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# BATTLEDRESS: USING IMMERSIVE DOCUMENTARY METHODS TO AERATE WORKING CLASS WOMEN'S ORAL HISTORY

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## ABSTRACT

This case study reflects on a multi-disciplinary research project **BATTLEDRESS** that investigates how methodologies of oral history and archive can be entwined with immersive techniques to create alternative 'encountered' histories of marginalised working-class women's experiences. The text reflects on a two-screen immersive film that draws on two oral testimonies with working class women writers reflecting on their teenage motivations for fighting and fashion choices and the little-explored themes of: Place and Belonging, Plenitude, Scarcity, Vulnerability, Invincibility, Femininity, Performance and Stepping Out that emerged from these. It discusses how working-class stories can be *aerated* through a layered two screen immersive approach where archive, audio/still and moving image sit in conversation with each other. These multiple iterations elicited unexpected findings and contradictions, encouraging the viewer/listener to delve into the underlying themes in the testimony, —prompting original insights into the confusion around gender roles and class uncertainty that can be at the heart of teenage female violence. It posits that experimenting with framing and eschewing a straightforward narrative can disrupt commonplace representations of grit, madness and despair whilst acknowledging the vulnerability, fragility, — but also ambitions and dreams of— the working-class teenage girl.

**Keywords:** Working Class Women, Oral History, Immersive Documentary, Archive, Fashion, Fighting, 1980's.



## INTRODUCTION

*"I belonged other places. That's what I felt like I felt like I belonged other places. Not this place, this place were too small!"* (BATTLEDRESS, Testimony Transcript, Participant 1, 2022)<sup>1</sup>

**BATTLEDRESS** is a multi-disciplinary, immersive project funded through the University Research and Knowledge Exchange Centre (UCKRE) at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) and Festival of the Mind at Sheffield University. The project is a collaboration between the authors, North West Film Archive, (NWFA) Human Studios, Sheffield, and Festival of the Mind. Author A is a researcher, filmmaker, and writer at School of Digital Arts (SODA), MMU and Author B is a researcher, writer and artist based at Manchester Writing School, MMU

This case study reflects on the authors' two screen immersive film, **BATTLEDRESS** exhibited at Festival of the Mind, Sheffield, Sept 2022 and inspired by a personal story 'Streetfighting Girls' written for The New Statesman by Author B in 2021, about the socio-economic pressures on girls approaching womanhood in 1980s Sheffield, exploring their collaborative creative methodologies and outlining their working process and nascent findings. The author's draw on approaches from oral history, archive filmmaking and immersive storytelling, synthesising these with practices from the fields of sensory ethnography and autobiographical filmmaking.

**BATTLEDRESS** gathered untold oral testimonies of fashion, fighting and allegiance that would otherwise be lost, to tell nuanced reflective stories from the unique perspective of working-class writers looking back on their teenage experiences in the North of England in the 1980's and 90's. The research examines how narrative, and form enmesh to bring out intimate disclosures highlighting the contradictions inherent in recalling challenging memories. **BATTLEDRESS** seeks to test creative methodologies by intertwining archive, oral testimony, and immersive storytelling across two screens prompting metaphorical stimulation, where each frame reaches out to the other inducing meaning neither alone can convey, in discursive 'encountered' narratives that disturb and reimagine the way working-class histories are framed.

Zimmerman (2022, P70) highlights the, '*persistent cultural tropes*' surrounding working class narratives and the ways that, '*my and others' pasts are so often represented as realist, object, in need of charitable support - that perpetuates a way of being visible based on erasure.*' For **BATTLEDRESS** the authors' challenge was to develop a form and methodology that would actively interfere with prevalent working class narratives

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Participant 1 Recorded by Author A June 2022



of *'marginal melancholy'* (Quintance, in Zimmerman, 2022, P70) and create an audio-visual work for viewers to 'step inside' and celebrate working class women's power, vulnerability, invincibility, joy, eccentricity, and imagination. In addition, the authors sought a co-creative methodology that honoured the autobiographical aspects of the work whilst also enlarging the first-person narrative to broaden the perspective.

