Epistemic Splits: The Sticky Process of Knowledge Acquisition for Working-Class Academics in Art Education Research

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Abstract

This thesis explores what happens at the sticky meeting point between working-class ways of knowing and being and academic writing in art education research. Entering into a tricky and ongoing conversation surrounding the continued relevance of 'class', I explore why working-class academics continue to call for a class-based kind of pedagogy, methodology, and epistemology, despite contrasting beliefs that class is no longer a valuable way to describe contemporary society. In response, I develop the concept of 'epistemic splits', which describes the tension between institutional misrecognition (external split), and the internalised doubt that shapes how knowledge is expressed (internal split). This framework helps articulate the contradictions that emerge when working-class individuals enter and move through academic spaces.

Using an arts-based research approach, I develop 'epistemic splits' from a theoretical framework into a method of inquiry, working with classed tension to show something new about said tension. Chapter 1 reads with epistemic splits through working-class academic Cynthia Cruz's multimodal text *The Melancholia of Class*, remaining attentive to how classed contradictions are performed through the concoction of memory, metaphor, story, and theory. Chapter 2 examines what happens when these splits become public within digital spaces, where working-class academics democratise their knowledge online. And Chapter 3 turns to my own fragmented writing, where I write with and through epistemic splits as both method and site of knowledge production, offering a way of reading class that theory alone perhaps cannot convey.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that the contradictions and stickiness shaping working-class academic experience are not things that need to be solved, but instead, held open as important sites of knowledge making in itself. In this way, I offer art education research a method of reading, writing and engaging with classed academic expression in a way that honours the integrity of the contradictions themselves.

Keywords: Working-class, epistemology, epistemic splits, arts-based research, art education research, higher education, fragmentation

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Contents

Introduction

> I'm not sure how to write this. But the more I learn, the more it hurts me. And as I go forwards, I cruckle[1] and buckle, and everything that once was, is both magnified and lost at the same time. It matters and it doesn't. Whatever I felt before, living on the peripheries, the frankness of my small world, the proximity, the naivety, I can now name and explain why it was and how it should have been in a hundred words or more. But what does this understanding do to a person? What has it done to us? I try to search for myself in those who know me and those who I have yet to meet and I can no longer trace a sense of self in either. Confusing everything I carry with everything I must perform, I feel sticky and messy, trapped and free between it all.
>
> *Fragment I*

This fragment illustrates the phenomenon I aim to explore throughout my thesis: the encounter between working-class ways of knowing and being, and academic ways of writing within art education. This research stems not simply from personal grievance or a confessional impulse, but from the discovery that the acquisition of knowledge, particularly within higher education, may not just be a simple intellectual endeavour, but perhaps also, a deeply social and emotional one. One of which is actually quite painful, slow and complicated, especially for those who grow up in environments where opportunities are less and access to them is low, and the only way 'out' is through what may be considered a 'dignified' education with the promise of upward mobility (Reay, 2018). Environments which often predominantly shape the shadows of the working-class, leaving imprints in how knowledge is encountered, negotiated and expressed, including the artistic and academic writing that emerges from and within them.

I choose those specific words, 'complicated', 'slow', and 'painful' however, quite immediately and with intention. While they are often associated with stereotypes of 'working-class experience', of which itself, is a sticky intersectional web of one's surroundings, geography, schooling, jobs, opportunities, family, sensibility, sensitivities, of which mine is only one strand, here they signify something more exigent. While critical theorist Paulo Freire famously once said that the oppressed must come to understand their oppression in order to be liberated from it (Freire, 2005), the process of so-called 'understanding' may actually be much more difficult and haunting than one initially thinks. Because learning in these contexts, involves a continuous negotiation with structures that were never designed for one's flourishing (Reay, 2018; Spivak, 1988; Suominen et al., 2021). And whatever 'thisness' and thatness' one tries to make sense of, may not always provide the

[1] Cruckle: to twist or roll on your ankle. A dialect verb originating from and largely used only in Rochdale, England.

satisfaction or simple liberation that one has always thought/expected to seek (Povinelli, 2011; Reay, 2018). Coming to understand why obstacles exist, why access is limited, and why social mobility is conditional, produces a peculiar epistemic position. One that is conflicted and relational. One that generates both empowerment and tension. This tension is not only with the content of what is learned, but also with how it is being acquired, how it is being embodied, and affects ultimately, how it is then being re-expressed (Suominen et al., 2021).

Caught in-between two ways of knowing or a sticky entwinement of both? These tensions form a point of contact that my thesis will attempt to both theorise and examine. This is the point where working-class epistemic formation meets the specific 'norms' of academic research writing. A contact point that I conceptualise as the meeting of an internal rupture with an external one. What I term, 'epistemic splits', and which I believe may hold potential implications for art education research. Art education, of which I interpret as an interdisciplinary field where artistic, pedagogical, and theoretical forms of writing may intersect, offers a particularly rich yet charged context for my work, because while it is inclusive of alternative ways of knowing and is open to a plethora of possibilities, it still remains shaped by institutional expectations of understanding and coherence (Schwab & Borgdorff, 2014; Suominen et al., 2021).

I aim to frame this contact point then, not as something rebellious, disruptive, or even truly spectacular, but as something subtle, ordinary, sometimes crass, sometimes cruddy and oftentimes messy (Povinelli, 2011). Throughout this thesis, I will think through and alongside Elizabeth E. Povinelli's notion of 'quasi-events', which she uses to describe moments so ordinary and so mundane, that despite their quiet erosion of life itself, they seem to "neither happen nor not happen" (Povinelli, 2011, p. 13). They describe not immediate, dramatic instances, but instead, operate through slow accumulation, appearing as 'normal life', but have long term complex effects. I relate this concept to the ways in which working-class ways of knowing and being show through in writing in art education. An epistemology of its own accord, where writing is fragmented, conflicted, a little jagged and a little messy. A type of knowing and a type of writing that emerges because of difficulty, illustrating the slow transformation of the self through knowledge acquisition. At the same time, patterns and struggles experienced by those navigating working-class life and academia can also be made visible.

As I navigate this myself, through my thesis I hope to provide three main contributions to the field and to other art education researchers. Theoretically, I hope to add

to the last three decades of conversations on class-conscious and class-sensitive pedagogies (Barker, 1996; Hey, 2003; Hummelstedt et al., 2025; Jones & Vagle, 2013; Reay, 2018), which, although may not change the system completely, if at all, can help in changing interpretations of it (Hummelstedt et al., 2025). Through developing my own concept of 'epistemic splits', I hope to provide a way for art education researchers to understand the textures and hues of how knowledge is acquired and expelled for and by the working-class.

Methodologically, I hope to provide a way of reading and/or engaging with writing differently, perhaps even suggesting an alternative reading practice altogether. An invitation to show how writing from those who identify as working-class, may not be just a way of reporting knowledge, but a place where knowledge is continuously formed and negotiated on the page, a quiet internal battle externalised (Povinelli, 2011). Where questions such as: How is this writing being produced? What tensions are being expressed here? What is provoking these contradictions? can be explored openly.

Pedagogically, I aim to illuminate the often invisible epistemic labour undertaken by working-class students, who not only oscillate between social worlds, but also emotional and economic ones (Jones & Vagle, 2013; Reay, 2018). As to write in such circumstances, at the very least, requires a certain level of peace, where time, stability, and mental space for thought is able unfold. Writing then, for the working-class, becomes a weighty, sticky and messy entanglement, far more than the simple act of recording thought on the page.

Problem Statement and Research Questions

In recent academic discourse, two juxtaposing tensions persist. The first, concerns the difficulties that working-class academics encounter when they try to write or entwine their ways of knowing and being into their research writing (Barker 1996; Cruz, 2021; Hey, 2003; Munch, 2025a; Reay, 2018). A difficulty that is ongoing, thus generating repeated calls for working-class based epistemologies, methodologies, and pedagogies over the last three decades (Barker, 1996; Hey, 2003; Hummelstedt et al., 2025; Jones & Vagle, 2013; Reay, 2018; Suominen et al., 2021). At the same time, broader academic discourse has and is, often framing class as anachronistic or as a diminishing category, no longer analytically meaningful in contemporary society (Beck, 1999; Pakulsi & Waters, 1996). I am therefore very interested in how these two positions can coexist.

Because of this, my thesis aims to explore what happens to knowledge when it moves between these different classed systems of legitimacy. Knowledge from the working-class, which I theorise as being shaped by 'epistemic splits', a concept I make from the existing theory, to help understand and describe the friction between institutional systems that fail to fully recognise working-class knowledge (external split) and the self that has been conditioned to doubt its own existence (internal split).

Focussing on art education as a field that is often positioned as open and inclusive, evidenced in recent research and dissertations that embrace experimental and personal writing practices (de Carvalho, 2022; Close, 2023a; Suominen et al., 2021), despite its historical reliance on scientific means of validation, I will investigate what happens at the meeting point between this internal split (working-classed epistemic practices) and the external one (higher education research). In doing so, I do not claim that there is a universal working-class experience that speaks to all working-class people. Nor do I aim to prove that all working-class people feel or experience such a meeting point. My goal instead, is to look at and interrogate why this meeting point occurs at all, and to analyse the patterns that emerge under specific conditions when they do.

To do this, I will be guided by my research question: <u>How might epistemic splits reshape how art education research(ers) understand, read and respond to working-class academic forms of expression?</u>

This research question then, is the grounding anchor across my three main chapters, each built around an example of the meeting point I theorise. These chapters are tied together through a coherent thread of reading with, engaging with and writing through epistemic

splits. In this way, I develop epistemic splits as an arts-based research method, inquiring into classed tension through the very conditions of classed tension itself (Suominen et al., 2021; Vis, 2021). Therefore, in Chapter 1, through a sensitive reading of working-class scholar Cynthia Cruz's work, *The Melancholia of Class* (2021), I trace the performance and repetitive unfolding of this meeting point through her autotheoretical writing. A writing that moves between the tendrils of lived experience, case studies of other working-class artists and creatives, and high theory. A writing that demonstrates what epistemic splits may look like in practice at an intimate level, as they are lived and written through. Chapter 2 extends this into a digital space, asking what happens when these splits are no longer contained within the page, but made public. Tracing two working-class academics who seek to democratise knowledge and engage in new forms of public pedagogy, I trace how epistemic splits are performed and negotiated, and perhaps even contested, in real time, as they move beyond the boundaries of academia. Finally, in Chapter 3, I turn to my own fragmented writing as a further site where this meeting point can occur. I write through the tensions I theorise as an arts-based research practice, treating writing as both method and site of knowledge generation (de Carvalho, 2022; Vis, 2021), potentially offering a new reading practice in art education research that encourages staying with the contradictions and the stickiness.

Taken together, these chapters will also attempt to provide the answer to my second sub research question: How does the intersection of arts-based research and art education research offer new ways of articulating classed sensibility within academia?

Literature Review:

Here, I begin by engaging in a tricky historical conversation about whether class continues (or discontinues) to shape distinct ways of knowing and being. In other words, why is it that we need a 'class-based' kind of anything? To do so, I draw on contemporary debates concerning the so-called 'death of class', alongside reoccurring calls for class-based epistemologies. To bring these positions into dialogue with one another, highlights the "terribly complex endeavour that involves 'living contradictions'" (Jones & Vagle, 2013, p. 2) underscoring the challenges of assembling theoretical approaches that account for how class shapes thought, feeling, and expression.

Why Do We Need a 'Class-Based' Anything?

Over the last few decades, there has been conflicting conversations about whether social class remains a meaningful category in modern societies, particularly those in the global North (Beck, 1999; Pakulsi & Waters, 1996). Some scholars argue that class in and of itself, is becoming more and more elusive (Hall, 1996). Like a mirage, they see class as less valuable in tracing the social divisions embedded in identity, inequality, and politics within the West (Pakulsi & Waters, 1996). Instead, it is being suggested that social difference today, is now being expressed more through individualisation, through lifestyle and consumer culture (Hey, 2003). Where, instead of being organised by typical working-class vs middle-class markers, such as occupation or local environment, society is increasingly structured through the freedom of one's own personal tastes and lifestyle choices (Beck, 1999; Hall, 1996; Pakulsi & Waters, 1996). In other words, what we buy, how we dress and the hobbies we partake in.

In 1996, sociologists Jan Pakulsi and Malcom Waters addressed this conundrum directly within their book, *The Death of Class?* Beginning with their provocative title and the claim that "classes are dissolving and some of the most advanced societies are no longer class societies" (Pakulsi & Waters, 1996, p. 4), they further suggest that the decline of political ideologies that once helped shape the language and articulation of class, such as Marxism and class-based regimes, has contributed to the decline in talking about class altogether. Ulrich Beck (1999), approaching class as an analytical category, further adds to this conversation by proposing that class has become a 'zombie category', one that remains alive in public discourse, but inaccurate to define our current realities. Yet what may appear as the weakening of class as a category, does not necessarily signal its disappearance. Instead, it

may suggest a growing disjunction between the frameworks through which class is analysed, and the way it continues to be lived and sensed in everyday life. While it is true that the values and ideas of our time are changing at a faster rate than we can ever comprehend them (Rosa, 2003), and while concerns such as globalisation, migration, and lifestyle differentiation take up more and more of our breathing spaces, these developments do not mitigate or erase class divisions. Perhaps it simply obscures them. Because even if we are 'talking less' about class, it still continues to structure everyday life in subtle yet persistent ways. Even if, as a society, we are consuming more, dressing more, broadcasting more, these tastes and choices are still deeply entrenched and shaped by one's economic resources and social background.

If class distinctions have truly passed, then we must also question why then, over the last thirty years, have there been increasing calls across the UK, US, Finland and elsewhere, arguing for and pleading for, centring a class-based kind of something. Within research and pedagogy, whether that be through class-based epistemologies (Barker, 1996), methodological approaches (Hey, 2003; Reay, 2018), and pedagogies attentive to working-class experience (Hummelstedt et al., 2025; Jones & Vagle, 2013), as the decades go by, scholars repeatedly ask how educational institutions might better recognise and respond to the complex realities faced by those who identify as working-class. One scholar in particular, Diane Reay, has spent her life's work on this very topic (Reay, 1997; 1998a; 1998b; 1998c; 2010; 2018; 2025), with the persistence that, contrary to claims of class decline, the significance and impact of class in shaping thought, knowledge and experience, is only intensifying as the years move forward.

Therefore, such a persistence encourages us to think about what it is that we not hearing? If the same issue has been raised consistently, then why does it keep resurfacing? While I will focus mainly on these calls within higher education research, I would also like to make a note here of working-class led movements that illustrate how class analysis, while naturally a contested discourse, is not solely an academic one. Publishing initiatives, *Working Press: books by and about working class artists* (1986-1996), *Arts of the Working Class* newspaper (2018-present), and *Left Cultures* magazine (2022-present) explicitly foreground working-class voices and perspectives, with centring class as a complex, continuous site of political, cultural, artistic, and epistemic struggle. Here, we can view such initiatives as evidence that class remains very much a meaningful sensibility and discourse, with specific intentions to 1) distribute locally and cheaply for the exact audiences they write about (Arts

of the Working Class, 2025), and 2) make it their mission to highlight the difficulties and intricacies of working-class knowledges and experiences to all (Left Cultures, 2025).

If we return back to that same year of 1996, we can see just how much class analysis is a truly contested topic. While Pakulsi & Waters question if class is alive or not, working-class scholar Judith Barker begins with one of the first of many calls for a class-based approach to epistemology. After attempting to incorporate a story of her mother in an academic article, she recounts feeling stung by a fellow working-class academic who voiced her discomfort with the choice of this entwinement. She writes:

> I wondered about the overall problems some of us encounter when we try to write academically; translating our working-class knowledge and understanding into a format, structure, and language that was designed to deny our knowledges, experiences, realities and values. I was already familiar with feminist and Afrocentric approaches to epistemology. I began to think a class-based approach was needed (Barker, 1996, p. 104).

This reflection by Barker, written thirty years ago, mirrors the exact tension driving the heart of this thesis: what is it about the complex meeting point between working-class ways of knowing and the conventions of academic research writing? In this instance, which is one of many (Hey, 2003; Maguire, 1997; Reay, 1997; Skeggs 1997), this intersection not only caused her pain, but unsettled her colleague and her work was repeatedly rejected. Instead of turning away from the injury, she deliberately continues to experiment with the same technique in subsequent work, rejecting a strict separation between 'experience' and 'high theory', and instead, advocates for their entangled coexistence (Barker, 1996). In her view, her working-class experience becomes a means of interpreting high theory, and at the same time, high theory helps reshape her understandings of that working-class experience. Translating between the two however, remains precarious. It carries the risk that something vital may be lost or negated. Barker's call for a class-based epistemology therefore, represents one that can honour the integrity of both working-class ways of communicating and the insights offered by theoretical frameworks.

