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How place mediates perceptions of the future for working-class youth in London, Rochdale and Morecambe

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the uncertain, insecure, and prolonged transitions young working class people make out of education and into a changing world of work. It offers a qualitative exploration of working-class youth London, Rochdale and Morecambe perceive of their transitions out of college and into the uncertain world of work. It argues that place plays a huge role in shaping aspiration and guiding young people towards or away from various pathways, which is compounded in the absence of social capital that might otherwise influence future transitions for middle-class people living in the same areas.

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Introduction

This paper explores how geographic place shapes working-class young people's perceptions of the transition out of college and into work across three distinct, but connected locations: the 'world city' London (Massey 2007); Rochdale, a deindustrialised town in Greater Manchester; and Morecambe, a coastal town in the North West of England. The role of place in shaping labour market outcomes has been of interest to academics and policymakers for some time (e.g. SMC 2017). In recent years, a 'renewed spatial turn' (Yu et al. 2024) has increased the attention paid to the relationship between social mobility and geography, which has been heightened in the post-Brexit landscape where there has been a focus on 'left behind' communities and areas (Martin et al. 2021; Fai and Tomlinson 2023). For instance, the most recent *Education Select Committee* report foregrounded 'place-based disparities' and 'geographic inequalities' (Gov UK 2021, 6) in arguing that there are a 'dearth of meaningful career opportunities in many left-behind neighbourhoods' (Gov UK 2021, 67). Here, there was a particular focus on those living in the deindustrialised north of England and in coastal towns, who were contrasted with urban-based ethnic minorities. This was captured by The Sewell Report, where it was stated, 'One advantage that ethnic minorities have is that they are disproportionately based in London – around 40% of the UK's ethnic minority population live in London (compared with just 9% of the White British population) and this mitigates the country's

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significant challenges with regional inequality' (Sewell et al 2021, 28). These narratives ignore the spatial divisions that exist within London (see Friedman and Macmillan 2017) and, in turn, influence employment outcomes. As Yang Yu, Sol Gamsu and Håkan Forsberg argue, graduates living in ethnically diverse and poorer boroughs in London share 'similar rates of social mobility to post-industrial urban areas in the North of England and Midlands', which suggests success at school 'may need feed through to the graduate labour market', resulting in 'social closure' for working-class students in London (Yu et al. 2024, 395, 391).

With it established that there is a relationship between class and place, in determining labour market transitions, there is a need for a renewed focus on the role of place in framing young people's perceptions of work, which presently is relatively unexplored. Responding to this context, this paper offers an empirical account of how place is central to understanding how working-class young people enrolled in further education colleges consider their transitions to work. It argues that their orientations towards the future – and to work – are profoundly shaped by an interplay between place and class, which in turn leads to divergent outcomes for young working-class people across locations, whose goals are shaped by what they can – and can not – see locally. It begins through outlining the 'spatial divisions of labour' (Massey 1979, 1995), emphasising how this necessitated inequality between and within regions, which in turn influences access to labour markets. In particular, this paper emphasises how the place-based dimensions of social class mediate student aspirations and relatedly their perceptions of the future, as the young people involved in this paper mobilised various strategies to contend with the future transitions, which were heavily shaped by place.

Place, the future and changing youth transitions

There is a groundswell of academic literature highlighting the changing nature of the UK labour market, placing it in a wider context of deindustrialisation amid the overarching relocation of the global industrial base towards emerging Asian economies and the turn towards foreign (as opposed to state) investment (Harvey 2011), as well as financial deregulation, which reorientated the economy around the City of London (Peck 2010; Copley 2021). The work of Doreen Massey is most instructive for this paper, not least her conception of the 'spatial division of labour' wherein 'different forms of economic activity incorporate or use the fact of spatial inequality in order to maximise profits' (Massey 1979, 234). For Massey, and other geographers, such regional inequality through centring the economy around the South-East necessitates a hollowing out of other regions (e.g. the former industrial bases of the Midlands, the North East and beyond), creating a periphery and a core; everywhere, versus the South East (Massey 1991). As Massey argues, 'one of the main characteristics of the developing geography of capitalist societies so far has been precisely the development of new areas and the abandonment of old' (Massey 1995, 48). Here, the former industrial centres are abandoned in favour of cheaper exports from abroad, as capitalist production constantly moves on, resulting in 'uneven geographies of development' across the UK (Massey 1979).

