



Homelessness in women's life histories:

Cultural silences, experiential
knowledge and personal
testimonies in England
c.1980s-present

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18th European Research Conference on Homelessness, 13/09/2024

1. Women's homelessness as 'hidden'
2. Project overview
3. Sources and methods
4. Testimonial narratives: close reading
5. What is at stake?

My project:

1. Explores the ways women have narrated experiences of homelessness
2. Historicises the politics of knowledge around women's homelessness in England c.1980s-present

'Hidden' homelessness?

- Meaningful: sofa-surfing, inadequate housing, survival relationships / sex
- Stigma; shame as a 'sticky emotion' (Sara Ahmed)
- 'Hidden' from history? Occluded from policy and provision?
- Is the idea of being 'hidden' given too much purchase?
- Important empirical work: Joanne Bretherton, Paula Mayock, Deborah Quilgars, Kesia Reeve, etc...

Conceptual framework:

Drawing on theorisations of **epistemic injustice** and **(Black) feminist thinking**, and theories and methods from **oral history** and **life-writing**: a way to probe 'silences', forces shaping inequality and self-expression, how and why certain testimonies aren't 'heard'

- Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (2007)
- Jose Medina, *Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations* (2013)
- Patricia Hill Collins' work: **controlling images, intersecting structures of oppressions, objectification as Other**
- **Experience as lens**: narrated (Joan Scott), micro/macro interplay in individual lives (Eve Worth), testimonial (Sidonie Smith and Kay Schaffer)

How have women recalled, narrated, analysed and constructed meaning from their experiences of homelessness?

Project overview: it historicises the politics of knowledge about women's homelessness

1. Recovers perspectives and activism (broadly defined) marginalised in the historical record
2. Charts how changes in legislation, political culture and gender have shaped activism, the production and reception of personal testimonies, and the growing valorisation and use of personal testimonies of homelessness within academic and charitable knowledge-production.
3. It elucidates the contemporary history of connection and cross-fertilization between feminist, housing and survivor-led activism - and, in particular, their developing valorisations of experiential knowledge - in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Research questions:

Why has women's homelessness repeatedly been constructed as invisible, unknown or, at times, newly-visible?

How has knowledge about this phenomenon been produced, circulated and gained credibility?

What place does experiential knowledge and personal testimony occupy in this history? And how is this related to changes in legislation, political culture and gender?

Contributions:

1. It recovers personal testimonies and gathers new data
2. History and contemporary policy: women's homelessness as case study of willful forgetting
3. Conceptual framework's contribution: working with 'silenced' histories

Sources

Interviews

10 new in-depth interviews

- Life history
- Biographical walking interviews

Life-writing

11 book-length autobiographies

- traditionally published
- self-published
 - commercially
 - DIY

'Lived experience' projects' life-writing

Archived material

Including personal testimonies used in reports, pamphlets, activist literature, previous research...

Contextualised:

- Interviews with activists and service-workers
- Archival material including charitable work and DIY magazines eg Skipper (1980s)

