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## Chapter 8 Writing past and present classed and gendered selves

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### Abstract

In this chapter we explore classed and gendered identities through feminist duoethnography and memory work. In so doing we write of and for a place where we no longer live, but which part of us will always inhabit and be inhabited by. Beyond geographical parameters, this place is deeply embedded in us and resides in the past. Being women academics of working-class backgrounds, we have gradually learnt to navigate the once foreign world of academia. Adapting to it has included not always being candid about our background, but in this text we foreground our histories, which ultimately have a bearing on our identities, our politics and our writing. We argue for the value of remembering past events as a source of knowledge which is personal yet social, as we present autobiographical reflections and excerpts of dialogue in which we explore our life and career trajectories. Our experiences, although felt to be subjective and private, are not entirely unique nor disconnected from historical, cultural and political circumstances. The chapter shows a way to explore past and present experiences, and to exercise a way of writing that seeks to capture the richness, contradictions, and intersubjective nature of ongoing interpretations of those experiences. We also reflect on how our approach might enrich our understanding of class and gender in academia, and what kind of knowledge it might furnish us with. Above all, we want to acknowledge the value of the knowledge of those, who in various ways, come from 'other places'.

**Keywords:** Class, gender, academia, duoethnography, memory work

In this text we look to 'find a voice ... one that, summoning the resources of the place we come from, can speak with eloquence of, and for, that place.' (Kuhn, 1995/2002, p.123). In doing so we write of and for a place where we no longer live, but which part of us will always inhabit and be inhabited by. Beyond geographical parameters, this place is deeply embedded in us and resides in the past. Yet, it insistently inserts itself without warning into our current lives, interrogating our intentions and intervening in our ongoing life histories. Here, our intention is to explore these spectral apparitions, not to lay them to rest, but to let them speak in order to write them more closely into our lives. We do this through a feminist duoethnographic approach; a collaborative process for creating 'dialogic and polyvocal narratives which are necessarily co-authored' (Schultz, 2017, p.508). Also drawing on memory work (Haug et al., 1987; Kuhn, 1995/2002), we argue for the value of remembering past events as a source of knowledge which is personal yet social.

Let us begin by introducing ourselves.

### *The places we come from*

Both born in the late 1960s – Marjana in Finland, Sally in Wales – we grew up in small towns with an industrial heritage. We were in homes with siblings and two working parents in ‘typical’ working class occupations such as cleaning, hairdressing, shop work, construction work, and, briefly, factory work. Our parents’ occupations position us as working-class, although already here our narratives show signs of shifting positions as Marjana’s father moved into a more middle-class type office job early on.

After completing our A-levels (the first ones to do so in our extended families) we both went to university, much thanks to the free education provided. Marjana decided to study Business to ‘get a good job’ while Sally opted for Drama and English which were subjects she liked and had done well in. After finishing our degrees we both worked for several years before returning to academia as mature PhD students – Marjana in Sweden, Sally in England. This, we have come to realise more clearly later on, was a significant step in a non-deliberate physical and psychological distancing from ‘the place we come from’.

### *Where we are now*

Since finishing our PhDs – Marjana in 2008, Sally in 2011 – we both work as full-time academics and consider ourselves very fortunate to be in this position in a sector where casualisation has rapidly increased. At the time of writing Marjana works at a Russell Group university in Scotland, Sally at a post-92 university<sup>1</sup> in England. We have gradually learnt to navigate the once foreign world of academia to become (so we think) skilled members of it. Like others who have written from similar classed and gendered positions (e.g. Hey, 2003; Loveday, 2016; Reay, 2004) we have however also had a nagging feeling of, at least at times, ‘not getting it right’ (Skeggs, 1997, p.87). Perhaps adapting to academia which has included not always being candid about our background inevitably harbours something we thought we left behind: ‘we may, at times, deny our history, but it is clear we cannot erase it’ (Gardner, 1993, p.56).

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<sup>1</sup> Russell Group universities is the label of UK universities regarded as representing elite institutions, whereas post-92 universities denote former polytechnics which became universities with the passing of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act.

