

<b>Institution:</b> De Montfort University		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 32		
<b>Title of case study:</b> <i>Blood Memory</i> and <i>Haystacks</i> : Reimagining and Rethinking Communities		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2015–present		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Professor Lala Meredith-Vula	Professor of Art and Photography	22 August 2002–present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> March 2015–December 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b> <p>Meredith-Vula's major photographic projects, <i>Blood Memory</i> and <i>Haystacks</i>, have had wide-reaching social, cultural and artistic impact both within the communities they represent and internationally, bolstered by high-profile exhibitions and award nominations. <i>Blood Memory</i> (a series of photos documenting Kosovo's Blood Feud reconciliation movement) has prompted fresh public, political and artistic engagement with Kosovo's turbulent modern history and the example set by the popular reconciliation movement. Similarly, her <i>Haystacks</i> work (an ongoing series of photographs of Eastern European farmers' haystacks) has captured an agricultural 'art' that is dying out in Europe and contributed to new ways of seeing the rural, among international artists, scholars and members of the public.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b> <p>The impacts of Meredith-Vula's work have arisen from her two major artistic projects – <i>Blood Memory</i> and <i>Haystacks</i> – and the exhibitions and other research outputs that these have generated. Both projects reflect Meredith-Vula's preoccupation with questions of identity and were inspired by her decision to visit Kosovo, in 1989, with the aim of reconnecting with the culture of her homeland. Her subsequent artistic research was, and continues to be, inspired by this re-engagement with the land of her birth.</p> <p><b>(1) BLOOD MEMORY</b></p> <p>While living in Kosovo in 1990–1991, Meredith-Vula observed what became known as the Blood Feud reconciliations. This movement to reconcile traditional blood feuds was popular in origin and, at a time of Serbian oppression, had a nationalistic dimension, as an assertion of shared national identity. Conscious that this was an important moment of peacemaking and solidarity, Meredith-Vula took more than 350 photos of the gatherings.</p> <p><b><u>National Gallery of the Arts (2015)</u></b></p> <p>Almost all of the photographs remained unprinted until 2015 when Erzen Shkololli, director of the National Gallery of Arts in Kosovo, invited Meredith-Vula to stage a solo exhibition of her <i>Blood Memory</i> work, as a way of encouraging visitors to remember this important moment in Kosovo's history. Meredith-Vula took this opportunity to work on the archive and reinterpret her photographs by curating a set of 40 images that would engage contemporary audiences emotionally and politically with the experience of the Blood Feud reconciliations and their insights into a positive model of popular activism and peacemaking [R1].</p> <p><b><u>documenta 14</u></b></p> <p>Shkololli later recommended Meredith-Vula's work to the 2017 <i>documenta 14</i> exhibition. The work was then selected by the <i>documenta 14</i> artistic director and board of curators. Staged only once every five years, <i>documenta</i> is one of the world's most prestigious and most visited contemporary art exhibitions. Five large works from <i>Blood Memory</i> were exhibited, along with 40 photographs from Meredith-Vula's <i>Haystacks</i> (22 of the images were taken in 2016 and 18 were earlier images</p>		

that had not been exhibited before) [R2].

## (2) **HAYSTACKS**

While living in Kosovo (1989–1991), on a British Council / Yugoslav Government Scholarship, Meredith-Vula became fascinated with the haystacks she saw in the villages outside Pristina and started to photograph them as works akin to modern sculptures, as well as material evidence of an older way of rural life with which she sought to connect. She has since built up an archive of nearly 4,000 images of haystacks, mostly taken in Eastern Europe. The largest tranche of these images (almost 2,000) derives from her revisiting of the project in 2016. Returning to Kosovo, Meredith-Vula was keen to explore whether there had been any decline in the making of traditional haystacks, as proved to be the case in many areas, making the images of the surviving practice an even more valuable cultural and artistic archive and source of evidence about environmental and technological change in Kosovo – including people's changing relationship to their environment – in the post-Cold War and Yugoslav War era. These 2016 images have been put in dialogue with Meredith-Vula's earlier work, via a series of new exhibitions of *Haystacks* images, starting with *documenta* 14 (2017), highlighting Kosovo's resilience in the aftermath of the political turbulence and war of the late 1990s [R2].

