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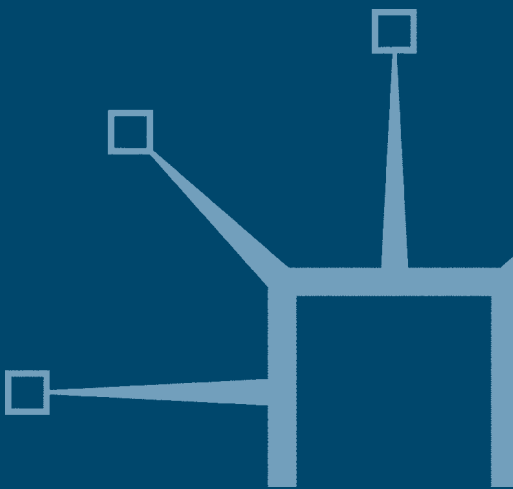
Working-Class Lesbian Life

Classed Outsiders

Yvette Taylor



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Classed Outsiders

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For my granny, Agnes McKelvie

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1
Reviewing the Literature: An Introduction

Here I seek to set out the ways that class and sexuality have, or have not, been discussed, suggesting a tendency to deny, abstract, separate, to 'complicate', these two categories so that instead of emphasising their relevance, interconnections and urgency, they become detached and disconnected, far removed from inequalities faced by actual people. The actual people I am concerned with are working-class lesbians – I'm not just 'putting them back in', filling a 'gap in the literature' but asking why they weren't included in the first place? While this may seem a weighty accusation, I believe it is substantiated by the absences and silences about working-class lesbian lives. I am indebted to previous, and current, academic debate on both class and sexuality – this book has been written from a critique of the in/adequacy of such approaches and it is with respect, which occasionally turns into scepticism, that I make such an intervention. Academic debate often involves 'abstract' 'theorising' and to engage with this can involve reifying such abstraction. This first chapter provides an overview of academic theories that I deploy and critique in my analysis but this chapter may be passed over; the further six chapters present and deliberately centre the empirical data which lies at the heart of this research.

The production of knowledges remains a classed practice – rarely are working-class voices heard or legitimated, and sometimes the louder they shout the less they are heard. In trying to establish this book (and myself) as academically rigorous I too am investing in classed processes, with unease as well as confidence (Taylor, 2005a). Rather than trying to reconcile the dilemma of the production of knowledge, theirs and mine, I will attempt to offer further contributions and challenges to place working-class lesbians' experiences at the centre of my analysis, rather than my own dis/satisfaction. But what of those 'other' academic

voices – what do they say, why do their views differ from mine? Re-reading the headlines, articles and debates I will look for the missing and the missed out, forging out a new space to think about the interconnection between class and sexuality and create an enduring and respectful, if not an exclusive or final, account.

I start this chapter by exploring class definitions, meanings and erasures, that is, 'Class in a new/cold climate'. The 'newness' refers to the ways that class is seen to belong to the ever distant past, while in a 'new' climate class is replaced by flux, fluidity and freedom from class constraints (Bauman, 1990; Beck, 2000b; Giddens, 1992). The coldness references the feeling of being left out of this, of taking away that which explains and informs. This applies not just to the economy but also to identity formation and continuation; the need to 'identify yourself' may not be a need at all if you are marked as 'one of those', and classified accordingly. When 'what you see is what you get' questions have to be asked about the continual production of class tables – the contrast between methodological precision and substantive issues of material inequality. I then go on to explore the gendering of class in 'a certain class of women': those who criticise class models by arguing that the class position of women is ignored, rarely consider the class position of lesbians.

As I move on to Hennessy's (2000) attention to the 'political economy of sex', the interconnections between class and sexuality are re-established. This is rather unique given its usual separation. Nevertheless, Hennessy's material 'interconnections' are remote from the lives of actual working-class people, who rarely appear in her account. There is a danger of abstracting class from actual everyday lives when talking about class 'out there': poverty does exist in wealthy capitalist countries and an analysis of class in such places serves as a reminder that everyone is implicated in class, everyone has a class position (Mahony and Zmroczek, 1997). I then look at Dunne's (1997) empirical study on 'lesbian lifestyles' and argue that her account ignores the experience of working-class lesbians; her sample and subsequent conclusions contain a middle-class bias.

