



**‘SEEING THINGS MORE QUEERLY’: A  
CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE EMOTIONS  
AND REALITIES OF A WORKING-CLASS  
QUEER EARLY CAREER RESEARCHER IN  
THE SCOTTISH HIGHER EDUCATION  
SECTOR**

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## Abstract

As an early career researcher (ECR), it is common to feel feelings of failure. As a working class (WC) individual in higher education (HE), it is common to feel feelings of failure and that you don't have, as Pierre Bourdieu might say, a 'feel for the game'. As a working-class queer (WCQ) in HE, that feeling of failure is underscored by a disoriented life that does not 'fit' the heteronormative 'successes' of what an ECR 'should be'. As a 'feminised' queer man, their formations of gender might 'naturally' feel or appear to align more to that of WC women. Therefore, it could be argued, that feminised work might be funnelled towards me whilst the 'real men' get on with the important work within academia; work valued by the institution and the broader sector.

In this autoethnographical layered account, I face my own failures as a precariously employed WCQ ECR trying to make sense of did I fail my first attempt at a PhD like I was structurally 'supposed to'?

Drawing on concepts and theory routed in psychodynamics of work, positive psychology, affect theory, queer theory and sociology, I construct a 'trial set' of lens I can look through and 'refract' my gaze to 'really' see what was at play during my failure. I aim (and want) to see things more queerly. I learn (and unlearn) ways of being in and navigating the world around me, against a backdrop where society and the promise of the good life is 'frayed'; near impossible to achieve.

Instead, however, what if I was to view this failure queerly? Maybe I was 'doomed' for failure all along. And perhaps 'getting lost' on my ECR journey meant I found a new way of 'doing' research. I found a new way of teaching. I found a new way of seeing my life and society more queerly, shedding away the pressures of heteronormativity and the farse that is meritocracy. I found a new way to value care, from my queer collective, my work collective and care towards my students.

This project does not aim to explain the failures of all WCQ ECRs (or workers more broadly). But it does aim to hold a mirror up to HE and society on the experiences of precarity in the Scottish HE sector. And most importantly to me, this project might contribute towards an intersectional WCQ reading list inspiring and spurring on the inclusive feminist classrooms our universities desperately need.

## Prologue

I failed.

I failed to achieve my PhD I started in October 2018.

I failed to make meaningful progress within the time expected of an early-career researcher (ECR) at Strathclyde Business School. In the summer of 2023, I decided to withdraw from my PhD programme because I felt overwhelmed by the PhD process, and I hated my PhD project because at the centre of it was COVID-19 pandemic.

I cannot read any more journal articles about the realities for frontline service workers during that time.

I cannot look at my netnographic data – documenting as frontline service workers worried, struggled through the pandemic and were reaching out for solidarity during that isolating and unpredictable time.

I cannot read another policy document about public health interventions, and which area of Scotland was under ‘tier three restrictions’ at what time and what this meant for ordinary working-class (WC) people.

So, I walked away, threw in the towel and gave up the ghost. And I couldn’t face telling anyone that I had done it.

I am a working-class queer (WCQ) lad from the estate of Hallglen in Falkirk. That’s that big white housing estate you see after departing Falkirk High rail station as you head towards Edinburgh Waverley on your left-hand side after you come out of the tunnel. I was born in 1986, seven years into the premiership of Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Margaret Thatcher. My parents, Elma and Stuart, both worked in hospitality as frontline service workers. Two years before I started primary school, Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 was passed by the UK Parliament which banned ‘the promotion of homosexuality’ by local authorities meaning queerness was completely erased from my primary and secondary education. For many lads at school, I was a to be bullied for being a ‘wee poof’. To the lassies, who made up (*and still make up*) all my friendships and allyships, I was someone to protect, and their role was to warn the lads to ‘leave me alone’. Section 28 (*or Clause 28 as it was later known*) was finally repealed by the Scottish Parliament in 2001, the year I left high school and started full time work. But I have been working since 1997.

As an 11-year-old paper boy, I delivered the news to homes cross Falkirk that 18 years of Tory rule in Britain had ended and Tony Blair had been elected Prime Minister - and later, as I ended my stint as a paper boy, news of the introduction of the Euro currency in January 2002. From 2001 to 2012, I worked in the retail sector; moving to London in 2006 and returning home when I decided to go back to further education and then attend university. It was while living in London at the age of 22, I finally ‘came out’ for the first time to queer friends and allies before coming out to hometown friends and family in the following months. My ‘coming out’ was relatively uneventful but, as I have discovered doing this project, the process of ‘becoming queer’ is ever evolving and a process of learning and unlearning. In 2013, at the ripe ‘mature student’ age of 27, I was the first of my family to attend university. The year before that, I had gone to college to get the necessary qualifications, in the form of a HNC in

Administration and Information Technology, to get accepted to the University of Stirling to study towards my BA (Hons) in Human Resource Management (*with French - which was dropped after semester one because I was hopeless*). On my first day, my fears of attending university as a mature student were fully realised as a (*much*) younger student asked if I was the lecturer as we waited to enter the lecture hall. I was mortified. I chose not to sit next to them in the lecture hall. After struggling academically through the first two years of university (*and realising, after seeking support and early stages of diagnosis, I was 'very probably' dyslexic – which is why reading and academic writing were such a challenge*) things turned around for me after being cared for and supported by a range of women in both lecturing roles and student support roles (*named within the acknowledgements*). I will always be grateful for the time, effort and care I received from these women who helped me achieve a first-class degree; despite working nearly full-time hour in various hospitality jobs. In 2017, I went on to study my MSc in Human Resource Management at Strathclyde Business School, whilst I continued to work in hospitality and I was also writing for a political website on a freelance basis during my studies, and I graduated with a distinction classification. But breaking my ankle in January 2018, halfway through my MSc no less and taking classes via Skype before it was the done thing, I had to claim Universal Credit for the first time because I was a precariously employed frontline service worker (FLSW) on a zero-hours contract (ZHC) who was not 'worth' the company sick pay.

After graduation, I was 'successful' in securing the Student Excellence Award (and stipend funding) to complete my PhD. But I failed in the becoming of a full-time doctoral researcher. Instead, I was 'compelled' to take on teaching work. There was always a reason though: to top up my stip-end 'earnings'; to cover bills and other financial commitments; but also, it gave me a fix of job satisfaction I lacked 'being a researcher'. As I had discovered in my former careers in retail and hospitality, I could extract genuine joy from providing good levels of customer service. I took pride in that line of work, and I was bloody good at it. I thrived caring for people and being seen as the good and reliable worker. In previous jobs, I was described by line managers as 'easy to manage' and a 'diligent hard worker' (*all of which should be a red flag that you are easy to exploit by the way*). In my tutoring role, I was recognised and seen as a great teacher. But later, perhaps when it was too late to change course on my PGR journey and do anything about it, I realised this type of recognition from colleagues does not count as 'real capital' to be exchanged on the 'fields of exchange' within academia. The real valuable capital for an academic career path is peer-reviewed publications, bids for funded research projects and knowledge exchange initiatives. In essence, the work that produces 'real capital' is all the work I was 'hiding' from.

Starting my PhD in October 2018, I took every opportunity I could to get into the classroom and in front of students. Since I started my HE career, I have been on numerous ZHCs, fixed term contracts (FTCs) and taking 'gigs' as bit parts on research projects which have so far failed to produce fruit I can exchange on the competitive HE market. By April 2023, at the end of my SEA funding, I found myself on five different employment contracts at once working across three institutions and at a hospitality venue in Falkirk. It was exhausting. And all my contracts felt, to one extent to another, precarious and could slip out of my grip at any time. I had to 'keep my foot in the door' in case suddenly, the flow of work from one employer was turned off like a tap. I *had* to have this work to hand. Or at least I felt I needed to have all this work to hand. Did I really have to have all this work to hand at once? Or did I never trust myself to let go of work I knew I could do well? Perhaps I feared failure in a new role, so clung onto the others I knew I couldn't fail in.

During this time, I was, and still am, in a long-term relationship with a cis man who is the sole career for his mum. He lives over an hours' drive away, meaning seeing each other must be planned; he must find someone to support with the caring responsibilities when he leaves the house for more than a few hours. As I write this in the summer of 2025, we have been in a relationship for 12 years; we previously lived together in both Glasgow and Dundee and, although he always had some degree of care responsibilities, we had our own version of a 'normal' little queer life. But during the COVID-19 pandemic, it came to the point that my partner had to spend more and more time caring. During the lockdown of 2020, we were separated as he shielded with his mum for three months. I lived alone in Dundee where I did not have friends, family or my own queer collective around me. I was alone. I was failing as a PGR. I was taking on more and more teaching as all class were held online as a distraction and to save money. By the end of 2021, my partner was living with his mum full time, and we decided I should move back to my hometown to 'put down roots' for us. We now see each other twice a week (*on a good week*) and if I could wish for anything it would be to be closer and having what resembles our version of a 'normal' little queer life again.

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As I edit this prologue for what feels like the 100<sup>th</sup> time, to include more important elements of my background – such as being the first in my family to attend university, my supervisor highlighted as an important element of my story at our last meeting - I smile thinking about when I had my last home together with my partner. Then remember the seasons of our favourite shows, like RuPaul's Drag Race, that remain unwatched, because of our silly (*but very important*) commitment to 'always watch a new episode together' but having very little time to binge like we used to on an evening. I look forward to the day when we have the time to dive into these episodes and go on our days out to the Ayrshire coast and to small provincial towns across Scotland to trawl the charity shops together like we used to.

But I digress...

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In 2021, I took an 18month voluntary suspension from my PhD programme to work in a HRM role and buy my wee humble flat just a ten-minute walk from where I grew up. On returning to my PhD studies in 2022, my project had been so altered by the Covid-19 pandemic I just couldn't get back into it. I found centring the COVID-19 pandemic in my work (*and I say this in all honesty*) traumatic. I made the decision to formally quit my PhD in September 2024; after securing a yearlong fixed-term lecturer post at an institution I had been taking casual work from. I could not have this heavy PGR weight around my neck any longer – especially as I took on a new role which needed much of my focus and brain power. I made the decision to become an MPhil student at Strathclyde Business School. I now take on no teaching responsibilities at the University of Strathclyde.

Seven years after starting my first attempt at a PhD, am I finally ready to ask myself the question: Have I failed like a working-class queer (WCQ) was structurally supposed to? Using theory and concepts from different traditions, can I finally make sense of this failure?

This MPhil is a manifestation of my failure. This autoethnography project would not have existed had I done 'what I was supposed to do' and go on and completed my PhD in a timely manner and listened to my supervisors like a good boy. I would never have read such fascinating AE journal articles where

the writers shared their (often) difficult experiences ranging from alcoholism, experiences of racism to navigating grief. I would not have engaged with so much queer literature. And it is for this I am so thankful for. I continue to learn so much about myself, others and the world around me by engaging with AE and queer literature. And for that alone, it was worth that failure. Getting lost on my ECR journey meant I found a new and exciting route forward with my research and career. But it was not without its costs – both financially and more holistically and personally.

But as always, when I talk about myself, I feel I am being self-indulgent, but the story is part and parcel of the substantive subject and project at hand: me ‘queering’ my own experiences of work as a WCQ ECR.

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To my folks, Stuart and Elma. I know raising a family and keeping me safe, fed and cared for wasn't easy. You were both so young when you had me and thinking about how incredible you did fills with me with pride and wonder. When I decided to go to university all those years ago, you couldn't have been prouder and more encouraging. You guys are my best pals, and I couldn't be any luckier than I am to have you both as my parents. Thank you.

All the amazing people that form my work collective, there are far too many of you to name across different institutions. So many have looked over aspects of this project and I have received so much cheerleading and feedback that has helped make this project what it is today. You guys make the 'real work' easier and do so with a laugh, care and a flourish.

To my queer collective, thanks for being there throughout my journey of completing this MPhil and help shape the direction of it. In my life beyond academia, your solidarity and friendship mean so much to me. The care we show for each other nourishes me and keeps me grounded when this world is getting harder and harder to navigate. My learning during this project has made me value you more.

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And last and certainly not least, my partner Glen. You remind me every day what love can and should be in everyday life and the right now. We have faced, and continue to face, hardship and separation but having you in my life is one of the greatest pleasures. During this project we discussed, debated and challenged each other's understandings of what it is to be queer in this crazy capitalist world. And you gave your time and love in proofreading the final edit of this work when my eyes were tired and I couldn't see the wood for the trees. Thank you for always reminding me that I don't need to 'reach

for the next big thing' because what we already have right now is great – even when society is always telling us to aim for 'bigger and better'.

## 1. Introductions

### 1.1 The Working-Class Queer Early Career Researcher

The impact of work on the self and society is huge. To make sense of how work and employment impact the individual, we must look to experience of work which is not solely “viewed from some detached objective standpoint” (Dejours et al, 2018: ix). This research project aims to answer that call and consider the psychodynamics of work from the perspective of the subjective self. Lauren Berlant’s (2011) theorising of cruel optimism critically reflects on the ‘manipulable material of the good life fantasy’ - including the desire for job security and positive labour relations contributing further to a challenging historical present in times of precarity in the everyday ordinariness. Bone’s (2021) research, exploring the cruel optimism in the experiences of precarious workers in higher education in Australia, where participants felt the casualised work they undertake is just a ‘precarious impasse’ on their journey to the ‘good life fantasy’ of secure fairly-paid and fulfilling work - which will come about if ‘they just worked hard enough for long enough’ (p 283). From a more materialist perspective, Dejours et al (2018) highlight the importance of considering the malaise that surrounds contemporary work and the worries, fears and psychological implications presented by work can have on the subjective self. Uncertain revenue streams and the financial pressures in contemporary universities reflect the precarious nature of employment, particularly for early career researchers (ECRs) (Bone, 2019: 2021). Moreover, within the context of the increasingly neoliberal university, Cannella and Koro-Ljungberg (2017) suggest higher education is now a space for an ‘entrepreneurial mindset’ where the labour of academics and the subjective self simply become ‘human capital’ to be exchanged for promotion.

The experiences and impacts of precarity in the workplace are not homogenous. Within academia specifically, career development, promotions and job security reinforce and reflect wider inequalities along class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and disability lines. However, a fuller understanding of the feelings and manifestations of intersectional inequalities of precarity must also consider the experiences of marginalisation, exile and lack of belonging in professional and personal spheres (Millar 2017 cited in Bone 2021) which this thesis aims to address in part. As noted in Winters and Ningard (2023), working-class queer (WCQ) ECRs face extensive “structural violence” (p27) as workers who experience precarious employment which baked into higher education (HE) institutions’ business models in neoliberal economies, resulting in unpredictable financial earnings, poor working conditions, work intensification and nonlinear career trajectories (UCU, 2025). Moreover, the poor and unstable working conditions experienced by the precariat (Standing, 2011) in HE continually reproduces the barriers facing ECRs. And the adjunctification of ECR work and employment creates a liminal space with little opportunity for ECRs to ‘free themselves’ due to the dismantling of remaining secure or permanent positions within universities (Winters and Ningard, 2023). From a queer perspective, Brim (2020) notes that scholars are conditioned (maybe even ‘straightened’?) and trained to research more mainstream topics which will have wider appeal and secure more ‘valuable’ capital to exchange in the HE academic market. To that end, queer scholars have a choice to pursue research projects which are more heteronormative and (in some cases) even pro-capitalist (to secure publications in the highest-ranking journals) or ‘persevere’ and engage in queer studies – using up whatever financial capital they have to secure more ‘niche’ publications. Moreover, precarious

workers are often excluded from funding to attend academic conferences (Taylor, Brim and Mhan, 2023), acting as a barrier to networking and career development. Where funding is available more locally at department level, particularly in business schools, these will often be for heteronormative and mainstream research areas – meaning little scope to showcase queer-centred research or network and be exposed to the work of other queer scholars. It might also be the case then that precarious workers are oblique or feel ‘on the margins’ of the broader workforce; due to their lack of job security and linear (or straight) career trajectory. Therefore, perhaps, these workers could be seen as odd or even a little queer (?) themselves, compared to the rest of the permanent workforce.

The study of queer life is essential to understand the nuances and experiences of those who live ‘on the margins’ of heteronormative capitalist society and this type of research is inherently political. Using Sedgwick’s (2011 adopted in Winters and Ningard (2023) and Guyan (2025)) conceptualisation of queer, it is largely agreed to be an inclusive and all-encompassing umbrella term for gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex and asexual plus people. But the use of ‘queer’ does not overlook the specific experiences, intersections and (dis)orientations of each group or individual of that community. Taylor, Brim and Mhan (2023) go as far as to state that queer people have been failed at an institutional level through (un)employment and misrecognition of their identities. Moreover, as a collective, they assert that working-class queer peoples’ experiences of precarity are both plural and intersectional “extending in and out of the university” (*Ibid*, p1). It is this plurality and intersectional nature of precarity of WCQ ECRs that this project aims to consider. Within this project, literature centred on positive psychology will also be considered and critiqued. In today’s ‘happiness industry’ (Davies, 2015), positive psychology can dominate the narrative on how one should navigate their career and cope with adversity in both their professional and private lives (see Prillentsky (2017)). However, this approach to psychology, with little consideration given the material realities of the precarious worker and has been heavily critiqued as lacking. Moreover, individualism within positive psychology overlooks the care offered amongst WCQ people, via queer collectives and chosen family (Winters and Ningard (2023)). This project will consider how, through the inability to find solace in positive psychology approaches or build ‘suitable’ levels of ‘resilience for success’, how one might feel or experience the world as a WCQ in a precariously employed ECR role.

## 1.2 Why Autoethnography?

To answer Dejours et al.’s (2018) call, for much needed subjective exploration of the impact of work on the self, and, inspired by Ronai’s (1992a) *The Reflective Self Through Narrative: A Night in the life of an Erotic Dancer/Researcher*, I aim to examine the lived experience of a WCQ on the frontline of HE in Scotland– using multi-layered personal accounts and self-reflections – to set out experiences and worries of the precariously employed from a WCQ orientation and recounted via autoethnography (AE).

