Introduction

Much of the debate surrounding class inequality and social mobility highlights the role of education in reducing income inequality and promoting equity (e.g., Wakeling and Laurison 2017). Pursuing higher education has been viewed as an important strategy for low-income individuals to gain the capital and skills necessary for upward social mobility (Torche 2011). The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD 2012:4) claims that “in an era of growing inequality, education policies that focus on equity may be an effective way to increase income mobility, between generations and reduce income disparities in the future”. Such policies have been taken up within a Canadian context (e.g., The Ontario First Generation Bursary provided by The Ontario Student Assistance Program 2017) and as of 2006, 31.4% of Canadian individuals attending university identified as coming from low-income backgrounds (Youth in Transition Survey 2011).

On the other hand, reliance on higher education to effect class equality requires working-class individuals to assimilate into the very structures that oppress them in order to achieve social mobility, an “optimistic fantasy” that can never truly address class-based inequality (Reay 2017:102) and may reproduce it (Haney 2015). While many scholars have attended to the experiences of working-class university students (Lehmann 2007; 2009; 2014; Devlin 2011; Reay 2005), most of the literature that examines the experiences of faculty from working-class backgrounds is autobiographical.

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) notions of capital, *habitus* and field, this paper addresses two research questions: First, how is upward social mobility experienced by Canadian academics who come from working-class or impoverished family backgrounds? Second, how does class identity shift or adapt following upward social mobility? The qualitative analysis reveals complexities in how upward mobility is experienced; it did not mitigate the everyday exclusions experienced by academics who came from working-class or impoverished origins, despite increased economic capital. Mobility did not ensure the *habitus* and cultural capital needed to move smoothly in academic culture, hindering attempts to build social capital. Further, drawing on Yosso’s (2005) notion of institutionalized whiteness, participants in this study who identified as coming from working-class backgrounds and as racial or ethnic minorities, demonstrate the
ways in which the cultural capital valued within academia is embedded with notions of whiteness. While a lack of the required cultural capital to successfully navigate the social world of academia affected all participants from working-class backgrounds, it had unique implications for racialized participants, as they were doubly disadvantaged within academia.

This paper critiques the notion of social mobility by illustrating the various experiences of working-class academics or those coming from impoverished backgrounds. In doing so, this paper argues that discourses around social mobility do little to trouble the structures of academia that render certain individuals as cultural outsiders in the first place and hide the many ways in which notions of class and race are embedded within the culture of academia.

**Literature Review**

*Theoretical Framework: Pierre Bourdieu*

For Pierre Bourdieu (1984; 1986; 1990) social inequalities are reproduced in distinct social fields, internally structured networks and sets of relationships among individuals, groups and organizations that establish dominant social and cultural rules. The ways that individuals are hierarchically distributed within fields is based on the amounts of multiple forms of capital they possess, and the value assigned to these forms of capital within the field (Bourdieu 1986). Individuals who lack the necessary forms of capital dominant within certain fields are hindered in their abilities to successfully navigate the social field, rendering them marginal (McCormick 2006).

Economic capital is understood as material assets such as money, income and material resources (Bourdieu 1984; 1986). Cultural capital concerns nonmaterial cultural resources that can be converted into economic resources, such as educational credentials, types of knowledge and expertise, and verbal skills. Furthermore, cultural capital can operate as “an internalized code that enables the deciphering of cultural fields, relations, and objects” (McCormick 2006:256)—knowing the ‘right’ things to ensure ease of movement in a given social field. Social capital refers to networks of social relationships and institutional connections that can be drawn upon as a resource—knowing the ‘right’ people. Symbolic capital refers to the prestige, honor, respect, and legitimacy that accrue to practices in a specific context, becoming a resource for wielding power (e.g., by conveying disapproval).

The constellation of these forms of capital in particular social fields serve to recreate and reproduce class distinctions. *Habitus* is the embodiment of class conditions and forms of capital: preferences, tastes, ways of being and doing that feel highly individual yet are socially produced (Bourdieu 1984). Habitus is, in a sense, how class gets under the skin, providing the internalized dispositions and mental structures that people draw on to navigate social fields. Habitus is evident in ways of “standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking” (Bourdieu 1990:70), though those become largely unconscious. Ultimately, habitus is the embodiment of
field-specific knowledge and capital that enable a “feel for the game” in a particular social field (McCormick 2006:258). When people lack the capital required to successfully navigate a social field, they are marginalized, feeling the “weight” of their habitus within a context in which it does not fit (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:127).

