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# The Powerful Whispers Project: A box of family photographs as archival site of post-memory and the 'trace'

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## Abstract

The Powerful Whispers Project documents the archive of artefacts, artistic responses, critical analysis, examined and generated, as responses to a personal archive: a box of family photographs documenting the Wilson family from the Victorian era to the 1980s. The artworks arising from the studied archive have been exhibited internationally under the collective name of 'The Powerful Whispers Project', an ongoing fibre-based series of works integrating digital and haptic technologies. The works explore the trace of memory, post-memory and the representation of post-memory using photographic archival materials and family narrative and memory.

The artworks establish a correlation between the concept of the material as fabric and the material as representation exploring the integration of the family in image, material culture and as a series of objects. Critical analysis positions the debate within the field of post memory in making and culture, appropriating images and the sensual in fibre and fabric, to expand the exploration of the fragmentary and the half remembered in Deleuzian folds in time and space.

The Powerful Whispers Project considers the remembered object and the remembered image of post-memory in relation to discourses on the concept of the surreal object and the phantasmagoria of memory, informed by Derrida's 'undeciderability' of the archive, the phantasmagoria of the archival image and literature on memory and post-memory by Jo Spence, Annette Kuhn, Marianne Hirsch, Patricia Holland and Joan Gibbons.

## Keywords

Visual Art, Archive, Cultural Memory, Post Memory, Material Culture

## Introduction

My mother's parents lived in Bramley, a suburb of Leeds in West Yorkshire, England, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A working-class family of the time my grandmother was a fine worsted mender at Airedale mill in Rodley next to the Leeds and Liverpool canal where we, as small children, would go fishing for 'tiddlers'. My grandfather was a tanner at the Turner Tanning Company in Bramley. The back to back working class terrace they lived in had a cold stone basement cellar used as a cool store pantry before the invention or affordability of refrigerators, which acted alternatively as a bomb shelter during the second world war war. There was a small living room and kitchen on the

ground floor and two small rooms upstairs. In my memory the house had toilets although the outside toilet buildings were still there they are now used as outhouses, spaced between every two houses, with a gate and yard to each double toilet block. The early to mid-twentieth century appears to me now a life of ritual and routine with Saturday football at the Old Boys Club and Monday was washing day; the whole street filled with sheets and clothes like quotidian bunting for a weekly coronation. All very discreet though, with no 'smalls' hanging on the line. Each house had an attic and I seem to recall my mother used to tell of how these were all connected at one time and you could walk from one attic to another. The attic, a space of mystery, held forgotten stories and secrets as in children's books and faery tales; a monster under the bed or strange lands through hidden doors, magical routes to other worlds. A large wardrobe full of clothes once worn but now forgotten, handmade dresses created by skills now lost, thrifted and remade during the war, those no longer fitting, shaped as memories of former times and other people, stood forlorn now in the corner. As Stallybrass states the wardrobe in memory and reality is an archive of ghosts waiting to step out to "appall us, haunt us, perhaps even console us" (Stallybrass 2016, 72). These clothes told stories of presence and intimacy recalling past lives lived through sight, touch and smell (Crewe 2017, 125). The attic was filled with a large bed with quilted, crafted and crocheted covers and the dressing table was filled with memory objects, forgotten objects, mythical objects, objects with stories, old hairbrushes, hand mirrors, shoes and inlaid boxes. These scenes are now preserved in fading memories of my childhood where oneiric objects bring about subconscious remembrance through an appropriated play of analogies that embrace a synaesthesia of evocative forms. Floating images as liquid memories dissolved in the fluid of the past (Bachelard 2012, 59, Svankmajer 2009, 39, Lehmann 2007, 30).

