

# The Australian working class in popular culture

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It is never easy to discuss class in Australia because the nation presents itself as the land of the ‘fair go’ – egalitarian (Leigh 2013, 3), a country where snobbery is not tolerated. In Australia you can call the Prime Minister ‘mate’ and have a beer with your boss. The image of the ‘battler’ is celebrated and is a favourite go-to slogan for Australian politicians who build campaigns based on their support for the typical ‘Aussie Battler’. This resistance to snobbery (and refusal to defer to authority) arguably has its origins in the defiance against authority found among the convicts of the penal colony and in Indigenous people who resisted the invasion. But what does this all mean? If the existence of ‘ordinary’ people is acknowledged, why is it that the mention of class leads to the denial of a class system, and ‘working class’ is considered an outmoded term?

Scholars have noted that class as a topic of discussion and debate has waned since the 1980s (Barnes and Cahill 2012, 47). While a number of pieces did appear in the early 2000s to the mid-2000s, there have been very few since (see Greig et al. 2003; Hindess and Sawer 2004; Kuhn 2005; and McGregor 2001). This is where working-class studies is useful. The field provides a way to discuss class and working-class life that counters these denials or the attempts to define class away. A working-class studies approach can examine how class is being constructed and reveal what kinds of understandings of class are contributing to the national imaginary. In this chapter I will focus on some forms of Australian popular culture and consider how working-class life is being represented. I’ll be asking whether these representations provide a nuanced picture of working-class experience or whether Australian popular culture reinforces class stereotypes, or renders the working-class invisible.

## **Historical context**

To understand contemporary representations of class in Australia, a detour into history is required. The founding myth of Australia suggests that anyone who came to Australia (the ‘Lucky Country’<sup>1</sup>) had equal opportunities, unencumbered by the class system of Britain that highly restricted class mobility (Greig et al. 2003, 160). There are stories of entrepreneurial ex-convicts who set up businesses and became wealthy. Free settlers also came, but the majority of those who set off to farm or search for precious metals already came with some resources. It is not difficult to challenge this idea of egalitarian Australia (Leigh 2013, 4). The British colonisers planted

their class system firmly in Australia (Buckley and Wheelwright 1994, 1). The working-classes of Australia were made up of the ex-convicts who worked as labourers, the descendants of convicts who worked as farm labourers or as factory hands, the Indigenous people who worked for rations for wealthy landowners or wealthy families in the cities (Haskins and Scrimgeour 2015, 89),<sup>2</sup> migrants from Asia and Europe and the Pacific Islanders who were either kidnapped or tricked into boarding ships for Australia to end up as slave labourers in the sugar cane fields (Speedy 2015, 344).

The hard-working, white, Australian man – the ‘bush man’ (Greig et al. 2003, 174) – epitomised this myth. The bush man valued his mates and was always loyal (Page 2002, 193). He worked hard in the harsh conditions of the Australian bush and never complained (Ward c1966, 2). This sense of ‘toughness’ is an enduring element of the myth of Australian masculinity. Australian men (those who are white, straight and Anglo-Celtic) have been portrayed as hardy, strong, unafraid, stoic (except when angry), always on the lookout for their mates, larrikins (ready to joke around) and drinkers, and as refusing to defer to their ‘betters’ (Hudson and Bolton 1997, 1). This image of the Australian man has its origins in the ANZAC<sup>3</sup> myth – the nation-building appropriation of the World War One soldier – a heroic man who always looked after his mates and treated everyone as an equal (Williams 1995, 109), the brave soldier who, once removed from the trenches, continued to show his mettle in the shearers’ shed or the factory floor – an all-round ‘good bloke’.

But of course, any national myth is built on exclusions. The men who are not included in the ANZAC myth are the Indigenous men, the queer men, the men from ethnic minorities and so on. And women are absent completely (Page 2002, 195). What is also often missing is the white bush man’s link with the violence of European invasion – the massacres of Indigenous people and the theft of Indigenous land. As Woollacott (2009) states, ‘frontier men celebrated their own and each other’s toughness, endurance and bravery – descriptions in which the use of violence could be implicit but was glossed over’ (11,10). And the mateship forged in the trenches of World War One was also predicated on violence – a soldier would look out for his mates in the act of killing the enemy in what Page (2002, 198) describes as ‘military solidarity’. The bush man and the ANZAC have featured heavily in literature and popular culture. Many of Australia’s most iconic literary works such as the poetry of A. B. (Banjo) Paterson and Henry Lawson included rural workers such as ‘drovers’ and ‘shearers’. Popular songs also immortalised the bushman – a rogue, but a loveable one.

