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'If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want to be Part of Your Revolution(s)': On being together in and outside of the academy

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Abstract

We have both, independently and with others, long been interested in collaboration within an institution that publicly supports such work whilst often working against it. Thus, in our daily working practices, we challenge (alone, with others and together) traditional definitions and myths of working, learning and being in higher education. In this article, through a focus on our relationship both in and outside of the academy, we critique and respond to the socio-political challenges of academic work. Through auto/biographical stories, we first show the general expectation on us (and others) to dance to 'the dominant societal tune' and second, focus on our experiences of working in a UK university. With reference to writers who have discussed spaces of slow scholarship and, in particular, care-full working and love, our central argument hinges on the significance of our friendship to our work in the neoliberal world. Our point is that practising platonic loving relationships, that comprise caring, creative and collaborative practices, offers a form of resistance. Such practices, we suggest, can enable alternative and powerful ways to dance (i.e. to work) that are positive and just as productive, if not more so.

Keywords The academy, collaboration, friendship, politics, creativity, love

First Thoughts

We have known each other for nearly 20 years. For the first 10 of these, we were academic colleagues crossing paths at the occasional meeting and seminar, respecting each other's work and liking what we saw of each other's practice and personality. Thus, following David Morgan (2009:5), our relationship was typical of acquaintanceship, *'characterised by a particular mix of intimacy and distance, although the intimacy is rarely very great and the distance rarely consequential'*. When Gayle left her full-time position at the University of Plymouth at the end of 2014 to pursue a freelance academic career alongside other projects and voluntary work, she was approached by Tracey to work as a mentor to a group of Medical Education colleagues, including Tracey herself, interested in social scientific methodology and pedagogy. Since then, our relationship – both professional AND personal – has grown, developed, and blossomed. We now work together on running methodological scholarship courses, conference organisation and conference presentations, publications, editing roles and research projects.

Officially, Gayle is mentor and Tracey mentee, although our relationship is much more fluid than this, and Gayle is as grateful to Tracey for academic support and inspiration as Tracey is to Gayle. There is always space for each of us to discuss our own separate intellectual endeavours and professional concerns. We share confidences about friends and family, chat about films, books, and food (a lot), and despair over the political challenges we all face. We motivate and support each other in terms of physical and mental wellbeing. Some of this we do in a physical face-to-face context, but since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, our regular online meet-ups have been significant to the wellbeing and productivity of each of us.

We agree that our collaborative working relationship and our friendship enrich the work we do alone and with others in that it gives us a safe space in which to speak up and to be vulnerable, which is not always possible and/or may be exploited elsewhere. We are each lucky enough to have positive (working) relationships with others, but the particular mix of personal and political, political and theoretical concerns that we share is unique. Thus, although in **all** our working relationships, we aim to develop 'care-full' rather than 'care-less' encounters (Rogers, 2017, Rogers and Tuckwell, 2016, Twinley and Letherby, 2022), we are grateful, not least, for the ease of communication between us and the unquestionable trust we have in each other.

This article emerges from auto/biographical discussions between us whilst working on a project and book (Letherby and Collett, forthcoming) concerned with the meaning of insults and the experience of being insulted. Our sharing of examples of personal insults, their impact, and how to challenge them led to further reflection on the management of our academic identities and the 'dances' we perform with colleagues, acquaintances, friends, and family.

In the pen-portrait individual introductions below, some of our own experiences of insults and of working and living in 'care-less' spaces are evident. Following our auto/biographical introductions, we tell our story of working and being together in and outside of the academy. We reflect on and challenge our experiences of 'care-lessness', suggesting that 'care-full' working and being is not only possible but (probably obviously) beneficial for all concerned.

Auto/Biographical Introductions

Tracey: Being a Pinball Academic

I grew up in a beautiful valley that I regard as one of the most special places in the world. On the hill to the right, facing the sea, was a clubhouse and about a hundred prefabricated holiday chalets frequented historically by Welsh mining families in the summer months. On the left was a handful of assorted dwellings, some no more than wooden huts, inhabited by us locals. My secondary

school, a two-mile walk away, was a lively hubbub of boys and girls, mainly working class: sons and daughters of local traders or children of 'incomers' whose parents had come to Cornwall mainly to work in the tourist industry.

My friends felt, to me, like another family: safe and great fun. However, during my final year of school, things changed. It was the mid-eighties. As was/is the case with many areas of rural deprivation, young people from my town (still) did not go on to further education but instead into relationships, starting their families young (for example, Frankenberg, 1996). My decision to go to further education and university was very much influenced by my mother, a sociologist specialising in gambling (Fisher, 1993). As a child, in the holidays, I would sometimes go with her to 'poly' and sit with her and her friends in the smoke-filled student union. It was exciting to be there; there seemed to be so many possibilities. Yet, at 16, when I became a Sociology student, I was cast increasingly by my peers as 'posh', a 'know it all', 'too good for us', 'studying fancy things'. Worse still, I was regarded with suspicion: a potential 'husband stealer' or 'slag'.

These claims about my identity left me confused. Like the pinball in my favourite amusement arcade machine, ricocheting against an assortment of solid bumpers, lights and targets, try as I might, it was hard to find acceptance when the opinions of others felt so entrenched and rigid. There was a hierarchy in the grown-up world of my hometown: people conferred status on others depending on their chosen pathway, drawing boundaries along the lines of gender. (For more on women and access to/experience of higher education, see Archer et al., 2003, Martin, 1991, Reay, 2003, Taylor, 2007. For a similar account of managing identity from the perspective of a working-class male, see Handley, 2022).

