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## Braided Stories of Ghostly Disappointments and Dissonances Encountered in Formations of Gender, Class and Age

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### Abstract

This article, based on a joint presentation to the 2024 BSA Auto/biography Study Group summer conference, is a response to the invitation to address the themes of 'disappointment' and dissonance'. In exploring our experiences of these in discussion with each other and in the initial writings we exchanged, the concepts of gender, class and ageing began to emerge – the last of these perhaps due to the fact that although we range in ages from our fifties to our seventies, we have each reached a stage in life when it is not uncommon to engage in evaluation of what has gone before and reflection on what might still be to come. In this interwoven text, our three voices are braided together as we explore, examine and confront the disappointments inherent in that powerful and pervasive notion of a *grand narrative*. A narrative often positioned as an ever-onward and upward trajectory, devoid of diversions, en route to the pinnacle we stand on, as the *hero of our own story*. A 'masculinist' narrative that doesn't fit any of us. In this *braiding*, we juxtapose our voices and our narratives, rippling across each others' identities, experiences, disappointments and dissonances, reaching back into the past, examining the present and speculating about the future in order to explore formations and representations of class, gender and age. Our voices are presented both individually and collectively.

**Keywords:** Collaborative autoethnography; gender; class; age

## Introduction

This article, based on a joint presentation by two white heterosexual women (Jackie Goode and Jan Bradford) and one white heterosexual man (Mark Price) to the 2024 BSA Auto/biography Study Group summer conference, is a reflexive response to the invitation to address the themes of ‘disappointment’ and ‘dissonance’. In exploring our experiences of these in relation to identity formation, discourses of *gender*, cultural experiences of *class*, and generational aspects of *age/ing* emerged.

With Byrne (2006:14), we take identities to be ‘discursive constructions, never complete and always in production’ and agree with her that ‘examination of processes of identification require an understanding of both how subject positions are constructed (including through racialised, classed and gendered discourses) and how individuals come to occupy those subject positions’. While “occupying” subject positions, we “perform” our identities. Butler (1993:2) defines performativity not as ‘that reiterative act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names, but rather, as that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains’. Through performativity, then, subjects repeatedly re-enact the discourses through which they are constructed.

It follows that we three majority ethnic subjects cannot but re-enact discourses of whiteness. While we might each, with adult hindsight, be able to identify moments growing up when our whiteness was thrown into relief, it has been in our adult lives that we have studied and come to understand how ethnicity intersects with class and gender (see Goode, 2019); how concepts of “race” can operate in situ (e.g. Lumsden, Goode and Black, 2019); and to recognise white privilege. The fact that this recognition occurred in adulthood (as opposed to experientially “knowing ourselves” as white and privileged in childhood/adolescence) may explain why the early memories of experiences of disappointments and dissonances that emerged here as significant for identity formation relate to formations of *gender* and *class*. We acknowledge, however, that our reflections arise from the subject positions of three (older) white subjects, “performing whiteness” more or less consciously at different periods of our lives.

The emergence of *age/ing* in our reflections is perhaps due to having reached transitional points in life – points when it is not uncommon to engage in evaluation of what has gone before and reflection on what might be still to come. Jackie officially retired over ten years ago from a 20-year career as a full-time researcher and has been in the process of “leaving academia” ever since; despite approaching eligibility for retirement, Mark had recently left the university he had worked at for the previous 21 years and taken up a post at a different university; and Jan had recently been awarded her doctorate at the same time as finding herself with an “empty nest” as her adult children left home. Points in life such as these prompt reflections on identity-related questions such as who we have been, how we got here, who we will become now, etc.

McAdams (1993) suggests that in our later years, some of us ... ‘will suspend the making of myth and begin to take stock of what we have made’ (1993:14). This “taking stock” may involve challenging or re-assessing some of the “myths” that have shaped us or, as Hockey (2008:14) suggests, ‘finding similarities and differences between different representations of the self - whether encountered through memorabilia and photographs or through revisiting long-lost relationships ... or old “haunts”’ – a word that in itself, she observes, suggests ‘some dislocation between me and my shadow self’. This paper traces our engagement with this stock-taking process in relation to gendered, classed and age-related formations of identity and its dislocations, bringing our “shadow selves” out into the light in the process.

## Methodology: “braided” stories

The three co-authors developed a collaborative writing methodology over several years. The process consists of discrete steps: first, we write autobiographically, individually and freely on

the topic. Next, we share what we have written via email. In Zoom meetings, we then discuss and reflexively respond to each other's writings without any set "agenda" but noting points of resonance and divergence. After "sitting with" and "incubating" for a period on what has emerged during this process, we meet again to identify how what we have written might be "theorised" (by relating personal experience to wider cultural and institutional forms of social organisation – in this case, the external expectations placed on us as children and adolescents by contemporary notions of our place in the class structure and what constitutes appropriate behaviours associated with these positions; and gender norms defining the "proper" performance of traditional masculinity and femininity in different eras), and "shaped" into a collaboratively "braided" narrative. One person then undertakes an initial draft, cutting individual sections together using intersections that place one extract in relation to the next with the aim of creating a coherent and progressive "narrative". The aim is to invite a response (rather than construct the Aristotelian "argument" that aims to persuade, more typical of a traditional academic paper).

