'We tell stories in order to live': Working-class existence and survival in the academy

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Abstract

How does it feel to be of working-class heritage and to work as an academic in the UK? This paper takes an autoethnographic approach in order to think this question through. Its focus is on the ways in which social class becomes internalised through the subtleties of affect and the enactments of symbolic violence over the life course. I suggest that the elite environment of the academe is a particularly painful place to be, especially when held in tension with one's working-class past and present. I suggest that the split at the heart of the cleft habitus is not singular, but the result of multiple fractures and tensions as one moves through different social contexts and locations. The academe is the place where this split can no longer be sutured and in fact becomes an open wound of class.

Keywords

Working-class academic, social class, symbolic violence, cleft habitus, autoethnography

In the beginning

Figure 1: My first year of life (1973)

What follows in this paper is a story I need to tell in order to confirm I have lived. There is an element of longevity, one might fantasise eternity, in having your words published. The words you see before you emerge from a deeply reflexive process, one which, without my exposure to and engagement with academic, scholarly, intellectual writings, would never have been able to take shape and organise itself so meticulously on the screen. In what follows, I aim to seize the illusive residue that lingers and continues to circulate within me. A murky residue left behind after the storms of inner- and outer-world conflicts, tensions, splitting, and

fragmentation. This paper, as finite, cohesive *thing*, is one way of me picking up those splinters and pieces and trying to put them all back together again. An attempt at cohesion, which may indeed be successful in the context of a journal dedicated to exploring working-class lives and experiences, but one which seems like an absolute impossibility in the context of the academic environment in which I most recently existed. I firstly want to explore how my understanding of being working-class has developed and has been shaped in relation to what one might think of as the 'classing gaze' and that process of interpellation that ensues. I then turn specifically to my experiences of working with, amongst and against academics, and the ways in which this relationality helped further sediment my sense of class.

This paper takes an autoethnographic approach to examining the experience of being working-class and an academic. Neither of these two labels are without their contradictions, complexities, and ambivalences. I take an autoethnographic approach precisely for this reason: I do not want to represent the working-class academic definitively, and I do not seek to make any generalised claims about this positionality either (Brook & Michell, 2012; Binns, 2019). What follows is my own experience. As a method, autoethnography allows me to write of the working-class experience (mine) without reproducing the harm that upper-middle-class colleagues enact when writing about working-class Others. It remains singular and specific to me, although one might assume (hope?) there will points of convergence and identification with others who may read this – such is the nature of constellations in transnational working-class experiences.

A spoiler alert that might be helpful here is that there is not a fairy tale ending to this story. After a succession of short fixed-term contracts, I am no longer employed in the academe. I am no longer an 'academic' (was I ever?) but of course I remain working-class. Joan Didion's observation that 'we tell stories in order to live' seems particularly pertinent to the working-class academic (Brook & Michell, 2012; Binns, 2019; Goodson, 2003). As Stacy Holman Jones writes, 'telling our stories is a way for us to be present to each other; the act provides a space for us to create a relationship embodied in the performance of writing and reading that is reflective, critical, loving, and chosen in solidarity' (Adams et al, 2014, p.5). Indeed, I would go as far to say that our ontological survival depends upon such acts.

When everyone was 'normal'

Figure 2: End of first year at school (1979)

This is me during my first year of primary school. My school was situated between two council estates,[1] so all the kids there were what I would describe as 'normal'. It is to my childhood photographs from the 1970s and 1980s that I go for the reassurance of my working-class heritage. Class is known for me, felt, through that affective response I have to the clothes, the home décor, the bad haircuts, the awkward poses. This heritage is easily forgotten in the mash-up of where I later became positioned and, post-PhD, where I can be perceived to be located now. This was a time when for me, class did not exist. I was surrounded by people 'like me'. I grew up in a seaside town on the south coast of England. Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government decimated the town, and during the 1980s half of it was boarded up, a ghost town.

