

## **Knowing Through the Body**

**Laura Di Pasquale**

**PhD Researcher in Anthropology and Visual Media**

What can we learn through the body in the aftermath of disruption? Why is the body often absent from our narratives and ways of making sense of the world?

These are some of the puzzles which I tried to solve during my PhD research on Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), a non-degenerative brain injury caused by an external force. The research is grounded in my own experience of Traumatic Brain Injury which I sustained in a road accident in Rome in 2005. For my PhD research I worked with twelve people willing to embark on a journey of self-discovery of our shared experiences of TBI. Recognising the unique perspectives of people with TBI, both as theorists and experts in their own lives, we developed a set of co-creative methods to explore the experience of brain injury and the subsequent, often radical, transformations in thinking and being that occur. I refer to this set of methods as "Auto-ethnographic Dialogue."

I made a short film "Knowing Through the Body" as part of the Diversifying the Curriculum initiative to enrich the course "Anthropology of Vision, Senses and Memory," taught by Professor Andrew Irving. The film focuses on one of these methods and explores some of the challenges I faced, and elected a rich discussion among students.

Despite the primacy of the body and the senses in everyday life, the people I worked with rarely mentioned their corporeality. Their bodies seemed absent from their stories and narratives. How could this be? To explore this question, I worked with a brilliant facilitator, Carla Fioravanti, to develop a somatic workshop that was designed to trigger the memories, insights, and understandings that emerge about ways of being and knowing through the body following a Traumatic Brain Injury.



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The film captures people who have experienced TBI—many of whom now live with disabilities—engaging in a different range of movements. Building on themes that emerged in my research, the facilitator gently guides them and invites them to focus on what they feel when rolling on the floor, turning, and walking. *Where and how does movement originate? And what is the most effective way to stand up?*, workshop participants seemed to ask themselves and then tried to find out. During the workshop, the participants expressed rare but profound insights. They noted similarities between the workshop and their experience of rehabilitation following their accident, including the heightened attention they gave to bodily movements that they previously took for granted. They also mentioned fears connected to what they had experienced. And yet, remained even more eager to experiment with their bodies, to pay attention to the connections within themselves through movement, rather than focusing on verbal communication.



The morning after the workshop, participants reflected on the somatic workshop and began to theorize their own experiences. Daniele, for instance, conveyed how TBI and the associated neuromotor impairments he experienced forced him to slow down and made him experience more fatigue: *"I have to stop and consider: what is important in my life? Not this, this, and this, but either this or that.. Yes, it is a chance to slow down, to reflect, to live a life with the right tempo"* He suggested that these changes triggered multiple radical shifts. *"Yes, this is a gift,"* added Sherry Lee about the transformations she herself experienced following her brain injury..

On watching the film, the students on the course reflected on how illness, disability, and disruption can open a space for self-reflection, lead to personal development and changes in how people re-inhabit the world, with some students noting the specificities of the methodological approach. Moving forward, two different versions of the film will be created and added to the course portfolio: a 4-minute version and a longer version. The short version will focus on the epistemological opportunities afforded by illness and disability from the perspective of people with disabilities. The longer version, tailored to people with a specific interest in illness and co-creative methods, will include longer verbal narratives and describe the methodological approach in greater detail.