

Chapter 21

Solidarity Spaces and Places of Reflection: Working-Class Identity in Higher Education Arts Faculty

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Abstract

This chapter stems from the authors' experiences hosting a 'Solidarity Space' for working-class academics (WCAs). Over the course of these recurrent meetings, certain themes have proven to be persistent: imposter syndrome, language, the class ceiling and career progression, narratives of escape and the sense that a working-class (WC) identity should be left behind in a university setting, and representation, intersectionality and race.

The authors' Solidarity Space was a forum for a rotating cast of participants to connect, decompress and share concerns and observations particular to the intersection of WC and academic identity. The authors limited the authors' call for participants to art schools because of the issues connected to culture, taste and access that are particular to this area. As numerous scholars, including Bourdieu (1997) and Brook et al. (2020) have noted, the arts appear to be a meritocracy, where anyone with talent can be recognised and succeed irrespective of class background. This is a powerful and persistent mythology which serves only to mask the highly classed, gendered and raced realities of access.

For academic staff who may possess fractured learner identities (Reay, 2018) control of the abstract semi-public, semi-private (Lefebvre, 1991) space where knowledge is produced is where the 'othering' of WC values, knowledge and experience takes place, and dominance is maintained. Perpetuating narratives of education as a means of 'escape' creates an experiential vacuum for WCAs for whom conceptual 'escape' often does not coalesce with a lived experience that is still inherently precarious in the context of a neo-liberal agenda.

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Introduction

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Arts institutions are particularly interesting in terms of class. As Bourdieu (1990, 1997) divulged: a myth of ‘natural talent’ prevails in the arts, and belies the taste culture underpinning what is deemed to be worthy of merit, let alone who is allowed the privilege of entering its non-utilitarian careers and organisations. The idea that the arts are a sector where individual creativity and voice are paramount, and therefore anyone can participate, has succeeded in concealing how this individualistic culture itself requires an agency that is underscored by advantage. This is still the case today as Brook et al. (2020, p. 2) show ‘To make it in a cultural job, you need the sort of social, economic and cultural resources that are not fairly shared within society’. This also speaks to the divide between theory and practice, or doing and thinking, outlined by Bell (2004) which, he claims, reflects the historical stratification between intellectual and manual labour. This stratification, in turn, reproduces societal divisions and Bell describes universities as, ‘notoriously conservative institutions, highly attuned to demarcations of social distinction and the reproduction of cultural capital’ (Bell, 2004, p. 742).

Group Design

We set up our Solidarity Space (SS) for working-class academics (WCAs) in London art and design institutions in autumn 2021, inspired by the International WCAs Conference of that summer. The conference being held online allowed exploration, and we found ourselves surprised by the force of the experience: the power of hearing such concordant voices and concerns; revelatory. We were enthralled. Here, Mycroft and colleagues demonstrated their regular practice of a Solidarity Thinking Space. Their gatherings were informed by Kline’s (2020, 2021) idea of a Thinking Environment, which fosters group equality via listening. This group of academics simply and generously demonstrated what one of their meetings looked like, in order to spread the practice more widely.

Propelled by a renewed sense of an urgent need for change, we resolved to create our own community. We issued a call to WCAs at London-based art schools: institutions which share cultural contexts and are quite prestigious establishments, which can amplify class difference. We sent out an open call via trade union groups, and the Arts Emergency WhatsApp group initially, and then university-wide emails via our home institutions. The SS has run monthly since October 2021, for 1 to 2 hours. For accessibility, and to accommodate our geographical dispersal, the events are mainly held online. We have a mailing list of 40 and up to 10 attendees at each meeting, with 2 hosts consistently present. While we enjoy a rotating cast of members, owing to scheduling and other teaching commitments, it is important that people can come back and there be some familiarity with those in attendance. As Bourdieu identified: ‘Social proximity and

familiarity in effect provide two of the social conditions of “non-violent” communication’ (1996 in Charlesworth, 2000, p. 145).

