

LIZ HINGLEY

UNMADE BEDS

LIZ HINGLEY GRADUATED FROM BRIGHTON UNIVERSITY, WITH A FIRST CLASS BA HONOURS IN EDITORIAL PHOTOGRAPHY IN 2007 AND WENT ONTO COMPLETE A TWO-YEAR SCHOLARSHIP WITH FABRICA RESEARCH AND COMMUNICATIONS DEPARTMENT IN ITALY. IN 2011 SHE GAINED AN MSC IN SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY (WITH DISTINCTION) FROM UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON (UCL) AND IS CURRENTLY ARTIST IN RESIDENCE AT THE UCL MIGRATION RESEARCH UNIT AS WELL AS HONORARY RESEARCH FELLOW OF THE DEPARTMENT OF THEOLOGY AND RELIGION AT BIRMINGHAM UNIVERSITY. HER WORK *UNDER GODS: STORIES FROM SOHO ROAD* WAS PUBLISHED IN BOTH ENGLISH AND FRENCH BY DEWI LEWIS PUBLISHING IN MARCH 2011; THE EXHIBITION IS TOURING INTERNATIONALLY.

ABSTRACT Liz Hingley received the 2011 Getty Editorial Grant to complete her project *The Jones Family*, which explores the intergenerational cycle of deprivation within the context of a wealthy country. In this visual essay, she observes the significance of one particular item of material culture—the bed—in the everyday life of a low-income British family. Photographs are taken as points of departure to demonstrate how a close examination of the bed can reveal the patterns of a household's past, present and future lives, economic situation, desires, and ideals. The bed is discussed in relation to socioeconomic status, home arrangement, taste and consumption, family relations, and identity.

KEYWORDS: beds, poverty, family, home, identity, consumption



Throughout my career as a photographer I have been drawn to explore the psychological constructs of home and the underlying human need for a private enclave that defines and constructs our identity

and communicates across social divides. In past projects I have focused on contemporary meanings of home and homelessness, disengaged urban living and materialistic ideals. On reflection, I realized that I had spent much of my time sitting on the beds of my subjects and taking photographs of them. In 2004 I focused on the growing wealth divide in Brighton. I produced portraits of homeless people sitting on beds in a homeless hostel as well as on the beds of show flats for opulent residential settlements located nearby. During explorations into the culture of material religion in urban homes of migrants in the UK and France, beds and bedrooms often proved to be among the most interesting subjects. Prominent photographic depictions raise complex and often contradictory issues that clarify the bed's provocative nature. Beds are ever-present within Richard Billingham's (2000) photographs of his family. They illustrate the identity of each character and the relations between family members, providing a compelling feast for the eyes. Billingham's father, Ray, is constantly depicted in his bed asleep, drinking, drunk; the dirty beds, either stark or disheveled, act as a symbol of poverty, loneliness, and forgotten dreams. His mother's obsession with decorative things can be seen in the flowery and lacy ruffles adorning the beds. In a similar vein, David Sameshima's constructed images of rumpled beds evoke domesticity, encapsulate the "private," and engender multiple-layered readings that create a register of paradoxical desires and projections.

In 2010, amid rising public concern over the effect of governmental benefit cuts on Britain's poorer classes, I was approached by the charity Save the Children. Four other photographers and I were commissioned to work on a campaign that "brings a new perspective to the lives of British children living in poverty, told through photographs, film and interviews" (2011a). According to Save the Children's (2011b) statistics, 3.9 million children across the UK live in poverty.

I approached this commission in a similar way to undertaking any project. I seek a more collaborative process of image-making rather than using the persons in my photographs as illustrations of a subject matter. For example, I ask people I portray for their opinions on how they wish to be represented, allow them to intervene in positioning themselves, and sometimes offer them cameras to document their surroundings. Thus, it was important for me to find a low-income British family with whom I could develop a trusting personal relationship rather than being allocated a family by Save the Children. I met the eldest daughter of the Jones family while leading a photography workshop in the industrial city of Wolverhampton, UK. I chose to work with the family over a number of years so as to look further into the intergenerational cycle of deprivation. It has been a transformative relationship of mutual learning and sharing.

