

# **Reilly, I.B., editor (2022) *The Lives of Working Class Academics: Getting Ideas Above Your Station*. Emerald Publishing**

Review by **Barbara Jensen**

This extraordinary, multi-faceted book of essays is a welcome addition to the literature of working-class academics. It speaks fearlessly of the difficulties of traveling the fraught terrain from poor and working-class backgrounds to the relative comfort and power of life as academics. Each article deserves a review of its own, there is such richness in each one and in the book as a whole. Packed with ideas from a multitude of perspectives, this book couldn't be more well-arranged and curated by its exceptional editor, Iona Burnell Reilly.

*Lives* illuminates acute and invisible struggles, as well the resilience and triumphs of academics from working-class backgrounds. It is a book by academics for academics. It offers no simple solutions or static definitions. As the foreword states, working-class academics have a complexity of identity “sculpted out of the structural and material resources we have available to us... Social identities are contingent, fluid, and always in a process of emergence...”. The collection illustrates a variety of identities and social positions, all of which contain a thread of working-class experience that urges working-class academics to not forget where we came from. It goes further to urge us to mine our working-class lives for knowledge and to dedicate ourselves to using this knowledge to help working-class students.

## **Method**

This book explicitly employs, and provides considerable support for, the research method of “autoethnography,” which is detailed and explained repeatedly by different authors, each with something particular to add. This approach employs personal experiences for academic knowledge. It dovetails with working-class autoethnographic academic literature in the United States, and especially in the Working-Class Studies Association with its challenge to understand class in terms of “lived experience.” As Mary Capello said in 1995, this produces “a knowledge that is just as valid as any and possibly more instructive than most.” As Reilly points out in the preface, quoting Byrne, “Working-class people are, by definition, relatively uneducated, which exposes the link between class and academia, and the inherent dissonance in thinking about oneself as a working-class [person]...the academy is not just classist, it is the source of classism, and of the very concept of the working class’.” In other words, for Working-Class Studies, as with Women’s Studies, African-American, and Ethnic Studies, the pursuit of knowledge necessarily requires reports from the people who have experienced real lives in the area of inquiry.

*Lives* contains multiple approaches and this makes it all the more fascinating. From sociology to poetry, from structural analyses to tender, personal stories. All track the many challenges for

working-class people in higher education, a difficult and complicated psychological navigation through accumulation of middle- and upper-class cultural capital and life quite different from the one that feels like home. Theorists that first pioneered this terrain, Basil Bernstein and Pierre Bourdieu, are quoted and aspects of their theories of language codes, codes-switching, habitus (culture), and cultural capital are examined and expanded.

### **Classism and Class Struggle**

“‘You’re new’ the teacher said, ‘do you like drama?’

‘Not really’ I said.

‘Not really? alright mate, alright mate’ the teacher mimicked.

Everyone laughed. My face turned beetroot red. The teacher had mimicked my cockney accent because nobody else in the school spoke like that.”

Reilly recounts this incident to introduce the concept of microaggressions, quoting Bourdieu about “symbolic violence,” a soft violence that includes racism, sexism and, as this book illuminates, classism.

Because this book was written in 2022, unlike the classic US texts *Strangers in Paradise* (1984) and *This Fine Place So far from Home* (1995), it describes many of the same dilemmas those books did, but also moves forward in history to detail the improvement in accessibility to higher education and the commitment of working-class academics to saving their working-class students from some of the cultural clashes and classism so common in higher education. Peter Shukie writes:

“Competition to ‘prove myself’, a process so worthless that involvement in such proving grounds makes us self-loathe, shuddering with the ugly clumsiness of having to define our families, communities, histories and backgrounds for the edification of others. It makes writing this chapter difficult, a lifetime of ‘chip on your shoulder’ reproaches that silence any reflections of what has shaped me. There is also the sense of betrayal, of discussing what we did not have that denies the struggles of parents also living with five children in a two-bedroomed terrace...I realised, as the writing emerged, how owning my working-classness is absolutely necessary in facing the power of an academy that seeks to nullify it.”

