

*What do the words not say? Ethnographic Fields and Visual Ethnography. Videoing in a London suburb of Plumstead.*

What do you think about Plumstead High Street?":

A Jamaican DJ living in Plumstead and working in East London: "there is nothing to in Plumstead High Street. I am surprised you have something to research here".

An English man \_ the guard from the local Belmarsh prison: "Plumstead High Street is like home. I lived here all my life, just round the corner. Once it was beautiful like a Sunday morning.

His daughter: "Once it was my street, but now it belongs to others and it is not safe to be out, I don't feel it is my street".

An Indian owner of the grocery market: "Plumstead is only for the unemployed. Look at the High Street, it's 11.00am and there are so many people here, what are they doing here, why do they not work?"

An English local who works in the city: I love Plumstead, the High Street is multicultural and busy, I moved to here just because of that.

An elderly English lady drinking beer in the local pub: "It is alright, I think, it is .....I don't know, hmmm, you know?..... I don't care...".

Through my motto question asked in those places: *whose is this street?* I tried to understand how people relate to this particular space and to others and how they articulate that relationship.

But when the question is asked, the response is already predetermined, and it enters a political chain of comments to follow. I do my interviews in the suburb of London Zone 4 which suffers a visible impoverishment, especially in comparison with other parts of South and South East London. My working in the field is a result of this particular situation. I found myself here as it was the cheapest postcode in London and I needed living space for me and my daughters for my single academic salary. Yet the cheap postcode is a result of economic and political inequality in the first place: struggle between capital and wage labour (Massey 1984); changes in the social relations of production (Castell 1977); distancing from social institutions (Giddens 1984). My research does not deploy the context of the ongoing urban regeneration and economic changes in the area. This project was not only a decision of a 'homeless' researcher seeking the causes of her not-belonging. Although her presence in the field is the result of a certain political situation which enabled her residence in the UK and next, brought about her interest in the underdeveloped area of Plumstead, the idea of doing such research emerged on the plane of cultural and social tensions which she faced as an immigrant and the consumer of the everyday life of the capital's suburb.

Everything is double-checked. Everything is ready.

This is a picture of a professional person,  
This is a researcher who knows what she is doing.  
Who knows her aims.  
Her tone is confident  
And her expectations are big

She feels power.

“You have to remember about shooting the whole scene,  
I don’t want people only, just talking heads,  
I want to film their space, and how they relate to others  
during the interview.  
And also close-ups of whatever they drink or eat, or buy,  
and me when I do the interview”  
“yeah, yeah”.

A group of white English customers are drinking their early afternoon beer in the “the proper English pub with food and a telly”. They hardly talk to each other. A glaze of boredom sheds the heads of their golden lagers. The wall behind them brightens the scenery up: an army of colourful ceramic pots and mugs line up neatly on the built-in shelves. A curvy shape of some original sculpture in the middle of the quaint collection - but I cannot see well since the light is too dim and we forget to turn the extra light on what spoilt a lot - adds the edge to the picture. Modern paintings of local artists surpassing the borders of the locality call for attention from behind the clients’ backs. A repeat of *We get Knocked Down*, by Tub Thumpers, on the hi-tech jukebox saturates the air with the fading memory of the local pride.

I ask two English customers sitting in the corner reading *the Sun*:

- May ask you some questions about Plumstead and the High Street?

- 1<sup>st</sup> man: Why, why do you want to know about Plumstead? and what do you want to know?

-I am doing an academic research for the University of East London and I want to ask you about what you do in the High Street, where you do your shopping, how you feel here.

-2<sup>nd</sup> man: We don’t want to be in the camera, but we could tell you a lot about this place. We lived here all our lives. But it changed lately

-1<sup>st</sup> man: I can be filmed, I don’t mind. Plumstead was famous many years ago.

-Me: Oh yes, that’s true. Would you like to tell me about this place, what you do here, how often do you come to here?

1<sup>st</sup> man: I come almost every day for a pint, a chat, and a paper. It is a good pub, everyone knows each other. But why do you really want to know about such things?