But why silence our histories? After all, they have a bearing on our identities, our politics and our writing. Instead of continuing to silence them this text seeks to engage with them. Our present experiences as academics are marked by how our past makes itself known through feelings of joy, anger, embarrassment and pride, waiting to be put into writing that ‘doesn’t hide its sources and its commitments... doesn’t try to efface contradictions or hide confusion and emotion’ (Welsch, 2005, p. xviii); that accepts vulnerability and rests on trust; that explores emotions and disruptions; and that maps the intermeshing of past and present selves with organisation. It is time to ‘learn to trust our own personal and cultural biographies as significant sources of knowledge’ (Collins, 1986, p.29); a standpoint perspective infused with a sociological imagination. Our experiences, although felt to be subjective and private, are not entirely unique nor disconnected from historical, cultural and political circumstances. Therefore, let us take ‘the socio-politically inscribed body as a central site of meaning making’ (Spry, 2001, p.710), and a valid site of knowledge. In terms of the characteristics of the said body, it is significant that we write as women. The experiences of women are systematically devalued in an academy and society predicated on masculinist forms of knowledge (Pullen, 2018; Vacchani, 2018). Writing about and for women’s experiences in seeking to disrupt dominant hierarchies and forms of knowledge production is a political act (Savigny, 2017). With our text we wish to both present a methodological approach to exploring past and present experiences, and exercise a way of writing that seeks to capture the richness, contradictions, and intersubjective nature of ongoing interpretations of those experiences. We also reflect on how our approach might enrich our understanding of class and gender in academia, and what kind of knowledge it might furnish us with.

### **Feminist duoethnography and memory work**

Our explorations into our histories are guided by a feminist duoethnographic approach (Spencer and Paisley, 2013; Schultz, 2017). Duoethnography, a collaborative form of autoethnography (Norris et al., 2012), draws on personal experience but emphasises the creation of a shared collaborative space for new interpretations to emerge. Following the principles of feminist collaborative work that interrogate the power relations between those involved in the research process, and the notion of ‘voice’, a feminist duoethnographic stance emphasises the validity of women’s experiences as knowledge, and seeks to acknowledge multiple perspectives through co-authored dialogic narratives (Schultz, 2017). We will in this text follow its tenets and present conversational excerpts in dialogic format, as well as include

autoethnographic vignettes and reflective notes. The impetus for our collaboration was happenstance: meeting at a Critical Management Studies conference through mutual friends, we found ourselves lingering in the hotel bar after the others had left. Although we had never met before something struck a chord: the ‘journey’ into academia which, given our background, had not been a given; our continued questioning of if and how we might ever truly belong; and the ripple effects our choices have had on our familial ties. This intuitive connecting is in itself a form of knowing; the embodied realisation that a stranger shares your supposed secrets. We decided there and then to write together to explore the conditions and realities of being white women of working-class background in academia.

In the course of our project we found that our conversations, ostensibly undertaken to explore our professional circumstances, to a large extent focused on our pre-professional past. When starting to analyse our transcripts we wondered if we had missed the mark, as rather little seemed to be about more recent professional experiences. If our research was supposed to be on classed and gendered identities in academia, surely the data must focus on that context? Yet, we had clearly had a pressing need to delve into our past. Shifting our framing, we decided to accept and explore the very fact that the past so persistently kept appearing. Perhaps our conversations turned out to be mostly about what had happened up to the point of becoming academics because we needed to explain – to ourselves as much as to each other – how we had arrived here.

This prompted us to turn to Anette Kuhn’s (1995/2002, p.5) notion of memory work, which explores connections between ‘historical events, structures of feeling, family dramas, relations of class, national identity and gender, and “personal” memory’. Memory work, originally attributed to Frigga Haug and others (1987) is rooted in a feminist emancipatory ethic and takes everyday experience as the basis of knowledge. It is a collaborative approach to working with memories in order to understand the ongoing construction of self as positioned within power relations, and exploring where the possibilities for reinterpreting one’s ways of being lie. While Haug advocates the avoidance of auto/biographical stories, further adaptations of the method have not excluded those aspects. For example, an approach called collective biography (Davies et al., 2001) pivots on the collective analysis of an individual’s memories of their life. The label ‘collective biography’ also points to how our perceived individuality is in fact the result of intersubjective meaning-making. We are specifically interested in biographical writing, and in our case the ‘collective’ is our duoethnographic dyad, although memory work commonly tends

to involve groups of several members. What we do retain as a key principle, however, is the imperative of working with the past to understand present, ongoing constructions of the self. Kuhn's writing, which explores her trajectory from a working-class background to a middle-class existence, strongly resonated with us. As she says, for those who 'have left their class of origin behind' (1995/2002, p.166), memories provide powerful means of examining questions of identity, and perhaps they also express a desire for the recovery and reincorporation of a place once lost.

