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Analysis of recent feminist literature and feminist photographic media art on the representation of the gendered body in a cross-cultural context

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Introduction

My practice-led doctoral research considers how my cultural identity and status as a feminist and Brazilian artist influence my artistic output. I identify myself as a feminist Latin American woman seen as white in my country of origin, Brazil, although my phenotype is interpreted differently depending on the territory I inhabit. Consequently, my identity is revealed differently in Brazil and overseas. I use a feminist standpoint from my positionality as a Brazilian feminist artist undertaking a PhD in Australia. My research first responds to current developments in gender politics that require a revisiting of feminist theories and practices; second, questions how contemporary digital photography affects the concept of gendered bodies; and, finally, aims to capture how cross-cultural aspects impact women's identity, as enacted through the body.

Responding to these three very different aspects, this ongoing literature and practice review surveys feminist perspectives on the definition and representation of the feminist body, feminist approaches to the gendered body within social contexts, and postcolonial perspectives on the concept of gender identity within the context of the power relations explicit in gendered bodies. This review is part of my inquiry into how contemporary digital photography challenges the concept of gendered bodies. My practice investigates emerging possibilities for identity formation as perceived through social construction in a cross-cultural setting of digitally altered gendered bodies.

As a feminist researcher, considering the perspectives of feminist theorists and artists on concepts of representation is essential. While the work of feminist theorists such as Moira Gatens, Judith Butler, Griselda Pollock, and Elizabeth Grosz are

foundational to the study, the main emphasis is on postcolonial feminist and Global South theory, including the perspectives of Swati Parashar, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Raewyn Connell, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, in order to analyse how Western culture establishes power relations based on gender and identity through corporeality. Róisín Ryan-Flood and Rosalind Gill's theories related to feminist researcher viewpoints on feminist body representation will also be investigated. In addition, the work of Julia Kristeva, and Moira Gatens, among others, is applied to explore how the body is perceived as a site of knowledge and production. In particular, and this relates to my practice, my research is based on the new materialism of feminist art, which includes artists such as Helga Stein, Kelli Connell, Rosana Paulino, Aida Muluneh, Pat Brassington, Lisa Reihana, and Anne Zahalka.

These varied approaches are fundamental to emerging contemporary feminist perspectives on gendered bodies within a diverse community as each offers complex viewpoints when considering the impact of cultural, ethnic and gender differences. The ensuing review is structured into three main topics: the feminist body, the gendered body, and gender identity. Under each of these topics, I scrutinize specific aspects in depth, which are further categorized under subheadings. The first segment of the review defines the feminist body and elucidates the approach employed in this study and practice. The subsequent section delves into the diverse ways of applying this knowledge in my artistic practice. In the final section, the scope of the investigation broadens to encompass feminist viewpoints on gendered bodies within a cross-cultural setting. This latter perspective is of particular significance, given my positionality within this scenario.

Feminist body

Feminisms and the body

This first section of my literature and practice review explores understanding and knowledge regarding feminist bodies within the field of visual arts.

I first investigated the concept of gender within a contemporary collective context in order to support how my research project intends to explore the gendered body in a cross-cultural setting, including its interpretations from a feminist perspective as gender roles play an integral part in feminist theories. The feminist philosopher Moira Gatens (1996) approaches the body by emphasising male and female embodiment. Specifically, for Gatens, "the theory of the body image shows that our bodies are lived and constituted as part of a network of bodies; and these bodies have depth and are dynamic" (1996). Gatens's thesis dialogues with the work of the philosopher

Judith Butler (1990) who states that “the body” is a construction, as are gendered “bodies”. Butler (1990) argues that when the constructed status of gender is theorised to be radically independent of sex, gender becomes a free-floating artifice, so gender is constructed via a sustained series of behaviours, and suggested by the gendered stylisation of the body within a cultural context. According to Butler (1990), any behaviour that attempts to convey an essence or identity through physical signs or other discursive means is considered performative. Because of its performative nature, the gendered body has no ontological importance outside its behaviours (Butler, 1990). Further, because gender connects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional discursively created identities, it is not always constituted logically or consistently in different historical settings. Thus, “gender” cannot be separated from the political subjects of sex/gender/desire and the cultural crossings that make and maintain it (Butler, 1990).

