

Independent scholar

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Parks, squats, four star hotels

Abstract:

As a social science researcher, my work is regularly forced into the strait-jacket of stylistic conventions agreed upon in consultation between the university research facility I work for and the government departments which fund our research. In this mode of writing, there is little room for movement, for flights of fancy, for philosophical observation. What isn't mentioned is that the research itself often exceeds its 'public service' boundaries, leaving remnants that leach under the skin. This paper in contrast acknowledges the uncanny traces of 'real world' research among the marginalized and vulnerable population of people who are chronically homeless. It questions, through its creative research format, how we might incorporate such 'lived experience' into our scholarly writing, when it is not only deeply unsettling on a personal level, but is also indigestible within the conventions of the academic and government funded research which frame the work.

Biographical note:

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Introduction

There's a lot I can do in my academic research. I can talk about the multiple and complex issues faced by people who are homeless both internationally and in Australia, referring to different strategies aimed at reducing homelessness (e.g. Phillips et al 2011) and preventing homelessness (e.g. Spinney & Blandy 2011; Parsell & Marston 2012). I can examine the role of integration in homelessness responses (e.g. Flatau et al 2010). I can rattle off some preliminary findings on integrated case management as well as discuss some of the outcomes and challenges in the area (Jones et al 2012). I can quote from key Australian and international theorists (e.g. Culhane & Metraux 2008; Fitzpatrick 2005; Neale 1997; Parsell 2011). I can throw the latest stats at you (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011). I can even point you in the direction of government policy if you want me to (Australian Government 2008; Council of Australian Governments 2009).

There's a lot I can do. And it's important stuff – don't get me wrong. I'm passionate about producing and disseminating research on homelessness, as are my colleagues. It needs to be written, published, 'out there'. It does impact in the 'real world' and it does make a difference¹ ... but this paper is not concerned, explicitly at least, with such scholarship. This paper is about what I *can't* do. That's what your Call for Papers asked for: work that doesn't necessarily conform to the conventions of academic research, writing that 'wants to turn and touch its listeners and readers and wants to feel their touch back' (Brewster & Schlunke 2005), art-works that jam culture/s, disrupt governing frequencies, linger.

As a paper about what I *can't* do, I am already uneasy. Such writing is at odds with the constraints of the research I have been commissioned to do. The funding body sent me official looking documents with governmental disclaimers in bold font: '**No part of this research will be published without the express permission of the relevant Government Department...**'. I signed on the dotted line, scanned the document, and emailed it back to the appropriate Manager. I wasn't to know that in the course of the research I would be impacted on so intensely by what I saw, smelt, touched, felt. I wasn't to know that these sensations, these impressions – *how do I describe them?* – would leave remnants. How do I frame such feelings in governmental style reports which claim to present 'objectivity', 'neutrality' and a 'sound evidence base'? As one colleague commented, 'Such reflections would not be welcome – nor valued – in the context of government funded research'. Alternately, how can I produce a vivid picture of my research here? How do I re/configure the contradictory images I am dealing with into papers I *can* do and papers I *can't* do?

The Offices

You sign in on the ground floor. On a large columned sheet attached to a clip-board, you write down the name of the person you are visiting along with your name and organisation. In the far right column, you sign on the dotted line. The security guard

hands you a lanyard in a plastic pouch and directs you to the lifts. As you wait in the lift lobby, you watch the public servants walk by: plastic lanyard with digitized ID photographs dangling around necks, iPads tucked under arms, take-away jumbo-sized Starbucks coffees held tightly between fingers and palms.

You travel up to the *n*th floor.

Glass doors reveal an open plan office – with a cluster of low panelled workstations separated from other pods by a series of higher panels – and a few closed offices reserved for Senior Management and Executives. The floor is populated with Government Order computer desks piled high with multi-fit document trays: an Office Works skyscraper pointing up towards the fluorescent strip lighting. Another desk is covered with wire vertical file holders stacked delicately side-by-side. Randomly thrown into these wire holders is a selection of manila folders: cherry red, sky blue, emerald green and buff manila. Below each desk is a gas-lift mesh chair, all a uniform charcoal shade, one of them with a distinct chrome footrest for support. Above the desks are cork boards with blown-up photographs pinned all over them: a young girl holding a Union Jack; a teenage boy wearing a pair of sunglasses with peace signs covering each eye; the Eiffel Tower; Times Square; and a photoshopped image of a large green moon. The walls are also adorned with electronic whiteboards: texta arrows growing out of capitalized words scrawled across the surface: *FUNDING? DEPARTMENT? TIME-LINE? PERSON RESPONSIBLE?* In the corner of the floor are two large desks overlaid with printers, scanners, faxes, shredders and a Xerox copier. The walls are lined with filing cabinets of different dimensions and appearances: 2 drawer. 3 drawer. 4 drawer. Grey. Silver. Beige. Scattered throughout the work-stations you identify a range of different plants: potted palm trees, bamboos trees, olive trees. It's not until you touch one, that you realise they're artificial. You wonder if the fact that the plants are fake will impact on the plant life balance qualities they're supposed to be bringing to the workplace.

