Working-Class Queers

'A much needed and timely deep forensic dive into the underrepresentation of working-class queers within our queer structures and concepts.'

—Juno Roche, writer

'This work holds rich and deep insights into lived experience, the power lines of learning within institutions, how people act on and transform each other in community. Yvette's book opens doors and transforms fault lines. It will be beneficial to thinkers, feelers and doers for years to come.'

—Sarah Schulman, author of *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York*

'Building on more than two decades of engaged research with LGBT+ communities, *Working-Class Queers* makes a major contribution to queer feminist methods. A must-read for thinkers asking about the how of queer and lesbian studies in troubled and hopeful times alike.'

—Matt Brim, Professor of Queer Studies at the College of Staten Island, City University of New York.

Working-Class Queers

Time, Place and Politics

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'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)? … 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.

—Glasgow Women's Library, 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.[1]

—Glasgow Women's Library, Lesbian Archive, Box File 2

Working-Class Queers draws on data from 2001 to 2021,[2] as a long-term project persistently returning to questions of sexuality and class. As a culmination of more than two decades of UK-based research, it has a past that precedes it, a present that it persists through, and a future that it hopes for. It overlaps – and is sometimes at odds – with my own professional and personal life. Sometimes going forward means going backwards. Sometimes we go back through archives as embodied journeys (un)doing our own data, and as reluctant returns, frustrations, and repetitions: 'I'm a Working-class Woman O.K.' becomes a queer claim in this non-linear forward–backward movement between data gathering, doing data, and being data.

As an undergraduate, I attended university in a different socio-political climate, benefiting from a full maintenance grant as a student from a working-class background. I live with the sense of getting into higher education just in time, before escalating costs from the New Labour period onwards, notably through the notorious Conservative–Liberal Democrats (2010–15) coalition government pact of increased tuition fees, positioned as a debt-absorbing investment in oneself. I imagined a different future in going to university – and still believe universities can offer access to and realisation of different futures. But my sense of optimism isn't wholly tied to individual financial return. Queer-feminist educators have always insisted on learning as socially transformative, as a commitment to social futures, rather than as a static essence, or as an investment in individual future selves (ourselves).

As a student in the '90s I attended a three-day long Marxism Now conference in London, with regional representation from across the UK: I opted into the Glasgow bus trip to London and benefited from the free place and free lunch. I experienced London cosmopolitanism, going into LGBTQ+ venues with some trepidation, before returning to the conference space and hearing some of the Left's political greats, such as Tony Benn. I remember other, maybe queerer, spaces, in classrooms and corridors on the edge of campus, and I remember giggling at the (over)use of 'comrades', as participants politicised identifications, in some of the same and different ways conveyed in frustrated badge-wearing at feminist conferences (see the opening extracts in this chapter). In many

ways, the move in and out of conference space (held in prestigious university premises) and scene space (lacking prestige, investment, or capital) represented the cross-over and disjuncture between queer-left agendas. As a young queer working-class person, I optimistically hoped for a future, which over the past two decades has been increasingly at odds with and disconnected from mainstream political shifts and, often, from queer or left politics.

Looking back and forward, through events, data, and career changes, embodied in the queer-feminist researcher (me) causes pause, disappointment, and hope. Across reading, researching, teaching, and writing efforts, I've experienced career mobility, even if queerly so – I've crossed disciplines, moved cities, and researched and taught at different 'types' of UK universities.[3] Without really knowing it, I started this project as part of a circular route away from and back to Scotland, having lived and worked in various parts of England – York, Newcastle, and London – since 2000. Moving institutions and departing 'cosmopolitan' London, I retraced my steps north. Having lived and worked in the 'provincial' North East of England for ten years, I relocated back to Scotland at the end of 2015. In many ways Glasgow, and Scotland, were changed places. Devolution and independence efforts arguably allow constituent UK nations to claim different futures – as still part of a collective European politics, as more socially democratic and left-of-centre, or as better at managing health crises or persisting socio-economic divisions. Much can be claimed through imagining difference or exceptionalism as a turning point: national progression and distinction is announced and celebrated in the headlines of the UK's LGBT Action Plan (2018), also evident in the Scottish Parliament's announcement of being 'world-leading' with their LGBT Inclusive Curriculum.[4]