Interrogating the feminist body further, art historian Griselda Pollock (2013) argues that “feminism encounters the canon as a structure of subordination and domination which marginalises and relativises all women according to their place in the contradictory structuration of power-race, gender, class and sexuality”. To combat these social constructions, according to the feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz (1994), women's bodies must be seen as dynamic, functional, and self-determining to prevent their reduction to passive objects of rationalisation and reproduction. This suggests that the female body is a priori capable of being seen and understood beyond the idea of castrated privation if it is flexible, malleable, and receptive to social re-inscription (Grosz, 1994).

The sociologist and feminist Heleieth Saffiotti (2001) clearly outlines a feminist perspective that is articulated through a model that views the human being as a whole, with the body and modelling both being significant socially. According to Saffiotti (2001), no feminist model exists; feminist perspectives translate into diverse models. Ignoring feminism's various parts homogenises a complex reality (Saffiotti, 2001). As a result, Sueli Carneiro (2016), a philosopher and feminist, contends that there has been an inability to perceive the disparities and inequities existing in the feminine realm, resulting in suppressed voices and stigmatised bodies. Based on this assumption, Carneiro (2016) concludes that feminism's political tactics and discourse have had to be re-evaluated in light of various kinds of oppression in Brazilian culture that go beyond sexism, such as racism. The emergence of the black women's movement is changing the ideological outlook of feminism in the political arena (Carneiro, 2016).

The many settings and viewpoints from which the feminist body (or network of bodies) is constructed elucidate the diverse layers that constitute its lived experience in different social and cultural contexts (Gatens, 1996). However, this assumes different positions and meanings through the power relations into which it finds itself inserted into society (Grosz, 1994). These layers can be recognised by examining the body's disparities and subjectivities. These subjectivities in the research field raise concerns about how the feminist body is represented.

Representation: Feminist researcher perspectives

In my research project, which will involve women participants of varied gender, colour, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class identities, comprehending the challenges of body portrayal within a feminist spectrum is crucial. Here, I draw on the work of the sociologist and researcher Róisín Ryan-Flood (2010) who emphasises that feminist research has brought to light issues of voice and representation, including women's voices in history, by revealing their hidden stories and experiences through intellectual and political approaches establishing a more egalitarian epistemological climate.

In terms of revealing women's voices, Ryan-Flood and the sociologist and feminist cultural theorist Rosalind Gill (2010) contend that a feminist approach examines how identity, intimacy, affect and power shape data and the broader research process—such as by engaging in a reflective praxis interpreting and critically reflecting on data. For example, the epistemological, ethical, and representational issues confronting members of a social group differ from those confronting the researcher, particularly when conducting a cross-cultural analysis and dealing with the historical questions of coloniser and colonised. In this regard, it is critical to consider power dynamics from the author's perspective when advocating or speaking on behalf of the *Other*. According to Edward Said (1995), Westerners view the Orient as the "Other" because of the disparity between their idealised version of the West and the real one. Contrary to the reality of the dominant relationships formed there—through territory invasion and as shown in artwork depictions of gender that fictionalise and exoticise the Other—the Occident has a romantic view of the Orient (Burney, 2012). Building on Said's concept of "Other", Ryan-Flood and Gill employ the feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) notion of epistemic violence to illustrate how colonial discourses aim to construct the colonial subject as Other (Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2010; Spivak, 1988) as well as the construction of women as Other. As Beauvoir states (1989), "[woman] is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with

reference to her” (p.16), which positions women as voiceless and misrepresented. The notion of *Other* is a significant aspect of my research as a Brazilian artist looking at a contemporary multicultural Australia.

In order to combat women's positions as voiceless and misrepresented, Christina Scharff (2010) postulates that the research process has been extensively theorised by feminist researchers, who emphasise that it is not an equal interaction but one marked by power disparities, which is significant to my art practice as I will be working with a diverse group of women. Awareness of such disparities leads to a feminist perspective which, according to Scharff (2010), extols that “critical investigation of silencing practices potentially helps us to occupy this space and become more aware of commonalities, differences and potentially shifting power-relationships” (p. 90).

