

Queer-Class Repetitions & Interruptions

Yvette Taylor^a

AUTHOR COPY

A Bed of Roses

I am writing to express the distress and anger I feel about the bigoted intolerance towards white, educated, 'middle-class' women.... on what basis do the self-styled working-class want to categorise other women, and in doing so promote disharmony amongst us? Father's occupation? Husband's? Own (if employed)? The use of these occupations to classify people is part of the male assumption that a person must be pigeonholed in a competitive pecking order... On the one hand they call for equal access to education and higher level jobs, then sneer at 'middle-class educational values' and reject those of us who have benefitted by such access, calling us 'over-educated' and 'over-privileged'. If we currently enjoy those things which they say all women should have, if we offer to share the particular skills we have acquired – e.g. how to use the system – we are accused of being patronizing 'do-gooders', but if we don't, then we are colluding with the patriarchal system in their oppression In any case, being 'middle-class' doesn't automatically mean that life is a bed of roses.
(Lesbian Archive, Box File 1)

I'm a Working-class Woman O.K.

I went along to this workshop feeling quite excited, proudly wearing my badge saying 'I'm a Working-class Woman O.K.', but came away completely disillusioned by the aggression that had been displayed and feeling that I had been indirectly attacked for being a lesbian ... for doing consciousness-raising (a middle-class indulgence), for wearing dungarees (uniform of the middle-class) ... Anyone who was in any way articulate or spoke with a middle-class accent was usually cut short or constantly interrupted. When those with a notably working-class accent spoke, there was complete silence and even applause at the end.
(Lesbian Archive, Box File 2)

Interruptions and Repetitions

My long-term research has persistently returned to questions of sexuality and class, influenced by feminist geographers. The Queer Precarities workshop which this Special Issue reports on acted as an invite to return again. But sometimes returning to go forward means going

^a School of Education, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland, UK.

backwards; sometimes we go back through archives, including our own data and embodied journeys, as reluctant returns, frustrations and repetitions. This piece is non-linear in its forward-backward movements between data gathering and being data – including appearing in queer-feminist-academic space or being the working-class queer at the workshop. I think thorough the situatedness of academic (re)productions as always occurring in time and place, when new terms and articulations may repeat or disguise; precarity as a term of now, may act to displace class as a term of then – or ‘them’ – again raising enduring questions about the politics and production of knowledge. I offer up queer-class stories, including dimensions of the personal, political, affective, archival and material, encountered across place and time. In thinking about (inter)disciplinary research productions, I am still compelled by class as a concept and one which still often collides with queer. If ‘precarity’ takes us closer to queer than what happens to ‘class’? In this short viewpoint, I hope to show and share some of the research reflections enabled by the Queer Precarities workshop.

I reflect back on queer lives as classed. Across the long term, I’m still thinking about my research, and myself, as queerly classed and wondering if this constitutes a repetition or an interruption: should queer-class terms and associations be interrupted or repeated and is ‘queer precarity’ a useful stretch or a strange elision? If precarity is taken to describe forms of insecure labour, such as zero-hours, fixed-term or seasonal work, or subjective feeling of insecurity, interdependence, risk and vulnerability, then I’m tempted still to search for structures and specificities within new conditions. When figured alongside gender, race and class, these new conditions may be viewed as enduring realities. Questions of class – a term with an expansive social-political and inter-disciplinary history – have *also and always* exceeded a numerical count, expressed as embodied states, privileges and precarious claims. Debates have shifted class from an un-dead ‘zombie category’, to multiple conveyer of social, cultural, economic worth, from begin ‘social-economic classification’ to a survey ‘experiment’, and from a source of politicised identification, to dis-identification. Movements back and forward, between our data and our own dis-locations, shift things too. The contributions in this Issue are valuable in making us re-think, update and interrupt our go-to terms including as personal, professional and politicized identifications. There are many definitions and usages of precarity: my concern is that privilege becomes wrapped in scare quotes, as in the above opening extracts, alongside ‘over-educated’ and ‘middle-class’, with ‘precarity’ neutralised, encompassing everything and everyone. We always need to be attentive to the work our terms do and do not do, and who is pulled along or left behind as academia re-names its subjects and itself.