In the attic was a garment box from the department store Schofields; a large retail store that traded from 1901 to 1996 regarded, for much of the twentieth century, as the pinnacle of shopping in Leeds. I recall as a small child visiting the shoe department to have my feet measured by kindly assistants in small vice like measures before purchasing a new pair of Start Rite school shoes. The Schofields garment box, originally holding a newly purchased wedding dress, contained a wealth of family photographs and memorabilia such as post cards and letters going back to the early days of photography when the practice of taking a photograph was an event in which each member of the family would dress in their 'Sunday best' on one special day and visit the town centre to solemnly stand next to arrangements of antic pillars in poses that they had practised for days in front of the mirror (Seabrook 1991, 179-180).

The collection of images found in the box of photographs from the 1850's to the 1980's is now a closed archive that, since my grandmother's death in the early nineties, has had nothing added and nothing taken away. It provides clues to lives that many of the family still living have no concept of and, those that do, have fading memories of the times they capture in their sepia and fading greys. It has become a form of material culture linking the familial past to present only through a post memory relating to metaphors and narratives of a past which now structures our sense of family

and identity, “a centre of fantasy – of romantic social fantasy” that both conceals and reveals a politics of the social and the everyday (Holland 1991, 14). The box of family photographs as an archive for reflection, creative investigation and re-evaluation through expressive imagination becomes a site of discourse in which there arises the consequences of a material culture that generates archives; a materiality through which we understand ourselves. The material archive and the collecting of objects and images in society, community and culture are embedded in everyday practices that contribute to the formation and the later loss of a person, family, community and society (Miller 2016, 136). In the same way the collection exists as the ‘stuff’ of memory that recall the “traces left by the person in the social matrix” (Miller 2016, 146). The everyday stuff of our lives become the power objects of material culture that intimately reveal the narratives of the social, political and cultural identities and belonging. The intimacy of clothing and textile, figures and setting in photographic emulsion and paper are as cadavers and echoes of past experiences and forgotten memories. The elements pictured within and the photographs as artefacts themselves are the subject and object narratives of biographies, autobiographies, genealogies and memories possessing a material link to the lives that look out from the old layers of chemical coated paper (Healy 2016, 94, Pain 2014, 103).

The images in the archive now take the form of post-memory experiences, stilled moments captured, telling stories of landscapes and peoples that are now only imagined. Photographic images that represent the human desire to still the movement of time and like a time traveller journey back to earlier lives and loves known or only acquainted with through the image. *Itself* (Warner 2012, 198-202). The ladies in big hats and the men in blazers, as my Aunt remembered them, become visionary beings forming a mythic narrative that, as Campbell states, has four functions; a mystical function and a cosmological function both of which serve a sense of our own mortality, a sociological function that validates a social order and a pedagogical function that teaches about ourselves whilst understanding those who have gone before us (Campbell 2001, 31). In taking out the fading prints that range from small passport photographs to worn and ragged studio shots from the early days of the town centre photographer of the Victorian era it appears that the past is another place “situated elsewhere, and both time and place are impregnated with a sense of unreality” (Bachelard 2012, 60).

## Grandpa Brown’s treasure

The ladies in their big hats would head out for their promenades on a Sunday with the men equally suited in large top hats. There are pictures of the mill buildings and a large house with an extensive lawn and one particular image of two men holding up the oars of a rowing boat on a boating lake. It seemed an ideal life in Victorian England for the Brown family. The family myth tells of Great Great Grandpa Brown, who had several wives including Agar, who had a face as stern as her name, and the mill that he bought with the wealth that he amassed from his investments in the American railroad. As a small child I would imagine him in the Wild West walking into saloon bars as the iron road