Another call comes a few years later, and again emerging from a place of pain. Building on the work of Diane Reay, Valerie Hey reflects on her grief of 'joining the club' of knowledge acquisition as a working-class woman (Hey, 2003). She describes a 'double bind' where, the more knowledge and academic language one acquires, the less connected one may

feel to their previous, 'real' life and identity. And as one feels disconnected to their previous life, they also may not feel fully at home in their new academic one either. Thus, perpetually occupying the position of (n)either/(n)or. This sense of being caught between two worlds is echoed across many accounts of working-class academics, who describe the term in slightly different yet strikingly similar terms: the "outsider within" (Barker, 1996, p, 106), "outsiders on the inside" (Reay, 2018, p. 32), "unstable/stable" (Maguire, 1997, p. 92), "success of failure or failure of success" (Reay, 1997, p, 19), "being/feeling the 'other' within the 'other' place" (Hey, 2003, p. 321). These terms consistently point towards a conflicted epistemic position, one that repeatedly surfaces, and is often accompanied by feelings of betrayal, loss, and dislocation (Hey, 2003). Diane Reay writes:

> I weep, we educated working-class women tend to weep a lot about a loss we are not supposed to experience (see also Skeggs, 1997), because the connection and empathy I feel are no longer recognised in working-class cultures where what is immediately, overwhelmingly apparent is my privilege. (Reay, 1998a, p. 17).

This position can be understood as a continuous and ongoing negotiation between personal intimate social worlds and institutional expectations. The misalignment between where one thinks they come from and where one thinks they need to be, does not simply generate social tension, but gives rise to a particular hue of knowing. Hey calls for "a more embodied reading of class and consciousness as the ideological sedimentation of everyday discourse" because such works are fundamentally inseparable from memory, anger, injury and pleasure (Hey, 2003, p. 322).

Stephanie Jones and Mark D. Vagle's framework for a "social class-sensitive pedagogy" (2013) similarly challenges claims on the dissolution of class, and instead, calls for a more attentive engagement with its ongoing effects. The five-step approach highlights the "living contradictions" (2013, p. 2) and complexities experienced by students from working-class backgrounds across educational contexts and beyond. In particular, Jones and Vagle examine the effects of educational mobility on those who have historically had limited access to opportunity, implying that upward mobility is not always experienced as wholly fulfilling or even positive. On the other hand, it may provoke a plethora of psychosocial wounds, especially where individuals feel compelled to 'leave behind' familiar ways of living and speaking in order to adapt to academic norms.

The textures of these wounds, of "hiding aspects of ourselves and our families" in order to "become somewhat different people" (p. 138), has also been explored further and quite recently in the final call that I will discuss, by Anniina Suominen, Tiina Pusa, Minna Suoniemi, Eljas Suvanto, and Elina Julin within *Infernal learning and the class clash* (2021). Here, in a collaborative arts-based research approach, five art educators from Finland explore "the less glorified, murkier sides of this path… the price one pays for this desired inclusion" (p. 138). Similar to the contradictions brought up previously by Barker (1996), Reay (1997; 1998a), and Hey (2003), the Finnish educators collectively share narratives and fragments of their classed experiences interspersed with theory and reflection. Ways of knowing derived from shame, embarrassment, anger and pride (Suominen et al., 2021). They do this in order to find language for a condition that has been historically been erased or silenced within academic contexts. And yet, still, what does their work tell us? Because if, as they argue, there still is not a sufficient language for such conditions, even twenty-five years into this tricky historical conversation of asking for one, can there ever be (Suominen et al., 2021)? Perhaps, the answer lies partly in how they conducted their work specifically, in the arts-based form of inquiry. Because instead of trying to force their working-class experience into something conventional, they adapt the form itself to better hold the experience. Through collaborative writing, fragmented narratives and theoretical reflection, they allow the contradiction of what it may mean to be a working-class academic, to remain open and alive. A new language in itself. In this way, arts-based research may become important, not simply as a method for studying this peculiar condition, but as a way of thinking through and with and against its sticky contradictions.

Conclusion

Therefore, if we take these reoccurring calls for a more nuanced and sensitive engagement with working-class ways of knowing and being seriously, then it becomes rather difficult to sustain the juxtaposing claim that class has faded into a distant mirage. Yet, the two coexisting tells us something important. That the two positions are not entirely incompatible. Instead, they mirror the contradictory, doubtful, and complex nature of the working-class position itself. In this way, arguments for the continued significance of class are not weakened, but actually reinforced, as class continues to shape our experiences, our understandings, and ultimately the ways we generate knowledge.

At the same time, what emerges through the blurriness of the mirage within this historical conversation, is a different kind of problem. The difficulty in articulating class, particularly what it feels and means to be 'working-class' within contemporary and academic landscapes. While class may be less visible as a unified political identity, it remains powerful, vivid and hardy, and felt in lived experience, as the reflections of working-class academics have repeatedly demonstrated. Such experiences, often illustrated through and characterised by fragmentation, the personal, precarity, and difficulty, are not easily separable from the forms through which they are expressed and theorised. The persistence of calls for a working-class epistemology/methodology/pedagogy spanning several decades suggests that there is something that remains unresolved, and new forms capable of carrying class tension is needed (Suominen et al., 2021). The return to this conversation continues not because class has disappeared as a meaningful category in society, but because it, and the pain bound up within it, has become harder and harder to see. A 'quasi event' so ordinary and mundane, that only those who live it can perceive it (Povinelli, 2011).

With this tricky historical conversation in mind, I now turn to my theoretical framework through which I develop the concept of 'epistemic splits' as a way of understanding the classed conditions shaping academic experience.

Theoretical Framework

Epistemic Splits

If the challenge of articulation and the persistent pain of working-class experience is difficult to see and express, it becomes necessary to attempt to explore what it is that it is producing these tensions. Why does working-class knowledge collide with expectations and norms of academic environments? Why do working-class scholars often occupy that in-between, insider/outsider, doubtful and awkward position (Barker, 1996; Hey, 2003; Maguire, 1997; Reay, 2018)? What is this 'pain' that their calls are born out of? Why do they try to articulate an experience that resists conventional forms of expression over and over? To address these questions, I introduce my concept of 'epistemic splits', developed to theorise both the tensions that arise within the working-class self and those that emerge when the self encounters institutional structures.

For my theoretical framework then, I distinguish between two dimensions of this process: the 'internal split,' which concerns the conflicts within the self, and the 'external split', which concerns the frictions produced in encounters with the environment. This framework is grounded in the existing literature and ideas that I have read, but the reformulations of them, are my own. I also acknowledge that these thinkers come from different disciplines and communities altogether, some very far away from the questions of class and art education. However, their work has deeply informed the development of this concept, and my interpretations arrive only through thinking with, through and against their ideas. Although I do not write about my experience exactly, my own position of being working-class was the unique starting point for this work. I understand that these splits may be traced across several disciplines and identities, and may not be class specific, however, I choose to conceptualise this theory to organise my own thoughts around the nuances and complexities of the working-class position, particularly in relation to working-class scholarship.

The last part of this theoretical framework approaches epistemic splits as not something only conceptual, but also lived and felt, therefore experienced. But by experience, I do not mean in a simple autobiographical or anecdotal way, but moreso, as a kind of sensibility. A sensibility formed through navigating difficult social realities, therefore shaping how one perceives and makes sense of the world, creating a specific kind of thought, theory, research and writing. Taken together then, this section outlines 'epistemic splits' as

the conditions through which working-class experience becomes epistemologically meaningful within art education research.

The Internal Split: How Knowledge is Formed

I will first begin with the internal split, a quiet rupture that arises inside both the body and the mind. A rupture that is generated by a tension between expectations and values internalised from the dominant culture, and the actual lived realities of working-class life (Freire, 2005). In other words, it is the tear between what one has been taught life should look like with certain goals to achieve, linear upward paths to follow, and the reality of perhaps not being able to follow through with these entirely, whether that be because of restricted access to opportunities or simply, lack of understanding in alternative possibilities. This discrepancy is too often experienced as a personal failure, rather than a systemic one, which then also results into feelings of shame, anger, and self-depreciation (Reay, 2018). It is a continuous place of in-betweenity, an interiorised, classed friction that when expressed, can resist conventional forms of articulation, and what I will argue, can be seen as a performance of knowledge as pain, knowledge as contradiction, knowledge emerging from injury and difficulty. A working-class epistemology.

When thinking about working-class knowledge, we must turn to education theorist Paulo Freire and his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2005). Here, Freire argues that liberation from oppression for the working-class, requires the acquisition of a conscientização, a critical awareness of one's own difficulties and contradictions (Freire, 2005). For him, the working-class' comprehension in understanding one's own place within the wider social and economic systems, is not a given or even natural. Instead, such a class-consciousness must be cultivated through sustained critical thought, articulating that thought out loud and acting on that thought in person with other people (Freire, 2005). While ground-breaking and empowering, such liberation is not so simple. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak desimplifies Freire's work, by highlighting that it is not that the oppressed do not recognise their feelings of oppression and the strains put upon them, thus why they/we can never be 'free', but the entrenched internalisation of dominant ideologies can perhaps limit the capacity to express such feelings and expression, in ways that render them socially legible and actionable (Spivak, 1998). Without the 'appropriate' language, concepts, and tools, the translation of lived experience into the class consciousness Freire theorises, may remain

profoundly constrained, even through attempts of conversation and contemplation (Spivak, 1988).

Constraint does not arise solely from a lack of access to the 'appropriate' language and conceptual tools needed to articulate oppression, but also from the difficulty of situating one's own position within the wider systems that structure it (Spivak, 1988). If one lives on the peripheries of global capitalism, where consumer culture or stable employment are hard to participate in, yet their pressures remain acutely felt, the formation and expression of one's class-consciousness can be significantly constrained, and in some cases, almost impossible to transform (Mahony & Zmroczek, 1997; Spivak, 1988). Such a position may only afford partial visibility of the dominant system, while the frameworks available to interpret oppression, are themselves, shaped by the very systems they attempt to make sense of. As a result, self-understanding may emerge in fragmented or partially intelligible forms, often marked by ongoing uncertainty, rather than coherence. This does not indicate an absence of knowledge at all, but instead, the presence of an injured way of knowing, the presence of the internal split.

This epistemic constraint is not only structural then, but also affective. The difficulty of articulation is often accompanied by an enduring attachment to the very systems that produce these limitations. Lauren Berlant conceptualises this dynamic as 'cruel optimism' (2011), a condition in which individuals remain attached to objects or systems that can at the same time, undermine, harm or sustain them. In the working-class context, the promise of upward mobility, 'making it out', or inclusion within dominant structures, continues to exert a magnetic and powerful pull, not necessarily because of what the system is, but because of what it appears to offer. Perhaps this is the real mirage. Not that class is fading, but that the seductive qualities of the system, the hope and its promises, obscure the very constraints it seems to intensify. Even if the system fails you, the attachment keeps the working-class life moving forward (Berlant, 2011).

Throughout this thesis, I repeatedly state that the 'working-class' are contradictory and complex. That is not to suggest that other classes are free from the frictions I speak of, nor that all working-class individuals experience hardship, pain or struggle. However, the contradictions I explore are shaped by the ways in which the working-class position is generated and perceived within larger social, economic and cultural systems. At the same time, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak reminds us in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988), there is a certain naivety in even naming such a category at all. To speak of the 'working-class' as a collective identity, risks foisting a set of assumptions drawn from dominant perspectives,

mitigating the particularities that exist within it (Spivak, 1988). It implies that if we view the 'working-class' as a unified social group, one that shares exact material conditions, political orientations, family values, and aspirations, then those who really are working-class, can easily become reduced to a simplified statistical object or an object of sorrow, as opposed to a nuanced lived and differentiated social position.

Yet, as stated previously, that values and ideas are changing at a much faster rate than we can keep up, the current capitalistic landscape is producing severely uneven forms of labour across the globe, generating complex structural inconsistencies (Rosa, 2003; Spivak, 1988). Some who choose to identify as 'working-class' do not always occupy a stable, manual labour type of job, and in some cases, may not be working at all. Others, despite policies that may strongly counter to their material interests, find themselves drawn to right-wing or anti-immigration politics. And further still, others occupy severely precarious labour conditions, such as freelance employment, informal 'under-the-table/cash-in-hand' work, or zero-hour contracts with no set income. While these arrangements often embody financial insecurity, they are sometimes also framed within contemporary discourse as forms of flexibility lifestyles or freedom, qualities more traditionally associated with the privileges of the upper classes.

At the same time, harbouring a collective identity also presumes a degree of cohesion and community, which of course is commonly present, but may not always be the case. As discussed in *This Bridge Called My Back* (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015), while many are bound together under a life of economic and material lack, life under uncertainty, life under threat, life on the hinterlands of society, can very quickly generate hostility and rivalry within communities (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015). While some may offer support and feel collective achievement, others experience upward mobility from a member of their community as a form of disloyalty, hence the common informal slang, 'class-traitor/class-betrayer' (Crozier, Reay & Clayton, 2019). This then, may make developing a conscientização even harder, and painful, as one has to navigate the internal contradictions of knowledge acquisition and self-understanding, but also the relational and social pressures belonging to a community that may respond to change with both resistance and attraction.

Returning back to Berlant's concept of 'cruel optimism' (2011), we may understand the internal split and the pains it exudes, as a form of everyday violence, where the seductive pressures to follow a prescribed life path render the consequences of failure, loss of community, and/or dislocation, as personal shortcomings as opposed to structural ones. These small but repetitive 'quasi-events', are often invisible, and as discussed, difficult to express in

a way that dominant systems can interpret (Povinelli, 2011). This helps explain why working-class ways of knowing and being, when expressed in writing, can appear conflicted, fragmented, contradictory and perhaps quietly painful. Because of the presence of an internal splitting.

External Split: How Knowledge is Received

If such fractures and ruptures and injuries may appear in working-class writings as expressions of the internal split, then let us look at what happens outside of the working-class body. Through turning outward, to what occurs when such writings already formed because of injury enter the institutional spaces that receive them, we can ask, what is at the other side of this meeting point, the epistemic field of art education research?

Art education is the context of my work, more specifically, art education research. In general, the modern university can and does offer itself up as a holding space for many kinds of epistemologies, communities, and ways of being (Kuokkanen, 2007). While not all scholars within the realm of art education, many nevertheless describe the university as oriented towards one goal, the production and distribution of knowledge (Kuokkanen, 2007; McKittrick, 2021). Embedded in this orientation then, is a subtle but powerful promise. A promise that, those whose knowledges, bodies and histories have been historically marginalised, also have the opportunity to offer something, to take up space, to exist. This subtle promise becomes even more illuminated within art education research however, because of its interdisciplinary nature, where spaces for diverse modes of expressing, writing, being, making and thinking have the potential to coexist, compliment and perhaps even coproduce one another. Like Suominen et al. writes, art education "can function like welcomed cracks and fractures amongst academic communities and their stubbornly persistent normative formations" (2021, p. 158), suggesting even further openness to multiplicity.

In recent years, research emerging from diverse and alternative ways of generating knowledge has become increasingly visible within the field. Examples include Rebecca Close's doctoral thesis on post-internet queer reproductive work (2023a), which explores the entanglement of digital technologies, capitalist systems and queer reproduction through artistic and theoretical inquiry, and Claire Penketh's scholarship on disability and art education (2024), which unravels normative pedagogical and institutional structures within

the field. Alongside these approaches, scholars such as Gloria J. Wilson and Joni Boyd Acuff, whose work is grounded in Black experience and Black feminist methodologies, explore ways of intertwining music, storytelling, feelings and friendship within academic forms of expression (Acuff, López & Wilson, 2019; Coleman & Wilson, 2020). While these works validate the value of alternative epistemic practices and histories, they also point to the limits of the systems within which they write. Limits that manifest in discomfort, hesitation, and heavy emotional labour, particularly in the efforts to challenge systems (Acuff, 2018) and the ambivalence that greets them when they do (Wilson & Shields, 2019).

Taken together, these works signal both the expansion of what art education research can encompass, but also a shifting understanding of what knowledge itself is, and how it comes to be seen as meaningful. As explored in the previous section when discussing the term 'working-class', research itself, is likewise not a stable or neutral space, but a historically contested field (Schwab & Borgdorff, 2014). One of which is continuously re-shaped, revised and redefined through struggles over what counts as 'real' knowledge (Schwab & Borgdorff, 2014). While new disciplines and perspectives may be now invited to interact, such convergence still remains structured by quiet conditions. Conditions that continue to be shaped by epistemic norms that determine what can be valued as meaningful and thus, taken seriously. It is not that the university is vindictive nor is it one-dimensional, but that, even in its efforts to perhaps humanise and include, it cannot help but to operate within epistemic frameworks that whether intentional or not, delimit what can be expressed and understood. Hence, these sporadic, yet repeated calls from the working-class to centre a working-class kind of 'something'.

