

# DOING TRAUMA WRONG



Freya Johnson

UNIVERSITY OF BRISTOL, UK

## ABSTRACT

This essay is a creative intervention into what it means to be traumatized. Drawing together memoir and theory, I make a case for working through sexual trauma in ways that go against the traditional ‘shape’ of what trauma is thought to be and how it should be responded to. ‘Doing trauma wrong’ makes space for trauma as affectively labile, and welcomes sensations that are often pathologized in clinical and therapeutic work—shame, anger, and feeling ‘broken’. I argue this pathologizing is integral to an historical psychiatrizing and depoliticizing of trauma, which deflects from the reality of sexual violence as systemic. I also argue that the dominant idea of trauma as a catastrophic, discrete event occludes from view sexual violence as chronic and endured by survivors as a quiet horror. Putting these ideas into practice, the writing is intended as a self-help experiment, and as a sort of ‘how-to’ for trauma for others, without being instructive. By laying bare on the page some of the most haunting and shameful details of my past, I hope to encourage by way of affective resonance others to embrace, or at least feel less awkward about, the inconsistencies and oddities of their own experiences. Ultimately, I hope to reduce the imperative to a seemingly self-evident happiness—a journey which is framed by normative assumptions and thrust upon sexual violence survivors in a bid to help them ‘get better.’

## KEYWORDS

trauma, event, affect theory, memoir, sexual violence

This essay is a self-help experiment, and it takes place through the act of writing itself. I use writing to disrupt what I call the ‘shape’ of trauma, which is a hard shape to fit into. Trauma is shaped by the explanatory assertions that work their way through clinical and theoretical literatures, narrating the when, where, and how (it *should* feel) of trauma, and describing characteristics thought to be common to all traumatic experience (see Caruth 1996, and Bessel van der Kolk, 2014). If you don’t fit the narrative—the shape—then you’re considered to be doing trauma wrong. You’re misshapen.

Because of this, the shape of trauma becomes an imperative to suffer in the right way. In cultural and social registers, there are always ideas around what counts as big or small—what is acceptable to feel bad about. What counts as dragging things out. And there’s a trajectory—a need to return to normalcy irrespective of the fact that ‘normalcy’ is something many bodies have never had access to anyway (Crimp 1989, 6). But not trying, or being seen to try, becomes synonymous with getting in the way of your own happiness (Ahmed 2014, 50). I am writing to remind myself that I don’t have to lurch around trying to fit the shape of trauma. I make a case for ‘doing trauma wrong’—feeling it out as a meandering train of sensations without conforming to symptoms or narratives. I focus particularly on shame, anger, and being ‘broken,’ which are feelings often pathologized. They are taken to be deviations from ‘normalcy’—things that need to be worked through in order to ‘heal’ and ‘get back on track.’

I make room for these feelings by using writing to perform trauma as ongoing and affectively labile, in real-time. I describe what I sense, as I sense it: anxiety, anger, expectation. These sensations are incomplete, but they have condensed enough for me to say ‘that’s something like it’, and write it down. And they are unstable, because my writing—as with any performance—only has life “in the present” (Phelan 1993, 146). After that, they become something else, if only slightly. Lauren Berlant (2009, 132) writes that “we are always in the process of playing catch up” to things we’ve read, heard—to things we’ve written. The same is true of this writing—it’s an attempt to catch up to sensations which can’t be caught, but whose impact can be traced through words—trauma as non-linear, chaotic, and difficult to put your finger on.

Disrupting the shape of trauma in this way is political work, namely because it necessarily involves disrupting the narratives that determine what fits in, and what gets left out. With this writing, I make statements about what trauma is

*not*, but I don't claim to know what it *is*. That's the point. I want there to be space for abused bodies to find their own conditions of possibility—to navigate trauma in ways that are meaningful to them. I want there to be room for the specifics of trauma to be understood as a felt, embodied experience (Morrigan 2019, 1).

'Doing trauma wrong,' isn't my concept, or at least, is not mine alone. There's a deep body of queer and critical race theory that I take as a point of departure, and which explores de-pathologizing trauma in relation to how it engages with Freud's vision of melancholia—which is as a profound mourning that marks bodies as absorptive and self-indulgent, unable to turn away from the source of misery (Crimp 1989, 6). Writing on living daily with the AIDS crisis, Douglas Crimp describes this in the context of public mournings of the dead—seen by AIDS activists as defeatist and sentimental. Pitched against a backdrop of public "ruthless interference with...bereavement"—a violence of both omission and silence—melancholia is constructed as a hapless, hopeless response to the crisis (Crimp 1989, 9; Cvetkovich 2003, 5). No struggle, no fight: just yielding misery.