made its way from east to west, New York to California via Washington, Virginia and the central plains, and often walking down Broadway with ladies on his arm bustling in the busy streets of ephemeral New York; a Victorian metropolis of contrast both progressive and unstable. As children we would create our own stories around the legacy of Grandpa Brown's treasure. My Grandma had an old painting called 'Hop Pickers in Kent' from the late nineteenth century by a Leeds artist of some renown. She sold this in the late 1970's much to the dismay of her sisters and brothers as the artwork belonged to all of them. She only received a small sum of two hundred pounds for the painting and they all thought it was worth much more. Unfortunately, the artwork would have been valued much higher if it was a scene from Leeds, industrial scenes of the North of England, the type of painting the artist had been famous for, rather than a minor work picturing Kent, rural southern England. In our childhood imagination and, now, family mythic consciousness Grandpa Brown's treasure is stitched into the back of the painting for some unsuspecting picture framer to later reveal as the work was rehung. Or maybe the treasure was in the 'Mary Cow'? The 'Mary Cow' is something I have never seen but it is said to be passed down through the line of Mary's within the family and is a ceramic cow. From what I've heard my cousin Sarah has it now. Her middle name is Mary. It would be passed onto her by her mother Joyce, my mother's sister, again with the middle name Mary. Or maybe the Mary Cow is broken or lost.

The truth is more mundane than the mythologised fictions we tell and the narratives exposed within the photographic images are as fragile as the fibres that connect the print and dye with which I work in my creative practice as a visual artist working in textiles and fibres. Great Grandpa Brown never went to America although he did invest in the American railroad. He probably bought shares from a stockbroker in Bramley or Leeds, and, in what was the nineteenth century equivalent of 'making a killing on the stock exchange', was very pleased when his investment paid off. He did buy the mill with its extensive grounds and boating lake and the Sundays, which the photographs record, are true frozen moments of certain salad days in the sun. Great Grandpa Brown was no mill owner or business man and he lost all his money and the mill very quickly and the family myth of Grandpa Brown's treasure has become a story that we recall at family parties in different ways; a mythic telling that binds the modern sense of a splintering family, social and community consciousness through the everyday complexities of contemporary social relationships and separations.

## The truth is stranger than fiction

The family album in modern society is a dying form of material culture where now society is living in a world full of virtual images floating in an ephemeral space. The constant exposure to this visual spectacle is changing our connection to the frozen moment and democratising the image. The archive of family memories and the narratives these frozen moments in time recall reach across a timeline of technologies and reflect the social implications of those

technologies. The early photographs, where the extended family groups travelled to the studios dressed in their finest clothes in later years became the frozen moments of happy holidays captured by the seaside photographer who took your photo and sold the image back to you. These pictures of parents holding hands with children, young people with the Morecambe breeze in their hair and young parents pushing prams are always caught in the action of walking taken by the seaside photographer who would take your photograph and later in the day sell you the print as a souvenir of your day by the sea. Later in the family album, as new technologies evolve, the family photographs each other at celebrations, graduations, birthday parties and weddings or days on the beach where the nine-year-old boy in striped short pants is throwing sand around and looking happy although I remember it as always being cold. Reflecting on her own family albums in the eighties Spence suggests that the family album is a symbolic representation of an idealised concept of family and that the family album tells us more about what was considered appropriate in picture making and the constraints of technology and methods of image making at a historical time. Rather than document the social, political and family relations they document universal lives and the everyday within a certain time frame of the familiar gaze with little indication of the more intimate social relations between the family, how the family behaved towards each other, their conflicts and contradictions (Spence 1991, 203-4, Kuhn 2002, 15-16). In one holiday photograph my mother is around seventeen walking happily along the promenade on the annual holiday in Morecambe. I once asked her why the family especially my grandparents were always in the habit of going to Morecambe when Scarborough and the East Coast of England was nearer. She said that the East Coast was bombed during the war and the west coast was safer. In the Morecambe picture my mother walks next to my grandfather. My grandmother often criticised my grandfather and I remember her calling him a "silly old man". It is said that my grandmother was 'a good time girl' and enjoyed going out dancing before she got married. There was a dance hall in Leeds by the station which they would go to on a Saturday afternoon. My grandmother realised she was pregnant before they were married and my grandfather and grandmother were consequently married, as one would have to in those days. Unfortunately, she lost the baby and probably the relationship between them was never the same again. My mother suffered with depression for much of her life and we can probably trace the root of her condition back to experiences from her childhood and her relationship with her mother. In reflection it appears that the archive of photos is a weaving together of times and spaces in an ever folding and unfolding as we occasionally take the images from the box and they fold together and unfold in their telling to reveal new stories and questions and expose more beneath their surfaces. As a visual artist working in textile surfaces and imagery on fibre, created fabric forms and innovations with materials and materiality, printed and embellished and manipulated the processes create an analogy with the passages of time and history as cited by Deleuze in his study of Leibniz and the Baroque where the fold is not only the billowing and flaring of clothing and cloth but the folding and unfolding of time and space hiding some aspects of the world and revealing others at different times (Deleuze 2011, 206-159). Derrida expresses this "undecidability" of the archive in *Archive Fever* when he states that the archive is a contradiction. When we look for the archive, its desire for