A loose theme is set for most sessions, sometimes prompted by a news article, something we have read or seen, or experienced. We ask participants to introduce what they have been doing/thinking/reading/watching/affected by, since the last session and then allow the discussion to evolve organically. This piece of work is structured around key areas of discussion that occur frequently within the group; imposter syndrome, language/accent, class ceilings, narratives of escape and representation. The writing here reflects our responses to the discussions and to secondary sources related to the issues, it does not directly reflect the thoughts of any of the individuals who attend. We chose not to conduct interviews with attendees in producing this chapter, to preserve the pressure-free ethos of the space and the freedoms it facilitates. Both the authors of this piece are from working-class (WC) backgrounds and have had less traditional trajectories into academia, but have been working within the field as insider/outside (Hoskins, 2010) for the best part of two decades. We find our SS cathartic and a site where validation, peer-to-peer mentorship, community and resistance can evolve. It is also a space where Fusco’s concept of WC as method (2023) works in action to continue resisting class inequalities and expose the opaque ideologies that sustain them.

Imposter Syndrome: Estrangement in Academia

The term Imposter Syndrome, or The Imposter Phenomenon, was coined by Clance and Imes (1978), during their study into high achieving women. It described an ‘internal experience of intellectual phoniness’, arguing that sex-role stereotyping contributed to this experience. Similarly, the characteristics commonly ascribed to social classes in the United Kingdom have contributed to an internalising of the sense of being ‘unworthy’ or ‘failures’ (Crew, 2020, p. 30) as a WCA. Imposter syndrome has a strong connection with the sense of not belonging (Crew, 2020; Kadi, 1993), and is often aligned with a person’s awareness of being outside the traditional nexus of power. It has been defined as “a public feeling” that is intersectional and situated with those without power’ (Breeze, 2018, in Crew, 2020, p. 70). Education, intertwined with social mobility, creates a sense that WC identity is something to be moved away from or ‘escaped’ (Lawler, 2000), that middle-classness and education are synonymous, and that entering the academy means embracing middle-class culture, and an acknowledgement that it is superior to, and more desirable than, WC culture. The individual from a WC background, from this perspective, starts from an inherently disadvantaged position. This is, of course, not true: WC cultures have many unique positive values including sophisticated creative traditions and innovations. While these exist alongside acknowledged economic and social disadvantages, Crew (2024, p. 99) documents the many capitals available specifically to WCAs which partly stem from these disadvantages themselves. Nevertheless, the narrative of value being newly

acquired via the aspiration towards middle-classness, through the education system, presents a very persuasive mythology in the Higher Education (HE) sector.

Within our SS, however, it was not usually when conducting work that participants felt a sense of inadequacy or uncertainty, but in social contexts with other colleagues. Here, the sense of not understanding unwritten rules, or being 'found out' came to the fore. While it was acknowledged that participants in the group might in fact perform more effectively in teaching, tutoring and lecturing contexts than non-WC colleagues, this often came with a degree of what was referred to as 'over-preparation'. This may seem like a harmless solution which offers good value to students, but can exacerbate inequalities and precarities; it means working fewer paid hours to allow the time for preparation. The associated lack of entitlement, alongside a desire to 'extend the ladder' to students, also inclines WCAs to spend less time focusing on overcoming hurdles to personal career progression – a theme we will turn to later in this chapter.

These complex tensions arise from a sense of not being able to fully apprehend or measure experiential differences. For example, those excelling at state schools have no way of knowing if they are at a disadvantage to those with equal attainment at private schools. Where they personally may not experience an attainment gap, there is, however, an attainment gap between their institutions in general (Dimsdale, 2024). Furthermore, early education and home life are, as Bourdieu (1997) indicated, where a noticeable habitus is formed; a set of personal characteristics which distinguishes groups with different socio-economic divisions via their taste, habits, language, department, cultural capital; qualities which feed into social capital, or the networks which sustain and propel careers. Our attendees were astute in recognising their own worth intellectually, at least some of the time, but expressed anxiety over social situations, where the rules and the basis of the judgement of others is not so clear, and where early experiences are felt to cast a long shadow. As Quinn-Walker (2025) in this book notes, conferences, which strike a balance between a professional and social situation, can provoke navigational challenges.