This history reveals a major contradiction of Australian culture – while the rural worker and the humble soldier have been awarded legendary status, class systems are rarely acknowledged and the existence of the working class is disputed. Further contradictions abound – while the majority of Australians have working-class backgrounds, there are rarely overt representations of working-class life in mainstream popular culture (outside of sport). And the world of ‘high art’ is dominated by the middle classes.

Whitman (2013, 52) suggests that white working-class masculinity is at the ‘centre of narratives concerning what it means to be an Australian’. Developing this idea further, Whitman argues that this ‘cultural ideal’ of heterosexual, white, working-class masculinity can be seen in media representations in advertising that use white working-class men to sell products and services and encourages middle-class men to adopt working-class characteristics (Whitman 2013, 52). I’d agree that certain products and services are sold in this way, but they belong to a specific category of products that are often associated with working-class culture, such as beer (not craft or micro-brewery beer), sport (and sport betting), utility vehicles and some fast food. Most other advertisements use middle-class characters – it would be highly unlikely, for example, that advertisements for products associated with middle-class consumers, such as wine, would feature

obvious working-class characters, unless used ironically. There is a sense of snobbery in Whitman's argument – she claims that 'anti-elitism' and 'anti-intellectualism' (2013, 60) is another staple of white working-class masculinity that has become part of this 'cultural tool' used to legitimate the working-class masculinity of Australian identity (2013, 52). But this demonstrates a lack of understanding of working-class culture. Anti-intellectualism is not common among working-class people, who are inclined to value education and the notion of being 'smart'. Anti-elitism is more likely, though not directed at the targets that Whitman implies (creative professionals and academics), but at the 'bosses' and politicians who seem out of touch with working-class life. The sort of anti-elitism and anti-intellectualism that she points to is expressed by dominant right-wing male figures in the mainstream media – the 'shock jocks' (talkback radio hosts) and their TV talk show host equivalents, who rail against the left and social justice activists.

It should be noted here, that the Australian working class is diverse. Often, it seems that 'working class' refers to white people. This is not the case. People of colour make up a large proportion of the Australian working class. Australia has a history of immigration, and many immigrants arriving since British invasion have been people of colour (or people not considered 'white' at the time of their arrival, such as Italians and Greeks). The majority of Indigenous people in Australia are working class (Grieg et al. 2003, 129) due to the inequality experienced by Indigenous communities. In this chapter, I refer specifically to 'white working-class' people at times; otherwise, the assumption should be that working-class people are from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds.

## Popular culture

Popular culture gives us somewhere to look for representations of working-class experience, and it is a good place to search because of the importance of popular culture in people's everyday lives. Outside of the scholarly studies of class by labour historians, political economists and sociologists, people are experiencing the lived reality of class every day and, at the same time, consuming popular culture. So what can popular culture tell us about how class works in Australia? Sport is a quite complex area, popular music offers some examples of cultural products that demonstrate how class and other categories of identification (such as race), intersect, but film and television provide slightly more straightforward examples of representation, or absence.

The official 'national imaginary' of Australia always includes sport. And, according to Moore (2000, 58), sport has 'expressed and shaped the working-class experience'. Rugby league (NRL) and Australian Rules football (AFL) are the two most popular football 'codes'. Rugby league is unashamedly working class (Moore 2000, 58), linked to the union movement and arguably formed as a challenge to the class hierarchies within sports such as rugby union, which were played by private school boys (Moore 2000, 60). Rugby League players are almost always from working-class families, and the culture is almost stereotypically working class. Footy players tend to be big drinkers. Fans consume beer and meat pies at the matches. The matches are shown in big suburban pubs. There was a dedicated television show called *The Footy Show* (1994–2019) that revelled in its self-consciously working-class culture. The presenters of the show were mostly ex-players, and presented themselves as unsophisticated and as 'ordinary' (mostly) 'blokes'. The show is what might be described as sport combined with 'light' entertainment, and due to the backgrounds of the presenters, the players and the majority of fans, it was a very working-class space.