In these interruptions – across time and place – from the workshop, to the archive, from the classroom to the fieldwork site, I choose to repeat ‘class’, queerly, noting its elisions and erasures as well as contemporary classifications and re-circulations. The above extracts are from the Lesbian Archives at Glasgow Women’s Library (GWL) – old concepts, words and thoughts reside here. But they also endure and animate the present. The first extract highlights women’s mis-fit from traditional heteronormative class analysis, classificatory struggles around ‘pigeonholing’, and possible normative and anti-normative actions. We can wonder if her stance is queer, classed and/or precarious, and if it might be all these things. In claiming that ‘I’m a Working-Class Women O.K’, the second extract bemoans the ‘constant interruption’ that follows, even in an affirming, applauding space – class reversals, sneering snobbery, implied shame and explicit aggression all feature. These words constitute interruptions and repetitions, as class interrupts feminist space, as queer interrupts recognisable classed signs and associations, and as white, middle-classness is repeated as the entitled but aggrieved wounded subject.

Sat in the archives at GWL I searched a range of local and national feminist publications dwelling on the emotional and material wounds of patriarchy, capitalism and hetero-sexism. In countless newsletters there are features, full pages articles, and multiple letters of classed interruptions to what feminism and feminists are. In many ways the classed conversations of 'then', the 1970s, '80s and '90s, are repeated in the 'now', with box files placed next to me forming a high and weighty pile of evidence across time. My fingers became dusty and my eyes strained as I dwelt on and in these living histories. These were and are lively archives, resonating across time and place, pulling us back and propelling us forward: I laughed in reading the full back-and-forward 'bust up' that the above letter excerpts convey. My laughter echoed in the now regenerated and relocated prize winning library, that I once inhabited in my teens and twenties in the late 1990s and early 2000s, then located in a smelly dimly lit back street lane. My partner and I now laugh that we might well have been sitting back-to-back in the cold damp building, having also braved the broken lift, as we read 'lesbian facts' and allowed ourselves to imagine what LGBTQ+ life might be like.... Were we queerly precarious, or precariously queer? Had queer been constructed for, or within reach of working-class queers, or has it, us, them, been deconstructed and decomposed, along with the old decaying GWL building?

The 'bust ups' in and beyond pages, whether community or academic, are still known and felt across LGBTQ+ community as generative archives. Life is still not 'a bed of roses' for many queers, despite a slew of legislation and, often uneasy, incorporation – into workplaces as 'diversity', into the calendar year as #LGBTHistoryMonth, into schools as rainbow coloured curriculum cladding. Being at GWL, and reading a distinctly Scottish queer archive, off-centre from US mappings of Queer Theory, means being firmly located, where questions of location, reflexivity and standpoint are never far off the feminist map. My partner and I are both Scottish and from Glasgow; I'm White and she is South Asian. We've departed and returned and Glasgow maps us whether we like it or not. I'm often recognised as being from Glasgow (and from a particular part of Glasgow) while often she is not: this (mis)recognition is repeated again and again, including at a recent queering-the-map event where people were invited to co-produce Glasgow's queer past, present and future.

Coming out as Glaswegian is often (mis)recognised as being authentically working-class. But that authenticity is already racialized. My partner grew up bilingual and is often told she doesn't have a Glaswegian accent. She's told she grew up in the posh 'West End', which wasn't the posh West End when she was growing up but a space of white-flight, as white working-class people left in an attempt to retain value in moving away from their South Asian neighbours. The white middle-classes have moved in and, in doing so, have extended themselves and the boundary of what constitutes the 'West End', and west-enders. They celebrate 'multiculturalism', pulling her in, while pushing her out. My partner is not recognised as bilingual, an association seemingly more easily attributable to modern language speakers, and was misplaced into the English-as-a-second-language group at school, as I differently sat in the 'bottom reading' group. We think about possibly sitting back-to-back in classroom settings, and recognise the class-race sorting and subverting that continues to entangle categories, experiences and emotions across time and place.