*What can I really say? That I am looking for home and their acceptance? I am a professional researcher and I have an agenda to follow. I cannot afford to be distracted. I have to keep this interview under control, I cannot show what I feel....*

Me: I am interested what people do here and how they feel. Do you feel here at home?

2<sup>nd</sup> man: I don’t. It’s all due to foreigners. How would you feel? How can you feel when everything is taken over? Plumstead is not ours anymore.

1<sup>st</sup>: I do feel at home, but here in this pub. It is our pub. Would you like a drink? I need a refill.

Me: no, thank you, maybe later.

2<sup>nd</sup> man: There is no community anymore. They don't mix. They have their own habits, you know. It's a different culture. And us? We are not important anymore. No one is interested. Look what Blair did, only immigrants can get it. The Polish and others have it. We are nothing. Polish people are coming and they take over our jobs and there is nothing left.

1<sup>st</sup> man: I know it sounds racist.....but we were invaded by foreigners. I know you are foreign too, but it is too many of them, too many of them.

*He smiles and tries to be nice and engaged, asked me for a drink after all. Yet I feel in his hands, completely in his power. I have to stick to my questions about shopping.....I have to remember my agenda.*

Me: Is there anything good about this immigration?

2<sup>nd</sup> man: No, but we can't even say it, it is not allowed.

Me: Why is it not allowed?

2<sup>nd</sup> man: you know why.....you cannot say anything to anybody. You can't say Merry Christmas – it's offensive.....

1<sup>st</sup> man: Where are you from?

Me: Where do you do your shopping?

1<sup>st</sup> man: in Morrison's, Sainsbury's, Marks & Spencer, Burton's

2<sup>nd</sup>: Sainsbury's and also Somerfield's, the supermarket up the road.

Me: Do you ever do any shopping in the local shops, those small shops in the High Street.

2<sup>nd</sup> man: They are all Asian shops.

1<sup>st</sup> man: Sari doesn't normally suit an English person. What's the point of walking there.....I am not saying no way.....but I don't want a stupid shirt for £6 that looks like an old man shirt. I don't want a sari and I don't want a turban. Where are you from?

*He did it again. Why can't he just stop? What right does he have to do it?*

1<sup>st</sup> man: It is not a difficult question, is it?

*I try to smile but my face turns into a pickled gherkin instead.*

Me: No, it's not. I came down from Glasgow.

1<sup>st</sup> man: but you are not Scottish with your.....

Me: accent? No, of course not, how could I? I have many nationalities.

1<sup>st</sup> man: how many?

*He will never stop. Why do I have to go through this?..... If it is obvious I am foreign, isn't it enough? What should I say?*

Me: three. I have three nationalities.

*Which is an obvious lie to avoid a definite answer.*

1<sup>st</sup> man: Yes, which ones?

Me: Russian, Slovak, and Czech.

1<sup>st</sup> man: Russia is a big place...which part are you from, Bosnia?

Me: Nooooooooooooo! Bosnia is not in Russia!. Let's move on.....

*I have my power back. He proved not knowing the difference between the Baltics and the Balkans! I hope he smelt my despise! I showed him in my tone, didn't I?*

Me: Let's go back to the main point: Whose is this street?

1<sup>st</sup> man: Whose is it?.....It's not ours, it's not ours anymore. .

There was much more happening under the surface of this interview than I could bear, but I could not signal my apprehension, nor could I skip it and pretend it was not there. I felt trapped in this situation and had to continue the interviews. After all they were all budgeted by the University which cannot accept panic attacks as an excuse from doing the job. No one will pay for my uncertainty. I finished this round up with my motto question and moved to another table. The first words I said to my next interviewer were: Hello, I am Polish, please tell me what you think about Plumstead High Street? No one will pay for a private lesson either.

My attempts to break through this community in the present conjuncture remind me of the Don Quixote's struggle. I try to find the sufficient language which could explain the prejudice of this research and my role within it. To move beyond an academic and socio-historical framework of my own ethnography is as difficult as finding home. Can I remove the signification of my migrant status and find the acceptance of the locals? Why is it more important than my original research question?

My everyday dance around the shops start at Dadoods  
 -the garage store full unknown smells and brief encounters.  
 It is run by Bobby  
 a self-made wizard of the impossible trade  
 of all markets in the world  
 meeting on the clustered shelves  
 -a map of the local tastes.