Movements and 'mobilities' are structured through class and I turn to Bourdieu's model of classed 'habitus' and class capitals to provide a sense of the ways that class still affects access into positions, travelling through space. Having the 'right' cultural, economic and social capitals (which, when legitimated turn into 'symbolic capital', a resource which the working-classes 'lack') produces opportunities and advantages across various social spheres. I suggest that these capitals influence 'economic achievement', more so than lesbian credentials (Dunne, 1997). Capitalising on the self, 'performing' at work, can be difficult when the

performance is not that good, is self-deceptive and not economically rewarding, as I explore in 'fixed smiles, emotional labour', where both class and sexuality are interrelated, connecting and dis-connecting theories of performativity and materiality.

The inter-relationship generates controversy amongst feminists and here I locate the demise of class within as well as outwith feminist circles. In topical work on sexuality much of the agenda has been set by queer theory (Butler, 1990; Fuss, 1991) and most claim that this 'cultural turn' has deflected attention away from material inequalities, as more performative aspects of identity construction are prioritised (Barrett, 1992; Jackson, 2001). Queer theory is seen to unhinge sexuality from the social structures that organise it as sexuality is the primary and often isolated site of analysis (Hennessy, 2000). 'Queer' or 'materialist', where are the working-class lesbians? Bourdieu's (1984) social theory offers many potential connections with contemporary feminist theory and Butler (1990, 1997) has detailed the relations between performativity and Bourdieu's framework of social positioning in social space.

Spatial aspects of classed and sexualised movements, opportunities and dis/comforts also need to be explored: 'Opening the map'. Profitable or marketable identities legitimately, though precariously, occupy public space, which raises particular problems for working-class lesbians, who may not be able to 'buy into' existing queer scene space – available on the market, for a price (Jeffreys, 1994; Hennessy, 2000; Chasin, 2000). Looking is equated with being – someone or no-one, hence I move on to look at the ways class and sexuality are 'written on the body'. Such a focus draws upon varying theories of identity in space, particularly the ways that certain bodies, appearances and identities are rendered unentitled to occupy space because of lack of capital, bodily or otherwise, to legitimately access that space and to receive interpersonal affirmations within it (Bourdieu, 1984; Skeggs, 1999, 2001).

Scene space is also contrasted with working-class space, as there is a need to look at everyday spaces. Such a contrast provides a focus on the often stigmatised places which working-class people inhabit (Howarth, 2002) in comparison to 'trendy' and fashionable scene space. Stigma and outsider status produces dis/identification, classification and boundary regulation between classed 'others' (Savage et al., 2001; Skeggs, 2001; Southerton, 2000). I look at the creation of classed and sexual boundaries working to create exclusion and feelings of not/belonging, combining attention to spatialised identity with the negotiated and embodied meanings and understandings of individuals in space.

In the final section of this chapter (Black sheep of the family) I look at the ways in which lesbian relationships are currently being discussed as exemplary sites of transformed intimacy (Giddens, 1992; Weeks et al., 2001). I suggest that emphases on 'equal, accountable' intimacy (Dunne, 1997), achieved in sexual relationships and through 'families of friends' (Weston, 1997) ignore the structuring of friendships, the class encounters within these and the continued structural inequalities within intimate relationships. I argue for the persistence of inequalities across class, rather than situating, for example, sexism and homophobia within the working-class. Class constitutes a significant gap in recent studies of family, friendship and sexual relationships where notions of the 'good' and the 'bad' family often still contain unspoken classed assumptions. I aim to look at the ways class and sexuality has been researched, in relation to meanings, effects, outcomes, participation and dis/advantage and have necessarily, and hopefully productively, drawn upon an array of theories in order to conceptualise interlinked working-class lesbian identities.

