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***writing + boxing = Left / Write // Hook***

Abstract:

This paper will focus on the (dis)embodied experiences of three rape and incest survivors who were part of the creative arts and sports intervention program, Left / Write // Hook. It suggests their understanding of self is a lived and (dis)embodied space in which they can creatively and reflexively re-tell, re-claim, and re-story their experiences of disconnection and shame associated with their trauma. Left / Write // Hook combines two acts; writing to a prompt, followed by non-contact boxing. The program ran in 2020 as part of a University of Melbourne creativity and wellbeing research initiative, targeting female survivors of childhood sexual abuse and trauma. About the program, founder Donna Lyon says: “The attempt to give expression to hidden and silenced thoughts and memories came through the act of writing, then boxing, to embody and release the emotion”. This paper observes the way that the process of writing informs trauma, trauma informs writing, and the embodied act of boxing informs the movement of stored trauma in the body. This article incorporates personal writing which recounts the experiences of these participants.

Biographical notes:

Dr Donna Lyon is a Senior Lecturer at University of Melbourne, based at the Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, VCA Film and Television in the master of producing program. She is the Founder of the writing and boxing program, Left / Write // Hook, for female survivors of childhood sexual abuse and trauma.

Claire Gaskin is in the School of Communication and Creative Arts at Deakin University. *A bud*, her first full length collection of poetry, was released by John Leonard Press in 2006, and was shortlisted in the John Bray SA Festival Awards for Literature in 2008. Her collection *Paperweight*, was published in 2013 by Hunter Publishers. Her collection, *Eurydice Speaks*, was published with Hunter Publishers in 2021. *Ismene's Survivable Resistance* was released in 2021 with Puncher & Wattmann.

Dr Gabrielle Everall is in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. She has a PhD in Creative Writing from University of Western Australia. She has written two books of poetry. The first, *Dona Juanita and the love of boys*, was published in its second edition in 2020. Her second book, *Les Belles Lettres*, was published in 2017 by Girls on Key Press.

Keywords:

Writing, boxing, trauma

Declaration of Interest:

Donna Lyon is the founder of Left / Write // Hook. Claire Gaskin and Gabrielle Everall are participants of the workshop and the project. All are featured in the published book, *Left / Write // Hook: Survivor Stories from a Boxing and Creative Writing Project*.

\*Content Note: This paper discusses personal accounts of rape, incest, and the long-term and adverse effects of childhood sexual abuse.

## Introduction

This essay looks at the interdependence of writing, boxing, and trauma. It does so via three distinct voices. Firstly, is Donna Lyon, the founder of the Left / Write // Hook program and a publicly declared childhood sexual abuse survivor. Left / Write // Hook is an evidence-based creative arts and sports intervention program for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) and trauma. Lyon discusses how the workshop combines mind and body through writing and boxing, and how these modalities are then viewed as artistic and expressive practices of movement from which to explore and process trauma.

Secondly, is practicing poet and participant of the program, Claire Gaskin. Gaskin posits that survivors' voices must be added to public discourse for any real and lasting change to be sustainable. She argues that poetic methods coupled with physical expression can be employed by survivors to gain voice and therefore autonomy.

Thirdly, is the voice of poet / writer and participant of the program, Gabrielle Everall. Everall writes about Kathy Acker's description of bodybuilding as a movement toward death (1992). Everall argues that Left / Write // Hook is instead a movement towards life. Left / Write // Hook can thaw the icy psychic and social deaths that incest and rape survivors experience. In the workshops, Everall says that "we acknowledge our disembodiment and then box the reawakening of our bodies in our anger".

Through these individual approaches, we aim to collectively show how the combination of writing and boxing can inform our understanding of trauma on the physical and mental concepts of self. The narratives of adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse and trauma are identified as a lived and (dis)embodied space in which survivors re-tell, re-claim, and re-story

shared experiences of disconnection, shame, grief, and the adverse effects of their abuse. In *Left / Write // Hook*, this is done in relationship with self and others through the acts of writing, sharing, and boxing. In the book, *Discoveries: A Group Resource Guide for Women who were Sexually Abused in Childhood*, Linnell and Cora state: “Resistance is a key to producing an alternative sense of self – to an identity based on something other than subjection to child sexual abuse” (1993, p. 3). We hope to show how the combination of these acts of expression can disrupt the lived space of survivors’ [dis]embodied selves to develop alternative narratives.

This essay often changes tense. The authors believe that the past and present are not stable categories for the survivor. The changing of tenses reflects the survivors’ experience in past events, which can often be experienced as in the present.

