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Investing ourselves: the role of space and place in being a working-class female academic

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As working-class female academics, this paper examines the constructions of our identities focusing on both what unites and differentiates us as working-class women. We focus on the structuring forces in our lives such as our class, our whiteness and our gender, but we also discuss how our experiences have been shaped by space and place as a complex set of time-sensitive inter-relationships involving domination and subordination. Here, our different stories of *where*, *when* and *how* we grew up are discussed as we attempt to make sense of these in relation to our construction of class and its intersectionality with these important aspects of our lives. We examine how these shaping features of our identities influence the personal investment we place in our work and how the middle-class 'status' inferred upon us by our educational 'success' and engagement within academia almost always feels contradictory to our own subjectivities and working-class loyalties.

Keywords: class; identity; space; place; academics; historical specificity

Revisiting 'Class Matters'

When *Class Matters* was published in 1997, it broke new ground in starting to chart the ways in which working 'class experience is deeply rooted, retained and carried through life rather than being left behind ... more like a footprint which carries us forward than a footprint which marks a past presence' (Mahony & Zmroczek, 1997, p. 4). Its focus was with working-class women academics and their ambivalent experiences of class/gender. One of us (Meg) contributed a chapter to the collection called *Missing Links: Working Class Women of Irish Descent* that foregrounded the manner in which class operated as an unstable category in the lives of female academics of a working-class background. We may be middle class in occupational/status terms, we may align ourselves with working-class politics, we may feel working class in our hearts and minds. But, however we see ourselves in different times and in different places, we can often be positioned differently again by colleagues and students. Sometimes, all this identity ambiguity can have high emotional and psychological costs and consequences – of trying to fit/never fitting, trying to feel inside/feeling outside – in our workplaces and elsewhere (Reay, 2017).

The chapter also focused on the (then) relative invisibility of Irish women in the diaspora – and the way in which class, culture and faith operated in complex ways in different times to shape their social world (Walter, 2011). The unevenness and internal contradictions of the 'academy' were problematised, and it was claimed that the

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different types of institutions and disciplines that made up higher education constructed a heterogeneous set of experiences and academic identities. Simultaneously, a case was made for the need to refuse essentialising constructions of 'women' and for the recognition of difference while recognising the structural and objective 'conditions of our lives which bind us together as women in the academy' (Maguire, 1997, p. 88). Women were marginalised, positioned as other, rendered invisible, systematically discriminated against in relation to pay and promotion in the academy, as we still are, relative to our male colleagues (Morley & David, 2009) though we are acutely aware of the relative privilege our roles in academia afford us more broadly.

In this paper, we want to retain these sorts of concerns but extend them to include more consideration of time, space and place. In what follows, we focus on the way in which both our lives have similarly been shaped by our class, our whiteness and our gender, but we also attempt to examine how our lives and experiences have been differently informed by space and place as a complex set of time-sensitive inter-relationships involving domination and subordination (Massey, 1994). Drawing in part on work by Jorgensen and Stedman (2001) and Jessop, Brenner, and Jones (2008), we see a sense of place as being implicated in the constructions we make of our identities. A sense of place is a complex and sometimes precarious bricolage of feelings about the place we come from and where we call 'home' as well as where we are right now, and those relationships between place(s) and self/selves. Our identities are created/constructed through these placed relations. These connections and networks are intimately informed by memories, feelings, values, and affect. Place can provoke feelings of belonging, self-expression and freedom to 'be oneself' and produce 'place connections' and 'place identity' (Smaldone, Harris, & Sanyal, 2005). Equally place can compound outsidership and 'othering' through being in the 'wrong place' or being 'out of one's place'. Here we are not able to do justice to the complexities that are involved in sociospatial theory (but see Massey, 1994; Jessop et al., 2008). What we want to do is recover space and place in this account of being working-class academic women.