The SS aimed to tackle this complexity of belonging by giving members permission to be both academics and WC simultaneously, without this being a fundamental contradiction, something to be hidden, or as something detrimental to social cohesion. The threat to social cohesion operates in both directions, with concern about a disconnection from WC roots, as important as a lack of fit within academia. As Langston (1993, p. 60) confesses 'I fear becoming oblivious to my privilege based on education. . . I fear becoming no better than the [middle-class] people who would look down on my family', while Gardner (1993, p. 49) notes 'These feelings [of estrangement] only intensified as I moved up the educational hierarchy. . . the more successful I became, the more marginal I felt. . . A key barrier to developing this awareness was the invisibility of other faculty who shared my class background'. During our SS meetings, we inhabited a space with others who shared the same intersection in our personal Venn diagrams of overlapping identities and experiences and raised our awareness of the role of classed identity in our professional and interpersonal relationships. Concerns,

observations, anxieties, once dissected and shared, were far less likely to provoke an individual's imposter syndrome and were instead given structural context.

Imposter syndrome is tied up with the complex issue of 'passing' for WCAs, who are often worried that they are not code-switching convincingly enough to manifest what is expected of an academic: middle-classness. The idea of 'passing' is important to interrogate further when thinking about intersections of race and class, since WC colleagues of colour do not have the privilege of this type of invisibility in the institution. We will return to a consideration of race and class later, but next set out a crucial barometer for the judgement of 'passing' or of a person's capacity to effectively operate in a competitive intellectual environment: language.

Language: Inauthenticity and Affirmation

Lorde (2018) observed that the 'master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' in setting out how the products of a racist patriarchy are ineffective for critiquing or replacing that racist patriarchy. 46 years on, this is still a point of contention for WCAs, who have often had to deny their difference and work hard to access the 'master's tools', and yet may still not 'pass' in the university because of perhaps the most important of these tools in an academic environment: language (Belanoff, 1993). This incorporates choice of vocabulary, perception of grammatical correctness or incorrectness and, of course, accent or dialect. All dialects have their own grammatical correctness that is unique to each of them, but which are considered incorrect by the linguistic canon of most universities (Belanoff, 1993; Charlesworth, 2000), while this canon, in turn, is universalised as correct by dint of their institutionally sanctioned intellectual authority. The members of our group hailed from diverse countries and regions but shared the experience of applying their language-habitus to a London art school context.

Contemporary London arts institutions cater to a very international student body, and lecturers strive to be understood by an audience who is working hard to listen to the content in their second or third language. WC voices are suppressed both to be understood clearly by the widest audience of listeners and also because they signify that which is distasteful to the institution, whose *raison d'être* is to elevate status. Taylor (2024) explores this in *Underclass*, which we discussed in one SS. Taylor recalls being openly accused of bringing her department and profession into *disrepute* by admitting that she grew up on a council estate. Despite this not being on a university-affiliated platform, issue was taken both with the content of her communication and how Taylor's experience was articulated: in her own voice. It was astonishing and upsetting to be confronted with this overt expression of distaste and attempt at policing, since we had all experienced more subtle forms of it ourselves. It gave a welcome opportunity to discuss Ehrenreich's *Fear of Falling* (1990) and the importance of status loss for middle-class subjects, who are therefore more likely to police the boundaries, through the exclusion of others.

To make the case that WC culture has positive value, we need to find ways to integrate diversity of voice into our professional lives. In our SS, even when tempered, regional accents shone bright, and we shared examples of how elements of our own vernacular were integrated into our academic voices, where alternative words would seem especially false, or cause a ‘dis/location’ between accent and vocabulary (Hey, 1997, p. 142). As Hey recognises ‘...no amount of fascination with poststructuralist accounts of “decentred” subjectivity can erase the “under the skin” sense of an intractable (working-class) class identity’ (Hey, 1997, p. 143). Every WCA is in a position of negotiation with their own, ‘authentic voice’, and the dominant language of the ‘master’ institution, but having permission and space to acknowledge this negotiation is crucial for recognising the value of WC experiences *and people*, and for extending the platform to hear their voices. While code switching can feel – and be – imposed, the ability to switch modes of communication is also a skill set useful to social researchers, and also, perhaps, ‘as multiple selves are held in play in language’ (Hey, 1997, p. 144) and the pleasures of being self-made can, come to the fore.