Working-Class in Higher Education

Bourdieu’s theoretical constructs have been extensively applied to the research on the educational experiences and outcomes of students from working-class backgrounds (e.g., Lehmann 2007; 2009; 2014; Devlin 2011; Reay 2005; Ostrove and Long 2007). As a social field, higher education is “immersed in social class” (Hurst and Nenga 2016: 6), marked by middle-class “markers” such as particular types of “clothing, speech, and interests” (Ostrove and Long 2007:365). Students from lower class backgrounds may not possess these forms of cultural capital, resulting in reduced sense of belonging and academic performance (Ostrove and Long 2007). Though present at the university, working-class students may remain “cultural outsiders” (Lehmann 2007; 2014). A qualitative study in Canada found that working-class students experienced a “break” in their habitus when entering university; the middle-class cultural practices embedded in academia left working-class students “caught between” new and old social worlds, not fully belonging to either (Lehmann 2014:12). Yosso (2005) extends that critique, noting that universities are steeped in institutionalized whiteness – a process by which power and privilege is afforded to white individuals through organizational structures and ideology. Institutional whiteness in the context of academia leaves students from racialized groups needing to learn the cultural capital of whiteness, “the cultural knowledge deemed valuable by dominant society” to succeed (2005:75). Thus, the cultural capital valued within academia can not only be reduced to class tastes and preferences, as it is just as bound up with a culture of whiteness that is privileged within academia.

Apart from autobiographical accounts (e.g., Dews and Laws 1996; Hurst and Nenga 2016; Muzzatti and Samarco 2006), there is little research on the experiences of academics from working-class backgrounds, and almost none in Canada. Most research has been conducted in the United States. Perhaps most prominent, Grimes and Morris (1997) surveyed working-class sociologists, finding that those who entered the social world of the university never truly felt that they belonged there or in their home communities; rather, they were “caught in the middle…and part of neither [social world]” (1997:18). A more recent qualitative study (Lee 2017) suggests that while the process of upward mobility through the university arguably removes stigma around class identity, universities ultimately heighten class-based stigma by fostering a normative upper-middle class culture. In Canada, Haney (2015) surveyed 176 working-class academics, finding they were burdened with assimilating into the class culture of academia, while sacrificing relationships with their families and communities (2015). Again, as we have documented elsewhere, that critique extends beyond class; racialized and Indigenous academics
in Canada face a culture of whiteness and colonialism in which the requisite cultural capital may be hard-earned (Authors, 2018).

Symbolic Capital and Boundary Marking
When social fields change with upward mobility, the habitus formed in the family of origin no longer fits well—it becomes disrupted, “a habitus divided against itself” (Bourdieu 1999:511). People may feel highly uncomfortable and anxious while acquiring new cultural capital to skillfully straddle class differences, and as a result may engage in processes of moral-boundary marking to signal class identity and allegiance (Lamont 2000; Lehmann 2009). To do so, they may employ symbolic capital by drawing on available class-based markers to strategically demonstrate alignment with one class group or the other. They may distance themselves from working-class origins to solidify their new class positions, depicting their families as lacking: “They do not know the right things, they do not value the right things, they do not want the right things” (Lawler 1999:11). Alternatively, they might signal allegiance with their working-class roots, refuting a new middle-class status. Both are processes of moral boundary marking, the employment of symbolic capital in the form of class-based symbols to mark alignment with or distance from particular classes (Lamont 2000).

Generally, the socially legitimated preferences and practices of the upper classes carry symbolic capital, marking the upper classes as respectable and virtuous, while simultaneously marking the lower classes as lacking: less intelligent, less virtuous, less respectable, and less worthy (Lawler 1999). But moral boundary marking, defining a ‘good person,’ is multidirectional; the lower classes, too, assert their worth and dignity relative to others, signaling virtues like thrift and work ethic as distinguishing them from the ‘unscrupulous’ or ‘lazy’ upper classes (Lamont 2000). As Haney (2015) found, some working-class academics work hard to display middle-class affiliation, while others signal pride in working-class identity.

This paper explores the professional experiences of Canadian academics who came from impoverished or working-class family origins. As Hurst and Nenga point out, “There are many people who inhabit academia who have never gone to bed hungry”; yet, “We who grew up poor, who grew up witnessing the myriad indignities and humiliations visited upon our parents, our brothers, our sisters, our communities, can never forget our pasts” (2016:4). Using habitus and cultural capital, we examine how participants experienced belonging and marginality within academia, and how those in turn shaped social capital. Further, we pay attention to how class and race intersect particularly in relation to cultural capital and how, for many of the racialized participants, it was difficult to untangle the two in many of their experiences. Finally, we consider how symbolic capital and moral boundary marking were operationalized in processes of class identification.