Class in a new/cold climate

There has been somewhat of a resurgence of interest in class across disciplines, for example, in feminist theory, geography and sociology (Charlesworth, 2000; Crompton et al., 2000; Ehrenreich, 2001; Nayak, 2003a; Skeggs, 2004; Zweig, 2000). In the United States, there have been several rich, ethnographic accounts of the continued effect of social class, as it intersects with other social positions, all of which challenge the popular myth of North America as a 'classless' society (Bettie, 2003; Kefalas, 2003; Lareau, 2003; Reese, 2005; Zweig, 2000). Yet defining class becomes difficult in a climate of supposed 'classlessness', where class inequalities are thought of as increasingly 'complex' or non-existent. Rather than there being a demise of class division, I argue that such pronouncements are in fact classed. Rather than 'moving away' from class, in an 'upward', 'unstable' and 'uncertain' manner I am remaining with it, due to its fixity and its ability to fix – to deny opportunities in a 'new' global market place (Hennessey, 2000).

Changes in the organisation of production and consumption, it is said, make it difficult to describe and analyse social class; occupations that have traditionally defined class have broken down, being replaced with service and information industries (Beck, 2000a,b; Castells, 2000; Urry, 2000a,b). Castells (2000) speaks of the 'power of flows' taking precedence over the 'flows of power' whereby capital flows are spread

throughout interconnected networks, creating a fast growing electronic economy in which money is increasingly abstract and invisible; there is no such thing as a global capitalist class as the behaviour of capitalists depends on submission to global networks, which is less secure than claims to the ownership of production.

In contrast, I believe that such flows work to sustain class structures, rather than undermine them. The 'unpredictability' of the flows of globalisation is often thought of in terms of increased flexibility or, indeed, re-named as improved 'choices' for workers; workers have the 'opportunity' to change their careers. But the security of traditional working-class jobs flows away. 'Choice' is therefore a multifaceted concept, some choosers accrue more benefits than others and the 'choice' may be whether to accept working in a certain framework, or to suffer poverty. While changing socio-economic structures lead some to question the relevance of social class, or at least to rethink previous conceptualisations, less is said about what class continues to do – not just what it is, or could be. For example, Bradley and Hebson (1999) argue that while the class dynamic remains a powerful force, that dynamic is itself complex and fluid. This may be an accurate description of the new global economy, but attention needs to be given to the ways class inequalities are lived in and why they are still relevant.

Class still insists upon its presence. There are many proponents of this argument (Bettie, 2003; Devine, 1992; Skeggs, 1997) who contend that even in the midst of economic changes, persistent occupational divisions of wealth and poverty prevail. These may be occurring within a different historical moment, with specific social and cultural conditions but they are still here. Even in the 'postmodern' global age, class continues to be a reliable predictor of life chances affecting, for example, health, education and housing. Changes in class structure should not be mistaken for the eradication of class; every generation has suspected that class has been in decline, only for its persistence to be discovered later on, triggering another round of academic debate (Roberts, 2001). The need to re-think class, yet again, can prove to be very frustrating and it is from and against such a sentiment that my research occurred. Yet frustration alone cannot explain the insistence, among the women I interviewed, of the relevance of class in their lives.

Examining psycho-social aspects of class and gender and, in particular, the discomfort in transition, via education, felt by both middle-class and working-class girls, into a 'new', de-industrialised, feminised labour market, Walkerdine et al. argue that as the boundaries of social class are 'opened up' self-definition becomes a painful and confusing process

where 'it is no longer possible to know who or what or where we are meant to be' (2001:10). While I agree that class identification can indeed be painful I am not convinced by the 'opening up' of class boundaries, or indeed of class identification. This work, like that which emphasises 'global' changes and flux, fails to address continued everyday identifications as working-class, even in 'unstable' places.

Identify yourself

Identity has become one of the unifying frameworks of academic debate, with concerns especially generated about 'transformations' in identity (Jenkins, 1996). But who decides who and what is 'transforming' and who is 'staying put'? Are we all really included in this transformative, reflexive process, where the 'choice' is not only about where to work but also what to be? While proponents of global flows dismiss the relevance of class at an economic level, such 'transformations' spill over onto identity concerns and similar key phrases mark out the supposed shift from class to … what? In an all moving, uncertain, shifting climate society, the economy and the individual cannot, it would seem, be adequately described (Beck, 1992; Lash and Urry, 1987, 1994). Against such conceptualisations I situate my work within those debates which do concede the continued relevance of class, as a factor informing economic and social experience (Devine, 1992; Marshall et al., 1988). I also see the importance of enquiring into class identification, rather than denouncing its relevance without empirical evidence.