Following Jessop et al. (2008), we also want to consider the element of time and 'historically specific geographies of social relations' as well as 'contextual and historical variation' (p. 392). In a nutshell, all this is what we explore in this paper through our two different/similar accounts in different sociospaces and in different times, in order to weave together what Massey (1994) has called 'the intricacy and profundity of the connection of space and place with gender and the constructions of gender relations' (p. 2). We start with an account that details some major shifts in the UK over the last twenty years and then we turn to our situated narratives of 'where, when and how'.

The last 20 years in the UK

Here we want to spend a little time focusing directly on the historic specificity of context by highlighting significant changes that have occurred in the UK since the publication of *Class Matters*. We do this by first focusing on those changes that have occurred at a macro societal level before following these shifts through into how they have manifested themselves within the (meso) context of higher education before turning to how these have affected us directly at a more micro-level as working-class, female academics. We start in 1997, the year *Class Matters* was published, a year that

signalled a potentially significant turning point in the UK following the election of the ‘New’ Labour government after 18 years of Thatcherism under the Conservative Party with its promise of a fresh pragmatic and less partisan approach to politics (Driver & Martell, 2006). Rather than being a ‘new’ direction in policy *per se*, the 13 years of New Labour is now considered significant in solidifying the end of the largely socially-democratic post-war period by shifting the centre-ground between the two main parties in British politics considerably to the right and cementing neoliberal dogma to the extent that has become accepted as the new ‘common sense’ (Hall & O’Shea, 2013).

Following the global financial crash of 2008, the New Labour government, lost power. The already significant gap between rich and poor continued to widen (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2018) and what has followed is an aggressive and sustained pursuit of the politics of austerity from 2010 onwards first by a Conservative-led coalition and then the 2015 Conservative government that has focused on scaling down public sector spending (Clarke & Newman, 2012). This turn has disproportionately affected working-class communities, seen by Cooper and Whyte (2017) as concerted systematic institutional violence against working-class communities and as the UN Special Rapporteur (2018) has argued, ‘could easily have spared the poor, if the political will had existed to do so’. Accompanied by the roll-out of universal-credit, the Conservative government’s flagship benefits reform policy, the UK has seen an unprecedented worsening of health outcomes and living conditions with infant mortality rates rising and life expectancy now falling (Dorling, 2018). At the same time, within both policy and popular discourse, the systemic nature of these inequalities is rarely acknowledged or engaged with and, instead, working-class lives and cultures are pathologised and caricatured and then exploited and consumed as voyeuristic entertainment (Jones, 2011). This process is exemplified by the long-running Jeremy Kyle Show, a tabloid-style talk show that invited vulnerable, predominantly working-class guests, to engage in confrontations around dysfunctional aspects of their lives, the programme only recently cancelled when it was labelled a ‘toxic brand’ following the suicide of a guest shortly after filming (Taylor, 2019). There has also been a recent onslaught of similar, documentary-style shows focused around the lives of those reliant on state benefits, as unruly people, as engaged in risky behaviours and bad spending habits and in summary, as socially ‘disgusting’ (Lawler, 2005) and ‘revolting’ (Tyler, 2013). The timing of this rise in so-called ‘poverty-porn’ is, according to Jensen (2014), not coincidental but rather is an attempt to directly seek (and gain) public sympathies for austerity culture where, ‘the social problems of deepening poverty, social immobility and profound economic inequalities are magically transformed into problems of “welfare dependence”, “cultures of entitlement” and “irresponsibility”’ (p. 2). Moreover, in this increasingly unequal and unsettled society, these representations of the working classes, and within this, some of the most disadvantaged sections of the working classes, are blamed for the general ills of society (Mooney, 2011).

