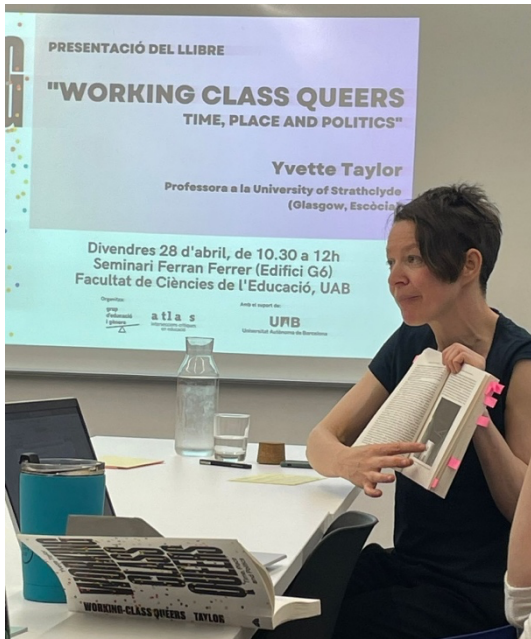


## Configurations of Gender and Sexuality: Interview with Professor Yvette Taylor



*'...people need to still be reminded that feminism has long been engaged in these debates, rather than using the times that we're in to reduce and insist on who is a 'proper woman'. We can use these moments to think about expanding the category of women, expanding our allyship, and to think about what that means in our classrooms, in our lives, and in our learning. But how do we resource that?'*

**Photo:** Yvette Taylor, Faculty of Education, UAB.

Professors Mauro Moschetti (GEPS, Globalisation, Education and Social Policies) and Ingrid Agud (Atlas, Critical Intersections in Education & GEG, Education and Gender Group) spoke with Professor Yvette Taylor (University of Strathclyde, Glasgow), who recently visited the Faculty of Education, UAB to present [Working Class Queers, Time, Place and Politics](#) (Pluto, 2023).

**Mauro: What do you think are some of the biggest challenges facing gender as a field of researchers today?**

Yvette: A problem now, and I think has been for a long time or rather continues to be, is feminism itself. So, feminism is a contentious word, and a word that is subject to illegitimacy and misuse. It's often a word that doesn't have credence. So how can we talk about inequalities of gender and sexuality in the classroom and beyond the classroom, without having a political purchase on the word 'feminism'? And I think this is where we are now. We are told that we live in post-feminist times, where gender and sexuality inequalities have been solved, there's no need for feminism anymore. We see this even despite things like the #MeToo movement. We see this despite the

appetite for gender and women's studies programs in our universities. I think the public in general still has a problem with the F word, feminism. So that has been true across time. If we think about the different waves of feminism, first wave feminism, all the complexities and branches and nuances of different feminist thinking, have often been reduced as not enough, while a series of stereotypes attach to who is a feminist, and so on. And I don't think we've made that much progress. So, I would say that that's a big struggle – to begin to articulate and have a politicized language around gender and sexuality inequalities, including when these become neutralized and mainstreamed, or talked about as diversity or inclusion issues. So, for me when I think about what's the main problem in gender studies, it's one of persisting tensions and reductions to *and* within feminisms.

Feminism has got a lot to tell us about the contemporary problems and solutions. If we think these as long-term issues, there's things that we can, I think, speak back to. And I would say that there's an increasing need for feminist politics, with the upsurge of right-wing movements and conservative governments globally, that there is a stronger need for feminism, and a scepticism towards any sense that we have arrived in post-feminist times. I think any transphobia has no place within feminism. TERF as a term is now out there in the public sphere. And I think we need to keep insisting that no feminist practice or politics is ever aligned with right-wing conservative politics, around the family, around reproduction, around the sense that there are real, authentic women, that nature is essential, that we are what we were born. I think feminism has long disputed all these ideas, and people need to still be reminded that feminism has long been engaged in these debates, rather than using the times that we're in to reduce and insist on who is a 'proper woman'. We can use these moments to think about expanding the category of women, expanding our allyship, and to think about what that means in our classrooms, in our lives, and in our learning. But how do we resource that? For me, that also connects the issue of feminist urgencies to contemporary political questions around crises. We hear a lot about crises these days, the cost-of-living crisis, the pandemic, the climate crisis. I think these are all feminist issues, these are all issues of gender and sexuality. And they compel, I would say, a restructuring that is attentive to resources,

because gender, sexual inequalities, and hierarchies mean that your experience of crisis will be very, different too. So that needs to be a feminist question. These are some of my urgencies and challenges for gender studies researchers.

