, 1998, p. 195). She talks of wanting to cultivate presence to enable her to live “[...] in the present absolute. In the happening of the instant” (Cixous, 1991b, p. 104). And she talked of holding a myopic view of the world around her which allowed her to see the detail of her existence yet, through her writings, simultaneously demonstrating her deep connection to broader social, cultural and philosophical considerations: “Details are my kingdoms,” she says (Cixous, 1991b, p. 109). Cixous’ approach also reflected my desire as a researcher:

[because] her close and evocative attention to detail mirrors the attention to detail that was necessary during my autoethnographic somatic inquiry. Her simultaneous sweep into broader realms of consideration echoes the reflexivity present at every level in this research project, particularly this autoethnographic component. In order to first uncover the subtlety and nuance of my autoethnographic somatic inquiry and then illuminate this through evocative language with as much exactitude as possible and with reflexivity, it was essential that I maintain a myopic or forensic awareness of my body at a cellular level while simultaneously holding my experience

within a wider cultural context, filtering this through an aesthetic lens.  
(Downing, 2016, p. 191)

Engaging in the practice and techniques of Body-Mind Centering, the somatic inquiry work also cultivated presence, enabling me to remain present to and feel my unresolved body states. It slowly validated those body states and enabled a process of re-integration. And as part of that re-integration, it brought clarity where there was confusion and a sense of reconnection with my body where there was acute detachment (Downing, 2016).

### **Participant somatic inquiry**

To add a final dimension to my research, I also recruited nine other women from across Australia, all of whom had experienced at least one rape event in childhood (under the age of eighteen years). Recruitment took place via flyers, posters and email to women's health and sexual assault centres. My interest in other women's experiences was multiple. I wanted to: gain a sense of how the women viewed their bodies across time; discover their interpretation of their bodily responses since being raped; determine if the women made links between their physical health across time and their rape experiences; see if disclosure to health care professionals had taken place and whether they had discussed their physical symptoms; and discover if any of the women attended therapeutic bodywork sessions and how this impacted on them (Downing, 2016).

The findings from this phase of the research, arrived at through a thematic analysis of material collected from the women via electronic surveys and interviews, revealed that the women experienced a suite of symptoms that echoed, and added to, my own. Some of these included: headaches and migraine; insomnia; pain; eating, digestive and weight concerns; anxiety and tension; gynaecological and sexual concerns; depression; Post Traumatic Stress Disorder—which has significant physical attributes (Rothschild, 2000); exaggerated startle reflex; hypervigilance; and claustrophobia (Downing, 2016). All of these symptoms are consistent with the post-rape literature (Boyd, 2011; Martin, Young, Billings, & Bross, 2007; Waldinger, Schulz, Barsky, & Ahern, 2006). Additionally, and almost without exception, the women, like me, had held extreme negative attitudes towards their bodies in the years and decades since being raped, and had carried intense feelings of self-blame and shame well into adulthood (Downing, 2016).

The rape trauma literature supports these findings. It notes that women who experience rape and other forms of sexual violence more often report compromised overall health (Golding, 1994) and/or a range of chronic illnesses compared with those who have not experienced sexual violence (Koss & Boeschen, 2000); self-blame and shame are often linked (Koss & Boeschen, 2000; Vidal & Petrak, 2007; Weiss, 2010), with shame playing a key role in determining whether a victim will disclose or whether a victim will self-silence (Feiring & Taska, 2005; Lee & James, 2013; Lievore, 2003).

Concluding this section, and to further amplify how it is to live with the profound and long-term consequences of childhood rape, I include extracts from the survey and interview material I gathered from the women participants (Downing, 2016). In line

with Edith Cowan University's ethics protocols, pseudonyms have been used. It should be noted that although some of the women did not feel ashamed of their experience and felt the use of a pseudonym unnecessary, they all agreed to their use.

Kate: "I felt disconnected from my body when I was growing up, it felt like a stranger's body. I used to feel like I was here for sex, here to be used. I didn't have a sense of my body separate from how an abuser might view and value my body. It was something I blamed for what was done to me."

