



The researcher as unreliable narrator: writing sociological crime fiction as a research method

Phil Crockett Thomas

To cite this article: Phil Crockett Thomas (2022): The researcher as unreliable narrator: writing sociological crime fiction as a research method, Law and Humanities, DOI: [10.1080/17521483.2022.2123618](https://doi.org/10.1080/17521483.2022.2123618)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17521483.2022.2123618>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 07 Oct 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 175



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

The researcher as unreliable narrator: writing sociological crime fiction as a research method

Phil Crockett Thomas

The Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

ABSTRACT

Whilst works of art, including fiction, are well established as legitimate objects of sociological analysis, and the narratives crafted by the subjects of social research are widely understood to be meaningful, the use of creative writing as a methodology is still quite novel within law and the social sciences. In this article, I seek to demonstrate how the practice and process of creating fiction can extend the aesthetic, affective, and ontological possibilities of social research. Further, I argue that it offers a model for working ethically and creatively with others within a poststructuralist theoretical framework. I will do this by reflecting on the creation of a series of sociological crime fictions, written between 2015 and 2017. I discuss how this approach developed in response to concerns about working ethically with people who had experienced criminalization and stigma, drawing on Carolyn Steedman's concept of 'enforced narratives'. I then survey some contemporary trends in sociological fiction, and earlier feminist experimental approaches to writing research, which have inspired my approach. Using one of my own works of sociological crime fiction as an example, I demonstrate how these works are composed, drawing on a conceptualization of research as a process of 'translation' as developed within actor-network theory. I hope that the practice of working carefully with people with experience of the justice system to make experimental fiction, might help us reimagine and re-present complex processes of crime and punishment, in a form that can travel beyond social science audiences and enrich the practice of law.

KEYWORDS Enforced narrative; affect; sociological crime fiction; translation; actor-network theory

Introduction: making things up or making things strange?

Whilst works of art, including fiction, are well established as legitimate objects of sociological analysis, and the narratives crafted by the subjects of social research are widely understood to be meaningful, the use of creative writing as a methodology is still quite novel within law and the social sciences. In this article, I seek to demonstrate how the practice and process

CONTACT Phil Crockett Thomas  phil.crocketthomas@stir.ac.uk

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

of creating fiction can extend the aesthetic, affective,¹ and ontological possibilities of social research. Further, I argue that it offers a model for working ethically and creatively with others within a poststructuralist theoretical framework. I will do this by reflecting on the creation of a series of sociological crime fictions, written between 2015 and 2017.² I discuss how this approach developed in response to concerns about working ethically with people who had experienced criminalization and stigma, drawing on Carolyn Steedman's concept of 'enforced narratives'.³ I then survey some contemporary trends in sociological fiction, and earlier feminist experimental approaches to writing research, which have inspired my approach. Using one of my own works of sociological crime fiction as an example, I demonstrate how these works are composed, drawing on a conceptualization of research as a process of 'translation' as developed within actor-network theory.⁴ I hope that the practice of working carefully with people with experience of the justice system to make experimental fiction, might help us reimagine and re-present complex processes of crime and punishment, in a form that can travel beyond social science audiences and enrich the practice of law.

Akin to other research methods grounded in creative practice, writing fiction foregrounds a process of invention and imagination (making things up) which troubles familiar scientific claims to objectivity, and raises questions about what constitutes adequate knowledge. For example, fiction tends to start in the middle of the action, which makes its narrative framing more apparent than in standard social science texts. As such, readers of fiction begin without the expectation that the narrative will start with the relation of a 'complete' set of facts, or a posed question. Characters are conveyed through different narrative voices, reminding the reader that these characters only have partial knowledge of their situation, and further, that behind the story there is a writer at work. Fiction explicitly aims to affect its readers, in ways that might make some researchers uncomfortable. It excites others, for example in some sociologists' praise for the HBO

¹Throughout this article, I use 'affect' in an imprecise sense to relate to both named emotions and unnamed sensations. As Ann Cvetkovich summarises, technically affect 'signals precognitive sensory experience and relations to surroundings' whereas emotion signals 'cultural constructs and conscious processes that emerge from them, such as anger, fear, or joy' *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Duke University Press 2012) 4.

²These stories and poems are published as the collection *Crime Series* (2020) and available open access at <<https://crowdedmouth.wordpress.com/fictionpoetryplays/crimeseries/>> accessed 25 August 2022.

³Carolyn Steedman, 'Enforced Narratives: Stories of Another Self' in Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield (eds), *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods* (Routledge 2000).

⁴The use of 'translation' within actor-network theory originated from Michel Callon's engagement with the concept as it appears in the transdisciplinary philosophy of Michel Serres. See Michel Callon, 'Struggles and Negotiations to Define What Is Problematic and What Is Not: The Sociology of Translation' in Karin D Knorr, Roger G Krohn and Richard Whitley (eds), *The Social Process of Scientific Investigation* (D Reidel 1981). It has been extensively theorised in the work of Callon, Bruno Latour, John Law and their collaborators since the 1980s. John Law characterises ANT as 'empirical stories about processes of translation' 'Notes on the Theory of the Actor-Network: Ordering, Strategy, and Heterogeneity' (1992) 5 *Systems Practice* 379, 386.

