

# CLASS MATTERS, THEN AND NOW: ADULT EDUCATION, CLASS AND THE PSYCHOSOCIAL; AUTO/BIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVES

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## ABSTRACT

Class once mattered in adult education, and still does in a neo-liberal world. But it can be difficult to define in the fragmentation of the organised working-class and the casualisation/manualisation of many middle-class occupations. Historically, in industrial societies class could be seen as shaped by productive relations, while class consciousness was a cultural phenomenon, partly forged by workers themselves in educational and political struggles. But those older industrial societies have fragmented and a more individualised culture and diversity politics have taken centre stage. Class as a living phenomenon can be neglected as gender, race and sexuality are foregrounded. Notwithstanding, class continues to shape experiences between people, and perceptions of education, levels of physical, mental health and life expectancy. And the neglect of class dynamics and social inequality has been challenged in forms of working-class auto/biographical research. This is inspired by the women's movement, the biographical/narrative turn and challenges to the neglect of the experiencing human subject in social and cultural studies. The research and writing especially encompass working-class women in diverse settings, and intergenerational dialogues. Class intersects here with other oppressions. The work illuminates how adult education requires holistic reconceptualisation as a relational, embodied, emotional, narrative, psychosocial, intellectual and even spiritual process, in which the dynamics of self/other recognition, love and the feminist notion of the gift are central.

## KEY WORDS

class; auto/biography; *écriture féminine*; recognition.



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**A CLASSE IMPORTA, NO PASSADO E NO PRESENTE: EDUCAÇÃO DE  
ADULTOS, CLASSE SOCIAL E AS PERSPETIVAS NARRATIVAS  
PSICOSSOCIAIS E AUTOBIOGRÁFICAS**

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**RESUMO**

A classe foi importante para a educação de adultos no passado, mas ainda é relevante no mundo neoliberal. Todavia, pode ser difícil defini-la no contexto fragmentado da organização da classe social e do caráter causal e manual de muitas ocupações da classe média. Historicamente, nas sociedades industriais, a classe era moldada pelas relações de produção, enquanto que a consciência de classe se constituía num fenómeno cultural, definido também pelos próprios trabalhadores nas lutas educativas e políticas. Mas as sociedades industriais do presente possuem uma cultura fragmentada e individualizada, assim como políticas diversificadas que assumem hoje uma dimensão central. A classe como um fenómeno social pode hoje ser negligenciada se se atribuir centralidade ao género, à raça ou à sexualidade. Apesar desta circunstância, a classe continua a moldar as experiências entre as pessoas, as perceções acerca da educação, o nível de saúde física e mental e a esperança de vida. A negação das dinâmicas de classe e da desigualdade social foi desafiada pela investigação autobiográfica da classe trabalhadora. Esta investigação inspirou-se no movimento feminista, nos estudos biográficos e narrativos e nos desafios causados pela negação que os estudos social e culturais têm atribuído à experiência humana. A investigação e os trabalhos académicos destacam as mulheres da classe trabalhadora em contextos diversos e os diálogos intergeracionais. A classe cruza aqui com outras formas de opressão. O trabalho enfatiza como a educação de adultos exige uma reconceptualização holística, enquanto processo relacional, corporizado, emocional, narrativa, psicossocial, intelectual e até espiritual, na qual as dinâmicas de reconhecimento de si e do outro, do amor e da noção feminista de dar-se ao outro são centrais.

**PALAVRAS - CHAVE**

classe; autobiografia; *écriture féminine*; reconhecimento.



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# LA CLASE IMPORTA, ENTONCES Y AHORA: EDUCACIÓN DE ADULTOS, CLASE SOCIAL Y LAS PERSPECTIVAS NARRATIVAS PSICOSOCIALES Y AUTOBIOGRÁFICAS

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## RESUMEN

La clase alguna vez fue importante en la educación de adultos, y todavía lo es en un mundo neoliberal. Pero puede ser difícil definirlo en la fragmentación de la clase trabajadora organizada y la precarización/manualización de muchas ocupaciones de la clase media. Históricamente, en las sociedades industriales se podía considerar que la clase estaba determinada por las relaciones productivas, mientras que la conciencia de clase era un fenómeno cultural, forjado en parte por los propios trabajadores en luchas educativas y políticas. Pero esas sociedades industriales más antiguas se han fragmentado y una cultura más individualizada y políticas de diversidad han pasado a ocupar un lugar central. La clase como fenómeno vivo puede descuidarse y se pone en primer plano el género, la raza y la sexualidad. No obstante, la clase sigue moldeando las experiencias entre las personas y las percepciones sobre la educación, los niveles de salud física, mental y la esperanza de vida. Y el descuido de la dinámica de clases y la desigualdad social ha sido cuestionado en formas de investigación autobiográfica y autobiográfica de la clase trabajadora. Esto se inspira en el movimiento de mujeres, el giro biográfico/narrativo y los desafíos al abandono del sujeto humano experimentado en los estudios sociales y culturales. La investigación y los escritos abarcan especialmente a mujeres de clase trabajadora en diversos entornos y diálogos intergeneracionales. La clase se cruza aquí con otras opresiones. El trabajo ilumina cómo la educación de adultos requiere una reconceptualización holística como un proceso relacional, encarnado, emocional, narrativo, psicosocial, intelectual e incluso espiritual, en el que la dinámica del reconocimiento de uno mismo/otro, el amor y la noción feminista entregarse a otro son centrales.

## PALABRAS CLAVE

clase; autobiografía; *écriture féminine*; reconocimiento.



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# Class Matters, Then and Now: Adult Education, Class and the Psychosocial; Auto/Biographical Narrative Perspectives

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## INTRODUCTION: THEN AND NOW

Class still matters in adult education, as it has throughout its histories. Class matters in different spaces, places, and times. It has to do with the nature and quality of relationships in which people are embedded, historical and contemporary. Historically, in industrial societies, class has been seen as shaped by the productive relationships into which people were born and or enter without choice. Class consciousness had to do with how such experience was processed, culturally, relationally, politically and educationally. Class, I suggest – despite profound economic and cultural changes in the rise of neo-liberalism and de-industrialisation – continues to matter, if sometimes in more diffuse and disparate ways. It matters not as a ‘thing’, or structure, in the words of distinguished labour historian and adult educator Edward Thomson (1963/1980), but as something happening between people. We cannot have love without lovers, deference without masters and servants; fulsome recognition or classed misrecognition educationally without students and teachers.

Class continues to shape experience in the neo-liberal hegemony: in deepening inequalities, precarity of life and livelihood for a majority of people. It influences perceptions of education and health, as well as work, and infuses the growing gap in life expectancy between affluent and materially impoverished communities (Marmot et al., 2020). It matters in post-industrial contexts like the ‘rust belts’ of the ‘developed’ world, and in a deregulated, profoundly unequal, financialised political economy. New manifestations of class inequality have renewed expression in schooling, in psychological and physical health, and how lives are reflexively experienced, understood and narrated (West, 2016).

Daniel Oesch (2022) has analysed how, over the last four decades, the traditional industrial working class experienced a massive decline in employment as economies were re-structured under neo-liberalism. The political and economic clout of organised working-class people diminished as older extractive and manufacturing industries disappeared and or work was outsourced to the ‘developing’ world. In consequence, older industrial class formations weakened, as did the once strong historical connections between organised labour and workers education. Workers education in the United Kingdom, and in Scandinavian countries, for instance, was grounded in workers’ institutions: in trade unions, political parties, cooperative organisations, non-conformist churches and educational associations.

