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**Using genre literature and video in homelessness research: a feminist  
sociological experiment in insurrectional textuality**

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## **ABSTRACT**

It is a truism that research does not occur outside of the life which researches and that 'things happen' which impact constantly on the development of thinking, knowing, theorising and writing/making (Oates 1992). Such things for me include reading novels, watching films and listening to music. Here I discuss the use of a literary feminist gothic style and the interjection of video excerpts and montages/mashups into a written academic text as a means of exploring the source, affect and dis/crediting of knowledges about homelessness at a time when British neo-liberal capitalism was on the rise.

**KEYWORDS:** methodology, epistemology, ethnography, auto/biography, feminist cultural studies, qualitative research, homelessness

## **INTRODUCTION**

While Clifford and Marcus's (1986) emphasis on the written rather than reported nature of social science has been widely explored and accepted in some areas of the social sciences, most of that exploration still remains at the level of theory; applications of such ideas are much less common. The 'vast outpouring of experimentation with modes of writing', which Marcus (1997: 2), referred to ten years after *Writing Culture* seems (more than ten years further on) to be largely a niche movement of experimental ethnography, rather than infiltrating 'large segments of the academic world' as he suggests. The social sciences continue to produce sophisticated analyses of mass and minority media. Meanwhile, digital ethnography is starting to appear in some sociological text books (Murthy 2008) but, despite the potentialities of web publishing, there remains little social scientific experimentation with the production of audiovisual texts beyond data recording (c.f. Hockings 1975).

Here I discuss the use of a literary feminist gothic style and the interjection of video excerpts and montages/mashups into a written academic text as a means of exploring the source, affect and dis/crediting of knowledge at a time when neo-liberal capitalism

was on the rise. Drawing on my own experiences as a social welfare worker and social scientist attempting to represent the homeless ‘other’ in Manchester in the 1980s-1990s, my PhD thesis, *The Monstrosity of Homelessness: Investigations of Street Homelessness in Manchester and London 1987-1994* (Madden 2001), takes the reader on an exploration of the production of the subjectivity of a social researcher working in the British poverty industry. The thesis is a work of social theory in a feminist cultural studies framework which takes seriously the idea that social welfare discourses have material effects for the self and the other.

Rather than re-state the problematics of representation, I wanted to positively engage with the practice implications for social science practitioners and researchers that are implied by feminist, narrative and poststructuralist approaches to knowledge production. I attempted what Shapiro (2001) terms 'insurrectional textuality', a practice 'self-reflective enough to show how meaning and writing practices are radically entangled in general or one that tends to denaturalise familiar realities by employing impertinent grammars and figurations'. I narrated my self and the people with whom I worked as, 'figure[s]' against the 'ground' of culturally given images of the self' (Parker 2005: 71). Social research on 'the homeless' was presented throughout the thesis as a highly charged, embodied, representational practice, constrained by its forms. Parallels were drawn between high contrast black and white social realism and aspects of the fantastical genres Gothic and Noir.

## **THE SETTING**

In 1980s Manchester, the move away from manufacturing and mass production towards the service sector and finance capitalism was devastating the local economy (Ward 1995: 5). As part of its shift towards a residual or liberal model welfare state, and in the name of 'simplification', the UK New Right Conservative administration introduced a number of complicated and contradictory changes to entitlement to social security benefits for young people. This culminated in the introduction of age based reductions in benefits for all under-25 year olds and the removal of general entitlement from 16-18s (Hutson and Liddiard 1994). As part of making this move seem acceptable, government discourse painted an ambiguous picture of young

people's status as adults or children (Harris 1989). Shortly after the introduction of these changes, homeless young people became a visible presence on the streets.

The growth in unemployment and homelessness required some explanation and the news media were providing classic 'moral panic' coverage (Cohen 1972). The 'crisis' of homelessness created and fed a desire for constant surveillance of those constructed as potential victims and/or potentially dangerous by virtue of their poverty (Dean 1991). By the late 1980s and early 1990s media images that evoked sympathy and promoted change gave way to a governmental and tabloid media accusation of an emerging 'underclass' (Morris 1994).

