Victoria Foster
Edge Hill University, UK

The Return of the Surreal: Towards a Poetic and Playful Sociology

Abstract   This article argues that the time is ripe to reacquaint sociology and surrealism. Taking inspiration from surrealism's emphasis on making the ordinary strange through bizarre, lively and sometimes haunting methods might result in a more poetic and playful sociology. The article looks at how this might be applied in practice through drawing on a variety of examples of social research that share some of the tenets of surrealism, not least the latter's focus on social justice. This enables discussion of a number of methodological concerns stemming from feminist and post-structuralist thought, including the troubling of narrative coherency and the notion of "voice." Infusing sociology with "a surrealist spirit" requires opening up and moving away from rationality in ways that allow for the exploration of contradictions, irreverence, humor, and paradox.

The surrealist movement began in the 1920s in Paris, quickly spreading throughout Europe and Latin America, unleashing a whirlwind of desire, hysteria, dreams, games, radical poetry, mystery, and chance encounters that rocked the good taste and rational outlook of the establishment. Refusing to take life at face value, not least because this would mean accepting social and political norms, the movement has produced a vast range of influential art, poetry, literature, and performance that has posed a challenge to the status quo. Known for its strange, dream-like juxtapositions, and visual non sequiturs, early surrealism was influenced by psychoanalysis. Rather than reduce Freud's work to an elitist form of therapy, though, Surrealists "put it in the service of poetry and revolution" (Rosemont 1998:45). Its central technique of free association liberated repressed desire and shone a light on the world of dreams and daydreams, and important-

Victoria Foster is a Senior Lecturer in Social Sciences at Edge Hill University, UK. She has a particular interest in collaborative, arts-based approaches to research with community groups. She is also the Associate Director of Edge Hill University's Institute for Public Policy and Professional Practice (I4P) which involves facilitating meaningful knowledge exchange between academics, practitioners, policy makers, and communities.

email address: Victoria.Foster@edgehill.ac.uk

ly discredited "the positivist rationalizations that make the world safe for capitalism and war" (Rosemont 1998:45).

Although surrealism is often thought to have died along with its founder André Breton in 1966, it continues to exert influence over art and culture. Over the decades it has continued to develop spirited ways of challenging hegemonic norms. Surrealist groups can still be found working across Europe, for instance, the Surrealist Group of Stockholm and the Leeds Surrealist Group in the UK. In the U.S., the Chicago Surrealist group (founded in 1966) is still going strong. Surrealism has also had a lasting impact on alternative comedy, particularly in the UK, where its influence can be seen from the absurdist humor of Spike Milligan and *The Goon Show* to the ridiculously successful comedy troupe *Monty Python's Flying Circus* which continues to loom large in people's imaginations. Its opening titles and sketches are peppered with collage-like animations of hybrid animals or a giant foot descending from the heavens and squashing whatever it makes contact with. Cartoonist Barry Blitt based a recent New Yorker cover (July 04, 2016) on Monty Python's famous *Ministry of Funny Walks* sketch in the wake of the UK's EU referendum with a piece entitled *Silly Walk off a Cliff,* illustrating (as well as the potential disaster that is Brexit) the continued common parlance of the surrealist comedy. Surrealism became entwined with satire in the 1980s (Gadd 2015) and can be seen at work today in the work of a range of comedians including Noel Fielding who is also a surrealist painter and collagist.

With its poetic and playful approach to understanding the world, there is much scope for a surrealist sensibility to breathe life into sociology. This would be in keeping with Les Back and Nirmal Puwar's (2012) mission to reinvigorate sociology through a focus on research methods. They have produced a "manifesto for live methods" which promotes the idea that researchers "become exposed to openness and the liveliness" of the social world (Back and Puwar 2012:12) using the full range of senses and an air of experimentation. There is certainly a need to find ways to "account for the social world without assassinating the life contained within it" (Back 2012:21). And what if this life includes the emotional, the unseen, the unspeakable, the irrational, the half-forgotten, or the hidden-behind-layers-of-acceptable-behavior? There have been in the social sciences, in recent years, successful attempts to capture the "realm of complex, finely nuanced meaning that is embodied, tacit, intoned, gestured, improvised, co-experienced, covert" (Conquergood 2002:146). These have involved, among others, arts-based and performative methods (see: Foster 2016), creative approaches (see: Atkinson 2013), autoethnography (see: Kafar and Ellis 2014), visual methods (see: Chaplin 2005; Pink 2007), feminist approaches (see: Sprague 2016), and queer methodologies (see: Nash and Browne 2016). A surrealist approach to social research would be aligned with such approaches that seek lively and inventive ways to come closer to being able to access the unspoken and intangible, and in the process come face to face with issues that have implications for the wider social world.