## The program

*Left / Write // Hook* is an eight-week creative arts and sport intervention program for survivors of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) and trauma. Lyon founded the program as a grassroots workshop in 2019 at her local boxing gym in Ferntree Gully, Melbourne. Lyon had been drawn to boxing as a physical and expressive outlet to release anger stored in her body that she knew was directly related to her sexual abuse history. She also found writing an effective tool to process memory and emotions but had observed that writing often made her feel sleepy and depressed. *Left / Write // Hook* was born out of the curiosity of combining writing with boxing as a way of redirecting repressed emotion from writing and from stored trauma in the body. The program ran twice in 2019 with deeply profound and positive results. In 2020, Lyon took the workshop into the research space at the University of Melbourne, sourcing funding from a Creative Arts and Wellbeing Research Initiative. The funding brought together mixed methods research combining quantitative psychological data with qualitative audio-visual and creative writing data to assess the program’s efficacy. The findings of these sources affirmed a reduction in PTSD, depression, and stress, and an increase in personal agency and wellbeing (Lyon et al., 2020).

Eight participants were involved in the study and the research intervention ended after the first eight-week program. An analysis of writings from all participants has been previously analysed and reported in another journal article (Lyon et al., 2020). The group decided to continue online (due to Covid-19) with the intention of working together on a curated book to publish their writings.

In 2021, Loving Healing Press (USA) published *Left / Write // Hook: Survivor Stories from a Creative Arts Boxing and Writing Project*, which contained three rounds of selected writings from the participants. Importantly, *Left / Write // Hook* is survivor led and focused with every participant actively engaged in each part of the program to ensure that survivor voices are amplified. Lyon chose to write this article with two participants from the workshop, who are also academics and published poets. This is a deliberate choice to centre the survivor as researcher of their own narrative, rather than as a subject to be researched. In this article, the

writers reveal in their own style how the program creatively and reflexively enables a re-telling, re-claiming, and re-storying of disconnection and shame associated with their trauma.

## Research context

Boxing has most notably been used as an effective intervention for CSA and domestic violence survivors by researcher Cathy Van Inge in Canada, in the program “Shape Your Life”. Van Ingen has incorporated participatory arts practices in aspects of her research, but no other program has yet been structured to include both writing and boxing as a primary intervention. As a survivor, Lyon drew on the work of other survivors to inform the creative writing process – notably, the work of Jen Cross, a writer, performer, and survivor who runs writing workshops for survivors. Her book, *Writing Ourselves Whole* (2017), was used as a stimulus for the project framework and constructing prompts. Lyon picked original prompts such as; “Body”, “Shame”, “I connected and...”, “To punch is to...”, “Healing is...”, and “Fighting back means...”. These prompts were chosen deliberately to provoke writing connected to participants’ abuse histories, whilst remaining open ended. A timer was set for 10 minutes, and each participant wrote non-stop until the buzzer went off. If anyone got stuck, they were directed to write “what I really want to say is, what I really want to say is...” (Cross, 2017, p. 241). Participants were encouraged to write freely based on a prompt and in whatever form they wanted.

The combination of writing and boxing offered survivors a way to express and move with, and through, their stored trauma. Lyon did not view the program as being the solution for the survivor. Rather, it was seen as a complement to existing therapies and as a modality to creatively express the long-term effects of trauma through the act of writing, then the embodied exercises of boxing. Boxing is energetic and forceful and requires the survivor to express their feelings and bodies in ways that they have perhaps not been used to. Bessell Van der Kolk expresses how we hold trauma in our body in his book, *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014); Panhofer describes the body as one that “feels, knows, and remembers” (2017, p. 6). Naparstek asserts that the most effective way to deal with trauma is through the creative and imaginal realms (2006). Purposefully embodying movements of expressive gesture, which includes writing, can therefore inform the movement of stored trauma in the body.

## Trauma Informs Writing | Boxing Informs Trauma

### Donna Lyon

My Trauma.

My trauma is a black hole that I can swim in. It is the air that I can breathe.

My trauma is the knife that splits and divides me into pieces.

My trauma is a hunter. Like a skilled sniper, it waits silently, tracing my every move.