I acknowledge these disparities in my research process through my photographic production which will require studio sessions with models-participants over the age of 18 composed of a cross-cultural (Brazil and Australia) group of distinctive gendered bodies. Gendered bodies within the scope of my research may include Cisgender, (women), Transgender (Women and Men), Gender Diverse and Non-Binary individuals. As a feminist researcher, I understand that representing these feminist bodies through art is a way of critically unveiling themes related to women within the social and historical context. As a result, the following subsection explores artists from many cultures who have personal experiences intertwined with feminist themes.

Feminist body in photography

My research practice review considers the following visual artists whose work, aesthetics and personal experiences are intricately entwined with feminist themes through photographic media.

The Brazilian artist Helga Stein’s (Guairá, São Paulo) artwork *Andros Hertz*, 2006, (Figure 1) is significant to my research in regard to the construction of identity and representation as I am interested in exploring different possibilities for representing gendered bodies in a cross-cultural setting. *Andros* comes from the word androgyny, which is connected to her work as Stein (2007b) assumes an undefined gender by representing herself in diverse ways and building different identities through her body. The word *Hertz* is a unit of frequency equal to one cycle per second used to measure the speed of data processing in personal computers, which has a close connection with the Flickr virtual community where the work was first exhibited. Stein

composes different portraits employing face altering methods such as makeup, hairstyles, clothing, facial expressions, various scenarios, and image manipulation using editing software, with the internet as inspiration (Figure 2). According to Stein (2007b), the validity of the image and the identity itself is questioned at this point because digital photographic modification, as its name implies, does not produce new data but works with each image's latent potential.



Figure 1: Helga Stein (2006), *Andros Hertz*, exhibition installation at Itaú Cultural Institute (Stein, 2006). Digital image. Photographer: Helga Stein. (Exception to copyright. Section: ss40, 103C. Exception: Research or study.)



Figure 2: Helga Stein (2006), *Andros Hertz*, project images for exhibition at the Itaú Cultural Institute (Stein, 2007a). Digital Image. Photographer: Helga Stein. (Exception to copyright. Section: ss40, 103C. Exception: Research or study.)

Similarly, the American artist Kelli Connell (Oklahoma, USA) uses portraiture to explore identity and gender issues. Within my research frame, I also investigate the fluidity of gender and cultural identity through a photographic portrait of participants from a feminist standpoint. My analysis focuses on her work *Sweetwater* (2008) (Figure 3) that is part of a series of images, *Double Life*, in which Connell photographs a young woman, Kiba Jacobson, at several points in time and manipulates the image digitally to create the appearance of two people in a relationship in the same environment. Specifically, this photograph was created by

scanning many negatives and digitally combining them in Adobe Photoshop. Connell uses photography to explore how sexuality and gender shape our individuality and how we show it in our interpersonal connections. Communication and Media Professor Yi-Hui Huang (2019) asserts that Connell embodies questions, doubts and aspirations about the dualism of the self between masculine and feminine, rational and irrational, in a couple's or single relationship.



Figure 3: Kelli Connell (2008), *Sweetwater*, from *Double Life*, (Connell, 2008). Digital image. Photographer: Kelli Connell. (Exception to copyright. Section: ss40, 103C. Exception: Research or study.)

Rosana Paulino is a Brazilian artist who addresses gender issues, in addition to social and racial themes, from a feminist and decolonial perspective through new materialism, which connects with my artistic practice that is also intimately related to new materialism feminism. I use an intersectional feminist theory and practice approach in my photography production process in terms of the political agency of my work, which respects the different views and experiences of gendered bodies.

Paulino's work is also significant in these terms, especially as a black woman in Brazil, where the black community is underrepresented. According to the academic researcher Nascimento (2007), people of African descent have made up the majority of Brazil's population for most of the country's post-colonial history. However, the idea of African inferiority, related to the period in which they were enslaved, has persisted, albeit unspoken, in the national unconsciousness, and it forms the basis of the whitening ideal, which drives miscegenation (Nascimento, 2007).