Meanwhile the 'Los Angeles School' rose to the forefront of theory on 'the city' in academic discourse. The influential work of the LA School focused on, 'the dialectics of de- and re-industrialisation, the peripheralisation of labour and the internationalisation of capital, housing and homelessness, the environmental consequences of untrammelled development, and the discourse of growth' (Davis 1990: 4). It was easy for the specificities of 'provincial' UK cities like Manchester to get swallowed up in generalisations about 'the [English] North' and Blade Runnerian visions of the city (see Haslam 1999; Taylor, Evans & Fraser 1996 on its specificity).

## **VIDEO INTERJECTIONS**

As with all socially problematised subgroups, particular images come to mind in any discussion of 'the homeless', many of which are not based on the individual personal observations of the discussants. The video journey in my thesis helped interrogate visual representations of homelessness and preserved a taste of the wider visual and aural knowledge elided and repressed in the construction of a written academic text; in a sense it formed the 'subconscious' of this experimental text. Attempts to include image and sound with textual analysis were becoming more acceptable in some areas of the social sciences (e.g. Bauer and Gaskell 2000) and I found some examples of a more creative approach to research methods in some areas of adult education and community work (Hall 1981: 453). Some of the video journey comprised short illustrative extracts and some of it was constructed using existing footage edited

together (at times altering the speed of the original film), combined with stills and music. Although no original camerawork was generated for the video journey, I thought of this process as in the Modernist cinematic tradition of montage:

An approach to editing developed by the Soviet filmmakers of the 1920s; it [montage] emphasizes dynamic, often discontinuous, relationships between shots and the juxtaposition of images to create ideas not present in either one by itself (Bordwell & Thompson 1993).

More recently, similarly compiled and reworked audiovisual texts have been labelled ‘mashup’ after the hip hop tradition of mixing together existing music tracks to form something ‘new’. Mashups merge separate works to see how they resonate with and affect each other. The resulting work can be read as a form of commentary on the original texts. The consumer becomes active as s/he constructs something out of the way s/he has heard or viewed a work. Mashup has been viewed negatively as the plundering of original works and positively as an analytical and productive intervention in popular culture. The ethical guidelines of the British Sociological Association and Association of Social Anthropologists of the Commonwealth which informed my study were largely concerned with matters of individualised researcher behaviour in face-to-face encounters with living subjects and had little to say about such matters of copyright or the consent and representation of recalled, dead and/or already written subjects.

## **THE STORY**

### **Video 1**

Extract from Victor Erice (1973) *Spirit of the Beehive*, Lumiere Studio spliced with *the warning prelude to James Whale’s (1931) Frankenstein*, Universal Studios

When a travelling cinema comes to town and shows *Frankenstein*, Anna starts to worry about the fate of the Monster. Her sister tells her that the Monster lives at the edge of the village. She summons up the courage to visit the house

and discovers a fugitive on the run who becomes a surrogate for the Monster of her imagining (Sleevenote).

### **1: The nigredo or blackening**

As Haraway (1992: 3) knows, 'it seems natural, even morally obligatory, to oppose fact and fiction; but their similarities run deep in western culture and language.' I begin with a day as a Research and Evaluation worker with Shades City Centre Project Ltd. that never happened but felt as if it did; a day in the late 1980s when I left work to go to the cinema.

Much of my work time was spent offering advice, support and information to young people who were leaving and changing home in Manchester. Like its voluntary sisters, Shades was struggling to survive. Our back-street office was located among pet shops, porn shops and joke shops in a crumbling building which also housed the barrows of market traders. The shopfront was unattractive; one of our Gay clientele likened it to 'a workhouse wall'. Outside, rotting fruit and vegetables added their foulness to the smoggy air. Inside, resources were tight and burnout was high. Amateur crisis management provided the choice between two metaphorical working practices: the headless chicken or the backside on fire. A lot of running round was essential to both.