Methods
The data come from a larger qualitative study exploring experiences of belonging and exclusion for Canadian university faculty members who self-identified as coming from social groups that may be marginalized by race, ethnicity, indigeneity, LGBTQ identity, disability and class origins. Gender was not a focus for recruitment so much as a focus for attention in analyses. Following university research ethics approval, participants were recruited through team members’ professional networks and snowball sampling, resulting in a sample from a wide range of Canadian universities and disciplines, including small to large universities, teaching and research-intensive, in small and large cities. All were tenured Assistant, Associate or Full Professors, who had been in the professoriate for five to 33 years. While limited-term and sessional instructors face deplorable precarity in the academic job market (Foster and Birdsell Bauer, 2018), this study focused on the experiences of tenured professors to explore how class continues to operate in the lives of people who are seen to have ‘made it’ in academia, when presumably ‘belonging’ has been attained.

Of the thirty participants, a sub-sample of eleven identified as coming from working-class or impoverished backgrounds (4 men, 7 women). Some of those eleven also identified with other marginalized identities and spoke primarily about those. (See Table 1 for demographics). For example, Lana’s work life was far more directly affected by a disabling chronic condition and being a queer single parent than by her working-class background, which she scarcely mentioned. Eva identified as working class but was far more focused on how Indigeneity shaped her work life. Five participants spoke in more detail about experiences with racism in the academy, though class was also addressed. While other identities certainly informed participants’ academic experiences, this paper focuses primarily on the impacts of class, which are not always easy to tease out, as they are often bound up with race and ethnicity. At times participants were very clear that they could not know whether an experience was due to class or other aspects of marginalization.

Table 1: Participant demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Class origins</th>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Years in professoriate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Edward</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Poverty, ethnic minority</td>
<td>Social sciences</td>
<td>10–14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Markus</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Working class, ethnic minority</td>
<td>Social sciences</td>
<td>10–14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yusuf</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Working class, racialized</td>
<td>Social sciences</td>
<td>20–30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>Education/law/social work</td>
<td>20–30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Working class, racialized</td>
<td>Education/law/social work</td>
<td>15–19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Working class, Indigenous</td>
<td>Education/law/social work</td>
<td>5–9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Working class, LGBTQ</td>
<td>Sciences/engineering</td>
<td>10–14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lana</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Working class, disabled, LGBTQ</td>
<td>Social sciences</td>
<td>15–19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>Social sciences</td>
<td>10–14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>Health/Medicine</td>
<td>5–9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>Health/Medicine</td>
<td>15–19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Following discussion of informed consent, semi-structured interviews grounded in critical theory were conducted with each participant by phone or in person. Questions included: How did your class identity inform your decision to enter academia? When do you feel like you least or most belong in your career? What would you tell your younger self before entering academia? Qualitative interviews allowed for a nuanced and in-depth discussion of participants’ everyday experiences of inclusion and exclusion within their careers. Interviews were one hour to two hours long and were transcribed verbatim, then de-identified with pseudonyms assigned.

Using ATLAS.ti data analysis software, all interview transcripts were analyzed by two of the authors, to capture themes in career trajectories and experiences, with a focus on belonging and exclusion. Themes were categorized by establishing codes, both informed by theory and previous empirical research, and using codes that arose in vivo. Interpretations and coding were confirmed through regular discussions with the larger research team, bringing in perspectives from diverse class origins. The authors repeatedly returned to the full transcripts for constant comparison across participants. A narrative summary was sent to each participant for feedback, as a form of member-checking.

Findings

Economic and Cultural Capitals: On Being “Cultural Outsiders”

Cultural capital enables ease of movement and social success in a class-specific social environment or field. When the context changes, ways of being that feel natural or unconscious may no longer allow smooth movement through social settings; the primary habitus, formed in the family of origin, is no longer a good fit (Bourdieu 1984). Upward social mobility may result in a disrupted habitus within an individual (Lawler 1999:14)—a sense of displacement, shame, and anxiety about being discovered. In such situations class-of-origin cultural capital no longer reaps benefits as individuals must cultivate cultural practices valued in the new social field.

Our study participants first noticed their ill-fitting cultural capital during undergraduate and graduate studies, perceiving themselves as cultural outsiders within academia (Lehmann 2007; 2014). As Lana stated, “I come from a really working-class family. No one had ever really gone to university or knew what university was about.” She later commented, “Going to [University] was a really big culture shock for me. I learned all kinds of things about how to dress, and about drinking, and, you know, what wine was supposed to be chilled and what gets served warm and uncorked and, yeah, a big learning curve, kind of culturally.” Liz wondered throughout her degrees when she would be discovered as a fraud and sent home: “I just don’t belong here. What am I doing here?” In graduate school, Eva felt “like a half breed Eliza Doolittle!” though she also took delight in challenging assumptions about who should be present.

Edward initially perceived the university as alien: “It’s a different language, it’s a different way of speaking, it’s a different way of seeing the world.” At odds with the culture of academia, he
almost left in the first month: “I almost quit university actually… I was like, this is all bullshit! These people are stuck up.” Richard also almost quit university:

I found myself in this strange world… I’d sit in the lounge, and feel absolutely alienated… It seemed to me that the other students began from a different place. They began from a different culture. They were sophisticated in ways that I was not. They travelled and they knew things about travel and art and literature that I didn’t know.

