

the aftermath of childhood rape

Feeling the Fleshed Body

Brenda Downing

Peter Lang

In 1971, on two separate occasions, Brenda Downing was raped. She was in her final year of primary school. In the immediate aftermath, the shame she harboured, coupled with a failed disclosure the same year, meant she did not risk talking of her experience again until almost thirty years later and did not begin to address the trauma, held frozen in her body, for a further ten years.

In this book, she not only explores her long-term somatic response to the trauma of rape, but also examines the bodily responses of nine other women raped in childhood. Using a combination of somatic inquiry, writing and performance-making, her pioneering reflexive and embodied methodology reveals the raped body as agentic and subversive, with the capacity to express trauma through symptoms not always readily recognized or understood. Her findings have significant implications for the care and treatment of rape victims, for further research into the multiple impacts of sexual trauma, and for materialist knowledge-making practices.

BRENDA DOWNING is a feminist academic. She completed her PhD at Edith Cowan University, Western Australia and is currently teaching in the School of Social Science and International Studies at Curtin University, Western Australia. Her research focuses on the long-term somatic impact of gendered sexual violence, rape trauma and cellular memory, and arts-based forms of reflexive and embodied inquiry including writing and performative autoethnography.



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I would like to dedicate this book to the memory of my gentle and loving brother, Murray, whose tender words in the last days of his life will stay with me always. I would also like to dedicate this book to the memory of Susan. Her enthusiasm for life and the courage she showed during her illness will remain an inspiration.

Where does rape begin?

From the instant
the violating other
pierces the threshold
of personal boundary,

the body is there.

Even if the mind scarpers
the body remains, a loyal
scribe laying down memory
in the archives of the self.

Traumatic memory,
an intolerable always.

Don't be misled,
the body feels everything,
forgets nothing.

Cellular shelves bow
with the weight
of experience.

Once touched, the body
cannot
be untouched.

All rape begins with the body.

(2012)

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^{®1} 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.

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.² 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.

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.

CHAPTER ONE

Philomela and me

The tragedy of violence is that it erases its own violent degrees, so that we may erase the first act of violence as trifling even though it was decisive. All violence has a history.

— HÉLÈNE CIXOUS¹

When we tell a story we exercise control, but in such a way as to leave a gap, an opening. It is a version, but never the final one. And perhaps we hope that the silences will be heard by someone else, and the story can continue, can be retold. When we write we offer the silence as much as the story. Words are the part of silence that can be spoken.

— JEANETTE WINTERSON²

This chapter is about bodily transformation. It is also about the significant role trauma plays in the transformation of bodies. The chapter begins with a brief overview of the neurobiological processes a body undergoes when experiencing and responding to a traumatic event. It then juxtaposes ancient myth and contemporary story. The inclusion of the Philomela myth amplifies the cultural presence of gendered and silenced sexual violence across time and reveals the potential for the unconventional communication of rape trauma. The primary focus of the book is my autoethnographic story of rape in childhood. This has already been revealed in the Introduction and will be explored in this chapter to further establish the motivations

1 From: Cixous, Hélène (1993). *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*. New York: Columbia University Press (47).

2 From: Winterson, Jeanette (2011). *Why be happy when you can be normal?* London: Jonathan Cape (8).

behind my interest in somatic research and in the material conditions of the raped body.

Trauma and the transformation of bodies

Candace Pert (1999, 189) reveals that ‘every second a massive information exchange is occurring in your body’. She describes these sites of exchange as a ‘vast super highway’ (310), a complex network of microscopic pathways transporting chemical information across membranous tissue throughout the human body. This network is known within anatomy and the physiological and neurobiological sciences to help facilitate the easeful and continuous flow of information as chemicals are released from different system areas of the body, including the immune, endocrine, nervous and gastro-intestinal systems (Tortora and Derrickson 2009). Pert observes this process generally takes place at the level of the subconscious as the ‘intelligent information travels from one system to another’ (189) via the complex, extensive, interconnecting, and interrelated molecular and neural network. This flow of information is designed to assist and maintain the body in a homeostatic, or balanced state (Pert 1999, Tortora and Derrickson 2009). As these homeostatic adjustments occur, the microscopic movement of the tissues and fluids responding to these adjustments creates micro-movement, and this movement ‘may be felt as an inner-body sensation’ (Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006, 15).