From now on, like Ronai (1992a), I will use three asterisks to indicate a shift to a different “temporal/spatial/attitudinal realm” (p102) – or to shift (back?) to my ‘researcher voice’. Think of it as my ‘turn to camera’ moment. Moreover, drawing on the methods used by Ronai (1992a and 1992b), I too adopt participant self-introspection, interactive introspection and participant observation techniques. As a participant observer, I have observed the behaviour of others and reflect on conversations with my fellow participants and think about those interactions through a ‘queerer’ set of ‘trial lenses’. As highlighted by Herman and Adams (2025), I too describe the setting and interactions

amongst participants whilst the focus of the project remains on my thoughts, feelings and reflections as I write, reflect and data analyse in tandem. When using AE in this manner, the data collection and analysis processes cannot be cleanly separated into one before another as look at my experiences more critically in retrospect.

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AE allows the researcher to document autobiographical style writing which showcase multiple layers of consciousness. As highlighted by Reed-Danahey, (1997), the autoethnographers (AErs) gaze might jump backwards and forwards in time; as well as looking at experiences through a wide-angle lens to consider societal aspects as well as the personal in a narrower frame and focus. Neumann (1996 cited in Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011) highlights that the AErs gaze turns inwards which can expose vulnerabilities deep within the self which can resist cultural interpretations from outsiders. Written in the first person, the method of AE allows distinctions of the personal and cultural to become completely blurred beyond recognition and separation. But the AEr can catalogue and analyse their experiences in a variety of different formats including fiction, reflective essays, layered accounts (as per Ronai, 1992a), as short stories or novels and even social science centred prose (Reed-Danahey, 1997) – producing original manifestations of academic art.

Herman and Adams (2025) break autoethnography down to its component parts (auto-ethno-graphy) to set out their definition. ‘Auto’ indicates a genre of writing about one’s life, revealing hidden, silenced or even possibly taboo perspectives on life experiences. ‘Ethno’ points towards the genre of social science research – which can utilise participant observations in their natural settings with a focus on cultural practices and principles, familiarity with popular texts and existing theory and empirical evidence to identify patterns of experience (*Ibid*, 2025). And finally, ‘graphy’ implies a focus on the process, craft and ethics of the writing and the representation. Within AE texts, Reed-Danahey (1997) suggests that the AEr can invoke or embody the urgent need for action and the need for further dialogue on a particular issue by providing a full and vivid immersive picture. It is in this project I aim to capture that spirit; while critically examining my own experiences as a WCQ ECR through queer, sociological and psychodynamic lenses, I wish to prompt much-needed dialogue and future research from myself and other WCQ. I also hope to contribute to and help shape a feminist intersectional reading list for students, as called for by the likes of Taylor (2023).

### 1.3 Theoretical (‘Trial’) Lenses

The theoretical orientation of the study is based on several distinctive approaches, namely a materialist approach, considering the working conditions and factors impacting on the realities of work, and the ‘affect’ these material considerations impact on the subjective self and the psychodynamics of work. Secondly, a sociological perspective is considered to critically analyse the phenomena in a holistic manner and how realities of work are reproduced and how these might be experienced by different groups of workers across society and how this malaise feels and is experienced by a precariously employed ECR in the Scottish HE sector. Despite its limitations and potential lack of ‘thickness’ and depth in creating a ‘robust and scientific’ conceptual framework, the

use of a broader approach to theory and concepts from different traditions to make sense of queer lives has been adopted by other queer academics - such as, most recently, by Dr Kevin Guyan (2025) in his book *'Rainbow Trap: Queer Lives, Classifications and the Dangers of Inclusion'* and by Professor Jack Halberstam (2011) in *'The Queer Art of Failure'*. The richness, thickness and depth will be provided using AE (Reed-Danahey, 1997), the theory and concepts kept to hand will be utilised to see things more queerly. Throughout this project, inspired by conversations with my own queer life collective, particularly by H\*\*\*\*\* who works as an optometrist, I adopt the metaphor of the 'trail set', 'trial frame' and 'trial lenses' that I will utilise and place in front of my eyes to 'see' and attempt to make sense of my worries, emotions and experiences as a WCQ as if I were in an eye test looking at what is before me – squinting to make sense of my own ordinariness in a 'refraction-like' way.

The core theoretical lenses that remain close by and within reach to the AEr throughout this study are as follows:

Firstly, the concept of the work collective (Dejours et al, 2018) will be utilised to zoom in on the suffering 'of the self' experienced by the 'real work' carried out amongst workers. The work collective also throws light on the technical dimensions of work and the collective negotiation between the 'prescribed work', set by management, and how these tasks are realised in the workplace across the workforce (in an attempt) to meet agreed standards and outcomes. It is here, this project considers that gap between the prescribed work and the real work and how that gap might be more challenging or labour intensive for some workers over others. Furthermore, Dejours et al. (2018) calls for recognition and consideration of the "worries that afflict modern societies around work" (p23) which points to and attempts to conceptualise a malaise around contemporary work and prompts us to consider how this might impact some workers more over others – such as those 'on the margins' of society or precariously employed 'hoping' to secure the dwindling number of tenured or permanent posts within academia (Winters and Ningard, 2023; Bone, 2021). At times, adding to the layering of the AE, I will consider the role of my own work collective in the production of this MPhil project.

Secondly, Lauren Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism will be embedded throughout this study. Cruel optimism exists "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (*Ibid*: 1). With the malaise around contemporary ECR employment within HE and dismantling of the remaining secure employment (Tayler, Brim and Mahn, 2023), this chimes with what Berlant (2011) identified as the 'fraying' (p196) of the perceptions of economic security and the unravelling of what 'the good life' could look like within the chaos of the ordinariness experienced by (predominantly) precarious workers. As Berlant themselves suggests, precarity is and reproduces "an affective atmosphere" and "an existential truth about contingencies of living" (2011:92). Despite these experiences in and out of the workplace, for the (precarious) worker, the optimism will remain and will continue to inflict illusions or desires for meritocracy and take part in "the neoliberal push" (Jackson, 2020: 13) to be self-starting, dynamic and adaptable professional while the fantasy decays but the lie that "hard work and gumption" (*Ibid*, 2020: 13) are the capital to achieve up upward mobility remains. But this project considers, inspired by discussions from my own (predominantly queer) work collective, in the 'real world', how fitting and useful is the concept of cruel optimism - given its conceptualisation from media analysis and the contemporary economic permacrisis HE education continues to face.

And thirdly, Bev Skeggs (1997) writing on the formation of class and gender will be considered. In her seminal text, Skeggs drew on Bourdieu's (1989) model of class which was based on capital and movements through social space of the everyday. Bourdieu identified four types of capital: namely: economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital. And Skeggs (1997) goes on to highlight that class is generated historically through what capital we have access to when we are born and how we occupy social positions such as gender roles, race and class (Moi, 1991 cited in Skeggs, 1997) allowing us to identify the interests, barriers and benefits of a particular group. Perhaps most importantly for this project, Skeggs (1997) identified that femininity is a form of cultural capital that women (and perhaps even 'feminised' queer people?) are encouraged to inhabit. But this feminine cultural capital tends to be traded and exchanged in certain types of work – namely those centred around care – and, as highlighted by Ackers (1990), are 'less valued' in other types of work (such as those dominated by [heterosexual] men).

#### 1.4 The Sole Research Aim of this Autoethnography Project

Utilising the theory and concepts set out in section 1.3 and considering the context set out in section 1.1 using the mono-method of AE, this project has one overarching research aim:

The aim of this research project is to critically analyse my feelings, emotions and experiences of a precariously employed working-class queer (WCQ) early career researcher (ECR) working in the Scottish higher education sector through the adoption of the layered account approach to autoethnography.

#### 1.5 Your Road Map

Unlike most dissertations and thesis', the autoethnographic dissertation and academic texts rarely follow the traditional format of introduction to literature review to methods to findings and discussion through to conclusions (Hermann and Adams, 2025). So, in that spirit, I will be doing things a little differently in places. As expected, Chapter 1 has set out the background to the study and introduced the methods, theoretical and conceptual 'lenses' and research aim. Chapter 2 comprises of a literature review which critically examines both contemporary and seminal texts in the several areas of this study – including: psychodynamics of work with a focus on Dejour et al.'s (2018) concept of the work collective; Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism; Formations of gender and class with a focus on the writings of Bev Skeggs (1997); WCQ realities and consideration will be given to experiences of ECRs with a sharp focus on precarity and its ripple effects on the subjective self (see Jankowski, 2024) and the precarious workers as a collective (Standing, 2011; 2023). Chapter 3 contains detailed considerations and critiques of methodological considerations – including: the adopting of Sara Ahmed's (2006) queer phenomenology as a philosophical approach and the layered account approach of AE. Within this chapter, the ethics and limitations of using AE as a mono-method for this study will be critically examined.

From then on, things take a different turn. Instead of a traditional 'findings and discussion', I will set out three separate vignettes – of which are a layered account (Ronai, 1992a) of 'the everyday' for me; the WCQ ECR. Vignette One considers the lived realities of precarious work and implications for a WCQ who is critically reflecting on their experiences of affect and cruel optimism as they face the near

certainly their fixed-term contract might come to end – likely ending their career in HE. Titled ‘I’m Sorry This Vignette is Late’: The (Current) Worries & Preoccupations of A Precariously Employed WCQ’, the piece explains why I failed to meet an agreed deadline with my supervisor to submit a draft of my vignette for review on time because of the ripple effect of precarity. Vignette Two critically analyses the experiences and emotions of caring (too much?) and the direct impact this could have on the experience of the ‘real work’ and precarious employment for some workers - in this case, of course, a precariously employed WCQ ECR. Titled ‘Mind the Working-Class Queer Gap’: The Fear of Failure Because You \*Really\* Care (Too Much?)’ I critically reflect on the of gender and ‘feminised’ caring work for a WCQ like me and the lack of value care work has on the HE ‘fields of exchange’. Vignette Three is more concise and considers the question I posed to myself within the prologue, ‘So, Did I Fail Like I Was Supposed To?’ taking into account my structural barriers of class and queerness and how failure might be the start of future ‘successes’ – a version of success defined by WCQs and constructed through queer care and solidarity.

Finally, the conclusion chapter considers key findings, takeaways and discussion points in relation the research aim of this project; pulling together and setting out how failure, cruel optimism and class, gender and sexuality have implications for WCQ ECRs. Moreover, comprehensive limitations of the research project and (just some of the many) avenues for future research will be considered – which signpost some consideration for my PhD in Social Sciences I hope to start on a part-time basis in late 2026. For now, we will turn to Chapter 2 and set out the ‘trial set and lenses’ which will be adopted to help me see things more queerly.

## 2. The Trial Set and Lenses: Christophe Dejours Work Collective, Caring (Too Much?) and the Working-Class Queer Precariat of Early-Career Research in the Scottish Higher Education Sector

### 2.1 Introduction

The following chapter will set out and consider the ‘trial lens’ that are within my reach to understand my experiences as a WCQ. These range from Dejours et al’s (2018) thesis which calls for a renewed focus and return of critical theory within the academic study of work and which highlights the centrality of work in a subject’s life and how this can (in most cases) have a detrimental impact on the self through suffering. Also, further consideration will be given to the psychodynamics of work and the realities (and worries) of contemporary work which make up the ‘malaise around work’. Later in the chapter, the concept of the work collective is critically examined and applied to the precarious work. Whilst this chapter critically analyses the implications of contemporary work on the subjective self, it aims to do this by zooming in on the experiences and worries of work specifically facing the WCQ ECR’s subjective self. Moreover, when critically examining the concept of the work collective, a focus on the ‘fear of failure’, where a subject is face to face with the impending, intimate and individual challenge of navigating and realising ‘the real work’, will take centre stage. Moreover, the writings of Beverly Skeggs (1997: 2004) on the formation of class and gender identity and Lauren Berlant’s (2011) concept of cruel optimism will be examined. This study homes in on the fear of failure ‘twisting’ the fear of failure identified by Dejours (1995) within the work collective by looking to Jack Halberstam’s (2011) contributions in *The Queer Art of Failure*. The chapter will close by revisiting each theory and concept, considering them individually as distinctive lens of which to critically examine the WCQ experience. And perhaps how making use of several ‘lens’ at once can refract my gaze to truly ‘see’ the phenomena before me.

Before diving into this chapter, important context must be set out to understand the origins of this approach to researching and understanding work. In their paper *‘The Centrality of Work’*, Dejours and Deranty (2010) define the psychodynamics of work as ‘the clinical approach based on a theory of work that focuses on the relationship between subjectivity, work and action’ (p167). Dejours (2007) also highlights the importance the role work plays in the social and in the affective life of the individual subject. Putting aside the technical benefits of work for now, such as salary and the ability to pay bills and to reproduce life, Dejours et al (2018) emphasize the variety of psychological experiences and emotions a subject can experience through the psychodynamics offered by work; notably ‘affect suffering’ – which is stress and emotional challenges in work – brought to the subject from working conditions and demands placed on individual worker’s self and body. The implications of contemporary work are central to the subjective self, which can have impacts in and out of the workplace (Deranty, 2009). And it is here we turn to the concept of subjective self and the experiences and emotions which interact with the milieu of contemporary academic work.

### 2.2 The Subjective Self, The Malaise Around Contemporary Academic Work and the Use Positive Psychology to Soothe Suffering

At its origins, the discipline of the psychodynamics of work was primarily focused on the individual’s mental illness in confronting the ‘organisational constraints of work’ (Dejours and Deranty, 2010: 169). However, work, under the ‘right’ organisational conditions and division of labour, can be a source of pleasure and self-fulfilment and work is never an individual endeavour - given that the subject is working, directly and indirectly, with others. As a starting point, we must consider that the subject’s

relationship with work (paid employment or otherwise) is not neutral (Dejours, 2014). Utilising Freudian terminology of '*Seelenleben*', Dejours highlights that our relationship with work is central to our existence and mental development from childhood; meaning that work "quite definitely goes to the very core of the life of the mind" (*Ibid*, p115) and the formation of our subjective identity in (and out) of the professional sphere (Deranty, 2010).

Dejours et al (2018) highlight the importance of considering the malaise that surrounds contemporary work and the worries, fears and psychological implications presented by work can have on the subjective self. To this end, Littler (2017) highlights that during the New Labour era in UK politics of the late 1990s and 2000s, individualism and meritocracy dominated the narrative on how one should view their own personal social mobility. This shift was intentional away from the politics of the collective, class and solidarity that had preceded it. This shift was a concerted effort of the New Labour project and elites to separate economic inequality from the political narrative of class-based struggle. All the while, individualism and the notion of the 'entrepreneurial spirit' were a centre piece on lumping the responsibility of success onto the individual - all while economic inequality widened in the UK, precarious work became normalised within the labour market (Standing, 2011: 2023) and the working class faced economic crisis after economic crisis (Paton, 2024). In HE more specifically, Edwards (2022) suggests that neoliberalism within the academic context is described as an economic ideology and a political one. Neoliberalism has advanced by the dominance of the free market and attitudes of entrepreneurship. And within the public sector more specifically, the 'logic' of the free market and competition becomes the dominant narrative in decision making. Edwards (2022) goes on to suggest that the "marketisation of education is the link between neoliberalism and [HE]" (p905).

Although Standing (2011) set out (convincingly) that the 'precariat' was a new social class that differed from the 'traditional proletariat', who experienced and benefitted from some forms of protected, unionised and secured work, Allen (2014 cited in Livanos and Popadopolous, 2019) argues that those traditional working-class communities also experience precarity in the everyday. But it was Butler's (2006) contributions to precarity that exudes from work (and wider society and economic realities) that invokes feelings and experiences of existential uncertainty which ripples through all aspects of one's life; including relationships and finding housing (see Jankowski, 2024). However, experiences of precarity in the workplace are not homogenous. Within HE specifically, career development, promotions and job security reinforce and reflect wider inequalities along class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and disability lines (Burke and Byrne, 2020). As Millar (2017 cited in Bone, 2021) highlights, a fuller understanding of the feelings and manifestations of intersectional inequalities of precarity must also consider the experiences of marginalisation, exile and lack of belonging in professional and personal spheres which this project aims to consider. In their report into the rise of precarious employment, the International Labour Organization (ILO) (2011:5) suggests that "forms of precarity seem to be ever expanding" and that "employers constantly uncover new ways to circumvent regulations or find loopholes in regulations to increase the profitability". UCU (2025) echoes these concerns for HE in the UK specifically and accuse universities as operating like private enterprises; squeezing labour costs by adopting zero-hours contracts, fixed-term contracts and other forms of precarious employment across a variety of academic and non-academic job roles. This includes, as Sisson (2010) identifies, fragmenting the (university) workforce by adopting arms-length companies to offer essential services (such as cleaners employed by different contractors from caterers for example) which can undermine collective action within an institution. Therefore, the fragmented workforces (and perhaps even those individual workers) feel atomised.

The realities for workers within the neoliberal university, compounded by work precarity and 'business-like' funding models (Bone, 2021), the individual academic embraces and complies with the ideas of competitive [heteronormative and capitalist] 'success' and failure. Therefore, as highlighted by Mahony and Weiner (2019), is likely to view both success and failure through the lens of personal accomplishment (through publications and funding grants for example) which are detached from the economic and political context (Edwards, 2022) which HE operates within. To counter and resist the dominant narrative of heteronormative success, Winters and Ningard (2023) proposes organising and deploying a collective queer ethic of care for working-class academics, support staff and students to combat the prevailing winds of budget cuts, marketisation and the elimination of programmes which can support WCQ people to access and 'flourish' in HE. However, Vitry (2020) suggests that very little research has been conducted into what 'queering organising' might look like. And Vitry (2020: 936) goes on to ask the question "how do we organize collectives that do not reproduce capitalist or neoliberal designs, but where we use our differences to build communities?". Moreover, Sugarman (2015) asks us to consider how difficult it might be for individuals (therefore collectives or coalitions) to 'opt out' of neoliberal thinking when the state of play is hyper capitalist and the sole goal of an institution is high productivity and profit – resulting in 'playing the game' whilst trying to 'destroy' it from the inside. It must therefore be considered, given the malaise that surrounds and shapes the world of academic work, how an individual worker 'should' respond to such a social environment. In the foreword for *The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Positive Psychology*, Isaac Prilleltensky questions the "tendency of psychologists" (p21) to locate the source of well-being within the individual. A notion captured in the quote Prilleltensky (2017) selected from William Davies' (2015) book *The Happiness Industry*:

"As positive psychology and happiness measurement have permeated our political and economic culture since the 1990s, there has been a growing unease with the way in which notions of happiness and well-being have been adopted by [policymakers] and managers. The risk is that this science ends up blaming . . . individuals for their own misery, and ignores the context that has contributed to it" (Davies, 2015: 5-6).