From these reflections then, an opposing question is raised. What would it mean to centre a working-class way of knowing, speaking, or writing within institutions that are not structured to fully recognise it? We can first begin by looking more closely at what is meant by these quiet epistemic norms/unspoken rules and conditions that are giving rise to such tensions. What is considered a 'norm' and what then, falls around it? Where do these tensions come from? And are they all bad, or are perhaps some good? To think through these questions, I turn towards the work of Denise Ferreira da Silva in *Towards a Global Idea of Race* (2007). While Silva's work primarily focuses on raciality, her analysis of modern epistemological systems as producing hierarchies of 'knowability' offers a poignant lens for understanding how working-class subjects may also be positioned within academic contexts as affective or insufficiently rational, particularly within art education research. In this way, Silva's concept of the 'universal' does not necessarily refer to the university as an institution,

but to a more expansive epistemic logic through which the university too, participates in (Silva, 2007).

This logic of the universal then, is one that Silva argues is rooted and then blossomed around coherence, clarity, commonality and a continuous generation of its opposite, the incoherent, the unclear, the Other (Silva, 2007). It is a logic that has historically claimed to speak from a neutral position, detached from situated realities and embodied experiences (Mignolo, 2009; Spivak, 1988). In order to sustain this, it must separate itself from anything else that is it's opposite, thus the formation of these epistemic 'norms'. Its opposite then, may include forms of knowledge and ways of being that are considered messy, emotional or peculiar (Silva, 2007). In many ways, the universal needs this opposite, which Silva refers to as the 'Other', to secure and retain its own coherence. However, this relation is not just a binary of Universal/Other or being inside the system versus sitting outside of it. Instead, the 'opposite' is a position that is fluid and is ongoingly created by the same epistemic logic that defines the universal itself. It is very much entangled inside the system, is part of how the system works, and is needed for the system to make sense of itself. Just as the working-class position has been described earlier as surviving along the hinterlands of society yet still being directly shaped by its forces, this is because it and similarly, the idea of the 'Other', remains within the same structuring logic rather than going beyond it.

Through this relational entanglement, epistemic hierarchies may be generated that organise what can be rendered 'knowable', and therefore, what can appear as real/legitimate knowledge within modern epistemic frameworks. If we think of art education as an extension of this logic, then it too, may participate in determining what counts as coherent, clear, legitimate, and so forth. However, this is acted in a much softer and less obvious way, due in part, to the field's promise of openness and possibility, but also to its gradual movement away from exclusively empirical modes of research (Schwab & Borgdorff, 2014). As such, including forms of understanding that are rooted in embodiment and affect (hooks, 1989), the presence of knowledge shaped across generations of lived and cultural experience (Kuokkanen, 2007), essences of epistemologies transmitted through shared silence (Hanisch, 1970), and when it comes to the working-class, sensibilities that are acquired slowly and quietly through pain and exuded through fragmentation and contradiction (Suominen et al., 2021), really do appear to mark a meaningful shift from the twentieth-century academisation of art education research, in which the language of data, clarity, control and empirical evidence are less strongly favoured (Schwab & Borgdorff, 2014). There has been real change for this field, and yet, tension and friction persists, especially for the working-class subjects

despite inclusion (Suominen et al., 2021). Perhaps this is because the field, and the broader epistemic structures under which is operates, have not moved beyond traditional norms completely, so much as reconfigured them. Like class, they are harder and harder to see, but still deeply felt.

As a result, this raises a need to question the act of 'inclusion' itself, and what it really does for the 'Other', and especially, for the working-class. Because if the Universal determines, according to its own comforts, boundaries and ideas, that what it has historically positioned outside itself may now be allowed to reside in its abode, does this not simply reinstate the hierarchal order it is attempting to undo? The positions of recogniser (Universal) and recognised (Other), are perhaps even more boldened. Because this can still centre the Universal as the main organising force, while the Other's agency and epistemic positioning are still mediated through it (Silva, 2007). Therefore, while it is important and absolutely essential to include those who have been marginalised into systems that have excluded them, it is also essential to highlight the contradictory nature of it, and what may be at risk. Even with the best intentions, how the Other is seen, heard and felt, may already be determined in advance. As such, the possibility of any epistemic nuance and complexity to emerge on its own, may be hindered.

In a similar light, the inclusion of voices that have been historically marginalised within art education research, may often be accompanied by gestures of empathy. While fostering understanding and attentiveness to different lived realities remains highly important in today's day and age, like inclusion, such gestures risk becoming what Freire calls "false generosity" (Freire, 2005, p. 44), an act that appears compassionate but ultimately may function as a performance that leaves underlying structures unchanged and continues to centre those already in positions of power. As Rebecca Glyn-Blanco vouches for within *Discomfort Against Empathy* (2022), empathy can also presume an instant grasp of the Other and their experiences. That those experiences for example, articulated by working-class scholars, Barker, Reay, and Hey, including the anger, the pleasure, the shame, and the ambivalence, can be at risk for being taken up as material for self-reflection or self-improvement, as opposed to being engaged with on their own epistemic terms. Again, those epistemic complexities and nuances that these forms of knowing try to express outwardly, may be become diluted in the process.

And so, despite attempts to empathise, despite attempts to include and despite the current 'turn' in expanding what counts as 'real' knowledge in art education research, there are limits that continue to linger. Fractures and ruptures and injuries that may appear in

working-class writing and is invited to exist inside within the institution, but at what cost? It is precisely here that the other half of the epistemic split becomes visible, the external one.

Experience as Sensibility

If the internal split can be understood as knowledge generated through pain and contradiction, and the external split as the outward movement or expression of that internal pressure, then together they can help theorise the complexities of navigating both personal and institutional worlds, and the specific forms of knowing from this navigation. It becomes difficult then, to disagree that they emerge to, from, through and into, what may be called a type of working-class 'experience'. Experience, which although is nuanced and not a 'one-size-fits-all' category, can be shared and recognisable too, and something that working-class scholars repeatedly state is almost impossibly inseparable from their intellectual labours (Barker, 1996; Cruz, 2021; Hey, 2003; Suominen et al., 2021). It is entangled with the very processes of knowledge acquisition and the shaping of the 'meeting point' between working-class epistemologies and art education research. It is therefore important now then, to pause and consider what is meant by experience, and perhaps even personal experience, in relation to this thesis. Why is it necessary? What is its point? And is it embodied, cognitive, both or neither?

As explored in the previous section, interweaving personal experience with high theory can often be fraught. Arousing empathy that simultaneously diminishes agency of the writer (Glyn-Blanco, 2022), the perpetuation of us/them, and Other/Universal hierarchies (Silva, 2007), forcing readers to confront histories and realities that they did not seek (Close, 2023b), and removing privacy from lives and communities that never sought public scrutiny in the first place (Close, 2023b). While all of these risks are real, I aim to portray working-class experience here within this thesis, as epistemological. A sensibility, rather than purely anecdotal. A set of dispositions, ways of seeing, thinking, making and acting that illuminates how we know what we know and why we know them in that way. Not simply a category or identity, but a complex sensitivity that shapes a mode of knowing, engaging with and getting to know the world. And if, getting to know the world, involves internal and external ruptures, contradictions and pain, as well as empowerment and pleasure, it cannot help but shape how one thinks, reads, and thus, writes.

And as such, in writing, these splits cannot be disentangled or smoothed over. Instead, they are sedimented and held in place through the work itself in everyday and subtle ways. This approach resonates with traditions within affect theory, where scholars such as Elizabeth E. Povinelli (2011), Kathleen Stewart (2007), and Lauren Berlant (2011), attend to the ordinary, the everyday, and the inarticulateable textures of lived experience. In their work, the aim is not to categorise or fully explain these textures, but to attune to their flows, intensities and incomplete forms of sense-making that often remain unresolved, cruelly seductive or only partially intelligible (Berlant, 2011; Povinelli, 2011).

In particular, Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* (2007), experiments with a mode of fragmented writing that does not aspire to stand outside of experience, but instead 'writes through' the textures and hues of it. By writing in fragments, she resists offering neat conclusions or stable interpretations, suggesting instead, that everyday life is already saturated with immanent, partially formed ways of knowing and being, that do not require resolution in order to be epistemically meaningful (Stewart, 2007). On writing through the ordinary, the mundane and the subtle, she states:

> The question they beg is not what they might mean in an order of representations, or whether they are good or bad in an overarching scheme of things, but where they might go and what potential modes of knowing, relating, and attending to things are already somehow present in them in a state of potentiality and resonance (Stewart, 2007, p. 3).

Stewart therefore, stays inside the contradictions of ordinary experience. She does not aim to solve them or smooth them over, but instead, holds them, traces them, and writes through them. In doing so, they become a sort of sensibility that shapes her writing and generates knowledge. As a result, her writing is a method of research in itself, not just a report of research, acting as the connective tissue between the personal, the epistemic and the methodological. Similarly, I aim to frame the working-class sensibility, as something that can also be 'written through'. The epistemic splits that I have outlined are therefore not simply objects of analysis, but conditions that can be actively illustrated on the page. And on that page, will be the intersection of the internal and the external, the intersection of the personal and the social, the intersection of experience and theory. The meeting point between working-class ways knowledge and art education research.

Conclusion

The theoretical framework of 'epistemic splits' is the engine of my thesis. By this, I mean, it not only organises my own thoughts on the peculiar meeting point between working-class processes of knowledge acquisition and academic institutions, but also structures how this thesis can be read. Because its theoretical contribution offers a new way of understanding how and why working-class knowledge may come to be in the first place. Knowledge formed through internal rupture, external tension, contradiction, fragmentation and pain, produced in the encounter between lived experience and institutional expectations. And while the term 'knowledge' itself can be an absolutely boundless category, for this thesis, I am concerned with knowledge from the working-class that surrounds the understanding of the self, especially in relation to one's perception of their class, to their shifting surroundings (both past and present), to their educational experience, and therefore, the ways in which the world becomes knowable through these conditions, affecting how and when they express it.

And instead of treating 'epistemic splits' as something purely descriptive, this thesis aims to extend this framework into something that can also be used as a method in art education research. Something that can be read through, engaged with and written through, using arts-based research methods. While each chapter tackles a different example of the meeting point I describe, through a different medium and therefore, requires a different method which I will outline in detail in a moment, they are all structured by the same underlying condition of epistemic tension. My theoretical offering of this framework to the field then, does so to highlight a classed way of knowing and being that remains not so present within art education research, and to speculate what may happen when class epistemologies, a little bit crass and a little bit cruddy (Povinelli, 2011), can be taken seriously. I will therefore now turn to my methodology chapter, to show how I will use this framework as method, and what I hope to gain by doing so.

Methodology and Paper Overview

For my thesis, I take on a multi-methods approach to match the multi-layered and sticky nature of my topic. As written by John Law in *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* (2004), "If the world is complex and messy, then at least some of the time we're going to have to give up on simplicities" (p. 2). Although 'giving up' may sound like defeat, here I mean quite the opposite. Instead of trying to smooth over the complex frictions that working-class scholars have been tracing over the last thirty years or so, into something neat and precise and easily understandable, I hope instead to lean into their difficult, sticky nature, exploring them through multiple methods, multiple angles and multiple ways of working (Law, 2004).

However, despite the multiplicity in the methods, there is one clear thread throughout that carries them through. That is, to read, to engage and to write through the concept I previously theorised, the concept of 'epistemic splits' and working-class ways of knowing. As a result, this thesis is split into three different chapters, and therefore includes three different approaches, approaches of which I orient within arts-based research. I do this to build upon the previous class work of Anniina Suominen, Tiina Pusa, Minna Suoniemi, Eljas Suvanto and Elina Julin (2021) as outlined in the literature review, and also because art-based research is a field where research can emerge from the creative process itself and not solely through its outcome (Hoette, 2026; Vis, 2021). A process in which the reader is also asked take part in, to join in on the meaning-making, as opposed to passively receiving it (APRIA, 2026; Vis, 2021). And a field where experience, intuition, relationality, and non-resolute ways of thinking as important and valid ways of generating knowledge (Aksu, 2026; Hoette, 2026; Vis, 2021).

While I do not apply a specific pre-existing arts-based method to my work, through developing epistemic splits as methodological approach for reading, engaging and writing, I potentially extend what arts-based research can be through working with and not resolving, classed epistemic tension. I am particularly interested in developing this connection to art education research, because if arts-based research already values the inarticulatable, the emotional and the fragmented (Vis, 2021), and art education research already engages with discussions of identity, pedagogy and inclusion (Acuff, 2018; Close, 2023b; Penketh, 2024), yet neither often theorise class as an epistemologically meaningful condition, then this class-conscious methodological form of inquiry may offer an important bridge between the two (Suominen et al, 2021). In doing do, it also suggests that class may need different

methodological forms to begin with, if its epistemic effects are to become perceptible at all. It is therefore within this intersection that I situate my contribution, which will unfold as follows.

In Chapter 1, I read through the internal and external splits within working-class academic Cynthia Cruz's *The Melancholia of Class* (2021), a multimodal work which combines the personal, the theoretical, the poetic, as well as the artistic. A work which uses both art and artists to mediate the understanding of one's life and working-class experience. Through remaining sensitive to the splits, I not only analyse what Cruz says, but also how she says it, paying attention to how meaning is produced through both form and content. Cruz's case studies, provocative imagery, personal memories, metaphors, and poetic language resonate again with John Law's discussion on complexity, in which knowledge may be generated through engagement with what may be "impossible or barely impossible, unthinkable or almost unthinkable" (Law, 2004, p. 6), staying with the fragmentations and contradictions. In this sense, I approach Cruz's work as a site where the epistemic splits are already in motion, and through staying with them, can offer art education researchers a way of understanding some of the hues of working-class experience, not as a fixed truth, but as a felt and structured complexity.

For Chapter 2 then, I explore what happens when epistemic splits are made public, when working-class academics and their ways of knowing become visible, circulated, and contested within an entirely new pedagogical landscape, a digital one. Here, I move from reading and writing practices, to analysing mediated social interaction. In particular, I turn to platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. I do this because if we think back to the literature review, where conversations around class and epistemology are persistent yet patchy (Barker, 1996; Beck, 1999; Hey, 2003; Pakulsi & Waters, 1996; Reay, 2018), similar conversations in contemporary digital environments appear much more intensified and immediate. These now allow academic knowledge to be performed and made accessible to broader audiences, outside of the traditional institutional setting (Highfield and Leaver, 2016). As a result, this may mean that epistemic splits are no longer confined to the private acts of reading and writing, but become socially enacted and interacted with on much bigger scales.

I therefore analyse the short-form videos produced by two working-class academics, Adrian Gallagher and Louisa Munch. Using the *Instagrammatics and Digital Methods: studying visual social media, from selfies and GIFs to memes and emojis* (2016) by Tim Highfield and Tama Leaver, I approach these videos as "visual content [that] are not just social media artefacts, isolated and individual, but are surrounded by debates and discussions

that take on political, legal, economic, technological and sociocultural dimensions" (p. 49). In light of this, I analyse not only what these academics say, but once again, how they say it and how their identities are performed visually and rhetorically, and how audiences engage with this through comments and interaction with their videos. To do this, I viewed all publicly available videos on each academic's profile across the last year, selecting two to three videos from each account for close analysis. Through this, I examined how the internal and external split becomes not only personally experienced, but also socially produced and consumed within a digital space. When analysing comments and engagement, I chose not to include the names or social media handles of the individual users. This is because I feel no good can come out in naming and shaming others, yet I must include these comments as part of my work to illustrate that the rhetoric around class is not an assumption on my part, nor is it a generalisation or exaggeration. That being said, although I anonymise these comments, they remain publicly accessible under the videos that are discussed and linked throughout the chapter.

Lastly, in Chapter 3, I aim to perform the concept of epistemic splits. This means that I take on an autotheoretical and arts-based research approach, treating writing as both method and evidence of the phenomenon that I am following (Springgay, Irwin, & Kind, 2005). This chapter is the most personal of the whole thesis, and while I initially resisted bringing the personal into the academic, a resistance that is itself a contradiction of its own accord, I came to realise, as reflected on by Judith Barker, "When I attempted to begin writing, I found that I could not separate my personal experience from my academic knowledge: my academic knowledge kept creeping into my personal account" (Barker, 1996, p. 103). In other words, as I continue to read and as I continue to write, these elements become less like separate entities that are far away from one another, and instead, interconnected ideas and locations that remain in constant messy dialogue (Barker, 1996; Hoette, 2026; Law, 2004; Vis, 2021).

