

Structure of Class Feeling / Feeling of Class Structure: Laura Wade's *Posh* and Katherine Soper's *Wish List*

ABSTRACT:

Theatre's counter-hegemonic resistance to the "demonization of the working class" (Owen Jones) is the subject of this article. This resistance is analysed through case studies of two "class acts": the elite Oxford boys in Laura Wade's *Posh* (2010) and poverty-stricken youth in Katherine Soper's *Wish List* (2016). My close reading of these two plays involves a reprise of Raymond Williams's "structure of feeling": the conjugation of "structure" and "feeling" allows me to engage with and advocate a dual concern with systems of *classification* as well as the affective, experiential (lived) dimension of being "classified." Moving between the class-fuelled feelings of entitlement in *Posh* and those of alienation in *Wish List*, I elucidate how, under the United Kingdom's regime of neoliberal austerity, the label "working class" has become "sticky" (Sara Ahmed) with disgust-making properties (Pierre Bourdieu). Overall, what emerges is a critical feeling for the United Kingdom as a class-divided nation and the urgent need to resist the entrenched classifying gaze of the neoliberalist imagination.

KEYWORDS:

class politics, working class, structure of feeling, women's playwriting

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The scene is set for a private dining experience. Ten “posh” Oxford boys gather to eat. These are the elite of the elite: the privileged boys of today, the Establishment figures of tomorrow. Hold on to that scene while I introduce another: a dilapidated kitchen in which a teenage brother and sister struggle to put food on the table. The brother has mental health issues and cannot hold down a job; his sister is starting work on a zero-hours contract in a warehouse. Both scenes are “unthinkable” – the filthy rich and the abject poor. Yet each represents a facet of contemporary Britain. In this article, I hold these two scenes/plays together: Laura Wade’s elite boys in *Posh* (2010) and Katherine Soper’s disenfranchised youth in *Wish List* (2016). Through these two “class acts” I feel my way towards a critical understanding of the United Kingdom as a class-divided nation.

Methodologically, I reprise Raymond Williams’s “structure of feeling”—a concept first introduced in *Preface to Film* (with Michael Orrom, 1954) and developed in *The Long Revolution* (1961)—to understand how class imprints on this contemporary drama and to examine the cultural traces of class formation that each of these two plays leaves behind. More particularly, the conjugation of “structure” and “feeling” allows me to engage with systems of *classification* as well as the affective, experiential (lived) dimension of being “classified.” As feminist sociologist Beverley Skeggs astutely observes, “[c]ategories of class operate not only as an organizing principle which enable access to and limitations on social movement and interaction but are also reproduced at intimate level as a ‘structure of feeling’ . . . in which doubt, anxiety and fear inform the production of subjectivity” (*Formations* 6). Following Skeggs, I focus on the various ways in which the plays render this dual concern with class as an “organizing principle” and the everyday, “intimate” feeling of class structure. Thus, underpinning the analysis is an acknowledgement of not only the categories of capital as

seminally defined by Pierre Bourdieu – economic, cultural, social, and symbolic – but also the emotional politics of class, whether the sense of entitlement that drives Wade’s “posh” boys or the alienation that conditions the lives of Soper’s teenagers.

Furthermore, in addition to analysing the dramatization of the social effects of classification and affective responses to feeling “classed,” I also reflect on how the feeling of class structure might occur at the level of audience engagement. Advocating Williams’s “structure of feeling” as valuable to critically informed understandings of how “to notice what causes hurt,” Sara Ahmed, akin to Skeggs, adds “that we might also want to explore ‘feelings of structures’: feelings might be how structures get under our skin” (*Promise* 216). For my purpose, I also consider the affective renderings of class on the part of Wade and Soper: the affective strategies deployed and designed to “get under our [audience] skin” so that spectators might “notice” the harmful structures that produce the social character of a class-divided nation.

Techniques of affective alienation or estrangement (in the Brechtian sense) are arguably useful, perhaps even necessary, to pierce the illusion of a classless society. That illusion was a significant concern for Williams: from a Marxist standpoint, he saw how the relative affluence of Britain in the sixties threatened to occlude the changing complexities of class and persistent inequalities of the capitalist system. Critical of the “supposed new phenomenon of classlessness,” he argued that “until social capital is socially owned,” there could “be no real classlessness” (352).

Given that capitalism is opposed to the idea of a “socially owned” means of production, it is capitalist interests that stand to “profit” from the myth of a classless society: from the veiling of exploitative structures that underpin wealth creation. Since the eighties and the rise of neoliberal, free-market capitalism, it is not, therefore, surprising to find successive governments

(Left and Right) heavily “invested” in the idea of classlessness. Under Margaret Thatcher, working-class industries and communities were systematically decimated. Collectivism gave way to individualism, and class was recused as a barrier to upwards mobility. As Owen Jones elucidates in his polemical, ground-breaking *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*, it was not Thatcher’s intention “to get rid of social classes, she just didn’t want us to perceive that we belonged to one. ‘It’s not the existence of classes that threatens the unity of the nation, but the existence of class feeling,’ as an official Conservative Party document put it in 1976” (48).

Anaesthetization of “class feeling” persisted with New Labour, which came to power in 1997 under Prime Minister Tony Blair’s leadership. Under New Labour, old labour alliances to the working classes were weakened by a policy of meritocratic as opposed to egalitarian socialism: increasing opportunities to compete within a market-based system, as opposed to adopting redistributive practices committed to the idea of a “socially owned” means of production. A meritocratic branding of classlessness could be heard in Blairite dogma that boasted: “We’re all middle class now” (*Chavs* 139). As Jones summarizes: “the expulsion of ‘class’ from the nation’s vocabulary by Thatcherism and New Labour has ensured minimal scrutiny of the manifestly unjust distribution wealth and power in modern Britain” (*Chavs* 248).

