

Afterword: Turning and Twisting Histories of Women's Education: reading reflexively and diffractively

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Abstract

The Afterword discusses continuities and differences in how researchers are positioned in feminist themes and emerging feminist perspectives as they play out in debates around researcher reflexivity and around diffraction as methodological strategies. The first section of the Afterword highlights the ongoing commitment to reflexivity when reading sources and generating knowledge in women's and gender history. The second part focuses on the challenge to reflexivity posed by diffractive methodologies that argue that knowledge is created from being entangled in the world, rather than reflecting on or during the production of historical work. This section discusses two examples of diffractive practice in archival research taken from the special issue. The third section outlines diffractive reading in more detail and provides two examples of diffractive reading of texts. Finally, the Afterword invites readers to undertake a diffractive reading of the articles in the special issue and provides some questions about diffraction for consideration.

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Introduction

The special issue aims to illustrate how historians of women's education are working in the interstices of processes, practices, posthumanist orientations, flux and permanence, becoming and being, as well as various orientations to women's, feminist and gender history. But it also illustrates Kathryn Gleadle's contention in the conclusion to her discussion of 'The Imagined Communities of Women's History' that, as with the current field of women's history, histories of women's education comprise a complex entanglement of 'older themes and emerging perspectives'.¹ In keeping with Gleadle's comment the Afterword takes its point of departure from a thread in the first volume of *Women's History Review* where June Purvis pointed to the importance of research positioning when reading sources and generating historical work.² The first part of the Afterword highlights the ongoing commitment to reflexivity that Sue Morgan³ and Joanna de Groot⁴ stress for the capacity of women's and gender history to continue as important areas of historical practices; and it discusses Margaret McFadden's deployment of reflexivity in her account of the Hungarian-American feminist, Rosika Schwimmer (1877-1948).⁵ The second part of the Afterword focuses on the challenge to reflexivity posed by diffractive methodologies that argue that knowledge is created from being entangled in the world. This section of the Afterword differentiates the optical metaphor of diffraction from that of reflection and reflexivity and addresses the claim that diffractive methodologies share similarities with genealogical method. It provides two examples of diffractive practice in archival research taken from the special issue: Maria Tamboukou's account of archival research⁶ and Ning de Coninck- Smith's diffractive reading of material from the historical collections of the first 25 years of Aarhus University.⁷ The third section of the Afterword moves to diffractive reading of texts and discusses diffractive reading in more detail. It outlines how Karen Barad uses diffractive reading to produce a new

understanding of how discursive practices relate to the material world;⁸ and how Iris van der Tuin deploys diffractive reading of debates that classified earlier feminist texts by the generation of feminist “waves”.⁹ Finally, the Afterword invites readers to undertake a diffractive reading of the articles in the special issue.

The researcher and/in the research

In the 1995 volume of *Women's History Review*, June Purvis pointed to the importance of considering ‘viewpoint’ when researching women’s history from a feminist perspective.¹⁰ In explaining how both descriptive and perspective analysis play out when working with documentary sources, Purvis noted: ‘I write as a white, heterosexual, middle-class feminist whose formal academic training is in sociology and women’s history’. Purvis linked her location to the production of the analysis in her article: ‘consequently I do not engage in the more detailed nuances of the feminist literary critic who interrogates her texts. Although I make reference to research on women’s past within a broad time-span for illustrative purposes I focus in particular upon examples from Victorian and Edwardian England, since this is the period and place with which I am most familiar’.¹¹ In making visible her position within the microcosm of academic fields and by linking this position explicitly to the production of historical scholarship, Purvis contested the invisibility of the researcher in scholarly work. She formed part of an important tradition that took issue with a view of ‘objectivity’ as disinterested, disembodied knowledge¹² that resonates with what Bourdieu terms the ‘scholastic point of view’. For Bourdieu the ‘scholastic point of view’ constitutes the ‘collective unconscious’ of the social organisation of the discipline or field that works to structure the modes and conventions of thinking and analytic disposition.¹³ As Tony Schirato and Jen Webb note¹⁴, and Jane Kenway and Julie McLeod discuss,¹⁵ the scholastic point of view has a tendency to abstract practices from their contexts, and to see them as ideas to be contemplated rather than as problems to be addressed or solved.¹⁶ As a consequence,

concludes Bourdieu, the scholastic point of view masquerades ‘as the natural and objective point of view’.¹⁷ For scholars like Kenway and McLeod this scholastic point of view constitutes a ‘perspective without a history’¹⁸ because it renders women invisible as historical actors and locates them outside the parameters by which scholarly disciplines have been ‘thought’. As a consequence, feminist historians have argued for the necessity of interrogating the multiple inter-relations between power and knowledge.¹⁹