Monica: "My first sexual assault was washed under the carpet [...] one little girl was not important [...]. When I was raped [again], at 18 I scrubbed and scrubbed with a scrubbing brush but I could not get clean [...]. The first time I spoke to a health care professional about being raped as a child was 16 years later. A social worker (male) said he didn't believe my story and that I didn't have my facts straight. I love massage but am not good with trust so have found the chairs in shopping centres to be the best alternative/compromise. After the childhood experience, I wanted to never have breasts so I bound them for a long time. I couldn't stand touching my own skin directly, and after my son was born I found it really hard to wash him because of my own fear that I would somehow tarnish him with my own filth. It took decades to be ok within my own skin."

Nancy: "There are many things I realised over time that were the result of the Childhood Sexual Abuse."

Philipa: "I only remember trying to tell my GP once, & being totally discounted, & being told not to make up silly stories. [...] I'm not very good at describing how my body responds—sorry."

Felicity: "[I] Push thought [to the] back of [my] mind. Never think about it."

Ros: "On one of the rare occasions that I have discussed the childhood rape with a health care professional, it was at my antenatal booking appointment and I received a pamphlet about childhood abuse and was advised to seek professional counselling, no personal interest was shown."

Carol: "I can't breathe if I watch people in confined spaces [...] I can't have my face underwater or held under a blanket. [...] I cannot eat tapioca or the other dessert which is similar without wanting to physically throw up because the texture and flavour is reminiscent of semen. I don't sleep longer than 2 hours ever. I am hypervigilant to sound and my environment. I notice everything. I cannot make noise of any kind during sexual activity; I fear being heard."

Nina: "[I have] fear about their [healthcare professionals] responses, fear I'd be forced to report the abuse."

Patricia: "Flashbacks can induce a sense as though somebody is painfully entering my body. [I] truly hated my body with a passion and imagined that it was dirty—particularly my sexual parts and my backside. I actually felt sick if I contemplated it for too long. [I once] considered having a sexual body was disgusting or dangerous."

## Writing-as-inquiry

My thesis, and the book that emerged from it (Downing, 2016), includes many extracts from my PhD journal. Journal writing was my “aesthetic/epistemic praxis” (Spry, 2009, p. 604) and my way of coming to knowing through what Tami Spry calls “embodied theorizing” (Spry, 2009, p. 604). I turned to my journal writing for critical reflection on the work of others, to explore kernels of ideas, develop slender thoughts, delve into intuitive hunches, struggle with difficulty and experiment with creative form—especially poetry. The privacy of my journal enabled me to berate myself, wrestle with and shout at the world, give in to grief, rejoice in pleasure, rest, gather myself, stretch, yawn, re-energise. It was also where I found my voice as a researcher. Every word in my journal helped me negotiate my way through the personal, sociocultural, political and historical landscapes and complexities of my research. My journal held just over 138,000 words (Downing, 2016).

While writing was a principal mode of inquiry, it was, at times, also problematic. More specifically, I found the task of bringing symbolic language to what was a process of interrogation of semiotic or bodily signs and sensations highly challenging. The work I engaged with in the autoethnographic somatic inquiry phase of the research was so deeply embodied that I often struggled to frame this within a system of language that often felt masculinist, overly analytical, and clumsy, and therefore inadequate to the task. I overcame this by lapsing into metaphor and poetry. Lori Neilsen Glenn (Neilsen, 2008, p. 98) argues that writing that engages poetic language “can be a transgressive and powerful tool, especially for women and others who prefer to write outside rationalist forms of language.” I argue that “by writing my way into knowing through language that engages deeply with metaphor to reach new meaning subjectively and tangentially, I am honouring the embodied process that supports this kind of arrival at understanding” (Downing, 2016, p. 243). By beginning from a position of valuing metaphor and poetic language for its groundedness in embodied states, I gave myself permission to unfold my somatic knowing through its use. Metaphor and poetic language were

a means of grasping hold of wisps of elusive experience, a way to hold myself in feeling that sometimes refused to linger. It reminded me that as we rub shoulders with experience and try to link arms with language, the beauty of metaphor is in its constantly evolving shape, in the certainty that the relationship we have to the words one day can be, will be, different to the next. (Downing, 2016, p. 244)