It catches me unaware. It hides in the shadows. It engulfs me. (Lyon, diary entry, August 22, 2017)

One week before, I had written this in my diary:

Tonight, I boxed. I had to dig deep for the first time. I had to keep going. There is a fight in there – a fight to live. The many thoughts of dying have played in my head for so long. They are getting boxed out of me. I must fight back. It is my revenge. (Lyon, diary entry, August 15, 2017)

Trauma informs my writing. I wrestle with its adverse effects and try to create meaning. As Gaskin says, “I write myself into existence” (cited in Gerrand, 2014, p. 95). Writing gives my trauma expression and helps me to narrate a broken past, to make sense of what’s going on inside my head. Boxing informs my trauma as I feel the long-lasting effects of it stuck in my body. The physicality of punching is a brutal reminder of the anger stored inside me, buried deep.

One day, a young female boxer turned to me and asked me if I liked being punched in the face *yet*. And then it happened. I felt the thrill of his jab connecting with my cheek. I froze for a split second and then the anger rose inside me, and I flicked a punch back. For a moment, I felt agency. I fought back.

Incest is a physical death of self (Grand, 2003). It cuts you off from self and confuses arousal. It makes you reject body, abhor body. Body is the enemy; mind is the enemy. If you think about it too much, things go blank. They stop making sense.

Boxing is violent. Boxing is a dance. Boxing is a skill. Boxing is brute. What is the point of non-contact trauma informed boxing? When boxing informs trauma, you write about the high intensity, about movement, flow and rhythm, and then you practise these concepts through the body. Free flowing punches, knees bent, weight of body, shifting back and forth on toes. Shoulders shimmy, the stealth of a hungry cat. Shadow boxing – with self. Self-punches. Self takes up space. Self-moves, strikes. Self is cat, self is lion, self is fast. Furious.

Many survivors have rejected their bodies (Grand, 2003). To practise being in body and contemplate the rage held within it, is radical and political. Van Ingen writes: “anger is a politically meaningful response to injustice” (2011, p. 185). Boxing not only helps the survivor to locate healthy aggression (van Ingen, 2011), but it can also position the survivor’s body as graceful, strong, and powerful. This grants the body the respect that was taken away by the abusers. The forceful energetic movements associated with boxing rarely give the survivor time to notice the discomfort of memory awakening. Each punch combination requires a certain amount of control and relaxation. *She is learning to be present whilst being in charge of each moment*. In *Left / Write // Hook*, this dichotomy is called out. The discomfort is acknowledged, and the survivor becomes willing to let it shift. *I told her I felt triggered*. She said, “I needed to protect myself. Duck, weave, step back, slip”. I had taught her these concepts. She fed them back to me in my vulnerability.

In the group, we practise movement. In the free writing section, we spill out our trauma on paper. We don't stop writing. It's clunky, prose fragments, stream of consciousness, brain dump, messy, our ugly unconscious. Truth. Libertarian words full of contradictions and realness/messiness. We play with speed and rhythm. Then we move into the space of our bodies. They are uncoordinated, strong, weak, and stiff. We are outward with expression. Punching bags, pads. Focusing on the enemy, the target of the bag. Suddenly, we notice we are holding breath. She yells; "keep on your toes. Keep arms long and gloves back to chin. Cover up". I'm angry but focused. Spirited. Aggression is channelled and loses grip. It's not controlled reps, focused on failure (Acker, 1992), instead each round brings the body back to mind, mind to body, restores sinew. I am desperately thinking *body is worth it. You shouldn't have touched body. Get off me.* All the words rendered powerless. Speechless. *I'm allowed to huff and puff in here.*

Writing gives expression to silenced words and feelings. Boxing gives expression to the powerlessness forced upon us. I step into the ring with consent. Boxing helps me to reclaim spaces that I inhabit, be it at the gym or in daily life. *Connection in group. Connection of punch. Bodies in space. Abused bodies in space. Disconnected bodies in space. Disconnected narratives living in space.* I came to boxing to release the anger raging inside me. It was connected to my childhood sexual abuse, and I wanted to channel it into a boxing bag. I quickly learnt that boxing is more than being angry. Instead, the skill is more in the ability to be present and grounded, mindful and focused, strong and sharp. I had dissociated due to my abuse, and I struggled to stay present and connect with my body. I felt like I lived in my head. It was safe there.

Boxing challenged me to practise the sport as a form of mindfulness. It helped me to feel strong in my body (Van Ingen, 2016). Like other survivors, I too hated feeling my body and taking up space. Boxing challenged all of this. I went on an 18-month amateur fight adventure, clocking up more losses than wins, but I kept stepping into the ring, as though each time, it would help me to regain a part of myself that had been destroyed. I'm not sure I ever achieved what I set out to, other than a few bloody noses and some good stories. When I decided to retire after a mammoth loss, I realised that what I loved about boxing wasn't the competition; it was the training, skill, and agency I felt when practising the movements. The training made me feel strong, like I had power to fight back, when I was once so powerless, and I had no control.