But there's potential for melancholia, or trauma, to be a productive rather than destructive force (Muñoz, 1999, 74). It can be what David Eng and Shinhee Han (2000, describe as "conflict rather than damage" (693). In this way, "mourning *becomes militancy*"—action taken to produce new kinds of intimacies and experiences (Crimp 1989, 9). Trauma is a very singular reality, so 'doing trauma wrong' can be any sort of 'doing' that breaks from the sanctions of what's acceptable to grieve or feel angry about, and how to go about it. Negotiating existence without aligning to 'normalcy' can, therefore, relieve the passive 'victim' status. And there's space to recognize that trauma extends beyond the ordinary repertoire of negative affects, too. There's the perverse and marginal, embarrassing, unexpected, and awkward pleasures and repulsions—all are included in the erratic terrain that makes up sites of and responses to trauma.

Writing, then, isn't about documenting either helpless damage or heroic recovery from trauma—it's an experimentation with, and building of, a strange and unpredictable world. I draw a lot from Kathleen Stewart and her approach she calls "compositional worlding" (2011,4). Words that make worlds. Trauma is a world, and it comes into being as it is sensed. Writing helps me give trauma some breathing space so I can attend to it as an uninterrupted stream of something-ness, rather than a decided list of this or that. Both Stewart's 2007 text *Ordinary Affects* and her recent collaboration with Lauren Berlant *The Hundreds* are expressions of this worlding—an exercise in "following out the impact of things" (2019, x).

Presented as short anecdotes, scenes, and happenings that are seemingly as fractured as they are connected, the writing in both texts steadily usurps the idea of underlying or symbolic meaning and focuses on building intensity. When I write about trauma, I also don't ascribe it any meaning—for me, there's no theatre of the unconscious—but I do think it can be followed and traced with words, mapping out sensations. When you feel something, it's easy to step over the affective stuff in a rush to point fingers at what you think the meaning might be. You give the feeling frames of reference to help you get there more quickly: What did I do last time I felt like this? What did so-and-so say that I should do to make it better? There's nothing wrong with doing those things, but there's a lot to be said for slowing down a little so you can feel out the texture and density of sensations in their own right. Stewart (2011, 4) calls this a “sideways step”—a pause to take in the sense that something is happening without trying to narrate it too firmly.

Trying to do this with writing isn't so easy. It's impossible to truly tell trauma before it becomes after the fact—but that doesn't mean there's no point in trying. When experimenting with writing styles I lean heavily on the Beckettian tic in Eimear McBride's writing—where words erupt with such immediacy that the trauma of the protagonist seems to be written as it takes place. The violence in McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* is hurried, frank, direct, and disjointed. It's a style I have embraced and followed along with Ann Cvetkovich's thoughts on memoir as a technique of process-based writing. For Cvetkovich (2012, 77), the “rough edges” of memoir writing can be disruptive of the usual continuous style of academic writing, with its “careful transitions” and “literary polish” that restrict how complex topics like trauma can be engaged with. The ends, it seems, don't necessarily have to meet.

Writing in this style is important for navigating, or following, trauma in a way to try and catch it (as much as is possible) red-handed. All too often, there's someone who's looking to speak for how you're feeling—who seems to *know* what trauma is and how it should be spoken or written. What you sense might be a dryness, or an ambivalence, a twitch, but there's a point at which the opportunity to simply feel it through gets taken away. It gets given a name, and gets squared up into a narrative that's been heard before. It quickly gets folded into something like a sideways glance or a dismissive gesture.

I've often had trauma repeated back to me as a sigh. A fed up sigh. A pitying sigh. A sigh down the end of the phone: why don't you *just* do this? Why don't you *just* do that? Exasperation. *Why didn't you just leave?* As if those logics are self-evident.

The following short memoir-moments are meant to upset those logics and offer some relief. Relief here is a release from pressure, but it's also a different topography. What I write brings some things up and holds others down. One of the things that comes up is how much the trauma of my mum's death pokes through when trying to work through my sexual trauma. Mum died of cancer a few weeks before my 18th birthday, and she got sick when I was 15—just before I went through about a year of sexual abuse by a man who was much older than me, and who liked plying the teenagers of my village with drugs and booze.

