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The university: Caring community or carewashing central? Autosociobiographical reflections

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a small slice of 'autosociobiography': autobiographical reflections which situate these impressions in a wider social context (Ernaux, 2022, Jaquet, 2023, Twellman & Lammers, 2023). These particular autosociobiographical reflections are about my experiences of university, and how they have offered both positive and sometimes more problematic forms of community. The first part of the article pursues this by considering the social contexts of my routes taken to university, narratives of social mobility, and the forces shaping higher education over that timeframe in the UK, in that particular geographical and social conjuncture. The second part of the article shifts its attention to the present day and considers the forms of 'carewashing' pushed by the contemporary university in the increasingly uncaring, and difficult, UK context of marketized higher education. It ends by considering the 'micro' and 'meso' forms of community and care which are today often used to attempt to cope with and survive such contexts, as well as the 'macro' changes discussed throughout the article that are urgently needed to redress such 'structural carelessness'. In the process, through these combined lenses, the article aims to consider relationships between care, community and 'the university'.

Part I: Contexts

Most people who have ever set foot in one will have a sense of universities as sites of both care and of not caring, of communities and alienation. I remember very early in my academic career reading Phil Agre's work and thinking about how we survive and thrive in universities by building 'communities of interest', or networks of connection, between and across them (Agre, 1998). It was a motif that stayed with me, in part because it wasn't learnt through formal education, but was one of those indispensable semi-invisible structural rules you acquire along the way and which help you survive work.

What follows is a slice of autobiographical writing in which some of my experience of university, and its pedagogy and community, is described and located in its social context. The very first incarnation of this piece was generated when I was asked to participate in a workshop on intergenerational life writing by feminist academics from a variety of disciplines seven years ago, for which we were invited to present a piece of autobiographical writing

which discussed topics including 'home', 'university' or 'family'. I chose 'university', although these topics of course overlap. It was a fascinating, slightly destabilizing and cathartic day-long experience, one where the voices and the sentences stayed in the room.[1] Some years later, in 2023, I went back and revived this dormant, filed-away talk when invited to participate in a conference on international cultures of 'care', because one of the topics was, again, 'university'.[2] This has meant thinking in a more focused fashion about the university in the UK as an institution of 'care' and carelessness, and revisiting the story by taking a step back to explain the national specificities and to relate it to a wider, interrelated and complex global context.

I mention these prompts for the analysis that follows as they have shaped the context of the piece, and therefore seem particularly fitting to mention given that this article is all about the contexts of academic work. It is of course true that there is more than one version of what a context is, as well as many different ways a story can be written. Throughout this process, I have learnt that forms of memoir in which specific social context is very consciously brought into the mix, like the one I began writing (and which follows this introduction) is today known as 'autosociobiography' (Twellman & Lammers, 2023; Spoerhause et al., 2025).[3] Today the phrase 'autosociobiography' is becoming more known after its popularization *via* Annie Ernaux, who has published numerous memoirs considering different facets of her experience in social context: including her abortion, the life of her father, and, in *The Years,* a kaleidoscopic social scrapbook of her memories, laid side by side with details from decades of political, economic and geographical change (Ernaux, 2022; Jaquet, 2023). *The Years* is a literary text which draws on sociologists including Bourdieu to offer a form of memoir which is transindividual and collective. In the process it offers the opposite to that charge sometimes laid at the feet of the memoir (particularly as the genre has stratospherically surged in popularity in recent years), that of hyper-individualised immediacy for an age of narcissism (Kornbluh, 2024).[4] Placing the autobiographical amidst the social can help us understand subjectivities in history. Such stories do not *have* to privilege individualization; on the contrary, they can show singular specificities alongside the collective, complex contexts that we share.

This article is one contribution to that wider seam of 'autosociobiographical' work, one which brings it into conversation with recent writing on 'care' (Care Collective, 2020; Dowling, 2021; Lynch, 2021; Tronto, 2015) by focusing on universities, an area in which there are a healthy number of generative texts which are to some extent or another autobiographical (eg Ahmed, 2017; Back, 2016; Eribon, 2013; hooks, 1994; Reay, 2024; Ryan-Flood & Gill, 2010; Segal, 2023). 'Autosociobiographical' forms of writing intersect with the theme of 'care' in a particular way, because through their emphasis on the social they tend to show how social, political and economic contexts provide care, or not. *The Care Manifesto* diagnosed the forms of contemporary 'structural carelessness' which make it hard to care for each other: which marketise, privatise and devalue care, and fail to renumerate or value it properly; and then asked what it would mean, and look like to put care at the centre of life, on every level, from our most intimate social worlds through communities, states up to our planetary environment (Care Collective, 2020). A similar social, contextual spirit and concern informs this piece.

