Paradise Lost? Patterns and Precarity in Working-Class Academic Narratives

Deborah M. Warnock, State University of New York, Cortland

Abstract

Through an analysis of eight collections of autoethnographic essays written by working-class academics and published over the span of thirty-two years, I identify stable themes and emergent patterns in lived experiences. Some broad and stable themes include a sense of alienation, lack of cultural capital, encountering stereotypes and microaggressions, experiencing survivor guilt and the impostor syndrome, and struggling to pass in a middle-class culture that values ego and networking. Two new and troubling patterns are crippling amounts of student debt and the increased exploitation of adjunct labor. I emphasize the importance of considering social class background as a form of diversity in academia and urge continued research on the experiences of working-class academics.

Keywords

Working-class academic, cultural capital, class identity, precarity

I was curled up in my second-hand reading chair, a faded pea green and suede monstrosity I had saved up money to purchase during my second year of graduate school, and the tears flowed down my face. I was reading *Limbo* by Alfred Lubrano (2004), in which he shares the stories of professionals who had been upwardly mobile. I saw myself reflected in the stories and for the first time I finally began to understand why I had felt so out of place and conflicted about my own upward mobility through higher education. The book even gave me a new name for myself, a community of others who had similar experiences – I was a 'straddler' (Lubrano 2004, p. 2). I don't even remember how or when I found this book, but I do remember the night I sat in my chair immobile and crying until I reached the last page. Those stories helped me put a name to my pain and made me realize that, following C. Wright Mills' (1959) sociological imagination, what seemed to be individual troubles were indeed social issues, that the alienation and grief I felt as I struggled to join a new class and culture were common experiences. My experiences echoed those of Renny Christopher (2008, p. 34), who writes of her time in graduate school:

> 'At first I felt utterly, completely lost. Eventually I learned to name that sense of being lost as being a working-class academic. Forming, defining, and claiming that identity took a lot of work and a lot of pain. I count it as the true subject matter and methodology I learned in graduate school, more than the disciplinary knowledge I was supposed to be learning.'

This discovery of self in the writing and work of other working-class academics is a theme that emerged from the writing of working-class academics.

Since that night I have found and read many more collections by working-class academics. I have contributed to the most recent collections by telling my own stories. I have worked with first-generation and working-class students to share their own experiences and to find community on campuses where they are too often invisible minorities. I have watched others experience the reflection of themselves in stories and the relief at seeing that they are not alone in this, the same relief I found when reading *Limbo* as a graduate student ten years ago.

The power of narrative and storytelling is real. Muzzatti and Samarco (2006, p. 3), in the introduction to their edited collection, identify autoethnography, or the use of personal narratives to explore social systems, as an 'outsider's methodology' appropriate for interrogating the working-class academic's outsider position. While some have criticized what they see as being a narcissistic and less than empirical method (Sparkes 2000), others have noted its usefulness as a form of visibility and resistance in opposition to the hegemonic middle-class academic experience (Bhabha 1990, p. 301; Holt 2003). Muzzatti & Samarco (2006, p. 3) also identify the usefulness of collections of autoethnographies for their ability to 'allow patterns to emerge.' In this article I draw upon the patterns revealed through the narratives in this and other collections in order to present a written portrait of the working-class academic experience.

I read eight collections of autoethnographic narratives of working-class academics, coding them for themes.[8] While these collections are not a representative sampling, they can provide us some insight into the lived experiences of the working-class academic. Similar to work on first-generation college students, it is possible that those who feel most affected by this particular identity or experience are more likely to identify as such (Stuber 2011). As Hurst (2010) writes, college students from the working-class employ different strategies to navigate the middle-class culture of college campuses. It is possible that professors employ similar logics and that those who seek to more fully assimilate may be missing from these narratives as they may be more likely to distance themselves from their origins. However, using survey data from the Canadian professoriate, Haney (2016) found that professors from working- class backgrounds differ in important ways from those from the middle-class. And, as the reader will see in this article, the same themes and experiences,   although

