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Autobiographical research in a post-traumatic body: a retrospective risk analysis

Abstract:

The body holds trauma far beyond the brain's ability to remember. Telling the story of trauma involves negotiating the conflicting needs to craft the story and live within the reawakened pain. This article will examine the impacts of critically engaging with one's own memoir of survival while living in a body forged by early childhood trauma. The external outcomes of trauma, the bodily reactions, will be linked to the processes of research, with this analysis demonstrating the potential for complex responses to trauma to be understood emotionally, critically and creatively.

Autobiographical Higher Degree Research sits on the intersection of practice and research and questions of self-care and rehabilitation are core to understanding how future researchers in this field do so while remaining emotionally safe. The research to be discussed explores memoir as a form of self-surveillance, positing that similar disciplinary forces are in place when surveilling one's self as is demonstrated by contemporary surveillance theory.

The role of the self-writer who examines trauma will be resituated beyond the concept of 'victim', showing how by examining and questioning our own narratives it is possible to find the seeds of self-realisation that are inherent in surviving and creating with the traumatic response.

Biographical Note:

Angela has just completed a memoir about the NSW prison system as part of a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Wollongong (UOW), which is currently under development with Affirm Publishers. Angela's path to academia has been rough, as she clawed her way from a childhood saturated in trauma, through addiction, homelessness and criminality, to find a space where her brain matters. Angela is a sessional academic, teaching literary and critical theory at UOW.

Key Words:

Creative Writing – Trauma – Memoir – Self-surveillance – Post-traumatic body – Risk analysis

Author's note: in writing this article (and my thesis), interesting fluctuations in POV and focalisation appeared when writing about difficult topics. While I was careful to eradicate as much of this as possible from my research, apart from in analysis, I've made a conscious decision to leave it here for experimental purposes. Now buckle in and play 'spot the defence writing strategies'.

Introduction

Writing autobiographically is inevitably a personal experience and cannot be separated from the self except by extreme force of will. What the author does is tell a story, but a story with themselves as both subject and author. If the story they tell is based in trauma, then the telling engenders the stirring up and complicating of the original traumatic events. One of many possible complications here is that the pain induced by revisiting memories might silence the writer. Telling trauma 'secrets' in writing is different to confronting trauma in a therapeutic setting. When you come up against trauma in a clinical space, you see it, feel it, then find a way to let it go. Narrating trauma, on the other hand, involves looking closer and deeper than you ever have, breaking the shards of trauma down into their narrative constituents and arranging those parts in a way that will allow the reader to immerse themselves in your 'reality'. In choosing to become narrator, the author separates themselves out emotionally from the subject, but no so far that they can see it objectively. It is a schizoid fracturing of identity, with the here-and-now author juggling the urge to relive the traumatic responses, the there-and-then subject still living in the trauma, and the beginning-and-end narrator corralling the trauma into narrative elements and cohesive structure.

(If you, my reader, find yourself uncomfortable with the lack of citation and engagement with scholarship in my opening, know you are not alone. My researcher brain agrees with peer reviewer two that these ideas are not purely mine, that they have footings in other great thinkers. However, as these are ideas torn from the trauma body, which I'll later frame for you as that ultimate academic authority of 'primary source', I hope you'll permit me the temporary resistance of experiential theorising. The citations are coming, I promise.)

As if the fragmented identity of narrator, author and subject isn't challenging enough, some self-writers then plunge into the quagmire of higher degree research. So what happens to that author/subject/narrator when you also add the objective role of researcher to the mix? This article examines one case of autobiographical higher degree research – my own – and explores the intellectual and bodily reactions and responses to storytelling stored trauma and critical engagement with pain. During the thinking phase of this article, I tweeted 'Use a microscope on your pain and a scalpel on your fear' (Williams 2016b). In crafting my study of the post-traumatic research body, I've drawn on strands of literary, critical, physiological and psychiatric theory to tighten the focus of the microscope, sharpen the edge of the scalpel and steady the hand which wields it. This article will introduce you to my higher degree research, and expand beyond it to look at the body's links to 'researcher' and 'subject', how the

brain responds to trauma with hardware changes, and provide some theoretical stepping-stools for future trauma-based creative and critical play.