There are many questions we might ask about how universities create, or abdicate, forms of caring; how they are shape possibilities, are 'agentic' and are themselves structured by larger systemic forces. The following sections of this article include some of the questions I have asked about these issues. In the first part, I consider the university as a site of community and care by narrating the way I experienced it during a particular time, place and balance of forces, or 'conjuncture', focusing primarily on social mobility, class and generational privilege. This section also offers context for the second part of the article, which turns its attention to dynamics of care in the present. It considers how some contemporary universities perpetuate extreme structural carelessnesss whilst at the same time they deploy 'carewashing' techniques that attempt to offset or disguise it. But to begin with, the past.

Part II: An autobiographical slice

No-one had been to university in my family before and we didn't have a whole lot of cultural capital. We had some books: Catherine Cookson's stout historical romances, Len Deighton's icy spy thrillers, Shirley Conran's surprisingly detailed 1970s guides to women's lifecycles. But my mum always encouraged me to read, partly because she thought it would help me in general; partly because she thought it would help me with social mobility in particular; and partly, I think, because for many years she was a single parent and me reading meant some time for herself, even if 'for herself' meant doing housework. As an only child in the days before the internet, reading opened up portals to other worlds: to Japanese tea ceremonies, civil rights in the American South, and the social behaviour of foxes. This was also thanks to the public library system, which was then available in all its municipal munificence. I started off in a tiny local library, and then moved, step by step, to the next, and then the next bigger one until I ended up in Manchester Central library. (These were the days before it was renovated into a 'library experience'). The stacks were crammed and cramped, interesting places to seek, to hide and explore. The pages of books smelled of history, their font told stories of different decades, their covers indicated esoteric eras. Today the smaller libraries are being shut down at a rate of knots.[5] I would not be able to have that stepping-stone experience through libraries, to have access to such breadth of facilities, to that steadily enabling and graduated form of learning.

My mother had been born into a conservative middle-class family in the south of England. She had been largely trained to be a housewife and had been taught to sniff at some working-class people as 'common'. She and my middle-class father split up when I was a baby, and he vanished from view. Then she became common herself, working on the shop floor at Marks & Spencer and marrying a working-class manual labourer from Manchester who was often in and out of a job and at one point prison. We had moved to the Stockport suburbs in the North of England when I was eight. I went to a large mixed comprehensive school. I was what I used to think of as 'mixed class'. It has always interested me that the phrase 'mixed race' became popular but the phrase 'mixed class' didn't catch on in the same way.[6] I think, as well as indicating some of the widespread nature of racist logic, it also seems to indicate something about the ongoing rigidity in British attitudes to class. Now being part-sociologist, however, I can also define myself with slightly more precision in Bourdieuan terms and as born into an upper-working/lower-middle class background with limited cultural and social capital,[7] plus an expansive collection of Tupperware.

My mother has been known to tell her friends 'I don't know why Joanne needed to get 3 degrees, one would have been enough!'. She would have been much happier if I had gone to work in a bank, something more *knowable*. At other times though she's been proud I joined the professional middle classes. Now I have been working for a while in the area of social mobility, I recognize that she wanted simultaneously, for me to get ahead and also was afraid of me moving too far away. It's what Sam Friedman calls 'the price of the ticket', what you pay for what you leave behind when you move up this far too narrow, and economically unfair, social ladder (Friedman, 2014). Richard Hoggart wrote about related social feelings back in the 1950s: of the complex psychological loss of the scholarship boy who moves away from his culture into a new, supposedly 'better' sphere, one which also works to invalidate his past (Hoggart, 1957) Pierre Bourdieu termed this dual sensation of social place a 'cleft habitus' (Bourdieu, 2008; see also Jaquet, 2023; and Reay, forthcoming 2025).

I wanted to go to university but didn't really know what to do. I was very into art but thought that I needed to extend my brain before painting any more. In retrospect it would have been good to continue practicing art alongside other subjects, and to do a degree that ranged across the arts and social sciences, but that wasn't possible, wasn't really the British way at that time, unlike it is in say, the United States. (Although things on this front have changed for the better now). The other 'A' level subjects I was doing were English and History.

I thought English Literature might be a gateway drug to other subjects, as literary types wrote about life, the universe and everything. So I chose that.

I hadn't met many people who had been to university before I applied and so didn't know much about what it involved or where to go. Oxbridge was where clever people went in films and its heritage looked glamorous and otherworldly. My school had portacabins, nineteen-seventies architecture and very minimal careers counselling. I went to an interview at Cambridge and stayed overnight in an old college room. It felt very strange, both fascinating and alienating. In the interview I went to visit a small academic study, was handed some sixteenth century poetry by someone posh and instructed to read it out loud. Then I was asked what I had learnt from my experiences of travel. We hadn't really spoken much Francis Bacon in Stockport, and I knew that Greater Manchester buses and school coach trips weren't what counted here as 'travelling experience', although, of course, they were. I've always thought there should be school exchange trips within Britain as well as outside of it, such is the variation.