Paulino approaches this issue by depicting the ancestry of Brazilian black women using a wide range of materials and techniques associated with traditional Brazilian culture and most commonly used by women, such as miniature terracotta dolls and embroidery hoops, sometimes connecting these techniques to contemporary visual culture through photographs (Marques and Myczkowski, 2016). Thus, she undertakes a journey of self-discovery through her creative process. In her *Embroidery Hoops Series* (Figure 4), for example, she transfers the image of black women from Brazil's slavery era to the needlework hoop by embroidering the eyes, lips, and throats. The embroidered images symbolise her identity as a black Brazilian woman and how her personal history is tied to black women in Brazil. The academic researcher Talita Trizoli (2019) underlines Paulino's central role in the restitution of subjectivities and memories of black people, especially women, due to their absence in culture as characters and archetypes or as builders of narratives.



Figure 4: Rosana Paulino (1997) *Embroidery Hoops Series*, (Paulino, 1997). Diameter 27.94 cm. Photocopy transfer on fabric, wooden embroidery hoops and sewing thread, (Exception to copyright. Section: ss40, 103C. Exception: Research or study.)

The photographer and contemporary artist Aida Muluneh (born in Ethiopia) also focuses on gender and postcolonial concerns in her work. Like Muluneh, I am interested in representing how the body is perceived as a site of knowledge and production from a decolonised perspective. As shown in Figure 5, colour plays a significant role in her images, introducing cultural and fictional components to the scene she constructs for the shot. Through her photography, she reimagines her journey as a black woman. Aida uses photography to reconnect with her heritage and resignify it, subverting misrepresentations of African people by sharing an alternative narrative. The writer Claire Raymond (2017) affirms that feminism is about dominance, not gender. According to Raymond (2017), for Muluneh, the Western appropriation, distortion, and erasure of African images are dominant forces.

Therefore, Raymond (2017) claims that Muluneh's photography resists Western political activities' visual elision of African culture.



Figure 5: Aida Muluneh 2016, *Sai Mado (The Distant Gaze)*, (Muluneh, 2016). Inkjet print on paper: 81.9 x 81.9 cm. Photographer: Aida Muluneh. (Exception to copyright. Section: ss40, 103C. Exception: Research or study.)

Pat Brassington is an Australian contemporary photomedia artist whose work explores the tensions between the human and animal, the shocking and the mundane, and the attractive and the repulsive in gendered bodies through photography using a feminist lens. This tension is connected to my research, as I aim to explore the diverse identities of digitally manipulated gendered bodies from a feminist perspective by constructing and revealing alternate corporealities. For instance, in her artwork, *the permissions #3* (2013), (Figure 6), Brassington digitally manipulates a fragmented body to create the impression of fluidity and dynamism, introducing an unfamiliar gaze to this body. Cultural Studies Professor Robin Ferrell (2018) explains Pat Brassington's work by referencing Julia Kristeva, a feminist psychotherapist and semiotician whose research encompasses the horror of corporeal excrescence and abjected flesh. According to Kristeva (1982), the abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor adopts a ban, rule, or law. Instead, it

misleads, corrupts, utilises and exploits them to deny them. Feller (2018) claims that Brassington's work shows the abject body but encrypts it by showing images of abject body parts in groin creases, stockinged thighs and so on.



Figure 6: Pat Brassington 2013, *The permissions #3*, from the series *Quill*, (Brassington, 2013). Pigment print: 20.9 x 18.1 cm. Photographer: Pat Brassington. (Exception to copyright. Section: ss40, 103C. Exception: Research or study.)

In turn, Lisa Reihana (Aotearoa/NZ) explores her roots in Māori culture and women's roles within it through a variety of media, including large-scale photography and video. In my artistic practice, I use new materialism feminism to also explore my ancestry, as a Brazilian woman, considering embodied subjectivity and cultural aspects within the context of the power relations explicit in gendered bodies. In her most recent project, *Nomads of the Sea*, a 3D film based on a 3D installation of the same name, Reihana presents a fictitious narrative set in the 19th century about a female mutineer, Charlotte, offered shelter in a Māori tribal homeland. Puhi, a native woman, views Charlotte as a harmful influence (Aikman, 2022). Figures 7 (3D installation) and 8 (3D video) show how Reihana emphasises women's matriarchal role in Aotearoa. This artwork, like Reihana's earlier works, confronts cross-cultural pollination and colonial impact (Aikman, 2022).



Figure 7: Lisa Reihana 2018, *Nomads of the Sea*, 3D Installation, (Reihana, 2018). (Exception to copyright. Section: ss40, 103C. Exception: Research or study.)



