

**Towards a feminist politics of desire: Caring, resisting, and becoming.  
Review of the book *Feminism and vital politics of depression and  
recovery* (Simone Fullagar, Wendy O'Brien & Adele Pavlidis, 2019)**

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1344/jnmr.v1i2.31841>

Biomedical imaginaries on mental disorders are generally based on linear structures of causal connections focused on the individual agency of recovery. Those usually don't include the critical contributions by feminist researchers that have largely proposed different connections between women's social and emotional lives, mental health diagnosis and forms of gender discrimination, inequality, violence and abuse suffered by women in both public and private spheres (Appignanesi, 2011; Chandler, 2016; McDermott & Roen, 2016; Stone & Kokanovic, 2016; Stoppard, 2000; Ussher, 1991; Wiener, 2005 in Fullagar, O'Brien & Pavlidis, 2019). *Feminism and vital politics of depression and recovery* by Simone Fullagar, Wendy O'Brien and Adele Pavlidis (2019) is an invitation to reconfigure discourses, imaginaries and narratives on mental health from a new materialist approach, by moving beyond individual problems to collective experiences that shape a feminist ethos. The authors invite readers "to engage with this book as a co-constituted process of reading-writing through visceral connections—guts, brains, hearts, skin, words, images, surfaces—to explore how gender matters" (Fullagar, O'Brien & Pavlidis, 2019, p. 1).

The 80 in-depth interviews presented in this research are not analysed by the authors from an interpretative perspective, by producing unequal relations between expert knowledge/situated knowledges, researchers/researched. Rather, their analysis produces creative, generative and relational dialogues with the women interviewed, by disclosing the subjectivity of the researchers and entangling it in intra-active and dialogical ways with other voices. This gesture responds to the challenges of extending poststructuralist critiques of discursive formats towards a *new materialist*

*ontology* (Barad, 2003; Hinton, 2013; St. Pierre, Jackson & Mazzei, 2016), by opening up the possibilities of a performative, affective and relational understanding of discourses. To this purpose, Fullagar et al.'s generative analysis moves beyond the representationalist perspectives that prefigure static humanist subjects and objective meanings to a new materialist direction; by exploring how social practices, affective relations, infrastructures of care, power and non-human elements lively produce and constitute processes, meanings and subjects.

In the first part of the book the authors provide an epistemological framework that takes up a combination of poststructuralist and new materialist conceptual configurations in order to reconsider depression and recovery as a non-linear process, but an entanglement of rhizomatic movements powered by the agency of human and non-human elements. The figure of *the knot*, introduced by Elisabeth de Freitas (2012) and Rebecca Coleman (2016), allows the authors thinking depression and recovery rhizomatically, by adopting the very behaviour of the knot –never positioned at a fixed point, but contracting and expanding in a proliferating process (de Freitas, 2012 in Fullagar, O'Brien & Pavlidis, 2019). Besides, the configuration of *inquiry as a knotty process* brings out the possibility of understanding research beyond representationalism towards world-making, while affecting and being affected by the (re)written biographical stories of women's depression-recovery experiences. In this regard, the authors "invoke a feminist politics to understand the bodying of tensions or knots that materialise through the enfolding of gender norms and injustices into thinking-feeling habits that can capture and disrupt" (Fullagar, O'Brien & Pavlidis, 2019, p. 28).

The encounter of the authors with 80 different women self-identified as recovering or recovered from an experience of depression configures an entanglement made of imbricated fragments of interviews, conversations, story-events, theoretical frameworks, affects, poems, narratives, habits, spaces, bodies, desires and displacements. From this entanglement, emerges a sort of collective memory that gives an account of the shared experience of depression-recovery from a feminist political and ethical perspective. Along with their participants, the authors propose a collaborative critical-creative analysis of the biographical transitions that cross and affect women's life such as puberty, (heteronormative pressures of) womanhood and

motherhood, and menopause. With an entire chapter dedicated to the historical gendered knot of maternal care and love, the authors explore the affective relations that haunt depression-recovery experiences linked to motherhood, by overlaying feminist ontologies with specific embodied experiences. This chapter questions the idea of maternal *love* as an ‘instinctive’, ‘biological’ and ‘natural’ behaviour, by rethinking it as an element “imbricated in multiple practices from popular narratives, birthing videos, breastfeeding, alcohol and drug use, anti-depressants and multiple intersubjective relationships [...] that become infrastructures of care within advanced liberalism (Butler, 2014)” (Fullagar, O’Brien & Pavlidis, 2019, p. 108).