Massey's work on spatial imaginaries offers a useful frame to think about how young people's aspirations and orientations towards the future are shaped by place, but more so the spatial dynamics of class (see also Donnelly and Gamsu 2022). There has accordingly

been burgeoning sociological interest in how young people navigate these transitions, with a growing focus on how place mediates these processes (Allen and Hollingworth 2013; Prince 2014). Prince, for instance, emphasised how place can narrow and broaden young people's conception of the future, potentially resulting in what Prince terms 'blunted future self-concept', which can be 'tied to a young person's experience of place, including how place becomes encoded cognitively into the future self-concept' (Prince 2014, 700).

More broadly, much literature on youth transitions focuses on how those from privileged backgrounds forward plan effectively through the transmission of social, cultural and economic capital from parent to child, which in turn confers unseen advantages (Lareau 2011; Bourdieu 2021). Less attention has been paid to how working-class young people without the relevant social, cultural and economic capital experience these transitions out of education and into an increasingly complex labour market (see Irwin and Elley 2013; Hardie 2015 as exceptions). Accordingly, there prevails a general emphasis on the capital *privileges* of a mobile middle and elite classes, as opposed to drawing out particular capital and social field compositions that actively orient geographically and class-marginalized youth constituencies, failing to render tangible the life course and narrations of the future developed in such settings, focusing instead on a resource (or capital) deficit perspective.

Methods

The empirical material presented in this paper is drawn from a project exploring how 62 working-class young people (16+) enrolled in college in London, Rochdale and Morecambe imagine their future transitions into work and how these processes are mediated by race, class, gender and place. The project employed qualitative research methods based on semi-structured interviews lasting between 45 and 90 min. Interviews discussed young people's experience of education, their plans for work, their experiences of work (if they had any) and their motivations for studying the course they were enrolled on. Fieldwork for the overall project was undertaken between October 2023 and April 2025 over four field-sites: one sixth-form college in London, one sixth-form college and one vocational college in Rochdale, and one vocational college in Morecambe. The names of all participants, like the college, have been pseudo-anonymised,

The three locations were chosen because of their centrality in wider discussions of working-class transitions to work. London is presented as the 'engine room' of social mobility (Friedman and Macmillan 2017), where working-class young people face fewer barriers to entry than their peers in the former industrial towns of the North of England, or coastal towns (Gov UK 2021; Sewell et al 2021). Yet, the connections go beyond this. As Doreen Massey argued in 1983, 'national economic and social development, and national economic and social geography' are 'closely linked' (Massey 2022, 22). Therefore, to understand inequality in any region, we have to think beyond that specific region, hence Massey's assertion that local economies are 'a complex result of the combination of its succession of roles within the series of wider, national and international, spatial divisions of labour' (Massey 1979). Here, London is a 'world city' that is the centre of capital in the UK, it is highly diverse but spatially unequal (Friedman and Macmillan 2017), with high levels of deprivation and destitution (Fitzpatrick et al.

2023). The orientation of the economy around London involved neglect of former industrial bases in the North of England, such as Rochdale. Rochdale is a former industrial town in Greater Manchester that was once at the centre of the imperial trade in cotton, but is now, like Morecambe, somewhere that would be considered 'left behind' (see Pike et al. 2023; Singh 2024). The local economy was once heavily oriented around the manufacturing sector, with a booming textile industry that employed a large number of people, including women (Massey and McDowell 1984). Here, it is worth noting that Rochdale is home to a large constituency of Pakistani migrants, who arrived in the town at the same time that textile related wages began to fall (see Kalra 2000). Morecambe is, like Rochdale, in the county of Lancashire. In years gone by, textile workers from the mill towns of Greater Manchester (notably Oldham and Rochdale), as well as Bradford in West Yorkshire, would visit Morecambe, a relatively local seaside resort. The supposed decline in Morecambe, then, was intimately intertwined with the collapse of the UK manufacturing sector. The industrial workers from the textile manufacturing centres in Bradford and Rochdale who would visit Morecambe were beginning to lose their jobs. Places like Rochdale, once home to plentiful manufacturing jobs, became areas with high levels of unemployment as the secure jobs of its industrial peak have been replaced by insecure work in the remaining local factories and warehouses. From 1973 to 1990 the value of tourism in Morecambe fell from £46.6 to £6.5 million, a remarkable decrease (Bunting 2023). The decline of the British seaside is not obviously a deindustrial story. There were no factories or warehouses. However, as historian John Walton argues, seaside towns were a type of industrial town, 'with health and pleasure as its products', possessing an infrastructure of hotels, sea defences, promenades and so-on. Walton suggests,

> the development of the seaside holiday and coastal resort as commercial phenomena were part and parcel of the industrialisation process, growing in step with it and integrated into its interactions of demand and supply from the beginning, rather than being mere consequences or side-effects of a more dynamic set of developments. (Walton 2011, 902, 901).