Shukie also speaks of public school for working-class kids: “I was naughty, it seemed, before I even arrived.” Like me, he was a frequent recipient of violent reprimands in public school. He describes how working-class children were regularly beaten, which reminds me of my own experience in primary education. Physical violence was a regular element of being in school, as was having to stay after school for “detention.” For him, as for myself and many others, that only served to prove the profound difference between us and the teachers, and to intensify our resistance to all things school-related. He describes how the children that received free school lunches went from waiting in that line to the one for “canings, admonishments, detentions and suspensions.” Others have illuminated such profoundly different treatment of working-class children in the US from that of middle, upper-middle, and wealthy children. It is no surprise that that antipathy continues in higher education.

A difference in this UK book from the literature by working-class academics in the US is that there is more of an explicitly structural, and Marxist, approach, and these structural analyses are interwoven with personal stories and reflections. The emphasis is on classes as living, fighting entities rather than abstract, inert or stratified social categories. This approach is established as central by the first essay in the book by Alpesh Maisuria, “Navigating the Relational Character of Social Class for Capitalism in the Academy.” Working-class academics are in a unique position to not only explain and dispel the disjuncture between working-class lives and neoliberal assumptions about human nature, of the vaunted ideology of individuality and its attendant constant competition, with real life in the working class, where mutual aid is more necessary, comfortable, and joyful, than competition, and having to “prove oneself.”

Stephen Wong argues that class is a *verb* and that “the notion of class is mostly elusive, always relational, and evolving.” Wong sees and uses various forms of cultural capital from both his academic and working-class cultures and believes this enriches his own life as well as the lives of his students.

Michael Pierson also emphasizes that “class is all about relationships – to wealth, to each other, to historic forces and also to representation. These relationships are far more than mere designators of social positioning; they are sometimes the origins of deeply personal traumas and life-defining wounds that go far beyond the economic *per se*.” This perspective allows for changes in class-based cultures over time, rather than reifying or essentializing more stationary concepts of class identity.

### **Intersections**

Class-based experiences and scholarship are interwoven with other social positions or identities. Sexism and racism are primary among them, but other identities also include disabilities and able-bodyism, ethnic identities, rural versus city life, and more. As Reilly notes, “These problematic factors are what make the lives of working-class academics all the more interesting, rich and powerful.”

Carli Rowell and Hannah Walters examine the role of working-class women in higher education and find they are overloaded with a “‘guilty burden’ of pastoral care...work that they chose to do, yet which is seldom acknowledged, rewarded, or formalized.” They describe how as women academics we are called upon to do emotional labor that men are not. Both gender and class conspire to require us to do service work that can lead to “pathologization of working-class women within academia to the detriment of career progression.” M.L. White speaks of “working the hyphens,” that her multiple identities lead her to embrace plurality and play the multi-faceted roles. She goes on to tell about her research with student teachers and how little the privileged students understood about poverty and disadvantage. Indeed, they reported not having “the language to talk about class.”

Language use is a crucial dimension of class in higher education because language is necessary for the creation of meaning and identity, and voice is also a part of developing a sense of agency,

of our ability to change the class bias of higher education. This book is an effort to find that language and share it with other working-class academics.

The entire collection echoes a resounding pride in being working class, though that identification is never simple or uncomplicated. As Kalil Akbar, a Pakistani raised in England put it, “I am working class at my core and always will be. Amidst that identity, I am also British, South Asian, Muslim and male...to ignore any one of my multiple identities would consequently negate an integral part of who I am.”

Marcia Wilson points out that there are 45 Black women professors out of approximately 23,000 full professors in the UK. She states,

“I have been fortunate to meet interesting people from all across the globe and all walks of life. However, most of my experiences have been where I was the only Black woman in the room which has been an overwhelmingly lonely and, sometimes, hostile place.”

She also spoke of “the additional emotional labor involved in simply existing in a space that was not designed for you.”

In the US, working-class scholar David Greene developed what he called “A Matrix of Identity” wherein he explores his Jewishness, his maleness and his working-class identity as tightly interwoven. He defiantly still identifies as a working-class person, as do many of these authors, though his adult life was as an academic. Teresa Crew elaborates on this complexity: “When people ask me about being a working-class academic, I remind people that I can ‘consume’ sophisticated culture, and still be working class, ideas to the contrary just perpetuate well-worn stereotypes of working-class people.”