The period since *Class Matters* was published has also seen radical reforms intensify within higher education in the UK and globally. The almost universal acceptance of neoliberalism as the ‘new common sense’ has permeated higher education (Torres, 2013; Vernon, 2018) with its deeply entrenched focus on market-driven performance and accountability cultures (Naidoo & Williams, 2015; Olssen, 2016), and is still actively transforming the neoliberal university (Smyth, 2017; Breeze, Taylor, & Costa, 2019). Couched within the ‘excellence’ agenda (Gourlay & Stevenson, 2017), the ‘holy trinity’ of teaching, research and most latterly knowledge

exchange in the UK (*Times Higher Education*, 2018) are reduced to crude, comparable metrics (Brown, 2015). These measures drive competition for prestige, funding and students in a (highly unequal) competitive national and global higher education marketplace, that has:

... turned full circle ... especially in England as the country has moved from seemingly endless expansion in the sector to witness the reverse fate of austerity's revenge. This has meant huge cuts in the public funding of higher education and will most likely lead to institutional closures, mergers and job losses. (Hey & Morley, 2011, p. 166)

In this context, academics have, as Ball (2012) points out, been 're-formed as ... neoliberal academic subject[s]' (p. 17). This has required us to make ourselves 'calculable rather than memorable' but also 'gets into our minds and our souls' (p. 18). The work we do is increasingly transformed into an economic rather intellectual endeavour (Morley, 2018) and the drive for rationalised, individualised and instrumental behaviours intensifies whilst ensuring that emotion, affect and 'care' continue to be marginalised in the academy (Morrissey, 2015; Shahjahan, 2019). This reconstruction is evident for those academics who have, at first-hand, experienced this shift as being one of significant change, as well as those who have only ever experienced their own time in the academy through the prism of being a neoliberal subject (Archer, 2008). However, whilst this process of becoming and/or being the 'neoliberal academic subject' is beset with psychosocial agonies and insecurities (Gill, 2009; Gill & Donaghue, 2016) not least attached to employability, casualisation and precarity, which might equally evoke passive conformity on the one hand through to active resistance on the other, there is still enough on offer to 'seduce' academics into 'consuming' as well as being 'consumed by' the academy (Page, 2019).

The neoliberalised university continues to intensify inequalities in labour force patterns within each institution. According to Morley (2018) the gendered nature of the academy 'valu(es) and reward(s) the areas and activities in which certain men have traditionally succeeded' (p. 15). Other significant gendered elements of the academy remain stubbornly and depressingly resistant to change, particularly those associated with the gendered division of labour and disparities in pay and promotion opportunities (Guibourg, 2019; The Res-Sisters, 2017). Likewise, the academy remains not only disproportionality white, with Black, Asian and minority ethnic academics underrepresented overall and especially at senior levels (Bhopal, 2016) but also remain purveyors of institutionalised whiteness through their curriculum and acts of 'racialised microaggression' (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019). In this sense, white, male, middle-class privilege remains normalised and unchecked in the neoliberal university (Bhopal, 2018; Crozier, 2018) where the 'academic walls' built through institutionalised forms of racism, sexism and classism are difficult, at times even impossible, to permeate (Ahmed, 2017).

For some academics the 'state of the nation' outlined above is merely a backdrop, the 'context' in which they are working. For academics like us, these are the places we come from and reflect the very real battles being fought by our families and those we care about, those we are deeply invested in. This is not just about our past but a shaping feature of who we are and why we do what we do. It is not a coincidence that academics writing about class inequalities in education are disproportionately those from working-class backgrounds. This is where our loyalties sit – this emotional investment in our work is both classed and gendered with academic women from working-class backgrounds feeling an overwhelming commitment 'to continue an ethic of service to others less 'lucky' than themselves' (Mahony & Zmroczek, 1997, p.

5). Our work is also likely to be dismissed on these grounds by those who might suggest it is ‘too emotional’, those who have not experienced some of the hidden injuries of class that we have (Sennett & Cobb, 1972). We are far from detached, neutral academics and repudiate the ‘carelessness’ that the neoliberal university normalises (Lynch, 2010). We want to see change, we want to see more positive recognition and respect for working-class experiences, and the removal of long-standing structural inequalities (Fraser, 1996). We feel real anger that inequality, including that pertaining to both education and the children and students that we regularly encounter in our line of work as academics, is presented as resulting from the irresponsible lifestyle choices and habits of the working classes rather than through the political choice to pursue austerity within the public sector, as recently exemplified by the UN Special Rapporteur (2018). We return to this complicated and often challenging relationship we have with academia as working-class academics later.