After another exasperating morning in the drop-in, I spent the afternoon sitting at my desk, filling in forms on behalf of people who had no income and nowhere to live. In order to make successful applications to the Social Fund, the new state-sanctioned competitive begging process, I was having to find ways to re-tell stories about healthy young people using the pathological criteria given (Madden 2002/3). Together we were forced to enter the elaborate game of more-hard-done-by-than-thou, concocting veiled threats about what claimants might do next if they didn't get the money. My creative powers were challenged and journalist requests to line up suitably skinny and wretched 'youth' for their columns and programmes continually broke my concentration. Sick of welfare pimping, I went to the movies to see Blade Runner:

We are in Los Angeles, but it is not the familiar city of palm trees and perpetual bright sunshine...A cold, bleak, maddening rainstorm goes on interminably...The mood is oppressive...We are trapped in one of the ultimate urban nightmares...The look of the place, dark, menacing, congested. Everything manages to glisten with futuristic pizzazz but nevertheless reveals itself to be tinged simultaneously with rot and decay: new and old, light and dark, airy and ineluctably heavy. The year is 2019, and this is the world of Ridley Scott's 1982 motion picture, *Blade Runner* (Silverberg 1984: 187).

After the film, still trying to get the 'shop' out of my head, I walked through the city and later, went home to bed with Frankenstein.

That night, my dreams were filled with cityscapes and monsters. When I woke, the dreams stayed with me. As they seeped into and saturated my waking, 'rational' consciousness, I came to see, feel and understand things differently:

A strange multiplicity of sensations seized me, and I saw, felt, heard, and smelt, at the same time; and it was, indeed, a long time before I learned to distinguish between the operations of my various senses...Darkness then came over me, and troubled me; but hardly had I felt this, when, by opening my eyes, as I now suppose, the light poured in upon me again...I presently found a great alteration in my sensations (the Creature in Shelley 1963: 105).

The mechanism causing the change was imperceptible, but the change was profound. Night and day were inverting. Characters that haunted my dreams followed me into daily life where they took on a life and shape of their own. The alteration in my sensations affected my work. From that time on I saw everything as if filtered through lenses of Gothic and Noir. And slowly, the black and white 'realism' of the urban poverty trade in which I was engaged began to reveal its crude self to me in all its shameful dystopian glory.

If Gothic at first appeared 'in the awful obscurity that haunted eighteenth-century rationality and morality' (Botting 1996: 1), my version sprang from the gloom of late 1980s Manchester where misery mingled with media chatter of success and excess.



The 'uncanny dualities of Victorian realism and decadence' were in English vogue again while 'the despairing ecstasies of Romantic idealism and individualism' never really went away (Botting 1996: 1). Gothic is fanciful and seems opposed to truth-filled social science and documentary realism. However, all are highly stylised forms depicting landscapes of fear and employing a language of high contrast opposites – Black/White, Good/Evil. The catch-all, olden-times imprecise 'historical' settings of Gothic fiction provided a resonant backdrop for a critique of Thatcherite heritage-history, its resurrection of 'Victorian values' and its offering of the Victorian/post Victorian home as prescriptive ideal.

## **Video 2**

Extracts on *the production of 'authentic' images of young homeless people from Wall to Wall Television (1991) Images of Poverty, The Media Show, Channel 4.*

The problem with actors is that they will act; as well as costing you a fortune. *What you've got [addressing young homeless man] is real, it's raw, and it's available (fictive casting director).*

Back at the shop after my fictive visit to the cinema and night with Frankenstein, I began to see the academic and 'popular' accounts of homelessness I produced and consumed as part of my trade as tormenting forms of entertainment. The mystery, or rather the mystification of homelessness disturbed me in new ways. As did the beginnings of my realisation of the role I was playing in its criminalisation. Earning my living in the trade was making me uneasy. I began to read the stories I brokered as morality tales with messages about the terrible oppressors or warnings that, 'but for the grace of god' that might be 'us.' The stories conjured dangerous journeys on dark, forbidding city streets and kept the audience guessing whether we should feel fear or pity for the characters that stimulated and challenged our powers of empathy. Were 'they' so similar to 'us' that 'their' fate might befall 'us', if so, similar to which parts of 'us' in what ways, and why was similarity so important? Could homelessness really happen to anyone or was there some key differentiation between 'us' and 'them', perhaps a fatal flaw? Was there some special dangerous similarity or difference that could be privileged above all others? Could and should I detect it? Did I have it in

me? Was there a welfare detective's equivalent of the Voight-Kampff machine, the exotic, intimidating lie detector and 'empathy test' that Deckard used in Blade Runner for exposing replicants? The welfare section of the story machine was thriving because it provided journalistic copy that was at once fascinating, appalling, engaging and so very close to home.

