

# TRANSVERSAL PRACTICES

## Studies in Material Thinking

### VOLUME 16

*Transversal Practices: Matter,  
Ecology and Relationality*

### PAPER 08

*Memory, Image, Matter: Trauma  
and Acts of Un-forgetting*

### AUTHOR

*Estelle Barrett*

### ABSTRACT

*How might we conceive of the role of memory as a non-representational mode of commemoration that reconstitutes and transforms lived experience? In this paper I will move from psychoanalytical accounts of trauma to applying conceptions of memory outlined in works of philosophers Edward Casey, Henri Bergson and others, in order to consider social and psychological effects of trauma and how aesthetic experience can trigger cathartic resolution or the cure of traumatic symptoms. An understanding of the relationship between images, memory, and matter and of memory as a primarily eidetic and material process may*

*also help to suggest how some people may be able to avoid or overcome trauma. Drawing on aspects of Indigenous epistemology and the work of Indigenous artist Deanne Gilson, I will consider how art-making generates images that, like memory, perform acts of 'unforgetting' through which the past is returned as a presence that is materially apprehended. This process can both sustain and transform individual and collective histories. Central to this idea is the notion that the structure of mind and of memory are co extensive with the external world and that the articulation of consciousness is crucially dependent on space and place*

### KEY WORDS

*Memory, trauma, image,  
matter, intra-action  
Indigenous epistemology,  
time, space, place,  
art-making, unforgetting,  
remembering*

## INTRODUCTION

In examining the connection between matter, memory, image and place, this essay seeks to extend an understanding of the dynamics of trauma and its relationship to art-making and aesthetic experience. I will first trace the trajectory of theories of trauma given in Ruth Leys' comprehensive account in *Trauma: A Genealogy* (2000) and consider the continued influence of Sigmund Freud on understandings of trauma. I will then introduce Julia Kristeva's alternative account of subjectivity, a departure from Freud, that helps to shift the critical focus away from repression and internal psychic processes as the sole basis for understanding and treating trauma towards a new materialist conception of trauma permitted by the work of Henri Bergson. Finally, I will consider aspects of Indigenous ontology and epistemology, in order to extend my account of the crucial role that place and *locatedness* has for illuminating the dynamics of trauma particularly as it relates to Indigenous peoples and, through an examination of the work of Indigenous artist Deanne Gilson, present specific illustration of the dynamics of art-making as a mode of recuperation and the assuaging the effects of trauma.

Understanding the interrelationships between image, trauma and place in this context may lead to better outcomes, not only for Indigenous people, but the broader population. This is not to homogenise Indigenous peoples who are made up of many different cultural and geographical groupings within Australia and globally; nor is it my intention here to conflate Indigenous experiences of trauma with that of non-Indigenous people. With regard to the former, my assertion is made within the context of the work of

a range of Indigenous scholars, for example that of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), Karen Martin (2003), and Margaret Kovach (2005), who point out that despite the differing ontologies, epistemologies and languages of Indigenous or First Nation cultures, a number of core beliefs and values are common to most. This is reflected in the comment of Canadian Opaskwayak Cree Scholar Shawn Wilson, who states that while differences between cultures is something to be acknowledged and embraced commonalities are also evident across vast geographical terrains:

*In meeting Indigenous people in Canada, United States, South-east Asia, Norway, New Zealand and Australia, I have noticed that we all share very similar beliefs and spirituality. I have often wondered how indigenous peoples from opposite sides of the earth could have values that are so alike. (Wilson, 1999, n.p.)*

In relation to the actual experiences of trauma as they present in Indigenous and non-indigenous populations, the conception of trauma that I am theorizing is founded on materially constituted processes that go beyond notions of identity, gender and culture; that is to say, the focus here is on an elaboration of biological and sensory processes that operate prior to their culturally coded or symbolic articulations.

Moreover, in positioning myself as a non-Indigenous academic, I cannot claim to be working through an Indigenous lens nor do I wish to misappropriate Indigenous knowledge, but rather, I hope that by marrying perspectives gained from both Indigenous and Western scholarship and practices,

we may arrive at new (materialist) understandings of the ways in which trauma is either perpetuated or ameliorated. My contention is that trauma affects the way in which images are produced and processed and that place has a crucial influence on how images affect consciousness and hence the psychological dynamics of trauma.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to give a brief overview of how my argument is located within established discourses of trauma, in particular those grounded in Freudian discourse, so as to demonstrate how a materialist perspective may provide a way out of the aporias and contradictions that are so clearly enunciated in Ruth Leys' (2000) genealogical examination of theories of trauma dating back to Freud's early work from the 1920s.

Leys tells us that in the mimetic theory of trauma, although the victim is hypnotically immersed in the traumatic event, the experience shatters or disables the victim's cognitive capacities so that he or she is unable to recall the traumatic event, suffers a form of amnesia akin to hypnotic forgetting and hence can only act out the event in other ways or through a kind of hypnotic imitation (Leys, 2000, p. 298). In this schema, the experience never becomes part of the victim's normal memory system. Leys articulates two implications of the mimetic theory. Firstly, that the victim has somehow not fully experienced the event or has remained apart from it. This raises the question of hypnotic suggestibility and false memory emerging in therapy. Further, the mimetic theory points to an element of identification with the aggressor that leaves the victim with feelings of hostility towards the self. (Leys, 2000, p. 298) Crucial to my argument in this paper is a questioning of the underlying premise in

this approach, which is that trauma results in damage or disablement of an a priori 'normal memory'. My argument here is that the psychic contents of trauma do not belong to normal memory, but are hallucinatory and compulsive repetitions that block the normal flows of memory and hence the capacity to adequately articulate lived experience.

Leys' premise is more directly evident in antimimetic theories of trauma as presented in her book. Here she explains that the antimimetic paradigm also posits imitation as a feature or element of traumatic experience. However, in the antimimetic model, the victim is not hypnotically immersed in the scene, but is aloof or separate from it, as well as from the aggressor. Hence, s/he remains a spectator of the traumatic event and therefore, can see and represent it to herself. The implication here, is that eventually, and under certain conditions, the victim will be able to remember and articulate the traumatic event (Leys, 2000, p. 299).