Australian popular music has often been a site of working-class expression, with stories of working-class life featuring in country songs, rock and rap. Bennett (2001, 1) states that popular music has always functioned at a 'collective level', reflecting and shaping contemporary issues. If this is the case, then it makes sense that working-class experience would also be reflected in

popular music. This collective consciousness has also been identified by Shepherd (1990, 136), who describes working-class music as rooted in shared experiences that are concrete, rather than abstract. Some iconic Australian songs have had working-class themes, such as Jimmy Barnes' 'Working class man', released in 1985. Indigenous artists have recorded songs about hardship, racism and colonisation using country, rock and reggae genres. Bands such as The Warumpi Band, Us Mob and No Fixed Address created anthems about their experiences that were sung by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous fans (Dunbar-Hall and Gibson 2004, 47). Australian hip hop has represented working-class life. The pioneers of Australian hip hop were 1990s artists such as Def Wish Cast from the multicultural working-class suburbs of Sydney – these groups localised the genre, rapping with Australian accents and writing lyrics about their lives as working-class and ethnic minority Australians (Mitchell 2007). According to Dunbar-Hall and Gibson (2004, 122), rap music is also very popular among young Indigenous Australians, who identify with its 'ethos of solidarity and loyalty' (122). Indigenous duo A. B. Original released a song in 2016, 'January 26<sup>th</sup>', calling for a change to the date of Australia's national day (Australia Day), currently celebrated on 26 January. This date marks the anniversary of the landing of the First Fleet in 1788, a day that is called Invasion Day by most Indigenous Australians. In their song and the accompanying video clip, the group uses imagery from working-class Australia to support their message. Australia Day is mostly embraced by white working-class Australians, who host barbeques at the beach or in their homes and mark the day with drinking and displays of nationalism (such as flag waving). In order to win support for a date change from legislators, activists need to win over the white working class and convince them that their celebration is based on a violent history.

## Film

Zaniello (2005) suggests that film is an excellent medium for understanding how class works (and the history of working-class experience), because film texts demonstrate how class and working-class history is both 'open or suppressed', in that films reveal 'erasure' and 'disclosure' of class (152). Williamson et al. (2001, 100) argue that working-class characters have often appeared in film, but the majority of these portrayals have been stereotypical or exist to make a specific point about class, which they argue can result in a lack of interest in a character (104). Although Williamson et al.'s and Zaniello's studies are focused on Hollywood and British film, their ideas can be applied to Australian film, and it's possible to consider which images of working-class life have been dominant and where and when they have been present.

Representation is important because it shapes views about people. According to Stuart Hall (1997, 1), representation is 'one of the central practices which produce culture'. Culture is important because it is 'concerned with the production and exchange of meanings ... between the members of a society or group' (Hall 1997, 2). Hall goes on to say that cultural meanings 'organise and regulate social practices, influence our conduct and consequently have real, practical effects' (1997, 4). Therefore, what we see in cultural products and practices can have a very real impact on how we behave. If we only ever see a certain group of people represented in a negative way, we will think of them in negative terms and be less inclined to accept them as our equals. Those of us from these groups can be disempowered by negative representations and even internalise these depictions. Hall states that meaning is produced in mass media (as well as in other places) and 'helps to set the rules, norms and conventions by which social life is ordered and governed' (1997, 4).

I would suggest that there are a number of tropes used in Australian film to portray working-class people – most noticeably, the figure of the white, violent man, and the 'bogan'. Bogan

is a derogatory short-hand term used to describe working-class people in Australia who are perceived as having no taste (Gibson 2013, 62). Bogans are uncouth, uneducated, unsophisticated and the object of ridicule. The term is similar to 'white trash' in the US and 'chav' in the UK, although less ethnically specific as 'white trash'.