I choose tilapia fish straight from the African coasts  
 And Indian chapattis with some yam  
 Cooked with onion and mushroom in my own way.  
 -If I had parsley they would be like my mum's potato bread...

My errands raise my curiosity.  
 What else is there I have never tried?  
 Will I be able to explore it all?  
 Will I ever be familiar with the whole street?

I cannot find parsley in the rainbow of choices  
 It's spinach which must do tonight. I hated it when I was a child.  
 From Bobby I know how to fry it with oil  
 and smuggle on my children's plate in a pancake...  
 There is a special occasion tonight  
 I am making friends with other mums  
 -My first attempt to tame the place.

“Goodbye, fish and chips? By Indraneel Sur:

Britain's most popular national dish is now chicken tikka masala, an entrée of oven-roasted chicken in a creamy tomato sauce widely served in Indian restaurants, the British foreign secretary proclaimed in a speech in April. Critics immediately blasted the speech, which celebrated multiculturalism in Britain, as a blatant attempt by the secretary, Robin Cook, to curry favor for his Labour Party with immigrant voters in upcoming national elections. But his remarks also provided official recognition of an extraordinary shift in Western eating habits. Once limited to notoriously basic dishes of beef, mutton and fish, the British are now major consumers of Indian food. The Times of India recently counted 8,500 Indian restaurants in Britain. "While in America you almost have a Chinese restaurant on every corner, in England it's an Indian restaurant," says John Jago-Ford, owner of the British Shoppe in Madison, which sells tea and British food, including curry mixes. Underlying the trend was the massive wave of South Asian immigration to the United Kingdom after World War II. But Indian food has wide appeal there. British retailer Marks & Spencer has long sold prepackaged chicken tikka masala sandwiches. On April 11, McDonald's in Britain kicked off a two-month campaign that puts "a host of Indian-inspired products" on the menu, such as lamb rogan josh and vegetable samosas. Even Queen Elizabeth reportedly has a favorite place for munching curry - the upscale Veeraswamy Restaurant on London's Regents Street". (Sur, 2001)

### *Red Lion*

A traditional Red Lion pub  
 Known to all people in Plumstead  
 Has been changed lately  
 Into a Chinese buffet  
 If you were new you would never tell it has ever been anything else  
 But a clean family restaurant  
 With a set of square tables  
 Covered with hygienic foil  
 And plastic flowers arranged in sophisticated bouquets  
 I have my favourite table there  
 Just by the neon picture of the roast duck  
 Before I sit in the corner the waitress already knows  
 That I drink jasmine only with the hint of green  
 Tea followed by freshly squeezed bunch of gossip  
 About the lion hearts of the Chinese staff  
 Reading the same menu every time  
 Anchors my fears  
 of the worldly news  
 Mixed hors' D'oeuvres  
 And the shredded smoked chicken  
 Ho fun soup and fried mussels  
 In black bean sauce (hot)  
 Roast duck with pineapple  
 Mixed vegetable vermicelli  
 Water chestnuts (large)

With barbecue spare ribs  
 Prawn crackers of course  
 With special chop suey  
 And a specialty of the place  
 Red Lion Rice (hot or mild)  
 With beef, chicken, roast pork,  
 Prawn, squid, fish cakes, prawn balls  
 And Chinese mushrooms.

The touch of the brass handles on the main door  
 Remind me of the cold shake  
 Every customer got to cool their hot heads  
 Two hundred years ago

The red lion roars at me when I leave the change on the counter

To acknowledge an interview as the social work of both interviewer's and interviewee's; cause and effect of their interaction; product and stimulus of their histories, is to deny the singular validity of objective finding with its finite meaning and embrace the shared unpredictable experience. As a result, the question "Who gets to tell whose story" appears a challenge for anyone who would like to be critically aware of the conditions of social transformation. Self-reflection on the performance of the stories involved: their narrative, rhythms, colours, mythology, sounds, and aesthetic artistry originates from a dialogical epistemology which reinforces the concept of shared governance, nonhierarchical relationships, and communal responsibility.