I studied for a PhD because of my mum and my little sister, but mainly because of my mum's friend Lynn (pseudonym). At different points in the 1990s, they all became chronically ill with fatigue and pain so severe that everyday life (school, work, parenting, maintaining friendships or family duties) ground to a halt to be replaced by, what seemed, an endless, housebound monotony (see Cooper, 1997, Collett, 2003 Ware, 1993).

After uni, I became Lynn's cleaner for a while. It was here that I witnessed in depth the reality of living with Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (ME/CFS). It was a 'triple whammy': first, the physical experience of a body wracked with incapacitating pain and tiredness, then the deep grief and loss experienced as a result of 'giving everything up'. Then third, as has been documented by disability theorists and sociologists specialising in non-legitimated or invisible conditions, the rejection of illness by family, friends and acquaintances (Cooper, 1997, Dickson et al., 2008, Murray and Turner, 2021, Ware, 1993). Family members felt that Lynn snubbed them when she didn't invite them for Christmas, her husband's colleagues suggested she was an unfit 'wife', and parents at the school gates gossiped that she was a 'bad parent'. Aspersions about Lynn's identity, dished out liberally by local folk, were matched by medical professionals: her GP told her to 'get a hobby' and that it was 'natural at her age to be a little depressed'. At the level of healthcare policy, ME/CFS was labelled predominantly a woman's syndrome to be treated with cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) alone': no further research required (Lloyd et al 1988). Lynn, like hundreds of thousands of others (Davenport et al 2019), fell through the gaps of a system that has no place for women with no observable pathological illness (see Collett, 2003, Freidson, 1970) and her experience rendered her (materially and spiritually) invisible (Charmaz, 1983, Kelly, 2021).

The experience of 'bumping up against the frameworks, narratives, meanings, assemblages, mental schemas of others' and falling between the gaps is, I realise, important with respect to my sense of who I am, in and out of the academy. (I recognise, of course, that this is the case for many others; indeed, I note the vast literature on race, class, gender, disability, intersectionality). My PhD exploring the moral career and embodied experience of ME/CFS led to working in a medical school as a Sociology teacher: my mission to help amplify marginalised voices. As noted by sociologists over the past 50 years, this is complicated work (Butler, 1969, Begun and Rieker, 1980, Chur-Hansen et al., 2008, Collett, 2022, Field 1988, Kendall et al 2018) I have come to realise

that it is important to understand that individuals working in Medicine are, themselves, often culturally ensnared by deeply embedded ideas associated with, for example: 'medical power and status', 'the hold of instrumental rationality' and 'the privileging of objective scientific reason' (Collett et al 2019,Oakley, 2000, Turner, 1995). At the same time, the profession of Medicine is battling with now deeply rooted historical forces of governmentality and creeping, relentless commercial interest (Harrison and Ahmad, 2000, Sheaff, 2017).

In medical education, my work honouring Lynn and many like her is made harder by 'the solid pillars of assumption' that I have bumped up against throughout my life. Made more noticeable by being in an interdisciplinary setting, narratives about who I am as an academic and the embodied responses that they engender have been a key feature of my world for many years. Some Sociology colleagues have suggested that I have 'sold out' and that I am a sociologist 'in' not 'of' Medicine (a 'handmaiden'). Others have warned that focussing too much on teaching in a university is 'career suicide' and that (as stated above) 'those that can't (research) teach'. Simultaneously, I have been cast (infantilised) by some medical educators as having imposter syndrome and unable to 'let go of my parent discipline'. Some colleagues have branded me a 'pseudo-scientist', and to practitioners and students of Medicine, I am the person 'who teaches the soft and fluffy stuff': 'nice', not 'need' to know (Litva and Peters, 2009). Conversely, when new institutional initiatives occur (for example, related to equality, diversity and inclusion), the sentiment has been, 'Why haven't you sorted this out yet'?

At the same time, how I present myself also continues to be mediated by fixed assumptions/words/tropes of the groups that I encounter externally. In addition to constantly flipping my identity so that I fit the varying contexts of my workplace, I do the same with friends (I take the jokes, make them back, agree politely and choose my battles). For example, I speak in generic terms about 'working at the college or teaching' and engage in banter about when I'm going to get a proper job or 'do something less dull'. At family gatherings, in conversations about social issues, I find my contribution is better made subtly, presenting ideas for example, as if they originated from someone else at the table. (Whereas my brother will start his sentences with 'to be honest with you ….' or 'I fail to see how …', I use sentence cues such as 'I wonder if …' and ' I really like that point…'). As I read this back, it sounds as if I am a little self-pitying or 'holier than thou', but my point is that I find myself presenting a version of myself that I think will retain my integrity but be acceptable to others. (Maybe I should just 'man up')!

I go back to my childhood valley every now and then to walk the dog. It is still beautiful but boarded up and awaiting new development. I have often questioned whether others find academic life to be such a **hustle**. Despite my privilege, it feels as if my own professional narrative has had few opportunities to emerge: my (sociological) voice is often rendered silent. This feels both personal (in terms of, for example, validation) and political, a living example of how knowledge is perpetuated and how 'whose truth matters'. Yet, is this simply a case of 'typical life' where working out how to fit in is an inevitable part of the journey? Is my experience particular to British culture, which has such a strong emphasis on systems of classification?