Although social identity has attracted considerable attention, there has been little recent research on the salience of class identities. Based on a UK study Savage et al. (2001) show that whilst class identities are 'ambivalent', they are also structured and coherent in their own terms, asserting that 'the ambivalence of class identities does therefore not entail breaking from class analysis itself.' Yet they claim that people identify with gender or locale with greater ease, with much less ambivalence, than class. Class is still deployed by interviewees as an external benchmark, as a peripheral marker used in the 'telling of stories' but not as an absolute, clear or definite part of such identity 'stories'. This research is part of a broader project on 'social networks, social capital and lifestyle'[1] through which they provide an account of contemporary class identity processes. Due to the 'threat' of attaching class to identity, respondents were concerned to establish their own 'ordinariness'. Ideas of class are seen to pollute references to 'ordinariness' and so this strategy is read as a 'defensive device to avoid the politics of being labelled in

class terms', while 'ordinariness' both undermines and invokes class location, since a comparison with the 'non-ordinary' is utilised (Savage et al., 2001: 875). There are classed reasons why people may wish to avoid social fixing, at different times either 'playing up' or 'playing down' their position. Invoking 'ordinariness' may be difficult if you are marked as 'other' and cannot afford to play reflexively with ideas of class. Savage et al. (2001) provide interesting insights into the dynamics of class dis-identification, yet disappointingly, and in contrast to Skeggs (1997), do not relate material inequalities to identity formation.

Many researchers have outlined the difficulties surrounding issues of class identification, suggesting that to accept a working-class identity is increasingly to accept a 'spoilt identity' (Reay, 1996) a 'white trash' status, synonymous with degradation and shame (Bettie, 2003; Brown, 1997; Sandell, 1997). Working-class people are depicted more and more as 'dis-identifying' from their working-classness, reluctant to become known through the markers of class (Lawler, 1999; Reay, 1998; Skeggs, 1997). In fact Skeggs (1997) claims that for the working-class women in her study, identity was constituted upon disassociation and avoidance of the possibility of being labelled working-class. Her respondents were eager to prove their 'respectability', against the 'unrespectable' and the stigmatised; far from 'reflexively' playing with class, the women she spoke to were deeply afraid of being 'one of those' and rather than seeking 'ordinariness' an extra-ordinary effort was required to disclaim classed associations and prove themselves as 'worthy' and 'decent'.

McRobbie (2000), Brown (1997) and Bettie (2003) consider class resistance and challenges to traditional notions of femininity in the use of material goods. In *Women Without Class* Bettie's (2003) ethnography, conducted in a high school in California's Central Valley, examines how White and Mexican-American girls construct their identities within the school as members of various subcultural groups: 'Smokers' ('white trash'), 'Cholas and Cholos' ('hard core' Mexican-American students from hard-living families), Las Chicas (other Mexican-American students who had 'outgrown' the cholas/os grouping), Skaters (the mass of white students, self-identifying as 'alternative'), 'hicks' (mostly white students from hard-living and settled families) and, finally, 'Preps' (primarily white students from middle-class backgrounds). Bettie (2003) is concerned with the lived intersection between class, gender, ethnicity and sexuality and the ways these are perfomatively constituted and resisted. Similarly, writing about a group of white teenagers from poor and working-class families in rural Maine, Brown (1997) reveals how respondents resist masculine control and that, far from rejecting one's class positioning,

class provided a source of group identity, solidarity and even resistance, challenging Skeggs's (1997) notion of dis-identification. Rather than investing in their femininity (like Skeggs's respondents) the working-class girls in Brown's research also provide a challenge to the constraints and understandings of traditional femininity, a signifier which is both classed and sexualised. Working-class women may not be able to positively invest in a (masculine) working-class identity, to claim a 'Real Geordie'[2] (Nayak, 2003a, 2003b), 'white trash' status (Wray and Newitz, 1997), but the increasing theorisation of class solely in terms of dis-identification can be interrogated to include a stronger sense of when working-class and middle-class women do and do not identify themselves as classed.