After my foray into the world of fighting, I set up Left / Write // Hook. Beyond my abuse, I was an educator, filmmaker, and arts practitioner. In some ways, boxing felt like a performance to me and so combining the artistic practice of creative writing with boxing, and setting the workshop in a boxing gym, seemed normal to me. I wanted to meet other survivors, hear their experiences, and then box with them. I wanted to punch bags, yell and scream, and express the anger and rage we held at our injustice. The project continues to evolve and grow with the publication of our book and a documentary in the making.

Our shared narratives are most often based on the adverse effects of our traumas. We tell, re-tell, claim, re-claim, and re-story the disconnection, shame, grief, and disgust bestowed upon

us. We do this in a sweaty gym, framed by a boxing ring. The ring acts as a metaphor for the daily battle to survive, for the trauma contained within us, for the bravery to step into the ring and face the demons of our past. Boxing is seen as violent and masculine, and we challenge this through taking the violence out of it. Boxing becomes about physical strength, building confidence and self-esteem.

## Writing Informs Trauma

### Claire Gaskin

I am a poet who participated in Left / Write // Hook. I employ poetry and publication as a means of gaining autonomy. I was attracted to the name, writing being physically dynamic and boxing being thoughtful and incisive and both being a means to public engagement. Bella Sagi identifies personal writing as therapeutically beneficial and a “nonhazardous space”, one that “does not threaten the social order” (2021, p. 153). I acknowledge that personal writing for survivors to express themselves without fear of retribution can be beneficial, but I favour the precision of poetry in the strengthening of voice with a focus on gaining a public outcome. I joined Left / Write // Hook to bear witness, to break silences, to strengthen my physical and mental stance, and gather force to purposely threaten an order that enables the continued sexual abuse of children. I posit that personal testimonies of survivors of childhood sexual abuse need to be added to public discourse.

*jab, jab, cross, hook, cross*  
*under the drag of the crowd*  
*jab, jab, cross, hook, cross, hook, cross*  
*down on bent knees*  
*down on bloodied knees*  
*down on pleasing knees as the mozzies bite me*  
*the fern garden like the dank of the wardrobe*

There are multiple ways survivors are silenced, not least of all being the pain of childhood sexual abuse and the fear of the implications of its exposure. Hélène Cixous states that writing “is the attempt to unerase, to unearth, to find the primitive picture again, ours, the one that frightens us”, the one we need to reclaim, the one we “constantly believe we must repress, forget and bury” (1993, p. 9). Writing functions as “an alternative to forbidden speech, which is evident whether consciously by keeping the secret or unconsciously by internalizing the aggressor” (Sagi, 2021, p. 153). As has been evidenced in studies on the benefits of writing, Left / Write // Hook led to “the movement between three main sequences: from forgetting to remembering, from silence to speech (the testimony process), and from dissolution of the self to its cohesiveness” (Sagi, 2021, p. 154). It is important that this writing as evidence of cohesion is made public as it remaining personal and private replicates the silencing intrinsic to the abuse.

*jab, jab, cross, hook, cross, hook, cross, duck, cross, duck, cross*  
*the cowering left barbed wire fence broken bottles*  
*stuck in the lift surrounding body sounds*  
*jab, cross, hook, cross, upper, upper*  
*muscle around memory*  
*jab, cross, hook, cross, upper, upper, hook, cross*

I believe that due to the focus and intensity of purpose of Left / Write // Hook the writing emerged with the distillation of language that is prose poetry. Poetry is uniquely placed to be a powerful tool for survivors because it can hold intensity, the contradictory and fragmentary within a cohesive whole. Survivors often express their story “in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility” (Herman, 2001, p. 1). Rather than discredit the survivor for communicating with intensity, with recourse to allusion through associative thinking I would champion this can be held in poetry as a means to coherence. It is a means of finding voice for the inexpressible and unpalatable. Projects such as Left / Write // Hook can be utilised to gain agency through a gaining of voice and physical expression for the intensely felt, the painful, the unknown, the unknowable, the silences, and the unspeakable. Poetry can incorporate the direct unambiguous voice and also employ ambiguity to integrate multiplicity and be a place where contradictions can co-exist. When the survivor’s story has been denied or erased and only fragments remain, making sense in a traditionally linear form is a privilege denied. A traumatic event is pervasive, as much as it is inescapable. This causes a break in continuity: “The future is no longer continuous with the past but is united with it through a profound discontinuity” (Caruth, 1996, p. 14). Poetic methods can help build cohesion by identifying what picture the fragments are telling.

