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Synthetic Sociology and the 'long workshop': How Mass Observation ruined meta- methodology.

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the relations between Mass Observation Reports, and the contemporary sociological valuing of articulacy, salience and coherence in participants' accounts. This is linked with a critique of sociological literariness, to question how participants' words are transformed into 'data' for research productions. The aims are threefold. First, to show how research participants' contributions have valuable attributes that do not always fit neatly into conventional analytic frame. Second, to highlight how 'awkward' data challenge the literary conventions of sociological production. Third, to illustrate how critical reflection on a particular form of vernacular poetry can inform the poetics and politics of sociological methodology. By addressing Mass Observation's inconvenient materiality, its peculiar temporality and its diverse content, the paper considers how these unsettle the notion of 'data'. Critically engaging with Charles Madge's and Humphrey Jennings' notion of Mass Observation as 'Popular Poetry', I then consider how Whitman's vernacular epic, *Leaves of Grass*, has been woven into the cultural biography of the U.S. By drawing an analogy between Mass Observation's 'Popular Poetry' and Whitman's democratic poetics, I ask how a legitimised/legitimising research habitus can change in interaction with such materials, rather than resynthesising itself. Moving on to an ethically difficult film-making project with asylum seekers I argue for methodological architectures that open up plural, precarious, untimely 'anthropologies of ourselves'. A politics of knowledge-making, that acknowledges the 'long workshops' where social worlds are crafted, can then materialise.

Keywords: *Mass Observation, Materiality, Methodology, Ethics, Narrative, Lists, Literariness, Poetics, Space*

Introduction

'I have made this letter longer, because I have not had the time to make it shorter.'

(Pascal 1657: 116)

- 1.1 By addressing three characteristics of [Mass Observation](#) (MO) - its inconvenient materiality, its peculiar temporality and its diverse content, the paper considers how these reflect on methodology. The aims are threefold. First, to show how research participants' contributions have valuable attributes that do not always fit neatly into conventional analytic frames. Second, to highlight how 'awkward' data challenge the literary conventions of sociological production. Third, to illustrate how critical reflection on a particular form of vernacular poetry can inform the poetics and politics of sociological methodology. In order to make these points effectively, the paper itself does not fit into the 'standard story' of a sociology paper. Its sections are not crocheted together with links emphasizing a narrative drive; the different materials of MO, poem and film do not fall together in a neat body of evidence. Nor is the end satisfyingly conclusive, for this is not an exercise in the art of persuasion. At least, it fails as literary sociological rhetoric, 'the journal article'. The quotations and facsimiles of MO documents, Whitman's notebooks and print publications, and extracts of other writing might obscure a line of argument, yet are included to emphasise the processes of thinking through such things. Although the article was written and is designed to be read onscreen, bulky fragments from two archives - [Mass Observation Archive](#) and the [Whitman Archive](#) one visited in person, the other online, stress that this methodology relies upon an archaeology of things.
- 1.2 After discussing work on archival research, narrativity and literariness, I turn to MO and the unruly materials its volunteers produced. Looking at specific files of Reports ([Mass Observation 1937; 1983](#)), I demonstrate the challenge of shaping these into analytic categories, and the problem of making any sort of sociologically valuable composition that neither reduces nor dismisses what these first observers produced. By critically engaging with modernist poet Charles Madge's founding conception of MO as 'popular poetry' ([Hubble](#)

2006: 5), I then consider how *Leaves of Grass* (Whitman 1891-2 [also 1855, 1856, 1860, 1867, 1871-2, 1881-2]) has been woven into the cultural biography of the U.S. This vernacular epic is particularly salient both to MO lists, and a critique of 'sociological' literariness. By drawing analogies between MO's 'popular poetry' and Whitman's democratic poets, I ask how a legitimised/legitimising research habitus can change in interaction with such 'data', rather than always reflecting itself (Christians 2005; Hurdley 2010). Finally, I refer to a recent project making films with asylum seekers about what matters to them (Burdley 2012). Methodology beginning with how participants express themselves, rather than how sociologists should express themselves, can transform sociology. Contemplation of everyday forms of expression may produce a more engaged, ethical 'anthropology of ourselves' (Madge and Harrisson 1939: 12). However, this approach takes time, requiring a different temporality from the squeezed presentism of many current funding regimes.

Poetics: making, writing, meaning

To a Historian
 You who celebrate bygones
 ...
 I project the history of the future.
 (Whitman 1998: 5)

2.1 Whitman is renowned for lists, catalogues and collages of 'borrowings' from earlier poets and writers in his poetry. He was a social observer, noting events, places, people; compending lists of things, such as rivers, insects; using whatever stub of pencil might be to hand, in notebooks he often made himself. As a former printer journeyman, he set the type himself for early editions of his work. His style was paratactic, strings of phrases and clauses that were not necessarily dependent on a main clause. His prose could be poetic, and his poetry like prose. Such disruption of literary genre, of grammatical hierarchies, and attention to the crafting of content and form invites similar attentiveness to the craft of sociology. Whitman's writing was founded upon close, constant observation and engagement with people, other creatures, places and things, rather than the abstract, universalising modernist poetry that followed. Although proponents of modernism dismissed the poem as old-fashioned, they adopted many of his methods, and in television/internet series such as *Breaking Bad*, the poem echoes through present-day America. Revised over decades by Whitman, reviled by many for years, it 'contain[s] multitudes' (Whitman 1998), as do Mass Observers' diverse texts.

2.2 Lists in MO Reports and *LoG* show how the word is the first unit of meaning, untrammelled by grammatical structure, ordered neither by neat conjunctions nor, perhaps, connective theory. Untrained 'Observers' for MO were 'subjective cameras', some of whom took part for 'literary or aesthetic' purposes (Madge and Harrisson 1938: 66-7). This highlights the 'double hermeneutic' of social sciences (Giddens 1984: 20), yet moves beyond it, since, if 'participants' are writing the world, why does sociology matter? Sociology must move beyond the search for synthesis in grand theory, 'gliding o'er all, through all' (Whitman 1998). In juxtaposing early social science (partly) countering the 'voicelessness of everyman and the smallness of the group which controls the fact-getting and fact-distributing' (Madge and Harrisson 1939: 9), with Whitman's 'poetics for democracy' (Miller 1962: 57), a different social/sociological poetics is possible:

'Though the literary is wayward as an approach to the large-scale movements of society, paradoxically its contribution is all the greater for its suggestiveness. The outcome is one answer to the 'trap of despair' that opens its doors when the generalist is confronted by the possibility that synthesis is impossible [citing Tilly 1984: 147]. With big punning, large troping and huge riddling, the grand idea is deferred to the kingdom of metaphor.' (Maslen 2009).

2.3 How assemblages of people, things, talk and texts, among others, work together in 'modes of ordering', as 'relational materiality' (Law 1994: 23) is a principal concern here:

Realities are not flat. They are not consistent, coherent and definite. Our research methods necessarily fail. Aporias are ubiquitous. But it is time to move on from the long rearward action that insists that reality is definite and singular. (Law 2003: 11)

2.4 Mass Observation is an ideal inconsistent, incoherent, indefinite and plural phenomenon to consider disordering as an organising research process. Messiness as method has been written about extensively (Law 2003, 2004; Savage 2007). But still, the push towards connectivity continues. Synthesis, as an over-arching meta-methodology, continues to organise research, in which narrative is a central trope. By narrative, 'I mean the sequential explanatory recounting of connected self-propelled people and events...Let us call these...standard stories' (Tilly 2002: 26). For 'narrative has always played a part in the production and distribution of human knowledge' (Czarniawska 1999: 64). Despite numerous research papers querying narrative as the foundation for qualitative interviews, interview extracts, and the academic research product itself, as monograph or peer-reviewed journal article, it endures (Atkinson 1997; Hurdley 2006; Brannen 2013). Even if a research project might not be employing narrative/biographic interviews, oral histories or written life stories as frames for collecting data, 'researchers have been telling stories all along' (Phillips et al. 2014: 11). Stories people tell can have multiple functions, including constructing and maintaining moral identities or passing on cultural heritage (Coffey and Atkinson 1996; Mason 2004; Hurdley 2006). The 'standard stories' of sociology fulfill both these functions, as the writer has to ensure that she is recognised as an academic in the field, and passing on the culture of research writing. By introducing her research, referring to the canon, explaining her method, selecting