Memory is always an active process of organising and meaning-making; it is not simply an archive of 'what really happened'. The idea of memory work is therefore not to try to find out whether memories are accurate factual representations of events. Instead, it is 'an active practice of remembering which takes an inquiring attitude towards the past and the activity of its (re)construction through memory' (Kuhn, 1995/2002, p.157). In articulating and retelling memories one both constructs and performs a self, a process where 'the listener/reader/viewer is implicated as witness, audience, collaborator, and co-constructor' (Lapadat et al., 2010, p.78). It permits reflecting on the ways in which the articulation of memories relate to the formation of identity (Haug et al., 1987). This speaks to us as we wrestle with what our trajectories have made us leave behind, but also what we perhaps have refused to abandon.

Memory texts typically consist of 'vignettes, anecdotes, fragments, 'snapshots', flashes' [which] refuse to be anchored in "real" historical time' (Kuhn, 1995/2002, p.162). Part of the material used here is based on previously written autobiographical vignettes. In addition, in writing this chapter, we agreed on reading four texts<sup>2</sup> that would act as 'triggers' (Onyx and Small, 2001) for remembering and sharing. We read the texts separately and wrote notes about any memories that they stirred. Having read our trigger texts and made our notes, we then read each other's notes and added further reflections. After this, we sat down for our duoethnographic conversation, which we recorded and transcribed. We knew that we partially shared similar experiences and a sense of having journeyed from one place to another geographically, socially and psychologically. What, however, did we not know about ourselves? What, if any, new knowledge would emerge? Might this possibly lead to rewriting our selves? In what follows, we incorporate vignettes, notes, and extracts of dialogue as we open up a space for thinking about how our memories serve as sources of knowledge. We

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<sup>2</sup> Giordano, 2005; Kuhn, 1995/2002; Langston 1993; Reay et al., 2009

demarcate the different types of 'sources' with different fonts, as we weave them together in narrative form. The different sections are presented as 'snapshots'; remembered glimpses of events and circumstances that we draw on to tell ourselves and others about ourselves.

### **Snapshots I: Working-class good girls**

*(S) My parents, especially my dad, were very open about their political affiliations and were ardent Labour supporters. My dad would get up and switch the TV off when Margaret Thatcher was on, saying he couldn't stand her voice. The reports of the [1984-85] miners' strike also had a major effect on me. Class was being played out in the violent suppression of picket lines and mobilising of police from across the country who were sent to South Wales to deal with strikers and to get the 'scabs' safely into work. This developed in me a burning sense of unfairness and an absolute abhorrence of perceived injustice.*

*(M) My parents were not engaged in my school, they were not politically engaged, they worked. In my family there was never talk of politics. ... The political aspect is definitely a dimension where our early experiences differ. I wonder how this has shaped our respective understanding of what it means to be working-class. ... In school I got to know other kids, who as far as I was concerned were like me. There was no noticeable difference in background, or at least none that I could see or understand. We didn't really talk about what our parents did. ... The others felt more or less the same, although as you grow older you start to notice differences in the size of houses, the clothes you wore, or the cars others' parents drove. I started to notice differences in material status but this never translated into a sense of class.*

*(S) I was a 'latch-key kid', a particular social 'issue' in the 1980s. However, it also meant that I learnt to cook, as my mum would often leave out instructions and ingredients for the evening meal, which I would cook before my mum and dad got in from work. Needless to say, my younger brother did not have similar domestic responsibilities. Also my brother was labelled the sporty one and I was labelled the brainy one – a highly gendered distinction. I took on the role of the 'good girl' and tried to give my mum and dad as little grief as possible because they had to deal with my brother. Although my dad was rarely there as he was out on building sites or doing plastering or brick laying jobs for family and friends. I did well at school as a result of*