*On the train to Plumstead.*

Behind the window yellow trees  
 Bend their backs with despair  
 Over their own loneliness.

However, my first action after moving in to the area was far from political, in fact, it was a long cry over the fate which swept me to the suburb of South East London. I did not want to live here and I did not want to admit this was to be my home for some time now. I tried to persuade myself that it was only temporary and I would take the first opportunity to move out.

"Who would like to live in Plumstead" – asked one of my informants a year later. "Plumstead is not even on the map of Greater London, how are we supposed to get there, are there any trains running behind the Thames Barrier at all? – inquired one of my friends invited for dinner who unfortunately never found the place.

When the reason to move out came, it appeared to be more painful than I could have expected. During the first three months of our living there my car underwent a series of violent damages, only to be finally stolen by a gang impersonating the Local Authority

contractors. Next, the door to my house was painted with some strange warnings about “them” coming back soon, and we had fights between the local ‘gangs’ of different races every second night just under our windows through the whole summer. I did not yet associate those incidents with my individual presence in the area at that time. But the local police had enough work with visiting my household almost every week. In the winter I was hit on the face by a big African man on a bus while traveling to work, I suppose with no reason at all, if standing on the deck can be any excuse. It was a completely accidental attack and, despite a swollen face and a blue eye, I asked the ambulance to drive me to work as normal. I said to myself,

*this is a reality of a big city, wake up, you wanted to live in London and I you have to accept its downsides too. – I really didn’t believe in what I was saying.*

However, when I faced a verbal attack from a group of the local English youths just in front of my house, who threw a pile of abuse on my ten years old daughter and myself, chanting “we don’t want you here”, I decided, *enough is enough*. While giving a description of the attackers to the police, we reported that they were two young couples with two babies in the prams, who, as confirmed by the police officers recognizing them very quickly from similar attempts executed on other foreigners coming to the area, lived in the same street.

My dialogues with the police officers in the aftermath of the incident:

-Why did you move to Plumstead?

-I don’t know, an estate agency had chosen the place for me according to the price I could afford. It was a random choice.

-If you don’t have any connection with this place, maybe you should consider moving out, we don’t mind coming again and again (friendly laugh), but it looks there is some serious issue against you and your children here.

-How could it be, I have been here only for six months, I even don’t know anyone in this area yet.

-How about your neighbours, are sure you did not get involved in any conflicts with them?

-Of course not! They are very friendly people. I know only two families next door, but they helped me to carry our furniture in and move around our stuff on our arrival. They are very helpful.

-Ok then, you will keep your eyes open and if anything happens, just let us know. We will proceed as usual with this case and the letter will be sent to you in these days.

- Yes, I know, as usual, thank you very much.

A letter from the police:

Dear Dr Rabikowska

I am sorry to hear that you have been a victim of the crime, which has been recorded at Greenwich Police station under the crime reference shown above. Please quote this in any communications. If you require information regarding this matter, please do not hesitate to call the Crime Management Unit on the above telephone number

between the hours of 8am to 8pm on weekdays and 8am to 4pm at weekend. However in emergencies always dial 999.

On behalf of the Metropolitan Police Service, may I thank you for your assistance in this matter.

Yours sincerely,  
Crime Management Unit

I have dialed 999 three more times, each time followed by a friendly letter from the concerned Crime Management Unit, before I decided to move out. Yet having made that decision I realized that I would have to start again in the same way in another place which may appear equally uninviting. I lost my trust in the estate agent's overriding enthusiasm about any properties they have to let. I still did not know anyone well enough to ask them advice in that matter, or maybe I did not try to make an effort to know them..... At that time my daughters informed me that they are not going to change schools for the third time this year and they are "ready to resist the Plumstead style for a bit longer". As long as I can guarantee that I will find something better in the near future, they can sacrifice and stay till the end of school.

Was it that moment when I moved from living a life of the private tenant in a terraced house to a life of an academic researcher on 24hour duty exploring the place with the cameras? Through the contingency of events and feelings, I decided to embark on the journey to know "why"? What is the reason behind all those incidents which happened to me, and why can I make this place my home?