In both models there is a general consensus that cure or resolution of the effects of trauma turns around bringing the scene back into consciousness, either through narration or hypnosis. Leys argues that catharsis has been conceptualized as an anti-mimetic impartial means for bringing traumatic memories into consciousness and narration, but also as a technique to mimetically induce actings-out that might either be a faithful representation of the original event, or fictive/suggestive performances which nevertheless can lead to assuaging the effects of trauma. Hence some therapists have revived the use of hypnosis to produce recollections and re-integration of traumatic memories, even though they may have reservations related to the possibility of mimetic confabulation or

distortions and misinterpretations of memory in patients who undergo this form of therapy. (Leys, 2000, p. 303).

Leys notes that Freud simultaneously embraces both mimetic and antimimetic positions and puts forward two accounts of trauma. Firstly, that it involves unconscious imitation and/or identification with the traumatic scene wherein the patient is blind to the original event and therefore cannot be made to remember it, but can only repeat or act it out as an always immediate and present experience, rather than as a memory of a past event. Cathy Caruth's notion of the traumatic flashback resonates with this (Caruth, 1995, p. 154).

Alternatively, in some aspect of his thinking about trauma, Freud takes an antimimetic stance in theorising trauma as being related to libidinal desires or unconscious/repressed wishes. In the case of the latter, the patient can be induced to remember and testify to the traumatic experience even though s/he is prone to forgetting it. Leys articulates this ambivalence in Freud as follows: 'In sum, for Freud traumatic memory is inherently unstable or mutable owing to the role of unconscious *motives* that confer meaning on it' (Leys, 2000, p. 20. My emphasis).

The scope of this paper does not allow for lengthy discussion of Freud's work on trauma. However, from a reading of, for example, his 1920 essays, 'General Theory of Neurosis' and 'Traumatic Fixation—The Unconscious', it is clear that his thinking has continued to influence both mimetic and antimimetic explanations. This influence can also be traced back to Freud's theorisation of conscious, pre-conscious and unconscious processes (Freud, 1976 [1900]). Freud attributes traumatic fixations and repetitions to the implication of unconscious psychological processes,

which he likens to abnormal processes experienced in hysteria (Freud, 1920). Central to his account of both hysteria and trauma, is the notion of the unconscious as the domain of repressed or forbidden wishes that produce destabilising elements of memory and disruption of normal thought processes. What falls out of Freud's model is the notion of psychical processes that are not solely predicated on Oedipal censorship, but are materially constituted. This is apparent, for example, in his interpretation of dreams, which he describes as, 'the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind' (Freud, 1976 [1900], p. 769). Here, regressive and libidinal drives of infancy are foregrounded as the basis for hysteria and abnormal thought in favour of the role of somatic and material processes. Borrowing from his work on hysteria in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud asserts:

*A normal thought is only submitted to abnormal psychical treatment of the sort we have been describing if an unconscious wish from infancy and in a state of repression has been transferred onto it. (Freud, 1976 [1900], p. 757)*

Freud's account of primary and preconscious processes is counterbalanced or contextualised in relation to the ego or subject of rational thought. (Freud, 1976 [1900], pp. 751-753) Moreover, his articulation of the operations of unconscious 'wishes' and 'motives' as the basis for abnormal thoughts (1976 [1900], p. 753) again leads us to the notion of repression and censorship. While the implication of somatic or material processes are not absent from his account of primary processes, for example with regard to pleasure and affect, Freud concludes:

*In its innermost nature it is as much unknown to us as the reality of the external world, and it is as incompletely presented by the data of consciousness as is the external world by the communication of the sense organs.*  
(Freud, 1976 [1900], p. 773).

It is Kristeva's departure from Freud and her account of abjection as a primal or semiotic mapping of the body that provides a basis for positing a different genealogy of trauma. The notion of abjection as process that precedes the child's entry into the symbolic, allows us to conceive of a dimension of subjectivity that is both symbolically *and* materially constituted. (Kristeva, 1982). Kristeva's conception of abjection indicates that a class of objects exists prior to language—the need for food, air and comfort. Based on her explanation, I suggest that traumatic images that fall outside of normal thought processes can be likened to her description of phobic objects. These appear at the place of a non-objectival drive, which, unlike the sexual or erotic drive that is directed towards others, is instead directed inward, towards self-preservation. The phobic object is therefore not an object of desire, but an 'object related to want and to primary processes of want' (Kristeva, 1982, p. 35). Abjection is experienced as fear and loathing when rational meaning fails to emerge; it points to a dynamics of fear prior to the emergence of the object and upon which the very capacity to symbolise external reality is dependent. Something akin to fear is first experienced in the trauma of birth, a violent break that upsets bio-drive balance. (Kristeva, 1982, p. 34).

This raises questions about the nature of objects that emerge within the psychic space as opposed to those related to the forms of repression that permit objects to emerge as signs. Lacking any external or objective correlative, these objects or 'hallucinations' are the effect of *material processes* articulating a void that underlies the play of signification and are 'the truest equivalents of fear' (Kristeva, 1982, p. 37). Kristeva opens a way of moving beyond Freud's repressive model for understanding trauma as symptom and also for articulating how aesthetic experience or art leads to cathartic resolution of traumatic symptoms.

In her account of phobia, Kristeva makes a clear distinction between fear that is communicable through language and fear as a pre-symbolic affect that emerges through abjection as a process that underpins the emergence of thought and the separation of the Ego from objects. Communicable fear arises from earlier archaic signals that have already been transformed into signs and therefore belongs to external reality. Language is 'fetshistic' in that it separates the subject from objects and is a substitute for objects; the first of which is the abject, the primary Thing or (m)other. With phobia or fear the processes related to this separation are disrupted. This produces an excess or eruption of affect projected as images that belong to psychical rather than external reality. In accordance with Freud's observations as discussed above, Kristeva observes that displacements and condensations that make up the phobic metaphor are unfathomable to psychoanalysis; she asserts that only art can linger over abjection and thus succeed in overcoming fear. Hence the writer or artist may be viewed as 'a phobic who succeeds in metaphorising in order to keep from being

frightened to death; instead he comes to life again in signs' (Kristeva, 1982, p. 38). It is this notion of creative practice that underpins catharsis or abreaction or resolution in therapy.