It is unlikely that a traditional academic article version of this text would have the capacity to elicit the same kind of visceral response our (and others') in-person Auto/biography conference presentations have received. Attempting to communicate something of the "unfolding narrative" aspects of our braided stories, therefore, and our aim to stimulate identificatory or at least engaged responses, the oral "transcript" is preserved here. The vignettes that constitute the narrative describe specificities located in place(s) and time. We see it as making a small contribution, from a later life perspective, to the project Walkerdine (2014, para. 40) calls for, of bringing together 'the historical and cultural work of understanding the specificities of classed [and gendered] experience in a variety of locations, the legacies of that experience into the present, the governance and disciplining of working class subjects and communities across that historical period and how this works in the present'.

But what might these "specificities" have to say to those younger than our middle- and older-aged selves, those whose "selves" are "becoming" under very different social, economic and global conditions? In her reflections on life writing, Somerset (2020:91) suggests that 'people born into the complex twenty-first century deserve to understand what led up to their epoch and to realise the "distance travelled" in the previous fifty years'. She describes Akala as skilfully weaving his identity throughout his book *Natives*, thereby giving a personal face to the forces of class, empire and white supremacy, and how they 'shape the life experience of a random child in ... early 1980s England' (Akala, 2018:22). We hope that the aspects of our identities and their formation explored here through our 'micronarratives' (see Aurell and Davis, 2019:507) of disappointments and dissonances similarly offer to those younger than us a personal face to some of the ways the forces of class, gender and white ethnicity in part shaped the lives of three children born between the post-war foundation of the Welfare State and the advent (and continuing dominance) of the "neoliberal state" ushered in by the election of Margaret Thatcher. In the spirit of stimulating a response as opposed to persuading the reader via an argument, we conclude the article, as we did the presentation, with a series of questions. Below are our braided stories.

### **Am I disappointed? [Mark]**

Am I disappointed? Just holding this now - in my head, in my heart.

The passion we may feel – and the focus of our passions, too – tap into something liminal, personal, cultural, political – or even spiritual. In those moments of passion, we fly free. Free of all those "rational" constraints of *oughts* and *shoulds*.

Music does it for me. And, nature too – when I'm in landscape. Those moments of reverence and awe. And, of course, in love and intimacy. How can "disappointment" get a look in... in such spaces... at such times?

Perhaps disappointment comes in with our anticipations or expectations about how a situation – or the future – *should* be. And these anticipations and expectations inevitably fall short or get out of alignment with “reality”, “actuality” – or at least, how all this appears to us and appears to fall short. And over-thinking definitely doesn’t help.

But I push for more – to go beyond the disappointment of Brexit (“disappointment” doesn’t come close enough here) or disappointment with my team’s performance – and my disappointment with the Labour Party. And with my garden. I’m disappointed too with having put on weight again – and with being round-shouldered – and having never learnt to swim properly. You see? Once I get started, disappointment comes so easily.

### **Mind the gap [Jan]**

Whoosh! Wind hits. Blinking – eyes tight shut – I surrender myself as I’m pulled along towards escalators by fellow passengers. A moving mass of humans. Tourists. Workers. Commuters. Strangers. Bodies of all colours, shapes and sizes. We’re all heading somewhere as we tap ourselves out from the bowels of the underground.

Past the ticket barrier, a homeless man yells:

*Do none of you fucking care? Fucking idiots!*

He bangs his dirty rucksack against the billboard-cladded wall.

*You don’t get it? We’re all being done over. Don’t you know what’s going on in society? How can’t you see it?*

He’s asking rhetorical questions. He’s down – but not-quite-out - not like some of the homeless people I pass lying huddled in doorways – physical sores gaping on their heads. Not like the raving man my youngest phoned emergency services and numerous homeless shelters about when he wandered the streets around her flat daily, desperately crying for help. *He* was deemed too far gone for help by those in charge of care.

But whilst the man banging the billboards as I exit the underground might not be conventionally “respectable” or indeed “respectful”, I suspect he’s banged on enough walls to know how hard it is for any of us to break through or scale any of those bricks in the walls of our lives. Those “walls in our head” that Hanley (2016:xii) argues constrain us as we ‘set [our] own limits and restrict [our] own potential in accordance with [our] delimited social status’.

But this man banging the billboard seems like he’s got fight in him as he makes his voice heard. *He* still cares.

But we all just walk past him.

### **Ghostly presences and lost lives [Jackie]**

Could any of us have been him? Could we have been other than who we are? In Akomfrah’s (2013) biopic of him, Stuart Hall describes identity formation as ‘an endless, ever-unfinished conversation’. ‘There continues to be a regret for the loss of a life which I might’ve lived but didn’t’, he tells us. For Steedman (2001:71), writing history is an interpersonal process of interaction with the ‘spirits’ or ‘ghostly presences’ of historical subjects haunting us from the past. For Gordon (1997:63-64), such haunting is a form of mediation between institution and individual,

social structure and subject, history and biography - in which 'vague memories' and 'bare traces' hint at what is missing - lost lives, paths not taken. Scott's (2020:2) symbolic interactionist 'theory of nothing' suggests that:

Biographical identity work can be performed not only on an extant self of conscious lived experience... but also on the myriad of lost, forgotten, unreal selves that never came to be.