Paralleling this “expulsion,” by the close of the twentieth century, class was also less visible in fields of theoretical study. Reasons for the “retreat from class.... across a range of academic sites” were, as Skeggs explains, varied and complex (*Formations* 6). Inter alia, she draws attention to sociological claims to increased rather than blocked social mobility, along with the dismissal of class in postmodern theorization, deemed an irrelevance in light of “the supposed ability to travel through differences unencumbered by structure or inequality” (7). Further, the relative invisibility of class differs from the way in which critical attention to gender,

race, or sexuality endured. As many scholars note, this difference arguably reflects how class demands a different kind of politics: where markers of identity such as gender and race call for the increased recognition of differences, the class struggle demands the erasure of difference through the equalizing of material and social conditions (see *Chavs* 255; Murphy 51; Žižek 33-34).

However, since the 2010 election of a Coalition government led by Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron, attentions to class have surfaced as a significant factor in a worsening economic divide between the United Kingdom's "haves" and "have nots." For Cameron's election agenda to mend what he called a "Broken Britain" in truth consisted of a "mending" that broke many social welfare measures designed to assist the least well off. Ushering in an age of austerity in the wake of the 2007-8 banking crisis, and remaining steadfastly committed to the policies and ethos of neoliberal self-interest, Cameron could legitimize the withdrawal of the state's support for those in need, since individuals now only had themselves to blame for failing to keep up. As a further link in an unbroken chain of class-biased, rather than classless, regimes, this withdrawal not only failed to mitigate adverse social and economic circumstances but also deepened divides and inequalities, as my cast study of Wade's *Posh* will attest.

Moreover, as antipathy, not empathy, towards those at the bottom of society has intensified at governmental level, the label "working class" has become a "sticky sign" – a sign that, as Ahmed explains, becomes "sticky" with meaning through repetition and by association (*Cultural Politics* 92). What now "sticks" to the designation "working class" are the disgusting, associative properties of failure and abjection, a stickiness that for Jones results in "demonization" or, as Imogen Tyler elucidates, serves to designate socially marginal subjects as "revolting subjects" (*Revolting* 3). Therefore, there is an urgent need for what Tyler, in her digest

of Paul Gilroy's advocacy of "tactics" resistant to "neoliberal governmentality," describes as "counter-hegemonic aesthetic practices through which to communicate and disseminate alternative understandings of poverty and disadvantage" ("Riots" para. 9.4). Thus, I offer my second case study as an example of a counter-hegemonic artistic response to this climate of government-sanctioned "demonization" and deprivation: Soper's *Wish List*, with its empathetic dramatization of what it feels like to live as one of the "undeserving" poor.

At the time of writing, Soper is the most recent addition to a steadily rising (albeit still not equalizing) number of women playwrights to emerge on the twenty-first-century British stage. These new women's voices include Bola Agbaje, Alia Bano, Ella Hickson, Lucy Kirkwood, Lucy Prebble, Penelope Skinner, Nina Raine, Anya Reiss, Polly Stenham, and Laura Wade. The "stickiness" of the "woman playwright" label has dogged successive generations of women dramatists: hegemonic, gender-only expectations have repeatedly stuck to their work, along with negatively couched impressions of feminism (see Aston 576). Though not immune to this "stickiness" and despite their monolithic grouping as "angry young women" (Auld), women embarking on playwriting careers since around the time of the banking crisis have proved much harder to categorize given the diversity of their work, both in terms of subject matter and form. Nonetheless, "bad feelings" about the many ways in which neoliberalism and capitalism exploit labour (*Wish List*), damage social welfare and the National Health Service (Raine's fast-paced *Tiger Country* [2011]), or wreak ecological disaster (Kirkwood's post-apocalyptic *The Children* [2016]) binds them together. Thus, while "gender trouble" remains (Skinner's *The Village Bike* [2011] and *Linda* [2015] are notable examples), it often gives way to or is in some way immersed in larger concerns with neoliberal capitalism to structure feelings of economic and social precarity. This is not least because the comfortable middle classes are no longer secure, as

evinced in the precarious middle-class workforce depicted in Kirkwood's *NSFW* (2012) or the fear of a prospect-less future faced by university-educated youngsters in Hickson's *Precious Little Talent* (2009) and *Boys* (2012). In short, it is less the fight for the recognition of differences and more the struggle against the insecurities and inequalities of neoliberalism that characterizes this theatre. And in the move against the mal-distributive practices of an ailing capitalism, a prevalent feeling among these women playwrights is that class matters.

POSH: "SICK TO FUCKING DEATH OF POOR PEOPLE"

The working classes have always mattered to London's Royal Court Theatre, England's foremost new writing venue, and one that over the years has been supportive of women writers (most notably Caryl Churchill). But on the appointment of Dominic Cooke to Artistic Director in 2007, audiences were prepared for a new direction. Cooke announced a departure from the Court's erstwhile tradition of "kitchen sink drama" in favour of turning the "spotlight" on the middle classes: "with more people in the middle class than ever, he wanted to focus on 'what it means to have wealth and power and privilege'" (qtd. in Jury). His inaugural season saw newcomer Polly Stenham debut with *That Face* (2007), a drama whose portrait of familial dysfunctionality among the upper-middle classes was widely acclaimed by the critics and retrospectively posited by some as the play-defining-moment that saw an increase in the numbers of women playwrights (see Auld). However, on closer inspection, the play's success appears to rest on its appeal to the middle-class tastes of the reviewers. Wade's breakthrough drama *Posh* (2010), which turns the "spotlight" on a group of upper-class young men, is arguably a more significant landmark with its rendition of the unpalatable "wealth and power and privilege" of this elite clique (as is, I would parenthetically note, Prebble's epic critique of global capitalism in

Enron, 2009).