I began to suspect that the more public than private investigation in which I was involved contributed as much to the perpetuation of the mystery of the cause of homelessness as to its solution. I was actually pouring fuel onto the fire of mystification, keeping it going, creating a foggy confusion and a permanent question, 'how can it be?' Gradually, it dawned on me that most of my purported attempts to contribute towards the solving of the mystery were not attempts at solving at all:

[T]he mystery element serves often to give but a sense of coherence to the narrative, and its principal purpose seems to be to permit access to those features which serve as the real interest of the story: the presentation of an exotic milieu of crime and corruption; a representation of characters who scorn the moral regimentation of 'conformist' society; a sequence of scenes structured around principles of masculine testing where the hero defines himself through the conflict with various sets of adversaries (criminals, women)' (Krutnik 1991: 40).

Those who wander and are not tied down; the fool, the minstrel, the vagabond, the novelist, the ethnographer, the flâneur, the journalist and the sexy outsider, have taken to the streets in order to observe, learn, inform and titillate with a hint of danger. Their stories utilised a modern variant of the age-old literary device, 'the journey undertaken ... during which the range and variety of human life is displayed' (Keating 1976: 13). I belonged to a long tradition of those who cast themselves as 'social explorers,' entering a world inhabited by the poor and the destitute 'for the good of all'. The latest version of the 'undiscovered country of the poor' (Mayhew [1861] 1985) was now to be found on the streets investigating the homeless (Madden 2003). I was a modern hard-boiled social investigator blending new techniques of inquiry with an old tradition of personal exploration in my naïve contribution towards the social good.

## **2: An impure white light**

Professional advancement and disturbances of conscience led me to the academy to pursue a Master's in Social and Community Work. Now I not only brokered young homeless people as fodder for the mass-media story machine, but also used them to animate the dull stories of academe. They helped give substance and life to unseen, a-temporal, abstract 'social forces'. I suspected that what was really at stake in much concerned liberal and 'radical' writing about the oppressed 'other' was the finding of a 'self'; the sensitive research self, constructed as a character with a particularly delicate and insightful sensibility to oppression. In the interests of a more rational and just society and equipped with the appropriate methodology, the properly applied radical social researcher could write for him or her-self the ability to transcend environmental influences, even if the researched could not.

### **Video 3**

Extract conveying the science fiction of crude structuralism taken from John Carpenter (1988) *They Live*, Carolco International N.V. produced by Larry Franco: Alive Films.

It is the near future and society is crumbling. John Nada is a struggling labourer who drifts into town and makes a deadly discovery - society has been invaded by aliens from another dimension who are controlling the Earth through mind control.

Armed with only a submachine gun and a pair of special glasses, can Nada infiltrate the aliens' transmitting station, and reveal their true forms?

(Sleevenote)

It turns out we are constantly being bombarded with subliminal messages, *such as 'Honour Apathy', 'Submit', 'Stay Asleep', 'Obey', and 'Watch TV', to keep us pliable while the aliens, with the help of high-placed human business men asset-strip the planet... As Carpenter described it: 'It takes the point of view of homeless Americans discovering the Reagan revolution is run by creatures from another planet'* (Brosnan 1991: 284-5).

Credential chasing is always a disturbing business for those of us not brought up to it and at first I found being back at University very difficult. As well as a tendency to dream off during my study day, I experienced strange moments of paralysis during the working week when sudden outbreaks of grand academic thinking threatened to lift me out of my body. Could and did I act on this 'I know better' way of going about things? Did I 'know better' and if so, how? Didn't unique social experience lead to unique epistemology? Identity politics was rife (Rutherford 1990). What kind of identity would befit me to work with young homeless people? Should I match on under/class, gender, 'race', ethnicity, sexuality, experience of physical or mental disablement, a background in 'care', poor housing, age or low income? I wasn't even Mancunian. Maybe homelessness wasn't 'that' kind of identity. It didn't seem appropriate to reclaim and reverse its meaning to, 'homeless and proud.' There must be something about its temporary nature that made it different. If it wasn't fixed (but were the other identities really that firmly fixed?), then how could there be THE HOMELESS? Surely it wasn't an identity at all but a temporary set of circumstances? That might explain why I couldn't recognise the 'they' and 'it' that the journalists could see. In fact I spent a lot of my working time trying to persuade young people that they didn't have to be exclusively defined by difficult circumstances and experiences.