The 1930s surrealist dancer Hélène Vanel, a passionate advocate of the poetic, championed its ability to "reveal the secret of the ties that attach us" to the "precious, intimate, and astonishing" things of the

world (LaCoss 2005:53). "True poets," Vanel argued, are those who "animate a world in re-creating it" (LaCoss 2005:53). For social scientists, a poetic approach need not literally mean writing research encounters as poems, although this can certainly be effective in terms of capturing emotions and enlivening findings (see: Bhattacharya 2008). It might instead involve a willingness to look more lyrically and more imaginatively at the world, an act which in itself can be construed as rebellious. Latimer and Skeggs (2011:393) argue that "the political can be understood partly in terms of attempts to close the imagination down; a closure that seeks to fix the ways in which we think and conduct ourselves and make permanent the endless divisions that rivet the world into place." An "open and critical" approach to social inquiry is required.

The act of keeping methodology "open, alive, loose" (Lather 2010:x), of acknowledging a variety of perspectives, requires an acceptance of difference and even the embracing of paradox (Foster 2016). The juxtapositions, ambiguities, and absurdities celebrated in surrealism can provide some inspiration here, not least when they come with a dose of humor. This might act as a form of resistance to power and inequality through its reliance on "a kind of 'double vision'—the ability to see the absurdity, irony, or double meanings in social situations and roles" (MacLure 2009:108). More playfulness would not go amiss in the academy either given that it is, as Watson (2015) observes, too often "terminally dull." Genuine amusement and spontaneous delight is hard to come by in a world that is prone to taking itself rather too seriously. And so we march onwards, "the great academic army of the not quite dead yet"

(Watson 2015:418). Not only does this make for an unfulfilling existence, there is a danger that our legacy as sociologists will be to have turned "the diversity of modern experiences into lifeless relics" (Back 2012:21).

The article's title is a play on Hal Foster's (1996) *The Return of the Real*. The book explores the ways in which the art world has recently refocused attention on practices that are embodied, or grounded, in actual social sites and social issues. One of Foster's (1996) chapters is entitled "The Artist as Ethnographer" and considers the ways that artists have attempted to adopt this new role. Conversely, in this article, the concern is for sociology and its research methods to become less literal and to draw on a surrealist sensibility. However, far from shying away from the "real," this approach is intended to heighten it in poetic and playful ways. Discussion of some of the main tenets of surrealism is woven together with consideration of a variety of methodological conundrums that have been thrown up in feminist and post-structural debate. These include the importance of acknowledging emotions in knowledge production, the troubling of narrative coherency, and moving away from privileging voice as the most authentic mode of meaning. Examples are provided of research projects that arguably display a surrealist spirit; ranging from the large-scale Mass-Observation project to a personal communication between researcher and horse. These are linked with a concern for promoting positive social change. This is in keeping with surrealist artist Toyen's description of surrealism as "a community of ethical views" (Rosemont 1998:81), which is a suitably loose definition for the purpose of this article.

Surrealism does not require locking up in the "dungeons of narrow definition" (Rosemont 1998:xxxii): "[T]he many cages in which journalists, critics, and its other enemies keep trying to confine it are in fact empty…[S]urrealism is elsewhere."

Sheer Daftness

Surrealism has never been about artists or writers or performers *escaping* into the imaginary (LaCoss 2005:37). Rather, it aims to develop a "radical awareness," a strategy that strives to "excavate the *realities* of everyday life" (LaCoss 2005:37 [my emphasis]). Daily life is understood as being produced by complex forces including unconscious ones (Shaw 1996:2), so it is important not to take it at face value. For surrealists, a passionate attention to the everyday involves taking a stand against the status quo with the aim of overcoming repressive systems (Rosemont 1998:xxxv). The critical study of the everyday has been established in sociology for decades, but it has recently experienced a resurgence in popularity. In a special issue of *Sociology* focusing on this theme, the editors noted how study of the quotidian is about more than the "straightforwardly mundane, ordinary, and routine" (Neal and Murji 2015:813). Rather, "everyday life is dynamic, surprising, and even enchanting; characterized by ambivalences, perils, puzzles, contradictions, accommodations, and transformative possibilities" (Neal and Murji 2015:813). A research methodology that adopts a surrealist spirit is best placed to capture such contradiction inherent in daily life and to challenge injustices, not least because it is through the everyday that the "endless 'quiet' reproduction" of social norms takes place. It is in the everyday that

the "most trenchant ideological beliefs, the most hard-to-fight bigotries" lurk (Highmore 2005:6).