### *Place*

I cannot be without being in the place  
A whole history is made of places  
I am a dweller of this suburb now.  
The city of London is at the stone throw  
SE18 – the cheapest London postcode  
South of the river.  
The Greenwich Council claims it has potential.  
The local people cannot believe it.  
How did I happen to be part of it?  
When did it start being my place?  
How did the camera delineate the High Street as my neighbourhood?  
This is my story of the place,  
Made up from the stories of others  
The people who came here long ago  
When the hill was still covered with plum trees  
And the High Street was busy with horse carts  
Echoing cries from the working Dockers  
Not to mention the prisoners who worked for the near port  
Giving the reputation to the area.  
The conversation suspect till today.  
A forgotten margin of the city



Sprawling desperately into the future  
 Longing for greatness of the past  
 Unknown to strangers.  
 A Victorian suburb stained with the foreign  
 Nothing like a London postcard  
 No one comes for sightseeing.  
 The smell of inertia hits you first.  
 Apparently it's like any other extended suburb in London  
 With the hill, fire station, high street and the Chinese buffet.  
 With one difference.  
 It is my place now.  
 I cover its streets everyday with my effort to be  
 To belong  
 To find a right direction in a labyrinth of stories.  
 Which GP should I register with?  
 Where is the nearest bakery?  
 A florist?  
 A good primary school?  
 And where can I buy sour kraut?  
 The pointer to grasp:  
 Chandra with gherkins, Greggs with snow white rolls, Heera with kilometers of textiles,  
 Woolworth's with magic,  
 Rose & Crown, Electric Orange  
 The Volunteer's and the O'Dowds.  
 I try to pin the local stories down  
 Create a map of spaces and people  
 I am a user of this street.  
 Walking from home to work  
 Passing by Ambala restaurant  
 Hello top Bobby in Dadoos  
 Daily shopping at Chandra's – always fresh Polish bread  
 Garlic nan bread always at Somerfield's  
 Remembering cars are coming from the left  
 Short chat with Tony  
 A 96 bus driver living next door  
 My first Chinese take away  
 A pint of beer at the Volunteer's when my parents come  
 And in O'Dowd's with my friends  
 Advice from the lollipop lady about the coming rain  
 And invite from Jo to a school fair  
 I am to bake Polish cakes  
 It took me two years....

A Nigerian client in the African hair salon:

“I don’t go to Asian shops, but I was at the party once and there was such food there, I really like their food: all those samosas and spring rolls. I go to African shops, to buy African products, they have them in the High Street. I buy yam there, and vegetables for Nigerian soups”.

In the eyes of a consumer from the outside of those two cultures, “samosas and spring rolls” signify a general sphere of foreign exoticness. They are products which belong to “them” rather than “us”, but despite that discursive divide they do not arouse any emotional or political problematics. Multicultural references come from underneath of the unemotional, and worn out phrases which “contain the stale wisdom of past-generation-element of the <collective consciousness>” (Zijdervald 1972:11) which neutralized the difference between them.

I wondered to what extent the discussion about otherness was performed for me and because of me. Was I a trigger of those comments as in interviewer asking certain questions or as a foreigner? I assume those two “selves” cannot be separated, so they have an effect on the situation simultaneously, but with different meanings. These interviews are for both myself and my informants a field of exchange of different ‘appearances’ which had affected our socio-cultural performance. We can also call it a battlefield revealing the work of power across and within different groups.

The collected answers regarding the ethnic affiliation of businesses and customers in the High Street were polarized around three racial groups: black, Asian, and white. Mainly, in the discourse of the informants the races stood for ethnicities, subsequently, African, Indian, and English. Adjectives Asian and Indian were very often used inversely or together in one phrase to name one Asian/Indian ethnic group; in the same way Nigerians and Somalians were often listed together to indicate the African and the black as the same. Why nobody ever noticed that Africans can also be white? Why nobody ever noticed that the whites can be non-English? Those who were white and non-English, like myself, do have some representation in the High Street marketplace. There is one massage-salon run by Angelo, an Italian immigrant, living in Plumstead for more than twenty five years. But his business is located in the back of the hair salon recognized by everyone as African due to the Nigerian ownership of Sharaz, who occupies the front of the place. Polish ethnicity is marked in Asian shops (Indian and Sri-Lankan) by many Polish adverts displayed in the newsagents’ windows and a great range of Polish products sold in the grocery and convenient shops. However, Poles living locally do not have any separate marketplace assigned to them and relay on the very responsive Asian entrepreneurship. Non-white ethnicities, like Chinese, Vietnamese, Turkish, Zimbabwe, or Sri Lankan, although visibly signified within the space of the High Street, either on the outside banners or in the local advertisements were not mentioned by my informants as separate consumer communities. For the English owners and customers, all non-white businesses were labeled unanimously as “theirs”: Indian/ Asian or African/Somalian/Nigerian/black. Although it was remembered that Plumstead was ‘originally drawing Asian immigrants and Africans came later’, in the discussion about