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[8] Dews, C. L. B. & Law, C. L. (eds) 1995, *This fine place so far from home: Voices of academics from the working class,* Temple University Press, Philadelphia, PA.; Hurst, A. L. & Nenga, S. K. (eds) 2016, *Working in class: Recognizing how social class shapes our academic work,* Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD.; Muzzatti, S. L. & Samarco, C. V. (eds) 2006, *Reflections from the wrong side of the tracks: Class, identity, and the working class experience in academe,* Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD.; Oldfield, K. & Johnson II, R. G. (eds) 2008, *Resilience: Queer professors from the working class,* State University of New York Press, Albany, NY.; Ryan, J. & Sackrey, C. 1984, *Strangers in paradise: Academics from the working class,* South End Press, Boston, MA.; Siegel, C. (ed.) 2014, *Rhizomes 27: Working-class academics: Theories, mythologies, realities,* viewed 20 July 2016, http://rhizomes.net/issue27/index.html*;* Tokarczyk, M. M. & Fay, E. A. (eds) 1993, *Working-class women in the academy: Laborers in the knowledge factory,* University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, MA.; Van Galen, J. A. & Dempsey, V. O. (eds) 2009, *Trajectories: The social and educational mobility of education scholars from poor and working class backgrounds,* Sense Publishers, Rotterdam.

sometimes identified by different terms, emerge again and again through a set of collections that span decades. Here I present my findings from the collections – the themes and patterns that recur when working-class academics write about their own experiences.

In addition to identifying recurring and stable themes across the collections, I also wondered if particular themes had become more or less resonant over time. The earliest collection included here (and from which this article draws its title) is *Strangers in Paradise*, edited by Jake Ryan and Charles Sackrey and published in 1984. The latest collection included is *Working in Class* edited by Allison Hurst and Sandi Nenga and published earlier this year, in 2016.[9] As I coded these autoethnographic essays, I noted the year in which they were originally published in
order to examine the extent to which emergent patterns changed over time. Indeed, as I detail below, I found discussions of precarity and debt to be overwhelmingly more present in the collections published in the past decade than in the preceding volumes. I conclude this article with a discussion of how the lived experience of the typical working-class academic (the skill sets, the values, the struggles) intersect with the current sociopolitical climate of higher education to further degrade our possibilities for both opportunity and success within academia.

The Working-Class Academic

In this section I present the themes that emerged from the coded autoethnographic essays to paint a portrait of the identity and experiences of the working-class academic.

Alienation. The working-class academic is first and foremost characterized by a sense of alienation. In every single autoethnographic account, alienation is either directly named or described in different terms. In addition to Lubrano's 'straddler,' working-class academics use a variety of terms to describe the cognitive dissonance of upward mobility. Working-class academics often describe themselves as 'outsiders,' part of a 'transition class…living on the margins of two cultural worlds but as members of neither' (Gardner 1993, p. 50). Christopher (2008, p. 42) describes being 'not either-or,' saying she moves 'back and forth.' LeCourt (2006, p. 83) shares, 'In the academic realm, I am both self *and* Other simultaneously. I reside in Homi Bhabha's 'third space' – the space of the hybrid, of ambivalence and possibility.' A number of academics invoked DuBois's (1903) 'double consciousness,' while others describe being 'nowhere at home' (Overall 1995, p. 209). Ryan and Sackrey (1984, p. 5) posit that the working-class academic 'internalizes the conflicts in the hierarchy of the class system.'

As I describe below, for a variety of reasons many academics feel less than at home in their destination class, yet struggle with maintaining ties to their class of origin as well. Todd (2009, p. 46) describes becoming 'an imposter in her home', an experience echoed by many working-class academics who return home from college or graduate school only to find that they can no longer bridge the cultural gap that

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[9] As this collection is not composed entirely of essays by working-class faculty, I coded only those chapters written by those who self-identified as such.

their education has created. Still others learn to navigate between the two cultures. As Parks (2009, p. 35) writes, 'I do more code-switching than a cryptographer.' In order to cope with the feelings of loneliness and isolation caused by this sense of limbo, a number of working-class academics seek comfort in alcohol and drug use with some developing problems of substance abuse (Jensen 2014).