### **TRAUMA AND THE AESTHETIC IMAGE**

Central to understanding the role of art making, and the experiencing of art as a mode of overcoming trauma, is the ambiguous, multiple and polyvalent structuration of the aesthetic image. As I have discussed previously, the aesthetic image refuses fixity and this intensifies engagement and investment in the object allowing new configurations of experience and thought to emerge (Barrett, 2013). The making of art is experiential and situated. This aspect is particularly relevant to understanding the link between art and well-being within an Indigenous context as I will discuss presently, with reference to Indigenous epistemology and Indigenous conceptions of the relation between Country, well-being, art-making and ceremony. The crucial link between memory and place as it is elaborated in Bergson's theory of memory and matter and more forcefully articulated in Edward S. Casey's work *Remembering* (2000) can extend our understanding of the link between memory and trauma and place and hence the persistence of trauma in some patients as well as dynamics of trans-generational trauma as it presents in Indigenous populations in Australia.

### **TRAUMA: TOWARDS A NEW MATERIALIST PERSPECTIVE**

From Henri Bergson (1988) we learn that images are co-extensive with matter and mind; that sentient life is made possible through the dynamical interaction and intra-action or flow and aggregation of images/memories that motivate and articulate living organisms' movements and their duration through time and space. Lesions or damage to the brain interferes with this process so that - not only does memory become dysfunctional, but so too does speech and movement since normal functioning of psychomotor processes related to memory are disrupted.

Caruth (1995) and other commentators of trauma explain that trauma leads to a malfunctioning of images and memory that can also affect our capacity for normal physical activity. Though images of the traumatic flashback remain vivid, they are frozen in time and space, often inaccessible to conscious control and recall and are therefore not integrated into the flows and narratives of past and present, nor to the imaginative projection of future states and experiences. It is perhaps, this aspect of trauma that affects physical activity of some victims of trauma. As well as its effect on normal physical functioning, trauma is also often accompanied by an inability to speak or an impairment of speech. Moreover, there is a "displacement" of the image from the space and place of experience; there is "nowhere to run", and there are no alternative images that might assist with a renewal of the normal flow of memories required for a reintegration of consciousness as living process and for assuaging the impact of the frozen traumatic image. Hence trauma

can be understood as a kind of “forgetting” imposed by the fixity of the traumatic image and an inability to generate the flow of images or memories that are vital to a continuation of mental and physical well-being. It is this aspect of trauma for which aesthetic experience and art making has crucial significance.

### **MEMORY, IMAGE, MATTER**

---

In *Memory and Matter* (1988) Bergson describes memory as being at the ‘intersection’ of mind and matter and presents an account of the intra-actions between memory, matter and image as processes through which meaning and representations are constituted. The notion of intra-action refigures conventional understandings of the relationship between object and object, subject and object, and body and mind. It refers to how memory and matter are not separate, but are rather mutually implicated in the flows and movements of their existence. Karen Barad illuminates further in her observation that matter does not refer to a fixed substance, and things do not have determinate boundaries, properties or meanings, but are in a constant iterative process of mutation and becoming (Barad, 2003). Bergson explains that matter as an aggregate of images and perception of matter emerges from eventual action of one particular image of the body; that is to say, perception arises out of intra-actions—the movements and disturbances of images that affect the body (Bergson, 1988, p. 21).

Known or positive facts emerge as a process of the flows of memory initially apprehended as images. Hence, human consciousness is derived from images that are derived from human entanglements

and continuity with matter. They are apprehended through what Bergson terms ‘affections’. These arise from fundamental instinctual processes of the living organism to move towards and incorporate that which will enhance survival, and to repel or avoid objects that threaten it. The instinctual responsiveness or centripetal and centrifugal rhythms and movements of the body later become differentiated into affections, which are an anterior indication of, or phase in, meaning-making processes. Bergson links affections to the sensation of pain, and argues that this responsiveness is the basis for the organism’s action. (Bergson, 1988, p. 50). Affections are related to nascent images, not all of which are visible to consciousness, but involuntarily impress practical attitudes and movement on the body. Afferent nerves that register disturbances travelling towards the brain are also images; the brain too, is part of the material world of images. These processes of meaning-making can thus be understood as *intra-action*.

Consciousness responds to, and registers, affections or sensations which fade if they lack ‘interest’ or the body’s investment in them. The body’s responses give rise to a particular aggregate of images that are processed via the nervous system to give birth to representation.

It should be noted that, though materialist in orientation, this explanation does not fall into biological reductionism, since memory can be understood at the same time, in terms of both meaning *and* matter. Kristeva’s (1982,1984) conception of abjection, heterogeneity and the semiotic dimension of language resonates with Bergson’s account of the relationship between memory, matter and processes leading to representation. Perception and

representation, in Bergson's schema, are functions of the disturbances of images (the flows of matter/memory) that are registered on and affect the body. Hence, Bergson asserts that there can be no perception which is not full of memories (Bergson, 1988, p. 33). There is a zone of indetermination surrounding the body in relation to objects, activity, perception and affective states, because these depend on the number, distance from, and attention given to objects (images) encountered by the body. This is a key to understanding place as a crucial aspect of memory, since the multifarious effects of biological or material processes specifically related to location are constantly being registered on the body—and by extension on the emergence of memory and meaning.

The reciprocal flows of movement between brain and matter can also be understood in terms of *temporality* because of the duration or intervals of movement between the body and surrounding objects. States of affection operate as a call to action—movements which give rise to externalized perception. What Bergson's account illuminates, is that relations to objects can be viewed as processes that modulate distance between organism and object; that is to say, spatial relations as movements towards or away from what is encountered in terms of a modulation of pain. Our representation of matter can be understood as the measure of our possible action on external bodies. The process that gives rise to representation results in a discarding (from consciousness) of what is of no interest to our needs and functions.