The interview experience felt, above all, shaming. I got all As in my core A level subjects and the highest mark in one of them out of everyone who sat that board's exam that year. But that wasn't enough for me to get into Cambridge, even though, notoriously someone richer with establishment connections like Toby Young could make it with low grades after his dad called up on the telephone.[8] In that context I couldn't help feeling that my lack of overseas travelling experience and confidence at reading Renaissance poetry aloud had somehow let me down. In Shamus Khan's book *Privilege* he writes of how students at elite schools are taught to talk about a very wide array of scholarly fields, of authors, artists and experience, with profound confidence, as if they know much more than they do. It is a fascinating book: he is a sociologist who returns back to the elite school he himself attended as a child in upstate New York to conduct a ethnography of their behaviour—the behaviour he himself learnt. He notices that the boys are encouraged to believe they deserve their privilege because of hard work, whilst also being taught to project an air of *not trying too hard* as that would be gauche. They are, he writes, taught to 'say meritocracy but to do privilege' (Khan, 2010).

That interview day left a sense of being 'marked' as having inferior social class, even though I am tall and white and in other contexts later learnt that I could in fact pass, should I want to, as being fairly posh myself. Mixed class. Later on, I was doing a PhD at Sussex when my supervisor moved to Oxford. She suggested I transfer with her. I applied but then turned them down when they offered me a place. By then Oxbridge seemed limited and snobbish and too white, even more than Sussex. And crucially I couldn't do a PhD in cultural studies there. I'd gravitated towards spaces of interdisciplinarity and cultural theory, anti and transdisciplines which let me explore what seemed, to me, the key driving questions of what was going on in our present moment and why.[9] By then I was mainly interested in theorizing the power dynamics of contemporary culture and society, of its balance of forces and inequalities. A PhD in English Literature didn't seem like it was going to let me do or understand that.

I was grateful for the spaces in my undergraduate degree at a 1960s-built 'plateglass' university (which was a largely traditional degree with some very radical pockets) and at my MA, which let me do critical theory and cultural studies: crossing disciplinary boundaries and understand something of where the disciplines themselves had come from and why, of the reasons for their formation and the premises on which they were based. On my MA I learnt that English literature had largely been produced as a subject for colonial wives under imperialism (Baldick, 1987). In Afua Hirsch's book *Brit(ish),* she writes of going back to her Oxbridge college and talking to the students about the power dynamics of how the subjects are shaped. One student points out that she is doing 'the classics', but 'the classics' just means white Greeks and Romans. All the students she talks to point out how white, and how male, their curriculum is (Hirsch, 2018). It has been so very good to see the seismic, much-needed push on this front in recent years *via* the 'decolonize my curriculum' movement and the critique of 'manels' at conferences (Bhambra et al., 2018).

When I think back over my university education I am grateful for many things. I am grateful for its expansiveness, its generosity, for the space to pursue the issues and the subjects that I think are important. I am grateful that I got to go at all, which was not true at that time for most of my schoolfriends, or family, and I am grateful I did not go into debt for my under-graduate degree. I was one of the last years of students who got a full grant. For me it was supplemented by part-time work, in bars, care homes, restaurants, shops, supermarkets, like some but actually not that many of my undergraduate peers, who were mainly more affluent. But my undergraduate years certainly did not involve racking up years of calcifying debt. I am aware that I now have sizeable *generational* privilege: a privilege that the majority of people younger than me do not have. I am not sure if I would have gone to university at that time if it was the case that it would be paid for, and I certainly would have felt pressured into doing something vocational. I am sure this would have been interesting in its own way but it would not have provided the space for questioning the systems, the culture, the social structures we live in.

And of course none of these formations are accidental. Enabling such questions to be predominantly asked by, to be the prerogative of the most privileged, who have a vested interest in perpetuating systems that benefit them, is what the millionaire class who run the 'Conservative' government, who have been in power for the past fourteen years, and who have structurally entrenched neoliberal marketisation, specialize in.[10] My university education, just like the libraries I went into, was free at the point of use and collectively paid for. It was socialized. This is what we call in *The Care Manifesto* a form of 'universal care' (Care Collective, 2020).

