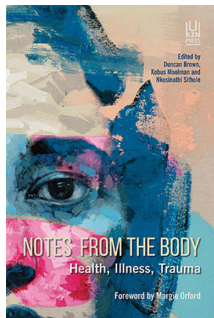


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# Notes from the body: An autobiographical review

An eye gazes out from the front cover, a fragment of a portrait both sombre and colourful, by Lionel Smit. That gaze both confronts and evades the viewer, looking inward as well as outward. It is an excellent visual cue to what lies between the covers: a series of essays, poems, slices and splices of memoir, meditations and dialogues written by 21 scholars, academics, poets, composers, teachers and other creatives.

Hosted at the University of the Western Cape and funded by the Mellon Foundation, this project began, with the kind of enormous irony that would be implausible in fiction, with the intention of reflecting on the theme 'this mortal body' – a topic promptly exploded by the arrival scant months later of an invisible virus that was to reshape the world as we knew it. The planned seminars went ahead virtually, a form of disembodiment forced by the pandemic. This necessity for virtual conversations and collaboration confronted us with hard truths about how we viewed bodies, especially 'different' bodies: those with disabilities, purported weaknesses, the dreaded 'comorbidities'. Bodies were now sites of infection, of potential lethal danger; they were the loci of vulnerability, unpredictability. At the same time, virtual meeting platforms made it possible for those considered 'vulnerable' and differently abled to contribute on a more equitable basis, to become 'visible' as we were all rendered talking heads on screens.

The genesis of this book spanned those fearful first years of the COVID-19 pandemic, a time when preoccupations with health and illness were dragged into the foreground of all our lives. On top of the everyday human ubiquity of sickness, loss, death and mourning, we were overwhelmed by layers of extra, and often impossible, grief and suffering. Nearly everyone, worldwide, lost people they loved, often under conditions of strict quarantine that forbade hospital visits, bedside vigils or funerals; many underwent lengthy ordeals in hospitals; yet more were disabled or left chronically ill – with systems of medicine and health care (often already compromised and broken) that had no experience, no history, no narratives for this disease. Terrified by what was little understood, some seized upon conspiracy theories, taking anti-vaccine stances, peddling quack remedies. It is worth remembering that, at present, there is not yet one doctor alive who was able to study COVID-19 in medical school. So the third word in the subtitle of this book springs into leering focus: we were (and still are) all traumatised.

We have developed varying degrees of amnesia about the stress of those early months and years, before the arrival of vaccines and the mutations of the virus itself into forms that were unpleasant and disabling rather than lethal. Globally, our reluctance to count the cost of the pandemic, our refusal to acknowledge its continuing presence, like Banquo's ghost at our table, is indicative of our shared trauma.

This is why *Notes From the Body* is such an important book. It is about all of these conundrums, heightened by a global medical crisis – but the pieces in it tell their truths slant. This is *not* a book about COVID, but it is about the frailty and also the extraordinary adaptive qualities of our fragile bodies. Joanne Bloch writes about the multiple ways she and others learn to reread context, clothing, activities and communities, in a deliberately vivid piece on loss of sight. Warren Swinney presents a series of observations and snapshots (literally) on the musician Gary Herselman, who experienced cyananthy (the belief that he was a dog) at times of extreme stress. Kobus Moolman's poem-epic about the ancient myth of the selkie plunges us into what it is to inhabit a broken body, or indeed the "wrong" body, and our obsession with "fixing" (double meaning deliberate) others within the limits of what we believe their outward bodies should signify. Antjie Krog, in the poem "it's when everything seems to be falling apart", encompasses both COVID and its all-too-human context in lines like "we feel how bush virus and human hate/scorch the hair on our arms".