For Bergson there is only a difference of *degree*, and not of kind, between *being* and being as it is consciously perceived. (Bergson, 1988, p. 37). Perception and memory as they are consciously

grasped can thus be viewed as matter differentiated. From this we can understand being as a state of *virtuality*. The virtual refers to the possibility of the body to isolate particular images or objects from the flow of matter/images. When virtual action results in real action or *movement*, images are processed via the nervous system to become affection (internal states) and these are differentiated further to become perceptions and representations. (Bergson 1988, p. 56)

However, not all memories are available to consciousness. Unconscious memories or what Bergson calls 'integral memories' remain in the background. They may nevertheless be utilized in present action through their unconscious integration into the processes that give rise to perception. Whilst learned or habitual memory occurs as a contracted form of duration and movement, these memories too can be integrated into the flows and narratives of the past, present and future. Habitual or learned memory does not represent the past to us but *acts it* (Bergson, 1988, p. 45). I suggest that it is this dimension of memory that is related to tacit knowledge, which not only binds people to place but also articulates a specific connection to others and shared identity. As I will discuss later in the paper, this tacit dimension also occurs as a form of intuitive inter-subjective communication.

### MEMORY AND MEANING AS ACTION AND DURATION

---

Trevor Perri points out that there are several forms of memory articulated in Bergson's thinking. However, what is fundamental to his theory of memory is the notion of action, duration and dynamism. Memory is



not a thing, 'it is a process; it is a movement' (Bergson in Perri, 2014, p. 847). The aspects of memory discussed here are central to understanding the dynamics of trauma and the way in which artistic process provides a means of overcoming trauma or enabling post-traumatic growth.

Two key points need to be grasped. Firstly, the kinds of perceptions and representations that emerge depend on our affections as they relate to place; and secondly, perceptions (memory) are tied to, and are dependent on, action/movement—the dynamical flow between matter, and body as matter. Bergson contends that, in processes of meaning-making, 'Movement whatever its inner nature becomes an indisputable reality'. (Bergson, 1988, 195-196) This reality necessarily occurs in relation to place. Memory can thus be understood not only as a kind of psychomotor process, but as a change of *state* or of *quality*. This illuminates why, in severe states of trauma and fear, the victim is frozen; movement is literally arrested and also there is a repetition of the static image(s) of trauma.

## PLACE

Edward S. Casey's work *Remembering* (2000) further emphasises the role of place in the workings of memory. He contends that place helps to 'fix' or allow memory to take hold. Place not only aids the flow of memory, but also acts as a container and preserver of memory and experiences. 'Memory is naturally place oriented and place supported. Memory is not indifferently dispersed, but rests on the particularities of what is *properly* in place' (Casey 2000, p. 187). Moreover, memory is itself a (fluid) place, 'wherein

the past can revive and survive' (Casey 2000, pp. 186-187). Place, as a container of our entire memorial lives, acts to alleviate the anxieties of disorientation and separation. In emphasizing the relationship between place and the body as articulation and preservation of memory, Casey also points to the material or embodied nature of memory as a crucial foundation of conscious thought and well-being. To be embodied is:

*To have not just a point of view but a place in which we are situated. It is to occupy a portion of space from out of which we both undergo given experiences and remember them. To be disembodied is not only to be deprived of place, unplaced; it is to be denied the basic stance on which every experience and its memory depend. (Casey, 2000, p. 182. Original emphasis)*

To be unplaced or displaced then, is to suffer a form of disembodiment, to be possessed of frozen and disembodied images such as the flash backs that characterize experiences of trauma.

However, if we return to Bergson, it is clear that his theorisation is largely based on the effects of physical lesions to the brain. These result in various forms of aphasia, disruptions of speech and linguistic incapacities similar to those often observed in victims of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Notably, his descriptions of certain kinds of pathology include seemingly contradictory dimensions, such as: the evocation of visual and memory that cannot be applied to corresponding perceptions; speech pathologies that hinder the evocation of memory; the capacity to understand speech/images, but an inability

to utter words, which is described as ‘motor aphasia’ (Bergson, 1988, p. 139).

There is an implication here, not only of the close relationship between memory, meaning making and the body, but also of the idea of a disruption of the circuit or normal flow of interactions between body and mind; memory and matter as an effect of trauma. More recently, in both therapeutic and philosophical contexts, there are indications that the brain can suffer damage not only from physical lesions but also as an effect of emotional trauma.

Some thinkers, including for example, Catherine Malabou (2012), have begun to examine trauma through broader social and philosophical perspectives. It is within the context of these transversal examinations of trauma, that I believe we may begin to gain a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that both perpetuate and alleviate trauma. This is particularly relevant to trans-generational trauma as it is understood within an Australian Indigenous context—for example, in the work of Judy Atkinson (2002). In her book, *Trauma trails, recreating song lines: The transgenerational effects of trauma in Indigenous Australia*, Atkinson describes the collective trauma suffered by Indigenous Australians as a result of the violence of European settlement, the forceful removal of children from parents and re-location of people away from their homelands. This resulted in the disruption and destruction of community over generations. The effects of policies enacted over decades following the colonization of Australia that are brought into stark focus in this work may be better understood through the insights afforded by the work related to memory and trauma discussed here.

## TRAUMA, IMAGE AND MEMORY

---

Trauma relates to an event that has not been fully integrated into a complete story of the past—it is not narrative memory and one cannot wilfully return to the traumatic image in the way we may return to past memories. The history that a flashback tells is, therefore, ‘a history that literally has *no place*’ either in the past, which was not fully experienced, or in the present in which it appears—and hence its incomprehensibility (Caruth, 1995, p. 154. original emphasis). Along with incomprehensibility therefore, there is a loss of relationality with both people and place. The imposition of the traumatic image is also the imposition of a state of amnesia, a disruption of the normal encoding of memory. With amnesia, large realms of experience or aspects of one’s identity are disowned or inaccessible (Caruth, 1995, p. 153). Paradoxically, there is also an insistence of intrusive images such as nightmares, but these are disassociated from reality and the current flow of lived experience. Flashbacks are denial of active recollection; they impose a forgetting that attests to the passivity and immobility often characteristic of the traumatised person.

I would suggest that in order to overcome or ameliorate the effects of trauma, there is a need to reinstate a normal flow of images that would trigger a process of ‘unforgetting’—and further, that aesthetic experience, either as the making or experiencing of the aesthetic image, is one of the means by which this unforgetting may be facilitated.