We hold our irritation between us, deflecting mis-recognition. We attend a feminist event and she's asked if she's 'out' to her family: family seems to follow her, while I'm rarely asked about mine, assumed to be 'ambitious' so un-attached, and without the 'weight' of family that 'career success' would, and does, disallow for women. Ambition is gendered, classed and racialised, and white middle-class women are the beneficiaries of 'equality, diversity and

inclusion' initiatives. Closet doors are summoned, prised open and peered into by a well-meaning white middle-class young out queer. The well-meaning one continues as we stall, telling us that 'lesbian' is a less expansive term, that queer does and says more. I feel this as an interruption and a repetition – to the term 'lesbian', to the story of 'outness', to the (im)possibility of being and doing 'queer', and to the precarity of our positions when (de)legitimatised through race and class.

Revisions and Afterthoughts

Such questions prompt revisions and revisitations about queer precarity as classed, as I turn backwards-forwards to the queer-class data archive built up over 20 years (Taylor, forthcoming). My box file contains many articles criticising the focus on white, Western, urban, middle-class gay male subjects. Contents connect political economy and culture including in the formation and incorporation of LGBTQ+ communities (D'Emilio 1993), and via city regeneration of commercialised scene spaces (Taylor, 2007). Things fall off well-categorised counts, exceeding the inclusion of same-sex rights such as marriage into a box which fits (Taylor 2009): tick-box tokenism towards equalities highlight the limits of liberal inclusion disrupted by queer-class intersections (Brim 2020). In this weight, evidence amounts that working-class queers may not be able to engage with a politics of normalisation, as 'ordinary', 'unremarkable' queers, or to position themselves as agentially becoming, via a neoliberal framing of customers, residents, workers and citizens (Hennessey 2000). This evidence becomes lag and potential lack.

My searching and sorting, adding to and discarding the queer-class archive has included published data, outputs, presentations and it has included people, meanings and stories now made visible as outputs, metrics, end of award outputs, or presentations; I pull out my own box files and feel the weight of past investments and present responsibilities. Writing on queer-class intersections over time has been precarious, often viewed as niche and/or excess, where I've been advised to write about something else. In over two decades of writing about class and queer, I've moved, with respondents, through different, interrupted and repeated times. This has included a shifting sense of the parameters of class, and of class dis-identifications and politicisations; it's included the celebratory landscape of the Equalities Legislation Act (2010) and the setting-up of protected characteristics. As set-up this has pitted some 'equalities' as contradictory to others, with sexuality, race and religion awkwardly mobilised as Rainbow Europe re-imagines itself as queer protector and liberator. Working-class communities and individuals have been blamed for right-wing popularism, hetero-activism, and regressive Brexit fall-out, effectively excluding queers and/as people of colour from imaginings of 'working-class', and from everyday political progress, including in just getting-by in 'hostile environments'.

Just before the UK 2020 lockdown, I co-organised a GWL workshop on, for, by 'poor queers', including a launch of Matt Brim's *Poor Queer Studies* (2020) book: I wanted to think through and with the communities that I'd spent time in, been a member of, interviewed and researched over decades, renewing my empirical work with a focus on *Working-Class Queers* now. Contentious terms and practices are constantly revised, also true for the host site, GWL: the regenerated library is not just a library, but also a museum, a learning hub, a community venue and so much more; it's not just local (Glasgow) but internationally recognised, and operating a trans and non-binary inclusive policy though not without controversy. It might be a queer space. This 'new' site still feels novel for me when my memories of it are as a precarious space,

bolstered by the efforts of founding staff and a host of volunteers. It may still be a precarious space, subject to funding applications, failures and successes, and just missing out on being awarded UK Museum of the Year. It's located in a 'working class' part of town and, having hosted events at GWL over the years, I'm variously praised as doing 'outreach' or cautioned against 'that part of town'.