Markus did drop out of his first university program, saying, “I just didn’t fit in. I had a really, really hard time.”

Acute awareness of class difference was not always experienced as negative. Liz recalled standing in front of an imposing stone building on campus, thrilled to be surrounded by world-class scholars, “I remember just standing there thinking ‘What’s a little girl from [rural area] doing here?!’ (laugh).” Janet echoed the excitement of being an outsider in the academy due to her working-class and racialized identities: “I remember when I first arrived… thinking ‘Oh, I always want to be in a place like this’… It just seemed so full of possibility.” Eva saw herself as “statistically improbable,” having longed to attend university, “even though I grew up in a single parent family and my mom doesn’t have a university degree.” She was grateful her mother had encouraged her to do something she loved regardless of economic practicality, even when Eva was working to pay off student loans.

Participants’ awareness of cultural difference from their peers was intensified by lacking the economic capital required to participate in social activities. As a student, not being able to buy drinks set Patricia apart:

The class issue, I noticed in terms of the social activities, right? Now, I wasn’t necessarily interested in going with all of these people to whatever they were doing anyways… ‘We’re all going pub-hopping Friday night. Come on out.’ Well, I’m sitting there going, ‘I can’t spend five bucks at each pub we hit for a drink! I just don’t have that kind of money. That’s not what my money’s for.’ And so that way, it set me apart.

Patricia could not afford the activities her classmates took for granted, but her working-class disposition also meant she did not assign priority or value to those events. Nonetheless, such informal social gatherings may be where middle-class social capital is cultivated as individuals learn and are encouraged to network with the ‘right people.’

As a student Edward also struggled to participate in social activities, because he was employed full-time and could not afford to waste money. He and other teaching assistants regularly met with their course professor over lunch; he had told the professor he could not afford to eat in a restaurant, and always claimed he was not hungry. One day the professor taunted Edward, telling
the group he could not afford to buy lunch: “I think that he didn’t necessarily believe that somebody was really that broke and at [this institution] doing a graduate degree.” Edward was furious: “I bought myself a lunch from that point forward, always bought a lunch which I couldn’t afford.” Unlike Patricia’s choice to opt out of social events, Edward’s work responsibilities required him to participate. His professor’s goading suggests an assumption that university students possess particular economic and cultural capital, again positioning working-class students as cultural outsiders.

Once they secured faculty positions, participants no longer lacked economic capital, though as Edward noted, he still felt a gnawing (if unrealistic) worry about how he would pay for rent and food: “I don’t think that other people who are in the same position worry about whether they’re going to eat or have money, whereas I do literally worry about that.” (As Haney [2015:180] notes, working-class academics may also be providing economic support to other family members.) Despite his income and employment security, Edward’s class-of-origin habitus and disposition remained at odds with his current material reality and acquired socioeconomic status.

Participants’ lack of middle-class cultural capital and habitus continued to position them as outsiders. Professional social status and authority rely upon notions of ‘respectability’ conveyed through speech, tastes, demeanor, comportment and appearances (Young 1990). Sarah described feeling “a bit disheveled” in her appearance, not as “put together” as her colleagues. She spoke of the disdain expressed by colleagues when people brought the ‘wrong’ things—such as processed foods—to departmental potlucks. She also sometimes felt intimidated meeting the parents of her students. Liz described the embodiment of poverty, saying, “My mouth has the effects of no dental care for all those years… I don’t know anybody else among my colleagues who has had that experience of losing teeth… most of my colleagues have lovely teeth.”

Even the expected conversational topics at social events could highlight outsider status by signalling cultural backgrounds that clash with expected patterns. Edward was aware that much of his life experience would not fit within academic conversational norms, due to both class background and ethnicity: “How do you break that open when you’re talking with Deans at a Deans’ lunch? ‘Yeah, so I’ve had two cousins that were shot, one that died, and I’ve had relatives in jail’ you know? That’s not dinner conversation.” Casual sharing of personal stories in informal conversations often positioned participants as outsiders, making concrete a sense of having the ‘wrong background’ for the culture of academia. In Edward’s situation, both his class and ethnic identities positioned him as a cultural outsider in relation to the dominant culture of academia – a culture embedded with whiteness and class-based notions of respectability.

Several people mentioned language and ways of speaking as symbols of class. Stephanie consciously changed her own speaking patterns to try to approximate what she observed in academia: “I have to really search deep for vocabulary. I think that’s sort of the working-class
background. And my colleagues…they sound like poets to me.” Participation in everyday conversations at the university presupposed ways of speaking that were uncomfortable and unfamiliar to Stephanie. Similarly, Richard described paying close attention to “syntax and grammar” and having at one point deliberately stripped his vocabulary of a politicized language of class. Eva spoke of working “really hard at learning how to be a code talker,” switching ways of talking and thinking between the culture of the university and her own working-class Indigenous culture. Such experiences of not-quite-belonging are perhaps one reason why many participants felt more comfortable, “more casual and relaxed” (Patricia), with university staff such as secretaries than with faculty colleagues.