As such, I use this entanglement to consciously write through and perform the concept of epistemic splits, giving texture and nuance that theory alone perhaps, cannot do (Fournier, 2021; McKittrick, 2021). I frame this writing as an arts-based approach because I treat the writing as both a method and medium of inquiry, not solely as a tool for reporting research (de Carvalho, 2022; Springgay, Irwin, & Kind, 2005; Vis, 2021). I use it to generate knowledge, help develop a new practice of reading, and convey complexity in a way that traditional academic prose may not. Because the prose is hesitant, sticky, shameful, alive, contradictory and personal, not to romanticise pain, and not only de-privitise a common and shared struggle (Close, 2023b), but to invite the reader into the process of knowledge

acquisition for the working-class, and into feeling what this splitting may be like. In doing so, I hope may redistribute some of the epistemic labour away from the working-class subject and onto the reader themselves.

Positioning

The methods and meanings previously outlined that drive this thesis derive from several intersecting disciplines. They emerge from the literature and research outlined previously, from the gaps and tensions that have been existing now for the last three decades (Barker, 1996; Beck, 1998; Hey, 2003; Jones & Vagle, 2013; Pakulsi & Waters, 1996; Reay, 2018; Suominen et al., 2021). And yet, such contractions and experiences explored throughout this work have also been mediated to me through music, literature, and working-class culture. Non-academic initiatives such as *Left Cultures* magazine (2025) and *The Arts of the Working Class* newspaper (2025), centre classed ways of knowing and classed artistic practices, highlighting moments where individuals become politicised through culture itself. Likewise, the autotheoretical works of Annie Ernaux (2017), Edna O' Brien (1983), Maggie Nelson (2015), and Marianne Brooker (2024) have also deeply impacted my thinking and my approach to this work, alongside the "poetry whirlpool" (Wu-Tang Clan, 1997) of working-class epistemic archives from the East Coast Renaissance rap movement and the British Northern soul era from the 1970s, where class contradictions, frictions, pride and assurances abound.

Although I am not writing about my personal experience directly, to notice patterns and threads throughout different disciplines and mediums, as well as my own upbringing, was nonetheless was a meaningful foundation for this work (Barker, 1996). Without them, tracing the peculiar epistemic phenomenon between classed experience and academic expectation, would not have been so sticky. Growing up Irish in a small town in Northern England, qualifying as the second most deprived town in the country where over 40% of children are living in poverty (Rochdale Borough Council, 2019), I carry the imprint of structural inequality alongside the lived and emotional landscapes of working- class life. And it is in this sensibility that has not only shaped what I know but how I know it, and what I choose to do with it, whether I reside in that same small town or not. While higher education has provided me with the language, materials, space and support to critically engage with this topic, my starting point in life and has also shaped the conditions of its possibility. Like the

frictions woven in an out of these chapters, these two positions do not stand apart from one another, but remain linked in so many ways, neither one now quite as meaningful to me without the other.

Limitations and Acknowledgements

At the same time, I acknowledge that my position also carries limitations. A limitation in that, my experience is specific and therefore, in no way universal. My particular relation to class does not speak for all working-class individuals, and even further still, all working-class academics. Because to be working-class is to exist within a multitude of different histories, geographies, races, generations, forms of labour, cultures and relationships to education, and therefore in no way, could it ever be singular (Spivak, 1988). However, the experience I have researched has been repeatedly brought up within the literature written by working-class academics across different contexts and landscapes. Whether Irish (Maguire, 1997), British (Hey, 2003; Reay, 2018), American (Barker, 1996; Cruz, 2021), Finnish (Hummelstedt et al., 2025; Suominen et al., 2021), and Australian (Pini & Previte, 2014), common peculiarities across distance and difference encouraged me to continue exploring this topic further.

I must also acknowledge my own approach to this research and the ways in which it could have been conducted differently, but was not. More specifically, I did not interview working-class students, reach out to working-class teachers, or speak directly with working-class academics in the field. As a result, my thesis does not draw on interview-based empirical data. Yet this was an intentional methodological decision, not an oversight. The main curiosity of my work is the process of knowledge acquisition for working-class academics, which I argue, can be traced and made visible both consciously and subconsciously, in writing and expression. To focus on the textual, visual and digital material then, within an arts-based research orientation, remained truthful to this curiosity and the concept of epistemic splits that structure this thesis. But further research could be done using more empirical-based methods if this topic was to be developed further.

Lastly, it is also important to note that while analysing digital content on social media, I also remain deeply aware of the tailored and personal nature of algorithms that shape what becomes visible in the first place, as well as the fleeting life span of posts and videos appearing momentarily before disappearing into a wider flow of content. Digital fragments in and of themselves that are often impossible to retrace (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Although I

frame this as a methodological limitation, I also find this raises all sorts of further curiosities. What kinds of knowing gets lost in the algorithm? Whose expressions are most likely to be forgotten? And whose are more likely to remembered?

Taking these limitations into account, I begin with the first chapter of this thesis, reading through epistemic splits in Cynthia Cruz's *The Melancholia of Class* (2021).

Chapter 1: Reading Through Cynthia Cruz's The Melancholia of Class

> We end up split, doubled: caught between the world of our origins and the middle-class world we now live in. Existing in neither, the working-class subject belongs nowhere. Having abandoned her working-class origins, coming up against the threshold of the middle-class world (which will not allow her access), she is neither working-class nor is she middle-class. She is a ghost, existing between worlds, a haunting. (Cruz, 2021, Introduction, para. 24).

Is the working-class academic being haunted by her working-class past, or is the working-class academic haunting others with her permeable position? In *The Melancholia of Class* (2021), working-class poet and academic Cynthia Cruz, illustrates that the answer is, perhaps actually both, resurrecting resonance to Ulrich Beck's description of class as a "zombie category" (Beck, 1999), something declared dead, yet somehow still living. Could this be an internal haunting meeting an external one? A diaphanous zone that through Cruz's conviction, lives on, lingers, looms, lusts and lasts?

To explore this in my first chapter, I offer a sensitive reading of Cruz's multimodal book. This means that I do not just analyse such text from a distance, but instead, stay attuned to where the epistemic splits may surface and collide (Stewart, 2007). In other words, I look for the contradictions, the fragments, the personal, and the ordinary between the lines of her work. I think about what she says, but also how she says it. I do this because it allows me to show the reader and myself, how these splits materialise in the expressions of working-class academics' work. How such expression is not solely a personal testimony, but a site where multiple epistemic worlds are continuously negotiated. Negotiations that are ongoing and uneven and often emotionally charged. And so, to stay with them, demands something of the reader. It pushes them to question their own assumptions about what is assumed by the personal and the fragmented, it pushes them to confront contradiction and tension as something meaningful as opposed to something lacking, and it pushes them to engage with an experience very far from their own. It requires a sort of labour, staying with the difficult conditions and dual splittings through which knowledge and meaning can be shaped.

Cruz's autotheoretical writing then, is one that unconsciously moves between part memoir, part theory, part philosophy, and part poetry. It unfolds personal experiences alongside long theoretical passages, and is also loaded with references to working-class films,

singers and artists. Amy Winehouse, Clarice Lispector, Barbara Loden, Paul Weller and James Baldwin, to name a few, are references that do not just decorate, but actively mediate. They mediate between Cruz's own personal experiences and the theoretical ideas that shape her understanding of it (Barker, 1996). Her writing therefore, performs a mode of knowing that showcases how knowledge may be encountered, negotiated, and expressed under constraint, a mode of knowing from epistemic splitting.

While Cynthia Cruz is first and foremost, a working-class poet, she has also obtained a PhD in her later years and works as a teaching professor at the University of Notre Dame. Her encounters with higher education came relatively later in life, a trajectory she documents throughout her book (Cruz, 2021). Encounters from childhood, through periods of homelessness, sensing that university was out of reach, to being told that even pursuing a doctorate was not an option for her, completing it 20 years later (Cruz, 2021). Her vignettes of lived experience, intertwined with theoretical reflection, mirror the decades worth scholarship by working-class academics calling for more situated and embodied forms of knowledge generation in academia (Barker, 1996; Hey, 2003; Reay, 2018). This is echoed particularly by Diane Reay, who has spent her whole career writing about class and education. In a recent academic article about Cruz's work, Reay writes, "It is not so much as I chose their work, as their work chose me… Their words spoke to me, my memories, experiences, and feelings in a way that academic writing rarely does" (Reay, 2025, p. 95). In that same piece, Reay entwines personal accounts of her own working-class upbringing with the psychological class wounds that continue to linger (Hummelstedt et al., 2025; Reay, 2025).

Although I will go on to explore later, the effects of Cruz's work, the pedagogical, and perhaps problematic, there is something shattering in Reay's response. A sense of having found oneself in another's writing after a long time of searching for it, through the articulation of experiences and feelings that traditional academic discourse has perhaps failed to hold. It is for this reason, that I begin with tracing epistemic splits within Cruz's *The Melancholia of Class* (2021), for my first chapter.

The Banshees of Melancholia

Throughout the entire book, Cynthia Cruz uses the metaphor of a ghost to refer to the working-class subject. "Alive but not living, a double: a contradiction" (Cruz, 2021,

Introduction, para. 18), Cruz suggests that even if one leaves their origins, one of material lack to material abundance, then the phantom effects of that lack, do not disappear. Shame, memory, habit, drive, and learned modes of self-(re)presentation, continue to permeate and haunt, no matter where one chooses to go (Cruz, 2021). And so, it is not that one cannot ever 'leave' their class roots, but that, their class roots can never leave them[2] (Kuhn, 1995; Reay, 2025). It is therefore not only about the physical things in what one has/had, but about the palimpsest of tensions and residues that continue to push how one comes to feel, move and understand oneself in relation to others (Hey, 2003). It is this internal split crafting a sensibility that cannot be simply resolved or healed. It is as what Anne Kuhn describes about class, as "being at the very core of your being" (Kuhn, 1995, p. 98), and Reay as "its dregs com[ing] with you" (Reay, 2025, p. 94), an essence that is particularly difficult to shed.

This echo, palimpsest, and haunting of the internal split as metaphor woven in and out of all eight chapters, is especially important because they help the reader visualise the ongoing presence of something that is socially assumed to be gone (Beck, 1996; Pakulsi & Waters, 1996). To imagine the sense of sadness attached to a place that no longer exists, or that one should be glad to have moved beyond it, such feelings may float around unprocessed (Cruz, 2021; Spivak, 1988). To linger and to haunt. They may result into what Cruz argues, is melancholia (Cruz, 2021). Yet by borrowing from Walter Benjamin, the notion of 'historical awakening', where the past and the present may surface simultaneously (Benjamin, 2003; Cruz, 2021, Chapter One, para. 29), Cruz shows that the very persistence of a ghostly split at all, is significant for working-class academics. As she writes, through this melancholia and the expression of this internal split, we can return to "forgotten moments of the past and, by including them in our work, redeem these shards of the past, the history, and the lives that have been forgotten" (Cruz, 2021, Chapter One, para. 29). In this sense, melancholia is not only a sign of loss, but also of persistence and potential return. The metaphor of a ghost then, as well as the presence of actual working-class ghosts (artists and singers who are no longer living) that dust the pages of her work, helps paint the picture of class as not a fixed identity, but as a sensibility that directly shapes how knowledge is encountered and organised and expressed within academia (Barker, 1996).

What is even more evocative about Cruz's use of metaphors alongside her chosen theory, is the way it begins to trouble the modern story of 'success'. The idea that if one

[2] Reminiscent of the local saying, "You can take the lad out of Rochdale, but you can't take Rochdale out of the lad."

'moves up' in the world through 'dignified education', then the problem(s) are somehow resolved (Reay, 2018). The heart palpitations developed in childhood, (Reay, 2025), the everyday fear of losing everything you built in a split second (Munch, 2025a), frequent imposter syndrome (Cruz, 2021; Reay, 2025), grief for a simpler life (Hey, 2003), feeling you deserve it when things go wrong, and pride for where you came from, but also shame and guilt (Suominen et al., 2021). Inner ruptures which shape this peculiar epistemic position, and perhaps cannot help but come out in writing, sometimes messy, other times controlled. Because if we think about the nature of a ghost at all, it is one that lingers precisely because it cannot move on. It cannot settle, cannot rest, cannot feel a sense of peace, because something remains unresolved. Like the repeated calls for a working-class epistemology, methodology, pedagogy, the image of a ghost makes us question, what is it that we are still not hearing?

Let us keep thinking about this peculiar and restless epistemic position for a moment. Cruz reiterates throughout her work that "the working-class subject belongs nowhere" (Cruz, 2021, Introduction, para. 24), it is "neither dead nor truly alive" (Chapter Three, para. 40), and as a result, "death haunts this text" (Introduction, para. 25). This, coupled with the imagery of a ghost conjuring up coldness, sadness, grief, anger, unease, etc, suggests that the working-class do not belong anywhere in the system, that they are 'outsiders' or perhaps even, go beyond it. However, through the lens of Denise Ferreira da Silva (2007), this position is more complicated. This position is not one of simple exclusion, nor is it of being simply 'outside of the system'. Instead, the working-class may feel unseen because they are structurally required to be backgrounded (Silva, 2007). They are positioned in such a way that they do not appear as full subjects within the system's own terms. It is why the internal and external split exists. Because while capitalist 'progress' depends on working-class labour to function, it also depends on keeping that labour invisible, so that 'progress' can appear universal and easily attainable, an 'everyone gets what they deserve' narrative (Monbiot, 2016; Reay, 2025). In practice though, it operates through the invisible sacrifices of those who power it (Reay, 2025; Silva, 2007). If a working-class subject becomes a working-class academic, and the traces of this previous life are deemed invisible, then of course tension with the environment will occur. Tension that when expressed out loud, may shift the figure of the ghost into one of a banshee[3]. A figure of mourning and rage, whose wailing and

[3] Banshee: A figure in Irish folklore. Usually a female spirit that wails and cries to warn families of incoming death.

melancholia is no longer passive or about being 'stuck' between worlds, but a method of active historical interruption, bringing both worlds to life (Benjamin, 2003; Cruz, 2021).

Such a sensibility then, is difficult to explain using academic theory alone, which is why Cruz's metaphor is so evocative and can lead to many interpretations. As written by Anna Lioliou and Juuso Tervo *within Metamorphic Methodology: Moving with Research and Writing* (2025), the use of metaphors in art education research writing, allows for the reader to sit and do the work in the 'in-between', somewhat translucent spaces, the uncertain positions between knowing something entirely and not knowing at all (Lioliou & Tervo, 2025). If the working-class sensibility has always been shaped by friction with the self and friction with the environment, as an idea of in-betweenness of fixed categories, as something negative, then Cruz's metaphor begins to shift some of the epistemic labour away from the working-class subject and onto the reader, asking them to do part of the work themselves. To sit with what cannot be fully categorised, and to experience knowledge as something partial, unsettled, ghostly, perhaps taking time to come to be, rather than fully graspable from the outside (Lioliou & Tervo, 2025).

The Death Drive

Returning back to Cruz's line, "death haunts this book" (Cruz, 2021, Introduction, para. 25), as well as the image of the working-class academic as a banshee, it may be tempting to read working-class lives as defined primarily by sorrow and pain. Perhaps even moreso, as I frame internal and external splits as just that, splits. While these conditions are undeniably present and materially significant for many (though not all), to reduce working-class experience to suffering alone, risks flattening the complexity and nuance of how these lives are lived and expressed (Björninen et al., 2024; Glyn-Blanco, 2022; Han, 2017). At the same time, to move so quickly away from these conditions, would equally be limiting. Because it would obscure the very forces through which working-class knowledge comes into being. Therefore, by attending to some of the sorrow through experience, despite how discomforting it may be for the reader, it is not to reproduce narratives of victimhood, nor to claim a universal experience of hardship, but to trace how particular epistemic formations emerge under specific social and material constraints, and to gain a sense of this sensibility, which perhaps theory alone cannot do. And through this tension, between resisting reductive portrayals of suffering and highlighting the structuring forces of hardship, that this next section will read through Cruz's

entwinement of reflection, anecdote and theory towards Freud's notion of the 'death drive' (Cruz, 2021; Freud, 1990).

If melancholia is described by Cruz as the feeling that you have lost something (your working-class background), but you cannot find or see what it is that you have lost, then the 'death drive' would be what you may do with that feeling (Cruz, 2021; Freud, 1990). An energy that has nowhere to go, and so instead, turns inward, intensifying that internal split. Expanding on Freud's original notion of the 'death drive', which can be described as the subconscious repetitive impulse towards destruction (Freud, 1990), Cruz writes:

> The death drive is an intrinsic pressure to repeat an earlier condition. This repetition compulsion provides the passive victim of trauma a means of agency over an event they once felt powerless over. With each repetition, the subject experiences pleasure at the act of repetition but at the same time displeasure at having to experience the original trauma – though sublimated – again. The act is inherently paradoxical because the drive is engaged in a forward momentum while, at the same time, its aim is always to return to its origins. (Cruz, 2021, Chapter Three, para. 37)

The death drive for the working-class, as Cruz implies, may be the unresolved internal melancholia feeling that does not disappear. It circulates, repeats. It may manifest in certain repetitive behaviours, actions, and thought patterns (Cruz, 2021). Actions that self-erase, behaviours that self-destruct, and thought patterns that produce shame. To help the reader understand this complex and rather personal notion, Cynthia Cruz traces the multiplicity of this compulsion, using lived experience and a range of artistic and cultural references to give texture to the theory she writes about. This is not an unfamiliar approach within art education research, as scholars such as Gloria B. Wilson and Joni Boyd Acuff, among others, have similarly drawn upon song and story to extend and embody theoretical concerns that cannot always be fully captured through conventional academic language alone (Acuff, López & Wilson, 2019; Coleman & Wilson, 2020; Elrayes, 2025; McKittrick, 2021).