By accident rather than political, anti-Tory design as some assumed (see Spencer), *Posh* opened at the Court in April 2010 during the run-up to the British General Election. It was unfortunate timing for the likes of Conservative politicians Cameron, George Osborne, and Boris Johnson, all former members of the real-life Bullingdon Club of Oxford University, a club as elite and allegedly debauched as Wade's fictional society of "posh" boys. After a sold-out run at the Court, in 2012 a revised and updated version of *Posh* transferred to the Duke of York's Theatre in London's West End. September 2014 saw the release of *The Riot Club*, a film based on the stage play, with a screenplay by Wade and direction by Lone Scherfig. This timeline spans the years of Cameron's Coalition government and his electioneering for a second term of office, which he won with a landslide majority in 2015. The "posh" boys were back in power. (As Jones notes, "twenty-three out of twenty-nine ministers in Cameron's first Cabinet were millionaires; 59 per cent went to private school, and just three attended a comprehensive" [*Chavs* 76-77]).

Wade's primary focus on the all-male tribe of Oxford boys is a departure from the gendered expectation of a predominantly female cast in plays by women. Interestingly, in spring 2017, it was revived at the Pleasance Theatre, London, with an all-female cast, a production in which single-sex casting made for an illuminating twist on women, class, and power, not least considering Oxford-educated Theresa May's appointment to Prime Minister after the surprise resignation of Cameron following the Brexit referendum in June 2016. Further, the play also deviates from the tradition of representing class from the perspective of working-class lives, a tradition, notwithstanding Cooke's "spotlight on the middle classes," very much enshrined in the Royal Court's repertoire. Instead, attending to the upper-class milieu of the "posh" boys, Wade

foregrounds the negative feelings of class occasioned by a “[t]hem and us” divide (Wade 108).

The play’s opening setting is a gentleman’s club in London: Jeremy, a former riot boy, advises his godson, Guy, on the forthcoming riot club dinner. From the aristocratic and gender-exclusive credentials of that setting, the drama shifts to the dining room in the Bull’s Head, a gastropub some distance from Oxford, since the riots of previous club dinners mean the boys are “[b]anned from anywhere closer” (Wade 29). Indeed, bad behaviour has seen them suffer “two terms without a dinner,” an allusion to New Labour keeping their Tory class “out in the cold” (55). But now they are back in power, “[s]ummoned back to the table to do what we do best” (55).

The social geography of the pub setting is significant because the boys’ private dining is forced to take place in a space characterized by what, from their upper-class discernments, appear to be downmarket, vulgar tastes. Taste is what, as Bourdieu explains, “unites and separates”; it is an essential means by which “one classifies oneself and is classified by others” (56). And “tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance (‘sick-making’) of the tastes of others” (56). It is the class “stickiness” of the gastropub – the accumulative effect of being in proximity to its bourgeois décor, wine, food, service, and (unseen) clientele – that fuels the boys’ disgust. Increasingly sickened by all the things and people occupying this bourgeois habitus, over the course of the play’s two acts, their disgust turns to anger and an outbreak of class hatred. Largely fuelled by the club’s most outspoken, class-antagonistic member, Alistair, distaste for the bourgeois “other” results in not only the trashing of the dining space but also an attack on its landlord, Chris.

In Bourdieu’s terms, Wade’s riot club could be characterized as a “smart” or “chic” club – one that excludes “other classes” and “other factions of the same class” and whose “strict

procedures” of entry (such as sponsorship or recommendation) achieve “homogeneity” and exclusivity (Bourdieu 162). If your brother was a member of the Riot Club, then, like the newly initiated boy, Ed, you might get sponsored. Or you could be the “Pretty Boy” choice of Hugo, the one gay guy in the group, which is how newbie Miles was selected (Wade 32). Selection, not application, ensures that only “the right sort of chap” (32) is allowed in, a selection that requires an intra-classifying gaze: one that looks within a class narcissistically to seek out the self-same. That gaze demonstrably seeks out the aristocratic, moneyed, straight, white, English “chap,” though is accepting of the gentrified queer (Hugo) and the super-rich, “dusky” Greek Dimitri, even while the latter’s lack of English heritage bars him from making a club toast for which you must be “titled” (59) and, he suspects, from being a future president of the club.

While the homosocial bonding of the club is designed to cement class privilege, the bond begins to come unstuck as the *inter*-classifying gaze – the gaze that is meant to uphold differences *between* classes – breaks down. Hierarchical class separation depends on the domination of one class being recognized by the subordinate gaze of the “other.” In the case of the boys, that subservient gaze is not returned. As the landlord, Chris governs the dining room and disciplines the boys with his housekeeping rules and codes of acceptable behaviour that do not include smoking indoors, drinking to excess, or riotous partying. Nor, as a manager of a respectable, family public house, will he allow the boys to bring a prostitute on to the premises – an incident towards the end of the first act that dramatizes Wade’s critical scrutiny of how women are classified as the objects of the boys’ sexual pleasure.

Sexism (along with classism and racism) courses through the boys’ banter in a way that alienates them from any intimate feelings for the opposite sex. (Only Guy has a girlfriend, and she is pejoratively categorized as “not a keeper” [14].) While they joke that their public-school

boy existence has left them ignorant about how to behave around women, their gentlemanly manners and misogynist behaviours constellate in a toxic mix of social etiquette and sexual predation. Their waitress (and Chris's daughter) Rachel is the butt of their classist and sexist humour. She is ridiculed for being a graduate from a university in the north-east of England (a "foreign" country as far as the Oxford set is concerned), and treated to lascivious looks or comments, each time she waits at their table.

The hiring of an escort, Charlie, by Harry – the acknowledged womaniser in the group – foregrounds how this privileged set of young men define women purely in terms of their sexual (ab)use value. Harry's assumption was that Charlie would perform oral sex on all of them – or nine of them, excluding Hugo – under the dining room table. Declining to be dehumanized as "a live version of the sock you wank into" (92), she insists on her rights as a professional sex worker – rights that determine how many clients in how many hours, and what kinds of service she is contracted to provide. Her refusal is regarded as an act of insubordination: if they are paying, why can't she oblige and perform? "Fuck's sake you're a whore, aren't you?" Harry shouts; the "*word hangs in the air*" (94). With their sexual gratification denied by Charlie, in the second act the boys advance on Rachel with an offer of cash for sex that she vigorously declines. In performance, the threat of sexual assault also "hangs in the air" as the boys' molestation of Rachel is bound up in a childish game of musical chairs: feelings of an imminent gang rape suffuse the riotous circling of ten drunken men around a table that one young woman is still attempting to clear. However, when it comes, the violent attack is reserved for Chris rather than Rachel. After the trashing of his dining room, Chris refuses to be paid off and the boys' anger escalates. But it is his patriarchal defence of his daughter, his threat of a "sexual assault conviction" (131) for suspected harassment of Rachel, that is the tipping point for the brutal

attack. Thus, these two, minor women's roles play a major part in disillusioning the boys' sense of sexual entitlement.