Nowadays, especially in the United Kingdom, trade union influence is much reduced, alongside rising income inequality and even family instability on the social margins (Oesch, 2022). The neo-liberal project, driven by the economic crisis of the early 1970s, and spearheaded by Thatcher and Reagan in the 1980s, represented a direct assault on

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organised labour, the welfare state and workers' organisations. Here was a programme to shatter the social and cultural restraints, as they were perceived, on international capital; and a political push, supported by various academics and journalists, to restore the power of economic elites and the conditions for unbridled capital accumulation (McGarraher, 2019). Working-class power and self-help institutions, including workers education, were deeply compromised.

Class matters therefore as capital relentlessly seeks higher returns and sources of cheap labour in a globalised world. Communities and people can be 'de-skilled' overnight, on the whim of the global investor's algorithm. Inequalities of wealth and ownership have grown, while the increasing mobility and financialisation of capital led to a redistribution of wealth upwards and weakened the capacity for popular democratic decision making from below (Finnegan & Merrill, 2017). Class continues to shape perceptions of education's purpose, including in adulthood: it colours issues of who we think we are (collectively and individually), what we can be and do, even what we deserve.

Class historically, I suggest, has been associated with economic relationships, and how people are shaped by these and associated cultural dynamics. Workers education once lay at the core of a struggle for new forms of class consciousness and assertiveness in building a more egalitarian world. Class offered collective resources of hope, knowledge and power to create better, less class-ridden societies (Rose, 2001/2010; Thompson, 1963/1980; West, 2017; Williams, 1989b). But the decline of older industrial economies, worker self-help organisations, and attacks on welfare states weakened the struggle. Moreover, the rise of the women's movement, black consciousness and broader identity politics led to some diminution of the idea of class as a prime source of oppression. The emancipatory power of feminism (and other popular movements) brought gender (and race) into the frame; but also placed greater emphasis and focus – in what was termed the biographical turn – on the experiencing subject herself, historically and contemporarily (Chamberlayne et al., 2000). This reinvigorated, among some, interest in class in its intersections with race and gender.

Moreover, despite the fragmentation of older industrial worlds and workers education, and the narrowing instrumentality of much contemporary adult and lifelong learning, particular forms of more feminised adult education and research have illuminated the continuing power of the mind-forged manacles of class, and its intersections with other oppressions. New kinds of finely grained, emotionally attuned, deeply relational auto/biographical research and writing illustrate the constraints of class – in women's lives for example – but also how these can be challenged and transcended. Greater attention is given to the depths and heights of lived experience in the 'biographical turn', and to their classed, gendered and or raced dimensions in their entirety, among various academics of working class origin (Chamberlayne et al., 2000; Formenti & West, 2018; Merrill, 2021; Merrill & West, 2009; Steedman, 1986). Our understanding of the oppressive, normalising power of class, inter alia, has been much enriched. And how it can feed the narrative imagination to build more aesthetically satisfying understanding of lives.

A more complex portraiture of classed lives and an interdisciplinary, psychosocial theory of the processes involved has, in other words, been generated. Class becomes both a relational socio-cultural as well as psychological phenomenon, where external and internal worlds, and changing qualities of relationship, dynamically interact. Working class auto/biography was once largely innocent of psychological theory, or of emotional life more generally. Carolyn Steedman (1986) suggests there had been an attribution of psychological simplicity to working class people, partly emanating from the limitations given to mental life within 1960s and 1970s Marxism, which in turn affected the study of adult education (West, 1996, 2017).



Here, the mode of production of material life was seen to condition the social, political, emotional and mental. Yet these forms of analysis and writing offered little by way of explanation of how class consciousness develops or is learned; or more radically how ‘false consciousness’ can be transcended. If emotional and mental life tended to be epiphenomenal, they merited less interest. But class gradually came to be seen as more complex, psychosocial, and a learned positioning in which human agency was involved. Psychoanalysis began to be applied in auto/biographical narrative inquiry in an effort to do greater justice to lived experience (Bainbridge & West, 2012; Chamberlayne et al., 2000; Steedman, 1986; West, 1996). Lives were more open to profound and fluid re/interpretations of the interplay of outer and inner worlds, intersectionally and interdisciplinarily (Stanley, 1992; Steedman, 1986). Class might be learned differently, in particular families and communities, illuminated by in-depth auto/biographical research and writing.

All of which was empowered by the rise of second wave radical feminism and other emancipatory movements like black consciousness. Inequalities and misrecognition in productive relationships were aligned with misrecognition in processes of reproduction and emotional labour (Merrill, 2021; Merrill & West, 2009; Steedman, 1986). There was challenge to the stereotyping of working class relationships: that men for instance were always and inevitably dominant figures and women lacked agency (Steedman, 1986). Psychological perspectives, as noted, had been neglected in mainly male working-class biography (West, 1996). The focus was on the political and socio-cultural in working class experience, rather than what was dismissed as essentialist psychology. Class was a phenomenon ‘out there’ in economic relationships, and adult education’s purpose was to build collective social critique and agency in relation to it. Psychology, especially psychoanalysis, and self-experience, interiority and intimacy, to repeat, were foreign countries about which – consciously at least – little was known. The literature was dominated by an emphasis on rationality in change processes and how reason’s light would illuminate the path to human liberation (Bainbridge & West, 2012; Formenti & West, 2018; West, 1996, 2016). Unfortunately, this could be to the neglect of feeling, the body, the imaginal and emotional life in social science in general and adult education more specifically (Chamberlayne et al., 2000; Merrill & West, 2009; Stanley, 1992; West, 1996).

The idea of recognition developed by Axel Honneth (Finnegan et al., 2014; Honneth 2007, 2009; West et al., 2013), within the traditions of critical theory, proved helpful in the auto/biographical and narrative study of adult learners. Honneth argued, philosophically, drawing on people like Habermas and Dewey, that processes of classed misrecognition and disrespect were pervasive in contemporary, neo-liberal capitalist dynamics. Class was deeply implicated, it was suggested, in processes of disrespect and misrecognition in how we experience and learn our place in the world. The gaze and judgements of dominant others are important, while they and the power they exercise over forms of representation can structure our feelings of who we are, even how we feel about ourselves (in education etc.), evoking in turn dissatisfaction, discontent and incompleteness. Class, in these terms, is about how powerful elites define and even demonise us and whole communities through their control of the means of representation and the neo-liberal, individualistic fiction that it is we who control our lives through our own will (West, 2016).

Under neo-liberalism’s individualistic sway, success or failure are seen, in other words, to derive from individual effort rather than social inequality or inherited privilege. The naming, shaming, even demonisation of whole categories of people penetrates to the heart of psychic and cultural life: when we feel negatively labelled – failures and ne’er do wells – we easily internalise the harsh judgements and even conspire in the

demonisation. Class, in these psychosocial perspectives, abrasively cuts to the psychic quick, alongside gendered, raced and sexual judgementalism. But, to repeat, not all experience of class (or gender and race) is identical or negative. Diverse others, in childhood, families, schooling and across learning lives, may love, nurture and encourage us, agentically, to think for ourselves and challenge the labelling. We can become more agentic: narratively and assertively reclaiming and shaping our lives on more of our own authentic terms, if never in conditions of our own choosing.