Those years are particularly shadowy for me, but at the time I didn't seem to care. I'm not sure how long it took me to cry about Mum's death, but it was a while. I remember sitting down with a photo of her and trying to get myself to cry. I remember being really drunk and loud and rude at the wake. My family was furious, understandably. However, they also didn't have the full picture of what was going on. Sometimes, I think they're still furious. I feel like I've grown up a detestable body as a result. The shame I feel is a dirt that I can't wash off, and that everyone can see. It makes me acutely aware of my own skin, like everyone knows that each imperfection is my fault.

Trauma is made up of searing pitches and deep recesses. My ambivalence and rudeness demonstrates that, and it shows how trauma unfolds unevenly in complex atmospheres. It doesn't necessarily play out how you might think—grief might simply evaporate, or it might sit at the pit of your stomach for years. You might backtrack, hesitate. And shame, partly fed by these inconsistencies, is not at all alien to me or other sexual violence survivors. As such, it seems only appropriate to include my shame when writing the ongoing-ness of my trauma. Following Eve Sedgwick, I think of shame as an affect of proximity—one that is both personal and social (2003). It's uncomfortable—like brushing a sensitive tooth, it winces right through you. It's also about being visible—a spectacle—which in turn generates introspection. To feel shame is to be self-aware and socially receptive: you're looking at yourself at the same time as looking at everyone else. That connection is inseparable.

When Elspeth Probyn talks about writing shame, she describes it as an exposure before others that triggers a sense of commonality (2005, 96). It's prickly, like being under a hot spotlight. My shame, then, is what connects this essay to my readers. If you feel discomfort by reading my shame—that's the connection. You can read the writing with blushed cheeks and sweaty palms, and confront all of the twists and turns of trauma alongside me. The result is a performative intervention into what it means to be traumatized.

The man would always tell me I smelled like sex

I wasn't really sure what sex smelled like and he told me to use a douche. There are very few things in this world that feel as unnatural as irrigating your own vagina

Having semen dribbling down the inside of your thigh is an awkward experience. Sometimes it happens straight afterwards when you go to the toilet. That's OK I guess. But sometimes it happens an hour or so later when you've re-dressed and are going about your day

does it shoot up further sometimes?

I don't know. I remember thinking it felt like the man was still inside me

my stupid body

you smell like sex

One of the things about being detestable is having detestable viewpoints. Writing my shame means I can bring myself to talk about them. A detestable viewpoint I have is how angry I often feel towards men. This viewpoint, however, comes with a disclaimer. Following Stewart, power isn't something that exists on its own terms—it's not something that someone owns, or something they can hold on to or have the authority to pass on (2007, 1-7). It's true that sexual violence is largely perpetuated by male bodies, but it is not true to say that male bodies are the owners and distributors of that power. Named structural forces (sexism, racism, neoliberalism) are definitely real and very pressing, but we need to be careful not to make it sound as though they have always existed—with or without us (Stewart 2007, 1). So 'men' are not powerful in that way. I truly believe this.

But sometimes I struggle to inhabit the idea. Because, when I tell a story about sexual trauma, I tell a story about men who have hurt me. Not just the man who abused me—my very own Humbert Humbert—but the surrounding men (boys) who goaded, belittled, and bullied me. And then there's the man who grabbed my vagina on the bus home from school. And there's the man who tried to kiss me when I was 14. Who I'm still too ashamed to name publicly because I'm scared of the fallout. And there's the man I dated who ended up on the register—acquitted of raping his 12 year old student. Acquitted, not charged, because she'd sent 'suggestive' text messages. And then there's the man who targeted me in a university lecture. And the man who dismissed my subsequent complaint because the man who had targeted me was a lecturer who was "going up in the world, so do you really want to take this further?"

And there's the men who have hurt my friends. Boyfriends who have raped them. Brothers who have raped them. Fathers who have raped them. In short, it can be really hard *not* to think of men as a totalized object of power that is out to get me. That's how I end up feeling full of anger.

It is difficult to fully explore this level of anger because the shape of trauma minimizes conversations about it. A good friend said to me not long ago that “the need to appear to have your shit together just so you come across as legitimate is draining.” There's not much room for anger when you're trying to be heard and recognized as valid. It also doesn't help that cultural, social, and legal spaces often overlook the chronic sites of trauma, like sexual and domestic violence, which are the ones that generate so much survivor-anger (Cvetkovich 2003, 4). Violence is often made out to be some sort of external force despite the fact that, for many, violence is something that sleeps next to them every night.