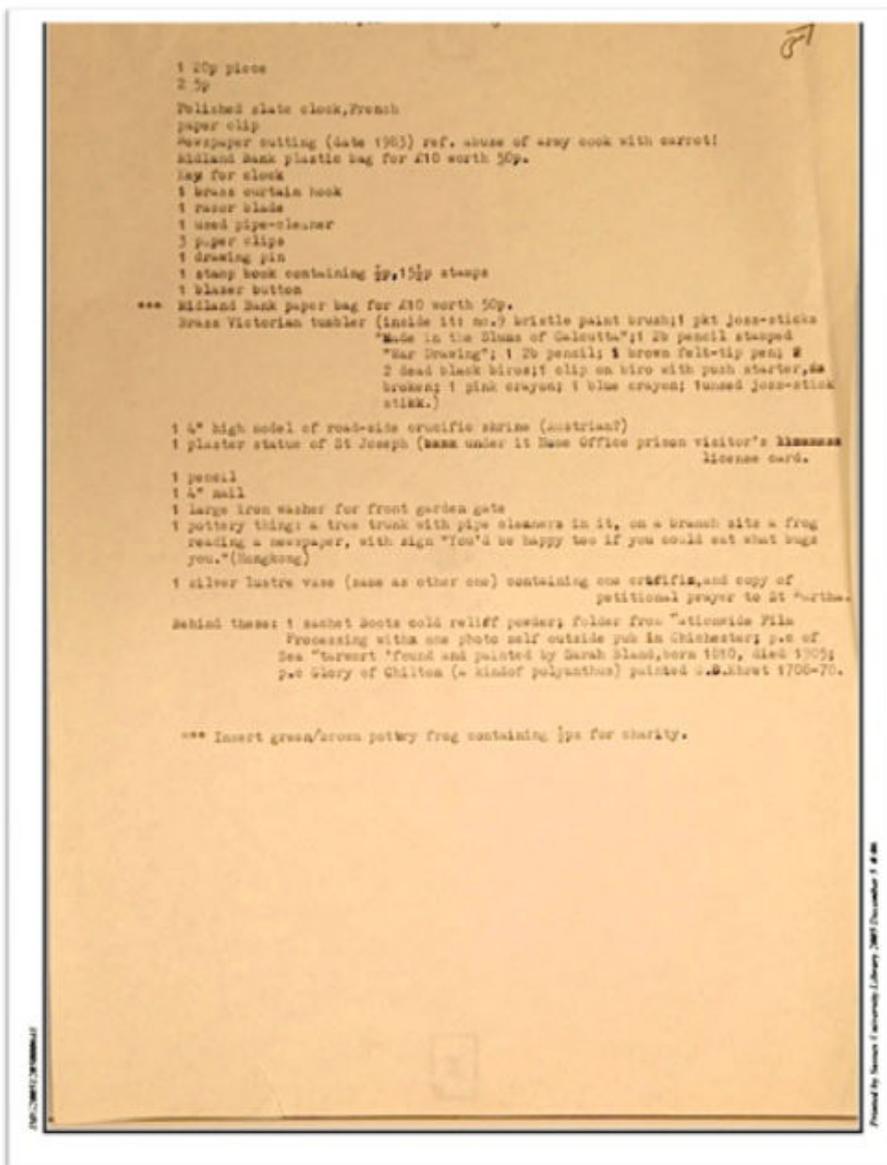
appropriate data and subsequent findings, with cohesive concluding remarks, she stories herself. A particular ordering of materials produces her identity as relational, legitimised through performance of writing research (see Bourdieu 1988; Silva 2007). Citing Peter LaSalle's 'The End of Narrative' (2006), Ellen Rose suggests that '...a coherent narrative line may give way to an incessant series of Google searches that lead, as LaSalle puts it, to "the ultimate frightening destination..."Which was nowhere,' he said" [p.674]' (Rose 2012: 100). Her commentary on various recent studies of the hyper-attentive mind argues that readers are moving from deep, contemplative attention to 'continuous partial attention' (Stone 2009), '...motivated not by productivity but by an insatiable desire to feel connected' (Rose 2012: 94). The end of narrative - understood here as a 'standard story' - looms frighteningly, as if without that particular form of coherence, there is nothing but the web weaving a net around us.

- 2.5 But what happens when knowledge sources are unusual, even viewed as lacking the legitimacy of 'data' in a rigorously designed research project? How does one shape contributions from people who were not originally participant in the contemporary project or whose reason for participation is not primarily that of academic research (Mannay 2011)? What is lost in the task of keeping sociology academic? Turning now to Mass Observation, I focus on how materials become sociological.

Mass Observation

- 3.1 What many researchers find unnerving when they first try to 'use' MO as a data source is the diversity of volunteers' writing. Even now, many volunteers submit their reports as 'hard copy', rather than via email. For researchers accustomed to interview transcripts, surveys, field notes or film/audio recordings, which can be fed into Qualitative Data Analysis Software packages, or at least stored digitally, translating MO submissions into units for analysis is challenging. Long letters, lists, stories, tangents, old photographs, drawings, type-written foolscap, torn envelopes, addenda, flirtations, life story, observation, catty remarks, questioning the question, green ink, emphatic underlining, curses, marital disputes, schoolboy essays. . . to flatten these to the material of the screen (Thrift 2005), the guile of content analyses and juicy extract (Savage 2007) is ridiculous. Here, for example, is the second page of a 'Mantelpiece Report' (MO 1983). The first page is omitted to anonymise the writer:

Figure 1. Male 953 (MO 1983)[1]



3.2 While it is possible to commandeer such words into a coherent research narrative, the process highlights the dishonesty of pretending any social science writing is beyond literariness. The formalism required for many peer-reviewed journals, book chapters, research monographs, reports and theses also constructs data *a priori*. Those that cannot be construed within such structures become problems. Current forays into innovative ethnographies (Vannini 2011) are critical to the relevance and survival of social sciences as university disciplines. However, they do not address the question of what to do sociologically with materials such as those making up MO and qualitative data archives such as ESDS in the UK (see Silva 2007; Mason 2007; Geiger et al. 2010 for debate). What sociologists do with MO can be extrapolated to what they do with materials produced by other people, which might become 'data'.

3.3 As Annebella Pollen comments in her exploration of Mass Observation as methodological problem and possibility:

'Although MO has no direct comparative parallels, its particular contingencies - from the subjective and impressionistic character of its contributions to their diverse and eclectic form - may well be applied to other idiosyncratic historical materials that prove slippery to handle or are unwieldy in size.' (Pollen 2013: 214).

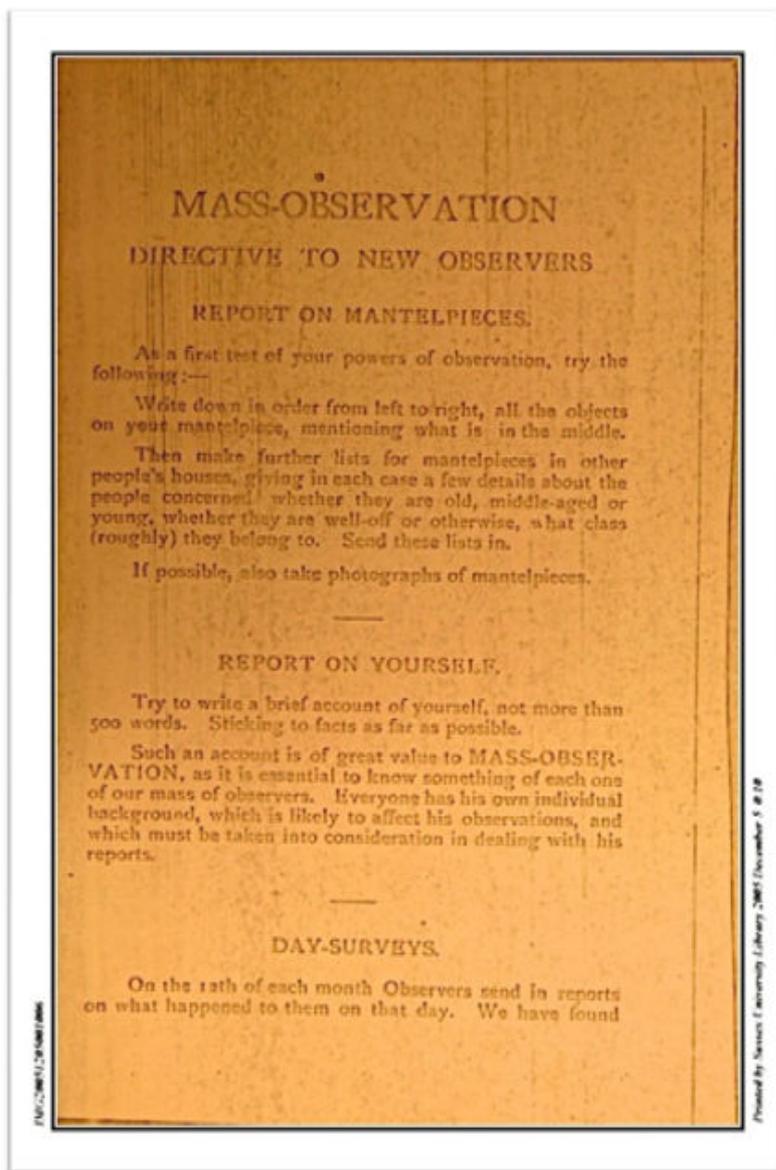
3.4 In this paper, I am specifically concerned with contemplating MO materials (MO 1937; 1983) without considering their potential as foundation for and presentation within a conventional research narrative, linking to wider themes (for this see Hurdley 2013; forthcoming). Rather than ask how to mould MO into suitable sociological matter, how might it change sociological research habitus (Bourdieu 1988; Hurdley 2010)? Mass Observation can be understood as the 'practice of understanding society as a totality of fragments' (Highmore 2002: 82). If we take this paradoxical phrase to encompass both the practice of understanding *and* society, then sociological and social 'doings' can be considered as symmetrical processes. Despite ever-present concerns with reflexivity, research writings inevitably do symbolic violence to the data, partly in the act of smoothing the way for the reader.

