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A paper presented at *Family Ties: Recollection and Representation*  
Centre for the Study of Cultural Memory at the IGRS  
Senate House, University of London: March 2012

The Family Ties inter-disciplinary conference was organised by Dr Sally Waterman (artist) and Dr Katia Pizzi (senior lecturer in Italian, IGRS) with keynote speakers Rosy Martin (artist) and Professor Marsha Meskimmon (Loughborough University). The event explored the representation and role of family memories in autobiographical writing, photography and artist's film and video.

'Since the 1990s there has been a proliferation of research on the relationship between photography and memory, such as seminal works by Jo Spence and Patricia Holland (1991), Annette Kuhn (1995) and Marianne Hirsch (1999, 1997). In particular, the family album has been used as a route to autobiographical writing or visual interpretation that encourages remembrance and the close examination of personal histories, documented by writers such as Laura Marcus (1994), Liz Stanley (1995) and Gen Doy (2005) and by artists such as Robert Frank, Tracey Moffat, Trish Morrissey and Annelies Strba.

'The recollection and interrogation of memories and family relationships has also led to methods of re-imagining, re-staging and role-play, underpinned by the re-enactment phototherapy work of Jo Spence and Rosy Martin in the mid-late 1980s. However, this conference aims to investigate the various motivations and approaches used by writers and artists when dealing with family memories, which range from the confessional, the therapeutic, the nostalgic, to the celebratory.'

The two-day conference offered a broad range of high-quality research papers and artist films streamed into six themed sessions:

A Question of Context  
Life Histories (the panel in which I presented my paper)  
Shifting Technologies  
Trauma: War and Exile  
Revisiting Loss  
Artists Exploring the Family Archive

The conference generated lively discussion and a group of seven presenters (myself included) are now working with Dr Sally Waterman to further disseminate the work, explore new possibilities and expand workshop opportunities under the broad umbrella of *Family Ties*.

***Communion:***  
**Oral Histories Retold, Ancestral Lands Reframed**



My maternal ancestors come from Mull;  
a place my mother spent much of her childhood,  
a place she continued to visit on a regular basis throughout her life  
(often with other members of our extended family, the Morison clan).

Mull has been in my consciousness for as long as I can remember;  
a place constantly referred to whenever family gathered,  
an island full of names and places forever lodged in my imagination.

My first visit was aged eighteen when the island finally became a physical reality,  
a series of places recalled made tangible.

I was taken to meet friends and relatives on the island, we went 'calling'  
and we went on walks where the waterfall flowed 'faster than ever before';  
where the hidden loch was revealed; where the family cairn was saluted;  
where 'Grauntie's stone' was indicated and family picnics were relived,  
old friends remembered.

Stories retold but here, on Mull, coming to life;  
those absent (re)gaining a presence in our midst.  
Names were attached to rocks, beaches, farms, paths, lochs and lighthouses;  
names were (re)found after picking out the moss on gravestones.

With only my aunt remaining to answer questions,  
I make the journey to Mull several times a year;  
walking in my mother's footsteps with my own family,  
repeating the tales as I remember them in places that have borne witness to my forebears.

More recently I have returned alone;  
finding Gaelic poems by Uncle Donald 'the Bard' in the museum in Tobermory;  
calling on family friends, making new connections, new friendships.

The Morisons (one 'r') live on; ghosts abound,  
myths are passed on as a history of sorts, and new stories come into being.  
The land remains inhabited; threads retraced, echoes overheard,  
new imprints, fresh voices.

As can be deduced, *Communion* is a project that builds on female genealogies.

French philosopher Luce Irigaray states that it is our female genealogy, our feminine ancestors that provide (women) a horizon for becoming. She encourages women to assert their genealogy, urging us to remember that each of us has a female lineage – mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers who came before – and that there will be daughters who will continue the (female) line. She says that the ‘special quality’ of the female genealogy can be overlooked and neglected, even denied, and stresses that we (women) already have a history and that this should not be forgotten. She asks us to remember our feminine forebears and underlines how important this is in terms of our own identities now as well as in the future, pressing us to ‘situate ourselves’ within the female genealogy ‘so that we can win and hold on to our identity’.