The ~~secrets~~ stories I'm telling

In February 2010, I had just completed a First-class Honours at the University of Wollongong. At 34, I was older than many graduates but after a long and hard 13 years I'd dug myself out of a history that included severe child abuse, the early loss of a parent, and the clichéd escapes of heroin, sex work and other less than savoury past times. I was a high-school drop-out who'd been in the 'opportunity' classes in primary school and all of a sudden (okay, not that suddenly) I was a high-achieving educated adult. I'd been in therapy for ten years with the same doctor and was well on track to being a symptom-free person living with complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. I had my neuroses, but they were mostly under control. I'd even quit smoking after being hooked since I was 11. Things were looking up. Then I stepped off the wrong gutter without looking right, got hit by a Postie on a motorbike and was arrested for a 13-year-old warrant that I thought I'd done time for. I went back to prison in NSW for six weeks then served ten months and one day on home detention. Locked up in the 'DIY Panopticon' Corrective Services and I constructed, I started writing a book about it. In late 2010, I applied for a PhD to think while I wrote. In June 2016, the PhD came back from markers with no revisions and two special commendations. Apparently, the thinking I did while writing was pretty okay.

My research, titled 'It's all just a game, you know, a stupid power game': Memoir as a practice in self-surveillance', reimagines the process of writing a memoir as a form of self-surveillance. It aligns the surveillant functions of 'classification' (Foucault 1991, 18 and 195–9) and 'risk mitigation' (Lyon 2007: 372) with the memoirist's shift into the narrator role and the self and other-protections that the author implements in writing. It then uses these pairings to look for the outcomes of surveillance – discipline and resistance – with the formation of 'narrative identity' (Eakin 2001: 114–5) and 'narrative fidelity' (Fisher 1985: 349–50). My methodology looks for a five-step pattern in three case studies (Kate Holden, *In My Skin* (2007); David Hicks, *Guantanamo: My Journey* (2010), and Ahn Do, *The Happiest Refugee* (2010)).

The process of autobiographical writing whilst under surveillance led me into questions of power and autonomy, provided the impetus to see this pattern: Foucault's 'docile body' (1991: 135–169) showing in my acquiescence to the discursive saturation of my flesh in the ever-present eye of Corrective Services. In reading the case studies, I recognised that while the authors also found themselves subjected to toxic power in their stories, as they that wrote their way into understanding the issues that drive their stories, the weight of their discursive positioning appeared to shift. The pattern I identified, stumbled upon during my own process of crafting the memoir, can be considered as the reflexive knee-jerk of a victim of trauma hoping for a path out of pain. The pattern that I 'felt' in my case studies, grew into the pattern I used to analyse both these texts and my own memoir, as follows:

1. Problems appear in the author's world, some flaw in their narrative identity/coherence that drives them to tell this story. At this stage the author may not be aware of the problems as problems.
2. The author decides to write the story, discovers the need and in doing so they shift into the narrator position, taking on all the responsibilities of the memoirist and also beginning the process of self-surveillance through classification and risk mitigation and beginning to see and identify the problems.
3. In the process of writing the story, the author/narrator also becomes subject of their narration, and in doing so they practise risk mitigation in what and how they tell us the story, allowing us to develop a nuanced understanding of their problems.
4. This risk mitigation leads to the narrator becoming aware of those ways in which self-discipline may act to help them solve the problems; in constructing the narrative for us they begin to understand the root causes of the problems and plot ways into solving them.
5. In understanding and unpacking the problems, the narrator becomes aware of their discursive positioning, those external forces that are impacting on or compounding the problems, delaying the implementation of the solutions. In this awareness, they find ways to invert the power dynamics and reposition themselves in the relations of power in such a way that opens up the path to the solutions and can be imagined as resistance.

I had set out to discover whether writing a memoir could be considered as a form of self-surveillance, to understand more about how we both imagine and represent ourselves. Starting with Foucault's argument that as lives are recorded in writing, they are submitted to 'a procedure of objectification and subjection' (1991: 191), I discovered that by taking on this role themselves, the memoirist embraces a narratorial position of power where they can take back the 'official records', write a story that places then in a unique position to understand, examine and enunciate their own identity. Within this framework, I situated the writing of memoir as a form of protest against the official version of the author's life that allows the subject and narrator to reclaim a version of themselves beyond those official records which objectify and subjugate them.

As suggested by Weir (2009), by combining Taylor's 'dialogic […] existential' construction of identity (1995: 225–34) and Foucault's externally imposed 'corrected, classified, normalized, excluded' identity (1991: 191–2), I discovered that not only are our memoirists trying to answer 'Who am I?' and 'Why am I who I am?' but also uncovered the power they claim in answering these questions. By using the five steps from the methodology, I interrogated my case studies, seeking evidence of both the functions and outcomes of surveillance and then performing close textual and discursive analyses to unlock this data and peer at the identities hidden within.