Clifford (1981) discusses how surrealism and ethnography developed in close proximity in the 1920s and 1930s. He draws comparisons and contradictions between the two schools of thought, asking "is not every ethnographer something of a surrealist, a reinventor and reshuffler of realities?" (Clifford 1981:564). However, surrealism and sociology's first real dalliance was in the 1930s, and it was the Mass-Observation project in the UK that brought them together. This was founded by the anthropologist Tom Harrison, the poet and sociologist Charles Madge, and the photographer and painter Humphrey Jenning. Madge and Jenning were heavily involved in the surrealist movement and Mass-Observation became a vehicle through which to pursue its aesthetic and political goals (Shaw 1996:2). An "unlikely and disquieting" project, Mass-Observation was also a remarkably democratic one (Highmore 2002:87). Members of the public were recruited with the purpose of collecting information on their own and others' everyday lives in ways that would "harness imaginative capacities" (Shaw 1996:2) and make the familiar strange.

In its original manifesto, Mass-Observation produced a list of topics for investigation (Harrison et al. 1937:155 as cited in Mengham 2001:28):

> Behavior at war memorials; Shouts and gestures of motorists; The aspidistra cult; Anthropology of football pools; Bathroom behavior; Beards, armpits, eyebrows; Anti-Semitism; Distribution, diffusion, and significance of the dirty joke; Funerals and

undertakers; Female taboos about eating; The private lives of midwives.

The "sheer daftness" of the list is "in perfect accord with the more facile subversions of surrealist humor" (Mengham 2001:28) and thus it was perhaps surprising that Mass-Observation so quickly garnered respect in many quarters. Via the public's observations and descriptions, their diary-writing, drawings, and records of dreams and daydreams, there emerged a "popular poetry of everyday life" (Highmore 2002:111) which anticipated the later concerns of reflexive ethnography (Clifford 1988:143) including multivocality and poetic representations. The project's emphasis on feelings and emotions and their impact on everyday life was unheard of in more "scientific" research (Shaw 1996:2), and it foreshadows the concerns of feminist methodologists. These avant-garde tenets contributed to the production of data imbued with liveliness. Reviewers of MO's first book, *May the Twelfth* (1937), touched on the "authenticity" of the project: "One really seems to hear the people speaking, and to look into their lives—like passing backyards in a train" (Hubble 2012:215).

However, it was not long before the artistic leanings of the project were abandoned and "the Surrealist connection and visionary quality was lost" in favor of a more "scientific" approach (Shaw 1996:6). The entire Mass-Observation project came to an end in the early 1950s, but was reprised in 1991 (as the Mass Observation Project) and it continues to enlist participants to take part in writing (based on their own lives rather than observing others) on a range of such idiosyncratic themes that it appears to be

quite in the spirit of the early days of the original project. Directives are issued on a quarterly basis: in Winter 2013, for example, participants were asked a series of provocative questions on the bizarrely juxtaposed topics "Serial Killers; the Countryside; What makes you happy?" (Mass Observation 2016).

This project is particularly interesting in a world where people are increasingly observing, recording, and broadcasting their own lives through social media networks. The mass of data available on people's everyday lives has obvious implications for social research. Some of these are exciting, not least the fact that "ordinary" people have a platform on which to transmit their thoughts and experiences. However, available formats for doing this are often formulaic and diminished. Zadie Smith (2010) describes Facebook as "the wild west of the Internet tamed to fit the suburban fantasies of a suburban soul." She cites the work of Jaron Lanier, virtual reality pioneer and master programmer. He has concerns over the ways that people "reduce themselves" in order that a computer's description of them seems more accurate: "'Information systems need to have information in order to run, but information *underrepresents reality*'" (Smith's italics). Moreover, given that it can seem as though the aim of social media users is to be liked by increasing numbers of "friends," "whatever is unusual about a person gets flattened out" (Smith 2010).

Given this context, Mass-Observation's quirky approach to generating large swathes of data on everyday life seems particularly refreshing. It *celebrates* the unusual rather than attempting to ashamedly cloak it. Rather than underrepresenting reality, its

surreal sensibility imbues it with the scope to produce a picture of heightened reality. Yet its large and unwieldy data sets have long been a source of consternation for academics. A letter in *The Spectator* in the early days of Mass-Observation described its scientific merit as "about as valuable as a chimpanzee's tea party at the zoo"; sociologist Mark Abrams described its methods as "inchoate and uncontrolled" (Pollen 2013:215). However, it is precisely because its data do not lend themselves to being flattened out or their liveliness suppressed, that Mass-Observation draws attention to the "standard stories" of sociology (Hurdley 2014). These involve a very particular framework and one which is not necessarily attuned to the energies of life. The quest for narrative coherence begins to look ill-advised given that its products are "synthetic"—"the fool's gold of scholarly literariness" (Hurdley 2014). Thus, it is its "inconsistent, indefinite, and plural" nature that makes Mass-Observation an ideal way to "consider disordering as an organizing research process" (Hurdley 2014).