The reflections emerging from the interviews conceptualise the configuration of subjectivities in social life and its subsequent forms of gender violence, blaming, and power relations. By doing so, the book draws lines of connection between different vital trajectories marked out by the experience of depression. In this respect, the authors move beyond the conceptualisation of illness-therapy-recovery as a linear and lonely path –subordinated to the subject’s individual decisions– towards a common concern, by epitomising *the personal is political* feminist rallying slogan. Thereupon, Fullagar, O’Brien and Pavlidis (2019) refuse humanist prefigurations about individual agency “that position women who consume medication as dupes of medicalisation, or romanticise women who refuse medication as somehow liberated from biopolitical assemblages” (p. 89). Instead, therapy and the ingestion of medication becomes “a practice through which recovering subjects are produced as permeable, corporeal and ambivalent sites that are traversed by the global flows of Big Pharma capital, health services, policy apparatus and prescribing practices” (p. 97).

The second part of the book follows the thread of the displacements experienced by women along with their recovery in order to explore the creative practices, habits, flows and rhythms that contribute to the process of *becoming healthy*. Recovery is explored as a performative process that women embody through daily routines. The authors refuse the idea of recovery as an event that emerges from a specific practice in a particular time, “by tracing the self-world entanglements that create new relationalities with materials, objects, aesthetics, spaces and modes of playfulness, experimentation and learning to do gender otherwise” (Fullagar, O’Brien & Pavlidis,

2019, p. 171). The notion of *recovery as becoming* is directly linked to creativity; writing blogs, dancing, cooking, painting, developing new skills and other creative practices emerge in the different trajectories of recovery as an opportunity for emancipation. These narratives reveal the agency of creativity as a catalyst for new possibilities that disrupt the Order of the Things. Thereupon, “the spatiotemporal assumptions that inform linear models of recovery and wellbeing are also challenged by notions of transformation that are not organised around neoliberal imperatives to improve and return to ‘normal’ productivity (McLeod, 2017; Swist et al., 2016)” (Fullagar, O’Brien & Pavlidis, 2019, p. 173).

The usage of poetry, metaphors and humour allows women in recovering to verbalise procedures, events, relations and affects that otherwise would stay invisible. According to the authors’ analysis, these practices “*make visible* the effects and affects of gender-based violence, poor medical treatment, lack of support and exclusion, precarity in work, housing and child support and so on” (Fullagar, O’Brien & Pavlidis, 2019, p. 192, italics in original). Moreover, the book proves that cultural and visibility practices play also a role of *feminist public pedagogies*, by disclosing personal-political narratives that disrupt the discourses established by gender normativity and its immediacy with the biomedical apparatus.

The research presented in this 245 pages combines a new materialist perspective with a post-qualitative approach, moving beyond knowledge production –typically based on representing the ‘truths’ of phenomena, experiences and social contexts by analysing a validated data set– into what we can term *spaces for thinking* (Sheikh, 2006). According to Simon Sheikh (2006) thinking is here “meant to imply networks of indiscipline, lines of flight and utopian questionings” (p.196). This configuration produces two challenging displacements that allow the authors to open up lines of flight in multiple directions along with their inquiry: *Think through* the materiality of the mental health (Fullagar, 2019) and *think in relation with* an onto-epistemological politics and ethics of other feminist authors. Women’s narratives are not considered as a static, transparent and accessible discourse that should be “given voice” by the researchers. Rather, through their critical-creative analysis, the authors produce dialogical and relational assemblages that emerge from their process of affect and being affected by the stories on mental illness experienced by women. By doing so,

the authors enact different writing formats through “the relations of depression-recovery to evoke biographical fragments, the embodied and remembered traces of gender power relations, tensions and contradictions, as well as the pleasurable and joyful moments when women recounted how things changed and what they had learnt” (Fullagar, O’Brien & Pavlidis, 2019, p. 18).

This book is configured as a radical proposal that dilutes the structures, categories and dichotomies under which biomedical and heteronormative imaginaries shape narratives and discourses around mental illness in women. This proposal unfolds an entanglement of biographical traces, personal stories, cultural practices and collective experiences from which emerge a reconceptualization of depression and recovery “as [a] gendered phenomena produced through multiple intraactions, rather than originating from singular causes be they biological, psychological or social” (Fullagar, O’Brien & Pavlidis, 2019, p. 203). Within this entanglement of trajectories, Fullagar, O’Brien and Pavlidis open up onto-epistemological proposals that contribute reconfiguring the imaginaries of depression and recovery from a feminist political and ethical logic of care, desire and resistance.

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