**Ingrid: Your work has also touched on issues that are related to social class, inequality, and religious identity. How do you see these issues intersecting with gender and sexuality today?**

Yvette: I think that's probably my reason for being in academia, is to always highlight intersections empirically and to always talk about the centrality of class within feminism. So first wave feminism, and arguably still now, is often criticized, especially liberal feminism, as being of and for a certain class of women. And a certain class of white women, imagined as the subject or beneficiary of, say, liberal feminist advances. My question has been, are working-class women imagined as feminist subjects? Do we recognize their feminist activism too? I'm really, eager to keep class very central to any thinking about gender and sexuality. And I would say when I started off my academic career, I was kind of looking for other literature that expressed that connection too, and was pulled into thinking about working-class women as having maybe a double disadvantage or a triple oppression. That sort of language became a bit additive and has been criticized since, because it's not that we can count these disadvantages, we can't say class, plus gender plus sexuality, and then get the outcome of disadvantage. It's more that the construction of gender is always about the construction of class, it's always about the construction of race and sexuality, and that they're always co-constitutional. Feminism has embraced intersectionality as a way of thinking about the complexities of identities and inequalities, and thinking about how to name, for example, race and class, sexuality and gender, disability and religion at the same time. Talking about class now in 2023, has and does mean something different when I started off my academic work, my PhD in ..... 2000 let's say. Class does shift. It's not static. Gender shifts, it's not static. We know this, that we can use these categories and classifications nonetheless, to say something that is complex about the social world. The social world that we also exist in, as academics, as people, as students, as teachers. Part of keeping class central to my work, including my empirical fieldwork and my readings

and writings, has been to tell the story about me and my background, and make that subject to feminist scrutiny too. **Lots of feminists have talked about telling their own story in and through the feminist classroom, self-positioning, avoiding the universal voice from everywhere or nowhere, or the pretence that we can be objective and disinvested. We can't.** I tell my students that I'm from a working-class background. Sometimes, depending on context, I will say I *am* working-class, because I realise that it's a provocation, and it elicits a response, and sometimes it elicits a lot of defensiveness. And sometimes that's worth having that conversation.

Sometimes I've been told, often quite forcefully, that I'm not working class, I'm middle-class, by very middle-class people, and who will tell me, for example, how much I've moved, how I'm an academic, and how I am objectively middle-class. And I can see the logic. I know that these are not easy categories, but **I do think that there's something to say about class, that it's not just about income and employment, that it's about how class stays with you**, and people have talked about this in terms of it being a structure of feeling, or an emotion, or a sense of place in the world. Where you're from travels with you, and even if you're no longer from that place, you can be put right back into that place, and that can be emotional, but it can also be material. It means that you can feel yourself to be very different from your middle-class peers, that you don't have the same expectation of mobility, or the same wealth and resources behind you. Or your resources as a 'successful professor', may be distributed in very different ways than your peers. You can't accumulate wealth, or even buy property, or you might have debts from your student days. This is not to deny my advantage now, but I'd want to kind of complicate that story, and I often pause in people's investment, when they tell me that story of how much I've moved, and how I am middle-class now. What is happening may be more of a denial of class mattering, and maybe restating my working-classness is a way to put class back in the story, rather than to render it neutral or past. I think these are always categories to be empirically explored. For all of what I've said about my own story there, I've always been interested in exploring these sociologically, through academic projects that combine class, and gender, and sexuality.

**Mauro: So interesting what you're putting on the table, it makes me think a lot about my journey as well, and I never mainstreamed or made that explicit in my career.**

Yvette: Yeah, it's difficult, and I think it is sometimes a balance between telling your own story, putting yourself in the picture, but not taking up the whole entire page either, because I'm not just a story of one. Our stories are political, though, as per feminist mantra 'the person is political', but it's often uneasy too. It's a story which needs to surpass ourselves, but we risk being misheard and misunderstood. I don't want to become the story of meritocracy, 'you made it into the university, so everything is fine'. It's not just about me either, of course! So, I think there's lots of ways that stories can be misrepresented.

One of the ways that I tried to hold class and gender together was a project that became a book called *Fitting into Place? Class and Gender, Geographies and Temporalities*, which set in the North East of England. Around that time I was living and working in the North East of England, I was living in Newcastle, which has a history of industry and often tells its present and future, I would say, through that historical narrative, which is true and painful and complex. But what it sometimes serves to do is to return working-classness to a white, masculinised, white male worker who's imagined as a shipbuilder or a miner, or on strike. If that's the story of the past, and there's a sense of young men's loss, we can have sympathy and concern for young men because there's no longer these jobs to have. What does that say about young women? Does that mean that they now fit into a feminised leisure sector economy? And is that better for young women? Do they fit in now? Did they fit in then into *that* past? Do they have any purchase or connection to that past as imagined through that sort of male worker narrative? Where do women fit in that story of the North East of England?

