

Resilience Embodied in Conversations and Creativity During a Covid Context

Beverley Hayward, Birkbeck, University of London, United Kingdom

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Abstract

Many working-class, disabled, mature women face great adversity in the academy in their (in)ability to play the game. Lacking the necessary cultural capitals to feel at home in the spaces of higher education, the women returnees describe themselves as interlopers in the education machine. Yet this positioning was overcome in a collective community of creative resilience. It was one outcome of the author's doctoral research at the institution in which the research was conducted, the University for the Creative Arts. Here the presentation of post-structural and postmodern lecture programmes encouraged new ways of knowledge production and meaning making. Again, this exploration of resilience was considered during the pandemic, as conversations between the researcher and the participants saw their resilient subjectivities changing. The physical containment in lockdown provoked new and innovative transformations in learning and development. Whilst a creative resilience prevailed, the confinements and constraints of freedoms were not without their challenges to their mental health and well-being. This paper explores the multiplicity of resiliencies as the women navigated their way in and now outside the academy in a covid context. Conversations continued as the artist-educator subjectivity triumphed during adversity in creative forms.

Keywords: Creativity, Covid, Education, Artist As Educator, Marginalisation, Representation, Ethnicity, Conversations

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Conversations to Introduce Creative Resilience

Many people belonging to minority groups, for example, Black, Asian, LGBTQI+, disabled and working-class, have difficulty finding their way in the university's masculinised, Eurocentric landscape (hooks, 1990; Jackson, Malcolm, & Thomas, 2011). Callendar and Melis (2022) discuss the disadvantages class places upon access and choice. This was the case for me and a group of first-generation university students who became part of my PhD research (Hayward, 2019). The research explored multilayered, and intersecting roles, performed in and outside the academy, as students, support workers and as what Clover (2010) terms 'artists as educators'. The context for this paper explores the significance of conversations and creativity over ten years including the recent covid pandemic and the post lockdown landscape. Considered are the embodied lived experiences and conversations as the resilient learner-artist-educator; this is despite a lack of representation in the academy and emotional and academic support (Finnegan & Merrill, 2017; Reay, 2017).

Entering the academy during the early 21st century, as mature, neurodiverse, working class women, we encountered great adversity in our (in)ability to 'play the game' (Bourdieu, 1985). We failed in the traditional pathway from school to university, as working-class teenagers. In a contemporary consideration of Pierre Bourdieu's (1985) notion of acquiring social and cultural capitals, we did not 'fit in'. Academics such as Diane Reay (2017), Liz Houlst (2012) Kerry Harman (2017) and Sue Jackson (2004; 2009; and 2012) expound upon marginalisation in higher education and are called upon in this paper to understand the complexities of resilience. As Jackson discussed at this very conference eight years ago, non-traditional students are required to fit into the existing structures and systems. And this is not without huge emotional distress and pain, and what Reay calls the 'inferior other' (2017, p. 101) or 'outcasts on the inside' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

Barely, playing the game, because as Houlst (2012, p. 97) explains in *A Winter's Tale* (2012), 'being in exile in a hostile land' the rules were neither known nor explained. We did not know how to research, read the right books, or write in that elusive third person. We could not speak the language of a 'mastery' discourse (Cixous, 1975). Yet this positioning was overcome in a 'collective community' of creative resilience (Clover & Stalker, 2007; Wenger, 1998; and Jackson, 2012). It was one of the outcomes of the doctoral research at the institution in which the research was conducted, the University for the Creative Arts (UCA). For this paper I draw upon the women's feminist interconnectivity and community of aesthetic praxis. This collaborative approach is an example of where 'resilient learners recognise, withstand, and negotiate the tension between inclusion and exclusion' (Houlst, 2012, p. 96). It is a psychological space in which much is made possible in a landscape of support and caring for the self and others.