*Communion* (documentation of performance)

In *Communion* I am strategically positioning myself within the horizon of my maternal ancestors in their ‘home’ landscape – Mull. Simultaneously, I am exploring my own becoming through familial links to place; specific landscapes on the island – particular areas where family lived and farmed, the routes across the hills, the cairns that remain, the moves they made around the north-western peninsular, all these I have traced. Research at Mull museum has furnished me with further information; dates, names, places – a list of connections to add to earlier tales as well as the remembrances of my aunt and my mother’s cousins that I so love to hear now. Memories and stories passed to my daughter – names she now recognises, places that are familiar – and new discoveries shared with older relatives as well as younger ones. *Communion* is a prayer for those who have gone before and a gift for those who have yet to come.

Irigaray states that in order to become, we need a horizon that ‘assures us the passage between past and future, the bridge of a present that remembers’ and this is key to the understanding that informs *Communion* – an artwork that draws on the past in the present and looks toward new understandings. Irigaray asserts that ‘the becoming of women is never over and done with, is always in gestation’ and it is important here to stress that the female genealogy is not singular – yes it applies to each individual woman but it is situated in the socio-cultural domain and has a (shared) history, an identity and strength. It is this strength that I celebrate in *Communion* through and with my own maternal ancestors on Mull.

In an effort ‘to work at ‘destroying’ the discursive mechanism’ Irigaray advocates a path of ‘mimicry’. Her call is for women to ‘assume the feminine role deliberately’; a stance that works ‘to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation and thus to begin to thwart it.’ She expands on this statement by suggesting that, through a reclamation of subjectivity, the female subject can proceed to present, ‘to make ‘visible’, by an effect of playful repetition’ that which ‘was supposed to remain invisible’.



*Communion* (photographic composite)

Through my research practice and in works made, I am aiming for an unveiling, a quiet revealing and questioning of sexual difference and socio-cultural roles rather than advocating a position of reversed privilege – more, an acceptance of and respect for difference. I am putting forward a proposition for consideration rather than suggesting any alternative ‘truth’ – the intention being to prompt questions and a plurality of readings. As phenomenological philosopher Tamsin Lorraine suggests, intimations of:

“... how the body comes into play in the production of the knowledges that inform our self-understanding and our conceptions of what is desirable as well as what is possible for human relationships and ethical community ...”.

In the *Communion* project, I have adopted strategic mimesis as a means to both evoke and provoke, and have brought several factors together to effect my intent. I am wearing a skirt, a conscious move to be recognisably female. By deliberately choosing to employ a piece of furniture in the work I am alluding to the domestic. By locating the performance in the landscape, I am attempting to trouble conceptions of spatial reality and ‘fixed’ boundaries between internal and external domains.



*Communion* (detail)

Through the inclusion of a small child’s rocking chair, it might be seen that the maker is suggesting another place, another time and/or another person. The inclusion of a child’s chair might also suggest the maternal as well as the domestic. Mimesis is employed but it is not direct or simple, there are multiple allusions; this is a troubled and troubling provocation – an example of my interpretation of strategic mimesis after Irigaray.

In *Communion* becoming is explored in practice via a series of quiet performances at ‘S Airde Beinn on Mull, a location significant to the Morison family. This research project builds on earlier works and is a project that continues to expand. In order to help you further understand the intentions underpinning *Communion*, I will now outline some practical background to the research project.



*Communion* (in preparation)

A eulogy to people and place

She died in May, shortly before my birthday  
and her granddaughter's third birthday;  
she is my mother

She died in May  
and when she died she gave me something  
something special, part of herself  
and a responsibility to continue to bring it into being  
and, in so doing, to become myself.

And to bring others with me;  
to gather, nurture, cherish ...  
a responsibility and a gift.

I returned to the Inner Hebrides alone,  
to the isle of Mull, home of my maternal ancestors.

I took a chair with me,  
a chair given by my mother to my daughter (now 18)  
on the occasion of her second birthday.

I went to visit my mother's favourite places on the island,  
I took the chair with me.

In taking it with me, I was also taking both my mother and my daughter.