This period saw increased claims around a supposed Scottish *difference,* through politics, culture, or even character.[5] In the aftermath of the Scottish independence referendum (2014) and the run-up to the European Union referendum (2016), and subsequent transition period leading to Brexit (2020), places of difference have mattered (and Scotland now makes rather bold claims about its 'world-leading' difference). But the council estate I grew up in *still* rates similarly, and badly, now as then, in terms of poor health,

housing, employment prospects, and life expectancy. The Scotland I remembered, and realised again on return, was often still a place of sexism, racism, homophobia, and transphobia, and of escalating poverty and inequality. Some endurances are embodied, while not always static: my accent changes over again, known and placed in Scotland, un-placed in England, where it's encompassed as just Scottish. How this is felt, as relief or otherwise, anonymity or identity, movement or lack of, maps onto class and sexuality, as politicised, professional, and personal inhabitations. I can say I'm the first person in my family to go to university, and I can say that I am a university professor, a lesbian, a feminist, a queer. What happens when these backgrounds are put to work in foregrounding queer intersectional thinking, re-activating the queer left?

Over two decades I've moved from being a student to being a teacher. I work in the politicised context of ongoing University and College Union (UCU) strike action. Higher education has not been immune to financialisation, or crises, as widening participation is constituted as a new marketing opportunity, a reaching out to new 'diversities', whether imagined as working-class students, international students, or LGBTQ+ students.[6] In reflecting back and forward in and through education, I ask if 'the queer' and 'the left' are aiming for the same future, and if a queer left might be possible. How will class knowledge, methods, and theorisation take account of queer – will they only nod at intersectionality as a catch-all gesture towards the queer-to-be-included? What can we learn by using class as a lens to understand queer sexuality in the context of the nation state over the past two decades? If life really has 'got better' for queers in the UK, what kinds of queers have been rewarded as good citizens? Who has been left behind? What happens when we lose class critique in queer politics and social analysis? In thinking about (inter)disciplinary research productions, I am still compelled by class as a concept, and one which still often collides with queer. In this book I consider queer *and* class, including dimensions of the political, affective, archival, material, and personal:

> You can always tell a real working-class person because they want to be middle-class. Not the culture of middle-class but they want

> a good salary, and they want the money, and they don't disdain those things. I've got colleagues who'll be like 'everybody should get paid the same', and I used to say all of that stuff as well. But it is, it'll be working-class job applicants at a senior level who'll be like 'no you fucking pay me my salary!', do you know what I mean? 'I crawled over cut glass to get here. Pay me my salary'. It's only middle-class people that romanticise being poor … I mean I'm still absolutely really wildly disordered about money because of being under-resourced and neglected in childhood. Like I have, if my bank card goes out of date and it beeps and doesn't run I have a full-blown panic attack, and I'm forty-eight years old and I know there's money in my bank account.
>
> —Senior manager in UK LGBTQ+ organisation, interviewed 2021

In interviewees' efforts and insistences ('I crawled over cut glass to get here. Pay me my salary'), I recognise class. I choose to repeat class queerly and across time and place – from the workshop to the archive, from the classroom to the fieldwork site – noting its elisions and erasures, as well as contemporary classifications and re-circulations. The opening letter extracts are from the Lesbian Archives at Glasgow Women's Library (GWL). Old concepts, words and thoughts reside there, but they also endure and animate the present. The first extract highlights women's misfit with traditional heteronormative class analysis, classificatory struggles around 'pigeonholing', and possible normative and anti-normative actions. Privilege becomes wrapped in scare quotes, alongside 'over-educated' and 'middle-class'. In claiming that 'I'm a Working-Class Woman 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 persisting patriarchy, capitalism, and heterosexism across the years, as enduring structures despite liberal policy shifts. In countless newsletters there are features, full-page articles, and multiple letters of classed interruptions to what feminism and feminists are, to what and who lesbians are, and to whether queer might stretch or solidify these terms. In many ways the classed conversations of 'then', the 1970s, '80s, and '90s, are repeated in the 'now', with the archival 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 opening letter extracts 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 backstreet lane. My partner and I now joke that we might well have been sitting back-to-back in the cold damp building, having braved the broken lift, as we read 'lesbian facts' and allowed ourselves to imagine what LGBTQ+ life might be like… 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 the LGBTQ+ community. 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 global (US) mappings of Queer Theory, means being firmly located, where questions of location, reflexivity and standpoint are never far from 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.