Where, when and how

Now we want to take some instances of where, when and how we grew up to relate these (parts of our) narratives to our construction of class and its intersectionality with space, place, and time as well as our gender/occupations. Taking an approach that borrows, in some ways from narrative enquiry, as well as autobiography, we (re)turn to our own lives and experiences. Our approach is based on the claim that personal meanings are constructed and reconstructed through the working and reworking of our narratives. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) have written that ‘people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives’ (p. 2). Here we are telling parts of our own stories, but our intention is to connect these narratives to broader structural matters in an attempt to set these within a broader socio-historical and socio-political framework (Goodson & Sikes, 2001).

We start with the role that place/space has played/plays in the construction of our classed identities. For me, Meg, this construction is bound up with what I wrote about in 1997 – an Irish Catholic childhood – albeit placed in central London. I was brought up in an environment where there were clear boundaries, what Valentine and Sadgrove (2013, p. 1992) call ‘containing’ narratives, around what to believe, how to behave and what to think – in some ways this was repressive, controlling and fearful – but in other ways, it opened up a rich inner world of powerful legend, myth and mystery (Maguire, 1997). It also provided a bulwark against all the pain and exclusions of poverty and class in 1950s London. I grew up in a working-class area in a strong Catholic community which lent strength and a sense of solidarity. We shared rituals, we shared common beliefs and a place we called ‘home’ (Ireland). We shared similar classed experiences with other urban-based migrant and local working-class communities; very poor post-war rented housing, run-down plots of land waiting to be cleared of debris (bomb-sites where we played out together), and very low wages being paid to our unskilled parents who frequently had to do two or more jobs to make ends more or less meet. But growing up in London and going to secondary school in the 1960s – a time of massive disruptions and challenges to older ways of thinking – meant that I was simultaneously exposed to a range of alternative positions and perspectives from literature, the media and shifts in society that rendered the older, perhaps more fixed ways of being, as unstable and disrupting. For example, what I was caught up in then and now, was a complex, hybridity of clashing values,

immediately evident then in massive rows within my family about Irish-British history, activism (particularly CND) as well as a perception that you could remake yourself and that there were more resources for doing this in London. There was high employment, a powerful and influential youth culture, music and a heady time of fighting back against oppression – and here I am thinking of the anti-Vietnam War movement, as well as second wave feminism. This emplacement in a mobile global city, populated by diverse communities offering different ways of being, meant that alternative worlds and other possibilities presented themselves. And yet, there were fixed places too – particularly of school – where to echo Mary Evans (1991) ‘the emotional costs of being plunged into a middle-class world was doubtlessly considerable, but equally significant’ (pp. 26–27) was the capital outlay necessary for this new educational experience. For example, attending my school meant purchasing a very expensive school uniform and a range of PE equipment for various sports. So poverty and lack were always a brake to what could be done, experienced or accessed.

But as well as being of Irish working-class heritage, I was/am also female and white – and these aspects of my identity also make for a more complicated account where advantage/disadvantage become complexly intertwined. In 1988, Peggy MacIntosh (1988) wrote about white privilege being a knapsack that was carried around. While she was writing about the situation in America, her arguments carry force for my life/Lisa’s life here in the UK. MacIntosh wrote of ‘interlocking oppressions. They take both active forms, which we can see, and embedded forms, which as a member of the dominant groups one is taught not to see’ (n.p.). She wrote of ‘invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth’ (n.p.). So when Lisa and I talk about class, space, and place, we acknowledge the relative privilege/lack/‘othering’ complexities involved in our day to day realisation of our situated white identities. And yet, growing up and living in a cosmopolitan, super-diverse, world city like London meant that many communities shared the same struggles, both economic and social. Nayak (2017) recognises that ‘Multicultural encounters are imbued with bumps, scratches and discordant white noise. At the same time they have the potential to cultivate a contingent conviviality’ (p. 299). While this conviviality may be spread very thinly, even in global cities, for working-class children and students who grow up, go to school and eventually work together in places like London, this ‘throwntogetherness’ of space/place can contribute to the sometimes transient ‘bringing together’ of ‘multicultural strangers’ (p. 290). So, growing up working class in London in the 1950s and onwards meant that diversity and differences, racism and oppression, were always evident. We lived in conditions of exclusions and inequalities.