return, homesickness and the return to an origin is precisely where the archive slips away into an “anarchive”; bringing about the death of what it represents (Derrida 2017, 90-93). As the mill workers that both my paternal and maternal grandmothers were and myself as a creative practitioner and critical thinker working with the family archive I perceive myself as a fine mender in fabric, image and forms working with the faults in the fabric of material culture. In the same way that fabric has a softness and fragility the images I create and create as a new reformation of the archive recall the fading of memory and the everyday idealised images and decisive moments that create the family’s identity disappearing into myth as each moment folds in on the other and the surface image hides the faults and folds in the conflicts and contradictions of the past (Spence 1991, 203-4).

As a conceptual project the photographs as an archive for creative interpretation and representation and the corresponding artworks that have developed from it have come to be named ‘Powerful Whispers’. Over several years from 2012 until her death in November 2017 my mother living in a care home and, during several visits, she told us she was writing the story of ‘Powerful Whispers’. To her ‘Powerful Whispers’ was a multi faith support group for women in Keighley, England, where she did much work for the local community and charities. In reflecting on its contents to me the archive is a ‘powerful whisper’. It tells stories and provides evidence in the form of a collection of material culture from the wedding dress box to the smallest passport photograph that spans over one hundred years. Now, all in the family who remember the earliest people represented in the photographs are gone, and we rely on post memory and other evidence to reveal new stories in what Kuhn calls a “phantasmagoria of memory”; a “collage of memory images and memory sounds” that draw on a commonly held store of visual and auditory currency which in the cultural consciousness are “strangely familiar” (Kuhn 2002, 31). Kuhn goes on to propose five ways that memory, and, I would also argue, post memory, constructs texts in visual texts, the creative crafts of making and textual media; memory shapes our inner worlds, memory acts in producing meaning, photographs as memory texts have their own formal conventions, memory texts voice a collective imagination, memory embodies both union and fragmentation and memory is formative of family, society, community and ultimately nationhood.

## Powerful whispers

“Family photographs may affect to show us our past, but what we do with them – how we use them – is really about today, not yesterday” (Kuhn 2012,189)

In the body of creative work being produced in the Powerful Whispers project the images reframe post memory recollections from material culture blowing the images up in scale to create large abstractions that become icons representing existential authenticity as large as in life and sometimes bigger as if we can engage with them in the photographic studio of the late nineteenth century but now their voices are silent unless we can animate them through