Cultural Capital. While not always named as such, a majority of the essays describe the fundamental mismatch between middle- and working-class tastes and behaviors emblematic of a lack of the dominant (read: middle-class) form of cultural capital. Following the work of Bourdieu and Passeron, Lamont and Lareau (1988, p. 156) define cultural capital as 'institutionalized, i.e., widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion.' Many specific examples of the working-class academic's lack of cultural capital, and the problems this lack creates, appear throughout these collections. Indeed, as Siegel (2014) shares, 'my appearance, my taste in food, art, and lovers, my approach to life, my spending habits, my manners are all so wrong, apparently as to call for intervention.' It is not only the lack of cultural capital, but the signals this lack emits of difference-- read by the middle-class
as inferiority or lack of dubiously defined 'fit'-- that lead to social, cultural, and professional exclusion.[10]

Examples also abound throughout these collections as to the specific consequences of this lack of cultural capital and knowledge, such as when Rothe (2006, p. 57) details her inability to be reimbursed for conference travel because she did not know to keep receipts. She was never told that this was a requirement – the assumption was simply made that she would possess this form of knowledge that those with professional parents are far more likely to have. This lack of cultural capital, as well as the faulty assumption on the part of her graduate school program, literally lost her money, as it does for many working-class academics, along with opportunities and jobs.

Language and Communication. Of the various forms of cultural capital, the most frequently mentioned in these collections is that of language and style of communication. The working-class scholars in this study communicate in a 'restricted code,' including more limited vocabulary size and usage, informal speech patterns, tendency to use anecdotes or stories to make points, passionate and emotional styles of communication, use of humor and profanity, and presence of accents marking one as working-class (Bernstein 1971). Each of these traits related to working-class education and upbringing may result in the speaker being taken less seriously or viewed as less authoritative on the subject matter. The regulation of emotion in particular is one of the most commonly discussed ways in which working-class scholars struggle to acclimate. As Presdee (2006, p. 36) explains, 'It was all confusing. Now I had to learn to argue without anger, reason and not hit, lose without seeking retaliation.' Garger (1995, p. 42) dubs this communication style mismatch the 'Bronx Syndrome.' The working-class academic must learn a new and different language and way of communicating while often being taught that their own natural style is inferior and not welcome or effective.

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[10] See Lynn Arner's (2014) excellent description of the working-class academic's difficulty with the academic hiring process.

Dress and Comportment. In her description of the difficulties faced by working-class women at the MLA interviews, Arner (2014) draws upon Bourdieu's concept of the 'bodily hexis' to discuss how class is coded, often unconsciously, through the body. From hairstyle, clothing fit and style, body size and shape, and how one carries oneself, even among working-class academics who seek to 'pass,' class is often physically signaled. When these signals differ from middle-class norms, they are often interpreted to mean that the person is a poor 'fit.' Some write about being openly teased by colleagues and students or assumed to be less intelligent on the basis of their attire. About a working-class academic who wrote an award-wining paper, a graduate school peer exclaimed, 'He may look like a country bumpkin, but he's actually very smart' (Blanton & Ewalt 2014). Rothe (2006, p. 55) describes the contradiction between the working-class value of, and pride in, thriftiness and the middle-class insult of being cheap. Specifically, she writes that a response of how little she paid for an item of clothing to a colleague's compliment of the item would be considered crude instead of the positive reinforcement she could expect from another working-class person. Soria (2016, p. 134) indicates the importance of clothing in passing as middle-class, describing how she covers her black metal t-shirts with cardigans.

Stereotypes and Microagressions. Working-class academics often encounter hurtful stereotypes and microaggressions from colleagues and students and must decide whether to "out" themselves by engaging with the offending speaker. These microaggressions, which begin as early as grade school and continue through graduate school, occur when teachers and fellow students talk about the working- class and poor as the inferior and distant 'other' (Law 1995, p. 3). Haney's (2016, p. 150) survey study of the Canadian professoriate found that 40% of participants reported classist language. Importantly, working-class faculty were significantly more likely than their middle-class colleagues to have witnessed class-based microaggressions, which suggests that middle-class faculty are less aware of class- based inequalities in academia. In addition to these microaggressions, enduring stereotypes of the working-class paint its members as racist and homophobic (Siegel 2014).