Delving into autobiography in order to mediate memory involves a process, an excavation, a digging deeper which lends itself to experimentation, the poetic and the uncertain. It brings one a step closer to an acknowledgement that subjectivity and self-reflexivity may provide rich possibilities for the cultural exploration of the social world. (Daniels, 2017, P 3)

Embracing Lebow's (2012, Pg 5) suggestion that in first person filmmaking the, *'speaking, and in this case filming, subject is neither solipsistic or monologic but is always already in dialogue ..... always already 'speaking with...'* the authors used the autobiographical voice as a pivot, around which other audio-visual narratives are layered to extend the dialogic aspects of the work.

## PROCESS & METHOD

### ORAL HISTORY

Oral history practices have long been associated with the repositioning of marginalised voices but can also prompt reflection on space, place, and memory itself. *'The spoken word lies at the heart of oral histories'* (Humphries, 2022, p 97) and gathering untold testimony from working class women writers of memories of nights out in the 1980's and early 90's was integral to our approach.

*Memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meanings. Thus, the specific utility of oral sources for the historian lies, not so much in their ability to preserve the past, as in the very changes wrought by memory. These changes reveal the narrators' effort to make sense of the past and to give a form to their lives...* (Portelli, 1991, P69)

Author A took Author B's personal story *'Streetfighting Girls'* as a starting place for developing a set of interview questions rooted in Author B's personal memories. This avoided agenda setting and allowed Author A to hone in on the sensory ethnographic and phenomenological experience of these recollections.



A sensory ethnographic approach was embraced for its 'participatory' ethos and the way it focuses on multi-sensorial, embodied, emplaced ways of knowing. *'Sensory memory or the mediation on the historical substance of experience is not mere repetition but transformation that brings past into the present as a natal event'* (Seremetakis in Pink, 2009, P16) Participant 2's response below illustrates this phenomenological entanglement of smell and sensation embodied in recalling teenage experience.

Getting ready to go out in like an extremely long protracted delicious process .....when I think of smell, I think of like hairspray and mousse and the really claggy feeling of it on your fingers. And you know the smell of it in your nose and also poppers because my cousin, my cousin was quite into poppers and so it was like hairspray and mousse and poppers. (**BATTLEDRESS**, Testimony Transcript, Participant 2, 2022)<sup>2</sup>

The authors gathered oral testimony in what Starecheski describes as an *'embodied, intimate, dialogic, intensive'* (Starecheski, 2020, P102) experience. The interviewer and participants had, *"enough rapport for there to be a genuine exchange of views and enough time and openness ..... for the interviewees to explore purposefully with the researcher the meanings they place on events in their worlds."* (Pink, 2015, P75) The challenging nature of the material required discursive space to empower participants, *'Allowing people to talk back'* Hooks, 1989 (and thus) *give voice to those who have been silenced'* (Pink, 2015, P 26)

In some sense these oral testimonies can be conceived of as a dialogue between the participants' teenage and present selves as well as a dialogue with the interviewer, what Author B calls 'the polyphonic personal.' Author B, (2013, submitted) quotes Bahktin *'one actualises oneself 'only' in relation to the other.... It is only the other who can catch us off guard and see the back of our neck.'* Author B asks, *"But what if that other is not someone else, but our past self or future self? Could (intra) locutors also prove dialogical in the right immersive space, and do more to promote immersive experience?"* (Author B, 2023, submitted) and also as Starecheski (2022, P106) has noted a dialogue with an imagined audience, *"An oral history interview is a dyadic encounter which includes an imaginary public audience."*

Pink in *Doing Sensory Ethnography* notes that, *"Interviews are not only places where researchers learn about other people's experiences, but where interviewees might arrive at new levels of awareness about their own lives and experiences."* (Pink, 2012, p. 80)

What emerged from these discussions around these new 'levels of awareness' and questions of intersubjectivity is expanded upon in the findings was that both participants' felt their voices were

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Participant 2 Recorded by Author B June 2022



'silenced' by shame or regret about certain teenage acts or ways of seeing younger selves that intervened over time.