## PRECARITY

The ideology of small government, minimal social welfare, the cult of markets, individualism and de-regulation, alongside the celebration of capital accumulation ('greed is good') and its uninhibited global compass, became the new right's religion. Its worship is combined with antipathy towards the older liberal and or social democratic post- Second World War, Keynesian consensus (McGarraher, 2019). And towards the organised working class. A story of social or liberal democratic progress, using the state and redistributive economics, and the power of collectivism in economic, trade union and political life – in which adult education was enmeshed – shattered. And, as mentioned, a new politics of diversity and identity could exclude class from the progressive conversation (Chan, 2023).

The neglect matters profoundly. Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2000) observes how what he called late, liquid capitalist modernity meant everything was constantly in flux, nothing secure or certain, as capital was liberated and older workers movements weakened. The role of adult education was in flux too. It became, for policy makers, a means to encourage individual adaptability to the functioning of markets and economic imperatives, in contrast to cultivating an informed, active citizenship. This new focus and content, Bauman thought, often involved a series of superficial, even meaningless projects disconnected from the humanitarian depth of disciplined scholarship and wisdom.

Bauman's ideas are troubling – above all the notion that social forms and human relationships melt away faster than new ones are forged, raising profound psychosocial questions of where inner and outer security and good enough conditions for human flourishing are found. The neo-liberal normalising dominance of *homo economicus* reduces humanity to consumers, not citizens, animated by the metaphor of rational, highly individualistic, self-aggrandising, calculating machines. Policy makers of course do attach significance to lifelong learning, but this is often of a short-term, instrumental, culturally and economically adaptive kind. Doctrines of individual responsibility, perpetual flexibility, short-term employment contracts and pervasive managerialism combine to create a new precariat enveloping many middle-class workers as well as remnants of the old working class. Mental well-being across whole populations has suffered (West, 1996, 2016). If class is in flux, it continues to matter in ubiquitous ways and countless lives.

Most of all perhaps among the by now fragmented, insecure working class on the economic and cultural margins. A class no longer with confident access to collectively created self-help organisations, or narratives of hope for progressive social change. For some commentators and academics, these changes, and the rise of the women's movement, led to greater (to an extent justified) emphasis on patriarchy and women's oppression, but to the neglect of class (Michael & Reed, 2023). For others, notions of meritocratic diversity mattered more than preoccupations with class and social equity: except a more diversified elite is no less an elite for that. Fortunately, as mentioned,



new forms of critical feminist auto/biography, autoethnography and psychosocial analysis, have helped rescue class from the enormous condescension of the neo-liberals and meritocratic myth.

Class and gender evoke, as will be observed, an especial symbiosis in auto/biographical and autoethnographic writing, radically challenging traditional understanding of how class and adult education are experienced and represented in women's as well as men's lives. And of what we mean by education at all. Such writing challenges, in particular, the conventional academic separation of literary, expressive, narrative, emotional, and auto/biographical sensibilities from reason and intelligence; and new forms of writing pay especial attention to the lived complexity of class, gender, race and learning, over time, in intimate as well as public space.

Those new forms of auto/biographical and autoethnographic scholarship matter. 'Auto' focuses on how the researcher's (or narrator's) life and experience shape, often unconsciously, perceptions of the other. Biography is a research methodology focuses on the study of lives, or more especially the stories we tell about them; and the interplay of macro-level process – like the power of neo-liberal ideology – with the meso dimension of communities, work, families, schooling etc. (Chamberlayne et al., 2000; Stanley, 1992). Crucially, it encompasses the interplay with the micro level of intimate relationships and inner worlds, as American sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) urged. There can be a psychoanalytically-informed focus on the relational shaping of intimate life. And on the dynamics of relationships in the here and now of reflexivity, thinking, writing, teaching and research as well as the *there* and *then* of a life story's focus. Meanings, in these terms, are co-created and negotiated: researcher and researched, teachers and students, become, potentially and reflexively, learners together in charting the dark and light of intimate hinterlands in the intersectional dynamics of class, gender, race, sexuality etc., and chronicling a life in more authentic ways (Formenti & West, 2018; Merrill & West, 2009).

## RELATIONSHIP, CLASS, AND 'THEN' IN ADULT EDUCATION

Previous generations of adult educators placed class emphatically at the core of their framing of adult education's purpose. Class was pervasive in the lives of worker-students, and sometimes of adult educators too (Williams, 1989b, 1960/1988). Class, and the working class specifically, became the vehicle to build an educated, egalitarian democracy. The Kingdom on earth for Christian socialist adult educators like Richard Henry Tawney. Workers education for him, at the beginning of the last century, was imagined within a Christian Socialist, social reformist and liberal framing (Goldman, 1995, 2014). It involved a challenge to capitalist inequalities and constraints; and a quest to replace these with the power of egalitarian, learning communities, and of shared, democratic ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange. Places where power could be redistributed, including in the classroom, so that all might be teachers and learners.

Here was a glimpse, for someone like Tawney, of the Christian Kingdom manifest on earth: of living, working and learning in greater equality, fraternity and conviviality. There was strong emphasis, in Tawney's early work, on the decentralisation of power and the necessity of participative democratic processes in building a vibrant educated democracy (Goldman, 2014). Women were present in Tawney's early workers' tutorial classes – there were substantial numbers of female elementary school teachers – but their voice,





and the gendered dimensions of lives, was neglected. The focus was firmly on production rather than reproduction or the emotional division of labour. Women's place in the emotional economy had to be inferred, although, there are also powerful testimonies from working class women/students themselves, chronicling struggles for, and the meanings of agency encompassing intimate experience too (Rose, 2001/2010).

Raymond Williams was of a later generation of adult educators. He was more the materialist than Oxford idealist. But class, for him, like Tawney, lay at the heart of his work and beliefs. He thought Tawney over-emphasised a kind of liberal impartiality in workers education. But Williams was similarly committed to the idea of workers education as a process as much as an outcome: a kind of long revolution of dialogically and democratically building class enlightenment, democratic competence and relationships, in contrast to the top-down prescriptions of certain Marxists. Those, especially, captivated by the Communist Party, or, for others, by the centralist, statist obsessions of the Fabians. Elites like these presume to know best.

Class was at the beating heart of Williams' academic and fictional writing (see McIlroy & Westwood, 1993). Class consciousness was reflexively forged in the thoughts, actions and experiences of living, breathing human beings (something lost in overly abstract and reductive, 'academic' conceptions of human progress). Class lay at the heart of capitalism's and communism's crude reduction of whole complex peoples to a mass. One to be shaped by the manipulators of Maddison Avenue (or central committees). "There are no masses", Williams wrote, "only ways of seeing people as masses" (Williams, 1989b, p. 11).

A student in one of his adult courses, in 1953, was writing about Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. She described a scene when waiting for her husband at Brighton Railway Station, in wartime "(...) a train disgorged, like some giant whale with a distaste for fish that day, masses of men on their way to football (...) not one of them looked handsome, good or clever". "Dirty, dingy, depressing and dead", she wrote. Raymond remarked that he often arrived by train himself during that period – and he was someone she presumably respected. Was he too then: "disgorged, dirty and dead?". The exchange suggested to both teacher and student the distortions in formulaic and unreflexive ways of seeing humanity. And the profound importance of challenging sterile, ingrained ways of thinking (McIlroy, 1993, p. 5).