Although it failed to equip me with the cure for resource starvation, rampant managerialism and the latest outbreak of anti-scrounger mania, the course did sharpen my taste for the language of academia. The light of the academy produced blinding flashes of insight, yet when its dazzle cleared, I felt alone and disorientated among an eerie gloom. Perhaps perversely, my hunger for knowledge was increasing. My ardour was for something as yet intangible to me, but I perceived a faint smell and wanted to inhale more of it.

### **3: A residue appears**

Beggars were on the streets and the story machine was expanding. The Big Issue magazine was offering itself as a means of salvation. Meanwhile, the academy required me to devote my attention to research methods and I began to choke on the ways of scientism (Bordo 1986; Habermas 1984). It seemed that unless a rigid boundary was maintained between knowledge and fiction, social science texts were in

danger of losing their truth content and philosophy might lapse into poetry. Already under pressure to sanitise the decay of the welfare state, I was feeling a ‘professional’ obligation to deny the mechanics of the story machine - as if ‘truth’ could be pasted directly onto the public page and appear in the public head without politically significant mechanisms of production, recognition and distribution. I stopped worrying about whether my work was ‘radical’ or ‘regular’ and learned from Mark Philp (1979) that, in the present mode of production, its most important function was as a cultural means of giving people specific humanity, a task made easier when the client group was constructed as knowable, ‘innocent’ and available for empathy.

#### **4: Magnetism/the pull of the magnet**

I was in need of a holiday. I passed Manchester’s own tourist attractions each day - temples to God, Mammon, Learning and Drink - but did not stop to admire them. They were over-familiar and formed part of my work landscape. No more able to resist the fabled magnetic lure of its bright urban lights than my homeless charges, I found myself heading for London. I stayed with a friend in a newly re-generated East End but it soon proved to be a busman’s holiday and I spent most of my time discussing apocalypses with angry young men-cum philosopher tramps in the West-End ‘tramp-city’.

#### **Video 4**

Extract from Mike Leigh (1993) Naked, London: Film Four. Homeless Mancunian Johnny and bored security guard Brian debate the meaning of life and the end of the world inside an empty office block cum “*postmodernist gas chamber*”.

#### **5: Splitting**

I began to experience night horrors.

#### **Video 5**

Montage: Fritz Lang (1926) Metropolis; Robert Aldrich (1955) Kiss Me Deadly; David Monaghan Production (1999) Killer Fog, Channel 4 Television; Carl Dreyer (1931) Vampyr (also know as Vampire: The Strange Adventure of David Gray and Castle of Doom. *Dreyer’s film is loosely based on stories by J. Sheridan LeFanu*).

Music: Waiwan (1998) Revenge Track 9 Distraction, London: Autonomy Records.

The lights went crazy and the city was plunged into darkness. I was frightened and sensed danger at the door. I reached for a torch only to see myself caught in its beam of light. I struggled to break free. I couldn't speak or shout. Captured, I was strapped to a table to be used in some ghastly experiment. I saw myself lying unconscious while a wizard/scientist used me to animate his robot. As he performed the process I began to lose a sense of who, what and where I was. Was that I on the table? Was I the robot? Then how could I be observing the whole thing? For a moment I thought I was the wizard conducting the experiment. The robot took on my fleshly appearance and opened its eyes. Then the scene changed and I saw myself as Pandora screaming silently as I opened a box of white light, unleashing its destructive power into the world. I saw fire, smoke and burning cities and then me sitting on a bench, split in two. A ghostly part of me wandered towards an empty house. I entered and saw myself as a corpse. I wanted to scream but still couldn't speak. Then the most horrible thing; I saw myself being carried to my own funeral. Not only that but I could see the sky and church on the way to my burial. Just before I reached the grave I woke up back on the bench.