## THE TRANSMISSION AND COMMUNICATION OF MEMORY

---

Through Bergson we have come to understand that, where there is investment and interest in the object, the subject 'receives' images as a process of the flows between memory and matter. Objects exist in themselves, but are also pictorial since they are apprehended as images. Indeed, every act of memory can be said to be an act of 'imaging'. The image is what connects the percipient subject to the thing perceived via the sensation of sight, touch, hearing and other sensory means. This allows images/memories to be accessed by the mind. However, and as Bergson observes, the 'formation of memory is never posterior to the formation of perception; it is contemporaneous with it'. (Bergson, 1975, p. 157)

Bergson tells us that all objects made by humans contain memories embedded in their physicality. Hence memories embedded in objects become transferable or communicable between subjects though the objects *themselves*. This is central to Indigenous epistemology as will be discussed below. The actual object that can be seen touched and experienced is full of virtual images that are in constant dynamic flow so that accessing images can also be understood as experiencing events. Because there is a flow of images between maker and perceiver, the accessing of images in aesthetic experience can be understood as participatory activity. The nature of this, and the transferability of images, will, however, be influenced by the degree to which there is a common experiential background between viewer and maker.

Elena Fell explains this transferability further with reference to the work of Eval Ilyenkov, who asserts

that human spirit and human memory are invested and remain present in everything that is handmade or manufactured. All manmade objects are permeated by ideas and memories and, as such, contain 'messages' that are transmissible to audiences. My suggestion that aesthetic image is the vehicle for this transmission aligns with Fell's account of the transmission of meaning held in crafted objects.

Fell observes that memories embedded in objects outside of the context of viewing or interaction continue to hold memory/meaning—what Ilyenkov calls the 'ideal' in suspension (Fell, 2012, p. 294). The ideal is not always conveyed in verbal form, but can be transmitted visually, in sculpture, dance and in ritualistic activity where objects are handled in a particular way. When the ideal or memory is objectified non-verbally, 'the communication is more effective because non-verbal, ocular objectification can be received directly by another mind rather than mediated by verbal conceptualization' (Fell, p. 294). The significance of objects as a mode of transmission of knowledge in Indigenous societies is illuminated in Fell's account.

Here, the issue of context is crucial to my earlier discussion related to tacit knowledge. An outsider will not have full or accurate access to the 'ideal' or memories/knowledge being conveyed, because these objects belong to a particular ontology and epistemology—aspects of human culture embodied in material form and related to cultural practices and place. Such meanings or memories contain an aggregate of historically established modes of activity and communication predicated on a special form of objective reality as opposed to material reality. This can be understood as embodied memory—memory

embodied in a fragment of modified matter and encoded in ritual and ceremonial objects. Stories, art, dance and other forms of these exist as inter-subjective realities that are linked to place or Country. I would argue that trans-generational trauma, can at least in part be attributed to the disruption of this relationality, which in effect is a disruption of the normal flows of matter, memory and image that constitute life and well-being. More importantly, however, Fell's account of transmissibility of memory through images also points both to the role that images may play in passing on trauma from generation to generation and also to their potential for healing. This relates not only through the production of images in art making, but also through engagement with art as viewer or audience.

An understanding of the relationship between images, memory, and matter and of memory as a primarily eidetic and material process may also help to explain how some people are able to avoid or overcome trauma. I suggest, further, that image production, art-making and narrative generate images that, like memory, can perform acts of 'unforgetting' through which the past is returned as a presence that is materially apprehended and refigured. It is to this that I will now turn through an examination of the work of Deanne Gilson.

### **INDIGENOUS ART AND ONTOLOGY**

---

The history of colonisation in Australia has shown that the separation of people from place leads to social and emotional dis-association. This is also an effect of the disruption and separation of people from the

practices of everyday life through which memory and meaning are forged as has been borne out in the experience of Indigenous Australians since European settlement. If we are to appreciate the dynamics of trans-generational trauma, we need to grasp the nature of Indigenous ontology as it is given in the work of Indigenous thinkers, rather than from the imposition of a western world view. Brian Martin (2013) has demonstrated the crucial role that land or Country plays in all aspects of Indigenous experience and how this is instantiated in Indigenous art making. In an Indigenous worldview there is no separation between the real and the imaginary, the material and spiritual realms. It is interesting that Bergson's account of the relationality between memory and matter is in accord with such a world view; his work demonstrates that spirit can be understood as the dynamical relationship between matter and memory in all its manifestations. Martin shows us that art in Indigenous society is an active mode of producing, preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge.

Moreover, other scholars (Foley, 2003; Martin, 2003) have articulated the profound interrelationship of material practices and epistemology in Indigenous cultures, where being, doing and knowing are enfolded and interdependent. Margaret Kovach (2005, p. 26) explains further, that Aboriginal language is verb-based as opposed to European languages, which are noun-based. The verb-based language is an indication of the close connection between being, doing and knowing. Traditionally, Aboriginal knowledge was transmitted orally through storytelling and other forms of art-making all of which relate to the interactive, durational and experiential nature of knowledge production and the nature of communication which is both verbal

and non-verbal, rational and intuitive. This accounts for the indeterminate and polyvalent emergence of meaning, which is always open to interpretation depending on the place and context of its production and transmission.

In Indigenous cultures, the making of objects is both utilitarian and ritualised; the designs, symbols and usage of objects often operate as an expression of shared identity as a mode of being, doing and knowing. In this sense art-making operates not only in terms of its use function, but as a mode of preserving, extending and transmitting collective memory, social relations, skills and knowledge that would otherwise be lost. This includes environmental, ecological, traditional and cultural knowledge and also a more profound knowledge: tacit or praxical knowledge, which encompasses the skill derived from making and using craft objects that cannot be fully conveyed through language and therefore escapes documentation. This unspoken knowledge constitutes inter-subjective 'knowing' and affective relations that are deeply connected to places of dwelling and the material realities from which they emerge. Not only are aspects of such knowledge deeply embedded in bodily or intuitive modes of knowing, but also it is knowledge that often cannot be accessed or enacted beyond the specific and materially constituted context from which it emerges. The maintenance integrity of memory is predicated on cultural practices that articulate an *experiential* connection to place and people. Maintaining practices in situ, but which are also emergent and responsive to change, thus becomes crucial to maintaining individual and cultural wellbeing.