It is a book about how childhood sexual abuse leaves psychic shards of glass in our souls, usually in perpetuity (and thus about what happens when a violated child is disbelieved – the extreme and toxic version of having our physical symptoms dismissed as "neurotic", or our emotional wounds masked by inappropriate medication). Phillipa Yaa de Villiers's poetic meditation on her history of sexual violence flows effortlessly into other contested areas of her identity; Gaireyah Fredericks howls with rage that allows for no excuses, no forgiveness in her account of how her father raped her while her mother turned a blind eye; Hélène Smit's fragments of memoir reflect the disassociation that is often the price paid for sexual violence in childhood.

The book also disturbs the binaries of our physicality: mind-body, sickness-health – creating and focusing on the unexpected spaces of rage, enquiry and creativity that billow out between those delineations.

Many of these contributions are painful to read, some even demanding. There is no resolution, no redemptive arc, no hope in Diana Bloem's prose poem on her bipolar son, or the boiling rage in Fredericks' "Lights Out!" There's an awful lot of shit going down (once again, literally: all the metaphors of the body double up as the real deal in this collection). Some pieces are fascinating, some funny; there's a memorable mental image of Duncan Brown wearing "Victoria's Secret" hospital bloomers as an ambulance carts him back and forth between two towns.

I first read this book months ago, and certain essays reached deeper into me than others. On re-reading for purposes of writing this review, different essays now poke at tender spots, elicit electric shocks of recognition. My responses were more than dialogic: they were (and are) autobiographical. Many readers will have the same reaction, finding their own unique and often private stories surfacing: they will *recognise* themselves. In this respect, this collection is invaluable, a kind of processing – even therapy – made possible by words on the page.

My life since March 2020 has been profoundly shaped by "health, illness and trauma"; I contracted COVID several days before South Africa's lockdown began, followed by seven weeks of pneumonia, followed again by the dubious distinction of being one of the first South Africans to be formally diagnosed with Long COVID – a condition unheard of and unrecognised in those early days of panic and mystification. There was a terrible loneliness in having one's life invaded by a condition that did not yet officially exist. As I continue to live with Long COVID (which I call LoCo,

in acknowledgement of its maddening and mystifying manifestations) more than four years after my first infection, it is the lens through which I took in most of the material in *Notes From the Body*.

This autobiographical identification did not stop with my own illness. In mid-December 2020, with vaccines for most South Africans still months away, my sister was admitted to Kingsbury Hospital with COVID. She collapsed in their emergency unit, was on a ventilator for a month, in an induced coma for seven weeks, in first critical and then serious condition in ICU for over two months. Her X-ray history shows that, at one point, she had the use of only five per cent of one lung. The sepsis that followed her COVID pneumonia meant that the dread in which we lived was unrelieved until only a few days before she was discharged (after 65 days – the hospital's record for the longest period a patient had spent in ICU and survived). She is now viewed by the medical community as a mystery, a bona fide miracle: we had been advised to brace ourselves for death or severe brain damage. Yet today she is less impaired than I am.

Samuel Njenga's account of (barely) surviving his spell in ICU with COVID hurled me back into that world. I recognised much, but was also struck by the differences between his experience and my sister's: he was conscious for some of his ordeal, and able to communicate with his family via iPad. He notes that after these one-sided conversations (speech is not possible after the tracheotomy that opens the throat to the blessed invasive ventilator), his oxygen saturation levels rose – further underlining the tension between the loneliness of dread disease and the need to locate our ailing selves within a community, to experience love and care when in extremis.

Likewise, Nkosinathi Sithole's account of how his life was saved both by the treatment he received for TB and the intercessions of his ancestors took me back to the months of my sister's coma, in which I fell again and again into a safety net of the prayers of others; performed visualisations that included sending four dogs on patrol through my sister's veins and organs; became convinced that the heron I saw in a nearby pond each morning was a protective spirit. The daughter of a scientist, I actively sought any 'non-rational' sign that offered hope, even as my sister's doctors 'cautioned' us against hope.