Figure 8: Lisa Reihana 2019, *Nomads of the Sea*, Photograph from 3D Movie [4-channel 3D UHD Video 19 mins: 5-channel audio, dimensions variable], (Reihana, 2019). (Exception to copyright. Section: ss40, 103C. Exception: Research or study.)

Anne Zahalka is an Australian photographer and media artist whose work impacts my research in terms of looking at a multicultural Australia, by exploring this cultural diversity through the representation of the gendered bodies. According to the scholar Suzie Attiwill (2014), Zahalka's art frequently examines societal stereotypes, such as depicted in the artwork *The New Bathers*, 2013 (Figure 9), which suggests an updating of multicultural Australia in regard to Zahalka's previous work *The Bathers* (Figure 10). For Attiwill (2014), this composition resembles Charles Meere's painting *Australian Beach Pattern* (1940), which depicts the national life of Australia and Australians during the interwar period as one of physical and mental perfection. In

both compositions, Zahalka emphasises the reality and specificity of bodies that differ in gender, size, age, ethnicity and culture.



Figure 9: Anne Zahalka 2013, *The New Bathers*, 2013, Type C photograph on flex 90cm x 74cm. Edition of 5 and 2 A/P's, (Zahalka, 2013). Photographer: Anne Zahalka. (Exception to copyright. Section: ss40, 103C. Exception: Research or study.)



Figure 10: Anne Zahalka, 1989. *The Bathers*, 1989. Type C photograph on flex. (Zahalka, 1989). Photographer: Anne Zahalka. (Exception to copyright. Section: ss40, 103C. Exception: Research or study.)

Photography is a powerful and symbolic medium through which the feminist body manifests itself—especially considering the role of photography in the intersection of power, desire and representation in Western culture (Batchen and Kometani, 1997). The feminist body in photography challenges Western cultural settings by critically exposing its social and historical fallacies. The gendered body, which is the subject of the following section, is one of the aspects of Western culture that the feminist perspective challenges.

Gendered body

Feminist approaches to the gendered body

This section uses feminist approaches to the gendered body in order to elucidate how Western culture has shaped the gendered body within social contexts throughout history. These approaches concern perceptions of gender identity that consider the notions of the gendered body's fluidity, its corporeality and its social inscription.

Feminist research reveals that Western culture's depiction of the female originates in rejection and fear of the body, a masculine fear linked to gynophobia and sexism. Instead, some feminists advocate glorifying women's bodies and ability to bear and raise children (Gatens, 1996). However, both concepts regard the body as an autonomous biological entity endowed with timeless characteristics and abilities, positioning this discussion in a dualism between body/mind and nature/culture (Gatens, 1996). According to the researchers Mariam Fraser (2004) and Monica Greco (2004), much modern sociology of the body uses a *Cartesian* dualism as its starting point, yet this dualism is anything but neutral, due to the pervasive feminisation and racialisation of all bodily concepts.

In turn, Judith Butler (1990) approaches the gendered body through the concept of gender identity, which will be further explored in the gender identity section. Butler (1990) asserts that the interplay of signifying absences that hint at but never expose identity as causes, actions, gestures and desires provide the effect of an internal core or substance that is produced on the surface of the body. According to Butler (1990), any behaviour that attempts to convey an essence or identity through physical signs or other discursive means is considered performative. Because of its performative nature, the gendered body has no ontological importance outside its behaviours (Butler, 1990). This also means that if reality is built around an internal essence, then interiority is a product of public and social discourse, and the public regulation of

imagination through the surface politics of the body and the management of gender borders creates the subject's "integrity" (Butler, 1990).

Understanding different feminist approaches to the gendered body is crucial to my research, as my practice is grounded in a feminist view of the gendered body. Consequently, I am compelled to investigate how Western society has developed power relations around this gendered body. As I work across two cultures, Australia and Brazil, this investigation will consider a cross-cultural setting.

Cross-cultural relations of power in gendered bodies

The purpose of this subsection is to explore how colonial characteristics influenced and affected the creation of the gendered body by discussing how these power relations operate in diverse cultural contexts. Issues pertaining to sexual differentiation and the cultural portrayal of the gendered body are considered in the analysis of the power connections within society.