### **Wisdom Today and Forever**

The international impact of the *documenta* exhibition led to a series of further invited exhibitions of Meredith-Vula's work. Eighteen images from *Haystacks* (selected from the 40 shown at *documenta*) were exhibited with seven new large wall photographs from *Blood Memory* as part of a solo exhibition, *Wisdom Today and Forever* at the Marubi National Museum of Photography in Shkodër, Albania (October 2017–January 2018) [R3].

### **The Needle, the Haystack, the Thread**

Between March and May 2018, five new large-scale Meredith-Vula *Haystacks* photographs were exhibited alongside the work of three other artists at the Arts Club of Chicago, USA, as part of an exhibition themed around ideas of traditional work, farm work and craft work. None of the images had been exhibited before [R4].

### **Select Haystacks (1989–ongoing)**

A different configuration of 13 *Haystacks* images was then displayed as a solo exhibition, *Select Haystacks (1989–ongoing)* at the Alberto Peola Contemporary Art Gallery, Turin, Italy (November 2018–February 2019), including eight large new prints of photographs taken in 2018 [R5]. Simultaneously, a further two images from the *Haystacks* series featured at the prestigious Artissima Art Fair, also in Turin.

## **3. References to the research**

[R1] Lala Meredith-Vula, *Blood Memory* (2015), National Gallery of Art, Pristina, Kosovo (Exhibition).

Nominated for the Deutsche Börse Foundation Photography Prize 2016 for the solo exhibition showing the most outstanding contribution to European photography in 2015. This is photography's equivalent of the Turner Prize.

[R2] Lala Meredith-Vula, contribution to *documenta* 14 (2017): (a) Photographs from *Blood Memory*, National Museum of Contemporary Art (EMST), Athens, Greece (Exhibition); (b) Photographs from *Haystacks*, 14 Bellevue Palais, Kassel, Germany (Exhibition).

Meredith-Vula's two contributions to *documenta* 14 were singled out for attention and praise in several of the reviews of the festival. *The New York Times* included a photograph of Meredith-Vula installing her work, selected along with three others for the article from around 160 artists who exhibited [C3]. Katie Bruton described Meredith-Vula's *Blood Memory* as 'perhaps the most notable exhibition piece' (Katie Bruton, 'Inside *documenta* 14, Athens', *Fields Magazine*, 22 June 2017); and artist Bonita Ely said in an interview that some of the 'stand out works for me ... were Lala Meredith-Vula's photographs of sculptural haystacks' (cited in Tessa Laird, 'Inside out: an artist's view of *documenta* 14', *Art and Australia*, [artandaustralia.com/online/discussions/inside-out-artist-s-view-documenta-14](http://artandaustralia.com/online/discussions/inside-out-artist-s-view-documenta-14),

2017).

- [R3] Lala Meredith-Vula, *Wisdom Today and Forever*, Marubi National Museum of Photography, Shkodër, Albania (October 2017–January 2018) (Exhibition).

The Marubi National Museum of Photography is the first museum of photography in Albania. Meredith-Vula's exhibition was reviewed in the prestigious photographic journal, *Camera Austria International* [C5].

- [R4] Lala Meredith-Vula, *The Needle, the Haystack, the Thread* (March–May 2018), The Arts Club of Chicago, USA (Exhibition).

The Arts Club of Chicago is over one hundred years old and famous for exhibiting new, cutting-edge art. The exhibition was reviewed positively in Stephanie Cristello (2018) 'Ariadne's thread: The Needle, The Haystack, The Thread: The Arts Club of Chicago', *The Seen: Chicago's International Online Journal of Contemporary and Modern Art*, 7 (26 September).

- [R5] Lala Meredith-Vula, *Select Haystacks (1989–ongoing)*, Alberto Peola Contemporary Art Gallery, Turin, Italy (November 2018–February 2019) (Exhibition).