3.5 Quite what MO was, why it was, and who was involved, remain ongoing questions (Hubble 2006; Savage 2007, 2008, 2010; Hinton 2013). MO is both subject and source for research within and about social science, survey, oral/social history, auto/biography, archive, surveillance, poetics, ethnography and the everyday, by Liz Stanley (2001), Ben Highmore (2002), James Hinton (2010), Murray Goot (2008), Mark Bhatti (2006); Louise Purbrick (2007), David Kynaston (2009) Simon Garfield (2009); and its recent director, Dorothy Sheridan (1993; Sheridan *et al.* 2000) - among others. Although problematised as statistically unrepresentative, even prejudiced, and methodologically brash, ignorant or unfathomable, MO offers not only unique material, but can also inform methodology. C. Wright Mills argued, 'the requirements of one's problem, rather than the limitations of any one rigid method, should be and have been the classic social analyst's paramount consideration', rather than dismissing historical materials as imprecise or incomplete (Mills 1959: 146). This pragmatic approach offers one way of using MO for its content. It does, however, limit how historical materials might transform social analytic processes.

Practising mantelpieces: 1937 and 1983 MO Reports

4.1 Many of the 1937 *Reports* submitted about mantelpieces were from participants in the initial *Day Surveys*, the fourth and most famous of which was the Coronation Day of King George the Sixth on May 1st (Jennings *et al.* 1937). Fifty two men and thirty nine women were these named individuals. There were twenty two other named volunteers, and nine schoolboys who wrote short essays about their mantelpieces for homework. Another twelve (unnamed) schoolboys wrote lists of what was on their home mantelpieces, and there were twenty four other *Reports* by unidentified volunteers. Therefore, there were 158 individual *Reports* about volunteers' own mantelpieces, and in most cases, mantelpieces in other people's houses. I read through these *Reports* twice during four visits to the Archive (housed in Sussex University library at that time), recording the form and contents of about half of them. A condition of publishing from the Archive is anonymity for volunteers, who are therefore referenced as they are in the Archive folders. 'Mantelpieces, the founders believed, displayed unexpected clues about religion, superstition, personal tastes and the entire life of the home' (Garfield 2009) and so the first *Directive* tasked new volunteers with doing mantelpiece 'Reports' (MO 1937:

Figure 2. Mass Observation Directive to New Observers^[2]



4.2 Distinguishing the 'trained Observer' - 'a camera with no distortion' - from these new volunteers, 'subjective cameras' (Madge and Harrison 1938: 66), whose 'test' was to 'report' the home, a site for and of managing identities (Goffman 1959), encapsulates Mass Observation's inherent contradictions. These lists show less than what is visible: only what the writer chooses to make visible, and, moreover, what they can remember, since many of the accounts are written from memory. A mantelpiece is paratactic, like Whitman's lists. Yet, the act of juxtaposing seemingly discrete things or words cannot help but make meaning: what it is *possible* to think is mobilised through this form of ordering (Foucault 1989 [1966]: xvi-xviii). A series of lists, shaping the mantel as a line to 'read' left to right, with a central point, is appropriate, it seems, to the ordered collection of orderly data, however 'subjective'. Yet multiple possibilities are omitted from the Directive: of nothing in the middle, of things on layered mantelshelves, brackets, alcoves, hanging above or sitting on the hearth. Its simplicity ignores the mundane complexity of letters behind clocks, rent books under the ashtray, pins and combs in vases or matches in the tea tin. Second, it does not allow for those submissions that did not conform to the list-form. Volunteers submitted drawings, stories, long digressions on their neighbours and families, and explanations of their localities, among many other 'non-list' responses (see Hurdley 2013; forthcoming for full discussion). Here, for example, is one of the essays that schoolboys handed in, set as a homework task:

Figure 3.1 and 3.2 . From File of Schoolboys who did not submit Day Surveys (1937)⁹¹

The Mantel-Piece

Starting at the left-hand end of the end of the dining-room mantel-piece, its contents are as follows:

Firstly, a cut glass flower-vase, with a silver base which has been lacquered black to avoid having to continually polish it. This vase is a receptacle for two or three pencils, receipts from the Gas Coy., and hairpins. Between this and the clock in the centre is a copper oxidised ash-tray brought home from Bournemouth by one

of the family about four years ago. This is generally full of safety pins, collar stiffeners, pen-knives, and matches.

The middle of the mantelpiece is occupied by a square green alarm clock (always about two hours fast) supported by an ornamental oak stand (Under this stand is kept the daily money for the milkman). Next to the clock is the ink-bottle, and two or three dirty pens, on a glass block with places for writing materials. This block is always covered in ink-stains.

Beside this stand is a little china dog, two paws of which are missing. Lastly, there is the companion glass vase to the one at the other

end - this one contains cotton wools, a few needles, and thimbles.

The spaces between these articles are at most times littered with postage stamps, letters, stumps of pencil, and other sundries, in spite of the fact that it is tidied every day. Between the right-hand flower-vase and the wall is a bulky wad of letters, insurance books, circulars, and any other papers which someone is too lazy to put in their right place.

The mantelpiece itself is of polished oak, forming the upper edging of a tiled hearth surround. It has no drapings whatever.

Blasphemy of people using the room - lower middle.

4.3 Collating these materials as 'data' through conventional content analysis is nonsensical (I tried). To force the mantelpiece, extending into numerous horizontal and vertical surfaces, layers and containers, into linear universal form, is an abstraction that veers into dishonesty. While MO in these early days explored many different genres of 'observation', including collages, poetry, film, diaries and day surveys, it is salient for social science methodology that the 'test' Directive set such boundaries. Not only are participants' words pre-scribed; the world 'out there' is pre-formed (Savage 2007). Multiple cultural materials, written, drawn, built, scattered and contained, are to be flattened to a single line of things on a mantel, of words, perhaps separated by commas or listed vertically on a page.

In the next section, a selection of lists, copied mainly from the 1937 Reports, are the focus.

Listing the mantel

5.1 Some 'Reporters' have underlined the object at the centre of the mantel. The first group of lists is transcribed from The Mass Observation *Mantelpiece file* 'Men 1937 H-Z' (MO 1937).

'Male 500'

Of a widow in 60s with two sons.

Left to right

Dalton jug, bracket above with shell case containing partridge feathers, ashtray (non-smoker), pewter mug, elephant recently won at fair by boy, perpetual calendar (rarely right date), mirror above, clock above picture rail, ashtray (non-smoker), pewter pot containing writing materials, letters behind, pewter jug (like others), bracket above with wooden bird on.

'Male 495'

Landlady with three sons living away -

Chestnut Cigarette box, chestnut perpetual calendar, postcard (art), container with writing materials, tiddlywinks and dice, container, two glazed tiles painted with nude female negroid figure and male figure, said to be Captain Scott's as left by previous tenant of house, his sister, postcard of Russia from holiday, bowl from Russia, coat button, hair clip.

'Male 502'

Own -

Overmantel: soapstone pot, clock, soapstone pot. Then, in between,

Left-right: picture, candlestick, framed photo of neighbours' baby, picture of dad (this was framed until I knocked it down),

Mantelpiece: at the ends, two vases (not symmetrical), no centre.

Left-right: Coronation plate of Edward VIII, vase of flowers, cigarette lighter, ash tray, perpetual calendar, Stafford china ornament of tulips.

'Male 536'

'Our' mantelpiece: ship, no centre, broken elephant.