In addition to a semi-structured interviews, students undertook a demographic survey, as discussed elsewhere (Singh 2024) which involved students describing their own class, then explaining these answers, as well as answering questions about parental occupation and level of qualifications, whether they lived in social housing or not, and free school meal eligibility, which is how the government determines class in data on educational attainment (e.g. Gov UK 2021). Eligibility for free school meals sets a very high bar for receipt – household income must be below £16,000 – leading to critiques of FSM as a sole indicator of class.[1] 35 out of 62 young people interviewed were eligible for free school meals, 15 had no parent in work, seven had two parents in work and the rest had one parent in work, usually in relatively precarious employment. These realities differed across location, as the table below shows;

Location	No parent in work	1 parent in work	2 parents in work	Student has a Part-time job	FSM eligibility
Woodhouse College (Rochdale)	4	13	1	9	11
	1	9	2	3	5

(*Continued*)

Continued.

Location	No parent in work	1 parent in work	2 parents in work	Student has a Part-time job	FSM eligibility
Newgate College (Rochdale)					
CTC (Morecambe)	9	13	2	4	17
Park Walk (London)	1	5	2	4	2
Total	**15**	**40**	**7**	**20**	**35**

The sample includes 62 participants from a range of courses. Park Walk and Newgate were A-level colleges, CTC and Woodhouse College were vocational colleges. At CTC and Woodhouse College students studied a range of courses, with my sample including those studying; barbering, hairdressing, eSports, Art, Design, Media, bricklaying, plumbing, animal care, catering and nutrition. The ethnic composition of respondents reflected the locales; in London no participants were white British, in CTC all respondents were white British and in Newgate and Woodhouse College there was a representative split of white British, Black British and Pakistani. Participants were aged between 16 and 24 and were an even gender split, including two graduates of Park Walk college who went to university who were aged 26 and 27 respectively.

Spatial realities, imaginaries & aspirations

In East London students emphasised the need to go to university, in order to experience upward social mobility which was framed not as escaping class, but as enjoying stability. Here, it is notable that students could name career pathways, not least Saffiyah, who described having aspirations to work as an 'investment banker', before naming two investment banks with headquarters in Canary Wharf (not far from the college); J.P Morgan and Morgan Stanley. In stark contrast, as argued elsewhere, A-Level students in Rochdale wanted a 'career', which they associated with going to university, but they could not name any careers, or any companies. All they knew is that their 'careers' would not take place in Rochdale, which was a place seen to be absent of careers (Singh 2024). Here, the point is that being in London influences the 'geographic imaginaries' young people have of working life, not least because of proximity to the City of London and Canary Wharf.

This section then offers a comparative account of Jimmy, a white eSports student on free school meals in Morecambe, and Elle, a Black-Carribean graduate of Park Walk college who went on to study at Oxford and now works in corporate law in the City of London. Their comparative accounts are complex, but represent the different spatial imaginaries and realities that students can contend with.

Jimmy had considered various career options, including becoming a chef or a mechanic. He relaid to me that his favourite television show was Suits, an American legal drama following a lawyer without a law degree at a glamorous New York City law firm.

Amit: Did Suits make you consider working in law?

Jimmy: Well, it did make me want to. I mean I definitely thought about being like a lawyer. But at the same time it also seems like one of the things where I don't know how achievable that is. Just cause it's, I don't know, I mean, you'd have to … Part of it would be like money, so I'm guessing to be a proper good lawyer, you'd have to be a really, not necessarily fancy, but well-

> known uni and stuff, which would be expensive and all of that. It seemed interesting, but I just don't know how you get into that

Firstly, it is important to stress how popular culture can frame working-class young people's perceptions of work in the absence of local reference points or family connections. However, despite Jimmy's love of Suits conjuring an interest in working in law, he ultimately perceives the legal profession to be unattainable, ruling it out based upon a variety of factors, including cost and the high barrier to entry in terms of education. Here, Elle's comparative ascent into the field of law is a point of comparison. Elle's ascent to corporate law was framed by place.

> Elle: I was always, not always, but I kind of have been following corporate law. When I was at Park Walk I did like some work experience with one of these magic circle firms after they came into college. So it's kind of it's been on my radar. So from the first year of uni, applied to all the open days, the vacation schemes, etc. Got a scholarship with one and then the training contract afterwards, beginning of my second year. So that had already been signed, my life away for the next five years.