'Silence' and 'Size'. They're the two other things that strike you as you walk around the open plan offices. The silence is in the polite 'not talking' that buzzes like *white noise* across the floor, reminding you – momentarily – of a library, except you can't see any laminated images of mobiles with big red crosses diagonally through them. The size of the work-stations also hits you. The higher up the role of the official, the larger the size of their office, the better the view. When you see the receptionist's cubicle tucked into a narrow archive as you enter the floor, you notice it's directly opposite from The Office CEO, whose spacious room takes in a panoramic view of the harbor, the mountains, and the park below. You stand at the CEO's window breathing in the spectacular view when you notice a small group of 'parkies'² standing under a grove discreetly passing around a bottle in a brown paper bag. Given that the police have been blitzing this park in an effort to 'clean up the CBD', you feel strangely heartened by this refusal to disappear.

After a quick tour of The Office, you duck into the Ladies where you're greeted with a series of promotional posters about washing your hands. There's a cartoon style man on

the poster, dressed up in a pale blue suit, who's shaking hands with a bottle-blonde in a floral dress.

There's a bubble coming out of his head: 'I hope *she's* washed her hands'.

The same thought bubble emanates from the woman's head: 'I hope *he's* washed his hands'.

'Have YOU washed YOUR hands?' beams the poster.

You make a few more jottings in your notebook – sanitized, sterilized, scented. And then just as quickly as you wrote them all down, you stick a line through them – ~~sanitized, sterilized, scented~~ – too predictable, too many S's. It doesn't work. You wash your hands for a second time, saturating your palms with liquid soap, whilst you glance again at the bubble floating up from the male cartoon character: 'I hope *she's* washed her hands'.

The Squat

In the late 70s and 80s, in the heavily photocopied pages of our stapled together zines, we romanticized squatting. We were reclaiming properties from 'capitalist pigs'. Not paying rent. More dole to spend on bread and wine. The electricity would be off, unless we'd arranged for an anarchist electrician (is that an oxymoron?) to wire it up so the power company would be left paying for it. We'd sit in the candle-light, making shadow puppets across the walls like our own moving light show. A dog, a bunny-rabbit, a swan, a gun – that was the easy one. Two fingers poised as if about to shoot. BANG BANG BANG. *You're dead!*

It's all different when I visit this squat – is it me that's changed?

Have I traded mattresses, with spokes careering out of them, for mid-life comforts. Do I really have to cover every mattress and pillow in the house with at least one protector. Will I be putting plastic covers on the sofas and chairs to make them last longer. Do I just like deleting question marks. Or is it that I don't want these questions answered.

You see it from the road first. The house has been painted a bright spring green colour. Not a dark bush green but much, much lighter. The windows are boarded up with thin brown wood slats which from a distance look just like flattened cardboard boxes. As you get out of the car and walk closer to the building, you see multiple holes in the walls – different sizes and different shapes – leading through to bare wood panels beneath, like an under layer of packing crates. Initially, when you start to describe the squat, it's the absences you find yourself discussing – the things that aren't there. Take the louvre windows, for example: there's two louvre slats lined up in the frame but you find yourself counting the eight empty ridges where the others should sit. The same for the lace curtain that no longer exists; instead, a large white rag – a peace offering? – hangs out of one of the window frames. When you reach the back door, you see large scrapings where the paint has peeled off, weathered away, to reveal the asbestos surface underneath. The

meter box is still intact although it has a large dent which closely resembles the imprint of a shoe.

You enter the building from the back, stepping over unidentified clear liquids on the floor – spilt wine, urine (human? animal?) – you can't accurately identify what it is but *you don't want to put your foot in it*. The first room you enter has a metal bed frame in the centre, its head-rest at a distinct angle as if somebody heavy has lain on it. You find yourself wondering where the mattress and the bedding are. You walk through into the kitchen – there's no appliances anymore – no stove, no fridge – just a sink and a tap. Did somebody pick up the stove and fridge and put them outside for collection? Did they walk them down the road to another location? Where have they gone? You move through to another room – living room? bed-room? – where you see a floral print sofa, with fabric torn off the arms, and a foam underlay as the base. In the bathroom you find a steel frame and a shower-head: no perspex screen, no shower curtain, no towel rail. You walk up to the front door and turn the door handle clock-wise to leave before you see the wooden slats nailed across it. Someone's boarded up the front door from inside. You re-trace your steps and leave by the back door.