Questioning the Meritocracy. While one might think that working-class academics would be the first to trumpet a belief in the meritocracy, analysis of the autoethnographies suggests the opposite. Working-class scholars are much more likely to identify themselves as the exceptions that prove the rule, the rule being class reproduction and rigidity. Many write about their own naïve beliefs in education as an equalizer until their experiences showed them otherwise; others were never believers to begin with. But none of these works espouse blind faith in the meritocracy and most, including those authors who have been successful on middle-class terms, acknowledge that the meritocracy is either broken or virtually non-existent. We were often successful in spite of, not always because of, our schooling experiences, which tended to cater overwhelmingly to the needs of middle-class students. We also know that one's educational level does not determine one's worth or value to society, despite its claim to do so.

Indeed, when it comes to the possibilities of upward mobility in the contemporary higher education climate marked by mounting debt burdens and rampant exploitation of adjunct faculty, it bears to question if the term working-class academic truly

remains a contradiction in terms. Ryan and Sackrey (1984), who write of the structural conditions and national policies that allowed for the wave of upward mobility through education from which their contributors benefitted, predicted the demise of that very short-lived period of educational expansion.

Awareness of Exploitation. A related theme that emerged from these collections was an awareness of and discomfort with exploitation. As Siegel (2014) states in her introduction to the *Rhizomes* volume, 'We know that some have because others don't, that the poor pay in suffering for what the more affluent enjoy.' This realization leads to a mistrust of authority that can manifest in maintaining distance from, as well as an exaggerated sense of deference to, campus leadership. Along with this sense of uneasiness around those in powerful positions, working-class academics confess to feeling more at home with campus service staff, who remind us of our friends and family. Many working-class academics also describe a reluctance to delegate tasks to departmental support staff, feeling ill at ease with the possibility of authority that accompany our roles as faculty. This reluctance to exercise power extends to the classroom, where many working-class faculty are loathe to require their students to use honorifics such as 'Doctor' or 'Professor' (Muzzatti & Samarco 2006, p. 76).   This cognitive dissonance is also present in the tenure-track or tenured working-class academics' reckoning with the increased use of adjunct professors (Warnock 2014).

Luck and Survivor Guilt. It is this acknowledgment of exploitation that undergirds the survivor guilt common to the class straddler. The term 'survivor guilt' implies an escape from a near-death experience or assault. While colleagues from the middle- class complain about what they see as being low pay and overwork, working-class academics feel like they 'won the lottery' (Sackrey and Ryan 1984, p. 290). Coincident feelings of luck and guilt pepper working-class academics' accounts of their upward mobility. Enjoying the benefits of being middle-class, like earning a living wage and working in safe and secure environs, can be difficult when one compares their own position with friends and family 'left behind.' Indeed, because the professional class is expected to be geographically mobile and working-class academics must often move far from friends and family to pursue their career, friends and family are literally left, a move that is anathema to working-class values of community and which only further enhances feelings of guilt. Part of the denial of social class differences espoused by the myth of meritocracy provides some working- class academics with a sense of guilt simply by referring to their families as 'working-class', a term and identity which the families themselves may not claim and which may be interpreted as further insult or betrayal (Annas 1993, p. 171).

Education as 'Escape.' The myth of meritocracy often casts those who are upwardly mobile as the 'hard-working' and meritorious few that managed to steer clear of the trappings of poverty (Hurst & Warnock 2015). This language, while usually questioned in these narratives, does exist in the accounts of working-class academics. Many write of their love of school, books, and reading as being the ticket out and serving as a sort of distraction from crippling poverty or less than ideal home conditions. In many of these accounts, the families also endorse the notion of education as escape mechanism from lives of poverty, and many academics write of the sacrifices their families made so they could pursue an education. However, as described above, there is an 'emotional cost' to their quest for upward mobility through education that many fail to predict (Cannon 2006, p. 104). For others

education is an escape from poverty marked by familial abuse. Kadi (1993, p. 90) wanted to attend university because she 'wanted out. Out of my home town, out of an abusive family, and, in my ignorance, out of the working class.' For many working-class children, class consciousness comes early and brings with it an internalized classism and sense of shame, which many report as they move through their academic careers.

The Impostor Syndrome. Almost every working-class academic writes about the sense of inferiority she feels relative to her middle-class peers and the fear that she will be found out for a fraud and summarily terminated. This feeling of the 'eternal game of catch-up' (Appel 2014) manifests as nervousness or anxiety that may be off-putting to middle-class colleagues (Arner 2014). Working-class academics often overcompensate for these feelings of inferiority by working longer hours and overproducing. Others respond to these feelings of inferiority with silence and a paralyzing fear that they do not have anything valuable to contribute to the academic discourse.