Conversations Past: Resilience Created

To begin, in this conversation I wish to take you, the reader, back to a powerful film, inspiring my own transformation and mobilisation of resilience, *Educating Rita* (1983). The struggles and difficulties of Rita are clearly visualised in the film by showing Rita as a woman straddling two cultures, albeit with 'painful compromises', (Reay, 2017, p. 101). Yet, seeing difference, whether class, gender, disability or ethnicity, is necessary for those marginalised groups to believe in themselves. I really thought that if Rita could do it, so could I. Accordingly, it is fundamental to see representation in the academy of different intersections within the student, and indeed the academic, body. Lewis Gilbert, Producer and

Director of *Educating Rita* realised that people of colour needed representation and understood this for students and academics alike. Gilbert considered adapting the film with Halle Berry and Denzel Washington, playing the lead roles. Their profiles were prolific at that time as both won Best Acting Oscars that year. Nevertheless, this conceptualisation did not materialise. *The Guardian* (2002) recorded that Gilbert said of his planned production: “There are so many good black actors in America. You only have to think of the two black actors who took the Best Actor awards at this year's Oscars”. With a black cast on the big screen it might have encouraged people of colour to apply to the academy as students and positions that might influence a career pathway to think they can be teachers, lecturers and managers. It was a shame that the remake was abandoned for this invisibility, which compounds the struggles of those trying to enter the physical and psychological space of the academy.

Thus, entering the space of the academy is a process that is challenging, but the physical obstacles, such as childcare, finance, travel and time constraints are not the only barrier. Winning, succeeding in the academy is hindered by the psychological fears of failure and embarrassment. This metaphor of struggle is clear in Rita's experiences of attempting to enter the academy, as she forces her way into Frank's office. She struggles to open Frank's study/office and trips up as she finally forces open the door. However, there is a resilience already present in order to make that initial step into the university. There is a curiosity to know and understand the cultures of academia, the canons of literature, music, art etc. Nevertheless, the landscape is complex, and Rita is an example of what Reay terms, an ‘outsider within’ (2017, p. 127). Frank explains what is necessary for her transformation:

Look, there's a way of answering examination questions that is...expected. It's a sort of accepted ritual. It's a game, with rules. And you have to observe those rules. Poets can ignore those rules; poets can break every rule in the book; poets are not trying to pass examinations. But Rita, you are. And therefore you must observe the rules (Act One, Scene Three).

Interestingly, where this scene was filmed, Trinity College, was for a time the place at which one of my research participants studied languages. She explains her experiences of education:

I fell in love with this building, Trinity College, in Dublin and I used to drive pass on the bus. I could see all these people walking around and I would just think – that's the place to go. ... But I left after two years. I don't regret having gone there. ... by the time I'd got to that age I wanted to go to art school. Now, I think I'm doing the right thing [a support worker, working in an arts university, UCA] (Interview, 2016, in Hayward, 2019).

Thus, the psychosocial elements of the individual, that is the internal and external self, need to be aligned. Like Rita, access was opened up for the participants at UCA. They studied courses in the arts. The Open University accepted me, and it was Professor Sue Jackson who gave me a chance to make a difference to my life in 2014. She supervised my master's dissertation at Birkbeck and encouraged me on my doctoral journey. That same year she was the Co-Chair for the conference for which this paper was written. In conversation with Dr. Joseph Haldane, IAFOR's Executive Director, she discussed the transformative power of education (Jackson 2014, YouTube). She encouraged dialogue between the themes of the conferences, past and present. In the vein that Sue advocated I wish to revisit the theme of that year, transformation in conjunction with resilience.

She was a change agent at Birkbeck and also in my own life as a student and educator. She rightly points out that often those in education assume that access is a seamless transition from compulsory education to university. It isn't. Lacking the necessary cultural capitals to feel at home in the spaces of higher education, the women returnees and I describe ourselves as 'interlopers', 'imposters' in education's neoliberal 'machine' (hooks, 1994; Cixous, 1975). But feeling at home, whether in a physical or psychological space is contingent upon how safe those spaces feel to the individual. We did gravitate to those post-1992 universities that seemed less intimidating. In thinking about my embodied journey of resilience, I realised that this transformative journey began in earnest in 2012. Starting an MSc in Gender, Sexuality and Society, it was and is the lived experiences of the women and their agency in the choice of motherhood, care-giving activities and a career (Harman, 2021), that is of value and what inspired my motivations for my research.

Revealed were the embodied conversations about resilience, resistance and representation; this spirit of comradeship facilitated a less painful journey for us (Hayward, 2022). To make that journey a bit easier for other minority groups one such way is to make visible our journey; the door of the academy was forced open to make the transformation to the artist-educator that we knew we could be. Then we must continue with an active visible approach of support for one another. At UCA the inclusion of post-structural and postmodern lecture programmes encouraged new ways of knowledge production and meaning making. We could really see the local othered groups in our art that we presented to each other. This connected resilience continued in the recent covid pandemic as we made a concerted effort to stay in touch.