One of the slogans circulating at that time was 'passionate people, passionate places', highlighting regional investment and creating worth in place. So, re-evaluating place and saying this is a place to feel proud of and that it's going places in the future. I looked at different communities, one was a more middle-class student community as sort of

incomers and investors in the North East but who didn't necessarily feel attached to that place, weren't tied to place. I looked at a rural community, an ex-mining community that still the past was felt very, very sharply. There were bars and places that miners who had crossed the picket line, they were still imagined, we have this term 'scabs', if you cross the picket line, so they were still marked 'scab pubs'. And so those 'pasts' were very much present. I was interested in women's sense of what that meant in working-class rural communities in the past and into the present. And the last community, the last space I looked at was a working-class area that had a lot of surface regeneration. But sometimes regeneration means sort of degeneration. The regeneration doesn't fully pay off in terms of the investment in the wrong infrastructure. It might lead to a *degeneration* of working-class communities. The Byker estate might be thought of in this way. The Byker Wall is celebrated as this architectural statement as a remarkable building and wall. And you can see it as part of the skyline. You can point to it. You see tourists taking pictures and it's the subject of exhibitions and books and all sorts.

But to live in the wall I found was isolating and not comfortable. It also borders a motorway and the wall itself, which is people's houses, they're within the wall, acts as a sound buffer. Now it replaced previously terraced line streets where according to the women's stories, and they were reflecting across time, they weren't necessarily romanticising this or overly nostalgic about it. But what they did remember is that they used to take care of their kids in that street. And there used to be a lot of talk and personal tasks in the street, such that they felt that they had a space. Now they were isolated from each other, and they spent the days alone because the wall was surveilled and securitized. It has a lot of CCTV cameras. It was difficult to move around. It didn't feel very safe. There's lots of sharp corners, isolated spaces where you couldn't see the next turn in, and it's hard to move around. A lot of older people expressed that same frustration that because of the security locks in different parts of the building, there was only so far that they can move internally before they came up against a gate that they couldn't move through.

This is a story about gender because of women's exclusion from the workplace and the burden of domestic labour. Often more women are at home with young children and can be very isolated, and they're not experiencing the Byker Wall as a statement of architectural worth at all, really. So, for me, putting those different women's stories in, it was across the age range as well as across class, really kind of complicated the story of the North East, either as sort of grim and grit, but also as up and coming. And I think that's sort of some of the tension that feminism grapples with more generally in terms of thinking about class and gender. Whose sort of mobility are we celebrating? When have women made it? And if we're still thinking about younger women's entry into the labour market as being profoundly shaped by class, and they're still imagining their future as being bound by class, even the next neighbourhood might be quite closed off to them, then I think that does fit in to a story about how feminism has still got a long way to go.

**Ingrid: What are some of the potential strategies or avenues for addressing intersectionality, especially gender and class and ethnicity as well, within these educational institutions to create more inclusive environments for LGBTQ+ students?**

**Yvette: I think there's worth in trying to implement and create LGBTQ+ inclusive education. I say that up front because I do have lots of caveats and questions about how that's signposted and perhaps reduced as a diversity statement, as an intention that's not practically followed through. I appreciate the push to think about practically how that happens.** I think there are things to be celebrated and recognised and in Jeffrey Weeks' book *The World We Have Won*, there's a kind of general oversight of, remember homosexuality was criminalised in the recent past, and it's still within many people's lifetimes that they can look back and remember that. Well, now we have same-sex marriage, we have the Equalities Act, we have protected characteristics even, as somebody who grew up under Section 28 in the UK, which 'prohibited the promotion of homosexuality', I can think about progress. In my schooling there were no classroom resources to talk about LGBTQ+ life in the classroom. I am welcoming of those gestures, but as a feminist, I'm sceptical. These words can often be put out there that, for example, Scotland is *the* world leader of LGBT inclusive curriculum, and as if saying it