television show *The Wire* as ‘a form of “social science-fiction” that takes the materials from good journalism and the social sciences and presents it in a compelling fictional form’.⁵ Within the discipline of law, debate and scholarship on the relationship between law and literature or law *as* literature has been accumulating since the late 1970s with the publication of influential texts such as James Boyd White’s *The Legal Imagination*, *Law’s Empire* by Ronald Dworkin, and Richard Posner’s *Law and Literature*.⁶ For Boyd White, a key motivation for his intervention was concern about the potential dehumanization of legal pedagogy and training. He proposed that the study of literature be incorporated into a law education because of its potential to bring the reader ‘to the edge of language’ and expose them to ‘both a multiplicity of voices and the self that can hear them’.⁷ Literature thus invites intensities of reflection, ambiguity, contradiction and doubt which might ordinarily be lacking within legal interpretation. Similarly, Dworkin saw legal judgement as a ‘creative, not reproductive operation’.⁸ As such, he claimed law itself was a ‘story in progress, one that is in the midst of writing itself, thanks to the successive interventions of its interpreters, always looking for the best possible response to a given case’.⁹ Maintaining awareness of the creative act of legal interpretation can help social science scholars like myself treat law as an active character within sociological crime fiction, rather than a hard edge to this space of play. In terms of traffic in the other direction, these scholars argued that literature relies on law for material, providing frameworks and limits that are explored by the ‘reader-judge ... who takes facts into account, and who considers them not only with regard to the law, but also with regard to the idea that there is a ‘just’; with regard to his individual conception of justice.’¹⁰ This account of the animating role of law in literature is reflected in the stories I have written, particularly in dramatizing blind spots within law and criminal justice (in *Lodger*), the afterlife of punishment (see *Rank Outsider*), and ‘public feelings’¹¹ about crime and punishment (for example, *You Will Have Your Day in Court*).¹²

⁵Ruth Penfold-Mounce, David Beer and Roger Burrows, ‘The Wire as Social Science-Fiction?’ (2011) 45 *Sociology* 152, 156.

⁶James Boyd White, *The Legal Imagination* (University of Chicago Press 1985); Ronald Dworkin, *Law’s Empire* (Belknap Press 1986); Richard A Posner, *Law and Literature: A Misunderstood Relation* (Harvard University Press 1988).

⁷Boyd White (n 6) 44; David Gurnham and others, ‘Forty-Five Years of Law and Literature: Reflections on James Boyd White’s the Legal Imagination and Its Impact on Law and Humanities Scholarship’ (2019) 13 *Law and Humanities* 95, 107.

⁸Christian Biet and Lissa Lincoln, ‘Introduction: Law and Literature’ (2011) 5 *Law and Humanities* vii, vii.

⁹*ibid* viii.

¹⁰Christian Biet, ‘Law, Literature, Theatre: The Fiction of Common Judgement’ (2011) 5 *Law and Humanities* 281, 287.

¹¹Cvetkovich (n 1).

¹²Phil Crockett Thomas, ‘Writing Sociological Crime Fiction: You Will Have Your Day in Court’ (2020) 6 *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal* 218.

As a sociologist working primarily on questions of crime and punishment, I have been keen to explore what affects and understanding a work of researched fiction might produce about public fears about crime, processes of criminalization, or homecoming after prison, that are different from more standard forms of sociological presentation. According to the early twentieth-century literary theorist Victor Shklovskii, art has a capacity to ‘enstrate’¹³ the familiar. Enstrangement shows a familiar object or concept to be unnatural and invented by manipulating it in a way that makes its audience see it afresh and unfamiliarly. To make strange is explicitly to interfere with the object of interest: the transformer’s fingerprints are left all over it. My argument then, is that rather than making things up, the value of creative approaches to research lies in this potential to make things strange and help us see differently.

Sociological crime fiction takes ‘crime’ as the concept to make strange, and explores and critiques reductive conceptions and representations of crime through writing crime differently. The potential of taking a creative approach to this research was first suggested by my doctoral experiences undertaking empirical research with people (including ex-prisoners, a policeman and a private investigator) with whom I co-produced differing and conflictual versions of ‘crime’. Rather than interpreting these research encounters as providing multiple perspectives on a singular object (crime), I argued that crime itself is a multiplicity. In response, I produced short stories, poems, collages, and films, which utilized the affordances of each medium in attempting to dramatize the ontological instability of crime in different ways. Subsequent projects include *We Who Are About To ...* (2017): an open-ended collaborative work of ‘speculative fiction’¹⁴ reflecting on the first workshop of an action-research project about re/integration after punishment, and *Stir* (2020), a collection of poetry based on undertaking ethnographic research in Scottish prisons.¹⁵ My development of this approach reflects a broader intellectual trend that moves beyond epistemological questions of adequate knowledge and accurate

¹³‘Ostraniene’ or ‘enstrangement’ was coined by the literary theorist Viktor Shklovskii in his essay ‘Art as Device/ Technique’. In this essay, he argues that our lives and perception of the world are dulled by routine to the point in which we no longer actively ‘see’ anything, but merely passively recognise things as they fit within our formulas and preconceptions. In his view, the purpose of art is, via novel or surprising presentations, to make familiar things strange and ‘to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition’. Viktor Shklovskii, ‘Art as Device/ Technique’ in Benjamin Sher (tr), *Theory of Prose* (Dalkey Archive Press 1990) 5–6.

¹⁴‘Speculative fiction’ is an umbrella category containing genres of non-mimetic fiction including science fiction, fantasy, and horror.

¹⁵*We Who Are About To ...* (2017) is open access and available at <www.voxliminis.co.uk/media/we-who-are-about-to/>. *Stir* (2020) is open access and available at <<https://crowdedmouth.wordpress.com/fictionpoetryplays/stir/>>. Both were created as part of my work on the Distant Voices project (2017–2021), funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ref: ES/P002536/1). For a discussion of *Stir* see Phil Crockett Thomas, ‘*Stir*: Poetic Field Works from the Distant Voices Project’ (2022) 18 *Crime, Media, Culture* 40.

representation, into what Annemarie Mol calls: 'ontological politics': a question of which realities we want to help produce through our research practice.¹⁶ The intellectual tendency of the 'ontological turn' draws on past and present poststructuralist, feminist, postcolonial and decolonial projects which deconstruct or decentre discourses of disinterested knowledge production, foregrounding the performativity of our methods of knowing and telling.