shopping and services they were put in to one basket. Melting the distinction between Asian and Indian origin was typical among all consumers, including the Indian themselves. Non-white informants also happened to add to this group other Asian ethnicities: Chinese, or Vietnamese, although not necessarily by naming them in a direct way. Language carries certain connotations between ethnicities and products which through the everyday repetition have become cultural clichés with no original roots (Zijdervald 1972):

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Yesterday, Pete -my assistant and myself decided to go out and try some Indian food in the High Street, of which we heard so much from our informants. I really don't know Indian food, but I am very curious about all different kinds of exotic dishes which were not available to me during all my life under Communism, so I wanted to buy everything at once. We were thinking about a proper meal in a restaurant which we deserved so much after a long day of interviews, but we could not find a place with tables and a full menu where we could sit down, chat and chill a bit. We popped in to all those "family restaurants" mentioned by our Indian interviewees, but I found them too loud, too crowded and too soaked with the smell of some cloying spice I didn't know. We decided to go for a take-away and a bottle of wine from the nearest off-license. It wasn't the meal as described by the informants who told us about "family Indian restaurants in the High Street, where you can smoke shisha and talk to your friends". We had checked every single one but we did not feel at "ours" in any of them: apparently those places which the Indians considered their homely environments did not speak to us in the same way. Despite our eating from the take-away bag, we were enjoying it very much. The food was great and I had lots of fun with learning all the names: jalfrazi, boryani, madras, bhuna, vindaloo, dupiazza, dansak, bhajee, and shisha.

Tomorrow, we will go for Chinese, I said to Pete.

"Ok, whatever, I like it too". But for me it wasn't just a "whatever choice". I haven't got enough of the new tastes and new words from other cultures to match. Every time I have Chinese I feel so cosmopolitan and I think about my home town in Poland where this kind of food is quite unknown and disapproved (on that basis). I noticed that while eating my meal with Pete I was speaking about this difference all the time. "This food is so colourful and vibrant, it is so dissimilar from anything I know from home. I love chutney sauce, I bought it once in the Indian grocery shop but I didn't know you need popodams with it. But this yellow lime dip is lovely too. It is sweet and sour at the same time, and so neon-bright! Our food is so greasy-gray and has no smell in comparison to this. I have to learn how to make these dips. And I want to make the bhajee too, look it is so simple: some onion and potato. I have already burnt popodams keeping it in boiling oil for ten minutes, but I am not giving up, I need to know more about these different foods. I need to understand them.

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Can I create a home on a new land by decision?

By a well planned strategy of knowing the other  
 Analysing their choices  
 Swallowing their food  
 How can I  
 Make these people embrace my difference?  
 Make the street unfold its litters under my feet  
 And pour the story of its people to my afternoon tea?  
 As Savage et al. say, today you choose where you want to belong  
 Maybe the “elective belonging” is what I wear?

A female Egyptian customer doing shopping in the Indian grocery store:

“I come to here from Welling. They have everything here I need. You have things here which you don’t have in ASDA and TESCO, but I haven’t tried anything I don’t know. I came here for my products; it feels exactly like in Egypt, I feel like at home. It is very multicultural here. It’s good, but it is good for me because I am not English”

The narrative is not innocent: “Representations of places have material consequences in so far as fantasies, desires, fears and longings are expressed in actual behaviour (Harvey 1993:22) In my empirical observation of the shops’ supply, I identified products from different countries on the shelves of Asian and African shops. Providing mainly to the Asians, Amar’s Cash & Carry sells Nigerian yam, Indian scents, figurines of Buddha and Jesus Christ. In reaction to the latest influx of the new immigrants from Eastern Europe, they have also introduced Polish products. In every Asian shop and news agent there are adverts, sales offers and original products’ names displayed in Polish language. There are no other Eastern European food stuffs or languages included yet. When asked why it is so, the Asian shop owner explained to me that “it is the majority of the clients which decide. There are more Polish now in Plumstead, so we do Polish”.