Recently, things have started coming together. I have realised that I have social capital on account of my age and experience; moreover, I have consciously aligned myself more with the discipline of Sociology and have been fortunate to receive support from an experienced mentor (Gayle). I have come to realise that the stuff of my experience – the identity work that I do and, in particular, the sense of invisibility, of existing 'in the spaces in between' 'is' Sociology. The interrogation of in-groups and out-groups, formations, allegiances, and the edge work and resistance that takes place has become my focus, and this is informing my approach to Medical Education. I am excited by theoretical work in this area, and ironically, in many ways, with our insults work in particular, I feel part of a group of scholars: a new sense of direction and, ultimately, a sense of belonging.

Gayle: 34 years of doing things (a little) differently

I came to higher education as a mature student aged 28, following ten years of training and working as a nursery nurse. It was an experience of loss, a miscarriage at 16 weeks, of my, to my knowledge, only pregnancy, only baby, that led me to an A Level Sociology evening class through to an undergraduate degree, a PhD and 34 years of work as teacher, researcher, writer, Head of Department, Research Institute Director, Reader, Professor, mentor, external examiner, free-lance consultant and writing workshop facilitator. I have written previously about my and others' experience of working and learning in HE (e.g. Letherby, 2015a, Letherby and Shiels, 2001, Letherby and Stenhouse, 2013, Ramsay and Letherby, 2006, Twinley and Letherby, 2022) and continue here to reflect on how doing things (a little) differently has impacted on my status and sense of self both in and out of work.

Loss has influenced my sociological work, and I believe that Sociology has affected how I do grief (in addition to my miscarriage and subsequent biological childlessness, my father, Ron, died in 1979 when I was 20, my second husband, John, in 2010 and my mother, Dorothy (who supported me through all the other losses and many other challenges) in 2012 (see Letherby, 2015b). My research interests are eclectic, but my own experience of loss and as a nonmother, and also someone who is cared for and who cares, is significant in terms of my research and writing concerns and also fundamental to my commitment to a Sociology that at least tries to make a difference.

From the beginning, my approach was auto/biographical, and indeed, I argue that '…all writing is in some ways auto/biography in that all texts bear traces of the author and are to some extent personal statements… within which the writer works from the self to the other and back again' (Letherby 2015b: 130). From the start, I was warned about and warned off auto/biography. Some colleagues were concerned I might face criticism, challenge, even a lack of academic advancement. Sure enough, others accused me of being 'not academic' and 'self-indulgent'. I cannot, of course, know what my career and academic experience would have been like if I had not chosen this approach, this path, but I do not believe that my choices have held me back, neither in terms of opportunity nor positive relationships made, although some critique continues. I remain forever grateful to others whose methodological and substantive work influenced and inspired my own and humbled by those who say that my work has influenced theirs. More recently, I have turned to writing sociologically informed fiction and memoirs (for audiences outside, as well as within academia). My argument here is that through these types of writings, we can express our auto/biographical, sociological, emotional and political imaginations, drawing on our own and on respondents/others' experiences (e.g. Douglas and Carless, 2013, Davidson and Letherby, 2020, Frank, 2020, Letherby, 2015b, Letherby, 2024a, Watson, 2016). This way of working, of writing, of academic storytelling explicitly blurs the boundaries of 'fact' and 'fiction'. It also has implications for the ways in which we define and attempt to enact, engage and impact within, besides and beyond the academy. Furthermore, for me, at least, such writings are significant in terms of my emotional wellbeing as a writer, and I hope similarly for the reader. Yet again, the reception has been mixed. Outside of the academy, I have been warmed by comments that some of my memoir and fiction writings (on topics ranging from non/motherhood to the experience of living through a pandemic, from food poverty to dying and the aftermath of death and more…) hold meaning for others. At work, I have received positive affirmation for my different writings from some, and I am now regularly asked to deliver 'Creative Writing for Academics' events. However, I have also been instructed to remove short pieces of fiction from academic pieces as they 'don't relate to your argument', and I have been asked (pointedly, I think, but maybe I'm being over-sensitive?) how I avoid 'over-romanticisation' when producing such pieces. Add to all this, I very often feel that both in and out of the academy, I am still challenging many of the stereotypes of both mothers' and nonmothers' experience, status and identity that I was challenging in 1990 when, for me, it all, academically, began. As I wrote a couple of years ago:

> A few months after my mum, Dorothy, died in late January 2012, I spent the afternoon with a long-time friend. After talking about my mum and the pain of this loss for me, we returned to a subject much discussed previously [my miscarriage and subsequent biological childlessness]. 'I'd have thought you'd be over that by now', my friend said. I know she did not mean to be unkind, but a decade on I feel as hurt by her comments as I was when she made them. I have written many times before about the significance of misunderstanding and exclusion in the lives of those who, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, do not mother (or father) children. Misunderstandings, not least because of the simplistic description of people without children as either pitiable (involuntary) or selfish (voluntary) and exclusion from conversation and activities, groups and gatherings…. Now, given my age – I'm 63 - 'How many children have you got?' is accompanied by 'Have you any grandchildren yet?' in exchanges with new acquaintances. I used to, when it felt polite to do so, physically move away from chats focusing on the concerns about and achievements of children at conferences and parties. Now, I just stay quiet or turn off my Zoom camera when colleagues compare grandchildren's ages or when in more politically focused meetings, participants proudly claim that what they do they do for their descendants. It's not that I don't have stories to tell, and with friends I'm close to, I talk fondly of the children I am blessed to have in my life, but, especially in casual company, my right to do so feels less worthy than those with biological claims… 'I'd have thought you'd be over that by now.' | ABCtales]