The photograph above was taken in my parents' little back garden, in the Wimpy-esque[2] terraced house they bought for £7,000 in 1976, and in which they continue to live today. These houses were built and marketed specifically for those who could just about afford to get off the council estate and become homeowners. My parents all grew up on estates and I started my life in one. As an adult, I have returned to estate living, it is where I feel at home, and I am proud to be a social housing tenant. For my parents, Thatcher's promise of status and social mobility via home ownership appealed.[3] They wanted to 'do better' than their parents had. In turn, they wanted their children to 'do better' than them. It is difficult to understand exactly what this means, but it was most certainly the result of an investment in a neoliberal narrative, which pedals the fantasy that status and security are on an equal playing field and one can move up the 'social ladder' with hard work, commitment, and dedication.

My parents were both born in the first couple of years after the end of the second world war, during the legacy of rationing. Their early years were filled with hardship: poverty, alcoholism, violence. I understand the affective dimensions of how homeownership was able to become such a powerful signifier of alternative futures and possibilities. They were young and desperate to believe that history need not repeat itself. However, the terrifying responsibility of a mortgage came at a price which filtered its way down into our family home – materially as well as emotionally. The purse strings had to be tied tightly and for those first six years or so, during my primary school years, there was no telephone, no colour tv (we all crowded round the black and white portable), and no car.

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[1] 'Council estates' is a term commonly used to denote a collection of local government subsidised dwellings, often existing across a collection of streets, carving out an entire area of such housing.

[2] 'Wimpy' was a construction and house building company which, during the 1970s, dominated the UK housebuilding market. Their houses were small and simple, akin to local authority houses, and would often follow the same structure, layout and aesthetic, so much so that other construction firms would build in the same style as Wimpy (such as my parents' home).

[3] Margaret Thatcher, former leader of the Conservative Party, was Prime Minister of the UK between 1979 and 1990. The Housing Act (1980) was legislation which enabled council tenants (i.e. tenants of local government subsidised housing) to purchase their home from the local government authority (which they rented from) at discounted market value (according to property type, length of tenure etc.) For many working-class people, this was the only way that owning a home was possible.

Figure 3: Christmas (1979)

My mum worked the twilight shift in the factory to help make ends meet until my brother was born. I remember her cutting the feet off his baby-grows so that he could get a bit more wear out of them; ripping up old sheets so that she could wrap these around her leaking breasts – breast pads would have been an unthinkable luxury; and washing our hair in washing-up detergent when there just wasn't enough to stretch to buy a new bottle of *Vosene* shampoo. Sunday 'tea' (as opposed to the Monday to Saturday 'dinner') involved tuna and vinegar sandwiches cut in triangles, crisps, jelly, tinned fruit and evaporated milk. We'd listen to the Top 40 on the radio and me and my sister would dance and flash torches, creating our own disco.

The weekly 'big shop' was a family mission, with the kids mucking in and lugging bags of shopping back home, as we all broke our backs during that 20-minute walk back from the 'big supermarket'. We'd use each other's bath water, and the hot water would only ever be put on when it was bath night. Woe betide anyone who forgot to turn the immersion off immediately after it was no longer needed![4] It meant I wore hand-me-downs and sported wonky home haircuts. We always had a 'meat and two veg' cooked dinner (often stewing steak, always potatoes); our house was always heated by the coal fire; we smelt of clean washing; and the pop man still came once a week. For those reasons, I never once thought we were poor. In fact, we had a lot more than several of the other kids I went to school with, who lived in carpetless, cold houses and regularly went to bed hungry, sleeping in their coats. This was a time where there seemed to be little difference between me and those around me. We were one and the same. Class did not exist.

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[4] Our central heating system was fuelled by a coal fire in the living room but did not heat the water. Therefore, washing up was often done by boiling a kettle and to run a warm bath an electric boiler (immersion heater) had to be switched on. A shallow, warm (not hot!) bath could be run after the heater had been on for about 30 minutes.

Figure 4: A birthday 'tea' (1980)

Introduction to the Middle-Classes

I passed my 11-plus and went to the local grammar school.[5] It was during this time that the cracks and fissures resulting from class difference and otherness began to start. It would be these early fractures that would provide the foundation for the wounds of class that would later emerge – slowly, insidiously, perniciously over time. It is only with hindsight that I see the significance of this move. At the time, I still had no idea about the subtleties of class-based abjection. At secondary school, you were placed in your form class alphabetically, so I was with all the kids at the end of alphabet. So, how come we had children in our class whose names started with Bs, or Ds or Gs? This was because all of the children from the one private prep school in the area were placed in the same class together, at the request of their headmaster.