It has to be stressed how difficult it is – regardless of geographic location – for a working-class young person to secure a training contract at a magic circle law firm where recruits tend to be from the same social milieu as recruiters (see Ashley & Empson 2017; Rivera 2015). Yet, as Elle captures, what put this on her 'radar' was the firm coming into Park Walk for a careers day, which is related to geography; the college's proximity to the City of London and Elle's ability to easily travel to the work placement. This made the career pathway tangible, as did Elle's obviously impressive academic record. Ultimately, being born in London offered Elle a route into work – as difficult as that was to achieve – that was never available to Jimmy because he lives in Morecambe. All of this is to say that how we perceive and move through the social world is structured by place, which frames how young people understand possibilities for the future.

Though London might not be the engine room of social mobility it is often claimed to be, and though spatial dynamics within London itself do influence the career options for graduates (Yu et al. 2024), London does offer proximity to a wide range of job options that do not exist in Rochdale or Morecambe, given the disproportionate amount of 'high skilled', graduate jobs in London (Xu 2023). In essence, becoming a lawyer (solicitor) is so unfamiliar, existing outside Jimmy's realm of comprehension, so he cannot aspire to it beyond a fleeting interest. Jimmy then worked through other options, settling on undertaking a Cyber Security course at another college in the North West. Crucially, the UK government plans to move the National Cyber Force base to Lancashire in 2025 as part of a 'North West Cyber Corridor'[2] which makes this a viable local career path for Jimmy, who had never considered this before a career meeting with his teacher and tutor, Joe.

> Jimmy: Joe helped me a lot with, like, knowing what I want to do. I had a career meeting with him and he sort of like listed different like paths and we just ended up with cyber security and the rest was history … Now I've got a whole little plan going for a change actually, because for like a long time I just had no idea what I wanted to do, because I just didn't really mind. I just wanted to be like happy and have an alright-ish amount of money. But now I've got a little plan. It's just a lot nicer to have an idea about what I'm gonna do

Here, it is worth stressing the role of adults in helping young working-class students plan their transitions, such as the 'cultural guides' described by Lareau (2015). Importantly, it was Jimmy's mum who pushed him to meet with Joe.

> Jimmy: My mum's the one that encouraged me to get a meeting with Joe to just like get a plan and figure out what I want to do. In like a loving supportive way she kept asking me 'what do you want to do' and I was like 'I don't know' and she was like 'well you need like think of something, speak to Joe', so then I had the meeting with Joe.

Like Jimmy, many of the young people I met, described how their parents were actively interested in what they did next, even if they were largely unable to name career pathways for their children, which reflects a lack of tacit knowledge based on their class position. This then disrupts the classist idea that working-class parents are not involved in their children's education or future planning. More broadly, Jimmy's account demonstrates the challenges facing working-class young people living in Morecambe, a place detached from major labour market hubs to the point that he could only briefly flirt with the idea of becoming a lawyer. Absent of that he was attempting to postpone his decisions through undertaking the eSports diploma, as only with the intervention of his Mum and then teacher, Joe, was he able to set himself on a viable forward plan.

Precarity, uncertainty & postponing the future in Morecambe

Jimmy's plan to do another course – albeit with a career in mind – was telling, as in Morecambe 11 out of 24 students had already done a course at college and 17/24 wanted to pursue a further course on completion of their current one, as students perceived of education as a stop-gap to postpone working life. For instance, Freddy, who described himself as 'not the brightest' student, initially followed his father into work, spending two years doing an electrical apprenticeship, quitting just before he was due to qualify. Unsure what to do next, he saw studying eSports as a stop-gap on his prolonged transition out of education and into work.

> Freddy: After I quit my apprenticeship, I was struggling a bit to figure out what I wanted to do. I thought to myself, why don't I do something I enjoy that also opens a gateway to other professions. So I landed on this Level 3 Esports, because it was something I was interested in … it was a high level and so it also opens many doors for me to go down, and it gives me time to also realise what I actually want to do.

This was starkly different from either field site in Rochdale or London. Partially, this worked through a lack of obvious routes into work for those not pursuing trades, as well as wider sense of place-based inertia. For instance, several students invoked the idea of pursuing another course, and/or working menial jobs locally.

> Katie: After I finish college I'll probably just, like, be working in cafes or pubs, like maybe a restaurant as well, like just like pot washing or like cleaning tables. but I would also like maybe want to go into uni and like carry on doing art there … to become an artist. See my art in museums, massive pictures, and people to see them and be like 'oh wow', thats the dream.
>
> ***
>
> Liam: I do plan on trying to search for a job that's possibly art related but if I can't find a job like that then I'll search for a job in a shop or a pub or something but my main job that I want

> to do is to design monsters and creatures. Like horror monsters, fantasy monsters like dragons for movies and video games.
>
> ***
>
> Maria: I wanna do something art related, maybe tattooing … I don't know, I'm just thinking of ideas of things to do. Maybe work in a pub.