Poetry Made by All

The chaotic, apparently irrational, juxtapositions that surrealist methods rely on, and which add relish to the Mass-Observation undertakings, proved a fascination to Michel Foucault. It was surrealism, for instance, and its focus on thinking outside of conventions, that provided a way in to his challenging the limited vision of religion (Carrette 2000:61). Surrealism's undermining of rationality also led to some of Foucault's ideas on language and representation. His essay *This is Not a Pipe* (Foucault 2008 [1968]) is based on the surreal paintings of René

Magritte and demonstrates Foucault's love of visual non sequiturs (which he calls *heterotopias*). It is in the preface to *The Order of Things* (Foucault 2002 [1966]) where Foucault introduces the idea of *heterotopias*, these troubling and incongruous textual spaces which contrast alarmingly with the comfort of *utopias*. He explains that this thinking came about after reading a passage of Jorge Luis Borges' writing and the laughter that shattered as he devoured the extract from a certain Chinese encyclopedia on the taxonomy of animals. The animals were divided into the following categories: "(a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies" (Foucault 2002 [1966]:xviii). Foucault quickly realized that his burst of hilarity was in part due to the fact that the "wonderment" and "exotic charm" of this system of thought highlights the very limitations of our own system. He also describes his laughter as coming with a certain sense of uneasiness as he puzzles over the impossibility of "finding residence" for these creatures; a space where they could all co-exist. Where could they exist but in language? Yet they even cause trouble here:

> *Heterotopias* are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy syntax in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to, but also

opposite one another) to "hang together." This is why utopias permit fable and discourse: They run with the very grain of language and are part of the very fundamental dimension of the *fabula*; heterotopias… desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of language at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences. [Foucault 2002 [1966]:xix]

Surrealism's goal of challenging comfortable and naturalized impressions of reality thus remains vital. One of the best loved methods of attempting to meet this goal is collage; this evokes the confusion of heterotopias in that it is simultaneously "a literal presence and a semiotic reality, a mythical construct and fictional fragments, an anatomical frame and isolated limbs" (Adamowicz 1998:185). Contemporary surrealist artist, Ivanir de Oliviera, embraces the way that the "physical limitations" of scraps or fragments "are transcended in the very act of creating new revelations that call into question the hegemony of the habitual" (Rosemont 1998:446). This, again in the vein of heterotopias, can have a "disorienting effect" on both producer and viewer (Adamowicz 1998:4).

Surrealist artist, Eileen Agar, a protagonist of this method, describes how her very life is a collage, "with time cutting and arranging the materials and laying them down, overlapping and contrasting, sometimes with the fresh shock of a surrealist painting" (Young Mallin 2001:213). Certainly everyday life is full of chance encounters and random detritus which often come together in surprisingly meaningful ways. And with much of our everyday life lived online these days, a Google search itself, "on any subject, might be said to yield a kind of blue-print for a collage" (Douglas 2011:7); a present-day equivalent of "a shoebox of newspaper clippings, postcards, old snapshots, ticket stubs, matchbooks, and art reproductions." Collage is a technique that inherently uses metaphor; image fragments are chosen and placed to give a "sense" of something rather than a literal expression of an idea (Butler-Kisber 2008). The process of collage can be seen as a democratic one in that it does not necessarily require formal artistic training. Its accessibility and playful aspect offers a way towards achieving Comte de Lautréamont's vision of a "poetry made by all" (Rosemont 1998:47).

Collage is an approach particularly favored by women surrealists, and historically it has been women surrealists who have used their art as a way of expressing personal traumas and nightmares; their work "became a means of gaining self-awareness, exploring their inner thoughts and feelings, dealing with their experiences, and locating or constructing their true identities" (Rosemont 1998:47). Humphreys (2006:378) draws comparisons between the collage art of Max Ernst (one of the best known and most prolific of the original surrealists) and that of Valentine Penrose. She argues that Penrose's collage-poem, *Dons des féminines*, whilst heavily influenced by the earlier work of Ernst—notably his celebrated pictorial novel *Une semaine de bonté*—is at the same time "an implicit critique" of male surrealists' representations of women. In this series of collages, which are presented alongside her poems, Penrose juxtaposes female figures (often sourced from Victorian fashion magazines) with animals or hybrid creatures in wide open landscapes. This is an "unreal hallucinatory world" (Chadwick 1985:227) and

one where there is "no hegemonic order" (Humphreys 2006:385).