*keeping my head down I think. I also liked school. ... My parents couldn't fathom where I got it from and I guess that gave me confidence in my abilities and a sense of pride. I got no help from my parents, as they left school at 14. I do remember my dad trying to help with my maths homework at one point but that was it. I was very conscientious and a good girl. I did my homework on time, I revised for my exams and put a lot of time into my studies. ... There was a boy in school who I got on really well with. I remember being really upset to hear, in our final year at primary school, that he was going to the (only) private school in the area and that he wouldn't be coming to the local comp, like everyone else. It was a shock to know that you **could** go to a different school – that some people had choices.*

*(M) I have come to realise how I thought life was just 'given to you', there was no sense of agency or changing it, or demanding something because you want it. Things were just given to you and you work hard and put up with it. The masochistic pleasure of being a hard-working 'good girl', thinking that hard work will speak for itself. Bollocks. I can see this is so not the case time and time again in academia.*

In our conversations we clearly noticed differences when talking about our circumstances in relation to if and how we 'knew' what class we were. The most notable difference was in the degree of class awareness; one which for Sally was very strong but which for Marjana was not politically articulated. This partly relates to the conditions of the countries we grew up in, at the time we grew up, and how class was or was not discursively and materially understood. It points to different facets of coming to 'know who you are', and the cultural, social and political conditions that surround our understanding of ourselves. An effect of these differences shows in the variations of understanding societal phenomena as structurally shaped versus taking an individual-focused approach – that your position is determined by your own actions (very much the meritocratic melody of the moment, see Littler, 2018). For Marjana, there was a striking paradox in on the one hand class not being part of her vocabulary or worldview, yet not growing up with a sense of there being choices. Understandings of class and what they mean in terms of providing us with a hermeneutic horizon was a key theme that underpinned our vignettes and conversations.

What we did share was an early love of reading, and doing well in school, which was parentally neither expected nor actively promoted. The sense of us therefore having had 'something'

which did not conform to the expected life trajectory is an aspect we both strongly feel has made a difference in our lives, and which is a significant part of our identity. It is a source of pride mixed with an undefinable fear that it can all be taken away. Doing well in school was a result of self-discipline suited to the system coupled with the available gendered archetype of the hard-working, good girl. That archetype is not confined to women and girls of working-class background, but the sense of beating the odds and showing academic aptitude ‘despite’ our background further makes it a powerful aspect of our subjectivities. That aspect is linked to the notion of work; another recurring theme in our texts and conversations.

### **Snapshots II: Learning to labour (for the academy)**

*M: I remember my dad was always ‘doing overtime’. ‘Where’s dad? Oh, he’s doing overtime’, that means he’s working, he’s not at home tonight. And my mother always had at least one, sometimes two or even three jobs on the go because that’s what you did, you were supposed to work.*

*S: So when you grew up, was not having a job a really bad thing?*

*M: It was never on the horizon. [Supposedly], something had to be wrong, if somebody was unemployed. And of course my parents worked all the time so I just took that for granted, that obviously you’re going to have a job.*

*S: And obviously if you’d been to university you were going to have a good job, a well-paid job. Whereas I think, again, it’s the time and the place [1980s/90s], there was such high unemployment in Wales that if you came out of university and you couldn’t get a job people would understand. It wouldn’t be a really bad thing. You wouldn’t be looked down upon. People would understand because there weren’t jobs for young people then and that’s another part of the reason why I went. So I never felt that pressure to make what I was doing pay back in terms of a job. But for you then, this idea about getting a job, that was an imperative, you had to do this, not because you needed the money but because you needed that...*

*M: It was just ‘natural’. It wasn’t a felt imperative, it was like, ‘Well, that’s what people do, isn’t it?’ There was no other option. There was a recession at the time of doing my degree, but it never touched me, all the people I knew still somehow got jobs and were working, so to me it was what you did. Like, this is the natural thing of life.*

*S: And your education would mean that you’d have a better choice of job, or freedom to do a job that wasn’t manual. Wasn’t like the factory job, or cleaning.*

M: *Exactly. I could get an 'interesting' job.*

S: *Even though you hated the subject and found it really boring! [Laughs] It's interesting this thing about jobs. None of my family did claim benefits, my parents were never unemployed, they always had jobs but it seemed almost like, in going to university – polytechnic, sorry, I have to always qualify that, I always have to say polytechnic! – that it kind of gave me a bit of freedom because only about ten per cent of people went, it kind of made [my parents] think, well you're outside the ordinary, so why would we impose that you have to go and work in a café or behind a bar? So, even though my family had always worked and never claimed benefits, if I'd have come back and signed on and claimed benefits that wouldn't have been a problem. I was something different because I'd kind of earned this breathing space or they understood that there weren't jobs that I could just walk into.*