Markus concisely described his sense of being a cultural outsider in academia, suggesting that, “You’re not of this world...you always remain slightly an outsider. And that’s not a bad thing. To me, that’s a good thing.” Though he often felt isolated, he thought being an outsider provided a unique vantage point valuable to his research and teaching. He thought his class background helped him avoid “oppressively enforcing rules without ever understanding what kind of problems and struggles [students] may go through,” something he often witnessed. Eva was routinely awarded bursaries in graduate school, because “I was still the poorest kid in my year!” Yet she described that marginality as a rare gift: “So I was in a margin, in an extremely bad way, in the circles I was in, but I was in the margins in a very rare and good way, from the circles I was from. You know?” Her whole interview emphasized not really wanting to fit in to academia.

For racialized working-class academics, it was not always possible to identify when social encounters were affected by race and when by class; these always intersected, particularly in relation to cultural capital. Janet spoke of feeling out of place during social events, due to her race and working-class background:

The social events, it’s… how people conduct themselves in these situations. … I don’t think—I’m not going to say this is limited to people of colour, I think it’s also a class thing too. So, if you have an event at the President’s house, it’s nerve wracking. I mean, how do I deal with this? Who am I going to talk to? I’m really struck by how many people feel like we do not belong there, except for the white men.

While race was often the more visible attribute of not-belonging, the cultural cues of social class were also operating through participants’ disrupted habitus. In contrast, other racialized participants from our larger sample commented on their upper-middle class cultural capital reducing marginality and alleviating the feeling of not belonging. One Afro-Caribbean participant suggested her cultural capital facilitated belonging:

We weren’t old money or anything like that. But we were, I guess we’d be considered sort of upper-middle class. So, a lot of the manners type issues – it’s not trivial, right? You go out to one of these dinners or you’re at a search committee for whoever, and the Chair’s there, and it’s stressful. Um, so a lot of those things I learned at home. (Marianna)
Similarly, for a disabled participant, cultural capital reduced barriers to inclusion:

I was in an academic environment growing up. So, we would have professors in the house. I guess half my dad’s friends were academics. So yeah, in terms of how one discusses, how you have, you know, a cocktail party conversation, I was trained to do that from very young. It’s been a huge advantage in that way. Becoming an academic and having that sort of academic identification, I don’t even know that there was an actual transition, or if there was, it was minimal… early training made all of that far easier than it could have been or would have been, if I had come from a different background. (Emily)

Social Capital: Isolation and Separation

Almost all participants described feeling isolated. The lack of cultural ease in the social field of academia extended to having weak social connections with other academics. Participants described themselves as having colleagues, rather than friends, at the university. Though she was not always certain whether it was because she was lesbian or because of her class background, Stephanie just avoided social events: “I don’t want to go out for drinks with people…I feel like I do not belong at that table.” Liz said bluntly, “Academics in general are kind of a weird group. Right? And they’re not my favourite people to hang out with, in my social life, quite honestly. There’s a lot of very twisted personalities and egos! (laugh)” Some participants had friendships with other working-class colleagues, and some crossed classes in their friendships. But they were equally likely to be friends with staff.

Academic conferences were singled out by several participants as a site where they intensely experienced habitus disruption (Lawler 1999). While conferences can be a means to build social capital though networking, navigating them successfully relies on a specific type of habitus and cultural capital. Three people independently used the term “schmoozing” to describe conferences, noting how the expected performances and “posturing” felt alien. Several people named conferences as moments when they felt like they least belonged in academia. Sarah called conferences “cliquey,” saying, “I don’t want to be one of those people who goes and schmoozes with the best-known people at the conference… I often feel like I’m on the outside. I often feel like I’m on the fringes.” Stephanie reflected on the career impact of her inability to use conferences to build social capital:

I cannot schmooze for the life of me. I tend to go wallflower at conferences, at seminars. It takes a lot for me to be proactive. And that really does have an impact on my career, because it is so important to do that stuff, both for career progression but just for, you know, getting grants, getting papers, to get your name out there and have people know who you are.

Like Sarah and Stephanie, Markus also found conferences challenging, so his attendance had declined: “You just get tired of the networking and the schmoozing. I’m a relatively unconnected
academic. I work mostly alone…I don’t have a large network…I’m not on any big projects. I tend to do my own thing.” Thus, the discomfort arising from a disruption of habitus and cultural capital perpetuated restricted social capital.