During a traumatic event, there is an abundance of sensory information entering the body (Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006, Levine 1997, Scaer 2001). The neuroscience and psychological literature surrounding trauma is clear that during, and in the immediate aftermath of a distressing event, dramatic neurobiological changes occur (Nijenhuis and van der Hart 1999, Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006) and molecular exchanges take place (Herman 1992, Levine 1997, Pert 1999, Scaer 2001, van der Kolk 1994). During a traumatic event such as rape, especially if the event is perceived as a threat to the individual’s survival, the body goes into over-drive. The

sensory systems and neural pathways become hyper-stimulated (Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006, Levine 1997, Rothschild 2000). The body under threat is flooded with an influx of sensory information via the obvious organs of sensory input such as the eyes, nose, ears and tongue as well as through the sense receptors of the skin and muscles. These receptors register kinaesthetic and pain information before feeding it into the nervous system. Deep within the membranes and tissues of the body, at a molecular level, and without consciousness, stress hormones and neurotransmitters are released to assist with the processing of this sensory information (Scaer, 2001). The body under threat becomes engulfed with chemicals. The body under threat is forced, instantaneously, to manage a plethora of information on a multitude of levels.

Amidst this maelstrom, when feelings, sensations, and chemical responses bombard every cell in an attempt to preserve life, if the 'fight, flight or freeze' response is unconsciously imitated, the influx of information can overwhelm the body. The body under threat is then in a state of distress. When this occurs, the experience and responses to it can move beyond explicit or conscious verbal memory to register and reside within implicit or subconscious non-verbal memory (van der Kolk 2007).³ This is the point at which temporal perception can slow (Rothschild 2000, Herman 1992), pain sensation can be modified (Herman 1992, Rothschild 2000), division of the memory into sensory or emotional fragments of the event can occur (Brison 2002, Culbertson 1995, van der Kolk, van der Hart, and Marmar 2007, Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006), and the energy generated by hyperarousal during the event can become trapped and 'frozen' in the body (Levine 1997, Pert 1999). In a primitive behavioural manoeuvre intended to protect the individual from further trauma, the shift of state to below the level of awareness can precipitate a sense of separation between the body and the mind (Nijenhuis and van der Hart 1999, Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006). This altered state is thought to act as 'a psychological escape mechanism from fear' (Scaer 2001, 98).

3 Explicit and implicit memory will be discussed in Chapter Four, *Correspondences*.

Unfortunately, although it offers a means of evading the fear of personal threat, the involvement of implicit memory in trauma processing can have lasting consequences (Herman 1992, Levine 1997, Pert 1999, Scaer 2001, van der Kolk 1994) with disturbing self-perpetuating complications. By consigning this information, even partially, to the subconscious as a means of self-protection, the body impairs its own ability to make sense of the event, particularly in relation to somatic disturbance. The dissociated and fragmented memory of the experience, the physiological re-living of the trauma when stimulated, and the somatic and non-linguistic memories which can linger, serve to “tell the story” without words, as though the body knows what they [the individuals] do not know cognitively’ (Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006, 3). This somatic disturbance in traumatised individuals’ bodies can be explained as them ‘reliving in their bodies the moments of terror that they cannot describe in words’ (Herman 1992, 239). However, although their bodies may be alive with such moments of terror, the dis-integration of body and mind can make it difficult for individuals to interpret and connect somatic symptoms, when they emerge, with the traumatic event itself (Goodwin and Attias 1999).