In his book *Academic Diary* Les Back writes of how he was talking to some of his students and they couldn't understand why students in the past would bother ever working hard for courses they hadn't paid for (Back, 2016). It's a marker of how easily and how fast mentalities can shift over a generation. Of course, work levels fluctuate just like now, but we worked at it because we were interested in the subject (and we wanted a degree). The marketing dynamics of the past few decades are profoundly infantilizing, as well as full of pointless competitive paranoia. Ours was educationally at least a less infantilizing dynamic.

When I finished my PhD I went to work in an ex-poly. Ex-polytechnics (universities that were formerly technical colleges) were where to me the interesting work was happening, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and where you could do cultural studies. I liked their openness to working with organisations and communities outside the university in the days before such activity was put through the unnecessary time-consuming sausage mincer of audit otherwise known as *the impact case study*. Gradually as higher education policy worked to expand uni-versities and step up the process of marketising them, raising fees and turning them into corporations with CEO-like Vice-Chancellors or 'Presidents', the ex-polys became more precarious (Littler, 2021; Mandler, 2020). I worked at a campus in Tottenham, a poor part of London; we used to have a lot of local students. Their numbers dried up. Instead, there was a rush to try to attract overseas students who wanted to come and who had the money to pay the fees. This seemed to me to be primarily a restrictive, money-grabbing form of internationalization rather than the kind of democratic exchange represented by international exchanges, or the Erasmus scheme. In today's UK it is hard to imagine an international university which is not riven by such extremes of wealth and poverty. But it is important to imagine the university as a space of democratic cosmopolitanism, of transnational education.

So I worked in a poly, and then later, when it was too precarious, moved to the another university, which is somewhere in the middle of this spectrum between rich and poor. Then after another decade, I moved again, to a very similarly positioned university, also in the middle of the spectrum; one more oriented to the arts than the sciences, which is the domain my work falls between, as it veers between the humanities and the social sciences in cultural studies fashion.

Today, the economic distance between rich and poor universities in the UK is greater than between schools. The money Oxbridge sits on has ballooned to 21 billion whilst much of the post-92 sector in particular is experiencing huge cuts, as are the Open University and the majority of programmes concerned with lifelong learning or adult education (Adams & Greenwood, 2018; Brown, 2012). The poorer the institution, the worse conditions tend to be for permanent staff; the number of permanent staff continues to shrink whilst those on precarious contracts rises; there is a widely reported mental health crisis among stressed staff in HE (Morrish, 2019). The mission of education for the social and public good has been replaced by education for economic growth and the needs of the private sector (Ashwin, 2020; Holmwood, 2011, 2017). This situation has local characteristics but is not confined to the UK (see de Barry, 2010).

In the UK, the idea of giving poorer kids access to Oxbridge and richer institutions as a healthy marker of social mobility is frequently touted as the solution to educational inequality. But it is not. As Sol Gamsu wrote

'We don't need to redouble our attention on wealthy elite universities while dismantling the educational institutions that serve the rest. ....What we need is to redistribute cultural and economic wealth away from these bastions of privilege.' (Gamsu, 2019)

This means universities becoming, once again, more socialised and less corporate. It means doing more co-operating than competing. Much of this practice is driven by political policy, by stealthily increasing involvement by corporations in shaping universities; but it is also shaped by all kinds of actions across the spectrum. And so it has been heartening to see some institutions (like Birkbeck and Ghent, for example) drop out of the league tables a while back, given that on a collective level it is damaging to students and to education.[11]

In telling this tale I have told a story which has primarily focused on class, its privileges and inequalities, its mobilities and generational dissonance. I am aware that there are many other ways to tell and extend the story. We could bring more international and environmental issues into the equation, and focus more expansively on ethnicity, as I gestured towards earlier. We could draw out the gender dynamics. Here I would have to tell a story in which I entered a university when the boys tended to get the top marks whilst we studied mainly male authors; and of working in institutions with pronounced gender pay gaps, where the men have been promoted faster than women, who tend in turn, to do more of the administrative housekeeping. And it would also involve talking of being in universities with radical pockets—if not full clothes - where modules were devoted to feminism and queer theory, from which I learned so much. I am grateful for these spaces, traditions and experience. Working in universities now, guided by corporate educational policies that divide us through competition, infantilise us through bureaucratic micro-management, and exhaust us through overwork, is often demoralizing. At the same time it is also a privilege and a pleasure: it is a privilege to work in a university, and across and between them in the wider university-community; a pleasure to be able to learn with others; and both bring with them a responsibility to work, however difficult, towards any forms of democratization we might be able to visualize.