Sources and gaps

Mortality

Challenges of biographical interviewing

Publishing

Overarching cultural narratives; complex trade-offs to gain visibility

Methods

Long historical view:
archival methods
expanded the scope from
1980s to 1960s

Visibilise grassroots
activisms, informal support,
mutual aid

Oral history, biographical walking
interviews: whole life story

- Oral history on dis/composure: Penny
Summerfield, Lynn Abrams

Archival methods

Narrative analysis

Shared biographical experiences

from full corpus of personal
testimonies

Trauma, often starting in childhood

Own childhood in care and children taken
into care

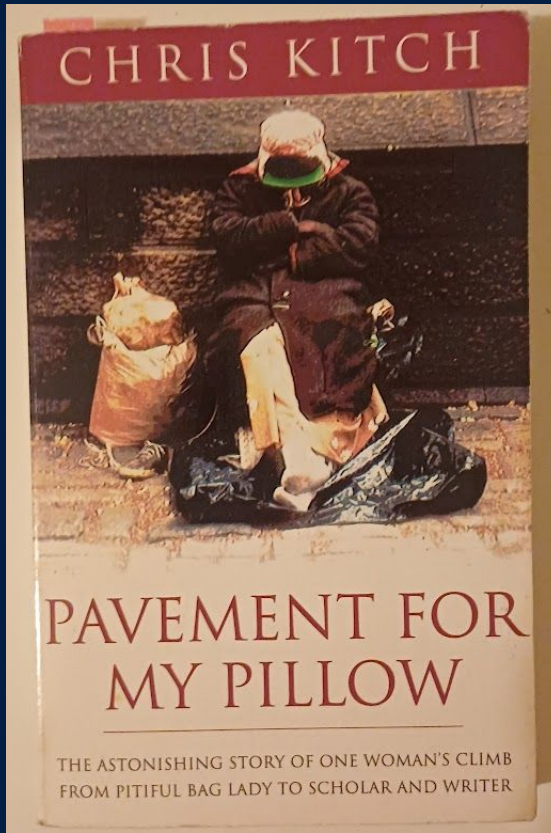
Violence

‘Cracks’ in welfare state

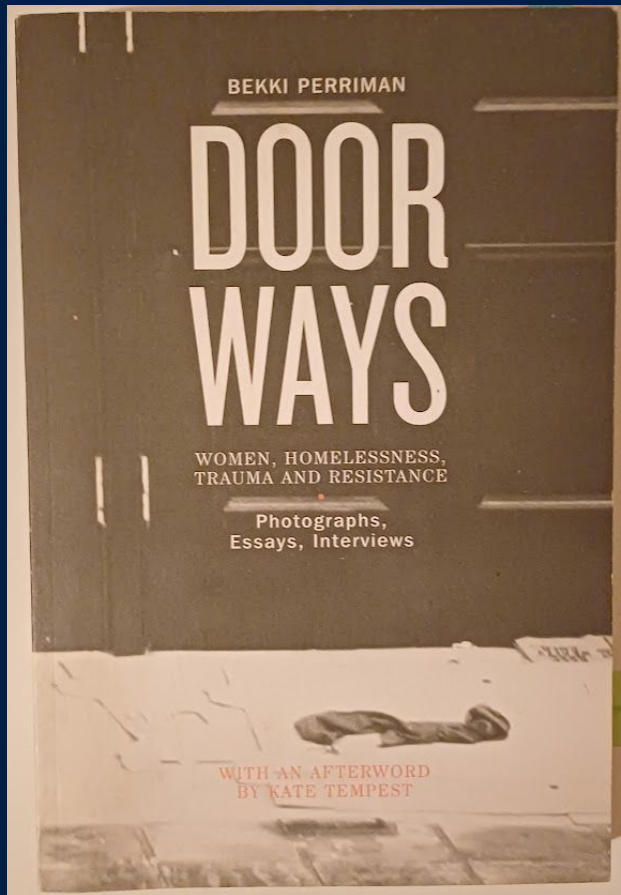
Informal learning and support between
friends/peers

Women and the state: narratives of a lack
of change, stasis, cycle

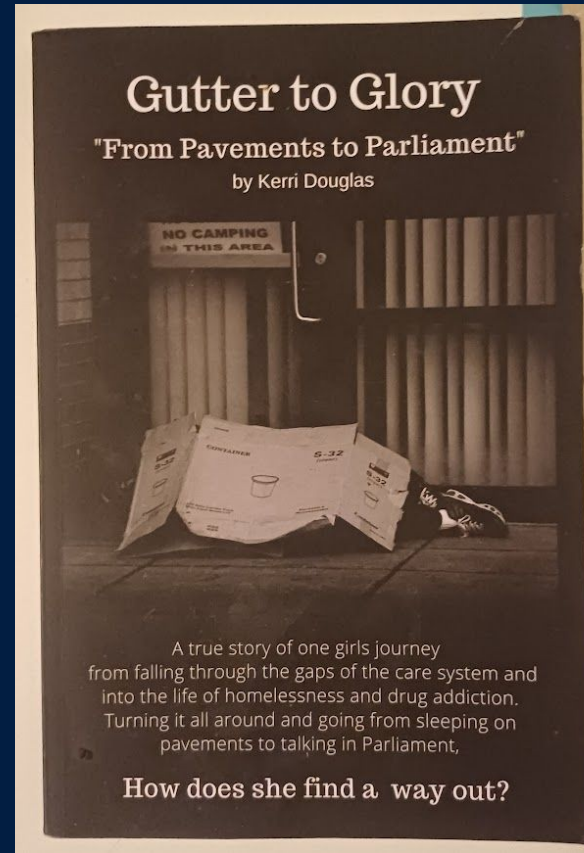
Theorisations of state focus on the family,
of sexist standards, needs being ignored



Orion, 1996



House Sparrow Press, 2018



Self-published, 2020

Storying the self and homelessness: complex trade-offs

Spivak: testimony has multiple valences and is always more than simply resistant or not; it can be resistant and/or co-opted and/or consolidate other resistant practices

Narratives:

- Life-writing: dominance of trauma narrative in memory boom since 1990s (Leigh Gilmore)
- Testimonial scripts:
 - *Scripting Addiction: The Politics of Therapeutic Talk and American Sobriety* and relationship to testimonial therapy in services (Summerson Carr)
 - Human rights testimonial scripts (Smith and Karr)

Experiential knowledge and 'experts by experience' in UK:
Barnes and Cotterell, Wilson and Beresford

What is at stake:

- Listening: women have been speaking out about homelessness for decades; the onus needs to be on those in power to listen and act. How might research as well as practice help?
- Narratives: how might we create space for messier and more free self-narratives, even if these are more ambivalent?

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