

Stranger in Paradise: Class, Academia, and Cultural Whiplash

Home is a deeply personal concept. Whether home is something you describe as a place, a person, a smell or a feeling, it is a distinct notion; the soothing smell of your mothers cooking or childhood memory that lives in some fragile archive in golden hues, the cool morning air and the spring sunshine on your skin in some place that feels somewhat of a dream but achingly close. It can come fleetingly, unexpectedly, a reminder that something precious once was, like your heart breathing life into a past long since lost from reality. Home is an equilibrium that feels entirely just right, just for you, like it was there and waiting, even when you weren't. Feeling at home is perhaps what we all seek in life, whether it is to build one, find one, create one or learn what it means to us. Losing your sense of home, place, security and peace is equally profound. It became the concept of my PhD thesis when I began writing on the concept of nostalgia.

The word comes from "Nostos" - homecoming and "Algia" – grief and sadness- in Greek. That familiar surface sting and sweet taste of retrospect. Home becomes most important when it feels as though it is waning, or that we are far from it. The moment a room becomes quite unfamiliar, that the joke doesn't quite land, that something is amiss, we seek that grounding, that journey of return even when we often know there is no way back. Nostalgia became the subject of my thesis but it also became a disturbing question to my own selfhood.

One Tuesday I sat and discussed with my PhD supervisor the contentions of using the term the "West" in my thesis to include anglophone and European countries and its problematic nuances. I was a little confused, but accustomed to the fact that just about any term I could ever use would hold contention, maybe something I would have to defend in my viva I thought. We discussed how the conversation may go, in this defence of the West – how it would change in the contemporary geopolitical situation, how I may want to change it to global north or anglophone world. Either way, I would have to debate this matter of semantics and its accuracy, of which I could prepare for. I would go home later to a different kind of debate. This one required far more vigour, quick wit, emotional management, scholarly and pedagogical language translation, conflict resolution, historical, political and social readership, a Marxist lens and a revolutionary spirit. This was dinner with my nan.

Armed and prepared for battle in the most compassionate way one can be when at war, I would sit in front of my fish and chips, amongst my family, in the post-industrial, perpetually rainy town of Rochdale in the foothills of the Pennines about half an hour from Manchester. A world away from academia. I would always be last to finish my tea because I was too busy loudly, insufferably projecting the basic economic structure of

capitalism to a family that supported Reform. Sometimes I would slump back and pack up a chip in surrender and sometimes I felt like I could get them to agree, for just a brief moment, it wasn't the immigrants that were taking from them. It was the billionaires. It was exhausting and sometimes heartbreaking to hear the way they had digested the lies of people like Nigel Farage, without a second thought.

My nan was a cleaner, my grandad a joiner, my mother had become a careers advisor for connexions when it was a thing, but she was more of a mentor to the very young girls in Rochdale who'd find themselves homeless, pregnant, abused or exploited in a town that felt dull and rainy in far more ways than the weather in the early 2000s. Back then I wasn't aware of what class even meant. I knew that there were girls poorer and more vulnerable than me and mum was doing her best to help them, but she found it exhausting too. The police, the government, the system we found ourselves in didn't seem too interested and I knew nothing of politics or what it meant in my little world that I called home. I knew my mum complaining to my dad of the battles she couldn't win, I knew high rise blocks of flats and old gas towers and walks on Sundays in the hills behind where we lived. I knew getting picked up from school by nan and getting a pound to spend at the shop and the labour club where everyone's birthday, christening and funeral were hosted. I knew draft lemonade and sticky carpets and playing out with my sister until mum shouted that tea was ready.

In some nauseating, often serendipitous turn of events and sometimes self-detrimental work ethic and self-discipline, I find myself stood in front a classroom of students, debating feminism, Marxism, historical materialism and literature at an elite university, far, far from home. But then, I am entirely at home, in a way I can barely describe. I come prepared with my lesson plan for my stupendously well-read, progressive and politically engaged students who organise protests for Palestine and debate freely on critical theory. Am I energised by their ideas, their perceptions, their unique insights into texts and their ability to think critically in a way that I perhaps didn't learn until I had spent my first year at University in Liverpool. I am home here. Despite my northern accent, that I have become profoundly aware of, I cling on to my sense of self as I navigate my students through difficult theory in a way, I hope, my nan could understand.

On Thursday's I teach my students intersectionality, imperialism and biopolitics, on Friday's I listen to friends of friends tell me the reason they couldn't get a doctor's appointment or their child in nursery is because of 'these people coming over on small boats'. I leave my classroom having had invigorating conversations on Franz Fanon, James Baldwin and Edward Said in a seminar on post-colonialism to hearing a nurse I know comfortably tell me she refused to prescribe Calpol to a foreign mother as 'she didn't deserve it.' I go from conversations with people in my cohort on Hannah Arendt's work on totalitarianism and its stark relevance to the current moment to hearing that

Britain is not for the British anymore and immigrants are taking away our British values. Home is not quite so simple anymore.