I draw upon Skeggs's work to highlight the negotiation of positive and negative meanings of working-classness but I suggest that for working-class lesbians, identity is not solely based on 'dis-identification': being working-class is hard to 'avoid' when it is so 'obvious'. In everyday situations identity is categorised and called into question, yet the continued classed aspects of this are under-investigated. Identity is constructed in interactions and institutionally, continually informing understandings of who we are and who other people are: 'the categorisations of others is a process upon which to draw the construction of our own identities' (Jenkins, 1996: 87). Our identifications also require validations from others. It is not enough to assert an identity, as we cannot see ourselves without also seeing how others see us; interpretations, readings and understandings are negotiated in social encounters. The presence of class reveals itself in everyday judgements and interpersonal interactions – informing not only the type of person we declare ourselves to be but also what we are seen to be and the structuring of this identity.

Symbolic interactionism focuses on the subjective aspects of social life, on actors actively negotiating, creating and responding to their social worlds: society is thus organised in the patterned interaction amongst individuals. The emphasis on the social construction of society and people's negotiated realities and identities therein causes attention to be focused on the meanings these have for individual 'actors' and the 'roles' created, or 'scripted', and responded to through language, gestures and actions (Gagnon and Simon, 1973; Goffman, 1968, 196; Mead, 1927). These negotiated reflections, expressions and remembrances are particularly important for marginalised groups in that they highlight agency, subjectivity and interpretation as the everyday meaning-making events are highlighted and challenged: it allows for voices and stories that would not otherwise be heard and seeks to elevate and validate these stories as a matter of urgency. By engaging with recent

studies that explore identity in interaction I aim to highlight the material, subjective and interpersonal constructions of class and sexual identity across time and place.

As far back as in 1969 Goffman noted the importance of 'the presentation of self' during interaction and the significance of impression management strategies in the construction of social identity, recognising that identity could be 'spoiled' and devalued. The matter of identity claims, resistances and counter-claims is relevant to the study of working-class identity. For the women I interviewed, identifications as working-class were mediated by such processes, as they wrestled with the positive and negative meanings and experiences contained within the term, responding to and 'reconciling' this with an 'outsider's' view of them. I am convinced that class processes can be in play, even without 'accurate' affirmed definitions, but this is yet another contested terrain.

What you see is what you get? Defining class

There have been many attempts to define class, to say exactly what it is, raising much debate and controversy – followed by a long silence. There is little point in rehearsing such debates, especially as my purpose is not primarily to say what class is but rather what it does, achieved through a focus on working-class lesbians' experiences of class and the meanings which they themselves attribute to it.

There may be no agreed definition of class, but people are invariably classed on the basis of their occupations. The Registrar General's Classification,[3] which does not measure class in a theoretically sophisticated way, has been replaced by various other class categorisations. The main classes identified in the Goldthrope Scheme are the service class and a working-class. There are also intermediate classes: lower-level white collar workers and a petite bourgeois, comprising self-employed non-professionals and proprietors of small businesses. To these the 1998 classification added a bottom stratum, in effect an 'underclass'. The notion that people are somehow 'under' class, rather than part of it, is a contentious one. Nevertheless, the concept of 'underclass', with its connotations of stigma, regularly appears in political rhetoric and policy (Bradley and Hebson, 1999; Byrne, 2005; Ehrenreich, 2001; Zweig, 2000). What happened to 'classlessness' here? Re-definitions are not eradications and renaming is not resolving. The pervasiveness or importance of class inequality cannot be ascertained from categorisation and classification alone, but allocation to such positions, including 'underclass', gives an indication of the ways in which class is still, officially persistent.

Members of the 'underclass' are blamed for their own circumstances, unwilling to take advantage of educational and occupational 'opportunities' (Murray, 1990, 1994), marking an individualisation of class processes in neo-liberal times (Hey, 2003; Reese, 2005; Skeggs, 2004; Walkerdine, 2003; Wray and Newitz, 1997). A more accurate account is that of MacDonald and Marsh (2000), who suggest that while cyclical transitions can transform labour market marginality into what appears to be almost permanent socio-economic exclusion, there is not a class of people beneath the lowest class of the gainfully employed. Rather, there is a restructuring of the lower levels of the labour market typified by cyclical movements around peripheral work and unemployment (Webster et al., 2004). Many women I interviewed were unemployed but I view this as a result of their class position, rather than as a result of their being 'under' class. To categorise is not an easy or innocent process, but class schemes are easy to find, much debated and, I would argue, still inadequate; they cannot, nor do they attempt to, describe the experience of occupying these categories. The employment aggregate approach has little to say about how class is played out in everyday life, with the crucial question concerning how many classes there are, rather than what class does.