By day the seemingly self-evident simple and grammatically embedded idea of putting appropriate academic distance between the knower and the known was causing me problems. I knew I depended on a set of oppositions to distinguish myself from the external world, yet some part of me wasn't sure I believed in the law of either/or. Ironically, all of my attempts at suitably researcher-like detachment engaged me in enhanced concentrations and reflections on myself. I attempted to banish my doppelganger dreams at breakfast by laughing with my friend at the attempts of some of my social explorer colleagues to beat the problem by indulging in homeless 'drag', i.e. dressing up and 'becoming' homeless for a time. I followed this amusement with some shopping, a failed attempt to combine feminine consumerism and flâneurship. At first a good shop brought back that old Woolworth's on a Saturday morning feeling; childish fantasies of risking prison for stealing seductive stationary. My giddy shopper's greed was allayed when I brought my fashion selections to the sobering cloister of the changing room. I tried on a couple of must-have items but the shop was overheated, the lighting harsh and the cold mirror seemed to possess a backside

doubling mechanism. Suddenly I wanted to leave before the omnipotent ‘too fat, too old, too hairy’ trinity ruined my day. Chastened, I retreated outside where a Big Issue seller and a couple of young beggars provided a melancholy contrast to the shop fronts. None were immune from the narcissistic self-surveillance world of consumer imagery; hoardings full of new fetishised and narcissistic visual codings of masculinity were busily giving birth to the ‘new man’ (Mort 1988).

My only successful purchase that day was a second hand work-related Salvation Army book full of disturbing images of homelessness, *For God’s Sake Care*. Bookshop celebrations of the Jack the Ripper centenary and a sense of vulnerability on the unfamiliar streets made me very aware of being a woman. I began to suspect that urban exploration was a man’s job after all. The more I learned of the logic of my profession, the more I felt like an impostor performing a bizarre masquerade. The night horrors returned. This time Frankenstein’s creature emerged. It had something to tell me, and there was no escape.

## **Video 6**

Montage: a slowed down scene of Boris Karloff as *Frankenstein’s creature* reaching up towards light and out towards its creator. Christopher Lee narrates the horror experienced by Frankenstein when his creature first looks at him and he realises that it will have its own subjectivity. The subjects in the photographs of a 1967 Salvation Army book appear as if dead and look at me and at their photographers with accusation in their eyes. There follows another slowed down scene of the creature and its creator looking back at each other in pursuit.

Montage: Robert Wise (1963) [The Haunting](#), MGM; James Whale 1931 [Frankenstein](#), Universal Studios; Stills - Virgil Finlay (1992 p2), The Salvation Army (1967)

Vocals: Christopher Lee (1994) reading Mary Shelley’s [Frankenstein](#), London: MCI Spoken Word

Music: Massive Attack (1998) Angel, Track 1 [Mezzanine](#), Circa Records

## **6: Necrotic yellowing**

Victor Frankenstein’s creature emerged to take me on a bizarre necro-tour of London, shaking me with its visions of the dead past in the present. It was convinced that its human body parts, retrieved in Victor’s dabbling amongst the damp of the grave,

were stolen from the bodies of the poor (Richardson 1987). It claimed to have shared a long and painful history with Capitalism and lectured me on the changing nature of poverty. Its narrative betrayed nearly two centuries of preoccupation with the suffering caused by inadequate sanitation, State warfare, unscrupulous anatomists and 'rational' reformers. Associating itself with a criminalized underclass, it told me that I was a mere player in the current carnival of charity. Social explorers were part missionary and I couldn't help but unwittingly preach the state gospel of the new age work ethic and taint my charges with its criminality. I was foolish to forget that violence is another form of knowledge.

### **Video 7**

Extract from Victor Erice (1973) Spirit of the Beehive, Lumiere. Anna watches the *censored scene of the creature throwing Maria in the lake from James Whale's (1931) Frankenstein.*

### **7: Gravid Reddening**

The gendered nature of my concerns about homelessness began to emerge as I considered the fate of the Frankenstein women.

### **Video 8**

Montage examining woman as the object rather than the subject of knowledge and the impossibility of *Frankenstein's destroyed-before-completed 'female' monster*.

Montage: Open University (1995) Approaching Literature BBC2; Open University (1993) *'Nature Display'd'* The Enlightenment BBC2; James Whale (1935) The Bride of Frankenstein, Universal Studios.