Roseneil (2009:427), building empirically on Gordon's work, suggests that individualised subjects are, in fact, 'fated to be inhabited by the traces of the lives of others'.

### **"Growing up girl" (Walkerdine et al, 2001) [Jackie]**

At this stage in *our* lives, we're confronting the lost and missing versions of *ourselves* as an act of repair of old disappointments and moments of dissonance - particularly in relation to expectations of gender and class-related identity formation.

Spell-bound by "stories" from an early age, I am using a kind of bibliomemoir of ghostly disappointments and dissonance as a vehicle to examine these losses and repairs.

In retracing *my* steps along paths both taken and not, I'm speculatively identifying the cultural discourses or "scripts" that influenced me in the form of a selection of *literary* and other kinds of *written texts*. A story told through stories - a kind of meta-Bildungsroman.

Succumbing like generations of children to Enid Blyton's appeal (see Byrne, 2020), at a primary school only recently leaving aside maps that marked the extent of "our" empire in pink, I devoured the *Famous Five* books at primary school, blind to their inherent classism and racism. Did I see myself as Ann or George? I wish I could say that I identified with George, but I wasn't a "tomboy". I didn't actually identify with Ann either, however, because I thought even then that she was a bit "wet". The "best" character in my mind was obviously Julian because he was the leader. He knew stuff, solved problems, took charge, was authoritative. I didn't *identify* with him, though, because he was a boy. I didn't see him as a role model for my own formative self - but as a prototypical male.

### **Expectations and embarrassments [Mark]**

I learned to temper my expectations in relation to both class and gender: "*People like us don't have things like that*" was a mantra I learned early on. That, and "*you can only do your best*" - with an unspoken-ness left hanging that this will never be enough. So, I taught my head to rule my heart. Being a boy, being a man, helped. The heart is unruly. It gets you into trouble. Blame it on desire. Better to have never loved than to have loved and lost ... and got hurt and become disappointed.

It's taken me disappointingly far too long to get over all this. But I think I'm getting there. These days I look for congruence and alignment - and people and spaces which support this. Head *and* heart.

Bochner (2017:76) reminds us that:

The only possible truth of the past [is] a narrative truth. Because the self is in a constant state of change over the course of a person's life, any "truths" we can write about events we have experienced necessarily are conditional, incomplete, and unsettled. What actually happened to us in the past may be fixed, but our memory of it and the stories we can tell about it will keep changing as long as we live.

I grew up with and got to know embarrassment in its myriad forms. To be embarrassed is to anticipate or *experience in the moment*, the disappointment, disapproval and disgust of others – and internalise it as a narrative cloak of shame. And at the same perhaps, seek to deflect the focus away from the “failure”, towards the self. Of course, this doesn’t work. But it is, to some extent, understandable; excusable. In the face of no other agency, at least I can be embarrassed. I learned this lesson well, adding embarrassment to my developing palette of psycho-social manipulations.

My memories now of being embarrassed, circle around the *physical* – my body; the *social* - my home, my family; and the *performative* – getting it wrong, being too much, or not enough – certainly not sporty enough.

My embarrassment stood in the place of an internalised disappointment and dissonance with an idealised, projected self. No wonder I was embarrassed – I had high hopes. But as a boy, I learned the singularly important lesson, which was to make sure that the social hot potato of masculine banter never stayed in my hands, my lap, long enough to burn. Remember – there’s always someone worse off than you. In the gym at school, Adrian Flowers was way more useless than me. And we *all* laughed when Brian Sansome got an erection in the shower after games. I felt his embarrassment. But at least it wasn’t me.

### **Literary role models [Jackie]**

There was a boy in my class called Keith Whittaker. He was often top of the class but was too shy to be a Julian – and he wasn’t one of “our” boys, either – the Arts lot who sat around during breaks performing our emergent selves to our own little group audience, trying to impress each other with witty conversation laced with literary allusions. For a period, one boy and I spent every lunchtime doing this - sitting opposite each other on top of the desks, quoting Oscar Wilde, engaging in deep philosophical debates, creating a competitive and amusing mutual admiration society. And then we didn’t anymore because he started going out with Cynthia, who was way ahead of me in the game.

Obsessed with my English teacher as I was at the time, I was thrilled when my contributions in class clearly delighted him. I guess during those lunchtimes, I’d been unconsciously practising with a more attainable potential object of desire. Sadly, by the time I caught up with Cynthia, my verbal and intellectual skills didn’t seem to work on any of the boys I actually did desire. We might laugh and joke, these boys and I, but they never asked me out.