Sue Morgan’s thirty-year retrospective of feminist history indicates the importance that feminist researchers continue to attribute to situating oneself by ‘owning’ investments and constructions in the research process.²⁰ Similarly, Kenway and McLeod highlight the need to historicise ‘the space of one’s point of view’ in the production of meaning.²¹ Morgan notes that challenging, debating and transforming the way history is and should be written has produced ‘a rich and self-reflexive feminist historiography’ that has been engendered by internal debates and self-critical dialogue between women themselves. It has resulted in a position whereby there can be ‘no return to the unreflective use of key analytical concepts’ or to the ‘smooth surfaces’ of modernist stories.²² Joanna de Groot outlines the importance of post-colonial histories in challenging the ethnocentrism of some women’s history while also interrogating the neglect of women in, and gender blindness of, much work on empire and race. Like Morgan, de Groot argues that the capacity of women’s and gender history to continue as an important area of historical practice is grounded in its commitment to reflexivity about problems and limitations in the field, as well as in its commitment to sustaining its key insights into the links between the personal and the structural, the global and the local, and the material and the cultural.²³

The processes of self-reflexivity that continue to enrich women’s, feminist and gender history, can be characterised along lines that Ulrick Beck terms a ‘process of self-confrontation’.²⁴ As Sandra Holton notes, the production of historical scholarship can be

impacted not only by gender but also by the place in time, the cultural and social context, and the capacity for, or lack of, reflexivity. All of these are likely to frame the choice of research topic, the way history is practiced and how evidence is interpreted to render reflexivity,²⁵ in Margaret McFadden's words, a necessity. McFadden's practice of reflexivity focuses around her work on the Hungarian-American Rosika Schwimmer (1877-1948). Schwimmer was an early leader in the Hungarian women's movement, co-ordinator of the Hungarian Women's Suffrage Alliance, host of the 1913 International Congress of Women's Suffrage Societies held in Budapest, translator of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Women and Economics* into Hungarian, and an extensive traveller in the cause of the women's movement. In approaching Schwimmer, McFadden attends to the 'necessity of reflexivity' by asking how boundaries of nation, language, memory, and time operate as researchers write the lost history of women; why and how subjects are chosen, and subjects choose writers; and to ponder on why she has chosen two subjects who spoke Finnish and Hungarian, two of the least known and difficult to learn languages for speakers of English. In seeking to address these questions, McFadden intersperses a 'shadow narrative' of her own borderland crossings into the narrative she weaves of Schwimmer's international border-crossing between Hungary and the United States during the interwar period. McFadden's shadow narrative responds to Ruth Behar's call for reflexive ways of narrating and understanding women's life histories, that do not 'just put the words of the informant down "objectively" without the researcher telling her own story and analysing her own place and time as well'.²⁶ McFadden's reflexive practice makes her an embodied and visible actor in weaving her account of Schwimmer's border crossings.

While reflexivity has been used as a critical practice in both historical and educational research, Donna Haraway²⁷ and Karen Barad²⁸ target the underlying assumptions of reflexivity as a critical method of researcher self-positioning. Barad builds on Haraway's argument that reflexivity is underpinned by a representational view of knowledge that mirrors

the geometric optic of reflection with its notion of mirror images. As a result, she argues, reflexivity remains caught in geometries of sameness.²⁹ But as Christina Hughes's discussion of reflections and mirrors illustrates, images in the mirror are not to be taken as simple reflections of reality; for feminist post-structural critiques ask us to look into the shadows of the mirror to notice how the judgements we make about reflections are inflected by issues of power.³⁰