Turning more directly to higher educational inequalities and classed experiences, I will start again with what I wrote in 1997. My ‘choice’ of career was not very surprising. For me, this choice was almost inevitable. For a working-class girl, becoming a teacher was a step up. It is part of a class mobility and dislocation narrative that stretches back to the nineteenth century. I was the first in my family to go onto higher education – never mind that it was a gendered choice (primary school teaching) or that my route was class specific – teacher training and not university – for no-one gave me any careers advice and my parents were not aware of any alternative possibilities. As Acker (1995) says ‘there are certain cultural scripts seen as suitable for women in a given place and time’ (p. 33). We would add to this that there were and still are cultural scripts about suitable jobs for the working classes. And of course, this question of classed-gendered-raced scripts still applies, but in different ways because the ‘context is ... one of considerable diversity-related

complexity, compounded by the effects of super-austerity' (Berg, 2019, p. 192).

I worked in London primary schools for a considerable time and was encouraged to apply for a job training primary teachers – and I didn't see this as a move into the academy – it was simply 'more of the same'. We were educationalists and people in other departments were academics! We just did a lot of heavy lifting in terms of teaching, marking, and visiting schools – we were expected to have a Master's degree – and that was all. We had no time for research and were expected to work as we had done in primary schools – five days a week with the same pattern of hours and availability to the student-teachers we were working with. It was a form of school-teaching but with adults instead of children. Moving to a post where I was expected to behave as an 'academic' came at a later time for me and was directly related to my practical experience, the courses I had taken as well as a degree of luck in getting another job.

Institutions have different histories and cultures and are influenced by their locale and their intake. In an 'old' London university, the expectations may be different. And there are different oppressions, opportunities, silences and voices. Yet rarely is the talk of classed identity (for academics) and many of my colleagues come (or seem to me to come) from middle-class backgrounds – moreso than my previous teacher training college. There is, in contrast, an unspoken assumption, or so it seems to me, that all academics are middle-class (because of their occupational status and education level), and yet, the processes of being and doing 'academia' can involve complicated psychic costs; of trying to empower students while not feeling very powerful; of trying to widen student participation in a setting where academic jobs are increasingly disappearing or being casualised; where despite our earlier discussion of urban-based conviviality, there is still massive under-representation of BAME colleagues and where white privilege still seems to walk unchecked (Arday & Mirza, 2018).

Space/place issues are critical in higher education as elsewhere – there is a hierarchy in the UK academy – but there are internal hierarchies too within each institution. It may be high status to work in an older, more elite university, but patterns of privilege, the capacity to undertake research, even attend conferences, are not shared out evenly (Page, 2019). Place is complicated - so working as a part-time tutor on a rolling contract on the PGCE in an old university may not seem that much of a privilege. Place matters in other ways too – being a younger 'early career' academic in a 'modern' university may offer very little in the way of advantage. Being older and being a 'longer-stayer' in an institution may lead to feelings of being more 'invested', although this might relate more to micro-cultures of departments and schools, rather than the wider (neo-liberal) institution (Ball, 2012; Olsen, 2016). In class terms, different institutions will have different classed cultures – shaped by their student intakes as well as by their locations – and this will impact the working lives of academics in these institutions. We may feel more like a fish in water in some places than in others if we have a working-class background ourselves. And inevitably, there will also be dislocations between how we feel and how we are seen.