brings it into effect in and of itself. **I don't know that these programmes are always best resourced, sometimes they are outsourced to the third sector.** In Scotland in particular *Time for Inclusive Education*, the TIE campaign, has done a lot of the hard work over a number of years to get learning packages and resources into classrooms in Scotland, and that's great work. I see them doing a lot of things, but it can be under resourced, and it can be easily retracted and pulled, and it can be refused at any time. **How do we make those work packages compulsory and resourced properly, so we're not reliant on say, one-off teachers or head teachers who think that it's good for their school in particular, or willing to take that risk, so how can we push that a bit further?** You can put up posters, you can have role models, you can name LGBTQ + figures and so on. These are great examples, but again thinking about our role as academics to be sceptical or uncertain sometimes, I'm not sure about postcards per se as doing enough political work. What stories, if we're selecting role models, matter and how might **that just be a showcase of diversity that doesn't really attend to differential educational outcomes** for young LGBTQ+ people. So, we can have this one wall poster, but that in itself doesn't necessarily attend to inequality – we know that LGBTQ+ youth are adversely affected often in their educational outcomes. Is there a way of talking about LGBT inclusive education that may be a bit more disruptive, that's not just about, say, LGBT history month, or the pride flag, or the go-to symbols and signifiers, as important as they are? **How do we go beyond that rainbow facade, if you like, and again, I think that is a story about intersectionality,** because role models can be exceptions, they can be sporting heroes, or people that have succeeded in social media, or in politics, and that's great, we need those examples, but they may not match these young people's lives either.

I think it's about making education more feminist and more radical, because these programmes often, offer the promise of LGBT inclusive education but it isn't often an explicitly a queer or feminist promise. It's not advocating for a queering of school. We may need to challenge some of the normative assumptions around, for example, what it means to succeed as a younger person, what family might mean beyond saying that it's two mums or two dads, for example. Can we – and schools – imagine intimacy and relationships beyond this familiar model? There's queer potential in that, and where



working-class young people are still told that educational success is not for them, that education is not for them, and that often their families are viewed as wrong. I think we need to connect these as sites and stories of struggle, that it's not just about representation, it is about resources, and who gets what in education. That's unfortunately is still tied to post-codes, where you grew up and where you're from, and when we're seeing an increase in Scotland, we talk about the attainment gap between rich and poor, that attainment gap is increasing rather than decreasing. We need to have that conversation *alongside* the good intentions around LGBTQ+ inclusion. Inclusion talk often reduces 'LGBT' as a discrete category, and **we need to think about those inequalities together because that implicates more people.** LGBTQ+ issues as class issues, as gender issues, as race issues, that makes teaching complicated, but if we can't say name that, then as a queer feminist academic I'd be quite concerned.

**Mauro: If we move to the policy realm, you have made an important contribution producing recommendations to guide policy approach for the implementation of LGBT inclusive education in Scotland, and we were wondering what are your views on these recommendations, and especially on the policy making and enactment challenges that these recommendations might generate or have generated?**

Yvette: Some of the policy work that I've been involved in is through the Scottish Parliament. I was a Scottish Parliamentary Fellow 2020-21, and I suppose that was at the beginning of the pandemic where people were still sort of floundering massively and working out what that meant, and my project was around COVID-19 and LGBTQ+ lives in the pandemic. In terms of thinking about what that meant for young people, **young people at schools, where LGBTQ+ young people can sometimes still be imagined as a risky group or as I've said myself, might not have the same kind of educational success as their peers or might be challenged in their educational journey,** I think that's a class story. But I wanted to see past those stories just of risk, and of course during the pandemic, schools experienced closure, there was a lot of concern over what would happen to educational outcomes. I wanted to be attentive towards that, and looking at the ways maybe the younger LGBTQ+ people were living with and through the pandemic nonetheless. So how were they grappling with the immediate

circumstances, digital media groups, community groups that were ad hoc, when pride for example had went online, and where were they doing their learning at the point of school closure, and where does the promise of LGBT inclusive education go when schools are closed and shut down, is that deprioritised? Right only before the pandemic struck that Scotland had announced itself as a 'world leader' in terms of inclusive curriculum. The pandemic forced a lot of that policy to then be put to one side, and so part of my work was about thinking 'what will happen post pandemic when we get back to school?'

I still want to think about what pandemic existence has ret-aught us about education, employment and life generally, is there scope to think differently, maybe even against the policy context that we inhabit? And I say that as somebody who was working with the Scottish Parliament, and had to produce briefings, and blogs for Parliament that were public, maybe in a way that some of my academic work hasn't been public. So I recognise that practical element of the things-to-do, producing the report which becomes a list of bullet points, as quite different from academic writing. But **I'm still convinced that being queer, and insisting on a queerer world, and via a queerer educational world, is not just about fitting in, it's about stretching those classroom contexts, rather than trying to fit back into contemporary imagines of the classroom, even if it's just adjusted a little bit more, even if we have the LGBT poster up.** And I can think of real, maybe smaller scale, but still transformative examples, so I've been able to work with a programme for inclusive education, it's called *Safe to Be Me*, and it's with Scottish Ballet, and they use dance as a way talking about bodies and relationships. And what I've found and heard time and time again, is that young people do have a complicated vocabulary, to talk about sex and gender and race and racism, and homophobia and transphobia, they do, they're doing it, often it's adults and adults' fears projected on younger people. I think **we can have complicated practices and discussions and actions in our classrooms that start with the young people themselves, and don't defer necessarily to teachers,** or to the fear that's often an imagined fear, that parents or institutions are going to have a problem with this, and our classrooms are going to be shut down. That's not what I've experienced in the classroom. **Young**