How power, dominance, and sexual difference play out in men's and women's everyday lives may be understood through the lens of Gatens's (1996) concept of the imaginary body. The term *imaginary* is used regarding images, symbols, metaphors, and representations that aid in developing different types of subjectivity (Gatens, 1996). Gatens (1996) argues that the imaginary body refers to the culturally distinctive (sometimes unconscious) imaginaries: the preconceived notions, stereotypes, and icons by which individuals and groups interpret and handle social bodies.

These social constructions of the gendered body lead to the analysis of sexual difference, which for the feminist theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2022) takes the form of a cross-culturally singular, monolithic concept of patriarchy or male dominance, that leads to the development of a similarly simplistic and homogeneous concept of what she refers to as the "third-world difference", that stable, ahistorical something that oppresses the vast majority of, if not all, women in these countries. According to Mohanty (2022), Western feminisms occupy the inherent complexities of women's lives in these nations by constructing this third-world difference. In regard to Mohanty's notion, the researcher Swati Parashar (2016) discusses the co-opting of third world women in refugee representations to re-signify the white saviour ideology. Parashar (2016) emphasises how postcolonial criticisms may show how hegemonic feminism erases women's experiences and representations during and after political violence.

Significant to this research project is the consideration of how sociocultural and historical circumstances affected the construction of power relations in gendered bodies in cross-cultural contexts. Cross-cultural settings may involve power connections based on colonialism in which the gendered body is subjected to a dominant culture (Mohanty, 2022). This power structure can be directly affected by sociological aspects, such as the patriarchy that positions the gendered body based on sexuality which has been historically connected to gender identity (Gatens, 1996). In order to clarify how feminism has been defining gender identity and how its approaches have impacted body image, I will investigate this topic in further depth in the following section.

Gender identity

Postcolonial feminism and gender Identity

The intersection of power, culture and gender identity through the analyses of postcolonial feminism are crucial in understanding gendered bodies in a cross-cultural setting. The conceptions of power over the body in society are intricately intertwined with gender identity, which has a significant effect on feminist debate. The desire for a more varied and inclusive perspective on these concerns, however, led to the development of postcolonial feminism.

Two key goals of feminist postcolonial theory have been to revisit traditional feminist thought and incorporate feminist concerns into theoretical frameworks for colonialism and postcolonialism as a result of black and third world feminist theorists' critique of the over-emphasis on white concerns, leading to a thorough rethinking of the category of gender itself (Lewis and Mills, 2013). Consequently, the term "gender" encompasses a diverse group of women but does not consider the diverse concerns and values in other cultures (Lewis and Mills, 2013).

In reference to incorporating a varied group of women within feminist perspectives, the feminist philosopher Sueli Carneiro (2016) argues that black women in the feminist movement confronted the contradictions and inequality that racism and discrimination produce between women, particularly black women and white women in Brazil, leading to the realisation that gender identity does not unfold naturally into intra-gender racial solidarity. As the postcolonial feminist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) emphasises, each discourse has its own vocabulary, narratives, and laws. One discourse's interaction might be significantly different from another's. In each discourse, what constitutes a good argument is different (Polatdemir and Binder, 2015; Spivak, 1988).

In the context of diverse feminist perspectives, the social scientist Raewyn Connell (Connell et al 2017) argues there is a need to construct empirical images of Global South knowledge-making, stating that “knowledge is not just an abstract social 'construct'. It is specifically a social product, generated by and embodied in particular forms of work”. As scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) asserts, decolonisation is an ongoing process that addresses the various manifestations of imperialism and colonialism. One decolonisation process focuses on researchers developing a more critical awareness of the assumptions, motives and values that shape their work (Smith, 1999). As such, a decolonised perspective of practice raises different questions about the colonality of gender, the feminist knowledge workforce and global counterpublics, which provide new insights into the field of feminist theory. Smith’s perspective can be linked to my research, which is embedded in Brazilian and Australian cultural issues regarding the construction of identity and body image through a photographic practice incorporating a feminist aesthetic. According to the sociologist Leavy (2007), “feminists are at the forefront of critically interrogating the texts and products that comprise culture to resist patriarchal understandings of social reality that push women and other minorities to the peripheries of their culture and social interpretive processes” (p. 2).