Class could rear its ugly head at any time in a society where middle-class encounters with the working-class other were limited and perception was often a matter of fantasy and projection. Fantasy could be unconsciously driven by fear of the masses or the mob – an old literary trope – in the changing sometimes violent world of the last and nineteenth centuries. Opportunities for people to truly encounter each other, across difference, were few. Gaskell's *North and South*, written in the nineteenth century and Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*, in the twentieth century, illuminated the largely separate lives of different social classes, with contrasting expectations, values and ways of seeing. To an extent this remains true. Raymond Williams describes some of the dynamic rather well:

(...) there are in fact no masses, but only ways of seeing people as masses. With the coming of industrialisation, much of the old social organisation broke down (...) we were constantly seeing people we did not know, and it was tempting to mass them, as 'the others', in our minds. Masses became a new word for the mob: the others, the unknown, the unwashed, the crowd beyond (...). (Williams, 1989b, p. 11)



Towards the end of the nineteenth century, on into the twentieth, adult education represented a space in which encounters with the other, and otherness, became more possible, at least for some in University Extension and in new educational alliances between progressive elements in universities and workers' organisations. Class in William's work evoked nuance, context, particularity, individuality as well as collective life: it could be manifest in intimate moments with a particular working-class student. Williams tells a story of a miner, for instance, visiting the Ashmolean museum in Oxford, as part of a miners' summer school, in the 1960s (Williams, 1968). The worker-students were encouraged to read novels about working class life; the miner and Williams found themselves alone together in a section of the museum as the other participants wandered elsewhere.

The miner started to talk, hesitantly. "I can't talk to explain to anybody what my work is". He looked past Raymond and said, "I can't". He couldn't do it. He then talked quickly of being a roadmaker underground. Building a road to the coal face. Williams remarked that he got the picture, but the miner responded, "with an aggressive edge". He said he didn't draw very well and took out a pencil and piece of paper and handed them to Raymond. "I don't draw very well (...) Draw it then", the miner said. Raymond did and thought, "it wasn't too bad". The miner looked relieved, took the pencil and paper back and made a slight alteration. They waited for a few moments, and Raymond thought this was a crucial moment. He continued to think about it and how a different quality of relationship was established. The rest of the week went much better (Williams, 1968, p. 242). A moment of mutual self/other recognition we might say. Of intimacy in which a risk was taken. The moment derives from a time when mining and miners' education loomed large in workers education (West, 2022). Of course, the miners' summer schools were firmly for the men, (although the wider Oxford summer schools, of which the miners schools were a part, had women too).

Later, in *Resources of Hope* (Williams, 1989b), Williams wrote of weaknesses in progressive movements with reference to women and the environment. But he too, in his literary output, could neglect women and the symbolically feminine in the emotional life of places like Pandy (the small community on the border between England and Wales where he was born). His novels are the setting for some of his most important writing: it was easier to bring emotion and intimate struggles into literary rather than academic composition [witness his novel *Border Country* (Williams, 1960/1988)]. His most evocative work revolves around father/son relationships. And of the difficulty of a son going to a university like Cambridge and then expressing direct, loving feelings in the local idiom to a dying working class father. Nowadays, working class women as well as men are creatively fusing the academic and personal, while emotional life for everyone is being represented more vibrantly and transparently in a literary as well as intellectual spirit (West, 2016). Some working-class female academics have found a confident place – inspired by the women's movement, the biographical turn, and new experimental feminist scholarship – to chronicle and consider deeply embodied processes of adult education and the interplay of class, gender, agency in transformative learning (Chapman Hoult, 2014; Merrill, 2021; Stone, 2021).

## RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

Relationships matter in finding voice, in personal as well as public space. They matter in understanding history, including family histories, gender and class. We noted how



Edward Thompson (1963/80) urged us to imagine class as a process – not a thing – happening within human relationships, over time. Class was embodied in actual people – in the way they talked, claimed space, thought and experienced a world in relation to others. He wrote that “the finest sociological net cannot give us a pure specimen of class, anymore that it can give us one of deference or love”. There is no love without lovers, or deference without squires and labourers (p. 8). Nor learning and change processes without the whole people at their heart. We cannot grasp the existential fragments called adult education without reference to people in the totality of their lives: in changing relationships with parents, siblings, partners, communities, tutors, other students, and to the symbolic as well as internal world (West, 1996). Adult education is one element in a psychosocial, cultural, relational and discursive complexity called life.

Historically within adult education writers stressed the liberatory power of reason’s light and cognitive rationality in contrast to magical thinking and false consciousness. The creation of Habermasian ideal speech communities, for instance, was a touchstone for social democratic, or for that matter, more radical purpose. These were communities in which people could think and talk freely (Honneth, 2007; McIlroy & Westwood, 1993; West, 2016, 2017). But there remains a gap when thinking about or imagining the parameters of and struggles for adult learning.

Women’s education, and auto/biographical narrative inquiry, have filled the gap and shifted the focus towards learning as embodied experience: challenging the neglect of corporality, desire, emotion, love, relationships and spirit (Chapman Houlton, 2014; Fraser, 2018; Merrill, 2021; Stone, 2021). An older masculinist, scientific stress on the centrality of reason became challenged in new forms of auto/biographical and literary expression. Our perceptions of learning have been correspondingly broadened and vitalised as a result (Chapman Houlton, 2014; Merrill, 2021; Stone, 2021). Writing itself came to be conceived as an integrative vehicle for creative, literary, interior/exterior as well as intellectual experiment, for both teachers and students. The personal was redefined as profoundly political under the influence of feminism while writing could itself constitute as well as represent a changing ‘reality’.

Writing, in the spirit of auto/biography, became the domain for new kinds of epistemological experiment and ontological sophistication; a form of emotionally expressive, narratively vibrant resistance, resilience and agency, in contrast to stolid, ‘scientific’ empiricism (Chapman Houlton, 2014). Writing contributed, in these terms, to a radical reimagining of learning’s domain, for students as well as teachers: encompassing heart, creativity, the mythic and poetic, the unconscious and spirit, alongside intellect; right as well as left hemisphere functioning together as psychiatrist, neuroscientist, philosopher and literary critic, Iain McGilchrist (2021) advocates. The Enlightenment emphasised the power of the left hemisphere to bring order, precision and rigour to intellectual work; unfortunately, the domain of the right hemisphere – the poetic, the messy, the mythic, the ineffable and what we can figuratively call the feminine – lost out. Both/and rather than an either/or of cognition and perception should matter.

## INTERSECTIONALITY

So, class never went away, although its power waned in the decline of the old, organised working class and in the emergence of new waves of gendered and racialised politics. Gender, as we have noted, could replace class completely as the object of interest, although widening participation in universities brought more working-class women and



people of colour into the academy, and their experiences could then be chronicled by women researchers (Merrill, 2021; Reay, 2018). Class, as experience and analytic category, intersected with the new consciousness of racial, gendered, and sexual oppression (Merrill, 2021). The basic idea of intersectionality is that all oppression is linked. Social categories like race, sex, gender and class overlap and even cohere into interdependent structuring processes; or, in adult education, their agentic opposites in a dialectic of psychosocial recognition of oppression in all its forms. Everything that disempowers matters, transcending either/or binary thinking.