The Jones family,¹ which consists of two parents and seven children, lives in a three-bedroom semi-detached council house. In the smallest bedroom, the fifty-year-old mother shares a double bed with

the forty-three-year-old father. In the second bedroom, there is a mattress on the floor and a bunk bed for the three boys (aged twenty-four, twenty-two, and eighteen). The third bedroom is shared by the four daughters (aged twenty-one, sixteen, fifteen, and fourteen) and contains a double bed and a bunk bed. In addition to these three upstairs bedrooms and one bathroom, the house comprises a living room and a kitchen downstairs. The council offered the Jones family larger accommodation on numerous occasions during the thirty-plus years that they have resided in the house. However, they refused the offer on the grounds of sentimental attachment; as the mother stated, “this is our house, it has so many memories in it” (this resembles Nettle’s (2009) assertion that, psychologically, “the environment ‘gets under the skin’”).

I decided to limit the photographs to the family’s home life within the five rooms of their house. I was drawn to consider the meanings embedded in the material qualities of their environment, the decoration, and objects they cherish, as well as the everyday rituals, practices, and interactions in which each family member finds personal expression and a sense of autonomy. The centrality of beds in the life of this particular household soon became clear. The following photographic essay investigates what the process and analysis of visual documentation of this particular item of material culture can reveal. There is not enough space here to show all the photographs I have taken and to detail the multiplicity of my observations on the various dimensions of beds. Here, the photographs will be the point of departure for discussion, with the aim to employ, as Edwards (1997: 53) suggests, photography’s strength as a medium to question, arouse curiosity, hear different voices, or see through different eyes.

Through the process of image-making I discovered the general complexity of household interaction and the layering of public and private realms. So as to cause minimal disruption with my photographic equipment, I chose to use ambient lighting rather than flash. I selected a waist-level camera to avoid having a device intruding on my direct face-to-face engagement with the Jones family members. I also employed a discrete portable scanning device in order to focus on material details and convey the textural quality of the household’s beds. Using these two visual devices allowed immediate and ongoing analysis of the multifaceted object of the bed in the intimate bedroom situation. Analyzing the images some time after shooting uncovered elements overlooked at the moment of capture. The process enabled me to move beyond first impressions and opened up new forms of inquiry for future visits to the family. Continuing discussion with the individuals about their relation to their beds gave an insight into my participants’ experiences of touch, smell, sound, and vision, particularly in relation to their home environment.

This study does not intend to construct a “typical” British home situation, but rather to recognize and comprehend cultural and social

difference. The photographs represent a small sample of a population, distinct in many ways (low educational and socioeconomic level, white British) that was studied at a certain time. Nevertheless, these images demonstrate how detailed examination of the bed has the potential to reveal certain patterns of a household's (individual and united) past, present, and future lives, economic situation, desires, and ideals. Beds provide a human narrative. They are expressive of each individual's personality and intricately incorporated into a family's culture.

IMAGES

This photograph (Figure 1) was taken from the parents' bedroom doorway one January afternoon. It shows the mother and youngest daughter of the Jones family. The double bed occupies nearly the entire floor space, which implies a house with rooms of similarly limited spatial dimensions. The surrounding plaster walls display remnants of



Figure 1
Socioeconomic status.

different wallpapers with which the family have lined the walls since they began renting the house from the council. In one discussion the mother highlighted her frustration at the council's intrusion: "They came and did the wiring but they stripped all the wallpaper and left it just peeling off." The father and mother of the family are both unemployed and receiving benefits, as are their twenty-four-year-old son and twenty-one-year-old daughter. The remaining three girls and two boys are in full-time education. The eldest daughter described how the younger girls would often go to sleep in their parents' bed when they came back from school.

In the living room (Figure 2) two of the girls make a game out of drying their hair after a shower. One girl uses a sheet from her bed, as towels are in short supply. I observed that the sheets, covers, and pillows from the beds had a variety of different uses and became of particular importance during colder months. The only heat in the house is from a small gas fire in the living room, so duvets are crucial even during the day. This portability of the family's bedcovers reveals not only a low level of material wealth but also each individual's attachment to them, as observed in the girls' practice of taking their duvets and pillows with them when they stay at friends' houses. The multifunctional aspect of beds has been touched upon in numerous articles.



Figure 2
Socioeconomic status.

For example, in Jerbi's (2006) study of the traditional Sudanese bed the author suggests that having multiple uses for objects is typical of people in low-income societies, whereas those in high-income societies tend to use each object for a different purpose.

This image (Figure 3) was taken from the doorway of the three boys' bedroom. It shows the eldest son working on a laptop on his mattress (he informed me that the legs of the bed had "broken off"). The laptop is borrowed from Wolverhampton University where he studied animation. He is the first in the family ever to attend university and after graduating established an animation business with fellow students. During the hours of 9 am to 5 pm the boys' bedroom is his office and access is denied to other family members. He dreams of working in London as an animator. However, he disclosed, that moving out of home would be extremely difficult for financial reasons. The poor condition of the room is apparent in the battered walls and



Figure 3
Zoning.

exposed bricks. The Wolverhampton Wanderers football shirt pinned to the wall belonged to the children's great-grandfather. The youngest boy, who hung it up, aspires to travel internationally as a sport coach.