A crucial part of the research for this sociological crime fiction, came through my involvement with the Open Book group: a higher-education access programme for people who faced barriers to education including prior experience of state sanctions and punishment. I started working with the Goldsmiths, University of London branch of the Open Book group in 2014, initially joining their weekly creative writing class as a participant. Here I became aware of the extent to which confessions, self-narrativizing and storytelling are part of what Foucault called 'infamous' lives.¹⁷ I was struck by how group members' experiences of periodic interviews with parole officers, forensic psychiatrists, police, social and key workers all functioned as spaces for high-stakes performances of passage or transformations (for example, from being classed 'a danger to society' to contrition, redemption and reintegration). One research participant, who could not remember a time in which social services was not a part of his life, half-joked that he could tell me the story of his life through such interviews. We could employ the historian Carolyn Steedman's concept of 'enforced narratives' to understand these performative biographical narratives. These are the clichéd narrative forms of the life stories demanded by the state from poor and marginalized people in exchange for aid, since at least the seventeenth century and the development of the administrative state. Steedman argues that we should interpret these narratives as evidencing a 'history of expectations, orders and instructions rather than one of urges and desires'.¹⁸ This is not to suggest that the process of making such accounts is always devoid of personal gratification or utility for the teller. Having a model through which to articulate one's experience might form the basis of resistance and political action, as much as it can act to trap oneself in a particular narrative.¹⁹ However, I believe that this historical contextual framing is absolutely vital to any contemporary attempt to analyse the accounts of self, made by those who have already been repeatedly produced as criminal or socially deviant through such narrative practices. This is not to imply that people

¹⁶Annemarie Mol, 'Ontological Politics. A Word and Some Questions' (1999) 47 *The Sociological Review* 74.

¹⁷Michel Foucault, 'The Lives of Infamous Men' in James D Faubion (ed), Robert Hurley (tr), *Power* (Penguin 2002) 157.

¹⁸Steedman (n 3) 28.

¹⁹ibid.

who are not socially marginalized are free to craft their narratives without social pressures, but to argue that the stakes and rewards are different and we need to remember this.²⁰ Thus, my approach employs a poststructuralist understanding of subjectivity, in working with people who might be particularly vulnerable to having their experiences dismissed akin what Gayatri Spivak termed ‘epistemic violence’.²¹ This is tricky: how might we work with ideas of ‘partial truths’²² while engaging ethically with people who are used to being treated as untruthful? How can we practice law and/ or scholarship in ways that do justice to this complexity?

Methodological reflections

Before I began to undertake the empirical research for this project, I had been sensitized to the unequal power relations inherent to traditional methods of social research, such as interviews, with concerns similar to those of many advocates of participatory and collaborative research. I thus started out with a democratic ideal of a research process that entailed inviting participants to become the researchers of their own lives and experiences. However, part of my attraction to Open Book as a project was that it focuses on participants’ futures and on developing their interests and skills, rather than on their past experiences. I was very conscious not to undermine this ethos by inviting people to reflect on traumatic experiences and hoped to find a way to disrupt the production of ‘enforced narratives’, or confessions that my project could be seen to invite. As there were a number of enthusiastic writers in the group, I proposed a writing exchange project that had the scope to turn into collaborative writing. After an interrogation about the exact nature of my research proposal and my political intentions, a few class members agreed to participate.

I regard the stage following as a misstep in part because the interviews developed from a sense that I didn’t know how to get the project going. Instead of ‘risking’ starting with sharing fiction, and thinking it would get us talking, give us material to work from, and help develop a ‘sociable method’,²³ I arranged one-to-one conversations with my participants – although perhaps a conversation where one participant has the information

²⁰Steedman argues that the ‘enforced narrative’ form runs in parallel to the development of elite autobiographies and their particular mode of performing the self, *ibid*.

²¹Gayatri Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (University of Illinois Press 1988).

²²James Clifford, ‘Introduction: Partial Truths’ in James Clifford and George E Marcus (eds), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography: A School of American Research Advanced Seminar* (University of California Press 1986).

²³Shamsar Sinha and Les Back, ‘Making Methods Sociable: Dialogue, Ethics and Authorship in Qualitative Research’ (2014) 14 *Qualitative Research* 473.

desired by the other, is more accurately termed an interview. Nevertheless, because I was keen to avoid a situation in which participants felt compelled to repeat 'their story' again, I took up the group's playful reflexivity – and conducted un-structured interviews *about* being interviewed by state actors.²⁴ There were to be no confessions – a condition that it was much easier for me to fulfil, not having undergone a lengthy conditioning to confess.

The collaborative writing project didn't happen as intended, firstly because I had underestimated the role of the writing class in providing a structure which made it possible for my participants to write. Enjoying participating in a creative writing class is not the same as having an ongoing practice of creative writing (as I have). I overestimated the effect of distancing that the performativity of the interview would have on participants. I also underestimated the estranging or paralyzing effect that receiving transcripts full of the hesitations, evasions, and contradictions that make up verbal conversations could have on my interviewees. It is important to remember that art does not have a monopoly on the power to make the familiar seem strange. I shared verbatim transcripts because I hoped that this would engender in the interviewees a sense of joint ownership and of being fairly represented. This I see now as a mistake. To do the 'making up' part of writing fiction, I think it is helpful to be able to create some distance between lived and recorded experience. This was obviously much easier for me to do as we were not talking about my life, and the stories were not entangled with memory. The transcripts acted to 'fix' my participants to the form and expression of those interviews, which were primarily a staging point that we had already surpassed in our subsequent interactions. More positively, I found that when they are more sociable in form, interviews can act to build relationships with the participants who would challenge and enrich my analysis, by helping to increase their confidence as a critical force. For example, exchanges within these interviews led me to invite members of the Open Book group to participate in a reading group on prison abolition in 2015, where we continued thinking about crime and punishment together. Through the process of undertaking this work, I have come to have more nuanced and realistic aspirations for collaborative research – which recognizes that people have different skills, situations and privileges which allow for different kinds of engagement and commitment. Collaboration is not *necessarily* evidenced by everybody undertaking the same practice, or by co-authorship, but by committing to a process of

²⁴I interviewed four members of the Open Book group in 2014. The interviews took place in public spaces around Goldsmiths, University of London as chosen by each interviewee, and lasted between one to two hours, coming to an end by mutual agreement.

ongoing negotiations over aims, and outcomes for a project and its participants. It also recognizes that, once shared, the narratives we have crafted might act in the world in ways that are beyond our control.²⁵ This foresight can help us think through the narrative choices we make while we are still in the process of writing.