All three young people planned to enrol on another course at college, which was measured against localised menial work; pubs, cafes, restaurants, which in itself is not easy to find. Maria had already worked at a local pub, struggling to get enough hours to make it worthwhile, but remained looking. For Katie and Liam, they invoke two different futures; (1) resignation to localised work, (2) a 'dream' future that they see as unlikely, hence their intent to remain at college pursuing another course. In part, this reflects the realities of place, as the art museums that Katie invokes would be in London or most locally 65 miles away in Manchester, rather than in Morecambe, which seems true for the animation work that Liam wants to do, resulting in an acceptance that both are most likely to end up working in a local pub, cafe or restaurant. Without local reference points, their expectations reflect Bourdieu's assertion that 'social agents have aspirations proportionate to their objective chances of fulfilling them' and subsequently adapt their expectations to available opportunities (Bourdieu 2021, 174). In many respects, this tacit acceptance of working menial jobs reflects the prevailing 'structure of feeling' (Williams 1977) brought about by decades of decline within Morecambe set against austerity and neoliberalism, which in turn have drastically altered how working-class people like Liam and Katie could imagine the future, resulting in resignation to localised menial work. No amount of increased aspiration can change these realities as both express what Sennett and Cobb describe as a class and place-induced 'gnawing sense of powerlessness' (Sennett and Cobb 2023, 182).

Tellingly, students in London had experience working in service-sector employment and in retail. Elle, for instance, had worked at various fast-food chains in London. Additionally, Saffiyah, mentioned earlier, worked in retail, as did her classmate Iman, who reflected that she did not want to pursue that long term, commenting, 'A lot of people I know work them jobs tend to have just come to this country or something like that. But there's no security in that, like long term, where do you go?' Though in London such jobs might be dominated by working-class young people or a migrant underclass (see Rogaly 2020), in Morecambe, that is not the case. The 'spatial division of labour' dictates the local opportunities students believe are available to them.

This does not mean there are no employment opportunities in Morecambe that could offer a degree of upward mobility and stability. Students could look for employment opportunities in the local government, NHS or in educational institutions. However, many of these routes would require passing grades for Maths and English at GCSE. These employment options are far more visible in Rochdale than in Morecambe, as Greater Manchester has ten large public hospitals. The Manchester University Trust (the biggest in England) employs 28,000 people, whilst a further 20,000 people are employed by the Northern Care Alliance, which serves Bury, Rochdale, Oldham and Salford. In the Morecambe and Lancaster area, there are only three hospitals, and none of those are in Morecambe; there is one in Lancaster, one fifty miles away in Barrow and another 25

miles away in Kendal in the Lake District (1 h and 20 min by public transport). Spread across these hospitals and the community, NHS Morecambe employs 8000 people compared to the 48,000 people employed across Greater Manchester in permanent NHS roles. In contrast, London has over 80 hospitals at the time of writing. The point is that NHS career paths are far less visible when the NHS hubs are scattered and not obviously local (none are particularly near the college or where the young people live). Without a parent working in the NHS or for the police, or so on, these jobs are unlikely to be on someone's radar in Morecambe. Hence, students in Morecambe find it challenging to grasp the potential of working in any form of employment that is not local service sector work (pubs, restaurants, cafes).

The resultant lack of obvious routes tied in to several students invoking the idea of a future in America despite never visiting, reflecting the cultural appeal of the 'American Dream' mediated via popular culture and media platforms. It also shows how a place-based stasis takes hold, as in the absence of obvious local ways to forge a future, students again invoke vague and unrealistic dreams.

> Katie: I've always dreamt about leaving the country, moving to a different country like America. I've always wanted to live there … It's got a lot more things to do, because in Morecambe there's not really much for anyone to do. But in America you've got loads of cities to go to, and a lot more shops to go to and stuff. There's so much more like job options you can do and like people can become anything in America. Here's just all basic stuff like cafes pubs working in arcades

In the absence of concrete reference points they can draw upon, locally or from their wider social and familial networks, popular culture frames young people's aspirations. As a result, Katie sees America as offering something Morecambe cannot: the chance to 'become anything', As Michelle Lamont has argued, though the American Dream is obviously more of a 'myth', it retains a strong cultural appeal and is predicated on the belief that anyone can achieve the dream and that this dream is predicated on 'actions and traits under one's control', irrespective of structural barriers to success (Lamont 2019). Hence Katie's belief that 'people can become anything' in America.

