

How do I create self-worth?

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***Note:** so I wrote this in Spring of 2020, and it is now a year later in 2021. Over that year I did a lot of changing and learning, so there's probably things in this text I would find (in modern parlance) a little cringe. I'm not re-reading it to identify and remove them, I can't remember what I said. Let this be an artefact to past-me's foolishness, but if you get something from this, then good for past-me and for you!*

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I've been asked to tell you a story about how I create self-worth. This is in response to Beverley Skeggs' text "feeling class." How about this?

I grew up down the road to a girl named Kim.* We were part of a gaggle of white trash who stuck together in primary school; mostly single parents, bouncing between our ex/council homes with a loose sense of solidarity. We were both smart, she was probably smarter. But she was also scary, and violent, and a bully. In school, I crept inside myself, taught myself to read and took to that - but Kim was bored and angry and acted out. She made a spectacle of breaking out of school, and she made me cry on the regs.

Now we're both... twelve? Thirteen? And she's been kicked out of three local schools, and when me and my little sister walk home she's there to taunt us, threaten us, steal and burn our belongings. It comes to a head with an argument where I hover out the front door, her lurking by the road. "I hate the way you talk," she says.

I was a weird, nerdy kid. I used long words, and wouldn't realise. I modelled myself on Doctor Who and Sherlock and when I was eleven I said "twas" and "twixt" unironically (it was faster innit). I did well in school and I didn't have to try. This always pissed off the middle-class kids, but it also pissed off Kim. Remember, she was smarter than me. But she'd been let down by the myth of social mobility through education, she'd been demonised at a school that failed to provide the support she needed. To her, I was posh. To me, she was a chav.

Skeggs says social encounters are "dialectical movements of value." Think dialogue - think fight - you establish your value at the expense of someone else. They go down, you go up. In the culture at large, the upper class do this to us by controlling the structures of taste and morality, dictating what has cultural and moral value, ergo which people. They make jokes out of the places we come from, the people we love. But down in the grit between the teeth of capitalism, things are a bit more nuanced, and

how each working-class person creates self-worth in resistance to this order is different. It varies based on gender, sexuality, relationship to white supremacy, etc.

In their text *Fairies in the Underclass*, artist Maz Murray talks about how queerness in working-class spaces is/was read as posh, for lack of the right language. Flaming homo comedian Tom Allen - raised in South East London - says that from an early age, with no understanding why, he 'talked posh.' We know we're different. We just don't know how.

So, me and Kim. Kim and me. I'm soft and nerdy and queer, I know words I shouldn't and I use them with abandon. Kim is hard and tall and (allegedly) sucks dick for vodka, she knows words she shouldn't and uses them with abandon. So dialectics. God, there's so much, I'm sorry if I'm struggling to get it out. I'm trying to squeeze 20 years of experience through the filter of the little bit of academic knowledge I have access to and push it back out into the world.

Skeggs' main bit of research she's done was working with women outside Manchester who all did caring courses. She says they subvert the moral hierarchy of the ruling class, create self-worth, by situating themselves as morally superior mothers. She talks about how men perform a similar subversion of values, pushing against the dominant values of their schools to prioritise "excitement, toughness, and luck." Well, that sounds like Kim to me. I wouldn't be surprised if she was a secret queer.

Kim and I created self-worth by **spurning** off each other. Kim saw me as something she maybe was expected to be, maybe wasn't allowed to be, as "putting on airs" (a grave sin). To create worth against mine, she had to situate herself as stronger, tougher, remind me that I was a deviant and that I could be crushed. People talk about crabs in a barrel, but they never ask who put the crabs there in the first place.

In turn, I generated self-worth against her - she was a slut, she was throwing her life away. In school the nerds used 'chav' to mean kids who were normal, who fitted in, and who hated us. It was a way to reclaim the worth they denied us, by distancing ourselves from our own class. They reject us, we reject them, round and round we go. Teachers at my school used to say 'beware the nerds, because we'll be making the video games you pay for one day.' Ironic, given the state of labour rights in games, but still - there's this idea that we'll come out on top, that we get our own back through class domination. And we, the weirdos, the queers, the neurodiverse, cast out from the working-class self-identity, leant into that. It was a lie. It was all we had.

"When one enters a social encounter with an awareness of the possibilities for denigration, a defensive response to the potential negative evaluation is prepared."