For a time, I stuck with filling my diary with detailed accounts of interactions with my English teacher. It records: listening to him reading aloud to the class; his voice saying “Ta-pocketa pocketa pocketa” when Thurber describes Walter Mitty hearing the cylinders of the plane he was fantasising about flying; my taking the part of Cecily to his Algernon when we did class readings of *The Importance of Being Ernest*; becoming enchanted by Paul Gallico’s *The Snow Goose* after he read that to us in instalments. Even after he left to take up a promotion at another school *before* we did Jane Austen’s *Emma* for ‘A’ level, he was my Mr Knightley, and I was clever, precocious Emma, mortified by his admonishment at my thoughtless cruelty to Miss Bates.

A few different role models on offer there – Wilde’s Cecily, Gallico’s Frith, Austen’s Emma .... Not Walter Mitty flying a plane, of course, that’s not what we girls were being schooled for.

### **Pristine, pretty and precocious [Jan]**

Exiting the underground into the brightness of July sunshine, my carefully set “overnight curls” are frizzy. Grime from the underground clings. Debris lurks - lingers in my body - *and* I’m sweating...

No – scratch that. *I* am not sweating. *I* do not sweat.

I write-reach for my nine-year-old self...– locate the image – a scene from my childhood. Whoosh...I am there:

*Ouch – Mum – ouch – Mum...stop! It hurts!*

*“Shoosh! Stay still!”*

Mum reprimands me as she pulls the brush through my unruly, long, mousy-brown hair. It’s tuggy. Mum pulls it back – tamed – sleek. And then she commands:

*“Shut your eyes!”*

Whoosh. I feel it. And smell it. The familiar liquid gold that we cannot afford, but Mum does three jobs to pay for – because *I* am worth it! Fine droplets of Elnett hairspray protect my hair against the elements like a protective helmet.

*“All done: Open your eyes!”*

I gaze in the mirror – at me – my reflection – and Mum’s - our reflection. We know I look like I have *‘just stepped out of a bandbox’*. I twirl. *Ta-da*. I bask in Mum’s approval. We smile at each other. Click.

Pristine. Pretty. Precocious. I am a child – perhaps not of my time – an 80’s child – but a child brought up by a mother - brought up by her grandparents.

Mum’s poor school attendance meant she seldom enjoyed the orange juice or free milk, which made Steedman (1986) feel like she mattered. As a *“B-stream learn how to cook-clean-care student”* Mum *“knows her place”*. But it is a sign of her times – growing up with the opportunities and optimism offered by the post-war Welfare State in Britain (Worth, 2023) - that Mum gleans from the world around that *she* might expect more for *her* children. Mum didn’t know what “social mobility” was – but it was palpable.

Born the eldest of the “second set” of thirteen children after a long gap, my dad - as “the new baby” - is doted on by older sisters. When I come to know them - my Aunts – with their pursed-up lips and disappointed eyes are women I cannot ever imagine having being young with hopes, desires or dreams of their own. But Dad respected and loved them. He saw the love behind their eyes that were hardened with years of sacrifice. They were young women who were shamed and curtailed - whilst he was allowed out to adventure.

I am a child instilled with “older-fashioned” values: *“Don’t forget where you come from”*; *“Mind your place”*. I am a child *behind* – perhaps – rather than ahead of her time. Nevertheless, I am a child born into hope.

Watching my clumsy nine-year-old self – in the mirror of my memory – pointing toes, plié-ing, attempting pathetic pirouettes - I see her learn how to contort her – our – my growing childhood body as I dream: I am a ballerina. I have a dressage pony. I am married with 2.4 perfect children. I believe in the “single story” (Adichie, 2009) presented in the books I grew up with; I believe in

the happily ever after of fairy tales – I can be everything I will ever want to be – surpassing all my dreams as I dance and twirl and leap in the air - forgetting who I am...

And then back down to earth. The ritual: the “thanking” and “curtseying”:

*Thank you, Miss Longford - to my ballet teacher.*

*Thank you, Miss Cairns - to the pianist.*

Then Miss Longford reminds us – a score of sweaty, imperfectly real aspiring little girls:

*“Thank you, girls. You’ve worked hard today. Now remember: Men sweat. Ladies perspire. But us dancers – well – we – girls – we just glow!”*

### **Mannish-boy [Mark]**

My embarrassment with my felt shortcomings as a boy-man was filtered through a lens of what I learnt to recognise as being “lower middle class”. Poor but with middle-class aspirations. My dad read books. But we never quite made it to the right side of town; the right kind of car; the right kind of what we later called “lifestyle”.

I got to understand this more and more, and I masked my embarrassment with pretence. I learned well how to be a “new man”. But the dissonance was never far from the surface. The mismatch between who I felt I *should* be (those who achieved masculinity and middle-class security with apparent ease), who I felt I *was* (the nearly failing one, cushioned with embarrassment) and the *projected self* – a developed narrative, woven from crafted but “safe” life journeying.