For women, the stories of sexual violence fill the archives of our existence; they are ubiquitous. Anchored in antiquity, these stories spiral up through time, coil around the present, and send out long tendrils into the future. Some of these stories come to us as tales of the imagination, others as narratives of lived experience. While the story of Philomela, which you are about to read, is considered myth, and therefore perhaps a work of fiction, there are those who study myths who consider these as ‘early science’ and an attempt to explain the social and cultural conditions of the day (Hamilton 1998, 13). For these researchers, myths are regarded as ‘socially powerful narratives’, that ‘occupy a highly significant position within the societies that retell them, in that they embody and explore the values, not just of individuals, but of social groups, and even whole communities’ (Buxton 2004, 18). Viewed through this lens, ancient stories such as Philomela’s become chronicles of early civilisation, accounts

drawn not simply from imagination, lavishly embellished with fantasy, but stories whose origins lie in the remembering of the everyday. These stories move through time and cultures, carefully passed from person to person, family to family, generation to generation, to take their place in mythology.

As you read Philomela's story, hold in your mind that it is written as a myth although, as is often the case with myths, hidden within the story lines are shards of the familiar, sharp hooks that extend beyond the edges of the page, barbs that can snag your clothes as you pass by and cause you to pause. And be aware as you pause, in that very moment of stasis, as you hang suspended between experience and action, as your senses take in all around you, one of those shards may penetrate the fibres of your flesh, pierce your heart and flood your body with a blood red resonance, filling you, perhaps, with the heat of the known.

Philomela: A Greek myth⁴

Tereus of Thrace, a descendant of the god Mars and a wealthy king, sails with his powerful army to Athens to help quell an uprising by barbarians. Pandion, himself wealthy and the king of Athens, has two beautiful daughters, Procne and Philomela. Always looking at ways to strengthen his position, Pandion is keen to form an alliance with Tereus and offers his daughter Procne to him in marriage. The couple wed without Juno, the Graces or Hymen, the traditional bearers of marital blessings, in attendance. Instead, their union is overseen by the Furies, the goddesses of vengeance. The couple return to Thrace.

In time a son is born to Tereus and Procne. He is given the name Itys.

4 This summary is drawn from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book 6, 230–243, 2004 edition translated by David Raeburn, published by Penguin Books Limited.

Twenty seasons pass and Procne pines more and more for the company of her sister. She pleads with Tereus to travel to Athens and seek permission from her father for Philomela to join her in Thrace.

Tereus sails again to Athens to the palace of the king. As Pandion greets him, the virginal Philomela appears bedecked with jewels, her beauty unparalleled. Tereus, his lustful nature aroused, cannot take his eyes from her and knowing he must have her for himself, doubles his efforts to persuade Pandion to allow her to travel with him. Philomela, excited at the prospect of seeing her sister again, pleads with her father for permission. Pandion reluctantly agrees and the two set off on the return journey.

Disembarking in Thrace, Tereus takes Philomela not to the palace where her sister patiently awaits her return, but rather, he drags her to a hut in a forest and rapes her. Philomela, when she recovers her senses, threatens to tell all who will listen about the rape. Tereus, enraged, draws his sword and cuts out her tongue so she may never speak of the rape or anything else ever again. Now mute, her tongue twitching at her feet, she is raped over and over again by Tereus who then leaves her locked in the hut and returns to the unsuspecting Procne. When Procne sees he is alone, he tells her Philomela is dead. Procne is overcome with grief.

Four seasons pass during which Philomela finds a loom in the cottage. Taking white thread she strings a warp and begins to weave a cloth. Woven into the cloth are purple signs that tell the story of her rape by Tereus. She entrusts the cloth to a woman, who carries it to the palace and places it into the hands of her grief-stricken sister. Procne is able to decipher the signs and so learns with horror the story of her sister's brutal rape by Tereus, her tyrant husband.

Desperate to find her sister and free her, Procne attends a nocturnal festival held by young women to worship Bacchus, the god of wine and revelry. There is much wildly excited dancing and music. Procne mimics this frenzied movement and rushes through the woods and finds the cottage where Philomela is being held captive. Procne frees her sister and together, their sisterly ties drawn closer by the violation that has taken place, they return to Thrace to seek retribution.