## WORKING WITH ARCHIVE/ FOUND FOOTAGE

Sourcing archive film and found footage involved a process of 'metal detecting' material that spoke to the testimony. Fumbling towards what Zimmerman (2022, P73 -74) describes as a 'cinematic vernacular' *of fragments, of imperfect memory, glimpses, unpredictable encounters; to start way down the road of a 'story' not to plod through the tired cause-and-effect or beginning, transformation and end.*

To support a transformative approach archival footage that replicated embodied experiences discussed in the testimony, such as the whirling motion of a fairground ride, or the physicality of bodies on a dance floor, was selected to act as a simulacrum of this sensory experience for the viewer.

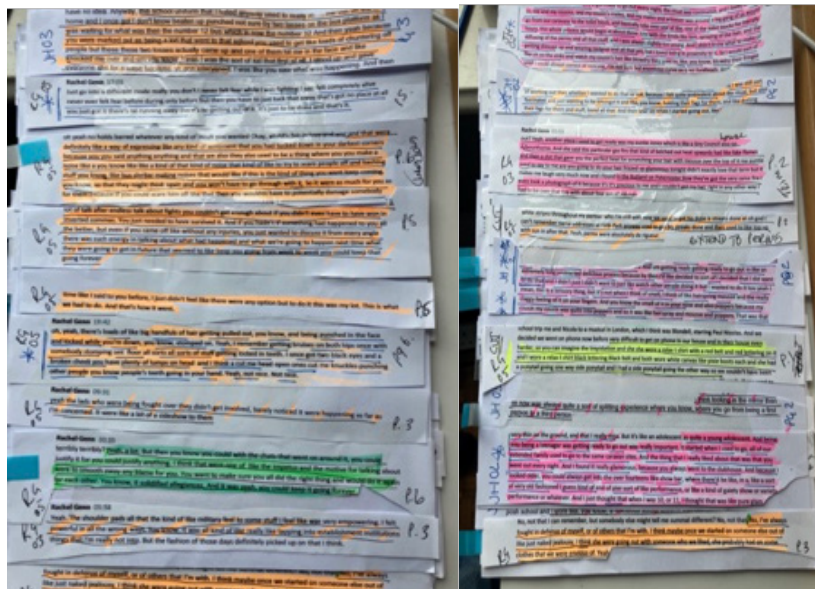
Polarised footage to highlight discursive narrative also leapt out, rich jewel like 16mm film gaudy with light and glamour, of young women at fairgrounds, dancing in clubs or stepping out at night in striking outfits and full make-up, remixed with dirty lo-res footage on early 1990's digital video formats, shot at night in youth clubs, queues for clubs and on estates, often produced through community arts projects and giving first person perspectives of Northern working-class landscapes. The interpolation of rich dreamy 16mm footage with grainy handheld video contrasted the dream or fantasy of a night out with the realities of the underlying violence of the streets that working class girls often encountered.

## EDITING

An analogue methodology was used to edit the oral testimony, Author A transcribed the testimonies which were then revisited and reviewed by both authors in a workshop process so that echoes and discourses threading through the material could surface. Themes emerged and were colour-coded of, Belonging, Plenitude, Scarcity, Violence, Femininity, Vulnerability, Invincibility, Performance and Stepping Out.



Fig 1. BATTLEDRESS Analogue Editing of Oral Histories<sup>3</sup>



Author A digitally edited the testimony then honed and refined the audio paying careful attention to emotion, intonation, delivery, pause and breath within the spoken word and the sensory and phenomenological qualities of this but also to the way the testimonies could be layered to create a dialogue around the emerging themes, "... not privileging one interpretation or perspective but allowing multiple subjectivities to co-exist in dynamic tension..." (Starecheski, 2022, P 106)

Eschewing linear story for polyphonic methods (multiple voices) and, 'opening up complex dialogues that reject binaries through polyphonies and which create mosaics of multiple lenses on issues.' (de Michiel & Zimmermann, in Nash, 2017, P11)

The excerpts below, recorded at separate times, were placed next to each other within the audio timeline in a polyphonic interchange reiterating the conflict and confusion both participants experienced around clothing the female body.