In each case, I found that the narrator had used the functions of self-classification and risk mitigation to identify the problems in their narrative world, and then applied self-

discipline and resistance to forge a path out of those problems. Each of these case studies began with a problem, and with the narrator emphasising this by using a shift in narrative time (i.e. 'Prologue', 'Epilogue' and 'Author's note') to formalise their narratorial role, just as I did with you, my reader. By shifting into this role, each memoirist classified themselves, showing by self-surveillance the problems inherent in their story world. As each began to utilise risk mitigation, both in their positioning as narrator and the ordering of story time and events, they showed themselves coming closer to finding a path out of their problems. Within this risk mitigation, for each, lay the seeds of self-discipline which showed the narrator edging closer to the problem-solving phase. However, it was in the resistance that each narrator demonstrated that moment of triumphant affect, the drawing together of their solutions and the way out of their problems.

I found in my own memoir this demonstrated process of self-surveillance: the same pattern at work, myself as narrator writing and thinking my way towards that 'relationship of self-possession and self-sovereignty' predicted by Foucault (1983: C5, 3). The fractured identity which was the problem at the start of my work was unpacked by the use of self-classification and risk mitigation, with the varying strands of Angela woven together through self-discipline to come to my own moment of triumphant affect, the 'yes' of resistance which appeared to highlight the solutions.

With all this thinking about risk mitigation, one might think I'd considered all angles, however, the one thing that escaped me in the construction of the sparkling theory was the role of the corporeal: the flesh. I had forgotten that what we think and write is stored in the body that memories ferment in the flesh, that the snapping synapses that carry the stories also warehouse the trauma. This is the schism in my identity widening from author, narrator, subject, researcher, to include *sack of meat and electricity which holds the others*.

An inevitable side effect of Higher Degree Research is that the researcher begins to see their patterns in everything, and turns their theoretical play out onto the world around them. As my word count grew, and my arguments formed, I also began to notice my body and how it reacted to the telling of secrets.

This is what I noticed.

The body is a site of trauma

Trauma is not just in the narratives, it is also the thread tying the stories to memories stored in flesh. All the pains and injuries the subject has erased, the body remembers. I have recently begun to use the term 'trauma body' to differentiate those physical parts of me, the parts that respond with encrypted messages before the rest of me even knows there's anything going on. The trauma body lived the stories – continues to live them – the brain percolates them, 'I' tell them. Bur for the narrative loop to emerge, there must be communications and these I've labelled 'trauma responses'.

An alternative term may be 'triggered', but this is both too shallow and too deep to encompass these messages. Coming out of attempts to understand PTSD and addiction, the terms 'trigger' and 'triggered' imply a powerlessness (Bernheim and

Rangel 2004) that does not imbue the term with hope. Further to this, the contemporary use of the term, particularly in abusive Internet attacks (RandomMan and pm me nudes 2015), requires looking beyond 'triggered' to define the trauma body's vocabulary.

Thinking out loud on the Internet, I described my body's trauma responses as 'a physically illustrated almanac of pain and lack … the song of mourning that my flesh and bones sing' (2016). However beyond and within the poetic, I am convinced that trauma responses can be understood, read like a text. Decoding the trauma body's messages gets easier the more you practice it, however it is only recently that I've begun to think about the critical and creative potential of mapping and decoding these responses. I've either re-discovered psychoanalysis 130 years late or am teetering on the cliffs of brilliance. I'm not on my own, making claims that the body can be a site of enquiry, for as Eades states 'when inside and outside are no longer clear, flesh becomes theory, and theory flesh' (2013). Eades, of course, speaks back to the many thinking bodies who have conceptulised the corporeal: from Cixous's 'écriture féminine' which drives us to write the flesh (1976), to Kristeva's 'corporeal reality' that lets us see the gaps between the self and other (1982), and through to Grosz's invitation to move beyond masculine theorisations of the body (1994). The flesh of my theory, the new ideas coming out of thinking about the significations embedded in my thesis builds on this scholarship. The experiential re-traumatisation of my autobiographical research was driven and shaped by the trauma body and its responses to the traumas of other bodies (included, but not limited to, my case studies).