That things ought to go their way is deemed a prerogative of their class. If they "arrange something," as the Club's President, James, explains to Rachel when their ten-bird roast dinner turns out to only consist of nine birds, "we kind of expect to get it" (78). As the dominant class, as the arbiters of taste, their way is, to borrow from Bourdieu, "the right way of being and doing" (511). But at each twist and turn of the dining occasion, the "wrong" way of "doing" compounds their distaste: the wine is wrong and the ten-bird roast is wrong; the hiring of Charlie goes wrong, and, since one of the boys (George) could not distinguish between a drug-dealer and a tramp in his attempt to buy cocaine for the evening (Wade 74), no deal was struck, so there is no drug-induced high to lift the mood around the table. Indignation escalates as their "right" way is met with "bourgeois outrage when we do anything, say *anything*," as Alistair complains (100). His speech that closes the first act is a veritable tirade against "these people" who "get everywhere" and "make everything so fucking second-rate" (100). It exemplifies the "symbolic violence" or "terrorism" that Bourdieu cites as occurring when those who are judged by others and "fall short, in the eyes of their judges" are subjected to "ridicule, indignity, shame, silence" (511): "Thinking they're cultured 'cause they read a big newspaper and eat asparagus and pretend not to be racist. Bursting a vein at the thought there's another floor their lift doesn't go up to for all their striving. Honest, decent people hell-bent on turning this country to fuck" (Wade 100). Ridiculing bourgeois tastes and upwardly mobile aspirations, Alistair's tirade ends, when it does, in "these people" deposited as excremental waste, as human detritus that "fucking drain – I mean I am sick, I am sick to fucking death of *poor people*" (101).

Instead of having to "*apologise*" for their class (110), the boys riot to assert their

perceived right to dominate. Urging them to unite in class hatred is the ghost of Lord Riot, reincarnated in the body of Toby. Toby is the boy who must wear the wig of shame for having brought the club into disrepute and to the attention of the press: his riotous behaviour and careless talk in a night club contravened the rule of secrecy designed to protect the club's identity and membership. This behaviour, we learn, occasioned the temporary ban on the club's dinners and a letter of public apology in the press. (This plot alludes to the way in which, in 2007, Cameron and Johnson were called to account when a photograph from 1987, depicting them in a line-up of the Bullingdon Club, was widely circulated in the press [see Gardham].) In Act Two, when Toby morphs into the bewigged Lord Riot, he admonishes the boys for putting up with "this plague of peasants" (113); he reminds them that they are "*still here*" despite the "ordure" thrown at them "down the years" (115). Riot's speech invokes an old concept of class based on birth and inherited privilege. It reminds them how the "common man" was defeated by the boys' ancestors—an allusion to the defeated General Strike in 1926—and insists that they show a united front as "the brightest, the boldest, the best," and "tear ... down" the world that they detest (115). Thus, the subsequent trashing of the dining room is not merely an instance of shameless debauchery but a declaration of class war.

This battle may be contemporary, but heritage and history are repeatedly declared to be on their side—a declaration scenographically reinforced in the production by design and costume. For instance, under Lyndsey Turner's direction, the segue from the gentleman's club into the pub was a moment of ingenious theatricality in which some of the boys animated the full-length, gilt-edged portraits of old, aristocratic figures. Thus, the Oxford chaps of today are framed by histories of past privilege carried on from one generation to the next. History too is encoded in the boys' club attire: regimental tails, waistcoats, and bow ties – an archaic look that

threatens to unmask their disguise as the “Young Entrepreneurs Club” (21). “It’s retro night,” lies George to Chris who was expecting “business suits, more of a pinstripe thing” (21).

This historic and inherited claim to privilege and wealth drives a wedge between other occasional feelings of a more empathetic kind. Should they not “find a way to co-exist,” queries Miles? (109). And do they not have a “responsibility to help” and “to guide” suggests George, who looks kindly on the workers from his family estate, workers “suffering” because of the recession (109). In this advocacy of virtuous beneficence lies what Adorno describes as the conflation of “goodness” and “wealth” dating back to the ancient Greeks, wherein economic and social capital attribute the moral value of “goodness” to those who have “goods” (Adorno 184-85). Hence, George’s family may be struggling but nonetheless can afford to help and in return be counted among the good. But Alistair insists no “good” can come of this: “George, *they hate you*” (Wade 109). This is the view that gains collective momentum among the boys. If “wealth as goodness is an element in the world’s mortar,” as Adorno reflects (185), then at this contemporary time, from the “posh” point of view, wealth is failing to cement the dominant class as the one who has “goods” and possesses “goodness.” On the one hand, their capital is under threat: ancestral homes are in hoc to the National Trust (Wade 102) and lucrative careers in the world of high finance are foreclosed by the banking crisis and economic recession (105). On the other, an exclusive right to “goodness” is diminished and devalued by the envy of those who want more of what they have – a wanting that stems from meritocratic, neoliberal self-interest and the myth of the classless society that endorses the idea of a “barbaric success-religion” (Adorno 187) as no longer the preserve of the dominant class but available to all. Thus, for the boys to insist on the class separation of the “haves” and “have nots” is to restore “the order in which the rich are right” (Adorno 185) *and* virtuous.