It was by being in proximity to these kids that I started to realise that perhaps my family was not actually 'normal' but we were in fact poor. These kids lived in big, detached houses with large gardens, professional parents, holidays abroad and so on. My mum left school at 14, my dad at 16. There were no holidays, abroad or otherwise; instead, we had local days out, lugging big carrier bags full of foil-wrapped sandwiches, unbranded crisps, and plastic bottles filled with squash.[6]

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[5] Throughout the UK there used to be a 'selective' school system, which meant that pupils sat an exam in their last year of primary school (year 6). Those children who 'passed' the exam were able to attend grammar school, where there was often a broader academic curriculum and higher educational attainment on completion. The system still exists in the UK in certain areas but has generally been replaced by a non-selective system whereby secondary (high) schools local children irrespective of educational attainment.

[6] 'Squash' is a colloquial term for cordial, a fruit flavoured concentrate to which water is added.

Figure 5: Family day out (1985)

My getting into grammar school was a source of pride for my mum and dad, an opportunity to believe that maybe my life would be less of a struggle than theirs was. No doubt many of the prep school kids were intensively tutored to pass the 11 plus – every single one of them got a place at the grammar school and were allowed to stay together. During my secondary school years, I began to get a sense of class without being able to name it as such. I came to be classed through the looks I received about my clothes or shoes, how my parents were looked at, and how other kids' parents looked at me. Without knowing what or why, I started to develop a level of embarrassment or insecurity about my home, my appearance, my family. I started paid work aged 12, working for a pound an hour in a café every Saturday and Sunday. This was so that I could afford to buy the clothes and shoes I wanted, cheap fashion from the market which would give that superficial sense of fitting in. I worked so I could 'pass' as having enough cultural capital (in the form of fashionable, albeit cheap, clothes) to participate on an equal footing in the complex network of the superficiality of adolescent relations. I worked to protect myself from feeling shame. At the start of secondary school, I was in the top three of the year for every subject, spanning the sciences and the humanities. Despite this academic 'success', the 'failure' of my lack of cultural capital meant that from age 13 I spent less time concerned about achieving good marks, and more time desperate to fit in or cultivate a sense of belonging.

It was at this age that my relationship with alcohol began, which would in turn lead to drugs, and my leaving grammar school with two A-levels graded B and D (see Reay, 2017; 2018 for a similar experience resulting in an eating disorder). Drugs and alcohol have plagued my adult life and yet in spite of this I managed to pass my undergraduate degree (after taking a two-year break mid-studies due to a drug induced psychosis). I was to be surrounded by more middle-class people during my time at university (technically it was a college back then although subsequently has had a rebrand). It became apparent that the further I went away from that house I grew up in, in that deprived coastal town, the more of these middle-class people I would meet. It was during this time at university that I first ate mayonnaise, olives and vegetables which were not root- or cabbage-based. I was being introduced to middle-class foods, music, and aesthetics, and still not quite knowing how or why, I was adopting many of these as my own. In my late twenties, I did a Masters' degree, getting a bank loan for the fees, running up copious amounts of debt via an extended overdraft facility. The result of this was having to live transiently, equipped only with a cashpoint (not debit) card, for 7 years, in order to avoid bailiffs and have the debt eventually written off.[7] In my adult life I have known hunger, homelessness, addiction, and criminality. Experiences that my parents had fought hard to

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[7] A 'cashpoint card' is a bank card which can only be used to withdraw money from ATMs, and cannot be used for purchases.

protect me from, yet still caught up with me at moments when I have tried to navigate the world without finance or security. At 40 I did another Masters, which eventually led to me successfully getting a Graduate Teaching Assistant job which included my PhD fees being paid. PhD study would not have been conceivable for me had it not been for that opportunity.