- *try not to be “too much”!*
- *be good!*
- *don’t over-step the mark!*

I remember Saturday afternoons. Ethel and Albert were an older couple who lived next door. I think they must have got together when they were in their 50s. That’s not new these days, but back then, it wasn’t common. I never knew what they did work-wise. I think Albert might have been retired by the time I used to go next door to see them. I was around 9 or 10, I think. Albert grew tomatoes and chrysanthemums. He wore a cap and didn’t say much. Ethel didn’t say much more – but she did all the cooking, preparing the same cycle of daily dishes, week on week – fish on Friday, roast on Sunday. And always puddings. I was never disappointed; I knew what was coming.

On Saturdays, Albert and I watched the wrestling. This was daring-doing. Lots of sweat and grunt, and bodies slammed against ropes and canvas. And as a puny 9-year-old, I wondered how my body would ever attain the impressive bulk of Mick McManus or Jackie Pallo. And, of course, it was on ITV – Ethel and Albert were definitely ITV people. And they were Baptists too – different in ways I didn’t fully understand to us Methodists.

Later, I’d head back home before the football results came on – and the disappointment that often came with that ritual. And the realisation, even at that age, that I would never play for Leicester City.

And my mum would always say, in response to either any of my rarely voiced anxieties or, indeed, aspirations...

*You can only do your best!*

“You can only do your best”. I took this as some kind of lower middle-class heraldic *motto* – a call to arms. The “only”, perhaps, a brace against the disappointment that surely followed. Better to aim lower and not be disappointed or have to mask failure with embarrassment.

I took to this life-course process well and carried it with me into many streams of learning, doing and becoming. Only in the latter quarter of my life have I learned to reach for more – and not to feel disappointed or embarrassed.

Is this the mantle of the lower middle classes? To be not quite confident enough? Not clever enough? Not strong enough? Not cool enough? To not belong enough?

Instead, I learned to be “of service” – to “be there” for others. To aid in their life-course process – and to use that sensitivity, which became awakened at an early age, through watching and witnessing. And to be no longer embarrassed.

### **In search of charm [Jackie]**

Before long, Georgette Heyer had succeeded Enid Blyton, and Julian had morphed into a succession of heroes who were all “suave” but also “saturnine” and who either met their match in a feisty, witty young woman or rescued a quiet one from being bullied by her family. In either case, the “resolution” for the woman was bagging the man.

Aping the former kind of heroine - would-be clever, witty, feisty - hadn’t worked for me so far, so as amazing as it seems to me now, I sought further guidance on how to “fulfil my destiny” from a guide-book to success called *In Search of Charm* (Young, 1962) – which imparted all the necessary information about how to walk, sit and stand; how to get in and out of cars; which gloves to wear with which style of evening dress, and how to remove them before eating

*“Take a firm but feminine grip.”*

*She* magazine described it as: ‘A wise, cheerful, well-illustrated survey of what a young girl needs to know about being grown up’ (back cover). The blurb on the book’s back cover, for some strange reason, also quotes the *Wolverhampton Express and Star*, which assured readers that it was ‘the perfect “vade mecum” for the teenager who does not want to make gaffes’.

Now, I have nothing against Wolverhampton but even then, when my school friends and I were going around speaking French to each other like Lyn Barber in her (2009) autobiography, or ironically quoting James Thurber (1965) cartoons to each other: “*It’s a Naïve Domestic Burgundy Without Any Breeding. But I Think You’ll Be Amused by its Presumption*”, the image that this book endorsement conjured up of a group of Wolverhampton teenagers gathered round a copy, while its owner is saying “No, honestly girls, it’s absolutely just the perfect *vade mecum!*” seemed preposterous.

If all of this gives the impression of a working-class girl whose gender identity formation was taking place not only along the aspiring class lines that our ex-Wykehamist Headteacher was laying down but also along the lines of solidly traditional femininity – leading me to fall in love simultaneously with traditionally “masculine” boys – and men – in real life *and* in literature, I’d say that would be pretty accurate.

In the first part of *her* autobiography, Levy (2013:40) writes, ‘It’s exhausting to learn how to become a subject’. She writes about her father being taken away when she was five and

imprisoned for his anti-apartheid activism. She writes about his unexpected return three years later. Her mother tells her and her brother not to be shy, to just be themselves. ‘We nodded gravely,’ she writes, ‘and went off to practise being ourselves’ (2013:111). And she writes that women are ‘cursed with the desire not to be disappointing’ (2013:22).

### **Disappointing Men [Jackie]**

In the early days of that ever-unfinished conversation of subjectivity, I learnt from boys at school that *I* was disappointing. But I learnt from teachers that I was clever enough to go to university. Once there, I tried to practise being myself. Still, it involved not being disappointing – especially to men, to whom I was still predisposed to grant a monopoly of authority. Men like our young sociology lecturer, a left-wing activist. He admired his older colleague, who had published an ethnography of the Yorkshire coal mining industry called *Coal is Our Life* (Dennis, 1956). Seeing himself as a “man of the people” he gathered a small inner coterie of students around him with whom he used to meet in the pub. I wasn’t one of them. And I was stung by the sarcastic comments he used to write on my faltering essays, indicating that he didn’t think I was left-leaning enough and so deserved “put-downs”. At the same time, working the Easter vacation as a barmaid at a posh local hostelry, I was ribbed mercilessly by the local Tory big-wig councillor for being the resident socialist. I hadn’t actually expressed any political views, largely because I was still formulating them. But there I went again - disappointing men – even men of opposing political stripes.