McFadden's discussion of her historical research approach illustrates that reflexivity can encompass an engagement with the self that involves careful thought in processes through which people 'recapture their experience, think about it, mull over it and evaluate it'.³¹ As in McFadden's case the result can be to unsettle research practice in ways that move beyond simply reflecting cognitively. Cunliffe and Jun write that reflexivity, like reflection assumes a reality from which we can separate and distance ourselves in order to think about it.³² For Barad, this separateness and distancing is problematic in that it overlooks how the researcher is embedded in the world they research and in the practices they deploy; and it fails to recognise that knowledge is created from being entangled with the world. Barad writes

[T]he point is not simply to put the observer or knower back in the world (as if the world were a container and we need merely to acknowledge our situatedness in it) but to understand and take account of the fact that we too are part of the worlds' differential becoming. And furthermore the point is not merely that knowledge practices have material consequences, but that practices of knowing are *specific material engagements that participate in (re)configuring the world*.³³

To highlight the entanglement of the researcher, the research, and research outcomes Barad draws attention to the optical metaphor of diffraction from wave phenomena in physics; and following Haraway, she deploys diffraction as a counterpoint to reflection and reflexivity. As scholars of wave phenomena note, reflection refers to how light impinging on a surface becomes visible to us to varying degrees and refraction refers to how waves change

direction when they pass from one medium to another. But diffraction refers to how waves - whether they be light, water or sound waves - behave (and spread out) when they move through passages or encounter an obstruction.³⁴ Waves meeting (or meeting an obstruction) either create a more intense wave together, cancel each other out, or result in anything in between.³⁵ At the point of diffraction, the original wave partly remains within the new wave after its transformation into a new one and so on, wave after wave.³⁶ What counts in diffraction are the effects of diffraction and entanglement; not the separate elements. For example, the colours and rings sometimes seen around the moon or the clouds cannot be attributed either to the moon or the clouds but are the consequence of their diffraction and entanglement.³⁷ As Haraway writes, diffraction is ‘a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction’ (1992: 300).³⁸

Barad’s deployment of diffraction as a feminist tool for thinking and researching builds on her training as a quantum physicist. In *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, she describes how in the laboratory the observable quality of an electron (wave/particle) can only be determined in relation with the apparatus being used.³⁹ As an optical phenomenon in laboratory experiments, diffraction is what happens when light waves pass through slits, and are broken up and a screen on the other side of the slits records what happens with the light, which produces a record of the history of the light’s passage through the slits. The resulting interference patterns change depending on the sizes, shapes, and placements of the slits in the research apparatus. Barad uses the quantum experiment to illustrate that research apparatuses are themselves transformative. They are not passive observing instruments but are productive of (and part of) phenomena⁴⁰ because they delineate the material conditions of possibility for research.⁴¹ They do so, claims Barad by performing ‘agential cuts’. These are the specific limits that an apparatus enacts in creating boundaries.⁴² As the material arrangements through which

concepts are given definition to the exclusion of others⁴³ apparatuses enact what comes to matter as ‘findings’.⁴⁴

Barad also argues that as researchers we become an entangled part of apparatuses as we set them up. So we can no longer be seen as the agency of observation, observing or reflecting on an object at a distance.⁴⁵ Instead, researchers are part of the processes through which the production of knowledge is constituted, and the boundaries and properties of objects and meanings of concepts are determined.⁴⁶ As Hillevi Lenz Taguchi and Anna Palmer write, the ways in which the apparatus is set up depends not only on the kinds of data we encounter, find and collect, but also on the differences that get made in our embodied engagements with these data in the apparatus of knowing.⁴⁷

Johanna Sefyrin argues that diffractive methodologies share similarities with Foucault’s genealogical method.⁴⁸ Genealogical method, as Maria Tamboukou notes in this special issue, is concerned with the processes, procedures and apparatuses, whereby truth and knowledge are produced. In articulating how Barad’s explanation of the diffraction experiment can be understood as a metaphor for research, Sefyrin conceptualises the empirical research material as the light and the slits in a screen as the apparatus constituting the research practices (research questions, data gathering practices, the situatedness of the researcher, the choice of theories and methods, the format of the completed text etc.). She notes that changing any of these aspects changes the interference pattern that results from the diffraction.⁴⁹ She argues that because diffraction patterns record (as Haraway puts it) ‘the history of interaction, interference, reinforcement, difference’,⁵⁰ diffractive research strategies enable researchers to account for both the history of how something came to *be* as well as what it *is*. This double aspect of diffractive approaches she maintains resonates with Foucault’s genealogical method.