Academia has felt like home many times. In fact, I never feel more at home than when I'm in a seminar with my wonderful students. They are critical thinkers, with so many differing takes, experiences and often elite education behind them. While I could not love my job as a university teacher any more than I do, academia is an entirely different world to the one I come home to at weekend. You don't have to have read reams of Bell Hooks to know the privilege and wealth surrounding academics reaches all the way back to antiquity. These elite institutions are rooted in classism, racism and an imperial whiteness that still ripples through the underbelly of academia in the UK. While the 'dark academia' aesthetic may seem like an appealing trend, the darkness does not lie in the shades of mahogany bookshelves or faded first edition book spines. Undeniably, higher education is still far more accessible to white upper class people than to the rest of us and this only becomes more apparent the higher you climb. And while it stands for something I feel is a true pillar of our civilisation and one of the few spaces of public good left, the privatisation of education in this country has only worsened the class divide in higher education.

This is not the only uncanny, identity-fracturing experience I've had. I am also the daughter of an EU migrant. My name, my height, my face, the way I spoke - didn't quite fit in with the English girls at school. "Go back to your own country" was something I heard too often from people who held the same passport as me. I found closeness with other girls who were "foreign" too. But later, I realised that dissimilating from them - denying my Danishness - made it easier to fit in. And I did.

I still feel guilty for the way I embodied this xenophobia for social inclusion. I, too, rejected the girls who had welcomed me, while they continued to endure what I escaped.

By the time I started college in 2015, the country was on the brink of Brexit. The far right was on the rise, scapegoating immigrants. My father, who had lived and worked here for 25 years, had to go to the Danish embassy to avoid being sent back.

Politics had entered my life not just as theory but as personal disorientation. Half of me, it seemed, had become the problem.

While I hold the privilege of whiteness, and my experience of otherness was relatively mild, the rising xenophobia since the referendum has made one thing clear: it's not my foreignness I wish to shed, but rather the imperialist Britishness that is now so brazenly proclaimed.

I feel at home in academia for this very purpose as a public good and its pedagogy as resistance. I feel that my work, my teaching and my PhD is meaningful and I have some

hope that what we do in these spaces of free and open discussion can make a difference to other peoples lives. However, as much as I feel I belong here, my easily placed northern accent, my lack of social coding for upper class academics and my apparent cultural differences say otherwise. Standing in front of the sons and daughters, nieces and nephews of politicians, professors, authors and academics as someone who travels home to Rochdale is inevitably preformulated for crippling imposter syndrome. While I have never sat at dinner tables that ask what piece of literary fiction one may be reading between piano lessons and tennis, I feel at times, it is extremely obvious, a sign of unworthiness and a reminder this will never be quite home.

While the drive back to Rochdale may be 3 hours, I feel I am driving between worlds, connected by the long outstretched non-place of the M6 confronted by my own lack of home. It can be unbearably lonely in a way that also makes me feel like some ungrateful whiney brat to complain about it. I am and should be grateful for the privilege of experiencing differing cultures, differing worlds, inhabit spaces I could only dream of before it became reality. But that's exactly it. I never quite know which one is the reality, which one is the dream, which one I should be waking up from or leaving behind, which one I should feel at home and which one feels foreign. I am split down the middle in so many ways and while most days I feel grateful that I can still hang on to both lives and myself, sometimes it is profoundly fracturing. I want to do right by the people I love and care so much about in all of these spaces and worlds that feel so antagonistic to each other but I'm often deemed too much of one thing and not enough of another either by myself or others. A stranger in paradise.

bell hooks writes, for those of us who are split down the middle through class, or culture, whiteness and non-whiteness in academia, while this may be unsettling "They must believe they can inhabit two different worlds, but they must make each space one of comfort. They must creatively invent ways to cross borders ... to subvert and challenge the existing cultures." (Hooks 1994, p183) And as spaces in academia in the West are becoming increasingly walled off to upper classes and critical pedagogy is devalued, I have to hope that knowing and being a part of such differing cultures may not be a weakness but instead, my strength.

Making these spaces both ones of comfort can be difficult without losing one's self or cutting out parts of one's life and while it often means tailoring my language, it does not mean tailoring my values. It can put me in uncomfortable conversations that can feel like a confrontation but with the privilege of differing cultural languages and a passion for pedagogy, you can trust me to be the annoying one in most social settings, especially if you don't like immigrants. Making oneself a home has been a question that embeds itself into my PhD and my search for selfhood in spaces that I hardly ever imagined inhabiting. Home is not one place at all, it is not in the roots you put down or the roots you dig up. Home may look like the rows of terraces and moorland horizon but

I feel it when my student's eyes light up in that familiar feeling that they really do get it. Home is the love we show ourselves and the arms I wrap around both of us when me and my nan have had it out over fish and chips. Home is the laughter over some esoteric joke with my PhD cohort and the self-deprecating humour we share in the pub after United lost again. Home is the sound of my dad fusing English sayings in an attempt to assimilate or thinking 'can't be arsed' was 'can't be asked' and repeating it, numerous times to his boss. Home is in flux, as are we, and in a world that demands us to rethink the way we see home, and welcome others into our own, there has never been concept or question more vital.