Class Ceiling: Getting ‘In’ Does Not Mean Getting ‘On’

Laurison and Friedman (2020) employed the phrase the ‘class ceiling’ to conceptualise the tacit and opaque barriers to social mobility they identified, drawing on over 150 interviews with people from four separate and ‘elite’ occupations (2019). For Laurison and Friedman, the key markers of privilege that help construct the class ceiling are; early career (financial) investment (allowing for risk taking, unpaid or short term work, time for networking) facilitated by the financial cushioning and security of familial wealth, activating symbolic networks (contacts, sponsors, patrons) and fluency in the opaque codes of embodied capital (how to ‘perform’ in particular situations, dressing appropriately, language use).

This research confirms recurrent discussions within our SS that professional progression is often impenetrable, frequently unobtainable or out-of-reach, depressingly beyond perception and even surprisingly undesirable for WCAs. This speaks to Reay’s point that ‘the possibility of a complex social trajectory for people who remain working-class is denied’ (Reay, in Mahony & Zmroczek, 1997, p. 19). Those joining the discussion space who do hold positions of authority implicitly understand that the site of authority they occupy is often saturated by a middle-class disposition where ‘the apex of the educational profession belongs to one specific type of person’ (Coogan, 2019, p. 2). As such, to hold positions of authority and influence requires constant intellectual, personal, emotional and existential negotiation. As a group we recognised Morley’s point that there is a class system of the intellect (1997). Drawing on Bourdieu, Morley explains:

Bourdieu (1997) predicted ...how culturally arbitrary qualifications can change their worth as badges of distinction acquired by different social groups and how new signs of exclusion can be

evolved by traditional elites to preserve privileged access to the powerful positions they previously inherited but which are now ostensibly open to meritocratic competition. (Morley, 2021, p. 115)

The shifting sands of academic or professional value discussed by Morley run parallel to the receding historical value of the WC. Class is not a protected characteristic and therefore class discrimination can remain unacknowledged, lurking in the shadows or operating invisibly while in plain sight (Crew, 2020).

We suggest that one of the systemic means by which class discrimination is perpetuated is through the control of conceptual space, bounded by the class ceiling. Here we think about the conceptual space of intelligence, academia, pedagogy and education manifested through access and progression. Drawing on the work of Lefebvre (1991) we conceptualise an abstract space (of access and progression) which is restricted by the specificity of the class ceiling created within academia. This space is a site where modern power relations, inscribed by class dynamics, are played out (Lefebvre, 1991). A space used to deny difference by controlling access. For Lefebvre, space is produced through human intent, it is a site of histories, of established hierarchies where dominant systems and structures remain in place or as Gottdiener (1993, p. 131) explained 'abstract space is constituted by the intersection of knowledge and power. It is the hierarchical space that is pertinent to those who wish to control social organisation'. For WCAs to comfortably access or occupy spaces of progression, authority, or influence in academia they must re-cast themselves, or as Stewart explains, 'at worst (they) are simply users or inhabitants inserted into space' (1995, p. 615).

This space is controlled in several ways, academics are managed via the triangulation of precarity (the casualisation of academic work), audit cultures (performance reviews, research plans) and uncomfortable expectations of competitive individualism (Breeze, 2018). Further, Morley (2021) identified a class system of intellect in academia which reinforces misinformation about what intelligence or knowledge *is*, and who 'holds' it. Often familiarity and fluency in the appropriate codes employed in academia is mistaken for intelligence or knowledge (Friedman & Laurison, 2020). Intellectual competency here follows the neoliberal model whereby the impact of structural privilege is denied in favour of narratives of the competent self. To be competent is something we inherently *are*, rather than something we can *become* given the right conditions (Lawler, 1999). This establishes a binary of deserving and undeserving intellectualism (Rickett & Morris, 2021). For the deserving, access to the space and passage through the class ceiling is often the result of middle-class sponsorship or the 'chance' of being championed in some way by someone further up the ladder and is framed as conditional gift, rather than a right, something that requires survival tactics of assimilation that can be personally problematic.