Tamboukou follows Barad's configuration in making connections between the setting up of a scientific experiment within the laboratory and the archival experiment of working within the boundaries of specific documents, their archival arrangements and periods. In noting how the challenge to the natural role of the apparatus also pertains to archival research, Tamboukou writes

In drawing analogies between the apparatus in scientific research and the archive as an apparatus in narrative research, what I want to emphasize here is that the specific material, spatial and discursive conditions of my archival research at the HRC in Austin, Texas, had a significant impact on the conduct and outcome of the research.⁵¹

Tamboukou notes that in the same way that 'apparatuses are not passive observing instruments', archives are not neutral sites within which researchers 'objectively' read, take notes and accumulate data. She casts the archive as a dynamic spatial and discursive milieu that forcefully acts upon the research process, the analytics of the research, the 'research findings', and 'the researcher' herself. She writes of the situated perspectives and theoretical frameworks that researchers bring as an element of the research apparatus and she highlights the importance of what Barad terms 'agential cuts'. Tamboukou show how the researcher 'cuts' the archive to create an archive of her own that gradually becomes part of wider fields and bodies of knowledge. She writes of the researcher's 'cut' creating a unity, by piecing together archival fragments, theoretical insights, spatio-temporal experiences and material conditions and limitations. She argues that in the same way that scientific measures, findings and outcomes are the effects of how the experiment was designed and set up in the first place, the knowledges and published outcomes that derive from archival research are situated within, and emerge through, the material and discursive entanglements between the researcher, the research object and the research context.⁵² In this special issue Tamboukou records how in the middle of the process of working in the archive, the researcher emerges as a reader with new ideas about the archival documents. She highlights how both the researcher

and the documents are gradually transformed: ‘they both “become other” through their entanglement within the space-time context of the archival phenomenon’.⁵³

Ning de Coninck-Smith (this special issue) also highlights an embodied engagement with the materiality of research data that she, too, refers to as ‘a becoming with the data as a researcher’. She writes of her overwhelming combination of disgust and surprise at what she found in the historical collections of the first 25 years of Aarhus University: humiliating rituals, naked images, scribblings of drunken students, and students suffering from post-war trauma tormenting their co-residents. ‘Was this really my University?’ asks de Coninck-Smith. She writes of this experience as ‘knowing in being’ powered by a sense of disturbance and diffraction as the sources collided with the memories of her own time at university during the 1970s. She notes that when reading the sources left by the residents at the female hall of residence she came across a photo of her mother participating in a party at a residential hall in Copenhagen and that a sense of entanglement with her own life grew as well as with that of her mother.⁵⁴

de Coninck-Smith includes a diffractive reading of female experiences through the lens of what happened in the male halls, which she notes moved her narrative from stories about female encounters towards stories about gendered meetings. She charts the new directions that her search for meaning took when she read the sources left by the residents at the female hall through the lens of other sources that stemmed from the male halls on campus. She writes: ‘This diffracted my knowledge and oriented me towards a point where anecdotes stopped being anecdotes and female encounters turned into encounters with gender - and with sexuality and affection more than anything else’. She comments that she had made a ‘cut’ as a researcher. Her account illustrates how this ‘cut’ was entangled in the processes through which her historical analysis emerged around how university cultures were created, changed and transformed through human and material encounters. She writes that the

diffracted reading helped her to make sense of the messiness of the matter, ‘but also to realise the entanglements of the presence and absence of knowledge and meaning’.

de Coninck- Smith’s analysis demonstrates how new understandings can emerge along unexpected lines when reading different accounts through each other diffractively. The following section moves from diffractive practices in archival research⁵⁵ to diffractive reading of texts. It outlines the diffractive approach to texts that Barad adopts in *Meeting the University Halfway* and which Iris van der Tuin adopts in her book on generational feminism. Finally it invites readers to approach the collection diffractively and raises some questions that readers might consider while experimenting with a diffractive approach. It begins by outlining diffractive reading practices in more detail.