And how interesting that my body has chosen now to become evident, almost as if it heard that moment of 'triumphant affect'? Coming out of these long five years of research, where I argued that the self-surveillance inherent in memoir guides the writer towards self-actualisation, and then BAM, I take the next big step in repairing my fractured identities? Convenient. The flesh has been a tool to me, but not a temple. I've asked my body to do things that I wouldn't ask anyone else to do, not thought of it for a second. The body should have piked years ago. The body, it seems, is now ready to have its say. The strands of Angela just keep on braiding themselves.

All I can do now is watch, listen, think, and write. Look after the body. And keep seeing Shrinkola, my professional reality consultant and body response translator.

The body, see, can be trusted to handle most of the processing of trauma, if the subject is aware enough to let it. While our group consciousness is still trying to break out of the Freudian 'wish fulfillment' approach to dreams (Freud 1913: C3), researchers (Wilmer 1996; Shaw 2000; Helminien and Punamäki 2008) are picking their way towards understanding dreams as a way of processing trauma. In some ways, this approach to 'reading' the body's trauma responses – finding a new language of trauma – can be seen to answer Kathleen Nader's call for 'more study' on how trauma links to nightmares and other symptoms (2001: 11). Understanding not just what the trauma body is trying to say but also the language it uses to speak doesn't just make for stronger stories: it can also make riding the trauma body easier.

As we now know, trauma during the formative years can restructure the brain, setting the child up for a life of carrying the extra baggage of abuse (Bremner 2006). One part of this baggage is packed by stress's impacts on the trauma body's cortisol system, which Bremner argues exists to 'mediate fear-related behaviors [sic]' (2006: 446). Bremner describes how when the 'normal' body suffers stress, the brain responds by releasing cortisol which sends messages to the pituitary gland to flood the body with adrenalin, kicking in the freeze, fight and flight response. When we were cave people, these responses either saved us or killed us, removing the stress in either outcome. Without some release of the stress, the system becomes stuck in alert mode. Bremner uses the example of a mother rat licking her babies after stress events as 'stress inoculation' as one way of releasing this stress (2006: 448), but unfortunately the trauma body (mine singular and the plural posited by Bremner) is most often lacking in consistent 'stress inoculations', never having a mother rat invested enough to inoculate. The trauma body I live in didn't have the fight option and so never learned the stress release inherent in 'winning'. Without release, the cortisol and adrenalin levels remain high, leaving the trauma body running on an emotional level near to or above the 'normal' body's typical panic point. The trauma body is addicted to cortisol and finds its own unique ways to meet that 'need': self-harm, sabotage, sedation. This paper will suggest healthier alternatives to meeting the cortisol needs of a writer living in a trauma body.

This chemical dependence on cortisol, can also help to explain the brain's response to traumatic stimuli in the trauma body, for 'exposure to traumatic reminders […] was associated with an increase in PTSD symptoms, decreased blood flow, and/or failure of activation in the medial prefrontal cortex/anterior cingulate' (2006: 450). Or put more simply, memories of pain cut off blood to our thinking, deciding and feeling hardware. So, for the trauma body – dependant on cortisol and its progenitor, stress – the processes of thinking, feeling and writing are hard-wired to take efforts far beyond those the critical and impartial researcher could imagine. I suppose you could say my empirical research supports these findings, that without the maternal licking inoculation or some other physiological alternative, thinking, feeling and deciding is hard work.

The body is a storyteller

Remembering that 'the English word for the meat of this animal, as prepared and served for a meal, is not sheep but mutton' (Saussure 2013: 136) and that in assenting to the meaning of words we acknowledge that all meaning depends on agreement, the researcher turns back to literary theory: to Lacan, Brooks, Barthes – led in this theoretical tango by Lobb's ideas on the interplay of 'the mirror stage', 'narrative desire' and 'dilatory space' (2009: 5–7). Making that 'epistemological break' Lobb suggests (2009: 6), the researcher takes theories written for readers, repurposed for writers, and shifts them a little further to understand the trauma body's need to speak. When Barthes states 'Is not the most erotic portion of a body where the garment gapes? ... It is this flash itself which seduces, or rather: the staging of appearance-as-disappearance' (1975: 9–10), could he not be just as easily talking about those gaps in

understanding between the trauma body and the 'I'? Could the researcher be poking at the 'threshold of the visible world', stumbling into Lacan's 'mirror stage' as they come face-to-face with the 'real' (1972: 3)?

