Ethnography has come under a lot of quite justified attack of late from a variety of different sources. This led in the 1980’s to the crisis in anthropology; a discipline hewn out of the ethnographic technique of studying the ‘other’ and to significant debates within feminist research (especially in Australia and the US). It has also led to a marked decline and reticence to undertake ethnography, which even in its uncritical heyday was not the easiest of activities. Yet it is precisely these difficulties that has made ethnography one of the most rigorous and important methodologies. It is the impossibility of not being able to avoid the accusations of exploitation, colonial reproduction and the quagmire of representation and ethics that makes for a reflexive and vigilant researcher.

It is for these reasons that I now make an argument for using ethnography for educational research, detailing throughout the costs and benefits involved. I begin with some scene setting, which investigates the epistemological underpinnings to ethnography, mining a pit-hole that needs to be avoided. I then explore how ethnographers use theory to show how the deployment of certain concepts can lead to a move from representations of powerless object to agentic subject. Then, using examples from two different research projects: one an ethnographic study of white working-class women in a further education college taking ‘caring courses’ sometimes known as parenting classes, some of which is published in *Formations of Class and Gender* and the other new project of *Violence, Sexuality and Space* (conducted with Karen Corteon, Les Moran, Carole Truman, Lindsay Turner, Paul Tyrer), I will show how temporalities and contradiction are best understood through rigorous and reflexive ethnography.

The paper is organised into five sections. The first outlines the historical background and the epistemological foundation of ethnography in which appearance is equated with truth. The second outlines the relationship between theory and ethnography. The third explores the importance of understanding
temporality, and the fourth discusses issues of representation and ethics and the fifth draws a contrast between ethnography and the new project.

**One: Background**

Ethnography’s association with demography, phrenology and Aristotle’s *physiognomonein*, has led to long-standing epistemological assumptions such as the belief that appearance is the sign of the soul. It is part of the scopic economy of Western knowledge in which the observable is semiotically rendered into meaning. This genealogy is absolutely central to many methods we use and to our everyday lives. We make judgements on the basis of appearance continually, as if to look is to be.

The Enlightenment continued in this tradition in its use of particular technologies (if you’re Foucauldian) to produce, know and control the ‘other’. Knowing the other through visual codes was central to the security of the powerful. In this way they could control physical space and generate their own sense of ontological security out of producing distance from supposedly recognisable others.

Ethnography was used as one of the main technologies of the Enlightenment to generate classifications and knowledge about ‘others’: the most notorious European case being the measurement and display of the genitals and body of Sarah Baartman (otherwise known as the Hottentot Venus) who was presented at events by the French ethnologist Georges Cuvier. A similar example of the popularisation of display and categorisation can be found in the case of the seven Aboriginal people who were taken and forcibly displayed in circuses throughout Australia: only two came back alive. Lynette Finch (1993) shows how ethnography was used, amongst other methods, in Sydney:

> The range of chosen concerns through which middle-class observers made sense of the observed, included references to: living room conditions...drinking behaviour...language (including both the type of things which were spoken about, and the manner in which they were referred to—literally the types of words used); and children’s behaviour...

These were *moral*, not economic, references. (1993, p. 10) (My emphasis)

Central to the project of distinguishing a knowable other was the observation of women’s bodies. These observations were central, she argues, to the generation of what came to be known as the working-class. Observation, interpretation and representation were the means by which others could be recognised and kept in their place. As Harvey (1989) notes: