Drawing with light in borderlands: A phenomenological case study of the use of photography in psychological recovery

Olive Kane*

Introduction

This is a story about walking away from writing an autoethnography for my Masters in Psychotherapy and Counselling; it is also a story about photography and the natural world continuing to heal a cross-cultural and intergenerational trauma. Gilmore (2001, p.15) talks about 'limit cases' providing insights into trauma and healing whether they 'extend, complicate, supplement, or challenge' accepted therapeutic paradigms. I present a detailed selection of phenomenological information from my 'case' and utilise neurobiological reasoning which collectively elicit a consideration of creative and ecopsychological expression as equal, *not adjunctive*, to verbal forms of expression.

The Tree of Phnom Bok

'Stand there and photograph that', she commanded.

My non-compliance and dismay confused her, a malfunction on the conveyor belt of pixel-hungry tourists. I imagined myself objectified in her eyes, another privileged white westerner consuming her heritage; a culture captured and carried away in dislocated rectangles, pixels to be prized and pixels to be obliterated. I realised that I too was objectifying her, my experiential wishes suspended silently in the reverent memory of a genocide and respecting our young Cambodian guide. A nameless tourist harbouring the psychological remnants of a collapsed system. A remote incoherence of debris and desolation. Her story or mine? She did not know that my psychological endurance test had unceremoniously ground to a halt. So very tired. Tired of our façades. I found the words to explain that there had been a misunderstanding, that the majestic temples were not what I was looking for.

My cultural deference had always been there, a subservience, an honour. I knew where it came from and I also knew what secrets it could hide. The shadow of culture lurked in the background as our guide mapped our itinerary to avoid peoples and cultures she deemed unworthy, 'dirty', 'disrespectful' she stated. I recalled being sixteen, another voice, the disquieting militance of a fourteen-year old girl from war-torn Yugoslavia. A passage into friendship with my Eastern European-peers opened as my mother was plucked from obscurity; her mother-tongue called upon to translate for the refugees who arrived in two coaches at the end of our road in our Northern England suburb. Serbo-Croat? No, you don't say

Tree of Phnom Bok

that anymore. An impossible cross-fire of public and personal priorities with my mother's family-of-origin not here, but there, in the war-zone. My mother's fearsome expression was more foreboding than her commands about who I should not talk to. I was under surveillance and there were rules. Generational and intergenerational narratives colliding in an ancient lesson of enmity which I did not want to learn.

The next day our guide arrived, her abandoned uniform signalling that things were going to be different. She said she had an idea, it was a place that she had found with her friends. Finally free of the stifling throng and with a spirit of adventure, we bounced off the tourist map and into the untamed distance, my sense of relief expanding in all directions as we travelled out then up a final ascent of almost a thousand steps.

I sat down and sank into the metamorphic vision. There was never a more perfect tree, roots abundantly nourished by stone. Out of reach, the tree answered again by tippling some petals to the ground. I picked up a couple from the dusty ground and inhaled their scent deeply. It was beautiful. A long and languid exposure, satiated and at peace, I picked up my camera. The word *photography* derives from a Greek term which translates literally as *drawing with light*, and it was this light that I needed more than anything, the sun at its highest, not a pictorially pleasing dawn or dusk but an abundant life-giving luminous light, a light that can perform miracles. A light that can sketch a tree from stone.

The camera as experiential 'medicine'