The Squat. You haven't done it justice. Your description of the rooms in the squat focuses, primarily, on the material traces left behind; evidence pertaining to the previous occupants. But there are more Items of No Commercial Value to catalogue and describe, the random found objects that populate the squat and the land surrounding it.

Found Objects (inside):

- 4 Pillows made from the plastic inner bladders of wine casks
- 2 wire coat hangers
- 8 used syringes
- A floral sofa with the fabric ripped off its arms
- A metal bed frame with no mattress
- 1 supermarket trolley (Woollies or Coles, I don't know) missing at least a couple of wheels
- 6 Empty cardboard wine casks: *CHARDONNAY A Rich and Distinctive Premium Dry White*; *COLOMBARD CHARDONNAY A Modern Australian Dry White Blend*

On the spine of the wine cask:

DID YOU KNOW?

YOUR POUR COULD BE MORE THAN YOU THINK.

This image represents 1.2 standard drinks for a typical 150ml serving.

It is not recommended to exceed 2 standard drinks in one day.

For more information on responsible wine consumption please visit:

www.bewinewise.org.au

- 3 McDonald's Big Mac cardboard cartons: *I'm lovin' it*
- 4 McDonald's Quarter Pounder burger cartons: *The taste you know and love*
- 1 black garbage bag with yellow ties
- 3 VB Cardboard cartons (empty) (semi-flattened)
- Numerous crushed aluminum VB cans
- 1 fly swat (retro lime green)

Found Objects (outside):

- 7 cardboard boxes with rotting mangoes (Did someone *buy* all of these?)
- Lots of ash; charred wood; a singed concrete block
- A car tyre
- A pair of faded blue jeans hanging over a tree branch
- An abandoned car, its bonnet up, and windows all down

I fire away.

Shot after shot.

Next time I turn on my digital camera, to search for the squat images, I find them between D for Dinner and F for Family. The dinner shots were taken at a wharf restaurant during my field trip away. I followed the lead of the American couple at the next table who were photographing everything that was put before them – drinks, entrees, dinner, desserts, even the espresso at the end. After exchanging notes on the etiquette of posting your dinners on Facebook, and acknowledging that it was a ‘curious’ habit, I followed their lead and started shooting. The drink. The food. I got it all down. Then there’s the image of my son’s first day at high school. These images are more explainable. A significant occasion. *Everyone takes these*. The white shirt, the grey pants, the knotted tie, the school blazer, and the polished black shoes. He’s smiling with that look: *get the damn thing over with ... c-h-e-e-s-e* The squat photos are positioned somewhere between the Dinner shots and the Family shots. The long grass, the damaged building, and the random found objects tussle for a place between the Up-market Dinner and the Uniformed Son in the Family Portrait.

The Hotel Room

It was booked online before you left. They described it as a ‘superior balcony room with a curved balcony looking out over the harbor and the promenade...’. The pictures on the iPad looked good. You walk through the foyer of the hotel to the lift, pass the plush sofas, the vending machines, the internet café and a bevvy of suitcases from a tour group. Mostly Samsonites.

You get out of the lift, turn to the left and walk down the hallway. You find Room 20. The number '2' on the room door has faded a little so when you first glance at the door, you're greeted with 0: Apartment 0. You slot the room card into the panel, pull it out quickly and open the door. You step inside into a spacious, newly-refurbished room. You write down the word 'contemporary' in your notebook followed by the word 'chic'. You cross out the word ~~ehie~~ and write down 'stylish' instead.

You look around. There's a large King Bed with a gold bedspread with feathers silhouetted on the linen and four plush pillows. One of the pillows has a cardboard wrapper around it with the word 'Hard', another one is adorned with the word 'Soft'. You pick up the 'Soft' pillow, and the one underneath it you assume is also 'Soft', and throw them both onto the armchair.

You slide the wardrobe door and find a row of coat hangers; an ironing board and iron and a dry-cleaning bag. On the floor you find a pair of complimentary white slippers encased in plastic. You walk over to the work desk where you find a box of chocolates with cellophane wrapping, a big bow, and a little gift card: 'Dear Dr de Kline', it reads, 'Welcome back to our hotel. If there is anything we can do to make your stay more ... comfortable ... enjoyable ...' the words trail off each other before the signature of someone in Management. Also on the desk you find an angle-poise lamp; a Yellow Pages; a writing pad and three biros with the logo and name of the hotel printed down one side, and an internet connection cord hanging out of the wall.