Sitting room of lodgings: landlady is 44 year old spinster; young male lodgers are clerks -

Left-right: vase, booklet behind, shoehorn, clock (stopped), behind: flashlight, insurance book, medal commemorating Edward VII's accession, cigarette lighter, pill box), cigarette card, vase containing envelope full of papers.

Dining room of convalescent home, Matlock:

Left-right: bronze cow bell, vase, clock, cow bell.

'Male 541', Edinburgh

At home -

Left-right: barrel containing cigarettes, vase from Algiers from brother (a sailor), clock (a wedding present of my parents), vase with letters behind, jug.

'Male 543'

Own parents' dining room:

Left-right: vase with calendars behind, printed Union Jack flags with George VI and Queen Elizabeth on them, old letters, smelling salts left there,

Lower shelf: Iron Jelloids tin, bowl containing junk, spectacles case, framed photo of self aged eight, Buddha (probably), portion of safety pin, father's pipe.

Lower shelf: cotton wool chick (relic of Easter),

Upper shelf: clock - dormant for years, a wedding present of my parents, an ashtray in front, annual accounts of Printers Association and old letters behind, between the clock and ashtray - a postcard of local ratepayers' society committee meeting times.

5.2 The second group of reports is copied from the *Mantelpiece file* 'Women A-G' (MO 1937).

'Female 7': unmarried, share[s] room with sister

No over mantel.

Framed photograph of 14th century French ivory Madonna and child, pot for flowers, framed picture of Durer (a gift from me to my sister), figure of St Margaret (a gift to sister from friend), pot of lavender, mirror.

'Female 26', aged 33

Left-right: face powder (not meant to be there, char never moves it), two ornaments bought in Oxford, ornamental ashtray (souvenir of Germany), clock acquired through Ardath cigarette coupons about 1930, souvenir of Venice, souvenir of Tyrol, brushes and comb, Christmas present for a friend, framed picture (Cezanne reproduction), four postcards from friends in a pile.

'Female 30'

My bedroom: ship, books with bookends, photo of fiancé, no centre.

Sitting room (mother has no artistic taste): jar of pipe cleaners, cocktail glass, dish of junk, vase, enamel miniature of self aged three, elephant, vase, Victorian plate, fancy match box.

Kitchen arranged by char woman, fifties, labouring class.

Letter rack containing bills, tea pot containing elastic, cotton and so on, tin containing milk checks, ash tray, reminder 'tablet', mirror, tin containing tacks, screws, buttons etc, smelling salts, vase with spills in, tea caddy, pile of circulars.

Fiancé's room at home: gun slugs, car clock, three golf balls, three photos of me, rather buckled, pipe, collar stud, five golf tees, magneto armature (no centre).

5.3 How long would you sit sifting through these? How many would you read, type into a laptop, or note with paper and pencil? Would any linger when you left the room? Then read them again, and again, hundreds of them, at intervals over years. My experience was, first, of bewilderment at the vastness, then emotional connection and wonder, conscientious study and notation, followed by fatigue, irritation, determination to fix them down, and, finally, a new kind of curiosity. Ben Highmore writes of the 'listlessness' he felt when trawling the archive, an emptiness that is also satiation:

'It is hard to visit an archive without an expectation, without an "image repertoire," already in mind. This could be thought of as the apperception-schema of archival searching: the desire to see patterns already imagined; the desire to find the evidence for the thought whose shape has already formed. Such apperception is hard to avoid (probably impossible), but the boredom of the archive, its ceaselessness, has a way of undoing it, of emptying it.' (Highmore 2012)

5.4 This temporality of sitting, sifting, pondering, revisiting, long train journeys, writing with pencil in multiple notebooks, trying to make sense not only of *their* paper work, but my paperwork too, also opens up a different materio-spatial awareness of doing research. Pens are not permitted in the archive, and I found that a laptop was inadequate for making notes of the diverse modes of reporting. A smartpen with an iPad might answer the shortcomings of technology, but I found the screen too small and smooth (Thrift 2005). Returning to pencil and notebook brought with it an awareness of the labour of making lists, of trying to use the paper space as best as I could, just as many of the MO reporters used whatever paper was available, such as the torn-off 'second' half of a sheet. Rusting paper clips, increasingly fragile folds and crossings-out marked the passing of time on the Reports. After many visits, pauses, journeys, the archive undoes purposeful research, the matter of history sitting in boxes, waiting (Steedman 2001). It can remain a resource of boxes of papers, or it can transform research practice. This came to the fore with the discovery in one of the boxes of a late addition:

Figure 4.1 and 4.2. Male C1154 (MO 1983)^[4]

C.1154

Kantelpiece.

Left to right.

1930's AA Badge

Avocado plant

Wooden cat from Mexico (ornament)

Kahlua bottle with candle therein

Wild Turkey bottle with candle therein

1960's matchbook with 'Merry Widow' cocktail printed thereon

Two Britains model cannon

One brass 'Carronade' from the Carron Iron Works factory shop

Photography pass for Parkhead dated 12/11/68

Grouse foot kilt pin

brass incense holder

pheasant feather

Moritake cup

black ash tray with beach pebbles therein

Full packet of 'Mary Long' cigarettes from Holland

Fester cocktail shaker made in Shanghai

Two 12 gauge shotgun cartridges. Live. 0 spread.

Rubber plant.

Brass carriage clock

International Press Card

1960's cigarette dispenser

Model of Panzer MkIV tank

World War One shell fuse

World War One shell case ash tray containing an acorn, twelve .22 rounds of ammunition, a .455 Kley round and a drawing pin.

Photo of Eric Liddell. (Charlotte of Fire)

Souvenir of Algeria ash tray containing marbles and beach stones

Three 1930's plastic duck clothes brushes

Letter holder containing postcards and invitations. Holder in shape of a cow

1970's whizzwheels toy car

Wooden box of jewellers rottenstone. (Victorian)

incense holder

World War one German fuse (used)

Jim Beam bottle with candle therein

Sol beer bottle with candle therein

Ends.



5.5 Submitted for the 1983 Autumn *Directive* (MO 1983), this *Report* was found years later in the file of a Mass Observation Panel member. Clearly, the 1988 stadium pass indicates that the person wrote it some years after the *Directive*, but not necessarily in 1988. As a man, this volunteer was in the minority for the 1983 *Directive*, for 261 women sent in *Reports*, and 72 men (mostly aged 50 or over). The assemblage of items on his mantelpiece is also, at first glance, extraordinary, inviting the reader to conjure the man who wrote it. Like the barest poetry, it lures the imagination, a biography of gaps for the reader to connect with flesh, sinew, the life of the man. A cultural archaeology of the files became blurred by a desire for biography, to personify the lists (Atkinson and Silverman 1997). But, time passed. . . this quest for narrative coherence, both in participants' words and research outputs, began to look like research alchemy, a synthetic product the fool's gold of scholarly literariness.

5.6 I stopped viewing lists as deficient, lazy, or shorthand, and participants who obeyed the *Directive* as dupes or unthinking. Lists are thinking, organising; words are the first unit of meaning. Whether strung together or placed one below the other, these words, or short groupings, were a different form of literariness from others' engaging stories. Discussing Rabelais's work, Susan Stewart wrote, ' . . . language becomes so surfeited that it erupts into the list, or the list's double, the collection' (Stewart 1993: 96), resonating with Highmore's (2012) comment on 'ceaselessness'. Lists, and collections of lists, are not deficient. If anything, they are hyper-efficient at bringing together ideas, concepts, things. Analyses of narrative-biographic interview transcripts, fieldnotes, pages of participants' paragraphs tend towards anatomic organising practices, whether through CAQDAS packages or corkboards full of post-it notes (Coffey and Atkinson 1996; Law 2004): lists, piles of paper or 'trees' of files. However, if the data are lists, this reductive practice prior to writing up comes into focus. The brevity of single lists becomes excess, when viewed as a collection. Does one reduce the surfeit of words by multiple writers into an edited collection of the 'best', or a meta-list of 'commonest', or pick words at random to produce a surrealist poem? Enter them all into a computer to produce a word-cloud? My point is that we must go beyond sleight of hand synthesis. These lists emphasise the poesis of sociological architectures. In the next section, I will look at one of the points raised here, the 'paper work' of both MO and of making sociology.

The Matter of the Archive

'Dwelling, inasmuch as it keeps the fourfold in things, is, as this keeping, a building' (Heidegger 1962: 353)

6.1 The unmanageability of MO material was part of its birth. In her appendix to *The Pub and the People* Dorothy Sheridan quotes the artist Julian Trevelyan, who participated in the Worktown project in Bolton (1957):

'What became of all this material that cluttered up the rooms of Davenport Street, the little house in Bolton that became our centre? How could it possibly be used? We liked to think that it was forming a museum for some future generation of social historians...' (Cited by Sheridan 1987: 341).