This reflection in the mirror of the girls' bedroom (Figure 4) captures something of all the occupants. The evident lack of privacy is frustrating for all concerned. As one of the girls commented, "I wish I had a single room with a single bed with no one around." My visits disclosed some regular routine within the household, which demonstrates a general desire amongst the family members to maintain order (Giddens 1984: 87), a zoning of space, and gender identity. The occupation of the living room by the boys was a prioritized at all times. At weekends and holidays the girls get up first and lie on the sofas in the living room watching television in their bedclothes with their duvets. The boys rise around midday and assume position on the sofas, also covered in their duvets. The four girls generally remain upstairs for the rest of the day, sitting on their beds playing computer games and watching television.

The youngest girl sits on her bottom bunk with posters of American wrestlers pinned up in the surrounding space (Figure 5). She commented, "I don't have much wall for posters; I only have a little wall, but it's important." This series of photographs demonstrates how



Figure 4
Zoning.



Figure 5
Identity.

beds (and people's engagements with them) offer personal narratives about their owners. Bedrooms, among all the rooms in a house, are known for their ability to convey individuality. By displaying symbols (e.g. a shirt of Wolverhampton Wanderers football club or posters of American wrestlers), occupants can communicate their attitudes and values to others and define themselves with the family group.

This depiction of one girl showing me the rug above her bed (Figure 6) was made at her request. She proudly explains that her dad had given it to her some years before and that it makes a good curtain. This picture (and previous ones) reveals how individual areas in the bedroom are highly segregated by wall hangings or posters. Family members inscribe themselves and their lives on their beds and surrounding space. This marking out of individual territory can be seen to define and enforce their identity and hierarchy within the household. As Bourdieu's (1970) study of Kabyle dwellings reminds us, the house is not some natural emanation; rather, it is created by artisans of greater or lesser skill to become the cultural object within which these same artisans see their own identity.



Figure 6
Identity.

The subject of this photograph (Figure 7) exemplifies the visible expressions of closeness between family members. Physical proximity is also enforced by the layout of the beds and the size of the bedrooms, which constrain possible patterns of interaction and confine the family to their beds. Each family member expressed both positive and negative feeling about living so close to one another. The eldest daughter described how she enjoys sleeping in the same room as her three sisters: “We all have a little chat before we go to bed ... our bedroom is our favourite room in the house.” The youngest concurred: “I don’t mind sharing with my older sister but I don’t want to share with anyone else. She is comfortable.” The girls informed me that they frequently change their sleeping positions because their mattresses get “saggy” due to their poor quality.

The youngest daughter, who occupies the top bunk bed, took this photograph (Figure 8) depicting her teddy bear on her bed. As part of



Figure 7
Family relations.

our collaboration, I offered cameras to all members of the Jones family but only the four girls accepted. Their images gave me an insight into how they viewed each other and what they saw as worth depicting in their environment. Toys and images of other family members lying on beds were popular subject matter to capture. Together with the posters and hangings on the wall, their pictures of toys signify how the family members appeared fixated with various themed fantasy worlds and were avid collectors of objects from comics to items related to wrestling, football, and pop music. These were literally incorporated into the beds in the design of the duvet covers and the numerous stuffed toys that adorned them.² It can be assumed that the children's rooms disclose the things that they see and find for amusement and instruction.

This scan (Figure 9) of the surface of the mother and father's bed reflects the mix of fabrics I regularly observed layered on top. The mother explained that some of the covers had been used when the children were babies and that she liked them because they reminded



Figure 8
Family relations.



Figure 9
Family relations.

her of “those days.” This resonates with De Visscher’s (1999) claim that it is the “dressings” of the bed more than the bed itself that provide the sleeper with a sense of *Heimlichkeit* (privacy) and personal comfort. Bedcovers become, according to McCracken (1989: 172), layers of intimacy, both encompassed and encompassing.

NOTES

1. All members of the Jones family have given their informed consent to take part in this research and to reproduce the images that are printed in this article.
2. At the time of compiling this essay, the three boys had *Space Invaders*, *Toy Story*, and *Cars* depicted on their duvet covers, while the girls had Hello Kitty, My Garden, Me to You Bear, and Wolves Football Club.

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