Narratives of Escape: 'Outsiders Within or Insiders-Out' (Hoskins, 2010, p. 135)

In academia despite decades of work (Casey, 2010; Crew, 2020, 2024; Lawler, 1999, 2008; Munt, 2000; Pilgrim-Brown, 2023; Skeggs, 2004; Tyler, 2015), the

understanding of how class is experienced is still relatively limited, having ‘rarely developed complex understandings of working-class people’ (Reay, 1998, p. 18). Prior research relies heavily on identifying, discussing and re-configuring the categories or labels associated with social class (Savage, 2015). Equally, significant work has been done determining and clarifying which factors place individuals into which category, from employment to education through to cultural competency. This work moves beyond limited and ridged historic categorisations to encompass the seminal work of Bourdieu (1990, 1996, 2003) and the intertwining of various forms of ‘capital’. More recently there has been acknowledgement that there is a myriad diversity of class experience or different ways of being WC in relation to gender, race or ethnicity (Block & Corona, 2014; Parsons, 2019; Pia, 2021; Reay, 2005, 2008; Tyler, 2008, 2012; Walkerdine et al., 2001) but drilling down into WC difference, or what those ways of being are and how they are experienced and felt in relation to each other, has yet to be fully unpacked.

Regardless of the more recent work and in spite of Beverly Skeggs’ claim that WC culture is not point zero (Skeggs, 1994), the persistent and overriding narrative remains that class – to be read here as the WC – is insidious, pervasive, suffocating and always lacking, while WC selves desire, or are in need of, escape from the ‘lacks’ of their lived experience into the realms of MC existence. The working and middle-class are not viewed or ‘socially constituted as different but equal’ (Lawler, 1999, p. 11) but rather disaggregating class categories re-draws additional layers of distinction, activated through the evaluation of cultural competency across a range of structural and embodied forms of capital. Such distinction sustains the prevailing hegemonic ideas that middle-class taste and behaviour are not lacking in any way but are the ‘right’ kind.

Against this contested experiential backdrop and because of recent political history in the United Kingdom and the dispersal of the political potential and collective consciousness of the WC, many WC individuals are reluctant, unwilling or unable to position themselves within a system of social stratification. This praxis leads to several contested assumptions around ‘escape’ narratives. The first is that the WC seek legitimisation by acquiring a/the desired middle-class identity, the second, as mentioned earlier, is that education is seen as a means to produce mobility – thereby suggesting that education and knowledge or being educated is/ can only be a middle-class thing – to be educated therefore is to be middle-class (Burke, 2018; Loveday, 2015; Morley, 2021; Reilly, 2022). Finally, there is the contested assumption that mobility must be about moving up and away rather than moving sideways or not moving at all (Friedman, 2014; Folkes, 2022). This is where the escape narrative (Lawler, 1999) gains traction as those who are seen to move away from a material existence defined by ‘lacks’, poverty or precarity by improving their living conditions or material existence are seen as fracturing class relationships through assimilation (Chibber, 2022). This suggests that notions of comfort and security (along with education and knowledge) are assumed to be solely the domain of the middle class.

Against the backdrop of the escape narrative the WCA occupies a difficult and transitory position described by Braidotti (2019) as an ongoing nomadic process of becoming. There are affective negative repercussions of the tension between

engagement and alienation or being the ‘outsider within’ (Hoskins, 2010; Reynolds, 1997, p. 14) where reflexivity forces the social and academic or the past and present to collide (Reay, 1998; Shields, 2023), creating habitus dislocation (Jin & Ball, 2021). These affective repercussions can include anxiety about being found out – read as imposter syndrome; internalising oppressive shame, as our impression of ourselves is reformed through the middle-class lens (Loveday, 2016; Morley, 2021; Reay, 1997), or anger and guilt about feeling excitement for intellectual work (Mahony & Zmroczek, 1997). Finding a personal or academic voice to counter, challenge or resist this is a constant battle that not all feel willing or able to engage in.