Contemporary tendencies and feminist legacies

The growing appetite for 'social science-fiction' could be seen to demonstrate both disciplinary anxieties about the public influence, 'impact', and relevance of social research; and disciplinary enthusiasm about the affordances of creative research. Thus, Ashleigh Watson suggests the 'sociological novel' as a promising form for 'public sociology',²⁶ because public engagement and dialogue 'requires affective sociological narratives'.²⁷ Similarly, the sociologist and novelist Patricia Leavy works within the genre of 'chick-lit' as a way of trying to make her sociological novels accessible to her target audience, young American women.²⁸ Creating fiction as a research methodology has gained more mainstream acceptance within the humanities and social sciences in recent decades, although it is telling that most practitioners call it something other than fiction. For example, Kathleen Stewart has termed her work 'ethnographic creative non-fiction',²⁹ and Leavy a 'feminist academic novel'.³⁰ *The Sociological Review* has championed the development of 'sociological fiction' creating a dedicated online space for it edited by Ashleigh Watson, who also edits *So Fi*, a zine for sociological fiction and poetry. These terms signal that although it might 'pass' as fiction, the work is intended to be read as research, or *researched*. As Cate Watson notes, after the poststructuralist troubling of truth claims 'what is decisive is genre', a question of authorial 'declaration, which serves to orientate the reader providing a set of expectations, [and] carries with it certain responsibilities on the part of the author'.³¹ By calling the creative work I produce sociological crime fiction within a research context, I am doing the same work of genre signalling. For example, in this article, I have provided an explanatory 'paratext'³²

²⁵For a discussion of these issues in relation to collaborative song writing with prisoners see: Phil Crockett Thomas and others, 'Mediating Punishment? Prisoners' Songs as Relational "Problem-Solving" Devices' (2020) 24 *Law Text Culture* <<https://ro.uow.edu.au/ltc/vol24/iss1/7>>.

²⁶Michael Burawoy, '2004 ASA Presidential Address: For Public Sociology' (2005) 70 *American Sociological Review* 4.

²⁷Ashleigh Watson, 'Directions for Public Sociology: Novel Writing as a Creative Approach' (2016) 10 *Cultural Sociology* 431, 443.

²⁸Patricia Leavy, 'Fiction and the Feminist Academic Novel' (2012) 18 *Qualitative Inquiry* 516, 519.

²⁹Kathleen Stewart, 'Pockets' (2012) 9 *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 365, 365.

³⁰Leavy (n 28) 516.

³¹Cate Watson, 'Staking a Small Claim for Fictional Narratives in Social and Educational Research' (2011) 11 *Qualitative Research* 395, 396.

³²Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge University Press 1997).

for my fiction, which I would not do in a literary context. However, when situated in a literary context I would be happy to describe this work as fiction or possibly ‘faction’, in recognition that novelists and poets also often use research methods such as archival research, interviews and participant observation to develop their work.³³ There are many writers of fiction and poetry whose practice engages the ‘sociological imagination’³⁴ of their readers without terming it research. For example, poets like Muriel Rukeyser, and lawyer-poets like Charles Reznikoff and M. NourbeSe Philip have worked with the form of legal texts, fragmenting and reworking them to produce hugely affecting works that critique the machinations of justice.³⁵

Although it may seem novel within the academy, researchers using fiction as a method today are indebted to much earlier interventions. Early twentieth-century anthropologists, such as Zora Neale Hurston, and Margery Wolf, didn’t cleanly separate creative writing from critical writing and experimented with different forms.³⁶ At the time, this closeness to fiction was seen to endanger the young discipline’s claims to the status of a science, and their experimentation was marginalized. Their work was rediscovered and rehabilitated by a new wave of feminist scholars in the 1980s and 1990s.³⁷ Feminist scholars such as Donna Haraway, Patti Lather, and Laurel Richardson then did a great deal of fraught work to address the concerns of the social sciences regarding validity, evidence and rigour in the blurring of fact and fiction that takes place in research which takes on a more literary form. Many of these highly inventive practices came out of feminist and postcolonial critiques of knowledge production, and attempts to create a difference through a process of writing differently. For example, Haraway defined her pioneering work as a political ‘struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly.’³⁸ This was not a refusal of language, but a struggle for language as multiplicity rather than as indexicality. As Richardson states:

³³See for example the historical novels of Hilary Mantel, or Marlon James’s *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. That a novel is an outcome of a research process is sometimes performed by the text. For example, Laurent Binet’s *HHH* is simultaneously a thriller about the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich during World War II and a metacommentary on the author’s restaging of history.

³⁴C Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford University Press 2000).

³⁵M NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Wesleyan University Press 2008); Muriel Rukeyser, ‘The Book of the Dead (1938)’ in Adrienne Rich (ed), *Selected Poems* (Bloodaxe Books Ltd 2013); Charles Reznikoff, *Testimony* (Black Sparrow Press 2015).

³⁶Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Virago 2018); Margery Wolf, *A Thrice Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism, and Ethnographic Responsibility* (Stanford University Press 1992).

³⁷Ruth Behar, ‘Introduction: Out of Exile’ in Ruth Behar and Deborah A Gordon (eds), *Women Writing Culture* (University of California Press 1995).

³⁸Donna Haraway, ‘A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s’ in Linda J Nicholson (ed), *Feminism / Postmodernism* (Routledge 1990) 218.