Ben, a 19-year-oldSports student who had previously enrolled on two other apprenticeships (electrical installation and plumbing) offered another account of planning for a dream future that was similarly tapered by spatial realities. His Dad is a bricklayer in Morecambe and helped set Ben up with his initial electrical installation apprenticeship, which could have set Ben up for secure and stable employment. However, the harsh life Ben's Dad has lived frames Ben's aspirations, as he repeatedly told me wanted to live an 'extraordinary life', in opposition to his parents.

> Ben: My dad has worked physically harder than anyone I know, yeah, probably harder than most people that anyone knows yeah other than people that do what he does but why? He's coming up 50, and he's fairly knackered for the most part. Like don't get me wrong, he's still going, but he's in pain … He's not extraordinary, his life's not extraordinary so it's like you've worked that hard for what?

Here it is worth noting that as well as restructuring labour markets, neoliberalism reshaped how we understand our own position in the world through the increasing popularisation of individualism, entrepreneurialism (Valluvan 2019), commodification, as well as the rise of the celebrity (Hall 2011). This denunciation of an ordinary life

resonates with what Zygmunt Bauman describes as 'liquid modernity', where the individual is seemingly liberated but at the same time trapped by an endless stream of possibilities, resulting in a context where it is impossible to feel satisfied with what one has, as one is always inclined to strive for greater fulfilment (Bauman 2000, 68), e.g. through becoming 'extraordinary'. This cultural and economic context shape

Ben's plans for an 'extraordinary life' were not imagined coherently.

> Ben: There's like small short-term goals I have and then there's like the far-fetched end goal and obviously that's like trying to get into real estate in different parts than around here yeah that's very much at the end of the road

Ben had heard about these schemes through 'Books, people, podcasts, YouTube, TED talks. Literally anyone that's talking about success'. It is telling that Ben describes these ambitions as 'far-fetched' as his dreamed 'extraordinary life' couldn't be further removed from his immediate plans on finishing college.

> Amit: So what are you going to do next?
>
> Ben: I'm looking to try and get on the power station outages at the minute. Doing whatever jobs' going because the outages are only a couple of months and there's one near here. You work 13 days on one off, 12hours a day so you save up a lot of money so I'll be able to just save that and be ahead of the curve of people my age 'round here.
>
> Amit: How did you find out about that?
>
> Ben: My Dad, he used to work at a power station and he said it's a good way to make money and if you get on the power station and you get a permanent contract, it's pretty much a job for life. You might start as a cleaner and then work up cos my Dad said they only promote from within.

Ben's acknowledgement that his plans to get into 'real estate' are 'far-fetched' combined with mentioning a 'job for life' in a nearby powerstation highlight how in the absence of obvious ways of making a financially stable future, students are forced into either stasis or to have dreams that are not grounded in reality. The problem for Ben is that he was previously enrolled on an electrical course and then a plumbing apprenticeship, two pathways that could have provided financial stability, but his desire for an 'extraordinary life' representes the 'cruel optimism' described by Berlant, wherein his desires – shaped by neoliberal narratives of the self – for an 'extraordinary life' have been harmful (Berlant 2011), resulting in plans to work in gruelling conditions on a power station, due to his dreams of something greater. Accepting a permanent future in the trades was ultimately ruled out as it forecloses the possibility, however distant, of living an extraordinary life.

This ability to defer the future, which carries with it obvious implications in terms of general occupation outcomes, I argued has certain place-marked characteristics, arising in geographic distance from metropolitan density and its own sense of consumer spectacle, diasporic uplift and interpersonal connections to variegated career making pathways. I suggested that place does extensive work here in affording a certain sense of short-term finality, one that helps reconcile the absence of prospects, even if in that reconciliation it further confirms the absence of an actual future. But as opposed to this resulting in a crushing sense of defeat or desolate melancholy, it is a certain deferral of the future,

through extending late adolescence or conceptions of temporary, short-term imminent work arrangements that takes precedence, providing a sort of delimited solace. In parallel, Ben's account demonstrated how the deferral of the future acted in tandem with hazily mediated conceptions of entrepreneurship, 'living an extraordinary life', filtered through online culture (YouTube, podcasts and so-on), which again is invoked alongside the notion of temporary, short-term work on a power station as either a necessary means to an end or as the starting point of a 'job for life', that is far removed from his dreams of an 'extraordinary life'.