Diffractive reading

Diffractive reading is the process of reading one text through another with a focus on the creative entanglements that result. The focus is on how texts, artefacts and humans may inform each other as a result of their entanglement.⁵⁶ It is not the individual text, nor the individual author, that is of interest in diffractive reading. A diffractive reading does not aim to find the essence of a text, its canonical interpretations, or the author’s exact intention.⁵⁷ Nor is it taking something learned from one reading and applying it to another, or using one reading to critique another⁵⁸ by using one reading as a fixed frame of reference for the other; and neither is it the sum of these texts.⁵⁹ What counts in diffractive reading is what emerges as creative and new concepts and ideas from reading texts, or from insights from texts (or from disciplinary or theoretical positions) through one another in a productive way.⁶⁰

Rather than focusing on representations or classifications, diffractive reading involves looking for contrasts and connections, interference patterns, and the possibilities for new ideas to evolve.⁶¹ It can entail identifying and lingering on ‘hotspots’ which ‘glow’, disturb, This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis Group in WOMEN’S HISTORY REVIEW on 3rd May 2019, available online: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09612025.2019.1611134>.

or which are experienced as difficult.⁶² But as Nina Lykke notes, the purpose of diffractive reading is neither to iron out differences, troubling clashes or tensions between theoretical stances and worlding practices, nor to end up in a stalemate between opposing binary claims.

Instead

The point is to undertake well-prepared moves beyond the comfort zones of differing theoretical stances, and to bring these stances into productive, mutually enriching and open-ended and world-making conversations.⁶³

As with archival material, diffractive reading of texts and/or disciplines is not just a case of highlighting where differences appear. Diffraction maps the *effects* of difference – what Haraway terms ‘differences that matter’.⁶⁴

Diffractive reading aims to produce affirmative readings that induce thinking but are not negatively critical. Pitting one set of views against another as critique assumes a superior and exterior position that Barad considers to be a potentially damaging process of distancing, othering and putting others down⁶⁵ - a viewpoint that resonates with Bruno Latour’s suggestion that critique has run out of steam.⁶⁶ As van der Tuin argues, negation may not be the best feminist reading strategy. She comments that critiquing the work of Bruno Latour for its gender blindness, its neat separation of the social and the technical and its overlooking of the labour and suffering of laboratory animals, draws more attention to Latour than to feminism and puts Latour on a pedestal.⁶⁷ Rather than focussing on the errors, contradictions or points of weakness of a text, a diffractive reading strategy avoids the usual method of critical analysis by seeking out the relevant insights from each text for the matter in hand.⁶⁸ In offering an affirmative detailed and ‘care-full’ practice of reading the ideas of one through another,⁶⁹ diffractive reading aims to rework concepts that structure what is diffracted without them being based on oppositional binaries. It seeks generative ‘inventive provocations’⁷⁰ with the potential to affirm and strengthen dynamic links between scholars.⁷¹

In Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning Barad brings together insights from quantum physics, science studies, the philosophy of physics, and ‘critical social theories’ (feminist theory, critical race theory, postcolonial theory, (post)-Marxist theory and poststructuralist theory). In bringing these areas together Barad aims to move beyond simply acknowledging that both material and discursive, and natural and cultural factors play a role in knowledge production. Rather she wants to think the ‘social’ and the ‘scientific’ together in order to clarify the relationship between them and to explore the material practices through which the world is divided into the categories of the social and the natural. Barad explains that bringing together areas of knowledge does not mean forcing them together, collapsing important differences between them, or treating them in the same way. She writes that in developing a diffractive methodology her aim is to provide a transdisciplinary approach that remains rigorously attentive to important details of specialised arguments in a given field, while also fostering constructive engagements across (and a reworking of) disciplinary boundaries.⁷² She hones in on performative accounts in feminist theory, queer theory and science studies approaches in an effort to sharpen both sets of tools and to develop a performative account that takes both sets of insights seriously.