To be rich and regarded as virtuous is “to veil” (Adorno 186) the injuries that class inflicts, not least because, in an opposite way, poverty is “sticky” with negative value judgements, bound to the idea of being without goods or goodness. For instance, the affective disgust which Wade, through Alistair, unveils as attaching to “*poor people*” was palpable in August 2011 when, just ten months before *Posh* transferred to the West End, the England riots took place. Ignited by the fatal police shooting of a young black father in Tottenham (the site of the Broadwater Farm riot in 1985), unrest spread from London boroughs to cities across the country. The rioters, many of whom were young and poor, burned buildings and looted shops stocked with goods they could not afford. However, it was not the deepening inequalities and injustices of neoliberalism that Cameron called to account in his post-riot speech on August 11, but the “bad” character of the rioters: “people with a twisted moral code”; “thugs” demonstrating “bad behaviour,” “irresponsibility,” and “selfishness.” This response typifies what Jones describes as the way in which politicians exercise “a key role in focusing public anger on the poorest in society,” thus “deflecting scrutiny from those at the top” (*Establishment* 49). The disgust-making rhetoric of Cameron’s speech is resonant in Alistair’s allusion to the riots: “nicking trainers ‘cause you can’t be arsed to get a job and then calling it legitimate protest? Fuck off” (Wade 110). Akin to Cameron, Alistair legitimates the “virtue” of his own position, “affect stripping” the sense of grievance felt by those in poverty (Skeggs, “Making of Class” 271). Instead of appearing as the injured class, they are rendered disgust-making, work-shy, and injurious.

Ultimately, it is Alistair who is scapegoated by the club for the attack on Chris. Although he is joined by some of the boys in inflicting grievous bodily harm on the landlord, to save the club only one boy will take the blame. Hence, when faced with a crisis, the boy’s musketeer-

styled mantra of “one for all and all for one” (Wade 33) falls short of its promise. Like the nine-rather-than-ten-bird roast or the nine-rather-than-ten boys lining up for Charlie’s services, the tenth man is left out and must take the fall. And yet, as the final scene of the play shows, in a return to the gentleman’s club and an encounter between Jeremy and Alistair, Alistair’s social capital – his connections to figures of the Establishment such as Jeremy – augurs a cover-up and a profitable, illustrious career in politics, even though he faces criminal charges. In short, what Wade impresses on her audience in this final scene is, to quote the title of Jones’s sequel to *Chavs*, a sense of “the Establishment: and how they get away with it” (see also Billington).

Overall, Wade neither demonizes nor apologizes for the “posh” boys but rather turns an anthropological gaze on their bad-boy behaviour. At times, their antics appear savage; at others, disarmingly funny. As Sam Lavender from Film4, one of the production companies behind *The Riot Club*, observed, “half the fun for me became watching the crowd’s reactions to her characters, how torn they were between liking and judging these guys” (qtd. in Thorpe). Equally, Wade’s drama is devoid of what Ahmed terms “points” of “affective conversion”: the moments in which “bad feelings” that stick to “objects” convert to good (*Promise* 44-45). Specifically, there is no affectively realized class “conversion” within the group: no one boy whose disgust for the “other” converts to self-disgust at the club’s behaviour. It is worth noting that, in this way, the play contrasts with the film, which tracks the “affective conversion” of new member Miles from the thrill of being chosen to discomfort with the club as things spiral dangerously out of control. This conversion is also influenced by the outsider’s gaze of his decidedly not posh, state-educated girlfriend, who feels disgust at the boys’ behaviour, especially when she becomes the unwitting sexual substitute for Charlie. Being disgusted and disturbed by the boys’ behaviour, she is the “affect alien”: the one who “converts good feelings into bad” and “kills’ the joy” of

the club (*Promise* 49).

With the exclusion of a forcefully present “killjoy” – even if Charlie, Rachel, and Chris each briefly occupies this role – and the absence of an affectively realized class conversion on the part of one or more of the boys, much depends on the affective charge of the performance to “convert” audience pleasure at the boys’ antics into feeling the damaging effects of an “us and them” divide. As with any performance, responses are not a given; there are no guarantees. What Ahmed explains about the “experiences of being in a crowd” also obtains for the experience of being part of a theatre audience: being part of a crowd “does not necessarily mean that we are all directed in the same way,” and nor can we “assume that those who appear directed ‘in the right way’ feel the same way about the direction they are facing” (*Promise* 43). For instance, Alistair’s vitriol that ideally “directs” an audience’s feeling, which I felt as shocking, perversely could be experienced as a *shared* feeling. That the show did stir up strong feelings is evinced in commentaries by those in the cast: “some really crazy responses” and a sense of “something going on in the audience” as actor Leo Bill (Alistair) observed (qtd. in Cavendish). Likewise, actor Richard Goulding (George) described how there were “almost fights breaking out sometimes – there was such a tension between the chaps in the cheap seats and the guys down in the stalls who were laughing,” with the former “almost going, ‘Shut up, it’s not funny!’” (qtd. in Cavendish).

For those caught up in the show’s “direction,” the likelihood is that the climactic build to the room-trashing episode and the subsequent tribal attack on Chris succeed in their affectively realized alienation of how class structures a feeling of “rightful” domination. As Wade instructs, the trashing is “*orchestrated and rhythmic, almost balletic*” (126): the boys smash china, glassware, and ornaments, ruin pictures, hurl food and drink, throw objects out of the window,

and swing from a chandelier. The feeling I took from this onstage action was the class-fuelled exhilaration of something being utterly destroyed.

As Jones observes, “class politics” is traditionally “understood to mean fighting the corner of working-class people” (*Chavs* 251), but as *Posh*, and this episode especially, exemplifies, it is “the preserve of the wealthy and their political apologists” (248). For a chap like Alistair who spurs his tribe into battle, “poor people” is a catch-all classification: it includes those with poor or vulgar bourgeois tastes; those in hock to the neoliberal dream with “the plasma telly, 95% mortgage” (Wade 104); and those who “can’t be arsed to get a job” (110). This indiscriminate kind of “othering” cements the “them and us” class feeling in which the “other” is deprived of any means to answer or fight back. More specifically, as Jones elucidates, it is the working classes who are rendered powerless and voiceless, who lack political representation at the same time as being represented in the neoliberalist imagination as an “object” of vilification. Thus, there is an urgent need to restore “class politics” to “fighting the corner of working-class people,” and, as I shall demonstrate with *Wish List*, for theatre to lend a counter-hegemonic voice to those who cannot be heard above the clamour of class hatred.