M: *That would have been unheard of, that didn't even enter my universe. That I would end up in a situation where I wasn't working, that simply wasn't on my horizon.*

S: *So, in some ways that's a working-class sensibility.*

The sense of work being the purpose of one's existence was inculcated from an early age, not through the preaching by our parents, but through our observations of them. This, as discussed above, served us well in school, and we believe it has also made us suitable for academia. Ironically, although the work we now do is not necessarily considered 'real work' in a working-class sense, our 'working-class sensibility' as Sally put it, has meant having a workhorse attitude to academia. This serves academia well, where women tend to carry out more administrative and pastoral work and working-class women might 'strive to "pass" by excessive commitment' (Hey, 2003, p.328) in the face of a classed, masculinist environment to prove themselves worthy (Reay, 2004). This, coupled with the sense of having made one's way into academia against expectations and while not conforming to its classed norm means that there has also been an element of cover-up, further exacerbating the strain and perhaps willingness to take on work to prove one's worth, and that 'hard graft' will be justly rewarded. However, ample evidence points to this not being the case (Gabriel and Tate, 2017; Gardner, 1993; Reay, 2004)

### **Snapshots III: Passing**

*(S) I never felt I had to pass as middle-class or as an academic until I was coming to the end of my PhD. I found it very difficult to accept the identity of 'academic' as perhaps this was the final breach with my home community – being a job that no-one at home would likely ever have*

*or indeed want. I did experience having to pass in poly but not as middle class. It was more about 'passing' as an English person and down-playing my Welshness (hence losing my accent). Although I guess there was some element of class there too, as I had always thought that all English people were, by default, middle-class.*

*M: I'm just looking at your notes and you're talking about passing as an English person, 'I never felt I had to pass as middle-class' you say, 'or an academic', until coming to the end of your PhD. This idea of passing and what that might be is something that's been with us throughout this project, rooted in the idea that we're doing something that doesn't match the stereotypical idea of working-classness, or having a working-class identity, so there's some kind of rift there. And that means that a question of authenticity comes in, like, am I now a failed working-class person?*

*S: Yeah, I guess that's the past in the present, the 'who am I now?'*

*M: Yeah. And that's why Langston, with her 'Who am I now?' text spoke to me... because of what we've gone through, how we were moulded differently to start with and then the different experiences of being at university and poly...*

*S: ... and maybe the different reasons for why we chose to do what we did. And I think we did have different experiences, reasons for going, experiences as far as passing, or needing to pass.*

*M: Yes. What is this 'passing'? ... At a conference a few years ago, having drinks before dinner, I was sitting next to a guy, now professor, we were talking about someone we both know. I remember his description: 'She's a working-class girl who came into academia and was starstruck by it all'. I remember his comment because I wondered if that's what I was seen as. Did he know I was working-class? I didn't say anything, not wanting to 'blow my cover' as it were.*

*S: Seems to make us hypervigilant – trying to figure out others' thoughts. It's interesting that I am often referred to as 'intimidating', 'confrontational' 'contrary' and 'argumentative'. I'm not aware of what I'm doing to be perceived like that. Perhaps because I've felt I've had to 'fight' to get where I am, I feel the need to keep fighting to work my way through the higher education system?*

*(M) Is it about passing, and is that ever possible? Am I even working-class any more, was I ever really? Am I losing touch/have I lost touch? Should I be visibly working-class in academia, to show that it's OK? What does it mean to be visibly working-class anyway?... I think about my bodily schema – how much has it changed? The phenomenology of my body, my being in the world, my perceived capabilities – have they changed? It feels like they have; I am both more constrained (policing manners, etc.) and more liberated ('more' of the world is there for me). ... I have the feeling that I have a perspective on different worlds, that I know something about being working-class and what that life is like, and I know something about being middle-class and what that life is like. However, they occupy different spaces: the former came with my upbringing, the latter I have consciously learnt. Now, I can't claim that I know about being working-class in the UK – it is different here; social exclusion feels much more palpable and social mobility more restricted. But it feels like I can step out of the existence I have now and reflect on my own position and how it has changed. And sometimes I wonder if I'm bogus in both camps. When I think I have something in common with someone who seemingly is working-class (and who hasn't made 'the journey'), that I somehow understand who they are – am I being condescending? Am I drawing on something for 'authenticity', but that narrative is also fabrication to the extent that it serves to somehow appease the fact that I have become a middle-class Guardian reader? Which means I'm not at home in the middle-class camp either as I can never fully embrace the lifestyle without self-mocking irony.*