In feminist writings of poets and social scientists, the position of the author is linked aesthetically, politically, emotionally, with those about whom they write. Knowledge is not appropriated and controlled, but shared; authors recognise a multiplicity of selves within themselves as well as interdependence with others, shadows and doubles.³⁹

Lather describes Richardson's work as exemplifying 'a disruptive excess which brings ethics and epistemology together in self-conscious partiality and embodied positionality and a tentativeness which leaves space for others to enter, for the joining of partial voices'.⁴⁰ In the context of her discussion of methodological validity, Lather suggests that Richardson's research generates an authority that comes from its performative excess: in "'go[ing] too far" with the politics of uncertainty'.⁴¹ On her transformation of an interview transcript into a poem made solely from her interviewee's words, Richardson claims that this 'poem displays how sociological authority is constructed, and problematises reliability, validity, and truth ... A poem as "findings" re-situates ideas of validity and reliability from "knowing" to "telling"'.⁴² Richardson produces a complicated account which performs the fragility of conceptualizing reality as multiple. Similarly, Saidiya Hartman combines archival and historical research with fiction in order to 'illuminate the contested character of history, narrative, event, and fact',⁴³ particularly concerning accounts of the lives of enslaved women. Hartman's practice of 'critical fabulation ... weaves present, past and future in ... narrating the time of slavery as our *present*'⁴⁴ rather than a reconciled past. Donna Haraway has more recently advocated a practice of 'speculative fabulation': the creation of 'stories in which multi-species players, who are enmeshed in partial and flawed translations across difference, redo ways of living and dying attuned to still possible finite flourishing, still possible recuperation'.⁴⁵ This is not a call to story a distant, unknown future, rather it 'requires learning to be truly present ... as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings'.⁴⁶ This approach emboldens us to craft stories of crime and justice with a materialist and post-humanist sensibility. Further, if law is akin to a literary practice as Dworkin and others have suggested, it is my hope that experimental writing practices such as these might engender new practices of law that embrace poststructuralist understandings of time, space and intersubjectivity.

³⁹Laurel Richardson, 'Poetics, Dramatics, and Transgressive Validity: The Case of the Skipped Line' (1993) 34 *The Sociological Quarterly* 695, 705.

⁴⁰Patti Lather, 'Fertile Obsession: Validity After Poststructuralism' (1993) 34 *Sociological Quarterly* 673, 683.

⁴¹*ibid.*

⁴²Richardson (n 39) 704.

⁴³Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts' (2008) 12 *Small Axe* 1, 12. Emphasis added.

⁴⁴*ibid* 11–12.

⁴⁵Donna J Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* (Duke University Press Books 2016) 10.

⁴⁶*ibid* 1.

As Patti Lather argued, ‘given the indeterminacies of language and the workings of power in the “will to know” we are all – researchers and researched – unreliable narrators’.⁴⁷ My work starts from the premise that far from being ‘experts in our own lives’ we cannot tell the truth about ourselves or our experiences, although the stories we tell are important. I am interested in how we might use creative methods that embrace uncertainty to undertake research that performs the partiality and provisionality of all knowledge claims, whilst working sensitively and collaboratively with people, particularly people who are socially marginalized and often over-researched. Popular culture is saturated with representations of crime and criminality, and John Braithwaite claims that criminology and fiction share the basic appeal of producing ‘narratives of lives that transgress’.⁴⁸ While not denying the excitement of representations of social transgression, my sociological crime fiction deliberately seeks to avoid producing sensationalist narratives of some lives as *essentially* transgressive or reifying the idea of the criminal ‘other’. I tend to resist the dramatic potential of crime, instead emphasizing its banality or social enmeshment in order to ask a broader question about social harm and justice. My stories attempt to situate criminalized acts within lives which are complex, multiple and not defined by those acts, although they may be significant. Consequently, these works may disappoint the seasoned reader of crime fiction.

What follows is my own work of sociological crime fiction entitled *Lodger* (2017) which – through a domestic drama – explores harm, fear, power, and the interplay of legal and research discourses.

Lodger

Last night I woke, wet with it, to find her standing over me. Not you, her. Over by our bed, *our* bed and she said, ‘she’s gone’, just like that, and made to touch me.

She’ll take this place when I’m gone, our place Sylv, and her not even blood. ‘Squatters rights’ I think she said, what does she take me for?

A dead man, nothing I do might surprise her.

She has the manner of someone who wouldn’t return your books. Sitting by me as schtum as a cat that’s completed its lick rounds of self-love. Her always eating slightly, mechanically, displaying silly trinkets she’s ‘discovered’ in the day. She: the lodger never asks to change the channel. Says she’s a sociologist, thinks herself quite the intellectual. I know she’s studying me, that I’m material;

⁴⁷Patti Lather, ‘How Research Can Be Made to Mean: Feminist Ethnography and the Limits of Representation’ in J Francisco Ibáñez-Carrasco and Erica R Meiners (eds), *Public Acts: Disruptive Readings on Making Curriculum Public* (Routledge 2004) 141.

⁴⁸John Braithwaite, ‘Foreword’ in Mary Bosworth and Carolyn Hoyle (eds), *What is Criminology?* (Oxford University Press 2011) viii.

white fish, food for thought. Spoilt brat. In my day you learnt a trade and minded your own business.

I could have been a great artist. She thinks she knows about art so I showed her my photographs.

Photography used to need more than a good eye, you needed to be a scientist too, 'little da vinci' is what my ma used to call me. She was sensitive, knew I had talent, persuaded dad to get me on the property ladder early.

The sociologist offered nothing much, only asked me,

'where did you take this one?' – a photograph of a toxic waste sign.

I say, 'no-one's ever seemed to want to buy it', she suggests I should try again, the market loves this kind of thing now,

'Banksy' she says. I nod and have no idea what she's talking about, I guess 'Bansky' is slang for money now. I think she is taking the Michael. She thinks of herself as an artist too, has had a few screenings, well, it's not what you know. Her art doesn't seem to have made her any 'Banksy' either.

Always at the same time, the school on the corner spits out its kids and they begin their torment. Lopsided lanky boys *pretend* to be walking home, but I see them fiddling with the gate, ruffling little messages into my hedge and pushing girls into the springing sticks. Palms flush against their flat chests. They draw symbols again and again, a looping or blocking script. I haven't worked out the pattern yet but I know they're marking this place out for some mischief. I stand with my fingers flexed above the 9, tap three times, sometimes I make contact. It's good to talk.

(When I'm sure they're gone I slip out to inspect their rubbish with my feet. Cigarettes, sweet wrappers, plastic things. Nothing conclusive but crucial to keep a proper record).