At its essence, positive psychology assumes that there are traits and processes that are inherently beneficial for well-being (McNulty and Fincham, 2012). When introducing positive psychology in their seminal paper, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) highlighted the importance of the subjective experience. By singling out satisfaction, contentment and well-being in the past, hope and optimism in the future and happiness in the present there is a profound individualisation of the self within positive psychology. The 'positive' individual traits Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi highlighted included the capacity for love, courage aesthetic sensibilities, perseverance, future mindedness, high talent and wisdom. As for the collective elements of positive psychology, it was focussed on 'moving' the individual 'forward' to become 'better citizens' through taking responsibility, altruism, civility and hard work ethic. McNulty and Fincham (2012) argue that psychological characteristics (the ones highlighted by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) or otherwise) cannot be inherently positive (or negative) and, looking to the writings of Lewin (1935 cited in McNulty and Fincham (2012)), that behaviour (therefore well-being) is determined by "the interplay between" (p102) one's social environment and psychological characteristics.

Prilleltensky (2017) acknowledges profound shortcomings of the inherent assumptions made in positive psychology. However, goes on to highlight the importance of the contributions of the positive psychology movement by emphasising strengths over limitations and the focus on well-being over pathologizing individuals facing hardship (in the workplace or otherwise) as 'troubled' or problematic.

Prilleltensky (2016) also suggests that building the skills to exhibit a positive psychology can be a positive experience and can equip individuals to cope with adversity. But in closing, Prilleltensky (2017) warns:

“In the absence of fair and just conditions, the potential benefits of positive psychology will remain within the province of the privileged. There is an urgent need to democratize positive psychology and all applied disciplines. Unless we do that, positive psychology will be a luxury for the few and a threat to the many, for the interiorization of well-being limits the exteriorization of injustice.” (p22).

It could be concluded that the messages received by working-class people (queer or otherwise) to reach for positive psychology orientated well-being initiatives (which might revolve around consumption or neo-liberal ideals of self-improvement or ‘success’) cannot bring about the much-needed solace and ‘flourishing’; without righting the injustices of inequality and fair working conditions.

### 2.3 The Work Collective and the ‘Real Work’

For Dejours (2014), the body, not just the brain, is “the locus of intelligence and skilfulness in work” (p49). Through the use of tools, machines and technical objects and persistence and interaction with tasks associated with a particular type of work, intelligence is released ‘through the body’ (*Ibid*). Deranty (2010), via the work of Hutchins (1995), highlights the way work is to be carried out, or the ‘explicit work rules’, are made from a “whole universe of unwritten professional rules” (p77). Dejours (2014) underscores that we work for someone – be that a manager, supervisor our colleagues or customers - and work takes place in a human world with relationships of inequality, power, control and domination. Dejours et al (2018) highlight the significance that work-based rules are (very) often written by (senior) managers and bureaucrats who conduct their own work far away from the frontline and the work tasks they are writing the explicit rules for; leaving a gulf between how the work should be conducted and how it will be realised by the worker and their colleagues. Dejours (2007: 2014) assert that if workers respected directives, the work-based rules written by (senior) management, and carried out rule without deviation no production would be possible and workers are “forced to depart from the actual prescription” (Dejours et al, 2018: 76).

“...working consists [for the subject] in bridging the gap between the prescriptive and the real. But what has to be done to bridge this gap cannot be planned in advance. The way to go from the prescribed to the real must always be invented or discovered by the working subject. Hence, for the [worker], work is defined as what the subject must add to the prescriptions [of work] to reach the objectives that are assigned to him.” (Dejours, 2003: 14 cited in Dejours, 2014).

These prescribed work-based rules therefore must be negotiated, reordered, reorganised and adjusted to construct the ‘real work’; which is different from what is prescribed from management. It can be presumed therefore that workers are involved in a collective debate to contribute to their experience of work (Dejours et al, 2018). These clear decisions and negotiations are sometime essential to realise a task. And the collective who reorganises the division of labour have therefore ‘exchanged arguments’ based on technical considerations, skill level, preferences, tastes, age, gender, health and perceived ‘best ways’ of realising the task at hand (Dejours, 2007 and Dejours et al, 2018).

## 2.4 Formations of a Working-Class Queer Habitus

Beverley Skeggs (2004), in aiming to critically examine different formations of the self, looks to Bourdieu's theory of habitus. Although Bourdieu is "opposed to the concept of the self" (p83) and believes it is as a fabrication constructed by the bourgeoisie, Skeggs suggests that the French philosopher "transposes habit to decentralize the self"; making the self an unconscious action and not one formed through willpower. In a nutshell, the habitus is an 'immanent law' that is experienced from childhood and is the "internalisation of objective structures" (p84). According to Bourdieu (2000), the habitus is "a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions" (p82-83). It can be argued then, that these dispositions, that of the working-class individual, will be formed (and reproduced) through objective structures such as language or economic circumstances. And the middle-classes can simply remake themselves and the rules of the 'game' are established and operated at the advantage of the middle-class (Skeggs, 2004) – making the game feel rigged to WC people.

As touched on in section 1.4 of this project, Bourdieu (1989) identified four types of capital: namely: economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital. For a working-class individual, their cultural and social capital, such as their (more limited) knowledge and understanding of art and how to discuss it in formalised social situations with middle or upper-class people, are less likely to have high exchange value in the fields of exchange within the middle-class arena of academia. As a working-class child, it is less likely that they will have been exposed to certain types of art, theatre, music and sensibilities, therefore unable (or less versed) navigating spaces designed for and by the middle and upper classes. Reay (1997) considers that the WC do not harbour feelings of entitlement to the same extent as the middle and upper classes, therefore cannot 'take over spaces' (or push themselves forward into positions of power or challenge authority). And, in their seminal text *'Formations of Class and Gender'*, Skeggs (1997) suggests the notions of 'respectability' is a unique signifier of class – which would not be a concern to the working-class had they not been classified as "dangerous, polluting, threatening, revolutionary, pathological and without respect" (p1) by the middle-class.

Skeggs (1997) embedded her own subjectivity and experiences of working-class woman within their research. And Wood and Littler (2025) highlight that Skeggs' location within the research that underpinned *'Formations'*, meant that Skeggs (1997) was able to 'feel' the experiences of the 83 white women who were enrolled in a local college caring courses in the north-west of England in the 1980s. Throughout Skeggs' contributions to understanding gender and class, Williams' (1961 cited in Skeggs, 2004) notion that 'class is lived as a structure of feeling' (p94-95) is called upon. Being working-class is a structured feeling. The yearning and aspiration to be seen as 'respectable', to display some of the outward sensibilities of middle-classness - but absolutely not to 'become middle-class' (Lewis, Benson and Skeggs, 2025) - is a way to combat the very perceptions bestowed on the WC by the middle class in a civilizing mission steeped in the colonizing of (Black and White) WC individuals who should be controlled and monitored. It is in the disidentification of WC identity that individuals identify as being working-class. It is this notion of respectability that Wood and Littler (2025) argue is at "the centre of struggles over the classification of the working class" (p349).

Turning to WC women more specifically, within Skeggs (1997) research, spoke of efforts of self-improvement which were not successful or realized. Trying to escape their identification as WC women failed because "their lack of power to convert cultural capital into symbolic capital" (p75); such as failing to harness overt sexuality and becoming respectable by having access to educational

and cultural consumption (Skeggs, 2004) and experiencing failure due to fears of judgement and shame. Wood and Littler (2025) highlight that respectability is reproduced through judgments of others and the effect of shame making the classification understood and felt by the individual and universal. Looking to analysis from reality TV, Skeggs and Wood (2012) observed the impact of shame on WC women whilst attempting to operate in a world through the 'middle class gaze' which resulted in failings and fears of failure. Even when respectability is 'achieved', the fear remains that it can be 'torn away' because the body might feel ashamed and feel the need to shame others (Skeggs, 1997:62). As highlighted by Wood and Little (2025), associations might be made to Muntz (2017 cited in Wood and Little, 2025) analysis of queer shame, leaving me to consider that 'feminised' queer men might experience these affects, in what Sara Ahmed (2004) coined 'affective economies', which could reproduce the hierarchies of race, gender and sexuality that dominate contemporary society. It could be considered then that WC 'feminised' queer men (or more specifically WCQs) could also desire respectability and yearn for those middle-class sensibilities (in the form of a successful career, in a middle-class dominated sector, such as academia) and, whilst operating within their working-class (queer) habitus, they do not have the 'feel for [that] game' which has been designed by and to benefit the heterosexual middle and upper-classes.

As noted by Bourdieu (1994), symbolic violence is "gentle, invisible form of violence" (p186) that can happen routinely in the everyday. The subtlety of this form of violence is particularly pernicious for the likes of WCQs because it is never "recognized" (*Ibid*, 1994: 186) as violence as such. In Bourdieu's (1977) conceptualization of symbolic violence, he aims understand inequalities and hierarchies are preserved and reproduced by subterranean power relations within the social structure in the everyday which create dominant and dominated groups. And these mechanisms of symbolic violence are internalised and normalised and made part of, for example, a WCQs habitus. Chambers (2005) highlights Bourdieu's aim to understand why "many forms of domination persist with" (p327) little or no resistance or challenges from the masses. The domination of the dominated is accepted as 'just so' and some groups in society have become and remain marginalized. A WCQ ECR might not have a 'high enough' exchange-value of cultural and social capital required to navigate academia as 'successfully' as a middle-class student. It could then be suggested then that a WCQ might 'naturally' gravitate towards a more caring role, or other such 'feminised roles' which women and feminised individuals are 'naturally' funneled into (McDowell, 2018), within the university to further protect themselves from failure of the 'real work' of leading or project managing successfully; avoiding having to elbow their way into a position of power because they 'do not possess' the ability or desire to challenge authority due to a distinct lack of embodied entitlement reserved for the middle-classes. And this symbolic violence might even keep a WCQ 'in their place'.

## 2.5 Cruel Optimism and Precarity

The concept of cruel optimism is far-reaching, spanning from attachments from romantic love, upward mobility, advancement of political projects or anything, big or small, that makes one excited "at the prospect of 'the change that's gonna come'" (Berlant, 2011: 2); making the concept broad and not routed in the experience of contemporary work specifically. Berlant highlights and makes clear that their book is not a "thorough expose of the state's withdrawal from the uneven expansion of economic opportunity, social norms, and legal rights that motored so much postwar optimism" but instead looks to (predominately Western) media, art, literature and melodrama from 1990 to 2011 to understand the "phantasmatic part of the optimism" (p2), which they assume is a material reality, and apply to the 'real' historical present. Despite these limitations, Berlant goes on to make a convincing case of the affect and experiences of attachment in a contemporary society where these 'promises' of the

good life have been 'frayed' by the state and economic realities: which have arguably been further vandalised, since the publication of *Cruel Optimism* in 2011, by the UK Government under austerity (Paton, 2024) and the cost-of-living-crisis.

Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism exists within the relations of "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing." So, for example, in the context of a WCQ ECR, this could be securing a permanent or job security in an academic post and the lifestyle this might provide now and in later life. However, outwith work in HE and in life more broadly, this "might involve food, or a kind of love" or it could also be any "fantasy of the good life" or the realisation of a political project of liberation coming to fruition. Berlant (2011) goes on to state that these "optimistic relations are not inherently cruel". However, they can become cruel "only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially" (p1). For example, in their study of ECRs in Australia, Bone (2021) suggest that "[a]cademia is conceived as a scene of desire while at the same time denying a clear pathway into the profession" which can be "intensely problematic" for ECRs who are pursuing a career in academia and experiencing profound precarity. As Berlant (2011) themselves argues, precarity refers to "an affective atmosphere," or "an existential truth about contingencies of living" (2011:92). Cruel optimism rests on the concept of affect. In essence, according to Anderson (2017), affect can be explained as "non-conscious" and "pre-cognitive", manifesting as "embodied feelings" that the individual is yet to register as conscious emotions. Those affect dispositions, sensibilities and sensations are intimately connected to and not separate of emotions one will consciously come to recognise. An affective investment in the object or "scene of desire" is not (always) done consciously (Berlant, 2011). The attachment, or the decision to become attached to a routine or thing, is also not pursued consciously by an individual.

Jackson (2020) states that affect "greases the gears of attachment" and produces "emotional anchors" (p12) around an object or 'desired' state of being. The desirable objects or scenes of desire are a "a cluster of promises [that] allow us to encounter what's incoherent or enigmatic in our attachments, not as confirmation of our irrationality but as an explanation of our sense of our endurance in the object, insofar as proximity to the object means proximity to the cluster of things that the object promises" (p24). But Berlant warns against harbouring feelings of shame in one's attachments and their cruel optimism, after all, as individuals, we might be looking to normalcy in the ordinariness, when, considering the economic and societal norms set out above, exclude working class people from the feeling of normality in their own everydayness.

## 2.6 The Art of (Working-Class) Queer Failure (at Work)

Dejours (2007) claims work is bound up with suffering; meaning for the subject, experiences of failure – be that of one's know-how, technique and autonomy and control over the process of work – is inevitable. Dejours et al (2018) goes on to suggest that work is not an 'unfortunate consequence' and bound up in the bodily intelligence of the subject and the revealing (and subsequent transformation) of subjectivity itself. In carrying out the 'real work' (by the 'working') the subject must 'bridge the gap' (Dejours, 2007: 720) between the prescribed work and the reality. It is at the foot of that bridge that the worker faces failure in the eye. This investment demanded of the worker is an affective experience and crossing that bridge to the real can involve affective suffering (Deranty, 2008) – which testing the subject's capacities. Within this paradigm, we can therefore expect failure the first time we cross that bridge as we do not have the necessary skill, know-how and experience to be 'successful'. As one learns and contributes towards the prescribed work-based rules and the collectively negotiated real work, the worker may no longer fail; meaning they may no longer feel the cycle of affective suffering.

Dashtipour (2014) suggests that overcoming the affective suffering in work can be “an emancipatory experience” (p113) making work a potentially freeing and transformational experience for the subject. Where workers are faced with a situation where failure seems inevitable, or where they are put in a situation where they are “forced to not work well” (Dejours et al, 2018: p90), it expected this could have serious subjective consequences. Resulting in the individual failing to mobilise the subjective life and fear of falling ‘into the abyss of potential failure’ (p96) is a certainty.

In attempting to view Dejours et al (2018) in a queerer way, we should note that ‘queer theory’ is not a ‘theory’ as such. According to Edelman (1994:114) it is “endlessly mutating token of non-assimilation”. Parker (2002:159) state queer theory is a push against heteronormativity; a “continuing ‘war of movement’ within the present”. Weatherhall and Ahuja (2021) suggest queer theory is “better characterised as an ongoing disruption and challenge to normativity and categorisation particularly in relation to gender and sexuality” (p407). Within this vein, Jack Halberstam’s (2011) book, *The Queer Art of Failure*, shines a spotlight into that abyss which looms when failure is faced— whether in work (or in life more broadly). To make sense of failure, Halberstam’s starting point is to ‘queer’ that experience of ‘failure’ and, for queer people specifically, that “success in a heteronormative, capitalist society equates too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation” (p2). And Halberstam also considers that, as queer people, utilising the concept of low theory, adapted from the work of Stuart Hall, shows how we tend to deviate, through exclusion or choice, from heteronormative expectations so failure, as a queer person, already feels near-inevitable. Using narratives constructed from popular (predominantly) children’s films (such as *Chicken Run* and *Bee Movie*) and wider art and literature, Halberstam considers ‘forgetting’ or ‘getting lost’ on one’s journey and in getting lost remembers that “dominant history teems with the remnants of alternative possibilities, and the job of the subversive intellectual is to trace the lines of the worlds they conjured and left behind” (p19).

In chapter two, Halberstam (2011) looks to the digital animation film *Finding Nemo* (2003), specifically the character of Dory, voiced by queer actor Ellen DeGeneres, who becomes a chosen non-maternal integrated member of Nemo’s family outside of traditional heterosexual relations and nuclear family set up in a queer sort of way, in a sense according to Halberstam, and they have short term memory loss. This condition is seen as Dory’s limitation throughout the film (and results in reoccurring ‘failures’ throughout the film) but the character possesses ‘obscure’ talents (such as ‘speaking whale’); ultimately helping Nemo’s father find his missing son, which forms the main storyline of the film. Halberstam differentiates, however, the manifestations of failure, within a working-class white-male heterosexual capitalist paradigm, which is embodied in films such as *Trainspotting* as “decidedly not queer” the failure here is “the rage of the excluded white male, a rage that promises and delivers punishments for women and people of [colour]” (p92). Of course, looking to art, literature and (predominately children’s) movies when devising and developing from a concept such as Stuart Hall’s ‘low theory’, to understand failure from a queer perspective, has its limitations (discussed in relation to cruel optimism in section 2.6). But there are clearly important contributions put forward which can explain or soothe why queer people constantly butt up against failure by how they reproduce their love and life and just go about in the every-day-ness; in a heteronormative world dominated by a neoliberal economic order. ‘Getting lost’ on one’s way and ‘forgetting’ can be a rewarding process but for many working-class people ‘getting lost’ and facing failure feels like its ‘not an option’. As Yvette Taylor (2023) examines in their book, *Working-Class Queers: Time, Place and Politics*, queer-based theory and research can overlook the realities of working-class queers (be that financial dependency on (precarious) employment and facing abuse from individual, society and the media) and it with this

in mind that this project aims to embed the WCQ experience of the 'real work' facing a WCQ ECR - and the affective and emotional experiences of facing (queer?) failure.