Part III: The present: Carewashing the university

I wrote the bulk of that 'autosociobiographical slice' seven years ago. Over the past few years, during the early 2020s, university inequalities and conditions in the UK have become far worse. I have seen friends, former colleagues, those I live with have their jobs slashed in half or lose them altogether. It is clearer than ever to so many of us know that asset management companies and corporate accountancy firms are now in positions of disproportionate influence and power, sitting on the boards and bodies that run universities, instructing them to downsize and shed highly skilled teaching staff whilst selling off physical assets, expanding middle management and continuing to outsource key domains (food, accommodation, cleaning) to expensive

and exploitative private corporations (Christophers, 2023; Ramsay, 2023; UCU, 2024). University managers and administrators are gaining increasingly stratospheric salaries and corporate titles like Chief Operating Officer whilst at least a third of entry level staff are permatemps (Burton & Bowman, 2022; Fenton et al., 2023).

Meanwhile, I watch my children become teenagers and hear their friends' parents talk of university being undesirable, or out of reach, for the level of indebtedness it entails. Whilst this is notably a bit less of a preoccupation of friends who were born into higher levels of wealth, in an economy in which class is increasingly 'asset-based' (Adkins, L., Cooper, M., and Konings, M. 2020), it increasingly now includes many middle-class parents. I worry about my kids' indebtedness, if they should go, and how on earth we might be able to afford the expected parental contributions (which in the UK are not spelled out to parents whilst being expected by the government, leaving many students impoverished, and thus currently subject to an intense campaign by national treasure/people's finance guru Martin Lewis).[12] In the UK, the 'widening participation' agenda has facilitated access to financial liquidity for poorer students whilst they do 'degrees on the side' and accumulate huge debt, whilst only a small pool of wealthy students are able to enter the small cadre able to have a student experience away from home (Simpson, 2020; Cunningham, 2024). Like nearly everyone in academia, some more than others, I worry about job security in a landscape where no position is secure, whilst all the while knowing full well that in this landscape we still count as 'lucky'.

We increasingly see tensions and mental health burdens primarily caused by these impossible working conditions spiral into multiple accusations between colleagues, as higher educational establishments become littered with formal complaints, accusations, and counteraccusations. Today, institutions tend to farm out problems and risk to inflated consultancies and accountancy firms, which means, as Marianna Mazzacato and Rosie Collington argue, that they are unable themselves to learn institutional lessons from their mistakes, and in effect are forced to be permanently infantilized whilst the hemorrhaging of public money to these private consultancy firms exacerbates the financial crisis they find themselves in Mazzacato and Collington (2023).[13]

The far and near right are explicitly targeting universities through a culture wars agenda, with in the UK a blizzard of accusations about what issues are unspeakable or 'cancelled'. They reframe calls to expand curricula beyond whiteness as cutting out history, rather than the expansion of historical perspective and consciousness it necessarily entails (Bhambra et al., 2018) and pour promotional money into anti-gender factions, creating the impossibility of the very debate they claim to want. These tendencies have been inflamed by a capitalist logic of fashionability which can ferment self-aggrandisement over dialogue (brown, 2020) and intense billionaire backing to hollow out the left by carving out space for more marketisation in new ideological guises (Littler, 2025; Fenton et al., 2023). There is a concerted effort to open more space for eugenics whilst closing departments specializing in critical thought. In the US, Deans who are female and/or people of colour are picked off by the right, and throughout the Global North many courses emphasising critical thinking are shut down. In Palestine universities are just bombed into obliteration.

This is the exacerbation of the neoliberal university and its imperial contours, though to be sure it is different and diversified in texture and import, scale and degree. Where you are situated affects your feelings and relationship to it. I am in an institution right now which has announced it wants to shed a fifth of staff posts, having cut more last year. It is depressing and it is extreme, but it is not unique.

Of course, the university was never perfect, never has been a unitary or fully caring institution; as indicated earlier, there are no shortage of tales of classism, sexism, racism, of multiple forms of institutional prejudice and exclusions (see for instance Reay, 2017, 2024, Guinier, 2015). There are wonderful people and projects within them which are not to be sneezed at: work that is crucial, education that is transformative, which extends our boundaries of existing knowledge. Universities exist. Interesting work gets done and occasionally, funded. Academics chase

the grants to give themselves breathing space from spinning too many plates, and to stay employable: we are incited to be money-making metric machines (Feldman & Sandoval, 2018). Alongside the diversitywashing and genderwashing of the institutions there is resistance (Puwar & Sharma, 2025). There is some movement towards some forms of diversification, even if not enough; the all-white panel and the all-male panel is not so readily accepted. Digital life connects our synapses, builds our capacity to understand, to connect with work and potential colleagues as well as overburden us with mountains of emails and the requirement to be 'always-on' (Gregg, 2011). Through such actions, alongside and despite the drive to marketisation, care is occasionally present, moulding selected structures, nurtured by people who want more egalitarianism, through specific acts and institutional and union wins. Yet 'structural carelessness', as *The Care Manifesto* puts it (Care Collective, 2020) by which is meant a purposeful carelessness, guided primarily by the corporate greed of marketisation—is predominant today and is still trying to win more ground.