Glasgow represents itself as an authentically working-class, down-to-earth, unpretentious city. But not everyone is included or recognised in this claim, which is also a gendered and racialised one, figured through masculinity and whiteness. 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 now 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, not cognisant of the work of code-switching[7] involved in alternating between two languages. My partner is often not recognised as bilingual, an association seemingly more easily attributable to modern language speakers; incorrectly, she was placed 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 misrecognition. 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 unattached 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 often the beneficiaries of 'equality, diversity, and inclusion' initiatives.[8] Closet doors are summoned, prised open and peered into by a well-meaning white, middle-class, young, out, queer, just as they are during the annual LGBT History Month, Black History Month, International Women's Day, and so on. 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. Feminism – and the lesbian feminist in particular – risks being read as the stall, as a TERF, a trans-exclusionary radical feminist. Knowing and feeling this makes me pause on the political potential of a queer corrective here. In this book I open up empirical enquiry to shifting and contested identifications, while refusing 'lesbian' as a singular, straight, or right-wing signifier, politically appropriated: this is not the past, present, or future that I recognise or hope for.

Such correctives become the 'common ground' that interviewees have shared across time and place. This has included expressing class solidarities, which are then shattered by experiences of racism, or rendered seemingly impossible when middle-class queer parents buy-in to middle-class privilege, acting in the 'best interests' of their children (an interest historically denied and even criminalised). Common ground has stretched across expressions of disbelief ('Is this useful?') that I am interested in working-class queer lives, to having to pull out and pay attention 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 lesbian, trans woman, interviewed 2019). My investment in working-class queers is an embodied, political and material investment in the data, literature, objects, boxes, carried across time and place as I've moved across disciplines, institutions, and UK cities. 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,[9] and via city regenerations of commercialised scene spaces.[10] Contents exceed the inclusion of same-sex rights, such as marriage,[11] into a box which fits, highlighting the limits of liberal inclusion, disrupted by queer-class commonalities.[12] But such common ground becomes weighted as evidence of potential lag and lack.

The (post-)Brexit UK climate sees a repetition of working-classness as deficit, as outside of 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). But working-class queers never fitted into (other, continued) crisis times, still living with and through austerity periods, pandemic and cost-of-living-crisis times. As a feminist project that has persisted, this book tracks what follows across the fieldwork period (2001–21) and in 'crisis times': what can be learnt in researching class and sexuality over the long-term, as continued crises are remade via heightened inequalities, austerity regimes, welfare demolition, and the local–global re-bordering in neoliberal Britain? The decline of left politics, the promise and failure of a 'third way', the dismantling of the welfare state, and the escalation of right-wing populism as mainstream political presences, even with uneasy 'feminist' alliances, seem to represent the times we're in. Such times constitute a persisting 'hostile environment', where the crises of austerity, Brexit, and the COVID-19 pandemic follow on from and compound one another. The experiences of working-class queers offer an empirical refocus on the push-and-pull of normative successes, and the lack of fit as responsible citizens, privatised families, happy workers, or competitive consumers. Working-class queers often pragmatically persist through these mis-fits nonetheless, living with failure and re-engaging in a 'disappointing world'.[13]

Using 'class' as a term, concept, or identity can risk reserving it for or authenticating it as the supposedly real (white, straight, male) working-class, thereby playing into the hands of conservative agendas by displacing a sense of globalised working-classness across nation states, while also sidelining intersecting inequalities.[14] Such tensions exist within a broader political economy, which includes the demise of the political left, both nationally and globally. In the UK context, the past two decades have been shaped by those preceding them: notably, the Thatcher era; the rise of centrist New Labour; the heightening of neoliberalism; the retraction of the welfare state; the increased financialisation of key institutions and public life and the reign of the free market as solutions to crisis – witnessed most recently in Brexit and in contemporary post-pandemic times.

I use the section below, 'The Outness of Queer: Researching Class and Sexuality over the Long-Term', to outline the research projects that this book draws upon, as well as the book's structure: I'll chart

my own research positionality and queer-class methods in Chapter 2. This leads to the empirical queer-class projects at the heart of this book (Chapters 3–6). As part of re-locating and re-engaging the possibilities and persistence of feminism, I explore the shifting landscape of feminist, queer, and class scholarship in Chapter 7. I think through the situatedness of academic productions as always occurring in time and place, when new terms and articulations may repeat or disguise; for example, 'precarity' as a term of now may act to displace 'class' as a term of then (or 'them'). I end by moving back to, and forwards through, a queer working-class reading list.