## 2.7 The 'Trail Set' and Components to Help See Things More Queerly

To bring this literature review to a close, it is important to bring this 'trial set' into a sharper focus. What has been set out here is not a full or 'thick' literature review to identify an explicit literature gap, which will be added to or filled by this research project. Instead, a selection of lenses has been set out and kept within reach as I critically analyse my experiences as a WCQ precariously employed as an ECR within the Scottish HE sector. Inspired by conversations by my project supervisor, my queer collective and fellow researchers, different concepts and theory have been critically engaged with from across different traditions. As noted earlier in the project, this project takes on concepts and theory from the psychodynamics of work, positive psychology and from affect traditions to shed a more critical and broad understanding of the realities of ECR. But at its heart, it looks to sociology of work, to understand these realities from a working-class queer perspective. Keeping these lenses to hand, I can pick them up and 'look through' them to understand my own experiences more queerly. The next chapter will set out and critically analyse the methodological considerations of this project.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Introduction

Within this chapter, the methodological considerations will be set out, critically analysed and justified in line with the research aim and objective set out in chapter one. Firstly, the concept of Queer Phenomenology (Ahmed, 2006) will be explored – showcasing the philosophical positioning of this project and assumptions made by the researcher. Secondly, the chapter turns to the use of autoethnography (AE); specifically, the utilisation and adoption of the layered account approach to AE (Ronai, 1992b). Thirdly, the chapter considers the limitations of utilising AE as a mono-method to conduct this project. Moreover, this chapter sets out robust and literature-informed ethical considerations which have helped guide me through the production of and editing of this research project.

#### 3.2 Queer Phenomenology

Sara Ahmed's *'Queer Phenomenology. Orientations, Objects and Others'* conceptualises the much-needed critical perspective to examine the way in which bodies, cannot (or indeed will not) align with spaces (or will not 'straighten' or follow heteronormative straight lines or expectations), will always present as the 'other' - and perhaps even then be the transgressive. Vitry (2020) argues these bodies are now 'queered'. And queer phenomenology then provides us with a starting point to understand experiencing life, work and organisation from a queer perspective. Ahmed (2006) begins with drawing on phenomenologists (including Husserl and Merleau-Ponty) to understand how bodies are "shaped by their dwellings and take shape by dwelling" (p9). By looking to the writing table a place of orientation, Ahmed encourages the reader to consider what is present at the writing desk – what is 'within reach' and how somethings are easier to reach than for others. For example, as Ahmed points out, Husserl might be able to take time and sit and philosophise because he has the capital and means to do so and possess the tools required for writing and the labour (most likely carried out by women 'for love') to prepare the writing desk and provide care. For some, certain objects will fade into the background. But for others, they will notice differently, having the knowledge and experience of how the writing table was constructed, cleaned, prepared or altered to make ready for writing. For some even, there might be no space prepared or suitable for writing to hand. Those individuals may not have the time to philosophize; perhaps they are unduly occupied providing care. In other words, with queer phenomenology, Ahmed (2006) calls on us to look behind phenomenology to understand what might have faded into the background. Or what bodies do not 'fit' or welcomed in within a space. Who has the time, today, to philosophise and to what extent and from what perspective.

Ahmed also questions the "orientation" phenomenology provides to discuss the ways in which bodies can be and are (dis)orientated by being in a space and by the space itself. According to Ahmed (2006:65), these spaces are the "field{s} of action" in which bodies interact with the world, as one might experience it, and with others. Orientation is therefore the way spaces push bodies along to follow a defined and well-trodden path, a 'straight line', and bodies that fall outwith that line are forced or, perhaps even, thrown "out of line" (Ibid, 2006:66) and become disorientated. Therefore, the queer body is thought to be out of line from its straight counterpart. The queer body is thrown out of line. The queer body does not always follow the well-trodden path, and it might be 'on the

margins' (and what we can assume) looking towards others who are 'towing the line' from a sedentary position. A 'straight space', described by Ahmed (2006) is where "the queer body does not extend into" (2006:92). With this 'straight space' in mind, it is the queer bodies that might be 'straightened' by those straight lines forcing them to fit their bodies into those spaces. Therefore, these straight lines are viewed as 'straightening devices'. In other words, as argued by Lane (2021), that being 'in-the-closet', which is a concept constructed by heteronormativity in the first place (Bautista et al., 2017), is where the queer body 'stays in line'. Coming 'out-of-the-closet' therefore, or indeed exiting the "vector for internalizing stigma" (Lane, 2021:2176), can have a detrimental impact on queer people as they have a "heightened awareness" (Ibid, 2021: 2176) of shame that stems from accepting the stigmatized identity – which becomes an ongoing process as one deviates from that 'straight line'.

Ahmed (2006) highlights the 'accumulation of lines' which can intersect to allow a queer white body to extend in white space more comfortably and readily than a Black or Brown body – drawing attention to the importance of considering intersectionality of the racial, classed and the able-bodied experience of the (queer) body along and outside the 'straight line'. But Ahmed (2006) also posits "it is possible to live on an oblique angle and follow straight lines" (p. 172) which could be seen as a reflection of a queer body living in a capitalist neoliberal heteronormative space – being coaxed, cajoled or pushed along one straight line after another. In places, there is limited consideration given to the intersectional considerations of class and location specifically within Ahmed's (2006) conceptualisation of queer phenomenology, something this project aims to consider to a greater extent. Merabet (2014) highlighted the importance of considering the creation of the 'queer habitus', which might be juxtaposed by some locations and could have a profound impact the extent to which a (queer) person might choose to follow the straight lines and be (more willing through coercion or fear) 'straightened'. By centring the experiences and feelings of 'out of liness' for a WCQ located outside of a city, in a small town in the central belt of Scotland for example, away from the 'safety' of queer spaces and anonymity offered by city life, this project aims to give some consideration onto the importance of location when adopting queer phenomenology.

As set out above, Ahmed (2006) sets out an ideal philosophical approach to critically examine phenomena in and out of the organisation from an explicitly queer perspective, perhaps looking away or towards the 'straight lines' - or what Vitay (2020) calls 'capitalist places' to discuss spaces that Acker (1990), Skeggs (1997) and Ahmed (2006) might suggest extend more readily to the shape white male heterosexual, middle class, and/or able-bodied bodies over that of a queer body forced further into the margins because of precarity and class.

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From the philosophical perspective of queer phenomenology, I will be able to fully embrace my subjective queer-self within the project overtly and transparently. As Howard (2007) highlights "Ahmed's refusal to be "properly" phenomenological" (p373) frames the structure of the argumentation of queer phenomenology as it stands – lending itself well to this project. By 'layering in' her own experiences and anecdotal evidence from her lesbian and mixed-race perspectives in the claims, the reader is "purposefully but logically" (p373) disoriented. By adopting queer phenomenology whilst 'doing' the mono-method of AE, I can centre my WCQ experience in my observations, reflections, emotions and desires. Ahmed (2006) cautions us not to generalize the queer experience and to consider its intricacies and individualities whilst considering the commonalities and binds across the queer community, suggesting that this approach could be well suited to autoethnography, a method which was now turn to.

### 3.3 Autoethnography

#### 3.3.1 An Overview

As set out and introduced in section 1.2, this project adopts the mono-method of AE. And in the drive to publish research that highlighted issues “shrouded in silence” (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011:32), AEs aim to sensitize their readers to issues such as identity politics and work precarity – so the audience might have a deeper more meaningful understanding and able to empathise with individuals who are different from ‘us’. Moreover, such stories and anecdotes may even help the audience make sense of themselves, the society of which they are part of and introduce new ways of thinking and feeling about a phenomenon (*ibid*, 2011). Autoethnography is a tool that can be used to resist the colonialist and sterile research impulses from exploiting minorities and cultural members – by (often) middle-class [heterosexual] able-bodied ‘Western’ white men, who may enter a culture, leave and write about the culture (as an ‘outsider’ to mainstream society (Ellis, 2007)) for professional and financial gain (Riedmann, 1993). The autoethnographical approach to ‘doing’ research allows the cultural member ‘use their voice’ and ‘join their voice’ with other minorities (Elhinawy, 2022:10) or cultural members, to amplify the voices of and demand the need to address injustices, such as sexism, racism (*ibid*) or victims of child abuse (as per Ronai, 1995). AEs acknowledge, understand and set out transparently for the reader the ways in which personal experience can influence the research process (See Ronai, 1992a). Moreover, when discussing issues of queer worker identity, for example, cultural members and minorities can show through narrative their assumptions about society and their view of the world (O’Shea, 2018). In doing so, cultural members show different ways in which people speak, write, navigate the world and their beliefs. Meaning that perhaps, more conventional (or canonised) ways of doing research are limiting, restricting and narrowing (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011).

Autoethnography (and ethnography) used within queer and cultural studies allows the researcher and writer to situate their reflections and experiences within the queer habitus (Merabet, 2014). Moreover, the process of recounting and articulating the thoughts, feelings and bodily interactions as a queer person ‘parading’ through the streets of Lebanon allows that ‘sense making’ to be recounted and critically examined from a queer perspective ‘straight’ from the horse’s mouth (*Ibid*, 2014). It is this layering of queer experience, sense making and theory that can give AE research is depth and richness whilst being unapologetically (self-)subjective (see Ronai, 1992a). To that end, AE is frequently used by those marginalised by broader society, such as queer people (O’Shea, 2018). O’Shea (2019) goes on to suggest, AE allows communities who have limited control over how they are portrayed allows the researcher from that minority group to grasp hold of the narrative and showcase ethical positions of political perspectives that are overlooked, erased or silenced by those with power. Thus, it can be concluded that AE will allow the writer to situate their own queer experiences, within their queer habitus and from the (dis)orientation of queer phenomenology; despite the limitations of a single participant study adopting a mono method deviates from a more ‘scientific’ or ‘robust’ form of research. Although, that being said, the limitations of AE will be explored within section 3.5 of this chapter. For now, we turn to the layered account as an approach to AE with this study adopts.

#### 3.3.2 My Approach to the Layered Account of Autoethnography

The layered account focuses on the author's experiences and aims to make sense of them; including those experiences that invoke worry, emotion and even heartbreak (see Jankowski, 2024 and Behar, 1996) - by looking at these experiences in retrospect. To achieve this, the author will share their personal experiences alongside other data, empirical evidence abstract analysis and underpin this analysis with academic literature (see Ellis, 1991b). As suggested by Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) this approach to doing autoethnography puts the procedural nature of research at the forefront of the writing. Moreover, Charmaz (1983) suggests that the layered account approach to doing AE is like grounded theory in a sense that data collection and analysis are taking place in tandem. Moreover, this form of data collection and doing research is a "source of questions and comparisons" instead of being overtly a "measure of truth" (p117) and fine detail in remembering the specifics of what happened when and where.

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My layered account vignettes were constructed through three main stages. First, a topic area was selected through mind-mapping, discussions with my own (work and queer) collectives and drawing on inspiration from the theory, concepts, academic and non-academic literature, podcasts and media I consumed and engaged with before and during the research process. In an almost 'Critical Incident Technique (CIT)-like' approach (Flanagan, 1954), I built my vignette around one major incident or a collection of smaller incidents that contributed to feelings and emotions I felt characterised the experience of a WCQ ECR at hand. Secondly, I looked for 'hard evidence' to brass tack the specifics of an incident to and remind myself of the 'order of events' as I recall emotions and experiences retrospectively. For example, I looked to emails from both personal and work accounts, WhatsApp messages between my work collective and entries in my personal e-journal which I keep on an ad-hoc basis on my iPhone's journaling app. I created a crudely written one page document of the 'key messages' I had for the audience – then I started writing; attempting to document the writing process and aspects of the editing process for the reader within the vignette itself for all to see. During the writing process, this one-page plan was often discarded. Sometimes, it helped create a basic structure to the vignette on first draft. But it always helped focus and my writing flowing. Whilst writing, I was reminded of concepts and theory from my reading which helped add the layering to the writing. For the third and final stage of writing, I shared rough drafts with my queer and work collective to collect their thoughts and reactions. When I had a second or third draft, I sent this onto my supervisor for feedback and follow up meetings and discussions would take place over coffee or via online meetings on Zoom. A sharing of literature and podcasts would flow between my supervisor and I before, during and after these meetings - nourishing not only my project but also my own understanding of the 'queering' of life and critique of positive psychology. I would critically reflect on my notes from such meetings; I would edit the vignette over and over – never altering the essence but finding clearer ways to communicate my feelings and experiences. But in places, I added in 'pop ins' to the vignettes to preserve some of the originality of earlier drafts and show how the discussions with my supervisor (and my broader work and queer collectives) added to my own understanding of the queering my experiences and the AE process more broadly. I left the rough edges and seams unfinished to aid in the transparency of the construction of the vignettes.

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To that end, Ellis (1991b) highlights that the layered account is an invitation to the audience to enter an immersive experience of doing the writing process, differing from grounded theory by adopting introspection, multiple voices and reflexivity. Ronai (1992a) extended that invitation to the audience by setting out the struggles of their writing, the impact research was having on their personal relations and how they battled with conceiving their worker and PGR identities during the research process and

while writing their layered account and their 'researcher and worker identity were much of the same'. Rambo (2005) states, that during the research process, the conceiving of the personal and professional identity is an "emergent process" (p123) – something I battled with in the early stages of vignette writing. And in Ronai (1995), calls for concrete and evocative texts, constructed through the layered account approach, to be considered as important and valid as abstract analyses within social sciences. My project aims to answer that call by ensuring the writing self-mirrors my living as my (queer) self as 'fully' as possible (*well, as fully as one is comfortable sharing for now anyway*). This approach to AE aligns with the research aim of this project in three distinct ways. First, it allows the writer to situate their queer habitus within their thoughts, reflections and worries as 'buddying' ECRs (as per Weatherhall and Ahuja (2020)). Secondly, the layered account allows the process of writing and reflexivity form part of the queering of the everyday (see Merabet (2014)). And thirdly, it centres the assimilation of the queer experience and the subjective self (via 'queer theory') with (gender and organisational) theory to understand holistically the phenomenon at hand (see Parker (2002) for example) through a distinctly queer set of trial lenses.

### 3.4 Autoethnography and Ethical Considerations

I will be looking to my own experiences as a cultural member by doing AE, retrospectively and selectively writing about key experiences rooted in that membership of a particular culture (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). As I adopt the layered account to AE, this will be set out like an "eyewitness account" (Caulley, 2008: 442) as I observed and lived through it. In approaching autoethnography in this manner, I implicate others in the writings. As with ethnographic research generally, the community, culture and institutions I write about are somewhat identifiable to the audience. This story is not only my own, but it also belongs to others who make up visible and invisible participants contributed to its construction and direction (Tolich, 2010). For example, some individuals (such as my partner or research supervisor) will be identifiable; the institutions I study and work at are identifiable too for those who know me or simply Google my name. For AERs though, the relationships with their participants are often valuable, long-term and require maintaining during and after the research process which can have an impact on the extent to which I share the 'messy specifics' about them and my feelings towards them at a specific time or another.

Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) identifies these interpersonal ethical issues affiliated with friendship, family [chosen, queer or otherwise] and other broader informal relations become an integral part of the autoethnographic research process. These "relational concerns" (Ellis, 2007: 25) are a crucial dimension of the ethical considerations for this study and more specifically during the writing and editing process. To combat these ethical concerns, the participants will have identifiable characteristics changed; I obscure reality in both time and space. This can include their name, location, gender, and race or how they described aesthetically. Regardless of these changes, the meaningfulness, depth and essence of the story remains the same. As per Tolich (2004), where removing identifiable characteristics will not sufficiently obscure or hide the identity of a participant, care and effort has been made to ensure what is written about an identifiable individual is what I would be happy to share with them face-to-face and being mindful of any impact this research could always have on them. To the best of my knowledge, I have adhered to this throughout the construction of this thesis.

When carrying out AE, Tolich (2010) identified three key themes of consent, consultation and vulnerability (p1607-1608). When considering consent with identifiable participants, checking in at

each stage of the process is crucial (as seen in Ellis, 2007 for example); avoiding coercion or apply pressure to give consent to appear in an AE project. In terms of consultation during an AE project (see Medford (2006)), Tolich (2010) challenges AERs to only publish what they would say to the individual or write what they would show to the persons mentioned in the text. I am confident and comfortable with what I have produced as part of this project that if an 'unidentifiable participant' challenged me to have those discussions and detail where the experiences set out in my texts overlaps with our relations and my emotions and perspective. Perhaps most importantly, Tolich (2004: 2010) prompts us to consider the vulnerability of identifiable and unidentifiable participants. For example, be aware of internal confidentiality and potential breaches in exposing such confidences to outsiders. Moreover, as per Ronai (1995), consider the future vulnerability of any participant by treating AE like a tattoo which is permanent and near impossible to erase. As noted in Ellis (1995 and 1992b), assume that all participants (either identifiable or otherwise) will read the text and where potential harm could come from a text all efforts are made to anonymise, obscure and minimize any harm.

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Finally, I must turn to ethical care for myself; the ARer sharing deep, emotional and personal stories. Upon submission of this thesis, what I have written will be captured and presented for the remainder of my lifetime and beyond through academic archives. Although that is daunting and intimidating; it's also liberating and exciting. Afterall, I write this AE project to amplify my voice and add it to those from (and who intersect) with my community. But I am mindful not to speak for all community members and urge readers to bear this in mind too. And during this project, I walked, hiked and ran (away?) for miles to get out into nature and away from the laptop and the stories included in this project to reflect on my life beyond these pages. At the later stages of this project, I started practicing yoga again, which was great for 'staying' grounded and great for the body. And importantly, I tried (and failed now and again, it must be said) to be consistent with meditation to be present in my messy WCQ ordinariness.

At times, I have found the weight of being so open, candid and (in some ways) vulnerable challenging. But, as Ellis (1995) identifies, I too find autoethnography as a therapeutic expression – particularly writing in an evocative and aesthetically pleasing way. As Ellis, Adams and Bocher (2011) encourage, I can write in compelling ways without citing fiction or being a trained or literary performer and I feel liberated by that. I am spurred on by important questions AERs must consider: who is reading my work (today and in the future)? How might they be affected by it? Who remembers this piece of research and passes onto someone in their own queer work collective to inspire or in provocation? Perhaps most importantly to me personally, how can the words written here keep conversations going? I can only hope to keep these conversations going for years to come and perhaps, like I did when discovering Ronai's (1992a) research, passed to me by a queer member of my work collective, inspire the next ECR to value and argue for the importance of AE in research within a business school. Or just maybe, this piece or one of my future writings might make a feminist intersectional reading list.