Back in the palace Procne is in a state of fury as she considers the many means with which she could punish Tereus. In her rage her eyes fall on her son Itys, who bears the facial features of his father. She knows she has found her revenge. Brandishing a sword, she drives it into her son's chest, killing him. The sisters proceed to remove the child's head and carve up his body. They cook his flesh in a stew and deliver this to Tereus. As Tereus gorges on the meal, he calls for his son but Procne announces that his son is with him already, that the meat in the stew, and now held captive in his belly, is the meat of his own flesh and blood. As he cries out in disbelief, Philomela rushes into the room, holding aloft the decapitated head of his son. As Tereus reaches for his sword in order to drive it into the bodies of the sisters to kill them, all three are transformed into birds. Tereus becomes a hoopoe, an ugly and ungainly large-beaked bird. Procne becomes a swallow, fated to swoop in silent arcs across the sky. And Philomela? She is transformed into a nightingale, destined to a life of song, beautiful but mournful laments that caress the ear and fill the heart.⁵

The story of Philomela is undoubtedly one of metamorphosis in the aftermath of trauma. But it is not just Philomela's transformation into a bird that is significant here. Philomela's story is also one of resilience, persistence, and imagination in the aftermath of repeated rape and silencing. My experiential knowing, and my research, reminds me that the trauma of rape and the silencing that can accompany it in the aftermath, each have a major role to play in shaping bodily relationships and in the transformation of lives. My purpose for including Philomela's story here is to foreground her quest, in the aftermath of sexual violence, to resist silencing and find a means of articulation with which to transmit her story. Philomela's resolution to her

5 It should be noted that Ovid was a Roman poet and in his *Metamorphoses*, Procne becomes a swallow and Philomela a nightingale. Some Greek variations of this myth differ, reversing the transformations so that Procne becomes a nightingale and Philomela a swallow.

silencing lies in the embodiment of her trauma through semiotic representation and in the trust she held in her sister to decipher that representation. I am fascinated by the many ways rape trauma can be expressed, through linguistic and non-linguistic means. I include Philomela's story, despite its location in mythology, to amplify the human endeavour to give voice to trauma in the aftermath of silenced sexual violence, to help reconceptualise what counts as legitimate trauma responses, to illustrate the critical need for vigilance to trauma's many forms of articulation if rape trauma is to be more readily identified and acknowledged, and through this, for the cultural silencing of rape trauma to be cracked open. I turn now from Philomela's story to my own.

A metamorphosis of another kind

I look at the slightly crumpled photograph taken during the summer of 1962 in Perth, Western Australia. I see a child, a girl, about three years of age. She wears a white loose dress without sleeves, white socks folded at the ankle, black patent leather Mary Jane style shoes. A white crocheted bag hangs from her left hand. Her blonde hair is held back from her face by a ribboned bow. She looks towards the camera, her face open, her cheeks rounded with her smile. Her feet do not align; one is placed slightly forward of the other giving her the appearance of being on the verge of walking towards the photographer. She looks a confident child, unafraid to stand in a city street and be photographed by a stranger.

I look at another photograph taken during the summer of 1975. I see a teenage girl. She sits on shaded grass in a backyard, her body side-on to the camera. Her back is curved, her shoulders hunched. She glares at the camera, strands of hair fall forward into her eyes, a scowl darkens her face. She looks angry and sullen.

I look at the third photograph taken in 1998. I see a woman. Her eyes are empty, her skin pale, bleached of lifeblood. No smile plays on her lips. Her shoulders are rounded in defeat. She looks hollow, listless, and remote.



As I hold these photographs in my hand I feel the confidence of the girl child, I feel the anger of the teenager and I feel the defeat of the woman. I feel that confidence, anger and defeat deep within my cells.

I feel those things because that girl-teenager-woman is me.

Philomela, time, and me

In juxtaposing Philomela's story with contemporary stories of the aftermath of rape in this book, I am disrupting and subverting time. By telling the story of the rape of Philomela alongside my own in this chapter and including snapshots of other women's stories of the aftermath of childhood rape later in the book, I wish to simultaneously stretch and compress past and present. Through these stories, I wish to play with time as I would a concertinaed instrument, slowly collapsing time and expanding it. In my hands, the plaintive tone of the in-breath and the sighing strains of the out-breath carry the notes of these narratives across the centuries, an ageless temporal accompaniment of pain and sorrow, fear, anger and shame.