Traditional art practices can be understood as

recursive commemoration (repetition with difference) that is, therefore, central to resisting the erasure of culture and identity and the effect of this as trans-generational trauma. An understanding of the link between memory, art and tacit or relational knowledge including that of the sacred and spiritual world helps to illuminate how dislocation from these practices and the places to which they refer can perpetuate trans-generational trauma. Aesthetic images not only constitute memory, but, through the structure of the image, transmit affect and meaning between artist and viewer. It is in this sense that aesthetic experience embodies and enacts the processes of un-forgetting which I argue are crucial to psychic well-being.

#### **ART, REMEMBRANCE AND THE ASSUAGING OF TRAUMA**

---

Gilson's work embraces an intercultural aesthetic as evidenced in, for example, the influence of Western genres of painting; at the same time, it articulates fundamental cultural ways of being and doing incorporating materials and motifs that are closely tied to her ancestry, that of the Wadawurrung people of south eastern Australia. This includes people from the country surrounding areas of Ballarat and Geelong of which Gilson is a traditional owner. Her work is both an articulation and a cathartic expression of the trauma of the violent history of colonization and its impact on her family and people. It is also a reclamation, preservation and commemoration of traditional symbols that articulate cultural beliefs and practices. Gilson's choice of materials and colours is rooted in the history and memory of place. For example, her use of clay is closely

connected to her place of dwelling and her kinships. So too, is her use of ochre, which has a strong influence on the artist's colour palette:

*I walked on Country and gathered as much ochre in as many different shades of yellow, white, grey, pink, blue and brown, that I could find, ... My ochre travels took me all over Wadawurrung Country from Ballarat, to Anglesea, to Werribee, Torquay, Black Hill in Ballarat and out to Skipton. (Gilson, 2015, p. 47)*

The colour of ochres and other materials used in Gilson's work are imbued with cultural meanings, but also operate ambiguously to produce multiple layers of meaning. This is evident in the painting *Reconciliation*



Figure 1: Deanne Gilson, *Reconciliation* (2016). Black Hill ochre, gold leaf, acrylic on linen. Photograph by the artist.

(2016), where gold is a reference to the greed that brought the colonisers to the Ballarat goldfields, but also symbolises the beneficence and bounty of the country.

In this work, the use of red is evocative of blood and violence as well as the memory and love of country and home. The artist comments:

*Reconciliation depicts feathers of my totem Waa the Crow. In this painting the feather itself is used to represent the human figure and I have given it a dual meaning. The feathers symbolise Western society and Aboriginal spirituality. The painting has one black feather, which I drew with charcoal sourced from a fire at my son's eighteenth birthday party. Turning eighteen is a sign of standing alone and becoming an adult. The black feather stands alone with the aim to reconcile with the white feathers. As the title suggests, Reconciliation portrays growth and maturity, unity and an appreciation for each other, all cultures, race and spiritual beliefs. (Gilson, 2016a)*

Though the cultural significance of this work may not be fully accessible through Western modes of interpretation, I suggest that as an aesthetic image, compositionally structured through an intercultural aesthetic, the work signifies in ways that transcend cultural specificity and gives rise to associations that go beyond conscious or manifest meanings intended by the artist. Compositional or formal elements: vertical and horizontal lines, rhythms of colour and light point to the double articulation of visual language; on the one hand they are elements that occur as direct sensory stimuli and are connected to material bodily processes

(the flow of matter) and on the other, when combined in certain ways, they result in perceptions and the emergence of coherent images or representations. Kristeva attributes this double articulation to the relationship between the symbolic disposition of language—its capacity to constitute meaning and thought and what she calls the semiotic disposition of language or the dimension that has a direct impact on the senses and bodily processes (Kristeva, 1984). In verbal language this relates to the musicality or sound dimensions of spoken language, rhythms repetitions and tonal qualities such onomatopoeia and alliteration—and in visual language, formal elements such as line, colour, scale, tone repetition and balance. As I have discussed elsewhere (Barrett, 2011), this can be understood in relation to Kristeva's account of abjection as material processes that are anterior to the emergence of language and meaning.

In *Reconciliation*, this double articulation produces multiple and ambiguous significations. The evocation of, for example, the stained glass of Catholic churches is engendered by a sense of entering light created by the application of gold. Together with the repetition of blue and red, this decorative dimension is counterpoised by the white ochre 'feathers' that ambiguously signify human figures, but also resemble gravestones so that the work can be read either as a stained glass window or a crowded graveyard—perhaps an unconscious reference to the massacres of Aboriginal people in the early years of colonisation. Also ambiguous, are the markings within the repeated forms that denote either the internal formation of feathers or, alternatively, the crucifix.

The rhythm and repetition of colour and, in particular, the intensity of the patches of blue,

engender an oscillation between meaning and direct sensory excitation. Kristeva has theorized the effect of this as chromatic joy, the pleasure or *jouissance*, derived from the disruption of meaning produced by the impact of colour and, in particular, of the colour blue, on instinctual or bodily drives as material process:

*Chromatic joy is the indication of a deep ideological and subjective transformation; it discreetly enters the theoretical signified, distorting and doing violence to it without relinquishing it. (Kristeva, 1980, p. 224)*

Together with formal elements, colour triggers movements between conscious or rational thought and unconscious materially-based processes (the flows of memory and matter) that are anterior to the emergence of meaning. Gilson has commented that her work is an attempt to come to terms with the violence and sexual abuse experienced by Aboriginal women, including particular members of her close family, under the veil of the Catholic Church. She explains that she is still experiencing the traumatic impact of witnessing and hearing of this as a child (Gilson, 2016b).