### **Round and round the garden [Jan]**

It’s October 2023. I’m in London, visiting my youngest.

I run round and around Russell Square gardens. I’m reminded of my Dad singing the nursery rhyme *Round and Round the Garden* when I was little... “*like a teddy bear... one step... two steps and ...*”. Bloody hell, my knees are sore!

A lap or two ahead of me – my youngest yells

*“Keep going!”*

I run (rather than throw) like that girl Young (1980) writes about – that girl who, she argues, is not constrained simply because of her physicality. One step forward, two to the side. I’m never going to get there. Wherever “there” is? I mean – I want to get there. It’s in sight. My “potential” is up for grabs. Palpable. Young is right - it’s not my physicality that constrains me. It’s not my mind. It’s the mind – the body – the whole “me” that I am the moment before I am even birthed into the world - not yet a classed-raced-gendered twinkle in anyone’s eye. Socially, culturally, politically and economically, I am always already corporeally marked.

My youngest runs past me – again. I sit on a bench. There is a commemorative plaque. I wonder about this person – now dead – who was loved enough for someone to pay to honour them. What impact did they have in their lifetime? What is their legacy? I wonder -wistfully - *what will my legacy be?* I think about people sleeping rough on these benches. People that former Home Secretary Suella Braverman argues are choosing as a “lifestyle” (Otte, 2023). And I think about my great-grandfather who Mum always reminds me lived in fear of the poorhouse. It was a real fear that loomed like a shadow across generations living in the Scottish mining town I was born and grew up in. My mum grew up alongside this fear and passed it on to me. I might have been reminded to always remember my roots – my place – but I was also (somewhat contradictorily) reminded to “better” myself – which, in hindsight, I recognise as an encouragement to distance myself from poverty – because it was a dreaded fear.

Mum and Dad worked hard. They bought their council house. They brought up two children who went to university. They are not disappointed. They “bettered” themselves. My brother and I are their “legacy”. They feel they have achieved something. What have I achieved? I have a PhD. I’m a “Dr”. But what difference do I make beyond day-to-day endless routine care – running around after others? It’s thankless – invisible – “care work” involving unpaid emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983). But it is important work – it needs to be done. As Bunting (2020:1) asserts, ‘No one can afford not to be interested in care’. But I wonder: what would my 1990’s career-girlself think of me now?

The trees are lush - green -as the sun twinkles-winks – peeks - through clouds as I get up and continue to run around Russel Square. The world I live in is *so* beautiful. I wish I had brought my camera to capture this moment – even though that would be impossible. As Derrida (1973) asserts – the thing itself always escapes. Like my potential. It will always escape me. Or do I throw it away?

### **Unafraid to be [Jackie]**

Running, running... One evening early on in my first term at university, something very disturbing - unnerving - happened. Dissonance Central. I looked at myself in the mirror in my room and didn't recognise the face peering back at me. I stared at myself, probably only for seconds, but the experience was so terrifying that I ran out of the building and into the streets, and I kept running until I was out of breath, and then I carried on, walking until I'd calmed down enough to - literally - compose myself and go back.

A couple of years later, I bought the book *Unafraid to Be* (Etchells, 1969). In it, I came across Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem ‘No worst, there is none’. There were lines that spoke to me:

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall  
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap  
May who ne'er hung there (1948:11).

And I came to associate them forever afterwards, not only with that one-off moment of depersonalisation but with other more generally disorienting experiences when a chasm unexpectedly opens up beneath us. The Hopkins poem was followed by a passage in which Etchells (1969:22) describes my experience exactly. She argues that at the root of such experiences is the attempt to explore and establish one’s own identity by anchoring it in time and place and in the ‘sensibly apprehensible’, that is, apprehensible through our senses.

Before the much-*more*-than-“disappointing” industrialisation of higher education, going to university offered the time, space and place to do exactly that – to explore and establish one’s own identity – and Etchells’ contextualisation of that unnerving experience offered me reassurance then that it was all part of that process, and that I wasn’t going mad. Unspeakably disappointing that today’s young people are being denied the opportunities university offered me to wobble but not disintegrate.

### **Generational [Mark]**

I’m back from a week away with my daughter, her partner and their 2-year-old little boy – my grandson. He’s a delight. He finds pleasure and pain in the moment and is able to stay absorbed way beyond my attention span. We’re out of the UK, and, apart from an app on my phone, I’m joyfully “disconnected” from much of what usually reaches me via the “news”. This includes, of course, the unfolding events in the Middle East.

I wonder about war, the nature of killing, driven by ideology and national/religious/cultural conviction. My dad was a conscientious objector during the Second World War and was deemed a coward at the time. His convictions were such that whilst he understood the justification for that war, he felt killing was wrong.