In *The Melancholia of Class* (2021) then, Cruz dedicates her entire last chapter to the life and work of working-class Brazillian writer, Clarice Lispector. She reads Lispector's repeated paradoxical return to poverty in her writing (a movement 'backwards'), alongside her movement into bourgeois life (a movement 'forwards'), not as an expression of escape, sorrow, romanticisation, or victimisation, but as symptoms of the death drive. A compulsive

logic of ongoing and ordinary repetition, through which one's origins are continually re-encountered in an ongoing attempt to recalibrate the self (Cruz, 2021; Freud, 1990; Povinelli, 2011). An ongoing attempt to heal and seal these splittings with the self. In the *The Hour of the Star* (1992), Lispector writes, "My truest life is unrecognizable… extremely interior and there is not a single word that defines it" (p. 3). This alludes to not a stable or unified sense of self, but an ambiguous and elusive one. One that exceeds the available language through which it might otherwise be made legible (Spivak, 1988). It is also not that Lispector desires to return to her working-class life, because class is not simply an environment or stage that can be moved away from (Freire, 2005; Kuhn, 1995), but instead, it is a structuring force that continues to push how the one is perceived and how one comes to perceive themselves (Freire, 2005; Kuhn, 1995; Spivak 1988). Lispector's writing may therefore be understood as a sustained negotiation between internal and external epistemic splitting. Her recursive returns that hold ruptures open, a unique mode of articulation of which Cruz argues, "mak[es] space for her true self" (Cruz, 2021, Chapter Eight, para. 3).

In a similar vein, we can view Cruz's use of her own personal fragments and memories fluttered throughout her work, as also a performance of this death drive. Because while Cruz does not explicitly identify what the death drive looks like for her in her own life, she shows it, through writing her own repetitions. The reoccurring returns to her childhood, her experiences with poverty, her homelessness and her fraught relationship with education, are often mirrored and mingled in with the artistic figures she engages with. They are not ever fully explained or resolved, but reappear throughout in different hues and intensities across the text. This 'returning' is particularly visible in her deep engagement with the lives and work of *Wanda* (1970) and Clarice Lispector. For example, at the start of *The Melancholia of Class*, Cruz recounts a moment from her youth where a friend asks about her father's occupation as a car salesman, "Are you not ashamed of what your father does for a living?" … I was not ashamed until she asked me, but from that point on, I felt shame" (Cruz, 2021, Chapter One, para. 3). It is a brief scene, yet lingers on, as Cruz returns to this feeling again at the end of the book via Lispector, who also faced a similar experience:

> 'Clarice, what did your father do professionally?' This is a common question used to determine one's social class. Lispector's face in the frame during the interview appears sad: her eyes, turned away, her mouth half-open. The question is a form of wounding: you can answer and remain fixed in your social class or you can lie or, of course, you can answer obliquely. Lispector tells the truth. She responds, 'A

> sales representative, things like that.' (Cruz, 2021, Chapter Eight, para. 4, citing Clarice Lispector, 1977)

And so, things like this, are fleeting and subtle 'barely there' moments that circle the same site of internal injury (Povinelli, 2011). But by returning to such feelings, they are not resolved, but sustained from different angles. Cruz processes her own repetitions through other working-class' lives and work. An entanglement which showcases a form of classed repetition under constraint, where past and present have the possibility to appear simultaneously (Benjamin, 2003), countering ideas that class is obsolete (Beck, 1999; Pakulsi & Waters, 1996).

Another example of this, is through Cruz's extended reading of *Wanda* (1970), directed by Barbara Loden. A film that follows a working-class woman drifting through a working-class brinkland[4], engaging in seemingly 'passive' encounters with different working-class men (Hernandez, 2026; Loden, 1970). Loden's work is often read by critics as not being about class at all, of having no narrative drive, and Wanda of being passive, repressed, or 'throwing her life away' (Leger, 2015). Cruz processes this misreading with an experience of her own. Reflecting on a time during her master's programme, she recalls how the poetry she produced about her classed life "made no sense" (Cruz, 2021, Chapter Two, para. 18) to her professors leading her to withdraw and erase much of her work. This erasure is compounded when another professor later tells her that "there are no classes in the US" (Cruz, 2021, Chapter Three, para. 9). The professor's denial of the conditions her writing sought to articulate (the external split), had a profound impact on her sense of self (the internal split). Through withdrawing her work, Cruz's illustrates how easily the external and internal split, denial and self-doubt, can intensify one another, even though what is being denied remains very much present underneath.

Yet, such returns, readings and responses are interesting. On the one hand, they reveal how deeply narratives of progression and upward mobility shape mass interpretation, because a life that does not appear to move 'forward' becomes difficult to understand through universal frameworks (Silva, 2007). At the same time, these responses highlight some broader methodological conundrums. Can only working-class people talk about class? Can

[4] Brinkland: A peripheral space that exists on the edge of society. It is neither fully included or excluded. Partially neglected. Usually working-class people live here. I learned this term from meeting working-class artistic researcher Katt Hernandez after attending her presentation on *Brinklands as Practice*, at the first Studies in Remoteness symposium with the Nordic Summer University in Berlin, 2026.

only working-class people understand working-class life? Who is allowed to interpret classed experience, and under what conditions can they do so? While it may seem obvious to insist that working-class individuals are best positioned to articulate the living textures and hues of their working-class life, this also raises a further tension. Because this may just produce a one-sided conversation, where class may become something that can only be spoken about from within, and any sort of critique from other positions may be read as an intrusion of something deeply personal, rather than something to be curiously engaged with. What may appear as protectiveness, may be taken as defensiveness and thus narrows even further, the conditions under which class is discussed collectively and critically.

And while the death drive is often associated with its most extreme and catastrophic manifestations, gestured also by Cruz through the references to the tumultuous lives of working-class stars and icons, Amy Winehouse, Paul Weller, Linkous and Jason Molina, it is not only expressed in such a way. Because while these cases may highlight that death for some working-class may feel closer than liberation, this can easily also become the main ways working-class experience is remembered. Thus, obscuring the intertextualities, ordinariness and complexities that live within it. All of which humanise and give life to the working-class sensibility derived from epistemic splits. Therefore, through Cruz's memories that reappear unexpectedly, through the persistent internal feelings of shame which she processes through others and through the theory of her choice, through the fragmented writing, and the everyday external encounters that seem to linger, Cruz's writing resists this reduction and oversimplification. She shows us that the death drive can also operate in smaller, quieter, less visible ways (Freud, 1990; Povinelli, 2011). A death drive which I argue, marks a reoccurring meeting point between working-class ways of knowing and academic forms of writing, between the internal split and the external one. A meeting point which acts a site where tensions are lived out messily and performed on the page (Povinelli, 2011). Its 'thisness' and 'thatness' is not concealed but continually negotiated.

Conclusion

Cynthia Cruz's *The Melancholia of Class* (2021), is not a transparent tome that tells the total tell-all truth about class or the working-class 'experience' itself. Instead, it is the performance of a mode of knowing that is made through the contradictions of both pain and pleasure, both empowerment and tension. A performance that allows the reader to experience how

knowledge may be acquired under working-class conditions, and what happens when this way of knowing enters higher education and academic spaces. It is a way of thinking-through-writing, an autotheoretical work which showcases someone trying to understand and process their own conditions through the entwinement of personal memory, the memory of others from their similar class positions, and the theory itself. In that first call for a working-class epistemology, Judith Barker writes:

> "We {working-class academics}, need to develop concepts, ideas, and categories that fit the everyday lives of working-class people; otherwise we are left with concepts developed to fit the lives of class-privileged people and then applied to working-class people." (Barker, 1996, p. 111).

Could Cruz's work, one of complexity, inconvenience and contradiction, be one answer to Barker's call from thirty years ago? And what about that second call from Valerie Hey in 2003? For a more embodied reading of class? What may this all really entail, especially as it is something that I too, proposed at the beginning of this chapter?

Well, Hey's call from 2003 offers a strong way to think about what a working-class epistemology derived from epistemic splits can offer to the research world. Cruz's description of class as ghostly and haunting, echoes Hey's description of class as a palimpsest, which she borrows from education scholar Julie McLeod (Hey, 2003, p. 330; McLeod, 1999). Something that is erased, rewritten, erased again, yet never fully out of sight. In a way, this never entirely stable, yet never entirely gone presence of class within academic discourse mirrors how class sensibility itself may be lived. Because while somewhat invisible, the traces remain. Traces that are briefly coherent. And it is in these fleeting, patchy moments of coherence that Hey argues is how working-class academics may find one another. Through collective reading and collective conversation, researchers may participate in what Hey extends from McLeod again as, a "public collective writing pad" (Hey, 2003, p. 330; McLeod, 1999). A shared space where meanings of class are not born, lived or carried alone, but are generated relationally, through reading of others, through writing of others and being in conversation with others (Hey, 2003; McLeod, 1999). This includes then, writing about experiences that may feel like personal failures or taboo struggles, and through the process of de-privitising them, reveals that they are instead, systemic, shared, even common (Close, 2023b).

And while it is important for working-class academics to find one another, what does Cruz's work and reading through epistemic splits actually do for others? In helping reshape how art education researchers understand and engage with working-class ways of knowing about being? Instead of trying to approach working-class experience as something to fully decode or fully grasp, Cruz's multimodal work encourages researchers to engage in a slower reading practice. Researchers must stay with ambiguity and do the work of reading in-between the lines and metaphors (Lioliou & Tervo, 2025). By doing so, they attune to how self-understanding for the working-class can come to be, how systems and structures relate, how both are mediated, and how contradiction and fragmentation are not deficits, but traces of conditions that are often assumed to be no longer present, or to no longer matter.

Through staying sensitive to this framework, researchers may also gain a sense of this working-class sensibility for themselves. Perhaps feeling unsettled and uncomfortable too. A sensibility that is not always about suffering or being an object of sorrow, but one that mediates itself through art and culture, community and experience, as well as precarity and inequality. In some ways, this kind of reading practice could potentially be encouraged within higher education classrooms, to shift how work from academics and students is read and responded to, especially though a stance of curiosity. This involves asking questions around what conditions shape particular forms of expression, so that discussions of class are regenerated and are not so one-sided or one-dimensional. In this way, epistemic splits can be seen as a methodological contribution to art education research, in offering a way of working with contradiction, affect and tension as a resource, not necessarily as a problem.

As Cruz writes in memory of herself, and of others, and as I write of her work alongside the working-class academics before her, and eventually turn to my own writing, her work then, becomes a kind of performance, "a language of resistance and, at the same time, its own threshold between the world of the ruling class and the working class" (Cruz, 2021, Chapter One, para. 13). While this performance within Cruz's multimodal work allows us to engage in a different reading practice, it also invites us to consider how such epistemic splits as an arts-based research method, may extend beyond literary or academic form. What might it mean to read through these splits in a different context altogether? In perhaps a digital one? Where reading becomes interactive, and where these splits may be further intensified when they are no longer contained on the page, but made even more public. To think through these questions, I turn to my second chapter.

Chapter 2: A Working-Class Epistemology Made Public

If, through Cruz's multimodal work, we can see how knowledge acquisition for the working-class is not only an intellectual endeavour, but also a deeply social and emotional one, one that is painful, slow and complicated, then what happens when this way of knowing is performed and exerted in a different epistemic environment altogether? Under another legibility demanding sphere that goes beyond the written context? The online one?

In this chapter, I continue to develop epistemic splits as an arts-based research method of inquiry, working with classed tension to generate new insights about said classed tension (Vis, 2021). However, because the medium is different, the method also shifts slightly. I therefore not only read through epistemic splits, but I also actively use them as a way of engaging with the videos, images, comments and interactions that emerge in digital spaces. By this I mean, I still trace and stay sensitive to moments of contradiction and rupture through what two working-class academics are saying and how they are saying it, but I do so in relation to platform specific and aesthetic choices, certain concepts and experiences they share, comments they choose to respond to, as well as their shifting tone and emotional registers. Since this thesis is concerned with how knowledge is acquired for the working-class under uneven social conditions and how this way of knowing is then expressed, the digital space becomes a highly relevant site to trace, not as a contemporary backdrop, but because of its immediacy and constancy. In doing do, I hope to consider what it means for epistemic splits to unfold socially, visually and pedagogically online, and what this can offer art education research(ers).

I do this because while I engaged in a tricky and historical conversation during my literature review, surrounding debates around whether class is alive or not over the last three decades, it is poignant to note that those sources appeared sporadically across time. They surfaced in waves of renewed concern, before slowly receding back down again. And while this reflects an important and persistent punchy field of debate of which I too, aim to be a part of, the patchiness of this pattern, raises further questions about when, where and how often class may become speakable.

And yet, in a different sphere altogether, contemporary digital environments are presenting a far more continuous, loud and visibly contested space in which discussions of class and epistemology are being actively circulated. And while louder does not necessarily guarantee truth, neither does informality diminish it. Therefore, platforms on social media can possibly and do regularly function as sites of knowledge generation, where individuals

have the freedom to articulate, negotiate, accept or reject, and essentially perform different ways of knowing and being (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Here, academic concepts in particular, may circulate beyond institutional boundaries, often detached from their original concepts, yet reinterpreted and made accessible in a plethora of ways. Because of this, and the fact that the conditions under which knowledge is generated are changing at a much rapid pace than we could ever comprehend (Rosa, 2003), it becomes essential to then also account for these current sites of knowledge sharing, particularly those found circulating across social media environments such as Instagram and TikTok, and of which many working-class people are a part of.

In this second chapter then, I therefore look to social media, not solely as a contemporary phenomenon, but as a critical site in which the contradictions and complexities of epistemic splits become even more entangled. I read through and engage with the work of two British working-class academics, Adrian Gallagher and Louisa Munch, who I chose because their videos speak directly to the concerns of this thesis. With epistemic splits in mind, I reflect on how working-class epistemologies by working-class academics are performed and received within these environments and how this visibility may allude to a further meeting point that is maybe not so peaceful. Here, the quiet, often cruddy labour involved not only in acquiring knowledge, but in embodying it and re-expressing it too, becomes newly exposed and vulnerable (Povinelli, 2011).

Poverty is an Education Money Can't Buy

Firstly, it is important to reflect on recent online movements that seek to alter the narrative and discourse surrounding poverty and working-class life in general, especially as these movements are led by working-class academics themselves. These social media movements do not aim to simply 'raise awareness', but perhaps initiate a tear with the dominant epistemic framework through which working-class ways of knowing and being are understood. Frameworks which may reduce them/us to anecdotes, statistics, and/or unified political objects of sentiment as opposed to subjects of thought (Spivak, 1988). By putting at the forefront, the contradictory narratives and rhetoric around working-class bodies and minds, these movements illustrate that such representations do not only cause external tensions, but refuel and perpetuate internal ones too. They circulate, reproduce and eventually sediment into what one may feel as 'common sense', shaping not only how society perceives

the working-class, but also how working-class individuals may come to understand themselves, internalising logics of blaming and shaming (Gallagher, 2026a).

While such movements may at times, be dismissed as fleeting trends or passing phases, in many respects, their very presence at all showcases a sustained effort to rework how working-class sensibilities are articulated and made intelligible. On top of this, such movements can also help open up conversations and awareness around the knowledge wealth gap (Munch, 2025a), the knowledge economy (Drucker, 1969), and the knowledge gap hypothesis (Tichenor, et al., 1970). These are frameworks which point to the uneven distribution of not just material and economic resources, but of the means to access knowledge, process that knowledge, and in the end, mobilise that knowledge, even if means choosing to resist or reject it (Drucker, 1969; Tichenor, et al., 1970). In this light, such movements may be understood as counter-interventions, attempts to reclaim the terms through which working-class sensibility is understood and performed, and assert the capability to interpret and author one's own world (Freire, 2005).

In particular, the movement *Poverty is an Education Money Can't Buy* initiated by working-class Professor Adrian Gallagher, who teaches at a top Russel Group University in the UK but grew up on a council estate, is a particularly interesting micro case-study for this chapter. Partially because it foregrounds the multidimensional nature of being poor, and partially because it emphasises that class can go beyond economic status, and into the uneven distribution of exercising agency over one's own life (Gallagher, 2026b).