- Beverley Skeggs

How about this: I'm fifteen, I'm bored and angry and acting out. I'm dating a tory (it lasted 6 days). Amelia* is a bisexual vicar's daughter from Kent, and our short-lived love affair consists of me exclaiming 'I can't BELIEVE you're a tory' over and over. She wants to work for Vogue, go to Oxford, and she attends a fancy grammar school (she didn't go to Oxford and votes Labour now love u bb xxx). The day before it ends, we go to the RA for a date.

She admonishes me for calling the paintings on display 'aesthetic' - "no, aestheticism was an art movement, you can't just use the word for everything." She's disgusted that I don't know who Emily Dickinson is. We hop on the tube to Kensington, walking through the parks. She admires the luxury architecture, stone balconies and that - I shrug; it's naff. She suggests going to see Emin's bed for £20 a pop and I lose my nut. We break up over messenger.

It wasn't fair. How should I know who Emily Dickinson is? At fifteen, Amelia already had a GCSE in creative writing. At school, the posh Mandarin teacher laughed at me for not knowing what dialectical meant, he called my comics cartoons. I told him to sod off back to Surrey. I saw all of these things that I didn't get to know, didn't get to see, that held up a cultural order that didn't want anything to do with me - and like Kim, I rejected it. Ignorance became resistance. I wanted everyone to know I was a chav and I thought their paintings and their poems were rubbish. In this way, I resisted Amelia's use of an upper-class dialectic of cultural value to pull me down, by flipping the switch. I knew I was entering a space where I didn't have the requisite knowledge; my defence was to reject its value entirely.

It was stupid of me to refuse to read Dickinson, though. Or engage with the paintings. I could do it, I enjoyed it - freed from the weight of judgement, of taste, of classification, it was the joy of art. Art is powerful because it communicates, even when language fails. When kids in school got mad at me for using big words they were scared of being inadequate, but we need to own these words. Words like 'dialectic' and 'bourgeois' (I refuse to know how to spell it) and 'alienation' - these are the tools we need to describe our experience. If we can describe our experience, build a mutual language of understanding, access a broad range of experiences, then we can organise around a mutual understanding of class. It's like tongues or something. The masters hoard knowledge because it's dangerous. Because knowledge is dangerous, we must steal it, create it, share it.

ella: right

ella: are you a chav?

aislinn: yeah, thats what im... unsure about?

aislinn: basically no, but that word and its connotations are smth i wanna dig into

aislinn: im still struggling to put it into words, but its like. stereotypes, working class masculinity, the way queer working class kids weaponise the word chav against straight working class kids, so the use of the word chav is trying to directly confront that dynamic? i guess?

aislinn: im drawn to it in titles bc its inflammatory, but also wary that its not really mine to reclaim

ella: okay

ella: Then lean into chav

ella: what's that book about chavs called?

ella: Is it just called chavs?

ella: Essentially in some sense.. *we all think of chavs as this label we own or don't own because of which friends we had or what we wore.. but it's actually this derogatory label for working class people when townies wasn't strong enough anymore.*

How about this.

I'm twenty, on a bus through Harold Hill to my mate's house. Mate sneers at a girl out the window - chav. "If we went to [Oxford/Surbi'on/Sowf Kensinton/wotever] right now," I say, "we'd all be chavs." It's something I tell my friends when they forget our place.

I generate self-worth by sounding extra common around poshos, by knowing more than them and refusing to prune the 'yeah's and 'innit's that grow on the end of my sentences. By knowing that knowledge is power and making myself an open-access archive for anyone who'll listen. By making long words public property. By recognising that for all the symbolic and real violence between us, Kim is my comrade. So is every shitbag who called me a freak in school. So is Amelia, really. So is everyone who faces selling their labour to get by. Whose cultural and real worth is diminished. Whose life (comfortable or not) hangs on a shoestring.

This dialectic - we all generate worth through a social capitalism. I can only be worth something by being worth more than you. When we invest in that system, whatever we place as valuable, we're buying into our own oppression.

I generate self-worth by acknowledging our collective worth. The workers are the value-creators, we make literally everything! As we've seen these last few months, maybe one lone worker can drop off and nothing changes, but collectively we could bring the world to its knees. The image of the chav is there to divide us, to make us hate ourselves, disidentify with each other, and to tell us that we are weak, powerless, feckless. But it's a lie.

We are all chavs. They're right to be scared.