I am reminded at this point of Marianne Hirsch (2008) and her work on the intergenerational transfer of traumatic memory. Her term 'postmemory'

describes the absorption of inherited traumatic experience by successive generations. 'Postmemory,' she argues, 'describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right' (1). Hirsch (1997) writes:

In my reading, postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through imaginative investment and creation. This is not to say that memory itself is unmediated, but that it is more directly connected to the past. Postmemory characterises the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth ... I have developed this notion in relation to children of holocaust survivors, but I believe it may usefully describe other second-generation memories of cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences. (22)

While Hirsch is referring specifically to the intergenerational transfer of holocaust memories, feminist philosopher and rape survivor Susan Brison (2002) argues the concept applies equally to multiple generations of girls and women in relation to sexual violence. Brison has appropriated the term *postmemory* and applied it to girls' and women's internalisation of cultural myths and rape stories. 'Girls in our society' she argues, 'are raised with so many cautionary tales about rape that, even if we are not assaulted in childhood, we enter womanhood freighted with postmemories of sexual violence' (87). Brison extends this concept further by suggesting that postmemories reach into the future, serving to create a phenomena she names 'prememory' (87). Brison writes:

The postmemory of rape not only haunts the present, however, as do the postmemories of children of Holocaust survivors, but also reaches into the future in the form of fear, a kind of prememory of what, at times, seems almost inevitable: one's own future experience of being raped. Postmemories (of other women's rapes) are transmuted into prememories (of one's own future rape) through early and ongoing socialization of girls and women, and both inflect the actual experiences and memories of rape survivors. (87)

Expanding on the ways in which postmemories are transmuted into prememories, Brison discusses the impact of computer-generated imagery or

simulated sexual violence (commonly seen in multiple forms of popular culture), on the internalisation of rape scripts. She cites depictions of sexual violence on television, film, video and electronic gaming as examples of mediums easily accessible by girls and women and argues these contribute to girls' and women's *postmemory of rape* and the creation of *prememories*. Brison acknowledges that the use of the term *prememory* (2002, 88) is a contentious one with its suggestion of prescience. She states:

The idea is as baffling as that of backwards causation – or anticipation of the past. Memory follows time's arrow into the past, whereas anticipation, in the form of fear or desire, points to the future. So how can one possibly remember the future? One way of trying to make sense of this paradox is to note that fear is a future-directed state and that it is primarily fear that is instilled by postmemory of rape. The backward-looking postmemory of rape thus, at every moment, turns into the forward-looking prememory of a feared future that someday will have been – a temporal correlate to the spatial paradox of the Mobius strip, in which what are apparently two surfaces fuse, at every point, into one. (88)

While Brison's concept – of women embodying the memory of a feared future that someday will have been – may be controversial for its paradoxical and seeming prophetic quality, research consistently demonstrates that high on the list of women's fear is the possibility of being raped (O'Donovan, Devilly, and Rapee 2007, Easta 1992a). Could it be that stories such as Philomela's enter the psyches of girls and women as postmemories to portend, as prememories, the terrifying future experience of rape?

The story of Philomela is certainly a cautionary tale. The resilience the story embodies by its continuing presence in mythology is testament to the relevance it still bears for generations who preserve the story by entrusting its transmission to future generations. Acts of gendered sexual violence cannot be viewed as simply a modern phenomenon, nor can they be attributed only to the barbaric behaviour of past ancient civilisations. There is no conveniently specific temporal or spatial location for trauma of this nature. The story of Philomela, the story of me, the stories of sexual violence against girls and women that have been silenced, and those that have not, these stories exist within the pleats and folds of global history.

In the folding and unfolding of the stories of Philomela and me, and the stories of others who have experienced sexual violence, in the

expanding and condensing that plays out across history, I wish to allow the movement and the breath necessary to open our minds and our bodies, to draw attention to the pervasiveness of gendered sexual violence in our culture and to the lived experience of sexually traumatised girls and women throughout millennia and across differing social, cultural and geographical landscapes.