Through a series of short-form videos on Instagram and TikTok, Gallagher frequently records himself seated at a table, leaning forward, arms folded and positioned very close to the camera for approximately two and a half minutes at a time. He speaks slowly, yet his carefully thought out sentences feel urgent, inflicted with sarcasm, anger and even elements of disbelief. While his tone is deeply emotional, the visual setup for such videos on the other hand, is rather plain. Plain, aside for the poking of an Irish flag on the wall behind him, a bookshelf, or the occasional framed certificate, subtle visual cues towards his heritage and his educational merits. This almost close and almost cosy form of address exercised throughout all of his work, is both intimate and somewhat confrontational, contradicting the more 'distanced' and 'formal' characteristics of his academic writing in the field of global security (Gallagher, 2022). The unpolished nature of his videos, minimally edited, also enforces a sense of immediacy. Urgent, unsettled and up in arms[5], the subtle discrepancies of

[5] Up in arms: Feeling angry about something.

Gallagher's movement, as well as how he enacts it, iterates that conversations around class and the 'mainstream' narrative surrounding poverty are far from over.

In a short two-and-a-half-minute video on poverty awareness (Gallagher, 2026a), recorded in this very set up, a string of uncomfortable questions begin to bubble up to the surface. Well, is it society that is to really be blamed for the distaste in thinking about class? Because why would one choose to empathise with a group that has so much negative rhetoric attached to it? Lazy layabout[6], low-life good-for-nothing, rough and scummy[7], thinks they're hard[8], greedy but skint[9], always cheating the system, a dodgy one that's in-and-out of prison, dressed like a knacker[10], drug-dealer, most likely never read a book in their life, and/or just plain stupid. Gallagher in the same video, directly confronts similar working-class tropes with visible anger and frustration, his voice loud and firm as he describes the dominant narratives as just simply "offensive" (Gallagher, 2026a, 0:17). He argues that these assumptions construct an almost inescapable logic, that many working-class individuals do not want to work, or if they do work, should work more or harder, and if they cannot work, then they should have done better in school, becomes so omnipresent that it is almost impenetrable. And so, if society struggles to empathise, then why and/how could they even empathise with themselves? Gallagher's colloquial and intimidating delivery, combined with personal storytelling, externalises what might otherwise remain an internal battle, one that is marked by shame, self-depreciation, worthlessness, and humiliation. Complicated emotions that when expressed publicly, may allow for the de-privatisation of a struggle that seems taboo, but is very common and thus, very ordinary (Close, 2023b; Povinelli, 2011). And of course, some of these negative characterisations may occasionally hold elements of truth, but to what extent can they be understood as individual failures really, as opposed to systemic ones?

Here, Gallagher resonates with both Freire and Spivak, whose work helps frame the articulation of the internal epistemic split, the internalisation of dominant narratives, whereby harmful stereotypes and deficit-based rhetoric are absorbed into the literal makeup and patterns of how one understands, looks into, looks out to, and feels present in world (Freire,

[6] Layabout: Someone with no goals or aspirations, they just want to 'lay about' all day.
[7] Scummy: Derives from the insult 'scumbag', but used to describe someone who grew up in a bad area, with a bad family and turns to crime.
[8] Hard: Used sarcastically when someone tries to come across as tough.
[9] Skint: Having barely any money.
[10] Knacker: Irish derogatory term to describe someone dressed in old, dirty clothes. Associated with Irish gypsy travellers.

2005; Spivak, 1988). The repetition of such discourse described, may not just distort perception, but actively shapes what one believes is possible (Spivak, 1988; Freire, 2005). To come to see oneself as failing against aspirations that were never fully accessible in the first place, is not only a form of epistemic constraint, but also reflects Berlant's 'cruel optimism' (2007). Measuring oneself against ideals that were never structured for working-class starting points, sustains the conditions of their failure (Berlant, 2011). Within this, the willpower to imagine alternatives, is not only difficult, but in a way, almost structurally impossible.

This impossibility of such agency, Gallagher consolidates with the entwinement of a personal story of his own mother. After receiving what he ironically frames as a 'heart-warming comment' on one of his videos on working-class anger (Gallagher, 2025b), Gallagher takes the 'bite', screenshotting the comment and displaying it behind him as he speaks. It reads:

> Not being funny mate I have worked hard to make the money I do and if you choose a shit job that pays fuck all that's your own fault it's as simple as that. (Gallagher, 2025a)

In a sarcastic and cutting re-enactment, Gallagher's reads the comment back aloud, his tone confrontational. Confrontational also in a way that functions as a response in itself, by meeting a critique of working-class anger with an intensified version of it. With the sarcastic words 'work harder & don't be angry' enlarged on the screen, Gallagher shifts to recounting the experience of his mother, who, as a young woman, had to care for her elderly mother and therefore, could not choose her own educational or professional path (Gallagher, 2025a). By the end of this journey, at age 37, her skills were limited to care work only. Yet dominant narratives (echoed both in public discourse and in the comment above), suggest that this was her own fault. She should have 'tried harder' or pursued something else. The assertion that being poor is an outcome of your own decisions, obscures the structural pressures at play. The pressures of class, caregiving responsibilities, as well as gendered expectations. An assertion that implies ongoing personal failure, as if lived limitation is freely chosen, where what one reaps is assumed to be what one has sown (Gallagher, 2025a).

And it is here, in this ordinary, everyday, subtle yet cruddy and repetitive moment that is Povinelli's 'quasi-event' (2011). In these seemingly minor assertions, casually directed and easily shrugged off, that wider structures of responsibility and shame are reproduced. To claim that it is 'as simple as that', strips away any sort of complexity and humanness,

reducing lived experience to a mere binary of success and failure (Spivak, 1988). This constitutes then, as a kind of subtle violence because such narratives do not merely encourage the internalisation, but they actively impose them, loudly. They tell the working-class who they are and why they are that way before they have even had the chance to explore it themselves, and without ever engaging with the conditions that shape their lives. The violence of this quasi-event lies not in its intensity, though one could argue that it is intense, but in its ongoingness. The quiet repetition through which lives are interpreted and accounted for before they have even begun to unfold (Povinelli, 2011).

Gallagher's response, his deliberate performance of working-class anger, often coded as 'illegitimate' throughout his *Poverty is an Education Money Can't Buy* videos, may be read as a refusal of this quiet violence, and a kneejerk reaction to something painful, not only on his behalf, but also in relation to his mother and the broader collective whose lives may be reduced to such simplified narratives. Yet in taking the 'bite', in continuously reiterating that he is a "professor who grew up on a council estate" at the start of every video (Gallagher 2025a; 2025b; 2026a; 2026b), and offering multiple personal stories as 'proof', there is also still, as Spivak explained, this simultaneous magnetic pull toward legibility, the desire to be recognised, believed, and to make one's working-class sensibility count within the very frameworks that are still producing such splits (Spivak, 1988). Therefore, the act of resisting, or to be epistemically disobedient, is never entirely liberating, or outside of the system (Mignolo, 2009). Like Silva argues, to be recognised by your recogniser, still brushes up against the need to perform, to justify, to translate (Silva, 2007). It is an attempt to close the external split, and perhaps by extension, ease the internal one.

And yet, to 'complicate' these narratives then, through this entwinement of personal story with theoretical framing, also does something. It may not resolve the tension, but it does hold it open, publicly. It opens up a space in which other first-generation working-class academics can articulate and share their 'cruel optimisms' and 'false promises' attached to education and the broader system (Berlant, 2011; Freire, 2005). Here, like in this space currently, contradictions are not aimed to be 'figured out', but are to be sustained, shared and made visible as a communal condition, instead of an individual, suppressed one.

Receiving over 1.5 million views in one month alone (Gallagher, 2026b), hundreds of lengthy comments respond to his videos, with individuals sharing their own stories and trajectories. Unpaid carers, cleaners, mechanics, students, teaching assistants, single parents, and lecturers join in on the conversation (Gallagher, 2026a). While many describe similar upbringings on council estates, the responses are not uniform. Some express deep gratitude

toward their education for enabling more comfortable living conditions, for example, “after decades of code switching to hide my roots I’m proud of what I know and how I learned it!” (comment on Gallagher 2026a), while others articulate a growing scepticism towards its value (Gallagher, 2026a). This scepticism shows a new narrative is emerging, one that sees education as no longer possible as a ‘way out’ of poverty, and instead, is a futile investment. The accumulation of debt, coupled with the absence of guaranteed employment, appears to destabilise its promise, potentially contributing to new cycles of economic precarity and limited social mobility.

This destabilisation reflects the emotional consequences of obtaining Freire’s conscientizção and complicates Spivak’s account of the oppressed subject’s desire to become like the oppressor (Freire, 2005; Spivak, 1988). Because if, through reflection and dialogue, critical awareness is now generating disillusionment and fatigue with education, then the desire to be included, to become like the oppressor, is also fractured through this weakening belief in what inclusion is supposed to secure. Instead, there are the beginnings of a growing pain located in the collapse of what education is supposed to do for the working-class. If education was the dreamy horizon, now it is possible that it is slowly eroding. And in this erosion, is pain. Because with reflection and dialogue, knowledge may begin to feel, for some, as something that does not liberate, but only clarifies the conditions of that lack of liberation. If not knowing before (exclusion, confusion) hurt, then knowing now (inclusion, clarity with no exit) also hurts. The question then, is not simply whether knowledge liberates, but what it does when it cannot? Is it more painful to not understand why you are oppressed, or to understand and remain within it?

As such, Gallagher makes public the processing of epistemic pain, and thus, the internal and external epistemic splits that structure a working-class sensibility. Between the lived and embodied knowledge and the dominant frameworks through which it is interpreted, contested, accepted or rejected. And while he sometimes attempts to resolve, overexplain, or mend these tensions, his videos more often resist closure, instead humanising them by allowing them to remain as they are. Their visibility does not smooth over their contradictions, nor their pain, nor their peculiarity (Silva, 2007), if anything, it does the opposite. It exposes these ruptures as real, enduring conditions that continue to shape how knowledge is generated, lived, felt, and expressed in real time.

Knowledge as Fragments of Judgement

Navigating the same sticky terrain, but on an even larger scale, is Danish Mancunian, working-class academic, Louisa Munch. With over 260,000 followers on Instagram, Munch consistently narrates and documents her research on critical pedagogy, the rise of the far right and cultural nostalgia. Like Gallagher, she works through short-form video, but also extends her reflections into longer personal essays on the platform Medium. Where Gallagher's intervention is more directly concerned with reshaping the narrative around poverty and class specifically, Munch's work aims to operate slightly differently. It urges audiences to think critically about the world around them, to reconnect with the cultural loss of imagination, and to attempt to envision a different type of future altogether. In her words, she aims "to make complicated critical theory, entirely uncomplicated" (Munch, 2025a, para. 11). As such, her work provides another compelling site for examining how working-class knowledge, shaped through internal and external ruptures is performed, made public, and assessed in real time.

Munch, born and raised in Rochdale, a Northern, post-industrial town known for its undulating moors and a landscape of council estate housing alongside high crime rates, embodies the complexities of navigating academia from a working-class background (Munch, 2025a). Like many working-class children, and later, working-class academics, she was told to 'work hard' in order to 'make it out' of her environment (Munch, 2025a). In a personal essay, *The Wealth Gap in Knowledge That No One Talks About* (2025), she reflects on her own pain of knowledge acquisition. She writes how 'very lucky' she felt to make it to university, despite the isolating challenges she faced and the countless considerations of abandoning that journey. She acknowledges what Valerie Hey also coins "the fiction of the meritocracy" (Hey, 2003, p. 319; Munch, 2025a), the myth that success comes solely through hard work and individual effort, without accounting for the uneven distribution of access to knowledge, opportunity, and institutional support (Cruz, 2021; Hey, 2003).

But despite being 'lucky', along with the acquisition of knowledge in higher education, comes the slow transformation of the self. Empowerment is therefore not uncomplicated. It is accompanied by guilt (in having made it out), inadequacy (having a later starting point than one's peers), and reoccurring feelings of giving up (the struggle does not end even with upward mobility). Yet with pain, comes agency. And in Munch's case, that agency comes through the gradual development of critical thought. It is in the midst of her self-funded PhD that she comes to recognise:

> We cannot have democracy without informed citizens and I do not mean if you read the news. Thinking critically is a wealth that is also inherited, perhaps the most important one. It is learnt through debating politics around a dinner table… something I was not privy to in a deprived northern working-class town. Mark Hodkinson summarised it beautifully in his title of his memoir 'no one round here reads Tolstoy' about his life growing up as an avid reader in Rochdale. The wealth gap in critical thinking, education and knowledge is arguably the most damaging form of oppression. You are robbed simply of your means to what Freire called 'naming the world': being able to understand and interpret it (Munch, 2025a, para. 10, citing Freire, 2005, p. 88).

Munch's realisation that critical thinking is a form of inherited wealth, is particularly telling. It further complicates Freire's proposition that reflection and dialogue offer a pathway towards liberation, by foregrounding the uneven conditions under which such practices become possible in the first place (Freire, 2005). That they are unevenly cultivated long before the university, shaped through lived experience, cultural exposure and the differing social spaces in which the world becomes legible. This makes the previous sentiments expressed in Gallagher's videos regarding the diminishing hope/promise/dependency on education, especially concerning. Because if higher education represents one of the very few, if only site(s) in which working-class individuals may successfully develop critical thinking skills, precisely because time, energy and emotional bandwidth are otherwise constrained, then the cynicism of education's promise carries significant consequences, or perhaps, in the voice of Munch, significant disenchantments (BBC Radio 4, 2026; Munch, 2026f). The erosion of education as a pathway, however imperfect or 'cruelly optimistic' it may be, risks foreclosing not only material mobility, but to the very forms of knowing that enable oneself to view and define the conditions of their very own existence (Gallagher, 2026a; Spivak, 1988).

To counter this then, are Munch's short-form videos. Here, she seeks to provide a more 'accessible' language through which individuals might begin to name and explain their experiences, allowing feelings of oppression and hopelessness and inadequacy to move beyond simply sitting as feelings in the pit of one's stomach, and instead, expelled into shared, loud, impassioned, and most importantly, empowering critical forms of dialogue (Munch, 2026b). Using the familiar contexts such as the gym, modern dating and football, Munch creates conversations that question and challenge the power structures of classed life (Munch, 2025b; 2026c; 2026d).

Like Gallagher, Munch also records her videos informally in her home. However, her setup is a little more curated and deliberately glamorous. She often appears very well dressed, speaking in front of several fully stacked and colourful walls of books, containing predominantly texts on critical theory and critical pedagogy, which she frequently references and recommends (Munch, 2026a; 2026e). Opening up each video with a rhetorical question and speaking slowly, her Rochdale accent and intonations are undeniably distinct, yet she does not hesitate to throw around theoretical terms alongside various Northern English colloquialisms. She is visibly passionate and cares about her research, her profile often interspersed with video clips from her appearances on television or on popular podcasts, where she shares about her PhD work and career as a lecturer, illustrating that her work is also transcending the digital platform and into an even wider public discourse (BBC Radio 4, 2026; BBC Sunday Morning Live, 2026).

And similar to Barker, Hey and Reay, Munch's work and her repeated calls for her audience to think critically in everyday life, can also be understood as being born from an injured way of knowing, situated at the intersection of her working-class ways of being and her intellectual pursuits. As a result, the unintended effect of her videos is the emergence of a new meeting point altogether. One that is not so peaceful and remains tainted by the same forces she seeks to critique. It is that the epistemic content of what she communicates is frequently bypassed and instead, her expression becomes an object of judgement.

Judgement that is not too dissimilar to academic-like criteria, such as the critique on her legibility, credibility, style and form. For example, when reposting a video of her appearance on BBC Radio 4, in which she discusses with journalist Amol Rajan, how young people feel so disenchanted with their futures (BBC Radio 4, 2026), Munch is criticised on her accent and colloquialisms, attributes inseparable from her Rochdale upbringing. Something she did not choose, nor cannot change. Comments such as, "like, like, like, like, like" (comment on BBC Radio 4, 2026), "take a shot every time she says like" (comment on BBC Radio 4, 2026), "she doesn't have a master's in English obviously" (comment on BBC Radio 4, 2026). And similarly, when she posts a video describing football as an analogy for Herbert Marcuse's notion of repressed desire (Marcuse, 1966; Munch, 2025b), more comments surface. "Is she a parody? The voice, the actions…" (comment on Munch, 2025b), "what's with the shitty voice?" (comment on Munch, 2025b), and "You had me at Rochdale" (comment on Munch, 2025b). Rather than thinking about what she is trying to convey, the focus shifts onto *how* she is saying it, undermining both her intelligence and her pedagogical intentions.