Collage translates particularly well into a social research method (see: Butler-Kisber 2008), not least because of its ability to address wide scale social issues through a medium that is often "'intensely personal," materials that are "equally intimate" and that might "attempt to map some previously unarticulated interior truth" (Douglas 2011:7). Moshoula Capous-Desyllas (2015) employs collage as a method of reflexively working through her emotional experiences of conducting a challenging and affecting research project with sex workers in Portland, USA. The research involved participatory photography, with the women taking photographs of their "lived experiences, needs, and aspirations," and Capous-Desyllas simultaneously produced a series of collages as a means of "(re)imagining, (re)presenting, and critically reflecting" on this process (Capous-Desyllas 2015:193-195), an important strategy in feminist research (see: Daley 2010). Capous-Desyllas describes the collage making as "highly intuitive" and, with very much a surrealist flavor, notes how unexpected associations between various images allowed her to make "connections that may otherwise have remained unconscious" (Capous-Desyllas 2015:195). One collage in particular, *Chaotic liberation*, with its vibrant and peculiar mix of female figures and animals, visually echoes some of the work in Penrose's *Dons des féminines* series as it likewise works through ideas about representations of women and issues of injustice.

Capous-Desyllas recalls how, although the project had brought much joy and laughter, she had at times been frightened, angry, and upset, particularly by the stories told to her of violent abuse, racism, and oppression. With her "feminist social work researcher" head on (she also describes herself as an artist and activist), Capous-Desyllas is able to make important, but perhaps predictable, connections between these stories and stereotyping, intersectionality, and structural oppression perpetuated by the prison system. The collage, however, transcends this discussion in a haunting way. The inclusion of an image of a black man and a porcelain female head reportedly enabled Capous-Desyllas to "process her discomfort" associated with stories she was told. She does not share any of the details of these stories with the reader, but the sinister overtones of the collage still manage to evoke a sense of these withheld horrors.

The emotional charge of the work is not insignificant. Emotions have usually been considered "potentially or actually subversive of knowledge" and reason rather than emotion "has been regarded as the indispensable faculty for acquiring knowledge" (Jaggar 1989:151). One of the most important contributions of feminist and anti-racist methodology is in its contestation of the opposition between rational thought and emotion. Not only has emotion been "projected onto the bodies of others," who are then pathologized as a result (Ahmed 2004:170), such a projection also "works to conceal the emotional and embodied aspects of thought and reason."

Because of their independence from rational and linguistic systems, arts-based methods are able to evoke an emotional or affective response. However, in the case of collage, this requires active input

from the reader (Adamowicz 1998:21). He or she is required to fill in spaces, identify sources or inter-texts, or inhabit the gaps (Adamowicz 1998:21). Yet it can be tempting for the researcher to fill in the gaps. For instance, Capous-Desyllas' collage incorporates strangely juxtaposed animal imagery, recalling the surrealist use of birds and beasts as emblems of transcendence, expanding knowledge beyond the everyday realm. When Capous-Desyllas explains the symbolism of each of her animals at some length, the power of the work is diminished. It would require a brave decision to forgo "the coherent comfort of narrative" (St. Pierre 2009:226), to leave the gaps alone, and to trust the reader to thoughtfully fill them or inhabit them.

Letting Go of the Literal

Letting go of conventional narrative structure is particularly difficult given that we tend to privilege voice as "the carrier of the truest meaning" (St. Pierre 2009:222). This has to be problematic, argues St. Pierre (2009:221), especially for "those who are wary of the supposed conscious, stable, unified, rational, coherent, knowing, autonomous… individual." This question of voice, and the extent to which social research can "give voice" to marginalized groups or "let voices speak for themselves" (Mazzei and Jackson 2009), is one which concerns feminist, postcolonial, and postmodern scholars (Bhattacharya 2008). Research that leans on the arts is not necessarily free from the issues surrounding voice in qualitative research; in fact, it is likely to reproduce the same knowledge as more conventional research, but "with a different literary twist" (Mazzei and Jackson 2009:2). Taking

inspiration from surrealism might help to avoid reliance on what Mazzei and Jackson term the "too easy" notions of voice.

Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* takes the form of a series of eighteen dialogues between the explorer Marco Polo and Kublai Khan whereby Polo describes a series of surreal cities he claims to have visited. Their methods of communication are perhaps more surreal than the cities themselves. Initially, the men are without a shared language and Polo can only express himself through gestures, "leaps, cries of wonder and of horror, animal barkings or hootings, or with objects he took from his knapsacks—ostrich plumes, pea-shooters, quartzes—which he arranged in front of him like chessmen" (Calvino 1997:21). Kublai was forced to interpret these "improvised pantomimes." Gradually, Polo not only learns the Tartar language, but also its idioms and dialects—so that he is able to communicate "the most precise and detailed" accounts. Yet the Great Khan found that each piece of information recalled "that first gesture or object with which Marco had designated the place" (Calvino 1997:22) and he gradually begins to lose interest in Marco Polo's words. So too do words begin to fail Marco Polo, until "little by little, he went back to relying on gestures, grimaces, glances" (Calvino 1997:39).