6.2 Trevelyan's suitcase 'full of newspapers, copies of Picture Post, seed catalogues, old bills, old bills and other scraps, together with a pair of scissors, a pot of gum, and a bottle of indian ink' (Trevelyan 1957; cited by Bolton Council 2013) is now a treasured artefact, displayed in museums and galleries (for example, Bolton Council 2013; Tate Gallery 2013). That particular collection of materials is now precious. In 2013, the Mass Observation Archive was moved from the University of Sussex library to a new purpose-built home, The Keep. This building is a practice, as much affording the time and space for thinking as a physically protective accommodation for the papers, books and other materials. In turn, thinking with these materials must make room for different ways of building. And it is paper that is the primary building material of the archive itself. Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge themselves commented on its ubiquity in their first publication, a collation of May 12th 1937 day-surveys:

'Out of many possible studies of the Coronation crowds, it seems worth while attempting to list the uses to which they put paper. Paper was used in newspapers, notices, tickets, maps, programmes, radio-lists, plates, drinking-cups, for wrapping cigarettes, knives, forks and food, as bunting, flags, house decorations, hats and suits of red, white and blue, for rosettes and streamers, in fireworks, in cardboard periscopes, for sitting on, for sleeping on, to shelter people from the rain, and when thoroughly wet the stuff was thrown about as a kind of bomb. . . People came to feel that there was so much paper about that you did not want any more.' (Jennings and Madge 1937, footnote p. 145)

6.3 Steven Connor (2001) ' . . . wonders quite what the practical point might be of compiling such a list, while marvelling at its weirdly purposive poetry. Perhaps one point about paper is just that it is the visible and tangible form of a nothing, of the very ephemerality and arbitrariness not only the day but of the exercise of recording it. After all, Mass Observation itself was a machine or organism for turning events or experiences into piles (piles

and piles) of paper'. Connor pursues the idea of paper, concluding that '... I have been unable to substantiate in Madge's own poetry my intuition that here paper becomes the mediating image of mass existence - though I will just mention the final night which falls at the end of 'Drinking in Bolton', like a 'pack of cards' [citing Madge 1994: 108]. Keeping all this paper, whether in Trevelyan's suitcase, or in the piles and piles that might have rotted, had it not been for Tom Harrisson and Dorothy Sheridan, is a problem common to all archives and archivists, including academics. Without proper care, decay sets in (or, in the case of one colleague, a huge wasp palace). Through contemplating original papers, the poetics of the archive can have a transformative effect. Trevelyan's suitcase is a treasure; the archive is now in its Keep. Martin Heidegger's essay 'Building Dwelling Thinking' elaborates this point:

Building and thinking are, each in its own way, inescapable for dwelling. The two, however, are also insufficient for dwelling so long as each busies its self with its own affairs in separation, instead of listening to the other. They are able to listen if both...belong to dwelling, if they remain within their limits and realise that the one as much as the other comes from the long workshop of long experience and incessant practice. (Heidegger 1962: p. 362; see also Latimer and Munro 2009).

6.4 The archive as dwelling, where the scholarly practices of thinking, and the building practices of the makers of MO are equal labours, revalues the processes of making, keeping and remaking. The worn papers of 'Male 500' and 'Female 7' are as precious as the artist's suitcase, their experience and practice kept in the ink and underlinings. Rather than try to rebuild these as 'sociology', using the toolbox of social research methods, it makes sense to recognise the 'long workshop' of vernacular building/writing practice, by considering an alternative poetics of literary practice. Pondering Madge's modernist poetics together with 'Harrison's method [which] was impressionist (great swathes of colour) but also pointillist (neat nuggets of fact)' (Smith 1987: X) also opens up a social aesthetic beyond the verbal, juxtaposing, rather than synthesising, the singular and the mass. Further, the modernist artistry of collage is also the craft of children: 'sticking and gluing' is a favoured activity of many under-tens. It has particular relevance here, as an inclusive practice of ordering things, and a method used with child research participants (Bagnoli 2009; Bagnoli and Clark 2010). Similarly, the mantel, its display items selected and drawn or listed, is a collage, the mediation of the personal with the mass 'out there' (see Giddens 1991: 187 for theorised, rather than practised 'collage effect'). A collage need not be non-verbal; in Bagnoli's (2010) research, it is notable how some participants used cut-out words and phrases. In the next section, I consider materiality in tandem with a second point raised in 'Listing the Mantel', that of lists as non-narrative literariness.

Popular poetics

*We hear on all lips a new song in the street all day,
Spreading from house to house without wires. This new song has come to stay.*

We shall be differently aware, we shall see all things new

Not as a craze or a surprise, but hard, naked, true. (Madge 1994: 128)

7.1 In this section, I turn to early ideas of Mass Observation as 'popular poetry' (Hubble 2006: 5; 15-16; 77-78), together with Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (Whitman 1955, 1856, 1860, 1867, 1871-2, 1881-2 and the 'Deathbed' edition 1891-2). Constantly reworked by the poet, who was also, for the first three editions, the printer, the poem was variously perceived as unpoetic, obscene and vulgar. However, it is now deeply woven into the U.S 'cultural biography' as national epic (Reynolds 1995). British modernist poetry focused on the surprise of the new, impersonal, objective, universal, seemingly the opposite of Whitman's expansive, corporeal and fervent poetry. Although the modernists were contemptuous of Whitman's style (Miller 2010: 99), they nevertheless adopted many of his techniques, such as non-rhyme, collage and verse experimentation. Whitman's use of paper clippings and glue, his printer's view of the poem as 'moveable type' (ibid.: 128) and reduction, even rejection of authorship as giving the text 'value' were visionary. His use of lists embodies this democratic poetic technique, seen, for example, in 'Song of the Broad-Axe' (Whitman 1998: 164-173), notably in Verse 9:

Figure 5. LoG: 'Song of the Broad-Axe', Verse 9

They spirt no more the blood of European nobles, they clasp no more the necks of queens.

I see the headsman withdraw and become useless,
I see the scaffold untrodden and mouldy, I see no longer any axe upon it,
I see the mighty and friendly emblem of the power of my own race, the newest, largest race.

9

(America ! I do not vaunt my love for you,
I have what I have.)

The axe leaps !
The solid forest gives fluid utterances,
They tumble forth, they rise and form,
Hut, tent, landing, survey,
Flail, plough, pick, crowbar, spade,
Shingle, rail, prop, wainscot, jamb, lath, panel, gable,
Citadel, ceiling, saloon, academy, organ, exhibition-house, library,
Cornice, trellis, pilaster, balcony, window, turret, porch,
Hoe, rake, pitchfork, pencil, wagon, staff, saw, jack-plane, mallet, wedge, rounce,
Chair, tub, hoop, table, wicket, vane, sash, floor,
Work-box, chest, string'd instrument, boat, frame, and what not,
Capitols of States, and capitol of the nation of States,
Long stately rows in avenues, hospitals for orphans or for the poor or sick,
Manhattan steamboats and clippers taking the measure of all seas.

The shapes arise !
Shapes of the using of axes anyhow, and the users and all that neighbors them,
Cutters down of wood and haulers of it to the Penobscot or Kennebec,
Dwellers in cabins among the Californian mountains or by the little lakes, or on the Columbia,
Dwellers south on the banks of the Gila or Rio Grande, friendly gatherings, the characters and fun,
Dwellers along the St. Lawrence, or north in Kanada, or down by the Yellowstone, dwellers on coasts and off coasts,
Seal-fishers, whalers, arctic seamen breaking passages through the ice.

The rest of the 'Song' can be seen in the [Walt Whitman Archive](#).

7.2 Both Whitman and the modernist poets were responding to rapid social transformations, unsettled futures and the brutal shocks of war. They were practising new politics of writing that broke with convention. MO, understood variously by its founders as social document, data collection, survey, poetry, objective science and subjective camera, was part of this quest for new ways of understanding society, immediately following the national shock of the abdication crisis ([Jennings and Madge 1937, 1939](#)). Its birth was controversial, viewed with popular suspicion and academic censure ([Madge and Harrison 1938: 48-63](#); [Sheridan et al. 2000: 37; 79-108](#)). Its outputs were varied in content and form, sometimes delayed by decades or never (yet) published. It disappeared for years, and without Tom Harrison and Dorothy Sheridan, it would surely have rotted. Many files are yet to be explored thoroughly, but in recent years it has become a source for scholars across disciplines. MO material has been exhibited, featured on radio, television and the stage. It has indeed become a popular compendium of 20th and 21st century 'ordinary' writing.

