

Chapter 2

Trauma and Memory in Women's Photographic Practice: A Diffractive Posthuman Approach

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ABSTRACT

Situated within the field of women's photographic practice, this chapter investigates the relationship between trauma, memory, and the embodied trace. Using practice examples, the text explores how self-performed modes of self-representation might offer insights into the complex—psychological and physiological—inscriptions left by trauma. Evaluating this relationship, the text draws on analyses by Griselda Pollock, Jill Bennett, and Margaret Iversen. The argument supports post-qualitative research methods that unfold subjective material through the 'doing-thinking-making' process. Approached through posthuman and new materialist frameworks referencing Karen Barad and Rosi Braidotti, the chapter examines how a diffractive—rather than purely reflective—methodology can synthesise praxis and theory through affective photographic outcomes. The chapter concludes by evaluating how a diffractive approach to photographic self-representation can be productive for re-thinking the self, re-interpreting narratives of trauma, and re-imagining the way we see ourselves in our 'becoming-with' others.

Many voices speak here in the interstices, a cacophony of always already reiteratively intra-acting stories. These are entangled tales. Each is diffractively threaded through and enfolded in the other. ~ (Barad, 2018)

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INTRODUCTION

This research enquiry is situated within the field of women's arts-based practice-research, where the traces of trauma and its effects are examined through my personal perspective as an arts practitioner-researcher. Using embodied and performative modes of self-representation and photographic intervention, I draw on subjectively-situated narratives to re-think and re-imagine the self through a series of works. Organised in three interrelated and overlapping thematic strands, examples are discussed and developed through Case Studies, comprising: *Case Study 1: Fragments*, *Case Study 2: The Damaged Family*, and *Case Study 3: Inscriptions*.

Considering how embodied, empirical and investigative modes of photographic practice might be approached, I refer to contemporary posthuman and new materialist theory to re-think and frame my analysis. Pioneering feminist theorists Donna Haraway, Karen Barad and Rosi Braidotti provide this framework by opening imaginative spaces for enquiry and creative concept-making. However, I also acknowledge work by black feminist scholars including writer and educator bell hooks (Gloria Jean Watkins) and African-American, self-described 'black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet' Audre Lorde, as influential activists dealing with subjecthood and issues of personal and collective trauma. This enquiry opens a speculative site for the archaeological or genealogical tracing of traumatic memory, and for exploring how a 'diffractive' methodological approach (Barad 2007, 2014; Davies 2014a, 2014b, 2017; Bozalek, 2017; van der Tuin, 2018) might provide a way for re-mapping the cartographic contours engraved in territories of the traumatised self. Against this milieu, the chapter proposes an alternative way for reconfiguring subjectivity in relation to trauma.

This prompts two questions: First, how might the effects of trauma be expressed through exploratory and performative modes of self-representation in women's photographic art practice? Second, how might a diffractive posthuman methodology support such a practice-led enquiry into the traumatised self? Responding to these questions the focus will be to 'unfold' (Gilles Deleuze, 1980/2004, 1993/2006) the 'psychic wounds' (Gavin Delahunty, 2021) embedded within the material and discursive artefacts emerging from the creative process.

Using photographic practice as a critical and artistic tool for navigating this enquiry, I argue that Barad's (2007) concept of 'entanglement' and adapted Deleuzian concept of the heterogeneous 'assemblage', enable a posthumanly-grounded understanding of what art of trauma *does*. I also argue that the embodied effects of trauma and dynamic operations enacted through the creative process, align with Barad's (2007) model of 'intra-action' in the way they impact, structure and re-structure the entangled subject. Further, using photography as a performative medium, I argue that a diffractive methodology is "respectful of the entanglement of ideas and other materials in ways that reflexive methodologies are not" (Barad, 2007, p. 24). This offers a contemporary posthuman understanding of how the complex patterns of trauma and autobiographical memory are intertwined.

To contextualise this enquiry, examples of my own practice are considered alongside works by other women artists exploring issues of trauma and selfhood within the genre of autobiographical self-representation. For example: Francesca Woodman's enigmatic works looking at absence and presence, the material and immaterial, or visible and invisible self; Ana Mendieta's visceral evocations exploring a displaced and alienated self; and work by Jo Spence and Rosy Martin looking at body-image, loss, family relationships and memory. As a counterpoint to white Western artists predominant in the genre, I identify the work of South African artist and 'visual activist' Zanele Muholi. For example, in the long-term project *Somnyama Ngonyama - Hail the Dark Lioness*, Muholi explores the oppression of racial

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