Throughout it all, I have been critical of those who argue that academics need a better work/life balance. I do not disagree with the view that we sometimes, often, work too hard and too long. No, rather my issue is with the term work/life, for is not work life, and a significant part of it, perhaps especially when our research, our concerns, relate to our own experiences and values? Despite all of this, outside of the academy, I often play down my achievements and accomplishments. Even at work, I sometimes find it hard to promote myself in a way that I always (I hope) encourage others to do. Why, I wonder? I don't think I feel, as others have suggested, an 'imposter' in higher education, for I have studied and worked hard and believe that my contribution is as valuable as anyone else's. Although, as the above account suggests, I do think that sometimes my approach (and I would add my employment in UK universities that prior to 1992 were classified as polytechnics and therefore of lesser status) has, on occasion, led to prejudice, if not discrimination. Thus, I have always fought and will continue to do so for recognition of the work that I, and similar others, do. However, I have always felt a tad uncomfortable around family, friends, and voluntary work colleagues when the conversation turns to paid occupation. Ironic, really, given that I still regularly experience exclusion (as highlighted above), not necessarily meant but often felt, when the conversation turns to children and grandchildren, that I do not feel able to boast at least a little about my academic status. I know that my gender and my class of origin likely have something to do with my reticence in that I do not want to be seen as getting 'above' myself. I'm also, again, ironic, given my keenness to be heard at work, rather shy in social circles. So, to add to the mixture of pleasure and pain my academic work brings is the complex relationship I have with my own personal/public persona.

It is perhaps not surprising then that although I've had a Twitter (X) account since 2013, which I set up mainly to engage with #AcademicTwitter, it was not until the middle of 2021 that I 'came out' as both doctor and professor. My bio now includes:

Prof Gayle Letherby
@gletherby
Sociologist, PhD, feminist….

My decision to 'own' my doctorate and my academic titles was made after I read a tweet from another woman, who I admire, noting how important it was for women to publicly claim such given continued #EverydaySexism both on and offline. Despite some nervousness, I was

overwhelmed by the support I received from the online community with people congratulating me, both for the titles themselves and for the claiming of them, and others saying what an inspiration I am to them and to their daughters. But, sure enough, there were have some less generous responses. Here are just a couple of examples from people who disagreed with my political position and opinions:

> 'And you're a professor, well I guess that fits.'
>
> 'She's a Sociology professor, she's used to wasting time.'
>
> 'Do some research on Marxism.' [particularly 'amusing' given my discipline]

The most interesting critiques, though, were the (very) few people who accused me of lying, exemplified by the following response:

> 'I don't know the background but it sounds to me like someone claiming a qualification they wish they had.'

How wonderful, though, that I did not have to reply to comments such as this as others did so for me, including the following two:

> 'Gayle has worked hard for her title.'
>
> 'Just google her, for God's sake.'

Like Elaine Campbell (2017), I believe that if we do not write about our experience of insults through trolling then it and our story of it remains hidden. Interestingly, for readers here, Campbell's own experience of extensive abuse was in response to her online discussion of working auto/biographically. My experience, as indicated here, was more mixed. Overall, I am acutely aware of the privilege I have, not least in having time and monetary resources to research and write about things that are as important to others who do not have the same as they are to me. My overwhelming feeling then, despite the messiness of managing my multiple identities and the intellectual and emotional work this involves, is gratitude.

Life IN and OUT of Higher Education

We move now to our experience – alone and together – of working in and challenging the neoliberal academy.

Since the 1980s, the rapid global neo-liberalisation (the marketisation) of higher education (Lynch, 2006, Naidoo and Williams, 2015, Sanders Mc-Donagh and Davis, 2018) has seen the glorification of students as consumers (and arguably staff as service providers). In bits and bytes, quantification has colonised every part of university practice, (re)creating normalised and ideological ways of thinking, doing and being. 'Quality assurance' is the dominant regulatory tool in the management of higher education. Psychometric approaches underpin much of the current teaching and learning practice and, increasingly, the theoretical literature. 'Efficiency' savings have led to automated processes in the daily work of university employees and our teaching and research performance is measured using metrics. As Mark Erickson et al. (2020) have argued, 'audit culture' has led to academics being one of the most surveilled groups in history.

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Andrew Sparkes (2012:1028) argues that academics find themselves entangled in 'metric assemblages'; that is, 'dataistic regimes of performativity' whereby complex social environments and the people within them become machine-readable and reduced to a score. Our working lives have become 'binary coded': University League Tables and Student Satisfaction Surveys such as the UK National Student Survey (NSS) have grown in significance. In Tracey's field of work (Medical Education), essays are rare because, as assessment tools, they are seen as 'subjective', and knowledge is seen as best tested via multiple choice, single best or short answer exam questions. Elaborate work tariffs are utilised to ensure that lecturers are contributing to all areas of university life; students can rate their professors via 'rate my professor dotcom'. Staff training in mental health, personal wellbeing and workplace safety is carried out online, and knowledge of these is tested via multiple-choice quizzes.

Sparkes (2021) maintains that auditing is not a neutral gaze; rather, it leads to new ways of thinking, doing and being in the academy. Further, he suggests that:

> *… the deep affective somatic and spiritual crises that many academics are suffering from … threatens to overwhelm them as they are propelled towards burn out or something worse. ... [Indeed] for some, making a spectacle of oneself (that is utilising metrics as a guide to promote oneself) provides an opportunity to be successful in the research marketplace, while for others … the psychosocial costs of doing so are high leading to inner conflicts of authenticity and self worth* (Sparkes, 2021: 1028).