the memory image (Gibbons 2013, 79). In the most recent works in progress sounds integrated into the works build relationships between time; mill shuttles booming and rattling captured from the Victorian working-class mill environment and ambient sounds of life alongside poetic reminiscences mixed with ambient sounds of the breathing of the viewers and footsteps on the gallery floor. Post memory is defined by Gibbons as the inheritance of past events or experiences that are still being worked through and agrees with Hirsch in post memories construction as secondary memory by progressive generations (Gibbons 2013, 73). Gibbons argues that post memory is a form of social memory which often discloses what has been inhibited by previous generations. In this way Hirsch also states that the power of photographic images and their creative representation and exploration through material culture lies not in their “evocation of memory” but in their “prescience of history we cannot assimilate” (Hirsch 2016, 41). In evoking post memory, the fragility of fibres captures the worn and fraying temporality of the photographic image suggesting at each moment that the past will disappear in another fold of time and each grain of light and dark on the photographic paper being as transient and temporary but as meaningful as the textile that becomes worn into the shape of the human body and becomes one with the identity, body, being and belonging of the wearer. In a collection of images produced through technology where light effects photo sensitive emulsion through chemical processes photographic archives are fertile spaces of memories and emotions with sociological meaning arising from their interplay (Dyens 2012, 75). In the Powerful Whispers project the trace of lives passed and stories told softly appear upon the surface of fibres and formed fabric substrate; a trace of the fading frozen moment blown up to a now lifeless but interactive and expressive photo imaged fragile fibre shroud.

## Postscript

Holland states the family collection kept in the box above the stairs is often guarded by an appointed archivist and so it was and is in our family (Holland 2000, 7). Initially it was my grandmother who added to it on a regular basis building a narrative in images of the lives of her great grandparents, her six brothers and sisters and her two daughters and their family. Lately the guardian of the family archive has been my mother’s cousin’s husband. My mother passed away in November 2017 after a long illness of Lewy Bodies dementia in which she would often have daily hallucinations and delusions with imaginary visits to Australia and meetings with relatives that had gone before her all experienced from within the four walls of her bedroom. At the funeral I returned the archival box of photographs to its guardian. I remember him saying that my mother had asked him to look after them and keep them safe; “Whatever that meant?” He asked me whether he had done a good job. I think so. The visual images now recorded in digital form have informed creative making in textile, fibre, moving image and sound as I build artefacts to further echo the Powerful Whispers that the archive echoes and attempt through my creative practice and visual artwork to create a discourse with Great Great Grandpa Brown and other ancestors to re-member, re-build, re-incarnate, re-place and re-pair



through critically rethinking the archive of images taking up the practice of my ancestors in the mills of West Yorkshire and being a fine mender of cloth (Hirsch 2016, 243).

A few weeks after my mother's funeral in December 2018 we were invited to a small family Christmas gathering. During the evening the conversation, as it often does, came to the subject of Great Great Grandpa Brown and the 'mythical' family treasure. Richard, my brother, said he'd been working in Bramley near Leeds and passed where the mill had been. Some of the buildings are still there behind a bakery on Bramley Town End; a large green decaying mill with a green tower on top which was the old water tower. Richard said that Grandpa Brown sold the land behind the mill with the lake and the gardens in his lifetime for seven hundred pounds to the local council. The land is now one of the main roads into the suburb of Bramley in Leeds. Grandpa Brown also owned a rope works in another part of the town. Richard recalls our grandmother saying that he should have sold the rope works and not the mill as the rope works soon afterwards became unprofitable due to the rise in motorised transport and technological speed of change during and after the Victorian era and, that, if he'd done that he could have made the mill successful. We can never know or travel through time to find out. Great Great Grandpa Brown had a large family as was normal in Victorian times. One of his daughters was my Grandmother's mother and the lineage to our family runs through the maternal line. Even if there ever was any treasure it would have been passed through the paternal line as is the English tradition and split between the large family and several wives. The story of Grandpa Brown's treasure still fires our family's imagination and connects the family's consciousness creating a binding narrative filled with the romantic image of ladies in big hats on the boating lake promenading on a summer Sunday afternoon.

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Rob Burton is a visual artist and Head of Design at Teesside University who explores themes of memory, loss and transformation through fiber, fabric making, print techniques, drawing and broad approaches to image making. His artworks cross the threshold of disciplines in a conceptual dialogue between the innovative use of analogue, contemporary and emerging techniques. Rob has recently exhibited internationally in group exhibitions, biennials and triennials in the USA, Eastern Europe and the UK.