Conversations Presented: A Collective Community

In today's changing family and work dynamics, roles are complex, as the public/ private spaces are ambiguous and blurred. So as women make life-changing career and educational choices, different family dynamics are possible, specifically with the forced homeworking that has retained a post-lockdown legacy. Now there is a fluidity of the home, office, studio spaces, suggesting a possibility of development and change. However, the working woman finds it extremely difficult to manage a family and a career and study, especially without a network of support. The non-paid family labour of domesticity supports this exclusion, of many, from the workplace, obtaining a 'top job' and returning to education. For Bousfield (2000), non-paid family labour is defined as the 'abject space' and other theorists, Oliver (1997), Gilligan (1993) and Wolf (1999) eloquently explain this as the hidden unvalued labour of mothers carried out in the private sphere. And in a covid context, domestic abuse has been amplified as the private, for some, became a space of increased seclusion, so that violence was perpetuated. Traditional domestic 'spaces of femininity' remain, in the social structures from which women may feel oppressed, resentful and unable to leave in order to pursue a career or formal lifelong learning (Pollock, 2003).

'Habitual currents' are formed (Woolf, 1927) in a psychological styling of the psyche, and so patterns of behaviour are repeated to damage creative fulfilment. Rather than trying to explain this, I wrote an I-poem, which is the direct use of the interview data to construct poetry, entitled: *Unruly Women: our story as an I-poem*. This accompanied the exhibition discussed in the next section.

Part 1: Habitual Currents

In my head,
I heard the teacher:
Over and over:
Over and over:
YOU can't go to uni!
You're too stupid,
Stand behind your chair.
Repeat after me:
You'll be lucky to get ungraded.
Repeat after me:
You are thick,
Repeat after me:
You are stupid
You can't be an auctioneer,
You are a girl,
You have a cockney accent.

No careers advice.
I didn't really have any direction.
I wanted to go to art college,
But I was talked out of it.
It wasn't a real profession.
It wasn't a real job.
It was a hobby.
I wasn't good enough,
Do you know -
Like, you are good,
But not that good.
I didn't get many qualifications,
But art.
But there was no money,
In art.
There's no money,
In that, to do a job.

Do you know what I think I am missing?
The ambition gene.
Careers advice?
I would say was a bit poor on the ground.
I remember that there was a table,
With leaflets.
There were a few:
I would say nursing,
There were the banks,
There was insurance,
And teaching
I really wanted to go to art's school,
But all the leaflets,
Were pretty gendered really.

She is capable of more than that –
Make her go and do something else,
And she can draw in her spare time.

In the ECE 2014, Jackson stated this situation is driven by ideologies that are still reproducing knowledges that ‘promote the dominant Western paradigms’ of traditional epistemologies (Jackson, 2014, YouTube). These are imbedded within both the psyche of the individual and society at large (Walby, 1997, p. 5). Often placing working class women at the bottom of the employment hierarchical ladder, looking up at the ‘glass ceiling’ (Gatrell and Cooper, 2007). Positioned in de Beauvoir’s (1997, p. 626) conceptualisation of the ‘Other’ in institutions and ‘organizations’ (Beatty, 2007, p. 34-56), it is up to us as individuals and as a collective to find non-hierarchical and democratic ways to critique these hegemonic beliefs (Jackson, 2012; Harman, 2017).

Accordingly, the space of creativity and transformation is delicate and fragile. Being physically locked down, creativity may be locked in. Whilst a creative resilience prevailed, the confinements and constraints of freedoms were not without their challenges to our mental health and well-being. Focus was lacking and the motivation to make became a struggle. Speaking to my participant group there was for some an overwhelming feeling of uncertainty, that caused a sense of anxiety. On reflection, for me this lack of focus was tied to my inability to concentrate for long periods. Yet, other areas developed: I wrote a book of poetry in lockdown, *Memories Made: An Anthology of Poetry in a Covid Context* (2021). Thus, this consideration of creativity and identity is not fix in a Cartesian state of totality; instead it is as Belsey explains (1997, p. 661),

the subject is ... the site of contradiction and is consequently perpetually in the process of construction, thrown into crisis by alteration in language and in the social formation, capable of change. And in the fact that the subject is a *process* lies the possibility of transformation.