I think often, when I buy clothes, I cannot help myself, but make the wrong decision. ...I love reading about clothes. I love talking about clothes. I love looking at pictures of clothes. But when it comes to actually clothing my body, I think because then you get so much interference.

(BATTLEDRESS, Testimony Transcript, Participant 1, 2022)<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Images Author's Own Copyright 2022

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Participant 1 Recorded by Author B June 2022





I do remember wanting to wear clothes that expressed my desires, but not to like, wanted to be attractive and look sexy. But I definitely didn't want to be having sex as a result of that.

(**BATTLEDRESS**, Testimony Transcript, Participant 2, 2022)<sup>5</sup>

In editing the archival material and testimony the authors also experimented with dialogic interaction or interplay. In early iterations of **BATTLEDRESS**, the archive film played on one screen with bursts of archive stills on the other but the tempo and content of this impeded the 'conversational flow.' In the exhibition at Festival of the Mind, Sept 2022 different iterations of the completed archive film played on adjacent monitors broken up with bursts of still images which the audience viewed at head height.

... a memory of images or sounds from the earlier version may appear in the spectator's memory in fragments or pieces and these will impact and inform each other while viewing the new film. The signified becomes less fixed and the overall effect and meaning cannot be predicted. (Daniels 2017, Pg 6)

The women's voices were panned through separate speakers enhancing the idea that the viewer was part of this polyphonic conversation and could add their voice to the narrative.

**Fig 2. BATTLEDRESS Exhibition, Festival of the Mind, Sheffield, Sept 2022<sup>6</sup>**



<sup>5</sup> Interview with Participant 2 Recorded by Author B June 2022

<sup>6</sup> Images Author's Own Copyright 2022



## ENGENDERING IMMERSION

"Immersiveness is a crucial aspect of ... installation and can be influenced by multiple factors such as video, sounds, interaction and, finally, the density of all combined stimuli." (Nakevska et al, 2017) This *density*, and how audience brains might detect and use it, is at the core of the authors' curiosity. Making sense of the simultaneous images on screen, associating this with the audio testimony is the means by which individual imagination becomes the crucible for combining previously unrelated elements and extending immersion.

When presented with more than one element to attend to— when the narrative is neither linear nor story— audience engagement (a significant component of immersion, presence, or meaningfulness of experience) can be increased. Therefore, two elements blending to produce more than either, had a bearing on choosing two screens, demanding more of audience imagination as metaphorical language does; "metaphorical construing requires...a rather sophisticated intellectual ability ...."stereoscopic vision": the ability to entertain two different points of view at the same time.' (Berggren, 1962, p. 238) This stereoscopic presentation invokes questions rather than providing answers, and this might be the root of the imaginative richness of metaphoric imagery.

Fig 3 **BATTLEDRESS** Split Screen Stills <sup>7</sup>



As readers of metaphor, the imaginative effort we exert inspires what Carey calls 'the creator's possessiveness,' (Carey, 2005; p. 213) we are enmeshed, participating in the production of the meaning of the imagery. Anne Carson sees metaphor as a machine to compare "what is and what is not the case. (p.) " Metaphors are perhaps best structurally adapted to contain and deal with the incongruent or odd; vagueness or indistinctness, be they linguistic or visual.

In addition to exploring the metaphoric potential of two screens, **BATTLEDRESS** sought to induce immersion through awe by playing with the footage frame rate. Archive clips were slowed down throughout to enhance 'dreaminess' apart from in a brief unexpected moment at the fairground where they were speeded up as a metaphor for the thrill, fear and inevitability associated with fighting described

<sup>7</sup> Images Author's Own Copyright 2022



in the testimony. Unexpectedness is one of the components of awe; a state related to the presence that engenders immersion. (Chirico et al, 2017)

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

### FINDING PARTICIPANTS

Finding participants was more complex than the author's had anticipated. At the planning stage three working class women from Author B's personal networks with shared experience of fashion and fighting in Sheffield in the 1980's indicated they were willing to share oral testimony but later withdrew from the project. For one of these, there were concerns that publicly discussing her participation in violence as a teenager (even if her identity was concealed) might have repercussions on her current employment situation, highlighting how economic precarity may be a factor in self 'silencing' for some working-class women.