### 3.6 Limitations of Autoethnography

"...the subject-as-author is given an authority over the life that is written about. After all, it is his or her life. This means the author has an authority in the text that is given by the very conventions that structure the writing or telling." (Denzin, 1989:42).

As Denzin (1989) suggests, qualitative methods of inquiry were in crisis in the late 1980s, rooted in concerns around the validity and generalisability of research conducted in the field of social sciences. At the turn of the 2010s, Doloriet and Sambrook (2011) suggest the similar concerns have been raised about autoethnography. As academics did with qualitative research in the 1980s, academics such as Rambo (2007) set out the tensions that exists with autoethnography because the approach does not fit with more 'conventional positivist scientific research' which business schools tend to prioritise. These tensions trickle down into postgraduate research projects; with some supervisors and schools discouraging students from utilising this approach for thesis' (Morse, 2002). But this discouragement is in vain, given the popularity of AE amongst ECRs (see Jago, 2002 and Harrington, 2020) to shed light on the experiences of precarity (see Jankowski, 2024) and queerness (see Merabet, 2014). Jackson & Mazzei (2008) provide their critique of AE for focusing on the researcher; not the phenomenon being researched. They warn researchers not to project or attempt to displace their own beliefs and experiences onto others - with a particular caution on placing their ideas and perspectives on those with less privilege (*Ibid*, 2008). Moreover, Russell (2012) explains in their research "autoethnography is a matter of listening in the darkness...I have to fall into writing" (p. 327). They go on to say that "to do that kind of writing... I examine an experience with my body, memory, psyche, my... soul" (p. 328).

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However, in writing this research, I tried to listen to the light too. I made time to 'listen', feel and reflect on the positive emotions experienced and the learning I have done in queering my own experiences – proving a more holistic and four-dimensional view of precarious work through a queer set of lenses.

Bochner (2000: 270 cited in Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011) sets out that the 'quality' and depth of 'good' self-narratives can be found in an AE thesis':

"Self-narratives . . . are not so much academic as they are existential, reflecting a desire to grasp or seize the possibilities of meaning, which is what gives life its imaginative and poetic qualities . . . a poetic social science does not beg the question of how to separate good narrativization from bad . . . [but] the good ones help the reader or listener to understand and feel the phenomena under scrutiny."

However, Doloriet and Sambrook (2011) argue that, despite the growing interest of 'quality' autoethnography in social sciences and healthcare research it is often discouraged in postgraduate research. Doloriet and Sambrook (2011) also go on to call on ECRs to adopt autoethnography as a viable methodological approach for studying business related subject. Taking inspiration from these arguments and calls, this autoethnography project aims to push against the idealised and systematic form of thesis' structure and development (as set out by Kaplan, 1998 for example) and opt for a layout that reflects the needs for vignettes; moving away from the conventional set structure of a MPhil thesis to one that accommodates the nature of AE writing, reflection and one that is sympathetic to the researchers journey of discovery of viewing life more queerly.

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As I was reminded by so many conversations from my work and queer collectives, for some, hiding their queerness is a matter of life and death. For others, hiding their queerness is second nature to preserve their relations with loved ones, family and community. For me, I choose to put my queerness front and centre in this project because I (now) feel able and comfortable to do so (*for the time being anyway, as the UK continues to see the rise of far-right populism and hatred spewed towards LGBTIAQ+ individuals*). I have not always had this ability or drive to be so forthright in putting my queerness 'out there'. But although my queerness is central to this project, I continue to struggle to discuss queerness as openly as I would in safe spaces with my queer collective. And interestingly, I find myself self-censoring and obscuring my queer realities as I write, almost like getting too close to an electric fence and changing course automatically (*almost subconsciously*). I must remember to consciously write queerly. As queer people, we constantly scan the room and spaces to assess how 'safe' we might be – I do this as I write, which will have an impact on the extent to which what I write was what I felt deeply at the time of writing; or what I evaluated as being safe or palatable for the audience. I also aim to view my experiences 'queerly' but I am learning to do this as a WCQ raised in and surrounded by neo-liberal heteronormativity – that default setting queer people constantly butt up against. My supervisor asked me at one supervision meeting, 'where is the queerness in this section of the vignette?' and looking at my writing and self-reflecting, maybe I am still trying to find, understand and value the queer way of life and pushes against the daft notions of meritocracy, individuality and the perpetual cycle of self-improvement society demands of us daily. Like many AERs (see Ronai 1992a for example), I am learning and working on my AE 'voice'. This project is part of me finding that voice. You are reading along as my knowledge and abilities change and develop. At editing stage, I 'tidied up' sections I feel that I could have elevated further to preserve my learning 'at that time'. I popped bits in. I never changed the substantial content.

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### 3.7 The Methods Toolbox

To conclude, this chapter has explored the philosophical approach of Ahmed's (2006) Queer Phenomenology and justified its use in a project built upon the use of AE as a mono-method. It then went on to explore and critically evaluate the use of the layered account approach to AE for a project of this nature which has the realities and experiences of a WCQ ECR at its heart. Subsequently, the chapter set out in detail the limitations associated with conducting AE and the ethical considerations of the method but countered these with academic literature and how AE is a suitable method to capture the depth and emotions required for this project. Within the last section, when discussing limitations, the ability to and reservations of speaking openly about queerness in a 'formalised' research space and how self-censorship, hiding oneself and lying to oneself and others has created an internal struggle on just 'how much' should I share with the reader. And it is to those intimate experiences and worries of a WCQ ECR which we now turn to.

#### 4. Vignette One: 'I'm Sorry This Vignette is Late': The (Current) Worries & Preoccupations of A Precariously Employed WCQ

It's a beautiful sunny and warm summer morning. In central Scotland, despite the good weather of late, these types of mornings still feel like a novelty. I decided to get out of the flat and head into town to write. Everyone looks like they're carrying less weight on their shoulders today. Walking through the park, everyone I passed smiled, and some made comment on the weather. It's 11am on a weekday in July, I am now sat in Falkirk Library. To my left, there is a very friendly (and chatty) group of women attending the 'Knit and Natter' club. There is coffee. There are snacks. There is knitting and nattering. One of the women is making a blanket for their granddaughter, it's red and yellow with cream and navy-blue detail. She is beaming while she tells me how the blanket is coming along and how she has a new granddaughter. It's her third grandchild. Another woman is working on a cream scarf for her daughter. I always enjoy seeing people making things for and out of 'genuine' love. I am asked to join in and sit with the women. But I'm neither a knitter nor a natterer. I am, largely, quiet and tend not to talk to strangers – ever since I was told not to do so in nursery.

I find a suitable time to put my noise-cancelling headphones on to exit from the pleasantries and the nattering vanishes. I choose a chill lo-fi playlist from Spotify. I crack my elbows, I'm ready to write. I came here to write. I came here to get away from the distraction of housework, gardening, cooking and life admin. I smile to myself thinking how tempting it is to clean the bathroom or do laundry when there is important and pressing work needing done. But here, in this space, I can only but write.

*(OK, I'm clearly not quite ready to write.)*

I continue to faff about with my phone, and I get distracted by a book by DJ and journalist Ian Wade titled '*1984: The Year Pop Went Queer*'. It is right in my line of vision from the table I am sat. Or, perhaps, Sara Ahmed (2006) might consider, did I just notice this because I am queer? Was I drawn to this book because I am queer? Am I drawn to this book because I am queer and love pop music? I am drawn to the fuchsia pink cover which has images of Madonna and George Michael on it and which is the word 'QUEER' in bold black capital letters. My eyes could have rested on any of the other bright book covers about other celebrities or other music-related titles; about The Smiths or Oasis for example. But my eyes chose to rest on this book. I walked up to the book and flicked through it. After appraising the book, I decide it should come home with me – largely because there is a chapter on Hazell Dean (*who is a very underrated artist in my opinion and I know has roots in performing at Heaven nightclub in London, a club I used to go to with queer friends when I lived in 'the big smoke' in my 20s*). I sit the book next to me; I keep it within reach to protect it. I don't want someone to come along and swipe it from the shelf. The book now sits as part of my (*queer*) writing desk I have constructed for the day. The book fades into the background of the table alongside my notes, books and other detritus I brought with me to construct my (temporary) and (publicly owned) writing desk for my self-induced writing marathon. My laptop sits in the forefront. I start to type, 'I'm Sorry this Vignette is Late...'

##### 4.1 Excuses, Excuses...

If I'm being completely honest with you, I should have had this draft vignette to my supervisor last week. I guess I failed to do that. I fail a lot around my own PGR-related goals. Perhaps I don't value this labour as much as I should. I always prioritise paid work and (*facilitating*) the caring for students and loved ones over my own PGR responsibilities. I do not carve out enough time for myself to write

and fully immerse myself in the writing process. I tend to write in short bursts when I find time (*which has not worked so well for me in the past, I'll tell you that*). But for this project, I have managed to plan in some (*paid*) time to complete my MPhil now that teaching has drawn to a close. The luxury of paid writing time in academia is afforded to those on 'more substantial' contracts. At the moment, I am on a fixed-term contract (FTC) which offers full time hours. But for how long is a question that has been at the forefront of my mind from day one of starting the contract. Not fully allowing myself to enjoy the security I had for 12 months.

The delay in getting this draft to my supervisor was partly because I had written two duds. They were a bit shit and kinda off-topic. And I had recurring bouts of worry and anxiety around my future in my current job role and the end of my financial security I had enjoyed in the past year. So, I decided to focus this vignette on that experience. In fact, this vignette is centred around a very unassuming (queer) day in July in Falkirk Library where I wrote my vignette that was delayed.

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The reasons for my delay in my submission are multifaceted but not really that complex or novel for a precarious worker. The main contributing factor is because my current FTC is ending in a few weeks and I got the 'things *are not* looking good' conversation. These conversations seem inevitable when all FTCs are coming to an end, I can see them coming a mile off. The 'things *are* looking good' conversations come flying out of joyful and impromptu cold calls on Teams or emails with great fanfare. Those conversations are exciting. Those conversations leave you feeling optimistic. Those conversations restore what little optimism remains in the never-ending cycle of economic uncertainty and the feeling of permanent crisis the HE sector seems to be in. Or is it, these conversations obscure the cold hard realities of life for a WCQ trying to 'make it' as an ECR? I guess that is a thought for another day.

The 'things *are not* looking good' discussions are always scheduled and more formalised and sombre in tone. They are rarely impromptu and certainly never arrive with great fanfare. Sometimes these conversations are a formality, to 'manage expectations that there might be no work' - \*wink wink, nudge nudge\*. But this one wasn't one of those conversations. This was a 'things are *\*really\** not looking good' conversation. I was given the reasons why they're not looking good and they are not looking good at all. I can't go into the reasons here (*for legal reasons – that's just a joke - but also kinda true*), but trust me, things are not looking good (*for my current institution in the short-term and higher education more broadly in the medium-to-long-term*).

If things were 'looking good' and I had had a different conversation with my line manager last week, I would have had my formal review instead of the 'things are not looking good' meeting. I would have been discussing what module I was going to lead next. I'd have discussed how best to use my allocated (*and paid*) research time between budding projects with amazing colleagues or writing up more personal projects and planning a book chapter I long to do. That would be, what Berlant (2011) would call, the 'good life' – in a work context within academia anyway. The way the HE sector is looking at the moment, I was never expecting the *\*really\** 'good life', such as a permanent contract and fair and sustainable and manageable workload within my contracted hours. But just the basic 'good life' was, for a brief few weeks, on the horizon because, at that time, 'things were looking good'.

Instead of those exciting positive conversations, I was being told the extent to which (*although I have a short extension of 4 months to my contract to support with teaching and tie up projects – so I should see that as a positive and I do*) there was nothing 'substantial' available, such as year or two-year contract, for me come December - which was 'always' the 'plan' and (*perhaps naively*) my hopeful expectation. My line manager and I discussed what teaching responsibilities I will have next trimester.

I have no formal module leadership role. I have limited programme-wide impact. I am just kinda there. Teaching on colleagues' modules. Not much else to *\*really\** get my teeth into teaching-wise. It *\*really\** feels like it is the start of the end of my role at this institution (*and likely HE as any other institution that I could commute to \*requires\* lecturers to have a PhD on nearing completion*). And the sadist thing of all, I'd had the 'things are looking good' conversation just five weeks earlier. I was (*naively*) relieved when there were preliminary talks of a two-year contract. I was pleased things were looking good. I felt valued. My line manager and I were enthusiastically chattering away about building that business case together to secure that contract. I was told to trust that senior management were 'on it'. I felt like I really was in the right place, at the right time and doing the right thing.

But that's the problem with 'things', they change. They always change. But when it comes to career prospects in HE, they never seem to change for the better.

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#### 4.2 My 'Scene of Desire'

Those glimmers of optimism are indeed cruel and fleeting. They are just enough for us to latch onto and for a moment to see, taste and feel the so called 'good life'. I find my WCQ flourishing when the basics are covered; when my bills are being paid and there is a fair wage coming in at the same time every month. I find some flourishing when I can keep my subscriptions on without fear of going overdrawn, I can go to the gym and I can access music, audiobooks and receive my Verso books and Tribune magazines by post. In doing those things, I keep my mind and body 'worked out'. When I have financial security, I can afford to buy the healthy and nutritious plant-based food that I want to buy with fresh vegetables and fruit, rather than the food I need to buy in bulk to feed myself for the week. I find my flourishing in the idea of adding to my knowledge of the Spanish language and having the time to finally crack open those Standard Grade and GCSE workbooks sourced from a charity shop years ago. I find my flourishing in having financial stability to do the things I love. I find my flourishing planning adventures here and abroad with my partner.

In the past 18 years, it feels we have gone from one economic crisis to another. Real-terms wages are not keeping up with the cost-of-living (Paton, 2024). More and more people are finding themselves in precarious forms of employment across Europe (Livanos and Popadopolous, 2019), this issue is particularly pernicious in HE across liberal economies the world over (UCU, 2025: Bone, 2021: Taylor, Brim and Mahn, 2023). Austerity has gutted public services and welfare provision (Paton, 2024). And those with political power and financial interests are blaming migrants and broader working-class for the ills of the UK that they themselves have supported or actively brought about. It feels as though what constitutes the foundations for a 'good life' has been eroded away by design, creating a more and more unequal society of those who have financial security and those that do not have financial security. I think about how my acquired knowledge of work precarity and my research around it reminds me and informs me of my experience in the everyday. And like Jankowski (2024), I am witnessing how my own precarious work interacts with a working-class person's broader precarious life and the ripple effects that span far beyond just work and the impacts it has on the lives of my loved ones, family and friends. Historically, work precarity has impacted on my ability to secure housing and remain financially independent. It has (*and still does*) impact on my ability to set out consistent quality time with my partner. It prevents me from visiting friends in London because I fear the need to restrict financial outgoings. And like Jankowski (2024), I conduct research and engage with literature around precarity which educates and shed a critical light on my own exploitation which adds to anger and frustration.

But still, given this bleak and uncertain context, (cruelly) the optimism persists in unwelcome flurries. I don't want it to. But it comes. I need to ground myself, reminding myself of the reality and that I am not a special case. HE is in a bad way. And that impacts on everyone, including me. I remind myself, going against all the pro-capitalist and meritocracy indoctrination we subtly consume through (social) media and within society, that I am queer. I can opt out of this rat race and carve out my own humble little queer life. I can redefine my own version of success that Jack Helberstam (2011) sets out. But that feeling is fleeting, I yanked back in the heteronormativity.

What if \*I\* am resilient enough to achieve my (full) 'flourishing' that heteronormative society recognises? What if \*I\* continue to work harder, for longer and deliver even better students experience and work through this 'precarious impasse'? What if \*I\* was to look on the bright side more often? What if \*I\* were to look to the positives, I can find that flourishing in the face of adversity? Maybe if I just do that one yoga class or order some daft quick fix online, I too could self-actualise myself overnight. As 'they' (*all seem to*) say, if you just work hard enough, you will achieve your goals. But then I remember, I'm not a special case. And I'm queer, I'm on the margins. I can capitalise on that and just live on the margins out of the 'heteronormative pro-accumulation gaze'.

Maybe 'that' version of flourishing is not my true flourishing?

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As I write about these political and economic realities, I look round the bustling public(ly owned) space I can see what's going on but not hear it. My lo-fi chill playlist makes the space feel like it's moving in slow motion. And the sun is beaming in the large windows. I see two men have now joined the table next to the knitters and natterers and they are reading the newspaper and nattering away with the group of women intermittently. I was so engrossed in my writing; I didn't see them walk in. I was furiously typing out my reflections of last week and thinking how differently I feel about them now. I have sketched out my thoughts and feelings and tried to timeline my emotions I had in such a short period.

But today, I feel ok about 'things not looking good'.

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This week, I have accepted and (*quite likely*) internalised my fate. Maybe some of the cruel aspects of the optimism have gone? It feels like it (*for now*). I have had feelings of liberation as I consider finding a 'secure' job outwith HE and start a part time PhD next year (*I know, I know, I've already failed one of those 'what am I thinking!?'- but I'll come back to this, maybe within that PhD(?) itself*). My mind starts to race with excitement about what I can do next. I am drawn to being a postie, being outdoors and getting my steps in every day and having the opportunity to step away from frontline 'care' – from students and from (*dealing with*) customers (*for a prolonged period of time*). I have friends, family and ex-colleagues who are posties, and they all say I would 'love it'. This could be a type of job that I could 'just do' part time. I would clock in and clock out; physically and mentally. A job I use to fund my passions, including my independent self-funded PhD project and finally learning to sew at an evening class. I could separate my (*paid*) work and my research completely. This line of thought is relatively new for me, before, I was constantly striving for that next post in HE. I had to be 'progressing' – or what I deemed others would see as progression within HE – and have that financial (*over*)security and (*to some extent*) accumulating to 'plan for the future'; planning for the 'good life'. The current fixed-term post I hold has provided this security (*for now*), I finally have savings which I feel is a buffer to the extremities of financial insecurity I have faced in previous years when 'things are not looking good'. Before, I was surviving month-to-month. Storing up pots of money so I could survive the work droughts

of summer, like a squirrel hiding food for the winter. Never spending unnecessarily. Never 'treating myself'. Always putting things off; for when things were looking good.