Oftentimes I only become aware that she's in the flat at some foreign sound, a boy she's smuggled in, or her stealing my grub from the fridge again. She sees with her hands, leaving the food at eye level to sour.

I remind the girl over *EastEnders* and Dot's dilemma, that I'm undecided about death. It's nice to know that it's an option but I probably won't get round to it. She'd presumably offer to help though – make a good story for her. I had a pal, Bob, whose wife loved to dance almost as much as mine loved to read; Sylv was always reading. Bob and Edna got into *Strictly Come Dancing* on the telly and decided they would start going to socials, like in the old times. It was there that merrily Edna had tripped and broken her neck. Bob went home and hung himself, his scruff stretched like smoothed out newspaper. *Why live?* And that's what she needs to understand, with her tray-baked head of correct opinions. To love, to love someone like my Sylvia, the heart can't hold any distractions.

When the bastards phone me up to ask about Sylv's money and what I want doing with it, like they do every day, every single day they make me tell them;

'my wife's dead, she's dead, gone – now leave me alone!' and they say a stiff sorry like I'm being rude, and then they call AGAIN the very next day, some other grasping voice. She looks at the floor so I can't see the pity in her leaking, shining eyes, she can't believe it's real, thinks I've lost it.

But it's true.

Always keep a knife for the lodgers, that's what my dad taught me, so they know what they are. Know where they stand in the household. Great man my father, local magistrate – Justice till he died.

Always make sure that the lodgers know you have a knife for them, that you know how to use it, that the police have better things to do than deal with such domestics, would give us a little talking to, and you would make your way snot stained and blundering back to your bedroom to sleep the nights over with a chair rammed under the doorknob. Oh yes and never put a lock on their door to discourage a sense of ownership.

It was Sylv who asked if we could stop taking lodgers,

'well we have another two properties after dad's death and wouldn't it be lovely to have our own space and to not be worried, peering at a stranger across the table, and maybe we could try for a baby you know use the space for a new room paint it up lemon, good for a boy or a girl?'

Baby came, all yellowed, ha ha I cried silently by his window.

There is a hotness when she is here, and in the corner of my eye like cataracts. She uses men like doorstops, never introduces us, we sit sharing what she imagines is my sense of disapproval, as if she invented sex.

She dresses like her Nanna did, all these girls do now, because they don't understand the fresh thickness of flesh, how the heat from young bodies reshapes old clothes. I've seen her eye-up Sylv's things too, her little Polish blouses and brocades as well as the nylon tea dresses.

She says, 'it's *such* a shame not to wear it,' as if it were for the sake of the clothes.

There's still some of her hair on the collar of the blue one with the off-white flowers. Not a curled keepsake wrapped in ribbon but just a pinch of the body's debris: stuff swept into corners and wiped out of eyes.

The lodger makes me watch *Strictly* on Saturday night. Assumes I will enjoy it because I'm an old fart, but we were never ones for dancing. Sylv loved to read. When I see Bruce Forsyth I think he must be hollow inside that suit. Glitter, drainpipe legs and a bobble head bouncing with old age and innuendo. Why's my Sylvia, Bob and Edna gone and him gurning and flattering into immortality.

None of that for me, for us. No winking at the band.

Personal practice and composition

I have explored questions of fear, violence, victimization and justice throughout my work but these themes are particularly strong in *Lodger*. The (unreliable) narrator is an elderly, fearful landlord. His rambling account temporally and thematically jumps without warning. He speaks lovingly of his dead wife and child, and bitterly of his young female lodger ('the sociologist'). However, his use of 'she' for both wife and lodger blurs his object of affection and/or disdain, a device which becomes useful as the narrative progresses and complicates. At first, the landlord appears to fit neatly within the familiar social categorization of the elderly as especially vulnerable to or fearful of crime. Similarly, the female lodger seems to fit a comparable categorization of vulnerability. The story aims to complexify these fearful characters, whose presumed vulnerability is often invoked in popular, political, and policy discourses in order to promote or justify more punitive approaches to the practice of justice.⁴⁹

The landlord seems isolated and infirm, apparently preyed upon by cold callers, school children ('juvenile delinquents') and his acquisitive lodger. He seems fearful of any element or character that possesses some outside agency, and spends his time detecting rituals and patterns of behaviour which give him a sense of control – such as monitoring children's littering and reporting their anti-social behaviour to the police. The lodger herself seems to both take advantage of his vulnerability but also to care for him. However, as the narrative progresses it takes on an aspect of horror as we come to understand that the landlord isn't simply a victim but also capable of physical and psychological violence towards this and/ or possibly earlier lodgers/ his wife. As readers, we never discover whether a violent course of action is something he has undertaken or simply a revenger's daydream. He revels in his knowledge of how to harm his tenant exactly within the blind spots of the U.K. justice system, one of which has traditionally been with the police's response to reports of domestic violence,⁵⁰ and another around the scant housing rights of lodgers.⁵¹ The landlord connects himself to powerful discourses about legal knowledge and justice, for example through his memory of his father a local magistrate and experience

⁴⁹For example, see the 'elderly lady with five bolts on her door or the woman terrified to walk home in the dark' in David Cameron, 'Crime and Justice Speech' (Centre for Social Justice, 22 October 2012) <www.gov.uk/government/speeches/crime-and-justice-speech> accessed 22 June 2020.

⁵⁰Amanda L Robinson, Gillian M Pinchevsky and Jennifer A Guthrie, 'Under the Radar: Policing Non-Violent Domestic Abuse in the US and UK' (2016) 40 *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice* 195; Harriet Agerholm, 'Police Failing to Attend One in Nine Domestic Violence Incidents, Figures Show' *The Independent* (10 December 2017) <www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/domestic-violence-abuse-police-reports-devon-cornwall-humberside-response-a8085146.html> accessed 11 June 2020.