7.3 Charles Madge's working title for MO, 'popular poetry', is underwritten as much by the Mantelpiece lists ([MO 1937, 1983](#)) as the juxtaposed day-survey accounts of May 12th and other wordier observations ([Hubble 2006: 15](#)). Modernist poetry, as commitment to 'the new', and to ordinary experience, finds articulation in mantelpiece prosody. The surfeit of paper, seemingly undernourished by these laconic lists, can be re-viewed, and revived, first, by thinking through a 'literary', rather than 'sociological' genre. Second, attending to the materiality of these amassed papers, of type, ink and pencil, some with photographs and drawings attached or incorporated, highlights the variety of stuff that is sifted through (or out) in the process of research writing.

7.4 *Leaves of Grass* is noted for its lists, catalogues and 'borrowings' from epic poets, the Bible and so on. Parallels between MO and the poem are not only stylistic, but also processual, in the constant revisioning of

nation, selves and others. The poem evolves in a form of free, open, inclusive, democratic verse. By the fourth edition (1867), Whitman had turned from the concept of an individual as writer to the 'En-Masse', 'the word democratic'. Polyphony, process, Everyman, Everywoman - and lists: the poetics of vernacular epic suggest a different methodology: accretive, unwasting, contemplative and questioning. In addition, the vast online resource exhibiting JPG images of Whitman's original papers and book covers, opened a new awareness of the material transformations involved in his poetry ([Walt Whitman Archive](#)). Despite the importance of the feel (and smell) of the MO papers, the long journeys and pauses, the ability to view these images in my hands brought its own sense of closeness and wonder, despite a desire to handle the things themselves. However, this sense of deprivation may have to change, since the 'rhizomatic. . . database may well be epic's new genre' ([Folsom 2007](#)).

7.5 This attention to process is not new in literary criticism; however, in sociological research, ability to present findings as solid artefacts drawn from rigorous research designs is vital. While methodological debates rage around mixed methods, narrative, survey, visual and multimodal methods, observation, these are too often treated as peripheral to the focal point, the object of the study.

Cultural Biography: the workshops of worlds

8.1 The powerful tropes of war, who rules whom, relations between personal and social/political, national and global characterise both *Leaves of Grass* and *Mass Observation*. By the 'final' edition of *LoG* in 1881, the civil war gives the text a dramatic shape. This edition, which included little new material, was called the 'workshop' edition, receiving little critical attention. However, 'as a text that circulated in the midst of an unsettled cultural "workshop" that was reconstituting the ruins of postwar America, this edition provides a fertile site in representing the incipient nationalist ideology...' ([Mancuso 1998](#): para. 2). *MO* was founded to address the crises of abdication and the coming war ([Madge and Harrisson 1939](#): 23-108), at a time of growing cosmopolitanism in sociological interests. Opening up the 'long workshop' ([Heidegger 1962](#): 362) is critical for understanding how ignoring these in-process workings excludes so much, for the sake of a 'final' statement of fact.

8.2 How we make research productions in turn makes us as researchers, and makes the research. The material genesis of both texts we study as data and any subsequent representations matters. Ed Folsom's ([2005](#)) forensic examination of the differing editions of *LoG* illustrates this. The covers, from texture, colour, choice of materials, patterns, pictures and font were as important as the poem within, varying according to the tone of that particular edition and Whitman's changing concerns (see [Folsom 2005](#): Figs 1-30). *LoG* was '...a shifting series of quite different texts - each one corresponding to a particular biographic and cultural moment - instead of a single book' ([Folsom 2005](#): Section 'Walt Whitman as a Maker of Books', para. 8). Notably, Whitman started his career as a printer and journalist.

'the whole modus of that initiation. . . the awkward holding of the stick—the type-box, or perhaps two or three old cases, put under his feet for the novice to stand on, to raise him high enough—the thumb in the stick—the compositor's rule—the upper case almost out of reach—the lower case spread out handier before him—learning the boxes. . . the slow and laborious formation, type by type, of the first line - its unlucky bursting by the too nervous pressure of the thumb. . . '

([Whitman 1998 \[1963\]](#): 48)

8.3 Despite the poem's unpopularity during Whitman's lifetime, his wish for it to be his '*carte visite* to the coming generations of the New World' ([Whitman 1891-92a](#): 425) was fulfilled, partly because he failed as a conventional 'epic' poet in his lifetime. *LoG* was seen as 'disturbingly sensual' ([Stewart 2002](#): 300), a motley collection of lists, exclamations, snippets from other poets and the Bible, without the comforting symmetry of rhyme. Of particular salience are the varying Daguerrotypes Whitman selected for the frontispiece of early editions, rather than the usual words. This technology enabled the mass production of small portraits as *cartes visites* in the 1850s. For the first time, ordinary Americans could represent themselves *in person*, as print on paper, and this connection was significant for Whitman, who was fascinated by the potential of photography to represent the world. ([Folsom 1988](#)). Wanting to stand as a 'representative American who spoke for the vast variety of the nation', the poet would not allow his name to appear on the cover or title page until the third edition. Instead he chose full-length Daguerrotypes of himself in workmen's clothes, with the crotch area deliberately enhanced in some of the print runs. Attracting opprobrium, this textured image emphasised how the poet was writing as an Everyman/woman, more from the labouring, desiring body than the intellectual authority of an 'epic' poet.

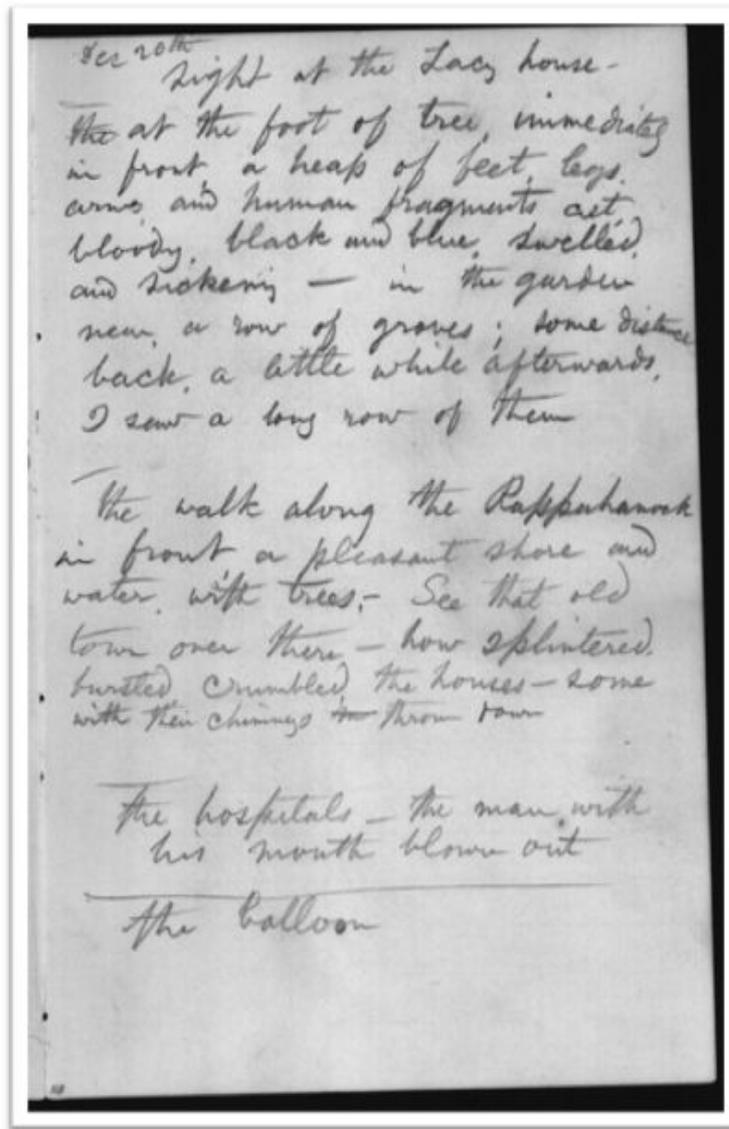
Figure 6. Left - unenhanced image; right - enhanced engraving for *LoG*
Frontispiece



Source: [Folsom 2005](#)