Maybe we can free ourselves from the drudgery of cruel optimism when we have 'just enough' to build a 'decent life'. Maybe cruel optimism fails take hold when we strive for what is close to us, more achievable and when we disown those 'heteronormative expectations we allow to permeate our lives and the capitalist dogma and prioritisation of the accumulation of wealth' (Halberstam, 2011). Maybe all we really need is love? The love of family, friends and our queer collectives of chosen family? So why do we, even as queer people latch on to the 'need' of needing more (and more) than 'just love'?

Last week, on the other hand, I was not feeling ok about 'things not looking good'. In fact, just two days ago, I was not ok. I felt angry at my institution. I felt rejected, despite all of my hard work in the sector. I felt (*and still feel*) angry at the Labour UK Government for capitulating to the (far-) right in passing legislation to reduce immigration numbers into the UK at any cost. I felt (*and still feel*) angry at the genocide taking place in Gaza. I felt (*and still feel*) angry about the rise in queer-phobia here in the UK and abroad; which is targeted mostly at our trans, non-binary and genderqueer siblings. I felt (*and still feel*) angry at war taking place across the globe. I felt (*and still feel*) angry about the rise in hate crimes against people of colour across the UK. I felt (*and still feel*) angry that the use of foodbanks in the UK continue to increase. I felt (*and still feel*) angry about the misogyny and sexism that is still baked into society. I felt (*and still feel*) angry that the two dominant political parties in the UK have done fuck all to fix these issues and, in fact, they are complicit in creating this reality working-class people experience.

Within my personal sphere, I felt embarrassed that I couldn't secure a job at the end of my FTC (*which I see as code for 'you tried your best' and 'thanks but no thanks to keeping you on and providing more work'*). I felt like 'how can I explain this failure to a future employer who doesn't understand how precarious HE can be?'. I worried about how I explain this to family, friends, colleagues and acquaintances as many seem to 'value' me being in one type of job over another. They might ask 'why am I not pursuing my career in HE (or a HR role) after all that work, I put in to my degrees and research?'. And I will give them my usual response - 'the value of a degree is not in the salary you get afterword's; it's in the learning and criticality'. But, like always, I'll be looked at like an alien. University is, in the eyes of so many, an input output mechanism to secure 'better' work. And by better work, they mean better paid work.

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No wonder I am tired, with all these thoughts, worries and emotions that I recall feeling in the past week. (*Yes, all those feelings in one week*). I realise that this is how my own personal manifestations of cruel optimism play out. This is the unhealthy obsession I have placed on the 'scene of desire' – of me being a permanent lecturer, (*apparently*) safe from the worries and feelings of precarity. But I know this is bullshit, deep down I know I would have other things to worry and find newer otherer things to worry about. I know a permanent contract is not the life raft I initially think it is (*especially in the current economic realities of HE*). I know a permanent contract will not fix all of these 'things'. I would love to be able liberate myself from these feelings, to accept the realities and just 'see the positives' and 'reach for the stars'- as we are constantly fed in the neoliberal well-being economy. I want to unlearn these notions and learn that all we need is love.

On taking on this project, I initially pondered on the concept of cruel optimism as a notion that Lauren Berlant (2011) formed and derived from art, media and literature. Does that mean the concept of cruel optimism is limited in its 'generalizability' and reflection of real life? And at the start of this project, I thought, with all of this reoccurring shit, surely there must be no cruel optimism left?

### 4.3 My Own (Queer) Work Collective

OK, no, wait. Stop! Haud the bus!

That's not the full story on my discovery and understanding of Lauren Berlant's work and AE more broadly. And after feedback sessions with my supervisor, I realise that I have been making my AE too individual and not considering my own work and queer collectives that has helped form the orientations of this vignette thus far. So let me tell you the journey of how I got to the position of pondering of Berlant's (2011) 'realness' in a more transparent and comprehensive way. I did not want to just re-edit what I had written to airbrush the work. I wanted this to be a pop-out (or pop-in?) section, so the reader can better understand the vignette construction and my own understanding and development of my layered account approach to AE and vignette writing – as Ellis (1991b) reminds us, AE is an invitation to the reader to know the process of the writing after all.

In 2020, after extensive discussion with both my queer collective and fellow PGR students, via Zoom and on phone call, I voiced my desire to include 'self-reflective elements in my thesis' which was on hospitality work and frontline employee misbehaviour. I suggested self-reflection as I had nearly 18 years of experience in frontline service work. A PGR colleague and I talked it out, she was very encouraging that I should 'make the thesis my own' and push against my then supervisory team who had acknowledged my desires but highlighted it 'didn't fit in my current research approach'. But my very recent experience in the hospitality sector and the knowing and understanding of the precarious nature of the work on a ZHC was 'clouding' my analysis. \*I\* had a lot to say on the matter through my research. But there seemed to be little space for 'that kind of stuff' in my project. So maybe that was not the right approach to 'my research'?

In sending me several resources on self-reflective writing and autoethnography, in particular Ronai (1992a), this fellow PGR colleague sparked a chain of events that would be five years in the making to producing this MPhil thesis. Through the lens of Dejours et al (2018), a body of worked shared with me and discussed extensively with my supervisor in the context of my original PhD project, my own (predominantly very queer) work collective changed the course of my 'real work'. This MPhil is my 'real work'. It was reliant on the influence of so many academics, support staff, fellow PGRs and those outside of the 'work' realm. This 'real work' has been produced through (predominantly) queer care and looking and feeling research differently. The prescribed work of a PhD, set by the university, is interpreted by PGRs and their own collectives all the time. The rules and regulations are stretched, altered and reinvented as PGRs and their supervisory teams explore and fill gaps, or, like this project, use a combination of theory and concepts to 'make sense' of the everyday.

Cruel optimism made its way into my 'trial set' of lenses after a discussion with my supervisor one day as we walked to a meeting. We were discussing the feeling of perpetual worry I felt at having to secure work across multiple universities and my desire to secure something more secure in academia. That evening, I dived into the audiobook. Although I felt disorientated by the approach to art and media analysis, having never engaged with this genre of writing and conceptualisation before, the notions of affect, attachment and scene of desire shone through the writing. I was able to start to make sense of my own anxieties, fears and disappointments. I learned, not only about the conceptualisation of cruel optimism but by engaging with Berlant's work, I felt like I was given the tools to attempt to dismantle some elements of my attachments to and shed a critical light onto my own fantasies I had created for myself. Understanding this made me feel more at ease in my precarious ordinariness.

In later discussions with my supervisor (and with other academics and fellow PGRs), I was able to (re)consider the possibility that cruel optimism was not a material reality that lived outside of art and

media giving the seemingly constant and reoccurring economic permacrisis HE found itself in. And so, lead me to pose the question, does cruel optimism live outside literature and media in the real world given the relentless economic vandalism inflicted by subsequent UK Governments since 2010 and the neoliberalisation of HE since the 1980s.

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And I hate to break it to you; cruel optimism does live on in the real world. With all of the planning, time and worry that goes into creating my alternative 'queer' routes forward in my alternative ordinary-within-reach working-class career paths, and all the feelings of excitement and liberation that that could actually bring – I know if I was given a glimmer of hope of a more secure post in HE, my brain would yearn for that 'good life' right away; no questions asked. And that really annoys me about myself, no end.

I have seen it on and off through the past year when 'things are looking good'. As soon as it is floated about a new contract, my brain just flicks a switch, and I yearn for the scene of desire again. I start to believe it could be true. And that scene of desire that would 'solve all my problems' but it might actually create new problems, and a permanent contract will not fix any of the old problems. I also find myself becoming frustrated with people who gently remind me to 'keep an open mind' and 'best not to put all your eggs in one basket' when I am indulging in my attachment to this fantasy brewing in my brain.

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The knitter and natterers are away now, they waved as they left. I didn't see them pack up their stuff or I would have asked them to watch my stuff so I could nip to the loo. But that ship has sailed. The two men have left too; I did not see them leave either. I was brought back to the present because the air conditioning has been turned on and I have the outdoorsy queer middle-aged man's summer attire on (*short shorts and walking boots, obvs*) and I am getting colder by the minute. I am going to move on to Café Nero on the high street to claim my free weekly coffee. (*I get this voucher from my energy provider for a free coffee once a week. But call me old fashioned, I would rather they just reduced the standing charge and cost of gas and electricity for the masses*). But I digress.

It's only a matter of time before cruel optimism rears its ugly head to capture my thoughts worries and emotions. It will take away the humble more easily accessible 'decent life' I could (*more easily*) carve out for myself from my brain. And ply me with those heteronormativity and capitalist accumulation dopamine hits most people love to get drunk on. But for now, I feel good about 'things not being so good'.

And that's all one can hope for in an economy where things rarely ever \*really\* look that good for a WCQ.

## 5. Vignette Two: 'Mind the Working-Class Queer Gap': The Fear of Failure Because You \*Really\* Care (Too Much?)

A few weeks ago, at the close of the current academic year, my undergraduate supervisee was awarded the Deans Award for Best Students and Best Dissertation. At the event, I was able to present them with the award. I was so proud of them, for their hard work and commitment to critical scholarly activity. At the event, there was space created where we could discuss their next steps without the formalities of teacher-student dynamics. I was able to discuss their project in hindsight and discuss the feedback and grade. The student was thankful for my support during their final year of their degree. They were inspired to use community autoethnography to explore the realities of migrant workers in the gig economy because of a conversation we had about my research in our second supervision meeting. This conversation set off a chain of events that concluded with the student saying 'thank you for guiding me to this form of research for my project, my colleagues and I now have the understanding and language to understand what is going on in our work. And how we might be able to start to resist it'. As an ECR and teacher who cares, this outcome could not have been more valuable to me. I will cherish it forever.

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I got into teaching in 2019; because I love to help people. (*Also, in part, because I was hiding from having to make progress with my PhD which I was increasingly hating and traumatised by during a global pandemic - but that's another story for another time*). I take pride in being 'that' helpful tutor. I value being seen to be the caring individual. I get a feeling of joy and warmth from seeing someone benefit from my support or encouragement. I continue to get this (*good*) feeling, even if it puts pressure or a burden on me emotionally or physically making me feel exhausted and burnout (a much *less good feeling*). As a (WCQ) ECR and teaching more specifically, I (*genuinely*) enjoy presenting thought-provoking original content and facilitating class discussion and debate 'beyond' the learning outcomes. I try to avoid doing the 'predictable' in my classes. And I pay attention to what students have already learned before sitting in front of me. Colleagues often comment that this approach is '*so much more work*' and '*exhausting thinking on your feet like that*'. And they'd be right. It is exhausting.

The neoliberal university has made the student experience like any other commodity (Bone, 2021: Taylor, Brim and Mann, 2023). A product manufactured efficiently under tight (*senior*) management control via the prescribed rules (Dejours et al, 2018); which take formation in faculty, school and university-wide policies and processes – manifesting as explicit learning outcomes by module as one example. Before taking a specific module, the student is 'fully' informed of what they can expect from the module in terms of assessment and teaching content. By me being an educator that cares about their teaching content (*and student well-being*), I tend to plan, design and deliver 'more' than what is expected of me to deliver a specific class. To care, in this context, is to lump more emotional and material labour onto myself. No one asks me to do this. If I didn't 'do' this, no one would notice (*apart from me*). But I continue to do it, even when I feel the strain of increased workload elsewhere in my job role. I do it out of love. I do it because education can, I believe, be an emancipatory tool for all involved (hooks 1994). In the classroom, I like to include intersectional debate and critical discussion and, as hooks (1994) advocates for, centre the student (*and my own personal*) experience at the heart of that discussion and debate. By centring the student experience, students can start to understand and relate to theory and build on that knowledge through their assigned and independent reading. This is my pedagogical approach. And this approach can fly in the face of the heavily controlled and prescribed elements of a business management programme. As Dejours et al (2018) highlight, these

prescribed rules (*and the control mechanisms to ensure compliance from the worker and dominance of the manager*) are harder to alter in institutions with 'low trust' between the manager and the worker; reorganising the division of labour and resisting the dominance of the manager is more challenging. But, within these prescribed rules, the door remains (*always*) open for workers (*who care*) to offer up their discretionary effort in abundance to provide a greater experience for the consumer (*or indeed, in this case, the student*).

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### 5.1 When You're \*Just\* A PGR

One incident that I recall is when I volunteered to take on a senior colleague's teaching (*one week before the delivery*) of a postgraduate module. They told me the materials were 'ready to go'. It was a topic area I was well-versed in, but I would have to learn some specific data beforehand – nothing I couldn't handle within the allocated preparation time. I was offered the (*very*) inflated adjunct lecturer rate (*£53 per hour, rather than the £17.20 per hour PGR rate – I know, this is outrageous isn't it. You could be a PGR delivering the same (prescribed) class as a senior colleague in the next room and they are being paid nearly £36 per hour extra*). This gig included substantial teaching and marking hours. So, naturally, I jumped at the chance.

I took on (*far*) too much, I knew this at the time. But needs must. At this point in my career, I was working at another two institutions taking on casual teaching and marking. But as a WCQ, you don't turn down a gig like that. That gig covered three months of bills and spending money. And it was due to be paid when teaching draws to a close for the summer (*and pay normally dries up completely*). But disaster struck when I received the teaching materials, they were underdeveloped, flat, poorly presented and in need of criticality and further underpinning with theory.

\*I\* couldn't have delivered this material in its original form to students. I just couldn't do it.

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Now, it has come about in the past, where I have been asked to fill in at the last minute or deliver specific and prescribed lecture material for a colleague which I felt was sub-standard. I found it hard to 'feel' enthusiastic about the content. I need to 'feel' the enthusiasm myself to radiate it into the room. I need to deep 'act' (Hochschild, 1983). I can't slap on a smile and surface act like I was forced to in a more transactional service encounters in former frontline hospitality job roles. Perhaps, it's because I care about the students (*and maybe I didn't care so much about the customers in my hospitality job*). I desire (*and perhaps even need*) the interactions with students to feel like a mutual exchange of ideas and critical critique. If I deliver sub-standard materials due to 'pressures of the job and workload', brought on by the realities and demands of the neoliberal university, I feel like there is a fundamental 'flaw' in the class that \*I\* am leading.

In that situation, I have not abided by my own pedagogy of care and to foster transgression and criticality. I will have failed to deliver that. I will have failed. Again.

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To avoid (*perceived*) failure this time around, to redesign and elevate the session I had been asked to deliver, I \*had\* to cancel (*very valuable and nourishing*) plans (*with my partner and family*) last minute to complete this work over the weekend. \*I\* could not deliver a mediocre class. I couldn't fail. I \*had\* to succeed. After all, I could well get offered this £4k gig again next year. How good would that be!? Or, I could fuck this up and lose out on other work!?

I, because I care (*and 'chose' to*), made the gap between the prescribed work and (my), in the words of Dejours et al (2018), 'real work' bigger and more demanding for me as a worker. I allowed the dysfunction in my work collective, and fear of failure intensify my workload. As an adjunct member of the team, I felt I could not challenge the senior colleague. As an adjunct, I felt like I was on my own and atomised. I felt I was on the periphery of the workforce that, because of my persistent caring, pops up and handles classes well and then goes back to the margins out of the way. I felt like I had no real line manager. I felt I would be an inconvenience if I pushed work back to a colleague I enthusiastically took on due to the price tag attached to it.

By taking on this workload for a senior colleague, I made my own 'realising' of the 'real work' more challenging. I added hours of reading, recrafting and redesigning to prepare an exciting, engaging and professional learning experience I could be proud of. I could have, quite reasonably, taken those mediocre slides tidied them up and delivered. I'd have got paid the same. I would have ticked the box. The students would have (*passively*) received the correct but mediocre uninspiring descriptive information. But I would have worried that I was perceived not to care. I would have worried that I would not have been in a position to bag this gig next year. I would have worried those students would have found my class boring, unrelatable and poorly developed. I did not want them to feel short-changed. I did not want to fail to deliver what I expect from myself. I added to my workload. I made the gap between the prescribed work and 'real work' bigger and more complex for myself.

## 5.2 Work Collective in A Precarious Crisis

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My wider work collective also stepped up during this time of crisis. I reached out on a WhatsApp group chat, calling for ideas on materials, sources and activities. By reaching out to other WC and precariously employed academics, I was flooded with slides they had created to teaching similar topics and ideas for exciting contemporary cases studies. I might have added to my own gap, in realising my own work from the prescribed work, but by reaching out to my own 'scattered' work collective, I was able to receive support and access to their own real work to adapt and harvest to make my real work easier. I was able to be inspired by their real work, to create a slides and activities that would engage students.

With this example in mind, we must consider for those in teaching roles who are WCQ, POC, women or those that find themselves in a precarious position where they feel they 'must' care or overdeliver. For permanent colleagues, they have the security to be perceived as uncaring. Some might choose to recycle the tired and worn-out dated material with little fear of repercussions from senior management. For the precarious worker, they feel the need to consistently overdeliver. That fall into the abyss of failure is further and faster for precarious workers. And any notion of 'getting lost' or embracing that version of failure is seen as not an option – not something we can afford to do.

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As I write about this incident, I feel incredibly sad and frustrated. I can now see I was exploited. I can see now, this was just a chance for this colleague to offload and focus on the 'important' work that is valuable to them (*and the institution*); namely research. This (*care*) work was funnelled to me. And I jumped at the chance because I am a precariously employed WCQ that would be 'daft to turn down all that work' despite what I missed out on with my partner and family. Also, during this time, I was not carrying out the work I *\*should\** have been valuing and prioritising. The work that my institution would have valued; namely my postgraduate research project.

But the story does not end there.

I completed all that (*extra*) preparation (*which took me well over my allocated preparation time and I was essentially working for free*), teaching and marking, and then I was refused the allocated higher pay grade I was offered by senior faculty staff. Instead of being able to focus on securing and carrying out my next and future work, I was haunted by an already symbolically violent past for months after completing this ‘gig’. I felt like a self-employed worker having to barter with a powerful client. I did not feel like an employee helping colleagues or my institution.