Meet the academic elite

'The term autoethnography invokes the self (auto), culture (ethno), and writing (graphy). When we do autoethnography, we study and write culture from the perspective of the self. When we do autoethnography, we look inward —into our identities, thoughts, feelings and experiences— and outward —into our relationships, communities, and cultures' (Adams et al, 2014, p.46). It is at this point in the narrative that I again look inward to return to the recent past. What follows is an account of how it felt to be me (read that as you will) working as an 'academic' in a British university. I use scare quotes around the word academic as it's a label that doesn't comfortably sit with my sense of self. Who exactly is an academic? If it is someone who teaches, lectures, designs modules, presents at conferences, and publishes research papers, then, yes, I seemed to qualify. But my experience tells me that an academic is not someone who sounds like me or has my background. Surely the proof is in the pudding? Well, despite the evidence being there (of publications, of invitations to speak at conferences, of glowing student feedback), I was constantly reminded of my 'place' as 'non-academic' by the 'proper' academics I worked alongside. 'Economic privilege gives a person the freedom to erase class - or to reduce it to value judgements about people's taste - as if 'good' and 'bad' taste are objective realities devoid of social context' (Johnston, 2018). I worked alongside those who belong to the upper-middle classes. Those who come from long lines of academics, doctors, writers, and other professionals. I often saw the same reflected in the PhD students who came through the Department. It seems that this trajectory is taken for granted by some, things seem guaranteed to always end this way for these people. It is inevitable, an entitlement, a right. It was their due. For people of this lineage, the barriers are invisible and can be passed through with ease, if seen at all (Binns, 2019; Friedman, 2015). They have secure academic careers forged by the age of 30, elitist (inherited?) networks already in place. There is a genealogy amongst academics which almost always can be traced back to privilege. They were always meant to take up their place in the academe. How the bloody hell did I slip in? I am an intruder. Don't leave your ivory tower offices unlocked, I might nick something.

Knowing My Place

Paulo Freire's (1970/2017) work is invaluable in illuminating the ways in which we participate in our own oppression. We become the oppressor at the same time as being the oppressed. I want to reflect upon a few examples of what I consider to be the symbolic violence enacted on me over those six years spent working in a university, a consequence of my outsider status of being proudly working-class. I refused to adopt their mannerisms, to strategically network through superficial ego massaging, to humblebrag, to change the way I sound, the way I dress, the place I live. I did not aspire to be them, nor do I now. At the time, I just wanted secure employment and the opportunity to write and teach. I'll start with the time in a departmental staff meeting when the issue of precarious contracts came up, a lecturer insisted on the difference between her precarity and mine (despite us both having fixed term lecturer contracts) was that she was 'not *just* a PhD student'. Or the first time I presented my work to the Department, and an eminent professor made a disparaging comment about my accent and the fact that I use the vernacular, to say 'well, if that's academic…' He didn't need to finish his sentence. Or the times that I was left out of email exchanges, or 'forgotten' to be invited to

crucial meetings. It's easy to forget who is a 'proper' member of staff and who isn't, obviously (Brook & Michell, 2012). Not being heard in meetings, but when a more senior academic says exactly the same as me (but with their accent, vocabulary and demeanour), everyone applauds and listens. Or being told that I should 'check my privilege' because of the location where I live (totally glossing over the fact that I qualified for social housing due to addiction, mental health issues, and homelessness), for me the postcode was irrelevant. The hatred that was projected my way in the most diffuse, yet consistent ways, seemed to always be circulating and was at times overwhelming. This all took place in what can be understood as a 'culture of disbelief' (Morella-Pozzi, 2016, p.177). Disbelief that they are capable of inflicting harm, disbelief that classism is a *thing* outside of my own imagination. When I once disclosed to a senior academic that I felt the snobbery and elitism of my fellow PhD students and the Department more generally, she said that she finds it hard to believe that anyone – apart from me – sees class as an issue. It must of course, just be me then. Me and my warped thinking and skewed perspective on things.