Research that adapts a surrealist spirit not only thrives on "messy spaces," it also plays with language in ways that make it ideally situated to toy with notions of voice. Polo's and the Khan's fantastic communications are not wildly divergent from MacLure's (2009:97-98) goal of '"voice research" which attends to:

laughter, mimicry, mockery, silence, stuttering, tears, slyness, shyness, shouts, jokes, lies, irreverence, partiality, inconsistency, self-doubt, masks, false starts, false "fronts" and faulty memories—not as impediments or lapses to be corrected, mastered, read "through," or written off, but as perplexing resources for the achievement of a dissembling, "authentic" voice.

The account of the creative storytelling project *Time Slips* takes as its starting point a challenge to the oft rolled out aim to "hear the voices" of the marginalized. Basting (2001:78) queries *how* the voices of the disabled—not least those with cognitive impairments or severe physical impairments—can be heard:

> In what forms can and do their voices have meaning? Might certain forms of narrative and modes of performance actually support ideals of independence and selfhood that fuel fears of disability in the first place? What can the stories of the disabled tell us about the very meaning of the "self?"

Time Slips involved 18 weeks of storytelling workshops in the USA with people with Alzheimer's disease and related dementia (ADRD); all participants required some form of 24-hour care. In the second phase of the project, many of the resultant stories were worked in to a play, a website, and art installation so that the work might reach a wide and varied audience. *Time Slips* aimed to acknowledge the *complexity* of participants' worlds and to do so by encouraging their creative expression. One aspect of this complexity is the relational nature of their selfhood given that they rely on people "to translate the world" for them. Whilst everyone's selfhood is constructed through relationships with other people

and institutions, this is an extreme example. It calls into question the forms of storytelling that might represent their lives. Certainly, traditional autobiography is not ideal given that it would necessarily "mask the intensity" of caregiving relationships. Memoir is problematic, not least because people with ADRD not only forget details, they also forget concepts: "One does not just forget where one put the keys. One cannot comprehend the *meaning* of a key." They also lose the ability to comprehend chronological time systems. Interestingly, surrealists have oft been preoccupied with depicting the passage of time; Dali's iconic painting, *The Persistence of Memory*, which depicts melting pocket watches is one example. The concept of time is emblematic of our attempts to structure our existence; when this breaks down, our purpose, our very being, is challenged. The *Time Slips* project was not concerned with memory but rather designed to create new stories about participants' present selves complete with missing words, repeated sounds, and hazy memories (Basting 2001). Although one storyteller's language was limited to the sounds "Babababababa," this was able to be incorporated into nearly all the stories.

Each week, the group's facilitator would encourage the group to choose an image from a selection, on which the story would be based. The story would be constructed by participants' answers to a series of questions posed by the facilitator. A "certain theatrical flair" was required to interpret "a random list of sensical and nonsensical answers" (Basting 2001:81). This process also involved having to let go of the literal and forsake linear narrative. Basting (2001: 89) admits that it was overwhelmingly difficult to resist the urge to tidy the stories up, to "craft them…to

draw out and polish the rich metaphors and symbols that lay like geodes in the riverbed of the tales." It is this resistance, however, that lends the project its fascination. Language remains free "to carry emotional, rather than literal, meaning" (Basting 2001:83).

That's a Big Body…

(In response to an image of an elephant and a little girl)

We are deep in the heart of Austin, Texas.

Grandfather the elephant lives at the zoo and does

tricks in the circus.

But he's not allowed to sing there.

One day, while walking down the street, he meets

Amy, a 10-year-old girl.

Now, most people would run away when they meet

an elephant on the

street, but Amy has no fear.

They become friends.

One day, Grandfather takes his car and drives from

the zoo to the church,

where Amy is at a wedding.

He waits for her outside, because he's too big for the

church.

If he went in, he'd break it down.

While Grandfather waits, he hears "Abide with Me"

coming from the

church. *(Group sings "Abide with Me.")*

He likes it because he's not allowed to sing at the circus.

Amy comes out to meet him and feeds Grandfather

corn and hay and grass, because grass is good.

Grandfather has floppy ears.

He's a very good person, he's comfortable and happy.

Amy falls asleep on Grandfather, and he waits for her

to wake, then gets

back in his car and drives back to the zoo.

[Basting 2001:84]

A Horse Is a Horse

Basting's (2001) article in which she discusses *Time Slips* is entitled "God is a Talking Horse," a line from one of the stories produced by people with ADRD entitled "A horse is a horse of course of course." "God" is short for Godfreya, a music-loving horse that enjoys a deep relationship with its cowboy owner. Anna Banks' (2016) research involves an actual communication between human and horse and, given that they share no common spoken language, this also disrupts "too easy" notions of voice. Banks is a horse masseuse and provides an account of this practice which involves her playing two roles: body-worker and ethnographer. The physical aim is to reduce tension in the horse's muscles and tissues; the ethnographic aim is to "record and communicate" information about the horse.