The mites

You step inside the bathroom where you find a large octagonal shaped spa bath; a variety of different sized towels, and packets of oatmeal soap. It's when you take the soaps out of their packaging, that the mites start to appear ...

It started with the posters in the Government Department urging you to wash your hands. Then after you'd interviewed the first clients, you returned to the NGO agency where their case manager worked. He threw you a bottle of anti-scabies cream.

'Lather your hands well', he said, 'they're highly contagious'.

You did as instructed. You put a generous portion of cream on your fingers, rubbed them together, then massaged the cream into your palms and fingers.

The case manager gestured towards the VCR on the wall where there was a static picture of an over-sized scabies mite and an infected wrist, dotted in scars, with a rolling caption beneath: 'You can also use alcohol hand gel to clean your hands'.

Later, back in the foyer of your hotel, you typed 'scabies' into the search engine. You discovered that it was derived from the Latin word for scratch – *scabere* – and that it was a contagious skin infection caught by close contact with someone with scabies.

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You also researched the treatments:

Tea-tree oil
Neem oil
Lavender oil
Sulfur creams
Permethrin
Antihistamines
Lice soaps
Lice shampoos

and the parts of the body where you applied the cream:

Pay particular attention to the
elbows,
breasts,
genitals,
hands,
feet (including under the toe nails).

I start to run the spa bath, pouring in capfuls of Clarins bath wash, and watching the foam rising. Before getting into the bath, I douse my body with the anti-scabies cream I picked up from the Pharmacy in the hotel. I wash my hands with the oatmeal soap and then saturate them both with the anti-scabies treatment. I light a couple of scented candles and turn off the main light. I lie back in the bath propping my head against a head-rest.

I close my eyes.

The mites are crawling up my limbs.

I try to rest.

I can feel them in the folds of my elbows, the palms of my hands.

I attempt, even, to meditate.

But they're coating my body with an uncomfortable thin tan where segments of burnt flesh peel off.

All I can feel, all I can see, all I can smell – *do scabies even have a smell?* – are the mites. Suddenly I'm the leading star – awake, alive – in a 70s disaster movie called Scabies. Random entities, alien creatures infesting my limbs, my torso, my flesh, eating into bodymindsoul.

The Mini Bar

After the bath, you open up the Mini Bar and scan the items: I *need* a drink. Crown Lager (2 bottles), Hahn Light (2 bottles), Jacob's Creek, Lindeman's Reserve Sparkling Wine, Coke (2 cans), Zero (2 cans), Sprite, Bottled Water, Peanut M&Ms, Snickers bar, Pringles, Salted Cashews ... the regular stuff. You pull out a Crownie and search around for a bottle opener in the cupboard. You locate one only to remember it's a twist-top. Off with the bottle top. Into the bin. The lager goes down well. Cold. Smooth. Soothing even ...

On the plane on the way up here you were reading an article about the world's strangest mini bar items. At the Trump International in Chicago you can pick up a Swarovski crystal adorned water bottle known as Bling H2O. In a Playboy owned hotel in LA there's Alexander Wang designed condoms. The Mondrian in LA stocks Alice in Wonderland hand mirrors with shatter-proof glass. In a New Orleans hotel the mini bar offers voodoo love dolls. Then there's a super tall hotel in China where you can get oxygen canisters just in case you get altitude sickness. But this isn't Chicago, LA, New Orleans or China. This is a hotel in a coastal Australian Town with a mini bar stocking The Regular Stuff. No crystal water bottles. No designer condoms. No voodoo dolls. Not even any oxygen just-in-case.

You take another sip of the lager, and another. You pull back the blinds, open the screen door, and stand out on the balcony. The first thing you see when you look out is Central Park where all the local parkies congregate. There's a small crowd there now, a bit of partying, but it seems pretty subdued. You look at the crowd again, trying to see if you recognize any of the people you spoke to today, but you're too far away to get a good look. You're reminded of the Barthes paper you read as an undergrad, 'The writer on holiday' (Barthes 1972). Even in your down-time, in holiday mode, you can't turn the 'researcher' button off. As the ABC news theme music comes on, you glance back at your hotel room. Suddenly it strikes you, somewhat uneasily, somewhat guiltily, that if it weren't for those people down there in the park, you wouldn't be up here in this hotel. You look down at the streets to a string of cafés and restaurants with neon lights flashing out their names. You see a country style hotel with a lot of people milling out the front. There's a couple of young blokes holding one of their mates up, arms on either side of him while he flails about: Students on a pub crawl? Army blokes on the piss? *Do the cops move them on too?* Across the road, in the not too far distance, you can see a harbourside

walkway shared by a steady flow of cyclists and joggers, a chain of out-door eating establishments trailing along the foreshore, and a string of boats in the harbor with the sky splashed across them.