Race, class and barbering in Rochdale

The aforementioned policy focus on working-class young people living in 'left behind' areas, has focused in on white boys, who are said to uniquely suffer from place-based inequalities and isolation from labour market hubs (again, Sewell et al 2021; Gov UK 2021). Erased from view are the experiences of their female counterparts, but also ethnic minority working-classes. In light of this context, this section focuses on how experiences of class are inflected by migratory routes, race and place through the accounts of five British-Pakistani boys studying barbering at Woodhouse College, the vocational college in Rochdale. Firstly, it is worth reiterating that Pakistani people migrated to Rochdale to work in the cotton industry at a time when cotton-related wages were beginning to fall as Britain headed towards deindustrialisation. These migrant workers then faced higher levels of unemployment than their white peers combined with facing harsh racism, as they became the lightning rod for all social ills. Cut off from dwindling local labour markets, many were either long-term unemployed or had to embrace risky entrepreneurial endeavours such as opening curry houses or becoming self-employed taxi drivers (Kalra 2000). Today, British Pakistanis are almost three times as likely to live in low-income households than white British people and are more likely to live in poverty (see Edmiston et al. 2022; ONS 2020). Additionally, though much is made of how white working-class boys on free school meals do not get high pass-rates at GCSE, the same is also true of Pakistani boys on free school meals, who do comparably badly in education and earn less in the labour market (Alexander and Shankley 2020). Relatedly, four of the five barbers sampled were on free school meals. None of their mothers worked and their Dad's worked either as part-time taxi-drivers or mechanics. Whilst three of the five failed their Maths and English GCSEs and none described themselves as particularly suited for academic pathways.

Their uneven journey's into barbering reflect these dynamics, particularly a lack of obvious alternative local routes into work in the context where university was not seen as a realistic, or desirable option (see Singh 2025). Barbering existed on their radar because of its local visibility in Rochdale as an 'Asian thing', which all of the students raised with me, as did the college's career advisor. For Bilal it was simply because 'Asian's are the best barbers, man!' Whilst Mustafa, offered the hint of an explanation that speaks to race, class and educational attainment; 'It's easy to get on the course, so you get into barbering like that. You don't need many GCSEs to get on'.

In Paul Willis' *Learning to Labour*, white working-class boys had a low valuation of schooling, knowing they would leave school at 15 to find readily available local work (Willis 1977). However, all of the barbers expressed that their parents wanted them –

perhaps expected them – to get good grades. Yet, for various reasons they did not and then did not know what to do with their lives, falling into barbering because of its local visibility and availability through Asian networks; friends, family members, their own barbers. Three of the five failed their Maths and English GCSEs and none described themselves as particularly suited for academic pathways. Barbering then becomes a good local option for working-class Pakistani boys who are not likely to go to university. This was the case for Hamza who failed all of his GCSEs, which led him to undertaking a Level 1 course in barbering. 'What can I say man, I didn't revise', Hamza reflected, 'it is what it is, but mum was pissed. I told her I'll come college and then retake everything'. Hamza then came to college with no idea about what he wanted to do, looking down the list of courses that would accept him without any GCSE passes, finding the Level 1 Barbering course. These boys relished the chance to make 'cash in hand', learn a 'trade', and imagine themselves as entrepreneurs given that they are self-employed (barbers rent chairs in barbershops) and believe that they will one day open their own barber shops, where people will then rent chairs off of them; 'that'd be easy money', Ahmed, a Level 2 barber told me.

Not knowing what to do and with no pre-ordained routes into work, they all ended up pursuing barbering. Hamza did not know much about the realities of barbering but told me, 'I thought it's a good trade and I can make some good money, £15 a haircut. Easy'. Hamza was not alone in describing barbering like this, many associated it as a strong vocational option based on knowing people who worked in local barbershops, all of which were Pakistani owned and run.

Having failed his Maths GCSE, which ruled out doing A-Levels, Mustafa settled on barbering because 'I had a few friends who were barbers, and they told me it'd be good for me. They make good money'. When he started doing the course, he would go to a local barber where his friend worked, watching him do haircuts, which eventually led him to get a job in the same shop. These informal arrangements were commonplace and part of the appeal for young barbers due to the perceived ease of finding work. As Mustafa reflected, 'One day, I just asked the boss to work, and he said, "Yeah, you could come work"'. The boss was Pakistani, which perhaps facilitated the informal working arrangement, which was a common theme as the young men described how they found work. One through his uncle, who owned a shop, the others through friends, or in Arif's case from getting his own haircut having recently been 'kicked out' of the town's A-Level college.

> Arif: When I found out I'm getting kicked out of sixth form, I was just sat in the chair getting a haircut, and I see they had an empty chair, and obviously empty chair means no rent for the boss. So I go to the boss, 'you look like you need some vacancies filled'. And he goes, 'Give me your number when you're done'. A few weeks went by, and he calls me, asks me to come in. I started working that week.