*I remember I kicked my sisters’ boyfriends*  
*as soon as they walked in the door*  
*where does a seven-year-old get that from*  
*they were bent over double*  
*I was swift     accurate*  
*‘use the iron bar*  
*hit the bag*  
*vocalise*  
*go hard’*  
*I want my life back*

There is a lot of fear of poetry as personal testimony because of its power to expose inequities. Since James W Pennebaker’s first work on expressive writing in 1986, several studies have demonstrated that writing about trauma has benefits. Significantly to Left / Write // Hook, one study found that out of three different groups – one writing, one moving, and one incorporating both – “only the movement-plus-writing group showed significant improvements in physical health and grade point average” (Pennebaker, 1997, p. 164). However, I want to draw attention to a paper by Pennebaker entitled, “Word Use in the Poetry of Suicidal and Nonsuicidal Poets” (2001), to look at the fear of poetry’s power to question the preconceived. The objective of this



study was to “determine whether distinctive features of language could be discerned in the poems of poets who committed suicide” (Stirman & Pennebaker, 2001, p. 517). Predictably, utilising Sylvia Plath as a case study, they concluded that poets who used the “I” were more likely to commit suicide. I think Plath’s crime was not so much her suicide but her threatening of the dominant narrative that all women found the inequities of the 1960s fulfilling. Her suicide has been painfully utilised as a warning against dissent ever since. The study says that people who use the “we” are healthier. It needs to be said that writing in the “I” is a way of bearing witness to an experience that is not included in the assumed “we”. Isolation is dangerous as the study says, but writing in the “I” is not the danger. An assumed “we” is dangerous because it is erasure of the perspectives it does not include and this harmfully replicates the erasure of agency that the original abuse perpetrated.

We can only know our world one personal story at a time – one poem, one essay, one article, or one research project at a time. There is no universal perspective. Sagi identifies survivors expressing “existential loneliness” (2021, p. 153). This isolation occurs when you have no public voice, when it is not believed that interfamilial sexual abuse is the outcome of an order where the entitled are enabled to assume that all things, including family members, exist to serve their needs and desires, and are there for their use and abuse. Understanding allusion is training to read for the implied: “to change existing social structures, the linguistic clichés that purvey them and make them appear as transparent, immutable truths must be detected, remarked, displaced” (Conley, 1984, p. 5). Writing poetry in the “I” threatens assumed universality that silences nonconforming voices; adding personal testimonies to public discourse breaks down the isolation of survivors whose experience is not represented in the dominant narrative.

*isolated on the page I have made a life*  
*jab, cross, hook, cross, upper, upper, hook, cross, hook, cross*  
*I keep dreaming she is not dead*  
*I have been making it up      being hyperbolic*  
*jab, cross, hook, cross, upper, upper x5, 10 shuffles*  
*the pen making contact*  
*the page sweating*

Survivors can often doubt that the abuse happened in the face of a culture of denial, threats, and repression. Sagi writes: “childhood sexual abuse is an unwitnessed experience” (2021, p. 151). The poetry I produced in Left / Write // Hook is a testimony to my experiences.

*a translucent stone      murky eye      keyhole*  
*bloody knuckles      braised with pain*  
*a life of self-blame*  
*the gloves the face the mask*  
*the bag of body*  
*plank rotations*  
*shaky hands secreted by mind*  
*body secrets whispered into crevices*

I propose that I can hold some of my unliveable experiences through poetic methods. Metaphors can be a means to talk about the forbidden or unbearable, as Emily Dickenson advises, “Tell all the truth but tell it slant” (1998, p. 1263). A metaphor can express an essence, a memory or thought in precise and distilled language or images. It can be a way of approaching very painful material without detaching from it emotionally or mentally; it may “even constitute a bridge between detached and dissociative parts” (Sagi, 2021, p. 159). Writing and boxing with peers facilitated bridging what I know but struggle to believe, and what I want to believe and know is not true.