Drawing on the work of others (e.g. Jones, 2018, Jubas and Siebal, 2016, Moriarty, 2019, Tree 2018), Sparkes contributes to the development of a set of resistance strategies designed to protect and support academics. Broadly, he proposes adopting a spatial perspective which:

> *… not only sharpens our awareness of provisional spatiotemporal constellations that are in process, alive, and unstable but also how they can be contested by the creative use of counter-spacing as a form of resistance.* (Sparkes, 2021: 1036).

Examples centre on the creation by academics of alternative spaces to slow down thinking and doing and encourage creativity.

Bringing Care into Our Spaces of Work

In all **our** working relationships, we aim to develop what Chrissie Rogers calls 'care-full' rather than 'care-less' encounters, not least because, as Michelle Addison (2017: 14) suggests:

> *. . . entering a space that has dominating structured feeling rules which are different to our own embodied feeling rules obliges us to manage and display our feelings, perhaps in uncomfortable and unfamiliar ways.*

Addison here is reflecting on Arlie Russell Hochschild's (1983[2003]) concepts of emotional management and emotional labour, which is relevant in terms of any discussion of **our**-selves with reference to emotional authenticity.

Rebecca Twinley and Gayle Letherby's edited 2022 book - *The Doctoral Journey as an Emotional, Embodied, Political Experience* – emerged from a paper presented at a British Sociological Association, Auto/Biography Study Group conference. The volume presents a challenge to traditional educational approaches that dictate that the supervisor-supervisee relationship must be value-neutral and objective, in much the same way that we have been instructed to intellectually detach when understanding reality. The auto/biographical accounts included in the book tell stories of cooperation, collective working and care, managing institutional rules and regulations, ethical working, and maintaining and developing human relationships. They also highlight the personal, as well as the academic, self of students, supervisors, and examiners, and they show how our differences and similarities impact our individual and joint experiences. One early chapter concerning the challenges and pleasures of multi-disciplinary working was written by Tracey (Collett, 2022).

Others, including many feminists, have written about the politics of care, relationality and social justice within the academy. For example, Monika Rogowska-Stangret (2021: 13) argues for care as a methodology where *'[c]are thus conceptualised is a way to reimagine research methodologies and practices for higher education pedagogies so that they could inspire, help and provide academic communities to face the challenges of "our today"'.* Similarly, Chrissie Rogers (2022: 119) argues for a care ethics model within HE that pays attention to emotional, practical, and socio-political issues. In a similar vein, Adrian Kelly (2015: 93) proposes a *'pedagogy of intimacy'* as an analytical space that values both skill **and** care. Over the last decade, a number of scholars have engaged with the concept of 'slow scholarship' (including slow research and slow pedagogy) as a response to corporate spaces. Slow scholarship highlights the ways in which the neoliberal approach within academia benefits the system rather than the people within it, and as Emilie Dionne (2021: 92) suggests:

> *… the slow scholarship movement aims to create and enact sustainable, positive, creative and liveable scholarship as well as space for it where one can come, join, live, thrive and strive with attention to uniqueness and differences. Slow scholarship aims to encompass dimensions of research such as slow science, but also to teach responsibility and philosophy, pedagogy and administrative tasks as well as to permeate into other spheres of one's life (e.g. relationships, family life, exercise, etc.)…. Ultimately slow scholarship also aims to rekindle "people-level" ways of knowing, being and becoming in "sustainable" ways; it also articulates itself as a micro-practice/politics, operating as sublevels …hardly perceptible at times but transgressive and subversive….*

We each have examples of how, at times, our working practices have been other than slow.

Gayle: *For six or so years bridging the 20th/21st centuries when I was working at Coventry University as deputy head of school (and acting head for more than a year) and deputy director of a research centre. I was living in Staffordshire) at the time with my husband John but would spend the working week in Coventry. At least four days a week (it was sometimes a bit later on Monday), I would be at my desk between 7-7.30 am and not leave the building until gone 9 pm at night. At 10 pm each night, the building automatically locked itself, and on one occasion, I had to call the security guards to let me out. On leaving Coventry and moving to the University of Plymouth, I made the decision to improve my work-home life balance: to not regularly work in the evenings, to have* ***whole*** *weekends off and so on, and mostly I kept to this. In my roles in Plymouth (including another period as acting head of school), I would tell people my story in an effort to encourage them to take better care of themselves. John's death in 2010 reminded me very starkly that I was now working against the*

expected norm. I took only two weeks off but on my return, was greeted with an email from a junior colleague saying that she was about to report me to the Vice Chancellor as I was the only HoS who had not completed a particular report and a message from a Masters' student anxious because I had not been available for a fortnight (it was several months away from her completion date). Over the next couple of weeks, the start of many emails about student concerns, workload issues and the like began, 'I'm sorry for your loss… but'. Soon, even these brief and what felt to me like perfunctory words were left off any communications.

Tracey: *Expanding on my auto/biographical introduction (above) and my discussion in Collett (2022), I am a Sociology lecturer in a Medical School. As noted, sociologists in' Medicine' are often seen to lose their academic integrity as medicine is a more powerful institution. This assumption is most vociferously illustrated in the popular idea of sociologists in Medicine as 'handmaidens'. With this in mind, in my early days of working in the Medical School, many colleagues in Sociology told me, 'get out when you can, if you can'.*

While I detest the term 'handmaidens', I have found that it resonates with me. Governed by the neoliberal logic of the higher education system and by the biomedical perspective of the profession of Medicine. I feel my double bind takes place in the workplace. Alongside the regular labour of organising sessions, responding to students, answering emails, researching, etc., my day job requires a lot of justification work - convincing students and a wide range of colleagues that Sociology, Social Science and Anthropological research and thinking are crucial to good medical practice rather than soft fluffy and nice, as opposed to need to know. This work comprises constant fighting for and defending curriculum space; it involves arguing my case with colleagues, bending to different ideas, and accommodating others' requirements into the curriculum. It is tiring and requires constant vigilance.