Photography authorship bloomed in the West in the 1970's, with John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972), Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (1977) and Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* (1981). Amidst the semiotics and politics of image-making, something else was demanding attention. Sontag (ibid. p.154) outlined it as 'the trace, something directly stencilled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask'. Barthes (ibid.) took things further, offering a new metaphysical language: that the physical object of the photographic film or print contains some materiality of the other and that his gaze will in turn touch the photograph; that he himself will physically be able to connect with his beloved dead mother. Whilst Marder (2012 p.157) deploys an ecclesiastical reference point of 'photography transubstantiat(ing) the body of the referent and transport(ing) it through space and time' to critique and undermine Barthes's supposition, Elkins (2011, p.49) manages to transpose this question of alchemy into a more accessible question of materiality: whether 'the material of art is transfigured into meaning or materiality a hypostasis of meaning into substance?'. The latter resonates. My quest to find these trees, trees which transcend and contextualize the ephemerality of human occupation in every sense, is primarily an experiential 'medicine'. The need to imprint through photography feels like an instinct to distil that experience into something which provides ongoing sustenance. Digital pixels are insubstantial for me, like transitory footprints in the sand. The materiality is central. It is a physical need to be able to get hold of the substance of the mark making film or print object with my hands, to physically make something new, a tangible reality - fossilised footprints. Filtered through a series of computers, the image here loses its metaphysical potency and the original sensorial experience is faint, but critically the digitised format retains its metaphoric content. Therein, at the private level, my *Tree of Phnom Bok* is a symbol of impossibility surmounting the reality of a black hole. Within a wider and wilder geological frame, it makes no claim for earth, it offers a third position, a productive space which holds *integrative* knowledge. Bhabha's (2004) ideology comes to mind, an honouring of 'in-between' cultures. I feel at home there.

There is the kinaesthetic act too. In geographical terms photography demands movement of my whole body to new terrains, new trees with the promise of new potentials. In physically finding my *Tree of Phnom Bok* and seeing that life is possible from a seemingly impossible premise, not only existence but something beautiful and awe inspiring, new somatic markers (Damasio, 2010) of growth amidst adversity are established. A new internalised memory upon which I can draw hope; a way to move forward. Then I use my hands. My camera is big, old and heavy. When

I hold it at the level of my stomach it centres itself like a kind of gyroscope, it centres me. Positioned precisely between external and internal worlds, it is a very safe space, a perfect parasympathetic partner. I now realise why meditation or other internal practices proved contraindicative for me. Divorced from the broader foundation of an ecological context and alone with an interiority which has experienced psychological invasion there is a sense of falling off balance. This splitting off from the materiality of the world, my materiality, induces a dizziness, a nausea; I can feel the gravitational pull and the event horizon is dangerously in view. As meditation and mindfulness are promoted in the West as wellbeing panaceas I am curious about my seeming outlier status. Rothschild (2000) underlines the dangers of state-dependent recall where proprioceptive nerves become operant, and highlights individuals who are experiencing post-traumatic stress symptoms as particularly susceptible. There are two operant factors for me: the closing of my eyes which are my primary grounding sense and the detachment from reality which has similar geographical markers to the liminal terrain of being on the receiving end of my mother's paranoid psychosis. My experience is significant as I discover it adds to the accumulating evidence of meditation and mindfulness practice blind spots, with dangers being identified as scales of anxiety, dissociation, depersonalisation and derealisation to severe psychotic episodes at worst (Lustyk et al., 2009; Hanley et al., 2016; Lindahl et al., 2017).

Re-entry

'Show, not tell'. Seven months earlier, this powerful literary convention was perhaps the biggest mistake I made. But isn't that what one should do to make an autoethnography compelling and vivid for the reader? Alarm bells rang in the distance when my partner's

Re-entry

Yamadori

voice punctuated the darkness; 'are you okay, the bed's shaking?' It had crept in - my nerves rattled silently. I should have paid more attention when I almost passed out in a mindfulness session billed as 'guaranteed to reduce anxiety' by the psychotherapist facilitating the session. I knew I had gone too far when I found myself vomiting in the middle of the night.

This article requires me to write something so that my photographs make sense to others. The writing process must be better this time; *better* as in the literary origin of the word, *healthier.* Not only a sharing of insight but an exercise in writing safely. I shall not follow literary conventions because that may be good for you but it is not for me; I shall

approach it from the side, and perhaps zig-zag my way across and sometimes disappear for a while. Yet this description is too pedestrian. If I am to share my experience about managing intergenerational trauma it will make more sense to suggest a visual of a black hole and my relationship to it. After twenty years, I have arrived at an understanding that no answers are to be found in the black hole, it is a merciless abyss and psychotherapy is not magic. Psychotherapy cannot deny the vortex of a mother's psychosis, the unspeakable horror of war or a beguiling undisclosed history. Psychotherapy cannot make a black hole disappear. What it has done is help me as an individual to understand the properties of a black hole and how to reposition myself in relation to it. It has been about becoming a better pilot, understanding the geography of the mind, knowing what to do when the gravity starts to pull, knowing what thrusters to use, how to accelerate away, and who to speak to in mission control. It has been about knowing how to navigate to a different galaxy entirely and finally land back on Earth.