Pathologizing trauma is a way of skirting around the persistence of systemic violence. It becomes a problem-requires-treatment formula that makes you feel like *you're* the problem. In recent years I've felt pressured to identify the things that 'felt bad' in order to figure out how to get 'back on track'. The need to 'get over' the loss experienced following sexual violence is synonymous with the assumption that everything is alright, usually. It frames rape as an individual problem—violence as an anomalous hiccup in an otherwise harmonious world. This is much like, as Eng and Han (2000, 671) write, the perceived inability of American Asians to 'get over' their depressive position of needing to be seen to assimilate with the American “melting pot” despite being them also being consistently figured as eccentric and pathological to the nation. The lack of blending in with the whole isn't their individual failure—it's a “socially determined interdiction” (Eng and Han 2000, 671).

As long as you just *get along*, things will be alright—we're told. But *getting along* means not getting in the way of the world as a scene that's alright, usually. *Getting along* means coping with consistent questioning of your credibility, and overlooking persistent, insidious violence. Those who get in the way of *getting along*, Sara Ahmed (2014, 154) writes, “are often judged as 'getting in their own way.'” Because of this framing, I've always found the conversation of recovery to be pretty contrived—how would I know when I had recovered? Figuring my body as unusual (derailed from 'the track') is inescapably pathological. It's right in identifying that sexual violence is a really shitty thing to have gone through, but it's unhelpful because it sets me apart from others. It others me.

When I was a little shit, which was always, I would scream and cry and generally be

difficult

I thought I was the only one this was happening to

Mum's hand would reach back from the steering wheel to grip my kick

Such a little shit. The radio sang

Turning fifteen was my grand peak of being a shit, all braces and makeup caked. Melting in the heat of that final school year summer

I hadn't done well in my exams. I hated school. I was avoided on the bus and no one wanted to fuck me. The most I'd had was a lame fingering at the back of a school disco which, on reflection, had felt like a smear test. It didn't feel like much of a triumph once I was

sent out into the world alone

I found other kids to hang out with in my village. They were shits too and I belonged. My parents gave up on me and I retreated to the curbs the woods the

church steps where we'd sit and smoke and sniff

I never had to go home for dinner again

One of the kids I was very close to. We always said we had a connection. He had a lot going on in his life. He'd grown up in South Africa. He told me how he remembered the end of apartheid and its stretching shadow

He told me a lot about right and wrong and the ways that people should be and I listened for most of it. His mother was always drinking wine and called me darling

And his father was

one night it was really bad. I remember laughing when my friend punched the mirror

At home, Mum got sick with cancer. I didn't feel much as it was explained to me. Bowel cancer was one of the better ones to have they said and so I wasn't worried. I told my friend. We had a few tins and a smoke

We were sitting under the lights at the local shop when we met the man

there were six of us

we didn't notice him when he approached

we didn't tend to notice people



An enormous amount of censoring and deflecting takes place in conversations (or non-conversations) with family and friends, and certain practices, ideas, and feelings start to get erased. Often, there's an imperative for survivors to match up with an impossible innocence—their own personality and sexuality need to be sanitized, with no murky secrets to tell. I have a small sisterhood of survivors of sexual violence, and we've each been galvanized by our experiences in different ways. Our styles of doing trauma vary wildly. We use our bodies to connect with environments around us in ways that feel comfortable. From being hyper-tactile and with a torrid sexuality, to being nervous of contact—we have different impulses, tendencies, and fantasies.

Trauma is something that is often quietly endured with persistence, which can feel lethargic and draining, rather than shocking and horrifying. That's not, however, the same as saying sexual trauma isn't awful. My point is that awfulness doesn't have to equate with catastrophe, if catastrophe is defined as something that is sudden and acute. It can be sharp, or it can be dull and drawn out. It is, as Lauren Berlant (2011, 10) describes it, "embedded in the ordinary"—a continuous struggle rather than an exceptional event.

One of my sisterhood is an incest survivor and we have talked a lot about this anti-climactic dullness, and the dullness that's also involved in feeling 'broken'. She talked about how 'brokenness' guides her daily and long-term choices about the direction in which she wants her life to go. It made me wonder if committing to being broken can be used, like anger, to do trauma wrong—or rather, to work through it without pathologizing the stuff that doesn't fit into the traditional shape. Working with being broken doesn't have to be the same as celebrating being broken. What I'm saying is it might be possible to *do* the brokenness instead of cover it up, and to welcome that bad taste in your mouth.