The Albert Peola Contemporary Art Gallery 'was opened in 1989 by Alberto Peola; it shows work by contemporary emerging artists from Italy and abroad' and it 'places a firm emphasis on new artistic trends which explore personal narrative research through different expressive means, ranging from painting to photography and video installations'.  
<https://albertopeola.com/en/gallery>

Meredith-Vula's exhibition at the gallery was reviewed in Alessandra Pioselli, 'Lala Meredith Vula', *ArtForum* (2019); <https://www.artforum.com/picks/lala-meredith-vula-77797>

- [R6] Kelley Wilder (2019) '“It's just so beautiful to see the pictures”: A conversation between Lala Meredith-Vula and Kelley Wilder', *PhotoResearcher*, 31: 8–31 (peer-reviewed journal article).

This is the international, peer-reviewed journal of the European Society for the History of Photography, based in Austria.

#### 4. Details of the impact

Meredith-Vula's *Blood Memory* and *Haystacks* projects have had considerable positive social, cultural and artistic impacts, particularly in Kosovo (where the research and the art first originated) but also internationally in Europe and North America, via public exhibitions of Meredith-Vula's work and the media and public attention these exhibitions have garnered. The beneficiaries have included members of the art world, politicians and members of the public, as outlined below.

Meredith-Vula's evocative *Blood Memory* and *Haystacks* images have achieved their impact chiefly via the public exhibitions of her work since 2015, as already described. These exhibitions have reached large international audiences, including artists, art critics, politicians and members of the public. The exhibition at the National Gallery of Art, Kosovo [R1] received distinguished visitors ranging from young people to politicians, including Atifete Jahjaga and Rosen Plevneliev (presidents of Kosovo and Bulgaria respectively), Federica Mogherini (High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the European Commission), and Samuel Žbogar (Slovenian diplomat and politician, EU Special Representative in North Macedonia and former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Slovenia). The exhibition also received extensive press coverage in Kosovo, featuring for example on Kosovo TV (KTV) in an arts programme *proX*, which is of equivalent stature to the BBC's art series *Imagine* and *Arena*, and later posted on YouTube, increasing the accessibility of the exhibition [C1].

The reach of Meredith-Vula's impact was widened further internationally, by the exhibition of images from the two projects as part of *documenta* 14 (2017) [R2] and *Wisdom Today and Forever* (2017–2018) [R3]; *documenta* 14, was attended by 1,230,500 visitors from across the world, an overall increase from the previous *documenta* event in 2012, which drew 930,000 visitors [C2]; and Meredith-Vula's work attracted particular attention, featuring, for example, in an article on the festival in *The New York Times* [C3] and the Arte TV documentary about *documenta* 14 [C4].

*Wisdom Today and Forever* also received some high-profile media coverage. As well as being reviewed in prestigious photographic journal, *Camera Austria International* [C5], the exhibition was visited by Albanian prime minister, Edi Rama, who promoted it on Facebook with a video clip featuring images of Meredith-Vula's work, which was viewed by over 80,000 people in the opening week of the exhibition (his post was viewed 88,000 times and there were 2,500 likes and 397 comments) [C6]. A large, international audience was also drawn to the Artissima Art Fair in Turin which was attended by 54,800 people from 35 countries in 2018 [C7].

### (1) IMPACTS AND BENEFICIARIES

*Blood Memory* has had social, cultural and political impact (from 2015), including raising public awareness of, and engagement with, the Blood Feud reconciliations of 1990–1991 as an important part of late-20th-century Kosovo's history. This engagement is reflected in the many examples Meredith-Vula witnessed of visitors photographing themselves with her images and thereby creating what Kelley Wilder characterises as 'new political photographs', including politicians, such as the presidents of Bulgaria and Kosovo who responded to the model of reconciliation in the photos, re-enacting 'forgiveness for the camera in the shape of the "v" sign' before one of Meredith-Vula's photographs [C8]. The experience of seeing the images has also prompted many people to share their stories, including a Kosovan man who had been part of the reconciliation process. He recognised himself and a friend in one of the photographs and wrote to Meredith-Vula, describing how seeing her work 'made me go back in time, where I personally experienced what I saw through your photographs'. He explained that his friend, who forgave the loss of his two brothers in a feud that day, was later killed during the Kosovan wars (1998). Despite the sadness of this, he ended by saying 'It's just so beautiful to see the pictures', demonstrating how the impact of *Blood Memory* on many people has been emotional as well as cultural (cited in C8). Indeed, one art critic specifically highlighted this, arguing that the images 'distinguish themselves from mere reportage because of the emotional impact they generate, rendering heroic a past too early forgotten' [C9].