Class, in these more complex, entwined ways, matters among men as well as women. Psychoanalyst Susie Orbach (2023) observes how, mainly due to feminism, women's work came to be relatively valued (and it is relative) inside and outside the home, at the same time as Thatcher and similar governments deindustrialised large swathes of the United Kingdom, mainland Europe and the American mid-West. The disappearance of men's previously secure occupations happened at roughly the same historical moment when women's contributions gained more recognition. And at an historic juncture where the prestige attached to money making, conspicuous consumption and displays of wealth increased exponentially under the enchantments of Mammon (McGarraher, 2019). A social contract was broken as core dimensions of men's places and roles, and of women's place, as well as of parenting and ideas of masculinity and femininity, were questioned. We remain enveloped in this turmoil, and misogynists like Andrew Tate can speak to younger men desperate for some recognition, however perverted. This in no way is to suggest that working class women's lives are free from oppression, rather that working class men, and maybe men as a whole, struggle too with profound economic and cultural dislocations.

Flux, anxiety and existential insecurity pervade many lives although adult education provides potential space for reflexive repair and resistance. Women however – more so than men nowadays – appear to claim most space. Various feminist writers on adult education have chronicled working class women's experience (Chapman Hoult, 2014; Merrill, 2021; Stone, 2021). For writers like Paula Stone, researching auto/biographically, and drawing on the work of critical theorist Axel Honneth, the struggle for recognition encompasses deeply painful classed as well as gendered oppression in being the child of a single mother in working class Kent. Or in Liz Chapman Hoult's writing, we get glimpses of how learning, and the love of literature, provide powerful antidotes to loss and precarity, intergenerationally.

Hoult draws on an interdisciplinary literature as well as what feminist writer Hélène Cixous terms '*écriture féminine*'. This is writing viscerally alive, experientially evocative, and conceptually challenging in relation to adult education (Chapman Hoult, 2014; Cixous, 1975/1986; West, 2023). Some of the writing, to repeat, is influenced by psychoanalysis, especially in its more relational forms (Bainbridge & West, 2012; Britzman, 2003; West, 1996). It enables us to perceive and interpret the interplay of structuring processes and agency in idiosyncratic, aesthetic and psychologically good enough ways. We break free, in doing so, of what Carolyn Steedman called, as noted, the reductive emotional patina of mainly male biographical writing on working class life (Steedman, 1986). Steedman wrote of her working-class mother, in the North West of England, who liked to do 'classy things': dressing up and going dancing. 'Looking classy' was in fact, Steedman suggests, a form of embodied agency and resistance. Dancing and giving expressive, bodily form to frustrated desire brought her mother life and energy. And her supposed marginalised working class, gendered existence was in fact one of relative power in comparison to her husband. Writing like Steedman's rescues women, men and class from over-generalisation as well as reductive misrecognition.

## GETTING PERSONAL: THE POWER OF WRITING LIVES

I want to illustrate struggles for agency, learning and recognition in the writing of three women. Barbara Merrill's (2021) biographical research focuses on class, gender and race in what she terms 'critical' studies of working class women in an elite university. Her theorising is grounded in their stories of lives and learning, rather than the more abstract preoccupations of what she terms 'feminist postmodernism'. There are commonalities as well as particularities in these learning biographies. Material pressures matter, drawing on critical feminist analysis. For the women, poverty, insecurity and a kind of cultural illegitimacy – whether they should be at university at all – haunt the stories. The costs of study and childcare figure large, materially and psychologically. There are troubling feelings of ambivalence in the university's middle-class habitus. Class intrudes directly into a conversation at one university seminar. Liz, a working-class student, struggled to find voice in a module on Politics and Food. She mentioned how school dinners had to be good because they might be the only hot meal some children would get. The younger, middle-class students struggled to understand: their parents were relatively wealthy, and the students knew little of life on the edge. Cathy, another student, talked of the perpetual struggle to manage lives and children: of feeling guilty at taking time for self and 'failing' to be a good, ever-present mother.

Class, in these terms, helped distinguish older working-class women from younger female middle-class students. And if class created some distance in the university, studying also opened gaps between older women and working-class friends. Julie, for instance, was unable to discuss university at the school gate. 'Look at you with your big briefcase', they might say: acting above yourself. She perceived these moments as confusedly judgmental and bewildering. It was hard to explain why university mattered. Not least studying social science and how it could deepen awareness of the constraints of working-class women's lives. And of perpetual insecurity; of the difficulty in putting self first; of being labelled at school as fit only for domesticity; and of new tensions in intimate relationships as selves and stories were re-imagined. But classed experience also paradoxically provided resources for comparative depth and richness when naming a world and in processes of self-recognition.

Paula Stone's work (2021) is grounded in the experience of being a child of a single parent in a working-class area of Kent and struggling against demeaning stereotypes. There are teachers who constantly disparage. There are layers of prejudice against a single parent and her child. Paula's journey towards a university career and a PhD encompasses unsettling cultural dissonance between past, present and possible futures. Her narrative moves from the deeply personal to a collective story of people categorised and diminished through the label 'illegitimate' in particular communities. Drawing on Bourdieu and Axel Honneth, she chronicles a world of poverty and everyday struggles to keep on keeping on; and of rage at being called 'illegitimate' as a kind of 'classed humiliation'. Paula's drive to succeed centres, as she now sees it, on a lifelong quest for legitimacy and fulsome recognition.

On entering university, and moving to a career in teacher education, she describes a classed and gendered university habitus. Her career spiralled into emotional conflict towards how she was being categorised. But her writing gradually provided a source of self-recognition, assertion and partial resolution, in the supportive even celebratory responses of significant others (I was there with her, as one of her supervisors). The hauntings of 'illegitimacy' and feelings of fraudulence narratively pulsate at times in her writing. But recognition lies in the process and completion of a PhD, and the gift it represented. A gift of feeling seen, accepted and celebrated. A terrain encompassing a

continuing struggle to dialogue with her mother about her, Paula's, interpretation of their two lives. Her mother could feel judged not celebrated. Adult education for Paula is deeply embodied, classed, relational, and psychosomatically layered in complex memory in feeling. But mind does get reconnected with body, past with present, narrative competence with personal reflexivity, recognition theory with existence, and one life with another.

Liz Chapman Hoult (2014) develops a literary and poetic sensibility in her account of class, gender and learning lives. Her text, like Stone's, is emotionally and interpretively vibrant, as she deconstructs the ideals of distance and objectivity within conventional social science. She chronicles the constraints and misrecognitions of class and gender in fusing the poetic, literary, auto/biographic and conceptual. She draws on gifts from intellectual and creative sisters like Virginia Woolf and Hélène Cixous. Woolf wrestled with the problem of bringing a mother into her writing, a crucial aspect of women's experience. Cixous encourages Chapman Hoult to re-experience, reinterpret and energise themes of loss, life and death, and of intergenerational survival and resilience. Chapman Hoult animates the narratives of two resilient working-class women, herself and her mother, in dialogue. She puts ferocious love and learning as well as literature at the heart of recognition of a mother and self. Bordieuan labels like social capital fail and fail again. We need more, Chapman Hoult insists, in our writing on mothers, daughters, the death of a father, the imprints of class and gender, and of the power and gift of love in adult education. Reciprocal gifts, she insists, not capital accumulation.