- 8.4** Whitman self-published the first edition of *LoG* in 1855. He therefore had almost total control over the material form and poetic content of the book. As interesting as the allegorical significance of the poem's materiality is its mundane inversion, since individual poems were often organised on the pages in 'an arrangement based on spatial concerns rather than thematic ones' ([Folsom 2005](#): Section 'The First Edition of *LoG*', para. 4). During the civil war, shortage of paper meant the poems had to be crowded onto the pages. However, the 1867 print runs were also varied according to Whitman's '...indecision over whether *LoG*, which originally set out to celebrate the unity of the United States, could properly contain poems chronicling the divisive war between the states' ([Folsom 2005](#): Section 'Walt Whitman as a Maker of Books', para. 7). Rather than an easy national unity, Whitman creates moving threads between the narrator, his subject and the reader, always refocusing on the person within the mass, particularly in the mass internecine slaughter of the American Civil War ([Stewart 2002](#): 300-302). Therefore texts, some containing 'Drum-Taps', some not, are materially and thematically affected by the conflict.□
- 8.5** In his collages of writing, Whitman sought a multisensory poetics, made of the stuff of everyday experience. Photo-realism was his aim, his constant textual revising a development process, thousands of words to build a world. In a curious paradox, this very mass of words creates wordless collages, oscillating between verbal pointillism and pictorial impressionism. Further, Whitman's articulation of visual, tangible sensoriality is kinetic, a film waiting to happen. Whitman's 'poems of materials' thus resonate with Savage's (2010a) 'mobile fragments' and Highmore's (2002) 'totality of fragments'. This can be seen in his notebooks, which he filled in,□ sometimes over years, giving them a collage-like construction. They resonate not only with the 'pointillist' observations of MO Mantelpiece lists, but also the 'impressionist' style of MO surveys ([Jennings and Madge 1937](#)) and, crucially, hasty scholarly fieldnotes, for example in the '1862' Notebook

Figure 7. Walt Whitman Notebook LC94 Image 113



Source: Library of Congress (2013)

8.6 Emphasis on shared humanity, crossing and recrossing the threshold between the personal and the social, combined with the writing of failure into the epic of nation and self, is Whitman's first contribution to reworking social poetics. Second is his 'journeyman' (literally, a day-by-day worker) experience. Trevelyan's suitcase, Whitman's box of type; the Mass Observer's or sociologist's pen, typewriter, paper, smartphone or laptop are the materials their/our bodies work with to make and remake things. William Michael Rossetti, a great admirer of Whitman, produced the British cut version of the 1867 edition, which the American called 'the horrible dismemberment of my book' (Whitman 1871). How can scholars 'keep faith' with participants' meanings in that transition from workshop to scholarly artefact? In the next section, I consider the politics of the process by which social poetics become sociological poetics.

Doubt as Sociological Poetics

Figure 8. LoG: 'Song of Myself', Verse 23

Endless unfolding of words of ages !
And mine a word of the modern, the word En-Masse.

A word of the faith that never balks,
Here or henceforward it is all the same to me, I accept Time absolutely.

It alone is without flaw, it alone rounds and completes all,
That mystic baffling wonder alone completes all.

I accept Reality and dare not question it,
Materialism first and last imbuing.

Hurrah for positive science ! long live exact demonstration !
Fêch stoncrop mixt with cedar and branches of lilac,
This is the lexicographer, this the chemist, this made a grammar
of the old cartouches,
These mariners put the ship through dangerous unknown seas,
This is the geologist, this works with the scalpel, and this is a
mathematician.

Gentlemen, to you the first honors always !
Your facts are useful, and yet they are not my dwelling,
I but enter by them to an area of my dwelling.

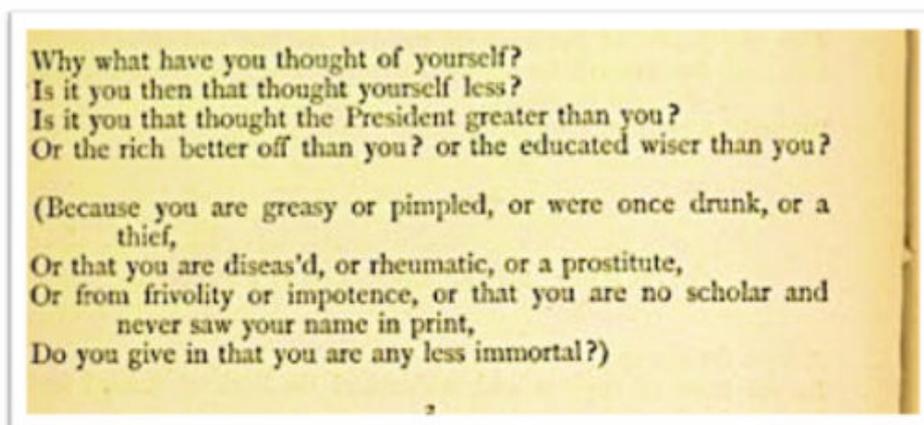
Source: [Walt Whitman Archive](#)

- 9.1 Mantelpieces and lists both invite narrative and deny it. When first 'writing up' the MO Mantelpiece Reports, I mined the narratives, the chatty letter-style missives, for the 'juicy quotes' (Savage 2007), blazing colour, with the lists filling in the cultural background. Lists are both miniature and gigantic (Stewart 1993), collections of words implying infinite worlds. Acknowledging the handiwork of multiple crafters, of dust, time, draughts and drafts is an alternative, open sociological poetics, displacing monumental coherence. Drawing on Trevelyan's 'collage' reporting, I made a written collage of the lists, since any other kind of re-presentation seemed to create a false certainty (Hurdley 2013: 38). However, the relation between the 'storied' Reports, and the list-forms continued to trouble the interpretation. Most of those who wrote for MO in 1937 are dead, although the times they write of are still within 'living memory'. Even 1983 is beyond a human generation, with the smell and patina of the past settling over the Reports. Although contributions were anonymised for publication, any ethical dilemmas seemed distant, hazy with age. However, when juxtaposed with a recent film project with asylum seekers and refugees (Hurdley 2012 [link to be added after peer review]), the ethics of using MO for sociological research came to parallel this work with a vulnerable group. Like Whitman and the Mass Observers of 1937, war and the shadows of war, unsettling pasts and futures had undone their worlds. Some made silent, some made loud with trauma, fear and unfamiliarity with English, four people co-produced short films with Welsh Refugee Council and me. One of them had to remain anonymous, while the other three wanted their faces shown; all wanted their stories to be heard and understood. Mohamed and 'Joseph' were learning English at the time, and so expressed themselves with difficulty. Elina had serious mental health issues and spoke fast, wanting to tell all; Ali lost his appeal, so became homeless and ever quieter during the filming. The times I spent with them were unpredictable, as to when, where, for how long, and under what circumstances. It was rare that we kept 'on topic', because it became increasingly evident that this was irrelevant. Some of what they said could not be recorded for their own protection. We had death threats, were warned off, joked with, given cups of tea, fed, ignored.

- 9.2 None of the participants could relate to the proposal, or told the stories that a leading refugee/asylum seeker advocate wanted, to publicise experience of exclusion and prejudice. Their experiences were 'unthinkable' to us, just as our project design was unthinkable to them. The films were rejected by the 'advocate', since the stories did not have the emotional pull she expected. The quietness, brevity, hesitation of the young men, Elina's digressions and Ali's change from verbose confidence to lost confusion 'failed'. Like MO lists, they were deficient surfeits, seemingly excluded both from advocacy for 'the excluded', and from the narrative articulacy of the 'mainstream' participants in the original research project. They 'lacked' articulacy, salience and coherence, the essential criteria for 'good' film subjects and research participants. How might sociological expression encompass their stories beyond the 'do no harm' principle in refugee research (Hugman *et al.* 2011).
- 9.3 I could make new films with participants with the 'right' stories to tell only in fluent English. However, the principal aim of the project, whatever the topic, or the hopes of the advocacy professional, was to increase understanding of asylum seeker/refugee experiences. They hoped for a welcoming 'new world', but were disappointed for various reasons. Many other potential participants had excluded themselves, either because they were scared, or lacked confidence, or wanted to wait for better times. I met them in buildings I would never normally have visited, heard stories I could not have imagined. These four were those who had come forward at the right time, happenstance, but not irrelevant to the massed accounts of the rest. Rather than rush out a 'standard story' (Tilly 2002: 26) that excluded them, but had the neat expected literariness of sociological research narrative, I dwelt awhile in doubt, thinking, unthinking, in a similar process to that Highmore (2012) describes. The participatory methodology framing the film project became problematic, and any conventional narrative representation of the group ethically doubtful (Dona 2007). Their pauses and gaps, as audible as their words, unfolded a methodology of silence (Ghorashi 2008). Eventually, the research monograph had no conventional conclusion, but an articulation of this doubt, with three drawings as an ending (Hurdley 2013).
- 9.4 The value Whitman's poetry now has in the making of America's 'cultural biography' (Reynolds 1995) means that his thinking/building materials are stored in the Whitman Archive. The relation between building, dwelling and thinking in and of 'America' (or the U.S.) is practised through ongoing social/cultural poetics of LoG. How do more diverse archival materials make national cultural biography, such as those in MO, or others which tread the sociological/historical line, such as *Foundations of British Sociology: The Sociological Review* Archive? By extension, how can short asylum seeker/refugee films 'fit' this notion of cultural biography?