WISH LIST: “WORK. ENJOY. IMPROVE.”

With *Wish List* winning the 2015 Bruntwood Prize for Playwriting in partnership with Manchester’s Royal Exchange Theatre, Katherine Soper was assured a high-profile debut: a co-production between the Exchange, where it opened in September 2016, and the Royal Court Theatre, to which it transferred in January 2017. The production, directed by Matthew Xia, went on to win three Manchester Theatre Awards: for Best Studio Production, Best Actress in a Studio Production (Erin Doherty), and Best Actor in a Studio Production (Joseph Quinn); Soper has

since won The Stage Debut Award for Best Writer (September 2017). Amid this success, Soper found herself courted by journalists who drew attention to what they perceived as the schizophrenic split between her abundance of cultural capital and low economic capital: between a well-educated playwright and shop girl in a high-end retail store. As Soper explains: “In the days after the Bruntwood win, it was this strange thing. For some people, it was ‘Perfume Seller wins Playwriting prize,’ then there were other people saying, ‘hang on, she went to Cambridge and did an MA in Playwriting, why are we talking about that?’” (qtd. in Greer). However, among the United Kingdom’s playwriting classes this kind of split is by no means exceptional. As Bourdieu notes, artists often need to undertake paid employment “as a means of buying time to work” (295). But in Soper’s case, “buying time” to write was “sticky” with the class and gender prejudice that attaches to the “shop girl.” As one journalist astutely observed when Soper won the award, the Bruntwood

headlines make a tacit judgement on the value of being a shop assistant by assuming that we will be surprised that someone who works in a shop could also write an award winning play. It’s symptomatic of the true extent of the ongoing demonization of the working classes that we should be surprised to hear that a young woman working in a low-level service industry might also be intelligent and talented with a voice worth including in our cultural narrative. (Atkinson-Lord)

There again, when the journalistic focus shifted to her education and playwriting training, Soper’s choice of working-class subject matter elicited a further note of value-laden, judgmental surprise: “why is she writing a play about this?” (Soper qtd. in Greer). Why should a Cambridge-educated young woman concern herself with the representation of the working classes? The

stigmatization that now attaches to the working classes provides a compelling answer: the need for counter-cultural responses that resist the disgust-making narrative that transforms the working classes “from salt of the earth to scum of the earth” (Jones, *Chavs* 72).

Within days of *Wish List* completing its Manchester run (24 September to 15 October 2016), the multi-award-winning film *I, Daniel Blake* was released (21 October 2016). Like Soper’s play, *I, Daniel Blake* (directed by the veteran, left-wing, British filmmaker Ken Loach) struck a compassionate class chord: it portrays those who, like the titular Daniel Blake, are casualties of a bureaucratic, unjust, and punitive welfare system. In close proximity to each other, these two newsworthy cultural events, with their spin-off conversations and commentaries in the press, structured empathetic feelings for the “scum” class the British public had been encouraged to hate.

That said, in his review of *Wish List*, Aleks Sierz lamented the “catalogue” of new plays concerned with “the subject of good people trapped in zero hour contracts and terrible working conditions”: “Like Ken Loach’s dreary film, *I, Daniel Blake*, these plays have integrity, but very little dramatic content.” The judgmental “dreary” jarred with the visceral way in which Soper’s play and Loach’s film got under my own spectator’s skin but also pressed on questions of an aesthetic kind: with an apparent eschewal of “dramatic content,” did representations of the poorest of Britain’s poor make for “dreary” plays and films? To agree would be to refute the cultural value of an anti-hegemonic, class-conscious social-realist tradition committed to showing life as it really is: to negate the feelings of class injury forged in the uneventful folds of everyday, unequal life, the aesthetic rendering of which (in Soper’s play and Loach’s film) has designs on restoring virtue to those “good people” otherwise vilified by the scum rhetoric.

The small cast of “good people” in Soper’s *Wish List* is headed up by teenagers Tamsin

(Doherty) and Dean (Quinn), siblings struggling to get by without any family support (their mother has died; there is no mention of a father). Dean has mental health issues so cannot work. Tamsin is her brother's primary carer and has given up her schooling to start a poorly paid job as a packer in an Amazon-styled, ironically named fulfilment centre (the clue is in the play's title – a nod to the “wish list” function on Amazon's website). Beginning work in the warehouse, her line manager, The Lead (played by the Bosnian actor Aleksandar Mikic) oversees her packing targets that are nigh on impossible to achieve. The one other character in the play is Luke Mburu (Shaquille Ali-Yebuah), Tamsin's co-worker, who has set his sights on going back to college. These role and casting choices were significant given how the play premiered in the wake of the Brexit referendum in which the Leave vote, fought by those on the radical right (notably the UKIP party), was designed to stir up anti-immigration sentiments among poor, white, working-class voters. By contrast, Soper's culturally diverse workforce is represented not as factionalized but as collectively struggling to survive a capitalist system whose dehumanizing conditions affect them all as workers caught in the poverty trap.

Ten scenes alternate between the domestic setting (Tamsin and Dean's flat) and the warehouse. Work repeatedly spills over into the domestic, a feeling underscored in the play's traverse staging: a rundown kitchen and bathroom space at one end of the corridor bleeding into a scaffolding structure complete with chute and a conveyor belt, designating the packing area, at the other. Since little happens by way of dramatic action (as Sierz complains), it is the rhythm of daily grind between work and home that provides textures to feelings of class injury.