Coming out as WC also risks a further set of repercussions. Being marked out or labelled as WC requires acceptance of negative associations or an acknowledgment of the possibility that you are ‘lacking’ (Walsh, 1997), disclosure is therefore exposing and can create a feeling of vulnerability (Walsh, 1997). Concurrently, the WCA, while subjected to the restrictions of the class ceiling (discussed above) is both a perceived embodiment of successful meritocracy (Reay, 1997) and a useful resource for diversity quotas. What happens, therefore, is perceived as a conflation of collusion and assimilation, or ‘mastery and submission’ (Burke, 2018, p. 369).

The escape narrative continues to assume a desire to escape, identifying a fear of losing it all or being dragged back (Jin & Ball, 2021; Lawler, 1999, 2000). Discussing fractures or dislocations (Reilly, 2022), highlighting judgements around assimilation and material mobility (Lawler, 2000; Loveday, 2016). There is very little written by or about those who have no desire to escape their working-classness (Holloway, 1997) but instead actively use it to destabilise hegemonic assumptions and disrupt existing narratives (Morley, 2021) around WC knowledge. This is something discussed at length during SS sessions where pride (and critique) in/of the lived experiences we bring to the group is given space. This moves the discussion away from escape, acknowledging Loveday’s idea of the fugitive (2015), towards a refusal to seek permission, and just belong.

Representation: ‘It Is Not Our Differences That Divide Us. It Is Our Inability to Recognise, Accept and Celebrate Those Differences’ (Lorde, 2012)

The structures of inequality within academia are intersectional so what it means to be WC will depend on individualised embodiment. While it may be difficult to disentangle class specific issues across those intersectional lines (Walsh, in Mahony & Zmroczek, 1997), there is recognition and a consensus that inequality is itself intersecting in that it encompasses structures, systems and culture and has both symbolic and affective currency (Burke, 2018). It is the nature of both examples of intersectionality that have been chosen for discussion within the SS.

According to Wilson et al. across academia the power of whiteness and patriarchy remains the strongest combined force (2021). Decolonising initiatives which seek to recognise, challenge and redress the imbalance of white male

domination have begun to challenge established practices and entrenched ideas about value, what should be ‘taught’, how we should teach, and how we measure achievement. However, the right to access HE remains reliant on withholding rather than redistributing, and exclusion, rather than representation (Burke, 2018). For many, the focus remains on learning to become or appreciating what you are not (Reilly, 2022).

Alongside the more recent ‘decolonising’ narratives, the concept of ‘Widening Participation’ – which has been around for decades according to a commons briefing paper from 2018 – is a common feature across UK higher education institutions. The purpose of widening participation is to address the entry barriers those from disadvantaged or marginalised backgrounds may face, thus welcoming different learners into HE (Reilly, 2022). However, drawing on the work of Lorde, Morley has discussed how institutions where possible, discredit difference by stealth in favour of the familiar tropes of whiteness and patriarchy in order to ringfence the profitability of the institution (Morley, 2021) leading to courses and institutions being devalued. Both Kinkaid (2020) and Rickett and Morris (2021) discuss what happens when difference enters the arena, suggesting that experiential unbelonging, alienation and unworthiness prevails for academics who often do not have an institutional history to draw upon (Reilly, 2022). The construction of difference – read as lacking – is where not all cultural capital is traded on equal terms (Lawler, 1999) and misrecognition, both structural and individualised, attaches damaging effects to types of bodies (Breeze, 2018). Here in the murky realms of exclusion and division unabashed exploitation prevails creating unequal access to and use of the abstract space. Loveday (2016) highlights that academics from marginalised groups who have accrued both value and capital continue to be discounted and/or questioned, while simultaneously diversity is marketised with Wilson et al. (2021, p. 8) commenting that ‘the academy uses people of colour to make it look diverse’. Reilly’s (2022) confrontational claim that middle-class academics colonise the expertise of the marginalised for publications and career progression is rendered more morally questionable as it occurs at the same time that the gap between the expansion of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion teams, committees or programmes and the negative experiences, progression and destinations of WC students actually widens (Breeze, 2018). This is evidenced through a 2023 Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) report that finds, ‘The gap in degree attainment between those in the most and least deprived deciles stands at 16 percentage points’ (Nathwani et al., 2023). In addition to this, the casualisation of academic labour continues to entrench inequality (Breeze, 2018).