The practice involves Banks collecting data, firstly through a conversation with its owner, but then through direct communication with the horse. This requires her own body to enter a particular state of being, "open and fully sensing." The bodywork begins with an initial sequence of rhythmic muscle pulsing; should the horse relax at this point, this embodied transmission is understood as an invitation to work more deeply at unknotting any tension. Banks includes fieldnotes on her work with a broodmare, Sage, and describes how she visually inspects the horse, uses her sense of smell to rule out particular issues, and listens to the mare's gut. She then uses the more metaphysical technique of reiki before beginning the massage. During the massage, Sage's foal joins in, nuzzling at the very same muscle that Banks is massaging, on the opposite side of

the mare's body. Banks records how the foal "perfectly mirrors" her touch:

> I experienced a wonderful sense of connection with them—mare and foal. After her massage, Sage, her foal and I paused for a moment in community before they and the other mares and foals returned to the herd and their regular life's activities, and I returned to mine. [Banks 2016:71]

There are no claims made to "give voice" to the mare and foal, yet the account of these animals very much brings them to life. The work has a surrealist sensibility not only because of the way it disrupts conventional understandings about communication but also because of the ecological concerns that the Surrealist movement displayed: "the adjective *wild* has always been a term of the highest prestige" (Rosemont 1998:li). Nature, wildlife, and wilderness are integral themes, particularly in the work of surrealist women whose work is often replete with animal imagery and set in wilderness landscapes (as is the case in Penrose's collages discussed above). Leonora Carrington's paintings and writings employ a veritable "vocabulary" of animals and birds, and are regularly punctuated by the white horse (Chadwick 1985:75). Paintings include *Self-Portrait (Inn of the Dawn Horse)* and *The Horses of Lord Candlestick* which respectively include references to her childhood hobby horse and family horses. In her play *Penelope* (written in 1946 and first performed in 1957 in Mexico), the protagonist rebels against her authoritarian father who has banned her from indulging in imaginative play with her hobby horse Tartar (named for the Ancient Greek mythological underworld) with whom she is in love. She escapes

this patriarchal domain by turning into a white horse and flying off into another realm (Chadwick 1985:78).

Forerunners of deep ecology and ecofeminism (Rosemont 1998:li), the work of these (predominantly women) surrealists called for a "redefinition of the relations between humankind and the animal, solidarity with endangered species, [and] a nonexploitative regard for the planet we live on" (Rosemont 1998:li). So too Banks draws attention to the schism that exists between many humans and the wider community of nature (animals, trees, plants, soils, and waters); her research aims to offer a glimpse into the complex communities that exist in the more than human world. One outcome of "reinvigorating our senses" and "re-attuning ourselves" to this wider community is that it opens the possibility of attending to the nuances of the lived experiences of the world around us.

Haraway (1988:593) describes how, in the vein of ecofeminism, and in a critical sense, the "world encountered in knowledge projects is an active entity." This is in opposition to the ("bourgeois" and "masculinist") majority who view it as a resource to be mined.

> Acknowledging the agency of the world in knowledge makes room for some unsettling possibilities, including a sense of the world's independent sense of humor. Such a sense of humor is not comfortable for [those] committed to the world as resource…Feminist objectivity makes room for surprise and ironies at the heart of all knowledge production; we are not in charge of the world. We just live here and try to strike

up non-innocent conversations by means of our prosthetic devices. [Haraway 1988:593]

The role of irony in knowledge production is an idea that Watson (2015) plays with. It is incongruity—that device loved by surrealists—that might be understood as "a method for constructing an ironic opposition." Because irony involves paradox and contradiction, seeing things from opposing viewpoints, it "constitutes the art of social science" (Watson 2015:415). It also challenges power relations (although the extent to which it might bring about a change of outlook is debatable):

> Irony undermines the pretence of control or power over the meaning of civic discourse and social parlance, thereby disengaging the speaker as a civic participant and freeing her or him from the proclivity to conform to social practice and the hegemony of social ritual. [Watson 2015:415]

Imbuing social research with a surreal sensibility is a way to attempt to see beyond hegemonic norms, even the prevailing (and environmentally catastrophic) notion that the natural world is somehow separate from human life. The truth is that we are profoundly entwined and listening carefully to the world and its creatures—with a sense of humor and a willingness to accept paradox—might well teach us more than we think possible.

Conclusion

Surrealism's aim is to "arrive at an ever more precise and at the same time more passionate apprehension of the tangible world" (Breton as cited in Nadeau 1973:37). Fabulous visions and hallucinatory worlds draw attention to the very realities of our own society and the taken-for-granted injustices embedded within it. This is not far apart from the aims of a critical sociology that seeks to uncloak the cruelties and contradictions inherent in the neoliberal world. This article has focused on the ways that surrealism might influence the process of knowledge production in the context of arts-based and critical inquiry. "For Surrealism," notes Sheringham (2006:67), "the possible is contained in the actual; what might be is always already present within what is. The problem is to find a way of grasping it." For sociology too, particularly in light of post-structural critiques of knowledge production, there is a challenge to grasp that which is hidden or non-literal and often remains stubbornly out of reach.