*I'm in my body I feel it now  
coming out of the dentist face half numb  
this is how it feels to get smacked in the face  
I didn't feel it at the time I feel it now  
this is how it feels to get smacked in the face  
jab, jab, cross, hook, cross x 10, squat jump x 5  
the kiss of fist to bag  
under the unbroken surface reflecting sky  
drowned bodies*

There are knowledges that are felt before they are thought: “poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought”. Boxing is a way to give form to that which has been overpowered by the abuse, to invite out of hiding what the abuse told us was not permitted, to defend (Lorde, 1984, p. 37). In this way, “poetry as illumination” and boxing as embodiment of strength and power are a means to autonomy, so that “those fears which rule our lives and form our silences begin to lose their control over us” (p. 36). I learnt to punch with my eyes open, with two feet in boxing stance, from the hip straight out through the shoulder. Writing in the “I” is punching with a straight arm and making contact; it is identifying my own thoughts and feelings as opposed to what I am told to think and feel. Expressing anger randomly is flaying, as a survivor I need to gather all my forces to focus, to hit a target in concentrated language. A word coupling can encapsulate a complex condition often by combining polarities. You create the form, the boxing stance, the timed writing exercise, and you inhabit it as a cohesive whole of multiplicities.

*secrets excreted  
a trail of red petals  
I am fire married to flight  
on my knees beside altars  
the cold smell of marble*

Poetic ambiguity works through inclusion rather than exclusion; it is and-both not either-or; it is radial not linear, a means to integrate the seemingly discordant or contradictory such as the traumatic experience of childhood sexual assault, where the perpetrator being a family member was also the protector. Sagi writes: “[to] Freud the metaphor is an associative bridge between the explicit and the implicit” (2021, p. 158), a means to making sense of the deep complexities

of traumatic experiences. When victims of interfamilial sexual abuse give voice to their experience and be strong in their bodies, punching and defending, they threaten the dominant narrative that survivor accounts are not credible. By explicitly taking a strong stance, it is implicit that your stance is strong.

*I rubbed off the writing on the wall  
I wasn't to blame but I am accountable  
broke the back of promise to self-annihilate  
fists swimming  
a weighted blanket over me  
hard to forgive what I haven't been given  
dream of going into surgery trying to spit out the drugs  
chanting and dogma  
proof in sensory  
oven warmed blanket  
detail specific  
case studies of the heart  
beaten humanity*

It cannot be understated what it means to be held by a circle of peers. I witnessed my experience, my fighting body, being witnessed. Reading to the other survivors and listening to their writing and holding the pads that they punched and punching the pads that they held while vocalising actualised my perspective free from being dismissed or discredited. Left / Write // Hook helps counter how the terms of mental health are weaponised to prevent survivors' voices being part of public discourse. Having a publication of survivor testimonies changes the representation of survivors as defined through deficit and puts the onus on a social order that enables the sexual abuse of children to continue. Through the bridging power of metaphor and image, my poetry is evidence of my unbroken consciousness. Boxing is evidence of my stance as strong and action ready.

*weather eaten words drop like contact  
the throat between rocks that the river moves through  
being believed is being in becoming  
what does it mean to arrive at wellness  
crying tears of teeth*

(Gaskin, 2021, p. 33)

## Left / Write // Hook: A Movement Toward Life

### Gabrielle Everall

In “Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the Body” (2001), Kathy Acker writes of bodybuilding. In attempting to do this after each workout, Acker would forget to write. Acker saw bodybuilding as being about the rejection of language. She found that the language spoken in the gym when bodybuilding was minimal where meaning was lost. Acker describes how in bodybuilding to “break down specific muscles ... it is necessary to work these areas in isolation up to failure” (p. 22). She concludes that the practice of bodybuilding is a movement toward death (p. 23). In opposition to this, I would like to argue that non-contact boxing in the context of Left / Write // Hook is a movement toward life. Similarly, in contradiction to Acker’s analysis of bodybuilding, language is fundamental to Left / Write // Hook. This is especially true in the writing workshops practiced in Left / Write // Hook and how they function in conjunction with boxing.

I am a big woman. I take up space. With non-contact boxing you can fight at any weight. You do not need to have a sculpted body. Non-contact boxing is about strong bodies and movement: a celebration of physicality. Non-contact boxing takes the violence out of it. Using Sue Grand’s article, “Unsexed and Ungendered Bodies: The Violated Self” (2003), I will compare the psychic death of Grand’s patient with my own. I will write about how my workshop writing and boxing experience in Left / Write // Hook brings about the thaw of icy psychic death and encourages the renewal of life and embodiment.

On psychic death and/or social death, the experience of incest and/or rape can make the survivor feel that life is not worth living. So Mayer writes:

Rape was and is a cultural and political act: it attempts to remove a person with agency, autonomy and belonging from our community, to secrete them and separate them, to depoliticise their body by rendering it detachable, violable, nothing. (2018, p. 140)

Being a survivor of incest and/or rape is like a social death; this is when people are not treated as human (Borgstrom, 2017). Women who are sexually abused as children and/or raped as adults are dehumanised.