The relationship between narrator, researcher and trauma body subject is contradictory in nature, based in tension and desire. It is a dialogue between the narrator's need to reach the end, the researcher's drive to see the whys and hows and the trauma body's self-protective impulses. The researcher, in partitioning off the subject, seems to have forgotten that as a reader 'one enters into an intellectual space provided by a writer: one might attempt to experience the problems encountered by the characters' (Lobb 2009: 5). So even within the research role, the traumas are still there, still waiting, only as percolated awful-beauty, trawled by the narrator to drag the reader to the end and ripe for critical plundering. The trauma body is still there, with its ever-simmering trauma responses, and yet so is the reader and researcher seeking after 'narrative desire' which, as Brooks reminds us, 'is oriented towards the end' (1984: 49). So just as the trauma body resists the responses, and yet also feeds off the cortisol, the researcher attempts to partition off the subject and yet also be immersed in it, seduced by it, drawn inevitably forward by it.

The researcher has always been uncomfortable with self-writing in the academic format, misses citations and documented proof, but is gradually finding comfort with the salve of a new identity: 'primary source'. Scanning the first few paragraphs of this article, the researcher tuts at the lack of citations, quotes: evidence. It is, however, quite easy to silence these complaints with logic from the methodology: if my case studies are considered primary sources, then my own 'case study' is also a primary source, I am a primary source. And in that moment of erasing the line around the subject, that magic unselfconscious I-without-inverted-commas appears. In owning the subject, I'm also able to see that the lack of 'evidence' is okay, that the missing citations is me speaking as primary source. What I've realised – in this weaving together of narrative strands and finding of the primary source – is that if the threads of narrative we collect as memoir can be considered as data, then other things can too. Writing the memoir inflamed my trauma responses, but in doing so opened a window into a whole new theoretical playground.

The body is data

If it is possible to map the body's responses and decode this language in the form of self-writing, then surely it is also possible to carry the data over into an interdisciplinary exploration of the corporeal language and vocabulary of trauma? Channeling my inner Bremner (but with less expensive diagnostic hardware (the memoirist's tools of self-surveillance, the blogger's play with self-exposure, the researcher's discursive self-analysis)), I build on my methodology and posit the following:

1. Finding a 'safe' way to let the 'trauma body' (the speaking, responding body) and 'researcher' speak will almost inevitably challenge researchers. The 'problems and solutions' analysis of my methodology is embedded in the corporeality of the narrator and subject. The differently-wired neural

pathways in the trauma body mean creative and critical enquiry will stir up 'trauma responses'. I had a brilliant supervisor in Shady Cosgrove and an equally formidable psychiatrist; safety nets are essential.

2. 'The seeds of the end hide in the beginning' I wrote in my prison diary, and this article, I think, has shown a way to uncover these seeds and consequently pull together a few more strands. If it is the catharsis of stress release and the mother rat's 'stress inoculation' missing, then perhaps – in a Lobb-esque reasoning leap – I can find a way of appropriating literary theory, 'desire' and 'dilatory spaces', to simulate 'trauma responses' and 'stress inoculations'.
3. Recent experiments with the trauma body in writing, workshopping and performing psychoanalytic micro-not-fiction show that processing a small to medium emotional stressor through self-writing, then sharing and critiquing said piece, leads to a similar set of 'trauma responses' to a large fight with a loved one (source redacted). The conscious and active application of thinking in the process of feeling, awareness of the trauma body during the process, and active construction of an imaginary real all made for easy unpacking with my reality consultant, Shrinkola.

Let's think about these propositions while we return just one more time to Foucault's claim that our 'official' stories come from 'a procedure of objectification and subjection' (1991: 191). My research took this idea as a pivot, spinning from there to memoir as form of self-surveillance, pulling Hicks, Holden and Do along gleefully in my slipstream. In telling a different version of my 'official records', I found a space to examine how the many different versions of 'I' – author, subject, narrator, researcher, primary source – came into being and what each of them has contributed to my trip from the gutters to the thesis. I haven't just clambered over the 'impossible', I've pointed out every toe hold and finger crack I found on my way, leaving as clear a path as I can for those who follow.

While learning how to think about trauma, I've also somehow found a way to connect with flesh that I'd long come to accept as the side effects of my brain. In recognising my trauma body and its responses, I've found a spark for new projects, the mapping of trauma as it speaks in the body. In using the new-to-me languages of chemistry and medicine to help decode the trauma body's dispatches, I'm finding my feet as that amorphous primary source.

In conclusion, the trauma body doesn't need to be a silent body. The hardware settings left in the brains of those carrying trauma do not prevent creative and critical engagement with autobiographical research. On the contrary, while the risks of reawakening old trauma is significant, with awareness of such – and good safety nets – the possible intellectual and curative benefits might be worth the risk.

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