Amidst this landscape, some of the most palpable and ridiculous examples over the past few years are of self-styled university initiatives which brand themselves as 'caring' whilst being anything but. They are the educational variant of what Andreas Chatzidakis and Jo Littler have analysed as examples of corporate 'carewashing': their taxonomy of carewashing includes the categories of 'opportunistic branding' (eg handwash that states it cares on the bottle), 'community resourcing' (eg cosmetic company Dove generating 'caring' promotional resources on body image for schools) and 'reputational steamrolling' (eg Amazon pronouncing in advertising that it cares for its staff whilst being legally judged as not doing (Chatzidakis & Littler, 2022). University initiatives over 'care' do not have to be uncaring, of course; and we know of several that are beneficial, from research initiatives on care to campaigns against sexual violence. At the same time it has also undoubtedly been the case that a signifier of 'care' has in university settings been used in uncaring ways.

For instance, during the second Covid-19 pandemic lockdown in the UK, when I was working full-time doing university teaching online, dealing with many students with mental health issues whilst simultaneously attempting to supervise the school education of my two children and keep in touch with older relatives, the university I worked in did not in any way minimise teaching hours for those with caring responsibilities. Instead, it provided extra online seminars run by an outsourced privatized 'corporate care' contractor. Having been asked by my union branch to attend one of their seminars and report back, I went to an online session on balancing work with home education. This seminar was being touted to the university employees to help those of us having to balance a fulltime online teaching load with fulltime childcare, i.e. looking after children and needing to supervise them through the school's online learning. However, the corporate care seminar was run by homeschool enthusiast who advocated opting out of the state education system altogether in favour of full-time, parent-led 'homeschooling' education. The advice on using this time to 'step back from the curriculum' and 'encourage their interests' ('maybe they have an interest in Michelin cooking that they've never been able to develop!' or perhaps we could teach them coding, as 'maybe they want to be the next Elon Musk!') could not have been less useful or less appropriate advice. Despite being a provision offered by the university, it failed to recognise that the overwhelming majority of participants had *jobs* in addition to suddenly rapidly increased caring needs. This was during a time in which we were trying to simultaneously help children who were being given school lessons online, and who needed help to navigate platforms and do multiple tasks, with another full-time job, that of university teaching. Many participants consequently left frustrated comments in the 'chat' function.

The provision of such extra courses, 'responsibilising' the employee to deal with impossible structural conditions and problems, which was not at useful and paid for at great expense by public money to privatized contractors under the guise of 'care' when it was anything but, was a galling, as well as incisive, example of an uncaring system. Another was the luxurious 'wellness

pod' in the university foyer, which was a small wooden structure looking a bit like a luxury play pen with plastic foliage around it and a reclining/massage sofa inside. *In situ* in there for several months, right in the middle of a very busy building entrance, it never seemed to be used, nor was it seemingly allowed to be; although it was the subject of fascination and hollow, sardonic laughter for staff and students alike. The 'wellness pod' appeared to be intended to function as a kind of 3D site-specific advert, a form of opportunistic branding for corporate 'wellness', a bolt-on which, like the corporate care seminar, did not in any way fulfill its purpose, and appeared at the same time as staff morale and 'wellness' as measured in global surveys was notably low and plummeting year on year. It chimed with how announcements of large-scale redundancies are now often made with reference to the 'institutional wellness' services on offer, as well as with how students are offered wellbeing services whilst so many are increasingly structurally improverished by fees and debt (Allen & Finn, 2024; Priestley, 2023).

How do these strategies of 'care' provided by universities connect to or are different from corporate 'carewashing' branding strategies? Whilst they do not fit seamlessly within any of the three typologies of corporate 'carewashing' but do share very pronounced commonalities with them. The wellness pod and the corporate care seminar both function as a form of opportunistic internal and external branding strategy. They are clearly intended to function as proof that the university does 'care', tuning in to the discursive popularity of the language of care which has exploded in recent years (Care Collective, 2020b). They attempt to *appear* like they are building a form of community, in that they are offering a communal resource. Although pitched at internal employees rather than external consumers (which also produces an extra layer of cognitive dissonance), they are perhaps most similar to the category of a 'reputational steamroller', bulldozing away current or prospective charges that the university does not care. Crucially these processes devolve the outsourcing of 'care' to an external responsibility rather than an integral internal component of structural working conditions. This is also, then, care as bolt-on extra, as purchased offset for structural care pollution. It is part of the wider tendency of public money being spent to boost the profits of the private sector, as it is frittered away on privatized outsourcing in the name of 'care'.