What can challenge the march of oppression (and a key element in the SS group) is to cultivate a shared sense of belonging through class experience. As Shields (2023) stated, the marginalised are less likely to feel they belong, as divisive politics, decontextualised and disembodied theorising (Burke, 2018), the notion that we must change to belong, fit in, assimilate, or be included in the space perpetuates racial inequalities and is a form of symbolic violence. The four domains of belonging identified by Gravett and Ajjawi (2022), academic, social, contextual, and personal, are the products of power. Creating a sense of belonging, being valued, within a space not controlled by the institution/s is

critical (Shields, 2023). Studying middle-class ‘knowledge’ will not undo the system (Reay, 1998), neither will tolerating the class ceiling or narratives of escape; ‘only work that centres injustice will control the alienation of advantage’ (Reay, 1998, p. 23). To eradicate the discrepancies between academic labour and its conversion into social and symbolic capital, to equity of control within the abstract space of the academy, we must extract the personal power forged through our difference/s (Wilson et al., 2021) and snatch legitimisation for our own forms of capital. Our SS offers a place to interrogate these issues.

Conclusion

This chapter situates the specific forms of marginalisation and exclusion at play when dealing with the experiences of WCAs within arts education. We focus on a considered selection of recurrent themes that form the discussions within our SS. The first of these is the notion of imposter syndrome – a concept that speaks to the everyday difficulties encountered by WCAs, and one that has pragmatic and psychological consequences. This section also touched upon the notion of belonging and briefly introduced the tensions inherent within social mobility. The following section discussed the language of class, regional accents and dialects and the ‘voice’ of academia that often works to quieten different ways of speaking. The chapter then moved on to explore the class ceiling; the conceptual space where progression is restricted, before challenging the narratives of escape often grafted onto WC achievement. The notion of social mobility was addressed again here. This chapter ends with consideration of the intersection of class and race and how belonging itself is in many ways further marginalised for particular groups of people, while the very same experiences are appropriated and theorised for professional advancement.

Thus far, our SS for WCAs in London art schools, has offered a thinking space and place to decompress: an opportunity to consider and understand our various classed positions and contexts, providing support for the emotional and professional consequences for dealing with such positions and their related experiences. We noticed a consistent and pervasive trend that WC colleagues had a keen desire not to ‘pull up the ladder’ after themselves, but rather wanted to use their position to support students and younger academics on their journeys through the academy. Simultaneously, we contrasted that desire with many middle-class colleagues who instead turned their attention upwards in terms of the academic hierarchy, and ensured that their efforts were best noticed by those who could assist with their own advancement. Consequently, we wanted our space to redress this imbalance by also functioning as a peer-to-peer mentoring network; supporting career progression against the class ceilings we find ourselves operating beneath. Alongside networking, an important element of this is simply the validation of shared experiences: the opportunity to take refuge from persistently being an outsider in the cultural setting of UK HE. This helped to re-establish the sense of community that we had had to forfeit to embark on our chosen careers, and, in turn, gave the space to recognise, challenge and resist inequalities within the

institution. Finally, in scrutinising how working-classness and intellect/education can be set up as opposites in universities, or how class difference can be concealed by the universalising of middle-class ideals and the myth of a meritocracy in the arts, it underscored for us just how crucial WC identities and experiences are to the academy, which would be myopic without them.

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