⁵¹Citizens Advice, 'What Rights Do Lodgers Have?' (27 September 2019) <www.citizensadvice.org.uk/housing/renting-a-home/subletting-and-lodging/lodging/what-rights-do-lodgers-have/> accessed 11 June 2020.

as a lifelong landlord. Meanwhile, the lodger/sociologist implicitly connects herself to powerful discourses about research. The work encourages the reader to ponder: to what extent do these discourses inure us to, or insulate us from harm?

I use the term ‘composition’⁵² to describe the creative process and practice within my research because as an activity it spans the literary, sonic, and the visual. In my experience these things are deeply interconnected – for example, images flash up in my mind as I read or listen to a story. Composition also captures my aesthetic preference for weaving fragments together to create an impression, image or mood, rather than necessarily developing a linear narrative. My own sociological crime fiction draws on a collection of resources including ‘true crime’ stories, tweets, rumours, memoirs, archival texts and images, newspaper articles, and academic texts; ethnographic field notes, and interviews that I conducted and transcribed. Although these materials are different in kind, they contain information pertinent to my research questions and I treat them all as valid materials for compositional inclusion. In *Lodger* the characters and scenario are invented but draw on experiences of a violent and coercive live-in landlord and precarious accommodation as a lodger in the U.K. This personal experience of vulnerability is also structural and collective, and as such, this work of sociological crime fiction aspires to ‘handle public issues and private troubles in such a way as to incorporate both within the problems of social science’.⁵³

In terms of my general writing process, I often start by experimenting with a piece of data simply by charting repeated words and phrases, or by imagining a character who might be connected to it, or an alternative scenario in which it could play out. For example, another of the stories in this collection, *Grand Designs* was inspired by *viagère*: an arrangement within French property law which I felt had blackly comic dramatic potential.⁵⁴ Most of these initial experiments either fail to develop in the way I had first imagined, or something unexpected emerged and fragments are translated into different compositions. This is not unexpected because practice-research is normatively reflexive and iterative.

⁵²My use of composition here is different in meaning from the use of composition within Deleuze and Guattari’s exploration of the ‘plane of composition’ also known as the plane of immanence or consistency: see especially Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Brian Massumi tr, Continuum 2004) 256–341. Similarly, I am not seeking to connect my project to Latour’s ‘compositionist manifesto’ Bruno Latour, ‘An Attempt at a “Compositionist Manifesto”’ (2010) 41 *New Literary History* 471.

⁵³Mills (n 34) 129.

⁵⁴*Viager* is an act of French property law that allows elderly homeowners to sell their house whilst retaining the right to use and live in it until their death. The new owners must pay a monthly sum (*rente viagère*) to the previous owner based on the elderly house-seller’s life expectancy. *Grand Designs* is available to read at: <https://www.thesociologicalreview.com/grand-designs/>.

Translation and actor–network theory

Research necessarily involves transformations and the altering of forms, and so I have found it helpful to think about research as a process of translation. To do this I have drawn on conceptualizations of ‘translation’ within actor–network theory. Here, translation figures as a verb, an active process undertaken by an actor or actors, rather than as a fixed output. It is important to point out that translation is not conceptualized as a special action – it is inherent to all acts of representation. Drawing on Michel Callon’s description of translation as an act of ‘displacement’ in which the researcher makes herself a ‘spokesperson’ for the object of her enquiry in her act of transforming it into a different form,⁵⁵ Michael Guggenheim writes that ‘the notion of translation displaces the notion of objectivity understood as non-interference, because it always assumes interference and acknowledges that the researcher has a practical involvement in this transformation with her own body and various media technologies’.⁵⁶ As such, the researcher’s translations are an interested act of interference and interpretation with ethical and ontological implications. To make oneself a spokesperson is to claim the right to speak for others, but only from one’s limited vantage point. I employ the term ‘translation’ in describing my approach rather than the related concept of transformation, because of the suggestion that in a translation, the translator works to retain something of the sense of the previous iteration: ‘*something* at least is kept constant’.⁵⁷ But how is this selection made and how is this work done? A crucial aspect of the conceptualization of translation is the gap: the difference between versions of content. My decisions about what to translate and what to lose through cutting, or disguise through transformation, are based partly on my narrative and aesthetic preferences, and partly on ethical reasoning about the impact of my compositions on the lives of the people who gave me information. In such instances, a gap between two points in a chain of translations is only visible to myself and the research participant.

I have found that the process of translation involved in the creation of characters from multiple accounts and events has not only functioned to anonymize, pseudo-anonymize or disguise interview and ethnographic material but also to help me to think about data in ways that were not overdetermined by its sources. However, in instances where I have drawn heavily on someone else’s account to make a work I have shared it with them, discussed it, and sought their consent. This is a part of my attempt to employ a method that

⁵⁵ Michel Callon, ‘Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St Brieuc Bay’ (1984) 32 *The Sociological Review* 196, 203.

⁵⁶ Michael Guggenheim, ‘The Media of Sociology: Tight or Loose Translations?’ (2015) 66 *The British Journal of Sociology* 345, 352.

⁵⁷ Bruno Latour, ‘The More Manipulations, the Better ...’ in Cateljine Coopmans and others (eds), *Representation in Scientific Practice Revisited* (MIT Press 2014) 158.

exposes the research and researcher to more scrutiny, challenge and input from research participants during the process. It also acts as a 'creative constraint' to know that they will be reading what you've written and need to be satisfied with what you've done. It can be difficult to manage research participants' expectations that you will tell their story faithfully. There has to be a conversation about how you can co-produce empirical research without a commitment to a simple realism or single story. Avery Gordon and Stephen Pfohl remind us that, aside from explicitly terming an intellectual approach 'realist', there is a more fundamental commitment to realism in both positivist and humanist approaches to theorizing, as both view 'social facts' as independent of the researcher's practice. In their view, positivists locate these social facts in terms of abstract and objective data that are quantifiable and classifiable, whereas humanists see the subjective meaning-making of researchers and participants as factual starting points of qualitative theoretical work.⁵⁸