So, this time I shall not descend to *show* you the deep dark interior of the 'claustrum' (Klein, 1997; Meltzer, 1992; Willoughby, 2001) or psychic invasion which is the closest psychological description I have found of the disturbingly unnatural sensation of being on the receiving end of my mother's psychosis; of containing my mother as a young adult then adult 'proper'. I shall not detail the emotional and somatic impact. This time I shall *tell* you that I took a photograph which I have entitled 'Yamadori' (Kane, 2010) and invite you to contemplate it closely if you wish to understand something of the nature of control. Yamadori is a Japanese term which cannot be translated in a straightforward manner. On the surface it means a tree collected from a mountainside, but this does not convey the subtle allusion to its essence; that it is a tree weathered and shaped by the forces of nature and time. In a confounding paradox, the bonsai master is attempting to both emulate and control nature. But, what I wish to underline here, this time, is the facticity of my seeking and photographing the tree; outside of the dynamic – getting to understand it. No longer the object but a witness.

When I look back I can see that the autoethnography was giving centrality to a story which needed to be de-centralized; that had in fact been de-centralized. This is key: through the autoethnographic process I was inadvertently reconstructing the experience of psychological invasion from my mother who had been diagnosed with paranoid psychosis at the onset of the civil war in Yugoslavia; a state which sustained for twenty years. It was a state which held my family in England silently hostage and our revered Yugoslavian counterparts oblivious. When I started my psychotherapy and counselling training, the securing of the *right* personal psychotherapist felt critical. I saw two counsellors in my mid-twenties. They were kind, but there was little psychological movement. The talking was insufficient. One seemed at a loss in responding to a passport sized photograph of my mother which had found its way into my bag; my relationship to that photo was the antithesis of Barthes's relationship to the photo of his mother. It frightened me, both the physical object and my mother's expression within. The counsellor appeared at a loss and after a few weeks suggested putting it in a drawer. My blasphemous and terrified phantasies remained silent. I needed somebody who was comfortable with liminal space, who understood the terrain and the tools required to navigate it. Fifteen years later I finally found a path to a wise and resourceful body-oriented psychotherapist with whom I worked at a deep embodied and creative level over four years to finally reclaim my freedom. My image 'Re-entry' represents some of this process. Maynard (1997) underlines the importance of *not* basing sign theories on linguistic theories, that is, separating the act of mark-making from its meaning and I suggest this approach when observing the image. The process is not cognitive and the content of the 2D image is not simply to be read. I began creating the image in 2013 with a canvas I painted black like space. Then the first symbol, the deployment of an important photograph of a re-entry capsule I had taken within a museum in 2007. The creative process utilised my entire body with created and found images being photographed, re-worked, transported to other countries and re-photographed. This particular image was a work in progress over a two-year period, with

each step revealing itself organically and requiring geographical movement in both physical and psychological senses. There is something notable about these long spans of time, when psychological stressors endure; the ongoing nature of my personal photography and creating mirroring the relentless managing of something unmanageable. This material output informed my psychotherapy and in turn my psychotherapist both witnessed and supported the evolution of my material.

Lury (1998, p.163) refers to the camera as 'a perceptual prothesis', a formulation which resonates closely with the way that I utilise this tool. The mechanics of this prothesis bears attention as the camera replicates the way that the human eye and brain receive and process external visual information almost identically. In simplified terms: 1. The camera lens (cornea) focuses the light reflected off an external object and creates the first impression of an image onto the camera film (retina); 2. The film is processed in chemicals to create a negative (retina converts the light into electrochemical signals); 3. The negative is physically transported to a darkroom location to be printed (the optic nerve transports the electrochemical signals to the brain, specifically the thalamus which formulates a mental image). 4. The thalamus relays sensory signals to the amygdala and prefrontal cortex where respective personal memories/emotions and reasoning associate an emotional response to the image. Here, the camera and visual system notably converge with the thalamus doing the same job whether assigning an emotional response to the final photographic print or the perceived external sight. The entire process is significant as it underlines the precedence of image alongside other sensory input in constructing autobiographical narratives before the brain assigns cognitive thought and literary commentary (Hass-Cohen and Loyd, 2008; Damasio, 2010). It is the decisive and powerful act of creating new sensorial-based mental images upon which an autobiography is authored. It is the realisation that we are not merely passive recipients of historical experiences, but owners and authors in the present. The impact is at the same time physiological and psychological.