The name of Grand’s patient is Rosa. Rosa was sexually abused by her great uncle. Rosa hated her body and felt that she had no sex or gender (Grand, 2003, p. 315). She felt her body was a “neutered edifice” (p. 315). She hated herself and felt that she had no genitals (p. 315). She was always isolated and dreaded “the prospect of any intimate contact” (p. 315). Rosa lived most of her life in celibacy (pp. 315-316). I too as an incest survivor have lived my life mostly in celibacy. I have felt “neuter” and like I had no genitals.

When Rosa was sexually abused by her great uncle, she became “deadness, imprisonment and dread” (p. 325). Grand theorises that Rosa’s great uncle was a corpse. I dreamt that my mother and I were trying to bury my abuser. On Rosa’s great uncle as a corpse, and on ungendered and

unsexed dead bodies, Grand writes:

Insofar as she was raped by a dead thing, bodies were not bodies. They had no sex and no gender. Genitals were absent because incest was transacted between nonhuman things. Incest was sexed and yet it was unsexed; it erased the very genitals it penetrated. (2003, p. 326)

When my abuser was sexually abusing me, he said “you are becoming a woman now”, but I was repulsed by sex and gender. In seeing Rosa’s solitude as a “retreat” and respecting this space in therapy and in transference with Grand, Rosa started to reconnect with her body. She felt pain and sensations in her body (p. 320). She felt “illness and hunger and overfullness” (p. 320). She made appointments with doctors and dentists; she exercised and had massages (p. 320). Rosa even wanted intimate contact with other people (p. 320).

Rosa dreams that she has a new body, she has the big breasts and slender limbs she has always wanted (p. 327). She also dreams she has a penis that she masturbates with happy surprise. I also dreamt I had a penis once, but I didn’t like it and I found it ugly. Grand writes about Rosa’s new body: “She feels beautiful and sufficient unto herself. We spoke of her having an inviolate body, a new body, unmolested, emergent within her own mind” (p. 327).

Similarly, being involved in Left / Write // Hook can bring about a renewed embodiment. Rosa felt her body. Before Left / Write // Hook my body felt passive, “obese”, victimised. After Left / Write // Hook, my body felt active, big, empowered, and like it had agency. How did this happen? First, I have to say boxing was something as a girl child I was forbidden to do in my family. Every morning I heard my father take my brothers to boxing in the early morning. Every time I yearned and wished that I could have gone too. Left / Write // Hook breaks with one tradition: that girls and women should not box. When I first started to work on my incest experience at 23, I was all alone with only the book *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* (Bass & Davis, 2011) for companionship. I became unwell and was hospitalised in Graylands (a mental institution in Perth, Western Australia) against my will. Now with Left / Write // Hook, I have seven other women to work with in writing workshops and boxing. The women at Left / Write // Hook are like a true family, always supporting each other. We write, share, and witness our experiences of (dis)embodiment together, then we box. When I was trying to deal with my incest trauma alone in the past, the community judged me as expressing my anger inappropriately and locked me up in Graylands. Left / Write // Hook, through the power of writing and boxing combined, helps me express my anger in a healthy way that is beneficial, grounding, and safe.

Left / Write // Hook starts with eight women sitting in a circle and writing to prompts about our childhood sexual abuse. The first prompt was, “I am here because...”. Then it all came out. I wrote about what happened to me in a different way for the first time. A way that captured the seriousness and validity of the abuse. It made me recognise the abuse mentally and emotionally. This would be compounded further in the body, the movement of the body, in physicality through boxing. This is the poem:

I am here because  
I felt like a bird on a barbed wire fence.  
The same fence around the paddock my brother told me to turn  
toward. Then, when he told me to turn back, I saw the terror  
of his genitals.  
The shrink said it's natural, its normal, children do that  
all the time. You show me yours; I'll show you mine.  
Then why did I feel forced to show him mine?  
Why did seeing my brother's genitals scare me so much?  
Why, when I was deciding to obey and take off my clothes,  
did I feel terror?  
He laid on top of me and stroked my sparse blonde pubic hair  
and said, "you are becoming a woman."  
I react now as a woman by rarely having sex and by fearing sex,  
especially with men.  
But maybe it is good I didn't have sex with the last  
man who actually wanted it because I didn't feel safe.  
My body, my child self, my emotions are numb.  
I feel like I have imposter syndrome, as a shrink and a social  
worker said my experience was minor.  
But my current psych says it isn't.