As a scholar, a child of deconstruction and, in my youth, a student of Derrida and Marx, I was accustomed to tracing the violence of either/or language or the dialectic within texts; decades later, it is clear that apparently oppositional symbols can collaborate, inflect, amplify or erode each other. Sithole's presentation of the multivocal responses to his illness, diagnosis and treatment shows how binarisms – such as 'Western' and 'traditional', 'education' and 'ignorance', 'reason' and 'superstition', even 'mind' and 'body' – are crude and ultimately unhelpful in our struggles to give meaning to suffering.

Margie Orford, whose intense and moving *Foreward* is worth the price of admission alone, also notices this: "Grief, like illness, like mental and physical pain, undoes the Cartesian divide between mind [...] and the unruly partisan feeling body." This is no theoretical response, but like mine, an autobiographical one; reading the book, she relives the pain of the sudden and recent death of a beloved sister. But she also points out the potential not so much for healing as *connection* that these pieces make possible: "Pain resists relation and connectedness. The person in pain is isolated from others [...] One is cast out by pain, cast aside. The power of language, like a loving touch, is that it creates connection. It is through writing (and reading) that we are able to see through the eyes of others, to feel with them."

Voices speak to one another, too: in an essay comprising emails and poem fragments between Andrea Garman and Gillian Rennie, the authors speak with sometimes disturbing honesty about the former's breast cancer and mastectomy, and how this affects their friendship, the dyad they construct for themselves. Their dual voices, laid out in parallel on the pages, are a riposte to a medical fraternity and society that is bothered by "asymmetrical" bodies.

The socio-political landscapes in which our bodies live are also presented, although not in the form of conventional political commentary. Vonani Bila's contribution – a riveting account of the trauma he experiences when thugs shoot him multiple times, and his long and incomplete journey towards recovery – is one of the pieces that holds the state accountable for the parlous treatment of its citizens' bodies. His account of the collapsing health services and other vital forms of infrastructure – such as navigable roads – in rural Limpopo where he lives, is scathing, but also a creative tour de force: like many of the pieces here that testify to bleak realities, the "salvage" comes in the form of the triumphant agency of the artist.

Nearly every piece combines sometimes shocking honesty with nuance at a historic moment when public discourse – especially about bodies, trauma and the role of science – has been polarised into wild rhetorical claims and boastful ignorance. These essays supply a refreshing push-back against the crassness of contemporary conversations on bodies and health.

The criticisms: as with all essay collections, some contributions shine more brightly than others – but this is as much about the reader as the writer. Everyone will have their preferences, but no one will be left unmoved. The reach and format of the work is ambitious: the contributors have been given glorious licence in terms of genre, their writing drawn from a variety of poetic forms, artworks, email correspondence, diary entries, fragments of memoir, and more formal essays. Some of the authors negotiate this freedom to play and experiment with a panache that reflects their experience and skill: it is hardly surprising that creative artists such as Phillipa Yaa de Villiers and Vonani Bila provide such bravura combinations of poetry, reflection, prose and memoir.

Possibly the most forceful critique I might make is that not enough scope has been given to discuss the astonishing innate abilities of the body, especially in terms of learning and storing skills. Bronwyn Law-Viljoen is the only contributor who specifically addresses this, recounting her history in terms of physical skills mastered – netball, bicycle racing, boxing, dancing – speaking of the "kinetic beauty" in which "[t]he athlete repeats and repeats an action, until action [...] seems to be thought itself". Anyone who has watched a ballet dancer en pointe, listened to the cadenza of a violin concerto, seen a carpet woven in an Agra workshop, witnessed Brian Lara in his heyday play a hook shot, or Serena Williams blaze through a backhand volley will know that moment of catching one's breath at (in the words of the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins): "the achieve, the mastery of the thing" – in these cases, the mortal body.

I have remarked on the absence of an historical record in dealing with COVID – it has been part of human existence for only four years and several months as I write this. This gap – not even an erasure as much as a blank – made me realise how profoundly we need shared narratives of illness and physical trauma: and this is partly why this collection provides a welcome and necessary gap, not just to academics, healthcare practitioners and those who read and write poetry and other creative works – but to all of us who inhabit frail, morbid, mortal and miraculously adept bodies: our lifelong homes.