Although Crompton (2000) argues for a genuinely pluralistic approach to class analysis in order to capture its complexity, measuring and revealing 'who gets what', more qualitative approaches seek to understand how people perceive, experience and respond to their circumstances.[4] This is important given Reay's claim that the experience of working-class lives are documented in empirical analysis from a distance: 'the structural location of working-class groups is analysed in theory. Exploitation, urgency, struggle and necessity are lost in a sea of statistics or theoretical abstractions' (1998: 309). It is important to investigate both 'objective' and 'subjective' aspects of class. Working-class experience is different from middle-class experience because of economic inequality – but an exploration of how this is lived in requires moving beyond class categorisations alone.

A certain class of woman

Hennessy and Ingraham (1997) highlight the movement of capital into new forms of work, expanding the service sector, education and middle-management and the ways in which middle-class women can benefit from and capitalise upon these changes. Like others, I remain sceptical about these changes and question their benefits (Chasin, 2000;

Hennessy, 2000). The 'female future' may in fact be highly polarised, producing sharp divisions amongst women (Walby, 1997; Walkerdine et al., 2001). Furthermore, divisions exist between women who have educational credentials and skills and those who leave school with few qualifications and enter a labour market characterised by poorly paid part-time work. For many working-class women there is a greater likelihood of being employed in 'pink-collar ghettos', doing poorly paid part-time, insecure work. Thus, economic change has to be considered in relation to the feminisation of poverty (Gluckman and Reed, 1997).

In arguing for an analysis of the gendered constitution of the class structure, Crompton's (2000) analysis of household and family structures remains middle-class, which is acknowledged, and heterosexual, which is unacknowledged. Most labour market theory either ignores sexuality or considers it unimportant for the gendered operations of the labour market (Adkins, 1995, 2000). My work emerges from these gaps, making use of the focus on gendered employment inequalities, but suggesting necessary extensions, given the inattention to the experience of working-class lesbians. Women's disadvantaged labour position has been largely ignored throughout class analysis,[5] and lesbians have been further ignored, or presumed to be too 'confusing' for comment: Valentine (1993a), for example, argues that the class position of many lesbians is 'complex', 'fluid' and 'multiple' (Penelope, 1994; Raffo, 1997; Valentine et al., 2003). Although there has been attention to the linkages between sexuality and class or more accurately, between capitalism and sexuality, these occur without reference to classed individuals – putting class in but leaving working-class lesbians out.

There is some relevant work, including that produced by other self-identified working-class lesbians such as Munt (2000) and Allison (1988, 1992), cross-cutting literary, cultural and sociological disciplinary boundaries. Writing within a US context, Allison seeks to give the 'white trash' a voice, speaking against the misrepresentations of working-class women, lesbians and poor people, in general, as trashy, distasteful, excessive and wrong (see also Skeggs, 2004). 'White trash' life is characterised by Allison as harsh, brutal and often violent, mixed together by an all-pervading sense of hopelessness and despair and thus the romanticised myth of the noble hard worker is resoundingly questioned. However, while the working-class has been both vilified and romanticised, arguably it is the former positioning which currently dominates (Skeggs, 2004). Discourses of class, of taste and distaste, of propriety and respect, excess and waste are profoundly linked to discourses of sexuality.