To put it in to perspective—it is the imperative to 'be happy' (or 'be less broken') that's made me really miserable. I've gone through various toxic patterns of thinking, and been desperate for a rewind button (to go back and make 'better' choices, do 'better' at school, be nicer to my parents) so I might have arrived at this point in my life 'happier'. But happiness, like trauma, is also shaped. Claims to happiness, Sara Ahmed (2010) describes, are also claims to knowing in advance what happiness looks like. The 'right' happiness is about following the 'right' path—turning towards certain ways of living, and turning away from others (Ahmed 2010, 9-11). It's an instruction of normativity. Brokenness, anger, and shame wouldn't fit in here, because they are thought of as things that create unhappiness.

Claims to happiness are also claims to moving forward. And forwardness—like happiness—is thought to be self-evident. Which way is forward? It's oddly specific and vague at the same time—a *step in the right direction*. Themes of direction and forward movement are important because they have a lot to do with how trauma gets prescribed, and they are really hard work to keep up with. Survivors of sexual violence are marked as unhappy, and thought of as needing to move forward. But they're also required to choose the right forward to get to the right kind of happy. It's an instruction—for the sake of your health—that can leave you stumbling around, trying to find happiness only to discover there's a false crescent. It can be a teeth-grinding, sleep-stealing, cruelly optimistic anxiety. Which is pretty ironic, given the idea that 'healing' is supposed to mean you ultimately feel better.

To reduce this anxiety, I want to take the 'not normal' or 'unhappy' of trauma and turn them from pathology to possibility. Rather than searching around for an indeterminate happiness, I want to take the time to consider how the weight of trauma is carried differently—as a felt experience that's not easily located temporally or spatially. And I want to think about navigating trauma without being told which way to go. Anger, shame, and brokenness, I argue, can be productive. Part of the de-politicizing of sexual trauma involves working to deflect those feelings, because they're seen as chronic, persistent misery. But to return to Muñoz's thoughts on melancholia as productive, the suffering following sexual violence is actually part and parcel of negotiating survival. It is what Muñoz (1999, 74) describes as "a structure of feeling"—an everyday process of coping with all of the horrors of different oppressions. And not only coping, but acting. Far from a "self-absorbed mood that inhibits activism," trauma can be a way of making and keeping visible the world as a scene that's *not* alright, usually (Muñoz 1999, 74). It is an act of being willful—of refusing to *get along*.

By way of closing, I suggest that being angry is one of the best ways of doing trauma wrong. It is a way of pushing against the shape of trauma and disrupting its pathologies. The caveat is that you'll quickly become what Sara Ahmed calls a feminist killjoy, but that's not a bad thing. Feminist killjoys disagree with things that others seem to think are O.K. (Ahmed 2014, 152). They're the kind of individuals that will call out a sexist joke at the dinner table—ruining the atmosphere for everyone. Because they don't laugh along, they turn away from happiness. They *must* be unhappy.

In the context of sexual trauma, the feminist killjoy attaches herself to things that are thought to be bad for her. She does trauma wrong because she isn't aspiring to fit its shape—to grieve appropriately and to get on the road to recovery. Recovery, for her, is about staying with the brokenness and feeling around the rough edges of anger and shame. It is a strategy for re-claiming trauma—for understanding it as something that can't be characterized or universalized. It is a resistance against determined states of what it means to be traumatized, so that an individual path can be navigated. Like singing off-key, it puts you out of tune with others. You might ruin the tune, but that's okay. Ruining tunes means things have to be heard differently.

They always said that I should go in there first

Make it sound casual. Make it sound like we're not with you. Make it sound like you want to see him

the room had wooden floors and deep red walls

Evenings at the man's house were kind of nice. There was red wine and Leffe beer flowing. And chatter and Cheech and Chong on the telly which I never thought was any good. But I'd get a meal. There was a hot tub. My friends were there. I was happy

they never asked why I often stayed later than they did

And I never asked why they left me behind

One New Year's Eve we were all high on mushrooms and ketamine. Left the man conked out on his sofa and legged it with some tins. The fireworks crackled their colours and we laughed and poked each other's faces.

the night yawned but it never ended

not really

When Mum died I was late. She was putting it on I was sure of it. She'd open her eyes soon, they said they'd only been open a few minutes before. She can't have been that bad surely

But they

didn't open

I wonder if it's because she didn't want to look at me. I went home and had a bath

I didn't even wait for her to die

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