A journalist, Fiona Barton, from *the Daily Mail* explains the truth about my situation in the UK:

“Since joining the EU, Poles have come here in their hundreds of thousands. Critics say they deprive Britons of jobs and houses. Economists say they are adding £300million to the economy and keeping interest rates down. Starting today, in this major investigative series, the Mail sets out to discover the truth ... The shelves of the Polskie Delikatesy are crammed with jars of red cabbage, pickled cucumbers, smoky kabanos sausages, dark Polski chleb (bread) and racy, indecipherable magazines. I ask a question and the assistant, a young woman with long black hair, looks at me blankly, shrugs and shakes her head. I turn to two other customers, a pair of stocky men in work clothes, but they are equally puzzled. So, unable to make myself understood, I retreat. I feel like a foreigner, but this is not Warsaw, Krakow or Gdansk. I am in Southampton, an English city where one in ten of the 220,000 population is now believed to be Polish”. (Barton 2006)

When I read this, I felt guilty of making Fiona feel foreign in her own country. At the same time I blame writing *per se* for closing me in the rigid frame of the definition of ethnicity. By writing: black, white and Asian, by providing quotations and a map, I simply reinforce or -as Edward Said says – “mime” the racially-orientated imagination of the white culture. Yet being aware of this authoritative mimetic obligation imposed on my academic self, does not help in eliminating its overpowering methodology. However, seeing in writing what I do in writing, enables me to recognize my own submissive position and I can open it to critical scrutiny. As one “externalizes” one’s argument in a text, they become the object of study too (Lofland 1971) as much as the text produced, as any other representation, faces interpretation. A political effect I hope for is contained in Thompson and Hirschman (1995) observation in that it emphasizes that representations not only reflect social relationships, but simultaneously rework them.

It is the second hour of footage, I am comforting myself with a big cup of hot chocolate and a warm blanket. I don’t feel well, it is the beginning of a flu. The context of the interview out there in the High Street and my own environment where I watch the tapes now in my living room add another semantic layer to the data.

The questions is how to engage the presence of the place’s representation on a video tape and not fall in to the leverage of words, images, and live experiences? A semiotic answer would be that they all produce meanings which add to the negotiated version of reality (see, for example, Devereaux’s essay *Experience, Representation and Film* in Devereaux and Hillman 1995 and also Strecker 1997). I cannot stop thinking that by writing what has been said in the interviews I do not negotiate, but rather reinforce the racial separation.

I want to give my ‘characters’ more visual space to let them be (re)presented in relation to their place and the context of the interview, but also I want to see myself in relation to them in that particular situation.

I look at rewind the tape, I look at each interview again. This is how I am going to edit it.....

The more I need this place to be my home  
 The more elusive it becomes  
 The map of the area falls apart whenever I try to restore it  
 People and places do not stay put  
 The stories do not fit the script of the academic project  
 Their lives burst into a catalogue of themes  
 Created with the digital software so minutely  
 With the grand plan in mind  
 To catch the words’ tail  
 What is the truth about this place?  
 The essence of my restless trials  
 To know the street

To plant the roots  
 In the scope of the location  
 Re-edited the hundredth time  
 Frozen in the moment of beauty  
 When the memories are born  
 And home shines in the scene  
 According to my direction.

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2. Nathalie Buscher, *In Search of Los Angeles Public Space: A Humble Quest Through Time and Space*
3. Charles Starks, *Automobiles, Engineering Standards, and the Commodification of the Public Realm*
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1. David Michalski, *Colliding Compositions in the Impossible City: the Interlaced Urban Designs of Buffalo, New York*
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4. Rafaela Santos, *106<sup>th</sup> Street and Me*

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