Australia has a long history of films focusing on working-class life, and since the beginning of the Australian film industry there have been many iconic films made about working-class people. A very early example is *The Sentimental Bloke* made in 1919 and based on a famous poem of the same name by C. J. Dennis, about a working-class man in Sydney (called 'The Bloke'), who is released from jail (he had been a petty criminal) and decides to stay on the straight and narrow in order to pursue the woman of his dreams (Shirley and Adams 1989, 54). It's a wonderful film – a lot of it is filmed on location in the streets of Sydney and provides a glimpse into what was then a very working-class city centre, before the area became gentrified and sought after for its harbour views. The Bloke is trying to avoid crime, but he still manages to get involved in fights with other working-class men and the police. The working-class men in the film are tough, heavy drinking, crude and often ready for a fight. The bloke is depicted as a bit 'soppy' due to his interest in a girl, but the film is overall a sympathetic representation of working-class inner-city life (Morgan 2011, 323).

There has been a continuing focus on white male violence in Australian films about working-class life. This leads me to pose a number of questions. Why are film-makers representing white working-class men as violent towards each other and/or violent towards women and minorities? What are the limitations of these kinds of representations? Do they paint an overly negative picture of white working-class men in Australia, or are they revealing a reality that needs to be addressed? What is the effect of the absence of female working-class characters (except as victims of violent men)?

There seems to be a particular preoccupation in contemporary Australian film with stories that are based on crimes committed by white working-class men. It could be suggested that this interest in criminality can be traced back to colonial Australia. Early colonial literature often featured stories of the convicts – some acknowledged as criminals, others as political prisoners or wrongfully accused. One of Australia's most iconic figures is a criminal: Ned Kelly, the leader of the Kelly Gang (a group of bushrangers who robbed banks), who was famously caught after a shoot-out with police and then hanged. Kelly's legendary status centres around his early life as the son of an Irish convict who died in prison. There have been numerous cinematic representations of Kelly and his gang since the beginnings of Australian cinema; the world's first feature film, made in Australia in 1906, is Charles Tait's *The Story of the Kelly Gang*. Basu et al. (2013, 2) suggest that Kelly represents 'the whiteness, hyper-heterosexual masculinity, and violence of "Australianness"'.

Some contemporary examples include films such as Geoffrey Wright's 1992 *Romper Stomper*. This is a bleak film that explores racism in a working-class suburb of Melbourne, using what O'Brien (2013) describes as an 'embodied mode of address' (67) and 'robust muscularity' (68). Russel Crowe stars as Hando, a neo-Nazi skinhead who heads a gang that terrorises ethnic minorities, particularly Vietnamese Australians (Butterss 1998, 41). The gang is brutal and terrifying and their violence is also directed at women (both in their gang and outside). They are the epitome of violent white masculinity, and while the film is ultimately an anti-racism film (Butterss 1998, 42), it does potentially confirm a stereotype of white working-class men as racist. This is not to suggest that racism is not a problem in working-class communities, but films like *Romper Stomper* depict people of colour and women as victims only and present a view of working-class people as exclusively white.

Australian scholars have examined masculine violence and considered the flip side of mateship that manifests in gang loyalty and celebrations of violence (particularly against women). Connell (1995, 111) suggests that hegemonic forms of masculinity play out in working-class communities as desires to exert dominance over those considered less powerful. While Connell doesn't articulate this in her work necessarily, there is an assumption here that working-class means white. Connell (1995, 55) points to working-class men who are racist and violent towards ethnic minorities, gay men and women, and sees this as the men taking out their resentment and powerlessness on those they perceive as weaker, rather than 'punching up', by engaging in collective action and challenging those in power (Curthoys and Markus 1978, xv). This definitely comes through in some Australian working-class films – there is often a sense that the violent men are resentful due to their own powerlessness, and while films like *Romper Stomper* do attempt to engage with racism, the majority of the violent men in Australian films commit violent acts on women, children or gay men (Butters 1998, 41). This can also be seen in some of the films that base their stories on true crime. Of note, are *The Boys* (Rowan Woods 1998), *Blackrock* (Steve Vidler 1997) and *Snowtown* (Justin Kurzel 2011). Sexual violence, particularly when perpetrated by a group of men, features quite often in film about white working-class men. According to Heller-Nicholas (2013), these depictions are used to illustrate how 'the loyalty' associated with the Australian notion of male 'mateship' can come with a 'horrific cost' in the shape of sexual violence – a form of violence that has long history in colonised Australia (109).