This pressing need to demonstrate one's worth and deservingness also reinforces frictions about the definition of hard work and the tendency for working-class academics to feel as though their work is somehow lacking compared to the 'real' work that their families did. About her desire to be back on her family's farm baling hay rather than writing her dissertation, Lehrermeier (2008, p. 19) writes, 'At least hay baling is real work. At least you sweat. At least you can see the reason behind it. It's hard, but it has a point. What was the point of my dissertation, anyway?'

Ego and Networking. The middle-class values of self-promotion and competition run in stark contrast to those of humility and community espoused by the working-class (Lareau 2003). Drawing attention to oneself, and debate for the sake of debate, were frequently mentioned as confounding behaviors in the new middle-class world of academia. Behaviors that appear to the working-class academic to signal arrogance are viewed by the middle-class as markers of confidence and self-assuredness. Attempting to engage in these behaviors often leads to a greater sense of alienation and discomfort in the working-class academic. Failure to properly self-promote makes the act of networking incredibly difficult and even impossible for many from working-class origins. Because self-promotion and networking are necessary to professional middle-class success, the working-class academic is once again at a disadvantage.

Passing. Although the social trappings necessary to network successfully elude most working-class academics, many still write of attempting to 'pass' or fit in with the middle-class academic culture. Working-class academics do this through manipulating dress, behavior, language, and any of the other characteristics that may give them away as different.

A Note on the Deficit Perspective. It is important to state that, while many of the attributes and experiences of the working-class academic described above place us at a disadvantage within a world that favors middle-class norms and values, these should not be considered as deficits. Too often, as I have described, working-class academics believe themselves to be somehow inferior, but it is the system that perpetuates class inequalities that we should be questioning and not the working-class academic's traits

and values. Rather than suggest that working-class academics are at fault for their position in academe, the goal of this article is to suggest the ways in which structural class inequalities obstruct success for and fail to recognize and reward the strengths of the working-class academic.

Paradise Lost?

In reading these autoethnographic accounts I admit to being unsurprised as to how similar experiences of working-class academics in 1984 appear to be to those in 2016. Many of the same themes appeared across the 32 years within which these collections were published. The notable exception can be found in the drastically increased accounts of financial exploitation in higher education both through the rise of the reliance on student debt to pay for college and the increased utilization of adjunct professors.

Student Debt. Student loan debt is now the largest form of debt in the United States and has been since 2010 when it surpassed credit card debt (Kantrowitz 2010). Median student debt among college graduates now exceeds $30,000 (Gallup & Purdue University 2015). The rise in student debt is concomitant with the decline in federal and state aid spending for higher education and the growth of tuition prices over the past few decades (Mettler 2014). These trends, along with the growth in merit aid and colleges' aggressive recruitment of wealthy students, have made upward mobility through education a less attainable goal for the contemporary working-class student (Warnock 2016). Among the more senior academics in these collections who began their careers in the 1990s or earlier, there are more mentions of being able to work their way through college or of family paying the bulk of tuition. As Kauzlarich (2006, p. 39), who began attending a community college in the 1980s,
shares, 'My parents indicated that they would be able to cough up the $13 per credit hour for my studies.'[11] Baker (2006, p. 205) credits her upward mobility to the 'macrolevel phenomena' such as the Basic Educational Opportunity Grants and other 'well-funded' financial aid programs available in the 1970s.

Reading through the most recent collections, and particularly the pieces written by more junior scholars who are still in graduate school or have only recently completed their degrees, the differences are striking. Student loan debt, while it did not go unmentioned in earlier volumes by senior scholars who tended to rely on a mixture of family support, work earnings, grants, and loans to finance their education, is described by more junior scholars as no less than crippling. Quintela (2016, p. 92) writes of the 'massive student loan debt with which [she is] burdened.' About the debt she accrued to complete her Ph.D. Appel (2014) fears 'that what was supposed to have served as a pathway *away* from the poverty of my childhood…could become the albatross around my neck ensuring that I would never escape that particular demon.' Arner (2014) describes the consequences of such debt and the stress and anxiety that often accompany it as being both a catalyst for taking a job quickly and prohibitive due to the desperation that potential employers may misread as incompetency. In these more recent essays, debt is more than another way to pay the tuition bills – it

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[11] It was also not uncommon in these narratives to find that working-class academics began their educational careers at community colleges due to concerns about cost.

has become another roadblock to mobility, one so large that some working-class academics question whether they will find financial stability or success in academia at all. As Todd (2009, p. 50) writes, 'A future in academia may elude me.'