Hélène Cixous says of the feminine writer, "her discourse, even when theoretical or political, is never simple or linear or objectivised: she involves her story in history (...) using poetry, fiction, and the theoretical idea of the gift in a feminine economy" (compared with Bourdieu's capital, which she terms part of a masculine economy). Gifts bring superior possibilities; "the genuine gift is admissible in the feminine economy", writes Chapman Hoult, "because of the ability of women to accept and accommodate the other, libidinally and reproductively, without violence". Cixous' s feminine giver seeks no direct return or profit, but to establish mutually vibrant, life affirming relations through the giving and receiving of gifts (Chapman Hoult, 2014, pp. 16-20).

Chapman Hoult's mother taught her how to read after the death of her father when she was just three. Her present writing generates resources of hope in the imaginative links woven between one generation and another, a mother's gift and her own existential resilience. In her mother's story reading is an act of resistance against loss, death, passivity and insecurity: an act of defiance in the face of insecurity, class and gendered constraint. Her working-class father re-enters the text – resurrected, in a way – because of his enthusiasm for adult education of a highly practical kind. For her mother adult education embodies the love of reading and a corresponding existential excitement and resilience. The love, joy and gifts of Jane Austen and H.G. Wells and the characters they evoke, alongside the conviviality of adult education. Life in the face of death, a kind of psychosocial zest and resurrection in the learning life.

Chapman Hoult challenges the restraints and perceptual death in some masculinist, overly rationalist readings of adult education. Space must be found for the life affirming energies of Shakespeare, Bernard Shaw, myth and the poetic: for the struggles of selves and the birth of new life. Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale* is an allegory of this as the character Leontes moves from the living death of misrecognition of his wife, Hermione, to a fuller recognition of her, and thus of himself. The character of Paulina wakes Hermione up with the help of music. She, like the gifted teacher, works to transform the object for Leontes, the reluctant learner. Chapman Hoult writes of walking naked into the text, drawing on Cixous's language. She does not hide feelings of desolation in death

or in confronting existentially vacuous, overly abstract academic concepts in conventional tales of adult learning.

Her struggle for authenticity and recognition gives birth to the new and startling. For Chapman Hoult it necessitates writing as if a child and dialoguing with a mother as well as writers like Margaret Atwood. She notes, with reference to the literary critic and academic Ben Knight (Chapman Hoult, 2014, pp. 170-171) how Atwood's protagonists are drawn back into a search for origins, as if looking for missing pieces in a jigsaw. Drawing pieces or fragments of experience together in the puzzle of lives, intergenerationally, over time, though the gift of relationship. This to challenge the reductive 'surveillance of an academic, social scientific management system'. Strong, vibrant and compelling words.

## GETTING PERSONAL; LIBERATING AUTO/BIOGRAPHY

I found my way to a similar place. The journey included encountering, like Stone, the concept of recognition – inspired by feminist writers, psychoanalysis and the Frankfurt School – to illuminate the role of class and gender in my own learning life and those of diverse others (Formenti & West, 2018). A set of ideas that brought dialectical meaning to deeply relational, narrative, unconscious, emotional and discursive struggles for self and agency. Class matters here. I was born into a working-class family on a public housing estate in the then industrial city of Stoke on Trent in the English Midlands. Growing up in the late 1940s and early 1950s and witnessing the effects at a micro and meso level of social transformation. After the sacrifice of the Second World War, bearing witness to the birth of a National Health Service, including free access to healthcare and liberation from the perpetual anxiety of how to pay doctor's bills. There was joy in living on a new housing estate and escaping the slums: houses with space, gardens, and streets with room for children to play (West, 1996).

Free school milk, too, every day, at primary school: a symbolic as well as literal, life affirming gift from the State. The psychosocial mattered at school and in transitions to primary and secondary education. Primary, because of psychologically insecure attachment with my mother – intense first day desperation at mother leaving me alone by the school gate. Going to secondary school meant leaving my community behind and encountering middle-class children in a grammar school. There I worried about how I spoke, an anxiety that got worse at university. I first encountered public (private) schoolboys and girls there. Anxiety about voice was embedded in the relationship with my mother: she inherited, intergenerationally, existential and material insecurities forged in lost status, as the daughter of a pottery manufacturer whose business went bankrupt in the Great Depression. Macro, meso and micro worlds colliding. She, as I now perceive it, projected much of her own lost status and frustrated desire on to me, her son. Class, and the desire to be 'classier' mattered to my mother as much as Carolyn Steedman's (Steedman, 1986; West, 1996).

Raymond Williams negotiated the contours of the English class system in an earlier decade (I was born in 1946, Williams in 1922). His story is different to mine. He was a Welsh scholarship boy going to Cambridge. I, a grammar school child of the post 1944 Education Act. Williams wrote:



The myth of the working-class boy arriving in Cambridge (...) is that he is an awkward misfit and has to learn new manners (...) Out of rural Wales it didn't feel like that. The class which has dominated Cambridge is given to describing itself as well-mannered and polite, sensitive. It continually contrasts itself favourably with the rougher and coarser ones (...) if then I say that what I found was an extraordinarily coarse, pushing, name-ridden group, I shall be told I am expressing class feeling, class envy, class resentment. That I showed class feeling is not in any doubt. All I would insist on is that nobody fortunate to grow up in a good home in a genuinely well-mannered and sensitive community, could for a moment envy these loud, competitive, deprived people. (Williams, 1989a, pp. 5-8).

Quite. I too came from a good home yet one damaged by the jagged shards of class and loss (West, 1996, 2016). My mother embodied dissatisfaction at lost middle-class status while my father was firmly working class. My own journey became, at times, in these terms, a life partly lived for others, wrestling with who I was, how I spoke, and who or what I was supposed to be. I was motivated by a psychosocial (and at the time largely unconscious) drive to be accepted and successful. A more authentic desire only emerged later in years of adult learning (in psychoanalysis), academic enquiry and writing. I wanted in earlier times to be like 'them', quite different to Raymond. However, I similarly, at times, felt distant from Dad.

My university, unlike Cambridge, was newer, more provincial but I still struggled with transition. More recently I became aware of what amounted in fact to a long lifewide learning journey back home as it were, symbolically: to an internal place of self-recognition in which different aspects of my life, including the ordinary, could be accepted. Creating 'home' involved narratively integrating life lived in an older working-class community, with the middle-class status of a university professor. Giving recognition to and gaining understanding of different fragments of a life. When I returned to Stoke, much later, from 2009/2010 to 2016, to do research, I encountered a struggling, precarious, politically and economically abandoned city in which racism and Islamic fundamentalism had found purchase. Fundamentalisms had colonised the void created by overly rapid deindustrialisation, the ravaging of lives, the loss of a collectivist, self-help culture as well as a demonisation of failure. And the loss of a once vibrant workers education tradition (West, 2016). But class still mattered in pernicious, intersectional ways.