Stills: Caspar David Friedrich c.1818 The Wanderer, Icon: The Museum Collection; Ana Medieta (1976) Untitled (from the Silveta Series), Ana Medieta (1973) Untitled (from the Silveta Series), Ana Medieta (1976) Untitled (from the Tree of Life Series) all from Whitney Chadwick (1998); Veronika Bromova (1996) Views (from the series *On the edge of the horizon*), Cindy Sherman (1992) Untitled #261 (from the series *Sex Pictures*) and Jan van Riemsdyck (1774) drawing for Tab. XXVI in William Hunter, Anatomy of the human gravid uterus all from Deanna Petherbridge and Ludmilla Jordonova (1997); Mary Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft montage on cover of Robert Woof, Stephen Hebron and Claire Tomalin (1997).



Vocals: *Christopher Lee (1994) reading Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, London: MCI Spoken Word.

Music: Henryk Gorecki (1976) Lento Largo – Tranquillissimo Symphony No. 3, Opus 36 Dawn Upshaw, Soprano. London Sinfonietta. David Zinman, Conductor.

## **8: Re-membering**

I returned home to face the worries of redundancy and begin a dissertation. What would I write? It seemed obvious at the beginning of the course that I would 'do' homelessness, but this felt like the last thing I wanted now. It had become abundantly clear to me that trying to represent my charges in ways that respected them posed a great challenge. The representational denigration they experienced in the story machine was not to be underestimated. Simple description easily slipped into denunciation of those so easily labelled rather than named (Daly 1987). I didn't want to write about 'their' culture in the city of fearful contrasts and I couldn't think how to avoid it. I was fed up of making a spectacle of 'them'. Of course, I knew that no directly detectable harm would befall my charges if I did write about them. It was easy to over-dramatise the impact of a small piece of work with the primary private purpose of winning a qualification. Writing about my charges would help me to gather some cultural capital but it was simply true that they had very little to gain from being turned into dissertation material. I saw the truth in Bev Skeggs's (1997: 11) statement, '[m]ost representations of working-class people contribute to devaluing and delegitimizing their already meagre capitals, putting future blocks on tradability, denying any conversion into symbolic capital'.

From my first experience as a 'non-traditional' (i.e. not middle class) student I knew that education was deployed as a key means of class and gender transmutation and as such a mechanism for discrediting and excluding knowledge. I decided that it was not in the interests of my charges or myself to keep writing us into objects of bourgeois, patriarchal fantasy; objects to be watched, pitied, educated and contained. I refused the myth that there was no articulate working class. Realising that his master's voice no longer suited me, I summoned my own. The repressed was returning and the voice of an/other of Frankenstein's monsters began to haunt me via Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Mary Daly, Virginia Woolf and Hélène Cixous.

## **Video 9**

Trailer for Robert Wise (1963) The Haunting, MGM.

### **9: The Philosopher's home**

I was beginning to break through. I shifted the spotlight away from homelessness for a while to focus on its use in the production of an idealised 'home'. My young homeless charges were greatly affected by their exclusion from its plenitude. Whether considered roofless or homeless and despite the horrors and mundanities that caused them to flee from 'home', theirs was always a status of 'lessness'. Definitions of citizenship and personhood were at stake. Emboldened by my recent experiences I began to write. Still seeking a suitable means of expression, I found that the metaphorical landscapes created by women writing in the Gothic form resonated with some of my own. However, on closer examination it seemed a constraining and sentimentalised form. I began to lose interest until, '[a] fully dressed woman walked out of the water' (Morrison 1987:50). I encountered Morrison's Pulitzer Prize winning ghost story, *Beloved* and found the inspiration to try and write my way out of the confines of barred rooms, binary categorisation and gothic castles. Concerned for the future of *Shades*, I had initially chosen the management route for my Master's in Social and Community Work. Finally finding more substance in fiction, I finished the course with a dissertation about Morrison's novels (Madden 1995). Not the issues behind the novels, not the novels as sociology, but what the books had to offer ways of thinking about subjectivity, identity and survival; issues that increasingly seemed not only relevant, but crucial in helping to understand the things happening to my young charges and to me.

## **Video 10**

Extract from Victor Erice (1973) Spirit of the Beehive, Lumiere where Anna meets her monster.

### **FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON A MONSTROUS AUTO/BIOGRAPHY**

At the time of writing I regarded this project as a form of retrospective ethnography with a literary and visual arts twang. It could also be read as a monstrous form of auto/biography. As Atkinson states (2006: 400) 'the autobiographical has been an element in the ethnographic imagination for almost as long as social scientists have

been engaged in such work'. The thesis was auto/biographical in the sense of being an intellectual and analytical reflection on a life lived as a community worker and researcher (Stanley 1992). The social researcher in my text is a character based on my observation and experiences. The point was to use my experience as a starting point for critique as a subject and agent of the late twentieth century capitalist production of homelessness.