In the 1980s, Joe Jackson (1982) wrote ironically (of course) of 'Real Men' when he sang:

*Man makes a gun, man goes to war  
Man can kill and man can drink  
And man can take a whore*

The context here was Jackson's examination of the shifting sands of male socio-cultural sexuality as HIV and AIDs first came to our awareness. Playing with my grandson, where the joyous kicking through fallen leaves and eating toast together when we get back inside, feels a long way from the brutality and misogyny of masculinity as it's enacted across the world, where we are still encouraged to "man-up" when we are feeling less than courageous; and the popularity of Donald Trump and Andrew Tate appears unabated. And I wonder how these toxic expectations of being male will come to my grandson, despite my daughter's fierce determination to bring him up "differently". Will she be disappointed if the stick he picks up in the park becomes a knife or a gun, even in "play"?

Every act I do is as a man. My masculinity is visible and present, filtered through my own educated, left-leaning middle-class heteronormative riff on the theme of everyday manliness. This has settled around me now. But still, I disappoint and am disappointed – by being a man and by not being man enough.

I want to be around for my grandson for years yet. I want to swish through the leaves with him some more, and explore with him other things in the natural world I love, and I hope he might delight in too. I want to tell him about his great-grandad's courage, and I want him to find a way to be a man who isn't disturbing or disappointing anyone, including himself.

### **Paternal pride [Jackie]**

At the end of my first year at university, I returned home early from a stint of live-in chamber-maiding – early because a complaint about the chef coming into my bedroom one night had been ignored. I'd had to leave a postcard for my exam results to be posted to me, and when I got home, I found that my dad had pinned this record of my "passes" to the chimney breast above the fire, topped with a paper banner that he'd cut out of the sports pages of the Daily Mirror. I'd never have got to university if he hadn't supported me against my mother's fierce opposition. He died in my second year – but not before communicating to me that he was proud of my achievements.

No disappointment there. A tangible sign of his pride in me, for me to tuck away for the future like secret treasure.

### **Becoming [Jan]**

Mum and Dad are not always proud of me. If I put a pound in a box every time I swear – this time next year, I would be a millionaire! My swears disappoints them. It's not ladylike - it's not 'becoming'.

But Rogers (1961) would argue *I am "becoming"*. As I turn towards creative analytic writing practices (Richardson and St Pierre, 2018) and practice *écriture féminine* - a feminine practice of

writing (Cixous, 1976) – a writing style embracing the difference of the other (O’Grady, 1996) – I am discovering that embodied reflexive writing leads me to examine myself and evaluate my life in relation to not just personal and societal expectations but also challenges me to consider how *I* make a difference in the world around me. Am I a disappointment to myself? Has my class encouraged me to ‘become stuck in ruts that don’t look like ruts’ – where being myself involves me ‘stay[ing] within well-defined social parameters’ (Hanley, 2016:xii)? Perhaps. But in my writing practice, I learn that my locus of evaluation (Rogers, 1961) is continually evolving.

Being seen as “respectable” concerns me considerably less than it did my foremothers - women who cleaned, cooked – women who were pit-brow lassies. Forgotten women. And the very real fears my ancestors had about ending their days in the poorhouse has dissipated. Nevertheless – my ancestors’ voices – those Scottish working-class men and women who physically toiled at the coalface - their voices remain in me. And in my research I seek an outlet to make their voices heard.

But I remain disappointed in myself. My time - stretched – my goals – desires – wants – my agency - my imperative to use my learning to make a difference in the big-wide, non-domestic world is always unfolding but never-endingly going nowhere as the domestic drones me out. And I never take time to “properly” listen – to understand those around me. Whoosh - I’m always onto the next task at hand. How can I understand others when “I’m at odds with myself” - struggling to understand myself – the “choices” I make? Dissonance vibrates through me.

Still, I make time for writing – there’s always hope – making sense of oneself – one’s life – in writing...

### **The reliability of literature [Jackie]**

Ah yes, struggling to understand oneself ... writing as a medium, a pathway...

... who was the ghostly girl *I* never was, the woman I *didn’t* become? What was lost along those paths not taken? Well, opportunities to put to good use what she learned about how to let her dinner companion guide her menu choices, or how to keep her knees together when getting out of a sports car, or how to choose evening gloves - were certainly lost. But then, so was the idea that men are the font of all knowledge – so it’s not all bad.

What *hasn’t* been lost? What *never* disappoints *me*?

Margaret Drabble’s *The Dark Flood Rises* examines the question of what makes a good life – and a good death. In it, a character called Josephine, who teaches literature to a WEA class every Tuesday morning, is reviewing her life. She looks around the room at her latest class and asks herself what any of it means. Is it, for them, just a way of passing time in company? Or can the texts they study transcend the mundanity of everyday life? She used to have more faith in the value of literature, she reflects - but now, towards the end of her life, she begins to question it ... Is she, as Montaigne saw himself, just recycling ‘other men’s flowers’? The passage’s conclusion, beginning with two very powerful words (‘And yet’), confirms the value, the power, of how she spends her time with her class each week:

And yet here she still is, still packaging words for others, providing the string, the ring folders, the photocopies. On Tuesday mornings (Drabble, 2017:123).