The fact that I am still haunted by these thoughtless dismissals, and the ways in which these iterations have interpellated my sense of self in the context of the academe, proves Freire's point (Skeggs, 2004). I am participating in my own oppression. Interactions such as these reinforce that 'feeling that I am in some way wrong just for being myself'. These are Morella-Pozzi's words, writing on how it feels to have a disability and be both student and faculty in the academy. Her words chime with my own experience which suggests that the further one gets from that pinnacle of privilege at the heart of university life, through those various intersections of our social locations, and rarely of our own making, the closer one comes to a kind of ontological dereliction. She goes on to say, 'The terrible dichotomy [of legitimacy] is this struggle for recognition, acknowledgment, and acceptance. It is the act of being legitimate and illegitimate all at once. Because of my insecurity of my legitimacy and validity, I often find myself unable to take back power when I really need to' (Morella-Pozzi, 2016, pp.187-8) So, how to 'take back power' in a situation such as this? It can only ever be reclamation of symbolic power, hence we are back to the start of this piece – the need to tell stories so that we may live.

The Struggle for Legitimacy

The struggle for legitimacy in the academe meant that I was constantly open for exploitation: having my workload changed to accommodate the needs of others; having to take on work that others have refused; carrying that unbearable weight left from the emotional dimension of pastoral care. I am blessed that there were many working-class students (at undergraduate level) at the institution I worked at. My relationships and the interpersonal dynamics with these students in the classroom were what kept me there. Students told me I'm 'normal', 'real', 'not like the other lecturers'. Ontologically, I felt more closely aligned with these students, than I did my colleagues. Senior academics and management focus on 'retention strategies' without considering the emotional toll this work has on staff who are working-class and / or Black or of colour (Binns, 2019). Like all the proletariat, I am there to do the graft for the benefit of others, just because my work was then taking place within an elite profession, these facts remained the same. At the start of my time there, I was so acutely aware of my outsider status I went above and beyond to prove my worth and legitimacy to be there, to exist. Ultimately, this meant that my work for the Department was always prioritised over my own PhD work. Due to the fact that my presence and activity can be witnessed and to some extent measured in the job, it was into the teaching and student support work that a disproportionate amount of my efforts were poured. The creative and thinking space required for the PhD constantly struggled

to gain legitimacy in a head which was forever telling me that I'm not good enough to be there and that my purpose is the job, to 'work'. In the end, it took six and a half years to complete the PhD. It was also only in the latter stages of the doctoral process that I was able to understand that, within an academic context, thinking *is* work. In many ways, how I've interpreted my intellectual labour epitomises my sense of alienation from a sense of academic legitimacy. Ever since that first pound-an-hour job, I always worked weekends and school holidays in shops, care homes, kitchens, and laundries. 'Working' for me meant physical labour. Sore hands, an aching back, and heavy legs. Tiredness. The ability to pursue a line of thought creatively and dynamically requires the time and a lack of responsibility that must surely be indicative of luxury, leisure, or respite, not work. This logic still haunts me. Despite the fact that 'thinking' is a vital necessity in the context of research, I continue to taunt myself that hours spent in that cycle of sitting, thinking, munching, thinking, is evidence of my laziness and, moreover, my academic illegitimacy. I need to be actively *doing*, in a way that can be witnessed by others, to gain legitimacy for my efforts and then *maybe* I'll recognise its value myself. The only way my intellectual musings can get some legitimacy is by making themselves visible as coherent words on a page – to become a product – which they rarely do, and never reading as intelligently as I think they should. For example, despite this paper being submitted under the rubric of 'research article', I would struggle to think of it as such. Even my 'story' seems to lack legitimacy once I feel it to be interpellated through the mechanisms of academic publishing. Yet, we must persist. So, I submit it anyway.