The removal of the tongue and the torture of silence

Silence and silencing each play a significant role in the story of Philomela, in my own story, and in the stories of the nine women whose stories appear in this book. Indeed, self-silencing and sociocultural silencing practices are a common, pervasive and highly damaging outcome of sexual violence against girls and women (Ahrens 2006).

You will recall that Philomela was silenced by Tereus after he first raped her; he drew his sword and sliced her tongue from her mouth when she threatened to disclose the rape. Philomela suffered the torture of imposed muteness for four seasons until, determined to find an alternative means to communicate her sexual violation and outrage, she discovered a loom. This loom became Philomela's tongue, her means of articulation. She found a voice through images woven into cloth, in white warp and purple weft, her fingers deftly working to create the symbols of her pain like blood seeping beneath pale virginal flesh to form deep bruises of story.

My own tongue, in relation to the sexual violence I experienced in 1971, was metaphorically torn from my mouth by the lacerating words of my school friend, her sharp accusations of untruth and her slicing dismissal. My own muteness from that point, both externally imposed and simultaneously self-imposed, lasted rather longer than four seasons. For too many years and to the eventual detriment of my health, I suppressed the memories of my traumatic experience from the moment my disclosure was met with disbelief, burying these deep within my body, and attempting to conduct my life as if they never existed.

Sadly, I was naively confident in my view that the self-imposed silencing of my experience would be enough to sustain my need for self-protection. In time, coupled with my despotic rule over my body, this conscious suppression of memory, albeit instituted and sustained as a form of self-care, became a form of torture in itself as the memories resisted constraint, wove their way through my cells, and played out through the loom of my body.

The twin burdens

I introduce at this point the first of many research journal extracts. The following extract was written several days after I attended a Body-Mind Centering hands-on session with Alice Cummins and eight months after I began my autoethnographic somatic inquiry process. Alice is the Body-Mind Centering practitioner, movement educator, and dance artist with whom I developed a close therapeutic relationship during the course of the somatic inquiry phase of my research. We also developed a creative collaborative partnership, working together on the development of *aperture*, which emerged as a solo theatre performance work. I include the following extract to graphically illustrate the irrepressible, enduring and distressing nature of the somatic impact of childhood rape.

9 March, 2011

I'm hesitating here in this writing. Although it is now Wednesday and the next experience I know I must describe was last Friday (the 4th), I can feel fear and dread spreading through my body. I (my psyche?) my body (my memory centre?) doesn't want to participate in the writing of this experience. I/we are simultaneously recoiling, united in the still raw and, as yet, only partially processed sensations and emotions.

It's difficult to distinguish between my two states, the somatic and the psychological. Each is clamouring for attention. Each is responding differently. Each is real.

My somatic state is one of extreme agitation. My body position has altered. I'm pressing back and away from the keyboard of my laptop. My breathing is shallower. I can feel the quickened beat of my heart beneath the fabric of my t-shirt. My skin is clammy. My neck muscles have tensed. My gut is clenched. The tick of the clock in the kitchen is irritating my ears. I want to throw something at it. I think of the 'flight, fight or freeze' response. I don't want to fight. I want to flee. My body is preparing for flight. I can feel my blood shrinking from my periphery. I can feel bubbles of oxygen rushing towards my viscera. My scalp is tingling. My flesh is alive. I feel dreadful and ill.

My mind is chaotic, my thoughts darting about like so many insects. My mind has no wish to settle and contemplate and taste. My mind is dodging the images that force their way into my consciousness as they rise from the semantic enveloping of this experience. Double images, triple images of the past and the present. The girl-child-me. The woman-adult-me. The girl-me within the woman-me. Inextricably linked, entwined, inseparable. Each lying on their backs. Each experiencing her own private terror. I must pause for a moment and breathe before I write of the hands-on session' which shifted everything.