Meredith-Vula's *Haystacks* work has had similar emotional and cultural impact (from 2016), likewise prompting active audience engagement with, and responses to, her photographs. She has been sent numerous photographs of haystacks taken by people inspired to engage with the haystacks as 'art' by her work, and she has been contacted by farmers excited by her capturing of a rural farming tradition, such as the German farmer who attended *documenta* 14 and later wrote to Meredith-Vula to say that she 'fell in love with your haystacks series' and their transformation of the haystacks 'into art'. The farmer shared photos of haystacks that she and her husband had made, inspired by the traditional methods modelled in Meredith-Vula's photographs [C10]. Meredith-Vula's *Haystacks* work has impacted significantly on a rethinking of the rural in the professional art world, as well, as evidenced by the prominent discussion of her work and the use of one of her haystacks images as the cover for a new art book on this subject, *Rurality Re-imagined* (2018), edited by Ben Stringer and published by ORO Editions, an internationally recognised publishing firm specialising in bespoke architecture, design, photography and art-related books [C11]. As Stringer comments 'Lala's celebrated Haystack series of photographs has very successfully invoked critical discussions about representations of rural life within public and professional art domains. It has done this partly by gauging familiar art historical references against place specific realities and partly by recasting humble haystacks as sites of imagination as well as food and bedding for animals' [C11].

### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- [C1] 'ProX Lala Meredith-Vula 14 04 2015', *YouTube*, 15 April 2015; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=utKXZobV2LA> (Language – Kosovan)
- [C2] Andrew Russeth, 'Documenta 14 Reports Record Attendance [Updated]', *Art News*, 19 September 2017; <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/market/documenta-14-reports-record-attendance-9007/>
- [C3] Rachel Donadio, 'German Art Exhibition Documenta Expands Into Athens', *The New York Times*, 5 April 2017; <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/05/arts/design/documenta-german-exhibition-greek-crisis.html>
- [C4] 'documenta 14' documentary, transmitted first on 14 June 2017, on the Arte TV channel at

9.50 pm, directed by Natascha Pflaumbaum, and then available for three months from that date on their catch-up service (not in PDF; evidence available on request).

- [C5] Arniso Zeqo (2018) 'Lala Meredith-Vula: Wisdom Today and Forever', *Camera Austria*, 141; <https://camera-austria.at/en/zeitschrift/141-2018-2/>
- [C6] Facebook post (20 October 2017) by the prime minister of Albania, Edi Rama.  
<https://edjathta.wordpress.com/2017/10/20/rama-urtesi-sot-e-mot-ekspozite-e-fotografit-kosovare-lala-meredith-vula/> (Language – Albanian).  
<https://www.facebook.com/marubimuseum/posts/1471504466269318/> (Language Albanian and English).
- [C7] Fabio Pariente, 'Fronrunner at Artissima 2018: The 25th Anniversary Fair', *Fronrunner*, 10 November 2018; <https://www.fronrunnermagazine.com/fronrunner-at-artissima-2018-the-25th-anniversary-fair/>
- [C8] Kelley Wilder (2019) '“It's just so beautiful to see the pictures”: A conversation between Lala Meredith-Vula and Kelley Wilder', *PhotoResearcher*, 31: 8–31.
- [C9] Angela Vettese, 'Documenta alla greca', *Il Sole 24 ORE*, 21 April 2017; <https://st.ilsole24ore.com/art/cultura/2017-04-21/documenta-greca-132255.shtml> (Language - Italian).
- [C10] Testimonial from a German farmer from Eckental near Nuremburg (6 September 2017), who contacted Lala Meredith-Vula through her website.
- [C11] Ben Stringer (ed.) (2018) *Rurality Re-Imagined: Villagers, Farmers, Wanderers and Wild Things*, San Francisco: ORO Editions; ISBN 9781940743349  
 Testimonial from Ben Stringer (via e-mail) (16 November 2020).