I was reminded of that passage by the wife of my old English teacher, an ex-WEA teacher herself, after I had lunch with them. So ... I hadn’t laid *his* ghost to rest, then? Well, yes and no... I felt nervous but excited when the invitation to meet up came – excited about getting to know him as an adult – to hear about his own schooling, his views of my old school, which he’d left when I was fifteen, his subsequent career, his own literary loves.

I arrived too early and went for a walk along the river and across the nearby park. It was quiet and sunny and blissful. It was like time stolen out of school. He was a generous host. As we talked over coffee and ate a bread-and-cheese lunch in his garden overlooking the park, layers of memories and pre-conceptions began to shift like rock strata, to rub against each other and settle into new formations.

We talked, among other things, about the learning and teaching of grammar, of how, for a while, we had jointly worked our way through exercises on “Parts of Speech” and “Clause Analysis”. We talked about set texts. He commented on how important he thinks reading aloud is for the teaching of English. He confessed that he wasn’t very good at reading aloud. My turn to correct *him*.

He had first read *The Snow Goose* (Gallico, 1948) to a class on teaching practice, he told me, and after finishing it, found himself completely at a loss as to what to do next. His tutor came forward. “What kind of a story has your teacher read to us there?” he asked. “A war story . . . yes”, he affirmed as the children volunteered their answers. “A story about animals, yes . . .” And he gently led them on to recognising it as a love story. And then he asked them – “what kind of love... ?”

I was also writing a love story – or rather, I was writing the ending of one kind of love story and the beginning of another kind. The erotically charged love within the pedagogic relationship is properly one that inevitably leads to a kind of disappointment. On that visit, in sacrificing an old fantasy, I was laying that ghost to rest.

But I was doing so in order to make space for its reincarnation in the form of an adult friendship between a man whose professional life had been lived in the passionate teaching of language and literature and a woman to whom he had bequeathed an abiding love of words - read, spoken and written. I was also salving the disappointment of not having been able to follow an instruction he gave me to become an English teacher, when he left before I started the 6<sup>th</sup> form.

### **More mesh [Mark]**

Writing this latest navigation, the edges don’t seem as sharp now – and I’m enjoying not having to pretend as much. Becoming invisible helps, too, to some extent. And so I try to choose more selectively now where to “do” my gender and class.

Age isn’t without its nudges, though. I was in surgery recently. A mesh has been inserted to keep things in place, as my body is showing unruly signs of “letting the side down”. How amazing it is to witness this – the healing and bruising and embracing of the dissonance between what I might have wanted to have been and what I am becoming.

I’ve been stitched up, and whilst I wasn’t fit enough for the Euros or the Olympics, recovery is coming along nicely, thank you.

I wonder about recovery and healing – personal and global – and what has healed and what else needs more healing from past dissonance and disappointment. Where more mesh would help.

### **Conclusion: Activating the potentials of the past**

In discussing the political relevance of Derrida’s concept of ‘hauntology’, the late cultural theorist Mark Fisher wrote:

At a time of political reaction and restoration when cultural innovation has stalled or even gone backwards, when “power...operates predictively as much as retrospectively”

(Eshun, 2003, p. 289), one function of hauntology is to keep insisting that there are futures beyond postmodernity's terminal time. When we must listen for the relics of the future in the *unactivated potentials of the past* (2013:53).

Through our confronting, in later life, past personal and political disappointments and experiences of dissonance, and through exploring the expectations that engendered them and how we responded, can we find jumping off points *from* those 'unactivated potentials of the past' *towards* the relics of alternative futures contained there?

As we explored and shared and wrote together about the ghosts that haunt us, we pondered the very differently-classed and gendered social worlds those younger than us have grown up in, the constraints and expectations engendered within their worlds and the possible disappointments arising from them. And we wondered, for all of us regardless of age, gender, class or ethnicity: at those times when the present is in danger of giving up on the future, *is* there 'unactivated potential' in bringing ghosts out from the shadows, in examining lives not lived – and how those that were lived were shaped? Potential to heal the hurts of past disappointments and dissonances? Potential for valuing the lives we did live, by recognising both the vulnerabilities and the resourcefulness contained in them? What unactivated potential is there in sharing and widening those "endless, ever-unfinished conversations" of becoming? And how might we realise it?

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Jan Bradford is an independent researcher. Inspired by Helene Cixous' concept of 'écriture féminine', she practices a feminine style of writing as a method of inquiry using psychoanalytic, sociological and literary lenses. Her research focuses on intergenerational trauma and maternal grief in working class communities.

Mark Price is an Associate Professor of Education, St Mary's University, Twickenham. Mark's writing and research interests lie in the fields of narrative and participatory inquiry and autoethnography, exploring particularly issues of agency, voice, border crossing and boundary spanning. This work mirrors his own professional life changes, from playworker, to teacher, to youth worker, to psychotherapist, to academic, researcher and writer.