The Affordances of Working Together in a Care-Less Space: Politics, Creativity and Joy

In working together, we not only encourage each other to find alternative ways of being and doing but also appreciate and embrace the permeation of our personal, political, and professional lives. In practice, all our working encounters include some discussion of our personal lives and concerns, and all our social encounters include at least a small discussion of what's happening at work at the moment. We meet once or twice a week (often for a few hours) to work together. Often, this takes place via Zoom, and we both feel it is a treat to meet in person. On some of these physically in-person occasions, we manage, in between **intense** work discussions, to fit in a quick whizz around the town to check out the 'sales'.

Two years ago, after some gentle nagging from a friend who was benefiting from the experience, Gayle signed up with a Personal Trainer close to home. For the first few sessions, she had to make herself go, but soon, it became one of the most enjoyable parts of her week. Inevitably, Gayle talked with Tracey about what she was doing and how much better it was making her feel. Soon, Tracey decided she would like to try something similar and signed up with a Personal Trainer close to her (we live 55 miles apart). Following this, whenever we met online or physically face-to-face (and in text and WhatsApp communications), we would swap stories of our development. The 'theory' of it all interested us too; not only the impact of the activity on how we felt mentally but also how much we valued the fact that during training the control, the responsibility, of what we were doing, belonged to someone else. The fact, too, that for that time, the focus was solely on us, and our needs were precious indeed. We wrote the first draft of this paper (for presentation at the 2022 Auto/Biography Summer Conference in Gayle's caravan in Coverack a place special to her as both her parents are buried there) and began each morning with 10 minutes of joint stretching, weight and band work and planks. We also managed to fit in a sea swim each day. We

engaged in a similar set of activities (minus the swim) each morning whilst in Oxford at the conference. This joint interest and activity continue, and we now share the same Personal Trainer with whom Tracey mostly works from a distance. In the studio together this summer, we laughed (at both the joke and the value in the message) when Andrew said, 'Couples who train together stay together'.

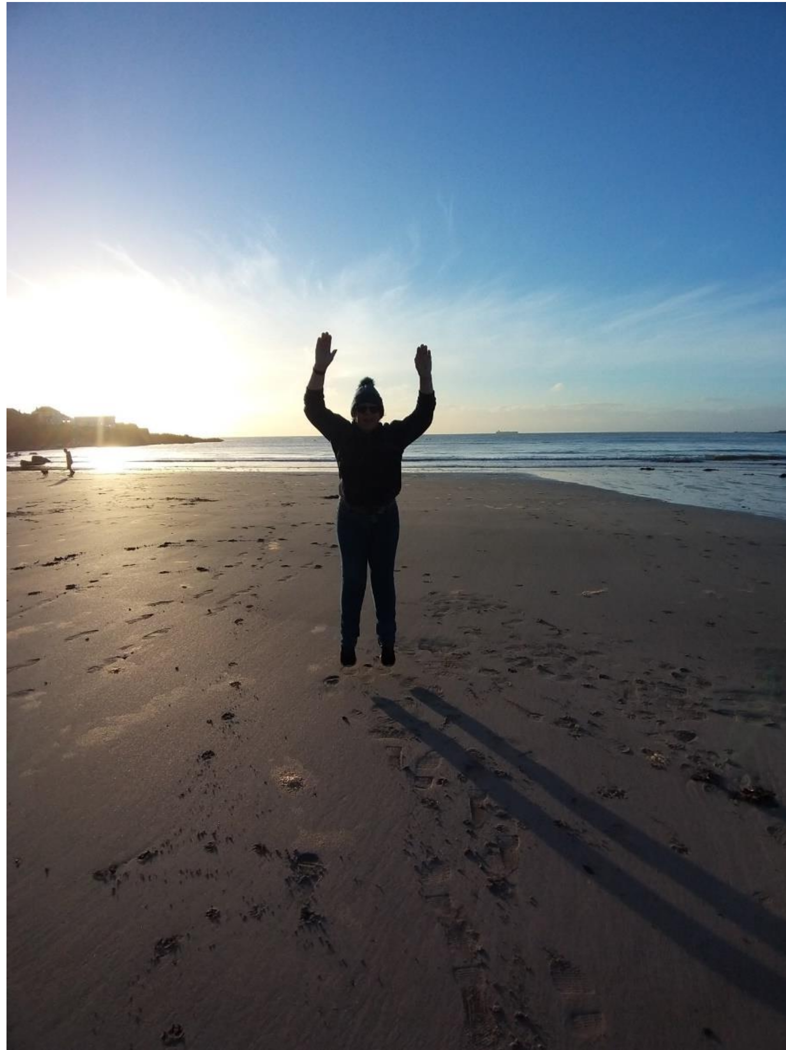

Figure 1: Gayle doing star jumps on Coverack beach

Julie Parsons (2018) argues that food and commensality (eating together) are important for community and friendship. We agree, so why not bring this into our working lives? We have found that most of our meetings involve eating together at some point and/or discussing food. Prior to Covid-19 we would regularly go out in Plymouth for lunch or an evening meal. But the eating thing really came into its own on Zoom when, after about an hour or so of working, one of us would pipe up – *'Coffee break – let's put the kettle on, see you in 5?'* This soon transformed into lunch breaks, too. Which then became – *'what are you having?'* Gayle knows about Tracey's penchant for a cheese and onion toasty, and Tracey has learnt from Gayle about the joys of a scrambled egg buttie (*'not a sandwich Trace, a buttie').* Our meetings often end with a ceremony of – *'What you having for dinner?'* (now simply – *'What you having?'*). Last year, we began a series of writing retreats in Gayle's caravan – on route, we stop at Sainsbury's for a shop up: *'Okay, what shall we have tonight – salad, wholemeal bread, what about some beer, alcoholic or not?'* We see it as a joint responsibility to ensure we get lots of points on Gayle's nectar card, which originally