*(S) Kuhn writes that her mother told her 'You can't rise out of your class' (p. 107). In some ways I think this is true - it's always there. In fact, I actively do not want to rise out of my class, as I don't see being middle-class as rising and I've never aspired to **be** middle-class. I actively resist it.*

Reay et al. (2009), in detailing the experiences of working-class students at elite universities, write about the layers of experiences that make up the habitus; not in a linear, cumulative manner, but through an ever-shifting, continually negotiated process. Early socialisation provides a perspective on subsequent events and experiences, but it is not set in stone. Faced with a new environment we look to draw on existing resources, but sometimes noticing that they seem insufficient, unacceptable or not valued in the new environment we seek to find ways to thrive nevertheless. The negotiation is classed, but also gendered, as exemplified by

the male academic's proclamation of the 'starstruck working-class girl', in awe of her new environment where the male, white, middle-class professor is the norm.

Langston (1993, p.70) writes: 'when working-class people enter a middle-class environment like academia, they are defined out of existence. Since we seem to "talk like" or "think like" educated people, we must be middle-class'. Throughout our project, questions around if and how we have changed, and who we are now, kept surfacing. This was due to us having experienced a move into a social realm where different rules to those we grew up with apply, and we have in our different ways sought to engage with those rules. While, as we say at the outset of this chapter, we are by now, we feel, competent members of the academic community, we still retain a sense of dislocation but also a sense of being able to reflect on and question the implicit dominant values of academia.

Class, as Kuhn writes, is under one's skin and therefore always a part of one even as new ways of being are forged. As has become clearer for us through this project – and this was probably already present in us at the time of our meeting, shown in our immediate decision to strike up a collaborative partnership – instead of covering up the place we come from, we need to acknowledge its continued role in our lives, and acknowledge the value of the knowledge of those, who in various ways, come from 'other places'. It is a recuperative and restorative process and an embracing of that place; a knowing that we will always carry it with us, and that we can speak of and for it. We will let the section below which touches upon this stand for itself.

### **Remembrance and reflexivity**

*S: This for me is where duoethnography comes in because you talking about something made me think about my experience, so it's interesting how I would never have thought... it really is co-creation.*

*M: Yes, it is, there are many things that I think about now that I hadn't thought about at the start of this project.*

*S: And the idea that, in some ways you're staging your memories, you're having to explain because you can't assume that the other person actually understands about your history. ... Being Welsh in the 80s, you can't just assume. I think if I'd done this with an English person I think they would know, because if they were of a similar age they would have been around at*

*that time but I think if you weren't even in the same country you really don't know what was going on.*

*M: No, and that means you have to explain it, which means you also have to explain your past to yourself.*

*S: And by saying it you make it real. Even though you might never have said these things, they're kind of there, but you've never actually verbalised them, and in verbalising they become concrete. They become 'real' memories then, they become what you remember, and your version of what you remember. ... I can't remember it in forensic detail, exactly what was going on but I remember how I felt, I've got snapshots, flashes of images... for me it's images and feelings attached to that image. And maybe because the feelings were strong, maybe that's why we've remembered those flashes or those snapshots.*

*M: Yeah, and that was our idea behind writing the vignettes; the moment where you become aware of something...*

*S: I think they do stay with you and maybe they are things that unconsciously inform the present. Because they're so powerful, these snapshots, these moments captured in time that become your life history and they're your perspective of what was going on in that situation. ... So, it's interesting doing this, it does make you realise, well, it makes me realise, how much of what I do now is in some ways maybe trying to hold on to my working-classness. The things that I won't countenance, I won't accept being middle-class, that's kind of me being true and authentic to this Welsh, working-class sensibility that I don't want to lose. Even though I've left that, but at the same time I don't want to leave it, and maybe, if admitting I was middle-class, then maybe the last vestige of that connection would be gone completely.*