For Skeggs, class remains an injury that is “hidden” (*Formations* 95) – the occluded “unremitting emotional distress” occasioned by “living class” on a “daily basis” (167). In her research into the lives of working-class women, she cites “identities” as formed not only by

“singular,” significant life events, but through the unacknowledged “mundane reiterative everyday experiences of living degradation and negative value positioning” (167). These “mundane experiences are a product of systematic inequality [...] profoundly located in structural organization [...] often *un-eventful (and rarely spectacular)*” (167; emphasis added). Similarly, what Soper acknowledges and seeks to reveal are the “hidden” injuries of day-to-day living within the “structural organization” of exploited labour. For Tamsin and her co-worker Luke, there is the physical stress of their labour: the requisite work boots that are ill-fitting and blister feet; the packing boxes that cut fingers and scar hands; the long working day whose repetitive packing is so very hard to keep up. Since all labour is subjected to electronic surveillance (hourly packing targets are systematically monitored on an electronic board that dominated the performance space), there is the emotional stress of failing to keep up, since that failure comes with the threat of unemployment. And then there is the sense of indignity and degradation: restrooms too far from the work station to be used without the risk of falling behind targets; no personal effects allowed in the workplace, and no mobile phones to allow contact with the outside world. Neither “spectacular” nor focused on the drama of a significant identity-forming event, *Wish List* instead identifies the economically vulnerable, low-income worker as living through the daily, reiterative emotional and physical strains of exploitation.

Exploitation is a class-based condition. As Jones explains in Marxist terms, the working class is defined in terms of the exploited, alienated labourer – the condition of having “to work for others” and without “autonomy” or “control over this labour” (*Chavs* 144). Factory workers on the assembly line, or miners and steelworkers in the old industrial sector, were once the signature of working-class labour, but this demographic has changed with the demise of industry and the “rise of a new service-sector working class” (*Chavs* 145). As part of this new sector,

servicing customer “wish lists,” Tamsin and Luke undertake labour that is no less regimented than the factory line. In the performance, as stage hands dropped packing boxes down the chute and the space became littered with boxes and commodities, ranging from vibrators to a forty-kilogram bag of couscous, so Marx’s theory of “estranged labour” (28) was concretized or actualized. For Marx, the “*devaluation* of the world of men is in direct proportion to the *increasing value* of the world of things”; the “worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces” (28; emphasis in original). Similarly, the “devaluation” or dehumanization of Tamsin and Luke was made visible in the space as the objects they packed accumulated, thereby heightening the sense of a “world of things” packaged and sold to generate capital at the expense of their poorly remunerated labour.

Significantly, while Tamsin and Luke represent the exploited class, there is no visible “master” of exploitation and thus no dramatic conflict between capitalist boss and low-paid worker. In one way, this choice reflects the global flows of neoliberal capitalism, where who owns the means of production is a complex question of international interests and investments (as typified by Amazon.com, an American company with multiple, national online retail outlets). In another way, it figures capitalism as a *system* that exploits and dehumanizes. As a system, it demands a competitive workforce and competition between workers. Hence, Tamsin’s packing scores are displayed against the higher-achieving Luke’s. Failing to meet her targets, Tamsin is repeatedly taken to task by The Lead, whose duty it is to improve her rate of production. In the role of The Lead, Mikic’s accented English was evocative of the East European migrant worker committed to an economic system of low pay, hard work, and the promise of a “better” capitalist future. As another cog in the capitalist wheel, he explains the precarity of his own position to Tamsin: “I have to be twice as professional. I *have* to be able to say yes I timed their toilet

breaks, yes I tried all of the above tactics when they were falling short on target, yes I did everything I could” (Soper 75). Although personally sympathetic to Tamsin’s situation with her brother, he further elaborates on how the system is devoid of empathetic understanding: “There are people at the top of this. And as far as they can see, they’re doing the right thing. They don’t see it from this – angle, they don’t see it from here, because they just get numbers in the red and they work out how to put them in the black. And it will be the same anywhere else you go (75). In sum, the anonymous “people at the top” refuse to see the human “devaluation” of their workforce: the alienation of those whose labour services the capitalist “wish list” for wealth creation.

In his commentary on the alienation of the worker, Marx argues that, since the labourer’s work is necessary to his survival, it is “not voluntary, but coerced; it is *forced labor*” (30; emphasis in original). Two feeling states follow from the idea of coerced labour: “[t]he worker ... only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself” (30). While Soper’s fulfilment centre announces itself as a site of labour in which to “Work. Enjoy. Improve.” (62), the conditions are such that positive feelings are negated. Only when the workers break the rules, snatch a moment for conversation, or take off work boots to ease aching feet is there a sense of momentary pleasure or pleasurable relief. Indeed, as Luke advises Tamsin, an ability to survive in the workplace depends on a state of non-feeling – on being a “robot” (37), not getting “emotional” (15) – and always paying lip-service to the idea that it is possible to “improve.”

By contrast, mid-way through the drama, Soper lightens the experience of labour-based alienation in two scenes (four and five), which portray Luke and Tamsin meeting outside of work – scenes in which it is possible for them to feel themselves and discover feelings for each other.

Although feelings of alienation are hard to entirely escape (bodies bear the aches and pains of labour, and night time brings dreams of “packing boxes in boxes in boxes” [36]), a feeling of happiness begins to flow as Tamsin sings a rock anthem by Meat Loaf. Her choice of song reprises an earlier moment when, in a work-based scene, one of her packing items is a vinyl recording of Meat Loaf’s “Bat Out of Hell II” album. For Tamsin, this classic rock just “gets you” and is “pure joy” (41). Away from work in Tamsin’s flat, with a lighting cue designed to create a disco effect, the youngsters make their own music: Luke beating out a rhythm and Tamsin singing (neither of them possess the means of recorded production; even Luke’s phone is out of data). Doherty’s “performance” of Meat Loaf’s “I Would Do Anything for Love (But I Won’t Do That)” was deliberately imperfect and unpolished to render an affectively charged moment expressive of non-alienated feeling: of a joyous release from the day-to-day regimented rhythms of “estranged labour,” in which, as Marx puts it, the worker “feels outside himself” (or herself). The affective rendering of this scene was a powerful reminder of the value Williams placed on art for its capacity to “create responses which bring new feelings to light” (87). In this instance, to feel *with* Tamsin/Doherty is to feel *for* a not-yet world of non-alienated labour.