In *The Boys*, *Blackrock* and *Snowtown*, there is an emphasis on the consumption of alcohol and drugs and other 'bodily pleasures' – a potential rejection of society and respectability and a focus on hedonistic pursuits (Butters 1998, 40). The working-class men in these films rape, torture and murder both women and gay men. They commit these crimes together, but there is no sense of working-class community outside of these terrible acts, and their victims are provided with no agency (Holland and O'Sullivan 1999, 80). Working-class neighbourhoods in these films are dysfunctional. There is no hope for any of the characters; they are trapped in their circumstances (O'Brien 2013, 70). This presents a picture of working-class people as pitted against each other and offers no insight into working-class community or collective action. Working-class people are dangerous and to be feared.

As a counter to these depictions are some films made by Indigenous film-makers and women that are also centred on working-class communities. Films employing 'Indigenous realism' (Woodhead 2011, 38) – such as Ivan Sen's 2011 *Toomelah*, set in a disadvantaged Indigenous rural neighbourhood – also include male violence. But the violence in Sen's film, and those of many other Indigenous film-makers is the result of the continuing trauma experienced by Indigenous people due to invasion and colonisation (Woodhead 2011, 40). The violence is mainly directed at other Indigenous men, rather than women or children. In some Indigenous films, the violence is perpetrated by white people against Indigenous people, but this violence is committed by white people of all classes and is not confined to white working-class people. According to Collins (2010), the generally positive reception from the public for films that engage with the violence and legacy of colonialism 'suggests that cinematic events that address Indigenous-settler relations do have the capacity to galvanize public attention' (65). There are many other Indigenous film-makers whose work displays the intersections of class, race and gender. As well as Ivan Sen's body of work, there are also powerful films by Warwick Thornton, Catriona McKenzie and Rachel Perkins (among others). Indigenous films reveal structural inequalities created and reinforced by class and racism.

Female directors such as Anna Kokkinos have also set films in working-class communities. Kokkinos' 2009 film *Blessed* is an adaptation of a stage play written collaboratively between

working-class and non-working-class writers (Tsiolkas 2005, 6). The film is a powerful representation of the injuries of class and centres on the stories of a number of working-class children and their mothers over the course of one night. This film gives agency to the working-class characters and contains many nuanced female characters. And there are ethnic minorities represented too. It is a very bleak film overall though, and extremely sad. While the representations of the impact of class are very real and there is less focus on white violent masculinity, there is still little sense of community on display.

Although there are some exceptions, Australian working-class films that fall outside of this violent white male category tend to be comedy films or 'quirky' films made by middle-class film-makers about working-class people. Classic Australian films, such as Rob Sitch's 1997 *The Castle*, depict working-class people as simple but kind-hearted. The family in *The Castle* (the Kerrigans) discover that their home has been earmarked for demolition (in order to expand the adjacent airport). They fight the decision with the help of a solicitor and a sympathetic barrister. While portrayed as sympathetic characters, fighting for equality (Milner 2009, 160), the family are buffoons. Their lack of cultural capital is regularly mocked. They like kitsch objects and have unsophisticated eating habits. It is assumed that the audience knows why the Kerrigans' tastes are to be laughed at. Middle-class audiences are aware that 'rissoles' are not sophisticated, and they also are aware that the Kerrigans' desire to live next to a runway is ridiculous. The comedy comes from the perceived incongruity of the Kerrigans' love for trashy things and the audiences' understanding of 'good' taste, in what has been described as 'suburban camp' (Lloyd 2002, 127). The Kerrigans are sympathetic 'bogans' – rather than being objects of scorn, they deserve the patronising sympathy of middle-class viewers (Gibson 2013, 65).

While the majority of films about working-class life tend to offer images of working-class people as either violent or simple, there are some that provide a more sympathetic representation. This is the case in Clayton Jacobson's 2006 mockumentary, *Kenny*. The central character of this film, Kenny, is a plumber who works for a company that fits portable toilets at festivals and other events. We follow Kenny through his work days as he encounters plumbing issues and philosophises on life and people's behaviour. Kenny takes pride in his work, and he is represented as a likeable, intelligent and complex character. The film is a comedy, but the joke is not on Kenny; it is on the people he encounters who either don't appreciate his work or who behave badly around him (such as the middle-class attendees at the events). Milner (2009, 154) suggests that the character of Kenny epitomises the Australian figure of the 'battler', which was recognisable to audiences.