This is of course part of the wider 'neoliberalisation' of the university (Holmwood, 2011; Featherstone, 2024). We might say that, just as the expansion of the use of the privatized consultancy industry stops public sector institutions learning and growing (Mazzacato & Collington, 2023) so too does the expanded use of privatized contractors mitigate against the public university from developing employment structures that genuinely care for their employees, whether by this we mean reasonable workloads, furloughing parents during an international pandemic or reducing precarity.

The problems of carewashing, overwork, privatization and precarity are of course not unique to universities. Rachel O'Neill's work on corporate 'wellness' cultures for instance has shown how it is used to undermine the NHS and public provision (O'Neill, 2023). Sometimes university workers celebrate 'leaving academia' in forms or tones which suggest that the problems are somehow unique to the university sector, rather than part of a much wider landscape of savage late capitalism in which logic of private capital and marketized structures are attempting to gain more and more ground. In other words, it's not like there's anywhere else in the private or public sector which is *that* much better than universities: its problems are particular in complexion and tone, but the lineaments of these problems are structurally very widely recognizable.

What has helped me survive, and at times thrive, in the modern university has been—to return to the very beginning of this piece—being part of different supportive 'communities of interest'. These have been different ecosystems, some long, some short, some evolving and growing, some fading away, some new shoots. It has included the friends with whom I learned much from and shared lengthy chats and support as an undergraduate, back when socializing was an economically sanctioned and culturally expected part of the UK student experience. It has included the many exciting people I met as a postgrad, many of whom continue as beloved

companions into the present, and people who put up with me and put me up, and those I joined writing and reading groups with.[14] It has included meeting people I've worked in the same building with but never talked to before on the picket line, and being part of the chaotic euphoria of marches and rallies and teach-outs. It has included the moments of mutual learning and collective joy with strangers at conferences, and spending day trips with people you've just met but with whom you have so many commonalties (both intellectual and of lived experience). It has included interviewing my heroes and asking questions of people whose work I have found invaluable. It has included working in journals that have prioritized collaboration, mutual support and learning, collective joy, and/or political engagement. It has involved talks in intimidating theatres and small classrooms and political events and on podcasts. It has included being challenged by younger and older academics and divergent viewpoints. It has included forming online communities and writing retreats to survive the pandemic and all the depressing dramas beyond. It has included writing and editing together, in varied combinations and methods, from articles planned with crisp precision to the amorphous one we ripped up and started again; to the pieces that never got written but still gave us a way to learn, together.

Conclusion

One of the reviewers of this article who, unlike the stereotype of 'Reviewer 2' who can never be pleased (there is a social media group called 'Reviewer 2 must be stopped!')[15] and was very nice about this article, nonetheless suggested it have a more thorough conclusion, drawing the threads together again and discussing what has been learned. Which is fair enough, and so here is my attempt to do that. In this article I have been sharing some of my specific experiential perspectives which have been placed in some of their socio-political contexts, in 'autosociobiographical' style. I went to university in the UK in the early 1990s at a time when the university landscape had over past decades moved away from being a finishing school for upper class men, and which had enabled an influx if not an equal number of women; which had diversified its educational provision, shaped by new intellectual currents fermented in the welfare state; which had enabled *some* slivers of anti-racism to germinate but not much; which was at the fag-end of providing fee-free education and free maintenance grants which had opened up the possibility of a wider range of social classes experiencing university. This expanding educational provision been shaped through the rhetoric and logic of meritocracy, enabling partial social mobility for a few, through which first generation students like me were able to gain partial upward social mobility because we scored very highly on tests (Littler, 2018). As neoliberalism gained pace throughout the 1990s in the UK at the expensive of collective forms of social democratic provision, this always-problematically partial, individualistic meritocracy became increasingly marketized, contributing significantly to widening inequalities through individualized debt, which helps making the social ladder longer, and increasing competitiveness over co-operation and solidarity.

These difficulties and challenges of the higher educational landscape are of course not separate from the wider social context but part of their texture is inflected by the sedimented histories of national educational policy, by their multifaceted use as creative testbeds, by the shifts of social movements. They have a recognizable family resemblance to neoliberal patterns and trends in other countries, whilst taking a specific form and character in the UK. Despite the huge efforts expended by both staff and students their organization and cultural economy has been shaped by purposeful inegalitarianism and structural carelessness which the examples of corporate carewashing such as those I have outlined in this article—from wellness pods to infuriatingly pointless privatized seminars - are designed to deflect from and deny, whilst also being an egregious, symptomatic example of public money being wasted on boosting the profits of the private sector.