The authors reflected on how to find new participants and mitigate working class women's fears about publicly discussing female violence. Their solution was to approach women already using art as an outlet to engage in public debates about working class narratives. This was a successful strategy and two working class women writers agreed to participate in the project (due to time constraints only one of these testimonies appears in the final work). The authors acknowledge that the small number of participants limits the perspective of the work to some degree. However, this happenstance opened up new terrain within the research providing insights into the specific experiences of working-class women writers.

### ON BEING INTERVIEWED

Embodying the emotional experience of participation, Author B references Herta Müller's description of interrogation by the secret police. Müller observes, "speech glows hot in the mouth, and what is spoken freezes", (Granta, 2022, online). Author B noted a definite conflict in being interviewed between *knowing* and *not wanting to know* what responses might reveal, how they might sound, compared with written responses to questions that are asked of the self when writing about working-class status. Although different from interrogation, interviews are obvious opportunities for deepening authenticity. Müller states: "It was only during interrogation that chance toppled the words from the head into the mouth and they crystallized. Inescapably, and terribly, and sometimes forever." Author B reported that in the interview she was aware that her past self, jostled with the interrogatory current self, producing an



'online' questioning of one's authenticity, one Müller also recognised: "I asked myself if any given word could possibly be considered my own, since each one could switch sides and turn on me. (Granta, 2022, online).

Both participants were quite shocked that being asked direct questions about their growing up revealed that they had never really thought about these things before. Participant 2 in particular felt some shame at not being able to answer, "What was your teenage bedroom like?" as it struck her in that moment that she didn't have one.

In the house, there were not enough bedrooms. And coz there were five of us and two and a half bedrooms, it was often a bit like musical chairs. So if a think of my teenage bedroom, it's sort of like shuttling between three rooms (**BATTLEDRESS**, Testimony Transcript, Participant 2, 2022)<sup>8</sup>

## WRITERS AS PARTICIPANTS

The two writers were interested in setting free working-class heritage but became aware of the tensions in themselves about expressing this. Shame, for instance, can silence us or can be a spur to expression. In this way, marginalisation takes on a new dimension.

Author B's place-based memoir rooted in regrettable acts exposed her experience of physical violence and signifiers of invincibility (clothes/language) used by working-class teenage girls rather than the direct discussion of the shame surrounding it. Rather than looking directly at shame and regret, she builds up an almost sonar image of her own and others' perceptions and reflections.

Discussing how shame might underlie the urge to express, Denise Riley notes a curiosity: there's a proximity of shame to exhibitionism. In the case of writers this serves a particular function.

An 'exhibited' kind of writerly shame can be concealment tangled with un-concealment. You do need a confident immodesty to display your own shame. Yet that real confidence could be covering over an equally real humiliation. (Riley, 2018, page 68)

The interview by contrast, allowed for what is contradictory or unexplained about participants' views of former selves, begging difficult, uncomfortable questions and precarious, even hazardous answers, about the shame involved in the accretion of class and gender identity.

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Participant 2 Recorded by Author B June 2022



As working-class writers, both participants found they struggled with an auto-censor, aware of efforts neither to justify or excuse what they had once been and how this affected their sense of self now. This gives a socio-economic dimension to the already prismatic notion of the polyphonic personal suggested by Author B.