The Exploitation of Adjunct Labor. Working-class academics are significantly underrepresented among the American professoriate (Arner 2016, p. 50). Part of this underrepresentation stems from the strong relationship between social class background and educational attainment. Access to a college education has become less attainable for academically strong, low-income students than it was 40 years ago (Kahlenberg 2004) and low-income students remain drastically underrepresented at the most prestigious colleges and universities (Carnevale and Strohl 2010). When they do make it to graduate school, working-class graduate students encounter greater difficulties, both financial and cultural, than their middle-class peers (Grimes & Morris 1997; Warnock & Appel 2012).

Meanwhile, the availability of full-time tenure-track positions has declined by 50% over the past 40 years with tenured and tenure-track faculty making up a scant 29% of the academic workforce (American Association of University Professors 2016). Women and faculty of color are overrepresented in contingent positions (Bousquet 2008) and Soria (2016) suggests that this is true of faculty from working-class backgrounds as well. Adjuncts and contingent faculty often teach classes at multiple institutions, earning poverty-level wages for the equivalent of a full-time teaching load. The increased reliance on adjunct labor reinforces and accentuates class hierarchy in academia, treating adjuncts as 'second class citizens' thereby weakening faculty governance and reducing graduation rates (Bettinger and Long 2004, p. 2). Apart from being underpaid, adjunct professors suffer from the stress, anxiety, and depression that accompanies the lack of respect and uncertainty of the position (Reevy & Deason 2014). Adjunct professors are less likely to engage in scholarship, largely because they lack the time and resources to do so (AAUP 2016). Wilson (2006, p. 164) argues that through the increased reliance on invisible and devalued adjunct labor, 'exploitation becomes normative' on the college campus.

While some senior scholars in these collections recall working as adjunct professors prior to or while earning their Ph.D., increasingly this has become the new normal for working-class academics. Especially because working-class academics are less likely to graduate from prestigious programs, which are more likely to lead to tenure-track positions, coupled with the fact that we struggle to find our way in a culture that is largely foreign and at times even hostile, the outlook is less and less rosy for today's working-class academic (Arner 2014).

As of 2016 working-class academics are competing for fewer tenure-track job openings, while struggling under a mountain of student loan debt, in addition to facing the same issues and difficulties first described back in 1984. The consequences, while certainly felt at the individual level, are institutional and societal as well. Heavy reliance on adjunct labor reduces student retention rates and is threatening to academic freedom (AAUP 2016). However, by not enfranchising working-class academics, who are underrepresented among tenured and tenure-track positions, academia is also silencing valuable and necessary voices in the classroom and in scholarship. Haney's (2016) survey study along with the accounts of multiple working-class academics indicate that they are more likely to seek out and mentor

working-class students, a group that is particularly vulnerable to attrition. In addition, if working-class academics do not have the time and support to engage in scholarship, important and different viewpoints will inevitably be lacking in the production of knowledge. Even if working-class adjunct faculty do find the time to engage in scholarship, the lack of security in their positions compromises their academic freedom to write about potentially controversial topics such as social class hierarchies in the academy. Finally, the need to repay student loans may drive working-class academics who are unable to find living-wage work out of academia altogether.

Moving Forward

Given the problematic and exploitative trends of the corporatized university, what steps can we take to ensure a more hospitable climate for the working-class academic? I conclude with policy and research directions for addressing these pressing issues.

Class as Diversity. For all of the reasons listed above, it is imperative that social class background be identified and prioritized as a diversity criterion for academic hires. Failing to diversify the professoriate on the basis of class background will continue to relegate valuable and underrepresented voices to insecure and underappreciated positions. Working-class academics have the potential to disrupt the class hierarchy within higher education, which may be why class has not been prioritized in conversations of increasing faculty diversity (Oldfield 2007). Our presence alone both reinforces and challenges the myth of meritocracy.