## DISTRESS IN A CITY

Class, gender and race were present in the stories I collected. And in reengaging afresh with the history of adult education (Goldman, 2014; Rose, 2001/2010). As I struggled in a dystopic political economy, Jonathan Rose provided a telling, enriching account of the history of adult education – a kind of existential gift. It included the story of a working-class woman called Nancy Dobrin. She was born in 1914 and wrote that the study of literature had revolutionary consequences for her. She grew up in a home where learning was unvalued and there was either 'a row or an order'. She read little but later joined a Workers Education Class (WEA) and learned to read avidly, although she admitted she originally went to the class in search of a man. Nancy was to become a writer. She described working for a German Jew during the Second World War, wondering what he



was doing there and why couldn't people like him go home. Later, in another class, she met her future husband, a German Jewish refugee describing himself as a Christian Communist. She talked of learning and change by reference to literary characters – in the writing of Lawrence, Tolstoy and James Joyce. She came to question, profoundly, her own bigotry. The experience shaped her relationships with her own children and family and impelled her to question aspects of their schooling. Agency takes many forms: in the everyday, in families as well as on a wider democratic stage (Dobrin, 1980). Class mattered individually and collectively in building the better world of the post Second World War settlement. Literature was a precious gift to Nancy: life enhancing in her struggle to be and become.

Class matters now as people seek some stability, meaning and hope in a world of precarity and social fracture. They wonder why the world is riddled with inequality and injustice; and why there is such judgementalism from on high towards peoples like themselves. Right wing politics and or Islamic fundamentalism begin to resonate and to fill, however distortedly, some of the economic, political, cultural and relational void left by the decline of industry and organised working-class power. Fascism and Islamism offer stories to explain, however perversely, oppression and how things could be put to right. Psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin (2018) describes how neo-liberal individualism, and its doctrine of the survival of the fittest, evoked a fantasised judgementalism towards working class people and their communities. All embellished by new right political influences in parts of the mass media. Blame was ladled on working class individuals for their condition in television programmes like *Benefit Cheats and Benefit Streets*: 'they' should learn to budget properly, and not depend on foodbanks; or must be more adaptable and get themselves properly retrained for work – however short-term and alienating. Benjamin, drawing on clinical vignettes, creates a clinically grounded account of how difficult recognition can be, complementing Honneth's more philosophical work. She provides a telling phrase that captures the consequences of new fragmented politics: 'there is only room for one victim'; only room for one of us to live: the Islamist, perhaps, or 'native' peoples. Only room for 'us'. 'They' the other, the Asylum seeker, the Muslim or the irreligious white infidel, are the problem to be eradicated.

While doing the research, I read in a local newspaper about a mosque being pipe-bombed and a shop, near to where I once lived – owned by South Asians – torched. There was a murder too of a South Asian taxi driver on a street nearby. I read of the rise of the British National Party (BNP), Fascist and aggressively racist. Only one group should live in the city, 'white natives' in the BNP's version of the great replacement theory. By 2010 it looked as if the BNP would take control of the City Council, as social democratic Labour imploded (West, 2016). The fact that the BNP fractured does not disguise the strength of racist politics and parties: the English Defence League, Ukip and bodies like Patriotic Alternative all reinforce the idea that the other is the problem and there is only room for 'us' to live.

There were stories of local Jihadists in working class South Asian communities travelling to Syria to fight for Islamic State; and of generational fractures in particular Mosques. Some of the early Imams came from poor, rural communities in Bangladesh and Kashmir, barely speaking English. For older generations, the Imams represented reassuring continuity between past and present, and a direct link back home. Later, for some of the young people educated in Britain, the Imams in their stuttering English could not to be taken seriously. I started to chronicle, auto/biographically, stories from various people living in predominantly white or South Asian working-class communities (West, 2016).

Two brief stories illuminate the pain and possibility of these times. Carol (a pseudonym) was a 70-year-old woman living on a predominantly white working-class estate. She was attracted to the BNP because she felt they cared. Her feelings of loss,

precarity and nostalgia were intense in the death of a husband who lost his job when the last mine closed. There were powerful feelings of loss in the decline of the quality of life on the estate as austerity bit hard. Carol suffered from mental distress and was hospitalised for a time. Talking cures were absent and disturbance on her hospital ward as various male patients came to pee in the ward because it was once theirs. The fire-bombing of the Asian shop and the death were directly opposite Carol's house. 'Druggies' on the corner disturbed her too. She was distressed at the loss of community, of streets unsafe for children; and of how her son, with a family, could no longer find work, or at best only minimum wage precarity in a distribution centre. He was advised to leave the area and find work in a place like Manchester. Carol was attracted to the BNP because they sorted out the druggies, and a broken gate. She felt recognised by them, unlike the defunct Labour Party. But the BNP's rhetoric soon turned to undeserving asylum seekers, as they put it, getting houses and taking 'our' jobs in the city. When an asylum seeker moved in close by, 'the problem' felt close to home. Fascism mines psychic and social precarity in depth.

In Burnley, in the North of England, a similar post-industrial town to Stoke, Makin-Waite (2021) has written of how the loss of social solidarities evokes deep divisions; you come to believe that your community suffers because someone else is getting resources. There was also envy at another's community – South Asian – where neighbours, so it was imagined, still chatted over garden fences and extended families lived cheek by jowl. The way it used to be for 'us' in a politics of nostalgia. Younger people in more cosmopolitan, relatively economically prosperous areas of larger cities like Manchester, where many public sector workers live, might stay loyal to the Labour Party. But Burnley is similar to Stoke in disenchantment being rife and how Fascists function (West, 2016).

Paul Verhaeghe (2014), a psychoanalyst, like Benjamin, brings clinical sensibilities to his interpretation of the effects of neo-liberalism in communities like Carol's. His insights derive from many years of practice. He has chronicled and theorised the effects of the present political economy on psychic health. He suggests a profound relationship between the neo-liberal experiment of the small state, unfettered market forces, privatization, fetishised individualism, and constant economic precarity on mental health. In the neo-liberal form of thinking, anyone who does not succeed must have something wrong with them. The pressure to achieve and be happy takes a heavy toll. It includes a warped view of the self, disorientation and despair. People are lonelier than ever before, he insists. From his clinical experience Verhaeghe sketches out the impact of social change on the nature of the disorders from which we suffer. Like excessive narcissism and a feverish cult of self-reliance. Individualism and the disintegration of collective notions of well-being and hope in 'post-industrial' communities bring a terrible toll. Carol knows this only too well. So, where on earth might resources of hope lie? (West, 2016).

Carol eventually found hope, she said, in the devotion of a loving friend and neighbour. They formed an alliance, the two of them, to walk, arm in arm, one lamppost further each day. Love and basic recognition Honneth would call it. Carol found self-respect in the intimacy, storytelling and conviviality of a sewing class as well as in the appreciation of a child reading to her as a volunteer in a local primary school. A process of recognition that includes the capacity to bear fulsome witness to the other, like a child. Later she became a community activist, energised by developing self-esteem and mutual recognition. There are fragments in her story of these processes: in loving encounters, in a cocreation of self-respect and mutual esteem in adult education. Such spaces for learning and agency in fractured working-class communities are priceless.

