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Meeting on Cycling Cultures at Manchester Metropolitan University

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Cycling Cultures 2019 was organized by Kate Themen and Cosmin Popan from the Department of Sociology, Manchester Metropolitan University. Academics, artists and representatives from business, local government, and community cycling organizations attended. The focus was on gender and race in relation to cycling, and a common theme was that cycling does not only improve physical and mental health, but also mirrors social divisions, and promotes social change.

Kate Themen discussed the experience of competitive women's cycling, considering the processes which a body undergoes as an athlete acquires the skills to become a professional cyclist. Kate used auto-ethnography: she signed up for velodrome sessions and captured her own sensory experiences of the transition to track rider. Alongside field notes, Kate shared a video of herself cycling on the velodrome, showing the discrepancy between what she felt she looked like (an Olympic racer) and the reality (a rather more sedate pace).

Marlon Moncrieffe's (Brighton University, *Figure 1*) project on the life-histories of Black-British champions in cycling, reveals the untold stories of Black British cycling, raising significant questions about the assumptions of nation, nationalism and (white) identity in cycling. Marlon focussed on Black women in competitive cycling, such as Ayesha McGowan. So the question, is who do we project as representing professional cycling, and how can that become more inclusive?



Figure 1: Marlon Moncrieffe Brighton University presenting at the Cycling Cultures meeting.

Nadia Williams' (Dundalk Institute of Technology, *Figure 2*) analysis of advertisements found that the road appears to belong to the driver, and that driver is male. Other social groups, such as women, or cyclists, barely exist. In fact, when she analyzed radio discourse about cycling, cyclists are 'dehumanized', lacking even basic human instincts like self-preservation. Across different media, streets are presented as belonging to drivers, and as incapable to accommodate cyclists. Social inequalities, whether between genders or drivers/cyclists, are highly interlinked in the media.



Figure 2: Nadia Williams from Dundalk Institute of Technology presenting at the Cycling Cultures meeting.

Bicycles and cinema have a surprising shared history; both relied on innovations in sewing machine engineering and bicycles have been captured in film from its inception (Lumière's 1895 debut 'Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory' featured cycling employees). Bruce Bennet (Lancaster University) researches cycling in the cinema. He studied women cyclists' representation in movies, and he identified 3 themes: slasher films, women cyclists at work, and professional sports documentaries. Several slasher films show the dire consequences of women venturing out on bikes. Similarly, bike messenger films show the risks of women using their bike as part of work. Finally, there are professional sport documentaries, which have shown exclusion of women from racing due to perceived female fragility.

Apart from the subject matter of cycling, the meeting highlighted the importance and the richness of qualitative methods. It was clear from the presentations that methods such as auto-ethnography, ethnographic film, discourse analysis of media outlets, books and films, allow us to arrive at a deeper understanding of people's experiences, attitudes and thought processes in relation to cycling.

These are a few examples of the day's talks. Throughout we learnt that the bicycle is not only a means of travel, but (with environmental concerns and social inequalities at the fore), the bicycle can be a metaphor for change. Manchester is currently in the centre of such changes. Transport for Greater Manchester is putting cycling at the centre of its strategy (e.g., the so called 'Beelines') and national and local organizations such as Sustrans and Lady Pedal are broadening the demographics for cycling accessibility. The role of research is to support this by exploring cycling from a variety of perspectives, including enablers and barriers for cycling, and how cycling can help reduce inequalities and improve quality of life.