However, recruitment of working-class faculty could aid in university missions of student retention. Low-income and first-generation students are especially vulnerable to attrition (Howard & Levine 2004) and working-class academics are dedicated to serving this student population (Haney 2016; Stricker 2011). Working-class faculty, who are especially sensitive and attuned to class hierarchies on campus, could also be valuable resources for fighting the continued and future exploitation of faculty labor. Finally, it is important to note that, similar to members from other underrepresented groups, working-class faculty have overcome myriad challenges and hurdles to persist in academia, making us valuable role models and mentors. Prioritizing social class background as a form of diversity in hiring would recognize the unique strengths the working-class academic has to offer.

The Continuing Importance of Narrative. Because social class remains largely invisible in the academic realm, drawing awareness to the experiences of working- class academics and students remains critical to improving conditions for these groups. Storytelling can help to reduce the sense of alienation and fears of inferiority which plague many from the working-class, whether faculty or students. Working- class 'others' in academe must learn that we are not alone and that our voices are valuable. Student- and faculty-organized groups for first-generation and working- class students can help to raise awareness and to spur activism on campuses (Warnock & Hurst 2016). In addition, the First Generation Digital Storytelling project founded by Jane Van Galen, one of the editors of the collections analyzed for this

article, is a great example of the power and importance of narrative in disrupting class hierarchies in academia.[12]

Class and Intersectionality. Too often the term 'working-class' exclusively conjures images of older, white men. Indeed, the first autoethnographic collection analyzed for this article was composed almost entirely of the stories of white men. While further volumes presented a more diverse set of voices and some, such as Tokarczyk and Fay's (1993) volume on working-class women and Oldfield and Johnson's (2008) collection of narratives from queer professors of the working-class, focused exclusively on the intersections of class with an additional social identity, there is a continued need for greater diversity within the field of working-class studies. While many narratives do discuss the intersection of race, ethnicity, and class, a volume dedicated to this form of intersectionality would be a welcome addition to the canon of working-class autoethnographies and would provide a more accurate and nuanced picture of the American 'working-class,' a group in which white men are the minority (Zweig 2011).

Future Research Directions. While autoethnography remains an important and powerful tool for interrogating the experiences of working-class academics, there is a need for quantitative and longitudinal data on our educational and career trajectories. While these narratives taken together paint a powerful picture of the working-class academic, we remain less certain about the extent to which working-class academics persist in academia, the percentage who find work on the tenure-track, and the extent to which student loan debt affects professional outcomes, to name a few. The invisibility of class background as an important or relevant social marker is partly to blame for this omission, often requiring academics who wish to study these questions to collect their own data sets rather than relying on nationally representative data (Grimes & Morris 1997; Haney 2016; Warnock and Appel 2012). To better understand the ways in which class background affects academic trajectories, we must have access to better data. And access to better data requires that nationally representative surveys of students and the professoriate include questions about class background.

This brings me back to my original point. Class matters. Class is not a switch that is flipped once you graduate college or complete a graduate degree. Class, while malleable, imparts lasting and tangible effects on the upwardly mobile, those 'crossovers' and 'straddlers' who seek to enter a world that offers greater financial security. What I fear is that this already difficult journey has become next to impossible within the new academic climate of class exploitation. While academia was never friendly to the working-class, conditions are now downright hostile. In order to earn a degree working-class students mortgage their futures by taking on debt and those who seek to enter the storied world of academia are less and less likely to find secure and financially stable work. What I fear is that for many would-be working-class academics, education represents no longer a dubious pathway to upward mobility but a likely pathway to downward mobility and a lifetime of repaying the debt accrued only to subsist on poverty-level wages as an adjunct professor. I fear that the paradise we strangers once sought has been lost and that instead of labeling ourselves as academics *from* the working-class, we will continue

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[12] https://firstinourfamilies.org/about/

to face class exploitation within the academic realm as academics *of* the working- class. If our crucial voices remain absent or disempowered, new generations of working-class youth will lose access to the powerful and revelatory experience of seeing themselves and their struggles reflected on the academic page.

Author Bio

Deborah Warnock is Assistant Professor of Sociology at SUNY Cortland. Her research, which has appeared in *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* and *Journal of College Student Development*, focuses on access to, and experiences of, higher education for low-income, first-generation, and/or working-class students.

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