While conferences and social events may be awkward for many academics regardless of class background, it is interesting that almost all of our participants from working-class and impoverished backgrounds singled out conferences for specific mention when asked about not fitting in. In contrast, Emily (introduced above) felt completely at home at conferences, largely because of her upper-middle class upbringing and possession of the requisite cultural capital:

In terms of when I feel like I most belong, I am the queen of the conference…I know how to work a room and to schmooze and negotiate. I know who should talk to…I know just about everyone there…I’m really good at those short snappy conversations that people then remember…I mean, let’s be honest, it’s a performance, right? You put on your academic costume and you go out and you perform ‘professor’, and I’m very good at performance.

Networking at conferences requires a certain performance, an embodiment of the cultural capital required in academic spaces to successfully make connections, know the ‘right’ people and impress others with your work. Emily’s class background facilitated a sense of ‘belonging’ at conferences and alleviated much of the distress she experienced in relation to her disabled identity.

While some people were isolated in their own universities, and some more broadly in their disciplines, many also described a growing distance from their working-class families as they immersed in the social field of the academy. As Haney found in his survey of working-class academics, families may resent being unable to understand their adult children’s work lives, and in turn academics may struggle against being perceived as snobbish (2015:177). Some conversational topics become off-limits or awkward.

These tensions were echoed in our study. Eva was one of several who described family reunions as “pretty stressful sometimes.” She felt she “stuck out” as the only one with a university degree among dozens of cousins. Stephanie felt her career was “almost resented a little bit,” while Sarah said, “There’s been some weirdness around me being an academic… kind of anti-intellectual things.” Several people said their families do not understand what they do:

It’s just sort of mysterious to people… From the working-class perspective, this is somebody who doesn’t work with their hands or anything like that, right? Doesn’t produce anything really tangible. (laugh) You know? They think maybe I have the whole summer off. (Janet)
Both Richard and Markus saw their academic work as inaccessible and irrelevant to working-class relatives. Markus said of his parents, “I don’t really tell them what I do, and they don’t really ask.” Richard thought class mobility had seriously compromised his family relationships: “There’s a deep dissonance…it’s been a huge rupture… Your obsessions have no relevance or meaning for the people that you love.” He went on to note that the awkward conversations are bi-directional: “I wasn’t as able to talk about, you know, carburetors and transmissions and automobiles and fishing and hunting. I also lived inside of a world of text.” Patricia attributed the end of a relationship to her career: “My rise in my profession and my education was a factor in the breakdown of my marriage. And the more I start to see myself as separate from where I came from, you start to hang on to where you came from a little bit.”

Coupled with social isolation occasioned by lacking the requisite habitus and cultural capital to mingle easily with colleagues, participants often grew increasingly distant from their working-class roots, leaving them fully belonging nowhere:

You’re not entirely sure sometimes where you belong and who you are and where your allegiances should be. And you lose to some extent, a closeness with friends and your family, and you become kind of distanced from them. And that can be, um, a pretty high price to pay. (Markus)

This disconnect from both their working-class roots and the middle-class social field of academia meant participants felt not fully a part of either social world. They were “caught in the middle” of both, while not really belonging in either (Grimes and Morris 1997:18).

At the same time, connections to family and community of origin sometimes added responsibility. Eva did not (or could not) separate social class from Indigeneity when she repeatedly described “being responsible to the community where you’re from” as an ongoing tension:

We’re going to get phone calls from family members who are in desperate times, very, very regularly. And how we navigate those conversations is very important … People who are so important to us, having such difficult experiences… we have relatives show up, with no notice, who have no money, who are pretty good people or may be in trouble, and we’re not going to help them? You know? Of course we would. But that might mean that suddenly we have to back out of a conference…

Here ‘we’ seems to be about both class and Indigeneity.

Symbolic Capital: Disavowal and Disenchantment

Most participants struggled with class identity, unsure where to align themselves. Their income was clearly middle-class or higher, yet their habitus and cultural capital made for an awkward fit. As Haney notes, class is possibly the one form of social inequality where people work hard to escape social membership; other forms allow far less mobility (2015:175). But escape also
entails losses. Yusuf described the conflict between the desire for upward mobility and the actual experience:

It’s a funny feeling ‘cause you want to [move up] on the one hand. Your parents, your teachers encourage you, inspire you to get out of your class skin and they want you to move up and be somebody…and when you move up…you come to a more comfortable position, and you kind of question your values, you kind of feel deep in your heart the pain and suffering of the marginalized.

Yusuf describes the internal conflict when individual success means assimilation into middle-class, white culture, while doing little to effect change for racialized working-class people generally; in fact, assimilation may bolster the class structure (Reay 2017) and thus reinforce institutionalized whiteness within academia (Yosso 2005).