The article has drawn on a number of projects imbued with a "surrealist sensibility" in order to begin to consider how surrealist notions might actually be applied in the research process. This discussion of parallels between social research methods and surrealist methods is by no means exhaustive. There are myriad other possibilities. For instance, the emphasis in sociology on walking as method (see: Moles 2008) has resonance with the surrealist method of dérive. It is Baudelaire's Flâneur that provides inspiration for walking methods; the surrealist version emphasizes the links between the external world and the internal psyche (see: Debord 1958). I am planning to explore this method in an arts-based research project that I am currently devising. It will take place at a local farm that adopts a Community Supported Agriculture model. I will be exploring the experiences of the farm's volunteers and considering the ecological,

health, and spiritual benefits of this sort of farming practice. Walking around the beautiful and productive fields should inspire reflection and conversation on the links people make between the external landscape and their internal ones. I am also planning to devise a series of surrealist games in this research to engage participants from the local community and to lend a playful and imaginative element to the project. Sarah Metcalf (2011) of the Leeds Surrealist Group has experimented with various techniques which might also be of use for encouraging a moving away from coherent narrative. Brotchie and Gooding's (1995) *Surrealist Games* is also replete with creative and humorous ideas.

I am also currently working on a series of collages that explore an ongoing research project. This involves an evaluation of a quirky educational project that a local arts organization has carried out at a school in Liverpool, UK. The collages that I am working on, as I analyze and write up the data I have collected, are enabling me to reflect on issues that are pertinent to the research (for instance, tensions between "child-led" and "adult-led" education practices) and will in time be written into the report of findings. They are also allowing me to explore my own feelings about some of the challenges involved in carrying out evaluative research as an academic. These are not appropriate for discussion in the evaluation report, but might be discussed in future academic writing. Given that this writing will not happen for some time, if at all, it is useful to have captured my immediate thoughts on this issue through strangely juxtaposed images that speak to me of some of the emotions and confusion that I experienced at the time about my academic career.

Drawing inspiration from surrealism in social research requires imagination, a "letting go of the literal rather than documenting it" (Rasberry 2002:116). It is imagination that is required to come to such a "startling defamiliarization with the ordinary" (Greene 2000:4). Imagination makes the real more real; more alive. Here there is resonance with a "live" sociology, which, as Back argues (2012:36), is "not just a methodological matter of bringing sociology to life but a way to live and sustain the life of things." Immersing ourselves in a surrealist sensibility becomes a way of life, one that is more in tune with the planet and acknowledges its aliveness. Freeing the imagination "is the heart of the process by which everyday life becomes the realization of poetry itself" (Rosemont 1998:xxxv).

The imagination can assist in highlighting the absurdity of the everyday, and enable acknowledgement of, if not resistance to, some of its brutality. Latimer and Skeggs (2011:393) argue that the imagination is rooted in socio-political and cultural contexts. In fact, it is "one of the key sites in which all political and cultural agendas are played out." Their "sociological imagination" is a new interpretation of C. Wright Mills' classic work which has long influenced sociology in terms of recognizing the relationship between personal experience and wider society. Latimer and Skeggs (2011) draw on the strengths of this contribution, but also stress the importance of not privileging any one perspective. Rather than focusing on *the* sociological imagination, they call for an opening up of possibilities, which, in turn, requires an "ethical commitment." They equate Foucault's concept of curiosity with the imagination:

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Curiosity is a vice that has been stigmatized in turn by Christianity, by philosophy, and even by a certain conception of science…I like the word however. To me it suggests something altogether different: it evokes "concern"; it evokes the care one takes for what exists and could exist; an acute sense of the real which, however, never becomes fixed; a readiness to find our surroundings strange and singular; a certain relentlessness in ridding ourselves of our familiarities and looking at things otherwise; a passion for seizing what is happening now and what is passing away; a lack of respect for traditional hierarchies of the important and the essential. [Foucault 1996 [1980]:305 as cited in Latimer and Skeggs 2011:399]

Curiosity (and especially the French, curiosité), in a linguistic accident, means not only a desire to know something, but also an oddity or novelty. The way that these concepts come together by chance and are encapsulated in one word would appeal to a surrealist sensibility. Both primary and secondary meanings very much contribute to the spirit of social inquiry inspired by surrealism. Surrealism's fervent creativity and glorious tumult of ideas for challenging the status quo and producing heightened versions of reality might provide inspiration for sociologists to look at life with a sense of curiosity. This in turn might result in the production of playful and poetic curiosities that provide insight into the world and help to keep sociology's spark alive.

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