Where, when and how

I (Lisa) was born in the northern-English city of Hull like both my parents and both sets of grandparents before them. Both parents come from working-class backgrounds characterised by male blue-collar work (one grandfather was a docker, the other a driver for British Rail), and female domestic/ancillary service work, with my mother

especially experiencing significant economic hardship growing up. After an array of low-skilled employment as a young man, my father worked full-time at British Petroleum as a chemical process operative (where he was also a trade union shop-steward) until he retired due to ill-health in his mid-forties. My mother was a stay-at-home parent until my younger brother started school. She then worked part-time for a large supermarket chain for 29 years until she left to help look after my children when I returned to work after an extended period of maternity leave. After outgrowing our two-bedroom council maisonette, my parents, sister, brother and I lived in a three-bedroom house on a council estate in East Hull which my parents then bought in the mid-1980s under the 'right-to-buy' scheme where tenants could purchase their homes from the council at discounted prices. We were working-class, though we were not poor, at least relative to many around us despite some periods of significant economic difficulties. Owning our home and having a car from the time when I was relatively young and regularly holidaying within the UK meant we were part of what might be termed the 'respectable' working class (Skeggs, 1997), 'neither rough nor posh, neither rich nor especially poor' (Hanley, 2016, p. 7).

I am truly a child of the 1980s, of neoliberal times, with the Conservative-government led by Margaret Thatcher coming to power just before I turned two in 1979. Brought up in a secular household, my experience of growing up felt distinctly more individualised than that of Meg's upbringing. However, a strong engagement with my extended family on my maternal side (my Nanna, Grandad, my mother's four siblings and all of their children) and a commitment to family was a significant shaping influence on my life. This was linked to my mother's relationship with (and caring responsibilities for) her own mother, my nanna the matriarch, who was in ill-health throughout my life until her death when I was 14, directly reminiscent of the type of wider kinship networks built around the bond between married-daughters/mothers reported by Young and Wilmott (1957) in their study of working-class family lives. From a very young age, I was also brought up to contribute to the home and importantly, to share in the 'care'; for my brother whilst my parents worked, or whilst my mother 'cared' for her parents and I regularly cared for younger cousins. Even from a very young age, the intersectionality of my class and gender are foregrounded here in family responsibilities.

I attended what was considered a 'failing' secondary school from 1988 leaving in 1993 as one of only 7% of children that year in my school who achieved the benchmark attainment by which schools in England are judged. Hull's schools were struggling then and continue to do so like other similarly disadvantaged post-industrial and isolated places (Department for Education, 2019). As well as falling behind their middle-class peers, working-class children in northern places like Hull are also doing less well than their working-class counterparts in the south of England (The Children's Commissioner, 2018). On reflection, my secondary schooling fostered a culture of low-expectation of my working-class peers and me where I was explicitly told I 'would never amount to anything' on more than one occasion, part, no doubt of the class-narrative or 'cultural script' for a working-class girl like me in that given 'time and place' (Acker, 1995, p. 33).

I was the first person on either side of my extended family to attend university in the mid-1990s. Both parents left school aged 15 with no formal qualifications and until I was 15 years old myself, I had never even considered that I could stay in education beyond the school leaving age of 16, or that this was even an option for me. This was part of a significant 'containing narrative' (Valentine & Sadgrove, 2013, p. 1992) that often serves to limit the 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson, Sparkes, &

Hodkinson, 1996) for many working-class young people in relation to further and higher study, especially as this possibility had never even been mentioned to us at school. It was only when I started a relationship with a boy at school whose brother was planning to attend university that I realised I too might be able to do this. However, I first had to convince my dad that studying at college and potentially going to university was a good opportunity and not simply laziness on my part in an attempt to avoid 'real' work, given the way this represented a stepping outside of the 'cultural script' for people like us (Acker, 1995, p. 33).

I studied sociology at university having enjoyed this at college, appreciative of the language it gave me to begin to make sense of the city in which I lived and my own experiences of growing up on a stigmatised council estate and attending a 'failing' school. I did my first year of my degree at a post-1992 university requiring relatively low entry requirements, my first choice university and course, chosen predominantly because I liked the look of the city. I lacked confidence in my own abilities and did not possess the right familial *habitus* or have access to the appropriate forms social and cultural capital required to make 'academic' choices to consider going elsewhere (Reay, 1998). I attended this university for just one year after a lonely and isolating experience living in a flat in a strange city (rather than halls of residence). I then arranged to transfer directly onto the second year of another sociology course at a Russell Group university in another city, again chosen because of place/location (the city where my boyfriend was studying). I had by this time picked-up a sense of the hierarchical nature of universities and having the grades to get into the Russell Group university in this city, I opted to do this. Here I once again felt isolated. Not in the physical sense experienced the previous year, but more as a result of feeling the class 'other', the result of my working-class *habitus* in the middle-class space of an elite university (Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2009). And yet despite this class discomfort, the feeling of somehow being somewhere, in a place and a space where people like us do not belong, academia has become a second 'home', a place where we can 'invest ourselves', especially in focusing on class inequalities.