Beyond the making of photographs, the spatio-psychological properties (Schore, 2007; Gibbons, 2009) of existing photographs offer emotional experimentation. Within my general research of intergenerational trauma, some literary accounts of The Holocaust made me sick. It is the case with any direct replications of genocide or extreme violation of human rights - where there is only unspeakable horror and all hope at that time has gone. Whilst the recording of history is unquestionably critical to our progress as mankind, it seems of the essence that there is a response, a movement forward. It was a relief to unearth Jablonskis's (2004) extraordinary film *Fotoamator = Photographer*. Baer (2002, p.178) conceptualizes this reorientation, noting critically Jablonskis's 'reshooting' rather than the 'reshowing' of a portfolio of Nazi photographs from the Łódź Ghetto; that Jablonskis's camera is attempting to 'unfreeze instances of humiliation'. From the apparently static truth of historical photographs - a folding of time; it is a remarkable intergenerational achievement, a masterclass in reclaiming power. Global case-studies of creative representation at the community level teach us further about ways of responding to international human rights violations beyond the traditional conception of two people talking in a room (Connolly, 2012; Eyerman, 2013; Liem, 2007; Yusin, 2009). It is a practice seen in *participatory photography* where organisations such as PhotoVoice facilitate projects around the world to support those traditionally objectified in front of the camera to change position, to get behind the camera, to hold it for themselves, to reclaim ownership of their being and consciously author their own lives. Transcending language barriers, participatory photography is a markedly apposite therapeutic and empowering tool within our evolving social landscapes.

Untitled

There were conflicting stories about my mother's reasons for leaving her homeland, why she didn't teach her native tongue to us as children born in England, why she changed religion. We don't know how this interacted with her enforced immobilisation and helplessness in distant view of the horrific civil

war in her homeland and its impact upon her family of origin - my kin, or how the war catalysed the psychosis and all of the miseries that that entailed. Ill-fated from the outset, this investigation was not meant to be; all sense of my need to understand these public and personal narratives evaporated as the final chapter of my mother's story was revealed with the abrupt news that she was dying with a metastatic cancer.

Supportive words of my Masters' dissertation supervisor, clinical supervisor, counselling manager and personal tutor were rendered ineffective. The Yamadori matrix functioning at critical mass, there was simply no choice but to stop, stop it all. I stopped my autoethnography, walked away from my course and left my counselling job.

Then nothing.

Just before I left my job, a fellow counsellor asked if I knew about Sebastião Salgado and the film about his life, *Salt of the Earth* (Wenders & Salgado, 2014). When interested in photography, it is almost impossible to be unaware of this eminent and deeply humanistic Brazilian photographer. What I wasn't aware of was his story of physical and psychological recovery following decades of being immersed in and photographing humanities most harrowing ills; 'We are a ferocious animal. We humans are terrible animals. Our history is a history of war. It's an endless story, a tale of madness' (ibid.). The horrifying reality of the Rwandan Genocide in the early nighties was his finishing blow. The film is both a moving account of Salgado's working life in photographs and the means by which he stopped photographing images of horror and restored his soul through returning to the earth. What happened is remarkable. In partnership with his wife Léila Wanick Salgado, he embarked upon an epic project of reforesting 15,000 acres of environmentally decimated and desert-like land on and around what had been his father's farm within the Rio Doce Valley in Brazil (a snapshot of industrial and political will with the widespread deforestation of the Amazon Rainforest commencing in the 1970's). Forming a community, non-profit, non-governmental organization, Salgado and his wife engaged the local community in collectively nurturing over four million seedlings. After fifteen years, the result of the subsequent communal planting was the growth of an astonishing, thriving subtropical rainforest (Instituto Terra, 2018). This rebirthing of the natural world enabled Salgado to pick up his camera again, this time to experience his camera as a tool for recovery, to photograph growth and life in a mammoth global photographic project entitled 'Genesis' (Wenders and Salgado, 2013).