Some in this volume call for community-engaged teachers with an understanding of the actual life experiences of the community their school serves. While this may seem obvious to working-class academics, it is not at all clear to those from middle- and upper- class backgrounds. Since the vast majority of college teachers are not from working-class backgrounds, the challenge becomes how to make the invisible visible?

## **Resistance**

Like *Strangers in Paradise* and *This Fine Place So Far from Home* in the US, *Lives* traces the paths of resistance of working-class academics. *Strangers* consists mainly of tenured, successful, and deeply-divided professors subject to profound cognitive dissonance and Imposter Syndrome in their new social locations. *This Fine Place* moves forward over ten years and reflects 1996 in the US, with contingent academic labor just beginning and contains articles from a wider range of academic positions and experiences than *Strangers*; it also devotes more time to diversity in working-class perspectives, as academia itself changed over time to allow more women and people of color within its membership.

For the authors in *Lives*, making changes in higher education emerges as a common mission and practice. They believe that all should have access to higher education, but also that the very content

of higher education must change in a way that includes, indeed invites, those not traditionally welcomed, let alone empowered within academia. To see the breadth of this challenge we should note that only 14% of academics in the UK were from working class backgrounds in 2017.

Crew talks about “resistance capital” as a way to counter “what is possible.” Resistance is resilience for these writers, and the very act of writing about class in higher education is a form of resistance to upper- and middle-class hegemony.

Like many of these essayists, editor Iona Burnett Reilly, taught at a school designed for people like her. She reflects on her experience, that tells a very different story from those in *Strangers*:

“For me, the effects of field–habitus clash were minimal. I attended the local university where many learners were from similar backgrounds. This university had taken full advantage of widening participation policies and strategies by encouraging large numbers from the local working-class community to participate in what the university had to offer. ... I studied alongside people from my own social class who were also enjoying the benefits of widening participation.”

She states that she doesn’t have to pretend to be middle class but she works on “...developing and evolving. into a comfortable and confident version of myself.” She has successfully developed her job role as what she calls “the neo-working class,” and she has adapted her working-class life to include higher education, as both a value and a practice. Her cockney accent is less pronounced than it once was, but neither does she entirely banish it; in fact, she uses it to relate to her students, and sees it as an assertion of her own working-class identity, a kind of pride in all of who she is.

Or, as Marcia Wilson explains:

“There are small steps that we can all take on this journey of change, and I urge courage and bravery to embrace your authentic self. It is important to stand in our truth and create opportunities to speak it. If we can engage in small changes, we are committing to leaving academia in a better state than when we found it.”

Shukie urges: “By forming new narratives we continue the push away of dominating toxicity that destroys [us] and replace these with our own voices, cultures, knowledges and ways of seeing.”

Carli Rowell and Hannah Walters detail a list of ways that working-class academics can support marginalized students.

### **Closing:**

This book aims to make real changes in the world of higher education. This includes the drafting of the world’s first University Code on Equal Opportunity for Working-Class Students and Academics drafted by the Alliance of Working-Class Academics. Our organization (WCSA) has endorsed this proposal, and I look forward to more collaborations between our organizations.

The action-orientation aspect of *Lives* is much stronger than previous collections, perhaps because more time has passed and the basic notion of working-class studies has grown and spread.

I close this review with a quote from the afterword from someone who has helped bridge the gap between the UK and US by being a leader in both the Working-Class Studies Association and the Alliance of Working-Class Academics: Valerie Walkerdine.

“I was really struck by the longing contained in many of the stories. I recognise that longing – such a strong desire to be able to think and to dream. How I reveled in it and nothing and nobody could take this away from me. Just think what would happen if all the working-class children were actually supported in their dreaming -- what a revolution that would be!”

**Reviewer bio:**

**Barbara Jensen** is a counseling and community psychologist in Minneapolis, where she has taught at Metropolitan State University. She is a founder and past president of the Working-Class Studies Association, and author of *Reading Classes: On Culture and Classism in America*.