The cadence, the intonation, the lack of rhoticity in her speech, do not just trigger this undermining, but also reveal the fragility in how easily one can oscillate between being an object of sentiment to a subject of thought, and back down to an object of sentiment again. While Munch acts as a facilitator of ethical work via her videos, encouraging audiences to reflect and think critically for themselves, particularly for those who have not had previous access to developing such skills, by doing so, she inadvertently becomes what Elizabeth Povinelli calls the 'ethical substance' upon which judgement is exercised (Povinelli, 2011; Foucault, 1990, p. 26). Drawing on Michel Foucault (1990), Povinelli's 'ethical substance' refers to the living and material aspects of a person that become objects of judgement. In *Economies of Abandonment* (2011), Povinelli highlights a gap between those who study suffering and those who live it. She writes, "Once again, we see a gap open between those who reflect on and evaluate ethical substance and those who are this ethical substance" (2011, p. 15; Foucault, 1990). If we take a step back for a moment, we can see Munch as appearing to occupy both of these positions at once, effectively filling this gap altogether. As she attempts to critique a system that has already limited her possibilities through making public her working-class epistemology, one of which honours the integrity of both her upbringing and her academic education, she also becomes the material through which this knowledge is judged (Barker, 1996; Munch, 2025b; Povinelli, 2011).

Quite possibly then, how she sounds indicates the crossing of some sort of invisible social boundary. As opposed to engaging with the reasoning behind her arguments, some resort to ridicule and mockery. The discomfort provoked by a working-class woman conveying academic theory through a slow, broad accent and several sentence fillers, reveals the palimpsest of deeply ingrained associations between class, gender and intellectual authority. One may not 'see' visibly her class status, but they can hear it. And in a way, these comments do more than just dismiss Munch, they work to restore the class hierarchies that she seeks to unsettle. Because while they are harmful, they are familiar and in familiarity, is comfort. Similar to Gallagher, Munch at times, cannot help but also take the 'bite' in responding to these comments. In one instance, she writes back:

> You highlight the point I make about the exclusion and imposter syndrome that working-class academics experience through the way we speak sound. I hope in spite of the way I sound I'm making the point clear that critical pedagogy and higher education is for everyone and it doesn't matter where you come from,

> how you sound or how much money you have, education is the most empowering tool you can have in an age that has never felt more disempowering, disenchanting and economically damaging (Munch, 2026f).

Disempowerment, disenchantment and economical damage form a tumultuous terrain most people are undoubtedly attempting to navigate (BBC Radio 4, 2026). Against this backdrop, such comments may initially seem small and insignificant, "intensified zones of being and not being" (Povinelli, 2011, p. 10) that are almost weightless and imperceptible, but with time, begin to chip away at one's sense of self. As such, they mark another painful meeting point that emerges when a working-class epistemology is made public. A meeting point that highlights the inseparability of the epistemic splits. Inseparable because they are continually feeding into one another. For example, if an internal split is already present, the self-doubt, shame, even epistemic insecurity formed through prior academic encounters, shapes the external performance of this working-class knowledge. Once made public and visible, the judgement of this expression feeds back into the internal split, because that shame and self-doubt is only intensified, and one becomes even more aware of how one is being read through an external gaze.

Louisa Munch's choice to continue sharing her working-class epistemology, her research, knowledge and anecdotes, on social media and beyond despite these continuous recursive loops, may not only reflect the hardy, driven, 'thick-skin', prodigious persona that many working-class academics have come to inhabit, but also a deeper form of "chosen self-alienation" (Hey, 2003, p. 327). An aghaidh-fidil[11]. Something that protects, and something that continues to make class harder and harder to see.

Conclusion

If we reflect on both Adrian Gallagher and Louisa Munch, does their pain outweigh their peace? What does the subtle, quiet and ordinary 'epistemic violence' they endure on a daily basis tell us about the conditions of making working-class knowledge public (Povinelli, 2011)? What does reading and engaging with their work online through epistemic splits offer

[11] Aghaidh-fidil: Gaeilge (Irish) word for face-mask. Associated with a disguise, usually around Samhain (Halloween).

art education researchers? And perhaps also, working-class students in higher education themselves?

While both academics are met with frequent criticism, much like Judith Barker in 1996 and Valerie Hey in 2003, they both do not turn away from their injuries, from the internal split and external tensions. Instead, in a way, it ignites a fire within them, propelling them forward. Where their 'working-class anger' and hardy pride from where they came from, transforms into a kind of public pedagogy, or what Freire deems, "dialogic encounters" (Freire, 2005, p. 32) of which we can see from two angles. Firstly, although Gallagher's work is grounded in emotional and embodied expression, and Munch's in the desire to democratise theory and make knowledge accessible, both mobilise their own classed experiences to communicate academic ideas in ways that are accessible, compressed, engaging and easier to relate to. Yet, by doing so, this pedagogical work does not remove them from any epistemic tension. Instead it inadvertently makes it just that much more visible. By this, I mean, they are often still translating themselves, still negotiating with public expectations, they still navigate the pressures to be understood or included in a certain way, and they still feel the need to prove themselves, even if it hurts them in the process (Berlant, 2011; Silva, 2007). Therefore, through reading and engaging with their work through epistemic splits, we can see that the labour attached to working-class academic life does not simply stay within the academic space, but instead, continues to multiply across differing platforms and differing mediums.

As a result, epistemic splits more generally, may be seen as not just a personal and interior condition, but also a pedagogical one. Through staying sensitive to this condition, Gallagher and Munch invite art education researchers to be more attentive to the emotional dimensions of learning and social mobility for the working class, particularly as these tensions unfold in real time, nearly all the time. These experiences are no longer only bound to or expressed through text or academic work, but increasingly emerge within and across contemporary spaces of knowledge production. In this light, engaging with epistemic splits may help researchers and educators better understand the negotiations and labour involved in classed academic life. This attentiveness may also make room for new pedagogical spaces where working-class students are able to articulate their own ways of knowing without immediately translating themselves into dominant academic forms.

Similarly, this may also hold significance for working-class students within higher education. Because they may resonate with aspects of their own experiences, for example, in the rhetoric that Gallagher attempts to reverse, in the theories that Munch tries to democratise, and also, in how the figures articulating these theories sound and act. Like Cruz, who

mediates understandings of her life through theory and the lives of others, working-class students may also find opportunities to negotiate and speak their own experiences through these digital spaces. If we return to the idea that art education research and arts-based research has had relatively little engagement with class, alongside the reality that the promise of education appears increasingly less attractive for many working-class students, then engaging with epistemic splits in a digital space may become important for rethinking how classed experience is sensed, articulated and made epistemologically meaningful, especially within academia.

With the multimodality of epistemic splits in mind, it is through this opening that I also attempt my own intervention into this intersection in the following chapter. Since Chapters 1 and 2 have focussed on reading and engaging with epistemic splits through the work and practices of others, this next chapter turns towards writing through them myself.

Chapter 3: My Own Fragmented Writing

In this chapter, I borrow a sentiment from Kathleen Stewart in the introduction of her work, *Ordinary Affects* (2007), "this is an experiment, not a judgement" (Stewart, 2007, p. 1). Although Stewart's work is largely theoretical and not formally considered arts-based research, her way of attending to the ordinary lived textures of everyday life through short fragments and small vignettes, informs my understanding of what writing as methodological practice can do for others. That is, providing a new way of engaging with the theory itself, a way of sensing it, a way of performing it, which aligns strongly with the values of arts-based research (Vis, 2021). In this spirit, Chapter 3 attempts to offer art education research something new, perhaps something a little bit uncomfortable. An alternative way of engaging with classed writing and classed experience, through the performance of the concept 'epistemic splits'.

Within these next pages, I try to write through a 'stickiness' that perhaps theory alone cannot fully encapsulate. Writing within the limits of writing itself (Stewart, 2007), not above, outside, or beyond them, but through them. The hesitations that I speak of, the repetitions, the returns and the open contractions throughout this chapter, are not signs of confusion, but traces of a different mode of knowing (Stewart, 2007). They reflect the tensions of moving between working-class ways of knowing (the internal split) and academic forms of articulation (the external split). I intertwine 'sticky' fragments with theoretical and personal reflection, to invite the reader to perhaps encounter and feel this meeting point more directly and engage in a new reading practice altogether. One that is attentive to fragmentation and contradiction, where understanding is negotiated on the page, sentence by sentence.

And through those sentences, I try to stay in touch with the four cornerstones of this thesis, how academic knowledge may be acquired for the working-class, how it may be processed, how it may be expelled, and how it may be received. Building on the work of Suominen et al. (2021), who combine fragments and experience as part of an arts-based research project in art education exploring class, the fragments here research similar poignant moments. The hesitation in even writing about class at all, the first encounters of class and shame in childhood, the effects of navigating two worlds, and the first return home (Suominen et al., 2021). I chose these moments because I feel these convey the literal make up of the internal and external split, the conditions that shape working-class ways of knowing and being. And as Suominen et al., write, such conditions and ways of knowing can be "emotionally charged, even after several decades" (p. 149). Again, illustrating that class as a

sensibility, lingers, looms and lasts. With that being said, within these fragments, there are small elements of my own personal experience, which I really resisted entwining but in the end, could not separate completely (Barker, 1996; Hey, 2003).

And while there is nothing radical or more 'authentic' by choosing to write in fragments, it is a methodological expression that illustrates what class can do to writing, to self-articulation, intellectual formation and the relationship to generating academic knowledge itself. A methodological expression, that has historically been connected to the material conditions of working-class intellectual production (Rogers & Cuming, 2019). Where lack of time, stability and emotional bandwidth do not just surround and limit the act of writing, but often shape the very form it takes in the first place. A small, hurried and half-finished fragment. The fragment is therefore not an aesthetic choice, but one that belongs to the broader genealogy of working-class writing, life-writing, and now, academic and artistic writing. A genealogy of "little jottings" (Rogers and Cumings, 2019, p. 184) on little scraps, about little bits of the ordinary that allow structures to be revealed and felt (Povinelli, 2011). Comfortable or uncomfortable, this allows us to engage in Valerie Hey's "collective writing pad" (2003, p. 330; McLeod, 1999), contributing not only to contemporary conversations around class-sensitive pedagogies within higher education research (Jones & Vagle, 2013), but more specifically, to questions surrounding what gets to count as real knowledge, who is it that gets to be a knowledge maker, and how these tensions themselves, consciously and subconsciously shape the act of generating new knowledge (Hey, 2003; Law, 2004). Thus, the following fragments are a form of epistemic labour in motion. A labour where knowledge is negotiated, interrupted, embodied and formed on the page, in real time.

Fragment II

Once again, I hesitate. Is it a life delicately coarse or a life coarsely delicate? Because to be working-class is to be everything and to be no such thing all at the same time. It is to be split between living a life and making sense of it. And in this articulation, feels there is a loss of texture and ambiguity and specificity. A sensibility of both possibility and loss. A sensibility from a working-class life that exists between tensions. Not as a synthesis, but as something sticky and inspiring and horrifying and alive and all entirely buzzing[12] at the same time.

A sticky tension born in sticky lives hidden in sticky forgotten towns, behind the grey sticky bricks of the Seven Sisters[13] and the white sticky plasters of Rory O'Connor Park[14].

[12] Buzzing: A common slang word from Rochdale/Manchester meaning to be very excited. It is associated with the 'worker bee' emblem seen everywhere in the city.
[13] Seven Sisters: A famous block of council flats in Rochdale.
[14] Rory O' Connor Park: An ordinary street in Dún Laoghaire, Ireland.

> Where communities stick together but also snap apart. Where seven people can live in a two-bedroom house and three generations in a council flat, sticky lives of loudness and tightness and love. Too loud and tight and too much care for having any peace of mind. Where localities are not safe but they are all you know, so in them you feel safety. Where crime, confidence, violence, softness, anger, hope are the backgrounds to your thinking, writing, reading. Where everyone knows everything, and so everything knows everyone. There are no surprises but probably a lot of trust, and probably a lot of anger and therefore probably a lot of pride. The street, the borough, the town, a small womb in the body of the world. A womb that is dry and rough but when you leave, you want it back, to be soothed in all its textures and bumps of ordinariness and complicatedness.
>
> It is nothing profound and nothing spectacular, though of course, why can it not be? It is something that cannot be translated, though of course, who said that we couldn't try? Because when we leave, that stickiness stays. It stretches and stretches, picking up new fluff and dirt and ways of knowing along the way. We mould and bend and hide our original shapes, but never always completely. Because the more we learn, the more it hurts us, and as we go forwards, we cruckle and buckle, and everything that once was is both magnified and lost at the same time. It matters and it doesn't. We confuse everything we carry with everything we must perform, and we feel sticky and messy, and trapped and free between it all.

To imagine ourselves as sticky usually comes with a sense of discomfort, of being enmeshed with something out of our control. Standing on someone else's sticky chewing gum, the feel of runny honey between your fingertips, the lingerings of a day's worth of sun cream on your back, your skin slowly peeling as you get up from a cold leather sofa. Not necessarily enjoyable, the notion of being sticky evokes the emotional and physical sensations of being shaped between two systems of knowledge, one of precarity and one of prestige. A space where everything is both intimate and suffocating, both uncomfortable and yet desirable (Mahony & Zmroczek, 1996). It is an internal split that many working-class academics have tried to unstick, resolve, understand, shed, and expose (Barker, 1996; Hey, 2003; Munch 2025; Reay, 2018; Reay, 2025).

In many ways, it describes the discomfort of feeling like an outsider within, or of being (n)either/(n)or, a ghost, a haunting and out of place. While we do our best to translate an experience into a theoretical piece of work, it perhaps is not always enough (Suominen et al., 2021). And so, we return to ourselves through stories, conversations, metaphors, fragments, pieces of art, the lives of others, the lives of our own, songs, sounds, and philosophical concepts, attempting to articulate something that resists straightforward capture within straightforward frameworks (Barker, 1996; Cruz, 2021; McKittrick, 2021). An understanding that is generated through a method of moving between memory, feelings and theory. And even though I also try to expose and to understand this peculiar epistemic

condition through theorising epistemic splits, tracing epistemic splits and now, performing epistemic splits, in this thesis, I try not to resolve and I try not to unstick. Because I now firmly believe that it is in this stickiness, this stiction of working-class ways of knowing and being and academic research writing, this stiction between the internal split and the external one, where the true power lies.

Fragment III

> Because to acknowledge this stickiness, means to acknowledge something that binds. Trapped and free, it is something relational, something excessive, perhaps a little bit messy, perhaps a little bit intolerable. A stickiness across bodies, communities, places, experiences, conversations, ideas, theories, readings and writings. And yet, trapped and free, trapped and free, why is it so hard to embrace? A resistance to resist this stickiness that I cannot explain. A resistance to share my own lived experience intertwined with the theory I talk of. I want to share but I don't. I want to be personal but I can't. I don't know the right way to write away, the right to write or share it. And yet, I feel without these missing pieces, I cannot name and explain why it was and how it should have been in a hundred words or more. I fight for the entanglements I theorise and yet I fear what it will do to us. We must write ourselves to preserve ourselves, and yet it feels unnatural and sticky and messy, trapped and free, trapped and free, somewhere between it all.

We must write ourselves to preserve ourselves is a sentiment that echoes Carol Hanisch's famous words, the personal is deeply political (1970). And yet, the personal and sharing the personal, has had a tough time of its own, particularly within academia (Björninen et al., 2024). Tough in that, it is not always taken seriously. It is not always understood (Close, 2023b). It is not always consumed gently, and yes, it is not always reliable (Björninen et al., 2024). And although the personal can indeed, be very damaging, the personal may not always be just what it sounds like, personal. Sometimes, the personal is just a reflection of a moment where an entire epistemic structure may become visible (Elrayes, 2025). And this visibility may only be seen, revisited and returned to after the slow, painful and often complicated process of knowledge acquisition, a re-encountering through new ways of knowing and new ways of being (Freire, 2005)

For example, those heart palpitations in Diane Reay (2025), the homelessness of Cynthia Cruz (2021), the shame in childhood (Suominen et al., 2021), the fear of an unexpected phone bill derailing your life (Gallagher, 2026a), they are more than just stories and confessions. They are sensibilities of internal and external splitting developed from unequal systems. But what do such sensibilities do to the reader? What does it do to poke and provoke, project that internal split out into the open? While the personal may seem a bit

intimate and also a bit taboo (Close, 2023b), what if it is actually everything but that? Experiences that are ordinarily unremarkable and instead, just happenings that are produced by the structures and systems we critique and write about (Povinelli, 2011)? Happenings that shape how one behaves, presents themselves, reads and writes, especially in academic spaces. In this light then, the personal from the working-class in academia, may not just be the sharing of an individual crass and cruddy memory in order to make those who are not working-class feel bad or guilty. Instead, in returning to such moments and in entwining them within academic work, particularly within art education research, we do so not just out of curiosity or confession, but as an epistemology of our own. An epistemology shaped by internal splitting and external tension, where experiences once felt but not fully understood can be re-encountered through newly acquired ways of knowing. And through the process of the writing itself, we may begin to negotiate these experiences on the page, in real time, perhaps even for the first time. And as a result, new understandings of the self, new understandings of the systems one lives in, and new understandings of the complicated, sticky relationship between the two, become possible.