Overall, the representation of working-class Australians on film is quite limited. While some of the films about violent white men are realist and convincing, there is very little depiction of working-class people outside of this small grouping. Indigenous films provide nuanced representation of Indigenous experience, which overlaps with issues of class, but few non-Indigenous films feature working-class women or working-class people from ethnic minority backgrounds.

## Television

The importance of television as a cultural tool should not be underestimated. Television is not just about entertainment but is also a source of education and socialisation. Television is one of the main sites for the creation and reinforcement of cultural memory and what O'Regan (1993, 81) describes as 'a common cultural and political core'. The consumption of television has been high in Australia, and Turner (2000) suggests that in Australia, television consumption takes up more leisure time than any other activities (3). A sense of national imaginary is still disseminated via television programmes and events, and it continues to be an important aspect of the Australian public sphere (Cunningham 2000, 29).

According to Skeggs and Wood (2011, 1), it is not possible to separate class from television, because of the emphasis in television on representing ‘everyday lives and ordinary people’. Television is also popular with working-class viewers who often occupy the position of ‘subordinated groups in capitalism’ (Fiske 1989, 73). But when looking at working-class representation in the medium, it becomes necessary to separate television shows into genres. Working-class people do appear on TV, but are usually restricted to reality TV and game shows. There is very little working-class representation in Australian television drama or comedy (Speed 2006, 408). It is interesting to consider this in light of the ways in which drama, in particular, is valued as ‘quality’ TV in comparison to reality TV and game shows (Bonner 2003). Contemporary Australian TV dramas are dominated by stories about professionals, mostly doctors and lawyers. In reality TV, it is possible to watch people at work, although most of the shows involve law enforcement of one kind or another. There are fly-on-the-wall documentaries about Gold Coast cops, Random Breath Test units, Kalgoorlie cops, Northern Territory cops and highway patrols, as well as border security (mostly set in Australian airports) and some shows that feature outback truck drivers. Hospital-based fly-on-the-wall documentaries include working-class patients, and there are working-class contestants on game shows, talent shows and some cooking competition shows (in cooking shows, working-class contestants are usually presented as the ‘underdogs’). Working-class people are ‘spectacularly visible’ (Skeggs and Wood 2011, 1) across reality TV even when there is no explicit class commentary included. There are fewer of the shows in Australia that portray working-class behaviours as ‘pathological abjectness’ (Skeggs and Wood 2011, 2) – a mode of representation that has been common in US and UK reality TV. An exception is *Struggle Street*, which aired in Australia in 2015 and featured poor working-class people from a Sydney suburb. There was a focus on dysfunction – the subjects were battling addictions, family breakdowns and chronic unemployment (Simic 2016, 171). A sensationalist voice-over narration provided little context for the situations of the subjects, and the show was an example of ‘poverty porn’ (Simic 2016, 172), made by and for middle-class audiences.

The lack of working-class characters on Australian TV (outside of reality TV, game shows and sports) is problematic. It suggests that the lives of working-class people are not interesting enough to be dramatised, and it renders working-class people invisible despite the working-class majority in Australia. Working-class characters do occur, but often as patients or criminals. There are some working-class characters in Australian comedy shows, but they often exist as stereotypes and are subject to mockery, such as the titular characters in the early 2000s sitcom *Kath and Kim* (Gibson 2013, 65), or the grotesque caricatures in *Housos* (2011–2013), set on a public housing estate. Slightly better is the sitcom *Upper Middle Bogan* (2013–present), which centres on an upper-class woman who discovers that her birth parents are working class (Campbell 2014, 37); while still employing some stereotypes, the show critiques the snobbery of the upper-class characters. A soap opera called *The Heights*, first broadcast in 2019, has challenged some of these stereotypes though with its sympathetic and quite nuanced depiction of residents of a public housing estate in Western Australia (Attfield 2019, para. 5).