The starting point for Barad’s transdisciplinary diffractive reading is the argument from quantum physicist Niels Bohr that understanding the world hinges on acknowledging that knowledge-making practices are part of the phenomena that we describe. In using Bohr’s argument Barad situates diffractive reading as a method attuned to the entanglement of the apparatuses of production, which she maintains enables genealogical analyses of how boundaries and distinctions are produced, rather than presuming sets of binaries and distinctions in advance. In making a range of transdisciplinary connections she offers a new understanding of how discursive practices are related to the material world. She argues that

her analysis of the entanglement of matter and meaning has far reaching consequences for grasping and attending to power and to political possibilities for change. She unfolds an analysis that is pertinent for the ethical responsibilities of researchers and is relevant for thinking about specific issues that have been central to feminist theory, activism and politics. These include the development of new reproductive technologies that continue to play a crucial role in feminist theories of the body. She uses insights about the entanglement of matter and meaning derived from her diffractive reading to argue that Butler's theory of performativity underestimates the space of possibilities for change; and conversely, she diffracts her analysis of the entanglement of matter and meaning back onto science to argue that aspects of her analysis hold important insights for quantum physics itself.⁷³

van der Tuin's diffractive reading of feminist texts aims to overcome debates that classified earlier feminist texts by generation or feminist 'waves' and by what we now think earlier feminist texts thought of as equality, difference, and deconstructive feminisms. In common with a number of other scholars,⁷⁴ van der Tuin takes issue with the classificatory generational logic of the type espoused by Mannheim.⁷⁵ This logic sees first wave feminists as the 'grandmothers' of the second wavers, and the latter as the 'mothers' of third-wave feminists. van der Tuin deploys the term 'classifixation' to demonstrate that a classification is not a neutral mediator, but is entangled in the work that it does. Classifixation logic, argues van der Tuin, is underpinned by a linear temporality of progress that has consequences for how we think of 'movement' in 'feminist movement'.⁷⁶ She draws on Elizabeth Grosz's argument that a linear temporality results in the classification of feminist 'waves' as separated and dichotomous; and she cites Grosz's view that such dichotomies limit feminism 'to the foreseeable and to contesting the recognised and the known'.⁷⁷ It is these separations that van der Tuin's aims to overcome through a diffractive reading strategy.⁷⁸

To strengthen dynamic links between women of different eras⁷⁹ van der Tuin explores the etymological meaning of generation. To take advantage of generation in a performative sense (i.e. based on what the concept can *do*) she conceptualises ‘generation’ in its double sense. She notes that etymologically speaking the concept of generation envelops generational classes (‘the old, the young-ish, the young; first-, second-, third-wave feminism’) but that it also includes the active notion of ‘to generate’. She anchors the word generation on its Greek root *genos*, which, she maintains, has tended to be translated into generational classes, rather than through its more general meaning of *genesthai*, which means to come into being. For van der Tuin, *genesthai* references processual becoming, which she argues the classificatory logic of generational cohorts obscures,⁸⁰ and she maintains that *genesthai* enables generational classes to be understood and so the relation of different age cohorts.

van der Tuin explores the intricacies of the doubleness in meanings of generation via a diffractive reading of Gayle Rubin’s 1975 text, ‘The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex’⁸¹ and Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born*, published in 1986.⁸² In reading their accounts through each other - ‘undisturbed by their classification in two different traditions of feminist/ lesbian politics’⁸³ - van der Tuin asks

what generations of sexual differing might come to the fore from my work and how do these conceptualizations shed light on sexual difference as a generated structure whose perpetual gendering, racializing and sexualising still plagues so many women, men and others, and whose opening-ups generate constant surprises?⁸⁴

van der Tuin outlines that the employment of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s notion of the exchange of women in ‘The Traffic in Women’ exposes the circulation of women through the hands of men as patriarchal and unbeneficial for women. She highlights how in Rubin’s account women have no affirmative relations to other women, only competitive and conflict based ones. Women only exist within the family structure; and they do so according to their

relations with older men (fathers), men of their own age (husbands), or younger men (sons). As a result, argues van der Tuin, in Rubin's account there can only exist *discontinuities* between women.⁸⁵ She highlights that Rich, too, argues that in patriarchy, the mother-daughter relationship has become a relationship of mutual exclusion, both in a real and a figurative sense; for empirically each mother is a daughter and each daughter may become a mother, while mothers and daughter are also concepts that extend beyond empirical reference.⁸⁶