Gilson's work demonstrates how the work of art as aesthetic image can engender flows between memory and matter that lead to the integration of unconscious and conscious psychic contents that may also result cathartic resolution or abreaction of excessive emotion. This is made possible not only by the way in which the artist's practice articulates close *material* connection to place, and commemoration of culture through the intended and representational meanings it signifies, but also to the internal structure of the work as an aesthetic image from which

additional latent meanings emerge. This can be grasped further through a close focus on the structure and formal elements of the work and, in particular, how these articulate a negotiation of space (*place*). Here again there is ambiguity in that the entire picture plane creates the sense of a suffocating lack of space, with the white forms squeezed up against each other until they are ‘falling’ off the edge of the frame. Conversely, the single black form appears to be lost in an infinity of space. The placement of this figure can be interpreted as a mode of determining *locatedness*. I suggest, further, that this locatedness is a crucial counterpoint to the repetition of the white motifs—a *repetition without difference*—that registers something akin to the flashback memory of trauma. I would argue that resolution of the tension of these repetitions is effected when/where the formal or abstract elements become integrated into the aesthetic image as a ‘whole’ allowing narrative elements to emerge. I suggest, further, that it is this movement or moment of transformation towards perception/ representation that gives art or aesthetic experience the capacity to effect the ‘cure’ by restoring the flow of normal images and memory. In conversation, Gilson concurs that transformations that come through the process of making work that makes her ‘feel good’. (Gilson, 2016b)

The power of the aesthetic image lies not only in its capacity to effect transformations of subjectivity through the making of art, but also for such transformation to be transmitted to audiences in the viewing of works. In the second of Gilson’s works to be considered here, the installation work entitled, *Warrongawon Veil (To Mourn the Veil)* (2014–15), empathetic engagement and identification intensify the viewing experience.

Kristeva observes that abjection posits a conception of space and locality that is ambiguous, in that it occurs somewhere between subject and object. (Kristeva, 1982, p. 8). It is not a space of external reality but of psychic reality where different objects can occupy the same place contemporaneously and where subject and object can collapse into each other. Hence abjection as material process gives rise not only to ambiguity, but also to positive and negative affects that dissolve the boundaries between subject and object. It is, thus, also the basis for identification between the viewing subject and the object of the gaze and for the transmission of affects and feelings from the artist to the viewer. This becomes evident in viewing *Warrongawon Veil (To Mourn the Veil)*, where the sense of entrapment and fragility engenders empathetic identification with the veiled figure. Abjection, as it relates to spatiality, also underpins creative production (the meaning and renewing of making), since the aesthetic images that arise from the material processes it articulates involve negotiation and re-negotiation of the *emplacement* of elements that constitute the aesthetic image. This aligns with Bergson’s account of the emergence of memory as an articulation of the relations of distance and location between subject and object. Gilson comments that this work, which took four months to complete, is a response to the abuse suffered by women under religious institutions and marriage and is intended to bring a sense of calmness and healing (Gilson, 2015, pp. 46–47). As an Aboriginal woman, healing is again viewed by the artist in relation to cultural beliefs and a re-connection to Country or place. In this work the markings on the feathers have been replaced with symbols that assert the artist’s cultural identity:



Figure 2: Deanne Gilson,  
*Warrongawon Veil (To Mourn the Veil)* (2014–15). Installation, Keane  
 paperclay raku, wire, wood, tulle.  
 Photograph by the artist.



The veil consists of over seven hundred and fifty clay feathers, imbued with hand carved symbols the traditional marks that I have reclaimed, consisting of the diamond and wave pattern, coupled with the symbol of the circle. The feathers from my totems, Waa the Crow and Bunjil the Eagle are depicted in white and represent ancestral spirit. (2015, p. 47)

I suggest that the healing power of this work also lies in the oscillation between manifest meanings and latent elements produced by psychic processes (abjection) at work during the creative process of making and then triggered, in the viewing of the work, by formal elements of the aesthetic image or internal structuring of the artwork. In the case of this work, it is not only the negotiation of space, but also aspects of scale—and the persistence of the colour white—that intensifies the oscillation between the two.

This does not negate the intentions, cultural imperatives and knowledge that the artist has brought to the making of the work, but indicates material

processes that are anterior to culture and identity, but that are also implicated in the emergence of the image.

The immediate impact in the viewing of *Warrongawon Veil (To Mourn the Veil)* is again a suffocating sense of enclosure and imprisonment and stultifying control. This is effected by the scale of the sculptural figure in relation to the bounded space. Notable too is the persistence of the crucifix motif of the white wooden enclosure against the black background, disrupting associations of domesticity and the security of home conventionally symbolised by the picket fence and emphasized further by the grim spectre of the white cross and darker allusions to racial violence that it connotes.

In this work, scale and the colour white carry a polyphony of meaning. Associations of innocence, purity and fragility are heightened by the slightest touch of blue denoting a ribbon at the top of the veil, giving the 'bridal' figure a child-like quality. This heightens affective empathy and identification with the faceless head, bowed perhaps in shame, and hidden beneath the immensity of the veil. However, compositional elements repeatedly disrupt any closure of meaning and this disruption is as much the result of what is hidden as by what can be seen. Gilson reveals that despite the apparent lightness and fragility of the figure, the clay veil is so heavy 'it's drowning in heaviness' (Gilson, 2016b).

Repetition and the less ordered and diagonal arrangement of some of the feathers, and seemingly innocuous filaments of tulle again in random arrangement around the border of the veil, evoke an uncanny sense of movement, perhaps of a creature about to take flight. Here, scale paradoxically carries connotations of strength and power. The feathers

appear to belong to an un-nameable form: part human, part animal, part spirit or supernatural entity evoking the most primal form of fear, abjection. The underlying symptom of this primal fear has given rise to images of female monsters such as the Medusa's head with its mouth open and head writhing with snakes (Freud, 1981 [1927], p. 354).

I suggest that the figure in *Warrongawon Veil (To Mourn the Veil)* may be construed as the externalisation of a symptom, or internal phobic image, derived from unconscious material processes triggered by trauma. The transformation of abnormal psychic contents into an integrated and locatable narrative framework—*repetition with difference*—is made possible through the art work as symbolic object, and the work that art does as material process. Compulsive repetitions of an immediate and present hallucination is thus replaced by an *emplaced* or locatable object that exists in time: past, present and future possibilities afforded by the aesthetic image and the multiple narratives it engenders. I suggest, further, that it is this double articulation that restores the flows of normal memory leading to the resolution of trauma.

## CONCLUSION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

---

In this paper I have attempted to posit an alternative account of trauma by bringing together psychoanalytic and new materialist perspectives. My aim has been to put forward an explanation of the dynamics of trauma in relation to the intra-actions that involve memory, image and matter as processes of making meaning—and of the crucial implication of place or space as integral to these processes. In doing so, I hope to have overcome some of the aporias related to mimetic and antimimetic accounts of trauma. Moreover, I have attempted to go beyond these explanations, by demonstrating *how* the dynamics of aesthetic experience can lead to cathartic resolution.