Davis and Kennedy's (1993) ethnography charts the life experiences of working-class lesbians in the United States from the 1930s to the 1960s in Buffalo and New York, speaking of particular places and times when working-class lesbians had more recognisable cultures, communities and scenes. Also based in the United States, *Queerly Classed* (Raffo, 1997) charts the intersections between class and sexuality, based on the personal reflections of a number of academics and activists; this book challenges the concept of 'classlessness' within North America, revealing it to be one of the most pervasive lies (Gluckman and Reed, 1997). The dual consideration of class and sexuality highlights that to be on the outside on both counts is quite a significant burden to bear, the intersection amounting to an outlaw status as sexuality both compliments and negates class status. In naming the effect and impact of class across a range of sites, from education, employment and leisure to activism, attitude and esteem (Kadi, 1997; Willow, 1997), the collection seeks to put class and queer together, as two interlocking, inseparable spheres shaping everyday experiences, forcing a 'coming out' on two fronts (Becker, 1997; Brownworth, 1997; Witherow, 1997). The real, emotive, painful and happy experiences within this book surpass the theories that explain, numerate and account for class in an 'objective' manner, yet what is absent is empirical data, beyond the author's own individual, yet shared, experiences: clearly some of the authors have moved away from, although ever mindful of their classed 'pasts' (see also Penelope, 1994). Working-class lesbians have always existed while they have rarely achieved recognition or visibility (Faderman, 1991; Feinberg, 1993; Nestle, 1987). There is a need to chart the experiences of working-class lesbians who remain in this interlocked 'outlaw' space, both subjectively and materially.

Gluckman and Reed (1997) tackle the myth of the 'pink pound', of gays and lesbians as an economically advantaged, hedonistic, opulent and 'in your face' minority capable of acting up in and re-claiming a range of cultural spaces. Importantly, Gluckman and Reeds's analysis serves as a reminder that lesbians exist in every income bracket, challenging both gay and mainstream media. In a UK lesbian lifestyle magazine ('Lesbians: Loaded and Loving It', *DIVA*, February, 2005), lesbians were declared to be the 'new gay men', equally capable of matching gay men's income and spending power. This was followed by mainstream press attention which failed to question such middle-classification of lesbians and instead pointed out the historical lineage of lesbians' middle, even upper-class, capitals, re-endorsing the mythical 'pink pound' passage to full societal inclusion (Badgett, 2001; Gluckman and Reed, 1997).

Buying in to the in crowd

Consumption is one variable of social exclusion measures representing, for Crompton and Scott (2000), a collapsing of class and consumption. Indeed consumption, as a 'lifestyle generator', is seen to provide the focus for identity that once came from paid employment (Pakulski and Waters, 1996). In identifying consumption as a way of differentiating social groups, Bauman (1998) claims that the poor can be viewed as 'flawed consumers' in that they are failing in one of the most crucial duties of citizens in a consumer society. Similarly, Pahl (2000) discusses 'financial citizenship' as a way of differentiating social groups, arguing that new forms of money have a divisive impact on patterns of consumption, creating the credit rich and the credit poor, where a wallet full of plastic may be much more impressive than a purse full of real pounds and pence. Notions of 'flawed consumers' excluded from 'financial citizenship' point to class without pointing it out, while the intersection between class and sexuality makes apparent enduring forms of exclusion.

Roseneil (2000) charts the cultural valorising of the queer in popular culture, fashion, magazines and television. This is taken as evidence of the 'aspirational status of queer', rather than as the class-exclusive 'aestheticization of everyday life' (Fraser, 1999; Hennessy, 2000). Queer theory has been associated with the pursuit of a queer lifestyle, constructed through a 'postmodern consumer ethic'. To the lament of many materialist feminists, theories of lesbian identity are increasingly preoccupied with the queer subject of desire, rather than with material needs and constraints, representing a separation between gender and sexuality (Hennessy, 2000; Jeffreys, 1994, 2003). The queer emphasis on identities as 'performative significations' largely ignores the material factors at play in self-fashioning (Hennessy, 2000). As I have commented elsewhere, queer opportunities may be accessible and obtainable to middle-class urban dwellers, but lesbians living on the breadline may well have few opportunities for engaging in subversive parodic practices (Taylor, 2005a). Queerness may in fact only be accessible to those materially poised to occupy the position, in contrast to those excluded from both heterosexual privilege and the circles of the fashionably queer – or 'lesbian chic' (Hennessy, 2000).

Hennessy (2000) pays attention to the global nature of the structures of patriarchy and capitalism as sustaining a 'political economy of sex'. She rearticulates the materiality of sexual identity formations, transformations and commodifications, situating these in the global structures of late capitalism. Drawing upon a vast range of empirical, international