The exception to this mostly narrow representation occurs in Indigenous dramas. A recent wave of television shows written and directed by Indigenous Australians offers more representation of working-class life (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous). In the Indigenous shows, characters are working-class blue- and white-collar workers living in public housing and working-class neighbourhoods. A note here on Indigenous representation – Marcia Langton (1993, 24) points to a ‘dense history of racist, distorted and often offensive representations of Indigenous people’ and identifies a need for Indigenous people to make self-representations to create an anti-colonial cultural critique in order to ‘undermine the colonial hegemony’ (8). Self-representations can change the way that non-Indigenous people understand Indigenous people,



because most of what is known is based on representations. According to Langton (1993), when Indigenous people are in control of representations, the ‘subject speaks back and the dominant culture is informed by Indigenous Cultural Practices, particularly practices of resistance’ (36). For Langton, Indigenous representations should be as diverse as Indigenous culture. Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2004) suggests that historically, Indigenous people have been ‘placed outside discursive regimes of power and knowledge’ (83). Indigenous people have often been (and still are) the subjects of investigation (such as in anthropology and ethnography), but have not often been considered by non-Indigenous people as providers of knowledge. Indigenous writers, directors and producers are therefore challenging the discursive regimes and the coloniser’s gaze.

The ground-breaking TV series *Redfern Now*, which first aired on ABC TV in Australia in 2012, tells the stories of Indigenous characters living in the inner-city suburb of Redfern (Collins 2013, 216) – traditionally an Indigenous working-class community. The representations of Indigenous characters are nuanced and realistic, and while not all characters are working class, the show reveals the intersections between race, class, gender and sexuality. Other shows (also aired on the ABC) such as family drama *The Gods of Wheat Street* (2014), science-fiction drama *Cleverman* (2016–present) and comedies *Black Comedy* (2014–present) and *8MMM Aboriginal Radio* (2015) also illustrate these intersections in interesting ways.

## Conclusion

Popular culture is an important place to look for working-class representation and working-class expression. It is possible that nuanced representations can shift attitudes towards working-class people and open up conversations about class and the ways in which class structures create and reinforce inequality. With inequality growing in Australia, the timing is important. As politicians deny or downplay the existence of inequality, the persuasiveness of popular culture becomes even more important. As asserted in the introduction, the field of working-class studies plays an important role. Through critical analysis of cultural texts, products and practices, scholars working in the field are able to bring to light the ways in which class works and advocate for change and improvements to working-class life. Revealing the limitations of current representations opens up conversations about how working-class life should be presented and can encourage more nuanced representations to be made. It’s possible that films and television shows to come will offer a more positive and empowering depiction of working-class life without shying away from the realities of inequality and discrimination.

## Notes

- 1 In 1964 Australian author Donald Horne wrote *The Lucky Country*. While Horne intended this description of Australia to be ironic, the term is most often used favourably.
- 2 Indigenous rural workers on the many sheep and cattle stations expected to work for rations rather than wages. Indigenous rural children were taken from their families, sent to ‘missions’ to receive a ‘white’ education and then taken to far away cities to work as indentured domestic servants.
- 3 ANZAC stands for Australian and New Zealand Army Corps – originally those who fought during the Gallipoli campaign of 1915.

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## Filmography

- Black Comedy*, Directors Beck Cole et al., 2014.
- Blackrock*, Director Steven Vidler, 1997.
- Blessed*, Director Anna Kokkinos, 2009.
- Cleverman*, Directors Wayne Blair and Leah Purcell, 2016–2017.
- Housos*, Director Paul Fenech, 2011–2013.
- Kath and Kim*, Director Ted Emery, 2002–2007.
- Kenny*, Director Clayton Jacobson, 2006.
- Redfern Now*, Directors Rachel Perkins et al., 2012–2015.
- Romper Stomper*, Director Geoffrey Wright, 1992.
- Snowtown*, Director Justin Kurzel, 2011.
- Struggle Street*, Producer Marc Radomsky, 2015.
- The Boys*, Director Rowan Woods, 1998.
- The Castle*, Director Rob Sitch, 1997.
- The Gods of Wheat Street*, Directors Wayne Blair et al., 2014.
- The Heights*, Directors Karl Zwicky et al., 2019–present.
- The Sentimental Bloke*, Director Raymond Longford, 1919.
- The Story of the Kelly Gang*, Director Charles Tait, 1906.
- Toomelah*, Director Ivan Sen, 2011.
- Upper Middle Bogan*, Directors Wayne Hope and Tony Martin, 2013.
- 8MMM Aboriginal Radio*, Director Dena Curtis, 2015.

## Discography

- January 26th*, A. B. Original, Adam Briggs and Daniel Rankine, 2016.
- Working Class Man*, Jimmy Barnes, 1985.