Metaphor was also “a device of memory” (Cook, 2000, p. 18) useful for animating embodied trauma memory through language “more connected to my body than more conventional forms” (Downing, 2016, p. 245). However, not all of my writing was poetic and laden with metaphor. Many passages were spare, stripped back to reveal the rawness of my experience. Overall, though, the practice of writing was, and remains an embodied process, not simply an act of cognitively arranging words together on a page. It is also, without any doubt, a way for me to come to knowing. In the embodied “doing” and “feeling” of writing, the contemplation, the movement of feeling responses, ideas, thoughts, and images through my body (Downing, 2016), I am enabled to through a range of writing forms to “make the world make sense” (Mairs, 1994, p. 36).

## Performance-making-as-inquiry

I brought into my research a life-long interest in performing and the performance arts as well as a desire to give my thesis a three-dimensional embodied and performative companion. Spry (2011, pp. 28-29) argues that “performance is not an added scholarly bonus. It does not operate as an interesting feature or entertaining option [...] performance does not ‘illuminate’ the text, rather it assists in the creation of the text; it is in itself performative.” Although I welcomed the opportunity to make a creative work, like Spry, the inclusion of a performance piece was not *an added scholarly bonus*. Nor was it an act of self-indulgent entertainment. For me, the making of a performance work was essential in order to engage an audience in the reality of sexual trauma in multiple ways.

Della Pollock (2005, p. 2) notes: “Performance is a promissory act. Not because it can promise possible change but because it catches its participants—often by surprise—in a contract with possibility: with imagining what might be, could be, should be.” To bring the stark consequences of rape into the public realm, to begin to find ways for the public imagination to engage with the topic of rape violence at a personal and cultural level, to enable uncensored public discussion, I felt performance was a means to explore Pollock’s notion of contracting others within the realm of *possibility*.

As a response, building on the emergent journal writing and drawing on the autoethnographic somatic inquiry work, I co-devised the solo theatre piece, *aperture*. Working alongside, and with the artistic guidance of Alice Cummins, I performed *aperture* in 2012. The critical reflection necessary for the making of this work, gave the bones of the written language of my explorations a heartbeat. Through rigorous creative interrogation, *aperture* draped muscle and flesh on the words of my written inquiry and pumped blood through its sentences (Downing, 2016).

During the creative development phases of *aperture*, my experiential knowing percolated through me in the studio and was spontaneously expressed through my body. The movement this generated enabled the multidimensionality of my silenced experience to “move and sweat, collapse and stand—rather than remain in stasis” (Downing, 2016, p. 258). The work also gave me another level of creative freedom when “the semiotic was given precedence over the semantic” (Downing, 2016, p. 260). In its final form, *aperture* became a multi-layered and multidimensional embodied conduit for the dissemination of knowledge to those who had not experienced sexual violence and a means of holding up a mirror to those who had; because *aperture* didn’t just evoke my story. It also creatively opened up a reflexive space for the wider story of rape to resonate against my own.

*Aperture* additionally enabled feminist theory and discourse, and ontological reality to co-mingle, grounding the work in an embodied materialist ethics and making it both culturally challenging and epistemologically relevant. By relying on my moving and, for the most part, non-verbal body and the capacity for experience and story to be evoked without reliance on symbolic language, the work also challenged the poststructuralist positioning of discourse and language as the primary means of identity construction, knowledge making and information dissemination.

Karen Barad (2008, p. 120) states unequivocally that “language has been granted too much power” and that matter, or the biological and fleshed body, has been diminished as a result. While Elizabeth Grosz (2008) notes that to interrogate the role and influence of discourse, there needs to be greater clarity around understandings of the complex interplay between biology and discourse. She suggests that if we are to assume that humans are biological, then it is necessary to formulate a sophisticated and nuanced interpretation of our biological basis that holds the capacity to offer an adequate explanation for the diversity that exists within our sociocultural and political lives.