At a time of personal desolation when all that was left to do was find solace in woodland, Salgado's story was both a balm and inspiration. It offers an example of the healing properties of an ecopsychological approach. It also shows the capacity for creativity and growth when people come together. I return to the start of Salgado's photographic story, to face the repeated international horrors which he experienced. I think about the fractured emotional legacies and cultural shadows which are being passed on intergenerationally and reflect upon facing the challenge of balancing cultural identity and integration paradigms without apotheosising either. I think of the multi-cultural groups of young people with whom I've worked; fears and prejudice leaking out across the cultural board. I think about the conceptual and practical *peace* seedlings which are in desperate need of attention far beyond the therapy room.

Discussion

The evidence for talking therapies is abundant. Yet it is important to remain critical of the academic bias mirrored in our standardised form of academic and scientific representation: journals, books, articles - in other words talking in text where self-referencing and 'exclusive' loops thrive. This bias can be seen in the research design of the work of Hinton and Lewis-Fernández (2011) employed by the APA to investigate the deficits in cross-cultural applicability of DSM PTSD criteria to then inform DSM-V, with literature searches limited to English language and cultural variation oxymoronically constrained by 'limiting the sample a priori to the symptoms already included in the official nosology' (ibid. p.790).

If we think of ourselves as an ethical field, at the sensorial level, we must ensure that we do not replicate these errors, that we are not inadvertently

constructing a self-referential paradigm; borders between our senses - splitting off sensorial forms of expression such as movement, art, theatre, dance, sculpture, design, film, music, photography or anything else into exotic and marginalised silos. I suggest that an understanding of the neurobiology of vision, alongside all other senses, is vital to improving the efficacy of authoring new narratives in psychotherapy as it helps to update a century old frame of reference which has held talking as central to improving mental health; a form of expression which is distinctly incompatible when used in isolation with our developing insights into 'the silence' associated with trauma (Audergon, 2004; Yusin, 2009; Marder, 2012; Cizmic, 2012; Connolly, 2012; Frankish and Bradbury, 2013; Kačkutė, 2015). This sensorial understanding asks us to challenge in ourselves as practitioners and in our clients the meaningless words 'I am not creative', where creativity is simply the generation of something new in any expressive form, including speech. If we collude with this, we are in danger of splitting off our own capacities and a client's ability to access our and their full sensorial resources which precede the vital cognition and talking which follows.

In walking away from my autoethnography, I walked away from the academic badge of a Master's degree within my psychotherapy and counselling training, which in other literary spheres may have disqualified my input. I wish to acknowledge *Self & Society* for inviting me to share my story. I fear my insights risk further discreditation through my anonymity as a 'professional'. I clarify here that I do not share my name as I occupy both client and qualified psychotherapist identities, where in research terms, the former's identity is securely guarded. In addition, I write about my mother who is both dead, and when alive vehemently rejected the paranoid psychosis diagnosis deemed applicable by two psychiatrists. I protect my mother's identity in respect of the whole of her person; the good and healthy parts of her life when I was a child, which are not discussed here. But mostly, I protect identity as the family context resides. It feels like an ethical minefield.

The author is a masters level photography practitioner-facilitator and qualified psychotherapist and counsellor, with a special interest in the emotional development of young people and young adults at individual and community levels beyond the therapy room. Working as a specialist mental health mentor for students across three HE institutions in Oxford and pastoral and behavioural lead on community residential programmes in Berkshire. Previously counsellor; creative course leader within an alternative curriculum setting and photography lecturer in FE and HE settings within Yorkshire. Independently developing a therapeutic, nature-based photography provision.

* Olive Kane is a pseudonym. Olive can be contacted via Dr Gillian Proctor. Email: g.m.proctor@leeds.ac.uk

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