Makin-Waite (2021) notes how workers from Mediation Northern Ireland were brought to Burnley by the local Council in the hope of creating spaces for dialogue and

mutual learning. He mentions his own initial scepticism (he was employed by the Council), thinking that dialogical processes would do little to address underlying economic and political weakness. He changed his mind as BNP voters and people of Bangladeshi and Pakistani origin shared stories, often in common, of domestic life, religious beliefs, food, and the performance of Burnley Football Club. Potentially precious fragments to help build some mutual understanding and social solidarity as the other might be reimagined as a fellow human being. But the initiative ended prematurely, Makin-Waite observes. Notwithstanding, room was created, for a while, where 'we' could begin to learn and live together with 'them', creating an 'us'.

A 30 something working class British Asian man, who I named Raafe (meaning companion in Arabic), lived in another part of Stoke. (For ethical reasons, Raafe is a composite of various stories). His narrative might simply be read by reference to race and religion, but class, cultural and economic precarity exist too. His family history was troubled, and he sought escape from distress via drugs. His relationship with his father fractured as the opportunity structures of traditional working-class life shattered and formerly ritualised father/son transitional spaces provided by work in a pottery disappeared. Class, and the precariousness of relationships in the harsh processes of deindustrialisation are part of this shredded fabric. Benjamin (2022) has written that the neo-liberal denial of the need for social solidarity, as defined by Thatcher and Reagan, plays on a deep psychic fear of being discarded. An anxiety that we do not count, we are not cared for, do not matter. That one can only matter if the other does not. Benjamin applies this to the largely unconscious fears of whole peoples – in her case, Jewish Israelis and Palestinians – but it might equally apply to working class communities in the United Kingdom like Raafe's (or Carol's). Especially, perhaps, in Raafe's case, among young people. Class, in terms of precarity and fractured social solidarities represents a fundamental layer of anxiety in intersectional strife.

Class in these terms fuelled Raafe's other insecurities, including strong reactions to the racist other on the street, and, as he saw it, the persecution of his religion. After all he said the slaughter at Srebrenica, where the Bosnian victims were white, taught him that disrespect was not wholly about race at all – although it was that too – but religion. A disrespect working internationally in the lawlessness of Srebrenica and the post-9/11 wars. Only one matters in this world – the white, imperialist other – and people like him do not. Class – in terms of cultural, material and relational precarity – pervaded this toxic racist and Islamophobic mix.

Raafe went to prison for a while because of drugs and violence and found a quality of 'education', as he perceived it, there. He learned of the first Crusades, and how the Muslim religion had been threatened over centuries by the armies of Rome, as he called them. He believed the new Crusades of the willing in places like Iraq and Afghanistan were a continuation of the same infidel aggression that must be defeated by heroic sacrifice, similar to Islamic 12th Century victories against Christian Kings in Jerusalem. He found a group of the likeminded and eventually took on a leadership role, and almost certainly went to Syria. 'A gang of his own', in Adam Phillips's (2012) provocative phrasing, provided forms of recognition in the fractures and rejection pervading his life. But only one story counted in this space, a fundamentalist version of history and narrative truth. Nothing else could be countenanced. In the final resort the groups to which he belonged were anti-educational, narratively emasculated cults of death.



## STILL MATTERING

Class continues to be important in educational transitions for ethnically diverse working-class children entering university, as Diane Reay (2018) chronicles. She writes of how studying can become an all-consuming obsession for some working-class children in elite universities, in the highly stratified British university system. She notes how neo-liberalism's grip led to a pronounced stratification of English higher education. Although nowadays, many more working-class children enter university they tend to end up in universities outside an elite 'Russell' group of research institutions. Reay writes of dark shadows of confusion and ambiguity among working-class students in the 'top' universities. Of concerns over competitiveness and feeling out of place. Relationships matter in the students' perceptions of how significant others judge them – like middle class students and administrators. The miraculés of the working class, in Bourdieu's terms, can remain the 'fish out of water'.

And they can compensate for messy feelings by an excessive compulsion to succeed, academically. Social adjustment is difficult, from Freshers' Week onwards (a time of induction and introduction to a variety of clubs and social activities). Learning can be hard won in these accounts rather than an expected entitlement of birth. Paula Stone would recognise the pattern, as I do. Clearly, Raymond Williams had different experiences in the elite university of his time. No one set of experiences is the same for everyone, but there are recognisable patterns in these elements over time. Patterns in encounters with a competitive, often culturally unaware other, someone who can easily misrecognise, and diminish our humanity.

## CONCLUSION

Class really does matter in considering adult or for that matter higher education. The old, organised, industrial working class may have largely gone to be replaced by pervasive fragmentation and perpetual precarity among those living in 'post-industrial' communities. At the same time, many middle-class jobs, even in universities, have become casualised and manualised; proletarianised, even. But when chronicling lives in marginalised spaces, class continues to weave a poisoned thread. Many are left feeling judged and negatively labelled by elites; and that lives are out of control – hopeless, sometimes – with no obvious authorities or collective resources to turn to. And yet adult education, of the broadest kind, once did, and might still provide precious space to understand how damage gets done, and can be ameliorated, in the powerful gift of self/other recognition. Social solidarities can be recreated, however precariously.

Older forms of workers education may have been metaphorically masculine in celebrating particular forms of cognitive understanding in the struggle to create a better world, but tutors like Tawney and Williams were alive to the personal and emotional struggles of their students too. Nowadays, feminism, auto/biography and interdisciplinary psychosocial perspectives provide rich additional insights into the complexities of experience, including class, and in holistic ways. And how adult education can represent transformational space. Sadly, however, many remain seduced by racists, Islamic fundamentalists or the snake oil salespeople of neo-liberalism. Each offers a truth and nothing but the truth in which the other is to blame. Only people like themselves deserve to live.



Axel Honneth and feminist writers help us theorise the power and intersections of class, gender and race: mediated through social, family, intimate and unconscious life. Some judgmental dynamics are simply unbearable and the psychic damage of disrespect is pushed into the unconscious, as Jessica Benjamin (2018) has written. The wounds of shaming and labelling a child 'illegitimate' can cause a person to hide away, disguise themselves and the rage they feel. But there remains hope in reengaging with the tangled web of emotion using adult education and *écriture féminine*. More such space is needed in a reinvigorated adult education to challenge the mind forged manacles of human life and overly rigid boundaries between therapeutic processes and narrower forms of adult education (Bainbridge & West, 2012).

Working class auto/biographical research and writing offer profound insights into how, as McGilchrist (2021) frames it, whole minds and hearts may be enlivened, right as well as left hemisphere engaged, the poetic becomes manifest in the rational, logos works with mythos, and new forms of democratic life can be created, from below. A place to bear witness to the other, and self, as well as to the interplay of macro, meso and micro worlds, structure and agency, in learning lives. Reason alone takes us only so far. We damage the project of adult education when the literary, poetic and the embodied are dispatched to the margins. Reason, it should be said, often lacks self-awareness. Cathy, Liz, Julie, Carol, Raafe, Paula, Liz, Barbara, Raymond Williams and me – maybe you the reader too – have stories to tell, which include the entangled imprints of class and other oppressions across lives. And how these imprints can, partly at least, be transformed, in mutual processes of creating learning lives, individually and together, on more of our own terms. In doing so, the language we use evolves and becomes aesthetically rehumanised. We can then strengthen the kind of liberation psychosociology, democratic impulse and power of self/other recognition manifest in the past and present but also a much needed future for adult education.

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