Linked to the notion of legitimacy is of course the notion of 'respectability', and as we know from work such as Elias' *The Civilising Process* (1969/2000) respectability has long been used as a marker for both 'race' and class. I drop 't's, often don't pronounce 'h's, my 'th's sound like 'f's and I swear frequently, whether I'm at home, teaching, or in meetings. I defy respectability, and class is deeply inscribed on my body (Reay, 2018; Skeggs, 2004). I may have white skin but, in the context of the social mileus of the upper-middle classes, I operate as one of the 'internal others' of whiteness. 'Whiteness as a site of privilege is not absolute but rather crosscut by a range of other axes of relative advantage and subordination; these do not erase or render irrelevant race privilege, but rather inflect or modify it' (Frankenberg, 2001, p. 76). Many of us who are trying to think about the bodily and affective dimensions of classism turn to Bourdieu's work (Binns, 2019). This is perhaps because of the nature of reflexivity at the heart of this work, that we are compelled to return to those childhood memories and locate them within particular social conditions (Thatcher et al, 2015). This becomes our starting point, our litmus paper, to determine how we might understand where we are at now (Skeggs, 2004).

The cleft habitus (or habitus clivé) is a useful tool to apply in order to think the implications of these dichotomies through (Brook & Michell, 2012). For me, the cleft is such that it cracks and splinters, with further fault lines off-shooting from it, much like the lines on the palm of one's hand. There are so many dichotomies, splits, fault lines, but ultimately all of these can be traced back to the markers of class. These clefts, splits or fractures, are not just symbolic – the hurt, pain and struggle is felt at the level of the body – physically and psychically (Reay, 2017; Binns, 2019). The embodied dimensions of class are something only the working-class have access to. It is only us who can know how it *feels*. Academics in my previous Department write about people like me, like us, as objects of study. Yet, they will never understand people like me, like us; neither would they fully accept my working-classness when I was in the role of academic. To do so would mean the object of study has become the subject, thus the status quo would be threatened, and the surety of their position of entitlement might come under threat. So, instead what happened was either I was invisible, not seen, I didn't exist – when my working-classness seeped out in the context of me being an academic; or I was *only* seen as

working-class and my academic capabilities were rendered invisible, obsolete, non-existent. Either way, something always had to be erased – be that my working-classness or my academic status. I signify something that the university wants – the success story of inclusivity, social mobility, widening participation - but I will always just be an empty signifier. My position as an academic will always be precarious – irrespective of contract. I felt paranoid, like they were all waiting for my working-classness to trip me up, to legitimise my removal. I existed like a spectre, haunting. The university wants students like me, wants to read and write papers on people like me, but doesn't want people like me doing a job that was never meant for me. The mutual coexistence of the dimensions of working-class and academic seems an impossibility in the imaginaries of those I worked with.

No Fairy Tale Ending

Figure 5: My daughter on our estate (2020)

Maya Angelou once said, 'My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive; and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humour and some style'. I would love to have this as my own motto but after seven years working within the institutional machinery of a contemporary British university, I think the best I could hope for is to survive. The academe does not seem to be a place which would like me to thrive. My 'style' maybe questionable, but I have humour and compassion in abundance and without my working-class upbringing I would not have either of these. What would it take to thrive in the academe? Assimilation would definitely make it easier (Binns, 2019; Friedman, 2015). However, I am not willing to kill off a part of myself which runs to my core. In fact, the more I was on my own surrounded by a sea of upper-middle-class assumptions, values and practices, the more desperately I held onto those working-class experiences that have shaped who I am (McKenzie, 2015). My story is told here so that I may live, as I am no longer part of the academe, and instead part of prison education. I wanted to go out giving a two-fingers up to the snobbery, elitism, and class prejudice. An empty gesture I know, as those who won't notice I've gone, have never accepted that I was there in the first place. Those with whom I live and love - friends, neighbours, family, the incarcerated men I teach – do not seek to abject me but all the time I was in that role as 'academic', I was always marked as different. None of the people I know really understand what *doing* a PhD means and, importantly, nor do they really care!

The crucial difference between my experiences of difference amongst working-class folks and amongst upper-middle-class academics is that amongst the working-classes my difference does not need to end in my rejection or my erasure. It does not render my existence, contributions,

relations illegitimate. The working-classes I live and work amongst can tolerate 'difference', do not insist upon assimilation, lack the defensiveness of upper-middle-class academics, and are not motivated by fantasies of their own prestigiousness. They / We have a level of acceptance and comfortability in our own skins, that the upper-middle-classes can only dream of … or, in the case of the well-published academic, write about.

Author Bio

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