(Everall, 2020)

After recognising the seriousness of my abuse, the damage caused – no relationships, no children, and no family – I fight back at the erasure caused by incest and rape in non-contact boxing. Donna instructed me on how to do it. *Punch, Punch, left, right, hook*. Repeat. We hit the punching bag and imagine resisting our abusers. I would imagine the face of my abuser as I hit the punching bag. I became surprisingly good at it, even though I was very doubtful at the beginning. This improved my self-esteem. I achieved something I never thought possible. Afterwards, I felt amazing. Grounded and not sick or triggered by the process. I had never felt so alive in my life. Our bodies become energised and reborn.

## Conclusion

Left / Write // Hook is an evidence-based creative arts and sports intervention program for survivors of childhood sexual abuse and trauma. The program ran for three eight-week rounds over nine months in 2020, with eight participants. The sessions went for two hours on a Saturday afternoon, and due to Covid, ran mostly online. After the mixed methods research project wrapped up at the end of round one, the effects of the program were analysed. This included reviewing and reporting on the writings, psychological wellbeing, and audio-visual data (see Lyon et al., 2020). The results proved the program's efficacy on the mental health and wellbeing of the participants. Due to the powerful and intimate nature of the work, the

survivors decided to continue working with each other with the intention of co-curating their writings into a book for publication. This book was released in 2021 and is set to launch early 2022.

The group continues to meet fortnightly to work on a documentary about the project. The participatory nature of Left / Write // Hook and the survivor-led and informed framework has meant the group has begun to establish ways to think and act differently and to be *made different* in the process of connection (with self and with each other). Lyon instigated this project because she believes that when women come together to write about and physicalise the effects of child sexual abuse, it serves to dynamically resist dominant narratives. Linnell and Cora state:

When women get together in groups to explore what happened to them in childhood, they are likely to discover commonalities which immediately inform them that they have been tricked and manipulated by the abuser/s and others. They also provide each other with an immediate audience for the telling of new and preferred stories about themselves and their lives. (1993, p. 3)

In this essay, three distinctive voices from the workshop share a personal, theoretical, and creative perspective of participating in Left / Write // Hook. The lived and (dis)embodied space of survivors is seen as a site in which to re-tell, re-claim, and re-story their experiences of disconnection, shame, and the adverse effects of abuse. The unique combination of writing, sharing, and boxing is key to producing a profound understanding of the lived effects of child sexual abuse and offering an alternative narrative of the survivors' sense of self.

Founder of the program and survivor, Donna Lyon, explores how her trauma informs the writing, and how the act of boxing informed the expression of her trauma. Boxing allowed aspects of the trauma to move through her in a powerful way where she began to reclaim her body as a site of power and strength. Lyon used the writing prompts to explore the effects of the abuse on the women's bodies, relationships, identities, work environments, and sense of self. She taught the women boxing after the first hour of the writing to physicalise the feelings that had come up through the writing. She encouraged the participants to powerfully and expressively release the trauma held inside their bodies. To her, the sessions were sad, emotional, cathartic, and authentic displays of women fighting with painful intrusions from their pasts that continued to overshadow their present self.

Claire Gaskin posits that the symptoms of trauma are also a means to survival after trauma and that the way the survivor communicates is not only valid but can be a highly creative way to resist abuses of power. The survivor is often communicating via the means of allusion, association, and evocation. These methods, typically used in poetry, can be held in a poem and help as a means to knowledge, a means to cohesion and autonomy, especially when applied consciously by the survivor in a free associative style of writing that can access the repressed and denied. The survivor can interpret and analyse, using these methods. This is autonomy and agency, as Gaskin writes: "To be central to my own story I stand in boxing stance, find my

own voice as liberated from the silencing tactics of the abusers; survivors' voices need to be added to public discourse to instigate change".

Gabrielle Everall provides a theoretical and personal account of how the embodied act of boxing informed the movement of stored trauma in her body. She compares Kathy Acker's description of weightlifting as a movement towards death and suggests that boxing is a movement towards life. Writing and boxing challenge the idea that rape and incest is a physical death of self. As Everall writes, it offers "renewed embodiment" – a mental and physical contemplation that the survivor can resist the identity bestowed upon her by the abusers.

This essay offers a personalised and collective account of how trauma manifests in the experiences of three survivors of childhood sexual abuse. It was found that the gaining of personal agency and amplification of voice was facilitated and intensified by the experience of solidarity expressed through writing and boxing. The combination of a physical, mental, and creative writing program by, and with, survivors was discovered to be mutually beneficial, empowering, and personally strengthening.

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