*M: Yeah and then you would really confine those snapshots into the past, like an archive that is no longer you, it's disconnected from you. So, it's a way of keeping that connection.*

*(S) I remember a gala dinner at a conference in Cardiff where the Treorchy Male voice choir sang before dinner. They sang Myfanwy and I was in floods of tears – it seemed to dig deep into a seam of... Nostalgia? Remembrance? Pride? Regret? I don't know, but it touched something at my core and spoke to me in such a powerful way. I'm even feeling a bit emotional writing about it... These are echoes of history and memory which I have always carried with me but I have never consciously unpacked. Until now.*

## **Conclusion: Memory, meaning and knowledge**

In this concluding section we reflect on what we think this project has brought about, its methodological approach, what the writing has meant, and how it relates to knowledge production.

From the start, this inevitably had to be a personal project, and for that to work the twin aspects of vulnerability and trust became its cornerstones. Throughout our writing we have dug deep, both into the past and into our emotions, thus making us vulnerable to exposure and possible hurt. We have shared memories and experiences of an intimate nature with each other, with the implicit understanding that our trust will not be violated by the other. As others who have recently shared their compelling, sometimes wrenching, stories (e.g. Boncori and Smith, 2018; Katila, 2018) we wanted to write ‘truthfully, vulnerably, and nonvoyeuristically’ (Lapadat et al., 2010, p.80); not censoring our experiences but also not exploiting those who appear in our narratives, in this case our closest family. The feminist duoethnographic approach followed from our political and ethical goals of seeking to tell our stories while also staking a claim for the value of the knowledge resident in personal experience.

Our conversations, unbeknownst to us at the start, showed a need to look to the past to explain the present. The decision to work with memories made the final piece of the puzzle fall into place. Memories are not factual accounts, but they are real to the one who remembers, and their articulation gives insight into social patterns, relations of power, and associated emotions. Moreover, memories gain new meanings as they are retold, and in doing so also raise the possibility of reshaping one’s present self. First, the act of sharing memories and realising that someone else is not alien to your experiences can come as a relief if the memory is a painful or embarrassing one. Second, new meanings created in dialogue shed fresh light on circumstances, reactions and emotions, and hence bear the possibility of emancipation. Our differing cultural backgrounds also meant that we had to articulate certain silent assumptions, and in so doing learnt more about ourselves and the circumstances surrounding our past experiences; reframing some of our memories, and re-examining aspects we had taken for granted. For example, precisely because a particular attitude towards work appears inescapable and ‘natural’ shows its power. The dialogic method enables us to question the story we tell ourselves and others about our ‘journey’, and why we might cling to particular aspects of it, out of self-preservation, habit or defiance. It also enables us to see ‘the place we come from’

in a new light; not confining it to a buried past but summoning it to become an enriching part of our lives and our scholarship.

Memories are, as Onyx and Small (2001, p.780) say, 'notoriously unreliable'. However, memory work is not about accurate representation of historical events, but 'the process of construction of the meanings of those events' (Crawford et al., 1992, p.51). The telling and writing is at the core here; the details we choose to foreground, the words we use to explain and describe. It is about how 'writers construct themselves or become textually produced, as belonging to a particular gender group or social class or generation or nationality or ethnic group' (Kuhn, 1995/2002, p.149). The way we write and the knowledge we draw on are political choices and acts (Savigny, 2017). The act of writing is always one of writing the self (Pullen, 2006), although the dominant principles of production of knowledge demand the erasure of traces of that self as an embodied, feeling, and sensing subject. However, in writing of the kind we have practiced here it becomes key.

By letting our writing show its 'sources and its commitments' (Welsch, 2005, p. xviii) so as not to cover up significant layers of our being, it has provided the means to understand and speak about what we have too often excluded from our professional lives. Through our speaking of and for the place we come from we can also question when, how and why that place becomes a potential source of shame. This is a valuable means of critique, not just in academia, but in other social and organisational contexts. For us, it has enabled the expanding of our understanding of our positions in the institutional context of academia, and also provided the means to make our presence known by joining others who speak of 'other places'. Finally, joyfully, it has revealed to us that in addition to at last writing of and for the place we come from we have always, although we might not have known it, written *from* that place.

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