Before the workshop, I'd arranged to meet with and interview a young queer woman, who'd responded to the call for working-class queers. We'd arranged to meet in central Glasgow and on meeting her I quickly realized that even being in Glasgow was a source of excitement and some trepidation. She'd undertaken quite a long journey across quite a short space, between Greater Glasgow and Glasgow city centre. We'd initially missed each other, and I walked around and re-checked my instructions, circling the coffee shop and eventually phoning: she explained she'd gotten a bit lost and couldn't use her google maps as she'd ran out of data. She wasn't familiar with Glasgow as although there was a bus route she could access, this still involved a long walk, or a car ride from her mum, who was juggling her own work and care and would likely ask for details about the trip. That day my participant had chosen to walk, and would face another long, isolated walk in the dark to get back home. I deliberately kept the interview short though and we kept in touch. I invited her to the GWL event. She never came – the commute was too long.

Such stories become the 'common ground' that interviewees have shared across time and place. This has included expressing class solidarities, then shattered by experiences of racism, or rendered seemingly impossible when middle-class queer parents buy-in middle-class privilege, acting in the 'best interests' of their children (an interest historically denied and even criminalised). It has included expressions of disbelief ('Is this useful?') that I am interested in working-class queer lives, to having to pull out and unpack when interviewees state things simply as obvious truths ('It's just like trans and race is like bread and butter to me', Nneka, 23, mixed race, pansexual trans woman, interviewed 2019). The (post)Brexit UK climate sees a repetition of working-classness outside of the Rainbow Europe pink-washing ('People think working-class council estates are Brexit crazy unionists, racist, homophobic, there's no place for us there, there's no LGBTQ there. Which is just a lie, which is just not true', Dan, 36, white, gay cis man, interviewed 2020). Working-class queers never fitted in to other (continued) crisis times, still living with and through the austerity period, and into pandemic times.

Academic knowledge production is set up in certain ways, as discovery projects with stakes in claiming who said-it-first, even if the discovery is a re-discovery, even if these things were and are common ground, always true and traceable. The oldness–newness of class debates, and their renaming, can grind, producing an endless circularity where class often can't be seen as present now, instead rendered past and over. Or, as an afterthought. I'm invited to contribute to a class handbook and would have loved to have been part of the project. But I've been invited to do so just several weeks before the editors' final deadline. Class and queer are afterthoughts. And often this still has consequences for who and what can become 'academic'.

As our lives have gone online over the last two years or so, we find ourselves digitally navigating these 'tough times', including as academics in academia. In wondering who is now, maybe newly in crises, and who has long endured crises of borders, finance, identity, belonging, care and connection have always endured, I appreciated the pull into the online Queer Precarities workshop. I appreciated being in the same digitally mediated space. And I wanted to hear more about presenters' own locations, their backgrounds rather than backdrops, feeling that presenters had maybe edited out themselves in pre-event shared papers. I wondered

about the rarely polite or innocent question ‘where are you from?’, as classing and racializing, which I try to answer *and* bypass. I wondered about archives and authenticities. I wondered if ‘precarity’, as an all encompassing everything – precarious people, places, times, spaces – has replaced class specifically. I wondered if precarity was intended as ‘intersectionality’, as attentive to structuring contexts, or if queer precarity surpassed intersectional understandings (Taylor et al., 2010). I wonder if we are repeating ourselves, and what terms matter as repetitions or interruptions?

References

- Brim, M. 2020. *Poor Queer Studies*. Duke University Press.
- Cohen, C.J. 1997. “Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens. The radical potential of queer politics” *GLQ*, 3: 437-465
- D'Emilio, J. 1993. “Capitalism and Gay Identity” *Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. Routledge
- Taylor, Y. Hines, S. & Casey. M. 2010. (Eds.), *Theorizing Intersectionality and Sexuality* London: Palgrave
- Hennessy, R. 2000. *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*. Psychology Press
- Taylor, Y. 2007. *Working-class lesbian life: Classed Outsiders*. Palgrave.
- Taylor, Y. 2008. “‘That’s not really my scene’. *Sexualities* 11(5), 523-546.
- Taylor, Y. 2009. *Lesbian and Gay Parenting: Securing Social and Educational Capital* Palgrave.
- Taylor, Y. 2015. *Making Space for Queer Identifying Youth*. Palgrave
- Taylor, Y. 2022. *Working-Class Queers*. Pluto Press.