## GENDER, CLASS & VIOLENCE

The oral testimonies revealed new insights into how class and gender intersected with fashion and violence in ways the authors had not envisaged at the outset. In post interview discussions the authors and participants reflected on the relationship between economic 'scarcity' and their teenage 'coveting' of other people's clothes. Both participants discussed fashion as emblematic of 'plenitude,'

And so I was collecting funny things from charity shops um from about the age of 10 or 11 I'd say and it was just really this feeling of .....which is posh stuff for cheap. I just couldn't believe the kinds of riches you were allowed to have .... Because the plenitude was part of it. You know, it was about being able to have anything you want and have loads of it. (**BATTLEDRESS**, Testimony Transcript, participant 2, 2022)<sup>9</sup>

but also, as something that created intense desires and 'coveting' of what others had and that sometimes acted as a precursor to female violence,

Coveting other people's clothes, created like desires, I probably to this day have not even had for any man. But yeah, I coveting things was a big reason to to start nudging somebody or at least falling into a more, you know, trying to provoke something without blatantly doing it.

(**BATTLEDRESS**, Testimony Transcript, Participant 1, 2022)<sup>10</sup>

Discomfort with gender as teenage girls was also a shared experience for both participants and the testimony sheds light on the way they used fashion to subvert gender and explore different modes of femininity.

I think at that early stage, you know, when I was a little girl who'd cut off all her hair, and was wearing a burgundy brocade tie in a pastel neon, green flowery shirt, I think

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Participant 2 Recorded by Author B June 2022

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Participant 1 Recorded by Author A June 2022



I was expressing a real profound discomfort with my own gender. (**BATTLEDRESS**, Testimony Transcript, Participant 2, 2022)<sup>11</sup>

I do remember going on a bit of a feminine kind of like tip, where I used to buy clothes from Wallace. And it was also very much about class it was very aspirational. You know, I want it to look kind of sexless, almost middle aged, you know, a drop waist dresses, and crepe du chine, and all these kind of things that were like anachronistic (**BATTLEDRESS**, Testimony Transcript, participant 1, 2022)<sup>12</sup>

Sciamma (Mayer, 2016,P138) discussing her film *Bandes des Filles* (2014) notes that, "In the last shot of the film, Marieme wears the braids of childhood, the makeup of a diva and the clothing of a boy. She's possibly everything or none of these." What emerged in both testimonies was fashion as a space for the participant's teenage selves to play with eccentric modes of self-expression that, like Marieme, refused to be pinned down or boxed off by gender expectations.

I had a giant brocade burgundy tie. That I used to wear and then I bought my pride and joy this coat ..... this amazing fur trimmed winter coat. It was a bit like kind of Anna Karenina, really. (**BATTLEDRESS**, Testimony Transcript, participant 2, 2022)<sup>13</sup>

I do remember she made me a full lined camel coat once and used to wear it with a cravat that was in about 1984 and some kind of like snide riding boots<sup>14</sup> (**BATTLEDRESS**, Testimony Transcript, participant 1, 2022)

Clothing also provided for moments of invincibility however fleeting and hazardous these might be.

And I had this dress that had hoops up around the neck to join in leather like embedded in leather inlaid and it was completely tight, extremely short, and a halter neck. So no back in it. ...And a bloke decided to pick me up put me over his shoulder and lift it up ..... I'd felt absolutely invincible in that dress. And in one second. He'd completely taken all that away. (**BATTLEDRESS**, Testimony Transcript, participant 1, 2022)<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with Participant 2 Recorded by Author B June 2022

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Participant 1 Recorded by Author A June 2022

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Participant 2 Recorded by Author B June 2022

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Participant 1 Recorded by Author A June 2022

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Participant 1 Recorded by Author A June 2022



Fashion both helped and hindered the adoption and interpretation of male behaviour codes. Participant 1 notes that she still hoped to be taken for a woman, but not the kind of women being prescribed for 'safe use' to working class girls in the North of England in the 1980's and 90's. In the excerpt below her rejection of 'available' working class femininities and the relationship of this to 'fighting' surfaces in the testimony offering insights into the messy web of class gender and violence that surrounded these experiences.