Following a two-year period post-graduation working first in a department store and then for the local council processing student grants, I once again left Hull to study a Master's followed by a PGCE in Further, Higher and Adult Education (completing my teaching placement at the Russell Group university and department in which I had just completed my Master's degree). I then obtained a part-time PhD studentship/part-time Research Assistant post in the same Russell Group university supplemented by and later replaced with various short-term, precarious research-only/teaching-only/administration contracts. I eventually secured a permanent Lectureship back in my home city where I had already returned in order to be near family, to both care for and to have my own children cared for by my parents continuing that close, working-class kinship bond (Young & Wilmott, 1957).

Hull, the city in which I grew up and call home, is an important character in my story. It is geographically isolated in a way that most English cities are not, surrounded by the Humber estuary to the south and a large, sparsely-populated and relatively affluent rural area, to the north, east and west. The name Hull, for as long as I recall, has been short hand for not very good and often used interchangeably with 'Hell' in many a news headline (See English, 2014). Significant industrial downturn and the dual-decline of the fishing industry and the port (Starkey et al., 2017), and a lack of investment has meant economic and social stagnation/decline in a similar vein to that experienced by other post-industrial cities (Hall, 2008). Whilst Hull often has featured at the wrong end of many league tables focused on health, education and

employment for instance, these metrics are abstracted from any historical and socio-political context of place. For instance, Hull is a very tightly-bound unitary authority with no suburbs to really call its own (Nolan, Reynolds, & Trotter, 2012). Hull was also the most bombed city outside of London in the World War II with 95% of housing stock damaged, many destroyed (Mourby, 2015). My own nanna lived in three homes that were all completely destroyed. Hull was therefore largely rebuilt from the late 1940s and 1950s onwards and what emerged was a huge council estate building programme, one that shaped modern Hull in such a way that comparing Hull to many other authorities and cities is not possible and displaces the uniqueness of place and space. As a result of the tight boundaries and extensive post-war council house building programme, Hull is a distinctly working-class city. It is also a very white city. Hull remains far from the mobile world city that is London where Meg grew up with super-diversity, economic opportunity and possibility. It is a struggling city, it was when I was growing up and it remains so as one of the ten cities most-hit by austerity (Centre for Cities, 2019). There has also been an unprecedented rise in destitution in England that is ‘clustered mainly in northern cities with a history of de-industrialisation’ (Fitzpatrick et al., 2018, p. 2). Cities like Hull, that are struggling, that are labelled as ‘left behind’, also offer a convenient scapegoat for discourses that emphasise a deep-seated malevolence to working class cultures (McKenzie, 2017). The implications of living in a supposed ‘left behind’ city like Hull rather than a world city like London, can result in limited access to alternative discourses of opportunity and lifestyles. For universities serving such places there may be a reach-out to ‘promote aspiration’, inclusion and towards widening participation. Coming from a working-class background, and from a city like Hull so frequently misrecognised and maligned, emotionally and affectively shaped my work within higher education in terms of both my teaching and my research. In consequence, the need to offer evidence-based, alternative narratives to those essentialising and malign discourses of working-class communities presented in the media (Jones, 2011) is what drives my work. This is particularly heightened in working at the university in the city I am from and call home, where many students I work with are female, white, and also come from the very same city and a similar class background that I come from with many also being first-generation university students (Reay, 1998). The hope is that through my commitment in my teaching and my research to dismantling the ‘miseducation’ of working-class young people (Reay, 2017), from similar backgrounds to my own, I can at least partially contribute to a recognition that it is about a lack of opportunities, not a lack of aspiration (Harrison & Waller, 2018), and that any lack of attainment is repositioned as the result of systemic and ideologically-driven structural inequalities, not the result of individualised failure (Jensen, 2014).