people are having to grapple with such conversations already – they know that families are not just mum and dad, they know that people are carers and have disabilities and so on. They know that people, including themselves, their families and peers, experience racism and transphobia and homophobia, and they can talk to that.

**Ingrid: In your research, you have used the concept of *homonationalism*, in the context of LGBTB inclusion policies in Scotland in producing ‘exceptionalisation’. Could you briefly provide your perspective on this topic.**

Yvette: Yes. In the book I hope to offer different understandings of the nation state, and when people kind of conflate Scotland and England. I also differentiate because that’s objectively true, they are different nation states, but they are united, at the current time. So, I’m also implicated in that, I’m a citizen of the UK, and I’m a British, passport holder. I joined the UK passport queue in coming here to Barcelona, with my head down, and feeling quite ashamed. So I think it is an interesting time to observe what it means to be British, what it means to be Scottish, what it means to be Scottish as a difference from English in particular perhaps. As somebody who’s lived in Scotland and England, and returned, fairly recently to Scotland, I’m interested, and, curious about the shape of Scottishness, now.

In terms of LGBT rights, Scotland has made a big deal about saying that it is ‘world leading’ and I think that in itself is a very grand sort of bombastic statement, how can such a small place make such a big, bold claim? In terms of political nuance and awareness, because other countries have been leading, and so it’s a question of where we look to. Do we notice when other countries make changes that are progressive? Do we imagine certain countries as progressive or regressive? And, what’s at stake in those claims? So, for me I understand that as a kind of glossing over some of Scotland’s problematic conservative and racist past and present and how inequalities persist. I see some of that glossing as deflection or projection – is about *England* and not about *Scotland*. The Westminster government make it very easy to cast blame of course. There are things that are different, as I said, in Scotland the Health System for example, the

responses to the pandemic, the Brexit vote ..... these are substantial differences. But that Britishness is projected only to Englishness leaves Scotland off the hook too easily.

I think we see that in the area of LGBTQ+ rights but I think we see that in other areas too, particularly around racism. I think Scotland is now pitching itself as closer to its European counterparts rather than England. That's a story about a certain progressive or even rainbow Europe, and that's a story with a fairly recent history, which itself is resting on a distinction between 'us' and 'them'. **It projects homophobia, transphobia on other places that are *not* Europe, right? Other countries, other elsewhere, that are not or never 'world leading' when measured from certain places.** We need to be careful about those sorts of claims around proximity and distance that are made and lessons can be learned from that. There was a lot of great feminist, activism around the campaign for independence, a lot of young people were mobilized, 16 year olds were granted the right to vote, and people had a lot to say. The level of sort of political activism, and public debates, were remarkable. **And so we need to make sure that our communities have that energy, political vocabulary, and rights, to be part of those debates.** And as we scale that to different levels, including the local level, we should be thinking about who's excluded, who's talking, who's participating, 'cause sometimes young people can be seen as signs of the future, and we can maybe forget that older people also deserve a right and a place. They're [older people] not just embodied indicators of traditional conservatism, we need to think across scales and generations. I think it becomes problematic to say we'll just invest in a local hope or a local young person as a sign of the right future. I'd want an allied collective going forward. I'm really practical or pragmatic about thinking about things such as independence, like what is the promise, what's on offer, and how's it going to be delivered? A lot of radical or grassroots feminists around the independence campaign said, 'look we can use the independence campaign to think about a better feminist future', rather than saying independence is a good thing in and of itself. It might just be replacing one structure with another structure, there's nothing sort of, authentically Scottish or innately better than Englishness, or better than Britishness. Maybe these processes of restructuring, and that's where I think there are commonalities across different country contexts, can

be a moment to think about what else are we demanding. Where do we want to go across time, across place, intergenerationally? To imagine better. Sometimes better means faster and more successful, better can mean back to business as usual, and it can be appropriated. But can we reimagine, we can think differently about nation states beyond a restatement of global hierarchies. We can be sceptical of the state as a sudden champion or saviour of LGBTQ+ lives, while also being hopeful of places of possibility, as what we can hold in common across time, place and politics.

**End of interview.**