A writer of sociological crime fiction should consciously make stylistic decisions about each piece of work based on what they want it to produce, or *do* to the audience: how they want it to affect and influence those who come into contact with it. In each of my finished works the 'original' data I select to work with is treated differently depending on the kind of impression I am trying to make. For example, I sometimes 'quote' very directly, whereas at other times I either absorb or translate material into something else. The appearance of authenticity can be a useful tool for initially engaging an audience, and as such I sometimes employ a style which is associated with some tropes of authentic presence, be it the confessional, stream of consciousness, academic footnotes, quotation marks and so on. However, I still aim to unsettle any durable perception of authenticity. For example, in *Lodger*, the narrative style is a confiding and unsettling 'stream of consciousness' which brings the reader inside the landlord's moral code. However, a reader might fairly wonder whether the landlord the true narrator of this tale? They may have noticed that whilst the perspective of the lodger/sociologist is inaccessible to the reader other than through the landlord's suspicious eyes, she gets to make a joke at his expense ('I guess "Banksy" is slang for money now'), and occupies a more complicated role in the narrative than solely that of his victim. Further, wasn't this story written by a sociologist? The refusal to let the lodger/sociologist character 'speak', resists providing an authoritative voice to make sense of the scenario for the reader. It is also a deliberate interpolation of the researchers in the audience and intended to make such readers uncomfortable.

It is important to state that in writing this fiction I neither claim to represent other people's experiences with fidelity, or to 'speak for' others. I am not

⁵⁸Avery Gordon and Stephen Pfohl, 'Criminological Displacements: A Sociological Deconstruction' (1986) 33 *Social Problems* 94, 96–97.

dismissing projects which aim to do this; however, I have tried to heed Sara Ahmed's warning that there is danger in the construction of sociological narratives in which 'we' academics play out our fantasies of compassion, benevolence, risk, danger, excitement, and imagine that we might come to take the place of the 'other'. She cautions that 'speaking for the other ... is premised on fantasies of absolute proximity and absolute distance'.⁵⁹ Not claiming to speak for my research participants does not extricate me from the subtler ethical problem of how as researchers we might be able to consume the pain of others as a resource for the self. Steedman questions us whether 'the possession of a terrible tale, a story of suffering, [is] *desired*, perhaps even envied, as a component of the other self'.⁶⁰ As a sociologist and writer who needs to learn from others' experiences to do their work, it is hard to disregard this uncomfortable accusation. Similarly, Beverley Skeggs critiques the implicit class dynamics of research, as middle and upper-class researchers often resource themselves through reflecting on knowledge gained via accessing the bodies and voices of the working class and socially marginalized.⁶¹ My research participants were well-aware of these dynamics, and I interpreted evasions, retractions, and silence on the part of my participants as forms of *solution* to the problem of being researched. A lack of trust in researchers, and suspicion that we might share information with other actors such as psychiatrists and police, is both reasonable and sensible on the part of participants in research. In *Lodger* I tried to capture this dynamic in the narrator's suspicion that he is being studied by his lodger (the 'sociologist'): 'I know she's studying me, that I'm material, white fish, food for thought'. Ultimately, he refuses to give up all his stories to her, and is happier to remain a mystery, to slip away from her offer of immortality.

Conclusion

This article has argued for the benefits of creating fiction as social research, and demonstrated how I have used this approach to produce new effects and affects, to attempt to better capture the complex ontology of crime, and legal processes of punishment. At the start of this article, I referred to Mol's 'ontological politics' which claim that 'reality does not precede the mundane practices in which we interact with it, but is rather shaped within these practices'.⁶² Reflecting this in our work means researchers need to conceptualize the politics of their practice differently. We must not imagine that we employ research methods that neutrally reveal the reality of states of

⁵⁹Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (Routledge 2000) 166.

⁶⁰Steedman (n 3) 36.

⁶¹Beverley Skeggs, 'Techniques for Telling the Reflexive Self' in Tim May (ed), *Qualitative Research in Action* (Sage 2002) 361.

⁶²Mol (n 16) 75.

affairs in the world. Echoing earlier feminist interventions, John Law and John Urry argue researchers should ‘think about the worlds [they] want to *help* to make’.⁶³ Their use of ‘help’ here recognizes that the social sciences are relational and interactive in their social enactments, i.e. messily entangled with, and often subservient to, other social productions.⁶⁴ So, what can sociological crime fiction help to do and what might be the limitations of this approach, particularly considering the law?

Writing sociological crime fiction is a craft, and I certainly would not want to suggest that this method is, or should be, for everyone. It is not intended as a replacement for other kinds of sociological writing, but rather as an extension of available forms. It is not a panacea for the problems of empirical research, but offers possibilities for ways of working sensitively, creatively and collaboratively with people. However, this is time consuming and painstaking work, and is most appropriate for negotiated projects with only a few research participants, and for projects where primary data gathering is heavily supplemented by other resources. I wrote earlier of the power of creative methods to make things strange. However, if we researchers use the affordances of fiction simply to retell socially acceptable ‘enforced narratives’, or familiar tales of criminal deviance, we might want to ask ourselves: why we are doing this work, and what worlds are we helping to make? With such work, there is a danger that the only thing we’re ‘estranging’ is a conservative notion of what constitutes research, leaving the concept of justice untroubled. As Deleuze commented, ‘creating has always been something different from communicating’.⁶⁵ The writer of sociological crime fiction undertakes empirical work whilst maintaining a sense of crime as a multiplicity.⁶⁶ Reflectively making choices about the practices of translation that one employs *as* we undertake our work reminds the researcher of her limited vantage point, and at the same time, of her central role in creating her research compositions. It reminds her that research is world-building and law-building within a context beyond her control.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Arts and Humanities Research Council [grant number 1369004] and Economic and Social Research Council [grant number ES/P002536/1].

⁶³John Law and John Urry, ‘Enacting the Social’ (2004) 33 *Economy and Society* 390, 319.

⁶⁴*ibid* 392.

⁶⁵Gilles Deleuze, ‘Control and Becoming’ in *Negotiations, 1972–1990* (Columbia University Press 1995) 175.

⁶⁶Phil Crockett Thomas, ‘Crime as an Assemblage’ (2020) 12 *The Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Criminology* 68.