I would like to acknowledge the generous contribution of Deanne Gilson to this paper, and thank her for giving me permission to reproduce images of her artwork in the publication of this essay.

## REFERENCES

---

- Atkinson, J. (2002). *Trauma trails, rec-creating song lines: The transgenerational effects of trauma in Indigenous Australia*. North Melbourne: Spinifex Press.
- Barad, K. (2003). Posthumanist performativity: toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28(3), 801–831. Retrieved 18 August 2016 from: <http://humweb.ucsc.edu/feministstudies/faculty/barad/barad-posthumanist.pdf>
- Barrett, E. (2011). *Kristeva reframed: Interpreting key thinkers for the arts*. London, UK: I. B. Tauris.
- Barrett, E. (2013). Materiality, affect and the aesthetic image. In E. Barrett & B. Bolt (Eds). *Carnal knowledge: Towards a “new materialism” through the arts* (pp. 63-73). London, UK: I.B Tauris.
- Bergson, H. (1975). *Mind-Energy: Lectures and essays*. Connecticut: Greenwood Press.
- Bergson, H. (1988). Matter and memory. (N. M. Paul & W. S. Palmer, Trans.) New York: Zone Books.
- Casey, E. S. (2000). *Remembering: A phenomenological study*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Caruth, C. (1995). *Trauma: Explorations in memory*. London: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Fell, E. (2012). Memory transition between communicating agents. *Journal for Communication Studies*, 5(2), 289–309.
- Foley, D. (2003). Indigenous epistemology and Indigenous standpoint theory. *Social Alternatives*, 22(1), 44–50.

- Freud, S. (1920). Part Three: General theory of the Neuroses and XV111. Traumatic fixation—The unconscious. Retrieved 2 September 2016 from: <http://www.bartleby.com/283/18.html>
- Freud, S. (1976 [1900]). *The interpretation of dreams*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin.
- Freud, S. (1981 [1927]). Fetishism. *On Sexuality*, Vol. 7 (pp. 345–357 ). Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Gilson D. (2015). Body of my ancestors: Exploring Wadawurrung dreaming through visual art. (Unpublished Master of Arts thesis). Deakin University, Melbourne.
- Gilson D. (2016a). *Reconciliation* (unpublished artist's statement). 14 March 2016
- Gilson D. (2016b). Conversations with Estelle Barrett. 10 August & 27 October 2016.
- Kovach, M. (2005). Emerging from the Margins. In L Brown and S. Strega (Eds.), *Research as resistance* (pp. 19–36). Toronto: Canadian Scholar's Press.
- Kristeva, J. (1980). Giotto's joy. In Leon S.Roudiez (Ed.), *Desire in language: A semiotic approach to literature and art* (pp. 210–236). (T. Gora, A. Jardine & L. S. Roudiez, Trans.). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay in abjection*. (L S. Roudiez, Trans.) New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kristeva, J. (1984). *Revolution in poetic language* (M. Waller, Trans.; L. S. Roudiez introd.) New York: Columbia University Press.
- Leys, R. (2000). *Trauma: A Genealogy*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press.
- Malabou, C. (2012). *Ontology of the accident: An essay on destructive plasticity*. (C. Shread, Trans.). Cambridge: Polity Press.

- Martin, B. (2013). Immaterial land. In E. Barrett and B. Bolt (Eds.), *Carnal knowledge: Towards a 'New Materialism' through the arts* (pp. 185–204). London and New York: I. B. Tauris.
- Martin K. (2003). Ways of knowing ways of being and ways of doing: A theoretical framework and methods for Indigenous re-search and Indigenist research. *Journal of Australian Studies*, 76, 203–234.
- Perri, T. (2014). Bergson's philosophy of memory. *Philosophy Compass*, 9(2), 837–847. Retrieved 2 February 2015 from Wiley Online Library: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/phc3.v9.12/issuetoc>
- Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. Dunedin: University of Otago Press.
- Wilson, S. (1999). Recognising the importance of spirituality in Indigenous learning. Retrieved 23 March 2015 from: <http://acea.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Shawn-Wilson-paper.pdf>

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

---

This article is based upon work from COST Action IS1307 New Materialism: Networking European Scholarship on 'How Matter Comes to Matter' supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

---

**Estelle Barrett /**  
 Deakin University /  
 Institute of Koorie Education /  
 e.barrett@deakin.edu.au

Estelle Barrett is Professor and HDR Coordinator at the Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University. She has co-edited three books with Barbara Bolt: *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry* (I. B. Tauris, 2007; reprinted 2010), *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a 'New Materialism' Through the Arts*, (I. B. Tauris, 2013) and *Material Inventions: Applying Creative Research* (I. B. Tauris, 2014). Barrett has published reviews and articles in *Real Time*, *Artlink*, *Text*, *Social Semiotics*, *Double Dialogues*, *Studies in Material Thinking*, *The International Journal of Critical Arts*, *the Journal of Visual Arts Practice*, *Zetesis*, and *Cultural Studies Review*. Her monograph, *Kristeva Reframed: Interpreting Key Thinkers for the Arts* (2011), examines the relevance of *Kristevan thought for the creative arts* and artistic research. Barrett is a Research Fellow of the International Centre for Fine Arts Research Birmingham University.

## STUDIES IN MATERIAL THINKING

[www.materialthinking.org](http://www.materialthinking.org)

ISSN: 1177-6234

Auckland University of Technology  
 First published in April 2007,  
 Auckland, New Zealand.  
 Copyright © Studies in Material  
 Thinking and the author.

All rights reserved. Apart from fair dealing for the purposes of study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the applicable copyright legislation, no part of this work may be reproduced by any process without written permission from the publisher or author. For permissions and other inquiries, please contact the Editor: <materialthinking@aut.ac.nz>

## STUDIES IN MATERIAL THINKING

is a peer-reviewed research journal supported by an International Editorial Advisory Group. The journal is listed in: the Australian ERA 2012 Journal List (Excellence in Research for Australia); the Danish Bibliometric Research Index; and the Norwegian register of approved scientific journals, series and publishers.