Despite the high income and social status of the professoriate, most participants were overtly resistant to middle-class identity and engaged in processes of moral boundary marking to align with their lower-class roots. Sarah stated outright, “Even though I got to sort of an objective class position that was quite different, I still think of myself as a working-class person.” While Lawler (1999) found upwardly mobile individuals distanced themselves from their working-class heritage, finding fault with the values and practices of their families of origin, in our study participants tended to disavow their current class status. They engaged in moral boundary marking (Lamont 2000) through explicit critique of the middle-class practices and values of academia, contrasting their own (lower-class) moral virtues. For example, Janet worried early in her career that she might “become one of those upper-class jerks that [she] used to have to deal with as a working-class person.” Richard expressed strong discomfort with a middle-class identity: “It means being phony…all the power that that kind of brings…makes me uncomfortable.” Yusuf suggested an avenue for reconciling his class background with his acquired class status, explaining that though he remains working-class at heart he has added an identity of “public intellectual”:

As you build your cultural capital, you transform yourself…you are a different person. But deep at heart, when you go way down…I am that working-class kid, and I feel like a working-class kid, but in terms of my cultural understanding and awareness of the world, I am a public intellectual… an activist in that sense. I’m working for, constantly struggling for social change. An identity as socially-engaged intellectual seemed to make class mobility into academia more palatable for Yusuf.

Class disavowal surfaced when several people stated that when they could buy a house they deliberately bought ‘on the wrong side of the tracks’: “I wanted just to blend in with the ordinary people” (Liz). Similarly, Patricia took pride in resisting dress codes of academia, always wearing jeans. Several people cursed during our interviews or explicitly stated they were working hard
not to, a practice not considered ‘respectable.’ Markus spoke of having developed middle-class tastes in food, wine and music, but also retaining working-class preferences:

I still like stuff that probably I wouldn’t necessarily admit to (laugh) my colleagues. There’s still a certain kind of music that, to me, it’s not even a guilty pleasure. It’s just a pleasure that is probably very ‘common’. And I like reading books that are not necessarily always classy, even though I do that as well. And I love beer!

When he described having been embarrassed by his parents’ preferences and backwardness as a young man, Markus said, “It makes my skin crawl just to say it, but you feel kind of embarrassed sometimes.”

For some disavowal of a middle-class identity was accompanied by a sense of disillusion or disenchantment. Four people independently referred to academia as a “game” with distinct rules and competitions. Bourdieu noted that each social field requires a “practical sense of what is to be done,” what he called “a ‘feel’ for the game” (1998:25). Our participants described academia as a game in that way: “I have a sense after all these years that I’m only now just starting to figure out the game. There are lots of aspects of it that I don’t know that I’ve ever really learned how to play” (Liz). But they also used the term game in a way that implied something irrelevant, artificial, involving playacting; disenchantment was evident. Liz said, “It all feels like a game to me.” Markus was more derogatory: “I just find that whole posturing and the whole playing the game too sleazy…I’m not very good at those types of things.” Richard spoke of the importance of understanding universities as driven by marketing and managerialism:

It’s all a game and you take what you can from it, and try not to believe in it, because there are other things that matter a whole helluva lot more. You know?

And do what you’re doing to survive… Just don’t buy it. Don’t believe in it. Go through the motions. And don’t let them know who you really are.

Participants did not romanticize working-class lives; they all acknowledged academia was better than other employment options. In graduate school when other students complained, Edward thought, “What the fuck are you talking about? [laughs], this is pretty good!… I felt like I had robbed the bank.” Richard said of academia, “It’s a good gig! I’m not grinding up asbestos!”

Still, some participants struggled to retain a sense of meaningfulness, while others disengaged from their work, insisting that academia was just a job, and refusing to take it seriously—another form of moral boundary marking.

The notion of academia as a “game” not to be taken seriously may negate the toll upward mobility took on participants. After our interview Liz reflected in an email, “I realize for the first time how much WORK and energy I have put into achieving the position that I have.” She found the interview emotionally challenging: “I wish I had known that I was always good enough. I wish I had known that I was always worthy.” The social field of academia may allow working-class scholars entrance, but the habitus, cultural capital, social capital and symbolic capital
required to succeed there, to move fluidly with ease in that social field, are hard won. As Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992:127) note, “when a habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a ‘fish in water’: it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted”. Participants’ lack of cultural and economic capital, and the clear disjuncture between their own habitus and that expected within the university, positioned them as ‘fish out of water’ in academia, isolated and alienated, disenchanted cultural outsiders.

Discussion
This study was small, and may have attracted academics who were particularly reflexive about integration into a higher social class. Those who have moved seamlessly upward may well have selected out of our study. Nonetheless, our qualitative data build on Haney’s (2015) quantitative results, showing at least some Canadian academics from working-class and impoverished family backgrounds struggle with upward social mobility. Exploring intersecting marginalized identities would enrich understandings of subtle forms of social exclusion in higher education. While many of our participants identified with more than one marginalized group, it was very challenging to get them to focus on multiple aspects, or on intersectionality, as they spoke about academia. Multiple interviews may have helped. It is also critical to note that the sample did not include precariously employed contract faculty, for whom full belonging and inclusion is systemically and structurally denied (Foster and Birdsell Bauer, 2018).