Alice said that she felt she wanted to place her hands on the area of my collarbones. She asked if this would be okay. I said that I didn't know until she tried. She rested her hands lightly over my collarbones. She asked if this felt okay. Her hands immediately felt threatening. My body flooded with heat and cold. It roiled with fear as it became instantly overwhelmed with powerful tingling, sparking, sweeping, prickling, gurgling sensations. I wondered, fleetingly, how long I could tolerate having her hands there. Then, suddenly, without any conscious intention, my left hand whipped up from the floor and pulled Alice's hand away. I tried to throw it off but she held me. I was in a deeply distressed state.

I couldn't breathe. I kept swallowing the saliva that gushed up from my throat. I was trembling uncontrollably. I heard Alice's voice from somewhere above me.

'Brenda, can you tell me what's happening?'

I was gulping in air. I couldn't speak. I couldn't organise myself in any way other than to suck in air.

'Try'

I gulped and swallowed, gulped and swallowed.

'I thought I was going to die'

Trauma and memory researcher Cathy Caruth (1996) asks:

Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it? At the core of these stories ... is thus a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival. (7)

Clearly, what I experienced on those two occasions in 1971 were encounters I perceived as life threatening. Clearly, I survived these encounters with death. However, as Cathy Caruth (1996) observes, there is an oscillating movement that takes place in the space between the perception of imminent death and the survival that follows, a movement which is deeply unsettling and distressing. My own experience then, carries this twin burden of encountering a life-threatening event and surviving it. My survival, however, meant conscious denial and suppression of my traumatic memories, and conscious denial and suppression of my traumatic memories involved the imposition of decades-long self-silencing practices, all of which exacerbated my now fragile sense of self and affected how I viewed my place in the world. It also shattered my mind-and-body relationship. These twin burdens, of facing the possibility of death and surviving it, led to a life-long pattern of self-protection that had unintended consequences.

Rape narratives echoing in the aftermath

The literature is clear that witnessing or experiencing a traumatic event can lead to the eventual expression of the memory of that experience as a suite of somatic or body-based symptoms. These symptoms can emerge sometimes months or years after the event itself (van der Kolk 2007, Levine 1997). In relation to sexual trauma, particularly when experienced in childhood and especially if involving a need for secrecy, the silencing impact of this imperative can impair an individual's ability to integrate the experience fully. As trauma researcher Judith Herman (1992) notes, even if the individual has 'banished it [the trauma experience] from her mind,

she continues to register its effects in her body' (Herman 1992, 108). Just as an echo continues to resonate long after the production of the original sound, body-held trauma memory can also continue to resonate long after the experiencing of the original event, especially if it has been silenced in some way or remains unresolved and dis-integrated.

In the autoethnographic component of the research, my deeply personal and complex story pivots on the conscious denial of trauma memory and its eventual expression in my body. It also pivots on silence. In addition to the externally imposed silencing that followed the trauma I endured in 1971, the self-silencing practice that I adopted as a response to this familial and sociocultural silencing has contributed to the complexity of my story. I believe silencing directly influenced the irrepressible and enduring unresolved nature of my trauma.

My evolving understandings of the somatic landscape of my rape aftermath was, at times, difficult research territory to navigate, reliant as it was on a process of trust (of the self and crucially, of others), deep inner listening through raised somatic awareness, conscious experiencing and re-experiencing of the ground of my trauma, the re-integration of my trauma memory, and self-reflexivity. During some of the autoethnographic exploration, I travelled across uncharted and shifting landscapes, an evolving topography featuring deep chasms and dark ravines, sheer-faced cliffs, raging swollen rivers, swallowing whirlpools, insurmountable ranges and vast desolate dunes. At other times though, this somatic landscape proved profoundly moving in its beauty, a complex and deeply intelligent cellular environment, breathtaking in its transformative potential and its capacity for resilience, renewal, and reciprocity. As I write, several years after I began the research for this book, my body remains in many ways a mysterious internal terrain, although I am less fearful of it now. By venturing into this cellular landscape through the somatic inquiry⁶ process undertaken as a major part of the research, I am now able to perceive my body's miraculous capacity to hold paradox and contradiction alongside profound clarity. I

6 The somatic inquiry method will be examined in Chapter Nine, *Coming to knowing through embodied autoethnography*.