But I always want it to be on the winning side. I did not want to be a woman as women were being presented to me. Because when I was growing up, you could either be a woman who people wanted to shag or somebody who were just quiet didn't say anything, didn't have anything, any options.....There were like two strands of femininity that I had access to, and neither of them were doing for me at all. I'd much rather be you know, train up, get good at fighting, and at least be able to punch my way out of me predestination. (**BATTLEDRESS**, Testimony Transcript, Participant 1, 2022) <sup>16</sup>

Jaqueline Rose (Rose in Mayer, P21, 2016) argues for a 'scandalous feminism, one which embraces without inhibition the most painful, outrageous aspects of the human heart, wherein physical darkness, the darkness of the unconscious and of the cinema screen are all taken back.'

**BATTLEDRESS** doesn't flinch from this 'darkness of the unconscious' the oral testimonies allow space for 'aerating' debates around women and violence that reveal the complex and contradictory socio-economic and gender forces navigated by working class girls in the North of England in the 1980's and 90's.

In the testimony below Participant 1 draws attention to the way 'remote violence' was absorbed through the 'ether' of her upbringing and how this related to 'powerlessness.'

Every corner of our house had weights, or a bull worker, or an Arnold Schwarzenegger book, you know, it was all everything was geared towards being strong enough to fight off anyone who came. And I think that was a real, collective feeling of powerlessness. And wanting to assert yourself in any way possible (**BATTLEDRESS**, Testimony Transcript, participant 1, 2022) <sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Participant 1 Recorded by Author A June 2022

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Participant 1 Recorded by Author A June 2022



And how the fear of being seen as weak when entangled with 'powerlessness' is revealed as a motive for violence.

And often it was about that you were like some kind of pussy like you couldn't fight or like you were you're going to be easy to knock out and trying to provoke you with your own weakness (**BATTLEDRESS**, Testimony Transcript, Participant 1, 2022)<sup>18</sup>

Connections between the restrictions of class and the perceived inevitability of violence experienced as a teenager can also be made within Participant 1's testimony.

I do think a lot of those teenage years and the younger years were really afraid that I was stuck in the class that I was born into. That I'd got ideas above my station, or that I thought I was something that I wasn't. (**BATTLEDRESS**, Testimony Transcript, Participant 1, 2022)<sup>19</sup>

I just didn't feel like there were any option but to do it this was my lot. This is what we had to do. And that's how it went (**BATTLEDRESS**, Testimony Transcript, Participant 1, 2022)<sup>20</sup>

Ambivalence around violence is also clearly expressed both in the testimony and in reflective discussion afterwards. Including teenage strategies employed to elicit fear in your opponent's prior to a fight so 'you won't have to go through with it' and 'endless talk' to justify behaviours.

We also they also used to be a thing where you you make a noise like a you know like like a kind of that kind of noise ....and bashing stuff you know, like bus shelter making noises that would like if this is the kind of thing you want keep coming you know, so that they might think again and you won't have to go through with it. (**BATTLEDRESS**, Testimony Transcript, Participant 1, 2022)<sup>21</sup>

A lot of talk after endless talk about fights....., you just wanted to discuss it from every angle there was such energy in talking about what had happened .....With the chats that went on around it, you could justify it for you could justify anything. I think that

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Participant 1 Recorded by Author A June 2022

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Participant 1 Recorded by Author A June 2022

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Participant 1 Recorded by Author A June 2022

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Participant 1 Recorded by Author A June 2022





were one of like the impetus and the motive for talking about were to smooth away any blame for you. You want to make sure you all did the right thing and would do it again for each other. You know, it solidified allegiances. (BATTLEDRESS, Testimony Transcript, Participant 1, 2022)<sup>22</sup>

Reflecting after the interview Author B noted *"I realise now I wasn't just talking about me and my clique, rather, I have let my wider community seep in,—overhearing my brothers/cousins/schoolmates as well as my immediate circle constantly talking of fights made for a constant and circular force powered by threat blame and justification that might have been more honestly levelled elsewhere."*

New transformative understandings of the memories shared within the testimonies were arrived at by both participants and they acknowledged that this dialogic interaction with their teenage selves however uncomfortable in some way helped them, actively create meaning and... *'make sense of the past'* (Portelli, 1991, P69)