Our results suggest that not only are upwardly mobile students positioned as cultural outsiders in the middle-class institutions of academia (Lehman 2014), but this may also be true for academics, even after attaining tenure and well into their careers. For many participants, university was a positive experience, one that pushed their critical thinking and brought exciting possibilities. Yet the embodiment of upper-middle class culture in academia makes integration difficult, as demonstrated by many of participants’ narratives that challenge the problematic notion of ‘escape’ implicit in mobility discourses. Despite acquiring professional incomes, many spoke of dressing ‘wrong,’ looking wrong, speaking wrong, having the wrong sort of teeth, bringing the wrong things to potlucks. They spoke of having the ‘wrong’ sort of lives to interject into casual conversations in ‘respectable’ company. While they were ambivalent about fully belonging in an academic social world, they were nonetheless aware that they remained cultural outsiders, in possession of the ‘wrong’ cultural capital—an Otherness intensified when class intersected with racialization.

As outsiders, they remained somewhat isolated, forging weak connections with academic colleagues, sometimes preferring social links with staff. This had costs in terms of building social capital, and potentially for professional success. Conferences were loathed and avoided by many. At the same time participants often experienced a growing distance from their families of origin, finding little common ground for connection and conversation. Many participants felt “caught in the middle” of both their academic social worlds and the social worlds from which they came (Grimes and Morris 1997:18).
Reay (2017:102) claims that “at the collective level, social mobility is no solution to either educational inequalities or wider social and economic injustices.” Nor is social mobility a solution at the individual level, since it requires lower-class individuals to rely on, and assimilate into, the very power structures that have oppressed them. Findings from this study support Reay’s claims, demonstrating the contradictions of social mobility. For participants, upward mobility was fraught with what Bourdieu (1984) called *hysteresis* and Friedman (2016:144) has termed “cleft habitus.” Referring to Bourdieu’s notion of “a habitus divided against itself” (1999:511), Friedman states, “However sought after, sudden upward movement in social space can dislocate the habitus, initiating a painful and disorientating struggle to reconstruct one’s sense of place within social space” (2016:139). New forms of economic capital needed may be more readily acquired than cultural capital; in academia ‘success’ and full integration demands accumulation of white, upper-middle class cultural capital (Haney 2015; Yosso 2005).

Friedman notes that those who experience upward mobility may be able to perform the expected class practices of the new social world, gaining acceptance, but “to do so would involve another painful contradiction, a betrayal” (2016:140). This betrayal is not only of the self, but also of family and roots. It is inherently contradictory when “the upwardly mobile experience ‘success as failure’, as a betrayal of those who have nurtured and created them” (2016:141). This was evident in our study, where participants struggled with class identity, frequently aligning themselves with their working-class and cultural roots through a process of moral boundary marking (Lamont 2000). They did not want to be “one of those upper-class jerks,” and used symbolic capital to display disavowal of middle-class identity as well as to align with their cultural roots. Wearing jeans, cursing, drinking beer instead of wine, listening to country music instead of classical, buying a home in the ‘wrong’ neighbourhood—these were practices of class boundary marking.

Even when successful, upward class mobility may be rife with difficult emotions. Speaking of his study participants, Friedman states, “Facing upwards in social space they routinely battled feelings of insecurity and inferiority, and facing downwards they were invariably met with a sense of guilt, estrangement and abandonment. Mobility, in short, brought with it a slew of hidden emotional injuries” (2016:144). He also points out that this requires “an exhausting amount of mental work” (2016:145), work undertaken alone. This was echoed in our study, though the disillusion and disenchantment expressed in people’s words does not capture the anger, resignation and despair sometimes evident in their tones. Liz was brought to tears reflecting on her career, describing class navigation as enormous invisible work. Participants spoke of their blood boiling, of shame, of ruptures in family relations and deep internal dissonance. While upward mobility may increase economic capital and social status, the emotional price may be high when it requires assimilation into an academic culture of whiteness, colonialism and upper-middle class dispositions.
Participants’ struggles with class identity, and their sense of not-fully-belonging in either their communities of origin or the academic environment, suggest that explorations of social mobility must account for more than increased income, attending to the complicated and often painful processes of assimilation into middle-class culture (Friedman 2016; Reay 2017). While it may benefit students to have professors who come from the lower classes, unless the elite culture of academia changes, not only will working-class students feel like cultural outsiders (Lehman 2014) but so too may their professors. Needing to detach from your career and assimilate into cultural practices at odds with your own is hardly a recipe for fulfilment.

References