I had to go into a three-month long dispute with the faculty to receive the correct pay (*at the higher rate of £53 per hour*) I had been offered when taking on the gig. I had to push management to not only process my pay claim in the first place, I had to defend why I should receive the higher rate – even though I was ‘*just a PGR and should receive the lower rate of pay*’ despite having an email stating I would be receiving all preparation, teaching and marking at the higher rate on a per hour basis. I was being told I should be paid £26 per hour less because I was ‘just’ a PGR.

I got angry. I felt I ‘had’ to ‘push the nuclear button’ and threaten to seek advice from the trade union to get the issue resolved. It took me, someone who is generally compliant and people pleasing, a lot to take that action and push back against the powerful institution. Senior management got involved. I very nearly said, ‘*sorry for the hassle, I’ll just take the lower rate*’ but something stopped me. At the time, I felt I would never get work in this department again because I stood up for myself. In the end, fortunately, I never had to find out if I was ‘blacklisted’ as I started a more secure work the following semester at another institution and have (*so far*) never had to look back. But it tarnished the near perfect relationship I had with this institution.

Eventually, five months after completing the work, I received all monies owed to me. I was told I was fortunate to be receiving the higher rate because ‘*PGRs get paid this [lower] rate*’. It took a lot more stress, emotional labour, administration and a three-month battle which no one should have to experience to receive payment. But for a precarious worker, this often comes with the territory to receive what is owed and access and make us of fundamental rights (Standing, 2011: 2023). And the fear of failure looms larger when the safety net of secure work and the protections this affords are absent in the employment relationship. The fall into the abyss of failure feels larger, more consuming and the fall feels easier to fall into when you work on the margins keeping yourself out of the workforces’ way.

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### 5.3 I Do it Because I Care

I will (*rightly or wrongly*) continue do this extra work because I care. I care (*probably entirely?*) because I am queer. I was (*and continue to be*) ‘feminised’ in society. Feminised people are ‘rewarded’ for caring behaviours at every stage of their life, from childhood to the workplace and in the home (see Skeggs (1997)). From my gender forming friendships in school, I have always been one of the girls. In fact, it was the girls who protected me from the boys. The organisation of labour and the structures that exist in the workplace reproduce the gendered division of labour Ackers (1990). I am continually rewarded for these (*caring*) behaviours, and I have internalised that immediate and urgent ‘*call to action*’ to care. And see that caring is ‘*our work*’ and ‘*not theirs*’ because ‘*they*’ have ‘*more important*’ tasks to get on with. I know the ‘feeling rules’ (Hochschild, 1983) that are expected of me, as a feminised queer person, to stop and take time to care, nurture and \*genuinely\* empathise – by deep acting (*Ibid*, 1983), actively embodying those worries of the student – to deliver a supportive ‘good’ ‘customer service’ the student expects because it has been sold by the university. My emotions and identity are commodified, packaged and sold in the degree factories in which we work.

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Conversations with (feminist) colleagues can really shine a spotlight on this phenomenon; especially when you fail to see it yourself. When the 'obligation' to care is central to your personal being (*and therefore your professional worker identity*).

I sit with my PGR supervisor in her office. We talk at length about how care is (*now*) central in the role of lecturer – considering the focus on student wellbeing and student experience. I tell her I seem to attract complex cases from students and feel the \*need\* to offer care and see the case through to a positive conclusion for the student.

She turned and said to me '*you need to think about \*why\* you feel like that...it's not the same for all colleagues.*'

*(I sit with that thought for a second, thinking what it must actually feel like \*not\*to feel obliged or wanting to care about student wellbeing. I think about how liberating that might feel for the worker on one-hand but desperately sad on a personal level on the other).*

And my PGR supervisor went on to say something that I don't think will ever leave me (*and was crucial for this project and the underpinning literature to click and to make 'sense' to me*) '*Congratulations, Brian! You're a woman now.*'

I cannot help but agree and think that because I am socialised to be 'like this', I have a big sign on my head that says 'happy to (*always*) help' on it – is this a hangover from decades of frontline service work too? I feel it hark back to my former (*feminised*) career of serving people as a frontline service worker (FLSW). I worked in the retail and hospitality sectors for nearly 20 years. Always in the front-of-house roles mind you; the 'women's job'. Never the back-of-house jobs with the men. Like so many queer men, I was the server, never the chef. I was the visual merchandiser and stylist, never the 'stockroom guy'. I was the supportive trainer, never the gruff and to the point bureaucrat. I was always drawn (*or channelled?*) into these feminised roles. And it's happening again (*and again*). I was and continue to be funnelled emotional and 'gendered' work.

I should really stand up and do something about that (*but only when I have a secure job and scope for autonomy in my HE career, am I right!?*). In fact, \*we\* should \*all\* stand up and do something about that.

#### 5.4 'You Must Get So Much More Student Wellbeing Issues Than I Do...'

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Another incident that lives rent free in my head exemplifies the gender division of labour that even the heterosexual man from down the corridor can see it.

A white heterosexual male colleague (*on a permanent contract*) summed this up in a one-to-one impromptu conversation in my office:

Me: \*Typing an email to a student facing some difficult personal circumstances, frowning and asking my colleague if my advice fits with the 'prescribed' flow chart and policy for dealing with the situation at hand\* (...*there's always a flow chart...*)

Him: 'You must get so much more student well-being student's issues to deal with than I do?'

Me: *\*I look at him with confusion but know where this is going despite never formally 'coming out' to him\* 'I must...?'*

Him: 'Yes, like all our female colleagues. Students never seem to come to me. But always go to them. I think it's because I'm *\*just\** a straight white guy.'

*('First of all, you're more than that, stop selling yourself short...' - but I decide not to provide care at this moment, I have a class in 10 minutes and this email to finish...)*

Me: 'You know what, you're right! I get students I am not 'responsible' for from other programmes contacting me - because they don't get a reply or support from their personal tutor or programme leader. I get students I teach in seminars contacting me, instead of their programme leader or other formal channels, because 'I am a friendly face'. I get approached by students after classes for advice and support. I get asked about student's issues during lessons. I even get students I have never met email me for help 'because their pal said I was super helpful and nice'.

Him: 'REALLY!?'

Me: Yes.... *\*...looks out the window, reflecting on why I get emotionally exhausted in this job role and wilfully and continually take on more and more care work...\**

There is much to unpack from this short interaction, but for now, I want to highlight that as a WCQ ECR I thrived on this recognition and 'mothering' of younger students. I reflect if this stems from the informal and organic queer caring communities I have been part of in my youth. Do I send out signals to students (often young women, POC and queer), I can and want to make sure you're ok. I am a WCQ person with some tangible power and skin in the HE game and I choose to use my power for good. But using this power comes at an emotional cost. And it 'takes me away' from the work that is real capital on the fields of exchange within HE. I will never get the promotion because 'I care the best'. I will likely not get that next promotion (or permanent job) because I do not allow myself to focus on the work that is really valued within HE.

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This reality of gendered, caring and emotional work is it (*still*) socially reproduced within the contemporary workplace and society (see Lewis, Benson and Skeggs (2025)). It is often marginalised workers who pick up on caring work (McDowell, 2018), whether this be those who have moved from their country of origin for one reason or another, WCQs, POC and women. But perhaps, for queer men certainly, we do not see ourselves (*or feel*) part of the broader debates of feminist critique of work and society. When the focus (*falls short and*) is centred on including (*exclusively biological*) women, there is a risk of putting up barriers where they must be dismantled to make meaningful progress. Here, we see the 'funneling' of care work to WCQ and 'feminised' workers. This is symbolic violence in action; the violence has no smell or visible characteristics one can point to when it 'kicks off'. But what we can see, and feel, is the emotions of being burnt-out and relied upon by students and colleagues after the act of violence has been inflicted on the dominated. I feel it when I have to 'get through' the last few weeks of the semester so my emotional labour can get a rest.

Taylor (2023) calls for a universal and accessible feminist, working-class and queer intersectional reading list to educate students by creating truly queer inclusive intersectional feminist classrooms – considering issues including the implications of gendered work and experiences on WCQ people and maybe being the seed for a shift in policy and working realities in HE. Alongside the need for an understanding of gendered work and broader issues in society, Taylor (2023) prescribes solidarity and coalition building to bring about the necessary changes in both policy and attitudes in society. And

bell hooks (1994) calls for a pedagogy of hope in classrooms within HE, grounded in discussing student experiences with an intersectional feminist perspective at its heart. Considering the work of WCQ ECRs more specifically within HE, Winters and Ningard (2023) call for the ethos of queer care collective to be established and fostered amongst WCQ and feminist academics, alongside comrades and allies, to offer solidarity and care for each other – as well as for our students and wider HE community. Perhaps those facing the brunt of symbolic violence can be the source of our own solace, care and resistance to liberate ourselves from domination - and make space to educate and bring about well-rounded students energised and able to change the world and stop the violence altogether.

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I conclude my writing in this vignette by thinking about my partner (*partly because he text me a few moments ago to ask how my writing was going – terribly thanks for asking, I tackle worries of not hitting the mark and the vignette feeling a little fragmented with multiple focuses, which, on reflection, might actually be its strength*). I consider my partner taking on his role as primary (*and sole*) carer for his mum. Many of the discussions we have about this ‘decision’ revolve around how my partner feels his (*predominately*) heterosexual siblings have ‘more important’ commitments such as their full-time careers, children, grandchildren and the other factors for their inability to ‘give up’ something or other to look after their mum. My partner has willingly put his (*and to some extent aspects of our lives*) ‘on hold’ to care. I have cancelled plans in the past because I care about my students (*maybe a little too much?*). I care because I am a WCQ. My partner cares because he is a WCQ. Maybe for those of us programmed through social reproduction to care; really do ‘need to care less’? Or at least, care about ourself and ourselves and establish and lean into those queer care collectives to receive that all so nourishing care from our comrades, friends, colleagues and allies.

## 6. Vignette Three: 'So, Did I Fail Like I Was Supposed To?'

I'm going to keep this short. I had no real intention of caving, to early demands of myself and later demands of my supervisor to include a third vignette. On starting this MPhil, it was supposed to be around 20k words long. It grew important and inspiring arms and legs as I continued my reading, and I received feedback from my supervisor and work and queer collectives. This is the nature of AE work, it is sculptured and shaped, primarily, but the writer but through feedback from a supervisor, a comrade, a friend, an ally or, as is the case with this project specifically, the overwhelming desire to immerse myself in new literature centring queerness, class and alternatives to neoliberal individualism from a distinctly feminist perspective.

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I met my supervisor in September 2025 to receive feedback on my project so far, we got into a deep conversation on my approach and experience of being a PGR at SBS. My supervisor said, 'despite everything you were going through at home and how much you were struggling, you never once complained about the support you received'. She went on to say, '...that was surprising...'. For me though, it wasn't surprising at all. It made me think about how I would a) consistently hide my feelings and struggles b) not want to challenge authority and c) how I am (too) understanding of other people's workload and not want to be seen as an inconvenience. I always want to be seen as the 'good worker'. I wanted to be seen as competent and able. I internalise struggle. And I blame myself for failure, without considering what external factors, social structures and barriers prevent me from making progress. But now, after making time for me to engage with a broad range of literature and \*really\* listen to my queer and work collectives, I know that I was being unfair on myself and 'going along with' heteronormative individualistic patriarchal 'well-being' society coaxes us to do – 'be resilient'.

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On my first project plan, I initially planned to return to this question in the epilogue of the project. But I woke up at 5am this morning and felt the need to write a direct answer to the question posed myself in the prologue as a vignette, did I fail like a WCQ was structurally supposed to? So, on a dark and unsettled morning in October 2025, as I sit with a black coffee at my wee writing desk in the corner of my living room in my humble one bed ground floor flat, I can admit and proclaim; 'Yea, I probably did.'

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I sigh a sense of relief that I can make sense of the process of 'failing' my first attempt at a PhD. I have carried that feeling of failure and shame (*to add to my vast collection of shame-like baggage*) for several years. Thinking back, I always avoided conversations about my PhD progress, hiding from presenting my work to colleagues and trying to make sense of failing to achieve the prescribed work set out by SBS. When I was in meetings with supervisors, I was closed-minded and always on the defensive when it came to how to carry the project forward because I couldn't be seen to be failing. As Bourdieu might identify, I did not possess from, earlier working-class life, the cultural capital to know what was expected of a scholar carrying out research to this magnitude. I did not even possess the 'feel for the game' on how one organises their day around work that was not 'controlled' by the immediate demands of a line manager, a customer or short-term tangible deadlines. I did not have the financial capital to 'get lost in literature' and the take my time to craft a considered and loved PhD project. I just had to get it done, so I could get back to earring. Like my BA (Hons) and MSc before it, I was trying to hold it together, learning what I 'needed' to learn whilst working near full time hours at SBS. I was studying around my paid work, not working in paid work around my studies. And I realised,

unfortunately, that you cannot spin plates like that with a PhD. As a WCQ, I was refusing to allow myself to get lost on my journey (*I \*had\* to stay on track to 'success' within the timeline prescribed and failure and asking for help was not an option. Getting lost or 'unnecessary reading' was seen as a waste of time*) and I did not consider discovering a new path for myself for my research for that was perhaps anti-heteronormative and anti-capitalist (as per Halberstam (2011)).

But this approach finally started to unravel this summer, I took a new approach. I chose to present an aspect of my AE project at a school-wide event, which had my name and my fear of failure as a WCQ 'in lights'. I did not want to hide anymore. I wanted to come out as a 'failure'. A WCQ failure who got lost and is finding a new way forward. I failed like I was structurally supposed to. And that was ok.

In August 2024, I read an article by Wendy Pratt in The Guardian on how, as a WC part-time PhD student she 'was on a treadmill of work and study that I couldn't get off'. Pratt (2024) went on to highlight how she felt she had to 'talk differently to alter her accent' in university settings and lived over an hour away from campus which made integration into the academic community challenging. She felt like a PhD 'wasn't for the likes of her'. For me though, although I could relate to much of what Wendy was saying, the tone of the article was striking, it was individualising the problem towards 'breaking imposter syndrome' and how she went on to write a book and succeed in a 'different way'. There was a triumphant happy ending. Although I am not surprised to see an individualised approach to this phenomenon published in The Guardian, I now refuse to fall into the trap of individualising my failure – such as grasping at the likes of positive psychology to (*fail to*) soothe my failure (*anymore*). I (*now*) chose to hold a mirror up to society and begin to understand the role of my WCQ identity played in bringing about my failure (*and the starting point on how I can view things different on what 'success' and 'failure' might entail*). I can now take off this layer of shame and failure and hang it up in the closet – still near, I can still see it and 'own it', but I don't feel the need to wear it every day and lug it about with me in a big suitcase as I go about my day.

As Prilleltensky (2017) warned, positive psychology risks overlooking the structural barriers faced by minorities when attempting to refocus the mind and 'reach for the stars'. As WCQ people, we must never lose sight of those structural inequalities and barriers we face and navigate every day - and be aware of the symbolic violence we face in everyday and fight back against it in equally subtle and insidious ways. I (*now*) refuse to individualise and internalise the heteronormative capitalist doctrine of one version of success. I failed my PhD for numerous reasons but when I allowed myself to fail by not achieving what I was 'supposed to', I charted a new and exciting journey in research, with the support, care and co-piloting of my work and queer collectives. Queer care is central to my ability and desire to chart this new course forward. I know this (*gestures to my choice to pursuit of AE and queer studies*) will make traditional success in academia more challenging (see Brim, 2020). I know that I may not secure the big funding projects deemed essential for promotion in HE and I will have to fight and try harder to get spots at conferences that have a more materialist perspective of work. I know I will struggle to secure real job security in academia, especially as I position myself at the intersection of sociology of work and queer studies that I genuinely enjoy. I know my family and some friends will think I am bonkers to embrace this 'niche' approach and pursuit of a 'Mickey Mouse' PhD. They'll think it's weird I might allow myself to just 'fall' into (*or actively choose*) employment outside of academia 'despite all my hard work' to fund this new direction. I am not afraid of doing that anymore. And I am not afraid to take that step and try a PhD again. The right kind of PhD, in the right kind of institution at the right time for me.

Like Halberstam (2011) notes, queer people need to find their own version of 'success' in this heteronormative pro-capitalist landscape. When reflecting on Olympians who come in 4<sup>th</sup> place, they fail to achieve a medal which, as Halberstam (2011) highlights, seen as some kind of failure. But when

reflecting, they just performed in a sport they love and represented their fucking country. Coming last place in the Olympics, or some other competition, should be seen as an incredible success. We need to change the narrative. I came last in the 'Olympics' of academia at SBS. I came last place in my cohort of PGRs. I'm proud to have even got there and here - and feel ok about it all now. I am also very proud of this project and what I have learned about having a less 'normal' queer little 'decent' life.

But for WCQs, we must be mindful that 'getting lost' can be more of a burden both financially (*where failure can have more profound implications for housing security or those who rely on us for care for example*) and for our future 'successes'. Getting lost on my own academic journey has been burdensome because I did not have the base cultural capital when engaging with philosophy, media analysis and even some of the fundamental sociological concepts on which to build on. At Falkirk High School, there was no time given to philosophical debates. My guidance teacher encouraged me to take 'practical' subjects; away from social sciences towards woodwork, accountancy and hard sciences. During my 'more applied' BA (Hons) and MSc, there was little room for real and meaningful critical debates around society, gender and philosophy outside of our solitary employment relations module. But now I am on a journey I feel is right for the WCQ me, I can take my time and make steady progress. But most importantly, enjoy the ride and keep my own 'affect level' manifestations of cruel optimism under control by keeping the 'affective body' (Blackman, 2021) in check. Be mindful that those unwelcome flurries of cruel optimism will come and go. And when they come, I do not become too attached. When they go, they depart with an acknowledgement of the 'fraying' of the societal promise of a good life. And I can turn to my queer collective, comrades, friends and allies for care. We can all resist the further fraying of the social structures around us and get to work towards creating a decent life and find our collective flourishing together.