## CONCLUSION

Creativity in working class people is often untapped or misrepresented in art by resorting to easily recognisable and overused tropes. The authors believe that Battledress in its choice of raw material, its editing and presentation, gives a wider margin for contradiction and unexpectedness *within* individual working-class voices. The film itself has a vibratory aesthetic, echoing the sentiments of the writer Daniela Cascella (Minor Literatures, 2018, online) who believes that faint signals (voices, however marginalised) should be detected and amplified and rather than static, voices should be kept 'mobile' and 'vibratory,' living between the page, interview, discussion, performance. The challenge of letting sense be made by randomising the second screen's association with the first, gave rise to a film with a rich interpretive potential.

As documented in the methodologies section, in a number of respects our intentions did not match outcomes but often, encountered obstacles were generative. For example, blindly trusting that the two screen method was necessary to unearthing entangled roots (with the metaphoric capability that the two screens could afford an audience), contributed to the aesthetics of the work and gave insights into the nature of immersion. The effort to apprehend the unpredicted chimes and synchronicities that emerged

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with Participant 1 Recorded by Author A June 2022



from the moment-by-moment associations between screen one, screen two (and what was being heard in terms of voice and music), was as much a result of chance as conscious choice by the authors.

The capability of metaphor to cope with “what is and is not,” helps produce work alive in the mind of the viewer by means of what Uricchio calls a “generative friction between experiential layers.” (2019, Leonardo, online) By fostering diffusion or indistinctness, the solid lines around what it means to be a Northern working-class female become less definite. Opposites become bedfellows; as Müller acknowledges on being asked questions in high stakes situations, “Fear and courage are probably to some extent one and the same thing. For me they were never complete opposites.”

The unique perspective of the interview process showed that previous acts and motivations, some quite monstrous, may not be explained or expunged as easily as participants and researchers had believed. Therefore, marginalisation in this context may also mean to put outside the boundary of oneself, answering as current self with your former self construed as “a different person.”

*Some bold authorial show of shame needn't cancel out the emotion itself.* (Riley, 2018, p.68)

As a participant, Author B felt this flicker of uncertainty in her own authenticity.

*After my partner watched it he said “I didn't realise that fighting was such a central part of your life back then.” I immediately felt defensive,—as if he was questioning my authenticity but when I thought about it, I started to analyse what the difference between truth and honesty in testimony was.* (Author B, debrief)

The unpredictable combination of unrelated elements to generate new meanings brought harmony out of chance, helping to transcend bounds of the intended meaning associated with binary stereotypes of Northern femininity. The end result exposed the raw intersection of class-consciousness and gender: *We don't quite know what we are, even as grown-ups, so how can you?*

The authors make the case that the transformative ‘natal event’ of sensory recollections (Seremetakis in Pink, 2009, P16) , especially of shameful events, can perhaps augment the immersive experience (the integration between the immersee and the immersive triggers in the environment). Viewers bring their individual virtual assets (imagination/memories) to the understanding of the content and form, making them party to the act of poesis - “that which “produces or leads (a thing) into being’ (Whitehead, 2003).

We hope this work has refreshed working-class immersive documentary allowing vital, creative, and idiosyncratic influences to emerge through the particular alignment of, and friction between methodologies that allow raw and contradictory perspectives to open *within* the first person. The authors



think that immersive art has a place in ideology and can help further promote an understanding of why gender examined within working class frames must be accepted as differences that count.

We hope that *Battledress* harnesses the power of ambiguity and indistinctness in reinterpreting female coming-of-age and reflection— weaves and amplifies confusion and shame, shows gender and class taboos in their glorious entanglement, revealing that these knots and snarls can be as beautiful as the cultural fabric they often get cut from.

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## **FOOTNOTED MATERIALS - ORIGINAL TESTIMONY TRANSCRIPTS**

Interview with Participant 1 Recorded by Author A June 2022

Interview with Participant 2 Recorded by Author B June 2022