Feminist aesthetics

Regarding the infinite number of possibilities photographers have when producing an image, the art critic John Berger (1972) emphasises that every image reflects a method of seeing. When this way of seeing an image concerns women’s depiction in photography, we do not see these diverse alternatives. Berger (1972) contends that the gender differences in portrayals of men and women are not due to any inherent differences between them but rather to the fact that the *ideal* viewer is always considered to be male and the image of the women is created to flatter him.

To combat this depiction of women, the decolonial feminist Claire Raymond (2017) argued that feminists throughout the twenty-first century, especially the post-structuralist feminists worked on a feminist aesthetic, as the aesthetic power that a picture may generate is one of few remaining political forces in this century. For Raymond (2017), a feminist aesthetic is protean, not set or grid based. In building a flexible and unexpected feminist aesthetic, she borrows from aesthetic theory’s foundations. Raymond (2017) regards the aesthetic event as a type of motion, a force with which the picture affects and changes the viewer.

In one sense, however, Raymond (2017) claims the photograph's materiality lends itself uncannily to aesthetic theory: if it can be described at all, the photograph is as image as such. As an image it transcends its own creation and performance bounds while is intended to be duplicated, distributed and reproduced. This photograph's always-replicated physicality makes it a political object (Raymond, 2017).

The reviewed researchers scaffold my research within a decolonial framework by acknowledging a diverse group of gendered bodies in terms of their subjectivity and agency, in contrast to the power relations that lead to categorising bodies into fixed gender identity categories. To combat these simplistic social constructions of the body, I approach the gendered body from a feminist gaze.

Gender identity and the feminist gaze

The male gaze (Berger, 1972) has been a component of gender identification. It manifests itself as a constant surveiller of our bodies and those of others (Berger, 1972), such as the media, with the capacity to arouse judgement and desire. In contrast, the feminist gaze emerged to re-evaluate this established relationship and our identification with it.

According to the feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey (1989), in a sexually imbalanced environment, active/male and passive/female lookers dominate. Women are the object of both sadistic and voyeuristic gazes. The actual image of woman as (passive) raw material for man's (active) gaze extends the argument into the content and structure of representation, adding another layer of ideological significance demanded by the patriarchal order (Mulvey, 1989). Further, Mulvey (1991) affirms that it was inevitable that a politics of the body would lead to a politics of body representation. The inclusion of the topic of women's images in the subsequent discussions and campaigns was one step that shifted feminism from the known terrain of political action onto the terrain of political aesthetics (Mulvey, 1991).

The concept of women as actors in their own depiction has been conceptualised as the *female gaze*; according to researcher Lisa French (2021), the female gaze is neither homogenous, unitary, or monolithic, and it will inevitably take multiple forms. Contexts other than sex and gender, such as ethnicity, sexuality, culture, class, religion, money, and physique, all have an equal impact on an individual's identity (French, 2021). Although French (2021) recognises that there are many distinctions between women artists and that each artist can only be adequately understood via

her works and the world(s) each woman creates and represents, it is appropriate to claim that there are many parallels amongst women artists.

Despite theorists' use of the word *female gaze*, I intend to explore the reconceptualisation of the term as *feminist gaze* and encompass diversity.

Conclusion

The investigation of various feminist perspectives, as presented in the three main sections, has led to a comprehensive understanding of the intersection of the gendered body and gender identity in a social-cultural context. This literature review's approach to the feminist body, the gendered body and gender identity has granted me greater agency as an artist and researcher, as the theories addressed dialogues with my artistic practice. The knowledge acquired throughout this review has created new opportunities for my artistic expression, particularly with regard to a feminist aesthetic that expands the range of possibilities for representing gendered bodies within cross-cultural settings. Notably, my photographic practice is embedded in cultural issues involving Brazil and Australia regarding the construction of identity and body image. Within this research framework and informed by critical decolonising feminist theory, I aspire to contribute to discussions regarding how cultural similarities and differences influence the perception of gendered bodies. These discussions seek to promote contemporary feminist perspectives on gendered bodies within a diverse community, thereby enhancing the comprehension of the discourses pertinent to gendered bodies and specifically the implications of these discourses in contemporary photography.

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