However, this reprieve is fleeting. Ultimately, *Wish List* refutes the fictional romance of a happy-ever-after ending since, whatever feelings Tamsin has for Luke and whatever her aspirations to return to college and study for an alternative future, she is bound to “*forced labour*” as the only way to support her brother. Binding Tamsin’s vulnerable employment situation to Dean’s mental health issue and question of unemployability, Soper interlaces the precarity of labour conditions with the problem of social welfare and benefits.

“Welfare scrounger” (*Chavs* 197) is the label that has stuck to those who are poor, out of work, and living on state benefits. In the popular imagination fuelled by anti-poor rhetoric in

media, press, and political camps, the “sick-making” “scrounger” label is reserved for those deemed work-shy fraudsters. As Tyler explains, a “political function” of this kind of “classification” is “employed to persuade people to act, feel, think about poverty and disadvantage in specific ways” (“Riots” para 9.3). Thus, even the alienated labourer can be persuaded to deride the benefit-claiming poor (see *Chavs* 260).

Casualties of those classified as “scroungers” include people on incapacity benefits who are suspected of being fit to work, as exemplified by the evidence gathered by the Citizens Advice Bureau in 2010 that revealed how “[t]erminally ill patients, people with advanced forms of Parkinson’s disease or multiple sclerosis, suffering mental illness or awaiting open heart surgery, were registered as capable of returning to work” (*Chavs* 200). Soper’s Dean is one such casualty: his entitlement to ESA (Employment and Support Allowance granted to those with disabilities or health problems that make it difficult to work) has been revoked. Deemed fit to work, he must prove he is actively seeking work to receive JSA (Jobseeker’s Allowance). But Dean is agoraphobic, phone-phobic, potentially anorexic (Tamsin struggles to make him eat), and subject to obsessive-compulsive rituals – a fixation with gelling his hair and hand-tapping rituals that accompany routine tasks such as making a cup of tea. Since he can neither persuade the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) that he is unfit for work nor, given his mental health difficulties, comply with the employment-seeking demands of JSA, his situation is extremely precarious. Caught up in a Kafkaesque welfare system where the reinstatement of ESA cannot proceed without a mandatory reconsideration, which in turn cannot proceed since Dean failed to answer a telephone call from the DWP, the likelihood is that he will end up with nothing at all.

When you want “to persuade someone,” then what you need, Luke counsels Tamsin, are

“rhetorical questions,” “facts,” and “emotive language” (58). Depicting Tamsin repeatedly asking herself how to get out of the poverty trap, and contemplating how to put the “facts” of her brother’s case to the DWP, Soper weaves an “emotive language” aimed at persuading spectators of the injustices and injuries of the welfare system. A heightened sense of injury is evoked towards the close of the drama when Dean’s compulsive hand-tapping ritual sees him accidentally burning his hand on the kitchen stove, after which the compulsion to complete a pattern means that he is compelled to self-harm by placing his other hand down on the stove. This affectively realized action, one that elicited an audible intake of audience breath, “taps” into the injurious feeling of a welfare system failing to care for its most vulnerable citizens.

Interviewed at the time of *The Riot Club*’s release in 2014, Wade stated that she found it “surprising that people aren’t more up in arms about inequality.” Perhaps, she speculated, this is “because everybody is so busy trying to keep their own head above water” (qtd. in Saner). As the lives of Soper’s youngsters demonstrate, social injustices are hard to protest when energies are consumed by the exhausting task of surviving an exploitative capitalist regime and a draconian welfare system. There is no mythical superhero to come to the rescue. Instead, as Dean/Quinn denotes by sporting his Superman T-shirt, the heroic is re-signified as the daily struggle to survive in a world hostile to basic needs.

Small acts of kindness also assist in this fight for survival, acts that render a sense of how the workers see themselves as in this struggle together: The Lead’s attempts to keep Tamsin employed and able to support her brother despite her poor performance; Luke offering a bar of chocolate to share, a cigarette to smoke, or a tea light from a broken packet in the warehouse. Before the final blackout, Tamsin/Doherty lit the tea light: a flickering memory of the kindness shown. Ultimately, however, Soper’s message is clear: without a radical transformation of the

hostile working and living conditions, this flame cannot burn brightly. Lives remain at risk; like the cosmic energy of the stars that Tamsin would dearly love to study, the risk is that the energy to survive diminishes, leaving the workers to “burn out” (Soper 54). (In Loach’s film, Blake dies of a heart attack at the point when he is finally granted an appeal hearing after a long and arduous battle to have his ESA reinstated.)

At governmental level, in 2015 a “call for a ‘kinder politics’” accompanied the unexpected election of democratic-socialist Jeremy Corbyn to Leader of the Labour Party and thus to Leader of the Opposition (Seymour 20). Corbyn’s key electioneering speech declared: “for a new type of society where ‘we each care for all, everybody caring for everybody else: I think it’s called socialism’” (20). This rallying “call for a ‘kinder politics’” is one that Williams undoubtedly would have heard as the call to break “old patterns” of inequality and poverty, to elicit “new feelings” and “new expectations” about “what life could be” (380). Those opposed to change will do all that they can “to keep the old patterns alive” (380) as Wade’s representation of the posh-boy elite attests. But *Posh* and *Wish List* also evince how artistic responses to class can help to structure a feeling of “what life could be” if those patterns were to break. Thus, although theatre cannot possibly succeed in making “affect aliens” of us all, “class acts” such as these offer important sites of affectively rendered resistance to the entrenched classifying gaze of the neoliberalist imagination and the disgust-making tactics deployed to posit the working class as abject and alien. As I write these concluding remarks in the autumn of 2017, feelings for a “kinder politics” are intensifying among younger generations and the poorer, “revolting” sectors of what, as my thick analytical description of these two plays has shown, remains a class-divided nation. Over fifty years on from Williams’s reflections on the “supposed new phenomenon of classlessness,” my hope is that these feelings auger the possibility of a more socially progressive

chapter in the continuing process of “the [ever] long revolution.”

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