belonged to her mum. Food is a way of coming down from work for a bit, of checking in that we are okay, of generating new meanings and links, which in turn feed into the creative processes of work.

As must be clear, it is not only at work that our relationship is significant. As further evidence of this, we now share some shared experiences of political engagement and angst. Following this, we include some examples of 'care-full', creative working practices which we think were influenced in part by our joint reflection on such activity within political settings.

The title of this article makes reference to a summary of a passage from Emma Goldman's 1914 essay *Marriage and love in anarchism*. Goldman was an American political activist and writer who played a pivotal role in the development of anarchist political philosophy in the early 20th century. Goldman is often quoted as saying, *"If I can't dance, I don't want to be in your revolution"* (Padilla 2022: online). This is actually (a very useful) but broad approximation of her discussion of the relationship between love and social change. A topic of interest to us both, something we discuss often, and an issue that Gayle is exploring elsewhere (e.g. 2022, 2024a, 2024b).

Briefly, Goldman argues that in society marriage and love are seen as synonymous (thus, love has been trapped or captured at a great disservice to love itself and humankind). For Goldman, love is:

> *… a force [it is] … the strongest and deepest element in all life, the harbinger of hope, of joy, of ecstasy, the defier of all laws, of all conventions… the freest, the most powerful moulder of human destiny* (Goldman,1914: online).

Building on this, we suggest that the places we work (and live in), the communities we are part of, and the processes we are employed to abide by are purposefully clinical and devoid of love and joy if we refuse to challenge – in our words and our practice - the academy (and society more broadly) as a neoliberal, marketised institution.

Connecting the concept of love to considerations of politics and positive social change, Goldman (1914: online) maintains that:

> *… some day, men and women will rise, they will reach the mountain peak, they will meet big and strong and free, ready to receive, to partake, and to bask in the golden rays of love. … What fancy, what imagination, what poetic genius can foresee even approximately the potentialities of such a force in the life of men and women*.

More recently, David Graeber (2013: online) suggests:

> *The human imagination stubbornly refuses to die. And the moment any significant number of people simultaneously shake off the shackles that have been placed on that collective imagination, even our most deeply inculcated assumptions about what is and what is not politically possible have been known to crumble overnight.*

Shared political values are another thing that unites us. Between 2016 and 2019, a commitment to working for a Jeremy Corbyn-led Labour Government was something we were both actively engaged in, through on and off-line activism and attendance at Labour Party events and conferences. As an aside, we note that this activity directly led to our 'insults' work both in terms of our observations of what was happening to others and, at times, the responses we received when we made **our** politics clear.

One of the criticisms of Corbyn-led Labour was the over-focus (as some saw it) on creativity (including music, poetry and comedy events often accompanied by the hashtag #StandUpForCorbyn). And yet, even those who dismissed this as distraction from real political

concerns attempted to copy it. Enter 'Tory Glastonbury' with Conservative MP George Freeman asking, 'Why is it the left that has all the fun in politics? The event - *The Big Tent Ideas Festival* - took place in 2017 and was agreed by all, including the main organiser, to be a flop with 't*oo many men and not enough music*'.

Annette Blum (2017: online), writing about the relationship between creativity and activism, argues:

> *The intersection of arts and political activism are two fields defined by a shared focus of creating engagement that shifts boundaries, changes relationships and creates new paradigms. Both activist and artist work in the challenges of the unknown and the unpredictable, never truly able to determine the outcome and forever questioning if there is more to be done.*

She adds:

> *… the practice of understanding the importance of our own creative engagement is a source of potential change on its own, and a space where valuable insight can be found through reflection and sharing.*

Such activity, and the (political) discussion of it, is not new. For example, during the movement for abolition, sewing circles served as a place for women to exchange ideas and talk about political work and during WW1 (for example), coded messages were knitted into socks and sent to men at the front (Letherby, 2020).

Impressed by such endeavours over the last number of years, we have each embraced creative approaches to teaching and learning and to research as part of our commitment to a *'Public Sociology'* (Burawoy, 2005) that at least attempts to make a difference both in and outside of the academy. This includes the use of fiction and memoir within scholarly writing and the use of collage as a mentoring and research team-building exercise and a medium for learning with students.

Examples of our own creative outputs include Tracey's *Teaching Coat* and Gayle's *Haunted Landscape*s video (2024b). Based on Parker Palmer's book *The Courage to Teach* (2017) and inspired by Tiffany Poirier (2013), Tracey and colleagues' *Teaching Coat* project involved physically (through the throwing around of paint) expressing their feelings about medical school life. For the past 14 years, much of Gayle's writing has been aimed at non-academic audiences (for some examples see gletherby | ABCtales), some of which later becomes included within academic pieces.