I argue that the performative nature of *aperture* enabled insight to be gained into the complexity of rape trauma and its social, cultural and political ramifications through the nuance of embodied performance and the complex voice of bodily narrative.

### **Key insights and outcomes**

Within therapeutic discourse and rape trauma research, there remains a tendency to hierarchically privilege psychological expressions of post-rape trauma over those that manifest in the body (Wilson, 2004), suggesting that the trauma of rape *begins* in the psyche.

My research revealed key insights that challenge the dominant psychological and discursive construction of rape trauma. Firstly, the damage of rape begins, in the first instance, with the sensing and feeling body, and psychological damage develops subsequently as the cognitive brain begins to process the sensory event. And secondly, the raped and traumatised body is not passive or inert and is instead agentic, often refusing to be silenced in the long-term aftermath (Downing, 2016). Finally, my autoethnographic somatic inquiry revealed that to fully attend to my trauma, talk-based therapy alone was not enough. The re-integration of the sensory elements of my childhood experience—‘frozen’ in my body since childhood—and a concomitant change in attitude towards my traumatised body was, I believe, only possible through an engagement with my body.

### **A call for change**

With these insights in mind, I argue that psychological interpretations of rape trauma offer one perspective only and that the cellular body with its capacity for storing embodied memory, cannot be overlooked, diminished or ignored. Even if, for some rape victims, the trauma they carry in their bodies cannot be articulated in other ways, even if some rape victims do not make links between bodily symptoms and their rape history, and even if girls and women are silenced by their experience of rape and rendered incapable of disclosure, “it does not mean the symptoms do not exist” (Downing, 2016, p. 283). It is imperative, therefore, that somatic symptoms are treated alongside and with the same level of respect and gravitas as symptoms that manifest or are expressed psychologically (Downing, 2016).

In terms of therapeutic options, for me, the benefits of body-based work cannot be underestimated. In a reimagined Australia, I would like to see body-focused therapies included in all post-rape care and treatment, not as an aside or afterthought, but centrally, to augment talk-based therapies and help create more appropriate holistic and multidimensional therapeutic treatment programs.

Therefore, I call for a wider understanding of post-rape trauma within rape trauma research and women's healthcare practice, one that acknowledges *all* dimensions and expressions of trauma, including, and especially, those that manifest in and through the female body.

### **And finally ...**

The misplaced shame that victims so often feel in the aftermath of rape is just another violation. In a reimagined Australia, I posit that the shame carried by countless girls and women be transformed into the country's shame, and, as citizens, we would consciously share the responsibility for creating cultural change in order to reduce or eliminate the incidence of gendered sexual violence.

We all have the potential to initiate change through action, however small or large that action may be. Change is possible on many levels and in many ways. Within academia, researchers can be bold and creative with their methodologies. They can ask difficult questions of themselves and of others. They can make themselves vulnerable and they can take risks. But beyond academia, all of us—not just those directly impacted by the violence of rape, or family and friends of victims, or those who fear being raped—*all of us* can begin by recognising and publicly acknowledging that Australia's global ranking as a country with one of the highest rates of sexual violence, particularly against girls and women, is a shameful one.

Action for change comes in many forms. As individuals, we can equip ourselves with knowledge and be alert to the possibility of rape trauma in those closest to us. We can make empathic space for victims to talk about the many dimensions of their lived experience, even if it makes us feel uncomfortable personally, and even if it challenges us professionally. Collectively, we can make room for the voices of rape victims and the narratives of rape violence and its consequences. We can expose ourselves to, and learn from, those narratives. We can discuss and accumulate and build on existing knowledge. We can critically reflect on, and take steps towards challenging the sorts of power structures, entrenched discourses, and social attitudes that fail rape victims and serve to support the status quo.

In time, if we are individually and collectively able to achieve these possibilities, we will truly begin to understand the reality of rape trauma and Australia's shameful status as a country with increasing rates of sexual violence will have a chance of receding into history. And if this happens, our children, especially our daughters, *will* be able to dream big and wide because they will not have to fear being raped, and they will not have to suffer the lifelong consequences of rape, nor carry their trauma in shame, in silence, and in their bodies.

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