THE OUTNESS OF QUEER: RESEARCHING CLASS AND SEXUALITY OVER THE LONG-TERM

> She had quite a strong working-class identity, she grew up around the miners' strike, so it's a very *different* kind of working-class experience, but when I used to say things she'd say 'Yeah!' It kinda astounded me, it was the first time I thought 'This isn't just to do with being Asian', and being brought up in this Asian environment when my parents didn't work, it's also about something bigger than that …
>
> —Asifa, 29, South Asian, lesbian, interviewed 2002, England

> I imagine my future at all points as being someone who is not fitting in, and I think sometimes structurally that means that the world is not for you.
>
> —Alisha, 39, South Asian, lesbian, interviewed 2020, Scotland

There are similarities and differences within and between Alisha's and Asifa's accounts, and when figured alongside structuring contexts of gender, race and class, supposedly new conditions may be viewed as enduring realities, as still (not) fitting in. Questions of class – a term with an expansive socio-political and interdisciplinary history – have *also and always* exceeded a numerical count, expressed as embodied states, privileges, and precarious claims. Debates have shifted class from an undead 'zombie category' to a conveyer of social, cultural, and economic worth, from being a descriptive 'socio-economic classification' to a survey 'experiment',

and from a source of politicised identification to one of dis-identification. Recent contributions are valuable in rethinking, updating, and interrupting go-to terms, including as personal, professional, and politicised expressions.[15] We always need to be attentive to the work our terms do, and who is pulled along or left behind.

In interviewing working-class queers over a number of decades, I've witnessed what 'queer materiality' means up close and personal, even if buffered by queer networks, scene spaces, and families of choice. My research participants have faced homelessness, poor housing, unemployment, underemployment, educational exclusion, workplace discrimination, precarity, benefits cuts, inadequate health services, and racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. In focus groups, interviews, workshops, in other people's homes and in mine, in fought-for and fraught-through LGBTQ+ community space, and in spaces such as churches, parks, food banks, schools, and playgrounds, I've researched different queer-class lives in the UK. I've done 'public sociology', as energising and exhausting: I've been involved in the pursuit of healthcare, housing, and benefits entitlement for interviewees – pursuits not conveyed in the ethics pages of university research committees, or easily captured as academic use or impact. These experiences are more than an appendix to proper theory or policy progression, and they also surpass a listing of individual associations or characteristics ('hard-working', 'undeserving', 'failing', 'ambitious'), instead being understood as social and collective.

Asifa's account, situated in the early 2000s, is one of finding other working-class queers, including in Manchester's commercially regenerated *Queer as Folk*[16] scene space. I remember meeting Asifa in a queer community centre and later going out on Canal Street, full of youthful optimism – in my twenties – thrilled by the only women's bar. Differently, the seemingly old, dated politics – of working-class communities and trade unionism – provided Asifa with a sense of 'something bigger', across racial–sexual difference. As an intimate connection linking into collective consciousness, Asifa's account rings true. But it is a truth disappeared in the reductive recasting of working-class life as male, white, and heterosexual. New Labour ideas on multicultural citizenship were soon ditched when minority ethnic groups, and Muslims in par-

ticular, were instructed to integrate into British society in the wake of 9/11 and the 7/7 London bombings.[17] Policies protecting and penalising those imagined as (to-be) included citizens and those pushed out as not-yet (not ever) British, actively mobilise gender and sexuality, witnessed then and now in the call against the 'war on terrorism', with LGBTQ+ groups seen as in need of protection from religious and racialised others.[18]

In the early 2000s, the New Labour (1997–2010) government was in its first term. It had already made bold claims on class and on gender, with 'Blair's Babes' becoming a sign that gender, like class, was over ('The class war is over. But the struggle for true equality has only just begun'[19]). Many have traced the political shifts during this time, when we were told things could only get better, a line used by New Labour in the 1997 election campaign. Election victory held the promise of a reversal of the socio-economic transformation of Britain, impacted by nearly 18 years of Conservative government, minus the inclusion of left-wing ideas ('We have rejected the worst of our past and rediscovered the best'). The electorate were positioned as individuals, rather than groups, communities, or collectives (such as unions), to be capacitated via education, employment and family. In these re-orderings, from structurally significant categories and collectivities to individuals and families, LGBTQ+ people were increasingly positioned as part of the right kind of diversity, assuming white, middle-class visibility. In standardising the age of consent, ending the ban of LGBT people from the armed forces, extending adoption rights, and creating civil partnerships, New Labour could be viewed as proactive in driving forward 'sexual citizenship', for some.

Within this context I started the fieldwork for what became *Working-Class Lesbian Life: Classed Outsiders* (2007), which included over 50 interviews and focus groups across England and Scotland. This study took place around the repeal of the UK's Section 28, legislation that had been introduced in 1988 by the Conservative government which banned local authorities from promoting homosexuality as a *pretended* family unit. In Scotland, I was part of anti-homophobic activism and protests – or 'real politics' – mobilised against the conservative Keep the Clause campaign and funded by millionaire businessman Brian Souter.[20]