Consequently, as the social and cultural changes are instigated by Covid, the subject is able to adapt, but not without the need for conversations with those communities of collaboration. In this strange and unhomely landscape that facilitated the vocabulary for prose, conversations between the researcher and the participants saw their resilient subjectivities adjusting. The physical containment in lockdown provoked new and innovative transformations in learning and development. Times are changing, despite patriarchal ‘gender stereotypes’ (Beatty, 2007, p. 34). There is a huge amount of opportunity in which roles in partnerships and collaboration can be explored and negotiated (Hughes, 2002, p. 14). Accordingly, women artists as educators are in a continuous state of performance, negotiating and redefining identity and their place in society. There was a shift, in the function of the home, as the women were once more established in the private sphere, making, creating.

Post lockdown we became the ‘visible and public presence of women’ (Huyssen 1986, p. 62). In our exhibition *Unruly Women*, we actively discussed our work during covid and in conversation with the public during the exhibition. The once masculine space was now home to unruly women, and thereby denying, Plato through to de Beauvoir and onto Derrida’s, binary oppositions between the nature/feminine and culture/masculine (Huyssen 1986, p. 62). Normative masculine and feminine characteristics were confused, destabilised and subverted, as we became a confident collective body of positivity visualised in public/cultured spaces.

Covid facilitated this move in the landscape; as mature women our childcare duties were replaced with creativity. In contesting the dominant ideology of woman as mother and primary care-giver an alternative is given. The alternative of a 'top job' or artist, curator, forces the viewer to rethink the role of social and biological mother (Betterton, 1996, p. 11). However, I am not negating woman as mother, but offering alternative family, work and pedagogic dynamics. The stereotypical active 'male bread winner' and the passive 'stay-at-home mother' are a site that our exhibition problematises. The gendered roles are no longer easily defined as they change in accordance with the social relations and environmental changes in which the role is in acted. Society needs to support the choice that the individual makes in the private and public spheres, to facilitate possibilities and transformation (Clover and Harman, 2022).

Conversations for The Future

Having endured years of feeling our opinions were not valued, the margins are a space from which resistance is possible. and we showed ourselves to be resilient learners, educators, artists, possessing the ability to transform by supporting each other to visualise a creative resilience (Clover & Stalker, 2007; Wenger, 1998). 'Resilience is what breaks the chain of endless reproduction in an education system that rewards the rich with ever more capital' (Hoult, 2012, p. 103). Conversations are continuing as the artist-educators whose subjectivities triumphed during adversity. And by supporting and caring for one another, this paper shares with you, some of that abundant creativity. To view some of the images we created for the *Unruly Women* Exhibition they can be found on Twitter, and the panoramic photograph I took in situ. I will end with the second part of the poem that sums up our resilience in the conversations we had. At the exhibition, in conversation with a current student from UCA, she said that it was a representation of how she felt and should be used in schools as a learning tool.

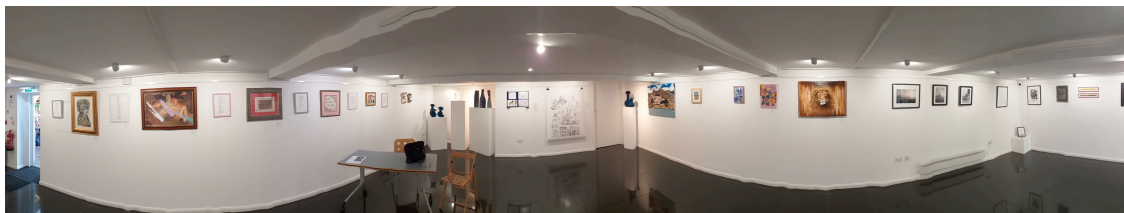


Fig. 1: *Unruly Women*, 2022 at the Nucleus Gallery Chatham, Kent. Photograph by Beverley Hayward, from left to right, featuring the work of Beverley Hayward, Jackie Hagan, Carole Hatfield, Chrissie Peters, Vickie Lane and Luna Zsigo.

Part 2: Flying Above and Beyond

I now consider myself to be an artist.
 I feel it has helped me
 Inspire young people,
 To achieve their dream
 And be creative.
 I want to inspire people,
 To not stop being creative.
 So, if they are in an art's uni,
 Like they are not there for nothing.
 It doesn't matter what they do with art,

As long as they recognise,
That they are creative,
As I am creative,
I can encourage.

I liked ceramics.
I liked the woodwork.
And I like making anything,
I've never really settled,
I'm a multimedia artist.

I am an artist.
Helping people.
Well if anyone's in need,
Then I seem to be there,
At the right time.
So, if I can help,
In any way,
To get them through,
To the next stage,
Even in the background.
You know I think,
Art should be fun.

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Contact email: b.hayward@bbk.ac.uk