## 7. Concluding thoughts

This final section of the project pulls together the many different threads (and lenses) back(?) together. In the process of learning (and my starting of the process of unlearning heteronormative and pro-accumulation norms and sensibilities), concepts and ideas have become ‘messy’. But that seems to be what happens for me as an AEr (and other AErS such as Grant (2010) experience when exploring feelings of anxiety, stress and addiction). There has been a lot of ‘things’ for me to say as WCQ ECR, when analysing my own working experiences in HE employment. And although there is so much more to be said on the ‘ripple effects’ of precarity (Jankowski, 2024) in the WC life beyond just work and the symbolic violence experienced as a WCQ ECR, this project has kept its grounding in the teaching aspects of work and employment.

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In section 1.4 of this project, a single research aim was set out:

The aim of this research project is to critically analyse my feelings, emotions and experiences of a precariously employed working-class queer (WCQ) early career researcher (ECR) working in the Scottish higher education sector through the adoption of the layered account approach to autoethnography.

I will now set out the extent to which each element of this research aim has been addressed and met within this MPhil research project.

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The layered account approach to AE, adopted by academics including Ronai (see 1992a and 1992b), has been the mono-method which I have utilised to attempt to ‘make sense’ and critically analyse the realities of work in HE by focussing on my ‘typical’ experiences. This project has looked to the experience of work which is not solely “viewed from some detached objective standpoint” (Dejours et al, 2018: ix). I have done so from a WCQ perspective, considering the formation of my queer ‘gendered’ experience of feminised work (underpinned by the work of Skeggs (1997: 2004) and to some extent Ackers (1990)) by considering the work that is both funnelled to me and what I am ‘naturally’ drawn to – be that customer service work in previous careers or caring for students in HE. As for my WC experiences of ECR work, as set out in Vignette One and Vignette Two, I did not have understand what ‘value’ was put on ‘gendered’ elements of work in HE. It took me, after constantly being given ‘less valued’ (but nonetheless important) student-centred caring work from colleagues. As per Bourdieu (1977: 1989), as a WC person, I lacked the necessary capital and ‘feel for the [Scottish HE] game’. I lacked the knowing of what work was ‘valued’ by the academy and (perhaps too late for my first PhD attempt) what capital I need for the ‘fields of exchange’ in Scottish HE to secure a permanent position or promotion, compared to the knowing of the middle-class or upper-class ECR. Within Vignette One and Vignette Three, the WC necessity to secure work to offer financial security was underscored by my reluctance and worry in ‘allowing myself’ to break away from the ‘prescribed work’ and ‘waste my time’ pursuing literature and research of genuine interest. In short, this project has documented my learning vis-à-vis my engagement with (predominantly) sociological literature.

In my learning, via the work of Halberstam (2011) and Berlant (2011) - being able to recognise the scenes of desire and alternative possibilities, and my unlearning of heteronormative 'go to quick fixes' of positive psychology and meritocracy induced 'work harder for longer' narrative to unlock some seemingly objective and commonly understood version of success and the 'good life;', I started to find solace and feelings of liberation in a (queerer) WC 'decent life' I could more easily create for myself because it was more 'within reach'. The emotions brought on by shame and feelings of failure which I faced in work (and beyond as a queer person), sometimes exacerbated by 'well-trodden' emotions and experiences from early life of being excluded in some form or being a 'closeted' queer person, were thick and overwhelming, despite knowing these 'cluster of promises' (Berlant, 2011) of the good life were damaging with the feelings of rejection and exclusion from my institution in Vignette One being just one example.

However, as showcased throughout Vignette One, Vignette Two and Vignette Three, the WCQ academic will likely be surrounded by an equally queer collective in their private life, which offers nourishment and care. And in my experience, and set out across all three vignettes, I was shown care and, specifically illustrated in Vignette One, new ways of being and doing research by my (predominantly) queer work collective. As per Dejours et al. (2018), my (queerer) work collective also feeds into my research experience and continues to shape and alter the 'real work' that was produced and that you read right now. So, it could be said, for a WCQ ECR, their research is made (even) queerer by the collectives in their life in both the professional and personal sphere. It is being a WCQ ECR that positions me as a torch bearer for, as hooks (1994) and Taylor (2023) call for, the WC inclusive intersectional feminist reading list and classroom - which has queerness at its heart and can centre student experience in the learning and unlearning in HE. As reflected on throughout all three vignettes, the role of my supervisor and my broader collectives shaped and added to the gap between the prescribed work of an MPhil thesis and 'real work' I produced. The feelings of love, care and at times despair at the grim and hostile political realities around us gave this project an energy and grounding which spurred it on. And as my supervisor reminded me, 'I should make my AE less lonely' – because we do not discover, experience or 'emotion' things individually.

As per Jankowski (2024), I also have the knowing and understanding to feel and know the often worrying and labour-intensive realities of precarious work within HE through my engagement with concepts, theory and literature in the field of sociology or work and employment relations. But it is within this knowing I found the ability to identify my own experiences and attempt make sense of them (*or putting it more bluntly, become angrier and more frustrated at my own exploitation*). Even with this prior knowledge and (somewhat) rich(er) understanding of WC realities in HE, I was still able to fall foul of the emotions and 'affect' of cruel optimism on my body and its varying manifestations and problematic 'ripple effects' infecting my personal life. But in my recent learning, by engaging with the likes of Halberstam (2011) and Berlant (2011), the unlearning of heteronormative ways of being led to the new learning and embracing newer ways of potentially being as a WCQ. I was able to name manifestations of fearing failure and my own versions of cruel optimism. I was able to *\*really\** recognise the limitations of positive psychology I had inadvertently been engaging with (*uncritically it must be noted*). By individualising my manifestations of failure and cruel optimism, I was not seeing the perceived lack of my own 'flourishing' holistically. I was blaming myself to a large extent. I knew 'things were not good' in the HE sector. But I somehow thought I could push beyond that on my own.

The emotions and feelings were, at times, all-consuming and I would engage in unhelpful coping mechanisms to soothe them with little or only temporary 'success'. But this project gave me the space, time and focus to 'get lost' and find my lane of research. It reminded me to see and value the input and outputs of care in a queer collective more than I had previously. But, as identified in Taylor (2023), I able to recognise how 'queer theory' can overlook the material realities for WCQs and in my unlearning I can be mindful of the limitations faced for WCQs in 'just allowing' myself to fail. But at the same time, I no longer 'have' to 'cling onto' heteronormative success and see how 'failing my PhD' has meant I have taken up this new approach to my research. And I am now *starting* to see things more queerly. So, with all of that in mind, I assert with confidence that my research aim has been met.

But I have so many more queer lenses to look through and try out. I have so much learning to do, still. And I have even more unlearning to do. And that work starts now.

## 8. Some Limitations of the Project

This first limitation is centred on the philosophical positioning of this project and the choice to focus on 'depth over breadth'. The project focussed on the work of Sarah Ahmed, focussing in depth on how Ahmed's (2006) (dis)orientations of queerness and how this interacts and is cajoled by the 'straight lines' of heteronormativity. However, there was scope to consider Husserl's concept of 'Epoche' (or bracketing) and embed this more explicitly and fully within the layered account AE within the vignettes. Perhaps even, a critical examination of bracketing in the context of a WCQ could have provided more depth and opened the door for further philosophical contributions from this project alongside the in tandem nature of data collection and analysis. However, given the scope and level of study of this MPhil project, it was deemed suitable to focus philosophical positioning around the work of Ahmed (2006) – with a focus on the 'obliqueness' of WCQ life with consideration given the intersectionality of queerness, class and to some extent gender via the 'feminised' queer body.

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The second limitation is focussed on the data collection approach. The chosen method of this research project was the layered account of AE as a mono-method, focusing on my own personal experience as a WCQ in my role as an ECR. The specifics of this project, be that writing this project from an explicitly WCQ perspective, the specific issues at play around HE precarity and toiling with issues of failure (when tackling a PhD for example), were both deeply personal and specific. However, there was scope for a more collaborative approach (by writing with my supervisor or my partner leaning into a more community autoethnography for example) but this might have extended and stretched the research aim further – making the project even broader and impacting on the depth of analysis. However, for future publications for example, this could be more suitable and perhaps working on a less time-bound project would allow for those dynamics, community building and learning to flow more organically in a less structured setting of an MPhil thesis.

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The third and final limitation noted here is associated with the validity or credibility of the data collection and the 'concealing' of some (potentially identifying) details and information surrounding the critical incidents explored within the data collection. Like all qualitative data collection methods, such as conducting semi-structure interviews with participants or asking them to keep a research

journal, there are risks that the participant (*in this case me*) could be withholding or changing important information or details around critical incidents. And as the participant and researcher, I can confirm that is the case, like most AE, details have been changed to protect participants. I do not want to allude to or identify the colleague who provided me with teaching content for teaching that I felt 'uncomfortable' utilising and 'standing in front of when delivering a class'. I changed the context, timeline and institution around this story to obscure the identity of the individual. But most importantly for the project at hand, the emotions and impact this had on my personally and professionally remain true as I saw and felt at the time and the relief and joy I felt as my own work collective sprang into action as I faced failure through my own self-imposed and widened WCQ gap between the prescribed work and real work discussed in Vignette Two.

As a writer, teacher and a relatively private individual, I do not feel comfortable showing my full self and battle against the perceptions that I 'overshare'. And as new AEr, I don't feel comfortable (*just yet*) to share the intimate details of my queer sexuality, my (*perhaps near dependency but certainly problematic*) relationship with alcohol or my historical personal financial circumstances brought on (*in part*) by the economic downturn of 2008/9. All these factors and events added to feelings of failure and shame, as well as growing up queer under Clause 28 which forced me to feel shame in my personal identity and sexuality and prompted confusion and disgust at my sexual desires. These are some of the elements I hope to unpack in a future project such as a PhD. But all this worry and shame aside, as Herman and Adams (2025) identify, there is cathartic feelings and solace that can be found from writing AE. And this I now feel in abundance!

## 9. Where Next for this Line of Enquiry?

The avenues for future research from this project are wide ranging and extensive, spurring me to want to pursue a PhD in Social Sciences from October 2026 to take this AE project forward. Of course, the first line of enquiry could centre the method of AE, critically examining the uses of AE to shed light on and critically analyse the experiences of WCQ ECRs – incorporating elements of community autoethnography. This project would open the door for a PhD project made up of a collection of essays and vignettes revolving around the use of AE as a mono-method for academic research. The early stages of that journey will start soon, as I intend to submit an abstract for a book chapter proposal to the Challenging Narratives: Creative Methodologies for Social Research in December 2025.

As has been acknowledged in section 2.7, the components, concepts and theory that make up the literature review for this project is broad. During the research and editing processes, many ideas – inspired by literature, discussions with my work and queer collectives and offered in feedback by my supervisor have been edited out, cut short or not carried forward. This is unfortunate, but sometimes you really do have to 'kill your darlings'. Two concepts and ideas that were not carried forward was to consider adopting Sara Ahmed's (2023) '*Feminist Killjoy*' approach to my own experiences of symbolic violence and refusing to see the 'funny side' of queerphobia, class-phobia and any other forms of prejudice disguised as some sort of phobia. Within this thread of argument, I could consider how venting or using humour with my work collective is doing us all damage. Of late, I find myself caveating all conversations about my contributions in my workplace with 'if I'm still working here, that could be a possibility', reminding everyone of my precarious position and refusing to make light of my precarity and refusing to 'plan ahead' and to some extent 'work to rule'. Until I am afforded the dignity and job

security of having a job beyond this semester, I will restrict my work-related contributions to the semester only. And I will not make light of it to make anyone in the room feel better about it.

Moreover, inspired by feedback and discussions with my supervisor and Sophie Lewis' (2025) book *'Enemy Feminisms – TERFs, Policewoman, and Girlbosses Against Liberation'*, I had considered and was very keen to carry forward the conceptualisation of a typology of 'Enemy Academics in the Social Sciences' – perhaps introducing, inspired by the 2021 viral sensation, 'Bean Dad', the academic who just provides you (*the baby academic*) with a tin of beans and tin opener to feed and 'nourish' yourself with no guidance or support. Or the 'Solidarity for All (But Not for You)' Academic, those academics that are vocalist leftists in public but reinforce and inflict symbolic violence in private. In my PhD, I might find the courage to hold up a mirror to other academics from the perspective of a WCQ ECR. But for now, my stamina is waning as submission deadline approaches, and you need to keep some ammo for the next stages in your career, right!? But if I am being completely honest, I am mostly worried to rock the boat as I remain on a precarious contract within an HE institution. So perhaps that vignette can remain in drafts until such a time I have a permanent contract.

Other academics contributions which require further unpacking in relation to WCQ ECR realities include the work of Joan Ackers (1990), by considering in much greater extent the masculinities and gendered nature of organisations in HE institutions, and bell hooks, with a focus on both 'Teaching [our students] to Transgress' (1994) and feelings of belonging for working-class academics in spaces created by (and predominantly for) the working-class. And finally, for now anyway, the next avenue for this project is to pursue, as part of a PhD project, to carry forward Taylor's (2023) call for an intersectional, feminist and queer reading list for WCQ life and in HE specifically. I would like my PhD to put forward contributions and bring to the fore relevant texts for students, PGRs and other colleagues to shape the teaching and discussions in business management and HRM classrooms. Within my PhD, I would also like to argue and call on other WCQ academics to consider picking up the tool of AE as a way to shed a critical light on the realities of work and their life in and outside the increasingly neo-liberalised HE sector in Scotland. And it is with those exciting routes put forward; I have started the early planning for my PhD proposal.

Stay tuned.

## Epilogue

When writing the epilogue, I really struggled to articulate how I felt post-writing of this MPhil project. I then tried writing a letter to myself, as this was easier to be kind and fair to myself. It took me out of myself. So, I decided to keep that format of writing for both transparency and show the reader how the ideas flowed, and how the final AE piece of the project came together.

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Dear Brian

You did fail.

You failed to achieve my PhD you started in October 2018. You failed to make the progress expected by Strathclyde Business School in the time specified.

In the summer 2023, you walked away from the PhD, threw in the towel and you gave up the ghost.

And that's ok.

It was all for the right reasons.

And as a WCQ, you should (and can) carve out your own version of success. You are queer. You are on the margins. You don't have to 'go along' with the heteronormative pro-capitalist way of life most people do. But take note, it's harder for those queers who are WC. You have less financial and cultural capital than the middle-class. You can do *\*some\** of the things you want to do by reaching for that 'decent life' – not having to attach yourself to that 'good life'; as this can be detrimental and source of reoccurring suffering. By listening to the likes of Halberstam (2011) and learning the lessons of Berlant (2011), you don't have to chase *\*that\** good life. You can create your own with others you love.

You have already started on the journey to creating your 'decent life'. In 2023, you decided to do a MPhil in a completely different subject area from that of your original PhD. You wanted to use AE, inspired by and the encouragement of your queer and work collectives, to tell a story about a WCQ lad who 'failed' his PhD, faced structural barriers integrating into HE and facing relentless precarity. But that story is not (and never has been) just about you, your resilience and 'reaching for the stars' while fuelled by positive psychology and the likes

You got lost on your PGR journey. At the same time, you carried that fear of failure, shame and faced financial instability. But whilst reading for that project, you learned. You *\*really\** learned. You learned about yourself. You learned you don't have to be that WC breakout star that gets the PhD first time and becomes the top academic in their field. You don't have to know everything to be a PGR. You don't have to be a greatest researcher from the start of the process. You can allow myself to tip toe around failure. You can allow yourself to fuck up and fall headfirst into failure. But as a precariously employed ECR, you will always have one eye on the fear of failure until some form of job security can be provided. You don't have the power to change that right now. Although the trade unions are trying, they are yet to make *\*real\** tangible change to the way casualised labour is normalised in HE. So, you, and other precariously employed workers, must look after each other. And you must lean into the care of your queer and work collectives. This journey is not about individualism or papering over the

cracks with a 'positive mental attitude' as a mechanism to 'get back to (hard) work' under the illusion of meritocracy.

The issues you have faced (and continue to face) are structural. They are not because of anything you have done or a failure on your part as such. Always remember, you cannot deal with the malaise of contemporary HE employment as WCQ ECR alone. What you can do is your best for future generations by creating feminist classrooms, with you and your comrades, which the issues of class, gender, race and sexuality sit in the middle of the room and students are encouraged to learn through their experiences and interactions with their own fear of failure and battling against a heteronormative neoliberal society where everyone 'must' do their 'best', all of the time and make strident steps up the ladder of some daft consensus of what success looks like.

You can and should take steps to move beyond the shame you have been carrying about your whole life. Whether that be because of this PhD failure, because of your previous unhealthy relationship with alcohol, your historical financial issues, being in a non-standard and open relationship or for just being a WCQ. That work started on page one of this project. And will continue long after the last page of it.

As a WCQ, you must be mindful of the rise of the far right and what this means for WC people and all minorities locally and nationally. And of course, consider the risk this poses to your rights and that of the wider queer community. As someone located in Falkirk, which has morphed into some kind of epicentre of far-right activism and racist sentiments of late, symbolised by the reoccurring anti-migrant protests (and counter anti-racist pro-migrant protests) at the Hotel Cladhan, which houses asylum seekers. You worked at this hotel. You met many members of your queer collective whilst working in that place. And you all must continue to fight back against the hatred being shown against these people who seek the divide. You must show care for these asylum seekers, ordinary people who will be confused and scared by the rising hate being shown towards them. As a queer collective, you must continue to have those challenging, frustrating and tiring conversations with family members, neighbours and strangers who chose to hate. You must be the anecdote to the spread of hatred across our WC communities and not allow the policy makers, financiers and super rich who have all played their part in devastating the living standards and realities for the people of Falkirk and far beyond. As a WCQ collective, you must never forget about the ongoing genocide in Gaza and the conflicts around the globe which must remain in the collective consciousness; apply pressure to policy makers who are responsible for this devastation.

But importantly, you must remember to take note of joy. And you must remember to be an activist who looks after themselves - so you have the ability, capacity and resources to care for others.

You can now see things a little more queerly. You (and others around you) no longer have to reach for heteronormative levers for solace or relief from sham of that frayed and non-existent 'good life'. You can construct your own decent life. You can continue to show care and be cared for by your queer collective. You are free to value love from your partner, comrades and friends equally. And doesn't that make being queer fucking fantastic.

Look after yourself and your wider collectives.

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