While pointing to Rubin's and Rich's diagnoses of generationality as patriarchal, van der Tuin illustrates how considering them together points to the importance of the continuity between women being restored. She highlights how Rich moves beyond the analysis of patriarchy to create a programme for feminism focussed around continuities between women. She argues that the continuity posed by Rich points to 'an *alternative conceptualisation of generationality* as well as an *alternative methodology* for (transnational) feminism.'⁸⁷ In creating a 'continuum' between women Rich cites the research and scholarship of 'childless' women - Charlotte Bronte (who died in her first pregnancy, Margaret Fuller (whose major work was done before her child was born), George Eliot, Emily Bronte, Emily Dickinson, Christina Rossetti, Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir. van der Tuin argues that Rich's affirmation of the importance of these writer's work follows Virginia Woolf in 'think[ing] back through our mothers'⁸⁸ and reinstalls continuity between women. In so doing, according to van der Tuin, 'Rich provides a conceptualisation of ... generationality that shifts the patriarchal concept and practice'. She sees this conceptualisation not repeating a patriarchal concept of generationality but 'yield[ing] the constitution of links between feminists on the basis of what their work does or allows us to do'.⁸⁹ The result, claims van der Tuin, is that Rich's conceptualisation moves away from a classificatory logic and constructs a generationality that is generative of feminist theory, methodologies and insights.

van der Tuin emphasises that a generationality that is *generative* of feminist theories, methodologies and insights gets constructed ‘*when two generations of feminists work together in a diffractive spirit*’.⁹⁰ For van der Tuin, a diffractive reading of Rubin and Rich enables a feminist new materialist ‘leap into the future’ towards ‘territories ... as yet unknown’. The ‘leap into this future’, she claims, is the result of ‘picking up on good - old scholars, theories, and objects of research’ and working *with* a feminist canon, rather than dismissing such material out of hand. This resonates with the editors’ contention, following Gleadle, that the current field of the history of women’s history comprises a complex entanglement of ‘older themes and emerging perspectives’. Paraphrasing Sue Morgan, it is this entanglement that remains the radical openness of the future of histories of women’s education as they look to their own transformations and re-imaginings.⁹¹

Reading the collection diffractively: an invitation

The two examples of diffractive archival strategies and the two examples of diffractive reading of texts illustrate ways in which diffractive reading has been deployed variously as research and/or reading strategy. By aiming to interrupt habits of thinking and doing, diffractive reading risks unpredictable possibilities for new imaginings, for complexity, and for the creation of the not yet known that align with notions of power to do and to act. As van der Tuin’s generational discussion illustrates, these new imaginings can involve working *with* existing material. It is our contention that diffractive strategies can produce the modest shifts and mutations in women’s, feminist and gender history that Kathryn Gleadle argues can be more effective cumulatively than single grand strategies. It is these modest shifts and mutations in the twists and turns at work in histories of women’s education that can continue to produce the modulated and complicated intellectual chronologies to which Gleadle alerts⁹² and which contributions to this collection demonstrate.

Finally, we invited you as reader to experiment with diffraction as a strategy through which to read the special issue. You may wish to approach the special issue as whole as if it were a diffraction grating through which to explore your research questions, research practices, your situatedness as a researcher, and your choice of theories and methods etc. Alternatively you may wish to diffract specific ‘material differences, relationalities and entanglements’⁹³ by sampling different articles. In the spirit of diffraction, you might find it helpful to focus on practices of thinking, rather than on the content of ‘thought’. You may wish to consider the nature of diffraction in relation to reflexivity and question, with Veronica Mitchell, whether diffraction is an enhanced form of reflexivity.⁹⁴ You may also like to ponder Slavoj Žižek’s question about whether the vitality that appears in some new materialist accounts is ‘a result of our perception being animistic or of an actual asubjective vital power’.⁹⁵ Whatever the nature of your engagement with the special issue and its contributions, we hope that you will find the twists and turns through which contributors illustrate histories of women’s education are moving, both enjoyable and thought provoking.

Notes

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