Figure 2: Tracey in her Teaching Coat

Relevant here, too, is the work we do together, one example being a paper we delivered in July 2023 at the International Conference of Autoethnography. *''Can't you take a joke?': reflecting on insults as the highest OR lowest form of wit'* was written and presented as a comedic script, incorporating dialogue, poetry and reference to song. We wore matching '*I'm with Stupid'* t-shirts and displayed a photograph of us drinking tea in bed together in an attempt to emulate the 20th-century British comedians Eric Morecambe and Ernie Wise.

Figure 3: Doing our 'Eric and Ernie'

By way of a conclusion: Celebrating new beginnings with continuing resistance

Our aim has been to make clear how our relationship has opened up new ways of working and new ways of being for both of us. Furthermore, and in conclusion (at least for now), it's worth adding how working together encourages us to challenge and resist again and again and again. Others have written about how a focus on an ethics of care and relatedly slow scholarship may be co-opted by the academy, as slow scholarship does not necessarily mean less scholarship, and self/collaborative care may release the institution from its own duty of care. Alternatively, it is suggested these practices may be '*too slow*' or too narrow *'to effectively and promisingly counter the neo-liberal forces of advanced capitalism'* (Dionne, 2021: 92). Furthermore, as Tracey (in progress) is exploring elsewhere, without constant critical self-reflection this approach can (sadly) be embraced by some for a period of time before returning to default traditional, expected and largely accepted, models of working practice.

In preparing our first drafts of this piece, we read other works arguing for similar, with related and different examples of stress and pleasure, and we were struck by the complex and jargonistic way in which some scholars write of care, relationality and slowness. We are reminded of the words of Audre Lorde (1984: online):

> *For **the master's tools** will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.*

Despite all of this, we believe that positive collaboration and creativity, and when we are especially lucky, loving working relationships, add to one's, certainly, personal, political and professional lives. As Lynne Segal (2017), in *Radical Happiness: moments of collective joy,* writes:

> *…the potential for the unleashing of collective action in almost any form, and along with that the moments of shared joy, collective energies easily foster, are always reappearing on the social horizon. This is why breaking down distances between people remains possible, at least some of the time, when we are working together for happier futures.*

Like bell hooks (2001), we have found it difficult to locate much public (or social scientific) discussion of love beyond the 'fairy-tale, love heart' version. Goldman (1914) is an exception of course. Sociologists, for example, talk about sex and sexuality and about negative as well as positive aspects of 'being in love', including unhappiness, violence, and death even, but it is harder to find much on love beyond that between sexual intimates and couples. Julia Carter (2013: online) begins her short article '*The Sociology of Love'* by writing:

> *Love is interesting sociologically for so many reasons. To start with, just the one word can represent so many different meanings and understandings: sexual love, intimate love, companionate love, romantic love, parental love, friendship love, inter-species love, love for places, belongings, views. It is a word that is used prolifically to mean so much, which means it is incredibly difficult to define and study.*

But after this promising start, Carter's focus returns to 'couple love'. We hope that this paper, that this sharing of our story(ies), demonstrates one form of resistance to traditional ways of working within the academy, with a focus on care **and** on love, is not only personally enriching but also professionally and intellectually productive. That we encourage and support each other in our work together and apart is an important aspect of this. So, too, is the joy we experience in being together and in working in ways that counter more traditional and noisy agendas. Two recent examples:

- In June 2024, we organised and facilitated an event for the South West Regional Medical Sociology Group. During the two days of *Developing Creative Research Practices* with ill/health (care) as the focus, we 'played' and encouraged others to play with a number of creative approaches (including collage, world-café discussion, music and storytelling) in order to explore new perspectives, challenge existing assumptions, embrace uncertainty and through curiosity and collaboration to explore new and different ways of doing and knowing.

- In August 2024, we spent two days together in Gayle's hometown. We met mid-morning on the first day, ate a late breakfast, and then walked into town. For several hours, we wandered through the shops (buying a few items along the way), stopping for a 0% lager towards the end of the afternoon. The evening was spent sea-swimming and eating supper with another friend. We started our second day training together at Foxcoat Studio, Personal Training & Martial Arts in Penryn | Foxcoat with our Personal Trainer, Andrew Clarkson, followed by another swim. Our last four hours together were spent writing down our collaborative working plans for the coming academic year, a task made much easier by the fact that we had spent a lot of our time together discussing our joint (and individual) 2023-2024 achievements and our 2024-2025 ambitions.

What these examples show, we suggest, is the possibility of working positively and productively outside of the expected norm. Such ways of working involve attention to and celebration of care and creativity. As such, the metaphor of a 'dance' is politically relevant yet again. Our dance together involves trust and fluidity, much practice and adaptation. We do not always get it right. We have occasionally taken a wrong step or stood on the others' toes. But we work hard at the dance, at the work, and in return, the pleasure it gives is beyond what either of us ever imagined our relationship could provide when we first met at a departmental seminar in 2005.

BRITISH SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

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Gayle Letherby: I am a Visiting Professor of Sociology at the Universities of Plymouth, Greenwich and Bath (specifically here in the Centre of Death and Society (CDAS)). Alongside substantive interests in the meanings of love; reproductive and non/parental identities; gender, health and wellbeing; loss and bereavement; travel and transport mobility; insults, solitude; and sports development I have always been fascinated by research methodology, including auto/biographical, feminist and creative practices. For the last 15 years I have written fiction and memoir for non-academic audiences and also embed similar within academic work. I facilitate creative writing workshops both within and outside of the academy www.gayle-letherby.co.uk.