Thus whilst Meg and I are both white, working-class women, it becomes difficult to suggest that place and space have not been significant shaping factors in our lives though we accept this is complicated and we have only begun to surface some of this complexity in this paper. More work needs to be done to come closer to better understanding these dynamic processes.

The contradictions of ‘success’

It is little surprise that those of us academics who have found ourselves crossing the ‘cultural cusp’ into the middle-class space that is academia, have attempted to make sense of our uneasy journeys by a reflexive engagement with class discourses as

illustrated so powerfully in *Class Matters* (Mahony & Zmroczek, 1997) as well as elsewhere (see Hoskins, 2010; Tokarczyk & Fay, 1993). In this paper, through the use of an auto-ethnographic and affective lens, we have attempted to focus on the ways in which macro-level socio-political contexts and structures are intimately tied to our micro-level experiences where a time-sensitive sense of place and space are undoubtedly central to understanding our world views, its influence on our work and our sense of belonging (or often otherness) in the academy. However, despite our early life experiences in different times, places and spaces, the significant and structuring ‘containing narratives’ (Valentine & Sadgrove, 2013) in our lives has been the intersection of our class and our gender. The feelings of ‘inferiority’ and ‘shame’ (Reay, 1997; 2001) for instance associated with being working-class do not leave, such is the strength of ‘the inscription of lack – and the naturalisation of deficiency’ (Loveday, 2016, p. 1142). ‘Class-crossing’ (Maguire, 2005), the act of supposedly moving from one class into another, has profound and often troubling effects on those who find themselves at ‘the friction point of two cultures’ (Hoggart, 1957, p. 292) as they struggle to negotiate the liminal space at this ‘cultural cusp’ including feelings of displacement and exclusion. Despite our combined years in academia, we still worry about not sounding ‘academic’ enough. We are, still, often burdened with those feelings of insecurity and shame as we consult dictionaries when we hear words we feel it is assumed we should know or check how to pronounce those words we have seen written but never heard spoken, an experience shared with other working-class ‘academics’ (see Clancy, 1997). This is in spite of the fact that so many of us are all too aware that such shame has become ‘misrecognised as a classed and gendered property of individuals, rather than a symptom of inequality’ (Loveday, 2016, p. 1143). In this context however, we also recognise the way in which the extension of performative regimes within higher education has increased the general fragility, and insecurity involved in being a working-class academic (Knights & Clarke, 2014; Shahjahan, 2019).

We both still feel a strong connection with our working-class past but little connection to our supposed middle-class present. Our identities have become ‘hybrid identities’ of the kind Lucey, Melody, and Walkerdine (2003) describe, whereby we may no longer comfortably ‘fit’ into the ‘working-class’ spaces we have supposedly left behind but do not feel affiliation to or an acceptance within the ‘professional’ middle-class space we have joined. Kirk (2004) argues that the experiences of class-crossing in popular and political discourse are presented as positive, as ‘social mobility’ or ‘transition’ which infer economic and social betterment. Like Kirk, we reject this view on the basis that it ‘legitimises one mode of existence as it maligns another’ (Kirk, 2004, p. 2). As Reay (2017, p.129) powerfully describes, the notion of social mobility acts as a form of ‘asset-stripping’ leaving the working class as something only to be escaped from and helping to reproduce the normality and desirability of ‘becoming’ middle class (Skeggs, 1997). Finally, we believe that the personal and emotional investment we place in our work, particularly our work on class, social justice and equity relates directly to our class-crossing status. As two of those who have ‘crossed’ class boundaries, we have directly witnessed and experienced symbolic class violence (for instance through our continued internalisation of shame) in a way that those who remain firmly within the middle-classes do not (Christopher, 2004). As such, the emotional connection to our work, how we invest ourselves, especially given the relative privilege we now have in our location within academia, comes with great responsibility.

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