Conclusion: The Politics of Method

Figure 9. LoG: 'A Song for Occupations', Verse 1



Source: [Walt Whitman Archive](#)

- 10.1 Everyday 'standard stories' become sedimented into cultural biographies - those of nation states, communities, groups such as sociologists. And sociologists are the critics, editors and publishers of participants' contributions, which is why attention to method matters. Barely visible is the careful working in of taste, of cultural, social and educational distinction into the patterns of these particular methods of writing and speaking (Bourdieu 1988; Skeggs 1997, 2010, 2011, 2012). Beverley Skeggs' central concern in her fieldwork is with the small processes of classing and devaluing in which white middle-class 'circuits of value' dominate. It is no longer enough to skirt an old intellectual line between legislators and interpreters (Bauman 1987), but to make 'the history of the future' now (Whitman 1998: 5), clumsily or gorgeously, always work-in-progress, questioned, questioning, often failing. As Carolyn Steedman, in her contemplation of archives, commented, 'Indeed, Dust is the opposite thing to Waste. . . It is about circularity, the impossibility of things disappearing, or going away, or being gone' (2001: 164). The politics of value, of what to keep, is cultural, as is all boundary work (Douglas 1966). Dust, silence and gaps have presence, just as the mass of words in Whitman's palimpsest epic shows traces of old workings beneath the new. His poetics are explicitly political, messy and flawed, pursuing democracy, yet

open to the troubling process of nation-making.

- 10.2** The rhetoric of sociological text production strives towards unity and closure, a standard story in which gaps are closed, traces erased and contours smoothed. The MO lists discussed in this paper offer eternal openings; gaps proliferate and additions are always possible. Making narratives, even life stories out of such lists is tempting, yet that shift in mode is utterly transformative, erasing what the participant/researchers produced, in the same way that the refugee/asylum seeker films were viewed as lacking, as waste, by an 'expert' in the field.□ To dismiss the materiality of archives as peripheral, or the left-overs from rich 'data', is deliberate forgetfulness. How to put such matter into place in sociological productions is up for discussion, but it must be discussed, rather than swept under the carpet. Juxtaposing MO materials and a flawed vernacular national epic with films made of□ and with a particularly vulnerable group of people offers no closure or synthesis. Rather, it is a messy archaeology of things, to show that any 'anthropology of ourselves' must encompass dust, mess and gaps if it is to materialize in a different methodological architecture.
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The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their wise comments, Mass Observation Archive trustees for use of the Archive materials and funders of my Early Career Fellowship, The Leverhulme Trust.

Notes

Typed and Handwritten Mass Observation Figures 1-4.2 [all typographical, spelling and grammar errors are in the original documents]

1

Fig. 1: Male 955 (MO 1983), page 2 of Report:

- 1 20p piece
- 2 5p

Polished Slate clock, French

paper clip

Newspaper cutting (date 1963) ref. abuse of army cook with carrot!

Midland Bank plastic bag for £10 worth of 50p.

Key for clock

1 brass curtain hook

1 razor blade

1 used pipe-cleaner

3 paper clips

1 drawing pin

1 stamp book containing ½ p, 15½p stamps

1 blazer button

*** Midland Bank paper bag for £10 worth 50p.

Brass Victorian tumbler (inside it: no. 9 bristle paint brush; 1 pkt joss-sticks

“Made in the Slums of Calcutta”; 1 2b pencil stamped

“War Drawing”; 1 2b pencil; 1 brown felt-tip pen; 2

2 dead black biro; 1 clip on biro with push starter, ~~be~~

broken; 1 pink crayon; 1 blue crayon; 1 used joss-stick
stick.)

1 4” high model of crucific shrine (Austrian?)

1 plaster statue of St Joseph (~~bene~~ under it Home Office prison visitor’s ~~license~~
license card.

1 pencil

1 4” nail

1 large iron washer for front garden gate

1 pottery thing: a tree trunk with pipe cleaners in it, on a branch sits a frog
reading a newspaper, with sign “You’d be happy too if you could eat what bugs
you.” (Hongkong)

1 silver lustre vase (same as other one) containing one crucifix, and copy of
petitional prayer to St^Martha.

Behind these: 1 sachet Boots cold relief powder; folder from Nationwide Fila

Processing withx one photo self outside pub in Chichester; p.c. of

Sea Starwort ‘found and painted by Sarah Bland, born 1810, died 1905;

p.c. Glory of Chilton (a kind of Polyanthus) painted C.D.Ehret 1708-1770

*** Insert green/brown pottery frog containing ½ ps for charity.

2

Fig. 2: Mass Observation Directive t New Observers

MASS-OBSERVATION

DIRECTIVE TO NEW OBSERVERS REPORT ON MANTELPICES

As a first test of your powers of observation, try the following:-

Write down in order from left to right, all the objects on your mantelpiece, mentioning what is in the middle. Then make further lists for mantelpieces in other people's houses, giving in each case a few details about the people concerned, whether they are old, middle aged or young, whether they are well-off or otherwise, what class (roughly) they belong to. Send these lists in.

If possible, also take photographs of mantelpieces.

REPORT ON YOURSELF

Try to write a brief account of yourself, not more than 500 words. Sticking to the facts as far as possible.

Such an account is of great value to MASS-OBSERVATION, as it is essential to know something of each one of our mass of observers. Everyone has his own individual background, which is likely to affect his observations, and which must be taken into consideration in dealing with his reports.

DAY-SURVEYS

On the 12th of each month Observers send in reports on what happened to them on that day. We have found [end of page]

3

Figs. 3.1 and 3.2 from File of Schoolboys who did not submit Day Surveys (1937)

- Starting at the left-hand end of the end of the dining room mantel-piece, its contents are as follows:
Firstly, a cut-glass flower vase, with a silver base which has been lacquered black to avoid having to continually polish it. This vase is a receptacle for two or three pencils, receipts from the Gas Co., and hairpins. Between this and the clock in the centre is a copper oxidised ash-tray brought home from Weymouth by one of the family about four years ago. This is generally full of safety pins, collar stiffeners, pen-nibs and matches.

The middle of the mantelpiece is occupied by a square green alarm clock (always about two hours fast) supported by an ornamental oak stand (under the stand is kept the daily money for the milkman). Next to the clock is the ink bottle, and two or three dirty pens, and a glass block with places for writing materials. This block is always covered in ink stains. Besides this stand is a little china dog, two paws of which are missing. Lastly, there is the companion glass vase to the one at the other end – this one contains cotton reels, a few needles, and thimbles.

The spaces between these articles are at most times littered with postage stamps, letters, stumps of pencil, and other sundries, in spite of the fact that it is tidied every day. Between the right-hand flower vase and the wall is a bulky wad of letters, insurance books, circulars, and any other papers which someone is too lazy to put in their right place.

The mantelpiece itself is of polished oak, forming the upper edging of a tiled hearth surround. It has no drapings whatsoever.

Class of people who use the room – lower middle

Mantelpiece. Left to right.

1930's AA Badge

Avacado plant

Wooden cat from Mexico (ornament)

Kahlua bottle with candle therein

Wild Turkey bottle with candle therein

1950's matchbook with 'Merry Widow' cocktail printed thereon

Two Britains model cannon

One brass 'Carrnade' from the Carron Iron Works factory shop

Photography pass for Parkhead dated 12/11/88

Grouse foot kilt pin

brass incense holder

pheasant feather

Noritake cup

black ash tray with beach pebbles therein

Full packet of 'Mary Long' cigarettes from Holland

Pewter cocktail shaker made in Shanghai

Two 12 guage shotgun cartridges. Live. 0 spread.

Rubber plant.

Brass carriage clock

International Preess Card

1950's cigarette dispenser

Model of Panzer MkIV tank

World War One shell fuse

World War One shell case ash tray containing an acorn, twelve .22 rounds of ammunition, a .455 Eley round and a drawing pin.

Photo of Eric Liddell. (Chariots of Fire)

Souvenir of Algeria ash tray containing marbles and beach stones

[next page]

Three 1930's plastic duck clothes brushes

Letter holder containg postcards and invitations. Holder in shape of a cow

1970's whizzwheel toy car

Wooden box of jewellers rottenstone. (Victorian)

inscence holder

World War one German fuse holder (used)

Jim Beam bottle with candle therein

Sol beer bottle with candle therein

Ends.

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