Fragment IV

Includes intertextual references from The Wizard of Oz (Fleming, 1939).

> The ice cream van jingles in the distance. *We're off to see the Wizard, the Wonderful Wizard of Oz!* A white and yellow, yellow and white van tugs around the corner. There is no sun but there is plenty of rain. My stomach drops and I feel embarrassed. I squeeze my mother's hand and wonder what she is thinking. What does she dream of? We both wait for Dad so that we can all eat together. Screwball[15] in hand, he smiles and smiles. I realise it's okay to take the ice cream but not okay to give it. My stomach is cold, because because because… (*Because of the wonderful things he does!)*
>
> "What do your parents do for a living?" I didn't feel shame until this moment. I say my mother is a manager. My father is a driver. But my mother does not work. And my father is the local ice-cream man. Sticky sticky, we do this to ourselves. Ashamed to be proud and proud to be ashamed. We live on the peripheries, the frankness of our small worlds, the proximity, the naivety, and it is not until later, we will realise why. And as the stickiness thickens, and as the ice cream melts, the sensations will remain, and there is no way out of them, but through.

As I advocate for the entwinement of the personal and the theoretical, I acknowledge that it also still feels difficult, shameful and perhaps even dangerous to engage in it. It is the

[15] Screwball: A popular ice cream from the early 2000's. Known for it's ball of chewing gum at the bottom.

external split feeding the internal one. It is describing judgement while also recreating the conditions for that judgement to become possible. Yet, like Cynthia Cruz, Clarice Lispector, Judith Barker, Diane Reay, Adrian Gallagher, and Louisa Munch, this fragment too, has nothing objectively terrible inside of it. Nothing catastrophic and nothing loud occurs, but it is in the quietness and ongoingness of it, where the meaning truly accumulates (Povinelli, 2011). And I share it anyway, because in many ways, it is not as personal as one may initially believe. Instead, it is an epistemic scene, a tiny moment of structured repetition that reappears throughout several other working-class academics' work (Cruz, 2021; Lispector, 1977). A moment that can only really be understood and returned to, after the painful process of knowledge acquisition. What once felt like an individual feeling, a source of embarrassment, shame or guilt, can later be understood differently through new ways of knowing and being. We may realise that for example, the accidental moment one becomes aware of their class, was never a personal let down, nor was it the fault of their mother or their father, but something socially and structurally produced instead. It is the beginnings of the internal split and the external one. Where systems become sensations and only later can these sensations make sense (Freire, 2005; Spivak, 1988).

And while such sensations which initially felt like personal failings, may begin to make sense, they may not always liberate, nor may they always heal. For although knowledge acquisition enables the articulation of feelings that are lived in the body, albeit in a sticky and messy way, it may also deepen the very ruptures we speak of (Spivak, 1988). Because to understand precarity and shame and anger, alongside pride and agency and meritocracy, does not mean they can simply be washed away, nor fully embraced. Knowledge acquisition may not erase these contradictions or resolve them neatly, instead it may mark an irreversible change in how one perceives and organises their entire world, for the good, the bad, and the ordinary (Povinelli, 2011).

Fragment V

> And where is it exactly that we feel sticky? In our mind, our hands, our ideas or our toes? Is it always like this, or is it only sometimes? We definitely feel sticky in the university, but what about going back to the valleys that shaped us? The tackiness doesn't stop there either. In the town, the street, the borough. We can breathe a bit better, that air of familiarity, but only for a short while. When we walk up the moors, down the Seven Sisters, around the Dell[16], something has changed and we're not sure what. We try to share our new worlds, but there's something shameful about this too.

[16] Dell: Short for Healey Dell, a nature reserve in the middle of Rochdale.

> We have the notions[17] and we don't sound like we used to. And though we do sound like we used to, and though we do look like we used to, and though our place is the world is exactly the same as we're used to, our interpretations of it are long long gone. Something has changed but it's hard to explain. I try to search for myself in those who know me and those who I have yet to meet and I can no longer trace a sense of self in either. Confusing everything I carry with everything I must perform, I feel sticky and messy, trapped and free, entangled between it all.

What then, might irreversible change mean when one returns home? Or when one remains in a place that, materially, may not have changed even slightly, but one's ways of knowing it has? To understand one's precarity and oppression, but to still exist inside of it? Because knowledge acquisition, through reflection and dialogue, may not necessarily alter or transform one's position in the world in ways that might be expected (Freire, 2005). Critical understanding may shift how oppression is felt and perceived, but it may not automatically move the subject beyond it (Freire, 2005; Spivak, 1988). And so, the splits stay in place because structural conditions still remain in place. Classed codes persist (Gallagher, 2026a), intergenerational ties remain, friends and family continue to inhabit the same postcodes, and familiarity coexists with its own forms of constraint. And in a similar way, the movement of knowledge can generate some sort of reciprocal dissonance, where both spaces become partially or somewhat estranged. By this, I mean, if working-class ways of knowing and being often produce external tension within academic spaces, then the academic ways of knowing and being may also begin to produce a new external tension and form of estrangement when carried back to the places one comes from (Hey, 2003; Mahony & Zmroczek, 1997). Neither space remains quite untouched, each altered slightly by the presence of the other.

And this is what is implied by a stickiness between two systems of knowledge. And although it may initially appear painful or pessimistic, in the refusal to resolve these frictions, something meaningful is able to emerge. Because knowledge can and does transform both understanding and in some cases, material circumstance for many working-class subjects, including myself through having the means and opportunity to write this thesis. But it is not an either/or condition. It is not simply pain or empowerment. It is pain coinciding with empowerment. It is difficulty falling in step with agency. It is liberation and constraint, together, at the same time. It is the epistemic splits just getting stickier, their meeting point occurring over and over, returning and never fully arriving. And through this

[17] Notions: Irish slang for thinking you're above everybody else.

stickiness, even when material lack does not transform into material abundance, there remains some possibilities. The choice to know more, or differently, the choice to resist, the choice to refuse or the choice to reframe. This is not a clean process, it is a sticky one. And as a result, it complicates what it means to remain, to return or to belong as a working-class individual within higher education.

Chapter Conclusion

As stated by Jones & Vagle (2013), to talk about class, it to dive headfirst into contradiction. Paradoxes that confuse, paradoxes that stick. We can see this in the tricky historical conversation on whether class has ceased to exist or not, in the sticky meeting point between the internal split and the external one. We can see it in the critique of institutions whilst also being shaped and legitimised by them. And perhaps most importantly, we can see it in the complicated effects of knowledge acquisition itself. Because while academic knowledge does offer liberation and agency and new ways of understanding both of the self and the world, it also produces estrangement, irreversibility and stickiness, all at the same time. The more one tries to understand and solve contradiction, the more it begins to spill over.

And so, the only way to write about it perhaps, is to write through it. Writing through epistemic splits, writing through the ordinary, writing through the personal, writing through the theory, and writing through the fragments. Because these fragments upon reflection, are not just simply about being a working-class academic. They are about trying to find language for that sticky meeting point of internal and external splitting that persists across time and distance, yet often exceeds the language available to even name it (Suominen et al., 2021). A reoccurring point within the process of knowledge acquisition, where new understandings of the self are formed and reformed through movement, between an old home and a new one, between leaving and returning. While much of the literature already speaks from a place of arrival in academia, of ‘having made it’, this chapter speaks from the stage beforehand. From the condition of being physically separated yet structurally entangled by multiple places at once. And it is here, where my contribution sits. These fragments then, research what happens when theory moves through lived sensation and what happens when lived sensation moves back into theory through writing, and writing about the ordinary (Barker, 1996; Povinelli, 2011). Because through the ordinary, we can show how structures become sensations, and sensations become sensibilities, and through sensibility, a

peculiar way of thinking, feeling, reading and meaning-making takes shape. And from there, we arrive back at the page, at writing itself. Writing not as just expression, but as a site where tension is visible and vociferous. The expression of the internal split and the external split, a process that is recursive and unfinished, always folding back into itself.

Therefore, this chapter is not simply trying to 'give voice' to the working-class within art education research, nor to romanticise the pains or struggles that may be read between each line, but to insist on their complexity and epistemic value. That when epistemic splits are developed as an arts-based research method in art education research, a working-class epistemology can be made visible. One where knowledge about how systems shape thought, how knowing is bound up with a sense of self, how this sense of self is mediated by art/theory/culture, how learning may be painful, and how knowledge is never neutral, but always generated within and through structures of inequality, can be seen on the page, read through and interacted with. Knowledge that is developed through hesitation, feelings, memories, contradiction and fragmented writing.

Art education researchers must therefore engage with this kind of writing differently. Not by trying to smooth out the stickiness, but by making space for it and staying with it a little while longer (Law, 2004). And perhaps, art education research is now uniquely positioned to do so, precisely because it already exists within a multidisciplinary intersection of theory, experimentation and alternative ways of knowing. Therefore through 'flipping the table', where epistemic splits are not read as failures, but as something that can be expressed, as something meaningful in their own right, art education researchers may begin to engage in their own epistemic labour. Not asking only what the writing says, but how it says it, why it says it in this way and what conditions have shaped it to begin with. Therefore, epistemic splits become not something to simply analyse, but as a way of reading, writing and encountering classed ways of knowing differently.

Thesis Conclusion

The beginning of this thesis began with a paradox. Trapped and free, trapped and free, the liberating and painful process of knowledge acquisition, a paradox that I tried to carry throughout every page of this thesis. And yet it is a paradox that cannot be resolved because it does not end. The sensations and the sensibilities derived from epistemic splitting that are traced in and out of this work, are understood now not as separate entities that can be glued together, nor written about cleanly and packed away. Instead, my findings show that they are ongoing and resemble a distinct yet irreversible condition, one that "neither happen[s] nor not happen[s]", but accumulates over time (Povinelli, 2011, p. 13). Because like the working-class scholars have showed us over the last three decades, the stickiness persists. Moving through new bodies, new minds, new contexts and new chapters, the complex meeting point between working-class ways of knowing and academic writing continues to unfold here and there, consciously and subconsciously, over and over. And so, how does this thesis, which performs this sticky meeting point, the contact zone between internal splitting and external splitting without fully resolving it, answer my central research question: How might epistemic splits reshape how art education research(ers) understand, read and respond to working-class academic forms of expression?

Well, to begin with, my primary theoretical contribution of naming and theorising epistemic splits, offers art education researchers a new way of understanding the conditions in *how* working-class individuals acquire, process, express and negotiate academic knowledge within the university, and how this may affect them not just intellectually, but also socially, emotionally, and even permanently. This way of understanding is especially important because it does not just foreground why expression may be fragmented or contradictorary, but highlights what conditions even make this expression possible (or impossible) in the first place.

Epistemic splits as a theoretical framework then, allowed for the development of epistemic splits as an arts-based methodological framework, which is my second contribution to the field, and provides many offerings of which I would like to develop further in future academic research, readings, and personal curiosities. Because rather than simply describing this epistemic condition using theory alone, through using epistemic splits as a mode of inquiry, reading through them, engaging with them, and writing through them, the paradoxes I identified in the beginning from the existing literature, could instead in many

ways, be brought to life, sensitively felt, and held open in their full complexity, honouring the integrity of the paradox itself (Barker, 1996).

For example, through staying sensitive to epistemic splits as a reading practice, it gives not only art education researchers but also higher education teachers in classroom settings, a new way to read and respond to working-class writing. When fragmentation, contradiction and personal experience occur, rather than seeing confusion, perhaps researchers and teachers question what it is that is being negotiated here? What tensions are shaping this mode of expression? How is the working-class individual mediating between the self and institutional expectations? And ultimately, what might this teach us about who is it that gets to appear as a knowledge maker within academic spaces and who does not? And through these practices, researchers and teachers may remain sensitive to the emotional dimensions of learning and social mobility for the working-class, encouraging more reflective and supportive ways of mentoring and knowledge sharing.

Through engaging with epistemic splits, for example in a digital landscape, it is here where the findings may potentially support working-class students, who may later become working-class academics. Because throughout the literature review and also Cruz's multimodal work, we can see that working-class academics have frequently struggled to locate themselves within academic discourse (Barker, 1996; Hey, 2003; Suominen et al., 2021). Perhaps because there is something difficult to fully articulate about class itself, because there are no 'right' words for such sticky experiences, especially with institutional language (Suominen et al., 2021), and perhaps because such fewer working-class people are able to afford the time or energy to risk writing about it in the first place. In a sense then, epistemic splits may offer students a way to actively engage in Hey's "collective writing pad" (2003, p. 330; McLeod, 1999), and through reading and engaging with the splits, may have more opportunity to explore contradiction not as something personal, but as something shared and structurally produced. In turn, this may also encourage art education researchers to approach class not simply as a social science topic, but as an epistemic condition. This reciprocal process reshapes both how working-class subjects articulate classed experience and how researchers respond to those articulations.

And finally, writing through the epistemic splits themselves, to perform and experience the contradictions simultaneously. To write through these splits allows for treating writing not just as a way of reporting knowledge, but as a way of investigating it, a process shaped by friction, self-doubt, embarrassment, shame pride and the desire to 'get it right', while still allowing these tensions to remain visible. While the theoretical framework

describes the conditions of epistemic struggle, writing through said conditions may offer researchers a more sensorial relationship to the theory (Stewart, 2007). Just as the acquisition of knowledge for working-class subjects may be intellectual, social and emotional, writing through the splits invites art education researchers into a similarly social and emotional mode of engaging with the paradox itself. Thus, offering a pedagogical contribution, where the epistemic labour and interpretive responsibility of translating a feeling into theory and unravelling a contradiction, is left instead to the researcher, reader or teacher. Where conversations around class and power are also no longer obsolete, anachronistic, ghostly, one-sided or ones of complaint. Instead, they are welcomed and met with curiosity.

Through mobilising epistemic splits as methodological framework throughout these chapters then, I am able to answer and demonstrate the answer, to my second research question: How does the intersection of arts-based research and art education research offer new ways of articulating classed sensibility within academia? Because as this thesis has discovered, there is a strong disjunction between how class is analysed and the way it continues to be lived, sensed, and negotiated in everyday life. Class therefore, needs forms of inquiry capable of holding the tensions and contradictions that shape it. Bridging art education research and arts-based research together through class, makes space for working-class academics to move beyond being simply represented, recognised, empathised with, and included in systems that have historically excluded them. Instead, it allows working-class expression to emerge as epistemologically meaningful. If arts-based research allows textures, hues, contradictions and feelings to be held open, and art education research provides interpretative frameworks for understanding these articulations, then this concoction may be an important way of holding classed sensibility within academia. In other words, arts-based research may help generate the expression, while art education research may help respond to it pedagogically. Epistemic splits, as a way of reading through, engaging with and writing through classed tension, therefore become one possible answer to the longstanding calls from Barker (1996), Hey (2003), Maguire (1997), Reay (1997; 1998a; 2010; 2018; 2025), and Suominen et al. (2021).

And yet, there is still a lot more that could be explored through further research. There remains countless opportunities for epistemic splits to be read through, written through, and engaged with across different contexts and disciplines. This openness feels especially important at a time when the distinctions between working-class and middle-class life are becoming increasingly unstable (Gallagher, 2026b), when many feel education no

longer guarantees a secure life with upward mobility in ways it once promised, and when class has re-emerged as a persistent and highly visible conversation across online spaces. Furthermore, this thesis approached working-class 'knowledge' as something rather general, with a slight inclination towards self-representation, self-expression, self-interpretation, and the process of navigating old and new worlds. Future research could engage more directly or more empirically with how working-class academics understand and represent themselves within tertiary education specifically, especially given that much educational research on class continues to focus predominantly on primary and secondary schooling. If the promise of education is beginning to falter, as discussed in Chapter 2, then it becomes especially important now to turn toward those who are already navigating this transitional space in real time, negotiating questions of identity, mobility, belonging and self-understanding though theory, poetry, song and story.

And so, to ask one more time, the reoccurring question throughout this thesis, what is it that happens at the meeting point between working-class ways of knowing and academic research writing? What happens when the internal split and the external split meet one another? Well, this thesis is, in many ways, an embodiment of that answer. It is the epistemic split itself. Because within these lines, I move between theory and experience, analysing and sensing, being coherent and writing in fragments, rejecting separation and advocating for their sticky coexistence. I move between feeling confident and feeling embarrassed, mediating between the 'whats' and the 'hows', never fully settling in either. And perhaps this is the main offering of this thesis. That to theorise epistemic instability while writing oneself through it, is itself this meeting point, and therefore, an example of a working-class epistemology. Not anything spectacular or anything special, but something messy, a little bit crass and a little bit cruddy (Povinelli, 2011). Something completely ordinary.

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