In writing on the novel, Bakhtin (1981: 294) emphasises the intertextual and dialogic quality of the languages into which we are born:

For any individual consciousness living in it, language is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world. All words have the 'taste' of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and the hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions.

For Bakhtin then, experience is inextricably linked with the available cultural forms of understanding of that experience. Language is loaded and stories provide frameworks for being. Beginning with *Frankenstein*, the social researcher in my experimental research text is written to recognise and reject some of the violent narratives of exclusion, assimilation and generalisation produced by neo-liberal capitalism. Instead of lamenting her complicity, she comes to realise that she has powers to haunt and inhabit its structures:

The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them in a certain way, because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it. Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion, from the old structure, borrowing them structurally... (Derrida 1976:24).

I was attracted to *Frankenstein's* cautionary theme about hubris in knowledge construction. It helped me to explore the ethics of the relationship between the researcher and the researched and to animate a critique of the transhistoricising notion that the 'poor are always with us' which was serving to naturalise and detract from the active production of homelessness in the present.

In experimenting with form it is wise to be mindful of Ruth Behar's suggestion (Behar and Gordon 1995) that women have been experimenting with academic form and writing style for many years but that their work is customarily marginalised or dismissed as literary rather than academic. Some similarities could be drawn between my work and a recent crop of autoethnographic writing in North American qualitative research literature. Having written one himself, Jeffrey P. Dennis (2005) considers autoethnography the least successful of the new methodologies that have followed the literary turn in social sciences. In a review of works by Laurel Richardson (with Ernest Lockridge 2004) and Carolyn Ellis (2004), Dennis explains some of his problems with the genre:

Boundaries sometimes exist for a reason. Sometimes a sociological text tells a good story, and sometimes a good novel offers profound sociological insight, but not very often; literature and sociology simply have different goals, and readers approach them with different expectations...in my view, sociologists who want to write novels should write novels... scholars, especially those who come from positions of privilege, had better bring considerable talent in writing to the table, or else their autoethnographies may lack sociological merit, or literary merit, or both.

Assuming such experimental texts find their way onto the market, the audience will no doubt decide. Paul Atkinson is (2006) wary of a fashion for subjective and evocative ethnographic work of the personal witness school. Ironically, this is a fashion that takes the literary turn in the social sciences back to the liberal humanist approach to literature that Barry (1995: 11) calls, 'theory before 'theory''.

I think that there is sociological merit and indeed a sociological duty to engage with the politics and means by which knowledge is re/produced. Personal narrative as an

object of enquiry in the social sciences is subject to analyses which tend to assume the transparency of language as a means of accessing truth. I wanted to foreground sociological narrative as an object of enquiry and to experiment with narrative as means rather than solely object of enquiry. In doing so, I was influenced by theorists of feminism and racialisation who raised complex questions about links between ontology and epistemology (Stanley & Wise 1993; Said 1978; Goldberg 1993) and by authors who provided a critique of the scientific pretensions of structuralism and made it clear that language had to be negotiated. My thesis was fuelled by the frustrations of arguing against the 'rationalist' tide of policies that were actively producing rising inequality (Wilkinson & Pickett 2009); the increasing application of neo-liberal quasi-economic managerialist discourse to every aspect of modern life (Lanchester 2009); and a methodological individualism that reduced the homelessness debate to the private examination of our own consciences, comparing 'us' with 'them' and, from within these ever-expanding circles of self-reference, plucking anti-collective solutions. I did what many do when faced with misery and absurdity; I turned to the arts of 'sensation' (Pykett 1992; Radford 2008). The 'I' in my monstrous multidisciplinary mashup text became Frankenstein, his monsters and more. Frankenstein's creatures are not single corpses, 'but a mass-ive assemblage of corpses, a crowd' (Marshall 1995: 55). This is a socially charged, impertinent and radically entangled crowd. Look out for us in the academy, in cemeteries, subways, laboratories, in the shopping mall and at home:

'I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper' (Shelley 1963).

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