I climbed 'S Airde Beinn, I went with chair, mother and daughter.  
As I climbed, I gathered my grandmother, my great-grandmother  
and the others before them



*Communion* (detail)

From the starting point of oral family histories, for the past decade I have been exploring ancestral connections on the Isle of Mull. My first question as a practising artist was how might I find a way into this place, shortly followed by how might I possibly attempt to articulate a multi-sensory bodily understanding of place and how might I (re)present my understanding of this (deeply personal) relationship in practice? Effectively, how could I suggest something of my ancestral links and the experiential landscape of Mull in my artwork; how might I invoke something of the physical and the psychological, the rational and the intuitive, the seen and the unseen of my relationship with Mull?

In attempting an articulation of the phenomenology of place, such questions are insistent – just how can the lived be translated? The importance of the personal, the subjective voice, yes, but one that carries over into cultural consciousness and collective experience thereby allowing inter-subjective understanding and multiple trans-personal readings; the importance for me of creating layers of meaning that somehow resonate with layers of experience in the viewer and thereby assist a level of inter-subjectivity being attained. Such is my intention, my ambition.

On Mull I have been following in the footsteps of my ancestors, both literally and metaphorically. I have chosen my locale and guided by family lore, I let my intuition guide me to places that reverberate in the present, that suggest possible futures (and possible future artworks) and that are hinged to the past in remembrance of people and oft-repeated tales. Exploring, investigating and examining – collecting objects, sounds, images and passing thoughts; new connections and associations are made and begin to mingle with old memories and echoes of other places and other times.

I brought a child's chair from Gloucestershire to Mull as a way of alluding to other people and places. I carried the chair out into the landscape, using it as a vehicle through which to explore the temporal and issues of constancy and change. Echoing the female lineage of my link with Mull, another reason for incorporating the chair was to prompt suggestions of the domestic and maternal and, in this way, to challenge notions of home and the feminine role more generally.

Already a complex mix of underlying intentions and concepts are coming together and beginning to rub against each other. In the process of making this quiet performance, the implications of the place, the chair, my presence and the haunting presence of others evoked through the chair began to come together to form the piece. It was a question of paying attention and listening with all my body, of paying heed to measures of intention and improvisation as they came into play. In this respect, my approach concurs with that of cultural theorist Jane Bennett:

“Under fortuitous circumstances, the good humour of enchantment spills over into critical consciousness and tempers it, thus rendering its judgement more generous and its claims less dogmatic. I pursue a life with moments of enchantment rather than an enchanted way of life. Such moments can be cultivated and intensified by artful means. Enchantment, as I use the term, is an uneasy combination of artifice and spontaneity.”

Through works produced I am not attempting to determine any answer as such or to suggest any definitive reading of place – what I am in the process of making and presenting in images shown is an extended response to the experiential landscape of Mull. *Communion* was made in recognition of my ancestral ties to Mull and is both testament and witness, a work made in celebration of my feminine forebears.



*Communion* (detail)

Through the *Communion* project contextual analysis of becoming is wed with social history and lived experience. Theoretical understandings are explored in performance in order to examine the inter-relationship between a place and a self and, as a result of seepage between theory and embodied practice, artworks are formed.

Lorraine suggests that ‘for something new to happen, something more than one’s intellectual or commonsense understanding must be involved’. She adds that ‘becomings are encounters that engage the subject at the limits of the corporeal and conceptual logics already formed’ and that this brings on ‘the destabilisation of conscious awareness’. She continues to state that this ‘forces the subject to a genuinely creative response’.

Lorraine’s conceptualisation of the creativity, the originary awareness of becoming, parallels my understanding of becoming in performative practice. Lorraine proposes that ‘articulating these becomings not only demonstrates our ongoing participation with nonhuman as well as human processes but also indicates new possibilities in self- and world- transformation’. As such, Lorraine’s proposition concurs with the premise of this project – that via such articulations (seen here through imagery from the *Communion* project that celebrates my maternal ancestors on Mull), new understandings of the co-constituency of people and place might be offered.

As Irigaray writes:

“Neither simple nature nor common spirit beyond nature, this transcendence exists in the difference of body and culture that continues to nourish our energy, its movement, its generation and its creation”.

Suze Adams  
March 2012

#### Bibliography

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