The alternative modes of higher education that we need right now are ones which move away from the destructive drives of our neoliberal half-century. They will drastically cap at the very least the reservoirs of public money flowing to privatized consultants. They will act as 'anchor institutions' in their local communities, as decent employers playing a living wage, engaged in the ecosystems

of their communities (Brown & Jones, 2021). They will view students as citizens engaging in learning and education: not consumers or cash cows to be milked (Rustin, 2023). They will prize co-operation over competition, within, between and beyond the university. They will place the public good above private wealth, be prioritized by policy and funded well. They will revive the mission of part-time and lifelong learning, creating a more expansive 'university as community'. They will enable international co-operation and will be anti-authoritarian, open, egalitarian and democratic. Such words might be abstract, but are also necessary to orient ourselves. All of these tendencies have precedents, have echoes of existence and proof of practical possibility in threads from the past. It is up to all of us to draw them together to create a different collective social biography.

Notes

1. Many thanks to Kate Soper, Christina Lupton and all the participants in that workshop including Carolyn Steedman, whose book *Landscape for a Good Woman* (Steedman, 1986) has been and remains a hugely influential 'autosociobiographical' work – emerging before the term was coined – on class and gender. I am also very grateful to Roshi Naidoo and Ros Gill for their later feedback and for subsequently sharing their own wonderful autosociobiographical work with me.
2. I am very grateful to John Erni and team for inviting me to participate in such a productive few days at the Education University of Hong Kong in 2023 with such interesting and multidisciplinary participants.
3. I learnt a lot about autosociobiography at the great workshop organised by Sam Friedman, Carlos Spoerhasue, Mike Savage and Fabienne Steeger at the University of Munich in 2023, and was encouraged to complete this paper by Diane Reay's own autosociobiographical presentation (see Reay, forthcoming and Friedman, Spoerhause and Savage, 2025).
4. Kornbluh's slick and highly entertaining book *Immediacy* has a chapter in which she critiques the rise of the memoir – now sometimes accounting for 80% of the *New York Times* bestsellers list. Citing the autotheory of Maggie Nelson and the popularity of this individualising literary form as one which ferries 'the flooded ruins of institutions like the university and the publishing house', providing, for her, evidence of the 'tangible detritus of evacuated sociality' (Kornbluh, 2024, p. 54). Whilst she clearly has a point (or more than one point) about the dominance of individualism and instantaneous attention spans, as Grace Byron points out in an astute review, it also conflates books with very different political projects together in a sweeping and oversimplifying analysis that can only be made by excluding collectivist-oriented writers like Ernaux, Naomi Klein and Audre Lorde from the picture (Byron, 2024) https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/antitheory-on-anna-kornbluhs-immediacy/.
5. For a good discussion of library closures and marketisations see Kirsten Forkert (2017) *Austerity as Public Mood*, Rowman and Littlefield.
6. These are large debates. For further reading on mixed race and class, see for instance Campion 2017 and Crompton 2008.
7. 'Habitus clivé', or divided habitus, is Bourdieu's term for shifting between classes over a longer life course, which there has been much interest in over the past decade (Bourdieu, 2008; Friedman, 2016) and which is also applicable here. However it doesn't capture the sense of 'mixed class' in one temporality which is what I am primarily referring to here.
8. Toby Young is a British conservative journalist and former head of the Office for Students. His father was Michael Young, author of *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958). I wrote about meritocracy in my book *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility* (Littler, 2018).
9. I discuss how interdisciplinarity and the conjuncture are constituent components of cultural studies in Littler, 2016.
10. The New Labour government of the 1997–2010 before that also engaged in marketisation and privatisation. This article was in production at the time when the Labour government won the 2024 election in the United Kingdom.
11. See https://www.bbk.ac.uk/news/league-tables and https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/01/23/ghent-university-belgium-embraces-new-approach-faculty-evaluation-less-focused.
12. Martin Lewis campaign: see for example https://www.moneysavingexpert.com/pressoffice/2021/6/martin-lewis-tells-ministers-to-stop-hiding-the-p1-000s-parents-/.
13. Not confined to Europe; for an article on the overspending of Australian higher education institutions on consultancies, see https://www.smh.com.au/education/they-were-carnivorous-the-universities-spending-millions-on-consultants-like-pwc-20230620-p5dhzk.html.
14. Four of us set up a group as MA students to swap bit of work on Fridays and give each other supportive and critical feedback, which was an education in learning how to write together and some 30 years on, one of them even read this chapter and gave predictably astute advice (thank you Sara Hackenberg).
15. I also know academics (Anamik Saha and Chris Moffat and friends) who have a band called 'Reviewer 2'.

Disclosure statement

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