The Restaurant

You find a restaurant, not too far from the hotel, but one which appears to have atmosphere, ambience, a good view, and Peroni on tap. Normally in these parts it's XXXX or VB. Not that you're a beer snob. Well, admit it – they've both got Bogan tags. And you? Just come clean. The housekeeper's cheat sheet even has you listed as Management. Management – *you*? Instead, there you are, sitting at the restaurant – a glass of Cloudy Bay in your hand – pondering an espresso and writing up your Field Notes. You're in the middle of writing up your schedule for tomorrow when a pair of heavily intoxicated men approach the diners at the next table, asking them for a fag. You wonder if these two men are parkies and whether you'll be interviewing them on this trip.

The Park

You drive to another park. And another. You drive out to the Diversionary Centre but the man you're looking for is not there. He just got the bus back into town. You drive to the squat. It's empty again. The guy who's been hanging out at the squat for the last few weeks is nowhere to be seen. Or he's doing a good job of hiding. It's 11am now and you haven't done an interview yet. You're on your way back to the agency when the case worker remembers another place to try: try the cemetery park at the back of the Industrial Estate. As you drive up you see two groups of people; one group are seated in the grass in a circle beneath a large hanging tree; the other group are milling around a parked Ambulance where a woman gestures towards another woman: *she's the one*. The case worker drives into the park, stops the car, winds down the window to chat with the Ambo. Nothing too serious, he says.

You tell the couple a little bit about the research. You mention the University you work at and the Government Department that commissioned the work. You tell them about the \$40 Coles/Myer voucher, the 'incentive', and they both agree to do the interview. Before you hand the voucher over, the case worker pulls out a big Texta and draws a line through the word 'Liquorland' on the back. *Is that ethical you wonder?*

The clients.

They didn't really want to talk to you.

Everybody Knows That.

They nodded. Smiled.

On the consent forms they ticked the boxes that applied; marked an X for their name and a signature you couldn't read.

You scribbled down the odd word or two that they said in response to your questions.

You note that none of the clients make eye contact with you until the very end of the interview when you hand over the voucher.

The case-worker leads you out of the park and into the air-con SUV.

At the end of every day, write up your field notes. Return to The University. Massage the interview transcripts and field-notes into a workable document using the site in question as a case study, fully theorized and substantiated with the latest literature from the field. Send the report to the relevant Government Department for 'approval'. Collaborate with colleagues to produce refereed conference proceedings and journal articles based on the research.

Conclusion

You lie down on the bed and start scribbling it all down:

The posters in the offices. The mites. The hand washing. The squat. The plastic pillows made from the inner balloons of wine flasks. The discarded items now conceptualized as 'found objects'. The four star hotel room. The restaurant. The park. The heat. The clients marking a big X on your dotted line.

You move them around – hotels, squats, parks, people, posters, restaurants, pillows made from wine casks.

She writes in her notebook: Utopia. No place. Good place. *No good place? Good no place?*

What would it look like? Where would the research go?

Whilst our unit may have secured a contract to undertake an 'independent' evaluation, there are definite constraints on what can actually be *seen* and *felt*. Presenting the indigestible 'for public consumption' would mean that the unseen and unsayable aspects of our research, and research processes, would be openly – and critically – theorized, which would take the existing literature on a new and different direction. A direction which acknowledged the contingent nature of the research process and simultaneously challenged it. Likewise, reflections on the clients' experiences of homelessness would not only be utilized in the 'Outcomes' section of the report, in a quantifiable 'before and after' type table. Rather, a vividly detailed description of place, and in particular the places where researchers and clients come into each others' presence (for work, but also out of hours), would permeate the whole report in an evocative and provocative manner. This is not the same as 'giving the clients a voice'. It is about explicitly demonstrating the very tangible and material ways in which homelessness impacts on people's bodies, their lives, their beings: *every breath they take*.

Endnotes

1. There are housing and homelessness scholars who have argued that research does not often influence policy or 'make a difference' (for example, Jones & Seelig 2005).
2. Although these people are often categorized as homeless, the term 'parkie' is used by Indigenous itinerant people who prefer to refer to themselves with labels such as parkies, long grassers or river campers (Memcott 2002).

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