Barring Hamza who did not work yet, the other boys made £300 a week, mostly 'cash in hand'. However, the work, regardless of how they frame it, is precarious; there is no sick pay, no pensions, no holiday pay, no secured hours. If they go away they could lose their clients, making this potentially high risk. They also worked relatively long hours outside of studying, with Mustafa working all day (from early) Saturday and Sunday to maximise his potential earnings. Yet, this is part of the allure associated with viewing oneself as an

entrepreneur, with barbering understood as offering autonomy and control over the self. In the sorts of precarious jobs Michael did, he was told when to be at work and what to do. Barbering, though precarious, still offers more control, but crucially a greater sense of autonomy.

> Bilal: I don't want no job clocking in, clocking out. I want to live my life my way
>
> Amit: But you have to turn up at certain times as a barber …
>
> Bilal: Nah, I work my own hours.
>
> Arif: Same.
>
> Amit: So the shop don't care what time you come in?
>
> Bilal: Honestly I do come in early and then obviously say if I've got bookings early in the morning and it's just early in the mornings, I could do them bookings and just go home. Or if it's like late at night, I can do whatever I want in the morning, come in at night. It just really depends.
>
> Arif: It's the flexibility. We rent the chairs and do our thing

There is a tension in how they account for their entrepreneurialism here. On the one hand, they embrace the ability to supposedly control their own hours. Still, on the other hand, they are at the whim of their clients, even if they are not at the whim of the person who owns the barbershop and gets their rent money off of Bilal and Arif, regardless of how many haircuts they do in a day. Regardless, all understood barbering as a good trade that offers them flexibility in the labour market; 'everyone always needs a haircut', Hamza told me. This was also tied into a localised Pakistani cultural economy, where, around big events, weddings, or eid, people would get their hair cut. As Ahmed relayed to me, 'everyone needs a fresh skin fade at Eid bro!' Part of the entrepreneurial aspect of barebring involved social media marketing, as Bilal, Mustafa and Arif post their haircuts on social media in a bid to build up their clients, working in the week and on weekends. These young men take solace in being entrepreneurs of the self and construct a narrative around self-improvement, hustling and investing in the future to go with it.

The Asian barbers were, in effect, learning to labour. All – barring Hamza who is yet to work, but is looking – are making relatively good money in the short-term, rather than deferring potential earnings by going to university and then taking on both debt and risk without the assurance of getting a job. They are able to find locally available work because of the dominance of Pakistani barbershops in the area, where they can get jobs off of other Pakistan men. Central to becoming a barber was the dignifying narrative that one was one's own boss, enabling them to exercise autonomy usually denied to the worker (see Sayer 2007). Yet, in theory, many members of the 'precariat' are also their own bosses, even if this is less easily wrapped up in entrepreneurial narratives in keeping with late modern morality. However, the notion of learning a 'trade', earning 'easy money' and doing something they ostensibly enjoyed that was tied into discourses of entrepreneurialism (the pursuit of one day owning a shop) certainly allowed these young boys to live a dignified life in ways that were not available necessarily (or at least obviously) in Morecambe.

Conclusion

This paper examined how the experiences of working-class young people in London, Rochdale and Morecambe was mediated by place. In London, the City of London framed young people's spatial imagineries, putting various forms of work on their radar, regardless of the difficulty of achieving these. Such imagineries were very different in Morecambe or Rochdale, where locally available middle-class professionalised employment opportunities were far less visible, in turn influencing how these young people imagined their future working-selves, particularly in the context of a lack of social networks. In Morecambe, this largely involved a deferral of the future, with my cohort having mostly failed their Maths and English GCSEs, which then ruled out the prospect of studying A-Levels (at least immediately) and made attending university unlikely. Yet, were these young people to attend university on masse, they would arguably be deferring the problem of transitioning to highly paid work, especially in the context of the risks associated with debt and a reduced graduate premium (Singh 2025).

Ultimately, this paper's argument is that the locale frames perception and in turn orientates young people towards various pathways, ruling out what seems unachievable and mediating expectations, even amidst the swirlign of wider dreams (which may or may not be mediated by the digital sphere; Youtube and so-forth). Absent of familial networks to draw upon (social capital) young people grasp locally, which is what led the British-Pakistani cohort to pursue barbering, a job that seemed readily available and easily achievable through tangible steps that was not obviously true of any other form of employment that they had considered. Place then plays a significant role in shaping young people's orientations and in turn, without addressing the spatial divison of labour, there is little that can be done to improve the prospects of young people in places like Rochdale or Morecambe, particularly against the backdrop of deepening inequality.

Notes

1. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jun/23/how-white-working-class-underachievement-has-been-used-to-demonise-antiracism.
2. https://www.gov.uk/government/news/permanent-location-of-national-cyber-force-campus-announced.

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